

“Uncompromising Grace”

Galatians 2: 1-10

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Grace makes the difference: The message of Christ in the Christian faith is one of uncompromising grace. Other faiths see salvation as something which is deserved because of one's achievements. Christian faith states that salvation cannot be earned, but is a gift of grace from God. Pure, uncompromising grace comes from Jesus Christ who took the sins of the world, was crucified and rose from the dead to defeat sin and death and anything that leads to death. Our call from God is to accept this gift of grace, and know that our sins are forgiven. We cannot earn this gift. It is freely given in love from God through Jesus Christ.

The Galatian church which had begun well in knowing God's grace was duped by religious legalists. These false teachers brought a different gospel which was shaped by rules to follow which were meant to please God and earn his favour. Paul was irate. These false teachers were creating disunity in the church. Paul wanted to turn the church from legalism, self-righteousness, and unnecessary ritual to grace. His mission was vital!

All are called to Seek Unity. It was revealed to Paul, that he was to go to meet the acknowledged leaders of the church (Christ's apostles) to establish that everyone was on the same page in terms of the freedom of grace in Jesus Christ. The necessary task of seeking unity in the church was not only a challenge for Paul 2,000 years ago, but also for us today. As Christians navigate the future together, Christ also calls us to seek unity. If there is a disagreement among Christians, it is important that they pray and reflect on the source of the disagreement. Is the conflict about a rule or some form of legalism or some other preference they may have added on? Is grace being compromised?

“Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. ² I went up in response to a revelation. Then I laid before them (though only in a private meeting with the acknowledged leaders) the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure that I was not running, or had not run, in vain (Galatians 2: 1-2).” In these verses, Paul is not wondering whether his gospel is authentic or true. He was certain that he met the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus and was sure of his call from Christ to preach to the Gentiles. What he was concerned about was disagreement and disunity among the leadership of the followers of Christ. Human desire to put controls on God's grace was of great concern to Paul. For example, Paul was concerned that the false teachers were insisting that everyone – both Jew and Gentile were to be circumcised in order to please God. Paul knew that Christians are no longer subject to the Old Testament law and therefore circumcision is no longer required. In Galatians 2: 1-3 and other passages in the New Testament, we read that we are delivered from our sins when we have faith in Christ. As Christians we are to remember that it is Christ's completed work in grace on the cross that saves us, not the observance of an eternal rite or ritual.

⁴ But because of false believers secretly brought in, who slipped in to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might enslave us— ⁵ we did not submit to them even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might always remain with you. How do we protect the freedom of the Gospel of Jesus Christ today from enslavement of these extras? A problem Christians have is the temptation to bring the culture of our society into the church. For example, consumerism in our society advertises that one must look good and acquire a number of things and experiences to appear successful. This kind of messaging is targeted on the ego. The emphasis is on how others see you on the outside. Sometimes without being aware, we can take this mentality into the church and judge others as not good Christians by the way they dress, or how they look. The temptation is to gather in groups of people who are similar to us, and create cliques leaving out others and even judging them because they are different. When this is being done, the truth of the Gospel of Grace has been altered because 'extras' have been added to the Gospel of Grace. *Do not submit to them for even a moment, so that the truth of the Gospel might always remain with you!*

Uncompromising grace means that our congregation is open to everyone who comes to be part of our church family. No one owns the church, it belongs to God and everyone has equal access to the benefits of belonging whether you have been here for decades or this is your first week. We are all equally loved by God's grace, and the call to each one of us is to freely extend grace to others.

Extending God's uncompromising grace means doing the most loving thing. Christ would call all of us to do the most loving thing by inviting others into our church family regardless of whether they are similar to us or not. Whether you are here for 1 day or 50 years we are all equal members of the family of God. Oakridge Presbyterian is a very welcoming congregation and numerous people have shared that with me. It is important to remember, however, that if we let our individualistic culture into our congregation, too often we do not let others get to know us. In a family it is important that we allow ourselves to be more vulnerable and get to know one another more deeply and in so doing grow in our relationships. It is understandable that some connect more easily than others, but it is important that we invite and encourage one another in gracious relationships. Then we are more able to help and support one another in our weaknesses. In a friendship or in a marriage it is necessary that the partners break that outer shell and get to know one another's joys and also their fears. Then in grace the friends can encourage and correct one another without fear and judgment. Grace is amazing because it is about God's free gift of steadfast and unconditional love.

⁹ and when James and Cephas and John, who were acknowledged pillars, recognized the grace that had been given to me, they gave to Barnabas and me the right hand of fellowship, agreeing that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. Unity is acknowledging one another's specific call but maintaining that grace found in Christ alone is the message which cannot be altered. Paul and the other leaders agreed that in Christ alone their hope is found – not in any extra requirement imposed on believers!

¹⁰ They asked only one thing, that we remember the poor, which was actually what I was eager to do. When the focus of our faith is on uncompromising grace, we naturally respond with helping the poor without casting judgment on them. Amen.