

Partakers of Grace in a Worthy Manner

Partakers of Grace

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Bible Text: Philippians 1:27-30

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You know, one of the key emphases in the New Testament is that God is mediating his plan and program in and through the local church. Did you know that? Of course, he could have accomplished his will any way he chose but Jesus was clear that after his death, after his burial, after his resurrection, after he paid the price for sin and made forgiveness and new life available for every person who would repent and believe that those individuals who place their faith in him would then be organized into churches. He told Peter after his great confession that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God and then Jesus said, "I also say to you that you are Peter," a little stone, but "upon this rock," this confession you just made of who I am, "I will build My church; and the gates of hell will not overpower it." The word "church" is ekklesia. Ek, the preposition for "out of." Kaleo, "to call." That's what a church is. That's what we are, a group of men and women who have been called out of the world, given new life in Christ so that we can in turn accomplish God's purposes on this earth.

It really is amazing that God has chosen us to do that, isn't it? What a great calling and what a compelling purpose. I mean, you think about it and you almost want to say, "Are you sure, Lord?" So many other ways. Maybe we would think better ways are, "Are you sure?" No doubt he's sure so just think about your New Testament, in the book of Acts, that great transition between the old covenant and the new covenant. We see that book begin with the birth of what? The birth of the church just like Jesus said. Then you have the great missionary journeys where the Gospel is proclaimed and then men and women come to Christ and they're organized into churches. Then, think through your New Testament, we have the epistles which are letters written to churches or groups of churches and by then it's amazing, there is already an organizational structure. It's amazing how closely aligned we are to what was happening in the early church and so you see those epistles addressed to pastors and to deacons and to the saints, to church members. You read those books and there are all sorts of victories. The church is on the move turning the world upside down for Christ. There are also some heartaches as well but Jesus is keeping his promise, huh? He does that. He keeps his promise of building his church so that the forces of evil, the gates of hell, will not overpower it.

Then think your way further into your New Testament to some of the books that were actually written directly to pastors. We call them pastoral epistles. Very good. Pastoral

epistles written to Timothy; written to Titus. Then we even have the book of Revelation which is not first a book about the end times, it's first a book where there are seven literal letters written to seven literal churches. The point is, for reasons known only to the Lord himself, God has chosen to mediate his plan and program through local churches, through people like us. Through people like us. Well, if that's the case, we need to be sure we understand the way we're supposed to function together in this thing called the church.

With that in mind, please open your Bible now to Philippians 1. That's on page 154 of the back section of the Bible under the chair in front of you if you need that this morning.

Our church's theme all year long is "Finding Grace." Don't you love that? Finding Grace, taken from Hebrews 4:16, "Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace." Think about what I've just said and then think about this verse, "so that we," the church, "may receive mercy and find grace to help in our time of need." Now, factor in what we've been talking about so far this morning that the Lord seeks to mediate his plan and program in his world through groups of people just like you and me and that motivates us to try to find as much grace as possible, huh? Run to the throne, baby. Run to the throne for all sorts of reasons. For our own struggle with sin. Did you have any of that this week? Then the pressure to compromise our beliefs in the heat of the moment. Did you have any of that this week? Then there is all the differences that exist between us. The temptation to divide up along economic or ethnic or gender or chronological lines. Then the challenges that come with being part of really what amounts to a volunteer army. You put all that in the crock pot and we need grace.

We need grace badly which is interesting when we come to this book of Philippians and find Paul describing this dear group of men and women who had so faithfully supported him as their missionary even while he was in prison. He describes them as what? As partakers of grace. Maybe that's why they were such a healthy church. Maybe that's why they were such a faithful church. Maybe that's why they were such an effective church because they were, why they were partakers of grace, so we read him say at the beginning of the book, "I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always offering prayer with joy in my every prayer for you all, in view of your participation in the gospel from the first day until now. For it is only right for me to feel this way about you all, because I have you in my heart, since both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel," here it is, "you all are partakers of grace with me." So we find hope, comfort, direction and confidence in this mission when we contemplate the access that we all have to the throne of grace. We're partakers of grace.

