

## Ephesians 3

Imagine, if you can, that you had a rich friend; a really rich friend. Now, I'm not talking about someone who just had thousands of pounds, sure you probably have one or two friends like that anyway or even someone with millions of pounds; one or two of you might already know some people like that. I want you to imagine that you had a friend who was absolutely undoubtedly filthy rich; a billionaire.

Now your billionaire friend takes you one day to the local bank and shows you one of the vaults in which there in front of you are his or her billions just sitting there. They then give you a card by which you can lift out this money but only on one condition. You can only take it out to give it away to help people who have got into financial difficulties. How do you feel about this new vocation in life? How do you feel about going around as the steward of the riches of your friend?

I'm sure at first it might be a bit awkward going round trying to give away this money. People might not trust you at first as you try to give it away for free. "What's the catch?" many people would say. Others might refuse your help, too proud to accept your charity but I am sure a great many people would be very grateful as you sorted out all of their money problems.

Of course after a while some people might start to object, the banks and the loan companies would complain as you went round Northern Ireland giving people money and putting them out of business, the loan sharks and the various other gangsters that feed off the poor in this country might even get violent if they saw that you were getting in the road of them making their money.

Some people might complain at the kind of people that you gave the money to; they would ask why you were giving the money to people to pay off their debts instead of giving it to good people who for one reason or another have never had a pick of debt in their life. How do you think that you would cope with the stresses of being the steward of so much wealth?

Paul writes to the people of Ephesus about his joy at being just such a steward only the vast riches that he has been given to administer are those of the grace and mercy of God as seen in Jesus. Surely, writes Paul in verse two as translated by the very literal English Standard Version, “You have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you”

He has already written in this letter about the amazing grace of God given freely to both Jews and Gentiles, to both the people who were in and the people who were at one stage out of God's kingdom. Paul's mission in life now is to go round as steward of that grace, he says, “Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery.”

Paul has become, if you like, a travelling grace man, touring the known world bringing the good news of Jesus to people everywhere. And if you had been brought up in a world like that of the people in Ephesus then this mystery that Paul refers would be really good news. If you had grown up thinking that the gods were far away from you, that they had no real care for human beings, that all that mattered in life was being rich or powerful or even better both, then to discover that God cares about you, that God wanted to have you in his family and part of his kingdom really is good news.

If you had grown up thinking that the gods were vengeful, capricious and angry beings who needed to be appeased at every turn otherwise your harvest would fail or your business would go bust or your children would be born with defects then to be told that God is a God of love, a God of justice and a God of mercy was and still is good news to hear. Paul travels to the gentiles with this good news that God is interested in and loves everyday normal human beings.

He has already outlined in earlier chapters just what was meant by this outpouring of God's grace. The God, who, up to this point, had been a mystery to the gentiles, was now being made clear to them. They no longer had to hear about God second hand through his people the Jews they could approach God themselves, learn about God themselves and be full members of God's family because of Jesus.

Jesus died for Jews and also for gentiles like us so that by his death he might pay for and destroy the sin that acted as a barrier between us and God. This is the amazing news and rich grace that Paul has been given the job of bringing to gentiles like you and me. The God who was once so mysterious to us can now be known. The God who was once so far off is now known to be a loving father. The God who once seemed so stern, and who seemed as though he was against us, is now on our side in the battle against death and condemnation.

That is the message that we too have to share. We have also experienced, like Paul, the riches of Christ's grace. Our God is not miserly and he has not been miserly with us. Time after time he has given us grace and strength, he has forgiven us our sins, kept us safe and strong through trauma and tragedy and that is not to mention the million and one material blessings that we take for granted each and every day.

God has blessed us out of his riches, out of his grace and he has done that so that we too can be a blessing to others. God's power worked in the life of Paul converting him and making him no longer a murderer or religious bigot but a servant of the grace of God, slaving for the very people he once sought to kill. Having been filled by the riches of that grace of Christ Paul now seeks to spread that grace and that power of God everywhere he goes.

There are so many ways in which we can share the grace of God but it is best to start by asking for it in our own lives. Paul prayed for the gentiles in Ephesus and that prayer applies to us Ulster gentiles too. He prayed that "Out of his glorious riches God may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God."

Grace is something that when it fills our lives soon seeks to overflow and find a way to touch and to bless other people. Once Paul had experienced the grace of God there was no holding him back. Although he knew that he was less than the least of all God's people, still he knew that grace, once it had gotten hold of you, was something that could not be held on to. We must pass grace on.

Once we receive grace we must be graceful to others for if we try to hoard grace, if we only receive but never give then grace withers in us like a root bound plant. Grace always seeks to grow, to be passed on, to be shared, to be handed out like those riches that we thought about at the start. Paul prayed that the Ephesians would be filled to overflowing with grace so that they too could catch a vision like his to move on and proclaim that grace to everyone that they meet.

Now this all sounds happy and good so far but there is a discordant, out of tune, note in the middle of this passage filled with grace notes. While Paul is reassuring the Ephesians of the riches of God's grace and his immense love for the gentiles he throws in two lines that bring us up short. In verse one and in verse thirteen Paul speaks about suffering in prison for the sake of the gentile believers.

Why was he in prison? Well, not everybody was happy with the idea that gentiles like us had access to the glorious riches of God's grace. As Robert reminded us last week old enmities and old bitterness separated the Jews from the gentiles. Jewish memories were long and they remembered the kinds of things that these gentiles had done to their Jewish forebears in the name of culture and religion.

