

Is it still?

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[0 : 00] Good morning to Galatians chapter 3. Now I would hope that this is an eagle-eyed congregation. Some are more eagle-eyed than others, for which I am hugely grateful, eternally grateful.

And most of you know that I am hugely absent-minded. And last week I enthusiastically encouraged the congregation to be excited about the prospect of us beginning a series in 2 Corinthians.

And as I was preparing the first of these sermons, I did think the passage was fairly familiar. But it wasn't until one of my great friends in the congregation at the door spoke to me and said, You preached from 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, a series, just over three years ago.

I said, I expect my congregation to remember what I preach, and yet I don't remember myself, because I'm absent-minded and I'm a poor lost sinner.

And so having checked this individual is always right. Having checked, of course he was right. And William, very grateful.

[1 : 20] And I'm glad because I would have begun to realise, and I know I could have gone on and carried on in 2 Corinthians, but I had lost motivation to do it again, and I think God's hand was in it in many different ways.

And I'm glad I preached it last week. I know one family, some people in particular, felt God speaking to them from that, and that's good, and that's great. But I'm now ditching 2 Corinthians, okay?

If you want to learn more about 2 Corinthians, you can go back to the sermons on the website, and maybe I can learn from them more as well. So, as always, your minister requires your forgiveness and your patience and your forbearance.

And rather what I'm going to do is I'm going to preach, and I feel very comfortable about this, a series on grace, on the grace of God. There can't be anything more central to our understanding, and that's what I like to do.

And then Galatians chapter 3 and in verse 3, Paul, in challenging this people of Galatia who had come to faith in Jesus, and then had drifted from that, he says to them, are you so foolish after beginning with the Spirit?

[2 : 44] Are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort? And I want to use that as a base for what I'm going to say in an introductory way today.

And can I say by way of introduction that I find the subject of God's grace hugely scary. I feel after over maybe nearly 30, 35 years as a Christian, my grasp of grace is like trying to hold a snowflake.

And I feel it's so fragile, my understanding, that I'm scared of spoiling the truth by sharing it with you. A glorious truth that I'm scared of spoiling it.

But I also know about grace and know that the strength and power of grace is like an avalanche in our lives. And we need God's grace, it is central to us, and really my poor efforts at sharing the truth of grace, I know will be used by God through his Spirit, because it's his grace and it's in his strength that we go forward.

So as I tremble preparing this, will you pray? Because if I tremble and you pray, then together we will learn a great deal about God's grace.

[4 : 20] And grace is a great thing, it's central to everything that we understand. And what's so great about it is it reminds us that it's all about God.

It's all about God. The triune God, God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Grace is infused into them and their work on our behalf is full of grace.

And it's all about being right with God. Now for some people that's maybe not important, lots of people maybe think, well I don't really care about being right with God because I don't really believe in God.

And that's a challenge for us. But I'm sure within this building at least we all care about being right with God, we recognise the importance of that, of being forgiven, of being spiritually alive, of being alive forever, of having the hope of heaven.

All of these things are really significant I hope for us to a greater or lesser degree. And grace is all about that. And grace is saying these things are a free gift from God.

[5 : 32] We don't earn it, we can't deserve it from Him. But as we accept His grace through the work of Jesus Christ and trust in Him and live independence on Him, we begin to understand what it is to be a Christian.

And this is very scary. And can I also say something which I hope is slightly provocative, for us naturally grace ticks all the wrong boxes.

It ticks all the wrong boxes for us in our natural thinking and in our natural understanding. What are the kind of boxes that we tick?

Well I'm thinking of three at least. One box that we tick says, I want to earn my own way to heaven. I want to earn it. That was really the problem with the Galatian church wasn't it?

They had come to faith, they had accepted God's grace and His love and then they were trying to carry on in their Christian lives with, by human effort.

[6 : 41] And they wanted to earn their favour with God as well as accepting His grace. I'll earn my way. It's absolutely, it just oozes out of our pores that need to earn our way.

I believe that I am worthy of earning at least some of my salvation. I'll meet God halfway. He can do the hard stuff. He can go on to cross, He can help me.

I'll begin my Christian life but once I'm on the way, once I'm rolling down the hill, I'll go on in my own strength and I'll not need grace so much. I'll earn that right to persevere and to keep going.

Now that is absolutely pouring out of our thinking because we live performance based lives.

Everything in our lives is about performance.

Our love relationships very often are based on performance and on earning the right to be loved.

Our work relationships, our studies, all that we are is based on how good we are at something, what we can do.

