

A Culture of Grace

Romans 15:14-33

Last week I suggested that a great question we could ask one another is:

“Where are you feeling weak? How can I help you carry that burden?”

Well, as it so happens, this past week I have been feeling very weak. I can't pinpoint any particular reason, just a general sense of being overwhelmed by all there is to do, and my own inability to do it.

And to be honest, this passage seemed to shine an uncomfortable light onto how I'm feeling. Paul speaks with such boldness, and I am often so timid. Paul just oozes gospel confidence, while I'm here feeling parched and dry. There is such a vibrancy and exuberance to the way Paul describes his ministry and his plans, that the comparison feels inevitably unflattering.

And I suspect that many of us come to church today in the full awareness of our weakness. I don't know what your last week has been like, but you probably don't sit there now thinking, “Man, I just nailed it.” Maybe you too hear of Paul's boldness and confidence and can't help feel like you fall far short of what God expects of you.

But, this passage is not here to make us feel bad, or to pile on the pressure. Last week we were reminded that the Scriptures are given to us to teach us endurance and provide us with encouragement. These words of Paul are also the Word of God, who speaks them to strengthen us, to embolden us and to equip us to keep going. It's always tempting to hear God's word coming to us in a tone of disappointment. But the reality is the very opposite. Here God is speaking his power into our weakness, his strength into our fragility, his encouragement into our discouragement. His grace into all our failure. His mercy into all our sin.

And so that is what I want to do today. I want to share with you four things which have encouraged me from these verses before us today. Four things that are true of me, and are true of you, by God's grace given to us in the gospel. And as we do, may the God of hope fill us with all joy and peace as we trust in him, so that we may overflow with hope by the Power of the Holy Spirit.

You Are A Priest

Firstly, God says to us in his Word today: “You are a priest.” Paul speaks in verse 15 and 16 of the grace God gave him “to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles.” And he goes on “He gave me this *priestly duty* of proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.”

Now, Paul had a very unique role in the history of redemption. He was appointed by God as apostle to the Gentiles, and God used Paul powerfully in the growth of the early church. Nevertheless, we share in Paul’s priestly calling, and are invited to join in that same priestly duty. As Peter writes elsewhere:

you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. (1 Peter 2:9)

The whole church is a priesthood. And the whole Christian life has a priestly character. And so what exactly does it mean to be a priest? Well, at its heart, to be a priest means that you are a recipient of grace, *and* a channel of grace. To be a priest is to point people to God as the source of all goodness, helping people to know and experience what you have come to know: the presence of God, the power of God, the provision of God, and most of all the full and free forgiveness of God.

And therein lies the key to endurance and the source of encouragement. For we have been given so much instruction in these few chapters of Romans. But by seeing the Christian life in these priestly terms, Paul is reminding us that God equips us with everything we need to live as his people.

Yes, Paul has written boldly to the church in Rome on a range of matters, but his writing is a reminder of what they already have! So he begins in verse 14:

“I myself am convinced, my brothers and sisters, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with knowledge and competent to instruct one another.”

What we are reading here is not some demand held out over us, as if we need to fill up what is lacking in our selves. We have already been filled! Paul writes with boldness, not because we need to add something onto what we have already been given, but because we so easily forget that we have been given everything we need. And so Paul does not proclaim a message of his own making, but the gospel which he has been given.

And the same is true for us: We don't need to dredge up from within us the resources to live for the Lord. For we have received the abundant riches of God's grace. His mercy is what overflows in our mercy to others. His welcome is what overflows in our welcome of others. His service is what overflows in our service of others. His love is what overflows in our love for others.

In Exodus 29, we read about the ordination of the priests in the tabernacle. And the Hebrew term for ordination is literally to “fill the hand”. At one point in the ceremony, after all the sacrifices have been made, three loaves of bread are placed in the empty hands of Aaron and his sons. The priests were to instruct and nourish the people, but what they needed to perform their task was placed into their hands, by the hand of God. This is a wonderful picture of what it means to be a Christian. Through the sacrifice of Christ, we hold out our empty hands, and God places in our hands all we need to serve him and his people.

When I was ordained, my hands were filled too. I was given a New Testament, as a reminder that what I have to offer is not anything that arises up within me, or any skill or ability or strategy of my own making. All I have to offer is the message of the gospel of God's grace. And why would I want to offer anything else? For in Christ I am a priest. And so are you.

v. 16.

DEFEATING US → Transformed by grace; sanctified by the Spirit.

You Are A Servant

And you are also a servant. Again this is how Paul frames his own ministry in verse 17: 'Therefore I glory in Christ Jesus in my *service to God*.

Now this might not immediately strike us as a picture of encouragement. Service conjures up images of hard labour and painful toil. And yet, Paul glories in this service. He sees this service as the great pleasure and passion of his life, the purpose that has taken him from Jerusalem to Illyricum, and he hopes, to Rome and even on to Spain.

And they key to seeing such encouragement in being a servant of God is there in verse 21. Paul says, "as it is written, those who were not told about him will see, and those who have not heard will understand." The footnote in your Bible tells you that this is a quote from Isaiah 52. And if you flicked back to Isaiah you would see that this is one of the prophet's Servant songs

Isaiah 52 and 53 famously speak about the *suffering* of God's servant. The servant who will be stricken and afflicted, who will take up our pain and bear our suffering. And through the suffering of the servant, people from every nation will hear of God's good news, and rejoice in his salvation.

Of course, Isaiah the prophet, by the power of the Spirit, is speaking of Christ. Jesus is the true Servant who suffered for our salvation. But now Paul is taking up this song and applying it to his own ministry? What's the deal with that?

