

October 17, 2010

Living in the Light of Christ's Return

Good Hope Through Grace

2 Thessalonians 2:13 – 17

We closed last Sunday by posing these questions: If you are concerned today that you may not be among the chosen, you should ponder these questions: *Is there a desire for holiness deep within? Do I want God – do I want more of God? Is His word a delight to my mind and food for my soul? Is there a sense in which I am striving for more of Christ in my life? Do I want His will to prevail in me, even though I struggle sometimes with control? Is the taste for the pleasures of sin like ashes in my mouth, even though I occasionally fall prey to its temptations?* If your answer to those questions is yes – that is good evidence of the grace of God working in you.

Paul was convinced that the Thessalonians were chosen to be saved because he saw evidence of this in their lives. Back in the first letter he makes the same kind of statement in chapter one, verse four: *For we know, brothers loved by God, that He has chosen you.* 1 Thessalonians 1:4 Paul was convinced they were chosen because their lives evidenced the grace of God at work. They had embraced the gospel and it changed their lives. They had turned from idols to serve the living God – they loved His word, it was a delight and joy to them as they endured suffering – their lives became a testimony of God's grace to all the other churches in Macedonia and Achaia – and they had a passion to spread the joy of the gospel to others.

In Matthew chapter seven, Jesus told His disciples that life is a road with two options – one option leads to eternal destruction, and one leads to eternal life. *Enter through the narrow gate ; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it.* Matthew 7:13-14 And then He told them how they could tell which road they were on: *You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes nor figs from thistles, are they? So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.* Matthew 7:16 – 19

The point He was making was not that we must work to produce good fruit and thus prove that we are a good tree. Rather He is making the point that what makes the difference is the tree. Good tree – good fruit. Bad tree – bad fruit. It has to do with the seed that was sown. Just like you would never expect dry thorn bushes to produce juicy grapes, or thistles to produce figs – you cannot expect good things from a bad source. The problem with the bad tree is not that it is producing bad fruit – you can't expect anything else. The problem is that it is a bad tree, and bad trees don't have good fruit. But if it is a good tree, we have every expectation of good fruit. So the implication is that the evidence that we have been born again is manifested in our choices and manner of life.

And then Jesus went on to give them the implications of this little picture: *Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles ? And then I will declare to them, I never knew you; Depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.* Matthew 7:21 – 23

We should understand at least two things from this. One is that just because you pray a prayer, or recite the Apostle's Creed every Sunday, or attend church fairly regularly, does not mean that you have embraced the gospel and are on the right road. What this passage indicates is that there will be a lot of people who are very surprised when Jesus returns. And the other thing we need to understand is that bearing good fruit has everything to do with the kind of tree that has been planted. Just as an apple tree does not have to work hard to produce apples, the fruit of a life surrendered to the will of God spontaneously manifests the life of God. The Christian life is not a life of works, but a work of life. That is, the very life of God that made us alive in Christ when we were born again and believed the gospel, works in us to produce the very thing that God desires. Which does not mean that we do not wrestle with the evil desires of the flesh and the temptations of the world. But what it does mean is that unlike those who have not been born again, we do wrestle. But it is a wrestling that is God-inspired and grace-empowered, and full of hope. Because we have been born again, we have eternal comfort and good hope through grace.

What does that mean – Good hope through grace? What is Paul talking about when he encourages the Thessalonians that they have eternal comfort and good hope through grace? What Paul is saying is that our eternal comfort and our hope of life eternal is all by means of grace. As we have said many times, grace is not a sort of divine do-over, which is what we mean many times when we talk about having grace for one another. Grace is the power of God to do in us what we could never do – and what we cannot do is produce the kind of fruit that is good all on our own.

Take the matter of character. Paul describes Christian character in terms of fruit in Galatians 5 and Peter adds to that in the first chapter of his second letter. The fruit of that tree are things like love, joy peace, longsuffering, self-control, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, knowledge, endurance, godliness and brotherly love. These things ought to be true of those who have been born again. How do we produce that on our own? Or how about our conduct? Colossians 1 tells us to *walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work* Colossians 1:10 Is it possible for you to please God in all respects apart from the grace of God that empowers you?

