

Grace, Gratitude, and the Glory of God

by John Piper

Paul's ministry aims to spread the gospel of grace and produce gratitude to Jesus in people's hearts, ultimately glorifying God.

Scripture: Psalm 50:23, Romans 5:17, Romans 11:33, 2 Corinthians 4:15, 2 Timothy 2:10

Topics: "Divine Grace", "Christian Gratitude"

Description

John Piper preaches on the importance of gratitude in the ministry, emphasizing that true gratitude is a response to grace and a feeling of happiness directed towards someone who has shown undeserved kindness. He explains that gratitude flourishes in the sphere of grace, reflecting back to God as happiness towards Jesus. Piper highlights that the ultimate goal of ministry is to increase gratitude to the glory of God, as gratitude glorifies the giver and acknowledges our need for God's beneficence.

Transcript

Thanksgiving Day

November 26, 1981

2 Corinthians 4:15

It is all for your sake so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving to the glory of God.

The subject that the apostle Paul is dealing with in this chapter is his own ministry and what it is like. He begins the chapter by saying that he has his ministry not because of his own merit or his own initiative, but "by the mercy of God." (I recall what a comfort it was to me seven years ago as I was finishing up my schooling and beginning to look for a place of service, when a letter came in the mail from a former teacher saying: "Remember 2 Cor. 4:1--your ministry will be as much a gift of undeserved mercy as was your salvation.") Then Paul says, in verse 2, that his ministry is open and aboveboard; it does not tamper with the word of God or in any way obscure God's truth or water it down. The content of his ministry, verse 5 says is Jesus Christ as Lord, and his role is to serve the churches for Jesus' sake. There are people who are blind to the glory of God in the face of Christ (v. 4), but by God's grace the light of the gospel can break through into the hearts of believers (v. 6).

In verse 7, Paul acknowledges that a tremendous power is necessary if the ministry of the gospel is to succeed and people are to be converted and transformed. This power is all God's and Paul is like a clay pot containing the glorious treasure of the gospel and of the life of Christ, so that God will get all the glory for Paul's successes. Verses 8 and 9 describe the gospel ministry as fraught with troubles, "afflicted in every way ... perplexed ... persecuted ... struck down ...," "but in all this sustained by God. The reason for all this trouble and suffering according to verses 10 and 11 is so that the life of Christ might shine out more clearly as Paul's own life hangs in the balance. When Paul endures so much for Jesus' sake, his willingness to suffer and die is strong evidence for the resurrection life of Christ. Paul ministers life to the churches by suffering for them and revealing to them the life of Christ in which he hopes.

Verses 13 and 14 show what sustains Paul in his willingness to share the death of Christ. He speaks out of faith which knows that if God raised Jesus from the dead, he will raise Paul also and not only Paul, but his converts as well. The prospect of standing before Christ surrounded by his spiritual children at Corinth so excites Paul that he says in verse 15, "It is all for your sake." All my suffering, all my preaching, all my labor as an apostle is for your sake, "so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving to the glory of God." Notice that Paul cannot let man, even converted, thankful man, be the end point of his ministry. Yes, his ministry is for man's sake, but beyond that, above that and vastly more important than that, his ministry reaches its goal when God's glory is exalted. When all eyes are off of man (the earthen vessel) and on God, mouths agape, and holy hands raised in praise, then the apostle's work is done.

But thanksgiving plays a very crucial part in the purpose of Paul's ministry and the purpose of your ministry too. So let's look more closely at verse 15.

Almost all English translations miss a beautiful opportunity to preserve in English a play on words that occurs in Paul's Greek. Paul says, "It is all for your sake so that as charis extends to more and more people it may increase eucharistian to the glory of God." The Greek word for thanks is built on the word for grace: charis becomes eucharistian. This could have been prescribed in English by the use of 'grace' and 'gratitude' which show the same original root. So I would translate: "It is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase gratitude to the glory of God." The reason this is important is because when we try to define thanks or gratitude what we find is that it has a very close relationship to grace. Unless we see this relationship we really don't know what gratitude is.

