

Opening Words

I wish every Christian and every preacher would listen to me just for a few moments. I am afraid that we have walked away from this verse. I am afraid that we have fallen into preaching principles and steps and feeling good and solutions and we have stopped preaching the riches of Christ.

140 Eph Paul the Preacher

No matter where Paul was and no matter what he was doing, he always took his identity from his relationship with Jesus Christ and he did this because he learned to experience so much grace from Jesus Christ.

Paul had many identities. He was the prisoner of Christ Jesus. He was the steward of God's grace, and now we will learn about him as the preacher. They sound glorious and romantic as if he were a superhero who flew from one victory to another, as if he were someone who achieved heights of victory that we can only gaze at with a telescope from a distance.

But it was not this way for Paul. I don't recall anyone ever saying that prison was a piece of cake. Prisoners may have experienced fellowship with Christ in deep ways, but they were always glad to get out. Paul could call himself the prisoner of Christ and not experience the shame that went with imprisonment only because he experienced grace. When he wrote to the Philippians and in 1:7 he said, "in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel, you all are partakers of grace with me." Paul learned how to get grace and how to apply it to his situation. So, while others may have looked upon him as the scum of the earth because he was in jail, he knew differently. He wasn't really Nero's prisoner. He was Christ's prisoner!

As a steward, he experienced grace as we saw in verse 2 when he spoke of the stewardship of God's grace which was **given** to him. Now in verses 7-8 he will use the same phrase. Let's listen to Paul:

of ~~which~~ [this gospel] I was made a minister, according to the gift of God's grace which was given to me according to the working of His power. ⁸To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ.

In verse 7 Paul says he was made a minister according to the grace of God and the Greek word he uses for minister is the word from which we get the word deacon – diakonos – and in verse 8 he said he was given grace to preach to the Gentiles. The Greek word there is euangelizo and has the idea of proclaiming good news. This was the word used in the ancient world when a herald would run from city to city proclaiming the good news that their nation's military had won a victory or a great dignitary was coming to visit. Paul viewed himself in such roles, servant or deacon roles or herald roles to proclaim glad tidings.

And all of it was because of the grace of God. Notice Paul's attitude. The grace of God did not come to him because he was a great man, but Paul mentions two quite different reasons why he received such grace.

First, the grace came according to the working of Christ's power. Did you catch that in verse 7? – the gift of God's grace was given to Paul according to the working of His power and the "his" refers to Christ. **Christ** was mightily at work in Paul's life. This was the resurrected Christ. This was the enthroned Christ who was Lord over all the powers and who was exercising his kingly authority in the world by giving gifts to his people and then energizing those gifts so that they would have a great effect in the world.

How sad that when we think of Christ going back into the heavens we think he has nothing to do with this world, as if he went on a celestial vacation! No, Christ went to headquarters and took up the scepter and he reigns and exercises his lordship in the world. One of the ways he does this is to impart gifts to his people according to the energizing or working of his power. When God uses you and me, in any way, it is because the living, resurrected Christ is mightily working in and through us to touch others.

Here is the second reason why grace came to Paul. He was a humble man. Listen to his words, "to me, the very least of all saints this grace was given." Is Paul being self deprecating here? Is he showing, what we moderns call, "a poor self image?" Not in the least. Paul, never seemed to have far from him the memory of his failures as a persecutor of God's church, and I am sure, other failures that he may not have mentioned for he was not a perfect man. Paul had this honest awareness of how far short he fell of the glory of God.

Paul took a word here and played with it to drive his point home. He took the Greek word for "least" and added a suffix to it. In English, this would be "leastest". I am the "leastest" of the saints he said. Well, that is bad grammar and we would laugh at someone using that word, but Paul makes it up to drive home a point, he was less than the least of God's people. It's as if he were saying, "you can line up all of God's people and rank them from the greatest to the least," and I would come after the least, limping along, hanging on to others, amazed that I am even in line.

