

Sermon 55: 1 Corinthians 15:9-11: All of Grace

OUTLINE

Saved and serving by grace
working and fruitful by grace

INTRODUCTION

‘There but for the grace of God go I.’ These famous words are attributed to the famous English Martyr John Bradford when he watched a number of criminals being marched off for execution. They are famous because they strike a chord with any true believer who has been shown a true sense of their sin and unworthiness. We love these words because they take us back to the truth of our sin and God’s grace. We love to be around those who carry this awareness of their unworthiness around with them, it tinctures their prayers, their actions, and how they put themselves forward. Paul was such a man. Not only does he see himself as the ‘least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle,’ 1 Cor. 15:9; but he says of himself ‘I am the very least of all the saints,’ Eph. 3:8; and in 1 Tim. 1:15 he calls himself the foremost of sinners. In the portion before us Paul is explaining that Jesus is resurrected from the dead as a foundation for dealing with some of their errors with regards to their own future bodily resurrection. He has just listed all the people the resurrected Lord appeared to but at the mention of the Lord appearing to him he stalls, he cannot talk about himself in the role of an apostle without reliving some of the shame of his past actions, without an immediate recognition of the grace of God who has made him an apostle. Today as we continue looking at 1 Cor. 15:9-11, we want to look at Paul’s awareness of God’s grace in his life, how everything he is and has accomplished is all of grace. We are grateful for Paul’s distraction because he is getting distracted by what should consume every single one of our hearts, God’s grace to unworthy sinners. We will look at these verses under two headings: saved and serving by grace; working and fruitful by grace.

Saved and serving by grace

V9, ‘For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.’ This is not the first of Paul’s reflections upon himself, they begin in v8, ‘Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.’ Paul indicates that he was the last appointed apostle to be set apart by the Resurrected Lord. But he refers to himself ‘as to one untimely born.’ This is a word that would be used to describe an abortion/still born child, but possibly also refers to a premature birth. Some think that Paul would be using the association of deformed babies self-aborting as a self-description to underline his ugliness in sin; others think he might be referring to the fact that unlike the other apostles who spent time with the Lord for three years and had plenty of training to be an apostle, Paul was forced into the world, as it were, without the benefits of a full gestation period. I favour the second opinion.

As we consider Paul’s salvation and call to service, we can see that it was all of grace. At the end of Acts 7 Stephen the first martyr of the church is stoned to death, and there is Saul giving approval, enflamed in the cause of putting down the church. As a Pharisee he would have seen Christianity as a threat to the religion of Israel and something that could provoke the hand of God’s judgement against Israel. Out of a false sense of zeal Saul sets out to cleanse the earth of

Christians. In Acts 9:1-2 we see that he is a vocal and proactive agent of removing Christians. Paul describes this time of his life to Agrippa, Acts 26:9-11, 'I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. ¹⁰ And I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them. ¹¹ And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities.' This is what drove him to go to Damascus where Jesus appeared to him on the Damascus road. Paul was not looking for Jesus, Jesus came looking for him. Paul reveals to us in Gal. 1:15 that this grace of God extends from eternity past and God's election, 'But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace.' And so it is with any sinner who is saved. God does not look on fallen humanity and see something good and worthy but unworthy, and yet in His goodness He planned to save sinners. Because of His goodness and love He planned to give all that was needed to secure our redemption in the death of His Son; and He planned to do all that was necessary to secure application of the finished work of Christ to us in our individual salvation. God predestines us by grace; He sent His Son to die and pay the price for our sin by grace; and then He by His Holy Spirit confronts us and draws us by His Spirit to saving faith in Christ.

Salvation by grace is good news for sinners. At first no one likes to hear that they are sinners, that they are worthy of judgement, we are by nature self-deceiving and think ourselves better than we are. This is one of the reasons why the Holy Spirit has to convict of sin. We all paint ourselves as victims, as well intended, not as rebels against God. But here is the good news, God is gracious, God saves the ungodly, there is nothing we can do to merit salvation, God must and does save sinners by His grace. Paul talks about himself as the foremost sinner, or the chief of sinners, 1 Tim. 1:15-16, '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. ¹⁶ But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life.' Paul tells us that he is an object lesson in God's grace, in other words, if God can and would save someone like Paul then God can save anyone. We forget this and act more like the older brother in the parable of the prodigal son. We find it hard to get our heads around God's free grace to the undeserving and we want to qualify it in some way. We can find it hard for someone else to be fully forgiven, or we can find it hard to see ourselves as fully forgiven. How can a holy God forgive sin without exacting payment from us? Many struggle with this idea today. 'In the early hours of October 16, 1946, Lutheran minister Henry Gerecke paid a visit to members of his small congregation in Nuremberg, Germany. This was no ordinary congregation, since the men he was visiting were about to be executed for committing the vilest crimes imaginable. One by one, Gerecke walked with his congregants to the gallows. When the noose was placed over the first man's head and he was asked for his last words, he gave testimony to his faith in Jesus Christ: "I place all my confidence in the Lamb who made atonement for my sins. May God have mercy on my soul." His name was Joachim von Ribbentrop, and until the previous year he had been the foreign minister of Adolf Hitler's Nazi Germany. When first visited by Gerecke in the Nuremberg prison where the war crimes trial was taking place, Ribbentrop had listed a long string of objections to the Christian faith. But under the faithful preaching of the gospel in the prison chapel, he had been thoroughly converted and saved. Not all of Gerecke's parishioners were converted. One of them was Hermann Goering, chief of the

