

January 27, 2013

Let Us Hold On to Grace

Hebrews 12:28 – 13:9

A central theme which runs throughout the Bible is that **God is creating a people who belong to Him.** Whether in the Old Covenant or the New, the work of God is the calling of a people. He is not merely saving individuals; He is building a new community in which he is the central participant. He is forming a new society out of the ashes of a fallen and rebellious human race. The development of a community lies at the heart of God's covenant promise "***I will be your God and you will be my people.***" Peter outlines this in his first epistle: *But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for His own possession.* 1 Peter 2:9 – 10 Look at those nouns: race, priesthood, nation, people – it is all about community. Christianity is not an individual sport – real faith does not remain private – it is all about community.

We have not been redeemed to simply live solitary, personal lives of holiness so that we can individually go to heaven. God intends to demonstrate His glory and power and love and grace through the church as Paul tells us in Ephesians. We also need to embrace our identity as a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people as Peter puts it. Those are community words – those are corporate words. Because we live in such an individualistic culture – we've put an individualistic spin on the central teaching of the Bible, and we need our minds renewed to the truth. I want to preface this passage in Hebrews with three truths from this passage in Peter.

The purpose of this community is to love God together and proclaim the good news of the gospel *that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.* 1 Peter 2:9 – 10 Peter tells us that God has brought us into community, He has made those who were not a people His people **so that they would proclaim the excellencies of Christ to the nations.** We proclaim the gospel to all people so that they will hear and respond and be brought into this community of grace. We are a gospel-centered community joyfully engaged in bringing others into the community of adoration and worship and praise of the Triune God.

It is by living in community that sanctification is worked out in our lives – that is, the practical outworking of the gospel happens in community – not isolation. After Peter talks about God creating community – a people for God's own possession; and the goal of that community – proclaiming the excellencies of Christ; he then goes on to flesh out what happens in community – sanctification. We are sanctified by living lives together that are honoring to God and marked by growth in holiness – together. Peter puts it like this: *Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul.* 1 Peter 2:11 He reminds us that we are at war – life is war; and as in war, if you are all by yourself, you're lost. In other words, he wants us to see that we are in this fight for holiness together – in community. By rehearsing the gospel together and living out its implications together we are participating in a corporate sanctification process.

Living in community testifies to the glory of God

And then he makes the assumption that the way we live together is seen by unbelievers around us and points them to Christ: *Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.* 1 Peter 2:12 We don't strive to conduct ourselves honorably in the world, or live holy lives to earn righteousness. Rather holy living is an outworking of the gospel in us that testifies to the power of the cross. People look at this community and see Jesus.

Jesus tells His disciples much the same thing on that last night in the upper room: *A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*" John 13:34-35 He is calling us to love one another in ways that can be seen by all people so that they will know that the reason we live like this is because our hearts and minds have been transformed by God. The primary purpose in community is not to meet our needs but that God would be glorified in the world.

So with that as the backdrop, let's look at this passage in Hebrews. *Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us hold on to grace. By it, we may serve God acceptably, with reverence and awe; for our God is a consuming fire.* Hebrews 12:28-29 The author is telling his readers that because they are receiving a kingdom, that they are coming into full possession of an incredible inheritance as a chosen race, royal priesthood, holy nation, a people for God's own possession – the needful thing for that to happen is grace. And they don't just need grace – they need to hold on to grace. There are two things we need from God – mercy and grace. If we did not receive mercy – we would never find grace. It is the mercy of God that we find grace. That is why the writer to the Hebrews earlier tells us to draw near to the throne of grace. *Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.* Hebrews 4:16 We should be all the time drawing near to the throne of grace – because that is where our deepest needs are met.

First of all we stand in need of **mercy**. The definition of mercy is the **'forbearance from inflicting harm or punishment when one has the power to inflict it – compassionate treatment of an offender or adversary.'** We deserve justice – but God is merciful. **Mercy is not getting what we deserve. It reminds me of the man who had his portrait done by a very famous artist. But when he saw the finished painting he stormed back to the painter and said: "This picture does not do me justice!" Whereupon the artist replied, "Sir, with a face like yours, you don't need justice, you need mercy!"** Mercy is what we need from our God who is a consuming fire. Mercy that we are not consumed by His wrath against sin. Mercy that God does not just say, 'Enough!' and end it all right now. Mercy that He will be long suffering with us because He knows our frailties and that we are but dust. We need mercy – 'Lord have mercy!' the psalmist cries.

