

This Sunday's texts:

Leviticus 19:9-18

Galatians 5:13-18

Mark 10:35-45

Lifestyle of Grace: Purpose

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The holy Gospel for this day comes to us from the Gospel of Mark, the tenth chapter:

Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to Him [Jesus]. "Teacher," they said, "we want You to do for us whatever we ask." "What do you want Me to do for you?" He asked. They replied, "Let one of us sit at Your right and the other at Your left in Your glory." "You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said. "Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?" "We can," they answered. Jesus said to them, "You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with, but to sit at My right or left is not for Me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared." When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John. Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many."

The Gospel of the Lord. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, allow Your Grace to impact every area of our lives and allow Your Grace to give us Your eyes. In Jesus' name. Amen.

I want to start this morning by acknowledging something that may not be as obvious as we think it should be. That is that the culture of Christianity, that is, the values of God are often counter to the values of our culture in the world. Now, the reason I say that might not be obvious is not because the Bible is not clear, but because our lives aren't clear. Barna is one of the research companies that often do surveys around and about Christianity. In their surveys, they have been known to ask people, "Are you a Christian?" Some say yes. Some say no. Then they'll ask them another series of questions about their lives and the reality is most of the time when they do this in America, the lives of the Christians and the non-Christians look the same. It begs the question. "Are we being shaped by our culture more than we are being shaped by our faith and our God?"

Our suggestion in this series is that our lifestyles are to flow from the grace of God. That is the Grace of God should be a transformative power for how we live out our lives and the attitudes with which we live them. But let me suggest again that we've got a struggle going on because our culture would want us to think differently and our culture will constantly feed us ideas that are counter to the Word of God.

Here is a quote from Aristotle, of all people. He should know what he's talking about. This is what Aristotle says. "Happiness is the meaning and purpose of life, the whole aim and end of the human existence."¹ No, it isn't. And I would suggest to you if you pursue happiness, it will evade you because all happiness is a byproduct of the other things we do in our lives, not a goal in and of itself.

Here's another one that I thought was interesting. "How to change your life and get everything you want" In my Christian life, I have made it a habit in my prayer life to always end my prayers with the words "In Jesus' name. Amen." Now I've also made it a habit, because I've read the Psalms a few times and the Psalms seem to suggest to me that in our prayers and the prayers of King David, we can be real with God. If we're angry, we can be angry. If we're sad, we can be sad. If we're excited, we can be excited. Whatever we're feeling, whatever the reality of our experiences at the moment is, God is able to handle the truth of where we are. And it's okay to ask God for what we want. I'm not kidding. It's okay to ask God for what we want. But I've also learned in my journey of faith that I don't necessarily want what I think I want. That is, I've learned to understand that God knows better than I what I need and what will be a true blessing to me. So when I pray, I end the prayer "In Jesus' name. Amen." Now the word *amen* at the end of our prayers literally means "so be it" or "let it be so." It's a confident ending that says God will do what I've asked him to do.

And here's the thing. I don't want God to do what I ask Him to do if it's not aligned with the character of Jesus, if it's not aligned with the value and the love of Jesus for me. If I ask for something that's going to hurt me, you know what I want God to say? No. And will I like it when He says it? No. But will I be blessed? Amen. So we need to allow God to shape us, knowing that His love for us is His motivation.

I'm talking about a worldview that's different for Christians. I'm talking about letting Christ change the way we see ourselves in the world. A lifestyle of Grace is embraced by the Grace of God so that that Grace changes how we see ourselves and the world. We're no longer needing to be wallowed up in sin. Not

¹ Aristotle, et al. *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*. University of Chicago Press, 2011.

only that, we don't need to be wallowed up in selfishness, which just leads to our own pain and sorrow.

Listen to this from Romans chapter 2. I found it fascinating. "Do you disregard the riches of His [God's] kindness, tolerance, and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads to repentance?"² God's grace leads to repentance. Now I know. I can see it in your head. I see right now. You're thinking "No, no, no. That's backward, Pastor Jim. It's our repentance that leads to God's grace." No, you see, *knowing* the love and grace of God *allows* us to repent, *allows* us to see again the truth of our ways, which is sometimes a problem.

Listen to another verse from 2 Peter 3, "The Lord is not slow in keeping His promise, as some understand slowness. Instead, He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."³ I need to tell you that one of my goals in life as a pastor of every church I serve including St Timothy's, is to help everyone in the church to understand what repentance means, because too many of us think that repentance means feeling sorry. Repentance is the Greek word *metanoia*. If you break that word apart, "meta" means "again" and "noia" means know. So "again know," or think again, or know the world differently. Allow God to shape how we understand our reality, our worldview, to see things according to the values of the Creator who made us, so that we can be in alignment with His will. Repentance is when you start rethinking your life in order to match how Jesus thinks. I need an amen. [Congregation says amen.] Repentance is when you start rethinking your life, in order to match how Jesus thinks.

