

AMAZING GRACE – Part 23

'Grace and the Mission of Christ (2)'

by Rev. Robert Griffith

Following on from our last sermon, I want to continue talking about the prominent place that grace has in the mission of Christ. Over the past few decades I have been asked a few times now when I am going to get off this grace hobby-horse and preach about sin and repentance. Paul was asked the same question and attracted the same criticism. He was constantly attacked verbally and even physically because his message of God's grace was an offence to the Pharisaic mind, as it still is today. Religious people walked away from Jesus and Paul and criticised them because they made people feel good about themselves instead of forcing them on their knees to grovel in the dirt before a holy, angry God. Religious people have walked away from me too over the last forty years and they will do that with anyone who preaches the grace of God the way it should always be preached.

That's why Jesus locked horns with the Pharisees so often - the grace of God is an offence to those still under the bondage of religion. If focusing on sin and repentance when preaching to the lost actually served to advance the Kingdom of God – I would do nothing else. But it doesn't - it never has and it never will! Read your Old Testament. It is literally full of 'turn or burn' sermons. Did they work? No! The very fact that we have a *New Covenant* and a *New Testament* is clear evidence that preaching against sin didn't change the people - certainly not over the long haul. Paul actually said it made them worse!

If those 'turn or burn' prophetic sermons could have worked - Jesus would not have come - there would have been no need for His atoning death and glorious resurrection. Look at Church history and so many of the evangelistic rallies in the latter part of the 20th century and see how many thousands of people responded to the '*save yourself from the wrath of God*' sermons. See how many of those hell-fire and damnation messages led to genuine, lasting repentance and changed lives.

I'm not talking about the people who are frightened into the Church for a year or two and then leave. I'm not talking about the people who are frightened into the Church and stay bound by religion for the rest of their lives. I'm talking about people who are genuinely saved and brought into the love and grace of God through that kind of preaching and who remain there and bear fruit. It just doesn't happen.

That's why Paul said in Romans 2:4 that, "*.. it's God's kindness that leads us to repentance.*" It's the overwhelming realisation that God loves us in spite of our sin and that He gives us the power to repent of our sin and change - that is what brings the fruit of repentance and holiness and allows sin to come out into the open and be exposed to the light of God's grace.

'You're going to hell, repent or die' sets up a win-lose proposition. The only way that you can win and they can win is for them to say yes. If they say no to your invitation to follow Jesus, the conversation comes to an end. The only way they can go on being your friend is for them to say yes. You put yourself on one side and them on the other. *'You're lost – I'm found - repent and believe and come over and join me.'*

The seductive thing about this is that in a technical sense that statement may have some truth in it - but it's not helpful and it is rarely effective. The good news, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, is always a win-win story.

The proper way to tell this gospel story is this:

'God loves you whether you believe it or not. God loves you whether you love Him back or not. God's love is boundless. You can't keep Him from loving you. How you feel about God is totally irrelevant to how He feels about you. You don't make God mad or stop His love for you because you sin. You might break His heart and grieve His Spirit, but His love for you is total - it's irrepensible, it's unconditional, it's unstoppable and it has no limits! You may not believe in God, but God believes in you!'

God does not let anybody in the world determine His attitude towards them because of their attitude towards Him. God doesn't love you because of anything in you - good or bad. Therefore He doesn't stop loving you because of anything in you - good or bad. He loves you because of what's in Him. He loves you because He is love. He loves you whether you repent or not. God so loved the world - before the world did anything.'

Now that is good news! That is the most wonderful story known to mankind! You can tell that story anywhere, anytime. Don't leave home without it! And you can't find anybody that isn't better off after you tell them that story! It's a win-win situation. If they don't accept that God loves them you can simply say, *'That's OK, I'll be back tomorrow to tell you again.'* You maintain the relationship. You do not demand anything from them. You do not ask them to change in any way. You are giving them something they desperately need: acceptance - and that acceptance, especially as it flows through you from God's heart, is what will open their hearts to the gospel. Once you say, *"Repent, turn or burn !"* ... you get one shot and you either win or lose. Our experience tells us we usually lose and that person is pushed further away from God and the Church.