Or what about the fruit that we are supposed to bear that comes from sharing the gospel as Paul tells us in Romans 1? If we are wholly responsible for gospel fruit I think we are in trouble. What about the fruit of our lips or praise as the writer of Hebrews shares? *Through Him then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name.* Hebrews 13:15 Without His grace our lips will sing our own praises. What of the fruit that is credited to our account as we give our money generously? *Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit.* Philippians 1:17 It is the grace of God that enables us to resist the impulse to spend our wealth on ourselves and give lavishly. The work of God in bearing fruit is a work of grace from start to finish.

Look at the progression Paul leads the Thessalonians through in verses 13 and 14. First they were chosen by God for salvation: *because God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved* – that is grace. Because in Romans Paul says: *So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace. But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace.* Romans 11:5-6 Then he says that salvation is through sanctification, which is the day to day working out of God's choosing. *'...saved, through sanctification by the Spirit.* In Corinthians Paul says that happens through *'...by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.* 1 Corinthians 10:15 He doesn't say he was being sanctified but the reality of sanctification is seen in that this religious, Christian-hating zealot was transformed into an obedient servant – and he credits the change to grace.

And then he links their salvation with grace-empowered belief in the truth: *saved, through...belief in the truth.* We cannot work up enough faith to believe the message of the gospel. Faith is a gift of grace and we can only believe because we have been graced. Acts 18 described salvation belonging to *'...those who through grace had believed.* Acts 18:27 To believe in the truth is an act of grace. Then Paul says that we have been called through the gospel and the calling of God is always by grace : *To this He called you through our gospel.* . As Paul explained to Timothy: *'...God, who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of His own purpose and grace, which He gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began.* 2 Timothy 1:9

And finally all of this is so that we *may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.* And we know from the first chapter of 2 Thessalonians that this is also by grace: *To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of His calling and may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by His power, so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in Him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.* 2 Thessalonians 1:11-12 From beginning to end our salvation – our election, our calling, our sanctification, our belief and ultimately our glorification – are all a work of God's grace.

So what are the implications of God's grace to us? Where does this all lead? Well, this is what Paul says: *Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word.* 2 Thessalonians 2:16 -17 Comfort our hearts and establish them in every good work and word. The point of grace is not that it should terminate on us. We have not been saved so that we could be better people – have more joy – live more abundantly or any other thing that ends with us. The eternal comfort and good hope we enjoy through God's choosing and calling and sanctifying is so that our hearts would be encouraged and firmly fixed in every good work and word.

I believe Paul is referring to the same thing he told the Ephesians in chapter 2 of that letter: *For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.* Ephesians 2:8-10 Notice why we have been saved. It has nothing to do with a better life, more joy, less pain, more satisfaction and less frustration. We are *HIS* workmanship – we belong to Him. And He has created and saved us *FOR* something.

Somehow, softly and subtly, the message of the gospel has been transformed from a cry to the rebellious and hostile sinner to repent and surrender to Christ to a begging plea to accept Him. David Platt writes in his book, Radical that *'We have taken the infinitely glorious Son of God, who endured the infinitely terrible wrath of God and who now reigns as the infinitely worthy Lord of all, and reduced Him to a poor, puny Savior who is just begging us to accept Him.'* What this does is cause the gospel to terminate on us. It makes salvation all about me. How many songs have been written and how many testimonies have you heard that say something like, *'When Jesus was on the cross, He died just for me?'* We used to sing one of those songs – perhaps you remember it. It begins well exalting the majesty and mystery of God the Father and God the Son:

*Above all powers above all kings
Above all nature and all created things
Above all wisdom and all the ways of man
You were here before the world began*

*Above all kingdoms above all thrones
Above all wonders the world has ever known
Above all wealth and treasures of the earth
There's no way to measure what You're worth*

*Crucified laid behind the stone
You lived to die rejected and alone
Like a rose trampled on the ground
You took the fall and thought of me above all*

That is a charming thought, even poetic, but it isn't Biblical. The writer has managed to replace the infinite God he marvels at nearly all the way through the song with himself as the object of worship. Luke 24:46-47 tells us that Jesus died so that repentance and forgiveness of sins would be preached in all nations. When we make the gospel terminate on us we distort the message. I am not trying to take anything away from the very personal way in which each one of us is brought to repentance and salvation. Jesus is a personal Savior – He has saved me personally, and I will rejoice and be glad that He has. But salvation is not about me it is about His glory and grace. I don't believe He was thinking about me above all. I believe He was thinking about bringing glory to His Father above all. That is the point – His glory, not mine.

