

GOD'S SAVING PURPOSES PREVAIL THROUGH A GRACE FILLED CHURCH

Acts 4:32-5:11

INTRODUCTION

I do not think that there is a more misunderstood word in the church in our day than the word “grace”. There is an enormous variety of misunderstandings of this central fact about God and his way of dealing with human beings. I cannot delve into every misunderstanding of this word but I want to concentrate on one of the most flagrant errors. Most people, even most Christian people, think of grace as merely leniency. In other words, God’s grace is his predisposition to not get upset about my sins. For many people grace is merely a description of God’s easygoing nature. He doesn’t get bent out of shape by our sins. He overlooks them and accepts us because he is gracious. God loves you no matter what you do.

Those of you who know what grace is can hear in this erroneous description some truth. Grace is indeed God’s overlooking of sin. It is his loving sinner's unconditionally. However, it fails to understand how God is able to do this. Grace is the opposite of justice. Justice is God’s determination to give people what they deserve. As every human being is a sinner, a criminal in God’s world, God’s justice requires that he sentence every human being to hell. On the other hand, grace is God’s determination to give people what they do not deserve. God is both just and gracious and thus he cannot merely overlook our sins, rather he punishes Jesus for the sins of all who trust in Christ alone for salvation. Grace is therefore, first of all, God overlooking our sins and counting us perfectly righteous because he has fulfilled his demand for justice against our sins by killing his own son in our place. Not a single person in the whole universe deserves to have God do this for him or her.

Second, grace is his giving to his people, contrary to what we deserve, new hearts that want to trust in Jesus. As Paul says in Ephesians 2:4-5, “But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy made us alive with Christ, even when we were dead in transgressions, it is by grace that you have been saved...” So grace is not only God forgiving sins through Christ but also grace is God’s giving life to dead, undeserving sinners for the sake of Jesus. Third, it is the same grace of God which gave Christ for us and gives us new life in Christ which also transforms us. Titus 2:11-14 says, “The grace of God which brings salvation...teaches us to say no to ungodliness and worldly passions and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age while we wait for ... Jesus Christ who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people of his very own eager to do what is good.” God’s unmerited favor in Jesus is God purifying us by Christ's work so that we are a people who are eager to do good. The only reason your sins are forgiven and you are going to heaven is because Jesus lived and died for you. However, everyone whose sins are forgiven by grace is also being transformed by that same grace.

The reason I am beginning this morning with clarifying what grace is, is because in Acts 4:33 after describing the unity and love and powerful witnessing of the church Luke tells us that “great grace was upon them all.” In other words, Luke understands that all the visible things that can be seen in the church are the result of God's undeserved favor towards sinners. Grace always changes lives and churches. God’s salvation by grace is not only a passing over of sins but a transforming of lives. So what we discover in our text today is the kind of church that God’s grace creates. Grace creates a changed community, not simply changed individuals.

MAIN POINT

God’s grace creates churches that are...

I. United in devotion to the Triune God through Jesus (v. 32a)

Luke’s description begins by describing the unity of the “multitude of believers.” We know from previous statements that the number of believers contained in that opening clause is close to 10,000 people. Luke says that all 10,000 hearts and souls were as one heart and one soul. It is a fallacy that only small churches can experience the unity that is being described here. Luke is telling us that 10,000 hearts beat as one heart and

10,000 souls formed but one soul. The size of a church does not have anything to do with the unity or disunity of the church. Rather, the question to be asked is, about what did they have one heart and one soul? What was the unifying factor among these 10,000 people?

That phrase, “heart and soul” (not “mind” as the NIV) ought to remind you of a very famous OT verse that was quoted by Jesus. Deuteronomy 6:4, “Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.” These thousands of believers are united by their common affection for the great Creator God, Yahweh, as made known through Jesus Christ by the work of the Holy Spirit. Each person trusts and loves God through Jesus by the Spirit and it is this common affection that is their unity. Their thousands of hearts beat as one heart for Jesus. The entire community is stunned by the grace of God. Though they should be cursed and consumed by God's wrath for their many sins, yet they are loved by God, forgiven and promised eternal life through Christ.

