

Grace in Paul – “The Unconditional Gift”

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Radical. It is a word that will conjure up a variety of names and ideologies for many of us sitting here today. For the majority of us it may invoke a negative response, more common with the extreme forms of religious groups, which dog our news headlines in this present era. We may even have heard it as a slang in the 90's, with kids everywhere using it as a word describing something excellent, the example being that's 'Radical' dude. But may I myself, do something radical and state that like many words in the English language it has evolved into something too narrow, carrying with it unhelpful connotations. Is it therefore safe to say, we would hesitate to ascribe such a word to the biblical witness found in the New Testament? Well, I would like to claim the word radical back this morning and quote one New Testament scholar who described the writer of the letter to the Romans as 'a Jewish radical who turned the world upside down'.

We all know this writer as Paul the Apostle who the church has in its own way helped to domesticate, normalize and shape to our own devices, all to shed him of his 'radical nature'. A man whose theology still today, confuses, challenges and changes us in new and exciting ways. And today we have the privilege to once again look at his writings and be confronted with what I think is his most radical views on the gospel and his most radical views of God, that of Grace in the book of Romans.

Let us now for a moment, imagine that we are in a debating hall. You are the audience, I am the judicator, and to my left and right are two different men here to defend and explain their positions. Let us imagine that one of those men is Paul and he is here standing to my right. And joining him is another man situated to my left. This man on my left is also Jewish and a philosopher and writer. And his name also starts with P; he is Philo of Alexandria who was a near contemporary of Paul who also drew on Greek and Jewish thought in his writings. Two men who if they were here today would have a lot in common, they both believed in the Jewish God, a God of grace and love but also of justice and holiness. But there would be two areas where they would disagree, firstly the question of who is the messiah and secondly how God's grace is worked out among humanity.

As we turn then to verses 6-18 found in Romans chapter 9, we find Paul facing a catastrophe of mammoth proportions. The gospel has been preached to both Jews and Gentiles, but the majority of God's people, the Jewish nation, have rejected it. If Paul therefore were present here on my right today, what would he say? He would start by stating that God's word has not failed because just as is witnessed in the history of Israel, not all from 'Israel are truly Israel', but only those who are of God's promise to Abraham, because his promise is unchangeable. He would go on to use the examples of Jacob and Esau, who Paul says "Before they had been born or had done anything good or bad (so that God's purpose of election might continue, not by works but by his call) their mother was told "The elder shall serve the younger" proving that even though Esau was of the same flesh, he was not included in the promise.

What is Paul's main point in these verses then? He is obviously wrestling with the crisis facing Israel, but he is also revealing something radical about the grace of God, that it is given without any human effort or achievement, because even before Jacob was born, God seemed to show him favor. Now If Paul was present here today and stated his case as above, I'm sure a cry of disagreement would come from my left. From our friend Philo, who also wrote extensively on the Jewish Scriptures. And in his writings wrestled with this very same question, how does God's grace operate? He would start off by saying to Paul that it is intolerable that God's decision could have been made without any reason at all, and his response would be to latch on to the one factor that might give him a clue to God's reason; their names. He uses this method throughout his writings, looking at the example of why Noah was chosen, stating that his name means 'rest from wickedness' or 'righteousness', so he must have had some sort of righteousness within him, however this is not to be confused with what the church has labeled 'works', but rather a part of his human nature.

But when it comes to Jacob and Esau the circumstances are different. They were chosen before they were born so Philo explains that the meaning is in God's knowledge of the future. Even at the earliest stages of creation says Philo, God knows their respective capacities, works and passions. So, God could see that Jacob was going to be accepting of his grace, and had some sort of intrinsic virtue, so therefore was chosen. For Philo, God does not give the gift of grace to unworthy recipients that would be irresponsible and arbitrary.

And so as we listen to these two men, where do we sit? In a way, one has some consideration for Philo's view, would we too give gifts to seemingly irresponsible people or whom we would deem unworthy?

