

The First Mark of Grace

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[0 : 00] We're going to turn now to the New Testament as we call it to the Colossians, chapter 3. We call it later to the Colossians, and the third chapter.

We'll take our reading, verse 15, page 1185, Colossians, chapter 3, and verse 15. We have all, we have three instructions. First one, beginning in verse 15, and let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body, and be thankful.

Let the word of Christ dwell in your richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts.

You don't know. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

You can see already the thread that binds these three instructions together. The instruction to let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.

[1 : 28] And whatever you do, the thread that runs all the way through these instructions is this. Giving thanks to God the Father through Jesus Christ.

It's one of the very first things that we teach our children, one of the things that we were taught ourselves, when our first words were, Ta, when we were a baby, when we were babies.

And one of the first things that we teach our children and our grandchildren, when we give them something, is to say thank you. So at the very least, we have grown up to know that to say thank you is a polite and a proper way of behaving.

And it's only those who are the very self-centered, the most self-centered people who fail to do that. It's also a part of our culture to give and to take.

And again, we teach our children to share what they have from a very young age. And one of the most difficult things to teach a young child is to give something or to share what they have.

[2 : 39] It doesn't seem to accord very much with fallen human nature. It's one of the ways in which you instantly recognize sin in a child when you want them to share what they have.

And you see the reaction when you tell them to do so. Also, giving and taking will differ depending on which culture you belong to.

For some cultures, giving is an absolute necessity even when it costs you more than you have. I remember going to India in 2001.

And someone telling me at that time, be prepared, they said. When you go to India, always leave space in your suitcase. Because you will be taking back twice as much as you took out.

And what they were talking about was the gifts that I would be expected to get from each person. Well, I didn't really believe that at first until I actually experienced it for myself. Sure enough, everywhere I went, I was given presents.

[3 : 44] But the same person who told me, be prepared to take back twice, also told me, be prepared also to take out gifts as well. Because it's part of their culture to give and to take.

And whoever you meet, and if you're having dinner with someone, or if you're staying at their home, or even if you're meeting them for any length of time, they will give you something, a gift, some kind of gift to take back.

And they'll also expect for you to give them something. That was the culture in which I was. But whatever our cultural habits, the Bible makes clear that thankfulness is a basic human characteristic. It does not start out with our indebtedness to one another, but a sense of indebtedness to God.

It is tied up with that inherent sense that every one of us possesses. The sense that tells us God is.

[4 : 46] And that proper response is to praise him, and thank him, and glorify him for what he is.

In fact, if you go back to the Old Testament, the word for praise is identical to the word for thanks. And thanks was not so much a human-to-human thing in the Old Testament, but a human-to-God action in which took place in the temple as an act of worship.

And that's what we've lost in the fall. Paul puts it this way. Although, he's talking about the whole human race, and this is what he says in Romans 1, verse 18. He says, In other words, what that tells us is that we thank one another because built into us is a sense of indebtedness, but that indebtedness actually properly belongs to God.

But our human nature means, our fallen nature rather, means that we have refused to acknowledge and recognize him as God, and we have refused to thank him and worship him as we ought.

That's what sin is, a refusal to have God and to love God with all our heart, and all our mind, and all our soul, and all our strength.

[6 : 28] And if anybody tells you, I'm not a sinner, then you simply ask him that question. Do you love God with all your heart, and mind, and soul, and strength? Sin is not primarily what we do.

Sin begins with what we fail to do, and every single one of us has been born into this world with a failure to love and to thank and to praise God.

And yet, we still have that inbuilt sense that when someone gives to us, we rightly acknowledge that giving.

However, that's a very interesting point, because it opens up a whole series of difficulties and questions. For a beginning, there is a certain awkwardness in the whole business of giving and taking.

Isn't there? And to say thank you when someone gives us something involves a certain amount of humiliation on our part.

[7 : 37] How often have you wanted to give someone something, and you've said to yourself, I can't, because he'll feel bad if I give him something when he hasn't given me anything.

It's true, isn't it? And it works both ways. When someone gives you something, you feel that you're divided into two.

Part of you feels good about what you've got and what you've been given, but another part instantly feels awkward. I didn't give him anything. That's the whole awkwardness of giving and taking.

There is an awkwardness in it. I was very interested to read an article in last week's Times newspaper by the writer Sophie Dahl. And the article was on the art of receiving.

It's very interesting. I never read anything like it. The art of receiving. I didn't agree with her conclusions or her mindset, but she made some very interesting observations.

