Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Reasons for Loving the Church, Part 1
Scripture: Selected Scriptures
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Through the years of ministry here at Grace Church, there has always been an underlying attitude that has filled my heart and it is an attitude of love for the church. I love the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. There are many things the Lord has called me to do and given me opportunity to do that I have done that do not come close to the privilege of serving the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. I could live without lots of things. I am thankful for the opportunity to give leadership to schools, to write books, to write commentaries. I'm thankful for the opportunity to go places and if only to touch ever so lightly down and preach a little while and go away again, which I have done through the many, many years of ministry.

But all of those things could be taken away from me and it would not touch me as to the true joy of my heart because my love is the church, the church of Jesus Christ. I love the church wherever I encounter it admittedly, whether I am fellowshiping with believers in Asia or Russia or wherever it is on the globe, whether in a primitive environment in the Andes Mountains, or a very sophisticated environment in Europe or with a small group or a large group, with a church of one of our seminary graduates, or some great event involving many churches and many Christians, wherever I go, the fellowship which I enjoy with God's people who are His church is a tremendous joy to me. I love the church.

But of all the church, I love this part of the church most. This group that God has assembled here through the years in this one place is the love of the church that exceeds all others. And that by virtue of the years and years of interaction and fellowship and mutual ministry and caring and living through all the experiences of life. All the rest of the things that I have done and do could be taken away from me and I would be left completely in tact if I were still here serving the church that I love.

As I said on the day of the fortieth, there has never been an impulse in my heart to go anywhere else. This has never been a job for me. This has never been a place to serve. This is...this has been the church, the segment of the church that the Lord has given to me.

Having reached, let's say, ten years of parenting, Patricia wouldn't look at each other and say, "Well, let's see, we've had ten years with these kids. Let's chuck them and get some new ones. No, we've had enough of this family, let's go find another family to invest our lives in."
At 20 years we wouldn't trade our precious children for any other children. That's an unthinkable concept. We are inseparable from the physical family the Lord has given us. And I will tell you this, we

are also inseparable from the spiritual family the Lord has given to us. That's why the thought never entered to leave.

I didn't really understand that when I came. I wasn't sure about that. My Dad had pastored many churches. I in contra distinction to him, and I think if I look back on it, maybe ten churches my Dad had pastored, and I have only been in one all these years. What a privilege that God brought me to this place and allowed us to have this kind of relationship.

There's a sense in which I love this church because I love in particular the people in this church. But it's bigger than that. It's bigger than that. Even those of you that I don't know, I love in a very unique way. Even those of you who don't intersect in my life on any regular basis, I love you in a unique way. I may not be able to personally express that love, nor may you be able to express your love to me, but I want to help you understand by the uniqueness with which I love the church.

I love the church not so much because all the people in it are so likable, although that is certainly true of our church...if not downright lovable. But I love the church because of what it is to the Lord of the church. You know, the Apostle John said, "Whoever loves the Lord, loves who the Lord loves." I love the Lord and I love the church because the Lord loves the church and I love who He loves.

I'll give you an analogy of that. I can tell by how children treat me how their parents feel about me. When little children pour out love to me, I know their parents love me because they love who their parents love. I know that. And I know that the Lord loves His church and I love who the Lord loves. The church is so amazing. It is the most amazing entity in the world. It is the assembly of the truly redeemed. We will never be separated. Get use to each other, this is forever. There will never be any separation. And you won't have to deal with all the difficulties because in glory we will all be perfect. We are the eternally blessed. We are the very reason for which the universe was created. We are the noblest cause in the universe. We are God's gathered people for eternal purposes. I love the church because it's just unlike everything else, nothing comes close.

Now I want to talk to you a little bit about why I love the church this morning, and next Sunday. Specifically, I am admittedly still in the 40-year-anniversary mode and this is a good time, 40 years in, to make a milestone, put it down. And if, as Bill said, I have 40 more, that's incomprehensible, of course, but let's say a few more, this would be a milestone, a marker point, sort of Ebenezer to be raised to identify where we've been and where we need to stay faithful in the future.

