

Transforming Grace
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1 Corinthians 15:8-11
February 9, 2014

For the past several weeks, we've been looking at the book of 1 Corinthians. We looked at Chapter 10 several weeks ago, and the warnings that God gave to the Corinthian church based upon the New Testament that happened with the people of God when they were coming out of Egypt. We looked at the section in 1 Corinthians 11 where Paul was admonishing the Corinthians to observe the Lord's Supper in a way that honored Him. Last week we looked at 1 Corinthians 15, the first nine verses, looking at the resurrection of Christ, and the Gospel, that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is our standing and sanctification. That it rests upon the Old Testament promises, and it also rests upon the post-resurrection appearances of many people. God has given us this passage of Scripture to encourage us in our faith, that we rest upon something that is very solid, and that the Gospel can sustain us as something that we can continue to go back to.

Well today what we're going to do is we're going to continue on in that 1 Corinthians 15 passage, and as it were, to use a modern illustration, when you are scrolling through on your electronic device, and you are going through a list of items, and you come to one and there is a hyperlink, and you want more information about that individual item in the list. You press on that hyperlink, and it takes you somewhere else, and now you get a lot more about that one particular item. Well that is what we are going to look at today, as we look at 1 Corinthians 15:8-11. It is as if we are going to click on a hyperlink on the apostle Paul, that he was the last one in the list of post-resurrection experiences, appearances. Now we are going to click and we are going to look in detail as the Scripture unfolds in this passage, Christ's appearance to him, and what it meant for his life. So I'm going to read 1 Corinthians 15, I'm going to read from Verses 1-11 to give us the greater context.

1 Corinthians 15:1-11 ~ Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, 2 and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. 3 For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, 4 that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, 5 and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. 6 Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one

time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. 7 Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. 8 Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. 9 For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. 10 But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. 11 Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.

Let's go to the Lord in prayer.

Heavenly Father, I come before You this morning. I thank You for the word of God, the way that You have spoken to us, and revealed Yourself to us. I pray this morning as we together look in detail at Your work, and Your grace in the life of one man, and what it meant for the church, and for even us today. That You would enable me to bring forth Your truth in all boldness and accuracy, and that You would be glorified through it. And I pray this in Christ's name, Amen.

I start this morning with an illustration from American history, and even though it is an illustration from American history, I'm going to be talking about someone who is Japanese. His name was Mitsuo Fuchida, maybe some of you know that name. I don't think it is probably a household name in the 21st Century. He was a man who grew up in Japan, and during the course of his life he joined the military, and he was very successful, and he gained great skills as a pilot, and became a fighter pilot in the Japanese Air Force. The Japanese, in the 1930's, had demonstrated in taking over some different parts of nations, and being in control of people. A real cruelty, and a desire to conquer, uncaring, unloving, not just conquering to bring good things to people, but coming with the spirit of putting people under their thumb, and bringing harm to them.

So this man, Mitsuo Fuchida, was part of this empire that was doing this, and as he rose in rank, and stature, and power, he was given a great honor in his life. That great honor was that he was going to be able to lead the charge as a pilot with a group of other pilots, to sneak up on one of the greatest countries in the world, the United States of America, and to come and to attack them, and to bring great harm and destruction upon them, and to kill many people. This act that I am talking about of course, is the attack in 1941 on Pearl Harbor. He was the pilot that led the charge, and the one who said, "Tora, tora, tora," as unexpectedly, the Japanese attacked America and did great devastation and harm.

After the war that he survived, he was in Hiroshima one day before the bomb was dropped upon it, amazingly. Several years after the war, he was going into a subway and he got passed out some literature. It gave the testimony of an American who had been a prisoner of war in Japan, and who had been mistreated, and abused for years and years. As he read this, he then went to the Bible, even though he came from a Buddhist background, and to quote the words of his own testimony, he said:

I read in Luke 23:34 the prayer of Jesus Christ at His death, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." I was impressed that I was certainly one of those for whom He prayed. The many men I'd killed had been slaughtered in the name of patriotism, for I did not understand the love which Christ wishes to implant in every heart. Right at that moment I seemed to meet Jesus for the first time. I understood the meaning of His death as a substitute for my wickedness, and so in prayer I requested Him to forgive my sins, and change me from a bitter, disillusioned, ex-pilot, into a well-balanced Christian with purpose in living.

