

June 10, 2018

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“Less Honking and More Helping”

2 Corinthians 4:14-18

INTRODUCTION

The Apostle Paul had a significant pastoral relationship with the church in Corinth. The letters that we have in the Bible written to them actually cover a number of years, and they reflect both positive and negative phases in their ministry together. Corinth was a dynamic and diverse place – a cosmopolitan crossroads for the time. Most of the church members were Gentiles, unfamiliar with the Jewish traditions that undergirded Jesus and Paul, yet they wanted rules to live by. Some were wealthy and others found themselves on the edge of the economy. All of them were influenced by the surrounding culture and susceptible to envy and status grasping; they also liked flowery speeches and Greek wisdom. Paul had an incredible story of conversion to Christ and personal integrity, but he wasn't an impressive orator. So this congregation and minister had some difficulties understanding each other and walking the Way together, but Paul continued to communicate the theological reasons for his teachings, which we read in this excerpt, and to practice deep love for them.

Last Sunday, Bob preached from the verses just before this passage, exploring Paul's metaphor, describing us as clay jars, filled with the treasure of the Gospel.

THE READING

¹⁴we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence. ¹⁵Yes, everything is for your sake, **so that grace, as it extends to more and more people**, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

¹⁶ **So we do not lose heart.** Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. ¹⁷For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, ¹⁸because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.

SERMON

During rush hour, at a busy intersection a woman's car just stopped; it wouldn't start up again! Immediately, cars started honking at her and angrily navigating around her. Nothing she tried worked. Stuck and discouraged, she got out of her car and called out to the person who was laying on the horn behind her: "If you would get out and try to start my car, I'd be happy to get in yours and honk the horn for you!"

It's easy to lose heart in situations in which there is no grace. We experience this in families or in relationships where criticism and complaints predominate – when what we do is never good enough. If our school or workplace doesn't make room for mistakes, it will be hard for us to learn and improve; in fact, we may want to give up. Then, in the social realm, when politics is about posturing instead of working together for positive change, people begin to lose confidence that things can get better. In *any* arena, when there's more honking than helping, people lose heart.

During his ministry the apostle Paul experienced numerous discouraging situations. In 2 Corinthians 6, he refers to "afflictions...beatings, imprisonments, riots...sleepless nights, and hunger" as he and his colleagues preached the gospel and started churches. He also battled his own moods, for Paul was a mix of anger and affection. He once wrote: "I do not understand my own actions; I do the very thing I hate!" (Romans 7:15)

So it didn't help that in his ministerial relationship with the Corinthian church, they "honked" at him about several matters: canceling his visit to them, not accepting the patronage of some of the wealthy members, and pushing a special collection for Christians elsewhere!¹ The two parties were different from each other culturally, but I suspect that the deeper issue for the church leaders was the fear that they weren't getting ahead as a church and not having much influence in Corinth for Christ.

Amazingly, however, in this part of his letter to them, Paul declares twice, "we do not lose heart," and he gives the reason why: because God's grace is at work. Help and encouragement is available.

The theological definition of grace is "the freely-given, unmerited favor of God." It is such an all-encompassing concept in Judaism and Christianity that theologians have identified sixteen or more types of it.² "Common grace," for example, refers to the ways that God takes

¹Ernest Best, *Second Corinthians – Interpretation Series* (Louisville, Ky: John Knox Press, 1987), p. 10-12.

²Donald K. McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), p. 120-121. McKim lists actual, cheap, common, cooperating, efficacious, free, glorifying, habitual, irresistible, justifying, prevenient, sanctifying, saving, special, sufficient, and systems of as the types of grace beyond a simple definition of "grace." These are categories of understanding that originate either from Roman Catholic or Protestant

care of us through creation, no matter our belief or behavior. "Sanctifying grace," as another, points to the way we can become more like Christ by the Holy Spirit. The grace of God fills the gaps, forgives us, is forbearing, and empowers our improvement as individuals and groups.

I have heard our TriCon youth and the adults who work with them, for instance, speak about the "community" that they forge together. It allows them to be who they are and, if they mess up in some way, gives them "do overs." In other words, *grace* is active in this group. More helping than honking goes on in this ministry!

In verse 16, Paul suggests that God's grace "renews our *inner* nature every day," so the church ought to be nurturing community. And in verse 15, "as grace extends to *more and more* people, it increases thanksgiving to the glory of God." Thus, the church ought to be engaged in service and mission with ministries of grace inside *and* beyond itself.

One of these is the organization known as Communities for Restorative Justice – c4rj – for short. Its mission is to provide an option within the criminal justice system by which victims of crime can directly address the individuals who have harmed them and help determine how this harm should be repaired. In this program, offenders can better understand the impact of their actions and make amends, and the fabric of the surrounding community can be strengthened.

In just one of c4rj's success stories, its local volunteers facilitated justice and reconciliation between Concord-Carlisle's Jewish community and four youths who had defaced public property with swastikas and drug-related graffiti. With the cooperation of all concerned in the circle process, the youths learned about the real negative effects of anti-Semitism, developed interfaith relationships, and performed community service. They also practiced ways of disengaging from the peer pressure they feel to participate in criminal activities. Without a restorative justice option, the police would have had to arrest the boys, and they would have appeared before a judge who may have imposed a sentence, but without all the healing benefits.³

Like water that seeps into the soil and reaches the roots of plants, God's grace brings encouragement wherever it goes. Like a river that flows patiently and persistently, God's grace can move even the most intractable barriers to reach its ultimate destination!

Things that are spiritual may not be visible, but they are real and eternal. Because God extends grace to us every moment of every day, you and I are able to offer grace to others, helping us *all* not to lose heart!

teaching, some of which overlap in meaning, and a few of which are directly connected to one particular theologian. For example, "cheap grace" is a negative term that the Lutheran Dietrich Bonhoeffer coined in his writings; he averred that God's grace is costly, not cheap, and grace calls forth sacrifice from us too.

³Found at c4rj.org.

