

Grace

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Date: 05 October 2014

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[0 : 00] Now we're going to look loosely, well not loosely but generally at Romans chapter 12. When I say generally loosely I mean that we're not going to great detail in each verse.

You'll be glad to know because it's a full chapter. There's lots in it. But it's the chapter that I'm using to base the theme.

Romans chapter 13, the third of four sermons are based on the vision and strategy of the church. And what we're looking at really I guess is our gospel DNA.

It's what makes us what we are. Now I don't think that it should be about us being unique at all. I think this DNA should be the same for every church. But we're focusing and seeking to focus constantly on these things.

So we've looked at the glory of God. You know that's why we exist. We exist for Him. We exist for His glory. That's why we live. That's why we worship. That's why we serve.

[0 : 59] That's why we do what we do. We also then looked at the gospel. That the gospel is central to what we are. That we stand on that solid rock.

That rock of I know nothing among you except Jesus and Him crucified. That good news. That gospel which we believe doesn't change. Which is the same yesterday, today and forever.

And today we're looking at grace. The importance of being a grace-centred or a grace-filled or a grace-active community of believers.

That grace is our default, spiritually, our default position. Now what would be good I think as we go through these and the last of them is growth is they've been obviously very self-conscious.

We've sought them to be self-conscious, to be simple, to be summary with the hope that you might remember when you think, why am I involved? Why did I go to church? Why did I choose?

[2 : 08] Why am I in St. Columba's? What is it about that we think of glory, gospel, grace and growth? They're easy to memorize and that's not insignificant and that's not unintentional.

But I wonder what we think, again, what we think of what the church is and what our involvement is in the church or what we think of the congregation because we're being...

I don't mean to be insular, we're not mean to be insular, but we are looking at what we are as a congregation and we hope that that enables us to be outward looking. But what we think we are and also what do we think we look like to people who come in?

People who come into the church? There may be a lot of visitors today, I wonder what they think as they come into the church or as they meet with us and as they get to know us. What kind of flavor do they get?

What do they think of when they see us as a community? What do others see in our life and in our work as a congregation, as a people? So the first thing I want to mention is the importance of seeing God's mercy and seeing God's grace.

[3 : 19] Seeing God's mercy. Verse 1 of this chapter, Therefore I urge you brothers, in view of God's mercy, as we see God's mercy, as we recognize His mercy, that's tremendously important.

Now, if we can't see that, our perspective of church and community will always be wrong. If we don't see God's mercy.

If the church is simply an institution, or if it's something that is merely an object of derision for us, or if it's a bit player in our lives, if the community of the gospel of God's people is just a bit player in our lives, then we've probably left God's mercy out of our understanding of what the church is.

And we need to recognize the centrality of God's mercy if we're to understand what we are as a community of God's people. It's the theme of the Bible from the very beginning.

From Genesis chapter 3, right, in fact, from Genesis chapter 1, but it's revealed itself even as mankind rebels against God, we find right from the very beginning, the theme of God's word is His

mercy.

[4 : 28] It's His long-suffering concern, and desire for His, what's called the divine pity. Now pity for us has become a kind of weak word. It's become a slightly unpleasant word.

But the divine pity is a great thing, because what it means is that He sees the desperate need for humanity, and He is full of compassion because of that, and He has moved to act on our behalf. That's the picture of God's mercy. He's a God who sees our need and is moved to act on our behalf, and is moved to act, and has the resources to act on our behalf, resources to meet our need.

And that's a great thing about God's divine pity for us, is that He sees the mess of humanity, and He is moved in His soul by that, and moved to act, and has the resources to act.

And He is moved to act, and has the resources to act on our behalf, that we see in His Son Jesus Christ, and the Gospel, and the message of Christ, and Him crucified.

[5 : 39] So there's this great reality that Jesus sees us. And if we are a people of grace, and a people of mercy, then we will be a people who see ourselves as God sees us.

You see how difficult that is? We see ourselves as God sees us. We see ourselves as broken, rebels, needy, dying, and weak.

People who have been given so much, who have so much potential, but who are broken and needy without Him. Selfish, and a bitter, and lustful, and greedy, and proud, and self-righteous without Him.

And when we see God's mercy, and see ourselves as He sees us, it transforms our own life, and the good news of the Gospel comes into our hearts, and transforms how we see one another.

So we see God's mercy, and that enables us to consider the community that we belong to. And we also are a people who have accepted then God's grace in verse 3, Paul says to the church, but that grace given me, I say to you.

[6 : 58] So there's that kind of gentle recognition in this passage that grace is a gift, that grace is something Paul has been given. And throughout the New Testament we, of course, have that same truth that grace is His mercy shown to us, the undeserving mercy of God that is poured out on those who come to Him by faith.