[7 : 50] And so we find that that desire to earn our favour with God is at the very root of our being. I'll earn my way. The second box that it doesn't tick, but sometimes we often think about is the one that says, I don't need your charity.

We don't want to be dependent on the grace of God and we don't believe we can be dependent. We don't want God's charity. Synically, we will look at salvation and the gospel and the gift of the gospel and we'll say, there's no such thing as a free gift. That's what we say, don't we, about lots of things in life.

We have this cynical view which says there isn't anything free. And if we receive anything free, we struggle with it. Well, unless we're looters in London.

But that's different. But nonetheless, there's this thing about we're quite proud, aren't we, in our lives? And we don't like receiving something which we perceive as for nothing.

It's self-sufficient. And if you've ever been in a place where someone, you're maybe in a position of need, and someone's been hugely generous to you, maybe a financial gift, maybe some other kind of gift, while being hugely grateful, do you not struggle a bit with that?

[9 : 14] Do you not struggle with the fact that you've needed that? Do you feel dependent then on them? Do you feel you owe them?

And that you aren't able to accept that easily because there's an independence and there's a self-sufficiency within us which says we want to be able to cater for ourselves. Now, in lots of areas in life, these are noble and right characteristics.

There's nothing wrong with them as such. But they really mess up our understanding of the gospel and our understanding of grace and our understanding of our own spiritual hearts.

And the third box that grace doesn't tick is this box, and we probably don't verbalise this very much, is I'm at the centre of my own life.

I don't want Christ or God to be at the centre of my life. I am very content with me being at the centre of my life. Naturally, we find ourselves revolting against the idea of God being number one, God being sovereign and Lord over not just the universe but even over our lives.

[10 : 29] It's at the very root, is it not? It's at the very root of our sinful humanity, is that we've rebelled against the idea of God being Lord and we want to be in control.

We want to be number one. We want to be the ones who are the significant other in our lives, as it were. I had the misfortune last night of going to watch Rise of the Planet of the Apes.

Truly awful film. But I was also reading about it this week and reading about the director. He was speaking about the original film, The Planet of the Apes, 1968, and he was speaking about the classic scene in that film, Rupert Wyatt is the director.

He was talking about the scene where the gorilla, which you all know well, the gorilla rides on a horse in military uniform with a gun. And he says, that scene taps into our primal fears. It introduces the idea of a world where we are not Alpha.

And he's absolutely right, because that is natural to us. We want to be Alpha. We want to be first. And whether it's a monkey, chimpanzee or God, we don't want not to be first.

[12:04] And yet that whole concept of being number one, of being sovereign in this world and sovereign as human beings, ultimately, paradoxically makes us small and insecure and enslaved.

So in many ways, grace ticks the wrong boxes for us. It's not an easy concept to bring to people or to ourselves, because we naturally want to be in that first place.

We naturally want to earn our way in life. We naturally don't want to be objects of what we regard as charity. But can we look spiritually at the background to grace, because it's very significant.

We're not just speaking on a natural plane. We're speaking about our condition spiritually. And the background to grace is very significant. In verse 11 of Galatians 3, Paul says, clearly no one is justified before God by the law because the righteous live by faith.

And that is kind of summarized well also in Romans 3, 23, a very famous verse. There is no difference spiritually before God, no difference for all of sin and fall short of the glory of God.

[13:33] And so there's a dark background to grace. Now grace is light and grace is good, but there is a dark background which puts it into focus very clearly.

That before God we recognize who God is as His person is revealed in Scripture. Holy, good, perfect and light.

And He says, we are not. He is, we are not. And again we're looking here at our heart.

We're looking at our spiritual condition. I'm not looking at the generality of human goodness. I'm not making comparisons between people as we'll see also.

But spiritually before God in a relationship with God, none of us are righteous. None of us are in a position where we are in relationship with God because our sin separates us from God.

[14:40] No one God says is righteous. We all fall short of where we should be with God. And the upshot of that is that we are naturally spiritually dead and physically dying.

That's the reality for all of us, spiritually dead and naturally dying before we come to Christ and we can't heal ourselves.

That's the background to grace. The background to grace is that we can never say God owes me something. We can never say that. We have never earned any rights before God.

And so we can never say God owes me. God is indebted to me because God says, no, you're bankrupt spiritually before me.

You have nothing positive that can make you right with me on your own. Spiritually bankrupt, it's a hard and a solemn message because he goes on to say we can never pay the debt that we owe.

[15:54] He never owes us anything and we can never pay the debt we owe before God. We can never, in other words, put things right. You can't put things right. I can't put things right.