German Luftwaffe and Hitler's closest colleague. Goering also attended chapel, but when Gerecke visited him on that last evening, Goering mocked Christianity. Within minutes after the pastor left him, Goering committed suicide. Others were more like Ribbentrop. When Gerecke first visited the cell of Field Marshal Wilhelm chief of the German armed forces. He found Keitel reading his Bible and professing Christ. Two others, Fritz Sauckel, the Nazi head of labor supply, described as the cruelest slave master since Pharaoh, and Wilhelm Frick, who as minister of the interior oversaw a reign of terror that had targeted many Christians, went to the scaffold confessing their sins and asking forgiveness from God through faith in Christ. Eight of the Nazi war criminals were accepted at the Lord's Table by Chaplain Gerecke on the basis of a credible profession of faith in Christ."— Jonah & Micah (Reformed Expository Commentaries) by Richard D. Phillips.

But Paul's marvelling at the grace of God does not stop at salvation but extends to the fact that he would be called as an apostle. Eph. 3:7-8, '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. ⁸To 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.' Look at that last part of v8, who is he that he should have the privilege of declaring the unsearchable riches of Christ. Paul uses bad grammar here to make his point in the Greek, calling himself the 'least' of all the saints, hence the translation 'very least.' It sounds like a redundancy but it is Paul's heart felt sentiment. Here is a man who deeply feels his unworthiness and the privilege of being saved, and being a servant, even an apostle. Every preacher feels the privilege that Paul feels, what an honour, what a responsibility to preach the unsearchable riches of Christ. Here is a man who is in touch with his unworthiness. Now this sense of one's sin is frowned upon today as detrimental to our mental health. This is what Spurgeon thinks, 'If you take a very lowly view of yourself, some may call you morbid but they know not of what spirit you are. Humility is healthy—lowliness is no disease. When we think worse and worse of ourselves, we are getting nearer and nearer to the truth. We are by nature depraved, degraded, guilty and worthy of the wrath of God. If any hard thing can be imagined against fallen man, it is assuredly true of him. What worse character can be given to human nature than that which is drawn by the pen of Inspiration in the third chapter of the Epistle to the Romans? Oh, that God would make us lowly in spirit and fill us with a deep feeling of our own unworthiness—for this will only be revealing to us the truth and delivering us from the way of falsehood.'¹ I think we need to learn the art of feeling our unworthiness in this fashion, not in a false guilt that the devil would delight in but in a posture of humility and gratitude that can act as fuel for service, even for suffering.

Friends we are more privileged than we can measure, to be saved is too much, but to be used by God is privilege upon privilege, let us feel these realities again as we consider Paul reflecting on the grace to Him.

Working and fruitful by grace

V10-11, '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. ¹¹Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.' Some Liberal scholars have felt that Paul is

¹ <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/spurgeon/sermons36.xxxix.html>

wrongly boasting at this point, that this unwarranted talk of himself and his accomplishments are an indulgence of ego. But this is not the case. The Corinthians were preached to by Paul, not Peter, James or John; an apostle born out of time, not one of the original 12. Some might take this difference as a way of disregarding Paul's message and authority, the Corinthians themselves might feel themselves vulnerable because they had the apostle Paul and not the apostle Peter preach to them. Paul is very happy to own his unworthiness as a sinner, and is happy to display the glory of God's grace in putting a one time enemy and persecutor into service as an example and encouragement to others; but he also does not allow anyone to say that his ministry has been in vain. In other words, that it is fruitless. Paul's ministry is by the power of God, it is the gospel of God which is the power of salvation to any who believe. Paul does not pretend that his ministry has been ineffective because that would make out as if God's gospel and power were not real. Likewise he emphasizes his labours, not as a way to show that he is better than anyone else, but in order to show that his labours as an apostle verify his ministry and the word they have heard. Apostles travel to take the word abroad, he has travelled further and more than any other; apostles suffer persecution for the word, Paul has suffered in all possible ways; apostle labour in preaching the gospel, Paul was tentmaker as well as a preacher in order to preach the gospel; apostles plant churches according to the teachings of Christ, Paul had set out on multiple missionary journeys and planted many churches. Paul fulfils all the criteria of an apostle fulfilling every category to the uttermost. Though of course, it is the grace of God that has done it all. Paul even ends this section that assuring them that whether you hear the gospel from Peter or Paul, it is the same message, and this is the message that the Corinthians have heard, and this is a message that God uses to save sinners.

