

Series: "Valuable Wisdom for a Church 'on the Move'"

Sermon: "Grace"

Text: *Philippians 4:23*

RGJJR/FBCCS/12-20-20 **UNEDITED**

- I enjoy TV programs that restore things—programs that uncover precious treasures easily missed because of surface appearances.
- I watch "This Old House" and enjoy it when they turn what first appeared to be an old, rundown structure into a beautiful functional place for a family to live their life together.
- Maybe my favorite these days—and it must be lots of peoples' favorite because it recently showed up on Netflix—is a British show called, "*The Repair Shop*."
- I marvel at the superpowers of the craftsmen on the show to repair things that are truly lost, hidden *treasures*. I'm envious of the lady who can carefully clean and then perfectly match colors and textures to restore a centuries-old painting. I wonder if I could learn how to take apart, clean, repair and reassemble the tiniest gears of any very old clock that has become a hidden treasure.
- Sometimes, I am so wrapped up in these restorations that my eyes sometimes water a bit when they reveal the treasure that was always there, but has been hidden from plain sight by the built-up mistreatment, neglect, distorting additions and dirt.
- Alas, I have not had the talent or perhaps the time to learn any of these magical, restorative trades. However, there is an often-hidden, precious treasure I do have the joy of restoring to its actual glory from time-to-time. The treasure is always there. It is never actually gone. It is only covered up from plain sight by mistreatment, neglect, distorting additions and *theological* dirt.
- The Apostle Paul never hid this treasure even when he used it to motivate Christians to sacrifice their lives in obedience to their created purpose of glorifying God. He always worked to let this treasure shine at its brightest in contexts where people were covering it up and making it duller than the treasure it is.

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- This precious treasure, is so often dulled by the filthy grime of tower-building, *human* theology and pragmatic, *human* church-building. However, it shines as brightly as it should in the last line of the Apostle's letter to the "good" church of Philippi.
- In *Philippians 4:23*, Paul simply closes by writing, "***The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.***"
- How precious is this treasure of "grace" that is so often hidden by human theological distortion and human pragmatic desires to get people to behave, as they want them to behave? It is so precious that Paul sees to its shining restoration to make sure it is perfectly visible at the end of every letter of his in God's Word.
- To the Romans he writes in chapter 16, verse 20, "***The GRACE of our Lord Jesus be with you.***"
- In 1 Corinthians 16:23, to a disobedient and selfish group of believers he writes the same words, "***The GRACE of our Lord Jesus be with you.***"
- When he must write them again in sadness over their nearly wasted life as a church, in 2 Corinthians 13:14 he writes, "***May the GRACE of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.***"
- To the church that had already, very early on in church history, covered up the precious treasure of grace Paul writes in chapter 6 verse 18, "***The GRACE of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit BROTHERS. Amen.***"
- To the church in Ephesus, he writes in 6:24, "***Grace to all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with an undying love.***"
- Next in the canonical order of our Bibles comes the *Philippians* clarification of grace we have already read.

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- Then comes the letter to the Colossian church, in verse 18 of chapter 4, "***I Paul write this greeting in my own hand. Remember my chains. GRACE be with you.***"
- 1 *Thessalonians* 5:18 closes that letter with, "***The GRACE of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.***"
- 2 *Thessalonians* 3:18 closes this second letter to the same believers with the same words and a single addition, "***The GRACE of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you ALL.***"
- The first letter to his beloved Timothy ends in 6:21 with, "***GRACE be with you.***"
- The second letter to his "son in the ministry" encouraging him to "hang in there with the truth" ends in 4:22 with "***The Lord be with your spirit. GRACE be with you.***"
- To another younger protegee, Titus, he concludes a letter in chapter 3 verse 15 with, "***Grace be with you all.***"
- The interesting, very different letter to Philemon, about his slave now become a brother, ends its short single chapter in our Bibles with verse 25 reading, "***The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit,***" exactly as we are looking at in *Philippians 4:23*.
- Being a curious troublemaker, I looked at *The Letter to the Hebrews*, not because I think the Apostle wrote it but because I think he influenced, the woman who possibly did. Sure enough, *Hebrews 13:25*, the letter's last verse reads, "***Grace be with you all.***"
- I actually included ***Hebrews*** because a biblical scholar might argue that all letters in Paul's day must have closed with something about "grace" as a standard closing for letters. But then I checked on other NT letters—Peter's letters and the three John wrote, and even the short letter of Jude—none of them use a standard closing of ***GRACE***. If anything they pick, "*peace.*"

