

Gripped by Grace

Holy Obsession – Part II

Romans 15:15-16

Introduction

We are in the midst of reading some of Paul's most personal comments about his own heart and life. He was a man with holy obsessions.

One that we uncovered in our last session, was Paul's obsession for holy living. We discovered, in our quest for holy living, that we are to make three radical refusals. We are to:

- refuse mediocrity – not settle for second class workmanship;
- refuse lethargy – not only learn the word, but live the word;
- refuse apathy – challenge one another along the journey of faith.

This, by the way, is rarely glamorous or great or thrilling or breathtaking or consistently stimulating. That is the reason it is so easy to be caught in the undertow of mediocrity and lethargy and apathy.

Whether changing diapers or grading papers or selling wallpaper or cleaning gutters or taking an exam or performing surgery or standing in a courtroom arguing a case before a jury of peers, we are to be obsessed that all be done with everything we can put into it. This is so the name and cause of Christ is honored; so even the smallest task will provoke the pleasure of God.

This is like Jesus Christ Himself, working in a carpenter shop, who made plows, as we learned in our last session, that were being used nearly a hundred years later.

Why should we care about this? Because Jesus modeled for us, the meaning of being obsessed with holy living.

Today, we will discover, tucked inside his personal resumé, Paul's obsession with the grace of God. Let us read it first, in Romans chapter 15, before we unpack as much of the truth as we can in our time together. We find Paul's resumé in Romans 15:15-16.

But I have written very boldly to you on some points, so as to remind you again, because of the grace that was given me from God, to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles, ministering as a priest the gospel of God, so that my offering of the Gentiles may become acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

In this brief resumé, Paul either implies or directly refers to three different positions or roles that he played in life. These roles are that of professor, preacher, and priest.

All of these roles are the direct result of grace. In fact, circle the words in the middle of verse 15,

... because of... grace ...

This is the key phrase for every aspect of Paul's life. If you bumped into Paul, he would spill grace. If you talked to Paul, he would speak grace. If you prayed with Paul, he would appeal to the grace of God.

I agree with one author who said that Paul never fully recovered from his conversion. Paul was gripped by the saving grace of God.

Max Lucado published a devotional book, several years ago, with this title, *In the Grip of Grace*. He began the book by telling a story he had created to declare the truths of grace; a story he entitled, “The Parable of the River”.

Once there were five sons who lived in a mountain castle with their father. The eldest was an obedient son, but his four younger brothers were rebellious. Their father had warned them of the river, but the younger sons had not listened.

The father had begged these four rebellious sons to stay clear of the bank, lest they be swept downstream, but the river’s lure was too strong. Each day they ventured closer and closer, until one son dared to reach in and feel the waters. “Hold my hand so I won’t fall in,” he said, and his brothers did.

However, when he touched the water, the current yanked all four of the brothers into the rapids and rolled them down the river. Over rocks they bounced, through the channels they roared, on the swells they rode. Their cries for help were lost in the rage of the river. After hours of struggle, they surrendered to the pull of the river and finally found themselves dumped on the bank of a strange land, in a distant country, in a barren place.

After some time, they gathered their courage and reentered the waters. The brothers were hoping to walk upstream, but the current was too strong. They attempted to walk along the river’s edge, but the terrain was too steep. They considered climbing the mountains, but the peaks were too high. Besides, they did not know the way.

Lucado goes on to talk about one of the brothers moving in with the barbarians in the valley below, building his own hut of mud and grass. He decided that life with the pagans was better than life with his father.

Another brother became bitter and decided to simply watch his other brother and report all the bad things he did.

A third brother decided that the only way back to his father was to build a path back up the river and walk back. He said, “There is only this option. Rock upon rock I will stack until I have enough rocks to travel upstream to the castle of my father. When he sees how hard I have worked and how diligent I have been, he will have no choice but to open the door and let me into his house.”

After several days, a rescuer appears. It is the firstborn son. But tragically, every one of his brothers rejects his offer of help.

The brother living with the barbarians has grown to prefer his life with them.

