

If My People - 16

Checking our Foundations

Before we venture any further into this extended teaching series based on 2 Chronicles 7:14, I need to take some time to make sure that our foundation is secure. If you can imagine this teaching series as a building project which takes many months to complete, then we need to make sure we are building on a really solid foundation.

That is vital when building a house and even more so when we are constructing a multi-storey building. Using that analogy, when finished, this series will be well over 20 storeys high (80,000 words!). Unless you have a really strong foundation to lay all that teaching on, disaster awaits you.

That foundation, as I stressed at the beginning of this series, is GRACE. God's grace is the foundation of the Christian faith and the key to life. The grace of God reveals the essence of God in His dealings with us which is why I have joined the Apostle Paul many times already in this series as I have declared, *"By the grace of God I am what I am ..."* I also affirm that by the grace of God you are what you are, and this Church is what it is today by God's grace. Let's read that whole verse again:

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."*

Without a firm foundation in grace, without a crystal-clear understanding of grace, we will not be able to handle the exhortations contained in this verse. They will be too heavy, and we will find that our foundation will crack and the whole structure will eventually fall in a heap and take us down with it. This was true in Jesus' day and in Paul's day. That is why they preached and demonstrated the grace of God as much as they did. It was a safeguard, a foundation, and backdrop for all the 'hard words' they also preached.

If you have been awake at all these past few months during this series you will have to agree that this teaching has contained a few hard words – some of which will offend and bruise and discourage those whose faith is not firmly grounded in God's grace. Unless your personal relationship with God is secure in your mind and heart (and that cannot happen without a solid understanding of His grace) then I guarantee that your foundation will crack under the load of this teaching (perhaps it has already?). This is why Paul issued this warning to the Church in Philippi:

Philippians 3:1 *"It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, it is a safeguard for you."*

The "same things" Paul was referring to here is the foundation of God's grace which he preached over and over and over and over again. He knew how easy it was for us be lured away from the bedrock of the true gospel as our foundation is eroded by the enemy and false teaching.

Jesus faced this same dynamic with the first disciples. Let's read these challenging words from our Lord:

John 6:60-67 *"Many of Jesus' disciples said, "This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?" ... Jesus said to them, "Does this offend you? ... The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life. Yet there are some of you who do not believe ... From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him. "You do not want to leave too, do you?" Jesus asked the Twelve."*

The hard teaching Jesus was giving them at that point was similar to the hard teaching coming in this series. What He was saying effectively was that unless those seeds are planted in the seedbed of God's grace - deep in our spirit - they will wither and die quickly or be misinterpreted by our fallen flesh and may even damage us.

I received an email last week from one of our 'extended' Congregation members who joins us online each week from South Africa. It was a very transparent and brutally honest confession from a sincere disciple of Jesus. There were four words which were clearly written from a pit of despair, and yet they were music to my ears (and to God's ears too). Those words were, *"I can't do this."*

This person has come to the realisation that we all must come to at some point. He has reached the end of his resources and he confesses now that he just cannot live up to the clear expectations of the New Testament. He read all the exhortations and admonitions and warnings, and he just sank in a pit of despair, because it's just too hard.

This makes perfect sense because the expectations of a sincere disciple of Jesus Christ are impossible for us to meet and until you get to the end of yourself and say, *"I can't do this;"* until you recognise that the high expectations of Scripture are way beyond your fallen flesh's ability, you have missed the whole essence of the Gospel and the Christian life.

Let's face it friends - we are dead at the starting gate in this race! Have you read some of the stuff in the New Testament? Have you looked at what is expected of you and me? Let me lay some of those expectations on you right now and see how you feel. Ok? Brace yourself.

Hebrews 12:14: *"Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord."*

2 Peter 1:5-8 *"Make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ."*

Ephesians 4:2-3 *"Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace."*

1 Timothy 6:11-12 *"Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, and gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called."*

These are heavy expectations from Paul and Peter and the writer of Hebrews, and these are just a few samples - there are hundreds more! But they were amateurs compared to Jesus! Have a look what He dumped on us:

Matthew 5:20-48 *“For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven. You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment. But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment ...*

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.

And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell ...

... “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.

... “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons and daughters of your Father in heaven.

... Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. “

All the way through His ministry, Jesus raised the bar so high that no sinful human being could ever clear it. For generation after generation the people of God had blown it. Read the Old Testament and you will see time after time after time, we failed to meet the holy standards of God. We needed to be saved from ourselves! So, when our Saviour finally came, what did He do? He took the law of God; He took the righteous requirements of the law, and He made them even harder! He deliberately raised the bar so incredibly high in order to show us once and for all that **we can't do it**. We are totally incapable of reaching the expectations of God – not then, not now, not ever!

Enter ... the grace of God.

Enter ... the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Enter ... the Word made flesh, the incarnate Son of God.

Enter ... the life death and resurrection of Jesus – gifted to us.

We could not even come close to meeting the righteous requirements of God, so Jesus did it for us. He was the only human being who ever met and ever will meet those requirements ... and it is His obedience, His perfect performance against the law of God, which is now credited to our account by the grace of God.

Can you see why they call this ‘good news’?! But wait, there’s more ...!

The wages of sin is death and the cause-and-effect laws of the universe required that sin must be atoned for – but no longer by the blood of goats and bulls which was always only temporary in its effect - this time God ended this saga with sin once and for all when He became flesh and died on our behalf - paying the price for sin once and forever. The holiness of God burned against all sin as the broken body of Jesus breathed its last breath on the cross. That death was also credited to our account as if it was our death. In some mysterious, but glorious exchange in heaven, all of our sin was traded for the righteousness of Christ. But wait, there’s more ...!

Jesus then conquered death! His resurrection to new life and victory over sin, death and Satan was then also credited to us. The Bible says that we were united with Him in His death and His resurrection so that now we are seated with Him in the heavenlies. We are citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven already! All of this came by the grace of God. The justice, mercy and grace of God were all in operation in this wonderful transaction.

Justice is when we get what we deserve ... but Jesus got what we deserved.

Mercy is when we don't get what we deserve ... and we did not have to pay the price of our sin. We were headed for an eternity outside the presence of God, and He stepped in and saved us.

Grace is when we do get what we don't deserve and who would be arrogant enough to suggest that we deserve so great a salvation as this? We are given the righteous robes of Jesus to wear as we walk into the throne room and fall at the feet of our holy, loving Heavenly Father. That is GRACE.

Now there are countless Christians who would say 'amen' to all the above, but their concept of grace stops at conversion. They buy into the heresy which says, *"Grace gets us in the door ... but then we need to do the rest."* That sounds fair enough, God achieved a lot in securing our salvation; it cost Him everything; the least we can do is play our part and do our bit to make all this work.

There is only one problem ... **we can't do it!** Grace doesn't just get us in the door - grace empowers us to live up to the high and holy calling as a disciple of Jesus. Let's look at some Scriptures which remind us of this. The one I have already quoted many times is a classic.

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."*

2 Corinthians 12:9 *"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me."*

Galatians 5:4 *"You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace."*

James 4:6 *"But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.'"*

So, what is this grace? Many traditional commentaries and dictionaries define it as *'God's unmerited favour.'* That definition is misleading and contributes to the error of thinking that grace is that which is in operation only when we are first saved. I believe *'God's unmerited favour'* is a far better definition for mercy, not grace. In the teaching series *'Amazing Grace'* [<https://robertgriffith.net/ag/>] I went into great detail to explain this by putting the word's *'God's unmerited favour'* in the place of the word *'grace'* wherever it appears in the New Testament. It fits well in some verses, but it makes absolutely no sense in many verses and yet the word is the same in the Greek.

So, as I pointed out in that 24-part teaching series, I believe a far more accurate definition for grace is *'The Empowering Presence of God.'* Test that one out in every example of *'grace'* in the New Testament and they will all fit, and the verses will also come to life in an amazing way! You can explore this new definition of grace further in part 14 of the above series.

So, what did I say to my brother in South Africa? How do you face such clear exhortations in the New Testament which tell us what we should be doing and how we should be living? Let me tell you first what you should NOT do when you hear or read those exhortations. You should not jump back 2,000 years and put yourself on the other side of the cross. You should not read these exhortations like people would have read the commands of God under the old covenant.

These are not legalistic requirements laid out before those who desire to please God and not be judged by Him. You cannot please God any more than He is already pleased because you stand in His grace, dressed in righteous robes of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Bible says you are in Christ, and God is very pleased with His Son – so He is pleased with you.

This is not about pleasing God or earning His love or blessing. When you understand grace; when you walk in the empowering presence of God; then you will see these exhortations and characteristics of a mature Christian in a totally different light. You will see them as promises of who you are becoming in Christ. You will see them as the goal or destiny of every believer who presses into the heart of God.

