

It's All About the Grace

Ephesians 6:21-24

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ October 4, 2015 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

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²¹ So that you also may know how I am and what I am doing, Tychicus will tell you everything. He is a dear brother and a faithful minister in the Lord. ²² I am sending him to you for this very purpose, to let you know how we are, and to encourage your hearts.

²³ Peace be to the whole community, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

²⁴ Grace be with all who have an undying love for our Lord Jesus Christ. (Ephesians 6:21-24, NRSV)

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As we come to the end of our journey through Paul's letter to the Ephesians, let's take a moment to look back. As I hope you remember, the last half of his letter, the final three chapters, has been full of challenge. Paul here pushes the church to be faithful in our life together. We have been challenged to strive for unity, to shed our old behaviors in favor of new ones, to speak the truth in love to one another, to control our anger and our words, to seek purity in our lives, to submit to one another in our relationships, and to do all we can to resist evil in this world. If our church takes the challenge we have been given here in Ephesians it will be the hardest thing we ever do in life.

As Paul ends his letter, however, he doesn't end with challenge but with grace. In a way, it's a reminder of the first half of his letter where he spent the first three chapters not telling us what we need to do but rather *what it is that God, through Christ, has already done!* This order is important, *critically* important. We are not saved because of what we do. We are saved because of what Christ has already done long before we did a thing. Therefore, our efforts, our good work, are not done to earn God's favor but is done *in response to* God's favor. This is grace, the very heart of the Gospel, and thus a perfect final note to Paul's message to us.

In fact, did you know that this is the note on which Paul ends nearly all of his letters? Philippians closes with these words, "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen."¹ Galatians closes with the exact same words. Both his letters to Timothy end simply, "Grace be with you."² All Paul's letters end with grace because Paul knows, as I hope you know, that grace is the opening note, the closing note, and the sustained central note of the Christian Gospel. It's what makes it good news in the first place. When it comes to Christianity, it's all about the grace.

Think about it this way. We live in a very anxious world. And we're anxious, so many of us, because we're not entirely certain that the things which matter most in life are secure. We're anxious because we fear we may not be approved and accepted by those who matter most to us. We're anxious because we fear that in the end the accomplishments of our lives will not measure up. We're anxious because we don't know what will happen to us when we die. What will be our ultimate destiny? If only these things were certain, we would not need to be so anxious.

From the time I was young I knew that I wanted to be married some day. But for several years as a young man I worried if it would ever happen. Specifically I was worried whether I would ever fall in love with a person who would, in turn, love me completely and simply for who I was. When I proposed marriage to Esther and, against all odds, she actually said yes, it was one of the most beautiful moments of my life. All that anxiety faded away and, in its place came rest. I was able to rest in the fact that I truly had been loved and accepted by one I loved and accepted. The most beautiful moments in life are those moments when our anxiety over things uncertain is quieted.

Here's the thing. God comes to us in his Son, Jesus Christ, and before we do a thing he extends to us absolute and unending acceptance, and approval and life. Because of what Jesus has already done, we are called sons and daughters of a Father in heaven who, we're told, delights in us and promises us that not even death can separate us from his love. Once you have faith that this is true, you come to find the deepest rest in life. And the fact that this rest comes to us

¹ Philippians 4:23

² I Timothy 6:21, II Timothy 4:22

before we have done a thing is simply grace. Grace is the rest of God unearned. And again, this grace is at the heart of the God's message to us, from beginning to end.

In fact, let me show you something very interesting. In the story of creation in Genesis 1, God spends the first six days at work creating everything that is now in existence. Then, on the seventh day God rests from his work. But understand something, the seventh day of God's creating was really the first day of creation's existence. Remember, God created humans on the sixth day and commanded them to cultivate the earth and to be fruitful and multiply. In other words, from the very beginning God gave us a lot of work to do. But then, the next day, the very first day after creation was finalized, what did God tell us to do. God told us to rest. God created the Sabbath, a word that literally means "to cease." Rest is God's starting point for creation. As life for us in this world began, the first thing God gives us to do is rest. That's grace.

