

Romans 5:1-11
(Isaiah 30:18-21; Matthew 11:25-30)
“This Grace in Which We Stand”

Introduction

How can I know that I am right with God? What question could possibly matter more, or have greater potential consequences? Yet it is a question too seldom asked in our age of easy acceptance. A half a century ago, C.S. Lewis observed that the positive virtues that were once revered in Western culture were being replaced by the negative attribute, tolerance. The idea that tolerance is the one, supremely necessary virtue in a pluralistic culture has continued to grow to the point where most folk seem to think that God would be violating some sort of equal access law if he were to find anyone at fault for the life they have chosen to live.

Of course, truth be told, we each have our own limits of tolerance. Each of us could name certain people, perhaps from our own experience, perhaps historical figures such as Hitler, whom we consider sufficiently wicked to merit God’s judgment. But most Americans live so far removed from the biblical view of things, and have been so thoroughly acculturated, that they presume themselves to be living at peace with God based – if not upon their own virtue – at least upon the absence of any extraordinarily outrageous behavior.

However, the Bible makes clear that “all have sinned and fallen short of God’s glory,” that “none is righteous, no not one.” And when the Holy Spirit begins to work on us, our eyes are opened to the true state of our souls, our hearts convicted of our sin and rebellion against God, and we cry out for forgiveness and rescue. But that leaves us with the question: How do we know that God has heard our cry and redeemed us? After all, many have felt conviction of sin, have cried out to the Lord, have perhaps even walked with him for a while, but have then turned back to the world. Jesus said, “Those who endure to the end will be saved.” So how can we know that we have eternal life? Must we wait for the end, holding our breath and living in anxiety until the last moment of life, in fear of turning back? Are there no distinguishing marks of God’s grace that we can apply to our lives in order to enjoy peace with God and the assurance that we are his children?

The answer is that the Scriptures in any number of places give us a picture of the life of grace, so that we *can* know what to expect if we have God’s Spirit living in us, and have been brought by grace from death to life. This morning I hope to underscore three such distinguishing marks of grace, marks that Paul describes in the first five verses of our text, and then to note three typical objections to living such a life, objections that Paul describes and answers in verses six through eleven.

It is my deepest hope that God will use these verses this morning to convict those who have been carelessly presuming on God’s grace without having yet known the

power of his salvation, and to comfort and encourage those who have been born again to pursue the kind of life promised to those whose lives are rooted and grounded in that grace that is greater than all our sin.

If grace is the soil in which this life grows, faith is the taproot that feeds off of grace, and that draws its own life from grace. Paul has been showing us that faith is an act of one's entire being, not merely the assent of the intellect to truth, but the affection of the heart and the resting of the will. We, who once looked to ourselves to supply our needs, now rest in the goodness of God and in his covenant of mercy to answer the deepest needs and longings of our life. This is a work of God's Spirit, who enables us to trust him, heart, mind and strength. And the Spirit within begins to manifest in and through us the very life of Christ.

Body

1. Paul depicts three distinguishing marks of a life of grace (5:1-5).

It is a life marked by peace. This peace rests upon God's promise that he has forgiven us our offenses against him and has restored our relationship with him as dearly loved children. We are at peace with God, no longer under his wrath, no longer facing his judgment. Thus, we experience a peace that this world cannot give, a peace that passes all human understanding, and that keeps our hearts and minds in the midst of the world's madness, even in the face of suffering and death.

It is a life marked by hope. Paul says that we rejoice in hope – no matter what life throws at us – for we realize that no weapon forged against us can finally prevail, nor can anything separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Hope has to do with the future. If faith looks back on what God has done to redeem us, hope looks ahead to the fulfillment of those glorious promises that are yet to be realized. Christ has gone on to prepare a place for us, and has promised to come again and take us to be with him forever.

But, how do we get to the place where we live in that hope, no matter how things may appear today? Paul tells us that it is the result of a process of character development. We are not given a certain character at birth, as if character were like physical beauty or a gift for music or mathematics. Character is a matrix of habits of the heart, formed by our life choices, by our learned responses to life. People of good character, may through a series of bad choices and decisions, become people of bad character; and vice versa: people of bad character can, by grace, begin making good choices, responding in a mature, and even a godly way, and begin to develop a good character.

Paul puts it this way: “More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame” (5:3-5). It is learning to trust God and endure in the face of suffering that bears the fruit of endurance and character, which enables the heart to hope, rather than yielding to despair.

It is a life marked by love. Supremely, the life of grace is a life that increasingly experiences the love of God, for in giving us his Spirit, God pours his love into our hearts (v.5). The outflow of a life filled with love is – more love! If a glass is filled with water, you can expect to pour water from it. If a life is filled with the love of God, you can expect God’s love to pour from it. This is the supreme mark of the new life of grace: we are beginning to love God and to love one another.

However, some of you are thinking, this is beyond my experience and my ability. I could never be such a person. And Paul answers three common objections.

2. Paul deals with three typical objections to living such a life (5:6-11).

I am too weak for such a life. You may be thinking, I can hardly make it through my life. I am miserable. My life is mess. It is all I can do to get out of bed and put one foot in front of another. How can I even think of living such a superlative life marked by faith hope and love, by love, joy and peace? Paul answers, “For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly” (v.6). It doesn’t depend upon us, upon our strength or ability. This is God’s doing, and he initiated all this precisely because we cannot help ourselves spiritually. His strength is greater than our weakness.

I am too bad for such a life. But, you may be thinking, this is for people who have not done the terrible things that I’ve done, who have not crossed the line over and over again. I am too wicked. I’ve killed, I’ve cursed, I’ve stolen, I’ve lied. God could never love someone like me. Paul responds, “But God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (v.8). As John Stott says, either you have too high a view of your sin, or too low a view of God’s grace. His grace is greater than sin, and that means greater than your sin and mine. He did not wait for us to do the impossible, to save ourselves. While we were still sinners, rebelling against him, going our own way, Christ died for us. Incredible! But that’s why it is grace.

I am too far from God for such a life. You may be thinking, I wish that I had heard this message years ago, but I’m too far-gone. I can’t even work up the desire in my heart. I’ve been God’s enemy for so many years, my life is defined by my rebellion against all that is good and true and lovely. Paul says, “For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, how much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his

life” (v.10). The truth is that we have all been enemies of God, alienated from him by our rebellion and sin, and there’s not nearly as much difference between people as we like to think. If you are weary and fearful, simply ask God to begin to put the desire for his grace into your heart. Your eternal life is at stake here. This is not just a matter of time, but of eternity. Don’t throw away God’s gracious offer of grace, new life, and of everything we were created to be.

Conclusion

At every point where our hearts cry out that we are unable, God answers in the strongest way possible: he has given his own Son for us. His strength is greater than our weakness, his goodness greater than our wickedness, his willingness to forgive and to reconcile us to him greater than our alienation from him. Salvation is not our work, but his, and we have but to ask and it will be given, to seek and we will find, to knock and the door will be opened. If we cry out to the Lord for grace, if we trust him and follow him, we will find that he has been carrying us all the while, enabling us to begin living as we have not been able to live before, to desire what we have not desired before, to love as we have never been able to love before. He will grant us the gift of faith, hope and love, flowering into love, joy and peace, even as Paul has described so wonderfully in our text.

This is the life God offers his people in the midst of the madness and uncertainty of this present age. What will you do in response to such grace? If today were your last day, how would you respond? How *will* you respond today?

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