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STRONG IN GRACE

2 Timothy 2:1

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2 Timothy Lesson 8

Strong in Grace 2 Timothy 2:1

Of all the concepts in the Bible, one of the most important for you to understand and apply daily to your life is that of God's grace. If you do not understand God's grace, you do not understand the gospel, because grace is at the core of the gospel (Acts 20:24). Not only are we saved by grace, but also we are to grow in grace (2 Pet. 3:18). God's grace motivates us to serve Him (1 Cor. 15:10; 2 Cor. 9:8). His grace sustains us in our trials (2 Cor. 12:9). When we are needy, we are invited to come to God's throne of grace to receive mercy and find grace to help in our time of need (Heb. 4:16). We are told to fix our hope completely on the grace to be brought to us when Jesus Christ returns (1 Pet. 1:13). The very last verse of the Bible reads (Rev. 22:21), "The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all. Amen."

Because God's grace is such a vital concept, it is not surprising that the enemy of our souls works overtime to subvert God's grace by spreading error and confusion about its true nature. Every false religion on earth promotes salvation either totally by human works or by some mixture of God's grace with human works. Among God's people who have been saved by His grace, the enemy promotes confusion about how to live the Christian life apart from God's grace. Some promote holiness through legalism, which only fosters the most pervasive of sins, namely, pride. Others turn the grace of God into licentiousness, thus denying our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ (Jude 4).

Because God's grace is such an important concept and because I frequently encounter those who do not understand it or live by it, I thought that it would be profitable to devote an entire message to 2 Timothy 2:1, "You therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus." The entire paragraph runs through verse 7. The theme of these verses is fruitful Christian service. Timothy, as we saw in chapter 1, was prone to shrink back from exercising his spiritual gifts because of shyness or fear of controversy. Three times Paul exhorts Timothy, either directly or indi-

rectly by example, not to be ashamed of the gospel or of Paul, who was in prison because of the gospel (1:8, 12, 16).

Now, in 2:1-7, he encourages Timothy to exercise his gifts so as to be a fruitful Christian. He is saying: To be a fruitful Christian, there is a person that you must be (strong in grace; 2:1); there is a task that you must do (entrust the gospel to faithful men, who will teach others also; 2:2); and, there is a price that you must pay (suffer hardship; 2:3-7). He uses three examples of those who suffer hardship for a greater goal: the soldier (2:3, 4); the athlete (2:5); and the farmer (2:7). Then (2:8-13), he gives three more examples of how present suffering leads to future glory: Jesus Christ, risen from the dead (2:8); Paul, suffering so that God's elect will obtain eternal glory (2:9-10); and, an ancient Christian hymn, which teaches that endurance results in reward (2:11-13).

With that overview, today we will focus on verse 1, which in the context is saying,

To be a fruitful Christian, you must be strong in the grace
that is in Christ Jesus.

The "you" is emphatic. The idea is that in contrast to the prevailing mood of those in Asia who are turning away from Paul (1:15), Timothy must stand firm. John Stott (*Guard the Gospel* [IVP1973], p. 49) paraphrases, "Never mind what other people may be thinking of or saying or doing. Never mind how weak and shy you yourself may feel. As for you, Timothy, be strong!"

"Therefore" links these verses back to the exhortations and examples of endurance and falling away from chapter 1. Paul's flow of thought is, "Therefore, in light of the great gospel message deposited with us and in light of the examples that you have in Onesiphorus and in me, if you want to endure and use your gifts for God's purpose and glory, you must be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus."

Paul addresses Timothy tenderly as "my son" or "my child." This reminds Timothy that he owes his salvation, humanly speaking, to the apostle Paul. It also reminds him that Paul's exhortations flowed out of his fatherly heart of love. Perhaps also there is the thought that as a child, Timothy was prone to be led astray by the crowd mentality that was turning away from Paul and the gos-

pel of God's grace. To be strong in grace we must stand firm against the enemy's relentless attempts to pollute God's grace with human merit (Gal. 2:4-5).

Flowing out of the situation in Ephesus that Paul was seeking to correct and out of Paul's entire ministry, there are four requirements if we want to be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus:

1. To be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus, you must be clear and stand firmly on the gospel of God's grace.

As you know, Paul was constantly plagued by the Judaizers, who perverted the gospel of God's grace by teaching that to be saved, you must be circumcised and keep the law of Moses (Acts 15:1, 5). He wrote Galatians to correct this error. He said that it is a different gospel, which is not a gospel at all and that all who teach such a false gospel are to be accursed or damned (Gal. 1:6-9).

In 1 Timothy 1, Paul repeatedly emphasizes the gospel. He was an apostle "according to the promise of life in Christ Jesus," which is the gospel. He reminds Timothy of his own conversion (1:5). He exhorts Timothy not to be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, but to join Paul "in suffering for the gospel" (1:8). He mentions how Christ "brought life and immortality to light through the gospel" (1:10). In the context, the deposit which Timothy is to guard is the gospel (1:14).