This should not surprise us or seem incomprehensible. Every Fourth of July thousands of hearts beat as one in delight over the fireworks here in Janesville down at Traxler Park. Every Saturday and Sunday in dozens of football stadiums around the U.S. tens of thousands of people gather together, “one in heart and soul.” With one voice they praise their teams. With one heart they celebrate the victory or mourn the defeat of the objects of their affection. It is not only men with their sports teams who know this experience but also women at their quilting shows or in their scrapbook conferences all experience their many hearts becoming one heart. Humans regularly associate with one another, one in heart and soul, around the things and persons that they love.

But here, by grace, contrary to what any of these people deserve, all these believers share together in their love for Jesus. Notice that this common affection for Jesus results in affection for one another. This is different from every other human association. While we may have a positive regard for those who love what we love, rarely do people actually do what we see the church doing, sharing property with one another out of a genuine affection that comes from our shared love for Jesus. But that is the third point, I want to draw your attention first to v. 33.

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- *United in devotion to the Triune God through Jesus*
- *And are...*

II. Effective in proclaiming the word of God (v. 33)

The text tells us that it was with “great power” that the apostles gave their testimony concerning the resurrection of Jesus. What does Luke mean by the fact that the apostles gave this testimony “with great power”? The primary emphasis here is upon the effectiveness of the apostles’ preaching. On a daily basis men and women and children were being cut to the heart by the proclamation of the gospel so that they repented of their sins, trusted in Jesus Christ, were baptized in the name of Jesus and thus were added to the multitude of believers. Preaching that results in the conversion of sinners is the effect of grace. It is a mark of God’s favor upon a church when the church is engaged in bold proclamation of the word of God and when that proclamation results in people embracing Jesus and entering into the fellowship of the church.

It takes great power to convert even a single sinner. This past Sunday as we baptized those five young people; we were bearing witness to the exercise of God’s almighty power in their salvation. These hardened sinners were given soft hearts that yielded to Christ by the exercise of that same power that God used to create the world (2 Corinthians 4:6). These dead sinners were raised to life by the exercise of that same power God used to raise Jesus from the dead (Ephesians 2:4-7). However, while we as a church have regularly witnessed God’s great power in the salvation of sinners, yet, as I said last week, I don’t think we are as concerned for that power going forth from us as we ought to be. I want to again challenge each of us to begin by praying the prayer the disciples prayed in v. 29, “enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness.” Luke intends for us to see that v. 33 is the answer to that prayer this church prayed with one voice in v. 29. May the Lord answer our prayer so that with “great power” we will bear witness to the resurrection of Jesus.

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III. Giving genuine, generous, organized care to the weak and hurting in the church (vv. 32b & 34-36)

Obviously the greatest evidence to God's grace in this church is the way in which these people loved and cared for each other. Their mutual love for Jesus leads to a genuine and real affection for one another and this leads to not one of them claiming that any of their possessions was exclusively for their use but each person in the congregation viewed and treated his or her possessions as if they belonged to the entire community. We know from what follows that this does not mean that they had a "common purse" in the sense that modern communes do. They didn't all sell all their possessions immediately and then pool all their money and each person received the same allowance as every other person. It is quite clear based on vv. 34 and 5:4 that the sale of property occurred voluntarily and as needs arose within the congregation. What v. 32 is telling us is the way in which each member of the church viewed his or her property.

Even though this passage teaches that Christians can have private property and what they do with that property is their business under God, yet it does teach a view of property that is quite at odds with how most of us think about the stuff we have. The attitude towards personal property revealed here is this: God gives me all that I have not simply for my provision and enjoyment but also for the provision and enjoyment of my brothers and sisters in the church. The resources God has given me are not mine; but ours. However, I do not get to say that your possessions are mine. I have no right to demand that you give me your stuff, nor does anyone else in the church. Nobody has the right to look at what others have and judge them and demand that they share. Rather, each of us must view what we have not as simply mine but ours and then we must voluntarily, cheerfully use these resources to meet the needs of those in the congregation who have need. The resources that God has placed under my control are to be used for me and my family's provision and for providing for the needs of God's people; not only in my own church, but as we will see later in Acts, also for God's church around the world. Our giving to the suffering church in India is an application of what we see here. We each need to evaluate our own view of our homes and cars and clothes and money. Do we view all that we have as given to us by God for the provision of the entire church? Do we have the attitude, "what's mine is yours?"