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- Well maybe they were more *Jewish* in their forms and Paul was more *Greek* in his letter writing forms. How about we just conclude for the Apostle Paul, writing the inspired text of Scripture, ***God's GRACE shining so clearly in the work of the Lord Jesus Christ was a precious treasure never to be hidden by the distortions of human performance oriented religion??!***
- We have reached the last words of this precious letter to that "good" church in Philippi and these last words are, "***God's GRACE!***"
- This church that knew their purpose was God's mission of redemption in the world—in the creation for that matter—this church undergoing change—"on the move" as I have played on the words for our sake—this church that had just been reminded the mission was for God's glory and that the mission involved all sorts of people—some of whom they might not naturally like—this church—as with every other church and person to whom Paul wrote in our Bible—this church needed to hear that final word—***GRACE!***
- I have turned this incarnational letter into a Christmas letter these three weeks because that is what Christmas is about the incarnation of the Lord Jesus Christ. We have seen over and over again that the incarnation of the Son of God was an act of ***humble sacrifice***.
- We have been concluding that this attitude of humble sacrifice for others on the redemptive mission that glorifies God—this attitude of the Lord Jesus Christ himself—is to be our own attitude as we serve in the supernatural koinonia—the Holy Spirit connection that is real because we have been born again into the same family of the One Father—God Himself.
- Now, when all is said and done, when just as every other letter we have from Paul addressing all sorts of issues in all manner of churches—when he finishes addressing the issues that will

potentially squelch the mission in Philippi, Paul cleans any possible dust and grime—any possible distortion that might hide this precious treasure—and writes to this “good” church on mission to people he loves and supports who love him and support him: ***The GRACE of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.***

- “Wow! Is Raleigh pressing this too hard?” Raleigh is convinced and has been convinced for many years of life and study and debate—no, ***God’s Grace*** is absolutely this important for living as believers. It is absolutely as precious a treasure, often hidden to the glee of the Evil One, as any treasure in God’s Word.
- So, we have one short line of Scripture today to consider—to exegete and then offer in exposition for application to our lives. That should be easy, right? There are really only a couple of words to even talk about—“***grace***” and “***spirit.***”
- Take that second easy word “***spirit***” first. We all immediately know what Paul means by it right? Except we don’t always know if the Greek word is meant to be translated with a capital “S” or a lower case “s” and that makes a big difference. Uppercase “S” would be the Holy Spirit and lower case would be out “human spirit.”
- Thankfully here, we have the possessive pronoun, “***your***” that suggests Paul has lowercase “s”—human spirit in mind. Not so thankfully here we have lowercase “s” spirit in the singular and a possessive pronoun that is plural suggesting something like “all ya’ll’s human spirit.” However, thankfully, we have the same singular and plural arrangement in the letter to Philemon so we don’t have to conclude this is “the ONE spirit” of the collective church in Philippi. But, I suspect that if it is everyone’s spirits Paul has in mind, the collective ONE spirit of the church in Philippi will eventually collectively reflect their individual spirits.

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- Whew! Glad we got that figured out, right? Except which of us clearly and completely understands Pauline Anthropological terms—words that describe the makeup of a human being—such as “spirit,” “flesh,” “body,” “mind,” “will,” “heart,” “soul” and so on.
- Sometimes Paul speaks of humans as if we are tripartite—body, soul and spirit. Other times he speaks as if we are only bipartite—body and spirit.
- I had a dear Greek professor in seminary, for whom I later worked as a grading assistant, who was working hard maybe even struggling the entire time I was there to finish a dissertation that involved just some of the questions around Pauline anthropological terms—how Paul understands and describes the makeup of humans. I checked, and he did finish his dissertation but I suspect he traveled back and forth to Great Britain more times than he wanted to trying to finish unraveling just a part of this in an acceptable, scholarly way.
- So, for those of you who have this all figured out or have Christian teachers you follow who can chart it all out for you with certainty, I offer a loving evaluation, **poppycock!**
- Admitting that my re-study on this these past weeks has not produced the definitive answers, I’ll suggest you keep reading Paul’s letters to validate or invalidate my hints at what this “easy” word “spirit” with a small “s” means for Paul.
- I was reminded Paul, probably can’t escape having Genesis 2 in mind when he uses “spirit” with a small “s.” to talk about humans. God breathed—God spirited—in the first man and he became a “living being.”
- Of course, we also know from Genesis that man, by virtue of God’s breath, became a living being purposed with and capable of being God’s image bearer in creation.