So why worry about any of them then? Why preach this stuff if these are not requirements of God? Why not just focus on the grace of God and let Him do the rest? Good question. I used to wonder that myself. The reason why I must preach the hard word and issue the strong exhortations to grow up into Christ and take responsibility for our actions is because that's what Jesus and Paul did. That's what is in the whole New Testament. Like Jesus and Paul, I have laid a foundation of God's grace upon which I can now build the rest of what I see to be the fullness of New Testament Christianity. I cannot ignore stuff that is on every second page of the New Testament. It is there for a reason. It is there to mature us, to refine us, to shape us into all that God desires for us to be.

These exhortations are given so that we know where we are headed. As Paul said so well, God's grace is meant to have an effect in us. It is meant to do more than make us feel warm and mushy inside at the thought of God loving us so much. When we understand grace as the empowering presence of God, then we can open the New Testament and read what we are empowered to do and who we are empowered to be. All these 'hard words' and admonitions are meant to do one thing and one thing only: drive us to our knees in humble submission before the God in Whose grace we stand.

When we read that wonderful list of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, and self-control - and then look in the mirror - we are not meant to crumble in despair because of our constant failure to live up to such expectations. That is true if we see them as things we are supposed to strive to achieve. But the passage itself says that these are the fruit of the Spirit. It is God's empowering presence within us which will produce that fruit - not our own effort.

So now for the magic question: How do we get it? How do we obtain or walk in or appropriate or experience this grace, this empowering presence of God? Well, you already know the answer! The opening words of 2 Chronicles 7:14 make it really clear. HUMILITY is the key. The Bible has already told us that God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble, and with that fuller definition of grace, we can see that key more clearly:

God opposes the proud (those who seek to achieve this high and holy calling in their own strength) **but He gives His empowering presence to the humble** (those whose No.1 priority is their personal relationship with God).

You see, as I said in the last few sermons on prayer - this is all about relationship. That is the source of our power and our ability to rise to the challenge of being the mighty army of God who marches against the powers of darkness. We march on our knees; we march on our faces before God in humble adoration and submission.

We all love the story of the battle of Jehosaphat in 2 Chronicles 20 when God brought a victory as the worship leaders were sent out ahead of the army. God was making a really important point that day, which is as true now as it was then. The battle belongs to the Lord and our place is in humble submission to Him at every point in our journey.

Next time you read that passage, I want you to notice something. In verse 17 the Lord tells the people through the prophetic voice to *“take up their positions”* and watch the Lord bring the victory. Have you ever wondered what that position was? I used to picture these people all standing on the edge of the mountain, weapons ready, watching the battle unfold. But I missed the very next verse after God told them to take up their positions. Verse 18 clearly shows us what that position is:

2 Chronicles 20:18 *“Jehosaphat bowed with his face to the ground, and all the people of Judah and Jerusalem fell down in worship before the LORD.”*

The empowering presence of God was unleashed that day as the people humbled themselves before Him. We focus on the worship band out the front and think that was what brought the victory. That is only partly true. Without the humble submission of the people of God, they would never have agreed to send the worshippers out in front – that would seem incomprehensible to the battle-hardened men of Judah. Humility released the grace of God. Humility unleashed the power of God and victory came.

Brothers and sisters I will continue to preach the hard words. I will continue to bring that mirror up before us as we look into the faces of our enemies - those enemies which lurk within our own hearts - pride, fear, laziness, selfishness and all the rest.

We cannot ignore those enemies, they are real. We cannot ignore the exhortations of God, they are real. We cannot be complacent about the thousands of people slipping into eternity each day while we play ‘nice to be nice’ Church games once or twice a week. We cannot ignore that huge credibility gap which exists when we look at the Church described in the New Testament and the impact it had on society compared to the Church of today and the impact we are *not* having on society. We must grow up into Christ and face the responsibilities of discipleship!

However, we must also be on guard at every point for the religious spirits that will seduce us and entice us back into a performance-based righteousness – back into religion! If shame, guilt or discouragement come your way as you hear the hard word preached then you need to realise what is happening ... you are falling away from grace and the empowering presence of God is no longer the force behind your motivation to obey and serve and grow and mature.

Like Jehosaphat, we need to take up our positions, humbly on our face; pressing into the heart of God every day; pursuing a personal, intimate relationship with Him as our highest priority. Then, and only then, will we see the victory. Then, and only then, will we see maturity emerging in our walk with God. Then, and only then, will we live to see the day when God heals our land.