Well, if you were with us last Sunday, you'd know that we focused on one of the shortest but most powerful verses in the book, "For to me," Paul says, "to live is Christ and to die is gain." Our very identity, who we are, the way we define our lives as wrapped up in what Jesus did for us on the cross. "For to me," would you say it? Paul did, "For to me to live is Christ." His shed blood provides forgiveness. His resurrection assures new life. The cross is what secures us access to the throne of grace. So the Gospel changes everything about us, even our stand before our holy heavenly Father. Our sin has been removed, that's half of it. His righteousness has been placed on our account so what we

say, I hope you've been saying it all week long: not out of drudgery, not out of joyless obligation but out of love and thankfulness, "For to me, to live is Christ."

Think about what we're about to do. "For to me, to live is Christ and," what? "And to die is gain." To die is gain. We sing that little chorus, "This world is not my home. I'm just a passing through. My treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue." Do you want me to break out into song? All Christians praying, we used to say. "The angels beckon me from heaven's golden shore and I can't feel at home in this world anymore." You see, we really believe there is a heaven to be gained here. There is a hell to be shunned. We were just singing about that. C. S. Lewis said, "If you read history you'll find that the Christians who did most for the present world were precisely those who thought most of the next." To die is gain. It's because Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this. Ouch, huh? Well, that's exactly what we don't want to be: ineffective in this world in which God has placed us. The final verses in Philippians 1 can help us avoid just that.

We're talking this morning about being partakers of grace in a worthy manner. Look at chapter 1, verse 27 please and think carefully about what we're being called upon to do and why it's so important for us to run to the table when we think of this. "Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ," did you hear that? "So that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I will hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel; in no way alarmed by your opponents - which is a sign of destruction for them, but of salvation for you, and that too, from God. For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake, experiencing the same conflict which you saw in me, and now hear to be in me."

This passage that we're talking about this morning gives us three characteristics of a Gospel-centered church. What can we learn from these verses? Well, first of all, there has to be a careful walk. Paul says, "Only conduct yourselves in a manner," did you hear it? "Worthy of the gospel of Christ." Now, just to be sure that we're absolutely clear: we're not talking about conducting ourselves in such a way that we could earn salvation. We know that Paul's not saying that. For example, he told the Ephesians, "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast." So we're not talking about conducting ourselves in a way that would earn righteousness from God. Of course not, but once we have accepted Christ by grace alone through faith alone, in him alone, what happens as a result? Well, Paul even says that in verse 10, "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them." The point is: there ought to be evidence of our new life in Christ that's attractive and compelling to those who don't yet know him.

Think about that: sure, we live in a world that is torn with racial strife and division. Are you watching the news? But we should conduct ourselves in a way that refuses to judge one another by the color of our skin. Why? Because that kind of prejudice has been put to death on the cross. That's why. There's no place for that and the Gospel. Yes, we live in a

world filled with expressions of selfishness and sensuality but we should conduct ourselves in a way that is worthy of the Gospel because Christ's resurrection gives us power to be concerned about and growing in personal holiness. Yes, we live on a planet where there are threats of war and unspeakable atrocities, refugees having to flee one country to another en masse, but the Gospel calls upon us to go into all the world and proclaim the arrival of the Prince of Peace. You see, we make a difference in the culture in which we live when there is a carefulness to the way we walk.

You see that theme in other places in Scripture as well, for example, Ephesians 4:1, "Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called," written at the same time in the book of Philippians. Or Colossians 1:10, "so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him." Are you letting the word of God do its evaluative work on you right now? "To please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God." Or this, 1 Thessalonians 2:12, "so that you would walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory." That's why as a church we're doing everything we can to provide all sorts of resources to help every member of our church grow in Christ. Why? Well, because around here, we want to take personal holiness seriously. We want to be the kind of men and women who conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of the Gospel.

Can I ask you to think about this past week for you? The interactions you had with the people around you? What about this matter of conducting yourself in a manner worthy of the Gospel? I think most of us would say, "I've got some work to do on that one." Hm? That's why it's so marvelous to have the Lord's Table, you know, because it gives us a natural opportunity to examine ourselves and to confess any known sin and to participate as Paul said in 1 Corinthians 11, at the table in a worthy manner and do you realize even as we do that, even in these moments together, we're becoming partakers of grace.

