

## **“The Signs of God’s Grace” based on 2 Corinthians 12:1-10**

**Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on July 7, 2024, at Shelby Presbyterian Church**

Last week, the Rev. Dr. Laurey Harrell brought us a message about wrestling with God. In it, she mentioned the story of a woman on an elevator at a retreat center, who was asked by a nun in the elevator why she came, and she responded with a laundry list of troubles. As the nun left the elevator, she turned back and said to the woman, “God must love you very much.” I don’t know about you, but that response feels strange.

We live in a world that wants us to believe divine favor is shown by the good things in our life. The ancient Romans believed this. They said that Rome’s victory in war and their conquering of the known world was the result of their proper worship of the gods who rewarded their practices. They believed failure to carry out these practices, including by monotheistic religions like Christianity was a threat to the empire itself. Failure to perform public duties to the gods was needed for the security of their empire. Any honor, no matter what you did or how it was acquired, showed divine favor. Any shame – even if you were doing the right thing – showed that the gods opposed you.

Sadly, we haven’t fully shed this in modern America. Despite the Christian faith being rooted in the idea that God’s grace is freely given, we continue to have an undercurrent of the Roman Empire in our outlook. We believe the fate of the nation depends on proper civil religion. Some say our success as a nation has been divine favor, and the perceived failures are removal of that favor. Even the non-religious will say the same thing, replacing God with “the right side of history.” Honor is seen as a reward for virtue, and shame is a punishment for vice.

Over the last three years, I’ve keyed in when I had the chance on the word, “blessing,” because too often we see blessings as the things anyone would objectively call good. A windfall of cash is a blessing. A new job is a blessing. Health is a blessing. We tend to think losing money, or losing a job, and getting sick are not blessings. And yet, surplus money, a new job, and perfect health, can lead us to think we don’t need God and damage our faith, while when facing loss and illness, we can grow closer to God.

These things in and of themselves are not blessings. The blessing is not the good thing or the bad thing. The blessing is our being brought closer to God. The curse is when we are drawn away from God. The Scottish missionary and theologian Lesslie Newbigin famously said that when he returned to the United Kingdom after missions to India, he found people were not as interested in hearing about God, despite being a Christian nation. What did they need God for if they’re comfortable at home. We could say the same here. Yet loss and struggle can bring us closer to God.

The woman at that retreat center was encouraged in her struggle to draw close to God. I don’t imagine that this was because her friend thought God was punishing her. Probably, she sent her because with all that she had going on, she needed to know or be reminded of God’s love. And so, the nun’s response makes sense for the woman whose mom died, whose father was drinking way too much, whose marriage was now falling apart, and who felt she was losing her mind. All of this brought her to the retreat to seek God. Indeed, the nun was right to say to her, “God must love you very much.”

After all, God's love for you does not depend on your accomplishments. It doesn't depend on your honor in this world. God does not withdraw love from you because of your mistakes. Nor does God turn from you because of your shame. The Apostle Paul wrote that Christ died for us while we were still sinners. The world tells us that we need accomplishments to earn God's favor, but this is not the way the true God of Israel revealed in Jesus actually works. That is the way Roman idols supposedly worked then and it is the way we think the caricature of God works now. Each of these is as equally false as "the right side of history."

In the church, we do the same with answered prayers, divine revelation, and miracles. We seem to think that if someone gets what they want after praying for it, that somehow God has shown favor upon them. That may be so. But sometimes, when God withholds what we want and what we pray for, this could be God's favor too. Some people claim direct divine revelation, claim to be prophets speaking for the Lord. That may be so, but at the same time Paul actually met the risen Jesus at Damascus. Paul who tells us in our reading today of his vision of heaven, even as he distances himself from them, but he does not want credit for these things. It is in his weakness, and thus in his shame that God's grace and power are truly revealed.

Paul wants so much to distance himself from getting credit for his visions, that he says he, "knows a man," because he is reluctant to share his story of his vision. He says that he will boast about this kind of person, because that's a normal response. But he will not boast about himself, except about his weakness.

Then Paul tells us about a time when his prayers were not answered as he wanted them to be. He talks of a "thorn in his flesh," which is a term that has puzzled scholars. Pauline scholar N.T. Wright argues that this could be Paul's own depression. The Apostle is writing to a Corinthian church that has rejected him. He is fresh out of prison and bears the scars of his ministry. Paul here admits his own struggles, just as Mother Teresa admitted her struggles.

At the start of the letter, Paul says that our faith in God consoles us in life's challenges, but this does not mean our faith is a cure all that treats or prevents depression. I know some think that you should not even have depression if you just have enough faith. No. that's not so. God never promised a perfect life for the believer. Instead, when Jesus said to come follow him, he actually said, "Take up your cross." Paul is a human being who is enduring great suffering. He is scarred physically and mentally, but he continues his ministry in obedience to God, persevering even when his request to be free of it is not granted.

I'll quote from Wright's Biography of Paul here for a moment on this: *"The fact that someone comes along one day, flings open the prison door, and tells you to be on your way doesn't mean you can take a deep breath, give yourself a shake and emerge smiling into the sunlight. The memories are ever present; the voices, both outside and inside; The nightmares are ready to pounce the minute you close your eyes. The mental scars remain after the physical ones have healed."*

Beloved, in your own achievement, your status, and your comfort, do not let these things turn you away from God's love. And likewise, in the face of trials, do not despair of God's love but recognize that it is there. For the grace of God is sufficient and God's power is seen in weakness.

This is at the heart of the gospel, for the grace of God is our Lord Jesus Christ, who being the eternal Son of God, fully divine and one with the Father, came down to us and became fully human one of

us, born in a lowly manger. In living within our limits, he died a shameful death on the Roman cross. Just as Paul was rejected by the Corinthians, he was rejected by his people and despite all the miracles, he died for us. But death could not hold him, and in the greatest miracle, he rose from the dead for us, to give us new life. He ascended for us, sending the Holy Spirit to us, to live in and among us. The Spirit is in us to empower us so that we might share in his work of revealing God's love.

The grace of God – the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ – is sufficient. It is what we need. And it was in his weakness, as God in a mortal body, and in his shame on that cross, that the power of God was revealed conquering death and giving us new life. If this is the God we believe in, then this truly is good news, because by the Holy Spirit, this God is with us, not as a reward, but to support us in loving others and serving God. This is the true power offered by our Lord Jesus.

Sisters and brothers, you are loved by God and the grace of God in Jesus is not earned. No, it is freely given. The sin of this world rebels against this love and tells us we have to earn it. It tells us that it's conditional. It tells us it is based on a feeling we have. But the Apostle Paul tells us that God's word is simple: the good news of Jesus Christ – Grace itself is all we need.

The power of God is seen in our weakness. We love, and if the love is not received by others, we move on, as Jesus told the disciples, taking nothing with us. Not even the dirt on your sandals.

You are loved and called to love. Even in the pain and the struggles of this world, you are enough, just as you are. But with the Holy Spirit of God, you can and will do great things. These are not great things as the world judges, but great by God's standard. This is greatness in the love we show toward others and the power of God in our weakness. Amen.