

"Thank God for Grace"

September 12, 2010

First Presbyterian Church Kingwood

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This morning we're starting a new sermon series. It will take us through the final days of the summer and most of the fall. And you'll notice each week that the sermon title will sound pretty similar, because it's going to start off each week with the same two words. "Thank God ..."

You know, as we've moved through this year and looked at the conversation we're meant to carry on with God in our lives, we've discovered something, haven't we? There are many ways to keep the conversation going. Over the course of the year so far we've looked at praise, petition, lament, confession. But we really haven't spent much time looking at thanksgiving.

So as we move through the next weeks, between now and November, I want to try and do that. I want to lead us in our sermon times together in a study of some of the great thanksgiving prayers in the Bible. And the prayers I want us to look at come from the pen of the apostle Paul.

They're called "Introductory Thanksgivings." And they're found in the first chapter of every Pauline letter. Every letter that is, except one: Galatians. And of course there's a reason for that. But before I tell you the reason, I want to tell you a story.

It's not my story. It's a story that comes from Gordon's McDonald. And if you don't know him by name, Gordon, for many years, was the Pastor of Grace Chapel in Lexington, Massachusetts. After he left that position he served as the President of Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship working with student groups on college campuses around the country. And now, he's a freelance author and speaker.

I first met him when he came as a visiting preacher to a church where I was on staff. And since then, I've tried to keep up with him and read as many of his sermons and stories as I can, because ... well, because they relate Scripture to my experience so very well. See if you don't feel the same way. Listen to a story Gordon told a few months ago, this past April.

"I, and millions of people like me," he said, "had never heard of volcanoes in Iceland until two of them blew up. They belched ash into the air at a rate of 750 tons a second. And that ash shut down airports and economies all across Europe. But after all the ash settled, I began to wonder. Maybe the eruption was a sign to us, a visual reminder that all of us have volcanoes, dormant or active, living inside us.

Like the volcanoes in Iceland, our inner volcanoes can erupt too, and usually without warning. It can happen in traffic or when a disagreement comes up. And as the pressure builds up inside us, we can find ourselves trembling, literally trembling with subterranean emotion.

The story goes on. I grew up thinking, Gordon says, that I was a pretty calm person; that it was others—not me—who struggled with anger. They might have volcanoes inside them. But my inner space, I thought, was an oasis of peace and order. Then one day my anger ignited that had never happened before. I can only describe it by telling you at the moment it happened, I felt a pressure, a volcanic kind of pressure building up inside me.

The crazy part about it though is this. It's been a few years now and I honestly can't remember much about the circumstances that produced the pressure any more. What I remember is the emotion. And when the volcano inside finally erupted, I remember how it brought everything else in my life to a standstill, the same way Iceland's volcanoes paralyzed Europe.

When it was over, I realized I needed to do something. So over the years I've made a real effort to better understand my anger. I've become a kind of inner "volcanologist." And while I can't say I'm an expert in the field yet, I've learned one important lesson. When molten anger starts to build up pressure inside me, I need to let grace work its way down into the crevasses of my spirit."

I like that line. I like its imagery and I like its recommendation; letting grace work its way down into us as anger's trying to work its way out of us. That's something I'd like to learn how to do. How about you? If it is, I've got some encouragement for you this morning.

You see I believe Paul had the same struggle with anger that you and I have. You may have noticed. We read the first five verses of Galatians 1 this morning, but we left off just before the eruption. "I'm astonished," Paul writes in verse 6, "astonished you're so quickly deserting the one who called you." And behind Paul's astonishment lies a Greek word dripping with irony, the kind of irony that only gets forged in the fires of anger.

The word is *thamazo*. Some Bibles translate it "I'm astonished," others with the expression "I'm shocked" and one simply says "I can't believe it!" And when you hear translations like that it's not difficult to hear the anger inside Paul. One thing seems to be behind it. "I'm astonished," Paul says, "that you're so quickly

turning to a different gospel ..." "Evidently," Paul writes "some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ."

So there it is, the situation that's got Paul so steamed up. An attempt is being made to try and turn the gospel of freedom back into a religion of obligation. A few days ago, a friend of mine said to me, "I got a promotional e-mail in my inbox this morning. It came from a company I usually like to buy from: L.L. Bean. And since I trust them, I took the time to read it. The subject line said: "Double Coupon Dollars: Our Gift to You."

And I was favorably impressed. So I started to read the rest of the text. But the first words I read under the headline said this, "Earn Double Coupon Dollars with every purchase." And when I read those words, I stopped reading. Didn't the head line talk about a gift. And now I was supposed to "earn" it? Suddenly my mood went from interested to frustrated; from curious to angry. It was the old "bait and switch" trick.

