

Conversion: From Religion to Grace

From the series: The One Covenant of Grace – The Salvation of the World

Text: Philippians 2:7

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

But whatever gain I had I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Philippians 2:7

God has determined from all eternity that He will save us, that He will redeem the world. He made a pre-decision. He decided, not only to create, but also that He would redeem, and we noted last week that that pre-decision is spoken of sometimes in the scripture as predestination - simply the determination of God to save, an eternal plan and purpose by which God will become the Saviour of the world. And in the execution of that plan, within the course of human history, He chose a special people, elected a people through whom to execute that plan and purpose, and in binding Himself to that people specially chosen, He entered into covenant relationship. And that covenant relationship with the people specially chosen was in order, again, to execute His eternal plan and purpose, to send that people specially chosen, bound to Him in covenant, to all the world to share good news and to announce the grace and mercy of God for all people. That, in a nutshell, is what the one story of the Bible is all about, and there's one covenant of grace that is witnessed to throughout the whole of the scripture.

It is grace in the Old Testament where God called Abraham and bound Himself to him. Abraham believed God and became the recipient of the grace of God. Throughout the whole Old Testament it was a story of a special people, specially graced. God bound Himself to the nation in the event of the Exodus and reiterated the promise that He had spoken to Abraham, "I will be your God, you will be my people." A special people in order that, through that people, all families of the earth might be blessed and the light and the salvation of the eternal God might be witnessed to in the midst of history. Jeremiah the prophet, seeing the dismal results of that mission in the life of Israel and Judah, said,

Behold the days are coming when God will bind Himself in new covenant and in that day it will not be a matter of external religion, but it will be

something of the heart, the law written within the heart when everyone will know the Lord.

Jeremiah knew that the whole national scheme of things was falling into shambles, but he also believed that the eternal plan and purpose of God would not fail, that God would continue binding Himself to a people in order that, through a people, there might be light for all people. The choice of a few on behalf of the many. The choice, not simply to salvation, but to mission for the whole world in order that the whole world might come to know that God is gracious, that God is a Saviour.

Paul was a son of that old covenant, and the Judaism of that first century had become a religion that had fallen into legalism and moralism as we know all too well from the New Testament witness. And yet, there was still that zeal, that determination and that dedication to God, which we see in the life of a Paul. Paul, as he tells his own story, tells of a life before he met Jesus Christ that was full of religion, that was full of pious practice, that was full of ritual rectitude, that was full of legal morality, that was full of passion, seriousness, dedication and commitment. But the paradox which Paul discovered was that his very religious intensity was the means by which he was cutting himself off from experiencing the love and the grace of God.

Paul, writing to the Church at Phillipi, is carrying on a controversy by those who were disturbing those converts that he had brought to Jesus Christ. Those who had come after him said, "Jesus, yes, but also Moses. Jesus, yes, but also the ceremonies of the law, and all of the trappings of religion." Ritual purity, legal rectitude, all of the embroidery that so easily attaches itself to the relationship of the person to God. Paul had cut through all of that. Paul had had all of that cut through in the moment in which he was confronted by the Risen and Ascended Lord Jesus Christ.

You know his story - On his way to throw into prison those who named the name of Jesus, he was overcome with a brilliant light and heard the voice of Jesus. He yielded himself to that voice, becoming the Apostle of Jesus Christ and the great champion of the radical grace of God. Paul was one of the few figures in history who understood the radicality of the grace of God. Paul was converted. Paul was turned around in his tracks. Paul did a 180° twist. Paul's whole existence was transformed in a moment, in the moment that he looked into the face of Jesus Christ, and came to experience the grace - the grace of God in Jesus Christ, his Lord.

This morning I want you to see that that one covenant of grace which is the one story of the Bible, which is of cosmic scope and of eternal dimension, that includes the new heaven and the new earth and all God's people, is nonetheless just as individualizing and just as personal as your name. For it is one thing to rejoice in the fact that God is a saviour, that God has determined to renew and to redeem the world, that God has, from all eternity, loved and gives Himself in

love, binding Himself to the creation that He called into being. But finally, what we all need to know is that we are loved, and that He knows our name.

The call to turn to God through Jesus Christ comes to us this morning, not as a call to those beyond the bounds of the Church, not to the nonreligious, not to the nonbeliever. We do that. We have a mission to the world. We do proclaim to people everywhere the love and grace of God. But the interesting thing about the call to conversion this morning as it comes to expression through Paul is that it is the call to conversion to people who are religious, for whom religion has become their security project by which they set themselves off from God.

That's the interesting thing about religion. Religion walks a narrow line. It can be a blessing, or it can be a burden. It can be freeing and liberating, or it can be binding and depressing. And I'm not sure but I suspect that religion has done more damage in the world than it's done good, and I'm not sure, but I believe that a person is better off with none of it than with a dose of a bad variety of it, because religion can cramp the human spirit. Rather than liberate, it can oppress; rather than inspire, it can dehumanize; it can make a person broken, cowering, crushed. It can be the heaviest burden that one can ever be called upon to bear.