The same man who had led the attack on Pearl Harbor was saved by the grace of God, and his life changed, and he became an evangelist to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Do you know one of the places that he went back to to preach was Hawaii, and Pearl Harbor, to bring back the good news of Christ to a group of many people who still had a deep-seeded hatred for the Japanese, and all that they brought? Reflecting years later, in his older age, he wrote:

I would give anything to retract my actions of 29 years ago at Pearl Harbor, but it is impossible. Instead, I now work at striking the death blow to the basic hatred which infects the human heart and causes such tragedies, and that hatred cannot be uprooted without assistance from Jesus Christ. He is the only one who was powerful enough to change my life, and inspire it with His thoughts.

So I set before you this illustration of something from our history, of how radically someone can change. How someone who was bent on antagonizing, and bringing harm, and destruction, and death to other people can be changed, and can even find themselves in the position of coming back to the very place where they had brought that harm and destruction, and coming back, and bringing a very different message, and a very different action.

This morning as we look at 1 Corinthians 15, we are going to witness an even more amazing account than the one that we have read. An account of the transforming power of grace, and one of the witnesses of the resurrected Christ. Saul of Tarsus, a man zealously persecuting the church, as we heard earlier in Acts 9, meeting the Lord Jesus Christ, and his life never being the same, and the benefits of his conversion floating down today to you, and to me.

So this morning in the sermon, I want to title it ‘Transforming Grace’. We will look at three basic points as we cover the life, and the change of the apostle Paul. Number one, we’re going to look at his radical conversion. His radical conversion in Verse 8. Secondly, we’re going to look at his profound humility in Verse 9, where he calls himself the least of the apostles. And third, we are going to look at diligent labor, looking at Verse 10, as he shows the effectiveness of the grace of God working in his life.

This morning, as we study in depth one of the post-resurrection appearances of Christ, and its lasting effects in the life of one man, which overflowed into many of the churches, and to us. Personally, corporately at Providence Church in Duluth, Georgia, that God’s means of calling Paul into a relationship with Himself, and into His apostolic ministry, was unique. But the transforming work of grace is not unique to the apostle Paul, it is something that many of us, that were not on the road to Damascus, and struck with a vision of Christ, have experienced. Some of you perhaps were walking in the wrong way and God met you. Others perhaps were raised in a Christian home, and your conversion was not so radical. But today, as we look to him, I want you to see that the transforming work of grace in your life has effects, and God desires to take it to its proper end. And for others of you today, who look at the life of this man, and you have not experienced the transforming work of grace, that you yourself would be gripped with the Lord Jesus Christ, with the power of God, with your need of salvation, and that you would turn and follow Him.

1) His Radical Conversion:

So let’s begin with the first point, looking at his radical conversion. In Verse 8 of 1 Corinthians 15, as Paul is going through this list of witnesses of the resurrection, he says that he appeared, *Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me*. So he puts himself here last in the list, and last chronologically. Now he uses a word here that is unique in the New Testament, when he says that he is one who is ‘untimely born’. Now it is a word that was used for a miscarriage, a still birth, and an abortion. It is the very same word. It is only used once in the New Testament, so

we don't have other context to compare it to, but when Paul is describing himself, he is describing not only his conversion, but he is also describing his call as an apostle.

To help us unpack this a little bit, and its importance, I think we might consider the way that he in a sense, came into his role as an apostle of the church. Now comparing the other disciples, such as Peter and John, these were people who gradually, over a period of time, and experience with Christ, came into their ministry. You know the accounts in the Gospel where Jesus is calling them to come and to be fishes of men? The accounts you have in the first chapter of John where you have these disciples that are going over from John the Baptist to Jesus. So they have this period of time that they walk with Christ, they live with Him, they follow Him, they see Him betrayed, they see His death, they see His resurrection, and He appears to them. So it happens gradually. But Paul, when he is describing his own conversion, when he is using these terms that for us are very negative terms, that is the idea of not being born in the right way, the normal way, the healthy way.

