

“CONTINUE IN THE GRACE OF GOD!”

Acts 13: 26-47

Rev. Ed Hoekstra

What’s so difficult about grace? In churches we hear a lot about grace. When we provide a worship service at Men’s Mission, the hymn “Amazing Grace” is sung every time. We love the concept of grace. We read from Ephesians 2: 8,9 where it states, *“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this not of your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works so that no one may boast.”* What exactly is this grace that we talk about? The word ‘grace’ translated from the Greek word ‘caris’ means ‘a free gift to someone who is undeserving’. In our reward and punishment society where good work gets rewarded and less than satisfactory work gets punishment, this idea of grace is something we are not used to, and thus difficult to live out each day.

Move on to grace! In our scripture reading for today, Paul and Barnabas say to the new Christians in Acts 13: 43b, *“continue in the grace of God”*. The old way (before Jesus came) was focused on keeping the law (reward and punishment) which could not set people free of their sins, because no one can earn their way to heaven – because no one is without sin! Rather, everyone who believes in Jesus is set free of their sins and can live in grace (underserved love). It is so easy to go back to the old religion of reward and punishment, because it was what they knew. The way of grace is the only true way of God, but requires an everyday close relationship with Jesus. To live in grace is so beautiful because it is based in undeserved love from God. To live in grace brings fullness and abundance to our lives and takes away our fears for today and for the future.

A negativity bias: A consensus among scientists including Dr. Rick Hansen (a psychologist) is that the brain has a built-in ‘negativity bias’. We have all experienced in our relationships that it takes 5 encouraging remarks directed to us to counteract one negative one. Hansen said that the brain is like Velcro for negative experiences and Teflon for positive ones. In other words, a negative experience seems to cling to us and hold on, where a positive experience more naturally slips away from us. Acquiring many negative statements and experiences can overwhelm a person, making them nervous, fearful and irritable, and render them unable to be patient and giving to others. However, through the power of God, with congregational and personal determination, repeated positive messages about God’s grace can change our thinking and heal the brain towards a positive bias. How do we move towards this goal? To this end, in the next couple of paragraphs, Paul points us in the right direction:

See the world from God’s perspective. When Paul is saying in our Acts 13 lesson today that we are to ‘continue in the grace of God’ he wants us to live positively and confidently and place our thoughts in the knowledge that we are loved. This means that we are to live in the knowledge that we do not have to prove ourselves to receive a reward or favour from God. In other words, in God’s eyes we are enough!

Discipline in focusing on the positive helps us to live more fully in the grace of God. In the book of Philippians, chapter 4:8, Paul addresses the importance of thinking positively: *“Finally brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is*

commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” The habit of giving thanks to God instills these positive thoughts in our minds.

The habit of giving thanks: German theologian and philosopher Meister Eckhart (1260 – 1328) said that *“if the only prayer you say in your life is ‘thank you’, that would suffice.”* Prayer is the foundation in which our relationship with Christ is built. To live in the grace of God, it is vital that the personal relationship with Christ is nurtured in prayer. When we say thank you to God in our prayer, we are recognizing and truly receiving these gifts in life of which we do not deserve grace. When we thank God, we are reminded of his awesome grace, and that gives us joy! Without thoughts of thanks each day, these positive thoughts will not be there to confront one’s negativity bias. The more we get into the habit of giving thanks to our Lord, the more our relationship with Jesus grows, and we can continue to live in freedom of God’s grace. Being thankful means being aware of your blessings, and being open to more gifts coming from our Lord. In order to continue in the grace of God living a life of thankfulness and communication with God is necessary. To stay strong in grace, it is important to stay close to God through prayer; it is important to be in worship regularly--to be reminded weekly of God’s grace in a society that most often lacks grace.

Be a light to others. At the end of our reading today (Acts 13: 47), Paul and Barnabas say to the converts, *“For the Lord has commanded us saying, ‘I have set you to be a light for the Gentiles, so that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.’”* Paul was teaching the Judaic converts that though they were among the promised people of Israel, they are called to be a light, to lead the path for the Gentiles (the non-Jews). In the same way, as Christians today, we are called to be a light to others – in other words, to express grace to others!

Since we have such a negativity bias, we are tempted to bring negativity into our relationships even though we may be Christians. This is not gracious living and not inspiring to others! Let me give you an example: Almost everyone has an annoying family member. You know how it goes: every visit with her, she says something inappropriate and even rude. Every time you see her, you and your spouse comment on how she is ‘a piece of work’. One our congregants at Oakridge had such a scenario in his family. After reading something about how Christians are to be more gracious, understanding and loving, he was given a clear message to change his attitude about his sister in-law.

This congregant of Oakridge soon went to his sister in-law’s home for a visit and apparently she was just as ridiculous as the time before. However, this time, our congregant promised himself to look at the good qualities in her. After the visit, in the car on the way home, our congregant and his spouse talked about the visit. The difference this time was that, something new was observed that was not noted on previous visits. On this visit (equipped with a new perspective), our congregant was able to see how his sister in-law was actually a loving spouse to our congregant’s brother. He saw more how they were well suited and the sister in law was a blessing! When one strives to live in grace, it spills out of us and we become more loving and less judgmental (more gracious) of others. Grace changes us - bringing light to our lives and then to the lives of others. As Paul and Barnabas said to the new Christians, let’s never stop encouraging one another to ‘continue in the grace of God’. Thanks be to God! Amen.