In a similar way did you know that God created night before day? On the fourth day of creation, when God creates the sun, moon and stars, the account ends this way, "And there was evening, and there was morning – the fourth day."³ Night comes first before day. This is why the Jewish day has always begun at sundown. They have understood what we have forgotten, that as the day begins it's time for us to go to sleep. God tell us that we should begin our day by resting before we have accomplished a thing. Again, that's grace.

Of course, that doesn't mean that as we sleep nothing is being accomplished. It most certainly is, just not by us. As writer Eugene Peterson puts it, "As we sleep, great and marvelous things are at work, far beyond our capacities to invent or engineer, the moon making its seasons, the lion roaring for its prey, the earthworms aerating the earth, the stars turning in their courses, the proteins repairing our muscles, our dreaming brains restoring a deeper sanity beneath the gossip and scheming of our waking hours."⁴ Each day begins with great productivity but we are not invited to join in until a good part of the day is over.

Do you see the pattern the Creator has woven into his creation from the very start? Rest is always God's starting place for us. But we get this backwards. For us, rest comes after work. We work hard all day and then finally get to reward ourselves in the evening with a good meal, an entertaining program, and a soft pillow. We work all week and reward ourselves by playing all weekend. Even vacation is something we believe is earned only after we've put in the required amount of work.

Again, this is why we are always so anxious. We've got it all backwards, horribly backwards. So much depends upon our efforts, our accomplishments, our abilities. We've turned rest into a reward instead of the gift it was always meant to be and, in doing so, we've forsaken true rest altogether. For if true rest, if that place of peace in life where you know that all that matters most is secure, is dependent on our efforts how do we ever know if and when we have done enough? We don't. And so we live perpetually anxious lives, full of stress, and fear, and exhaustion.

Jesus put it this way. "I am the vine," he said in John 15, "and you are the branches. Abide in me first and then you will bear much fruit."⁵ We are like branches, Jesus said. If you're a branch in a vineyard, what do you need to do to produce grapes? You first must abide in the vine, sometimes for several years, before you produce a single grape. A branch that tried to produce fruit before 'resting' in the vine will remain barren. Jesus says it is the same with us. Nothing good and lasting will ever come from our efforts unless we learn first to rest in God for he is the one who will produce fruit in and through our lives.

Though this message is so central in God's teaching it is also one we so easily forget. But since God knew this would happen, from the outset he gave us reminders which we ignore at our own peril.

First, God gave us night. The sun will go down tonight just like it does every night. This is God's reminder to you. When nighttime comes it will be good for you to go to sleep. When you do, remind yourself that the day is not ending but just beginning. Seriously. I want you to do this. As you get into bed tonight thank God for the new day which has just begun and let him remind you that the first thing he wants you to do on this new day is rest. You are his beloved daughter, his son in whom he delights, and this is true on this new day before you have accomplished a single thing.

³ Genesis 1:19, NIV

⁴ Eugene Peterson, *Working the Angles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 69.

⁵ Read is teaching in John 15:1-17

The second reminder God gave us is Sabbath. Notice how on most calendars the first day of the week is Sunday and not Monday. If you have a calendar that begins on Monday, get rid of it. Today is the Sabbath. It's the first day of the week. You didn't earn it. It's a gift. Like me, you may have a lot of work to do this week. Before you get started, however, stop and remember that everything which matters most in life is already yours in faith before you have lifted a finger. All your efforts this week, therefore, your efforts to accomplish something and your efforts to become something, are not done to earn God's favor but are done in response to God's favor. There is no place for guilt, only gratitude. No place for anxiety, only acceptance.