I used to say to my son, because I wanted him to get it into his mind. I used to ask him the question, "What is Daddy think of you?" There was a stock answer I was looking for, words that I was trying to put in his mouth, so that he could think right about how I think of him, And his answer was to be "Daddy thinks I'm wonderful." I wanted him to know I thought he was wonderful. Our Father in heaven wants you to know that He thinks you're wonderful, that He loves you enough to give His Son to make you right with Him. And all the judgments you want to put on yourself are you or the devil talking, not our Father in heaven, who gave His Son for you. So brothers and sisters in Christ, hear Romans when it says "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind."⁴

² Romans 2:4, Berean Standard Bible

³ 2 Peter 3:9

⁴ Romans 12:2, ESV

By the way, this verse is the introduction to Pastor Joe's verse from last week which was from Romans 12 and it said this, "Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God - this is your true and proper worship."⁵ Giving our whole lives over to God is our worship. It is our singing. It is our prayers. It is our eating. It is our drinking. It is our walking. It is our running, if we run. All that we do is to bring glory to our Father in heaven. Amen?

So all that we do is an expression of worship, including loving our neighbor, including letting God transform the way we see ourselves and the world, so that we respond to that world according to the goodness of our God. Jesus says, in the lesson today, if you want to become great, serve. Whoever wants to become great, must be a servant. And just in case you didn't hear it, it goes on to say whoever wants to be greatest of all, must be *slave* of all. I mean we're talking like all the way down. Elevating others above ourselves is the way to greatness.

I don't know about you, but in order for that to happen, I need God to transform my heart and my life. I need Him to change the way I think. I need Him to transform the way I see others. To be honest with you, I need Him to assure me that I'm okay, so that out of my okay-ness, I can bless other people. If I feel threatened, if I feel weak, if I feel incapable, I'm likely to do nothing at all to serve others. But if God fills me up, that overflow is what will bless others. That was a great illustration from Pastor Joe a couple of weeks ago. Watch it online, if you missed it.

I also want to talk about this faith, the workings of God in our lives, the Grace that God pours into us, *engages* us in the world, doesn't *disengage* us from the world. We're not called to pull back, so that we can stay safe. We're called to be made strong in our weakness, so that we can engage the world, not so that the world can be a negative influence on us, not so that the world can set our values and in the way we live, but so that we can be an influence in the world, showing them the goodness of God, through the goodness of our own lives and actions. We are, in fact, blessed to be a blessing. This is not a New Testament understanding. This is a God understanding, from the very beginning when God said to Adam and Eve, be fruitful and multiply, have dominion over the Earth, meaning take care of the world. We are blessed to be a blessing. There's a purpose for God's blessing of your lives. He literally wants to change the world through His people.

⁵ Romans 12:1

In Leviticus, God tells the vineyard owners, when you're going out to harvest your grapes, don't harvest all the way to the end. Don't make a second pass. Don't pick up the fruit on the ground.⁶ That is, by the way, not really good efficiency. I don't think that most farmers do all their preparation of the field, so that they can take three-quarters of it. They usually want to gather all that they can gather. But God said be concerned with the stranger and the widow among you. Leave some fruit in the field, so that they can come and pick and eat, so that the poor among you can be cared for. Don't just claim it all for yourselves.

Then in Mark today, it says this, "whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant" and then it reminds us of the example of our Lord Jesus. "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and give His life as a ransom for many."⁷ That was the purpose of Jesus coming, to give His life for us. That is the purpose of God's Grace for us, to give our lives for others. It is, in fact, a high calling of great honor.

So what does it mean for us to serve others? Well, let's look at some of the texts that are in our reading today. First off, in the Old Testament, in Leviticus, it said a number of things, a number of laws we were to abide by and it ended with this one: you shall "love your neighbor as yourself."⁸ Have you been hearing that theme in the last few weeks? And then it says, "I am Yahweh." Now if you were listening to Sam reading earlier, he repeated over and over again "I am the Lord." I don't know about you, but in my mind, "lord" means "master." But is that what Lord means in the Old Testament when the LORD is all capitalized? No, it does not. When you have all four of those letters in the word Lord capitalized, it's just the English way of honoring the name of God, instead of putting Yahweh.

We are to do those things or not do those things because our God is Yahweh, the God who hears the cries of His people and sets them free, the God who has a personal relationship with His chosen people, you, because He loves us. Luther picked up on this when he wrote the Small Catechism for parents to teach their children about the faith. At the end of each of the Ten Commandments in the Small Catechism, there's an explanation of what we are not supposed to do and what we are supposed to do. All of those explanations begin with these words, "we are to fear and love God so that ..."

