

Free to Care

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

Text: Galatians 6:2, 9-10

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Help one another to carry these heavy loads, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ... So let us never tire of doing good...let us work for the good of all... Galatians 6:2, 9-10

I am all excited again about being Christ's Community. You may respond, "You have been excited about it for nearly 17 years," and, of course, you would be right; I have been. But one goes through stages; sometimes the vision is clear and the movement strong. At other times the direction seems less clear. Sometimes the energy flows with great spontaneity; at other times it seems like an uphill grind. Sometimes the focus is clear; at times I get sidetracked with peripheral matters and I lose focus.

These past weeks have been rather difficult for me. The preparation to preach has been a struggle. I take this business very seriously and I have experienced more of the agony than the ecstasy of preaching.

We have been wrestling with the very center of what Christ Community is all about. We have a unique identity. It is not the only possible identity for a congregation. Every congregation has a distinct personality. Every congregation has its niche. When I say we have a unique identity, I am not boasting. I am saying, however, that for us, identity has been worked at intentionally and deliberately. We are self-conscious, self-aware. We have worked at that biblically and theologically over the past decade and a half. We re-named ourselves in May of 1971 and we did that in the midst of an explosion of the Spirit's power and grace. The name spoke a vision of what we wanted to become and it became a formative influence in our becoming what we are – Christ Community.

Not a community church which represented the lowest common denominator of biblical and theological understanding. Rather - Christ's Community - a community of people united in Jesus Christ.

Both words are significant:

Christ - The one through whom the grace of God has come to us.

Community - A fellowship of mutual love and support in which we share life together.

A community of openness and healing for all persons needing the grace of God; a community consciously seeking to transcend the limits and barriers to fellowship - ethnic barriers, denominational barriers, confessional barriers, social barriers.

A radio jingle we used for a long time said it well - "A community that cares about people."

That community finds its source in the radical grace of God. Radical grace is an old, familiar theme here. Yet in these weeks I have wrestled with it anew. For whatever reason, the messages have not come easily. But, now at the end of this series, I sense a deeper grasp or a new conviction about the nature of what we are and what we must continue to become. For me the focus has become very sharp again. We are called by Jesus Christ to be a community of care.

If radical grace is our theme, then radical love issuing in radical care must be our life.

I was struck with the power of the insight that came clear to me last week. Just as we find in Paul's Galatians letter the statement of a radical grace issuing in freedom, so we find in that same letter a statement of our radical obligation. Galatians is about freedom and obligation. Grace sets us free. There is no hedging on that. Paul's strenuous defense and exposition of God's radical grace issues in his climactic charge:

Christ has set us free, to be free people. Stand firm, then, and refuse to be tied to the yoke of slavery again.

You, my friends, were called to be free persons.

Free! That is our state in the grace of God - God's unilateral action binding us to Himself quite apart from anything we are or any performance on our part.

But, is that not dangerous? Will we not take advantage of such grace that asks nothing but simply sets us free? Certainly we might do that; we do do that! Paul was not unaware of the possible abuse of grace. He anticipated the objection to his understanding of grace in his letter to the Romans. He raises the objector's question:

What shall we say, then? Shall we persist in sin, so that there may be all the more grace? (Romans 6:1)

His answer is swift and direct:

By no means!

Recognizing the danger, however, does not cause Paul to moderate his insistence on radical grace. He will not tolerate a compromise – a mixture of law and grace. Rather, he speaks of the obligation of the person set free by grace in as radical terms as he had spoken of grace. God's people are called to be free, but, Paul adds:

...Only do not turn your freedom into license for the flesh, or, for the self-principle, but be servants to one another in love. For the whole law can be summed up in a single commandment: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'

Radical grace issues in freedom to love radically. The parallel is very interesting.

In relating his own experience of grace and thereby pointing to the fundamental experience of grace, Paul wrote:

I have been crucified with Christ: The life I now live is not my life, but the life which Christ lives in me.

Paul died. The old Paul who so strenuously sought to fulfill the obligations of the law, thereby justifying himself, was dead. He looked away from self; he looked to God Who justifies by grace.

Now he is equally dead to self when it comes to the life he now lives. He looks away from self to the neighbor. *Self-ish* existence is past in terms both of self-justification and self-serving. Freed from self, the one graced by God is free for the neighbor.

Only a free person can give self away. A person engaged in a self-project, a project aimed at self-justification, self-validation, self-vindication has self at the center. There is always the compulsion in a multitude of ways to guard, defend, enhance and authenticate the self. A person who has died to self, having been given the gift of life by the grace of God, no longer focuses on the self.

