

Stewards of God's Mysterious Grace

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Preacher: Chris Hatch

[0 : 00] Good morning, New City. This is Ephesians 3, verses 7 through 13. Of this gospel, I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me by the working of His power.

To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things, so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

This was according to the eternal purpose that He has realized in Jesus Christ, our Lord, in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in Him.

So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory. Amen. Thanks be to God. You may be seated. Okay, great.

Keep my notes here. I must say I was getting a little emotional. I was married right here, standing in this, I mean, I was literally right here.

[1 : 31] And seven weeks, I became, Josephine and I became grandparents, and our daughter was baptized right here, like right there. And in Chicago, her and her husband welcomed Imara, a little girl, seven weeks ago.

God has been faithful to our family. And then, actually, Mary, I was ordained in that church in New Life, Massigar, in London. And we were there for a number of years and then planted a new city in London.

God has been faithful for many years to us and through you, God's people. Let's pray before we dig into this passage here. Father, we come to you humbly again.

We thank you that we can gather in your name, the creator of all, the way you guide our lives through the years.

And, Lord, I just thank you for your people and just the friendly faces and the new friends, Lord, that you have in this place.

[2 : 38] We pray, Father, that you would send your spirit that now, as we look at your word together, that it wouldn't just be my words, some few thoughts that I've had, but that your spirit would be at work in the lives of your people.

Now, we come to you humbly, Jesus, asking you to touch us in these next few minutes we have together. In Christ's name we pray.

Amen. Amen. A few years ago, I was in Rwanda, in Kigali, and with a team teaching at a pastor's conference, and it was a wonderful trip.

And during the break at one of the times, one of the pastors came up, and he asked me, so, one of my elders is a murderer. He was involved in the genocide in 1993.

And is that okay for him to help lead our church? Whoa! I didn't get that in other places.

[3 : 47] I'll return to this in a little while, but let that question linger in your mind. Is someone who's directly involved in genocide acceptable to be a member, a leader of your church?

Today, we're looking at Paul's letter to the churches in Ephesus, which is in Turkey now. And in chapter 2, Paul has commented on the fact that Jesus has broken down the walls of hostility.

In fact, that's the sermon that was preached at our wedding 30 years ago, right here. The hostility between Jews and Gentiles, those of us who are not ethnically Jewish.

It was real, and we see the lingering effects of that ongoing. But reconciliation is happening. God is at work, and it's become in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Relationships, both with our Creator God and with fellow human beings, can now be different because of what Christ has done.

[4 : 57] Different types of people can be restored in relationships. God is calling a multi-ethnic people to Himself. And He's done this for a purpose.

His purpose is to bring His blessings to the world. This was His plan from the beginning when He promised Abraham that He would have more children than the stars in the sky.

And these children were not going to be called to God just for themselves. They were going to be called for His purposes, to be His hands and feet, to be on mission in this world, to bring His peace, His justice, His healing to our broken world.

And this mission is centered upon the finished work of Jesus. Now, before the days of Christ, you sort of needed to become Jewish, ethnically Jewish, to participate in the life of God's chosen people.

There were provisions for non-ethnically Jewish people. You might remember the story in John 2, when Jesus goes into the temple and He clears out the part of the temple with the whip.

[6 : 10] And what was that for? Because people were selling animals in the court of the Gentiles, the place where probably our ancestors would have gone to worship.

Those folks who were not ethnically Jewish. Can you imagine? There's like a bunch of sheep over here and goats over here while we're trying to worship. Like, it doesn't work.

And Jesus is furious. This is not God's intention. God intended from the very beginning to work through the Jewish people, but for all, all of us to come together.

And it was a justice issue. Because people were being treated in ways that neglected God's plan for them. That all nations will be blessed through Father Abraham.

Now, Paul is bringing in these non-Jewish people. Our ancestors, I'm guessing most of the people in here are European, African, Asian background. He's bringing them into the church through the blood of Jesus.