I love the church. First of all, I love the church because it is the only spiritual, the only spiritual entity our Lord is building. It is the only spiritual entity our Lord is building. This is it. This is it. I can't imagine life apart from the church. This is the only institution our Lord is building.

Go back with me to Matthew chapter 16, and we're going to be covering some things that through the years we have emphasized, perhaps in a little different structure. But in Matthew chapter 16, Jesus makes one statement and it's really all we need to look at, it's in verse 18 and you are familiar with it. Jesus, after Peter has acknowledged that He is the Christ, Son of the living God, affirms that on that reality of who He is, verse 18 He says, "I will build My church and the gates of Hades will not overpower it." That speaks of the church's invincibility. I will build My church and even the gates of Hades, which is a euphemism for death, cannot stop it.

Now when you take the phrase, "I will build My church," you have a very definitive statement. The church is not ours, it's His...My church. It is not ours to build, it is His to build. "I will build My church." It is invincible, I will build My church and nothing will stop it. This is so foundational. It is where we begin with our understanding of the church. The church is not a human organization. It is not built by men. It is not built by the cleverness of men, the ingenuity of men, the tactics of men, the strategies of men. It is not built by the gifts of men. I will build My church. That is so foundational that the only question to ask after that is how does the Lord build His church and how can I serve Him in that building? I will build My church.

Many years ago a reporter said to me, "Do you have a great desire to build the church," to which I said, "I have no desire to build the church, Jesus said He would build the church and I don't want to compete with Him." I don't build the church. I have no interest in building the church. More than that, I have no ability to build the church. I have no power to build the church. The best of my sermons can't awaken the dead. The best of my sermons can't give sight to the blind. Only God can do that. I can throw seed. I can't change soil. I have no desire to build the church. I just want to know, by what means does the Lord build His church and get in line with that. That's why we've never had an identity crisis here. That's why we haven't been blown around by every ecclesiastical wind that comes down the pipe that wants to shift us over to this trend and that trend. We simply want to know how the Lord builds His church and the only place we can find out is where He's revealed Himself and that's on the pages of Scripture. I will build My church. Something very intimate, something very personal about the church. It is Christ's church. It is God's church. It belongs to them. It belongs to the trinity, if you will. It is the only entity that God is building in the world. Everything else will be destroyed either the material creation that goes out of existence, or the unregenerate who end up in an eternal punishment in hell. In the end, heaven awaits only one entity and that is the assembly of the redeemed which in this age involves the church. The church one day will be blended together with Israel of old and all who believed in the true and living God in the Old Testament era to compose the final bride of Christ. Just one entity. How wonderful to be a part of it, to be a part of the Lord's work in the church.

Now to give you a sense of why God is doing this...why? In the Trinity, before anything existed except the Trinity, why...why....why did God decide to do this? Why even create a universe? Why create an earth? Why create man on the earth? Why this theater in the midst of what looks like an infinite

universe? Why commit yourself to this little theater of human life? Why?

The answer is, for the purpose of redemption, to build a redeemed people. Let me show you how to understand this. Turn to Titus chapter 1...Titus chapter 1. Now the Apostle Paul in Titus, identifies himself as a slave of God and an Apostle of Jesus Christ. The big picture, he's a slave of God. More narrowly, his slavery, his particular duty is to be an Apostle of Jesus Christ, a messenger of the gospel, if you will.

Now here's the purpose for which he serves, "For the faith of those chosen of God and the knowledge of the truth which is according to godliness, in the hope of eternal life." In those very few words, you have a comprehensive understanding of gospel ministry. There are three elements to gospel ministry, and they're all there. Paul says, first of all, I am a messenger of Jesus Christ for the faith of the elect of God. That is, to bring the gospel so that the elect can hear it and believe. That's what the faith of those chosen of God means. My objective is to recognize that God has chosen certain people to believe. They can't believe until they hear the truth. How shall they hear it without a preacher? Faith comes by hearing the Word of Christ.