Paul understood that. He was deadly serious, deeply committed and passionately involved in the practice of religion. And remember this, too, for Paul this was not some kind of dark, degenerate paganism. Paul was a son of the covenant. Paul lived in the light of the covenant of Israel; he lived in the light of the Torah; he had all of the privilege that was accorded that special people to whom God had specially bound Himself. When we speak of Paul, we're speaking of one who served the true and living God, and what we have to see with Paul was that what he needed was not to believe that there was a God rather than no God; what he had to come to experience was not that he had to turn from his secular life and begin to be serious about spiritual things. The interesting thing about Paul is that he was all tied up in the true religion, in the religion of the true God, in the revelation of the God to Israel. What he had to learn was that all of his religion was his "self-project" by which he was securing himself, justifying himself, seeking to validate himself over *against* God, to guarantee his life, to secure his existence. That probably is the greatest temptation and the greatest peril to religious people.

It's difficult to be the Church. It's difficult to be a society like we are, where religion is practiced, where it has become institutionalized, where it has taken on forms and structures, where it has developed a liturgy, a ritual life, a polity, a form of government; where it has all of the trappings that any human institution has. In such a situation where people are gathered together in the name of God in the religious institution, there comes that subtle temptation to trust the institution, to trust the practice, to trust the exercise of religion and to lose sight of the fact that all of that is only so much scaffolding; all of that is so much instrument or means for the end of coming to experience the grace of God.

Paul came to realize two very important things, which he shares with the congregation at Phillipi. He says that religion, first of all, or the grace of God, the experience of salvation, is not a matter of status. If you want to talk credentials, let me tell you my credentials, he says. He was an Israelite, so he belonged to that special people who had been specially chosen, who had experienced the electing love of God. More than that, he says, I was circumcised on the eighth day; I was ritually proper. Once in a while I sense someone who gets very nervous about being ritually pure. What if we do it this way, or what if we don't do it this way, or what if this is not the process we follow, as though the rituals that we have established have some kind of magic about them. What if the communion is distributed by, God forbid, Deacons rather than Elders? Or if the bread should be broken by an Elder rather than a Minister of the Word or, to be ridiculous, what if the service were at 9 o'clock rather than 9:15?

And we may laugh, but religion has that terrifying power of binding people into structures and forms that become absolutized and eternalized, and finally become the things that are trusted, rather than recognizing that all of it could go. All of it could go! We must simply rest in the grace of God, Who needs none of it! And just the time we get so proper and so proud and so arrogant is the time that the Spirit of God needs to shatter all of our forms. Paul was circumcised on the eighth day; so what? His religion was burden, not a means of access to the smile of God. The tribe of Benjamin - that's like saying the family of the Rockefellers, the elite, something a little special. Paul says, No. To be in the grace of God is not a matter of status.

But, neither is it a matter of achievement. If it were a matter of achievement, would Paul have needed to find grace in the face of Jesus Christ? No, because there wasn't much that God could do for Paul. He had achieved it all. Hebrew of Hebrew-speaking parents. That means Jews of the dispersion living way off in Tarsus but still speaking Hebrew. That's how serious was Paul's home about the tradition. Still speaking Hebrew. As to the Law, a Pharisee. There were never more than 6,000 of them. There were never many rough and ready religious souls to be able to keep the discipline of the Pharisee. The Pharisee gets bad press in the New Testament and we don't like them very well, but they were serious people. They were the cream of the crop. Not many of us here in Christ Community would qualify, a funny church such as we are! We take anybody. Not many Pharisees could come out of a bunch like you. As to zeal, persecuting the Church. No "live and let live" with Paul. No nonchalance. No easy tolerance. Paul went to haul into prison those who dared to name the name of Jesus whom the likes of Paul had crucified because Jesus put in peril their religion by which they were justifying themselves. And he says as far as the Law is concerned, blameless.

Human achievement! Paul was no piker, but he wraps it all up in one little package and tosses it on the dung hill, literally. Translate it more colloquially for yourselves. That's what it was worth as a means of finding peace with God.

A person whose religion is a matter of ought, heavy ought, duty, obligation, onerous grinding out that which has to be done, all the time creating hostility within and repressed anger that can never come out to God and so comes out in ugliness to everybody else - all of that, Paul says, is to no avail. "One day I met Jesus." Paul wasn't converted from darkness to light, from unbelief to belief, from nonreligion to religion. Paul was converted from religion to grace, to the grace of God Who says, "How come you're bustin' your buns, Buddy? I've always loved you. Why don't you relax and let me put my arms around you? And then, incidentally, tell the story."

"I considered all of that rubbish for the sake of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord," says Paul. His whole existence transformed. His life changed. Paul converted, realizing what God intended in the first place with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Israel. And what had happened in Israel happened in the Church over and over again so that a voice like Paul's arises just once in a while and for not very long because the cry of radical grace does not build strong institutions where people are sheep and the religious leaders hold the spigot of grace. Once in a while, through the sham and the ceremony of religious pride and arrogance, a voice is raised, crying, "Radical grace!" and then again the saving God Who revealed Himself in the face of Jesus breaks through and says to people, "Relax. I love you. And there's nothing you can do about it."

Amen.