

Gospel Ministry: Grace to the Least

Ephesians 3:1-13

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For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles—2 assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you, 3 how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly. 4 When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, 5 which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit. 6 This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

7 Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me by the working of his power. 8 To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, 9 and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things, 10 so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. 11 This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord, 12 in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him. 13 So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory. - Ephesians 3:1-13, ESV

Introduction: For Professionals or Professors?

This morning, we return to the book of Ephesians and we pick up with the same passage we looked at together a month ago, Ephesians 3:1-13. Last time, we focused our attention on the word “mystery” and saw how God unites believing Jews and Gentiles in one body, one people in Christ. Because Christ is the fulfillment of all that Israel was intended to be - the true Image of God, God's firstborn Son and the Light to the Nations - all those who are united to Christ by faith become members of the true spiritual Israel, the covenant people of God and receive all of God's covenant promises as equal partakers of the grace of God in Christ Jesus.

This morning, we want to return to this same passage and pick up a different “m” word - minister. In verse 7, Paul says, “*Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace.*” Then, he goes on in verses 7-10 to describe his Gospel ministry. Now, I know I'm already risking losing all of your attention. You may already be thinking, “Oh, we're going to hear about Paul's ministry. I'm not a minister, so this doesn't apply to me.” Well, hold on a minute. It may be true that not every Christian is called to be a full-time minister with the ministry of preaching the Gospel, but all Christians are called to ministry.

Paul's ministry was to proclaim Christ, and all of us are called to proclaim Christ in some way to the people God puts in our lives. In other words, this is not just a message for professionals but for all professing Christians.

I. The Grace of Ministry

The first thing we want to highlight about Paul's view of ministry is that he sees ministry as a gift of God's grace. Three times in 7 verses, verses 2-8, he identifies ministry as a gift of God's grace. Now, we are accustomed to the language of grace related to our salvation. As Paul wrote in chapter 2, "By grace you have been saved, through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, so that no one may boast."

Grace is God's undeserved favor, His kindness extended to those who deserve His wrath, His favor given to those who deserve His displeasure. We know and believe and rejoice in the truth that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. But ministry? Isn't that something we give back to God? Isn't that something we do for Him out of love and thankfulness for the grace of salvation? Ministry is something we do, isn't it? Well, yes . . . and no.

Ministry is how we serve the Lord. What Paul says about his call to ministry in 1 Timothy is very helpful for understanding how ministry is a gift of grace:

I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life. - 1 Tim. 1:12-16, ESV

Paul viewed it as a high privilege, a gracious gift, that God would appoint him to His service despite his past as a violent persecutor of the church. For all of us, the grace of being given a ministry is really inseparable from the grace of being saved. Just as it is God's undeserved favor and kindness to save us from our sins and adopt us into His family, so it is also His undeserved favor and kindness to send us out to a world in need with good news to proclaim through our words and deeds.

I am convinced that the more we all learn to view every aspect of our Christians lives - indeed, every aspect of our whole lives - as a gift and a privilege instead of a duty, burden or obligation, the more freely, joyfully and faithfully we will be able to serve the Lord.

A. Stewardship of God's Grace - *the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you, (v. 2)*

The first thing Paul says about his ministry in verse 2 is that it is a stewardship of God's grace, given to him. Paul says he was given as a gift the privilege of being a steward of the grace of God. This "stewardship" or "administration" is a word that refers to the management of something that belongs to someone else.

In my professional career, I have been a school administrator for over ten years. Never during these years of administration did I think that the schools belonged to me. I always had a sense that I was being entrusted with the oversight and care of that which belonged to another.

God, in His grace, allows us to be stewards of His grace. He's the One who gives us this stewardship and holds us accountable for it, and He gives it to us that we might extend His grace to bless others. This is the meaning of "for you." Paul's stewardship of God's grace was *for* the Gentiles and *for* the Ephesians, for their benefit and blessing.

It is a high and holy privilege and blessing to be entrusted with the grace of God in the good news of Jesus Christ and to be allowed to extend that kindness and saving grace to others as instruments, vessels and ambassadors of God's redeeming love.

Stewardship inescapably requires and is accompanied by giving an account for the stewardship to the master. In 1 Corinthians 4, Paul writes this:

This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful. But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. 4For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God.

