

Paul, Apostle by God's Grace

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Preacher: Iain MacRitchie

[0 : 00] 1 Corinthians chapter 15. 1 Corinthians chapter 15.

And I'd like us to take for our text this evening the words that we find in verses 9 and 10. 1 Corinthians 15 verses 9 and 10.

For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not 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.

By the grace of God I am what I am. Friends, I'd like to begin this evening by asking you a question.

[1 : 08] And that is, I'd like to ask you to reflect upon all that you have done in the week that has gone by. All the thoughts that you have had and all the actions that you have taken, all the words that you have spoken.

And as you reflect upon all that has happened in the week that has gone by, I'd like you as you sit here this evening to think about how you see yourself before a holy God.

You may have come here this evening and you may not have thought very much about it. You may not equate your behavior in the week that has gone by with how you are before a holy God.

Or it may be that you are sitting here tonight and you are struggling. It might be that if the truth be told, you are struggling against the world.

You are struggling against the flesh. You are struggling against the devil. And perhaps even in the week that has gone by, you have found that the Christian walk is just too difficult.

[2 : 22] Friends, if that is you tonight, be assured that the text that we have before us here has some of the most encouraging words that there are in Scripture.

By the grace of God, I am what I am. These words I'd like us to think about for a short time together and to apply them to our own lives.

Before we go into this text, it's helpful for us to apply these words in their context. This evening we find ourselves towards the end of Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth.

This was by no means Paul's first interaction, if you like, with the church in Corinth, although this is his first letter here. Because having previously been mocked and beaten for the sake of the gospel in Philippi and in Athens, you'll remember that previously Paul had moved on to Corinth.

When he came to Corinth, he began to preach in the synagogue, Sabbath after Sabbath. And as he preached in the synagogues, people heard the word and it became effectual to them.

[3 : 40] They came to know the Lord under his preaching. He remained there for about 18 months and he then moved on. And as he moved on, he passed the baton of the gospel, if you like, on to Apollos, who would continue to preach the gospel.

So because of the teaching that the church in Corinth had had, both under Paul and then under Apollos, Paul himself would have thought that this was a church that was well on its way to maturing and growing spiritually.

This was a church that would have been growing in knowledge and in truth. But yet we read here tonight that this is far from how things were.

Instead, Paul receives here a letter about, sorry, a report of a church that is subject amongst other things to divisions, to adultery, to idolatry, to needing guidance on issues of marriage, to needing guidance and decorum and public worship.

a church that had lost its footing with its teaching on the Lord's Supper. And so friends, it's to this scene of a church in complete chaos that Paul is here compelled to write.

[5 : 08] And so here in chapter 15, towards the end of the letter, we see at the beginning of the chapter, Paul addressing an issue that he says in his own words in verse 3, that is of first

importance.

He's left the most important issue that's facing the church in Corinth to last. What was that issue? Was it the fact that they were a church that was idolatrous?

A church that was engaged in adultery? A church that had wrong views on the Lord's Supper and so on? Well, all these things were, yes, very, very important.

These things aren't to be downplayed, if you like, but yet that is not the issue that was of first importance. What was it? Well, we read here, it was the issue of the resurrection of the dead.

That reality of body and soul uniting on that last day, on that great day of judgment. You see, Paul was well aware of the fact that the Greeks had such a skeptical attitude towards this doctrine.

[6 : 22] They believed, the Greek philosophers believed, that the body to be a prison. And so death was seen as a welcome release from this prison.

And so the very notion that on the last day, body and soul would once again be united together, that was seen as a backward step. It was seen as something that was in no way to be desired.

And so when Paul preached this doctrine, we read in Acts 17, 32, that when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked.

They made fun of him. They simply couldn't see how his doctrine, how his teaching was in any way to be believed.

Yes, we read that some of them believed in the resurrection of Christ. We read that in verse 1, where we see Paul reminding the Corinthian church that he had previously preached this doctrine to them and that they had indeed received it.

[7 : 29] However, despite this, we then read in verse 12 that some of them said that there was no resurrection from the dead. But why did this matter?