Thus when Paul exhorts Timothy to "be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus" (2:1), at least in part Paul was thinking of the message of the gospel of God's grace. Every attack on the gospel is an attack on the grace of God. Some false religions blatantly teach a system of human works to earn salvation. Others are more subtle, mixing God's grace with human works. But any teaching that adds works to God's grace diminishes Christ's work on the cross. It would mean that His substitutionary death is not sufficient to save us so that we must add something from ourselves to supplement His death. But that pollutes the pure stream of God's grace.

Grace is properly defined as God's unmerited favor. It is *not* "the desire and power to do God's will," as Bill Gothard teaches. I agree that God gives us the desire and power to do His will (Phil. 2:13), but that is not grace. Grace means that God freely gives us eternal life completely apart from anything we are or anything we

do. In fact, He gives it *in spite of* who we are and what we do (Rom. 5:6-10). God's grace stems solely from His character and His sovereign will, not from anything in us. God did not bestow His grace on us because He foresaw that we would believe in Him. That would take glory from God alone, and share it with us as the cause of our salvation. He did not give us His grace because He saw great potential in us or because we are basically good people or because we have done good works in His name.

You may wonder, "If grace comes to us totally apart from anything that we do, then why does the Bible say that God gives grace to the humble (1 Pet. 5:5)? Doesn't that imply that we must do something to merit or earn His grace?" The answer is that by its very nature, grace can only be received by the humble, because the proud person does not see or acknowledge his need for grace. The proud person wants to help pay his own way. But the humble person recognizes, "I deserve only God's wrath and judgment. If salvation depends on me, I'm doomed." So he cries out to God for mercy, and thus God gets all the glory when He saves him.

In order for you to understand clearly what I'm talking about, I must be specific here by mentioning the Roman Catholic Church. There is a strong movement today, led by well-known men like Charles Colson, Max Lucado, and the Promise Keepers movement, to set aside our differences with Catholics and come together in the areas where we agree. The problem with that thinking is that the Roman Catholic Church teaches a different way of salvation that is not salvation at all. It teaches that we are saved by God's grace through faith, but not by grace through faith *alone*. Rather, we must cooperate with God's grace by adding our works and in combination, eventually we may accumulate enough merit to be saved. But that is the essence of the Galatian heresy. Here is how the official Catholic teaching reads (*The Councils of Trent*, in Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* [Baker]):

If any one saith, that justifying faith is nothing else but confidence in the divine mercy which remits sins for Christ's sake; or, that this confidence alone is that whereby we are justified: let him be anathema. (Session 6, Canon 12, in Schaff, 2:113.)

If any one saith, that the justice received is not preserved and also increased before God through good works; but that the

said works are merely the fruits and signs of Justification obtained, but not a cause of the increase thereof: let him be anathema. (Session 6, Canon 24, in Schaff, 2:115.)

In other words, the Catholic Church declares that we are justified before God by grace through faith, but *not* through faith *alone*. Rather, our good works must be added to faith in order both to preserve and increase our right standing before God. This process is not completed at the initial point of faith in Christ, and not even in this life, but only, maybe, in Purgatory. (For further treatment, see *Justification by Faith Alone* [Soli Deo Gloria], ed. by Don Kistler, especially pp. 7-14, by John MacArthur, Jr.)

This gospel of God's grace alone is also under attack by the so-called "New Perspective on Paul." While I do not have time to deal with that, it only shows that Satan is relentless in attacking the gospel of God's grace. To be strong in grace, you must be clear on and stand firmly on salvation by grace alone through faith alone.

2. To be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus, you must be clear on your standing in Christ.

The Greek here may be translated either, "be strong *by* the grace that is in Christ Jesus" or "be strong *in* the grace that is in Christ Jesus." Either concept is biblically valid, since it is *by* God's grace that we are strong and we are strong *in* God's grace. But in the context here, it seems preferable to take it as, "be strong in the sphere of grace that is in Christ Jesus." As you know, Paul used the phrase "in Christ" dozens of times. It refers to the amazing truth that when you trust Christ as your Savior, God views you as totally identified with Jesus Christ. If God accepts Jesus Christ, then He accepts you, because you are in His Son. Paul puts it this way (Eph.1:3): "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ." All of the riches of Christ are ours because we are "in Him"!

Every once in a while, you read a bizarre story of a person who had a fortune in the bank, but he lived and died like a pauper because he did not draw on his vast resources. Many Christians are like that. Everything that God has to give us is in Christ and we are in Christ. But either through ignorance or unbelief, we do not lay

hold of these riches in our daily lives. Our text says that there is grace to be found in Christ Jesus. We need that grace daily because we fall short daily. Go to God's Word and by faith lay hold of the promises of God that are yours in Christ. If the enemy accuses you because you have sinned, confess your sins to God and lay hold of the grace that is in Christ Jesus. If you need victory over some stubborn sin, lay hold of the truth that you died with Christ and that you are raised up with Him, so that sin no longer has dominion (Rom. 6:1-11). To be strong in grace, you must understand your new position in Christ through God's abundant grace.

3. To be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus, you must avoid appeals to become godly through legalism.

