

AMAZING GRACE – Part 24*'Living Under Grace'*

by Rev. Robert Griffith

The Apostle Paul preached about God's amazing grace often and intensely. He repeatedly said that we are loved and accepted and given the power of God without the works of the law and that it all came to us freely through Christ Jesus. There was no other message for Paul and he preached that message tirelessly wherever he went.

His letter to the Church at Philippi shows Paul rejoicing with these believers who stood with him in sharing the work of the gospel. It is Paul's most intimate and joyful letter, as he recounts his own journey of living under grace. Then he concludes (Philippians 3:1):

"Finally, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord."

Maybe he meant to stop there, because that sums it up! The Christian life is meant to be one of power and joy and fruitfulness - but he couldn't stop there! He went on and said:

"It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you."

He explains his single-mindedness: *'It's a safeguard for you that I keep preaching this and reinforcing how much God loves you, how freely He accepts you, and how that can never be taken away from you.'* He says it's not a bother for him to say this over and over again. Paul's attitude regarding the gospel and what is safe is somewhat different to many in the Church today.

Teachers of religion say that it is unsafe to emphasise the free, radical grace of God without the works of the law. Of them, Paul says in verse 2: *"Watch out for those dogs, those men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh. For it is we who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh ..."*

Paul says: *'You are what you are by a gift from God – not any work of the flesh - now act like it.'*

The Church will be renewed the day we truly believe who we really are. We are already law-keepers before God in Christ; we are already perfect before God, in Christ. When that truth hits home, we will see transformation in our community. The power of God will creatively communicate what we are and the message of who Christ is to those who don't know it. Grace is the heart and soul of the gospel. People will be attracted to us and to the Church like never before when we are living in the victory, the freedom and the power that is already ours in Christ.

As we have already discussed, the law is the tool that Satan uses to attack us and drag us away from God and each other. We see in Colossians 2 that Satan needs the law in order to accuse us and in that same beautiful passage we see that Jesus disarmed the devil by nailing the law to the cross! We keep the devil disarmed by preaching grace over and over and over and over again!

That's why Paul says: *'It's no trouble for me to keep telling you and reminding you of God's love and acceptance and empowering through grace. It's no trouble for me and it's a safeguard for you - because it keeps the devil disarmed.'*

Many have grown up in the Church with the idea that our greatest struggle in life is between doing good and doing bad. The truth is: you are accepted freely by grace, regardless of your good deeds or bad deeds. When you lose sight of that truth, you expose your heart and your life to the enemy of God. Any lie, but especially a religious lie, is dangerous because it becomes the fertile soil where the 'father of lies', the devil, plants his seed and grows his evil crops.

There are lots of great reasons for doing good! We know that we reap what we sow. If you choose to do good, whether you are a Christian or not, your life will work a lot better, all things considered. If you choose to do evil, whether you are a Christian or not, the chances are pretty high that your life will be impacted negatively. So choose to do good - it's good for you, and it's good for those around you. Sin does not glorify God and it hurts you and those around you – so don't do it. It's that simple.

However, sinning or not sinning has nothing to do with our relationship with God, because that relationship was established for us in Christ and given to us as a free gift. The big personal conflict facing us all is not choosing between good and evil, but choosing between the Spirit and the flesh.

Paul said: *'Watch out for those dogs, those men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh. For it is we who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh.'* We worship by the Spirit - and put no confidence in the flesh. There is always conflict between Spirit and flesh.

What does it mean to be *in the Spirit*? Does that refer to a vision or special revelation, or to be in the presence of God in a truly powerful way in worship, or when you say or do something that really blesses someone else, or when you pray in tongues? All of those things may well be spiritual, but that's not what Paul is talking about here. Being in the Spirit, according to Paul is to glory in Christ, rather than putting confidence in the flesh.