[7 : 19] And all peoples, it doesn't matter what your ethnic background, you're welcome into the new community of faith. And that was a radical message. There are ethnic implications that Paul is teaching here.

And it's so out of the box of what the people were used to. He suffered for it. It tells us in verse 13. He's suffering for their good. I think we have a hard time of understanding, well, now with the news we can see what's going on in the Middle East.

How radical Paul's message of inclusion was there. But really, are we that much different? 2,000 years, now we see it on the news.

But reality is we've all got our problems. And Joseph and I travel a good bit around the world, and I've come to learn that everybody has somebody they love to hate.

It doesn't matter where you're at. You've got somebody who's not your people, they're those people. And we're not those people, and we don't like those people. It doesn't matter what color you are, what country you're in, whatever.

- [8 : 24] The problems we have in America, they're deep. They're serious. But they're not unique. We have the same problems in the Middle East. We have the same problems in Kenya. We have the same problems in the Far East or wherever you want to go. So, we love to hate each other, unfortunately. The divisions we see around the world, they plague us. So, after giving his argument that God is calling people to be reconciled to himself and to each other, it's almost as Paul needs to sort of step back a little bit from his argument. And he needs to explain, I've been called to this, to be a minister to the non-Jewish people, these Gentiles. So, in these verses, he steps back from his argument. And he talks about being called to be a minister of the good news of Jesus to all people, no matter what your background. So, the argument I want to make for you today is that that same calling, that same grace of God that changed Paul, and that same calling that God gave Paul is on us as well. It's the same grace, the same calling, that together as a church, we were called to be stewards of this mysterious gift that God has given Paul and God has given us.
- [9 : 45] First here, three points, good Presbyterian with three-point sermon. God's mysterious grace was given to us. Have you ever received an invitation, a secret invitation to a birthday party? And, you know, it's coming up, and then you know we're going to celebrate your friends, 30, 40, 50, you know, something, 60, 70, 80, 90, our friend Rosemary, birthday, 100 coming up. And you're around them, and you can feel, like, to the tension, right? They're like, oh, it's, what are you doing Saturday? Oh, yeah, just hanging out, whatever. You know what's going on. You got, we got it. We're going to have a party. This is what's happening here with Paul. He's got the excitement, this mystery of the gospel. He knows, and he's just excited about it. It's coming. Look at our passage today, or, for us. There's multiple references here. It's not something that he's doing. It's something has been given, this mystery.
- [10 : 51] He's been made known. And then we have a couple of references already before we get to verse 7. But verse 7, the gift of God's grace, which was given to me. Verse 8, the grace was given. Verse 9, the manifold wisdom might be made known. Paul wants us to know that these ideas that he's talking about, this reconciliation, is from God. He didn't make this up. It's a mysterious gift that he's received, that these non-Jewish people can be incorporated into the body of Christ. And he's saying this again and again. This is so wild. You're not going to believe this. And he's so excited. God revealed this to me. Wow! This is great! In the same way, God reveals himself in his grace to us. If you claim the name of Christ, God's Spirit has been working in you. It's not something you can just make up. He's given you ears to hear and a heart to believe that his grace is real. Can you boast that you're so smart?
- [12 : 02] You figured all this out? No. No. You received a gift. This mystery was revealed to you, and you received it by faith. Now, many of us, like me, grew up in a Christian home, Christian family. My parents read me Bible stories when I was a kid. I prayed to receive Christ when I was five and prayed twice to make, in case Jesus was busy with somebody else, you know, that he would hear me, you know, that kind of thing. And I remember a friend got on to me here in Chattanooga who had a very different testimony.

And he said, and I was complaining because my testimony was boring and like, oh, but you have such a great testimony. You are saved in prison. And he just, man, he didn't slap me, but he was, he verbally slapped me.

No, no, no. You know, sometimes God does reveal, even today, Paul obviously met the Lord on the road to Damascus in a vision.