I think what Paul is trying to point out here is that for him, his conversion, and his call to be an apostle, all happened at once. In one moment he was persecuting the church, and in the next moment over here, he was not only called to Christ, and to follow Him, but he was told that he was going to be shown how much that he was going to suffer in the name of Christ, and that he was going to be God's appointed tool to take the Gospel to the Gentiles. There is also a possibility here that Paul is dealing with some of his opponents. When you look in other parts of 1 Corinthians, and 2 Corinthians, you find out that Paul had people that he was ministering to that were not on his side, did not think a lot of him, as we will mention later, and that he possibly was even referring to a slur that people were saying about him. Saying that basically his apostleship was an abortion, but we don't know for sure where the word and its usage came from.

Now we read earlier today in Acts 9, Paul's dramatic and amazing conversion. Perhaps for many Christians, and others who have read the New Testament, this is one of the most notable accounts of the change that Jesus Christ can bring to individual. The background, of course, to this Chapter 9 experience in Acts, of his being on the road to Damascus, in Acts 7 we read of Stephen, and we read of his preaching, and then we read of his stoning, and how angry the people became at him. We find that after the people had stoned him, that the witnesses that were stoning Stephen, they came and they laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. That Saul was right there when Stephen was stoned, and

he was right there giving approval to it. As if that were not enough, not only was he taking this action, but he was also going around and he was going in some cases from house to house, and what he was trying to do was he was trying to search out disciples of Christ so that he could imprison them.

And then if it wasn't enough to do that in Jerusalem, he went further and he requested letters so that he could go to another town, and so he could do the same thing. This was not merely a passive rejection of the Gospel of Christ and His ministry. This was not merely someone who just didn't believe and found himself being in opposition in a certain situation. But this was someone who's set purpose in life was to try to oppose the Gospel and the church, and to stand against all that God was rightly trying to do. That he was intentional in what he was doing. That he was purposely, individually persecuting people.

Now you might think about a comparison here, when we think about warfare as it has been over the centuries. Sometimes you have those battles where you have the big group over here, whether it was an older type of warfare, or more modern, the soldiers, the tanks, whatever it is, in the old days the horses, the cavalry, and then you have the other group over here and they come together. But think about some of the modern warfare we've seen in the last decade or so, where people are going in and trying to hunt individual people down, and they are going from house to house trying to find that person. They are opening the door, they are risking, they are going through, and they are taking that to find that individual person. Here is Paul, persecuting the church, person-to-person, and house-to-house.

We've read of his conversion today in Acts 9, that is he was on the road to Damascus, that God met him in a most dramatic way, blinding him, and appearing to him, and saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why is it that you are persecuting Me?" Now I don't know if you've had the experience before of being exposed, where you were taking some action, maybe you were saying things and you were just saying them because you just felt like saying them. You just kind of wanted to express your opinion, and say what you thought about somebody else, and what they did or didn't do. You later found out that that person heard these things, and they were taking those things very deeply to heart. That in your words, which you thought were just casual comments, just flowing out of yourself, that you really had done great discussion, not just in general, but to an individual person. Well Jesus confronts Paul, and what He tells Paul is this: "That you've been going from house to house, and you've been standing there approving the stoning of Stephen. You've been doing all of these things, but Saul, you are not just persecuting those

believers, you are persecuting Me.” And here is Saul, confronted, blinded, and gripped with the fact that he was in direct opposition to the true work of God.

God’s transforming grace is able to change the vilest opponent into a willing servant. The conversion of Saul on the road to Damascus was so shocking that we find out that when he then goes to other disciples of Christ, they can’t believe it. They think, “This guy is a fake. He is just using some kind of manipulative, deceitful technique to come back with the Gospel. You can read the account from the introduction that when Mitsuo Fuchida went back to Pearl Harbor one time, there was a pastor who had fought in the war, and had been there on Pearl Harbor day, and he himself still couldn’t believe it until he finally heard him speak, and went up and shook his hand and talked to him, that God had actually brought that change in his heart.

Now one challenge that we have as we witness the radical conversion of Saul coming to Christ and His calling, is that for many of us our conversion to Christ was not so dramatic. In fact, I think all of us today who are adults in the church, following and pursuing our faith in Christ, we don’t desire that our children would have to go through some kind of radical experience of going off into the world, and into disobedience and sin, to a point that would radically affect their lives in destructive patterns. We don’t want that. We try to provide for them a foundation of discipleship, to point them the way of wisdom that they would go.

