

PEACE THROUGH GRACE (NOT THROUGH SELF-ESTEEM)

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In 1 Corinthians 15:1-11, St. Paul presents the facts that form the heart of the gospel: the vicarious death of Christ and His victorious resurrection. He wants us to be enduringly grounded and established in this liberating gospel so that we will not fall away and have believed in vain. In the second half of the passage, vss. 8-10 specifically, he writes autobiographically, and his comments tell us volumes about where we are to find our sense of self-worth. We live in the era of self-love and self-esteem. The worst thing you can do these days is anything that could conceivably lower someone's self-esteem. Yet for all the self-esteem being cast about, people are still lost sinners, sinning in a sinful world. We will ourselves better, but we never get there.

Paul tells us that we're barking up the wrong tree. We are to seek our self-worth in the grace of God through Jesus Christ. In the gospel of forgiveness and love, we can admit what we are, be freed from it, be accepted by almighty God, and be empowered to live in a new way. St. Paul, one of the most influential men in all human history, said, "By the grace of God I am what I am". Let's take a closer look.

In vss. 5-7 Paul lists the most significant post-resurrection appearances of Christ to the Apostles and others. When he gets to the end of the list he mentions himself. He speaks about himself, his apostolic office, and his work in a very instructive way. He says:

1 Corinthians 15:8 And last of all he was seen of me also, as of one born out of due time.
9 For I am the least of the apostles, that am not meet to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. 10 But by the grace of God I am what I am: and his grace which *was bestowed* upon me was not in vain; but I laboured more abundantly than they all: yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me.

He speaks of himself with profound humility and recognition of past failures, but there is not trace of weakness or inferiority in him. This is key: Paul has confidence, assurance, courage, etc., yet it does not flow from himself or his accomplishments, but from another source: God, who in grace, has had mercy on Paul for Christ's sake, and has, through forgiveness and love, made him what he now is.

Speaking of Christ's appearance to him on the Damascus Road (Acts 9), he says that that appearance was as to "one born out of due time". What does this mean? Well, translating the Greek word in this phrase into English is a delicate matter because the imagery is graphic and unpleasant. If you look in the margin of your King James Version, you'll notice that the translators, back in 1611, give an alternate rendering: "an abortive". Paul compares his pre-Christian life to that of a fetus that comes forth already dead; a still-birth, a miscarriage, an abortive. He is saying that his life as an unbelieving persecutor of the Church was not really a life at all, but the expression of utter spiritual death.

In this light he goes on to say, "I am the least of the apostles, that am not meet to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God." These are matter of fact words. They speak of an ignominious past, but they do so without pathological weakness or smarmy self-indulgence. These words are not the expression of an inferiority complex. They are rather sober words of acknowledgement by a man who has been forgiven and given a new and enduring place to stand in Christ. What enables a person to triumph over their sins and live with courage and hope?

"He was seen by me..." (vs. 8). Despite Paul's sins and spiritual death, Jesus appeared to him, forgave and saved him, and called him to be an apostle. How is this possible? Because "Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures" (vs. 3)! This great fact means that no one has to carry around the ball and chain of past and present sins. Forgiveness and reconciliation with God is accomplished and provided by Christ. To believe in Christ is to believe that we, even we, are loved and esteemed by God, enough that He gave His only begotten Son to die for us. You don't need assertiveness training or lessons in self-esteem. You don't have to pretend you're something you're not. You don't have to keep telling yourself, "I'm special. I'm a star." You've got almighty God smiling on you and accepting you as His child because of Christ.

Therefore Paul could acknowledge his failings, heinous as they were, because they were not the last word about him. He adds: "But by the grace of God I am what I am."

By God's grace we are forgiven, adopted, accepted, called and empowered. Paul was an apostle because of God's gracious call. He was saved because of God's gracious atoning work in Christ. All this precisely to a person who did not deserve it. The result? Assurance and confidence born of forgiveness. And a life set free to serve God and neighbor by the empowering grace of God. Paul had, almost singlehandedly at first, founded scores of congregations in Asia and Europe while the other Twelve Apostles were still in Jerusalem and Judea. He got a late start, but he more than made up for lost time.

It was the same with Luther. He accomplished comparatively little in his early monastic days. But when he discovered the freedom of the grace of God, the pure gospel, it freed him from the vicious circle of self-salvation and self-absorption, and empowered him to such an extent that his collected works are over 120 volumes in length.

And it can be the same with us. Ground yourself in the freedom of the gospel. Find your self-worth not in secular pop-psychological schemes, but in the saving death and resurrection of Christ. Remember that in Christ God is our dear father, and we have become his dear children. That is the ground of confident discipleship. "By the grace of God I am what I am."