- How does Paul then apply this God-breathed-ness as "spirit" in his letters? Let me give you three broad categories of ways. This spirit of man created by the breath of God is 1st how man is aware of and can connect with God who is spirit. So our spirit is 1st our *God-knowing* part.
- Then 2nd, Paul uses "spirit" to speak of our human part that allows for *koinonia*—connecting with God and others. It is our "*communing*" part that is somehow different in us from all other creatures God made.
- 3rd, this one is tough and has fewer examples—it is our eschatological inheritance—part. It is the part of us that is involved in adoption into the family of God. We don't have a human spirit of fear but of "adoption" as *forever* children of God the King. It is our forever *identity* human part.
- Come on Raleigh, where in the world are you going with this? Where I am going is making the point that if indeed Paul speaks of our human "spirit" with a small "s" as our human ***God-knowing, God and human communing*** and our ***forever identifying*** part—our human spirit—with a small "s" is a big part of who we are now and forever.
- It shapes us in all our relationships. It gives us the sense of who we are and who God is in relationship with us. It tells us where we are going and who we will be and whom we will be with forevermore. Our human "spirit" with a small "s," seems pretty much to be the most important part of us as humans.
- That makes sense since it is uniquely God-breathed into us. That makes sense that apart from God in Christ our human spirit is dead—that is separated from God and his purpose for it.
- So, listen, now, here is the pay-off. In every letter we have that Paul wrote, ***GRACE*** was the treasure he highlighted at the end of it all. In

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this letter to the Philippians—a good church on mission in changing circumstances—a church that wanted to glorify God as God worked through all kinds of people for his mission—in this letter we have studied, Paul tells us we need a human spirit—with a small “s” that has **GRACE**.

- Somehow, **GRACE**, is to permeate and be with our human part that is Our God-knowing, human and God communing and our forever-identifying part.
- Do you get the idea that maybe God’s **GRACE** is for more than just making sure we can go to heaven someday? Could God’s **GRACE** be in the mix—central to everything we are now and forever—every relationship we ever have and will have—and to the very possibility of knowing God now and for eternity? Yeah! I think God’s **GRACE** is just that big a deal and just that precious a treasure. And, yeah! I think we humans often dirty it up hiding the ABSOLUTE treasure it actually is.
- Well, if God’s grace is this important, good thing it is another easy word to understand here in *Philippians 4:23*. Right?
- ***The GRACE of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.***
- Martin Luther is quoted as saying (of course he said it in German not English): *“The sin underneath all our sins is to trust the lie of the serpent that we cannot trust the love and grace of Christ and must take matters into our own hands.”*
- I picked Martin Luther, imperfect as his theology and any human theology might be because he worked in the “Repair Shop” of his day to restore the visibility of the precious treasure of God’s grace. It had never gone away but it had certainly been dirtied by human theology and pragmatic “tower-building” for significance in Jesus’ church. I picked this slide wondering if the artist who made it knew

of human tower-building from *Genesis* and thus used a tower in the background. Brilliant theology if they did!

- In a simplified telling for lack of time, Luther, a Roman Catholic priest, began to see the precious treasure that had been so deeply hidden under the grime of the official church in his day. One smudge of filth on the precious picture was the sale of church-approved sale of something called "indulgences" by many including another priest, a Dominican monk named John Tetzel.
- Quoting from a source that I have lost so I can't give them credit...

"What is an indulgence? According to the (church) it was a sort of "ticket" (a religious "writ") that had great value, assuring the buyer (or bearer) of complete forgiveness of sins, participation in the grace of God, and freedom from purgatory. Furthermore the ticket holder would be absolved from all crimes and punishments and would be allowed to exchange any vows for other more agreeable good works. He became a sharer in all the good works performed by all the members of the whole church. The indulgence also provided full remission of sins to departed persons in purgatory. The salesman of these certificates, a Dominican monk named John Tetzel, went even further in claiming that the red cross of the indulgence was equal to the cross of Christ. Scare tactics were used to promote and distribute these fundraising tickets.