Romans 2:28-29 *"A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God."*

When we're righteous according to the written code we get our praise from each other. But we get praise from God by believing that He has given us everything freely. It really is that simple. If you feel less inclined to work for the Kingdom because you realise that God isn't going to pay you for it with His blessings or power, nor praise you for it either, then your motivation was wrong anyway. Paul contrasts the Spirit with the written code. We identify some things by looking at their opposite. Living by the Spirit, by grace, putting confidence in Christ alone - is the opposite of living and relating to God through the law - through religious behaviour and rule-keeping.

Romans 7:5,6 *"For when we were controlled by the sinful nature, the sinful passions aroused by the law ..."*

One of the reasons that the preaching of the law doesn't work is because the law has absolutely no value in restraining sinful behaviour. Sinful passions are aroused by the law! Being under the law didn't work. We all tried and failed and tried and failed and tried again. People will tell you that's the normal Christian life. No it's not! That's the *abnormal* Christian life - it's trying to live the Christian life under the law and the two don't mix! The new way is by the Spirit, the old way is by the law.

Romans 7:5-6 *"... For when we were controlled by the sinful nature, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in our bodies, so that we bore fruit for death. But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code."*

Now, back to Philippians:

Philippians 3:3 *“For it is we who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh though I myself have reasons for such confidence.”*

The new way is by glorifying Christ. Paul says: *‘I don't just put some confidence in the flesh; I put NO confidence in the flesh.’* Being in the flesh, according to Paul, is putting confidence in our own ability to gain favour with God by the works of the law – or in layman's terms, trying to please God by our performance. Being in the flesh is being in yourself rather than in Christ. When operating in the flesh, our relative worth and acceptance is dependent upon our performance. Flesh is self-righteousness.

So when holiness preachers tell us that the Church is full of flesh - they're right, but not in the way they think. When they rave against the sin in the Church, they are not referring to the flesh, even though they think they are. There's more flesh in what they're preaching than in those they're preaching to! They are encouraging a breed of self-righteous Christians who judge their relative worth in the Kingdom of God and in His Church by what they do and how well they do it. *That is the flesh!*

Let's see how Paul defines it ...

Philippians 3:3-6 *“We ... worship by the Spirit of God, and glorify Christ Jesus, and ... put no confidence in the flesh though I myself have reasons for such confidence. If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless.”*

Flesh is being a good, holy, right person and being proud of it. We have the choice of being in the Spirit - having confidence in Jesus and allowing the Spirit to communicate with us and to establish a relationship between us and God; OR, being in the flesh - thinking the law can mediate our relationship with God.

Paul says we cannot and do not rely on our own effort in any way, shape or form. So those who say that a little law is needed to balance grace are, in essence, saying that a little flesh is needed to balance Spirit. But Paul says he puts no confidence in the flesh whatsoever:

“But whatever was to my profit ... (all this law keeping and legalistic righteousness - I am a perfect Pharisee) ... I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish (the Greek is much stronger than that!) ... that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ - the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection ...” (Philippians 3:7-10)

If we think that our good deeds are at least some gain before God, Paul says forget it - they are rubbish before God! We think that obedience and sacrifice and being good gets us closer to God: Paul says that's garbage! If anyone could have done that it would have been Paul. Instead, he says he had a revelation of God's grace in Christ, through the Holy Spirit - and so he now counts all that hard work and obedience as loss!

Now he puts no confidence in that whatsoever. Paul's profound and compelling reason to put absolutely no confidence in the flesh – is so he may **know Christ**.

Paul learned the one thing that matters above all others – is to actually know Christ and to know His power. This was his prayer for all believers in Ephesians:

Ephesians 1:17-19 *“I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe...”*

Paul wanted to know God in an intimate way and he wanted the power of God in His life and ministry, and he says we can all get that - not by doing more and trying harder through the law – but by the Spirit of wisdom and revelation. The Spirit ministers God's total, free acceptance of us in Christ and His unconditional love for us because of the blood sacrifice of Christ. That is how we know God as our Saviour. **God wants to be known as He really is.** That is why He sent Jesus Christ. Jesus said, *“If you've seen me – you've seen the Father.”* (John 14:9)

Some of you have a hunger and longing to know God and at times that hunger triggers impatience and frustration. You need to remember that fruit doesn't just pop out the minute the seed is planted - it takes time. The Lord is able and willing to give you immeasurably more than all you ask or imagine - but He won't give you the lot tomorrow. Just like a fruit tree, when the seed has grown and been nurtured with the right food, the fruit will show at the right time - but that season of fruit bearing is preceded by years of growth and maturing.