I'm not to love you so that I treat you well. I am to fear and love God so that I treat you well. Because of the character of the God I serve, my life takes on new meaning, new purpose, new direction because of who God is, in Jesus' name.

⁶ Leviticus 19:9-10

⁷ Mark 10:44-45

⁸ Leviticus 19:18

According to the character of the God I worship, my life is to be shaped by His spirit and His hand.

But as I told you, the Spirit is in competition with the world. The world wants you to know that you're just not going to make it unless you brush your teeth with Crest toothpaste. You're just not going to cut it unless you drive the latest car, or dress in the latest style, or use the latest makeup, or ... I mean, essentially, that's the marketing reality of the world in which we live in. They want to convince you that without their product, your life is going to be less. So go buy their products, so that you can "make it." You can be the "in" crowd because you got to look out for number one.

Every day the world, the culture we're in will compete with the Sovereign God who needs first place in our lives and in our world, and in our actions. "For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want."⁹ That doesn't sound like freedom. I mean isn't freedom the freedom to be able to do whatever I want? Isn't freedom to be able to stay up as late as I want or out as long as I want to be out? I mean, isn't that what freedom is? The answer is no!

Freedom in Christ is not staying in bondage to my sin and selfishness. It's being set free from those things that will rob me of true greatness, of true joy, and experiencing God's purpose for our lives. "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."¹⁰ Not gossip, not backbite, not talk about why you have the better translation of the Bible or are more Christian than the person next to you, but by loving each other in the Church, we empower the Church to love others in God's name. We are called *together* to serve the world to the honor and glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

"Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the Word planted in you, which can save you."¹¹ Some of you have been reading through this week the book of James. There's a lot of great stuff in James. One of the people at my Thursday night Bible study suggested that it's often in James about humility, that greatness comes from humility, that those who humble themselves will be exalted and those who exalt themselves will be humbled.¹² Do not merely listen to the Word of God, but be doers of it.¹³ Let God

⁹ Galatians 5:17

¹⁰ John 13:35

¹¹ James 1:21

¹² Last clause (about exalting and humbling) was a paraphrase of Matthew 23:12

¹³ See James 1:22

follow through in your life with what He desires to do through you, so that you can feel the wonder of blessings flowing through you to others.

“Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it with their good life, by deeds done in humility that come from wisdom.”¹⁴ I don't know when I read “who is wise and understanding among you,” I think of someone exalted. Don't you? No. Greatness comes from service. The greatest among us are the servants of all.

“It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by the yoke of slavery.”¹⁵ Paul is saying to the followers of Christ, number one don't be enslaved again by this sense of striving and thinking you need to live up to what God wants of you, but rather live in the freedom of Grace, serving God out of the joy and hope and fullness of who *He* is. I interpret this also to say do not let yourself be burdened again by the selfishness that can so easily consume us, by your own desires and your own wants, but rather, allow God to transform your heart, to see the blessing that exists in the blessing of others, through you. That is your purpose as a brother and sister in Christ. That is the lifestyle of Grace, the way God would want us to see ourselves and the world that He is at work in and through us, and that He is at work in the *world* in and through us, so that we can experience the fullness of His Kingdom in our midst.

“And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are in the household of faith.”¹⁶ Let's build each other up. Let's encourage each other, so that as a faith community, as the people of God in this place, which, by the way, has been St Timothy's history from day one, the people of God who have gathered as a part of this congregation have been serving this community beautifully for decades and we continue to do it, but let us remember to do it together. As we build each other up, we build up the world that is around us.

We have this motto. It says, “To know the Father, to grow as a disciple of Jesus, and to go with the Spirit.” Let us walk by the Spirit. Let us allow the Grace of God in us to empower us, to change our eyes so that we can change our behavior, demonstrating the very presence of God at work in our lives and in our circumstances.

¹⁴ James 3:13

¹⁵ Galatians 5:1

¹⁶ Galatians 6:9-10, NKJV

I was taught when I was in school that there's a particular way in which you write a letter. I was taught that the best way to sign off is to write "Sincerely," and your name. I want you to know that I did that because I was taught to do that, but sometimes, I wasn't sincere. I want to suggest to you that when the apostle Paul signs off at the end of his letter as he does at the end of Galatians, he means exactly what he's saying. And I want to suggest that this Lifestyle of Grace can be expressed right here in the letter of Paul, in his last signature, where he says, "The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers and sisters. [Let it be so] Amen"¹⁷

¹⁷ Galatians 6:18