Do you think that the prostitutes, tax-collectors and other drop-kicks with whom Jesus spent so much time actually responded to the gospel the first time they met Him? I doubt it. I have no Scripture to prove that, but I seriously doubt it. I think it's more likely that Jesus would have been building a relationship with these people by loving them unconditionally, sharing fellowship and meals with them and it was that acceptance of them as people which melted any barriers and brought the fruit of repentance. If He had said, *'turn or burn'* the first time He laid eyes on them - He would not have seen many of them again.

I've discovered that not only is this story good for people who don't yet believe it - in a way it's even better for people who think they believe it - but don't experience it yet. In many ways the people who need evangelising more than any other people in the world are the people in the Church! They need to *believe* what they believe. They need to *experience* what they have been told. They need to *live* what they sing about - that God loves them.

I get to tell this story almost every day of my life, and I get to see it literally change people's lives. It's the greatest thrill in the world - and when I move out of this role, and look back I will see some really hard times and remember the intensity of the pain and heartache from being in the front line of ministry - but that will never cancel out the joy of telling the story of Jesus over and over again.

God's way of producing the energy for us to engage with the mission of Christ is to fill us so full of His love and unconditional acceptance that it simply oozes out and overflows into all those around us. When you realise that you can't lose no matter what you do - then your motivation to get out there and do something is going to skyrocket. This story is so boundless that everybody, especially people in the Church, need to hear it every day. It is never wasted on anybody.

There are people that you need to tell this story to today. Some kind of encouragement or blessing or expression of love is your way of saying to someone: *'You're accepted here, you're loved here and a little bit of that massive love that God has for you has come through me.'*

A smile, a hug - an offer to help and the wonderful thing is that it never falls to the ground - it never returns void. The grace of God that equips the Church for Christ's mission is first of all unlimited - it is without boundaries and secondly it is unconditional.

Do you remember the story of Zacchaeus in Luke 19? Jesus was walking through the town of Jericho and saw old Zac the tax collector up in a tree and He said: *"Zacchaeus, come down right now."* Now suppose that God woke you up in the middle of the night and said: *"This is God - get up out of bed - I have words to say to you."* How would you feel? Just a little bit nervous I would guess! *"Oops, I'm in trouble now!"*

We find it hard to get the policeman image of God out of our heads. I'm pretty sure Zacchaeus, given his life choices at that time, would have been expecting something from Jesus like: *"Zac, you're in deep trouble - you're a cheat, you're an extortionist, you're a turncoat - you're heading for hell - you need to repent - you need to believe - you need to make restitution to the people that you have cheated and you need to do it now."*

Zac might have expected that from Jesus, because in one sense it was all true. But the Pharisees, the established Church leaders, the Senior Pastors in town had been telling Zac that for years and it hadn't done any good at all. Highlighting his sin and need for repentance had not changed Zac's heart in any way.

So Zac climbs down and braces himself for another barrage of criticism and a good old-fashioned 'turn or burn' sermon. However, what he gets is so radically different and so unexpected and so out of character to what religion has dished out to him for years. What he gets is the spotless, sinless Son of the living God Himself saying: *"Hey Zac, I like you - and I am dining at your house today."* Or words to that effect. Zac is shocked to say the least. To share table fellowship with someone in that culture was an intimate thing - something which communicated strong acceptance of that person. Zacchaeus (and everyone around him) could not believe that Jesus would want to share that kind of intimacy with a low-life scum-bag like old Zac.

But he is not about to refuse this grace, so he leads Jesus off to his house and sits down and is on his best behaviour. He brings out the food, and he's just waiting for Jesus to say: *"Now Zac let me tell you why I'm really here ... I want your pledge card and a tenth of all you earn and a promise that you'll be a good boy from now on."* But he didn't get the lecture he expected. Jesus just said: *"Pass the bread Zac, I'm hungry."* Zac waits and waits and can't believe it when Jesus gets up to leave without preaching to him about his sin. *"Hey Jesus, is that it? Is that all you're going to say to me?"*

Yes, that's it. Jesus just wanted to enjoy Zac's company and his home and have a meal with him. He wanted to identify with Zacchaeus. He wanted His grace towards Zacchaeus to be His message. Jesus loved Zacchaeus unconditionally. All the others are outside saying: *"He's eating with sinners!"* Jesus' reputation was going down the drain. His credibility as a teacher in that part of town was now destroyed and he says: *"This is why I came - to eat with the sinners. I came for those who are sick and know they are sick - not the ones who are sick and think they're not."* Zac is overwhelmed ... *"You mean you love me the way I am - you haven't asked me to repent or give any money back or change or conform in any way. Wow, I can't believe it."*

Now listen, in Jesus name please get this, what is this man's reaction to the unconditional love and acceptance of Jesus? Repentance followed naturally. When grace came to Zac's house he said: *"I promise to give half of what I own to the poor and if I've cheated anybody I promise to pay back four times what I cheated."* And Jesus said: *"Today salvation has come to this home."* He didn't once mention sin or repentance or judgment - and yet the result was conviction of sin, repentance and a changed life.