So let's try to define just what gratitude is in our experience. I have found it helpful to think of some things that might be thought of as gratitude, but really are not. For example, gratitude is more than saying "Thank you," when someone gives you something. Gratitude is more than an action which we decide to do by an act of will power. You can say the words, "thank you," when there is not gratitude in your heart at all. Custom may dictate that you say the words when you don't really appreciate what has been done for you. What it takes to turn the words, "thank you," into gratitude is the real genuine feeling of gratitude. Gratitude is a feeling that arises uncoerced in the heart. It cannot be willed into existence directly if it is not there. If you give a ten year-old a necktie or a pair of socks for Christmas he may dutifully say, "Thank you," but the spontaneous feeling of gratitude will probably not be there like it would be if you gave him a new electronic game or hockey stick. Gratitude is a feeling not an act of will power. And it is a good feeling. When it rises in our hearts we like it. It is part of happiness not misery. Gratitude is a form of delight.

But gratitude is more than delighting in a gift. It is more than feeling happy that you got something you wanted. For example, if you give that ten year-old the electronic game, he might just rip open the package,

say, "Wow," and walk away and start bragging how much better his game is than his neighbor's. He might not even give a thought to the kindness you did for him in giving him the game. He delights in getting the gift, but he is still an ungrateful child because his delight is not directed to you the giver. So gratitude is more than delighting in a gift. It is a feeling of happiness directed toward a person for giving you something good. It is a happiness that comes not merely from the gift, but from the act of giving. Gratitude is a happy feeling you have about a giver because of his giving something good to you or doing something good for you.

But one more qualification has to be made: generally we don't send our employer a thank you note every payday. This does not mean that we don't feel grateful that we have a job and that we have the strength to earn money and that our employer pays us fairly. What it means is that the emotion of gratitude generally rises in direct proportion to how undeserved a gift is. Where work and pay are commensurate, we do not feel pay as an undeserved kindness, but as our due, and therefore the feeling of gratitude is not very intense toward our employer. He has not done us a favor; we have traded favors.

In other words, gratitude flourishes in the sphere of grace. And that is why the play on words in 2 Corinthians 4:15 is significant. Grace is *charis* and gratitude is *eucharistian* because gratitude is a response to grace. Gratitude is the feeling of happiness you feel toward somebody who has shown you some undeserved kindness, that is, who has been gracious to you.

This close relationship between grace and gratitude can be illustrated even in situations where it looks like we contradict it. For example, kind people often say, "Thank you," even where it is unnecessary. Even in places where goods are being fairly traded, value for value, we often say thank you. Why? One reason is that there are often little things people do beyond the demands of the bare transaction which benefit us - like a smile or an encouraging word or a gentle and caring demeanor. These we sense as unpaid for grace and so we feel gratitude in our heart for them.

But there is another reason we often say thanks when people are merely doing for us what we've paid for. Since gratitude is universally known as a feeling that comes in response to grace, expressions of gratitude have come to be used as expressions of humility and encouragement. When we say, "Thank you, to someone we humble ourselves as a person who has needs and we exalt them to her person as one who can meet those needs. For example, in a restaurant why do I say, "Thank you," to the waitress for bringing my meal? I will pay for it and I will tip her. She is doing nothing beyond her duty and may not even be cheerful. The reason is that "thank you" is a gesture of humility that says to her: I am not eager to exalt myself as one to whom you owe service. I do not wish to presume upon your work as my due. I am happy to put myself in the position of one who receives grace. I am happy to honor you as one who can meet my need. The reason a simple, unnecessary "thank you" can say all this is because of its close association with grace. Since the feeling of gratitude usually rises in our hearts when someone does us an undeserved or uncalled-for favor, the expression of thanks will at any time communicate humility (I am a mere beneficiary of grace) and encouragement (you are my needed and helpful benefactor).