God continues to reveal himself in mysterious, wonderful ways. We have lots of friends, like Mary talked about, from Muslim, Hindu, Sikh background, other faiths, who meet the Lord in miraculous ways.

[13 : 16] One of the fellow students at Trinity, she came from China, absolutely no contact with the gospel for her. She came for her undergrad and ended up living with a Christian family. And now she's at Trinity Seminary working on a master's.

Lord is, is amazing doing creative, wonderful things and calling people to himself in all kind of mysterious ways. And that is a wonderful, wonderful thing. Paul says here in verse 7 that he was made a minister.

He's been called, but he's been made a minister, like a steward or a servant of this good news. This announcement that through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the kingdom has come.

This is news of the kingdom. This is not good advice. It's not something Paul made up, that he has received by grace. Secondly here, this God's mysterious grace calls us.

It calls us out. He heard this good news from God, but it wasn't just a passive hearing. Oh, okay, God's grace, whatever, he's, you know, reconciled, whatever. No, he's heard what God's done and he's given him a calling as a steward.

[14 : 28] He's changed his heart by the power of the Spirit. When God reveals himself to you, he does not leave you the same. His grace calls you into the work that God is doing.

We are now servants of the King. And the King is bringing healing. He is bringing justice. He is bringing peace to our world. And he's calling you, if you claim the name of Christ, into his work here in Chattanooga, wherever he calls you.

What does that look like for you and me? And it's going to be different. We know that. But God calls each of us into his family, into his servant.

And our lives are going to look different than they looked in the past. And our churches should look different than they looked in the past. Honestly, there's, we're wrestling in the U.S. and even around the world.

What does it mean to break down the barriers that divide us? Normal Christianity looks very different. And it looks like it's breaking down the racial, ethnic, historic barriers that we see in whatever society we're in.

[15 : 41] And the reality is, though, that for most of us, this calling is not some dramatic, mind-blowing event.

The stewardship of the gospel can honestly look very ordinary. The calling upon our lives is a wonderful calling. But if you boil it down, very simple.

Love God. Love your neighbor. Love your neighbor. The pastor, Eugene Peterson, is a writer. He's passed away a couple years ago.

But I've enjoyed his writing and making the scriptures understandable for us. And he wrote in one of his books a letter that he received from one of his members of his church who was a new convert.

And she says this. She says, dear pastor, among my artist friends, she was an artist, I feel so defensive about my life. I mean, about going to church. You know, they have no idea what I'm doing and they act bewildered.

- [16 : 45] She goes on to say in this letter, my friends would accept me more readily if they found that I was in some bizarre cult involving exotic and strange activities like black magic.
- But what's going on in the church is so branded so terribly ordinary. But that's what endears me to me. This facade of ordinariness.
- When you pull back the veil of ordinariness, you find the most extraordinary life behind it. The life of God's people who are stewarding the gospel is pretty simple.
- You gather to worship and you scatter to love each other and love the community around you. Especially the orphan and the widow and the immigrant and the poor. Those quartet of those who are outside the scripture talks about.
- Loving those who are vulnerable. And for some of you, this may be more dramatic. Maybe God's talked to Mary or us about moving over the seas. We need folks at Surge that work in Uganda or in Peru or London or wherever God would take you.
- [17 : 57] But for all of us, it means taking your mind off yourself. And taking the initiative to love others practically in the name of Jesus.
- Simple things may be inviting a single mom and her kids to go hiking when you're going hiking out here. There's all these wonderful places to hike around Chattanooga. It may mean drinking a cup of coffee.
- Maybe even instant coffee with a widow that lives down the street from you. It may be helping with a tutoring program. I don't know. There's millions of different ways that God could call you individually to get involved in stewarding this mysterious grace.
- Years ago here in Chattanooga with some of the men in the church, I remember working on a widow's roof all day. And it was a Saturday. We'd get together. And, you know, I'm not a roofer, in case anybody was wondering.
- And there's certain muscles that you use when you're roofing a house that, you know, you don't normally use when you're a pastor or these kinds of things. It's, I remember getting home and I could barely even stand up in the shower.
- [19 : 03] I was so, I mean, I got back to my chair and like over in San Elmo and just like, and I remember I've lost this day. In a real sense, I've given this day to an elderly widow woman who was in need.
- And it honestly didn't cost me that much, you know, some sore muscles and lost a day instead of watching football or whatever. But it reminded me that the advance of the kingdom is small.
- It's quiet. It's acts of love to my neighbor in the name of Jesus. This is a stewardship of the mystery of the gospel that God has given us as He works in our hearts.
- And He impacts our daily decisions in the countless small ways that we can't number. To show the love of Christ to each other here in this congregation.
- And to show the love of Christ to your neighbors, to those here in Chattanooga or around the world, wherever God calls you. And it isn't just that He calls you individually.
- [20 : 07] God calls us as a body, as a church together for His purposes. Look here in verse 10. Through the church, the manifold witness, wisdom of God might be now made known to the rulers and authorities in heavenly places.
- You know, it's like the angels in heaven are like, whoa, look what's going on down there in the church, the body of Christ. This is great. It's the church that God calls together for His purposes here in each individual place.
- Chris Wright is an English theologian. He writes this, He's not looking to just create little robots.