- **Wow! What a perversion! What a mess this made of the beautiful precious *Grace* of God in Christ Jesus. It was as if God's grace were a commodity, a thing, which one could purchase in chunks when it was needed to pay God for sin and failure.**
- Most evangelicals I know, read or listen to today would scoff at Tetzel's papers of indulgence—his huckstering of chunks of grace for a price.
- Most would say, *"Of course we are saved by grace through faith not by purchasing indulgences to balance out our sin."*
- Most would define that grace as something like *"God's unmerited favor."* And, as I said, most would insist we go to heaven and escape hell for eternity—their way of describing what we think of as

"salvation"—we get salvation by grace through faith which is we get God's unmerited favor by faith.

- I'd argue with the way some of this is put. And, I would wonder if some who say it actually mean it.
- Why? Because my experience is that many believers then go on to live a life of grace by *quid pro quo*. It is a life of reciprocity. It is a life lived with God believing God's favor is granted for something we do. It is a life that deep down inside clings to the common wisdom of humans apart from God, that there just is no free lunch!
- God, if I give up this sin—this bad habit—this distraction, will you *graciously* bless me in *this way*?
- God if I sacrifice this for you, go there for you, work hard for you, will you then *graciously accept me as a good Christian*?
- There are two reasons I believe this *quid pro quo* understanding of the Christian life is more prevalent than we admit—more prevalent than we would like to accept right now when we hear it spoken of so bluntly.
- **Reason 1:** I know many Christians who say they believe in living by grace that were, what they would call saved by grace that now live *desperate* lives of *performance* instead of *grace*. *Quid pro quo* lives.
- **Reason 2:** I know myself. This is how I sometimes live—bargaining with God to produce the results I want by paying him off with behavior then attributing the results to his grace as if I were trusting that God's grace along. I sometimes live a *quid pro quo* life.
- Visually represented, here is what that life feels like. (Pictures of overburdened animals and vehicles). I know many believers who claim they are trusting God's grace when what they are really doing is trying to buy chunks of it as if it were a commodity available for purchase.

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- Let me finish by tying together a point of all the laborious detail surrounding these two words we all assume we know—"grace" and "spirit" with a small "s."
- When we see God's grace for living as piece of something he gives us or we buy from him, *quid pro quo*, we have so dirtied grace, that it could never shine as the precious jewel that Paul makes it finishing every one of his biblical letters including *Philippians*.
- What do I mean? Well, the clue was in that quotation I offered from Martin Luther. Let me remind you of it. "*The sin underneath all our sins is to trust the lie of the serpent that we cannot trust the love and grace of Christ and must take matters into our own hands.*"
- What did Eve do when she listened to the serpent? She turned from looking to God with her hands open for his gracious provision for life to looking away from God and a life she would have to provide with her own hands.
- I have emphasized a few times that it is a mistake to see God's grace as a quantity of something he hands to us like a chunk of gold. It is most certainly not.
- When Paul speaks of God's grace he is speaking of a characteristic of God that is as much a part of who he is as when we are told God *IS* "love." God is gracious. However, we must be turned to him in faith with open hands to experience that graciousness. Many times, like Eve we have turned away and when we need it we ask God to sell us a piece of grace and toss it over our shoulder because our back is to Him—as if *quid pro quo* grace were possible.
- Look at God. What do you see? If you see an angry old man ready to condemn you for your imperfections—a policeman ready to arrest your crimes—an instructor gleefully giving you a failing grade—then you are not looking at God in Jesus Christ. You are away from our gracious God and hoping he will sell you some grace for performing.

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- God doesn't break off and give away pieces of Grace for a price. God **is** grace. If we are trusting ourselves instead of God to be *good* believers we had better quit claiming we live by God's grace.
- What is the consequence of a *quid pro quo* Christian life? There will be no grace with our "spirit" (with a small "s") as Paul asks for here and in his other letters.
- That human spirit of ours that is our human part having to do with **knowing God, communing with God and other humans** and us **being able to rest in our eternally settled identity** as God's children--without God's grace in all its precious beauty, our human spirit cannot take us on God's redemptive mission
- The "good" Philippian church could not stay on God's mission without clear grace shining in their human spirits. Going forward, whatever the things we do, old or new, FBC will need an unsullied treasure of God's precious grace with our human spirits.
- **Free grace**—not simply garce to go to heaven when we die but for living all of life as humans, will be like the gas in our tank on the mission because God's grace is life.
- When we are living as a church of grace, we will be looking to God with open hands. If, God forbid, we should turn from God to build our own tower something other than God's grace will be "with us." The mission will be over.
- So I pray...***The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit(s) and this be with this church. Amen.***