As Christians, we made that profession maybe a long time ago. Lord God, I can't put things right. I can't be right with you. I can't pay the debt. I can't end this judgment that I'm under.

I can't make myself live forever. I can't make myself spiritually alive. I can't love you and I can't love others as you require of me through your law. We can never live our lives which is, I think, what the Galatians were beginning to do.

And we're saying, we'll try and outweigh the bad with the good. There's a lot of bad things that happen. Christ died for it. Brought it up. And now I'm living my Christian life, so I'll try not to do bad things and I'll try and do good things.

And the good things will outweigh the bad things. And on the last day, then I'll be accepted because the good that I've done will outweigh the bad things that have happened. And so we feel that we can somehow on our own pay the debt towards God.

[17:00] I'll do this this week. I'll go to church this week. I'll read my Bible. I'll say something good to someone and that will please God. And I'll earn some favour with Him by doing that. I'll try my

best. I'll give to charity.

I'll do good things. I'll read my Bible. I'll pray. And they're good things and God will be pleased with them and He'll accept me. But we have nothing that we can bring to pay the debt to God.

Nothing that we can engage in. No works that we can do. No religion. No good goodness that we can bring. We haven't got the facility spiritually to pay the debt.

Nor can we get closer to God than other people. Romans 3.23, all of sin fall short of the glory of God.

We can't sit in a nice, peaceful atmosphere like this and say, I'll get to heaven before them. I'm not putting it at anyone in particular. I'll get to heaven before them.

[18:04] I'm going to earn more favour with people with God than these people. We need to get away from it. It's simply not about comparative morality.

It's not about how good we can be compared with other people. Surely I'll get to heaven. Oh yeah, Hitler deserves the deepest pit in hell. But I'm much better than him. So God will accept me because we have grades of morality.

And it may not be quite as extreme as that, of course. But we would see ourselves and judge ourselves with human goodness. I'm upright. I don't break the law.

I don't do things against other people that would hurt them or offend them. I've done my best, better than others. And we'll be closer to God because of that.

God says, however significant that might be to live in that way, universal disease of guilt belongs to us all. That spiritually, on the inside, you know, if we're dead, we're dead.

[19:10] Is that not right? You can't be more dead than others. You can't be less dead. Well, sometimes, maybe you think that, when you look about a church, some people may look more dead than others.

But you know, if you're dead, you're dead. If your heart's beating, it's beating. You can't be half dead, although we use that phrase. You can't really, can you? You're either dead or alive. And God says you're dead spiritually in your trespasses and sins.

And he uses that illustration because it's very powerful. We're all in God's eyes. Lawbreakers, you know? It doesn't matter. It's God's law. And it's that law of love, which he says you love me perfectly and you love others perfectly.

Then you get to heaven. There's only one person who's done that, Jesus Christ. Only one, ever.

But we're all lawbreak, we're all spiritually dead. Some of them are along the line, I've often mentioned this here, haven't I?

Some of them, what has happened where we are perceived in the world of, in the secular world as being better, being goody-goody, that, you know, Christianity is for people who think they're better than other people or who live better than other people.

[20:23] We've somewhere got it all wrong. We're Christians because we've come to recognise God's truth that we are the worst of people, along with other people, that we're all in that common boat.

At one level, Jack, Job, Tamsen's, Burns. At another level, Bob Dylan sang a song in the 60s, which was iconic. It's all right, ma.

And in that song he has a line which says, in the President of the United States, must sometimes have to stand naked. And because he's simply staying, you know, at one level, it doesn't matter who we are, we're all in the same boat.

We're all exposed and the living God exposes us. Who are we? We're that ungrateful kid. That's who we are.

We're that miserable, snotty-nosed child who grows up to be a selfish, horrible, arrogant, hateful of his parents, person, who steals from them, who takes all the resources, who abandons them and walks away from them, and who at every opportunity slanders them.

[21:37] That's who we are, before God. But we have the light of grace. I want to speak about grace until Christmas time, until grace is coming out of our every spiritual poor in church.

And if I were to repeat this sermon all through eternity, it would never get to the stage where we understood. In studying this, I feel I have no real deep understanding of grace.

Otherwise, I'd be jumping from rooftop to rooftop with its knowledge. Grace is such a glorious reality. We read about the problem in Romans 3.23, and then Romans 5 verse 8, Paul goes on to say, but God demonstrates his own love or grace for us in this, while we were still sinners.

Christ died for us. A hugely significant statement. Not long ago, we had Lucy's baptism, and there was a number of fire fighters there.

An unbeknown to me, I quoted that great verse, which says, greater love has no man than this, that he laid down his life for his friends.

[23 : 02] And that's the motto, the Edinburgh Fire Service. I didn't know that, but isn't that a great truth, these fire fighters here in church? But isn't that a great truth for all of us?

Greater love has no man than this. That is what grace, that's the light of grace that stands beautifully in contrast to the darkness of our condition.

God the Father takes home this miserable, snotty, nosed child to his home, and he gives him everything, absolutely everything.

So you sit here today, and I sit, and we say, but that's not fair. That's not fair. This child's miserable deserves nothing.

Well, on that count, we're right, but it's not unfair, because God is God. And God doesn't just take us and say, well, it doesn't matter what your heart's like.

[24 : 14] It doesn't matter your greed and your selfishness, your pride and your lust. It doesn't matter that we, at every turn, show ourselves to be God-haters.

He doesn't just say, it's okay, come on home. I'll accept you. You've done your best, you've tried your hardest. No. God is love, but God is just.

He doesn't simply ignore our sin and our guilt and the darkness of our lives. What does He do?

Greater love has no man than this.

He takes the darkness upon Himself. You know, the darkness of Calvary, it was very physical, but it had a clear spiritual message also. Clearly spiritual.

And that the Son of God, the Light of God, couldn't look on the darkness of that event. He dies in the darkness. The Light of the world dies in the darkness.

[25 : 14] To fulfill both His justice, because He dies for our sins, not His own. He loved God perfectly.

He loved humanity perfectly, as the God the Son who comes in the flesh to be our substitute. But He dies as the guilty one. You know that, and I know that as well.

But we must keep the cross absolutely at the core of everything that we believe and everything that we understand about God. The cross must be central.

The minute you move away from the cross, you become a Galatian. You start wanting to live your Christian life by human effort. The cross is meaningless. The cross, everything about our Christian life is cross shaped.

Because it's at the cross we recognize and see our need. God's glorious justice and His outstanding love. And on that cross it says, Paid in full.

[26 : 17] So your sins when you come to Christ, past, today and in the future, are all wiped away. And He loves you because of what Jesus has done.

And He loves you just as much tomorrow, whatever you do as you did yesterday. And you can never please Him more tomorrow than you did today. Because of how you live.

If you get up tomorrow and you read your Bible and you pray and you do Christian things tomorrow, we'll feel good about ourselves. But can I say He'll not love you when I ought a more by doing that than He does today.

Because His love for you is not based on your obedience. It's based on the finished work of Jesus Christ. He sees you covered. This righteousness that is not of the law.

It's not by how we live, it's by what Christ has done. It's utterly crucial for our Christianity to understand that that God is just and that the cross is central.

[27 : 16] And that God also is loved. God is love. It's not unfair, you see, if we can't do it for ourselves.

You know we talk a lot about tough love, don't we? And tough love is a good thing. It's when we love someone, we kind of, we don't mollicoddle them, for example.

We kind of get hands off and say, well, this is a good way to learn. You can do it. You can do it.

Now if that was the case spiritually, would God could just say, take His hands back and say, you can live the Christian life.

You can do it on your own. And that would have been tough love. And that would have been a good thing to do. But what He's saying with grace is, I love you and I know you can't do it.

So it's no love to say to someone with no legs, come on, walk up this stair, climb that mountain. That's just cruelty, is it not?

[28 : 25] So it would be hugely cruel for God to say to us, make yourself right with me. When we can't do it. That's why the cross is so central.

And that's why if you reject the cross, you're sticking your fingers up at God and saying, I don't need that. I'll come to church. I'll measure my commitment to Him.

I'll do what I can do on a Sunday. And then the rest of my life, I'll live the way I want. His love encourages us to be born anew.

Born of the Spirit. Born with that same attitude and ability of grace that He gifts to us. So our greatest danger, very briefly as we close, our greatest danger is the same danger as it was for the church in Galatia, that we carry on our Christian living without Christ.

We come at faith in Christ. We're Orthodox. If anyone asks us what a Christian is, we'll know. We believe in Jesus and we believe in the dead and the cross. But we live, and I've said this a million times here because I know at my own heart, we live as practical atheists.

[29 : 40] Our greatest danger is we return to a performance-based Christianity, where it's about what we're doing. It's about our efforts, where God sets us on our way.

We do the rest on our own. And what are some of the warning signs of that? Four B's, very briefly. We blank God.