Discipleship is not looking at the mirror and say, wow, I prayed some more today. I memorized three verses this week instead of two. Aren't I a good guy? That's not what God's called you to.

No. We join in with Jesus together as the body of Christ. Seeing the church impact the community that God has called you to. That's a beautiful, wonderful thing.

[21 : 40] And it may look very small, but it's a wonderful thing. Thirdly here, God's mysterious grace. It actually heals us. It heals the divisions we see in the world, we see in the church.

They are real. The racial divisions, history of racial oppression in our country, it is real. The conflicts we see around the world, they are, they are, my mind can't even get my head around to think about what's going on in Gaza.

But God doesn't call us to put our heads in the sand and pretend that everything is wonderful. Oh, me and Jesus, victorious Christian living. That's not.

We can be honest with what's happened. And we can be honest with our own struggles. The own failures that we've had.

The ways that we have hurt others. The racial trauma that maybe we've inflicted on others.

[22 : 46] The words that have come out of our mouth. The family that you grew up in that was very traumatic. My grandfather remembers his first memories of sitting at as a three-year-old atop of the steps and hearing his parents scream at each other.

That's the memories of his life. And some of you, I don't know everybody here, of course, but I know you have traumatic experiences in your past. But the reality is that that has changed by the power of his spirit.

God is bringing hope and he's bringing hope to you personally in whatever your past has been. There's been a change in your life if you're in Christ.

And God can reconcile you with the sin to himself that you've committed, the things you've done. And he can heal you from the things that have been done to you.

Joseph and I listened to a podcast with Esau McCauley on the way down here yesterday. He's a professor at Wheaton College. And he reminded me that we need to be careful, though, as I had this, this was in my text, that it's not just those people sinned against me or I sinned.

[24 : 02] All of that is in my own heart. I am the oppressed and I am the oppressor. I am the sinner and I am the one who has sinned against.

This has all come part of us. And yet God is at work bringing healing, bringing redemption, bringing this group of people, American-born or immigrant, white, black, Hispanic, Asian.

We're all part of God's family. And God is healing his community so that we can be used for his glory in the place that he has placed us.

Together, we are stewards of this watching world that looks at the church. Woo, that's what Jesus said? I don't know if I want to be that. The people are looking at you, New City Fellowship.

You are the witness to the watching community. We are the witness. The divisions that we see in the church are scandalous to the name of Christ. But as we eat together, as we serve together, as we worship together, we testify that God's grace has changed us.

[25 : 11] We scream out, sometimes literally, but, you know, figuratively, that God is a God of love. And God reconciles people and he heals us.

He has not forgotten us. Paul says here in verse 8, I'm the very least of the saints. And you're like, boy, come on, Paul.