So, Paul says first responsibility is to proclaim the truth of Jesus Christ so that the elect can hear and exercise faith. That is an evangelistic emphasis. That is to bring people to the place, let's use the word, justification, salvation. That's the first aspect of ministry.

Second aspect, having come to faith, I have a second duty with these people, that is to give them the knowledge of the truth which is according to godliness. That deals not with justification but with sanctification, the second aspect in Paul's ministry. First, you bring the gospel so the elect can hear and believe. And then to those who believe, you bring the knowledge of truth that produces godliness. That's sanctification.

Finally, verse 2, you focus on the hope of eternal life which is glorification. Those are the three aspects of salvation...justification, sanctification, glorification. Justification, we're saved from the penalty of sin. Sanctification, we are being delivered from the power of sin. Glorification, we will forever be delivered from the presence of sin. This is the full salvation and it starts with election and in time we are brought to faith, we are in the process of being separated from sin and more and more conformed to the image of Christ until one day we enter into glory and are made like Him. This is the plan of salvation, it involves election, justification, sanctification and glorification.

Now, I want you to notice when this began, end of verse 2. God promised all this, God promised all this and God doesn't lie, right? So if this is what He promised, this is what will be. But when did He promise this? Well, the NAS says long ages ago. The Greek says before time began...before time began, before there was any earth, before there was any universe, before there was anything material, when there was only a Trinity, only God, one in three. God made a promise before time

began. The question then is to whom did He make a promise? And the answer is, no one existed but Himself. So you must have then an intertrinitarian promise. God promising to choose, justify, sanctify and glorify a redeemed people that aren't even in existence.
To whom does He make the promise? Go back to 2 Timothy chapter 1...2 Timothy chapter 1, verse 8 ends with the word God and that word, that person becomes the antecedent for verse 9. God, who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to His own purpose and grace..." Again here, this whole salvation, all of it, is bound up in a divine holy calling, "Not having anything to do with our works, but according to His own purpose and grace...now follow, verse 9...which was granted us in Christ Jesus....here's the same exact Greek phrase...before time began." Before time began, Titus 1 and 2 says, God made a promise. Here before time began it is clear that the promise is made to Christ Jesus, the Son of God, the second member of the Trinity.

Why did God create the world? Why did God set out to redeem sinners? Because He made a promise to His Son. The Father made a promise to the Son when only God existed. And the promise was to give to the Son a bride. Bound up in the love of the Father for the Son, the Father loving the Son with perfect love wants to demonstrate His love to the Son with a gift. We understand that. You can love without giving, but you...you can give without loving, I should say, but you cannot love without giving. Love by its very nature gives and God in perfect expression of love to the Son determined to give to the Son a gift of His love, a redeemed humanity, in a sense, a bride for the Son. And God sets out and creates the universe and creates the earth and populates it with man and comes through the Fall with a redemptive plan to collect this bride for His Son so that all of redemptive history is the Father seeking a bride for His Son. He promised Him that before time began. He promised a people who were elect, justified, sanctified, and glorified.

And so, the plan of redemption is the Father taking a bride for His Son. I think most people assume that the plan of salvation is about God saving us. Well, that's a component of it, that's the...that's the intermediary step but the goal of redemption is to give a bride to the Son. In a sense, we are incidental to that. We are not the final object, we are only the intermediate object. He collects us not for our own worth, not for our intrinsic value, but to transform us into something of value to give to His Son as an expression of His love. It's a vast, sweeping plan.