So sometimes when we read about a radical conversion, we can think, “Well, you know, my conversion is not that important.” I remember as a young Christian coming to faith and I’d hear testimonies that people would give. They were often this, and they did this, and they were all into these things, and I thought, “I don’t want to stand up and talk to people, and say that from the time I was four weeks old I was in the nursery at a church, and I grew up, and I heard sermons, and I went to Sunday school, and there were Bibles there. I mean, blah, blah, blah, it just doesn’t sound that exciting as when you hear the dramatic conversion and testimony of someone else. But we need to be reminded that transforming grace, that the sin in all of us that is overcome when God works in our lives, and He takes out our heart of stone, and He gives us a heart of flesh, and He makes us willing to believe, and He draws us to Himself, that that is a dramatic act in itself. Maybe the outside circumstances of it, and the change don’t appear so dramatic as something like the apostle Paul, or others that we’ve heard of, but we need to keep in mind what a work of grace it is that all those seeds of sin that are within me, in my flesh, even if they have not worked themselves out in the same way as we see in Paul, but that same sin has been overcome in the transforming work of grace. Perhaps

there is one of you here today who says, “Well, you know, I’m not a persecutor of the church. I’m not persecuting Christ. I’m actually pretty tolerant of other people and their beliefs, and I’m willing to listen and hear. I think there are some good things in the Gospel and Christianity. The Bible has some teachings that seem to have some pretty good impact. The church seems to be a pretty good place to be. But really at the end of the day, I really don’t desire to follow Jesus Christ. That is, if you really pressed me, and you put me in a corner, there isn’t anything there. But I’m not like Paul. I wasn’t persecuting Christ, I wasn’t doing any of those things.”

I know in my own life, even though my conversion was much more calm and peaceful than the apostle Paul’s, that I can remember as a child, as a teenager, going to a summer youth camp at one point. We had this assignment in the morning, we were told to take our Bibles, and to take some paper, or a notebook, and we were given some basic assignments. We were supposed to go read the Bible and we were supposed to go commune with God. Now I have to tell you that that was one of the most awkward moments of my life that I can remember because I went out on the beach, and it was quiet, and there were other children all up and down here. I had a Bible, and I had some blank paper there, and I thought to myself, “Something is supposed to be happening. I don’t know what it is but there is supposed to be something about some invisible God that I cannot see, who exists, and who other people seem to have some kind of relationship with, and they love, and they want to please, and they want to serve.” It wasn’t the assignment that was difficult, because I was in high school and did all kinds of studies like everyone else, but it was the quietness of the moment, where I was caused to sit there, and I was caused to reflect upon my relationship in standing with God. It would be more than a year later that He would work in my life, in a less dramatic way than Paul, where He would bring someone to me, as I was recounting out the hypocrisy of some other people that said they were Christians, but didn’t act like it. Then someone said to me, “You know, Steven, it doesn’t matter about them. You know one day you are going to stand before the judgment seat of Christ, what about you?” It was as if somebody took a finger to my chest and pointed it out that even if the world is full of hypocrites, what about you, and your need for Christ?

Today if you are outside of Christ, I would call you to turn from your sin, and to follow after Him. I would call you away from the world and its temptations and allurements. I would call you to see that one day you will have to give an account for your life, but that God has made a way, that He is calling you today to repent, and to believe, and that He promises, as we will see further on, that once He begins that work in you, that He is going to continue it, and that He is going to work His will, in His life, by His grace.

2) Profound Humility:

Let's now move to the second point, profound humility, looking at Verse 9. Now we read in this account again remembering that we're looking at Paul in particular now, and we're looking at details here of his life and his calling, for he says in Verse 9:

1 Corinthians 15:9 ~ For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.

Now let's think about this statement *...the least of the apostles...* Sometimes when we read in the New Testament, we have sections that are very doctrinal and objective, sections that are more application oriented, doctrinal application, and sometimes we have parts of Scripture that are more autobiographical, sort of like the one we're looking at today. Now, sometimes when you read about Paul, especially in 1 and 2 Corinthians, you get a lot of autobiographical, and he's talking about himself, and he's talking about his relationship with the church, and he's talking about his opponents in many cases. And when you read a statement like this, we can be concerned at first—is this maybe false humility? You know what that's like, don't you? “Well, I am the least of all the apostles,” when you know, of course, then I have this look on my face that really says, “I think I'm the most of them.” But I think we need to take this and we need to look at what he's saying and understand that this was a genuine humility that he was speaking forth.