You're an apostle. You can't be the least. You're, you're, ah. But think about it. He was a murderer of Christians.

He was a murderer of people who follow the name of Christ. And God met him, turned him around, and sent him out to bring glory to God Almighty.

And it's the same for that elder of my friend's church in Rwanda who participated in that genocide. Does he have the right to be a leader of the church?

[26 : 15] All by himself? No. No. But united to Christ by faith. Even the least of the saints, like Paul, murderer Paul, can become stewards of this great, wonderful mystery of the gospel.

Not only can be reconciled to your creator by his grace, God is healing ethnic divisions in Rwanda. It's not simple, of course.

Another church leader during one of the other breaks said, can the Lord take away the nightmares that I have of seeing all the dead bodies? Is the Lord powerful enough to do that, that I can, I can actually spend a whole evening sleeping without waking up having nightmares?

I say yes. He can. It may not come in this lifetime.

He can heal, but we may have to wait. He can heal the divisions between our peoples. It may not see it in my lifetime.

[27 : 27] It may not see it in yours. It may not see it in any of our lifetimes. But God is at work healing us and breaking down the walls of hostility. Are there areas in your life, in your past, that are so deep, so painful, that you feel there's no way you can move on?

There's no way you can get away from that nightmare? We've had some real struggles in our family this year. Death of my nephew this summer.

And it haunts me at times. And I'm sure you've got things as well that haunt you. I'm here to say God can bring healing to your past.

He can forgive your sins, yes. The things you've done. The way you've abused others in your family or around you. And He can heal you from the nightmares.

The abuse you've received. The pain you've received upon yourself. We live in a brutal world. It is a painful place to live.

[28 : 40] But God can bring healing to our sins, our own sins, and the ways we've been sinned against. As we come to Him in repentance and faith.

We have access to the Father. Look again here in verses 11 and 12. This was according to the eternal purpose that He has realized in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

In whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in Him. Boldness. You can come to your Creator. You can come to your Creator. No matter what you've done. No matter what kind of shameful things have happened to you.

You have access to the Creator of the universe. And you can come to Him. In confidence, it says. Confidence.

Because you're a child of the King if you have faith in Jesus. By the blood, we can come back to our Creator. And we can also go to our neighbor that we've hurt.

[29 : 43] To our spouse. To our children. And we can say, Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner. And so and so, have mercy on me, I'm a sinner.

Let's heal this relationship. Because God is at work in my life. And I want to see it happen on peer-to-peer as well. He will bind up your wounds.

And He will bind you together as God's people. With new brothers, new sisters, and a new community. And He will send you out. For His purposes. Finally here, let me finish with another quote from a British pastor.

Well, he's John Stott. He was pastor at All Souls in central London for many years. He said, he wrote this. We proclaim that God is love.

And that Jesus offers true community. We insist that the church is part of the gospel. God's purpose, we say, is not merely to save isolated individuals.

[30 : 47] And so perpetuate their loneliness. I just, I read that and I was like, the loneliness that we're facing in America and Europe, in London as well. Lonely London, we used to joke about it.

God has a plan to deal with your loneliness. And it involves the church, the people of God together. So we're not perpetuating loneliness.

God is not saving merely isolated individuals. But building a church to create a new society. Even a new humanity. In which racial, national, social, sexual barriers have been abolished.

May that be true here at New City, in Chattanooga, and across our globe. Amen. Let us pray. Amen. Father, we see our world.

We see the news. And our heart breaks. We lament the tragedy of seeing babies killed, homes destroyed.

[31 : 56] Not only in Gaza, but in Ukraine and different parts, other parts of the world. We lament our own, the ways we've suffered, the way we've, here in Chattanooga and St. Louis and other places in our country.

The pain is real. But we thank you that you are a God on the move. You have not left your people alone. You continue to draw us to yourself by your grace.

And you continue to bring healing and sending us out for your purposes, for your glory. Be with your people here at New City. Continue to bind them together. Use them here in Chattanooga for your glory.

In Christ Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen.