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## Sermon

### **Stewards of Grace**

**Ephesians 3:1-12**

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Paul has written to the Ephesians about the wonder of who Christ is. He has written about the salvation which has been given to them and us. He has written about the bringing together of Jewish believer and Gentile believer into one body of Christ, one Church, into unity.

He has just exclaimed over the wonder of believers being built into a temple of God and in 3:1 starts to say, "For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles – " Then he interrupts himself. The sentence is left incomplete and he goes off on a diversion. If you look down the page to verse 14, he picks up that thought again, "For this reason I kneel before the Father ..." now and he continues with his adoration of God.

So our text today is basically an aside from Paul's main thought. What strikes me about this passage is grace. Paul mentions it eleven times in the letter and three times in this section. In the rest of the letter, the grace refers to God's actions in general or to the Church, but in this section grace is the equipping of Paul: v2 "the administration of God's grace"; v7 "I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace..."; v8 "this grace was given to me: to preach the gospel to the Gentiles..."

As we pick up this passage, we find Paul refers to himself as a prisoner of Christ Jesus. There are three imprisonments that could be referenced, but it is most commonly thought that this is when Paul was under house arrest in Rome.

Everyone else would say he was a prisoner of the Romans, but he says he is a prisoner of Christ. He is only there because of Christ. The radical transformation that came into his life, the utter dependence he knew to Christ, these allow him to say that he is a prisoner of Christ. Christ is in control not the Romans. And he is there for the ministry to the Gentiles.

#### **Grace in Paul's Life**

First let us explore the grace of God affecting this man, Saul. You know the story – he was a zealous rabbi. He describes himself as a Pharisee of the Pharisees – an extreme Pharisee. He was meticulous at keeping the Jewish Law and the traditions of the rabbis. We first hear of him at the death of Stephen. A couple of weeks ago, we paid some attention to Stephen, this parish's patron saint. Stephen was had up on false charges of blasphemy and stoned to death. In Acts 7:58 we read, "Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul." The account continues, "And Saul was there approving of his death." Saul set out to destroy the church.

In Acts, Luke tells of Saul's conversion, but also records Saul's testimony twice.

Acts 26:9-20 <sup>9</sup> "I was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. <sup>10</sup> And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the saints in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. <sup>11</sup> Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. In my obsession against them, I even went to foreign cities to persecute them. <sup>12</sup> "On one of these journeys I was going to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. <sup>13</sup> About noon, O King, as I was on the road, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing around me and my companions. <sup>14</sup> We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.' <sup>15</sup> "Then I asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' " 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,' the Lord replied. <sup>16</sup> 'Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of me and what I will show you. <sup>17</sup> I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them <sup>18</sup> to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.' <sup>19</sup> "So then, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven. <sup>20</sup> First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and to the Gentiles also, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds.

When God a task accomplished he usually chooses the most unlikely person so all the glory goes to God not to the person. Saul was dead set against Christianity and Jesus arrested him. There was a revelation – there was power. Saul was struck blind and later his sight was miraculously restored.

He was a transformed man – totally changed. He went from rabidly persecuting the Church to preaching Christ and became the foremost missionary of the apostles.

Was this his own doing? No! Did he deserve the appointment? No! He was an enemy turned upside down and inside out.

Change the leopard change his spots? The early Christians weren't ready to trust him. But yes – in Christ – there is true repentance; there can be reformation of character.

How did Saul regard himself? We hear in the Ephesians text verse:

<sup>8</sup> "Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ ...

I am less than the least of all God's people – that's how Paul saw himself. He says as much in 1 Corinthians 15:9

"For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God."

Or in 1 Timothy 1:16,

"But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life."

So how did he end up where he did? Hear again verse 7: "I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power." Doesn't that describe the Damascus Road experience? God's grace – Saul was saved out of his opposition and hatred – not because he deserved it but because God chose to do it.

I too was saved not because of any goodness in me but because God is generous. When I was confirmed I was really saying I believe in God. It took the next three years for me to realise that I could not live to please God in my abilities. I needed to be rescued. I needed grace. It is the same for everyone. None of us can do it for God – we fail and fail and fail again. We need God's mercy and grace to give us life and start to work in us his good purposes.

Saul, the super-Pharisee and hater of Christians became Paul the apostle to the Gentiles. He changed his name to the Greek form – unthinkable before! He wrote that he was “a prisoner of Christ Jesus for your Gentiles” - incomprehensible before!

We have seen that God’s grace was at work in changing Paul radically. Have you encountered such grace in your life? You may not have started in so negative a place but we all need that grace to rescue us - seek it and pursue it.

### **Administration of Grace**

The next aspect of grace is the administration of Grace. In v2, he writes, “Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you...”

Have you ever thought about that before – I don’t think I had. Administration of grace. The word is *oikonomia* – from house (*oikos*) rule (*nomos*). It is the root of our word, economy – house rule. In Greek, It relates to stewardship. Now a steward has the job of looking after the owner’s property or business on his behalf. A steward of a large estate would run the property for the owner. In this case, Paul says he is a steward of grace and that grace is directed to the Gentiles.

Now the very nature of grace is generosity. To be a steward of generosity is to be entrusted with stuff to give away for the benefit of others. Here’s an idea for your giving. If you make the decision that you are going to give away so much, then the next decision is to whom? And that decision is far more enjoyable once the first is made. If you were to decide, “I will give 10% to church and another say 5% to general charities.” Then you have the administration of that generosity. There is a freedom and a joy as you disperse the money which is no longer yours because you have given it to God already.

Do you think of your ministry as a stewardship, something God has entrusted to you for the sake of others? Or do we tend to think of ministry as our gift to God? Paul understood ministry as God’s gift to him. Listen to verse 8: “this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles...” The ministry of preaching to the Gentiles was God’s gift of grace to him.

All Christians receive grace. You can’t become a Christian without it. One commentator writes,

“Grace engages us, calls us, pushes us, develops us and gives us a ministry. Ministry is the gift of God’s power at work in us for managing grace. The application of this text is obvious: Get to work.”<sup>1</sup>

### **Grace gives us confidence**

Finally, grace gives us confidence. We all know good reasons why we are the lesser ones – like Paul’s “less than the least” comment. But, grace overcomes past failures. Grace prevents us thinking we are too small for a ministry (since it is him working through us). Grace prevents us thinking we are too great for a task God assigns – since God is responsible for all success. If we operate from grace, then we have a confidence in God’s ability and his call of us, rather than in ourselves.

Verse 12: “In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.”

Being in Christ gives us access to God with boldness and confidence. He accepts us because of Christ – it doesn’t depend on our efforts anymore. So you can come with confidence. So you can come boldly. When I was a lad I would visit my father’s office in town sometimes. I remember hearing some staff worrying about something which had gone wrong and should they tell Mr Hardcastle. I offered to tell him and they were relieved. But he was my father – I was able to knock on his door and tell him the news, confident of our relationship and his acceptance of me. He didn’t mind – I knew he wouldn’t – he’d much rather be told the truth.

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<sup>1</sup> Snodgrass, K., 1996, “The NIV Bible Commentary: Ephesians”, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, p171

So it is with Father God, we come in confidence in Christ. We know that Jesus has dealt with the problem and we are accepted in him. It is not a brash or cocky attitude. It is still respectful but with a confidence of loving acceptance.

I hope you all know that freedom and confidence. Again, we need to press in to find that relationship with God – it is available but we need to ask for it. Have you? Will you? Do pray with the team after the service if you need to gain a confidence of the grace which is extended to you.