

## **“RESTING IN GRACE”**

Romans 14:1-9; Philippians 4:10-20

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There were other reformers before Martin Luther in the sixteenth century, but it's with Luther that the Reformation picks up steam. His recognition that salvation is initiated by God resonated with people who felt burdened by the church's emphasis on the necessity of obedience to merit God's blessing. Luther leaned heavily on Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus to grasp the truth that salvation was God's gift, not a reward for good behavior. "By grace you are saved," Paul wrote to the church, "It is the gift of God...."

Were I interested this morning in preaching on the theology of grace, I would have to start with that text; but as I preached on it fairly recently and am more interested in talking about the experience of grace, this passage from Philippians seemed a better place to begin. The Christians in Philippi are the only people with whom Paul seems to have a wholly positive relationship. Read any of his other letters and you will discover a Paul who is not fully satisfied with the church. He calls the churches in Galatia, "foolish." He is unhappy with leaders in Colossae that are preaching bad theology. He corrects the behavior of the people in Corinth on a number of points. He sees division, dissension, jealousy, and inequality in the other congregations. In Philippians, Paul talks about the experience of grace in the context of God's goodness and within the community of faith.

"I have learned to be content..." he wrote. Whether he has little or much, is hungry or full, he is content. He knows the grace of God in all circumstances, because he has learned to rest in that grace. When we talk about the experience of grace, the most important thing to say is that it is "all the time." The Reformation emphasized the theology of grace when it affirmed "grace alone." It is only by grace that we are saved, but in Philippians we see that it is grace that operates "all the time."

This is why we say, "God is good!... All the time!" Not because we are always happy... not because good things are happening. We say, "God is good..." because there is no circumstance when God is not present. "God is good..." because when we hurt, God feels our pain. We say, "God is good..." because when our bodies fail or disappoint us, God is there to heal or sustain us. When the job is not going well, or there is no job, and the income falls well below the expenses, we say "God is good..." because God blesses the poor with the riches of a life filled by God's presence. We say "God is good..." because God knows how to fill the hungry with righteousness, because God knows how to comfort those who mourn. We say "God is good..." when dissension and enmity seem to rule the day, because God adopts the peacemaker as God's own child; when evil surrounds us, because God is revealed to the "pure in heart; and because God knows how to reward those who stand for justice in the midst of persecution.

Grace is always and everywhere, even in the deepest pit of despair. In our Brief Statement of Faith, we declare that "in life and in death, we belong to God." "Whether we live or

whether we die,” Paul wrote to the church in Rome, “We are the Lord’s.” This is the foundation for grace in every time and every place. Resting in grace means to hold this reality at the center of our everyday experience.

We may forget this when the pressures of life stretch us, but mostly we know to remember grace in trying times. More often we forget it in good times. We sometimes like to take credit for the good that comes to us. We can become quite proud of our achievements, our success, our possessions. It wasn’t long after the Reformation that Protestants began to see prosperity as a sign of God’s favor. Some believed that material wealth was the reward for faithfulness and poverty was a sign of disobedience. This attitude persists in the form of the prosperity gospel and it leads to the habit of “blaming the victim.” The words, “I earned this,” do not belong to the one resting in grace. Unless we acknowledge the grace intrinsic to the goodness that comes to us, we run the risk of turning our backs on God. We lose the graciousness that belongs to the life of Jesus’ followers. Instead of being the blessing to the world that God intends, we become the judge that condemns the innocent.

This is what Paul warns the Roman Church against. Some eat meat sacrificed to idols, while others do not. Some set aside the Sabbath as a special day, while others see all days as special. These were hotly disputed positions in the church. Paul doesn’t discourage discussion of the issues, but he warns them against becoming judgmental. What matters he says is that each person honors God in their actions, that they give thanks to God, that they rest in the grace of a God who is able to sustain them, even if they are mistaken in their position. He basically is saying that giving thanks is more important than being right.

“God is good...” This is not a statement that all is going well, but an affirmation of the grace of God in all circumstances. It is also not a statement that we don’t have to do anything because God will take care of it. Resting in grace is active, something that we not only receive, but participate in as well.

Grace is not just the miraculous recovery, but the doctor whose counsel leads to healing. It is not just the encouragement one feels in the presence of God, but the community of faith that expresses care with a meal, a card, or an offer of assistance. It is not just the reward received from God for faithful effort, but the support received from family and community that contributed to the achievement. Resting in grace means acknowledging the blessing of God for the work that we do. Following Jesus is a very active sort of resting.

Grace comes from God, but it is also experienced in community. When Paul wrote about sharing in the gospel to the church at Philippi, he was writing about the experience of grace. The theology of grace says grace alone that comes from God, but the experience of grace sees it all around, and especially in the community of faith.

Grace surrounds us because it’s not so simple as God dispensing grace to each individual. God infuses the world with grace. It is intrinsic to the nature of the world.

Resting in grace means receiving it from God and from creation. Resting in grace means acknowledging that God heals, doctors and nurses heal, nature heals.

Reformation Sunday is not just a day to give thanks for the reformers of 500 years ago, but a day to remember that the church is not stagnant, the world is not standing still. So we give thanks to the reformers for reminding us that grace alone comes from God, but we also recognize that grace surrounds us all, that we experience it not only through the presence of God, but in the community of faith and the universe in which we live. It is everywhere in all times, and for all people. It is God's gift in making the world. "God is good! All the time!"

Amen.