It's the picture of someone really great, and sovereign, and good, and powerful, much more superior to us, who pours out His love to those who are inferior, and who can't earn that love, who can't win that love for themselves, but who recognize it by grace.

I wonder if you've ever prayed the prayer, having done something rubbish, done something that you regret, done something that you're sorry about, something that just reveals your heart, and reveals your sinful heart.

And you go back to God and you say, Lord, I am so sorry. I just simply, I don't deserve your grace. Have you ever prayed that?

I don't deserve your grace. I reflect a deep misunderstanding within all of us that at any point, at any part, and any day of our lives, we do deserve His grace.

[8 : 27] There is no point where we will say, Lord, well, I deserve your grace today. It's been a good one. I've done my very best. And is that not the truth for us so often that we make that prayer?

That sounds a great prayer. Lord, today I don't deserve your grace, but I think it reflects sometimes in us that deep-seated reality that we actually think we deserve His grace.

There are days when we will go to God and say, well, I deserve your love today. I deserve your acceptance. Maybe it's not one particular day, but on some days we think we deserve it.

But the reality of understanding God's truth and God's mercy is that we have been changed from the inside out and that we have this great Father who loves us and who accepts us despite who we are.

So it's a kind of mixed place, this church. It's going to be a place, and I'll go on to say a little bit more about it, it's a fragility and also of God's strength, and a place where the teaching and the preaching and the emphasis of all that we do will be about our need, about our condition, and about God's provision for us.

[9 : 41] It will be a place where we experience forgiveness and we live in forgiveness and where we use the old language of repentance and faith where we're turning to God and we're following God.

It's a place. Now, this is very important. It's going to be a place where, as a church, where a community of believers, where it's an easy place, an easy place to make mistakes. That's where a community of grace will be. Now, don't misunderstand me, but it's a place where it's easy to make mistakes. Why? Because we recognize that's who we are and we recognize that that is what we do.

And it will also, therefore, be an easy place to say, I am sorry for who I am. And I'm sorry for what I've done and I'm sorry if I've hurt and offended you by what I've said.

A place where it's easy to make mistakes and a place where it's easy to say, I'm sorry. That is a community of grace. That is what we are seeking to be here. A place where we understand who we are under God's mercy and where we are recipients of His grace so we don't have some kind of false, self-righteous, independent spirit which suggests that we don't need Jesus Christ.

[11:00] Isn't it sometimes the hardest place to say? I need forgiveness or I'm sorry. Or the hardest place to make mistakes. Aren't we often very high in our demands of the behavior and the actions and the reactions and the conversations of others?

It should be a place where it is easy for us, by grace, and under God's mercy to recognize our mistakes and move on. So grace is that kind of reality that we have accepted.

That's the...you know, in terms of even membership of the congregation, it is just simply on that recognition that we are sinners that have come to Jesus Christ and are saved by grace.

So a grace-filled community. What does it look like? What does a grace-filled or a community seeking to be graceful, what does it look like? Well, this chapter says something, it's a far too big a subject to look at, really, in one sermon, obviously, but I'm just going to skim over one or two things that are significant.

It will be a society, a community that has offered, we have offered our lives to Christ. Again, look at verse 1, therefore I urge you in the view of God's mercy to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God.

[12:20] This is your spiritual act of worship. So we're offering our lives to God. That is what we are as a people with the grace, with gratitude. Now what's so easy about being in church is that sometimes what we do, we do out of guilt, out of fear, or out of self-promotion.

And yet what God is asking us is to recognize that we're giving and we're offering and we're serving and we're living our lives because we recognize His grace and His mercy.

And we see the whole of life, therefore, as God's. That we are God's and we serve Him, we're His disciples, and we follow Him. And that is our great desire.

And that's our great longing. It's our personal responsibility as Christians to serve God. Much more in a sense, for the 99, as we look before, the 98% of your life that is outside of here, outside of this building, that you are serving.

And grace is persevering. You're offering your life and your whole being to the Lord Jesus Christ. And that will be reflective of a grace-filled community that we seek to be.

[13:32] But it's also a recognition that not just are we serving Him with all that we are, but we are renewing our minds into grace. Do not, verse 2, do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed with the renewing of your mind, and then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is good, pleasing and perfect will.

So there's this renewal of our minds that is a reflection of a community of grace. Grace, I think I was often, we often associate with just feeling nice, and feeling good, and feeling loving.

And we don't feel loving, then we're not feeling grace, it's much deeper than that, and it's much kind of more solid than that. It's a freedom to enable our minds, our very thought processes to be radically renewed, and to think differently. It's a transformation.

So a grace-filled community is one that is allowing God, by His grace, to reveal His Lordship in the transformation of our minds, of our thinking.

You know, the phallops' paraphrase of this verse is not about, don't conform any longer, but don't let the world squeeze you into its mould. And that's what grace is. Grace is a really strong thing.

