



“WANTED: DEAD AND ALIVE”
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ROMANS 6:1-11

I remember taking some classes in seminary and one of them on New Testament Theology had to do with Paul’s writings. We studied Paul quite a bit. And one of the things that we learned about Paul was that he would never, ever use twenty words to say something when he could use two hundred! That’s just Paul! Paul never, ever thought about being succinct and to the point. As a matter of fact, we believe Paul was the origin of the “Department of Redundancy Department!” If you read his words, he says the same thing seventeen ways from Sunday.

But there’s a reason for that, especially in today’s reading. Paul is writing to Christians throughout the Roman Empire, especially those Christians in and around Rome. Well, they weren’t exactly Jewish by heritage; they were more likely Gentiles. They didn’t have the same history and heritage that Paul had as a “good upstanding Pharisee.” As a matter of fact, most of these folks in this Roman church were new converts to Christianity. So new, that they had a lot of trouble with the doctrines that were espoused in the Christian faith. One of them was the doctrine of grace. They struggled with grace.

Now, you have to understand that the reason is because they were used to all the plethora of gods that they had in the Roman understanding of religious traditions. They, like the Greeks, had a god for everything and everything had a god! And as a result, part of their understanding of belief in God was that God had to be appeased. They believed that the only way that one could earn the pleasure of God and the blessing of God was just that – through that four letter word, earn. They had to earn it. And so this notion of grace is incredibly foreign to them. Paul uses his entire book of Romans to set about the treatise of grace, to try to define it and explain it in such a way that they couldn’t possibly misunderstand it, which is why it seems somewhat redundant at times.

You’ll notice that today’s passage of scripture – these eleven short verses – talk an awful lot about life and death, and death and life; and dying and living and living and dying, and you get the picture. It’s because Paul knows that they’re really struggling with this issue of grace.

But it’s nothing that we haven’t heard before. We know about grace because we’ve heard other folks talk about it over the years. There was this fellow from England, his name was John Wesley, and he wrote a little bit about grace. He preached about it from time to time. If you’ve ever been on a Walk to Emmaus, (it’s alright to admit it!) raise your hand. You listened to several talks about grace in its three different distinct forms. There’s Preventive grace, there’s Justifying grace and there’s Sanctifying grace. Now these are not original with Wesley, but he’s the one who kind of put them all together into some sort of semblance of order.

If you don’t know what those terms are, let me explain them to you briefly: Preventive Grace that grace that God has for us before we are even aware that there is a God who loves us. The notion of the definition of grace is that which is given without merit – it is a free gift. Now there’s another term from the Department Of Redundancy Department! The word “gift” means free, but we like to put the word “free” in front of gift. Free Gift! So preventive grace is the gift that is given to us of God’s love for us before we even know there is a God.

Justifying Grace is when we recognize that God is giving us this grace with no strings attached, and that there’s nothing we could do to earn it anyway. You can’t steal it, or borrow it. It’s given freely. And when we accept that grace, we accept for ourselves the gift that God has given us life abundant and full. It is God’s way of saying, “I love you so much that I will give you my most

prized possession – which is my Son.” And that’s just what God did. And we accept that grace, and so we are justified – just as if I hadn’t sinned. All our sins are removed in that act of receiving that grace. God does that for us free.

Then there’s sanctifying grace. That’s that wonderful Latin-based word that means the life-long process of becoming holy – of becoming all that God has set forth for us to reach our God-given potential. To be all that we could be, to coin the Army’s terms. Sanctifying Grace comes from that Latin word Sanctus, which literally means “holy.” So Sanctifying is that process where we learn and we grow and we become more and more what God wants us to be.

But there’s a couple other graces that I think Paul’s trying to get at here. He’s using different terms but the concepts are basically this: Costly Grace, and Cheap Grace. Paul is probably the one who is originating those concepts – costly and cheap grace – in his book of Romans. But there was a fellow who lived about sixty years ago in Germany, in Nazi Germany. During the war and before, he was a Lutheran Pastor, and his name was Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He was a pastor who was arrested for his complicity in the assassination attempt of Adolph Hitler. He was sentenced to prison, to be executed, and he ultimately was a few weeks before the Allies had liberated that area of Germany. Bonhoeffer wrote an awful lot during his time in prison. He opposed the Nazi regime because it opposed the Christian faith. And one of the things that Bonhoeffer did was ironically took Paul’s letter to the Romans and expounded upon it greatly in relation to his own life situation in Nazi Germany. And one of the concepts he came to was the issue of costly versus cheap grace. Those are his terms. Bonhoeffer tried to explain his understanding of cheap grace by trying to define them as understanding and appreciating the cost that was incurred to the giver.

