

1 Corinthians 15:1-10 + By Grace I Am What I Am + Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost + 23 August 2009

Grace is a little word often misunderstood, often taken for granted, often tossed around without any thought. Before a meal, you might hear the host say, "Let's say grace..." The name Grace was the 21st most popular girls' name in 2008. It was 20th the year before. Having a little girl with Grace as her middle name, I can tell you I don't always think about it when I say it.

Grace is a little word often taken for granted, but it's also the big reason you and I are here. If not for grace, we'd probably be out enjoying another weekend, but without grace, you're dead. Without grace, you're blind and ignorant. Without grace, you're God's enemy #1. Grace is a little word that makes a big difference. Today St. Paul makes us stop to see how grace has changed everything, especially individual lives like yours and mine. In awe of God's grace, you then realize **BY GRACE I AM WHAT I AM!**

We find Paul writing to Christians in the city of Corinth. The church there had a lot of problems. One in particular was the rise of teachers who denied the resurrection of the dead. So in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul lays out quite possibly the greatest discourse ever written on Christ's resurrection and the resurrection of all the dead on the Last Day. In spite of all their problems and failings, Paul could've forsaken them in frustration, but he loved these brothers and sisters in Christ as Christ loved him. For the Apostle Paul, the grace of God was THE most important thing in life. If there is any single thread that runs through every single letter Paul ever wrote, it is that self-sacrificing loving-kindness of God for people even though they deserve it not as shown to us in Jesus Christ. Paul always wanted his readers to understand and appreciate that grace of God. It's no different here.

"Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain." It all started with the Gospel—the good news of God's grace in Jesus Christ. Paul had spent 1 1/2 years proclaiming that Gospel in the streets and homes of Corinth. People had eagerly received that good news and had even taken a stand on it in the godless city of Corinth, but that was really a miracle of God's grace when you consider that every one of them was headed for hell. In spite of that miracle of God's grace, though, after Paul left, the people began to take God's grace for granted. It happens quite easily even among us. Then when false teachers rose up among them, the people even started to deny God's acts of grace, especially his promise to raise the dead on the Last Day. By doing so, they were basically denying the Christian faith, because if you deny the resurrection of the dead, then you deny that Jesus rose.

So here comes Paul ever the faithful shepherd to remind them of what he had taught, what they had received and believed and on which they stood. In so doing, he reminds you and me of what we have received and believed and on which we now stand—God's amazing grace. ***"For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures..."*** It was God's undeserved, self-sacrificing loving-kindness that brought Jesus into this world in the first place, but why? Paul pulls no punches when he describes you and me and all people in Ephesians 2, ***"As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were objects of wrath."***

Pleasant description of what we once were, isn't it? Some phrases just jump out at you and show you how undeserving each of us really is—***"dead"***, ***"disobedient"***, ***"gratifying the cravings"***, ***"objects of wrath"***. To hear those words makes you feel uncomfortable. Maybe you even wonder, "How could this describe me?" Well, by nature, from the moment you were conceived, you were dead in sin. As a child, as a teen, as an adult, by nature, you freely and willingly disobey the holy God. If he tells you that you can't lust after someone or something, that you have to keep your words clean and your thoughts pure, that you have to bring him honor in every one of your life's callings all the time, that you have to follow him on his terms and not your own, that makes your sinful nature rise up in revolt. By nature you'd rather gratify your cravings than carry out God's will and that's what often happens. ***"Like the rest, we were objects of wrath."*** By nature, you're God's Enemy #1 and you deserve every ounce of his condemnation.

That's what you were by nature, but then God's grace steps in and changes everything. It was at the heart of what Paul preached, ***"...that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures..."*** Christ died for our sins! Jesus Christ—true

God and true man, the holy, sinless, innocent Son of God, gave up everything to die for our sins! Just think about that for a moment. If you really want to understand the grace of God and how it has changed everything, look no further than the cross. See there a bloody, battered Savior with hands and feet literally nailed to the rough wooden beams of a cross, his body hanging there. See there a bloody King willingly giving his life for the criminals next to him and his enemies around him, as they jeered him mercilessly. Hear him cry out, ***“It is finished”*** in victory over your sin and your guilt for your forgiveness. See there a Savior who took God’s grace so seriously that he gave up everything for you, even his own life. See there the wondrous love of God that defies human speech.

See the dead body of the Savior taken down from the cross and placed in a tomb that you deserve for your sin. Hear the crunch of the stone cover the entrance to the tomb, but three days later, peer into the same tomb empty and abandoned where a Savior now living once lay. Marvel at the grace of God on that cross, in that tomb, and in its emptiness—all that to rescue you from the crushing burden of guilt, the terrifying specter of death, and the gaping jaws of hell. See grace change everything!

Then to make us absolutely certain of that grace, Paul lists undeserving sinner after undeserving sinner who saw the risen Christ with his or her own eyes. ***“He appeared to Peter*** (who had publicly denied him)...***then to the Twelve*** (who had literally abandoned him in his hour of need). ***After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time...Then...to James*** (his half-brother, who at one point did not believe that Jesus was the Messiah), ***then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one prematurely born.***”

Someone once said, “No one can understand or appreciate the grace of God unless he first recognizes how much he deserves to be punished.” Paul totally and completely understood that. That’s why he referred to himself with such a strange phrase at the end of that list of witnesses. ***“He appeared to me also, as to one prematurely born.”*** Paul knew how unworthy he was to be an apostle, one directly sent by the risen Christ. He hadn’t had all the experience of the other apostles who had been called by Jesus and had followed Jesus for three years, but Paul had even greater reason to consider himself unworthy of even being a Christian. He explains, ***“For I am the least of the apostles and do not deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.”*** Paul had actively persecuted God’s people because he thought he was doing God a favor by eliminating Christians. Yet one day on a road to Damascus the bright light of God’s grace changed his life forever when Jesus appeared to Paul.

In no possible way did Paul deserve such a rescue. ***“But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.”*** God’s grace rescued Paul and changed his life forever. Paul realized that the only way he could write authoritatively to the Corinthians, that he could serve them, that he could even be in a position to share his Christian faith, let alone be a Christian was by the undeserved, self-sacrificing loving-kindness of God his Savior. Paul never decided to follow Jesus. Paul never earned it. No, God’s grace in Christ Jesus changed Paul’s life forever and that same grace changes your life!

You and I were just as guilty as Paul. We were as guilty as one who puts Christians to death, but by grace, you and I are here. By grace, you received Christ’s forgiveness and became a member of his family through the waters of Holy Baptism connected with God’s holy Word. By grace, you have heard the Word of God through which the Holy Spirit strengthens your faith to grow in the grace and knowledge of your Savior Jesus. By grace, you come to realize and appreciate how big and broad and deep the love of Christ truly is for you as he forgives your sin, holds you up when you have to bear life’s crosses, and stays by your side even unto death. By grace, that new life begins to show itself in your daily life as you live out your God-given callings as parent or spouse or child or employer or employee or student or neighbor or member or friend seeing opportunities to serve your “neighbor” as opportunities to serve your loving Lord. Grace changes your life and how you look at life so you see it’s not all about you, but like Paul, it becomes all about God’s grace in Christ Jesus.

Grace is really a big word, isn’t it? It makes all the difference in your life and mine. It makes all the difference in the life to come. As we’ll sing later, grace is what brought us here and grace will bring us home one day. How amazing! By grace, then, I am what I am and always will be! Amen.