

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
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Life Verses: I Corinthians 15:10
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One of my favorite weekends of the year is in the fall when we invite the second graders to come up here, often only the second time in their lives after their Baptism, and receive a Bible from us. The church generously offers them a Bible when they join the second grade. Two things happen then in my week plus the fact that I love to shake their little hands. The first is that for much of the week before, I am signing 140-plus Bibles and underlining a couple of different verses in that Bible with a note to try to make it personal for them. The second is that on Thursday night Sarah, our children's director, gathers all the kids and all the parents together because many of the parents do not know how to teach their kids how to read the Bible. They just have never learned themselves, so she uses that as an evening where they can explore this new gift together and goes through the evening asking different people on the staff to say what is the most significant verse in the Bible for them. When it comes my turn, I ask them to take out their Bibles and turn to the first letter that Paul wrote to the Church in Corinth, a city in Greece, a very important trade city. Why don't you take out your Bibles and turn to the 1st Corinthians 15, right toward the end of that first letter. I ask them to raise their hands when they find it, so when you find 1st Corinthians 15, raise your hands. When they've all gotten to it, I read my favorite passage. It starts out in verse 9.

⁹ For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle,
a leader in the church,

because I persecuted the church of God.

Remember this is Saul, the persecutor of the early church's story. He killed the first martyr, Stephen. Then my favorite verse, verse 10. Would you take out a pen or a pencil and if it is not already underlined, would you please underline 1st Corinthians 15:10. It says this in my translation.

¹⁰ But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect.

Then Paul says,

No, I worked harder than all of them...

No, it wasn't only me. I didn't work harder. It was God's grace in me.

—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me. ¹¹ Whether, then, it is I or they, this is what we preach, and this is what you believed.

Then I tell the kids, that's the first verse I can ever remember trying to memorize because it was as if God was speaking to me. "But by the grace of God I am what I am...." Then I ask them to talk from, what does grace mean? Rich was trying to explain that to the children today. Philip Yancey wrote a phenomenal book. If you have not read this book, I would highly recommend it to you. It is called *What's So Amazing About Grace?* He quotes the poet Byron saying, "Grace is the last best unspoiled word in the English language. Grace is something good that we get that we don't deserve." Something good that we receive that we do not deserve. We don't deserve grace. We just get it. We don't define it. We have to experience it. "But by the grace of God I am what I am...." Where do you experience grace?

In his book Yancey tells the story of a young prostitute on the streets of his native Chicago who ended up there because she came from a terrible family. After promiscuity she fell into prostitution. After prostitution she became a drug addict. After becoming a drug addict, she accidentally got pregnant. After becoming accidentally pregnant, she continued to live on the street and eight or ten years later became so desperate, she was not only selling her own body, but her child's body as well. Finally one day, coming to her senses, she goes to one of the local missions in Chicago that gives out food and clothing and shelter and turns to the leader of the mission. Out the depths of human despair, she says, "What can I do? I know I'm going to screw up again. This is the seventh time I've been here. What am I going to do?" The counselor says, "I don't usually say this but what would you think about going to church? Would that help?" The woman said, "Church? Why would I go to church? I feel bad enough already. Why would I go to church?" He says the young prostitute's comments hurt because she found the weak spot in the church.

Some of us seem so anxious to avoid going to hell that we forget to celebrate our journey to heaven. Others of us are rightly concerned about the great world issues of our day and take sides in the cultural war all around us but we neglect the church's mission as a haven of grace in a world of pain. So, again, do you experience grace?

I used to say that I grew up in a dysfunctional home, but Rich Phenow has taught me that every home in America is dysfunctional, just in different ways. Mine, perhaps, was just a little bit more vividly dysfunctional. Between the alcohol abuse and the incessant fighting and the uncertainty economically, I started to think that I could only be loved as long as I did whatever it took to be loved. From my mother that meant I should at least appear to work harder at school and study more and get good grades. She valued academics so I had to appear to be smart. I would impress my father by being a good athlete and work hard at sports. He was all about athletics and sports and so I would run out and play with the kids for hours. I wanted so much to be loved by my friends but I knew their standards weren't the same. They didn't care about their grades so I didn't care about my grades with them. They wanted to be wild people and I thought, maybe if I was one of the wild guys, they'd love and accept me too, and I lived a life doing whatever it took to be loved and accepted.

By the end of high school and beginning of college, I had totally drifted away from the church of my childhood because at that church, I would hear people say that I was a sinner, that I had done bad things all week. I'd say I already knew that part. They would say that God was mad at

me. They had categories for me, limbo if I got lucky, purgatory if I didn't change, or hell-bound for sure, so I didn't just leave Catholicism, I didn't just leave Christianity, I tried to leave that angry God behind.

I saw this cute little girl and tried to impress her by hanging out with her friends who were in a Christian group. They did not appear very Christian because for one thing, they were having way too much fun. They didn't seem to be impressed with people who were the smartest or the wildest but they seemed to want to love me anyway. I didn't want to be a Christian, but I wanted to be like these people and since they happened to be Christians, I went to their youth group. Even though I didn't believe anymore, at this point I wanted to be like them because they made me feel loved, no matter how I acted.

The leader started to talk about God in a way that was not just about judgment or doing the right things but about Jesus, who spent most of His time with people who felt just like I felt, whether they acted like me or not, people who felt like they were on the outside struggling to get in. My friends said that the reason they call it the good news is that God wants to love me the way He loved them. I didn't have to prove myself because I could not. I had already proved that I was a screw up. They said God wanted to forgive me and love me and wanted me to be His child. Do you want that?

I let that sit for months. I checked out Christianity again intellectually. You know, that pseudo little intellectual thing you get in college. I spent time watching my friends, and they told me the story of The Prodigal Son. The Rembrandt exhibit at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts doesn't have this painting. (*Slide shown.*) It is way too famous to be down there. It is Rembrandt's picture of The Prodigal Son. They said, "This is what God is like." The best line in the New Testament in Luke 15 says,

¹⁷ "When he came to his senses...

The Prodigal Son said, "I want to go home."

²⁰ So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

When my new friends told me this story, they said, "That's you. You want to be loved like that." So one night in Chicago in the middle of winter on a skating rink, I was a skating rink guard, after the pond closed I was hosing down the rink and I went out on the ice and said, "God, I'm not positive but I sense that You're here. God, I need to know that no matter what I do, You'll love me. I'm sorry for all the stuff I've done and that I know I'm going to do again because I'm tired of trying to measure up so people will love me. God, will you still love me anyway?" God's love and God's grace are the reasons that I am here.

Too often people outside the faith look at Christians and say, "Christianity is just about what you believe. You guys have a checklist of all the things that you believe and don't believe." Or "Christians are the people who do this and do that and don't ever do that." I don't think Christians are the people who believe or behave first. I think Christians are the ones who say, "You know, I heard God tell me, 'I love you. I forgive you. May I put my love so deep inside you

that you will always believe that I still love you?” It is a free gift. It is the gift that Rich opened for the kids. You can't earn it. You can't try harder or jump higher. “I sent My Son Jesus to show you what real love looks like.” That is grace. That is at the core of becoming a Christian. It's turning to God and saying, “I love You, too. Will You keep loving me?” It is a relationship. It is not about having good days and bad days. I have terrible days, but they are not pulling me farther away from God.

So anyway, I get to college. Went out and bought a Bible. In this first Bible, I came to Paul's 1st Letter to the Corinthians, chapter 15, verse 10, “But by the grace of God I am what I am....” And it was like God was saying, “You are exactly who you are. You don't have to pretend any more.” “...I am what I am....” You don't have to be anybody else to be loved. That is the reason they call it good news. And so, as we talked about, I underlined it. It became my life verse,

¹⁰ But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect.

That's what we mean when we talk about life verses, but that's not *it* for me. That's just the *beginning* of the story because I don't know about you but when you receive grace, you want to become a better person, right? I want to become the person I think God loves and as I start to get better, I look around and say, “You know, you should get better, too.” Then it becomes about better and better and good and better, and we seem to forget the grace because we think about being better, and we forget that we will be broken, flawed, and sin-filled until *after* we take our first last breath. Just like me.

This church that offers grace becomes the do-better, try-harder place, look-better. And do you know what we become like? We go back to the picture of The Prodigal Son up there (*referring to slide*). In the background of The Prodigal Son, you can see in the shadows the older brother who is not at all crazy about what is going on because his lousy, stinking, sin-filled brother is all of a sudden the center of attention, and they are all yelling and cheering and having a feast for him. He goes, “Wait a minute! I've been good.” And he is angry. Churches are not known for being grace-filled places. We become do-good, try-harder people. “But by the grace of God I am what I am....”

How many of you have ever had a hard time getting to sleep? Anybody here ever have a hard time getting to sleep? I lie there at night often, and sometimes think about the apostle Paul, the way his life changed, how he went around the Roman Empire and everywhere he goes, he gets in trouble. He gets thrown in prison. I wonder if Paul ever had trouble getting to sleep. I bet he did. I bet that he had nightmares. He couldn't have lived the way he lived and not have had nightmares. I bet one of the apostle Paul's nightmares far away from home was about seeing a man saying, “Jesus is the Messiah,” and people starting to throw rocks at him. “No, Jesus loves you.” And people throwing more rocks at him, and finally the man falling down, and they throw rocks harder and harder and harder, and they kill him. Paul is right there holding people's coats saying, “Get him again.” I bet he tosses and turns and thinks about the little girls who have seen their moms ripped out of their arms and the little boys who will never know their fathers because Saul went into their houses and said, “I'll show you who the Messiah is” and ripping them out of their houses and taking them off to be punished just for following this Jesus. He would always be known for that the rest of his life. It is a nightmare. I think he had a hard time sleeping, just like some of you do, just like I do. Oh, God....

I have nightmares. Maybe you do, too, but mine is just mine. I am here preaching, and it is not one of those all of a sudden you are naked in front of everybody and you don't know what to do dreams. That's bad enough. That's your nightmare. For me the nightmare is I am here preaching. I am talking about how God wants you to turn from darkness to light, to come not just to grace but to grow up and live the kind of life you are supposed to live, to live pure in singledom, to be faithful in marriage, to be generous. And half-way through what happens is, the back door opens and a woman comes in and sits down there. Then another woman comes in and she sits there, and another woman comes and sits there, and another woman sits right over there. They just sit there looking at me. I have a hard time finishing the sentence because I know these women. They know another side of me from before I followed Christ, some of them after I started to follow Christ. I did not love them. I made love to myself through them. And my wife whom I love more than anything sits right over there. And then I see,

¹⁰ But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect.

That's what keeps me up at night sometimes. I can never preach well enough or get far enough away or be a good enough husband or a good enough dad to pretend that that didn't happen. I need something else to happen. I need the slate to be wiped clean. I need to be reminded again this weekend that I am forgiven, that I am beloved, and that when I walk through the door, God doesn't say, "Come here! Come here! You know what you did!" But that God says, "Ahhhh, you are here at last!" and smiles when He sees me.

I wake up and I realize that I need to be reminded of grace again and again, over and over, until it sinks in so deep that it starts to ooze out, "...and his grace to me was not without effect." Grace should change your game but that is because it changes the scorecard. You don't keep score anymore. It is His grace working through me. I want to live like that, and I want that for you. Grace is not pretending like it didn't happen. Grace is not just saying, "I am sorry. It will never happen again!" Grace is God saying, "It is over! I forgive you. It is clean. Don't let it weigh you down anymore!" We all need to be reminded of grace over and over till it sinks in and oozes out.

For the rest of his life, Paul would go around saying, "You are broken and I know it because I am more broken. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect." I am a sign that God's grace can change us all. God's grace either changes your life or it is not grace, what Bonhoeffer called cheap grace. "I feel bad." Too bad. "I'm sorry." Here's grace. That's cheap grace, just words and feeling bad. Real grace is the gift that you open from heaven.

Sometimes you find examples of that in the oddest places. With apologies to Frank Sinatra, probably not the most famous singer in the world. The most famous singer in the world is almost certainly from Northern Ireland, the head of a group called U2. His name is Bono and for the last 20 years he has had a great passion for the poor of the earth and especially in helping with the crisis of AIDS. He came to the church but at first found the church resistant to helping him. He said, "I found the church just so filled with judgmental people. I don't know what to do with the church." Then his attitude started to change. Let me show you 90 seconds.