Why did it matter that, yes, they believed in the resurrection of Christ but not the resurrection of the dead? Well, this was a view that would have huge implications.

All these other issues in the Corinthian church were important, absolutely, but this view here was a view that would have the greatest of implications.

Because you see, to not believe in the resurrection of the dead was to effectively not believe in the power of the resurrection of Christ.

This was a heresy that would undermine the whole gospel message. It was Charles Hodge who said, but if Christ be risen, then his people will also rise because he rose as a pledge of their resurrection.

[8 : 38] The fact is that Christ was the first fruits of the dead. Because he rose from the dead, it follows also that his people will rise from the grave to that everlasting life.

That body that was sown in corruption will be raised incorruptible. That is surely the hope that has gathered us here together tonight as believers looking forward with a desire to worship.

But where does our text come into all of this? Why is it that Paul appears to be in the midst of this important doctrinal teaching?

Why is it that he seems to digress? Why is it in verses 9 and 10 he says, for I am the least of the apostles. I am unworthy to be called an apostle because I persecuted the church of God.

But by the grace of God, I am what I am. Well friends, it's as if here Paul is saying, yes, yes I am writing to you as a church to share all the many concerns I have about your doctrine, about your views of the resurrection of the dead.

[9 : 58] But yet I haven't forgotten. I haven't forgotten who I was. I haven't forgotten who I am.

I haven't lost sight of the fact that I too am a sinner in constant need of the grace of God. And he's here in these words showing the Corinthian church that it is only because of this glorious doctrine of the resurrection of the dead, it's only because of this that he can say, by the grace of God, I am what I am.

He knows that left to himself, he would be no better than they are. And so friends, this evening I'd like us to think how Paul's words here apply to you and to me.

And I'd like us to look at these verses under three headings. I'd like us firstly to look at Paul's confession when he says, I am the least of the apostles.

Then we'll think about Paul's confidence when he says, but by the grace of God, I am what I am.

And then lastly, we'll think of Paul's commitment when he says, on the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that was with me.

[11 : 25] Confession, confidence, and commitment. I began at the beginning of the service by asking you how you view yourself.

And I ask this to myself also, how do we view ourselves before a holy God? I come from the Isle of Lewis and the Western Isles and often the charge is laid against Highland and Island Christianity of being far too inward looking.

And that might be true. It's never ever very healthy for us to only look within because if we only look within, we'll only ever see darkness, we'll only ever see depravity.

But isn't it interesting here that we see the Apostle Paul with a view that some might say is negative, this view that he has of himself.

He says, I am the least of the apostles. I am unworthy to be called an apostle. Here's the Apostle Paul himself. And so in our minds, if there was anyone worthy to be called an apostle, it was Paul.

[12 : 44] He was the man who was truly not ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ. He was the man who was willing to put his life on the line for his Saviour. He was a man who spent and was spent for the one who died and gave himself for him.

But yet, he was bothered by sin. He was so aware of how his evil actions in the past had affected the church of Christ.

Here there had been no one like him with such a zeal and a hatred for God's people. There had been no one like him with such an energy for persecuting the church of Christ.

And that bothered him. You know, it wasn't just Paul's past sins that bothered him. We read in Romans 7, 19, 19 rather, him saying, for the good that I will to do, I do not.

But the evil I will not to do, that I practice. In other words, the things that I want to do, I don't do them. And the things I don't really want to do, I find myself doing them time and time again.

[13 : 57] Something I think we can all relate to. Here, Paul was honest. He was honest not only to himself, but he was honest before God.

Not only was he honest before God, but he was honest before the whole church in Corinth as he pens these words. Friends, isn't that a good thing?

It's never a good thing only to look to ourselves and not to look to Christ. But yet, it's a good thing to look to ourselves and then to look to Christ.

Why? Because it keeps us humble. It keeps us thankful. It reminds us what we've been saved from. It reminds us that we've been saved from the depravity of our own will. Paul here wasn't proudly looking down in the church in Corinth waving and pointing his finger at them for all that was wrong with them.