The brother who has grown bitter and only wants to watch the failure and the sin of the barbarians and of his brother is also too preoccupied to be rescued.

The brother who is building a path upstream has been able to take five steps homeward, of which he is very proud, but when the rescuer tells him there are five million steps to go, he grows angry and begins to throw rocks at his oldest brother. In spite of the possibility of rescue, he prefers to work his way home and earn his father’s forgiveness, and thus, rejects the firstborn son.¹

The analogies are obvious, are they not?

Look back at Paul’s history as a faithful Hebrew, a fearless patriot of the Law, and a meticulous keeper of all the regulations and ceremonies of his Jewish people. He would have been the brother on the river bank, working unceasingly at the futile task of building a path to heaven out of the rocks of man-made righteousness. He had walked five steps, but had five million to go.

Paul experienced saving grace on that pathway, while heading to Damascus to arrest the Christians who dared to suggest that the crucified carpenter was the Son of God. In a flash of light from the sky, the appearance of Christ to Paul brought about a flash of divine light. While he physically went blind for several days, he gained spiritual sight. He was brought to life through faith in his newly found Lord, Jesus Christ.

Paul would later write his testimony,

[I was] circumcised the eighth day [as prescribed in the Mosaic law], of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless. But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. (Philippians 3:5-7)

After his conversion, Paul began a remarkable ministry that has continued to impact the church for nearly two thousand years.

What were the roles Paul played as he demonstrated his rescue by grace? In II Timothy 1:11, he writes that by God,

. . . I was appointed a preacher and an apostle and a teacher.

In Romans 15, there are three roles that Paul fulfills. These are the roles of:

- professor;
- preacher;
- priest.

It was Paul's job to be a teacher or professor. It was Paul's jurisdiction to be a preacher to the Gentiles. It was Paul's joy to be a priest unto God.

Paul, the Professor

Let us look at Paul's first role of professor. Look back at the first part of Romans 15:15.

But I have written very boldly to you on some points so as to remind you again . . .

A teacher's most powerful tool may very well be the review sheet – before the exam. When the final exams are just around the corner, the students are all ears.

I do not know about you, but I had the terrible habit of ignoring the lectures in class and simply waiting for the review. Of course, I never made the Dean's list either.

I have had military personnel tell me that a soldier listens to a review of his equipment much differently at his assigned destination than he did while at the base.

I have counseled dozens of couples who plan to get married and the way they listen to me in my office is vastly different than the way they listen to me in the ceremony when I deliver the charge. In fact, everyone is listening.

I could preach today on death and dying; heaven and hell, but this audience would not listen as well as an audience at a funeral. Ask any pastor and they will tell you that an audience's attention at a funeral service is unrivaled.

There is something about being reminded when you really need to know.

- That student wants to pass the exam!
- That soldier is about to go into battle!
- That couple is about to become husband and wife!
- That audience is face to face with a coffin and they want to know about eternal life!

The Roman believers were surrounded by the challenges of life and the difficulties of building not only their lives, but a church. They needed to know! So like a great professor, Paul gave them, and us, a

number of review sheets to help us pass the exams of life.

With these and other believers, Paul often spent time reminding them of the truths of grace.

Paul had spent three years teaching the Ephesian believers, establishing the elders as shepherds, and then, in his farewell, he exhorts them to,

. . . remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." (Acts 20:35b)

Paul challenged the Galatians to join him in being eager to,

. . . remember the poor . . . (Galatians 2:10)

As Timothy struggled in his ministry as a young and inexperienced pastor, Paul encouraged him to,

remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead . . . for which I [Paul] suffer hardship even to imprisonment . . . (II Timothy 2:8-9).

In addition, in this same letter, Paul reminded Timothy of,

- the gift that God had given him to use in the ministry,
. . . God has . . . given us a spirit . . . of power and love and discipline. (II Timothy 1:7)
- the fact that God
has saved us and called us . . . according to His own purpose and grace . . . (II Timothy 1:9)
- the fact that, to those who believe,
our Savior . . . has abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel, (II Timothy 1:10)
 - the remembrance that,
. . . I am not ashamed [of the gospel]; for I know whom I have believed and I am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him until that day. (I Timothy 1:12)
- the reminder, concerning the preaching of this gospel,
Retain the standard of sound words . . . (I Timothy 1:15)

Ladies and gentlemen, one of the best things you can do at times, to refresh your holy obsession for God, is remember.

This is like the prophet Isaiah, who said,

Listen to me, you who . . . seek [to follow] the Lord: look to the rock from which you were hewn and to the excavation of [the] pit from which you were dug. (Isaiah 51:1)

This is like David the Psalmist, as well, who sang,

He brought me up out of the pit of destruction, out of the miry clay, and He set my feet upon a rock . . . (Psalm 40:2)

Why do you think the Lord delivered to the church only one ordinance to repeat over and over? It is the one we do as often as we choose when we assemble and we call it the Lord's Table of Remembrance. We do this ordinance to remember Him!

Now notice that Paul the professor is speaking boldly to the Romans. He writes, in Romans 15:15a,

But I have written very boldly to you on some points . . .

Why is there the need for boldness?

For one thing, a person who already knows what you are telling them, could grow frustrated or even upset that you are reminding them of what they already know.

This is like the teenager who does not like to be reminded again and again, "Drive safely," or, "Be careful."

Their parents get the answer, "I know, Dad," or "I know, Mom."

It is one thing to tell a child, "2 + 2 = 4," when he did not already know it. It is another thing to tell that to Einstein.

It is one thing to tell a fourth grade computer class, "Now, class, here's what a right click on a mouse will do." It is entirely different to tell Bill Gates, "Here's what a mouse can do."

A teacher runs the risk of being ignored, at best, and of boring the students after a while.

This past week, I had the delight of welcoming into my office all of the three and four year old preschool children's classes at our church. One of the teachers had asked me if I would come and meet the children and their teachers and perhaps, speak at their chapel service.

I said, "Sure, I'd love to, but how about another idea? Why don't we have them come to my office and let me talk to them and show them my office and my books? I have about a thousand books alone on either side of my desk that I could show them.

Maybe I could tell them what a pastor does and even show them some of the treasures I've collected from mission fields of the world."

The teacher said, "That would be great."

So, this past week, four classes of three and four year olds visited me in my office. They came through, one at a time, for about ten minutes each. The teachers stood at the back and the kids gathered around my desk and my chair.

Every class had a talker; a natural leader who asked all the questions and volunteered information – information I did not want to know! I learned about many of your marriages and about your home life. I want to see some of you later!

I showed them my books, "Do you see all of these books? They're all about the book of Romans – it's the only book in the Bible that I know anything about!"

Anyway, after showing them my carved ostrich egg from India, one little girl, who just seemed so enamored by the whole thing, raised her hand. "Oh, oh," she said.

I said, "Yes ma'am, and what do you want to ask me?"

She said, "Um, can we get outta here now?!"

I was a huge success!

A professor runs the risk of boring his students with stuff they already know or stuff they do not care to know anything about.

Obviously the Roman believers welcomed the review and, like us today, would love to have been given even more on their review sheet.

Paul was a wonderful professor.

Paul, the Preacher

Now let us look at Paul's second role as the preacher. Notice again, Romans 15:15b-16a,

. . . because of the grace that was given me from God, to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles . . .

Paul's job was to be a teacher. Paul's jurisdiction was to be a preacher to the Gentiles.

Paul was given a special responsibility for the Gentiles. In Galatians 2:1-10, we are told that Peter primarily preached to the Jews and Paul primarily preached to the Gentiles. The predominant influencer of the church – this brand new organism; the body of Christ – was not Peter, but Paul.

Soon after Paul was converted on the road to Damascus, the Lord said to Ananias in a vision that,

. . . he [Paul] is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles . . . (Acts 9:15)

In the first chapter of Romans, Paul revealed that God had made him an apostle,

. . . to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles . . . (Romans 1:5)

We could correctly say that the Gentiles were the primary jurisdiction of Paul's preaching influence.

