

8-23-09 2 Cor. 6:1-10 “Grace: From Crunch to Character”—Richard Boatman

¹ As God’s partners, we beg you not to accept this marvelous gift of God’s grace and then ignore it...³ We live in such a way that no one will stumble because of us, in order that the ministry may not be discredited. ⁴... We patiently endure troubles and hardships and calamities of every kind. ⁵ We have been beaten, been put in prison, faced angry mobs, worked to exhaustion, endured sleepless nights, and gone without food. ⁶ We prove ourselves by our purity, our understanding, our patience, our kindness, by the Holy Spirit within us, and by our sincere love. ⁷ We faithfully preach the truth. God’s power is working in us...⁸ We serve God whether people honor us or despise us, whether they slander us or praise us. We are honest, but they call us impostors. ⁹... We live close to death, but we are still alive. We have been beaten, but we have not been killed. ¹⁰ Our hearts ache, but we always have joy. We are poor, but we give spiritual riches to others. We own nothing, and yet we have everything.

Notice the premise of this passage is that we are partners with God, what other translations call “fellow workers” or “cooperators with God.” The last verse of chapter 5 tells us how it is possible for mere humans to be partners with God in the ongoing work of the gospel: *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.* Remember that righteousness refers to both our position of right-standing with God and to lifestyles that are becoming right or righteous because of this relationship. As partners with God we have responsibility. And our chief responsibility is to respond to his ability, taking grace seriously.

Grace is more than the acronym, *God’s Riches at Christ’s Expense*. Grace is that ongoing movement of God that is “conform[ing us] to the likeness of his Son” (Romans 8:29). So, our partnership with God means taking grace seriously by cooperating with this ongoing formation of our spirit and soul.

Verses three and four in today’s passage show us two areas through which we cooperate with this process of being formed into Christ’s image. Verse three says, “We live in such a way that no one will stumble because of us...” and verse four says, “We patiently endure troubles...”

Let us consider verse three: “We live in such a way that no one will stumble [spiritually trip and fall] because of us...” In other words, *we endeavor to consistently live our faith so that if anyone is offended it is with the truth of the message itself and not with our flippant or disingenuous way of living it.* What

strikes me about this is that our attitude regarding how we should live is of critical importance to our spiritual formation. Have you ever thought of that? Our attitude of living out the truth in Christ can open or close the door to experiencing God's presence and grace in our lives. "It's no one's business how I live; that's between God and me." Ever heard that? It's a door closer. The fact is, for grace to fulfill its work in us we have to live with the awareness that our actions and choices do affect the faith of others. "We live in such a way," the apostle says, "that no one will stumble because of us..." When we drift from living "near to the heart of God," when we walk away from the protective environs of God's Word and Spirit, we spiritually smell and that odor causes others to devalue the faith we profess.

A number of years ago when Terry Juergens was still with us, Mary went down in the basement to get something from the freezer. A big frozen turkey was in the way, so in order to get to the stuff she wanted, she took it out of the deep freeze. She looked around to see where to put it and seeing a child's port-a-potty close but kind of hidden away, she stuck the turkey on that. She finished her business in the freezer, closed the doors and went upstairs, forgetting about the turkey. A week later they began smelling something. Two weeks later the odor was so intense that Terry, convinced it was backed up sewage, called the plumber. The plumber went into the basement and after a few minutes called for Mary to come down. He had found the problem. There was a turkey on the pot.

We may think that drifting from God only affects us, that walking away from God's protective presence is no one's business but ours; but when there's a turkey on the pot of our lives, the spiritual odor it generates affects everyone. If we're going to take grace seriously, then we must get rid of the turkeys and "live in such a way that no one will stumble because of us."

Now consider verse four: "We patiently endure troubles and hardships and calamities of every kind." *Patiently endure* is a Greek word that means more than passive resignation, *whatever will be, will be*. Rather, the word, as one commentator asserts, "describes the ability to bear things in such a triumphant way that it transfigures [us]...It...transmutes tribulation into strength and glory."

Nothing is gained in the weight room by letting a couple hundred pounds just rest on your chest. Muscles and strength come from resisting the weight. Jesus said, "In your patience [*in your bearing of things in a triumphant way*], you possess your soul." In speaking about dwelling in God's peace amidst difficulties, the author of Hebrews instructs, "Let us diligently labor to enter into that rest" (4:11). As "troubles and hardships and calamities" come like weights falling upon us, the

enemy's intent is to get us off center, to remove us from our place of focused and vital union in the Lord. But as we resist this, as we exert energy to stay before the Lord, yielded and trusting, strength comes.

