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Galatians 5:16, 22-23a, ESV

¹⁶ But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. ²² The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

2nd Corinthians 5:17–18, 20, ESV, abbreviated

¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. ¹⁸ All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation. ²⁰ Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us.

1st Corinthians 9:19–23, ESV, abbreviated

¹⁹ I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. ²⁰ To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. ²¹ To those outside the law I became as one outside the law that I might win those outside the law. ²² To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. ²³ I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.

The U-turn.

When Wendy was late in her pregnancy with our third child, Julien, she was working as a technical writer at Hewlett-Packard in Fort Collins. Julien was born in February, and Wendy worked until close to his delivery date. One day there was a huge storm that dumped a couple of feet of snow. It happened when

Wendy was up in Fort Collins. Even when there is no traffic and the weather is perfect, it takes an hour to get from Fort Collins to Boulder. Wendy started home just before dark. The freeway was plowed, and she was making good time, although she was driving slowly through heavily falling snow. But then her car – a very old Volvo that we had had for many years – broke down. She found herself on the right shoulder of the freeway, with many hundreds of cars sloshing by. No one stopped. America is like this. And this was in the days before cell phones, so she couldn't call me. I'll get back to this.

Our first passage today is from Galatians, a vibrant and highly spiritual overview of what it means to be a Christian. What's important to know about this letter, and in fact, what's important to know about all of Paul's writings is that he was a highly educated Jew who had been trained in the heavily legalistic Jewish tradition. But Paul believed in a personal connection with God and Jesus Christ. He was a mystical person. This might be the oldest letter written by Paul that has survived. Galatians first talks about the importance of spreading the Gospel and about how the story of Christ lays down the basis of all that we believe. Paul then moves on to the main topic of the letter, and that is justification by faith. We become true Christians simply by having faith in God and in Jesus Christ, and in the way that Jesus taught us to live with humility and forgiveness. We also do not

need to obey a host of religious laws as Jews of the time believed to be necessary. We are to personally connect with Christ, and that connection is to be the basis of our faith and our life. That is the essence of the New Covenant, the agreement between God and us, as delivered to us by Jesus Christ. Paul also talks about grace, that unearned gift from God. He tells us that through grace, Christ lives within us, directs us, and empowers us to be the hands and mouth of God on earth. We act as an instrument of Jesus Christ. We walk with the Holy Spirit, and we live for the things of God's world, not for the things of the human world. It is the impact of grace upon us that I want to talk about today.

Our first quote is from near the end of Chapter 5. The chapter as a whole is about living in a moral fashion. Paul is trying to give folks some hardcore advice on how to live. His point is that as a result of having the Holy Spirit within us, we find a beautiful way to live. ¹⁶ *But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.* ²² *The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,* ²³ *gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.* The point is that if we live with a sense that the Holy Spirit is living within us every day, that we are blessed with a grace from God that is extraordinarily powerful, we will feel the fruits of the spirit: *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,* ²³ *gentleness, and self-control.* This is a

very critical message, especially when you consider its age. This was written very close to the time of Jesus' death, when Christianity was fresh, when Christians were busy trying to figure out what it meant to follow Jesus, rather than Jewish law. We do not believe in living corrupt lives where we harm ourselves and each other, where we are selfish and destructive. Jews believed all this. But they also had to follow intricate laws. The thing that is new and different about being a follower of Christ is that we are free. We are not using some detailed rule book as a guide for our daily lives. Our lives are simple: through God's grace, God takes possession of us. We then feel a joy that overwhelms all the temptations that haunt unfulfilled people. Then, we live for things of God's world: *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,*²³ *gentleness, and self-control.*

But there is something about grace and its impact on us that extends beyond ourselves. God's grace doesn't just let us enjoy a calm life where we feel the presence of Christ in our lives. It doesn't just let us enjoy the fruits of a life lived for the things of God's world. Grace makes us want to pass it on. We want others to feel the way we do. We are driven to give to others what God gives us through grace: *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,*²³ *gentleness, and self-control.* There is a notion in mathematics called transitivity. Essentially, it says this: if A has a certain relationship with B, and if B has a certain

relationship with C, then A has that relationship with C. An example of a transitive relationship in math is greater-than. Since 10 is greater than 5, and 5 is greater than 1, 10 must be greater than 1. Well, grace puts us into all kinds of transitive relationships with people in the world. If God is forgiving with us, and if we are forgiving with Joe, then God is forgiving with Joe. Wow. How does this happen? We have a tremendous power. God forgives us and God brings joy into our lives. Through grace, we are then inspired. We find that we want to forgive others and to bring joy into their lives. This opens that person's heart to God. And then sometimes, that person, simply because we have treated them with grace, and if that person is aware that the root of our sense of forgiveness and of our joy is our faith in God, they become open to the message of God. That person might discover faith. Yes, it's a transitive relationship. God gives us grace. We give someone else grace – and as a result, if that person knows that we are believers – that person accepts grace from God. Where do I get this from? I did not make it up. It's biblical. Let's look at our second and third passage for today.

