

Expanding Grace

Last week we were reminded of the amazing depth and breadth of grace that is supplied to us through the gift of forgiveness purchased for us by Jesus. We worked our way through Romans 5:12-17, focusing on the last verse in that section, which tells us that this abundant grace of God causes us to reign in life if we will simply receive it. In fact, it says that just as surely as Adam's sin brought death into the world, and that death has reigned from then until now, just that surely those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and the gift of righteousness will reign in life through Jesus Christ.

We're told that the only two things that we can be sure of are death and taxes -- but Paul is telling us that we can be just as sure that we will reign in life, we'll have a confidence and joy and overcoming nature, because we have been given the gift of righteousness through Christ.

Now, I want to continue with the end of Romans 5, so that we can get to this next question which is, "How can grace expand across our world?" It sounds like an obvious question, but Paul answers it in a unique way:

Just as the result of one trespass (Adam's) was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men. For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man, the many will be made righteous.

The law was added so that the trespass might increase. But where sin increased, grace increased all the more, so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?

This gift of God's grace is so free, and so complete in its provision, that the natural question that it raises is, "So, should we go on sinning then, so that grace can increase more and more?" After all, Paul has just said that where sin increased, grace increased all the more, so it would seem that a continuation of sinful behaviour would only be good for us, resulting in mountains more of God's grace to us! The answer at the bottom, the answer given in Romans 6:2, is the one that most often is cited as the way to respond to this question.

We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?

This is a reference to the Christian rite of baptism, where as we go under the water we declare that we are dying to the old life, to the life dominated by this world, by sin that leads to death. And as we are lifted out of the water, we understand that we are being raised to new life, as Jesus was following His sacrificial death. Paul makes this clear in the verses that follow:

Just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glorious power of the Father, now we also may live new lives (v. 4) . . . Our old sinful selves were crucified with

Christ so that sin might lose its power in our lives; we are no longer slaves to sin (v. 6) . . . So you should consider yourselves dead to sin and able to live for the glory of God through Jesus Christ (v. 11).

Change! There is a transformation that takes place in the life of a person who surrenders to Jesus and who makes Him Lord. There is a life that is born of the Spirit of God that people on earth can't manufacture for ourselves. There is a new perspective on life and on the world and on what's important -- all these things are gifts of the Holy Spirit and they change us. So much so that others can easily see that we are a new creation, that something is very different about us than what they see in the world.

When I was in my third year of studying at U.B.C. -- I was a bachelor of Arts student, so I use the term "studying" in the broadest context possible -- I was majoring in philosophy. I had come to university to get smart, to discover important things, to learn the wisdom of the academic world, and I was being disillusioned of that pursuit more every year. But I was really disillusioned by the middle of my third year as I finally clued in that there was no great secret to understanding the world except that everyone makes their own choices. My professor made a choice about what system of ethical decision-making he preferred, then argued his way around the circle of reasoning that led him back to where he started. Big deal. This was not truth, it was preference. This wasn't insight into the mysteries of human existence but somebody trying to convince us of his personal values . . . for a whole year!

A few months into that year, I read a little book by Francis Schaeffer, one of the most important Christian thinkers and writers of the 1960's and 70's. The book was called Escape From Reason and it described the "leap of faith" that every world view required those who held that world view to make. Schaeffer then argued that the leap of faith required by the Christian world view was the most logical and reasonable one, for a variety of reasons, and, as I had been raised within that world view and now saw that it was one I could defend, I made my choice. At 20 years old, I went beyond simply 'believing that Christianity was true' to the place where I was committed to living under the truth of this message. As I declared that choice, that commitment, over the Christmas holidays, I was changed. I had been cynical, somewhat depressed, angry and lonely and not having much joy. What God did in my life at that crucial juncture was that He gave me great joy, an energy for serving in His Kingdom, and He just stripped me of the bad language, the cutting sarcasm and the negative bent that had been my calling card over the past couple of years.

But what's important in telling you this is that others, some whom I hardly saw and barely knew, noticed that I had changed. They told my friends and my friends told me and I was overwhelmed at what God had done, that people I had virtually no relationship with had noticed that God was doing a new thing in my life. I knew that I felt different on the inside, but they were seeing that new life translated into a new attitude and a new way of living on the outside as well.