Two points need to be made from Paul's comments here. Firstly, what does he mean that 'his grace towards me was not in vain'? some have wrongly assumed that this is a verse where Paul is saying that God saved him by grace, and now by his own efforts he keeps himself in the grace of God by works. No, Paul is not talking about his personal salvation he is talking about the fruitfulness of his apostolic ministry. Paul is indirectly saying to the Corinthians, 'You are a true work of grace,'/ 'You have heard the true gospel and experienced a true work of God.' God did not save Paul, call Paul, give him detailed instructions, enable his ministry with powerful miracles and miraculous deliverances only for the Corinthians to hear the gospel and not be saved. This gospel is the power of God unto salvation. I take great encouragement from Paul's point. The Corinthians were fixated on who preached, not what was being preached. Paul is reminding the Corinthians that the gospel is the power of God unto salvation for any who believe. This means that those here today can be saved; that salvation is available to all who hear this message that Jesus died for sinners, that Jesus rose from the dead, that any who believe in Him can be saved. you don't need an emissary from heaven. It is this way of thinking that lies behind the closing exhortation of this chapter, v58, '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.' Because our efforts are blessed by God they produce true fruit, they do not depend upon us but Him. This is an encouragement to keep on working not to give up.

This brings me to an important understanding about Christian labour that we see in Paul's understanding. Look again at these words from v10, 'I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.' These are some of the most important words when it comes to understanding

Christian holiness, Christian growth and Christian responsibility. There has been a lot of confusion in the area of sanctification. If we are sanctified by the grace of God, then sanctification is without our activity. This has led to a confused teaching on holiness, the 'let go and let God' movement. There has been some confusion in the area of evangelism, that if God saves His elect, what about the responsibility to evangelize? This confusion has also impacted the area of prayer, if God knows what you are going to pray for before you ask, why pray? Here we see Paul putting forward an important double emphasis. God's grace is at work, and we are also strenuously working. Paul recognizes that salvation is all of God and all of grace, but Paul pours out his life in exhausting ministry and God uses the means of Paul's words, Paul's labours, and Paul's prayers to bring about salvation in the lives of the Corinthians. This is most important for us to note. Salvation is all of God and all of grace, but God has appointed the ordinary means of prayer, the sharing of the gospel, the power of a holy life as a convincing testimony as a means to bring the truth of the gospel home to the heart of a dead sinner and save them. Are you seeking the salvation of a loved one? You know that the power of God alone can save them, so what then must you do? Are you to do nothing? No, God we see in the life of Paul uses our efforts, not because He needs them, but because He has appointed to use them. God does not need us, but we are privileged to be included as partners. He could do it without us, but has ordained that we will be His instruments. So we must preach, and therefore know the message, think hard about the people we are speaking to and think of compelling ways to present the gospel in a winsome and convincing manner. We must pray, recognizing that God has appointed prayer, not because He needs us, not because we change His mind, but because He changes us in prayer and bestows upon us the privilege of partnering in His work in this world.

Paul says something similar regarding holiness in Phil. 2:12-13, 'Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, ¹³ for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.' V13 is the verse that we are most concerned to look at, as it gives the motivation why the Philippians should continue to obey and work at their holiness. 'For it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.' Here is how holiness happens it is a case of God by His Spirit working in us 100%. He does the regenerating work so that we are new creatures in Christ with a new set of desires. And He is constantly at work in us to bring about the image of Christ in us. He is tireless and more earnest than we are in this pursuit. He prompts our minds, He shapes our characters, He illuminates our understanding, He tends our wills, He convicts of sin, He enthuses us with joy inexpressible. In many different ways the Spirit is working in our hearts both a hunger for holiness and the strength to do it. He is the catalyst, the one who starts the reaction, it is for this reason that the Christian credits God with every good deed and thought, all holiness has its root in His working in our lives.

As some have seen this truth they have become imbalanced and thought to themselves, 'Well, if God is doing it then I don't have to.' In fact there is a brand of holiness teaching called Keswick teaching that taught that we receive sanctification in the same way in which we receive justification, by faith, all you have to do in sanctification is receive it. But this is fundamentally flawed. This resulted in a pattern of waiting for Jesus to nail certain sins to the cross and not working at sanctification. For this reason Paul states that there is a working and

willing in us that is affected by the Spirit. We don't not will, or not work, we do both but only because He has first worked them in us.

This verse has been confusing to many because we tend to think of these willing issues in terms of the laws of matter, matter replaces matter and you can't have two objects inhabiting the same space. So likewise people think that either it is God willing and working, or me, but it can't be both. But this is exactly what Paul is saying, it is a case of both and, not either or. Paul reflects this perspective in 1 Cor 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." This would be a vain brag but for the fact we know who he really thinks is the source of his good works.

It is good to think about our unworthiness, but never on its own, this should send us like Paul to the grace of God. We are saved by grace, we serve by grace, we are sustained by grace, and any effectiveness we have is by grace. This should encourage us to pray harder, try harder, fight sin harder, share the gospel more because our labour is not in vain.