But **mercy is not grace**. Now I think we all have a view of grace that is somewhat incomplete. The classic definition of grace is **unmerited favor**. But I would argue that that is mercy. Mercy is undeserved or unmerited withholding of adverse actions against us. That is, we have a punishment or consequence coming that we richly deserve, but instead of receiving the punishment we receive mercy – simply because of the will of the one who gives it. *'I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy.'* We don't do anything to obtain mercy – it is either given or not. We can't earn it or buy it – **we can only receive it**. It is passive – we **don't** get what we deserve.

But grace is different. We will often say, **'Have some grace for me will you?'** And we mean, **'Cut me some slack.'** Or **'Give me more time.'** Or **'Have patience, God is not through with me yet.'** And all of these simply mean, 'Have mercy – I don't deserve your consideration – but in view of my frailty – have some compassion, and don't visit me with the consequences of my actions.' And we need mercy, **but mercy cannot help us with sin – it can only overlook sin**. And we need something that will overcome sin. We need action – not just a passive overlooking. And grace is active. Grace does not lower the bar with respect to sin – it takes us over the bar. Grace is not a time extension – because time will not solve our sin problem – we need grace to overcome sin.

Romans 5:20 tells us that *'...where sin abounds, grace does much more abound.'* **Grace conquers sin**. Is there sin in your life? Do you struggle with temptation? **What you need to receive is mercy** – to not get what you deserve. To not be immediately destroyed by a Holy God because of sin. **And you need to find grace!** Not just another opportunity to try and do better. We need grace. Grace is what conquers the sin. **We need sin – conquering grace**. And you have to go to the **grace place** to get it – the throne of grace. The only place you are going to get help when you need it is on your knees. The reason most of us don't find grace is that we are not willing to come to the place of prayer. Oh, we may pray, but it's a token prayer – it lacks conviction, dedication and endurance. The promise is there – mercy is there – sin-conquering grace is there. The problem is not with God – it is with us. We have not come to the throne of grace – we've approached the throne of self – and there's no help there. We need help – not a cosmic do-over, because if we had the chance to do it over we'd probably sin even worse.

If we see grace as only that quality that somehow gets us out of punishment or consequences we deserve – it robs grace of its power. **Grace is the power of God doing in us what we could never do ourselves**. Grace is God Himself working in us to overcome sin and the destructive tendencies of our self-centered living, to fight and win over temptation. 2 Thessalonians 1:11-12 says, *And in view of this, we always pray for you that our God will consider you worthy of His calling, and will, by His power, fulfill every desire for goodness and the work of faith, so that the name of our Lord Jesus will be glorified by you, and you by Him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.* Living a worthy life before God and every good intention and faithful deed is made possible by grace.

Look at the work of grace:

We were chosen by grace – Romans 11:5

We are justified by grace – Romans 3:24

We are called by grace – 2 Timothy 1:9

We are saved by grace – Ephesians 2:5

And grace will lead us home. In every case, grace is a power that works – it works to choose, to justify, to call and to save.

Grace is not a thing – ***grace is the power of God working in us to change us, and mold us, and conform us to the image of Christ.*** When Paul was struggling with what he called 'a thorn in the flesh' and couldn't take it any more, he asked the Lord repeatedly to remove it. But God replied that *"My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness."* 2 Corinthians 12:8 **God's grace is God's power** working in and for and through us to accomplish His will and purpose in these weak and frail vessels. *But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me.* 1 Corinthians 15:10

And here the writer to the Hebrews begs his readers to hold on to grace – because we are coming into possession of royal power, because we are being built into a holy community. In this passage we hear the echo of Peter's reminder that we are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation – a new community that belongs to God. And he says that the needful thing, the important thing we have to have is grace, because it is grace that gives us the reverence and awe that translates into acceptable worship. The ESV translates **serve God acceptably** more accurately here as **offer acceptable worship**. So the writer is saying **'It is by the means of grace that we may worship God in a manner that pleases Him best – so hold on to grace.'**

So what does that look like? You have to understand that the original letter to the Hebrews did not have these chapter breaks like we do now – those were added later. Originally, the letter went like this: *Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us hold on to grace. By it, we may offer acceptable worship to God, with reverence and awe; for our God is a consuming fire. Let brotherly love continue....'* The writer moves right from talking about acceptable worship to brotherly love, and hospitality to strangers, and ministering to prisoners, and social justice, and sexual purity, and generosity of heart. And so what are we to conclude? I think we are supposed to conclude that **acceptable worship to God, real worship to God, is about community**. More than anything, this passage speaks to us of the community of the redeemed worshipping God together in a way that pleases Him. To have brotherly love necessarily means that you have some brothers and sisters to love. To show hospitality means that you have people to whom you can be hospitable. Worshipping God was never meant to be a solo show. The way we worship God, in spirit and in truth as John tells us, the way He is most magnified and glorified in us and in the world is in community – together.

