

## If My People - 2

### *'The Key to Everything'*

In my introduction to this series last week, we began by looking at that vitally important statement of the Apostle Paul's. Let's look at it again for a moment.

**1 Corinthians 15:10** *"By the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them - yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me."*

Like a double-sided coin, there are two foundational truths in this verse which appear very different, have very different implications, and yet they remain on the same coin and they need to be held in balance.

The first truth states that we are who we are by the grace of God. Understanding God's grace is a vital first step understanding everything else in the Christian life. We must know deep down in our spirit that we did not earn our salvation, we did not deserve it, there is nothing we can do to pay Him back for it. We were born into a lost and rebellious generation and the condition of sin in which we found ourselves, separated us from the experience of God's love and we were powerless to do anything about it. Then God broke the power of sin, death and Satan through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

There are thousands of people following God today who are still not personally familiar with this side of the coin ... and until they are ... flipping the coin to the other side will not serve them or their God at all. If you think you would like to know more about God's grace, then the teaching series [Amazing Grace](#) is a must for you.

Now assuming you do have a reasonable grasp on God's grace, let me now flip the coin and tell you that whilst God's grace is unconditional in that we do not need to do anything to earn it, receive it or deserve it, we have to understand that the *effect* of God's grace is conditional upon our choices and efforts. Look at Paul's words again ...

*"By the grace of God I am what I am ..."*

Hallelujah ... God is good ... I don't deserve it ... nothing I do or don't do will alter his love and grace to me.

*"but .... his grace to me was not without effect....."*

I didn't just receive it ... and enjoy it and feel warm and mushy inside because of it ... it had an effect in my life. Why? Why was this grace effective for Paul?

*"..... because I worked harder than all of them."*

Paul is effectively saying: *"This wonderful free grace of God that has been lavished upon me has been effective ... it has borne fruit ... it has actually done what it was meant to do ... **because I made a choice** to work hard, in partnership with God."*

Then of course, just to maintain the balance Paul reminds us that even our efforts are empowered ultimately by God – as he says,

*“ ... yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.”*

In Jesus’ name please get this - it is a vital key to the power and glory and reality of God’s kingdom. This is the key to an effective, abundant Christian life. Let me give you a sentence that will appear to be a riddle at first - but it will make a lot of sense when you understand what I mean by it. I have shared this before, but I want to highlight it once again here:

**Our efforts are ineffective in securing God’s grace,  
but God’s grace is ineffective without our efforts.**

This is what Paul is saying. This is also what Paul proved in his life and ministry. Our salvation, our right standing before God, our forgiveness and cleansing, His gifts and power ... the whole wonderful package of the gospel is given to us FREE - by His grace - no strings attached - no effort on our part to secure it. In fact, God secured it for us long before we were even born! That’s the first side of the coin and many of you know that side of the coin very well - it is polished and well-worn and you could articulate the truths contained on that side of the coin to most people.

The other side of the coin is equally important and often neglected by those who think they understand grace. It is the side which says that this grace will be ineffective in the mission of Christ if we do not make deliberate and daily choices which open up the channel for this grace to flow through us - rather than just to us. That’s why Paul mentions God’s grace and His hard work in the same breath: this is a partnership. It is for freedom that Christ has set us free – freedom is an end itself as far as our relationship with God is concerned. However we also need to understand that we have been set free for a purpose. God wants us to respond to His grace and be channels of His grace to a lost and needy world.

This is a pattern all the way through the Bible. We read of God’s grace, love, mercy, forbearance and forgiveness - then almost in the same paragraph we are faced with the question, *“How then shall I live?”* In other words, what is my response to what God has done? What choices am I making each day so that what God has put in me – gets out and makes a difference in my life and the life of those around me?

Let me give you a nice worldly, down-to-earth illustration that we could all relate to. Imagine for a moment (it will be a nice moment, I’m sure), that I deposited ten million dollars into your bank account today. The transaction is legal and there are no strings attached. This is a FREE gift. It is all yours. You can do with it as you wish. You are the legal owner of every last one of those ten million little gifts.

If, and I stress that little word now, if you choose to use that money and spend it, then you will not only be the legal owner of the money, it will have an effect in your life. There may be a few people in the world who would leave that money in the bank and never touch it, but I am sure you would agree that the vast majority of normal people would want that money to have an effect in their life. They would want to see the fruit of their gift. They would want to see it make a difference in their world.

Well at some point in eternity, God deposited far more than ten million dollars into your account. He made a whole range of deposits, in fact. He transferred forgiveness; grace; mercy; holiness; righteousness; abundant life; eternal life; a whole bank-roll of spiritual gifts; power; glory; majesty; healing; wholeness; peace; love; joy; patience; kindness; goodness; self-control.