[8 : 43] She talks about the awkwardness and discomfort at taking things. And this is what she says. She says, the British are not a nation of receivers. We feel somehow unworthy.

When we do receive, we don't, as a rule, do it with a whole lot of grace. We argue. Tell an English woman that she's beautiful. Or that you like her dress.

And she'll look at you with something like reproach and extreme suspicion. Beautiful? Me? No, I'm not. I've put on a stone. My hair is filthy.

Look at it. This dress, it's ancient, cheap. I got it at a sale at Primark. And then she says this. When it comes to receiving gifts, it's the same story. When someone gives us something, there is, she says, the ubiquitous and dreadfully dull, all you shouldn't have.

Why shouldn't I have, she says? I truly wanted to give it to you. That's why I gave it. What we need, she says, is the acceptance with which we choose to receive.

[9 : 55] It's very interesting, isn't it? When you think about it in a biblical sense. Two particularly interesting biblical themes.

The Lord, first of all, makes clear that real kindness, real kindness, is shown when we give without expecting to get anything in return.

That's what he tells us in the Sermon on the Mount. When we greet those from whom we do not expect to get a greeting. When we give without expecting to get it back in some way.

And when we do to others as we would have them do to us. That's real kindness.

That's kindness in God's estimation. But it's also biblically important to learn to take what is given to us in sheer kindness and refuse to give in return.

[10 : 59] Because the moment that we give in return what we're trying to do is to pay them back for their kindness and to relieve us of the humiliation in having to take something we did nothing for.

In other words, we're talking and all of this reflects back to the giving of God. And it can be summarized in the word grace.

The grace of God in the gospel. And grace is two things. Grace is when God gives because he wants to give when we don't deserve it.

But grace is also when we simply receive God's gift without trying to earn it.

Two things. It is God's giving because he wants to give when we don't deserve it. And it is our receiving without trying to earn it.

[12:09] That's what grace is. Grace is where an almighty and holy God who is separate from sin and indeed separate from all that he has created when he through his own pleasure decides to save men and women by giving himself no less than himself.

And he does so because of his sheer willingness and love towards a lost world. And what Sophie Dahl calls the art of receiving it's not an art at all when it comes to the Bible it is the grace of receiving the grace that God puts into the heart of every believer.

The first mark of faith is a willingness to receive God's salvation God's son a willingness to receive the price that Jesus paid at Calvary for our sins and a willingness to accept the free offer of the gospel.

You see for many people faith is giving and doing and working. They equate faith to what they do and their diligence and their devotion and their church going and all the rest of it.

But for the Christian the first step in knowing Jesus is taking what he has freely done for us and what he freely offers us.

[13:45] And that means when it comes to God's giving of himself it is totally dishonoring to him when we fail or refuse to acknowledge his great goodness to us.

Now you might say or some people might say well I do that. I never ever fail to acknowledge the goodness of God. I'm thankful. There is a day in my life when I'm not thankful to God and I recognize that the life that I live and everything I enjoy in this life, my health, my strength, everything I have, my family, my home, all the food that I have on my table, I recognize that every single day I believe that I acknowledge what God is doing.

I'm thankful but for lots of people, for too many people, that sense of thankfulness is enough for them. They don't want to go any further than that. They're quite happy with that.

They think that that's some way of keeping in with God. And somehow or other they've convinced themselves that because they are aware that what they enjoy in this life is the goodness of God, then that awareness is enough to somehow keep God on their side.

And they feel that if they fail to give thanks to God, that somehow God is going to stop in some way. He's not going to keep up his side of the bargain. For them, he gives and I thank, that's it.

[15:18] I don't need any more than that. That's my religion. But that's like the Old Testament Jewish people and their sacrifices.

It was God that had ordered them in the beginning to make sacrifice to him for sin, but it became a ritual so that as long as they went through the motions of killing the animal, of burning the animal, they really truly believed, that's it, I don't need to do any more than that.

That's the extent of my commitment to the Lord. And as long as I do that every day or every month or whenever or however often I've decided to do it, that surely is enough.

And it's the same way when we think that our thankfulness is enough. But the Lord is asking us tonight, are we first and foremost thankful for his greatest gift of all?

How can anyone say I'm thankful for God's gifts to me and for his goodness to me and at the same time turn his back on the greatest gift of all?

[16:30] How dishonoring is that? That's not thankfulness at all. That's sheer outrage.

