

Sermon: Pressing Onward
Scripture: Palm 19; Philippians 3:4b-14
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World Communion Sunday
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In today's Psalm reading, we come across a beautiful, poetic description of our God as the creator and perfecter, and Psalmist shares with us how we should respond to God's love. Due to its bold theological claim in an eloquent words, C.S. Lewis claimed Psalm 19 to be "the greatest poem in the Psalter and one of the greatest lyrics in the world."¹ Let us hear the Word of the Lord.

Psalm 19

The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims God's handiwork.
Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge.
There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard;
yet their voice goes out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world.
In the heavens God has set a tent for the sun,
which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy,
and like a strong man runs its course with joy.
Its rising is from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the end of them;
and nothing is hid from its heat.

The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul;
the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple;
the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes;
the fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever;
the ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.
More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb.

Moreover by them is your servant warned;
in keeping them there is great reward.
But who can detect their errors? Clear me from hidden faults.
Keep back your servant also from the insolent;
do not let them have dominion over me.
Then I shall be blameless, and innocent of great transgression.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable to you O Lord,
my rock and my redeemer.

¹ C.S. Lewis, Reflections on the Psalms (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1986) 63.

Today's New Testament reading is from Philippians 3:4b-14. Paul is responding to the group converted Jews who argue that one must also follow the laws of Moses along with receiving Christ's grace to obtain salvation. Hear now the Word of the Lord.

Philippians 3:4b-14

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

Let us pray:

Heavenly Father, we thank you for your Word, which is a lamp on our feet and a light to our path.² The grass withers and the flowers fall but the Word of our God endures forever.³ May these living words reveal your way and illumine our understanding. May your Holy Spirit connect our hearts to hear what you are saying to all your children around the world. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be pleasing to you, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.

If someone who was not a Christian or was a new Christian asks what grace is, what would be your response? How would you go about explaining God's grace and how one can obtain it? It is pretty big question, so I will give you a moment to think about it.

I hope no one took the approach of trying to define what grace is. It is something hard to explain what it is, but it is a bit easier to define what it is not. My personal short definition of grace is that grace is no longer a grace when it can be explained with a doctrinal formula or when it requires a sweat equity from the person that receives it. The popular way of answering this hard question is making an analogy, to say it is like something, which in this case is a gift – a free gift from the Lord. Receiving something that one did not deserve,

² Psalm 119:105

³ Isaiah 40:8 NIV

without any conditions. A free gift that required the giver to pay heavily for. As the acronym GRACE testifies – **God’s Redemption At Christ’s Expense**.

When members of Westminster (or other Christian kindreds around the world) are asked what grace is, I hope we will not stop at defining what grace is for them, but share their story – their testimony – of how God’s grace affected their lives; how it changed and molded them, and how it continues to remind them and drives them to be more Christ-like every day. Today’s passage is Saul’s version of sharing God’s grace with the people of Philippi, encouraging new believers by sharing his personal testimony of how grace made him change.

Saul first describes who he used to be – a person with many pedigree and privileges as a Jew. 1) *Circumcised on the eighth day*: a religious pedigree describing how he was raised in a Godly home with parents who feared the Lord; 2) *member of people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews*: an ethnic and social pedigree describing the non-mixed, pureness of his ethnic identity as well as naming the lineage that can be traced back to Abraham; 3) *he is a Pharisee*: an educational privilege as they were the PhD equivalent of the day; 4) *a persecutor of the church*; a power and authority privilege among the Jews to lead fellow Jews to capture and sentence every Christians to their death to defend their belief; and 5) *righteousness under the law, blameless*: a moral and economic privilege where he has not committed any wrong and if he has done something wrong, he was able to amend it by making hefty sacrifices on his behalf. This list was so daunting that he does not even bother to include his other privilege as a Roman Citizen. Everything points to him being in the top 1% of the Jewish world.

All this changed when Saul met Jesus and received God’s grace on his journey to Damascus. Just like how Abram and Sarai received new name from the Lord when they entered a new home in a foreign land, when Saul found a new spiritual home in Jesus Christ, he received a new name as Paul according to Luke in the Book of Acts of the Apostles 13:9. He then borrows accounting languages to highlight and relate to the people of Philippi the transformation of himself and the shifting of his inner values.

Verse 7 of today’s reading tells us that all his former values as Saul (what the Jewish world would value as gains or assets) became as loss or a liability to Paul because of Christ. Why would it be so? Because once we are the beneficiary of God’s grace, it should propel us to be transformed and the goal of our lives should become to know God, as Paul explains in verse 10. Let us break this down into two parts, first the transformation.

All the privileges and pedigrees that were once assets become liabilities or disadvantages in God’s economy because we can rely on them instead of God’s generosity and grace. You see, many of Saul’s assets, we have them too. Many of us have the religious pedigree inherited from our parents being Christians, and being Americans we have ethnic, social, educational, power, authority, economic, and even moral privilege over many others around

the world. According to the Gallup research done in Dec. 2013, “The median annual household income worldwide is \$9,733, and the median per-capita household income is \$2,920.”⁴ Compare that with the United States median household income of \$43,585 and median per-capita income of \$15,480, it is obvious that we are very privileged. Standing firm on our achievements, pedigree, and privilege becomes a disadvantage because we can rely on these things rather than on God’s grace and generosity. As Kenya mission team members have experienced, Christians in Kenya has joy and faith that we did not understand while not having much. We all wanted to know where that came from, and maybe when we lean less on our worldly gains but on God’s grace, we may all experience the same joy they expressed.

By experiencing God’s grace, everything in the end is not valuable as much as knowing Christ Jesus for Paul according to verse 8-11, and Paul makes it his goal to attain knowing Christ. Paul wants to know Christ, meaning he wants to be intimate with Christ, want to be like Jesus, to understand the will of God. So rather than looking back to all the achievements, pedigrees, and privileges, he wants to remove the rearview mirror on his life and look forward and rely on God each step along the way. He is straining forward to experience God’s grace and generosity that are waiting for him.⁵ Each time when we rely on the Lord, God will reveal more of Godself to us. Many times, God will answer saying I have blessed you with riches of the world or right people to handle such situations, as if our own intuitions are correct. But sometimes as we seek God’s advice even on the trivial problems, God will offer an alternative route that might be different. Sometimes God will tug at your heart to share your possessions with people who are needy. Sometimes simply a prayer or spending extra moment with someone going through a rough time. God will once again show us to use our liabilities as a resource for God’s economy when we seek, ask, and knock.

Therefore, we must keep pressing onward, making our life goal to know Christ. When I say “knowing Christ,” I do not mean like an equivalent “knowing” on Facebook, twitter, Instagram, our contact list, or even our neighbors, but know him like you know your significant other; to know Jesus so well that we can say, I love you Jesus; to show Christ’s love and grace to others; to share our gifts and blessings with others who are in need; to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.⁶

⁴ Crabtree, Glenn Phelps and Steve. “Worldwide, Median Household Income About \$10,000.” *Gallup.com*, Gallup, 16 May 2019, news.gallup.com/poll/166211/worldwide-median-household-income-000.aspx.

⁵ Philippians 3:13

⁶ Micah 6:8