Notice that Paul does not say, in Romans 15, that he has been appointed as the chief instrument of Christ because of his superior intellect, or his speaking ability, or his background in the law, or his personality, or anything like that.ⁱⁱ

Paul directly links his preaching office to the fact that he is the recipient of the grace of God. He is gripped with the truth that God's grace has not only redeemed him, but has ordained him.

Perhaps this is the reason that Paul does not flash his credentials as an apostle to the Roman church. He does not say, "Hey, listen, I'm not only your professor, I'm an apostle."

Notice that Paul, in Romans 15:16, does not say, "I am an apostle of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles." Instead, he says,

. . . [I am] a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles . . .

The word he uses, in this verse, comes out of sheer humility. The word "minister" is the Greek word "leitourgos (λειτουργος)," which gives us our English word, "liturgy".

The word originally referred to someone who served a public office at his own expense.ⁱⁱⁱ

In other words, there is no salary, no pension, no benefit package with this office – just service for the public good out of a generous heart.

Over time, this word came to refer to someone who volunteered to serve their country or their city in some way. I found several ancient examples of what it meant to be a "leitourgos".

Greek cities had great festivals each year that included music and drama. Men who loved their city would volunteer to collect, instruct, and equip a chorus at their own expense.

The Athenians were the greatest naval power of the ancient world. One of the most patriotic things that a wealthy man could do was underwrite the

expenses of one warship for a whole year. This was an incredible sacrifice for the good of his country.

The word was also used in relation to the Athenian games. During these festival games, there would be the famous torch races. The Athenians would be divided into ten tribes. In these races, teams from the tribes would race each other in relay races and the runners would actually carry a lit torch. To this day, we speak of handing off the torch to the next in line. These games were paid for by "leitourgos" – men who not only paid the expenses, but spent time selecting and training the athletes to represent their tribe.

Over time the word was associated with people who performed religious duties. More than likely this was because the duties were voluntary.

Out of this came the translation "minister," which was a reference to someone who handled the liturgies of the church.^{iv}

Paul is announcing that he views himself as so gripped by grace that he is willing to pour out all that he owns and all that he is for the sake of his new family; his new tribe; his new country. No matter what the cost, no matter how much time it demanded, he was willing to sacrifice everything to win the race; to pass on the torch; to equip the ship and fight the good fight of faith; to train the church to sing praise to God. It did not matter to him if it cost him his life.

Like most physicians of great experience, Dr. Evan Kane had become preoccupied with a particular facet of medicine. His strong feelings concerned the use of general anesthesia in major surgery.

Dr. Kane believed that most major operations could and should be performed under a local anesthetic, for, in his opinion, the hazards of general anesthesia outweighed the risks of the surgery itself. His medical mission was to prove to his colleagues, once and for all, that local anesthesia was worth exploring.

To prove the viability of major surgery using only a local anesthetic, Kane would have to find a patient brave enough to go through a major surgery without general anesthesia. In his thirty-seven years as a surgeon, Kane had performed nearly four thousand appendectomies. It was not long before he found a patient who needed an appendectomy, and would volunteer to take the risk of only local anesthesia.

I read about this surgery just a few days ago, although it took place many years ago.

The patient was prepped in all the normal ways, but in the operating room was given only a local anesthetic. As he had thousands of times before, Dr. Kane entered the abdomen, slicing tissue and clamping blood vessels as he operated on his patient. Locating the appendix, the surgeon skillfully clipped it away, folded the stump back in place, and sewed up the patient's wound – all with the patient being fully awake and experiencing only minor discomfort. After two days of recovery – much faster than general anesthesia cases – the patient was released from the hospital to recuperate at home.

Dr. Kane had achieved his goal. His patient was too credible a testimony to deny or ignore. You see, Dr. Evan Kane had operated on himself. He was the only patient he could find willing to take the risk and make the sacrifice.