And as you're telling what you're doing, if that's what you're saying, is you're throwing the gift of God back in his face. So please don't say that you're thankful, because you're not.

The whole thing has been turned on its head. If for you, your sense of thankfulness is enough. What God says to every one of us is to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.

That is the first step in real thankfulness. And it's only when we come to faith in Christ, that the full measure of what we're calling this evening his grace, his saving grace, comes truly home to us.

It's against the backdrop of our sheer sinfulness and guilt that the light of his grace towards us becomes clear and the intensity, the sheer intensity of his love becomes apparent.

[17 : 36] And if you don't think you're a sinner, if you think that somehow your thankfulness is going to be enough to keep you in with God, then you haven't begun to see your own sin and you'll never know the goodness of God for sure.

The very first mark of someone who begins to follow Jesus then is to accept the gift of God in the Lord Jesus Christ, eternal life in the Lord Jesus Christ.

And let me ask you this evening, have you, have you accepted, have you heard God's invitation, have you accepted, God's invitation to come and to put your trust and to surrender.

Who knows even this evening, as we're aware of the great goodness of God, don't get me wrong, I'm not saying that thankfulness is wrong, of course it isn't, of course we want to give, who knows it may work in a positive way, who knows maybe tonight you come here and you're reflecting as you're sitting in your seat, you're reflecting on all the goodness and you're coming to the discovery that every good thing that you enjoy and that you benefit from in this world, it has to come from God and who knows, but even that goodness itself might be God convicting you and entering into your heart and making you see that this great God who's responsible for every good thing that you enjoy is the God who offers you the very greatest thing and you haven't taken it.

God. Now that doesn't make sense to me. How can you take some and not all? How can you just take what you want? Is it not just self-centeredness for you to just take what you want of a good God and not to discover what God truly can give you in the person of his son, the new life that God take that step, come to God and know for sure the goodness of God in ways that you've never experienced yet by loving, by coming to trust in Jesus Christ as your Savior.

[19 : 52] But if we follow on this great love of God that we've been talking about, the goodness of God, even in following Jesus it can be difficult to accept that the intensity and the immensity of that love on an ongoing basis.

Is it not true that as Christians when we feel strong and lively we can easily accept the truth of God's love for us? And when we feel down and when we feel low we're less conscious of that love. And you end up believing that somehow God's love is here today and stronger one day and it's weaker the next. But what you're doing is you're grounding your consciousness of God's love and God's goodness on how you feel, whether you feel strong or whether you feel weak, instead of coming to the Bible that tells us that God's mercy never fails.

That God's mercy is always indescribable. love and the same God who called me out of darkness into his marvelous light and the same love that drew me to trust in Jesus Christ is the love that guides and keeps and protects and provides for my every single need 10 years or 20 years or 30 years down the road.

And yet we still very often struggle with the immensity of that love, the constant, unchanging love of God, the endless love of God, which doesn't strengthen and doesn't weaken according to how well we're doing or how well we're not doing as God's people.

[21 : 45] It cannot be more and it can't be made less. And we need to train our minds day by day to focus on the immensity of that.

Indescribable love, which is almost embarrassingly immense. You look at some of the statements in the Bible and they make you feel awkward. Sometimes they put in terms of human love, the love of a man and a woman.

For example, in Psalm 45 and verse 11, there's this great wedding theme that we all know is a description of the love that Jesus has for his people.

Now, if you're a follower of Jesus Christ by faith, that's you. What does he say? He says this, the king shall desire your beauty. That's what it says.

The king shall desire. And that word for desire, it's an immense word. It's a strong word. It's a word that's full of longing and passion.

[22 : 52] A word full of power. love. What about this one? Song of Solomon chapter 1 and verse 5. I am dark, she says, but lovely. How does she know she's lovely? Because the king has told her she's lovely.

He has said to her, you are lovely. Now, it's difficult for us to think of God saying that about us all. We talk in theory of the love of God and the goodness of God.

But it's difficult when we actually put it in those terms that God tonight thinks I am lovely. You say, no, that can't be true. No, there's no way that it can be true.

Because I'm so conscious. And that's the problem. We become preoccupied by our weaknesses and our sinfulness and we lose sight of the love of God. Now, I'm not saying, I'm not saying don't be conscious of our sinfulness.

The Bible tells us to examine ourselves and to be conscious of it. But yet, we've got to run with that to Jesus and we've got to cast that consciousness on the Lord Jesus and to confess our sins because it says he is faithful and just and cleanses us from all unrighteousness.

