

The Gospel of Radical Grace: No Human Invention

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

Text: Galatians 1:11-12
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Transcription of the spoken sermon

...The gospel you heard me preach is no human invention... I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. Galatians 1:11-12

As the people of God, we are here to celebrate the radical grace of God. We come here week after week, not simply to fulfill the Sunday obligation; we come here week after week, not simply out of custom, or habit, or out of a sense of duty which has become onerous duty; we come here not begrudging the time or the effort that it takes; we come here week after week to celebrate the radical grace of God. We are a people who celebrate and now for many years we have had it printed on our Order of Worship - Worship is Celebration. Worship is singing and dancing and proclaiming joyfully the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We are a people who come here week by week in order to focus upon God, in order to have God in our minds and before our hearts. We are a people who come here week after week in order to lose ourselves in wonder, love and praise. We are a people who come here expecting that the pageantry of corporate worship will catch us up so that we will lose ourselves and so that we will be transported into the very presence of God, so that we will leave this place, if not with an intellectual proposition that we can repeat, nonetheless with an experience that we cannot deny. We come here to present our whole being before the being of God, to experience the Word of His grace, to hear again the joyful proclamation that God is for us, and together to lift our voices and to become joined through that union that the Spirit creates so that we know that we are the people of God and that God is for us, God is with us, God is on our side.

We are a people for whom worship is celebration, and there are all kinds of worship. Sometimes the experience is one of silence when we are overcome with the sheer beauty of it all; sometimes the experience of worship is one of contemplation as we reflect quietly on the grace of God; and sometimes the experience of worship is one of such exuberance that we simply cannot be silent,

that we simply cannot sit still, for we are literally lifted out of ourselves experiencing the joy of the truth of the grace of God.

I suppose that it is true that what I have just described is the ideal, and I suppose that the ideal at Christ Community only happens now and again, and I also believe that the ideal happens across the country in the Christian Church rarely, for it is true that the Christian Church has so often become terribly dull and boring and trivial. When you think of the wonder of the Gospel, when you think of the drama of the proclamation, when you think of the fundamental reality to which we point and to which we seek to enter, then for us to be so dull and so drab is a contradiction of the reality we claim.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is a Gospel of radical grace and that is the most fundamental truth of all the world. We come here to celebrate the truth. We come here to enter into reality. We come here in order to be in touch with that which is elemental, fundamental, basic reality. We come here to present ourselves in the presence of God and to worship because of that revelation of Himself in Jesus Christ which assures us that God is for us and God is with us and that we are the objects of His radical grace.

The Gospel of radical grace is no human invention. Paul says that in so many words. Had I read the scripture lesson in the New English Bible translation, he would have protested against those who were against him.

The Gospel you heard me preach is no human invention. I did not take it over from any man. No taught it me. I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

And then a little farther down he says,

But then in his good pleasure God, Who had set me apart from my birth and called me through His grace, chose to reveal His Son to me and through me.

The Apostle Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, strongly declared that the Gospel of radical grace is not a human invention, but is rather the revelation of God. And it is that Gospel, that good news, that reality that we celebrate when we come together for worship. That is why worship must never be boring, never be dull. It is the experience in which we, the people, together, corporately, lose ourselves in the praise of God, because the face of the matter is that God is gracious, God has reached out to us, God has embraced us. It is the bedrock, fundamental, elemental reality that that with which we have to do is the Gospel of radical grace which is no human invention, but the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul in this Letter to the Galatians, as in no other place, rings the changes on the radical grace of God. It has been our theme at Christ Community Church. We have celebrated it over and over again over the years. It is, as I have admitted to you many times, the one string on my banjo and I will be happy to be buried

with the tombstone saying, "He believed; he lived; he preached radical grace." Because that is the heart of the matter.

Over the centuries the Church has encrusted the Gospel with all kinds of subsidiary considerations; over the years, the Church has been tempted to move away from the Gospel of grace, institutionalizing itself, setting up structures and forms, degenerating into a kind of moralism that is nothing more than the Boy Scout motto of being good and kind and always prepared, as fine as those things are. The Church of Jesus Christ has degenerated into simply a social club that has celebrated the fact that we ought to be good people, decent people, moral people, and it has so often fallen off its one dramatic, marvelous proclamation that God is gracious, that He has intervened into our history, that He has penetrated into our lives with a message that transforms and frees us, a message of His grace.