Well, I think the answer is that Paul knows he is united with Christ by God's grace in the gospel. And because he is united with Christ, his whole life is caught up in this story of grace. Indeed, Paul looks out and sees that the whole world is caught up in the story of God's grace. In Christ, Paul sees the whole world as a theatre of God's glory, a place of gospel opportunity in which he has a role to play.

That's why Paul says he glories *in Christ Jesus* in his service to God. It's why he will not venture to speak of anything except what *Christ has accomplished through him*. Yes, Paul speaks and acts, but all his speaking and doing is animated by the power of the Holy Spirit, as Christ does *his* work through his apostle. Paul is *a* servant because he is united to Christ *the* Servant. So am I. And so are you.

And when you put the priestly picture and the servant picture together, we discover that God has us totally surrounded by his grace. God doesn't simply make demands of us, he fills our hands with everything we need to serve him. And he doesn't just give us what we need and send us out on our own: "here's some supplies, now it's all up to you!". No, God equips us, and he is *with* us. We are united with Christ, and filled with the Holy Spirit. And as we speak and act, Christ is working through us to accomplish his purposes.

And so when you go to work. You are a priest and a servant: In Christ you have all you need, and Christ is with you everywhere you go. When you're at school this week, you are a priest and a servant: When you're with family, or friends, speaking to your neighbours and even with strangers, you are a priest and a servant: in Christ you have all that you need and Christ is with you everywhere you go. And in that knowledge we can dare to speak of Jesus, and we can dare to act like Jesus.

For the world is still caught up in the story of God's grace. It is still a theatre of God's glory, and God still gives his people their role to play. And who knows what the Lord Jesus may accomplish through what we do and say?

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You Are A Part of a Church

And so you are a priest. You are a servant. And third encouragement: you are part of a church. Here is grace upon grace, blessing on top of blessing, vast riches piled on top of already absurd abundance. For in our relationships with one another in the church, we are given a rich experience of what is already true of us in Christ.

We've already said that God gives us all that we need in Christ. And that provision of God is echoed in the giving and receiving between the churches that Paul speaks of in verses 23-28.

We've already said that Christ works through us and is present with us. And that presence of God is echoed in the prayers of the church. We join with each other in our struggles as we ask for God to help our brothers and sisters in their service of him.

We are priests and servants, but none of us are lone rangers. We belong to a family of priests and a fellowship of servants that spreads out over all the earth. And as we give and receive, pray and provide, we are strengthening each other and supporting each other in serving Jesus.

And there are two particularly delightful comments that draw out the great blessing it is to be part of a church. When Paul outlines his plans in verse 24 he said he will come to Rome and then head on to Spain *after I have enjoyed your company for a little while*. And then as he asks for prayer in verse 32 he urges them to pray *that I may come to you with joy, by God's will, and in your company be refreshed*.

Paul's ministry is sustained in large part by the enjoyable and refreshing company of other Christians. Just being together, reminding one another of the gospel, sharing meals together, praying together, laughing and crying together; these very simple things are means of God's grace to us. God uses our fellowship to fill us up and to encourage us.

We know this is true for the mission partners we support here at St Mark's. James Lane said when he was here a few weeks ago how refreshing it is for him and his family to spend time with us a couple of times through the year. There's a small group of people who meet to pray with Riaan and Elani on Zoom every few months, and every time we all leave that call rejoicing and refreshed. Even more than material provision, those times of praying together and especially when we are present with one another, are what truly sustain people in God's service.

And what's true on a global scale, is true at the local level too. We come to church not just for a download of information, but to drink deeply from the well of fellowship that God has given us in our relationships with each other. We enjoy each others' company, and in each others' company we are refreshed. And I think that's because when we come together as a church, we are instruct one another and remind one another of who we really are and what is really true.

Day by day there are so many competing messages vying for our attention, but when we come to church we remember that only the message of the gospel truly satisfies.

Through the week we hear so many voices calling us to follow, but when we come to church we tune our ears to hear the voice of God as the only voice that won't let us down.

Out there in the world there are so many demands made of us, and pressures placed upon us, but when we come to church we can rest, we can breathe. For we're not truly defined by anything we have or anything we've done. Rather we're defined by what Christ has done for us. We don't need to wear a mask, or put on an act, because everyone here is a sinner, freely forgiven by God. And so the church should be an oasis of grace, where we can rest in the grace we've received, enjoy the grace we share, and be refreshed by grace for our priestly service of the Lord.

You Are Known By The Lord

Today God's Word tells us that we are priests, that we are servants, and that we belong to the church. But there is one final encouragement. For all of these blessings come to us, in the chief blessing of being known by the Lord. It's striking just how much this passage is saturated with the activity of God. The God who gives us his grace and calls us into his service. Christ who works with us, accomplishing his purposes. And the Spirit who loves us and who works powerfully through us.

When you boil it all down, to be a priest is simply to live your life in God's presence. To be a servant is simply to be united with Christ. To belong to the church is simply to be a part of that family of believers who have been filled by the Spirit. To be a Christian is simply to know God and to be known by him.

And so if you are feeling weak. God has you exactly where he wants you. For in your weakness, you can depend on his power. In your fragility, you can trust in his strength. In your failures you can depend upon his forgiveness. And in every moment of every day you can depend upon his grace.

For whatever else we lack. The final verse reminds us that we have God. And if we have God, we actually don't need anything else. And if that doesn't teach us endurance, or provide us with encouragement, then I don't know what will.

And so may the God of peace be with us all.

Amen.