[14:59] I think we sometimes think of grace as a kind of weak alternative to law, as it were. And yet what we have here is grace is serving and following and loving God through obedience and the transforming of our minds.

So this church will be a church where we strive to teach the disciplines of grace to allow our mind to be renewed by Jesus and by the revelation of Himself in His Word.

That we'll encourage that discipleship of following Jesus, which allows us to have our mind and our lives transformed. Because what you hear from Christ and what He offers in grace is absolutely transforming.

You'll not hear it in the schoolroom. You'll not hear it in the playground or in the political arena or in the office or in the media or in your package holiday or in the pub. You'll not hear the transforming message of the Lord Jesus Christ and of the way of grace and of the message of grace and of the truth of grace for us.

So it's about renewing our minds into grace. But most importantly really today, what I want to stress for a few moments is it's about belonging. It's really about belonging.

[16:21] In verse 5, He says, So in Christ we who are many form one body and each member belongs to all the others. It's about a grace community then, which we are striving to work out here, is a community where we belong.

Now that is really tough. That's particularly tough because we're a city center congregation. We're a gathered congregation. We don't live near one another, generally speaking. And for many the church concept is the one hour a week concept.

And we are fluid, you know, where a lot of people are coming and going. So that sense of belonging is really difficult and as the church grows, it becomes harder.

But we seek to be a place where relationships matter under God, where we serve, where we're accountable, where we love, where through the city groups through hospitality, which sometimes you must think, oh, it's a pain in the neck.

We're not just welcome people in my home again and things like that. And where we seek to do life together now, I recognize that that can be something that is formulaic, which is a disaster.

[17:38] And it can be overorganized and that is also a disaster. But what we seek to be, and I'm sure there's many times we fail, but it's to be at the scaffold for this big family, bigish family to work out grace.

That's what we're trying to do, to provide a scaffold in which to work out grace. And that's tough as the congregation grows, but it's why we want to work on the premise of growing and then planting and losing people to a small community, grace-filled, we hope, gospel-centered, God-glorifying group.

So we want to spread the gospel throughout the city this way. And it's that fine balance, that need for prayer, that need for commitment to that lifestyle. Now, again, I know there's a great deal we could say about belonging.

I just want to say a couple of things. What does it mean? Well, it means in the first place, I am needy. If we're going to be a people who are belonging to one another by grace, we will need at some point to recognize I'm needy.

For by the grace given to me, I say in verse 3 to everyone, don't think of yourself more highly than you ought, but think of yourself with sober judgment. And that will enable us to say as a people there are times when I come and when I'm involved, I say, I am needy.

[19:08] I'm weak. I'm struggling. I can't serve formally. I can't do the things I'm being asked to do. I'm failed. My faith is weak.

I'm full of doubt. I'm hurting. I'm overwhelmed. I can't fit into your box. I'm struggling. I need encouragement.

I need forgiveness. I need help. I need rest. I need an oasis. That's what I need. I need a spiritual oasis. And that is what a community of grace should be able to offer.

And that is what we should be able to offer here. Not just with Christ, but with His people. That place where we can say and where we can be, I am needy.

Because that is an understanding of God's mercy and an understanding of our own hearts. But it's also a place where we recognize others will be needy.

[20:09] See, you will put, and I will put myself in the shoes of others, where we recognize that grace is willing to be bothered, is willing to be put out, is willing to meet the needs of others and go the extra mile.

To see need and to serve where there is need, to be devoted, to be strong, to be forgiving, to be helpful, to see the lonely, to see and work out the disillusioned, the angry, the grumpy and the struggling and take the lead to comfort and encourage and teach and be alongside.

Because I am needy. Because others are needy. And a community of grace in recognizing that also recognizes that we are diverse. We belong to a needy place, a place where our needs we hope are met and where we help those whose needs need to be met, but a place where we are diverse, chapter verse 6 onwards speaks a little bit of different gifts according to the grace given to us in time to go into these gifts.

But there's not for us here in St. Colom, there's not for us a stereotypical Christian. Oh yeah, okay, we're Christ-like. That makes us stereotypical.

There's holiness that makes us stereotypical to Christ, but we're all absolutely individuals and we have different levels of grace, different levels of faith, different gifts that God has given us to serve.

[21 : 37] And that is how we function as a community. That's because God's a diverse God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And we're not all the same. And we don't want to be all the same.

How dull and boring and miserable would that be if we were all the same? If we were all at the same level, if we were all doing the same things, if we were all moving in the same direction, or at least at the same speed, the same direction.

We are a diverse people. And we want to be, and we strive to be multi-generational, multi-cultural, multi-gifted.

It's graceless if we are all uniform, if we are all the same. If we all want to be absolutely identical, we're diverse.

We were also united, we recognise that from this passage also. We are many form one body. And then in verses 9 to 13, well maybe no, 9, even longer, 9 maybe down to 19 or so, it speaks about the way that unity has worked out, isn't it?