The Psalms are filled with this dynamic: *O Lord, how my adversaries have increased! Many are rising up against me... O Lord, consider my groaning. Heed the sound of my cry for help... O Lord, save me from all those who pursue me... O God...strangers have risen against me, and violent men have sought my life. We could all add: O Lord, my windows are broken, my bedding is ruined, my carpet is filled with glass, my roof is destroyed, my car is totaled, my crops are beaten to a pulp, my adjustors are swamped, and I'm tired. Yet over-and-over David finishes these thoughts: Behold, God is my helper; the Lord is the sustainer of my soul... I will trust in you... You are my rock... You are my refuge... You are my redeemer... Bless the Lord, O my soul!*

David and Paul both realized that from trials can come triumph; that, by the grace of God, from the crunch of life, character can emerge: ⁹...*We live close to death, but we are still alive. We have been beaten, but we have not been killed.* ¹⁰ *Our hearts ache, but we always have joy. We are poor, but we give spiritual riches to others. We own nothing, and yet we have everything.* Paul takes grace seriously. He sees the difficulties that buffet his life as opportunities for growth and spiritual formation. Something good can come from this as grace can turn the crunch of calamities into the character of Christ.

Notice I said it *can* happen; I did not say it *always* happens. Again, we can choose to cooperate with the grace that would form us or we can choose to resist God's grace in the storm. Said differently, the "crunch" can make us bitter or better.

Marilyn Adams, a native of Iowa had a choice. It was an awful accident that claimed the life of her eleven year old son. Staying home from school in order to help his stepfather with the corn crop, little Keith was enamored with the rhythm of the harvest from the combine to the wagon to the augur and to the bin. Uncertainty clouds the details: did Keith climb into the wagon or did he fall in? Regardless, his little body was submerged in oxygen depleting corn. By the time he was discovered and pulled from the wagon, it was too late. Marilyn Adams was then submerged in her own suffocating depression. She became bitter and wanted to die. She neglected her remaining kids and a growing resentment towards her husband threatened to destroy their marriage. Bitter or Better—which will it be?

During the second year after the tragedy Marilyn Adams writes, "I began to realize

that my life was no longer about what I wanted, because what I wanted most, I could not have. Rather, my life was about living with what I had. And the challenge, then, became choice—that is, choosing from what is offered because you can't choose from what cannot be...Life is about choices, and choices can help you find purpose.”

Marilyn's sense of purpose came in the form of her daughter coming home one day with an FFA (Future Farmers of America) project. Inspired by Keith, she wanted to create a farm safety presentation on gravity flow wagons. She asked her mom to help her. And through this Marilyn Adams testifies to God's love slowly pulling her from the depths of despair into the light of grace, moved by a renewed sense of meaning and purpose. You can read about it in her book: Rhythm of The Seasons, a transparent account of pain and grace, of growing from bitter to better, from crunch to character.

Listen to Romans 5:3-5: “...but we also rejoice in our afflictions [sufferings], because we know that affliction produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit...”

Afflictions, Perseverance, Character, Hope, Love—these are the movements through which God's grace plays its rich melody, a melody that if sung transforms us into Christ's image. Have you known loss and suffering? The notes of God's grace may be found within them. What choices have you made? Are you becoming bitter or are you becoming better? Is the crunch of life being turned into lasting character? And is your Christ-like character giving birth to hope and love? Hope and love—Marilyn Adams insists that “it is from hope that healing emerges.”

All of us who weathered the recent hail storm have experienced loss. But in visiting with so many of you, the common theme I have heard is not discouragement but hope. Our community has come together in ways that perhaps only common suffering can create. Everything is not perfect, but in most cases a sense of healing and rebuilding is replacing the sense of loss; laughter is replacing sadness. Like the song says, we're *Trading Our Sorrows* for the joy of the Lord.

The last word comes from Marilyn Adams who speaks about one of her many encounters with a fellow sufferer, this one on board a plane: “And we who began the journey as strangers ended it as friends, feeling each others loss, carrying each other's grief.”