That's quite an impressive bank statement! In fact, the bottom line of your statement actually reads: *The Life of Christ* - and all those things I just mentioned, and more, came in Christ. What you received in this heavenly direct-transfer is worth a thousand times more than all money in the world. Money is great, we may all wish we had more, however the deposits made into our spiritual bank account are worth infinitely more. But those deposits are only useful and effective if you choose to use them. They will only have an effect in your life and through your life for others if you choose to connect with them and let them out.

IF is such a tiny word, but what power it contains! All through history this tiny word has made such a huge difference in life. All through the Bible we see this word. It shouldn't have all that much power. It's just a two-letter word. But this tiny word punches above its weight because once it begins a sentence, it controls everything else that follows. Its power is disproportionate to its size.

Sometimes I think when we read the Bible, we just ignore this little word. We seem really good at the 'then' part. We preach about it and cry out to God for all the 'then' promises ... but we disconnect it from the 'if' part. We read right through the book of Genesis. We read through the prophets, the Psalms, the minor prophets - into the gospels, then the epistles. And we so easily ignore this tiny word. The problem is that 'if' just won't go away. It's there on nearly every page of Old and New Testaments.

One of the most powerful sentences in the whole Bible, and the verse upon which this series is based, begins with this little word.

**2 Chronicles 7:14** *"If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land."*

God will do what He has promised ... if His people respond to His love and grace and blessing. This big little word is all through the Bible. It's in the Garden of Eden. It's in the story of Cain and Abel. It's in the story of Moses and Abraham and every other great man and woman of God. This big little word is all through history. We live in a cause-and-effect world which is dominated by the 'if ... then' reality.

Now let me stress here that I am NOT talking about a performance-based rewards system. I am not talking about God rewarding us for our efforts ... I am talking about a more practical and pragmatic reality. I am simply saying that God has set us totally and completely free to choose life or death; heaven or hell, right or wrong, this colour car or that colour car; this Church or that Church. We are free to choose. Yes, God is sovereign. I affirm that. I have a very high view of God's sovereignty - but as a sovereign God He can do whatever He wants and what He did with you and me is absolutely amazing and just a little terrifying at times. In His sovereignty, God chose to channel His sovereignty into the choices of His beloved children. He so desperately wanted a free relationship of love with us - He set us totally and completely free.

We are free to sin or not sin.

We are free to obey or not obey.

We are free to worship or not worship.

We are free to use the spiritual gifts He gives or ignore them.

We are free to reach out into our community and change lives every day or stay safe within our fortress and die on the vine.

We are free to believe what God says so clearly or ignore it and make up theologies which suit our personal agendas.

We are free to receive the riches of heaven in salvation and then do absolutely nothing with them.

God wants us to love Him, serve Him and fulfil His great commission and the mission of Christ because we want to ... not because we have to. That is why He set us totally free. That is why there are hundreds of "If ... then" pleas from God all through the Bible. Each one of those statements affirms our freedom to choose and affirms what God can and will do IF we choose to let Him. It is really amazing how we read the Bible and see all the wonderful "then" promises ... but we miss the big "if" which precedes most of them and then we wonder why God doesn't appear to answer us when we cry out for healing and revival and intimacy.

The fabric of our faith must be woven together not only with God's grace, but also with the resulting obedience and action on our part which allows that grace to have an effect. We don't want it to be that way. We want God's promises to be effective without us. We want to just sit back and watch God do His stuff – with us in the grandstand cheering "Go God ... Go God ...!!"

We want to read scripture from Genesis to Revelation, ignoring the big "if." But the big "if" is there, seemingly on almost every page and every paragraph. "If my people will ... then I will ..."

Do you understand the power of "if?" It can't be out-voted by popular opinion. It can't be outflanked by policy. Nothing can change this "if" because it's God's "if." If we do what we're asked to do and what we were created to do ... then all the promises of God will unfold and bear fruit before our very eyes. We will cash cheques on our heavenly bank account every day and we will really make a difference IF ... and only IF ... we do it God's way.

*A couple of stories from real life:*

A man and his family were going camping. They came across a sign that said, "Road Closed. Do Not Enter." The man just drove around the sign because he was sure it would save them time on their journey. Some men are like that ... especially when on vacation ... they need to get from point A to point B by a certain time and that means no stopping to smell the roses and no turning back because of some warning sign. So this guy just drove right around the sign.

His wife was resistant to going around that sign. She was cautious. She was wise. But there was no stopping this persistent road warrior. After a few kilometres of successful navigation, now quite happy with his decision to ignore the road sign, he began to boast of his gift of discernment. He knew there wasn't anything wrong with the road. Someone just put that sign there. Whatever it was, it was nothing big enough to stop him.

It wasn't long before he broke out in a humble sweat as he looked up ahead at a washed out bridge. He turned the car around and retraced his tracks back to the main road. He didn't save time. He lost heaps of time. When they arrived at the original warning sign he was greeted by large hand-painted block letters on the back side of the sign. His wife and three children all read the hand-painted sign out loud. It said: "Welcome back, stupid!"

That's the way it is with God's master plan for His children. God's word answers the age-old question, *"How then shall we live?"* He lays out the boundaries and erects all the road signs and IF we observe them ... IF we actually listen to God and let Him guide our path ... THEN our lives will work and we will make a HUGE difference in this life and the next. IF we cross over those boundaries or ignore the signs however, THEN we reap the consequences in this life. Terrible things happen when we go places we really shouldn't go.

There was one lady on vacation who went up a mountain she should have avoided. No one would have blamed her had she stayed behind. At twelve below zero, even Frosty the Snowman would have opted for the warm fire. Hardly a day for snow skiing, but her husband was - like our other friend - very insistent, and she went.

While waiting on the lift, she realized she was in need of a restroom! Her husband assured her there would be a restroom at the top of the lift. She endured the ride with great torture - the bouncy ride - only to discover at the top there was no such facility. She panicked.

Her husband had an idea: Why not go into the woods? Since she was wearing an all-white outfit, she'd blend in with the snow. And what better powder room than a piney grove? What choice did she have? She skied past the tree line and arranged her ski suit at half-mast. I'm sure you get the picture. Fortunately, no one could see her.

Unfortunately, her husband hadn't told her to remove her skis. Before you could blink, she was streaking backwards down the slope, revealing more about herself than she ever intended. (After all, hindsight is 20/20.) With arms flailing and skis sailing, she sped under the very lift she'd just ridden and collided with a pylon.

She scrambled to cover the essentials and discovered her arm was broken. Fortunately, her husband raced to her rescue. He summoned the ski patrol, who transported her to the hospital. While being treated in the emergency room, a man with a broken leg was carried in and placed next to her. By now she'd regained her composure enough to make small talk. "So, how'd you break your leg?" she asked.

*"It was the darndest thing you ever saw," he explained. "I was riding up the ski lift and suddenly I couldn't believe my eyes. There was this crazy half naked woman skiing backwards, at top speed. I leaned over to get a better look and I fell out of the lift."* Then he turned to her and asked, *"So how'd you break your arm?"*

We make the same mistake, don't we? We climb mountains we are never intended to climb. We go up when we should have stayed down. As a result, we take nasty spills in view of the whole world as it watches us fall in our folly. We, too, end up bruised, embarrassed and exposed when we don't obey or follow the clear path that God has laid out before us.

Now you might be thinking to yourself at this point ... *"He's reading from the Old Testament. What about the New Testament? In the Old Testament, God is a God of law. But in the New Testament, God is a God of grace. Unconditional grace. The big 'if' is absent from the New Testament."*

Not so. The big IF is all the way through the New Testament. Yes, the grace and mercy of God is far more pronounced in the New Testament and yes, the grace of God which saves us is unconditional in the sense that it is in no way a reward for our performance or the quality of our obedience. That is all true and I have multiple teaching series available which will drive that truth home.

However, the effect of God's grace and mercy and forgiveness is conditional. We have to believe it first ... that is our choice and then we have to act on it and allow it to manifest in observable ways in our lives.

We can rejoice in the fact that we are saved and redeemed and reconciled to God and that by His grace we are bound for heaven. But we still live in a cause-and-effect reality. The choices we make will have a direct bearing on what God can do in our life, in our city and in this whole nation.

Remember the statement I made earlier? *Our efforts are ineffective in securing God's grace, but God's grace is ineffective without our efforts.*

IF we cash a cheque against our ten million dollar bank account ... it will change the way we live and we will get to see the fruit of those riches.

IF we cash a cheque against the bank of heaven ... that is, if we make daily choices which are consistent with the revealed will of God and His plan for His children, then it will change the way we live and we will see the incredible, eternal fruit of those choices.

The big "if." No matter how much we'd like to get rid of it, it looms large in the text. What about you? What about the "if"?

We must begin with that little word ... it is a gateway to all the glory and riches and city-transforming power of heaven ... or it is a road-block in our whole journey with God. Everything we hope for and everything we ever dreamed of hinges on what we do with that one HUGE word: IF.

IF you decide to let that word be a gateway to the abundant life God has planned for you; IF you decide you want to know what choices you need to make on the other side of that gate, then stay tuned to this channel as we continue our examination of that one verse in 2 Chronicles 7:14:

***"If** my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, **then** will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land."*

A truly powerful and confronting verse which sums up every IF in the whole Bible. A verse which, when unpacked and applied, can and will change our whole lives. But that will not happen ... that will not begin to happen until we get past that first word IF.

Are you prepared to pay the price and go through that gateway?

Are you prepared to fulfil your end of this amazing partnership with God?

Are you prepared to make the choices necessary to unleash the riches and power and glory of heaven in your life, in this Church and in this city?

Spend some time with the Lord soon and let Him reveal your heart and you will find the answer to those important questions.