This reality, of the account we will all give to God, is both sobering and liberating. Paul was freed from the pressure of being judged by others, even of having to judge himself, because

he knew that, in the end, the Lord Himself will be the One who judges and commends us for our service, which He has given to us.

B. According to the Gift of God's Grace - *Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace (v. 7)*

The next thing Paul says, in verse 7, is that he was made a minister of the gospel according to the gift of God's grace. Now this simply, wonderfully and profoundly means that God Himself gives to each of His children whatever ministry He deems appropriate, according to His grace, and not according to our deserving.

For Paul, the gift of God's grace made him a minister of the gospel. For you, it may give you a different ministry, to steward God's grace differently. The reality that God gives us all gifts and calls us all to be stewards of His grace is made clear in 1 Peter 4:10: "*As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace.*" (ESV) Peter then distinguished between those gifted to speak and those gifted to serve: "*whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.*" (4:11, ESV)

So, whether you speak or serve, and however you speak or serve, you do so as a privilege, as a gift of God's grace in its varied forms and as a vessel of God's grace in its varied forms.

C. The Very Least of All the Saints - *To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles (v. 8)*

Next, in verse 8, we see Paul's humility and gratitude in the face of God's grace to him. Paul identifies himself as "the very least of all the saints." He is not putting on airs or being overly dramatic. His language here is similar to what he says in 1 Timothy 1:15, where he calls himself the chief of sinners. In both places, he has his background as a violent persecutor of Christians in mind. He sees himself as being the least deserving, the least worthy and the most sinful because he used to violently and ruthlessly pursue and persecute Christians.

Paul's awareness of his own sinful background and his deep awareness of his own unworthiness make him humble and thankful for the grace he has received of being called to preach the Gospel to Gentiles. For each of us, an awareness of our own sinful nature, our sinful past and where we would be without the grace of God is vital to developing a heart of humility, gratitude and joyful service.

Your testimony may be different from the Apostle Paul's, but your salvation is still entirely by the grace of God and without His grace, you would be without hope. As we consider the

truth of who we would be without Christ and the power of saving grace, our humility deepens and our gratitude grows.

II. The Gospel of Ministry

Paul's ministry is rooted in grace and it is centered on the Gospel - on Gospel proclamation to the Gentiles and on Gospel demonstration through the church.

A. The Unsearchable Riches of Christ

“to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ”

At its heart, Paul's ministry was a preaching ministry. But it was not just any preaching, but Gospel-preaching. The verb Paul uses for preach does not just mean “proclaim” but “evangelize” or “Gospel-proclaim.” And what is Paul Gospel-proclaiming? Here he uses a very unusual expression, saying that he Gospel-proclaims “the unsearchable riches of Christ”

Normally, the object of this verb “to Gospel-preach” is the gospel itself, sometime it is Christ Himself, and sometimes it is “the faith.” Here, Paul says He is proclaiming through the proclamation of the Gospel “the unsearchable riches of Christ.” How can you proclaim that which is unsearchable? Well, that's kind of like asking, “How can you know that which is incomprehensible or describe that which is indescribable?” One of my favorite Gospel words is “ineffable,” meaning “too great or too extreme to be described in words.”

The words we use to describe God are sweeping all-and-not words that are hard to really define or picture. God is all-powerful (omnipotent), all-knowing (omniscient), all-present (omnipresent) - which are ways of saying there's nothing He cannot do, nothing He does not know and nowhere where He is not present. We say God is immortal, which means He does not die. We say God is infinite, which means He is not finite, not limited. We say He is unchanging, which means He does not change. But try to really grasp and truly comprehend any of these qualities and you can't.

So it is with the riches of Christ- that is, not the riches that Christ owns, but the riches which are found in Christ, or the riches that Christ is in Himself. If you have Christ and Christ has you, then you have unsearchable riches and will never truly lack for anything you need or that your soul truly desires. We get Christ through the Gospel, so to be called to proclaim the Gospel in word and/or in deed, is to be called to proclaim and extend to others unsearchable riches.

Millions of people have been in a frenzy this weekend over a PowerBall jackpot that reached almost a billion dollars, but even a billion dollars is a finite amount that can be exhausted. After all, our government spends \$10.5 billion per day. The national debt is nearly \$19,000 billion dollars and yet even it is not unsearchable or inexhaustible, though at this point it's probably impossible for us to ever pay off.