Paul also talks about a firm stand. He says, "Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or remain absent," here you go, "I will hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit." Why would that be important? Well, because there is this weakness of our own flesh. If you're living for the Gospel, you're going to stand out and you may have to forfeit the applause and approval of man coupled with a world that is seeking as Paul affirmed in Romans 1:18, suppressing truth in unrighteousness and trying to conform you into its mold. What that means is: God is pleased with men and women who are standing firm. That's part of what it means to conduct yourself in a manner that is worthy of the Gospel. Not out of anger. Not out of self-righteousness, but who take the position like Joshua, "As for me and my house, we're going to serve the Lord."

Or the three Hebrew children in the book of Daniel who said, "Listen, we're not bowing down to the king's image. We just ain't." That's in the original Hebrew for you folks about to send me some sort of a grammar email. Do you remember that event? I love it. Nebuchadnezzar responded and said to them, "Is it true, Shadrach, Meshech and Abednego, that you don't serve my gods or worship the golden image that I have set up?"

Here's the deal: at the moment you hear the sound of the horn, flute, lyre, trigon, psaltery, bagpipe and all kinds of music, to fall down and worship the image that I have made. It will all be good. That would be really good. Really good, but if you don't worship, you'll immediately be cast into the midst of the furnace of blazing fire. What god is there who could deliver you out of my hands?" Dumb question times three. Shadrach, Meshech and Abednego replied to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we don't need to give you an answer concerning this matter." In other words, we're not changing what we already said. "If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire. He'll deliver us out of your hand, O king, but even if he doesn't, let it be known to you, O king, we're not going to serve your gods." With a smile on their face, I'm sure they said that. "We ain't serving your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up."

I was talking to a political leader recently about a particular issue and he said, "You just need to stand your ground," he said. Yeah, that's what Paul calls us to do in this passage. In fact, next Sunday evening, we're going to be explaining some clarifications we're proposing to our articles of faith regarding exactly what we believe about the sanctity of human life and regarding exactly what we believe about the biblical definition of marriage and we're not trying to be needlessly adversarial about that but we want to be crystal clear as a church family about what we believe God's word says on contemporary issues. And we believe it's important in this day and age to stand firm. To stand firm in one spirit but that too requires massive doses of grace, huh? Which is why it's so important for us to regularly remember that the death, the burial, the resurrection of our Savior, his blood makes it possible for us to stand in a way that is worthy of the Gospel.

Then lastly, unified service. Paul says, "Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I will hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit," now here, "with one mind," look at the unity, "striving together for the faith of the gospel." What that means is when everybody on the team is committed to conducting ourselves in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Christ, it's amazing what we can accomplish together.

A couple of weeks ago we spoke about eight new initiatives we're launching as we continue to follow the five year ministry plan that we developed as a church family a year and a half ago now. One of them had to do with our community development corporation that the city asked us to start. Now we have been able to renovate a couple of houses. There are a few more in the pipeline. We're starting to develop relationships with men and women in one of the most troubled areas of our city, the north end. We're now looking forward to transforming the marvelous Cooler Keg Bar. Some of you told me, "Hey, I drove by the bar we got. Great purchase. Great purchase." Hope you had your doors locked.

Billy Jack and Amber Smith were willing to move into our first CDC house on Seventh Street and I've asked them to come now and tell us about what conducting themselves in a manner worthy of the Gospel looks like in that particular neighborhood.

Billy Jack: Good morning. My name is Billy Jack and this is my wife, Amber. We have a daughter, Addison, who is 1 ½. Choosing to buy a home in the lower Lincoln neighborhood was not a decision we took lightly but we know that the safest place to be is in the center of God's will. In Philippians 1:27, we as followers of Jesus Christ, bear the responsibility to conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Christ. There are so many practical applications for this principle be they are work, church or even at the grocery store. We would like to share just a few of the simple ways God has helped us to live out this principle in our neighborhood.

Amber: One of the most practical ways we've been privileged to demonstrate the Gospel to our neighbors is simply being with them. There are kids upon kids upon kids often with no adult in sight. Sometimes this means a lonely young girl whose parents are both working all the time just to make ends meet will talk my ear off when I have a long to-do list to complete and short amount of time to complete it in. Conducting myself in a manner worthy of the Gospel may mean putting aside my to-do list for a stranger and just listen and encourage her. Other ways we work to adorn the Gospel we proclaim is simply by taking good care of our home, picking up trash in our neighborhood, learning names of our neighbors and offering meals for pregnant women.

