

“Purpose & Grace”

2 Timothy 1:1-10, 14

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God,
for the sake of the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus,

To Timothy, my beloved child: Grace, mercy, and peace
from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

I am grateful to God, whom I worship with a clear conscience,
as my ancestors did, when I remember you constantly
in my prayers night and day.

Recalling your tears, I long to see you so
that I may be filled with joy.

I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first
in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice
and now, I am sure, lives in you.

For this reason I remind you
to rekindle the gift of God that is within you
through the laying on of my hands;
for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice,
but rather a spirit of power & of love & of self-discipline.

Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord
or of me "his prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel,
relying on the power of God, who saved us
and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works
but according to his own purpose and grace.

This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus
before the ages began, but it has now been revealed
through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus,
who abolished death and brought life
and immortality to light through the gospel.

Guard the good treasure entrusted to you,
with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us.

Purpose & Grace

2 Timothy 1:1-10, 14

October 5, 2025

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I.

The sermon this morning will be in two parts. In the first part we will address the notion of *grace*, while the *purpose* of that grace will constitute the second. It will be easy to give your attention to the second part, less so the first part. However, it is only through the first part that we fully appreciate the second. Here we go.

Though it is doubtful that Paul actually wrote 2 Timothy, which along with 1 Timothy and Titus are called the “Pastoral Epistles” because they are letters with instruction for pastors and congregations, the message contained within 2 Timothy is nothing short of remarkable. The author, most certainly a person closely associated with Paul, clearly had an intimate, thorough, and accurate understanding of the Apostle’s theological architecture because here in this epistle we find an espousal of Paul’s core concept of God’s all pervasive Grace. This grace is a *gift* to us *in* Christ, given to us before the ages began, only now has it been revealed to us through the cross.

II.

Of course, grace is something of which Christians all over the world often speak. The occasion of World Communion Sunday, is, in fact, a global *celebration* of grace. Grace, as a theological concept, is the second most ubiquitous theme at work in Christendom; with the concept of sin being the most common by a country mile. Yet, grace and sin are like milk and cookies, often served and best enjoyed together. Sin, without the grace to dunk it in, is a bitter dish indeed. Grace, though, without a sense of sin is often a bland and unappreciated tonic. For Paul, and for everyone of us who is purposefully seeking to plumb the depths of the spiritual life, one cannot fully understand *grace*, without fully understanding *sin*.

III.

All too often when people *hear* the word “sin” or *talk* about “sin” (almost always *other* people’s sin) what they usually have in mind (whether they know it or not) is the equivalent of our mother telling us not to steal cookies from the cookie jar. Yet, *we* go right ahead and steal that cookie anyway (don’t we?). The line was clearly drawn, agreed upon, and vividly communicated. Nevertheless we crossed over it, and the punishment for the transgression is swift, real, unavoidable, and final.

However, the Apostle Paul’s understanding of sin is *not* stealing cookies from the cookie jar, neither is it the irresistible desire to do so. Oh no, sin is that the cookie jar is *broken* and no matter how, or how many times, we try to fix it we simply cannot.

IV.

For Paul, sin is likened unto a tear in the very fabric of the cosmos which causes everything (and I mean *everything*) to spill out into a chaotic and noxious pile where odium overcomes beauty and nothing is ever quite right or as it should be. Moreover, the tear keeps worsening with the edges continuing to fray, break, and pull apart. At some level, whether they realize it or not, *everyone* understands the concept of sin. Oh, they may call it by another name or miss the forest for the trees but sin, by *far*, is the most readily apparent and demonstrable of the Christian tenants.

Most people, again, whether they know it or not ascribe to the solution that we, as a species, will somehow evolve or think our way out of that noxious, chaotic pile of shhh...stuff through the application of science and technology arising from an overall greater human enlightenment. As if we were the little Dutch boy and all we need to do is stick our finger in the dyke and be patient.

V.

Such thinking, or such a hope, reveals a *staggering* naivety as the scope of the problem of sin is *enormous*. Even though we may greatly and honestly desire it, we simply do not possess the tools or skills to get the job done. More to the point, we *never* will. It would be like the little Dutch boy standing firm with a single stone in hand and, with it, trying to hold back a tidal wave.

Regardless of how large the stone we might muster and manage to carry, no matter how much we, as a species, advance ourselves, it simply is *not* going to happen; *ever*. Admittedly, it is a lovely thought, but it is crazy town just the same. Ultimately, the *only* way the cookie jar gets fixed is by having someone *other* than ourselves fix it; namely, God. That God has chosen, through Christ's sacrifice on the cross, to fix the jar, mend the tear, and build the dyke, is what we call Grace.

VI.

So there you have it, sin and grace. This, though, is really just the backdrop to what I *really* want to speak to you about today: which is *purpose*. Many of us have read, or at least heard, an awful lot of scripture: either as literature or the inspired Word of God. Sometimes, much of it is so familiar it admittedly sounds like yada, yada, yada or blah, blah, blah.