In another of Paul's letters, 2nd Corinthians, Paul gives us our second passage for today. By the way, it is believed he also wrote this letter personally, although scholars believe that two or three letters of his were blended together into this one letter by later editors. This was most likely done after his death,

when his letters were being passed around by early Christians. Here is what Paul tells us: ¹⁷ *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.* ¹⁸ *All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.* ²⁰ *Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us.* Simply put, God gives us the benefits of unearned grace. And we are to pass it on. We are literally God's ambassadors. We aren't to keep grace to ourselves. Those two things go hand-in-hand: we feel the joy at receiving the gifts of grace, and we feel joyful at passing them on to others, both by treating others with grace and by making sure they know the source of our grace. God gives us a gift. We give someone else a gift. And suddenly, that person accepts a gift from God.

But there is an issue. We have to be willing to put in a little bit of work to pass grace on to others, to bring them into the family of Christ. Consider our third passage, which is from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. ¹⁹ *I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them.* ²⁰ *To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law.* ²¹ *To those outside the law I became as one outside the law that I might win those outside the law.* ²² *To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all*

things to all people, that by all means I might save some. ²³ I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings. What does this mean?

We have to meet people on their terms. Not on ours. God fills us with grace, and through the power of the Holy Spirit, we leave the things of this world behind and we live for the things of God's world. This doesn't mean we all move to the desert and wear sack cloth and eat grasshoppers. We continue to live our lives like we always have. But we are now walking in the Kingdom of God as we walk through the Kingdom of people. When we come across people in this world, we connect with them on their terms. It doesn't mean we lie about who we are. It means that we accept them for who they are – and welcome them into the Kingdom of God. Then we let grace work away on them. You know the easiest way to connect with someone? It's often by helping them out. It's as simple as that. The foodbank at this church is a great example. We don't proselytize, but they know that they are being helped out by Christians. We are people of faith and we step into someone else's world – and we act with the grace that God has given us.

What's intriguing is how infrequently Americans treat others with grace. It gives us an incredible opportunity to get someone's attention by doing so. People aren't used to it. I recently was talking to a woman in the hospital where I am a

chaplain; she took a spill skiing. She broke her neck at a Colorado resort and needed major surgery to repair her neck. In the end, she only suffered some loss of sensation and she wasn't paralyzed. She was from Quebec. We talked about the fact that my father lived there with his parents, and about the fact that my mother was French. One thing she said to me was that she had been skiing with her two young children. They had skied ahead of her, and after she fell, dozens of people passed her on the slope without stopping to help her. She actually had to stand up on her own, even though she was in incredible pain and felt numb, and ski down the rest of the hill by herself. Then she found a member of the ski patrol who called for a helicopter to fly her to Boulder Community Hospital. She told me that in Quebec or the rest of Canada, many people would have stopped to help her after she fell. I have seen the same thing while traveling. In many other nations, including ones that are not at all Christian, people are far more likely to stop and help if someone is hurt, or if their car breaks down. I've seen this in the Middle East, in Asia, in Russia.

Remember my story about Wendy being stranded in a blizzard with darkness descending? After she had sat hoping for a police officer to stop, for an hour, and about the time I was getting worried back home because she hadn't gotten home, a man in a beat-up old car pulled up behind her car. She walked up

to the passenger's window. The first thing she noticed was three very little kids in the back seat. The second thing she noticed was a Bible on the dash. The guy who stopped was motivated largely by his faith, by his desire to pass on to someone else what had been given to him by God. That Bible was there deliberately. He was a Christian stepping into Wendy's world, accepting her as a child of God in need. He told Wendy that he had been headed north to pick up his kids from his ex and noticed her car on the side of the road. But when he was driving back south with his kids, the car was still there. He had seen a woman by herself in the car and had been concerned about her. He drove her to Boulder, and only when he knew she was safe, he took his three little kids home. Wendy trusted him – and got into this stranger's car – because she saw little kids and a Bible and figured that he was motivated by God's grace. He went far out of his way so that he could pass on what God had given him. Please pray with me.

God, let us feel the energy, the fire of the Holy Spirit within us. Give us opportunities to forgive, to love, to help, to provide empathy, to feed someone, to make someone's life happier or easier. May we, by doing this, and by quietly witnessing to them about our faith, bring people to you. And may we always live with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,²³ gentleness, and self-control. Amen.