Christ ALONE is inexhaustible, unsearchable riches!

B. The Wonderfully Wise Plan of God

While Paul's ministry was a Gospel-preaching ministry at its heart, his ministry of Gospel proclamation was also one of bringing *"to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things,"*

In other words, in proclaiming the Gospel, Paul is not just showing forth the unsearchable riches of Christ, but he is also laying out God's wise plan for the world for everyone to see. If you want to know the riches of Christ, look at the Gospel. If you want to know God's plan for the world, look at the Gospel.

In the Gospel, in the good news of Jesus Christ, we see the love, forgiveness, grace and wisdom of God most fully displayed, as Christ comes to give Himself for us and bring us into His eternal kingdom and into His very eternal life. All creation is summed up under His headship and He is Lord over All forever.

III. The Goal of Ministry

The end result of the explanation, proclamation and demonstration of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is this: The church becomes an eternal, living display of the wisdom of God for the angels of heaven to eternally contemplate and celebrate, bringing heavenly, eternal glory to God.

This is how Paul says it in verse 10: *"so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places."*

A. A Living, Cosmic Display to the Angels

"Rulers and authorities in the heavenly places" could mean the hosts of hell or the hosts of heaven or both.

The language sounds similar to Ephesians 6:12: *"For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this*

present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." Except we need to note that here in 2:10, Paul does not specifically characterize these as evil rulers and authorities.

So, whether Paul means heavenly hosts or the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places, it is clear that God intends for the church to be a demonstration of His wisdom in salvation for angels - fallen and/or unfallen - to witness. This is because, in Christ Jesus, God did something for people that He never did for angels. The angels who chose to rebel against God are lost and condemned forever. The angels who did not rebel never will have the opportunity to do so again.

Angels have no free will and angels receive no redemption. God the Son did not become like the angels to redeem angels, He became like people to redeem people. In 1 Peter 1:12, Peter makes it clear that the good news of the Gospel contains "*things into which angels long to look.*"

B. Of the Manifold Wisdom of God

Specifically, what is displayed through the church is the "manifold wisdom of God." This word "manifold" carries the meaning of both "many-sided" and "many-colored": 1. God's wisdom unfolds a plan that takes the apparent defeat of Christ Jesus on the cross and makes it His triumph over sin and hell.

2. The wisdom of God takes the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and makes it the inauguration of a new creation, the dawning of the new heavens and the new earth.

3. The wisdom of God takes the message of the Gospel, the good news about Jesus, and uses it as the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.

4. God's wisdom is pleased to take all that Christ is and has and count it as ours through faith alone.

5. God's wisdom uses this same Gospel to reconcile very different kinds of people to each other, turning age-old enemies into brothers and sisters in the Lord.

This wisdom of God is multifaceted, complex, luminous, radiant - like the rarest and most precious jewel. Nothing else can compare to the wisdom of God, and nothing better displays it than the Gospel's work in the church. Precisely because we are so small, so weak, so petty, so sinful, so foolish, the transformation that only the Gospel can bring makes the wisdom of God shine more brightly!

So, what is our calling in ministry? Our ministry may have a different outward form, calling on different gifts that God has given us, but the heart is the same:

1. We should see our call to ministry, to service, as a gracious gift of God

2. We should also see our ministry as a stewardship of God's grace for the good of others.
3. We should see the Gospel of Jesus Christ as the center and heart of our ministry. We are not called to magnify ourselves call attention to ourselves or make ourselves look good. We are called to share and tell about Jesus and what He has done and is doing for us and in us and through us.
4. Ultimately, our ministry is about the showing the wisdom of God, which is bringing people to Himself and to one another and redeeming and reconciling all of creation under Christ through the Gospel.

This has many implications, but consider just a few in closing:

1. Think of Christian service not as what you do for God but as what God gives you as a gracious gift to do for others as stewards of God's grace.
2. Don't be so eager to show people how good you are or to talk so much about your religion, but instead be more eager to show people how wonderful Jesus is and how much He has done for you.
3. Love your brothers and sisters in the Lord, and support and pray for them in their ministry, as you also ask them to support and pray for you in your ministry. As we love one another and bear one another's burdens, we fulfill the law of Christ and magnify the wise grace of God.

Remember, none of this is about how great we are, but it is all about how great He is!