I can't take credit for the works of grace that the Holy Spirit brought into my life. But I have realized since that there had been an old person - a cynical, critical, angry old person inside me that wasn't there any more. There had been a person who had no positive purpose driving my life and suddenly I was volunteering with two youth groups that took up three evenings a week and I loved it. Was I sinless? No. Was I nearly perfect? No. Did I struggle with temptation and sin in the years following? Absolutely. So how can I relate my experience to what Paul says here, "we are no longer slaves to sin", and "you should consider yourselves dead to sin and able to live for the glory of God through Jesus Christ"?

Simply this: before we knew Jesus in the way we come to know Him when we surrender our lives to Him, we could not choose to do things by the power of the Spirit. We could choose to be nice, to be kind, even to be generous, but we didn't have the power or the authority to do the works of the Kingdom of God. So, if being nice was the standard, and all people had to do to change the world or to get to heaven was to be nice . . . some of the time ... we might have qualified. But niceness is not the standard. The standard God sets is that people will believe in the work of His Son and will receive the gift of grace that He freely offers those who believe. It's humbling, I know, and it is the only way of salvation.

Because we didn't have the Holy Spirit we were unable to bring glory to God. Again, being nice, staying out of trouble, only going 10 km/hour over the speed limit, are not the kinds of things that bring glory to God. God gets glory when lives are changed by the power of the gospel, by the presence of the Spirit, by the new life and the gift of His righteousness that He gives us. That's not the fruit of a life that is given over to being nice and staying out of trouble.

The new life contains within it the desire to bring glory to God. Before you knew Jesus it didn't matter to you whether He got glory from your life or not, whether people were grateful to God because of you or not, whether people saw your life up close and decided you had something that they wanted ... or not. Before you knew Jesus, you were bent towards making your life work to your own satisfaction. After you know Jesus, your mindset shifts towards making your life count for His Kingdom.

Part of that means that you turn from sin. Again, the New Testament doesn't tell us that we will achieve perfection, that we will never mess up again. What it tells us is that we have a new desire to walk in a way that honours God, that we have a new power, the presence of the Holy Spirit who lives within us and who leads us and convicts us when we get off course. We now have the capacity to choose to reject temptation, to turn away from the things that dishonor our Lord and to refuse the identity that we got from the world. This means that we will see ourselves as children of God and will see the kingdoms of this world as hostile to the God who has loved us and given Himself for us. We choose sides. We choose to love and honour the Lord of love and we do that by resisting the sin that was part of our old life. As Paul puts it in Romans 6, "now we also may live new lives," "we are no longer slaves to sin," and "you should consider yourselves dead to sin and able to live for the glory of God

through Jesus Christ.”

That’s the teaching from Romans 6, the teaching that follows Paul’s question, “Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?” But there is another consideration in understanding the question and its answer and this is found just before the end of chapter 5. Of course, we know that Paul didn’t write a letter to the church in Rome that included chapters and verses -- those were added many hundreds of years later. So, right before his question in chapter 6, verse 1, is this statement from the final verse of chapter 5:

Where sin increased, grace increased all the more, so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Now, what does that phrase “through righteousness” mean in this context? He has written just a few verses earlier about the gift of righteousness being key to the believer “reigning in life”, so it would be an error to think of the righteousness he’s writing about here being anything other than the gift of righteousness, right standing, that God gives to those who receive His grace.

The contrast is strong and clear: while sin had a victory by producing death, grace has a greater victory - eternal life through the righteousness that God gives believers. This gift of God is not simply a legal thing, like a piece of paper that says, “You’re okay with God” - get out of jail for free. God didn’t intend to give us the gift of His righteousness so that we could go on living exactly like we did before we knew Him, before we received His Spirit.

Instead, this gift impacts the way we think, especially the way we think about what’s good and evil, what’s right and wrong. While the gift says that God now sees us through the sacrifice of His Son, it also impacts us directly, personally, reshaping our values. The gift of righteousness is a gift that changes everyone who receives it.