[24 : 07] And God thinks his people are lovely. That means you. That means me.

Whatever I think of myself. And whatever confession I bring to the Lord, I bring it on the basis of God's estimation of me, which is that in Christ I am lovely.

It's hard for me to say that. It's difficult for me to say that. And I can only say it because the word tells me. That's the description of God's law.

What about this one? Paul's letter to the Ephesians, chapter 3 and verse 19, that he prayed that the Ephesian Christians would have the strength to comprehend. This was his prayer, that you may have the strength to comprehend what is the breadth and the depth and the height and to know, to know the love of Christ.

That's what we are doing tonight. We're knowing, we're trying to grasp, we're trying to get our heads around the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge. And all we can do is to think of all the terms, the different terms that the Bible chooses to express that love and to believe by faith that that love applies to me as one of his children.

[25 : 25] And it is quite dishonoring of us to refuse to accept that love because it is freely given and because we've done nothing to deserve it.

It is dishonoring to the giver and it is dishonoring to the God who has declared that love for his people. Now it's only when we begin to discover that immeasurable grace and kindness and love of God that we begin to learn what true thanksgiving is.

It puts a different light on it, doesn't it? We're no longer thanking God just and I'm not minimizing his provision for us as human beings. I'm not minimizing that in any way.

But what we're doing is we're beginning to see our lives in a completely different light. And we're only truly thankful when we recognize that what we have and enjoy everything comes through Christ, in Christ, from God.

And that good God has also sent his son into the world to save from our sin. And we only come to know that as we surrender, surrender our lives to him and walk by faith.

[26 : 45] But when you do come to know Christ and to experience his grace in the gospel, you begin to see your whole life in a different perspective. It's a bit like Zacchaeus when he was converted, he discovered that the things that he lived for before, they meant very little to him now, now that he had found Jesus, now that his life had been changed.

So he said, here and now, I give half my goods to feed the poor. Everything that he lived for before, his whole life had been turned upside down. The things that meant so much to him then, they didn't mean the same now.

And a day of Thanksgiving is a day when we must focus our minds not just on what God has given, but on our own responsibilities in respect to what God has given us.

Because our whole lives have taken on a different perspective. We now belong to God. We recognize that everything has come from God. But we recognize also that every moment of our lives is spent in the service of God.

And everything that we have belongs to God. Now for some Christians they think that their only duty in this respect is to give to the church. And they give to the church a certain proportion of their income, then they think that I can do what I like with the rest.

[28 : 11] Well I don't find that in the Bible at all. What I find in the Bible is that if I'm a Christian, a child of God, I'm accountable to him for everything, every single thing that I do.

And that means that I need to deploy what God has given in service to him. That means that we are to honor God with what he has given us.

What does that mean, to honor God? Now with this I'm going to bring things to a close. It means, first of all, I am to treasure, to treasure everything that God has given to me.

It's very difficult, you know, to do that in a world in which there is perhaps a celebrity culture, and the celebrities are the ones who live in luxury, and I don't.

But when you think about it, we all live in luxury, in actual fact. every one of us, we live in luxury. We have food on our tables, we live in warm, comfortable homes, we really have enough of everything. [29 : 22] How much do we treasure? You remember how the apostle Paul in the shipwreck, we looked at it some weeks ago, in Acts chapter 27, and how he broke bread, just a loaf of bread, he's in the middle of a shipwreck, he doesn't know what's, well he does know, but he's in immense danger, and all these men, they haven't eaten for days and days and days, and he takes this loaf of bread, and the first thing he does is he gives thanks.

You would never expect a man in the middle of the most fearful storm to give thanks for a loaf of bread, but why is he doing it? Because he's treasuring it. It doesn't matter what circumstances he's in, he's recognizing that this little loaf of bread is a treasure given to him by God, and we have to live the same way, by treasuring what we have, the good things that we have, and it's incredibly dangerous to live in a celebrity-driven world where we're looking, we're looking at what the celebrities have, and the rich people in this world, and it's a way of making us covetous so that we don't value what we have ourselves.

Well, forget it. Forget the way they live. Ask the Lord to give you a sense of thankfulness for the little things that you have, and then you discover they're not so little after all.

They're great because they reflect his goodness to us. We're also to be content with what God has. You know what the book of Proverbs tells us? It says this, this was his prayer, Give me neither poverty nor riches.