So too with your relationship with God - be hungry and thirsty for more of His presence, His blessings and His empowering for ministry - He gave you that hunger, it's good - just recognise that it takes time. There will be instant change in some areas, as people are set free from spiritual bondage and legalistic oppression; but other things will be slowly transformed and dealt with over the long haul. It will happen as you grow in the Lord, and often, slow change is the most profound of all. But let me say this: the speed at which you travel on this road with God, and the size and nature of the blessings and ministry and opportunity, will depend largely on how much you really want. James says: *“You have not because you ask not ..”* (James 4:3). Many of us are fearful of asking for more from God because we either don't think we are worthy of it, or we don't think we could handle it when it comes. Both are lies from the enemy.

God's bidding is God's enabling and if we have the humility, He will give us the ability. He gives us the strength, the power and the wisdom, as and when required, for the fruit that He desires to bring. However, to a significant degree, we determine how much we want from God, and as far as I'm concerned, let's have the lot! Back up your truck to heaven and ask God to dump the lot - let Him worry about whether you can handle it or whether you deserve it – that's His problem, He just told us to ask for it.

Now the key to fruit-bearing is remaining in Jesus, not keeping the law. So what does remaining in Jesus mean? :

John 15:1-11 *“You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.*

If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you.

This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete."

The two components of remaining in Christ, or maintaining intimacy with Him, are attending to His word and obeying His commands. Sadly, religion takes these very things and turns them into oppressive law and legalistic duties.

It's a mystery, but it's an observable fact, I have seen so people transformed and given new life and joy and meaning because of the words that have come from this teaching. There is a new kind of life, a new kind of expectation - a new thing happening in those know they have been hearing the words of Jesus which are interpreted by His Holy Spirit and lodged in their heart as seeds.

Reading the Bible is a great way of sowing those seeds. His Word is life. If you let it in, and meditate on it and protect it, and let the it dwell richly in you, it will of its own accord, produce life and fruit in abundance. Seeds look very ordinary – tiny and lifeless – they show no sign of the amazing life potential inside them. Words are common, but if they contain the life-changing Word of God and you take them in, they find fertile soil that the Holy Spirit has prepared and they germinate. When the time is right, life explodes from that seed, intermixed with excitement and joy. I remember when this happened for the first time for me many years ago I was thinking, *'Something's breaking up through the ground - the stony walls of my heart are coming down! The seeds are destroying the foundations of my legalism! My entire perspective of God, myself and others is changing!'*

One tiny life-impregnated seed can split a huge lifeless rock - because life always overcomes death! Light always dispels darkness. We remain in Jesus by attending to His Word. Each time you take it in, you are impacted by something different. That's the power of the Word of God.

The second way we remain in Jesus is by doing what He says. Again, we are so close to religion here. If we turn just half a notch on this dial - the devil turns this into legalistic, life-destroying religion. Doing what Jesus says is entirely different to obeying the law. The law is written on paper, on stone – it is objective, it doesn't care about your circumstances. The instructions of Jesus come from a person to a person and they come with character and personality. They come in the context of a relationship and we can never have a personal relationship with an impersonal law.

A cold, abstract law does not inspire motivation, but when a person whom you love and respect and want to please calls you to live in a certain way, everything changes. Jesus pleads with us as dearly loved children - He says: *'Your lives will work - you will be so blessed and joyful and fulfilled and happy and that's what I want for you, and that will happen if you do what I say.'* Commands in the New Testament are spoken against a very different backdrop to those commands under the old covenant law. In fact, I would be happier personally if we referred to them as *exhortations*, for that is what they are in effect.