(Video begins.)

I'm pretty sure that, you know, the universe operates by the laws of karma essentially, and all physical laws do, and that what you put out comes back against you, you know. Then enters the story of grace, which really is the story of Christ, and it turns this view of the universe upside down. And it's completely contrary to, I think it's very, very hard for human beings to grasp grace. We can actually grasp atonement, revenge, fairness. All of this we can grasp, but we don't grasp grace very well. I'm much more interested in grace because I'm really depending on it. I desperately need it. If I'm living by karma, I'm in big trouble.

(Video ends.)

One of Bono's most favorite songs is from Psalm 40,

I waited patiently for the Lord
He inclined and heard my cry....

He is a terrible example of a Christian but he is a perfect example of grace. You and I together are terrible examples of Christians but we can be perfect examples of grace. We don't apologize here for talking about sin. We want to call people to live holy lives that fulfill them, that follow God's Word. But what is unique about Jesus Christ is that we believe He came for you and me. He did not say, "Change and I'll love you." He said, "I will love you forever. Would you like to learn to love people the way that I love you?"

One of my favorite authors is Anne LaMotte out in San Francisco. She goes to a Presbyterian church, St. Andrew's. Her pastor is a large, African-American woman, whom I have had the privilege of meeting. This pastor said, "Do you know what church is all about? Church is the place where grace makes people know who they really are." She tells the story of one time when she was seven years old, growing up in Oakland. One of her best friends wandered away, got lost the way seven year olds do, and his parents were frantic. The streets of Oakland are not a very safe place to be alone at seven. Everybody is out looking for him, but he just kept turning the wrong way, getting further and further away. Hours later a police car stops him, but he starts to run because he is so afraid. The policeman catches him, and he starts to cry. The policeman asks if he is lost. He says, "Yes." "Can we get you home?" "I don't know where home is!" "Well, what is your address?" "I don't remember." The policeman puts him in the passenger seat of the car, and they start driving up and down the streets. Finally they turn a corner and the little boy yells, "There, there, there!" and points to a church on the corner. The policeman stops and the little boy says, "This is my church!" He opens the door and says, "I always know how to get home from here!"

The Gospel of grace is that God comes to you and says, "Let Me take you home." We meet here because God can always bring us home from here. My sense is that some of you are prodigal children. You need to be reminded that you are saved by grace and that you don't have to keep feeling guilty. You don't have to keep pretending. You can ask again for that reminder that you are grace-filled people. Some of us over the years have become older brothers and older sisters. We all need grace, but older brothers and sisters need to be reminded that they have to share that grace to keep experiencing it, share it with somebody else because unshared grace rots and just becomes religion. What I would like to do is to ask you to close your eyes and pray with me. I'll ask you to raise your hand when God is talking about you. Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, I needed to be reminded again today that I don't have to pretend to be somebody that I'm not, that by the grace of God, by the Blood of Jesus, I am what I am, and Your grace has not been without effect. I pray for my fellow prodigal sisters and prodigal brothers here, tired of pretending, needing to be reminded of grace, and ask that You would fill their hearts with mercy and love and life and joy that cannot be snatched away.

If that's you, it's between you and God, if You would like a confirmation of that love for you, just raise your hand. Let God know that you want that kind of grace and receive it as a gift that washes you clean and reminds you that you are His child. Some of us feel a need to share that grace. We have made church too much about believing or behaving. We need to share grace and not be older sisters and brothers.

If you can think of someone whom you have judged or someone who should hear about this grace, if you are angry the church is not church here, why don't you just turn to the Lord and say, "Lord, forgive me, a sinner. Help me know how to get home from here." If that is you, raise your hand. Some of us can raise our hands both times and that is what is so amazing about grace.

I remember, Lord Jesus, how John Newton, the slave trader who experienced amazing grace and turned pastor, how he said at the end of his life, "I only know that I am a great sinner and serve a great Savior." Amazing grace, how sweet the sound. In the Name of the Father, Son, the Holy Spirit. Give life. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.