[15 : 01] But rather, Paul here in love is directing them to the truth and the full knowledge that his own heart was far from perfect.

And you know, it's not only Paul that we read of in Scripture who had this sense of unworthiness before God. We see it with John the Baptist when he says, speaking of Jesus, he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry.

We also see it with the centurion in Matthew chapter 8 verse 8. Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only say the word and my servant will be healed.

Perhaps as you sit here this evening in Livingston Free Church, perhaps you feel that you are the least of the Christians in here. Perhaps you feel that you are even unworthy to be called a Christian. You may even be doubting whether you are a Christian or not when you see the thoughts of your heart and your mind. Friend, the fact is that none of us are worthy.

[16 : 17] the fact is that none of us are worthy of any good thing from God and left to ourselves where all each and every one of us are worthy only of his wrath and his curse.

We praise God this night. We praise God that this verse does not stand alone. We praise God that we don't just have the words of verse 9 without the words of verse 10 and that is the beauty of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

It never ever leaves us without hope. We read, I am the least of the apostles. I am unworthy to be called an apostle because I persecuted the church of God.

But, I just love that word, but by the grace of God I am what I am and whose grace toward me was not in vain.

Which brings us to our second point, Paul's confidence. It's true to say that the Christian walk is all about balance.

[17 : 35] It was C.H. Spurgeon who said, know where Adam left you. Know where the Spirit of God has placed you. But, do not know either of these things so exclusively so as to forget the other.

In other words, always remember the words of verse 9, that we are sinners, but also always remember the words of verse 10, that the hope that we have is not in ourselves, but in the grace of God.

And so to have the words of verse 9 without verse 10 would be to be imbalanced. And so the other way around, that would lead us to have a one-sided Christianity.

And if we're imbalanced Christians, if we're looking too much to ourselves without looking to Christ, or if we're looking to Christ and somehow thinking that our sins are of no consequence, that will leave us without having any confidence.

You see, Paul knew that in spite of all of his sins past and present, in spite of all his faults and failings, he knew that he wasn't what he once was.

[18 : 56] There had been a change in his life. Yes, his sins bothered him, they bothered him greatly, but that wasn't the end of the story.

He wasn't left wallowing and despairing in a helpless pool of self-pity. Why? Because of that one beautiful word, grace.

Grace. It was Thomas Gillespie who said that the covenant of grace is the very hinge upon which the whole business of salvation is turned about.

God. You see, friends, everything hinges tonight upon the grace of God. Our sin has caused there to be a great gulf between us and God.

Our sins have distanced us from God and the only thing that can bridge that gap is the grace of God. Grace restores that union between mankind and his creator, a union that should never ever have been broken in the first place.

[20 : 08] Ephesians 2 tells us, for by grace you have been saved through faith and not of yourselves. It is a gift from God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.

It is a free gift. One commentator even said that grace is the pure favor of God. Isn't that wonderful? And you know, just as the church in Corinth needed to be reminded of the resurrection of the dead, so too do you and do I, do we need to be reminded of the grace of God.

Allow me to challenge you. When was the last time that you truly meditated, consciously meditated upon the grace of God?

The fact is it should never ever cease to amaze us. does it amaze you as you sit here tonight? Does it stir you up from the very core of your being?

[21 : 11] Does it stir you up when you think of all that is yours and all that will be yours as a result of the grace of God? Thomas Brooks said that grace is a pure ring of gold and Christ is a sparkling diamond in that ring?

And so to have grace is to have Christ and to have Christ is to have grace. I wonder if you can say that you have this grace tonight.

I don't know many of you here tonight. I do not know your spiritual state. But if you do have grace, you'll know that it satisfies.

you know that with the psalmist when he says we surely shall be satisfied with thy abundant grace. You know the fullness that there is to be found in that saving grace.

It might be that you know nothing of this grace. Allow me then to ask you for what it is that truly satisfies you.