Legalism is the attempt to be holy by keeping certain standards (usually manmade) without dealing with your heart before God. The Pharisees in Christ's day were concerned about ceremonial purity, fastidiously observing their rules about washing their hands and pots and pans. But they ignored obeying God on the heart level (Mark 7:1-23). They practiced their supposed righteousness to look good to other men, but they did not live to please God, who examines the heart (Matt. 6:1-18). Legalists always boast in the flesh, but the Christian is to boast in the cross (Gal. 6:13-14).

Paul dealt with this perpetual problem in many places in his letters. But note especially Colossians 2:20-23:

If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, "Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!" (which all refer to things destined to perish with use)—in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence.

Then (in 3:1-4) he goes on to talk about our new position in Christ, how we have been raised up with Him and must, therefore, keep seeking the things above. In other words, legalism never produces genuine godliness because it only deals with the flesh, not with the heart. Through grace, we have died to the flesh and we are

made alive in Him. Living in view of these glorious truths is the key to holiness.

I should also mention that some react against legalism and go into licentiousness, claiming to be under grace. I have heard Bible teachers say that legalism and licentiousness are two opposite extremes, with grace being the balance point in the middle. I have also often heard of grace being portrayed as sloppy, hang-loose living. But that is to misunderstand these terms. In reality, legalism and licentiousness are flip sides of the same coin, because they both appeal to the flesh. The legalist takes pride in his outward observance of certain rules. The licentious person indulges the flesh, saying that it doesn't matter because he is under grace. But both are simply living in accordance with the flesh. Living under grace does not mean that we are free to be sloppy about obeying God's moral commandments.

To live under the true grace of God in Christ always leads to a desire to please God in thought and deed. Note Titus 2:11-12: "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age." God's true grace always leads to holiness. Or, as Paul put it (1 Cor. 15:10), "But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them [the apostles], yet not I, but the grace of God with me." God's grace motivated Paul to labor for the Lord, not to kick back and take it easy.

Thus to be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus, you must be clear and stand firmly on the gospel of God's grace. You also must be clear on your standing in Christ by grace. You must avoid appeals to become godly through legalism, as well as the other danger of thinking that God's grace allows you to tolerate sin.

4. To be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus, you must be weak in yourself, but strong in His sufficiency.

Implicit in the phrase "be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus" is also the statement, "Recognize your own weakness so that you rely completely on His strength." To the extent that we think that we are strong, we will not rely on God's sufficiency and power. In 2 Corinthians 1, Paul tells how he was burdened excessively be-

yond his strength, so that he despaired even of life. He adds (2 Cor. 1:9), "indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead." We will only be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus to the extent that we are weak in ourselves and cast ourselves on the all-sufficiency of Jesus Christ.

The apostle Paul had an amazing revelation of the glory of heaven, which may have happened when he was stoned and left for dead (2 Cor. 12:1-4; Acts 14:19-20). But God knew that having such a vision of heaven could easily lead Paul to exalt himself. Thus God sent Paul a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to keep him from exalting himself. This may have been a physical ailment or it may refer to the Judaizers, who dogged his every step. But whatever it was, Paul cried out to God to remove it. In that context, God said to Paul (2 Cor. 12:9), "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." Paul goes on to add (12:10), "when I am weak, then I am strong."

In the context of talking about preaching the gospel, Paul exclaimed (2 Cor. 2:16), "And who is adequate for these things?" A few verses later (3:5), he answered his own question: "Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God." In himself, Timothy was not adequate to stand firm against the false teachers who were undermining the gospel. He was certainly not adequate to fill the sandals of the apostle Paul (who would be!). But if he was strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus, that grace would be sufficient for him in every situation. That same grace is sufficient for you.

The well-known British preacher, Charles Spurgeon, was riding home after a heavy day's work. He felt weary and depressed, when suddenly the text came to him, "My grace is sufficient for thee." It came home to him with the emphasis on two words, "My grace is sufficient for *thee*." Spurgeon said, "Doubtless it is. Surely the grace of the infinite God is more than sufficient for such a mere insect as I am," and he burst out laughing as he thought on how far the supply exceeded all his needs.

He said that it was as if he were a little fish in the sea, and in his thirst he said, "Alas, I shall drink up the ocean." Then the Father of the waters lifted up His head and smilingly replied, "Little

fish, the boundless main is sufficient for thee.” The thought made unbelief appear supremely ridiculous, as indeed it is (*Lectures to My Students* [Zondervan, 1965 reprint], pp. 193-194). To be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus, you must be weak in yourself, but strong in Christ’s sufficiency.

Conclusion

As I said, the context of Paul’s exhortation to Timothy is that of being fruitful as a Christian. To be a fruitful Christian, you must be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. It will cause you to revel often in His amazing grace that saved you. It will sustain you as you serve Him. It will flow through you to others and attract them to Christ, because His grace is supremely attractive. I pray that we all will be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus!

Application Questions

1. Why can’t we set aside differences over the details of how we are saved and join with those who claim to follow Christ (such as the Catholic Church)?
2. Are there laws under grace? Why must we resist the idea that living under grace means not being concerned about sin?
3. Why does legalism never produce true holiness? Does this mean that we should not have any rules?
4. Some fear that teaching God’s grace will lead to licentious living. Is this concern valid? Should we balance grace with law?

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