

GRACE APPEARED

By Rev. Will Nelken

Presented at Trinity Community Church, San Rafael, California, on Sunday, October 13, 2013

“The United States of America, one nation, under God, with liberty and justice for all.” We have all pledged ourselves to that. But how it plays out can be tricky. It’s a risky business.

We want liberty and justice—whenever we have been misjudged or mistreated—but we’re not always ready to yield the same “liberty and justice” to those who think it is *we* who have oppressed or wronged *them*. “It’s not fair!” we cry, imagining that absolute fairness (“equality”) is our undeniable right.

Freedom is a risky business! We want freedom in a big way—for ourselves—but we’re often unsure if others can handle it properly. We eagerly claim our own freedom in Christ, but complain when others use their freedom in ways that we disapprove.

Who, here, has had your freedom threatened?

Who, here, has been responsible for curtailing the freedom of someone else? (All parents should raise their hands!)

When someone has been misusing their freedom, our police are authorized to take their freedom away from them temporarily, so that others may evaluate the situation. Judges and juries take away the freedom of citizens every day because they have misused the freedom they once had. This is a divinely authorized social structure.

But we repudiate “vigilante (unauthorized) justice.”

The bottom line is this: there cannot be liberty and justice for all, in this nation or any other, unless we are truly “under God.”

Every generation of the Church has had to deal with the persistent encroachment of legalism—the unauthorized enforcement of *religious laws*—because, by its very nature, it nullifies the Good News of God’s grace. Let’s see how the Bible addresses this subject.

More than anyone else, the Apostle Paul argued this case, as he planted churches and nurtured young believers in the ways of Christ.

Paul wrote one such letter to Titus, whom he called “my true son in the faith.” Paul was a mentor to Titus, whom he had stationed as pastor of the church that Paul planted in

Crete, the largest of the Greek islands. Paul may even have led Titus to faith in Jesus Christ.

A poet/prophet from Crete, Epimenides, said, “The people of Crete are all liars, cruel animals, and lazy gluttons,” giving us a glimpse of the crowd Titus was called to pastor. Even among those who now followed Jesus, some demonstrated a certain rebelliousness, asserting their “knowledge” and vying for control in the fledgling church. They suggested that all believers still needed to follow the Jewish religious code.

In his letter to Titus, Paul strongly opposed their false teaching, demonstrating that God’s grace and religious legalism could not co-exist.

Titus 2:11-14 (NET)

¹¹ For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all people, ¹² training us to reject godless ways and worldly desires and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, ¹³ as we wait for the happy fulfillment of our hope in the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. ¹⁴ He gave Himself for us to set us free from every kind of lawlessness and to purify for Himself a people who are truly His, who are eager to do good.

Let’s unpack these verses to see what Paul had to say.

“The grace of God has appeared.” Grace, as a concept, could not “appear,” but as a person He could, and He has. God’s grace appeared in the Person of Jesus. God’s grace appeared within human history. He was born in Bethlehem and laid in a manger. He was baptized in the Jordan River and ministered throughout Judea. He was crucified near Jerusalem and arose from the dead. God’s glory shall appear in splendor when that Person returns.

“The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all people.” God’s gift of grace was not just the Man and His life, but also the divine purpose behind His death and all that follows: salvation for humanity! Jesus came *“to seek and save those who are lost”* (Luke 19:10) That is His purpose, which He has achieved. *“Now is the accepted time... Today is the day of salvation”* (2 Corinthians 6:2)

This is the view to the past, what the grace of God *has done*. But the grace of God is still present and active, for Jesus is still alive and interceding on our behalf every day. Salvation is still unfolding, and people come to faith and salvation every day still.

God’s grace also *trains* us every day. On the negative side (our *unlearning* lessons), Jesus trains us to reject godless ways and worldly desires. Every day the Holy Spirit draws us to the Lord, who brings us to the Father. We have been made to be *with Him*, not without Him. So, we are to reject all ways of life that do not *include* God—that ig-

nore Him, discount Him, or rebel against Him—and the worldly desires that draw us away from Him and into ourselves.

On the positive side, we are being trained by God's grace to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives. We are to allow the Holy Spirit to control our emotions and our thoughts. We are to do what is right in God's eyes, even if it is inconvenient or difficult. We are to devote ourselves to God, in the midst of a godless world.