[22 : 25] what it is that motivates you to get out of your bed each and every day. What is it that motivates you to live your life?

Maybe that day after day you are, as I mentioned in my prayer, you're looking to the things of this world, desperately looking for that one thing that will give you fulfillment, that will give you that satisfaction.

I wonder is that you? It's lovely to see young folk here with us tonight and I remember clearly when I was around about your age, I would always have something that I was looking forward to.

I wonder if you've got something that you're looking forward to. I would perhaps be looking forward to Christmas till I would get all these lovely gifts gifts and I would open the gifts and I would enjoy having these gifts and I would enjoy playing with these gifts.

Or it might be that I would be looking forward to going on holiday with my family. We often went on caravan holidays round about Scotland and I used to love these holidays and I would look forward

to them and I would think about them and I loved being living on an island.

[23 : 50] I loved the fact that I would have to get a ferry to go to the mainland. It was all very much part of the adventure. But with all these different things that I looked forward to in life and I think we can apply this to adults because this followed me into adulthood also always having something to look forward to.

The one thing I noticed was that when that thing came, when I got that thing, when I achieved whatever it was I was looking to achieve in life, yes there was pleasure in it, yes there was satisfaction and enjoyment in it, but only for a short time.

And then after a little while I would move on to the next thing, that other thing that I had to have to look forward to. I wonder if you know what I'm talking about tonight.

Well friends, we can't say the same with grace. Because if you receive and when you receive the grace of God in your life, it doesn't mean that life is going to be plain sailing, it doesn't mean that everything is going to be wonderful day after day, but what it does mean is that you will be truly satisfied.

It's often said that there is a Christ shaped void in our hearts. And isn't that true? We can try and fill it with the things of this world, but there will always be gaps, always emptiness, but not so with grace.

[25 : 27] And so I would urge all our young friends here, and indeed our older friends also, that if you haven't yet to come to know this grace for yourself, that you would seek it, that you wouldn't stop seeking it until you find it.

Because boy, is it worth finding? But what does this grace look like in the life of the believer? How do we respond to this free, unwarranted gift from God?

Well, we see in our text tonight that Paul responded, which takes us to our third and final point, commitment. We read that his grace toward me was not in vain, on the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that was with me.

His grace toward me was not in vain. In other words, this grace that Paul enjoyed through faith, it didn't lead him to be a passive Christian.

It didn't lead him to sit back and to enjoy the many blessings things that he would receive from God with nothing in response. Yes, we know that it was a gift from God.

[26 : 50] We know that it is a gift from God. We are not required to give anything to receive that gift. But yet, this is a gift that was so, so precious that Paul couldn't but show his love and his appreciation to the giver of this gift, the Lord himself.

How did he do this? Well, we read that he worked harder than any of the other apostles in what would have been around 20 years since he was saved. He had shown commitment to the one who had opened up that new and living way for him.

He had fulfilled the mandate of Romans 12, 1, where we read, I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice.

And that just means presenting our whole selves, our whole lives, every square inch of our lives is presented to God as a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service or your reasonable worship.

Friends, ought that not to be our response? Should it not be that this grace produces in us an energetic single-mindedness to serve Christ?

[28 : 14] A willingness to give our lives fully to the one who has given his life for us? That's a challenge.

At times, it can be so difficult to live for Christ. Perhaps you know such a time in your experience just now. Perhaps you're feeling a leanness in your soul.

That yes, you're united to Christ, but you're not enjoying that communion that you once did. It's true that yes, we do live in a world that's full of temptation, a world that can so often draw us away from the things of the Lord.

We can find it so difficult even to witness on his side. I know myself, in my workplace, I was a primary school teacher before I applied for the ministry, and I found that often times it was so difficult to share the gospel with those around me.

My mouth was closed, and I could easily, quite easily say, well, I didn't get the opportunity, but often I could pinpoint that to something perhaps in my own life that wasn't quite right.

[29 : 33] I lost that boldness because I wasn't walking with the Lord. Yes, it is difficult, but you know, friends, we aren't asked to go it alone.