The graced self has no need to prove itself, defend itself, promote itself. The self-protecting, promoting, validating project is over and done with. The terrible driving, compelling need to be liked, recognized, rewarded is dead. Now one possesses one's self by grace. God gives one one's life. That self can now give itself away.

And Paul says the obligation to love is as unconditional and radical as is the grace that frees and gives new life. One is never through with the obligation to love.

To live by law is easier and much neater. If there were a set of legal obligations I must fulfill and thus find favor with God, then it would follow that there would likewise be certain legal obligations incumbent on me in regard to my neighbor.

We could probably come up with a code of duties to neighbor. But if it is a legal, contractual obligation, then I can check off the list of duties and finally have done with it.

But, if I am loved unconditionally, must I not love unconditionally?

If my obligation is to love my neighbor, I am never through with it. The radical nature of my obligation to love my neighbor simply follows as a matter of course from the radical grace that flows from the infinite love of God.

Galatians 6 deals with the obligation to love in terms of caring for one another in the community of faith and beyond. Life in the community of God's people is quite in contrast to the situation of human society as a whole. Listen to Paul:

We must not be conceited, challenging one another to rivalry, jealous of one another.

Pride, competitiveness, jealousy - so characteristic of human society - are not to be present. They are the consequences of a society of selves at war. But in the Christian community, self has died.

And what if someone falls and really messes up his life? Ostracize? Criticize? Trample? Not so! Rather,

... set him right again very gently.

Scott Peck opens *The Road Less Traveled* with the words, "Life is difficult. Paul would agree. So he counsels:

Help one another to carry these heavy loads...

Again in verses 9 and 10 he calls us to the radical obligation to care.

So let us never tire of doing good... Therefore, as opportunity offers, let us work for the good of all...

Do we grow weary of caring?

Sure we do. Compassion fatigue is a common experience. Paul knew that, too. What are we tempted to do when we grow weary in well-doing? We are tempted to short-circuit the obligation. We are tempted to say, "Well, I went the extra mile but no one can expect me to do more." Or, "I tried, but I give up."

But we can't get away with that with Paul. We ought to be honest. Let's not kid ourselves. Let's simply admit when the nerve of compassion is cut. Let's withdraw, find some space to be renewed and then go at it again. But, let's not kid ourselves that any amount of effort, of care, of compassionate outreach fulfills the

obligation. We are never through with loving and caring and we never finally turn away from another human being having completed the claims of love.

We are graced - given life as a gift.

Therefore we are free of any need to perform to win God's favor. Therefore we are free to love, free to care. And there is no end to it. In humility, with compassion, we serve one another in love. We never miss an opportunity to do good to our neighbor.

That word "opportunity" translates the Greek word *Kairos*, which is the word for time, not in the sense of ongoing time, but in the sense of significant time – the moment filled with opportunity, freighted with eternity. Paul's meaning is that this time of the new age between Jesus' resurrection and His coming again is a time for loving and caring.

The call to good to all persons concludes the paragraph that began with the warning about trying to fool God. Paul reminds us that that simply is not possible. God is not fooled. What we are is transparent to God and finally, in God's presence, will be apparent to us ourselves. Within Paul's uncompromising claim of God's radical grace there is as well his insistence that our lives will be reviewed. This is not a threat; it is simply reality. How could it be otherwise? Life is serious. It matters how we live. Grace sets us free from condemnation. It gives peace with God. We are free from the driving compulsion to measure up – we are loved just as we are and declared righteous in Jesus Christ. Precisely that wonderful news changes us, frees us, sets us about responding joyfully to act out what has been enacted in us, for us, in Jesus Christ.

There is no fear in judgment. Pain there will be. Regret there will be.

Refining fire will be necessary to finish the work in us until we are perfectly conformed to the image of Jesus Christ. One day we will be just like him and today is the day of opportunity to walk toward that goal by loving as we have been loved and caring as we have been cared for.

I am excited all over again about what Christ Community is all about, about our initial vision and our constant concentration. We are in the business of loving and caring for people – all kinds of people in all sorts of conditions.

I was reminded this week of what I personally experienced through this congregation. When I thought it was all over, you invited me back, believed in me, trusted me, healed me, fed me, clothed me.

Remember my commitment to this congregation was not to a thriving 3,000-member church, but to 678 persons in a village congregation. No vision of grandeur, just a spontaneous response to love and care.