Since this surgery in 1921, Dr. Kane's breakthrough technique changed the face of surgery and saved the lives of countless numbers of people.^v

Is it any wonder that the people of God who make the most difference in our lives are not the ones who walk around strutting their stuff and flashing their credentials to remind us of how much they know and how much they matter? Instead, they are typically volunteers who offer their bodies, their hearts, their bank accounts, their time to save countless lives.

Like Paul, the people of God who make the most difference are enamored by the grace of God and the God of grace.

This is Paul the professor and Paul the preacher. There is one more role of Paul's in this text.

Paul, the Priest

Let us look at Paul's role as the priest. As a:

- professor, Paul was clearly motivated by grace;
- preacher, Paul delivered the message of grace;
- priest, Paul was involved in the miracle of grace.

Notice Romans 15:16 again.

to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles, ministering as a priest the gospel of God, so that my offering of the Gentiles may become acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

If being a professor was Paul's job,

and preaching to the Gentiles was Paul's *jurisdiction*,

then, being a priest unto God was Paul's *joy*.

As a priest in this dispensation of grace, Paul was not offering up a lamb or a grain offering. The text tells us that he was offering up to God Gentile converts; he was offering to God this miracle of grace – sanctified Gentile believers.^{vi}

What mattered most to Paul were the people. It was not his job, not his jurisdiction, not even his own sense of satisfaction and joy that mattered the most to Paul, but sanctified, growing, separated, holy, maturing disciples.

What a great challenge to everyone who is also a priest unto God – for Christ,

. . . has made us to be . . . priests to His God and Father . . . (Revelation 1:6)

This also is our joy.

We can easily become preoccupied with the programs we administer, the subject matter we teach, the books we read or write, and forget that the purpose of all the programs, classes, books, lessons, and activities is nothing less than the formation of strong Christians – sanctified Christians; that is, set apart and holy, acceptable offerings unto God, which is our reasonable service.^{vii}

Paul saw himself dressed, as it were, in priestly garments, even though he was involved in the dusty, mundane business of traveling the ancient world on foot, while suffering from exposure, threats, beatings, and rejection. How? He saw himself dressed in priestly garb, in the holy of holies, lifting up the souls of men, as it were, ascending as sweet smelling savor to almighty God.

This view made the most mundane daily occurrences holy. It meant, all of life was liturgy.

Paul was gripped by the grace of God, serving with grace, the people of God, for the glory of God.

If only we could see our service like this, then our lives would be filled the same holy obsession. A pie baked for a neighbor becomes an offering to God; a child loved is an act of worship; an employee treated with dignity becomes a hymn of praise; the gospel shared with an unbeliever becomes a sweet gift to God; a Sunday school class becomes a holy place where you handle sacred things.

This is the sacred view of life . . . this is what it means to become gripped by grace; this is holy obsession.^{viii}

It led one believer to make this commitment to Christ, “The will of God: nothing less; nothing more; nothing else.

Another believer who lived for Christ, said it this way, “No reserve! No regrets! No retreat!”

They have become gripped by the love and grace of the Lord. And this grace; this love that is,

. . . so amazing, so divine,

Demands . . .

What?

. . . my soul, my life, my all.

This is living with holy obsession. This is saying, “No reserve! No regrets! No retreat!”

The will of God,

The work of God,

The name of God,

The leadership of God,

The honor and glory of God,

nothing less; nothing more; nothing else.

I believe this is what it means to be gripped by the grace of God.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 5/7/2006 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ Max Lucado, In the Grip of Grace (Word Publishers, 1996), p. 1.

ⁱⁱ R. C. H. Lenski, The Interpretation of St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans (Augsburg Publishing, 1945), p. 878.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ralph Earle, Word Meanings in the New Testament (Baker, 1974), p. 205.

^{iv} William Barclay, The Letter to the Romans (Westminster Press, 1975), p. 202.

^v Kenneth Boa and William Kruidenier, Holman New Testament Commentary: Romans (Holman, 2000), p. 445.

^{vi} R. Kent Hughes, Romans: Righteousness from Heaven (Crossway Books), 1991), p. 288.

^{vii} Clinton Arnold, Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary (Zondervan, 2002), p. 88.

^{viii} Hughes, p. 288.