

Heavenly Enigma

July 5, 2015

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2 Corinthians 12:7-10 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

7 even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore, to keep[a] me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated.[b] 8 Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, 9 but he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power[c] is made perfect in weakness.” So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. 10 Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

This scripture gives us a glimpse into Paul’s personality. He was indeed a man of God, but he could put barbs in his words when needed. The church at Corinth would be a challenge to any preacher, so let’s take a look at the situation. You may recall, the church at Corinth was a church in constant conflict.

The Corinthians had adopted what is known as *Theologia Gloria*. They viewed Christ as a way to self-betterment, to success, to achievement and affirmation by their peers. I must say, we have such people in our society today. Some of them call themselves Christians. The Corinthians had put themselves at the center of things instead of putting Christ at the center. Put too many people at the center and conflict results.

Paul had been challenged by false apostles partly because he did not accept payment from the Corinthians for preaching. If it’s not worth paying for, it must not be very good. After all, you get what you pay for. And what I pay for with my money, I get to control, right?

Some bible commentaries tell us that these false apostles were great boasters. They were in competition with Paul for the attention of the church members and I am sure they were motivated by money, among other things. So, Paul makes a polite mockery of them by proclaiming the false apostles to be foolish. But he says the Corinthian church is equally foolish because they believe these false apostles. They boast about their qualifications, so Paul boasts about his, but in a sardonic fashion.

The faith of this community is in a precarious balance and he disguises his anger at those who would lead them in the wrong direction. He points to the fact that they are tolerating those who exploit and brutalize them. The false apostles measured themselves by earthly standards. Paul gives a sarcastic apology and says, "If this is what you want, then I must be weak, because I can't give it to you."

When our two sons were in their middle school years, we took them to a Baltimore Orioles baseball game. I must admit, it was one of the best games I had seen. The batters were real busy that night. There were base hits with extra bases, home runs, great double play action, all you could ask for. And the Orioles won! It was the boys' first game.

A few weeks later, I took them to another and it was more average, or maybe a bit below average. It was one of those games that puts you to sleep. They looked at me and began to question why had it been such a lackluster game? Such was their expectation and I just couldn't give it to them. I could have said to my boys after the second game, "What a fool I have been! All I did was drive for one hour to get here, buy the tickets, find the seats, buy you souvenirs, explain the game to you, and do whatever I could to make it an enjoyable evening. How foolish of me! I should have called ahead and placed an order for home runs and the like. Why didn't I think of that?" But I didn't say that.

The church community Paul was dealing with was a tough crowd, indeed. He had a situation somewhat similar to what I had had with my boys at the ball game. The false apostles gave the church home runs and Paul could not. So Paul tried a reverse approach, saying what a fool he was for not

delivering what they expected. He explained that all he did was endure hardships, hunger, stoning, shipwreck, and persecution. How silly of him to think that these things would be enough to show his sincerity and dedication! I hope I gave my boys a more consoling response than Paul gave the Corinthians.

Paul says, if you think I am a fool then I'll tell you what a fool I am. In fact, he continues on with his credentials to the point of boasting. But in contrast to the false apostles, with each boast, he implies that God stepped in and bailed him out. What he boasts about most are his own weaknesses, because that's where God comes in. So, his boasts become praises of God, not of his own accomplishments.

Paul had one weakness boast in particular and that was his 'thorn in my side.' We're not sure what this was, but he talked about it on more than one occasion. He said that three times he asked God to take it away, but God answered "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Paul says when he is weak, he sees the power of God and that makes him strong. Now, Paul is only human. No one is going to say, "Oh boy! The ship is sinking! Now we get to see God in action! I'll just sit back and watch the show!" No, God put Paul's misfortune to good use. That's grace. And Paul's actions were gratitude for that grace.

When we were getting Stephen Ministry started at my last church, there was a great deal of frustration. Not enough money, not enough interest, not enough people, and the list goes on. So many times I wanted to just throw up my hands and quit. I tell you truthfully, each time I felt my own weakness and helplessness, God did something. Something happened. Without my asking, one of the ladies of the church called me and said, "What you need is a yard sale and we've already started getting organized." And it happened.

When we were still short cash, the church office called me and said, "Someone just donated \$1000.00." When I felt like the lone ranger because it seemed that no one was interested; that the ministry was dead in the water, someone would step forward and ask to be included. My

weak moments were God's opportunity to show his glory. We need to remember that in hard times. Don't give up. Tie a knot and hang on. That's what Paul is telling us. He's talking about grace – grace and gratitude.

Grace is not about something that makes sense. It is a paradox we must accept. Consider the parable of the workers hired at different times of the day, yet all were paid the same wage at the end of the day. The parable shows that grace does not show economic sense. Why not? It's not supposed to! Grace is not about counting. It's not about being first or last. It's not about winners and losers. It's not something we can earn. It's a heavenly enigma.

It is a gift – your gift, my gift.

What we cannot do is take credit for what God has done. It is not by our grace that we accomplish things, but by God's grace. We are more than our accomplishments. So often success is followed by pride. C.S. Lewis says pride is the source of all sin. I must say, that's a tough pill to swallow. My parents and grandparents told me to do my best in school so I could be proud of what I had done. But invariably, as Lewis says, pride is based on comparison. A model may say she is proud to be pretty, a wealthy man may say he is proud to be rich. A weight lifter might say he is proud to be strong. But it means: prettier than the next one, richer than my neighbor, stronger than the other guy. Pride always comes down to saying "Look at me," although we have become very skilled at disguising this aspect of pride.

When we say, "Look at me," we are in no way saying, "Look at Jesus." Remember what happened to Peter in the Gospel of Matthew. He saw Jesus coming toward the boat and stepped out to meet him. But as soon as he took his eyes off Jesus and saw only the wind and waves, he thought of himself and started to sink. Fear took his eyes off Jesus. Pride takes our eyes off Jesus. Pride is counter to grace. In verse 10, Paul boasted that he relished the idea of hardship because he knew God would be there. Verse 10 reads, "That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults,

in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

C.S. Lewis was once attending a theological conference and he heard a small group of scholars in a corner arguing about something. He asked what were they talking about and one of them explained they were trying to determine the biggest difference between Christianity and all other world religions. Without hesitation, Lewis answered with one word, “Grace!”

How true. In all other religions there are lists of rules to follow that supposedly allow a person to reach the level of their god. Only in Christianity does the one true God reach down to us. That, in a nutshell, is grace. I used to think grace was just God’s forgiveness, but it’s more. It’s His love, His blessings, His guidance, His all-encompassing relationship with us – that’s grace. And we don’t deserve it. Remember the movie, “Bad News Bears?” It’s about a little league team that couldn’t do anything right. That’s us. And we have the winning-est coach in the universe.

And our response to grace is gratitude. It’s not just a thank you note on a preprinted card or an extra five dollars in the offering plate, or a brief footnote in your prayers before bedtime, but gratitude in action. Steve Hayner, the former President of Columbia Seminary, said, “As long as I have life, I have a calling.” Steve was dying of pancreatic cancer when he said that. God’s power was made perfect in Steve when He enabled Steve to continue his calling and Steve responded with gratitude in action.

And so should we.

Grace and gratitude; it’s the rhythm of God’s kingdom. It’s what allows us into the conversation of the trinity. God lets us, mere humans, show His power in our actions out of our gratitude for His grace. We are actually part of God’s plan. He enables us and we do His will.

The world can do anything as good, or even better than the church does, with one exception. The world can build houses, feed the hungry, and heal the sick. But the world cannot offer us grace.

Companies and governments cannot run by grace. There is no place for failures in the secular world.

But grace is different. And we respond. It's everything to us and we derive our very existence from Him. It's the same as flowers that know to follow the sun across the sky.

* It's when the biggest kid on the neighborhood ball team sees the new kid on the block and says, "Here, come meet the guys."

* It's when the child who was badly burned in a car wreck and three years later in the courtroom, looks at the man who caused her injury and says, "I forgive you."

* It's when a woman, in her last weeks of battling cancer, decides to tell her family about her faith and beliefs.

* It's when a family, split apart for years by petty conflicts, comes back together by circumstances that only God could have engineered.

* It's when you realize, as Philip Yancey says, "There is nothing we can do to make God love us more and there is nothing we can do to make Him love us less." That's grace.

Since grace is a gift, no man can boast. But, we can boldly approach the throne of grace, even though we don't deserve it. God has personally intervened in human history. The motivation of man's approach to God is not to be found in man's fulfillment of the divine command. It's found in a final act of self-commitment on the part of God in which he has given himself to man – to us – through sheer love and in such a fashion that it cuts clean across all aspects of struggle and victory.

Grace is the most important word in the bible. It's the greatest gift in the universe. And the gift tag has our names on it.

Amen.