Back to our verse 21 and let me rephrase the parts about grace so that we can see this for what it’s saying:

Grace increased more and more so that it, grace, might reign through God’s gift of righteousness to us so that it will bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

How does this all fit together? Satan’s strategy has been to kill and to steal and to destroy. We are told in Scripture that he accuses believers day and night. He tempted Adam and Eve to violate God’s one command and so produced sin in the world. Sin brought death. God brings grace through the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ and with that grace comes the gift of His righteousness.

Where sin reigns, there is death. Where grace reigns through our embracing the righteousness of Christ, the result is eternal life. So, another answer to the question, “Should we go on sinning so that grace may increase?” is to say, “We will increase grace, not by denying the fruit of righteousness God is producing in us by the Holy

Spirit (in other words, go on sinning), but by including others in God's offer of eternal life." We do that by sharing the good news, by praying for people's needs, by serving them in the love of Christ and by inviting them to respond in faith to God's gracious offer of salvation. After all, the more people receive God's gift of grace, the more grace abounds and with it, the gift of righteousness and of eternal life.

This whole section becomes really interesting and really practical when it comes time to make applications to our daily walk in life.

1. When we surrender our lives to Jesus and ask Him to be our Lord and our Saviour, there are changes that take place right away. There will be other changes that happen over the course of time, but some happen instantly. If you're anything like me, you found that attitudes changed -- maybe you were really anxious and suddenly found a new measure of peace. Maybe you were hurt and bitter, and you felt your heart warmed with the forgiving love of Jesus. Maybe you were cynical and lonely and you found yourself becoming a positive person who began to care for others -- and quickly lost your loneliness. Maybe you had no purpose or sense of direction for your life and God supplied that need when you gave your heart to Him. Those are internal changes, heart changes, that will show up in real life situations.

Some people find great things happening physically, such as healing of chronic pain, or the breaking of a cycle of addiction or a release from habits of speech and action that were destructive. And many, many people find a joy that simply wasn't there before, a sense that finally they are on the right track in life and a huge burden of trying to live to the wrong expectations is lifted.

All of this change gives us confidence that God is really at work, that His Spirit has, in fact, begun to work in our lives.

2. The second thing that I see in this passage and that I have experienced through the years is that I am sorry for my sin. Have you ever done things that were selfish and hurt people's feelings and were dishonest and you didn't care? You figured they probably deserved it and you could think about what you'd done without feeling badly about it at all. Do you remember what it was like to do what everyone else was doing and if anybody challenged you on it, you would just say, "Everyone else is doing it" and you could leave it at that? But now, when you disobey God's commands, it hurts. You feel sad, disappointed with yourself and wanting to do better in that area. That's what happens to us when we receive the gift of God's righteousness through Jesus Christ.

God promised through the Old Testament prophets that He would write His law on our hearts . . . and He has. Now we know when we've stepped outside His will, without ever looking it up in the Scriptures. We can hear the voice of the Spirit telling us that we've gone down the wrong path. If you have experienced this, you should be very encouraged today because it means that God is with you in a powerful and personal way. He cares about you. He desires that your life would bring glory to His name and He is working towards that end. That's so encouraging. Our lives have

been changed by the gift of righteousness and this gift continues to lead us back to the place of confession, of repentance and of obedience to God.

3. The final thing that I want to touch on today is a reminder that we have an enemy who accuses us night and day, who is constantly reminding us of our failures and minimizing the grace of God at work in our life. We have to fight back. We can't just give in to the schemes that he uses to undermine our faith and rob us of confidence in our salvation. Remember last week, when the general finished his speech at the end of Babette's Feast he said, "Grace, my dear friends, demands nothing from us but that we shall await it with confidence and acknowledge it in gratitude." Well, awaiting the fulfilment of grace with confidence is not as easy as it sounds when you take into account the enemy's designs against us. We have to remind ourselves again and again of God's love, God's purpose, the changes He has already brought into our lives and the conviction that He continues to bring. And we need to remember that God's grace is stronger than sin, that the power of the resurrection is stronger than death and that the gift of righteousness is stronger than the enemy's condemnations. God will win the day if we only continue to trust Him and grace will expand in the world if we tell others this great news of a loving God who is willing to give these gifts to any who will trust Him.