Some people beat themselves up over their sins and they never learn to forgive themselves long after Christ and others have forgiven them, but I don't think that is going on here. I don't think Paul is beating himself up. Let me explain something I am learning in my experience. I am learning to walk before God aware of my sins **and** aware of the grace of God at the same time and it is the most blessed place to be. Being ever aware of my sins keeps me humble. And when I speak of being aware I don't mean that I walk around feeling guilty and lousy because the grace of God is too wonderful for that. But it means I am aware of what I am without Christ and at the same time I relish in the fact that I am not under any condemnation! I am aware that I have fallen short of the glory of God but I have died to sin, been raised in Christ and been seated in his representative enthronement. This keeps me humble, and it keeps me rejoicing. When I look at myself I see one thing. When I look at Christ I see quite another. And by keeping my gaze on Christ and his grace, my life changes.

I hope you experience this – you don't want to miss the grace of Christ. I hope you will experience the working of his mighty power in your life and that you will be honest about yourself and say, "yes, I am a sinner. Yes, I have failed. Yes, I am deeply aware of my insufficiency. But I don't think

about that too much and when I do, I know I am not under condemnation because of his grace which is greater than my sin.” It is a blessed place to be, to experience this.

But I have talked about things on which Paul was not focusing. I wanted to talk about them because they are important for our lives but I want to get to what Paul was focusing on. He said God gave him grace so that he might preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ.

What a statement and what an important phrase for the church today! Paul preached the riches of Christ. I wish every Christian and every preacher would listen to me just for a few moments on this point. I am afraid that we have walked away from this verse. I am afraid that we have fallen into preaching principles and steps and feeling good and solutions and we have stopped preaching the riches of Christ.

Paul preached Jesus Christ to others. Jesus Christ was his message – his identity and what he came to do. And surely, part of the weakness of the Church today is that we have ceased preaching the riches of Christ. I am all for practical help and making our messages relevant. I am not speaking about giving only high sounding theological terminology to our audiences, but if we do not connect everything that we say and do to Christ and what he has done for us, then we are being unfaithful to our Lord, we are hindering the ministry, and robbing people of the riches that are theirs because of their relationship with Christ.

What are the riches of Christ? This phrase is synonymous with Paul’s phrase in 1:3 where he says, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in heavenly places in Christ Jesus.”

Remember that verse? Remember that message? Remember the several messages where we talked about the wonders of the spiritual world in Ephesians 1-2? Let me quickly repeat them because we must remind ourselves of what we have in Christ Jesus.

- We have the status of being chosen ones in Christ.
- We have been chosen to be holy and blameless before him.
- We have been predestined in his love to be adopted into his family.
- We have received the riches of his grace which he lavished upon us.
- We have been purchased and now belong to him.
- He has made known to us the mystery of his will.
- We have obtained an inheritance.
- We have received the Spirit.
- We have been raised in Him.
- We have been enthroned in Him.
- We have experienced the four faces of salvation.
- We have been prepared for good works.
- We have been reconciled to him and to his family!

This is what Paul preached to the Gentiles. This is the good news he heralded. The prophecy said, “how beautiful are the feet of him who brings good news.” How people must have greeted runners

who would come to a city with good news of the king's victory in battle. And Paul was running from city to city heralding the good news of the King's victory for the world. He was telling them, "You can be in God's family. You can be a chosen one. You can belong. You can be blameless. You can know God's will. You can have an inheritance. You can have God's Spirit. You can be made alive in Christ and be prepared for royalty. You can live a life of good works that God has specially designed for you. You can be reconciled to God and to his people." God has prepared all these riches to satisfy the deepest hunger and urging of your soul.

And did you notice that Paul said, "unfathomable riches?" Some translations use the word inexplorable. Some, untraceable, some inexhaustible, some illimitable, some inscrutable, some incalculable. I think they all mean to express that the riches of Christ to meet our deepest needs for time and for eternity, are infinite.

This is worth preaching and this is what I want to preach for the rest of my life! I hope you will join us in this great endeavor at WGS Ministries to preach the infinite riches of Christ and I hope you will share them with others.