

1 Corinthians 15:1-11, John 1: 14-18

By the Grace of God!

February 7, 2010

Many years ago I was in a church group with a woman who could not stand the thought that Jesus had died for her. Whenever we talked about the sacrifice that Jesus had made for us and how he had died for us, she would become very upset.

One evening she lost it. Becoming hysterical, she cried out in grief, "I never asked him to do that! I never asked him to die for me! Why did he do that?? I never asked him to!"

Tears streamed down her face. She sobbed. She was inconsolable. At that point she could not listen to any kind of calm explanation. She didn't want any kind of theological analysis. All she knew was that Jesus had died a terrible, painful death on her behalf and she didn't want to have that on her conscience.

She cried that she had never asked him to do that, that she didn't want him to die! She was asking for forgiveness. In her mind she was guilty of sending him to the cross. If she had been a better person, maybe he wouldn't have had to die like that. She knew she was a sinner.

The Apostle Paul also knew he was a sinner. The first mention of him in the Bible is that he watched the first martyr, Stephen, get stoned to death. After that, he took the lead in persecuting Christians. He broke in on their meetings and had them arrested. Many of them were executed.

He was on his way from Jerusalem to Damascus one day when suddenly there was a bright light. Jesus appeared to him and asked him, "Why do you persecute me?" And Paul's life was changed dramatically.

He changed from hater to apostle, from persecutor to church planter. From working to enforce the Jewish law to being the recipient of grace.

Paul writes, "By the grace of God I am who I am." By the grace of God he was saved from being hate-filled and angry to being Spirit-led and working tirelessly to share the Good News of Jesus Christ.

By the grace of God!

The grace of God works in our lives, too! All of us can say, "By the grace of God, I am who I am!" By the grace of God we have heard the gospel of Jesus Christ and we believe that Christ came to save us from sin and death, and save us TO lives lived in service to the living God.

We are saved FROM hopelessness and fear and saved TO lives of meaning and purpose.

By the grace of God, I am who I am. God changed me from a shy, fearful child to a pastor who is not afraid to speak the message of Jesus Christ and work to fulfill my calling in the service of God.

By the grace of God, I am who I am, called to be more than I ever thought I could be in this world.

I see the grace of God at work every day. I see it in the flowers, in the sunset, in the hug from a friend----all of these and so many more are gifts of grace. Every morning when I open my eyes, I know that each new day is a gift of grace from God.

God, by grace, has forgiven me all of my sins, and that forgiveness keeps on coming, because I am far from perfect. Every day I know that God's mercy is new for me. It does not get stale because God's grace continues to flow.

I want you to think for a moment or two---what has God done for you in your life? Think of one thing that you are especially grateful for, one particular change that God has brought about in you. Are you the same as you were half your lifetime ago? How have you grown and changed for the better?

By the grace of God, I am who I am.

What has God done for you lately? How have you seen the grace of God at work in your life this past year, this past month, this morning?

Think about it.

God has blessed each of us in many ways. Even if you look back at your life and see hardship after hardship, loss after loss, nothing but struggles and pain, God is still at work in your life. I want you to think about that, too.

How is God at work? You woke up this morning. You found your way here. That tells me that even if things are really hard for you right now, there is a spark of hope inside of you. Hope that has brought you here.

That hope is a gift of grace from God, who is the source of all grace.

And if life is going pretty well for you, have you thought about how much of that is a gift from God? Have you stopped to show your gratitude for God's abundant grace?

Paul was grateful to be what he became through the grace of God. It is amazing grace that has made all of us what we are today. Without grace we would not be Christians because there would have been no Christ!

Without grace we wouldn't know God the way we do, because it is only by the grace of God that we have Christ. It is only by grace that we have had people in our lives who showed us the love of God and who brought us to believe.

Grace is at work in our lives. We don't have to do anything to earn God's grace. Grace is at work before we even know we need it. God extends to us love and mercy and forgiveness before we ask.

Our response to grace is simple, but it's not always easy. We need to admit that we need God, that we are too weak, too prone to mistakes, too easily tempted, not wise enough or loving enough to make it without God.



When Jesus appeared to Paul, he was blinded by the bright light from heaven and he spent several days depending on others to lead him to a home and take care of him. He depended on a Christian man to come and heal his blindness.

Realizing that he had to depend on people whose very lives he had been threatening only a short while before taught Paul the meaning of grace.

Realizing that we depend on God for everything we are and everything that sustains us makes the meaning of grace clear to us as well.

Defining grace is not easy in words. Here is my best shot-----

Grace is God giving all of us more love, mercy, and forgiveness than we can possibly imagine. It's not about what we deserve. It's not even about what we ask for. It's not about what we want.

It's about what we need and God knowing what we need before we even ask. It's about God's presence in our lives, about God being with us in our suffering and pain and hurt.

A few days after the earthquake hit Haiti, reporters quoted a young man who had survived as saying, "We know God is with us, because if he weren't, there would be no Haitians left."

Instead of despairing and questioning where God had been, this man recognized that God's hand was in the surviving, not in the destruction. He knew grace when he saw it. He knew he was dependent on God for everything, including his life. And he knew that God is always with us, even when the unimaginable happens.

God sent Christ to be with us in everything we go through so that we could know beyond any doubt that God knows what we feel, whether it's love or joy or hurt or anguish. Christ did not come to pretend to be human and then escape the worst that people can dish out to each other.

Christ came to be with us in our worst agony, and to forgive the worst that people can do to each other, even when it was done to him.

Christ came to show us what a grace-filled, spirit-led life can look like, even when the worst, most horrible, most brutal things were happening.

And Christ came to show us that we would not be left alone in our pain and death, but that we will live forever with him.

This is what the woman in the church group had missed. By missing it she was left helpless in her misery and guilt that she had contributed to Christ's death.

We are not left guilty. By the grace of God we are set free from guilt and forgiven for our responsibility in the death of Christ. By the grace of God we are what we are----beloved children of God.

All we have to do is open our hearts and accept the great gift of grace that God has given to each of us, a gift we don't earn by deeds. We only have to admit that we need it.

Amen