Billy Jack: A specific way we have been convicted to demonstrate the Gospel practically is by attending as many events as possible that Faith Church provides for our neighborhood. This often means sacrificing our relaxing Saturday morning or evening family time to rub shoulders with neighbors at these events but sacrifice is at the root of the Gospel so we work hard to prioritize these events into our family's schedule so that we can build relationships with them.

In our community, we also regularly see drug deals, alcohol addiction, sex offenders, domestic violence and even an occasional shooting but we are determined not to let people or circumstances scare us away from our God-appointed mission field. Amber and I know that our character is being watched by those around us and so we choose to go on walks as regularly as possible so that our neighbors can see us interact as a Christian family. Knowing that we are from Faith Church and call ourselves Christians, they pay attention to how I talk to my wife, how she responds to me and how we parent Addison. This provides a great opportunity for us to conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of the Gospel to God's glory.

Amber: Just as Paul and the church at Philippi strived together to further the Gospel of Christ, we have the incredible privilege of striving together with you as our local body of Christ. Last month the youth group came

down to our lower Lincoln neighborhood and provided us with a community cook-out. This not only is a blessing to us simply as members of that community but it also helps us to more easily connect with our neighbors. The day after the cook-out, an elderly neighbor we had never met showed up on our doorstep with her 15 year old grand-daughter to sell cookies for school. Because I had seen her at a distance the night before, starting a casual conversation was fairly effortless. By the grace of God and with butterflies in my stomach, I also seized this opportunity to invite the teenage girl to go to church with us some time and visit the youth group. She immediately replied, "Oh, I can't go to church because I don't believe none of that hunky-junky God stuff yet." Because of the ministry of the youth group the night before, I was able to reassure her that she is welcome and will be loved on regardless of what she believes so she agreed to come and see what the hunky-junky stuff is all about. We're trusting that in God's perfect timing this boisterous young lady will come to the realization that God is real, not hunky-junky.

Billy Jack: Without the time, effort, resources and heart of our youth group and its leaders backed by the congregation and the staff at Faith Church, this conversation might not even have taken place in our neighborhood. Jesus was all about relationships and Paul understood that. We see his example from striving together with other believers, praying for one another and encouraging one another to live life in a way that is worthy of the Gospel so thank you, Faith Church, for partnering with us to love our neighbors who are no more in need of Jesus Christ than we are. Please pray for us that we would be faithful to conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of the Gospel in lower Lincoln and that we would do so, not for our own benefit or glory, but with humility according to Colossians 1:10, in order to please Christ and bring glory to him, bearing fruit and increasing in the knowledge of God.

Are you letting this phrase about conducting ourselves in a manner worthy of the Gospel, are you allowing it to sink deeply this morning? And I hope when you think about the ways that you've been able to do that, that you would very quickly say, "But only by the grace of God. Only because somebody died in my place. Only because somebody was resurrected to make that possible." And in those ways where you might say, "I don't know if I can overcome that temptation. I don't know if I can seize that. I don't." You wouldn't let your heart be gripped with doubt and fear about what God wants to do in and through you right here at the table, would you? So I would encourage us to embrace the Gospel even as we think about what it means to walk in a manner worthy of it.

Paul said, "For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus in the night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, 'This is My body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of Me.'"

One of the books that has been very helpful to many of us as we've tried to consider what it means practically to live a Gospel-focused life has been by Milton Vincent, "A Gospel Primer," and we have asked Jerry and Amy J. to come now and to read from portions of that book and I want to encourage you to think about what's going on in your life and then think about these meditations and how it can help us practically do what it is that we're studying from the word of God this morning.

Amy: I'll be reading from section 18 entitled "Perspectives in Trials." More than anything else I could ever do, the gospel enables me to embrace my tribulations and thereby position myself to gain full benefit from them. For the gospel is the one great permanent circumstance in which I live and move; and every hardship in my life is allowed by God only because it serves His gospel purposes in me. When I view my circumstances in this light, I realize that the gospel is not just one piece of good news that fits into my life somewhere among all the bad. I realize instead that the gospel makes genuinely good news out of every other aspect of my life, including my severest trials. The good news about my trials is that God is forcing them to bow to His gospel purposes and do good unto me by improving my character and making me more conformed to the image of Christ.