Now with this insight into the meaning of gratitude and its relation to grace we can understand our text more fully. Paul says that his ministry "is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase gratitude to the glory of God." The reason the spreading of grace increases gratitude is because gratitude is the happy feeling directed toward a person who does us some undeserved favor. The person our gratitude is directed to in verse 15 is Jesus Christ and God the Father through him. In verse 5 Paul said, "What we preach is not ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord," Therefore,

the grace that spreads as Paul pursues his ministry is the grace given by Jesus. Chapter 8 verse 9 defines this for us pretty clearly: "For you know the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor so that by his poverty you might become rich." Grace begins when one person is full and another is empty. One person is a have and the other a have-not. One is rich, the other is poor. Then grace comes into action as the emptiness of one is filled up by the fullness of the other. What we do not have is supplied by what he has. Our poverty is replaced by his wealth. And all that not because we deserve it, but because Jesus is gracious. His riches are free. Therefore, gratitude wells up in the hearts of those who "receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness" (Rom. 5:17). This gratitude to Christ, which marks all true believers (Rom. 1:21), is more than saying "Thank you," or trying to return some service; it is more than being glad you are free from condemnation; it is being glad toward Jesus for the riches of salvation and the way he made it ours. When the grace of Jesus penetrates the human heart it rebounds back to God as gratitude. Christian gratitude is grace reflected back to God in the happiness we feel toward Jesus.

Now that we see the relation between grace and gratitude there are two other observations from the text which will make more sense and not seem so at odds. The first is that Paul says all his grace-spreading ministry is for your sake. The second is that Paul says the purpose of his grace-spreading ministry is for God's sake. "It is all for your sake so that as grace spreads to more and more people it may increase gratitude to the glory of God. Let's look at these two aims one at a time and then see how they fit together.

First, Paul says that everything he endures in the ministry of God's grace is for the sake of us in the church. Here is the way he says it in 2 Timothy 2:10, "I endure everything for the sake of the elect that they also may obtain salvation in Christ Jesus with its eternal glory." Paul lived for the sake of others. He lived to do good to the household of God. And the good he aimed to do them in 2 Cor. 4:15 was to make them thankful. The goal of his apostolic labors was to produce gratitude to Jesus in people's hearts. And since gratitude is begotten by grace, his ministry was a spreading of the gospel of grace. And we should be able to see now that to aim at producing gratitude is to aim at producing joy (2 Cor. 1:24), because Christian gratitude is joy directed toward Jesus for his grace. And if Paul lives for our joy, then he is working for our sake indeed, just as he said: "It is all for your sake."

In some contemporary conceptions of the gospel, we might just stop right there. The grace of Christ is given for the sake of man and Paul, a servant of that gospel also lives for the sake of man. Both the grace of Christ and the ministry of Paul aim to give man the freedom and joy of gratitude. Period. But therein lies a great weakness in much contemporary Christianity: its endpoint is man, to be sure redeemed man, but still man not God. For those of us who have caught a glimpse of the glory of God in the face of Christ (4:6) and who have felt the passion with which God pursues his own glory (Is. 48:9-11), it is a tragic thing to see Christian theologians and preachers and lay people talk about God's purposes almost entirely in terms of what becomes of man.

For the apostle Paul this was not the case. Again and again this theme comes to expression:

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments and inscrutable his ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord or who has been his counselor? Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid? For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen. (Rom. 11:33-36)

The beginning point, the middle point and the end point of all Paul's thought and all of life and history is God himself. And so it is here in our text.

"It is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase gratitude to the glory of God." Gratitude is joy toward God for his grace. But by its very nature, gratitude glorifies the giver. It acknowledges its own need and the beneficence of the giver. Just like I humble myself and exalt the waitress in the restaurant when I say, "Thank you," to her, so I humble myself and exalt God when I feel gratitude to him. The difference of course is that I really am infinitely in debt to God for his grace and everything he does for me is free and undeserved. But the point is that gratitude glorifies the giver. It glorifies God. And this is Paul's final goal in all his labors: for the sake of the church--yes; but, above and beyond that for the glory of God. "He who offers a sacrifice of thanksgiving honors God" (Ps. 50:23). The wonderful thing about the gospel is that the response it requires from us for God's glory is also the response which we feel to be most natural and joyful, namely, gratitude for grace. God's glory and our gladness are not in competition.

Hudson Taylor, who endured great hardships and tragedies in his lifelong mission work in China, said when he was old, "I never made a sacrifice." What he meant was that along the path of self-denying service you experience so much joyful gratitude for God's sustaining grace that whatever you forsake to buy that pearl it is as if there were no sacrifice at all. Therefore, a life that gives glory to God for his grace and a life of deepest gladness are always the same life. And what makes them one is gratitude.

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