The New Testament calls people like me Shepherds, but understand this: **Shepherds do not feed sheep. Shepherds lead sheep to food and the sheep decide to eat it or not.**

I cannot force people to take in what they need, or to change or to do anything. I care greatly when I see people in the Church struggling under the load of guilt or rejection or pain; and I could lose sleep and energy over the sheep who don't want to eat, but I realise that I can never change that. It's not my job to feed anyone – that's their responsibility. I cannot take responsibility for your life or anybody else's life.

I don't want you to believe anything or do anything I say just because I said it. I want only one thing, and I want it with all my heart. I want you to know Jesus Christ - and everything I say and do is designed to make that connection - a personal intimacy with your Creator and Redeemer! Just love Him. Develop a personal face-to face relationship with Jesus. Many people find that statement difficult. Some people have been going to Church and living as a Christian for years, but still don't know what that really means. Trust me, there is more - a whole lot more. In fact, if you don't get to know Jesus in a personal, vibrant, intimate way - you really have nothing.

Don't let the devil deceive you and keep you locked in some kind of 'intellectual faith', which is a contradiction in terms really. You can *know* Jesus personally. Jesus is alive! If you have welcomed Him into your life then He is alive in you. He will speak to you - He will stimulate your emotions and give you courage and joy. He will alter your life in such a way that you will know that He's alive and you can experience Him walking with you – and you will settle for nothing less than that. You will experience Him as the Holy Spirit releases the presence and power and ministry of Jesus in this Church, in this community and across this nation.

So allow me to take away one last opportunity for legalism and say this: If you just can't get your mind around the free grace of God or cannot accept it at this point, don't worry about it ... you are not outside of God's grace just because you don't understand it. As long as you're here – you're here, and if you can't believe this in your heart, then we'll believe it for you for a while - maybe a long while because we're in this together. God loves you and accepts you as you are - so will we. We'll know Jesus for you for a while - but ultimately, Jesus wants you to know Him as He knows you. There will never be a time in your life when you are not going to need a Saviour to love you; you're never going to outgrow the need for God as He really is. You will know God and will experience His love, His power, His compassion and His mercy - when you understand His grace in all its truth, by revelation from the Holy Spirit.

The primary purpose of this teaching series has been to prepare us to participate with Jesus Christ in His mission – for that is the only mission we have. The Church doesn't have a mission. Christ has a mission and that mission has a Church. It has been my goal in these 24 sermons to strip away all religious baggage by exposing some of the ways in which it comes into our lives, and the lies that perpetuate it. Jesus paid the price to free us from religion once and for all time and that freedom is experienced as we walk in intimacy with Him.

To know Jesus at all is to know Him as a free gift. To participate in His mission and to experience fellowship with one another and minister to one another, we have to understand His grace. We need to receive love from God and love from others – and never try to earn it. We also need to learn to give God love freely, in worship, obedience and service and freely give love to each other in acceptance and kindness. We've been accepted and loved freely and when that reality hits home - we are empowered to accept and love others freely. Revival, renewal and reformation will come when the grace of God is preached and understood in all its truth.

I share Paul's conviction below and I can think of no better words than his to express my heart's desire as I finish this important teaching series:

Acts 20:24 *"I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord has given me - the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace."*

1. Read through this week's sermon once without taking notes or highlighting anything ... just to get the big picture. Go through the text more closely. Highlighting or underlining key phrases or paragraphs which stand out as significant to you. What single statement impacted you the most? How will that now change your life? Write down what you need to do to respond to God's truth today.

2. Ponder the following statements from this week's sermon. What practical implications could or should flow from each of these statements? If you ask "How then shall I live?" in light of each of these truths, what would be your answer?

The Church will be renewed the day we truly believe who we really are.

Paul says we cannot and do not rely on our own effort in any way, shape or form. So those who say that a little law is needed to balance grace are, in essence, saying that a little flesh is needed to balance Spirit.

Don't let the devil deceive you and keep you locked in some kind of 'intellectual faith', which is a contradiction in terms really. You can know Jesus personally. Jesus is alive!

The Church doesn't have a mission. Christ has a mission and that mission has a Church.