Feed me with the food that is needful for me, lest I be full and deny the Lord and say who is the Lord, or lest I be poor and steal and profane the name of my God.

[31 : 08] We are to be content. Godliness with contentment. I know how to abound and how to suffer, says the apostle. I'm content in whatever situation the Lord has given me.

That's our second prayer, to ask for contentment with what we have and to know when to draw the line and when enough is enough. We're also not to waste.

We live in a wasteful world. And by that I don't mean how much plastic we put in our bins or how many bottles we put in our bins or the amount of rubbish we produce. That's the way that people talk about waste nowadays.

But I'm talking about wasting what God has thrown away, what God has given us. By a wasteful use of the money that God has given us and the great things, the great gifts that God has given us.

And by always looking over our shoulder to see what the neighbor has or to see what someone else has and to discard things before we really need to, we live in a terribly wasteful world.

[32 : 07] And it comes down to that. It comes down to our fascination and obsession with having to have the newest and the biggest and the best of everything. Some people have that obsession and we only have it because we live in a 21st century western world that is obsessed with how much we have.

But Christians aren't to live like that. We are to live different lives. We are to live lives that are glorifying to God and they begin by treasuring what God has given. We are also to share what God has given.

We are to see the needs of others and we are to use what God has given us to supply the needs of others. And then we are to offer what God has given.

And by that of course I mean as an act of worship. I said last Sunday that our offering is part of the service which we come to attend. And there's a real sense in which the service begins the moment you walk in the door and you put your money into the plate.

It's not just you're not just throwing it away. You're actually giving to the Lord with a prayer and in faith that God will take your contribution even although you may not be able to afford much.

[33 : 16] You'll take that contribution and the Lord will use it towards the sharing of the gospel and the extension of his kingdom. Who knows what God will do with your little contribution.

giving us the apostle has many things. God has many things to say about the way in which we give and how much we give.

And that's for you of course and for me to work out prayerfully in my own heart between myself and the Lord. But it's something that we need to review. I would say every year to ask how God is guiding us in this respect.

And we're to see how much that offering of our own, of the resource that God has given us, it works within the whole structure of the church to the glory of God.

You know there's a wonderful verse and I'm going to close with this. In 2 Corinthians chapter 9 and verse 12 Paul is tying up and it's like a he's knitting together.

[34 : 21] How? The contribution of each Christian in Corinth works its way towards the extension of the kingdom and the encouragement of other Christians in other places.

And he says this, you will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way which through us will produce thanksgiving to God.

For the ministry of the service is not only supplying the needs of the saints, but is also overflowing in many thanksgivings to God. By their approval of this service they will glorify God because of your submission flowing from your confession of the gospel of Christ and the generosity of your contribution for them and for all others while they long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God upon you.

Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift. Now what he's saying is there it starts with God's inexpressible gift. Christ giving himself on the cross. And then as a result of that the gospel goes out by the power of the gospel people's lives are changed and their pockets are opened.

and they see that by their generosity they are working towards the extension of God's kingdom so that others hear and so that others come in are encouraged through the preaching of the gospel and so that others begin to enjoy what they have enjoyed and see what they have seen and so all the whole thing works out to the glory of God in this world and that's where they play their part.

[36 : 04] I was watching the news tonight picking up the pieces of the England game last night and how they lost to Croatia and I heard a really interesting thing they were on tonight about how the fallout from this loss is massive not just because their pride has been shattered or whatever else but shares in Umbro have gone down tourism is going to suffer there's all kinds of different ways in which this one single loss is going to lose the economy in fact they said this two billion pounds is going to be lost to the economy through this incredible isn't it and they worked it all out you know these all these economists had worked it out you see one single event has devastating consequences but according to the apostle Paul this is it in reverse one single event the death of Jesus at

Calvin it has marvelous consequences not to the impoverishment of people but to the enrichment of the whole world as the gospel goes all over all over the world and as people come together their lives are changed and as they discover the greatness of God and God is glorified and he is thanked that's the importance of thankfulness with our hearts thankfulness with our voices and thankfulness with our lives in the service of God to the glory of God may God bless his word to us let's pray together gracious and eternal God we give thanks for this evening and for the opportunity which has been given to us to recognize what God has done in the gospel and we ask Lord that our thankfulness will not just be an act of worship but it will be an act of making this vow this sacrifice this coming and presenting ourselves as living sacrifices to the Lord forgive our sins we pray in Jesus name Amen