Preaching the gospel to myself each day provides a lens through which I can view my trials in this way and see the true cause for rejoicing that exists in them. I can embrace trials as friends and allow them to do God's good work in me.

Jerry: Section 23, "A Heart for the Poor." Like nothing else could ever do, the gospel instills in me a heart for the downcast, the poverty-stricken, and those in need of physical mercies, especially when such persons are of the household of faith.

When I see persons who are materially poor, I instantly feel a kinship with them, for they are physically what I was spiritually when my heart was closed to Christ. Perhaps some of them are in their condition because of sin, but so was I. Perhaps they are unkind when I try to help them; but I, too, have been spiteful to God when He has sought to help me. Perhaps they are thankless and even abuse the kindness I show them, but how many times have I been thankless and used what God has given me to serve selfish ends? Perhaps a poverty-stricken person will be blessed and changed as a result of some kindness I show them. If so, God be praised for His grace through me. But if the person walks away unchanged by my kindness, then I still rejoice over the opportunity to love as God loves. Perhaps the person will repent in time; but for now, my heart is chastened and made wiser by the tangible depiction of what I myself have done to God on numerous occasions.

The gospel reminds me daily of the spiritual poverty into which I was born and also of the staggering generosity of Christ towards me. Such reminders instill in me both a felt connection to the poor and a desire to show them the same generosity that has been lavished on me. When ministering to the poor with these motivations, I not only preach the gospel to them through word and deed, but I reenact the gospel to my own benefit as well.

If we're going to get this done, this matter of walking in a manner that is worthy of the Gospel, we're going to have to bathe it in prayer and so I've asked Dwayne M. and then Jose P. to come and to lead our church family in prayer about these things.

Dwayne: Dear heavenly Father, thank you for loving us so much that you sent your only Son to the cross for our sins to reconcile our relationship with you. Thank you for his living example of how to love our church, love our family, love our neighbors and love our community. Thank you for the Scripture that teaches us how to live a Gospel-centered life filled with compassion and love and personal holiness. Lord, we pray that your grace would wash away the selfish judging and self-centered thinking so that we can find reconciliation and harmony. We need more than ever the reminder of Acts 17:26, from one man he created all nations throughout the whole earth. Loving God, thank you for hearing our prayers, feeding our souls and loving us unconditionally. In his name, we pray, amen.

Jose: God, your word says, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the Gospel in peace." Thank you for the privilege that we have here today to be gathered proclaiming your name and learning about you. Thank you for sending your precious Son to die for sinners. Thank you for because of you and not of our own works but through faith alone on what Jesus did, we are saved. Thank you for those who you have given the passion to leave their comfort zone and privileges in order to go and preach in other places the Gospel. Thank you for the liberty that you have given us today to freely preach the Gospel and let us use this opportunity to preach it in season and out of season. Thank you for these gifts, blessings and promises and all your mercies that we don't even see and take for granted. Thank you for your amazing grace.

We pray for our brothers and sisters around the world that are going through trials and tribulations, for those who are being killed, persecuted and imprisoned because they have chosen to believe in you. We pray that you are with them. Give them strength and the joy just like the Apostle Paul had to proclaim the Gospel to every corner of the earth. Let us be like Paul boasting in your own works and not our own, but rejoicing in what Jesus did on the cross. Let this motivate us to pursue a life that lives for you alone and not our own pleasures. Let our brothers and sisters preach to the entire world and preach how great your name is. Open our

eyes so we can seek opportunities to serve others. Let us live in way that you want us to so that people can see our good works and glorify the Father who is in heaven. Help us, our brothers and sisters around the globe, to live Gospel-centered lives wherever they are, whatever their current situation is.

You commanded us to go and proclaim your name to every person. We pray that you give each one of us the determination to preach your name and live every single day for your glory. Let us be light and salt of this world. Use us as instruments to proclaim your glory and show the world how amazing your grace is. We pray all this in the name of who was sacrificed for our sins, Jesus Christ. Amen.