[22 : 52] You know that we are sincere, that we cling to what is good, that we are devoted to one another in brotherly love, that we honour, that we don't lack zeal, but we are joyful and hope patient. We share, we practice, you know, it just stumbles off.

There is so much there about how we show our unity to one another in our commitment, in our service, and in our love. Because love, you know, has characteristics. And love does things, and love is like something.

It's like Jesus Christ, and that's a great challenge for us. That we practically work out some of these things in our lives, that we are not overcome with evil, but we are overcome with good.

And each of us plays our part. Now, I'm going to finish with one thing. I've talked about the kind of community of grace we are, the graceful community. Some of the things that looks like here in this chapter, that we offer our lives to Christ, that we renew our minds in Christ, that we belong to Christ. But there's one thing that I want to finish with. I think it's because it's very simple in reflecting what is a community of grace. And that is peace.

[24 : 08] For me, that is a hugely helpful definition of grace at work in the people, in a community of God's people. And if it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with anyone.

We are a community at peace, and a community of peace. You see, if you look around you, if you drive in the city, if you go a football match, if you watch the television and see the news, if you think about the problems you have at work, what is the reality?

And sometimes it might not be dramatic. Sometimes it's very dramatic. But what do we see? We see dis-peace. We see aggression. We see people at each other's throats.

We see people standing all over other people. We don't see love. We see hatred. We see it in very subtle ways, but we see it also very brutal and very blunt ways.

And we know that that is really the out-working of sin right from the very beginning. It's brought dis-peace with ourselves and God. And shortly after that, who?

[25 : 20] Cain kills Abel right at the very beginning. It begins with familiar dis-peace. In the family, there's murder.

And that dis-peace has gone away. And Christ has come that we might have peace. First vertically with God, obviously, but also with one another.

We see that grace and the mercy of God brings us to be at peace with God. And that's the greatest thing that there is in this world, peace with God. That is that we are made right with God through what Jesus has done for us.

Our sins are taken away. And where there was only a judge, there is now a father. A father that we see in the person of the prodigal father.

And there's grace in what we say a little bit more about that maybe tonight. But that vertical peace must challenge how we think and live together horizontally as a people that we live at peace with one another.

[26 : 29] That's a personal responsibility. God says if it is possible, as far as it depends on you. You have to live as far as it depends. What you're saying is that it might not always work because there's other people who say I'm a marriage.

But as far as it depends on you, you live at grace at peace with others. And that responsibility is so great. So often isn't in the church, we're like, well, if only everyone else would change. If only everyone else was different. If only everyone else understood and saw things my way. And if only everyone else recognized my needs. And these may be legitimate questions.

But often the reality is God is wanting us as far as it depends on us to live at peace with one another. Because we have found peace in Jesus Christ.

So this place ought to be, and I don't just mean on a Sunday, but I mean in our relationships. When it's difficult, when there's a great deal of demands when we're asked to do and serve or whatever it might be.

[27 : 37] That we have here an understanding of one another and our need of God's mercy. And it is that oasis of peace. That in all that we do, that we're looking for relationships that are right.

Where we forgive one another, where we deal with matters if they need forgiving. You know, rather than walking away. That we face up in love to these matters. And sometimes we'll recognize they're not quite such big matters after all.

Love covers a multitude of sins. But we're a people who take peace initiative. That we live as much as possible, that we forgive as much as possible.

That we commit as much as possible. We are a people of peace. A people who come and find peace together. The peace of God and the peace of love.

Every week I have a nightmare. I have a nightmare that I turn up in church and there's nobody here. Nobody comes back.

[28 : 43] Everyone is fed up with one another and leaves and goes somewhere else. The church disintegrates. Now I think that's a fear that comes from the devil and is a temptation from Satan.

And Jesus Christ as my advocate stands against that. But we recognize and see. And I know that you will be here because you're a people of grace.

And because you're a people of prayer and a people of love and a people of blessing. Amen. Let's bow our heads. Father God, we ask and pray that you would teach us your way and teach us your truth.

And teach us to understand what it means to follow you and to serve you. Help us to know grace. Help us to live grace and to understand the mercy of God for us.

And help us to be a people that are weak in ourselves but strong in Christ. Vulnerable but victorious and needy and dependent yet strong and courageous.

[30 : 05] Help us live that paradox of spiritual closeness to Jesus. And may it be reflected in the way we treat one another. In the way we think of one another.

In the way that we love one another. And may it be at the very foundation of all that we do. All the structures that any big-ish group of people need to have in place.

May it simply be a scaffold for grace. And an opportunity for grace to flourish. May it never become an end in itself. May it never become institutionalised and forgive us when it is.

Help us, guide us, keep us and protect us. And show us your way and show us your truth we ask. In Jesus' name, amen.