

“The Power of Grace”

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

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“By the grace of God, I am what I am, and his grace to me has not been in vain”

I Corinthians 15:10a.

There are times when a verse of scripture grabs your attention and overshadows everything else that is in the text. This is one of those times for me.

This is not to say that the rest of the text is unimportant. To the contrary, it is very important and helps us understand this verse.

There was some confusion in the Corinthian church about the resurrection of the dead and Paul felt compelled to address it in this portion of his letter. He reminded his readers of the earliest Christian creed, which was handed down to him and he had passed on to all the churches he began: Jesus died; he was buried; he arose; and he appeared to the disciples and others.

Paul became very personal at this point in his letter and told them, as unlikely as it seemed because of his past, Jesus appeared to him, which led to dramatic changes in his life. Paul was very humble about this, which led to this memorable verse, **“But by the grace of God, I am what I am, and his grace to me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I but the grace of God that is with me.”** I want to make this verse the focal point of my sermon today. Let me tell you why.

Up to this point in Paul’s letter to the church at Corinth, he used the word “grace” three times. He equaled that in the verse above. In my opinion, this demands our attention.

What is the grace of God? It is a love for people at their best and their worst. It is a love which gives people what they need, not what they deserve. It is a combination of forgiveness and hope.

Let me remind you again of the overall theme of this text, which is the resurrection. Grace and resurrection have a lot in common. Both have to do with new life, beginning again. When you think all hope is gone, grace gives you another chance. It will not let you live in despair. It will not leave you lost and wandering. It is that radical, powerful, practical and transformative.

“But by the grace of God, I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain,” Paul wrote. So, who was Paul? He was a changed man, completely changed.

As a devout and zealous Pharisee, he hunted down and persecuted Christians. After his dramatic encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus, he planted churches and encouraged Christians to remain faithful in the midst of adversity. What a change in direction and purpose!

No longer did he make decisions based upon the Law, but the Golden Rule, an ethic of love. People were more important to him than regulations. Humility was more important than boastful pride. Knowing Christ was more important than being known. Compassion was more important than a judgmental spirit. Serving others was more important to him than being served. Righteousness was more important to him than ritual. Pursuing justice and peace was more important to him than grasping for wealth or power. Being a faithful disciple was more important to him than living a long life.

Yes, Paul was a changed man, and it was all due to the grace of God. Without God’s unconditional and immeasurable love for him, he would have never made these changes and would have missed so much. Writing at another time, he told the good people in Philippi that any sacrifices he made for the cause of Christ were well worth it. He would not trade one thing he had before he met Jesus for one thing he had after he followed him. God’s grace toward him had not been in vain.

What kind of impact has God's grace had upon you? How do you think, behave and relate to others differently? How do you handle temptations, challenges or problems differently? How do you see the world differently? What's important to you now?

Let me come at this from another angle. **How different would you be if you really turned God's grace loose in your life, like Paul did?** If you fully embraced His grace, or more appropriately, if you were fully embraced by it, how would it change you?

Would you quit beating yourself up for mistakes you've made? Would you finally forgive yourself and release the shame and guilt?

Would you quit holding a grudge against someone who hurt you? Would you let go of those painful memories? Would you do your best to turn an enemy into a friend?

Would you respond to others' needs more generously? Would you be more tolerant of others' imperfections? Would you stop insisting on having your way? Would you live by the Golden Rule?

Would you quit worrying so much? Would you rearrange your values and priorities? Would you go on a mission trip? Would you spend more time with your family? Would you be a better neighbor?

Be honest. Can you really say this morning, "By the grace of God, I am what I am," or would it be more accurate to say, "Of my own will and by my own strength, I am what I am?"

Can you name one thing you did last week that would give evidence of God's grace in your life? Can anyone around you?

I'm not asking you to identify what you did last week that was good. I am confident you did many good things. What did you do, however, that was so difficult or unnatural for you that it required God's grace? Without His help, you would not have done it.

Remember the response of the nurse who was tenderly bandaging the wounds of an enemy soldier? When someone passed by and shouted, "I wouldn't do that for a million dollars," she humbly replied, "Neither would I."

Who do you know that models a grace-filled life? What stands out about them? How have they influenced you?

Who needs you to model a grace-filled life? Who is watching you? Who needs you to reflect the love of Christ and bring his presence to their situation?

How do you do it? How would Paul answer this? I believe he would refer us to his words to the believers in Philippi, "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead" Philippians 3:10-11.

Johnny Lee Clary was recently ordained in the Church of God in Christ, the largest black denomination in America. What makes this so unusual is not that Clary is white, but a former Ku Klux Klan Imperial Wizard. By God's grace, Clary sought forgiveness and reconciliation. By God's grace, The Church of God in Christ granted it.

Think about that this week when you are faced with some tough decisions.