And when Paul wrote this letter to the Galatians, he was struggling against that which has proven to be the peril and the temptation of the Church down through the centuries – that is, to move the Gospel of Grace to a religion filled with obligation and duty and structure and form, failing thereby to live constantly in amazement at the grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ that has set us free. Everywhere Paul went he proclaimed the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and those who believed found their lives transformed, and those whose lives were transformed formed a community of faith. Paul would go on to another place and another and another. But every place he went there would be others who would come in and who would not deny that God is gracious, who would not deny that God had revealed Himself in Jesus the Messiah, but who would deny that all one needed was Jesus Christ for salvation, who would suggest to those who had come out of the darkness of paganism in that ancient world that God *was* gracious, that Jesus *had* come and died for them, but what they also needed beyond their faith in him was to submit, for example, to the Old Testament rite of circumcision, to follow the Old Testament dietary laws – in a word to add to Jesus, Moses. The critical issue in the first century was whether or not one had to become a Jew in order to become a Christian, whether the vestibule into the sanctuary of the people of God passed through Moses, whether or not all of the Old Testament legislation and ceremony had to be added on to one's faith in Jesus Christ.

Paul said, "Absolutely not!" Christ alone. Jesus reveals the grace of God, and by faith in him we are redeemed. And in this letter to the Galatians, he claims in the very beginning that that gospel of radical grace is not a human invention, but was given to him by revelation. If you would go through that first chapter carefully you would find that Paul argued for the authority of his gospel on the basis of his call and the revelation that God gave to him. Paul argued for his authority for the Gospel that he preached on the basis that it came through no human consultation, not by discussing it with the Apostles, not as the result of some church ecclesiastical court, but simply as the revelation of God in Jesus Christ to him. And Paul submitted his Gospel to the Apostles; he met with Peter and he met with the other disciples 14 years later, and he checked the Gospel out with

them, and they gave him the right hand of fellowship and they confirmed that the Gospel that he preached was indeed the Gospel that they understood through Jesus Christ. The thing that Paul continued to maintain was that that which he preached was not the result of consultation, it was not a human commission, it was not data and information, it was a revelation from God through Jesus Christ himself. In his own experience he said, "Look. Look at me as one who has been changed by the Gospel. In the first place, I persecuted the Church. The record is there. And in the second place, I was zealous for the traditions of my fathers far beyond my contemporaries; I outstripped them all."

Sometimes we make out as though Paul was a miserable, guilty, guilt-laden sinner. There's nothing in the New Testament to indicate that. Paul says, "I was zealous for the traditions of the fathers. I was so zealous for the tradition of my fathers, that I even persecuted the Church, but it pleased God to reveal His son to me." It is in that revelation of Jesus Christ that Paul learned the Gospel and experienced his call to proclaim it. The revelation of God in Jesus Christ is the revelation of radical grace, and Paul would have nothing added to it. Down through the centuries the Church has added to the Gospel, encrusted the Gospel with all kinds of secondary matters, domesticated the Gospel, but the reality of the situation is simply this – that God in Jesus Christ had provided for salvation to be received by us by faith, adding nothing to it. And that Gospel, Paul said, is a gospel for which I'll go to the stake. He wouldn't compromise it.

It was not that Paul was hardnosed. Paul has gotten bad press, to be sure. Sometimes Paul comes off as not a very nice guy, and maybe he's not the kind of person you'd choose for a roommate, but at least he cared about something. At least he committed his life to something. He wasn't cool. He wasn't laid back. He wasn't nonchalant. But neither was he just another religious bigot and dogmatist for, if we look at his letters and his writing, we'll find, for example, when he wrote to the church at Corinth, he said, "When I deal with people who are under the law, I am as one under the law, and when I deal with people who are without the law, I am as one without the law. I am all things to all people, that by all means I might win some."