He doesn't expect us, he doesn't give us the grace to be the Lord and then leave us. He doesn't save us and say, well, now you're on your own.

His grace is sufficient. And you know, sometimes I think we forget the fact that people like the Apostle Paul, they were sinners just like you and just like me, conceived in guiltiness and sin. They didn't have something that we don't have. But yet, we see that he worked harder than any of them.

Did he take the glory to himself? No. He says, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. It was the Lord that graciously provided for Paul and it is the Lord that graciously provides for you and for me that sustaining grace, that strengthening grace, that grace that will enable us to go into the world tomorrow with a boldness that we cannot get in and off ourselves.

[31 : 02] You know, friends, it's true to say that the grace that we need day by day is, as it were, streams that come from the fountain of life himself, the Lord Jesus Christ.

We cannot make this stream to flow. We cannot make this grace flow. but surely we can position ourselves in a way that we are ready to receive it.

John Piper said that we can fight to walk in the paths where he has promised his blessings. How do we fight to walk in the paths where he has promised his blessings?

Well, to use that old fashioned term, by attending to the means of grace. By attending to those places that the Lord promises to spiritually feed you and me, namely, the word of God, the sacraments and prayers.

You see, if you read the Bible during family worship this morning, that was a means of grace. when you gather together on a Wednesday or whatever evening you do for prayer, that is a means of grace.

[32 : 26] Sitting here this evening is a means of grace. When we sit at the Lord's table, if we are Christians, that is a means of grace, the strengthening ordinance.

And Roderick Lawson in his comments on the shorter catechese, when he's speaking of the Lord's Supper, and I think we can apply this to every means of grace, he says that in itself, it is of no value whatsoever.

But when it is received in faith, it quickens our love to God, it deepens our faith in Christ, and it promotes the welfare of our soul.

Can't you see why the evil one, why Satan himself, every time you come aside to perhaps pray to the Lord, or to read the word, a distracting thought comes into your mind, something to take you away from that means of grace.

Why does that happen? Well, he knows, he knows that it quickens our love to God, he knows it deepens our faith in Christ, he knows that it promotes the welfare of our soul, and he wants nothing more than to stop that happening.

[33 : 54] And yes, it's difficult, but friends, let's thrive, let's pray to the Lord that he will give us that grace, that we would avail ourselves of that grace that he's so mercifully provided for us in Christ.

Let us, as Hebrews 4, 16 tells us, let us come boldly, come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Come boldly, let's come expectantly, let's be able to say along with John Newton, let us be able to say confidently that yes, I'm not what I ought to be, I'm not what I want to be, I'm not what I hope to be in another world, but still, but still, I'm not what I used to be, and by the grace of God, I am what I am.

And so, friends, as you go into yet another week, if you're spared to see it on life's journey, let us all strive to lay hold of this precious grace, let's be that confessing people, a people that takes sin seriously, but yet a people who are confident, not confident in anything that we can do, but confident in what he has done for us, and what he is also able to do for the whole of Livingston, and in that confidence, let us be a committed people, let us be committed to the one who is worthy of our all, confession, confidence, and commitment, by having all three in our lives, day by day, I have no doubt, although it can be difficult at times, I have no doubt that we can all fight that good fight of faith, that we can run the race that has been set before us, and that in doing so, we can also share some other words of John

Newton, that we can boldly share in his sentiments when he said, amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me, I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see, through many dangers, toils and snares, I have already come, tis grace that has brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home, dear friends, may it be so, for your good, but ultimately for his glory, amen, and we pray that he would bless these few thoughts to us.

[37 : 00] We can conclude now by singing to God's praise from Psalm 84, Psalm 84 in the Scottish Psalter, reading at verse 7 of the Psalm, So they from strength unwearied go still forward unto strength, until in Zion they appear before the Lord at length.

Lord God of hosts my prayers hear, O Jacob's God give ear, see God our shield look on the face of thine anointed dear. We can sing verses 7 to the end of the Psalm to God's praise, so they from strength unwearied go, still forward unto strength.