The Greeks had once invaded Palestine and under a particularly wicked and insane ruler by the name of Antiochus Epiphanes they had tried to persecute the Jews out of existence. They attacked Jewish identity by outlawing all of those things that were peculiar to Judaism and tried to make all of the Jews accept Greek culture. This is a quote from the record of the war of independence that the Jews fought against their Greek oppressors.

<sup>NJB</sup> **1 Maccabees 1:41** The king (That is Antiochus Epiphanes) then issued a proclamation to his whole kingdom that all were to become a single people, each nation renouncing its particular customs.<sup>42</sup> All the gentiles conformed to the king's decree,<sup>43</sup> and many Israelites chose to accept his religion, sacrificing to idols and profaning the Sabbath....

<sup>54</sup> On the fifteenth day of (The month of) Chislew in the year 145 (167 BC) the king built the abomination that causes desolation on top of the altar of burnt offering; and altars were built in the surrounding towns of Judah<sup>55</sup> and incense offered at the doors of houses and in the streets.<sup>56</sup> Any books of the Law that came to light were torn up and burned.<sup>57</sup> Whenever anyone was discovered possessing a copy of the covenant or practising the Law, the king's decree sentenced him to death.

<sup>58</sup> Month after month they took harsh action against any offenders they discovered in the towns of Israel.<sup>59</sup> On the twenty-fifth day of each month, sacrifice was offered on the altar erected on top of the altar of burnt offering.<sup>60</sup> Women who had had their children circumcised were put to death according to the edict<sup>61</sup> with their babies hung round their necks, and the members of their household and those who had performed the circumcision were executed with them.

<sup>62</sup> Yet there were many in Israel who stood firm and found the courage to refuse unclean food.<sup>63</sup> They chose death rather than contamination by such fare or profanation of the holy covenant, and they were executed.<sup>64</sup> It was a truly dreadful retribution that visited Israel.

If you are interested in reading about that period that was a quote from **1 Maccabees 1:41**, you'll find that book in some very old Anglican copies of the King James Version.

The Jews won that particular war but they lost and sacrificed a great deal in the process. The battle against the Greeks hardened the attitude of the Jews against the gentiles, especially the attitudes of Jews who, like those in Ephesus, lived in a world dominated by Greek culture.

In Ephesus the signs of Greek idol worship were everywhere and I am sure they found it difficult to keep their young people from getting caught up in all of the idolatrous activities of Greek world around them. The last thing that they wanted to hear was this mad travelling preacher who was telling people that their long hoped for Messiah died for the gentiles and loved them too.

People had fought and died over issues like circumcision, they had fought and died over issues of clean and unclean food, they had fought and died over the keeping of the Sabbath but here was this preacher who called himself a Jew going round telling people that God accepted the gentiles even if they did not convert to Judaism. God accepted them uncircumcised and eating their unclean food. What, they thought, did their people fight and die for?

I'm sure you have been to churches where there are monuments to RUC officers and soldiers of the UDR and Royal Irish and others who have served and died for their country. The Jews regarded the martyrs of the wars of independence in the same way. They regarded Christians like Paul as people who had no respect whatsoever for the sacrifices made by those who died for the freedom of religion that they now precariously held.

You see the grace of God is not only one of the most beautiful aspects of the Christian faith but also the most scandalous. For the Jews of Paul's time there were some acts that quite simply were not forgivable. I have spoken to people before who hate Christianity precisely because of God's grace that forgives everybody who repents. They could not tolerate the idea that God might love the people who had visited such awful acts upon them and their ancestors.

Paul's preaching incited many a violent reaction from the Jewish people in the towns he went to and he was attacked and framed by some of these people on trumped up charges a number of times and it is on one of these occasions that he writes this letter from prison. Their hatred of their old enemies led them to pervert the course of justice and to send an innocent man to prison.

I don't think we can rush to judge these Jewish leaders for their lack of grace living as we do in a society where talking about grace for our enemies is worse than using foul language in public. We live in a land where the G word is worse than the F word among people like us who call ourselves Christians. Our politicians Catholic and Protestant seem to compete with one another to be seen as the least forgiving and least graceful party in our country because they know that those who show the least grace get most votes.

How does Paul respond to this lack of grace on the part of his Jewish contemporaries? He counters this hatred of grace with a prayer for more grace on the part of him and the church. Lack of grace can only be defeated by an overflowing of grace. Hatred of grace can only be countered by even greater demonstration of grace and love.

This is one of the reasons why he prays that both they and we might be filled to the brim with this grace of God for it is only through this infilling and outpouring of grace that we can seek to break down the strongholds of ungraceful thinking and behaviour in our society. Do you think that is possible, do you think that can be done in a society where grace, even the grace of God, has become a bad word?

Just in case either the Ephesians or ourselves were to begin to think, like the Jews, that there are some people beyond even the grace and power of God Paul finishes this section with a prayer, a doxology to use the technical jargon, a prayer that speaks of the glory of God. The God who “is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine.”

I can imagine a lot, can you? I can ask for a lot can you?

I can imagine a society in which God’s people have learned to follow the example of their Lord and forgive and reach out in grace to their enemies. I can imagine a church that rather than cowering inside the walls of our grand buildings moves out to change our country and this world through the grace of God. I can imagine a church that sees no one as beyond the grace of God, a church that is not prejudiced against people because of how they speak or where they come from, what colour they are or what they or their ancestors have done in the past.

I can imagine a lot, I can ask for a lot and God can do more than that, God can do more than we can ask or imagine. Let us pray that God expands our imagination, that he increases the ambition of our prayers for Grace for ourselves and for the world in which we live.