The gospel is the good news of extravagant grace, unbelievable, marvelous grace, raining down on those whom He has chosen for no other reason but that He chose to do so. But it was never meant to center on us. If all we understand from the gospel is that God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life we have missed the point and we think that the gospel is about us. But if we understand that the gospel tells us that we are enemies of God, dead in our sins and rebellion and not even able to see that we need God, much less rouse ourselves out of our dead condition; then we begin to see how dependent upon His grace we really are. Without grace we cannot come to Him. Without grace we have absolutely no faith to be saved – we cannot initiate or manufacture it. God must come to us and overcome our evil, and appease His wrath and open our eyes and cause us to see – in short He must make grace fall like rain.

His glory and grace go together. All things were created to bring Him glory. And the grace we receive is to bring Him glory. *To this He called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.* 1 Thessalonians 1:14 Do you notice that it is *His* glory we are talking about? His all-sufficient grace is so that we will display and declare His glory. The more we live for His glory, the more grace we will experience. The wonder and beauty of the Christian faith is that we experience transcendent, marvelous grace as we live for His transcendent, marvelous glory. And that kind of grace produces good hope, in God and all the promises of God for us. And that grace works in us to comfort our hearts and establish our hearts in every good work and word.

Paul says that we were called for the very purpose of gaining the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. I believe we need to understand that in two senses. The first is that we gain His glory when He returns and our vile bodies are changed into the likeness of His glorious body as Philippians 3:21 says. That is the culmination of salvation – the redemption of our bodies. But I also think that we gain His glory as we live for His glory. That is the whole effort and bent of our lives is so that we bring Him glory.

What does it mean to live for His glory? How is that expressed in my life and in your life? I believe that the best evidence that we have embraced the gospel and trusted Christ for salvation is that all our deepest longings and desires and our highest ambitions are wrapped up in Christ. Our need for Him, our love for Him, our seeking after Him, wells up spontaneously from within and we discover that He is indeed the great reward of our salvation. We want Him so much that we abandon everything else to experience Him. All other pursuits and temporary pleasures are meaningless in His presence.

And that focus and desire for God and the things of God spills over into the lives of those around us as we spread the joy that we have experienced in the gospel. Paul prayed that the comfort and good hope we have through grace spill over into every good work and word and I believe the primary thrust of those good works and good words are found in the Great Commission in Matthew 28: *And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."* Matthew 28:18-20

We have good hope through grace so that we would live for the glory of God and spread the good news of His grace to the world. Listen to the words of Psalm 67: *God be gracious to us and bless us, And cause His face to shine upon us. That Your way may be known on the earth, Your salvation among all nations.* Psalm 67:1-2 Our mission is not simply to be better people through the gospel, but to spread the joy and gladness and grace that we have received to others so that God's glory is manifested and magnified.

Charles Spurgeon wrote: *If you are yourself saved, the work is but half done until you are employed to bring others to Christ. You are as yet but half formed in the image of your Lord. You have not attained to the full development of the Christ-life in you unless you have commenced in some feeble way to tell others of the grace of God; and I trust that you will find no rest to the sole of your foot till you have been the means of leading many to that blessed Saviour who is your confidence and your hope.* Charles Spurgeon

We are not given good hope through grace so that we can be better people; we have been graced with good hope so that we might live for the glory of God. The gospel does not call men to be better men; the gospel calls men to make much of Jesus for the glory of God. That is the call of grace this morning – come to Christ and spend your life making much of Him so that His way may be known on the earth, His salvation among all nations.

Our gracious heavenly Father,

We thank You for the grace that has been poured out like rain from heaven on undeserving hearts. Grant that all our deepest longings and desires and our highest ambitions would be wrapped up in Christ. May we be those who want You so much that we abandon everything else for Your glory and honor. Teach us that all other pursuits and temporary pleasures are meaningless in light of Your glory and purpose on the earth. Forbid it Lord that we should ever think that Your grace and the glorious good news of the gospel terminate on us. Let the eternal comfort and good hope with which we have been graced cause us to make much of Jesus for the glory of God, and be those people who delight in God through Jesus Christ, living to spread His joy through the gospel to all people, we pray in the gracious, life-giving name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.