The first thing Luke says in v. 34 is that there was no poor person among them. The term that Luke uses for "needy" or "poor" is not the most common word but it is the word that is used for "poor" in Deuteronomy 15 which describes how God promises that when Israel enters the land of Canaan there will be no poor person among them because of how abundantly he will provide for them. Luke is making the point that God is fulfilling his promise made to Israel of no poor people among them through Christ in his church. Luke views the generosity of this church as more evidence that the church is Israel and that all the promises God made to Israel in the OT were made not to national, ethnic Israel but to elect, believing Israel. The promises of God are all "yes" in Jesus and nowhere else because Jesus and all who are related to him by faith are true Israel.

Notice, in v. 35, the way in which God provided for the poor is that from time to time those who owned houses and land sold their property and brought the proceeds of the sale to that place where the apostles were teaching and laid the money at the feet of the apostles. This act of placing cash at the feet of the apostles shows that the giver forfeits all rights to the money and puts the money under the authority of the church as led by the apostles. While the money was under the authority of the apostles the actual process of distributing it was most likely done by others acting under the authority of the apostles. How it actually took place we do not know. All we know is that there was some kind of organized system through which needs were assessed and then resources were delivered to those in need, in proportion to their need.

Does this mean that it is wrong for a Christian to privately give aid to another Christian who is in need? Is the church, under the authority of the elders to manage all of the relief to the poor among us? No because there are other passages in the NT that presume Christians care for one another privately, i.e. 1 John 3:17-18, James 1:26-27. However, there are good reasons for entrusting the distribution of resources to the needy among us to the church under the authority of the elders. There are at least four benefits to a formal, corporate provision of aid. First, it is a hindrance to unscrupulous people feigning need in order to defraud others of their resources. A formal, consolidated process prevents the con-artist from going from person to person to get help but places that person in accountability to those who know their situation and how much help has already been given. Second, it prevents unscrupulous givers from lording it over those they help. There is a temptation when you give to another to put yourself over the other and act as though you have a right to decide for them how they can use the resources you gave. Third, when we give our resources to the church we are clearly expressing our submission to Jesus as he rules us through the leadership he has appointed in the church. It is a clear expression of our faith in Jesus. Fourth, when aid is distributed by the church it is more clearly seen that Jesus himself is providing for the need as the church is Jesus on the earth.

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IV. Confronting sin in the camp (5:1-11)

The general description of the church's provision for the needy ends with telling us about a specific example of how one person, a man who went by the nickname, Barnabas, sold a piece of property and then put the full sale price at the feet of the apostles. Barnabas' virtuous action is explained in order to contrast what Ananias and Sapphira do. Ananias and Sapphira, after witnessing Barnabas and others sell property and put it at the feet of the apostles decide they want in on the esteem and respect that is being given to people like Barnabas. They are jealous of Barnabas' position of respect in the community. They covet the approval and applause of men. However, they also crave the security and pleasures of wealth. They cannot bear the thought of disposing of all their wealth. They come up with a way to both be respected by the church and to maintain their standard of living. They sell their property and then publicly give only a portion of the proceeds while declaring that they are giving the whole of it. A perfect plan, except for one thing, God knows what they did.