We think of the character Jean Val Jean in the play and movie *Les Miserable*. The main character Jean is released from prison, and having no where to stay he knocks on the local Bishop's house, who accordingly invites him in and has his maid prepare a meal which they sit to eat together, during dinner Jean divulges that he was in prison for theft, trying to scare his hosts. They finish the meal however and unmoved by Jean's rough past invite him to stay the evening; out of compassion the Bishop has taken him in, feed him and given him a bed. But during the night, the old nature has its way in Jean, and he steals the Bishop's silverware that he had been eyeing up during dinner. The bishop hears him in the night and confronts him only to receive the ultimate of insults, a black eye. Jean flees into the night, leaving a trail of misery behind him. The next day the bishop is busy in his garden when the police turn up with Jean, and say they have caught him. To which the Bishop replies "I'm very disappointed in you Jean" "you forgot to take the candle sticks also" and tells his maid to fetch them so Jean may take them, requesting the police to let him go. And in a moment of utmost beauty the Bishop says to Jean "Don't forget it, don't ever forget it, you've promised to become a new man" "I've ransomed you from fear and hate and now I hand you back to God" In a radical act of kindness, the Bishop gifts Jean an unimaginable gift.

Is this similar to the gift of Grace Paul illustrates in Romans 9? For Paul uses the examples of Jacob and Esau as his illustration. These two men were both born of the same Mother, so it could not be by blood relation. It was before they were born, so it wasn't anything to do with their nature, and to exclude yet one more option Paul quotes God's statement that "the greater shall serve the lesser" showing that age or status is also irrelevant to God. And to hammer home his point Paul finishes this step in the argument with the brutal statement of Malachi: 'Jacob I loved; Esau I hated', as one writer puts it "Just that; no explanation, no rationale, nothing to indicate why one and not the other". Was Jean Val Jean worthy of the gift given by the bishop, in every way we would say no? Did God divinely choose him? Well, we don't know, but I suspect many have got stuck on the issues of predestination in these chapters and have forgotten the radicalness of what Paul is stating, what could be called an almost dangerous grace. God chooses to give to anyone regardless of who they are and what they have done. There is no precondition, only God's choice. I feel that if we have not taken offense in these first steps of Paul's argument we clearly should have. But it gets worse one could say, as Paul continues his explanation with the difficult statement issued by God in the aftermath of the Golden Calf incident "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion". It is said, "that this citation is simultaneously hopeful - If God will be merciful, as he

was to Israel at Sinai there is a path beyond deserved judgment and strangely disorientating.” But what is hard to grasp is whom God is merciful too leaving us with a description of His will that is unknown and in principle unknowable.

So are we just left with a ‘mystery’ that ultimately irritates us? Well, one could say yes, but I believe there is one more element not spoken of here that reorients us, and that is the Christ-Event, which for Paul is Jesus Christ’s death on the cross. The ultimate paradox, a gift that defies explanation or rationale, whether legal, social or moral, that it is, the gift that ‘justifies the ungodly’, and reconciles the world to God ‘while we were yet sinners’, because it was of course ultimately this perplexing grace that had revolutionized Paul’s own life. And further it is not just an external act for God; it is something that he himself bore and continues too which still perplexes us all.

See the problem is that Paul was not a systematic theologian, he also almost always wrote his theology in response to contextual issues, so we will never be able to put him in a box. But the radical nature of his understanding of divine grace and human worth challenges all societal norms and opens up the possibilities of new creative and even revolutionary moments in cultural history. That’s why it is so important not to silence Paul, or domesticate him or sideline his theology to a purely individualistic mystery. If we actually pursue his radical idea’s and always view them through the lens of the ultimate radical act, the Death of the God man Jesus of Nazareth on the Cross as a gift to all, the ungodly, the unworthy and the undeserving we will discover new ways to be church, new ways to run economies, new ways to care for the environment, and new ways to share that gift that we have all received.

See the argument isn’t ‘who will be saved’ but who will accept the free gift given? Our friend Philo would of undoubtedly found Paul’s ideas far to radical, how can God give irrespective without some sort of worth? This challenges us with a radical perspective of our interactions with those around us; do we show grace irrespective of peoples? Do we truly understand its implications on the way we run social services and form political policies? You may be disappointed to know that I don’t have the answers, but I feel we must always be reassessing Paul’s views of Grace as radical, so that we, just like Jean Val Jean and the societies we live in, will not miss the opportunity to be set free from fear and hate.

Amen