And when my friend told me his story the other day, I nodded my head. I understood how he felt. I think Paul would have too. Because in Galatians 1, Paul is as frustrated and angry as my friend was. An attempt is being made by some un-named people to "bait" the Galatians into believing the freedom of the gospel comes with a price. You've got to earn it, they say. You've got to be circumcised and obey the Law of Moses to deserve God's grace.

So for the next five and a half chapters Paul goes back to basics. He re-presents the gospel to the Galatians. He defines it. He explains it. He defends it. Listen to what he says in Galatians 2:20. "Through the law," Paul says, "I died to the law that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me."

And then ... then Paul comes to the last line of the letter. And in his own hand, with large letters he writes a benediction, a closing prayer, "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers and sisters."

Now I've got to tell you, when I read those words, I'm always surprised. For if it had been me and my frustration, I probably wouldn't have ended this letter with a benediction, I probably would have ended it with an admonition and a pretty pointed one.

I might have said something like the commercial I saw the other night on TV. A retired drill sergeant is sitting in a chair, listening like to a man on a couch. He's taking notes like a therapist would until the man on the couch finishes his story. Then he puts down his pad and pen, slowly leans toward the man on the couch and says, "you know what makes me sad, you do!"

But when Paul puts his pad and pen down he doesn't do that, does he? No, instead of shouting, Paul prays. And the prayer he prays is powerful, because all through the letter to the Galatians Paul has talking about grace but now he shows it. What the Galatians deserve at the end of this letter is a final burst of anger. But what they receive is a final blessing, a benediction. "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers and sisters."

And the fact that Paul finishes his letter to them this way, with a gracious benediction instead of angry admonition; it must have spoken volumes to the Christians at Galatia, don't you think? So what do you think it would do in our lives, if we learned how to do the same kind of thing? What do you think it would do in your life or mine if we learned how to hold others appropriately accountable for their actions but learned how to finish off our conversations with a word of grace?

You see I believe that's one of the practical lessons the last line of Paul's letter can teach us. I believe one of the takeaways you and I can get from this letter is to learn to do that. So let's talk this last line of Galatians 6 apart, and see if we can't get in touch with the thoughts that were running through Paul's mind as he wrote it.

It starts off, of course with a subject and the subject is grace. But it's not just any kind of grace. It's a specific kind of grace. It's the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. It's the grace that that comes from Him to us. And it comes to us, Paul implies, when we allow Jesus to be out Lord in the midst of anger.

You see grace is not simply what comes to us to save us, grace is what comes to us to guide us after we're saved. Grace is what comes to us to help us remember that now that we're saved, we have a Lord, a Lord whose word is meant to guide us. And actually Jesus' word is pretty specific when it comes to anger. You can find it in Matthew, in the Sermon on the Mount.

"You have heard that it was said to our people long ago, 'You must not murder anyone...' Jesus says. Then he continues, "But I tell you, everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment ..."

And sometimes people think Jesus is trying to say we should never be angry. But that's not what Jesus is saying. For when he tells us that "everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment" Jesus uses a very specific kind of grammar. It describes not just anger but continuing anger, the kind that keeps on going; the kind you keep on tending deep in your soul.

So Jesus isn't trying to teach us that we can never get angry. For Jesus himself got angry, at the temple with the money changers, with the Pharisees and their hypocrisy, even with his disciples when they misunderstood him. But the difference between Jesus' anger and ours is this. Jesus never let his anger

linger. He never let it continue. He never let it control him that way. Instead, with Jesus, the anger was there for a moment; then it was gone.

Psalms 30 says that's how God's anger works. It's real but it's only for a moment. And as human beings created in God's image, that's the way God hopes our anger will work too. Anger isn't supposed to control us. Instead grace is supposed to control our anger.

Each time you get angry, and you will. It could happen to you today, or tomorrow or later this week, but it will happen. And each time you get angry, here's what you need to remember. It's OK to get angry. But it's not OK to let anger keep burning inside you. Instead you need to let grace work its way down into the volcano of your angry spirit.

How do you do that? You think through anger. You think it through in your own life. You think it through in your life with God. You see you and I were once the objects of God's righteous anger because of our sins. But because of the gracious sacrifice of Jesus Christ, God's anger was set aside and our sins were forgiven.

Or, as Paul puts in his benediction. "May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit brothers and sisters." And when you realize what the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ has done for you, it gets much easier to extend that grace to someone else. So this morning, as we begin this new sermon series, thank God for grace with me, will you? And let's pray ...