Let me put it another way. Do you remember those placards that you used to see in the endzones and the outfields of professional sports arenas? They said, “John 3:16” “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whosoever should believe in him should have life eternal.” That’s costly grace. Knowing what God gave up so that God might have us. Costly grace. God gave his only Son. Now there’s a Father’s Day Sermon for you.

Cheap grace is accepting the gift of God’s grace without considering the cost that was incurred the giver. Now you’re asking me what in the world does this have to do with Paul’s writing. I’ll tell you. It’s in that first verse. Paul asks a rhetorical question. “Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound?” In other words, should we just continue to just live it up in sin, as if we were never baptized, - because even though we’ve been baptized, it’s still a gift of grace, and since we couldn’t have earned it anyway, we might as well just keep living the life we were living. Should we continue to live in sin, in order that Grace may continue to abound? The answer to that is extremely explicit is “BY NO MEANS!” Because once you have been baptized in Christ, you are no longer the same person you were. Once you’ve been baptized in Christ, you’ve died with him on the cross, and your sins are gone! And you are no longer under the power and authority of those sins and that sinful life. Once you’ve accepted Christ, once you’ve been baptized in Christ’s name, you are no longer bound by sin. You are to live a different life now. You live in God in Christ Jesus. Should we continue to live in sin? NO! You’re different now. You’ve been changed and transformed. In that simple act of baptism, your old life has died, and was buried, and is rotting in the grave. Pushing up daisies. You are now living in Christ, with new life and new hope; with a different understanding of life. You are living in grace. To live in sin is to discount grace. To make it cheap.

There’s something else you have to understand about Paul’s mindset. Paul understands that every human being, no matter where you are or how old you are, no matter what culture you’re in, every human being is enslaved to something. You might be enslaved to power, or you might be enslaved to whatever obligation you have – your marriage, your job, or whatever. But for Paul, every human being who is not in Christ is enslaved to sin. And so for Paul, the object here is not that

you'll become free, but that you'll change what you'll be enslaved to. You're no longer enslaved to sin, but you're enslaved to God in Christ Jesus, and that in itself brings freedom. Is it freedom that you don't have to worry about sin any more? Not quite. Because when you are in Christ, you don't want to sin any more. You want to live a whole life. For Paul, that's that life of sanctification. He said, "We know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again." He did it once and he did it once for all. We don't have to worry about it again! Death no longer has hold on him. And if we've been baptized in Christ, we've died with Christ too. Death no longer has hold on us! Now we LIVE in Christ, just as he was raised. If death no longer has dominion on him, the death he died he died to sin, once for all, just like we have. The life he lives he lives to God. Paul is talking about a changed life here.

And for those Roman Christians living in that first century that was important for them to hear because they were still stuck in the Roman Empire! Gee whiz, doesn't that sound familiar? Aren't we still stuck in our empires, in our enslavements? Jobs and schools, bills and debt, anger and hatred and violence, suffering and disease and ... you get the picture. We're no longer enslaved to those things. We live a free life now in Christ.

I happened to be watching an old western on TV. That's how I came up with this sermon title this morning. You remember those old movies, where the sheriff would walk out and take a look around town (hitching up his britches!). And right behind him was a large poster: Wanted: Dead or Alive. And I got to thinking about this passage of scripture about what Paul was trying to say to us. That's exactly the way God wants us, except its Wanted: Dead AND Alive. Dead to sin and alive to Christ. That's the way we're called to live. Dead to sin. That old life is gone. It's now a part of the commitment that we take upon ourselves when we're baptized. Committed to Christ. Now we live differently – we walk and move and breathe differently because we are different. We are alive in Christ.

Redundant? Yeah! Because it's a lesson that we need to keep learning over and over again! It's very important – because it's God's grace that is given to us. A free gift, unearned, undeserved, unmerited. The gift of life. If you've been baptized in Jesus Christ no matter what age, you've been given a new life. That old life in sin is gone. Live the new life in Christ, and truly find and experience life in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.