That's one of the warning signs. In other words, we're prayerless. If we confess Christ, if we believe in Christ, and if you believe in Christ and yet your Christian life is prayerless, if you give Him an injection of Christian thinking on a Sunday, you can do a week at a very holy day and you do lots of praying and you come to church and then the rest of the week, you live your own life, your own way, then you're living by human effort.

You're moving away from the cross and from grace. Because you're saying, I can be Christ-like for the rest of the week. I don't need Jesus. Don't be legalistic about prayer.

I don't need prayer. Maybe you think you don't even need to be like Jesus the rest of the week. One day He'll do. One day and that'll probably earn enough.

[30 : 53] Brownie points. Can we think like that? If we are prayerless, we are misunderstanding grace, because grace says, today Lord, I need you. I love you, but I need you to enable me to be Christ-like.

I need you in my workplace. I need you in my home. I need you in the decisions. I need you in the entertainment that I choose. I need you in how I speak to my wife or my husband or my neighbour or my friend. I need your grace to work throughout me.

If we are blanking God, that's a warning sign. If we're not praying. If we're bartering with God, we're probably returning to human effort. You know God, I've got lots I really need today.

I'll read my Bible. I'll try my best. Will you give me it? Will you bless me? Because I've tried. Will you bless me because I've been obedient? Our obedience doesn't bring blessing as a merit.

Our obedience brings blessing as a grace. It's not because we deserve it. It's because that's what He wants to do for us. He has, as it were, open arms all the time saying, I want to bless you.

[32 : 02] And I'll bless you because of what Jesus has done. Not because you've earned it. Not because you've gone to church. Not because you've read your Bible. Bartering with God is something that we can often do.

Another B is blaming God. I'm doing my best. I'm trying my hardest.

Why have I got cancer? Why have you allowed this to happen? What kind of God are you? Why would you let this happen in my life?

We blame God when we think we're doing our best. We're trying our hardest. We blame Him. But that's because we are thinking in terms of human effort.

I'm not saying life is easy, and I'm not saying suffering is trite in any way. But we need to look at it through the prism of the cross, where He's already given us His Son and said, I can't love you anymore.

[33 : 05] Don't blame me. This life is a life of suffering. Recognize that I compassionate and care for you through it. Please don't blame me and think that your suffering is a result of your life.

I love you. Will you trust me? Blank God, barter with God, blame God, where we can become gods. Where we take God's place and we start judging other people as if we're God. And we lose sight of the fact that we are saved by grace.

And we start thinking that we are saved because we're good and better than other people. And we start judging other people. And we start putting ourselves above other people, or we start looking for approval from others by judging and putting down other people.

We're a child of God. We have the truth of God, but we're not God. Stop acting like we're God. Why do we need to be God? We are God's children, but that simply doesn't mean we have all the answers.

[34 : 16] Nor does it mean we know better. We're Christ's. We're children of God. And Paul in this section, as I close, he basically says to them with this problem in the first five verses, he says, think about your experience, you know.

Think about Christ Jesus who was clearly portrayed to you as crucified. Think about that. Think about the fact that you came to faith by believing, not by living a certain way or by going to church. Think about your experience. Think about the miracles that he's done. And that's been by grace, he says, not by what anything you've earned. And then he says also, think about the Bible.

Because he goes on to speak about Abraham. And that Abraham was justified by faith, not by works. And he says that in the Old Testament, right through to the New, that's the message. The message of grace sets you free. Everything else enslaves us. And so for these next few weeks, my theme is going to be amazing grace.

[35 : 17] I hope we will find it amazing. But I know that you need to pray, and I need to tremble. Will you do that? Will we enter that pack together?

That as I tremble and as you pray, that grace will lift from the pages of Scripture and become more real to us in our everyday living than it ever has been.

Because I think when it does, it will transform us. It will blow us apart. It will completely change what we think, how we think.

That's power heads. Heavenly Father, grant us grace, we pray, to understand you. And understand what it means to live in this way.

How easily we revert to human effort. Our own goodness, our own gifts, our own abilities. How often, how easily we judge others.

[36 : 15] We measure ourselves by others conveniently, leaving the sovereign, pure, holy, perfect, crucified God out of the equation.

Help us Lord God to be excited by grace. May the Spirit of God breathe life into these studies so that they may not be really about the doctrines of grace as much as about the reality of grace in our lives.

And may we give thanks to you for the glory of your gift that sets us free from performance living, from trying to attain favour with you by our own efforts, by judging others, and by all the ancillary issues that come from not understanding grace.

So Lord help us, we pray, guide us and bless us and continue with us as we worship the living God. So we ask it in His precious name, Amen.