Can you see the incredible power behind this story of Zacchaeus with regard to evangelism? It's mind-blowing. This is the unconditional love, acceptance and grace of God at work. That's why Paul said the gospel is "... *the power of God unto salvation.*"

Jesus came to seek and to save the lost - the sinners. As you look outside the Church you need to know that the Spirit of Jesus is hovering around those people seeking to save them. Whoever you talk to, you know that Jesus has already been there.

You don't change in order to be accepted. Acceptance empowers you to change.

That is GRACE. That is the gospel. If you have even the slightest doubt whether you are totally, unconditionally accepted by God, please do whatever you have to do until you believe that, because your life will not work and you will not become who God created you to become until you get this straight.

One of the changes will be that you will find joy in telling this story to someone else. You won't be witnessing under the weight of obligation, afraid to offend or lose friends – you will experience an inexpressible and glorious joy which compels you to tell this story to everyone in the world. When that happens, you've got the gospel – you've discovered the power of God's amazing grace.

If you have never felt relaxed and comfortable witnessing in the past, maybe it's because you were telling the wrong story or you were telling someone else's story because it was not your own experience. When God's grace is understood and embraced, it will well up inside you and you'll speak out what is in your heart. The more you do it - the more it works. The more you respond to those little inclinations to tell somebody the good news - the more joy you have in doing it.

The most rewarding and fulfilling thing for me in this ministry is to see people's lives changed by the love and acceptance of God. To see someone's eyes sparkle as the reality of the grace and love of God hits home and to see that person change in character and personality before my eyes is more exciting and fulfilling than watching a leg grow when I am praying for it.

Believe me, I've seen both, and I can tell you that the bigger miracle of God for me is to see how simple words about God's love and the Spirit of God in people confirming that, changes them and empowers them to go out and to tell others so this thing spreads and grows and takes on a life of its own. That is the real wonder and miracle and joy of ministry for me.

Repentance and a changed life are not conditions for salvation - they are the first fruits of salvation, and if we would only believe that truth and act upon it, this Church and this community would be turned on its head for Jesus Christ! When the people in our community hear that God loves them unconditionally and that in spite of their lifestyle and morality and sinfulness, while they were lost in that sin - God sent His only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ to die for them and take the punishment for all that sin and more so they can have a relationship with Him again – they are going to hear the real gospel, perhaps for the very first time.

When those people find in you and in me the same unconditional love and acceptance that they would find in Jesus; when they don't hear us or feel us judging their behaviour or telling them what they have to give up before we'll accept them; when we can look past the cigarette smoke, the smell of liquor, the immorality, and the foul language - without condoning it – and look straight into the eyes of their heart, like Jesus did with Zacchaeus and say 'I love you and accept you, **as you are** because God loves you and accepts you as you are' – then, and only then, this community and this nation will see revival. I am confident of that because I know the power of God's accepting love and God's amazing grace.

The powerful testimony of the early Church is that coming into contact with Jesus and accepting the grace of God through Him, changes people from the inside out. God delights to use ordinary people to do extraordinary things. When we receive blessings or good news, we can't wait to tell others. That is how the gospel spread in those early days – people had to tell their neighbours about the good things they had found in God. That is the mission of Christ and engaging in that mission is the purpose of the Church.

The life and love that He has given us will have an effect in the world around us. People will be drawn to God through the Church when they see His love and acceptance and experience that from His children – the Church. We have good news to tell: God doesn't want anyone to be lost. He wants them to be found by Him.

Understanding and receiving God's amazing grace has to be our highest priority across the Body of Christ because this Great Southland will never see the light and life and glory of God until His people, who are called by His name, connect with His truth. Then we will be changed and empowered to spread that truth as fast as the wind of the Spirit can blow.

How than shall we live?

By His grace and for His glory.

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?

".. it's God's kindness that leads us to repentance." (Romans 2:4)

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