Every once in a while, though, something jarring literally leaps off the page, sets off alarm bells in our head, or tugs at our heart. Which is the reason we should continue to *study* scripture, so that we get our comfortable little worlds rocked every once in a while (if only a bit). For me, 2 Timothy 1:9 is just such a world-rocker: "*God saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to God's own purpose and grace.*"

VII.

Owing to our proper understanding of sin, intellectually we can comprehend the epic nature of God's grace. We can also grasp the notion of grace from an emotional perspective, as it is our solace and the place of our refugee from the troubles and woes of our life. Purpose, however, is an *experiential* truth that, almost by necessity, requires a *physical* manifestation. As it turns out, however, this is something of an odd or novel approach for spiritual people.

If you have come thus far with me this morning, congratulations: you have made it through the first part of the sermon which is the hard part. Now for the second part. A few years ago my wife, Linda, and I took a multi-week trip to and through Canada's Maritime Provinces (PEI, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick). It was a mountain top experience for us. There really is no other way to describe it. We know, because we have tried.

VIII.

Yes, we could show folks each of the 656 photos we took, and tell them any number of funny, interesting, and even wild stories (like our encounter with the bear) but all of this would miss the mark. We know, because we have tried. The simple fact of the matter is, it was an *experiential* truth, intimately shared between two people, in a particular place (or places), at a particular time (or times).

That said, what I *can* describe for you is the impact it has had and the feelings it created. Chief among such feelings is *gratitude*. With every beach we walked, vista we enjoyed, oyster we ate, and day we spent together Linda and I were humbled to realize that all you not only *facilitated* that time away for such an adventure, but *supported* and *cheered* us on in it. It is simply impossible for you to ever know the depth of the gift you gave us, and continue to give us, nor the profundity of our thankfulness in receiving such a gift again and again.

IX.

The other thing Linda and I both felt is more than a little bit of embarrassment at having been afforded such an opportunity and, really, the privilege to have had such an experience. It isn't that we think we don't *deserve* it, but, rather, that we *all* deserve such things. And, so, we often find ourselves walking a little softly when we tell the tale of this congregation and the grace you show us.

Of course beyond what we shared *together*, along the way Linda and I each had our *own* individual experiences and realizations; both in the moment and, later, upon reflection. I would never try to speak for Linda, but for myself, what I discovered up there on the mountain top was...myself. Fairly early on in the trip, and it wasn't any one particular moment but, rather, perhaps a critical mass of moments, I began to remember, again, who I am. Not my roles or responsibilities in life, but simply "me." I came home to myself. Then, I began to imagine who I might yet become.

X.

The challenge of any mountain top experience is that, eventually, we have to come back down. Back to down to earth, back to reality, back to the grind. For it is at the base of such mountains that most of us live our lives. This does not mean that we cannot take ourselves back down with us, however. Nor does it mean that the mountain top is ever beyond reach; it is *always* there for us so long as we are willing to make the climb. Because here is the truth of the situation: it isn't the mountain that matters, being at home with oneself is the summit we seek.

Said another way, "*to rekindle the gift of God that is within you...the good treasure which has been entrusted to you.*" This is God's *purpose* for us, and God's *grace* is the means we have been given to achieve it. Not according to our own works, but according to God's plan for our lives and this world. It is what God *wants* to happen. It is what God is *making* happen. It is the *reason* for the cross of Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

XI.

Certainly all of us on the spiritual quest want to believe the words which I have just spoken. Whether we actually *have* the means to so, however, is an entirely different matter altogether. Which is why, at the onset, I told you it will be easy to give your attention to this second part of the sermon, However, it is only through the first part, about the profundity and pervasiveness of sin, that we come to appreciate the incredible gift of grace which has been given to us. And, it is the power of God's grace in overcoming such sin which makes possible our purpose: to rekindle the gift of God that is within us and safeguard the good treasure which has been entrusted to us.

XII.

Now, I fully appreciate all of this *sounds* good and is, perhaps, not all that unexpected coming from a person whose job it is to remind others of the existence of the mountain. Having an awareness of the mountain, however, isn't of much value to anyone unless and until the opportunity exists for them to make the climb for themselves and, moreover, to be supported and cheered on all the while they make the ascent knowing that if they fail and fall (and we *all* fail and fall) others will be there to help them to get back up on their feet and start climbing all over again.

This is what we do for each other in a church. The people on our left and on our right along with *every* person gathered here today in this sacred space; virtually and in-person. Make no mistake about it, this *is* a sacred space, not because of any ritual of consecration offered long ago by people we never met, but because *every* Sunday each of us brings to this sanctuary, this church, our *own* sacredness, the treasure within, full of God's purpose and grace, as a gift to share.

XIII.

This is our sacred home because it is here, in this church, that we can come home to ourselves. It is here, in the midst of this congregation, that we have the opportunity to discover and actually *live* the experiential truth of what it means to be a child of God. And this is not an onerous stone to carry, it is the rock upon which we must stand and a rock upon which we might build. But we will never know it *until* we try, and unless we *keep* trying. Amen.