Let me just say that it will not be easy for any of us to live into God's gracious rhythm of rest before work. Everything else in the world has it backwards. Sabbath keeping is hard. It requires deliberate action and will never happen by accident. We must, therefore, encourage each other in these things if we are ever to escape from what one writer calls our "vicious, accelerating, self-perpetuating cycle of faithless and graceless busyness."⁶

This will not be easy, and that's why we as a church are going to commit this year to recovering this rhythm together. As a start, we are setting aside the first Sunday of every month as a First Sunday Sabbath. On these days, beginning today, we will cancel all meetings, adult classes and other formal activities at church other than worship. On these days we will simply come together to sing the Lord's praises, hear the Lord's Word, and gather around the Lord's Table. Then, between services, we will gather together as the Lord's people to celebrate, to fellowship and to feast. This is, after all, God's intention for the Sabbath, that we would begin each week not by creating but by setting aside a day to simply enjoy our Creator and enjoy his creation. As I heard it put one time, the Sabbath is a day for us to pray and play.

Understand, this is not a legalistic burden. Please, let's not ever make it that. The religious leaders in Jesus' day made Sabbath a day full of rules of things you couldn't do and, in doing so, took something God intended for freedom and used to put people in bondage. The point is not that Sabbath look the same for all of us but that, in some way, we encourage one another to all find a day to begin each week where we can simply pray and play in ways that help us each rest and live more fully into God's grace.

So not only this morning, but let me encourage you to take the rest of this day, until the new day begins at sundown this evening, to set everything else aside and simply enjoy your Creator and his creation. Worship and fellowship with your church family this morning. Ten go and take a nap or a walk. Take in a movie that lifts your spirits. Have a feast. Better yet, share a feast with friends. Waste time; Sabbath is a good time to waste time. Find a hammock or a comfortable chair. Read a book that feeds your soul. Breathe deeply. Literally, breathe deeply. Play a game with your kids or grandkids, or somebody else's kids or grandkids. Do the Sunday crossword, if that's your thing. Get outside. Do whatever it is that brings you joy.⁷ If it bring you joy – not necessarily just pleasure, but joy – chances are it brings your Father in heaven joy just watching you.

Trust me, there will still be plenty of time to get your work done, the next six days in fact are set aside for that. And if six days aren't enough time to get your work done, then you are doing more than God wants you to do. Today begin where God always wants us to begin, with rest. It is God's gift to you of grace, not only for your week, but for your life.

The great Scottish pastor George McDonald once wrote, "Sleep is God's device for giving us the help he cannot get into us when we are awake." I might suggest that Sabbath is God's device for giving us the help he cannot get into us when we are at work.

In the end, as it was in the beginning, may God's grace be with you.

Amen.

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⁶ Peterson, 72.

⁷ The most marvelous book I've come across about the Sabbath, both in terms of depth and practicality, is *The Rest of God* by Mark Buchanan (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2006).

The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read Ephesians 6:21-24 again. What does the way Paul signs off his letter tell you about his intentions in sending this letter?
2. Paul ends every single one of his letters by extending grace. What is grace?
3. God commands us to set aside one day a week for Sabbath, a day to cease our work and spend the day praying (worshipping the creator) and playing (enjoying the creation). Do you? Why or why not?
4. When was the last time you did something enjoyable which was also a total waste of time (i.e. it didn't accomplish anything but was great fun)? How did you feel afterwards? How do you imagine God felt as he watched you?
5. What is the danger of making rest a reward rather than seeing rest as a gift? How is this a danger in your life?
6. How would things change for you if you went to sleep each night with the expectation that the day was about to begin or if you began each Sabbath Sunday with the expectation that the week was about to begin? How would life be different if you learned to work *out of* rest instead of rest *after* work?
7. The Scottish minister George McDonald once said, "Sleep is God's device for giving us the help he cannot get into us when we are awake." What do you think he was getting at? Could you also say, "Sabbath is God's device for giving us the help he cannot get into us when we are working"?
8. What is one thing you can do with your family or with friends (be specific!) this coming Sunday to honor the Sabbath by praying and playing?



Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

What is one thing our family could do to make sure that we played together on Sunday?