There were all kinds of things about which Paul did not care. In his letter to the Romans, he deals with the question about which day of rest should be observed. Should it be the Sabbath Day, the seventh day, or should it be the first day, the Lord's Day? And Paul says, "Really, it doesn't matter. Would you like to worship on Monday?" Religious people have gotten all hung up on all kinds of things. Paul says it doesn't matter. The day doesn't matter. When he wrote to the Church at Corinth, there were some people who went to the butcher shop that was connected with the Temple and they bought a pot roast and the pot roast had, first of all, been offered to the pagan idol, and there were other Christians who saw them buying that pot roast that had been offered to the pagan idol and they said, "Oh, you can't eat something that's been offered to an idol." They said, "Well, let's ask Paul." Paul said, "Who cares? The idol isn't anything. Wave it in

front of the idol as often as you want to. It won't affect the meat. If it's US Prime, it'll be good!"

But the point of it all was this – Paul was very flexible, very open; he was not an uptight religious person. Paul was not picayunish. Paul was not small and narrow and mean. Paul didn't go around excluding people from the Kingdom because they parted their hair differently. Paul says the freedom of the Christian person in Christ is grounded in the grace of God. Live it out how you will. Determine how you'll live it out and then do it out of faith, but don't denounce one another and judge one another and condemn one another. Be free in Christ and be of good heart, and then do as you will before the face of God. And so, Paul was not really a bigot, not a dogmatist, not a hard-nose, except on this one thing – he said if you want to turn the grace of God into a religious system full of obligations and duties thereby completing salvation, be accursed. Paul knew that everything was at stake on this pivot point. And this Gospel, he said, is the truth of God.

It's not so popular today to talk about the truth. We live in an age in which we have learned to tolerate differences of opinion, and that's good. We live in an age which values tolerance and it is a value. But there are some things, my good friends, that are either true or false, and the Gospel of Jesus Christ is either the expression of the radical grace of God Who is for us and in Jesus Christ has redeemed us, or it is something else, but it's not a gospel. Paul says they preach another gospel which is not another gospel because there is no other gospel.

This I received by revelation of Jesus Christ.

Now you say, well, that's all fine, Paul. If I were to be able to be smitten with a bright light on the way to Damascus, I would book passage tomorrow. But it wasn't just that. Paul didn't learn about Jesus Christ in the Damascus Road experience. First of all, remember he was battling the followers of Jesus. Brilliant as he was, don't you think that Paul learned about Jesus Christ more than those that he was battling? Don't you think that he had gotten himself well-briefed? Don't you think that he understood every fact about Jesus Christ, even when he was battling? The Damascus Road experience convinced him that Jesus was alive, that Jesus was the Son of God. It was the transforming moment. But when he wrote to the Church at Corinth, he said, "The tradition I received I pass along to you...." He also mentions the tradition when he speaks of the institution of the Lord's Supper in his letter to the Corinthians. He says, "I pass along to you the fact that has been passed along to me."

It wasn't as though he was some Lone Ranger that went off to Damascus and had a message in the sky. Paul was, in that sense, not so different from us who have had access to all of the data and all of the information. Do we not know the Gospel? Any one of you could stand up and you could announce the facts, that data of the Gospel. But what is the Gospel? It is more than the tradition. It is more than Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures, was raised on the third day. It is more than the hard facts that you get out of the book. When Paul

says "by revelation," he says that all of that suddenly came into focus. "And in a moment I was transformed and I realized that all the data pointed to the stupendous truth - that God, in His grace, through Jesus Christ, loved me." And that the one solid, bedrock, fundamental, basic, elemental truth is that God is gracious, that God is a Saviour, that God has loved us, that all that has to be done has been done, that salvation is complete, that there is nothing we can do for it, nothing we can do to it, nothing we can do to merit it. There is nothing we can do to warrant it! It has been done! It has been done! It is done! Christ has died. Salvation is ours. We are a people loved and graced and all we can do is sing, "Alleluia!" That's why St. Augustine says that a Christian is a person who says, "Alleluia! from the crown of his head to the sole of his foot."

And where do we get off with our dullness, with our boring worship, with our hum attitude, with a strong song of praise that elicits nothing more than a yawn? Shame on us. Shame on us for living in the light of the one great reality, that which is true, and being so blasé about it! Ah, this, my friends, is a celebration in a world that is filled with claims and counterclaims about what is true and what is important and about what ought to have the priority, in a world that is sated with information and data and newscasts and news analysis. In a world like that, this is true – God is good, God is gracious, God loves us, God is *the strong foundation* of our life, God holds us in His hand and He'll never let us go. And all of His people said,

Amen!