In a way that we are not told, God reveals to Peter what this couple has done. Immediately after Ananias places the money at the feet of the apostles, Peter confronts Ananias with his duplicity. Peter's confrontation begins with his assertion that it is Satan who has filled his heart. Rather than being filled with the HS like the rest of the church, Ananias is filled with Satan. Peter does not say that Satan made him do it but rather that Ananias has permitted Satan to fill him and thus he has lied to God by keeping back a portion while saying he has given it all. So what does it mean that Satan filled his heart? The Father of lies has, as he did in the case of Adam and Eve, promised Ananias not only that nothing bad will happen to him but also he will experience many good things by this sin. Ananias has listened to and believed the promises of the devil, rather than the promises of God. This is true for all sin. In v. 5 Peter then shows the extremity of his sin by showing that he was under no compulsion to sell his property or give the proceeds to the church. God was not commanding him to do this. He freely chose to sell and to give. Thus the entire action was a voluntary, pre-meditated act of deception and rebellion. While Ananias knew that he was seeking to deceive people he did not think of himself as seeking to deceive God. In fact, this is the heart of his problem, he did not think about God at all. He was not devoted heart and soul to Christ. He did not view the saving mercy of God in Christ as a great thing. Rather he viewed the applause of men and the security of wealth as a great thing.

Immediately upon Peter's confrontation, Ananias is struck down by God. I do not think Peter knew this was going to happen. He was doing what Jesus required to be done. Ananias had sinned in a very public, flagrant

manner and so Peter was confronting him in a very public way. I assume that Peter's plan was to call him to repentance and if he would not repent, to put him out of the church as Jesus instructed he and the other apostles in Matthew 18. However, God killed him before Peter could do anything else. A group of young men take him out of the presence of the church and bury him. Three hours later Ananias' wife Sapphira enters and Peter seeks to find out if the poison was limited to only the husband or if the wife also was filled with Satan. So he asks her what was the sale price of the property? At that point Sapphira could have escaped judgment and found forgiveness but she loved the approval of men and the security of money far more than she loved Jesus and so she also lied without provocation. Peter now knows there is no chance for repentance and so he announces God's judgment upon her and she immediately falls at his feet, dead and is carried out and buried as well.

The death of this corrupt couple is clearly reminiscent of a number of similar judgments of God upon Israelites during the Exodus period. We think of Nadab and Abihu whom God killed for burning the wrong incense; of the man who was gathering sticks on the Sabbath day and God commanded him to be stoned; of Dathan and Korah who rebelled against Moses and the earth opened under them and swallowed them and all that belonged to them; and particularly we are reminded of Achan the man who "kept back" (same word as used here) a portion of the plunder from Jericho as Israel entered the Promised Land and whom God exposed and commanded that he be stoned. Here again is another indication that God is saving us from our slavery to sin through Christ as foreshadowed in his saving Israel from Egypt through Moses.

Why does Luke include this story of this corrupt couple and their sudden demise? What do we learn? First, this story shows that the visible church is a mixed company. While there is evidence of great grace in the devotion, power and love of the church, yet there is also evidence of disguised unbelievers within the visible church. Second, it is a warning to us. It warns us that we have an enemy who is out to destroy us. It warns us by exposing the powerful lusts for acclaim and wealth and power that are still in us and that must be mastered. It warns us of the very real possibility of hypocrisy. Just because I've publicly professed faith in Christ, been baptized and joined the church does not mean that I am a Christian. The faith that saves is a faith that perseveres in fighting sin until the day I die. The evidence that I have been saved by grace is that I resist sin and pursue holiness. Third, we learn that lying to the church, pretending to be something that I am not in order to gain the approval of other Christians is lying to God. Fourth, this story emphasizes that you and I are living in God's sight all the time. He sees all and he takes note of everything. While God may permit you to be a hypocrite in the church for a lifetime, and not kill you like he did this couple, yet he knows and one day you will face his wrath for your hypocrisy. You may be able to fool us but you cannot fool God. Finally, it shows us that a loving church confronts the sins of its members, sometimes in a very public manner.

The vision of the church that is given to us here shows the power of God's grace to create a new community. When a group of people are overcome with the knowledge of God's undeserved love for them through Christ and respond with true faith in and love for Christ then they live together in radical ways. The Lord Jesus Christ manifests his power and his love and his justice to us and in us and through us. Let us humbly seek his face together and plead with him that he would make us into his image, not just individually, but as his body, here in Janesville.

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