We are to order our lives in these ways (rejecting godlessness and embracing godliness) *"in the present age."* Although the present age is *not* so ordered, we *are*, by the Holy Spirit who lives in us. *"Greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world"* (1 John 4:4). Don't wait for a perfect world. Don't wait for Heaven. Start living the Christ-life here, now, in *this* world. Swim against the current!

We hope for a world that *is* so ordered, but such order will not be the result of our efforts; it will not be a world of our creation. Such a world is promised to us upon the return of Christ. He will order it; He will create it. And we will enjoy it with Him!

By God's grace, I may order my life according to God's ways. But that is just *my* life, in the midst of the "present (wayward) age." Jesus' life did not transform the age in which He lived; He transformed the hearts of people in His day. You and I may transform the hearts of people in our day, by bringing them to Jesus, but the age will continue on its godless way, until Christ returns and sets it in order. This is our hope.

God's grace is the *source* of our hope. God's glory is the *sum* of our hope, revealed at the return of Christ.

God's grace was most apparent in the life of Jesus when He gave up His life for us by dying on the cross. The effect, as Paul wrote, was *"to set us free from every kind of lawlessness and to purify for Himself a people who are truly His, who are eager to do good."* To set us free and to purify us. Powerful!

Have you ever felt like "lawlessness" had a grip on you? Like you just had to do whatever someone told you *not* to do? Oddly, that may feel like "freedom" at the time—"no one can tell me," "no one is boss of me"—but it is actually a prison house of invisible walls and bars. While we imagine that we are masters of our own lives, an invisible master has captured us to do his will (2 Timothy 2:26).

There is only One who can set us free from that prison. *"If the Son sets you free, you are truly free"* (John 8:36). That is the effect of the grace of God.

Purity is not always what we think. Usually, we think of cleanliness; purity is the result of removing dirt. That is true, but it is incomplete. Paul is clear: purity is likeness to Christ. It is an identity: *a people who are truly His*. Do you want to *belong* to Jesus? Do

you want to be *like* Him? Or, do you just want to associate loosely with Him? Follow at a distance? That identity is revealed, not in name alone, nor in doctrine, but in similarity of heart: *a people... who are eager to do good*. Are you *eager* to do good for others? Jesus is. Do you want to be *like* Jesus? If so, God's grace is the key!

The grace of God not only trains us, it also *empowers* us. "*For God is working in you, giving you the desire and the power to do what pleases him*" (Philippians 2:13). He gives you the *want to!* What you haven't wanted to do before, God's grace and love will transform, for He pours His love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit whom He has given to us (Romans 5:5). Then He gives you the *ability to!* Courage rises to lead you where you thought you would never go, could never go.

The grace of Christ *empowers* godly living. Hope in Christ *encourages* godly living. Heaven has come down to earth! You and I are living out that "hoped for" life in this present challenging age. That's what the grace of God is for!

God's glory shall be fully revealed—in Jesus and in us—when Christ returns.

Here's what all this means:

- You are being TRAINED to reject godless ways and worldly desires.
- You have the POWER to live a self-controlled, upright, and godly life.
- You have the COURAGE through your hope of Christ's return and the life to come.

When you're in training, everything about you is influenced by your training—diet, fitness, sleep patterns, recreation, workouts. If you feel sore somewhere today, it's just because you're in training. That's not a strange thing; it's a normal thing. Don't whine about it; work it out.

Sure, people can be challenging! You yourself can be challenging. And life can be hard, but you're bigger than life. "*Greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world!*" You're more than a conqueror. Don't whine about it; lift up the shield of faith and wield the sword of the Spirit. You're an overcomer!

I know the road seems long at times, and the enemies seem numerous, but the promises of God are "Yes!" and "Amen!" in Christ (2 Corinthians 1:20). Don't whine about it. God keeps His covenant, so that you can, too. The wrongs we must put up with today will be made right when Christ returns. God will have His way! Justice will roll down! Glory will come! This is our hope, so take courage.

God has given us all three—training, power, and courage—because we *need* all three!

When you don't know what to do—what to reject or what to embrace—ask God for wisdom (James 1:5) and reflect on your training (what lessons has He been orchestrating in your life recently?). Look to Jesus.

When you are challenged by worldly desires and enticed by godless ways, know that you already have the power to overcome them (Acts 1:8). Look to Jesus.

When you have lost sight of the reason to fight against the darkness, remember the Lord is coming again and *all* His promises will be fulfilled. Look to Jesus.

Which one will you pray about today? How you're being trained? The power of the Spirit in your life? Your courage to endure? Maybe all three!

God be gracious to you as you seek Him!