And for that we need grace. Sin-conquering, offense-covering, burden-bearing grace. Just look at the first thing he talks about – **brotherly love**. The writer says, *Let brotherly love continue.* Hebrews 13:1 The word he uses here is one we are probably all familiar with: **philadelphia**. This is a family love – the kind of love that springs from the fact that we are family. Over in Romans, Paul emphasizes this when he says: *'Be devoted to one another in brotherly love.'* And he uses another word in conjunction with **philadelphia – philostorgas**. And that was a specific word that meant **the mutual love among family** – Husband for wife, parents for children, siblings for siblings. It is a kind of love over which you have no choice. They are family and you must love them. And if your families are anything like mine – you know that you need the grace of God to love them. If you are like me you know that there were times in your life when if you weren't family with these people, you would have seriously considered other arrangements.

The Bible says let this kind of love continue. That is, don't put any roadblocks in the way of brotherly love; let it be kept secure, let it be constant, let it be enduring, let it be held continually – keep loving one another as brothers and sisters. And part of the problem is that we say, 'Yeah, brotherly love, brotherly love' and we even call each other brother and sister. But the radical nature of this does not really impact our hearts. You see, this kind of thing among people who didn't really know each other, weren't flesh and blood relatives, was a radical thought in the day when this letter was written. Christians were seen as very peculiar people **because** they practiced brotherly love.

Lucian of Samosata was a Greek intellectual who lived in the second century when Christianity had spread to virtually every corner of the Roman Empire and way beyond its borders. He was a satirist and cynic who hated Christians for many reasons, but primarily because he considered them ignorant, gullible, and naïve. Nevertheless, he recognized something about them – and what stood out was this thing called brotherly love. He said: ***Their founder persuaded them that they should be like brothers to one another. Therefore they despise their own privacy and view all their possessions as common property.***

This was radical then – and it's radical now. Lucien of Samosata knew how radical – he basically said that because these people considered themselves brothers and sisters, they have given up their privacy and the right to use their possessions any way they want. If you know anything about family you know that they have a claim on your resources, they have a claim on your wallet, they have a claim on your living space. Families know who you really are. They've wiped your nose and wiped your bottom – or you've wiped their nose and bottom – or you've seen those things wiped. You can't put on airs – they've seen you in the morning before the makeup goes on. They've seen you at your best and they've seen you at your worst and yet you're still in – they still love you. Home is the place where they have to take you in. ***Let brotherly love continue*** talks about our unconditional commitment to one another and a level of transparency that is only found in families.

Living in community means that we are radically committed to one another

The fact that individually we have experienced the grace of God through Christ in the gospel, means that every other person who has experienced this grace, regardless of race or status or any other normally limiting factor, is our brother or sister – we are family. ***And for this we need the grace of God.*** Grace, the power of God because we need it. Grace, the power of God when we are offended and hurt. Grace, the power of God to help us overlook those offenses and hurts. Grace, the power of God to fill our hearts and minds with hope and joy and encouragement. Grace, the power of God to cause us to live a worthy life. Grace, the power of God to help us battle the world, the flesh and the devil. Grace, the power of God to fight through our lust, and our pride and our rebellion. Grace, the power of God that enables us to live in community, loving God and loving one another.

It is God's mercy that He didn't give us what we so richly deserved, and it was God's grace that reached down and plucked each one of us from our headlong pursuit of hell and brought us into His family where we call Him Father and each other brother and sister. And it is His grace that sustains us in community and allows us to testify of His grace to the world. If you are here this morning and you don't have a sense that you are part of the family of God, I urge you by the mercies of God to accept the grace poured out for you on the cross of Christ, who loved us and gave Himself for us – who was rejected so that we might be accepted into His family, who bore our sins in His body on the cross so that we might be no longer strangers and aliens, but children of God, a people for God's own possession, loved and treasured by Him, holding on to grace.

Our gracious God and Father,

We thank You for waking our soul and our senses to the reality that we are together a holy community that reflects the glory of God on earth. Forgive us for living for ourselves and neglecting our calling as a holy people who live to proclaim the excellencies of Christ. Forgive us according to Your promise to be slow to anger and abounding in mercy and full of grace. We take You at Your word to boldly approach the throne of grace to receive that mercy and find that grace for timely help. Come now and fill our souls with new resolve and new power; open the eyes of our hearts to a new view of Your promises and of Your supreme value. Pour out on our thirsty souls showers of mercy and rivers of sin-conquering grace. Let brotherly love reign among us and make us a holy community that so magnifies and glorifies God, that it causes the world to believe in Your Son, and grant that we would delight in God through Jesus Christ spreading His joy through the gospel, we pray in the precious, life-giving, joy-filling, community-making name of Jesus Christ our Savior, Amen.