Paul is writing, consider this, to a group of people that included a number who questioned his apostolic authority, they criticize aspects of his ministry, and who would have held other apostles such as Peter and James who were in that list of post-resurrection appearances, in a much higher esteem. In fact, in Chapter 9 of this same book of 1 Corinthians, he lays out a detail what he sees is the rights of an apostle. He says, “As an apostle, do you know what? I have the right to take with me a believing wife in my travels, in my ministry.” He says, “I have the right, apostles have the right for the churches to support them,” and he says a number of other things, but when he gets to the end of 1 Corinthians 9, what he tells them is, “You know what? Even though I had these rights, I laid my rights down and I did that just because I wanted to show you the genuineness of my motives in serving and ministering to you.” That's the kind of criticism that he was under at the church that he had to take those kinds of actions with them.

In the second letter to the Corinthians, he quotes some of their statements about his ministry. They say his letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily appearance is weak, and his speech is of no account. So they discounted him. Think about this. Think about the legacy that God through the Holy Spirit has left us through Paul, but when he was ministering to these people, they went away and said, “You know, bodily appearance is weak, not very impressive speaker, I just don’t really know that I’m going to put a lot of stock in this person.” So for Paul to write to these people and call himself the least of the apostles, think about the humility that that requires. It’s hard enough for us to be humble before people we know love us, but how much harder is it for us to humble ourselves before someone that isn’t our friend and our loved one, who doesn’t think well of us, and we have to go down and say, “You know, I need to admit to you and confess to you I’ve done this, and I’ve failed in this area,” and I have this concern, but if I tell him I’m weak and I show weakness, well they’re just going to pounce upon me. But in humility, when we look upward to the Lord, we don’t care when God is worth that humility. We bring that forth, and as he does here, being willing to call himself the least of the apostles.

Now of course the reason that’s mentioned right after this is that not only is he the least, but he’s unworthy, and for this reason, because he persecuted the church of God. We’ve already discussed his actions, that he was somewhat involved in causing holy and innocent people pain and death. When we read about persecution sometimes in the New Testament, it’s just a word for us, because we aren’t living the kind of persecution day by day. It isn’t something we can immediately relate to, but there were people, faithful Christians, that Paul put in prison, others that he lead to their death. His deeds were not minor, passive acts or even actions occasioned by the unexpected response in the heat of the moment.

An illustration—I was talking to Ron Chantal last week about this passage, and he mentioned an illustration from the country of Liberia. Many of you know that we have been involved in encouraging an orphanage there and some Christian ministry there, but there is a famous account of a very controversial figure who was a warlord during the wars in Liberia. I’m going to give you his name and I’m not going to give you his nickname. His name is Joshua Blahyi. I think that’s how you pronounce it, but he estimates that he was responsible for the death of about 20,000 people during the civil wars. Now, he’s still alive today and he’s not in prison, and not only was he responsible for the deaths of 20,000 people or so, but they were cruel, horrible, and torturous deaths. He was a cannibal and his men with him were cannibals.

Now, a change came about in him as someone preached the Gospel to him, and today he professes to be a believer in Jesus Christ, professes to be a minister of the Gospel, and he makes it his point to actually go back to the victims of these families and to ask for their forgiveness. Now, can you imagine what that would be like, that if you were this man and that you had been responsible for all of these deaths and these horrible, cruel, gruesome atrocities had been done, and to actually go back before another person and say, “Will you forgive me? I understand if you don’t forgive me, but I am seeking your forgiveness,” and to be able to say as he has said, “I’m willing to face death for my crimes. I’m willing to face imprisonment, whatever it would be.”

One thing that Scripture presents to us in the humility of the apostle Paul are two other parallel statements along with this least of the apostles statement. Some of you are familiar with these, I’m sure, and some have seen in the life of the apostle Paul in his maturing and growing in Christ, that there’s a downward progression in his humility. That’s positive, actually, a downward progression. He starts in 1 Corinthians and he talks about being the least of all the apostles, so he’s looking around himself and he’s considering himself with these other apostles. Well, then in Ephesians Chapter 3, he writes the following:

Ephesians 3:7 ~ Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me by the working of his power. 8 To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ,...

So here he is, “I’m the least of the apostles,” and the next step down is, “I’m the very least of all the saints,” and now he’s looking at all those believers there, and he’s seeing his sin and persecuting Christ, putting him down even lower. But then there is another step in 1 Timothy where he writes the following in 1 Timothy 1:

1 Timothy 1: 15 ~ The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.

He’s saying he’s the chief of sinners, the least of the apostles, less than the least of all the saints, and now broadening it out to include all of mankind, that I am the foremost of sinners. In Wayne Mack’s book *Humility, the Forgotten Virtue*, he gives the following definition of pride and humility. First of all, he gives one of pride.

Pride consists in attributing to ourselves and demanding for ourselves the honor, privileges, prerogatives, rights, and power that are due to God alone, thus it is the very root in essence, because pride at its core is idolatry of self. A proud person has put himself or herself in God's place.

You see that in the life of Paul that when he was persecuting the church and he was persecuting Christ, that what he was doing is he was rejecting God's provision of Christ as the Messiah, the Chief cornerstone, the stone that the builders rejected, and instead what he was doing is he was saying, "I am putting myself in God's place. I will not accept His provision, and I am now going to turn, and I'm going to try to wipe out all of the work of God," and standing as it were, in a way, over judgment of God Himself. But listen as well to the definition of humility.

Humility, then, consists in an attitude wherein we recognize our own insignificance and unworthiness before God, and attribute to Him the supreme honor, praise, prerogatives, rights, privileges, worship, devotion, authority, submission and obedience that He alone deserves. The pride of our hearts swells up when we make the wrong comparisons leading us to elevate ourselves more and more while we diminish God's authority and power.

Now, think about how this works in our lives. If I spend all my time, and I look around me at other people, and I find fault in them, and I analyze them, and I look for their weaknesses, maybe in my mind I even have a desire to help them, a good desire, but I let perhaps a good desire go way too far, what I find myself in is that I begin to elevate myself in my thoughts, because I'm looking at everybody else and I'm beginning to write out in my mind: *What's wrong with them? What do they need to work on? Where is it that they're failing in their faith and in their life?* So I begin to elevate myself, and now I become the judge over them.

If I'm not careful and I do this with more than one person, I can do it with everybody in my life, and now my position in my heart is held up high, way up here over everyone else, and in that I smack of pride and I say, "Lord, thank You that I am not unworthy," and I become like the Pharisee and the Publican, and I look at everyone else. But consider what has been shown here in Paul's life in the example and in the testimony, and what it is, is not of raising yourself up but of pulling himself down, because if you consider his actual track record, he did a lot better than you and I did. He was a lot more holy, a lot more focused, a lot more diligent, a lot more sacrificial than we are, but he compared himself to the right things, which was God and His standard of holiness.

So if I look at God and His standard of holiness, and I look at me first, and I keep saying, “Lord, show me my failings, show me where I have fallen short of the glory of God, show me how it is that I compare to You and Your holy and righteous standard,” then I begin to sink down and down. “Lord, help me see other people and see Your work of grace in their lives. Help me to see as they have been made in the image and the likeness of God, that evidence that is still there although marred by sin.”

Today I ask you, has transforming grace produced humility in your life? Most of us know better than to spout off overtly prideful statements especially in a context of church and other gatherings with believers, because we know it’s wrong. So we know how to generally, or at least most of us learn generally how to control that with our tongues, but I ask you, when you are in private, what do your actions, your statements, and your perspectives demonstrate about your own heart and your position and consideration of yourself with other people, and with God, and with His authorities that He has placed in your life? The humble path is hard and it’s difficult, but remember the promise of Proverbs 18:12, that before destruction, a man’s heart is haughty, but humility comes before honor. So let’s move now to the third point:

3) Diligent Labor:

We’ve already seen how the work of transforming grace led to Paul’s radical conversion, and from that radical conversion it produced a profound sense of humility in His life, and from that profound humility in his life it produced diligent labor. I’m going to read Verses 10 and 11 for us again, for he writes:

1 Corinthians 15:10 ~ But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. 11 Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.

The grace of God, this concept of grace, of course, is something that we see over and over presented to us in the New Testament. Many have learned the Sunday School definition of grace: unmerited favor, God’s riches at Christ’s expense. It’s used in many different ways in different forms, and expresses this idea of God’s favor to those who have rebelled against Him and who are unworthy, and who are undeserving.

As for its usage here, one writer said this, that it refers to exceptional effects produced by divine grace above and beyond those usually experienced by Christians. Paul knows that through the grace of God he has been called to be an apostle, and that he has been fitted out with the powers and capabilities that are requisite for this office. Now, if you read 1 Corinthians 15:10, you're going to notice that grace is mentioned three times. There's a point that's being driven home in this verse to us. It's grace, it's grace, and it's grace. It's all of the grace of God in our lives. Perhaps you could think of this verse in this way, that he says, "By the grace of God I am what I am." His identity rests in the grace of God. "His grace toward me was not in vain," that is, the grace of God is effective and powerful, and he says, "Not I, but the grace of God that is with me." It's empowerment for his life.

Now one of the most basic understandings that we have to get to as Christians, of course, is the relationship when we consider grace, the relationship between the grace of God and the work that He has called us to. It's so basic and so simple, but it continues to come back to us over and over again. For some, they misunderstand the Gospel, and when they hear the words of truth being preached and spoken and taught from the Bible and read, they read it through a grid that says, "I just need to do better, and I need to work harder, and I need to obey the Ten Commandments, and I need to be the best person that I can be," and many people have done that even though it's been so clearly pronounced that it is all of grace. We see this relationship so clearly brought out in those familiar verses of Ephesians 2:

Ephesians 2:8 ~ For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, 9 not a result of works, so that no one may boast. 10 For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

Catch the relationship and never lose it, that our salvation is all of grace. It's not of our own doing, but there's a purpose for it, that God didn't save me to just sit around, but He saved me so that He could demonstrate and work good works in my life. We see here that Paul talks about grace working in his life, and he says a statement that seems to be in contradiction to his previous one, because he just said, "I'm the least of all the apostles," and now he says, "I worked harder than any of them." If you grew up in a family, or you have multiple children, you know how competition is. "Well, I did more than he did." "He did this much work and I did this." You know how it is.

Maybe you work at a company and you know that feeling where you have your peers at the same level, and you want to make sure that the boss understands, “I just wanted you to know, just for your information, that he did ten projects last year and I did fifteen. I know it’s December and it’s bonus time. I just wanted you to know that I did more than he did. I just wanted to bring that to your attention if you missed it.” Well, let’s consider here that the Bible does lay out a biblical principle of work. We won’t go into detail, but read Proverbs. Pay attention to this as you read through it.

Proverbs 13:4 ~ The soul of the sluggard craves and gets nothing, while the soul of the diligent is richly supplied.

It’s the principle there that those who are lazy and do not work and apply themselves come to ruin, but those who diligently apply themselves are blessed.

Proverbs 18:9 ~ Whoever is slack in his work is a brother to him who destroys.

There’s a real danger to not working diligently as God has called us, and this same principle is carried over into ministry. If we were to go through 1 Corinthians 15 to the end of the chapter, we would read all about the resurrection of Christ, the resurrection of believers, and we would be stirred in our faith, and we get to the last verse of 1 Corinthians 15, and we read this:

1 Corinthians 15:58 ~ Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

So let’s consider Paul’s comment that he worked harder than they did. Now, is this just boasting out of hand? I think again we need to consider this in context. He’s got these opponents who basically are saying, “You’re not a real apostle, or if you are an apostle, you’re not as good as those who were born the normal way who are the famous guys, and you’re not really impressive as a person, as a speaker, and a teacher, and an individual, and so you’re way down here.” So both here and also even in more detail in the next letter to the Corinthian church, he has to defend his ministry to the glory of God, not to the glory of his own pride. I’ll read a few verses for you where he describes his labors in 2 Corinthians 11. This is a famous passage. He starts listing out and he talks about what he’s endured. He says:

2 Corinthians 11: 24 ~ Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. 25 Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; 26 on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; 27 in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.

Now that's a list, and if you heard it from anybody else, you would say, "Oh, you're just whining. You're just making it up. There is no possible way that you have gone through all of this in your life. You're exaggerating." But he's just laying out the facts and he has to do that in that next letter to the church, and he has to show them that he is legitimate, and so therefore, they have no reason to reject his words that he brings to them. And in addition to this, he says, "Apart from other things, there's a daily pressure on me in my anxiety for all the churches," that not only is he dealing with this physical suffering and issues, but that he's bearing emotionally in his heart all of these spiritual children that he has birthed or seen Christ birth and bring into existence.

Today in this last point, we've seen that a radical conversion leads all the way to diligent labor. If you have been a recipient of God's grace, then you also are His workmanship, and you have been created in Christ for a purpose to do good works, that God has worked in your life in a specific way, through specific circumstances, with a specific background, giving you specific spiritual gifts for use in His service. I would call you today as you look at Paul and his example to see that that grace working in your life wants to work itself all the way through to bring you to a point where you are diligently laboring and applying yourself for Him.

Now in conclusion it's easy for us to look at Paul, and perhaps you've thought this before or think this today, you know, when I read about the apostle Paul and his conversion, it's dramatic effects, and I read about all that he did, the one that would be apostle to the Gentiles, to go into the Roman Empire, and to travel, and to suffer all of this, and to plan all of these churches, and to lead for us through the Holy Spirit's work, all this part of the New Testament here, I look at him and I feel like what I'm looking at is not a human being, but it's as if I'm looking at Superman in the sky with some magical powers, and he is so far removed from my individual life and existence right now that it inspires me to see what God can do, but I'm so disconnected with it that I just can't quite get there and think that God is working in the same way in me.

Well, consider a few points of connection if you're wrestling with that. Consider for the fact that one of the things—and we'll break it down to items we can relate to—some things that Paul did. One of those is he applied himself to the Scriptures. Now, he had the benefit, of course, of growing up with all that training as a rabbi, to be taught the Scriptures of the Old Testament, but consider all of the time that he spent in the Scriptures that he had. As well we can see that he was a man of prayer. You read it in his letters to the churches where he's writing to the Philippians and he's talking about *always*, and *all of my prayers for you*, and praying with joy because of our partnership, our fellowship in the Gospel. When he's writing to these different churches and you see these little snippets of his prayers as he's praying for their spiritual growth and their transformation, well, you have a Bible and you have the opportunity to pray and seek God as well as he did.

Someone else may say, "Well, you know, I haven't been called to fulltime ministry. I work and Paul didn't know what it was like to get up, and to travel, and to do business, and to have to deal with all the ins and outs of what that was like." Well, I would say read 1 Corinthians 9, because one of his points to the church was he lay down his right as an apostle to be supported, and he worked with his hands not only as an example at that time, but also because they needed to see that he wasn't milking them for something. So the apostle Paul knew what it was like to be a tentmaker, to buy and sell, and to trade, and to get materials, and to do labor, and work, and have to market them, and sell them. I don't know all of the details. The Bible doesn't present that to them, but he knew what that was like, and so look at what God did in his life. I'm just bringing connection points to you if you feel that he is the Superman in the sky. Now as well, someone will say, "Okay, well, what about me? What can I do to serve in God's kingdom and this church? I'm not perhaps in the same position as others." One may say, "Well, I've got a family to look to." Another person may say, "Well, I'm single. What use can I be in the church?" Consider the apostle Paul. He left aside the right to take upon a believing wife, and he was a single man, and he traveled with his companions, and he dealt with the lack of companionship that he would have enjoyed if he had been married and had a family. I just bring these to you as connection points today.

The point of saying all this is that I believe that God wants to do a work in our lives, having transformed us by His grace, that He wants to do a work in your life and in mine of bringing us to profound humility so that we stop looking at other people, comparing ourselves with them, but looking to God and His perfection and holiness, and bringing us to a point where we are very useful in a service because it's not about me, it's about Christ, that we can say with the apostle, "For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain."

Whether that means that you do it as an itinerate missionary, or you do it as a stay-at-home mom with little kids, or you do it as a man who goes off into the workplace, or you do it as a father with grown children, whatever position the Lord has you in, He wants to work to that point that you take that transforming grace, the humility it produces, and then begin to work it out in every situation in your life so that you would glorify him.

In conclusion today, I would hope and pray that the Lord would work in each one of us so that we would not just see a great man, but we would see a great work that God can do in each one of us today.

Let's close in prayer...

Father, we thank You for Your loving-kindness that is better than life. We rejoice today that You have not let us alone to follow our own course, but that You have come into our lives and that You have transformed us, and changed us, and given us new hopes and desires, and Father, we pray that You would even this week by Your Spirit's power continue that work among us, and I ask this in Christ's Name, Amen.

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