So, who am I? I'm just this guy who is given by God an opportunity to help serve as much as I can in my weakness and frailty, the God of the universe who is calling out a bride for His Son. He knows who they are. He wrote their names down before the foundation of the world. In time He will bring them to faith, to godliness and to glory. All I have is a simple, weak, role to play in the purpose of God who has chosen not only to draw to Himself a bride, but to use those who are a part of that bride as the means by which He gathers the others.Turn to John 6 and you will hear Jesus speak and you will know that He fully understood this. Of course He understood it, because He is the Son of God, because He has omniscience, because, of course, He has perfect knowledge of this plan. But I want you to see how clear the language is in John 6 verse 37. "All that the Father gives Me will come to

Me."

What a statement! All that the Father gives to Me will come to Me. Every individual who is saved is a gift by the Father to the Son. Every individual who comes to faith is a gift by the Father to the Son. The Son understood that.

If you go down to verse 44, Jesus speaking, "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him." The Father chooses, the Father draws. The Father gives to the Son, every person who comes to faith in Christ is a gift from the Father to the Son, chosen by the Father, drawn by the Father, given to the Son.

And, back to verse 37, "All that the Father gives Me will come to Me." This is what we mean by irresistible grace. All that the Father draws will come. All that the Father gives Me will come. No one can resist it. And the one who comes to Me, I will certainly not cast out, not because there's some inherent value in the person, but because that person is a gift from God, the Father. I think you understand that. You probably have a closet somewhere in your house full of gifts that are virtually useless in themselves, but you keep them because the giver meant something to you, right? We all understand that. The gift of itself is not significant, the act of the giving is a significant expression of love. I think we have to understand that there's nothing particularly charming about us. You know, we all have those things that were given to us that we wouldn't wear unless we were caught in some level of desperation. But we cherish the expression of love and we embrace the gift for the sake of the love of the giver. And we have to understand that there's nothing intrinsically beautiful about us, but there is something wonderful about the Father loving the Son enough to give us to the Son and then ultimately to transform us into something that is eternally beautiful and lovely and worthy. We are all gifts.

Jesus says then in verse 38, "I have come down from heaven not to do My own will but the will of Him who sent Me. And what is the will of Him who sent Me? This is the will of Him who sent Me that of all that He has given Me, I lose none, but raise him up on the last day." The Father chooses, the Son receives, doesn't reject, the Son holds and the Son raises.

So verse 40, "This is the will of My Father that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him will have eternal life. I Myself will raise Him up on the last day." So the Father in eternity past before there was time says to the Son, "I want to give You a redeemed humanity. I want to give them to You, to worship You, to serve You, to glorify You, to honor You forever and ever and ever and ever. And t hey will have a kind of praise that the holy angels do not have because they will have praise as those who have been redeemed from hell." There will be a kind of praise that holy angels know nothing about for there is no redemption of angels. They will praise You as the Lamb that was slain. They will praise You as the one who gave Himself for their redemption. They will serve You. They will honor You. They will glorify You. Heaven forever will ring with the words, "Worthy is the Lamb that was

slain."

This is what the bride does for the bridegroom forever. That is why the New Jerusalem, the capital city of heaven is seen as a bride adorned for her husband. That is why the church is called the bride. That is why even Israel of old is seen as the wife of God.

If you will turn to the seventeenth chapter of John, you will see this same wonderful understanding as our Lord is praying here. This understanding again is clearly in the front of His mind. He's getting ready to face the cross. He's going to be separated from God for a period of time. He's going to be coming back to heaven, back to glory. He wants to make sure those that the Father gives Him are cared for. And so, in verse 9, He prays for those who belong to Him, who have been given to Him. He says in verse 9, "I ask on their behalf, I do not ask on behalf of the world, but of those whom You have given Me, for they are Yours and all things that are Mine are Yours and Yours are Mine."

This is a stunning reality that every person who ever comes to faith in Christ is one who belongs to God and is given by God to the Son as a gift. And then the ownership is shared. We belong to God, we belong to the Son of God.

In verse 11, "I am no longer in the world, yet they themselves are in the world and I come to You, holy Father, keep them in Your name, the name which You have given Me that they may be one, even as we are. I was with them, I was keeping them in Your name which You have given Me and I guarded them and not one of them perished." Of course, with the exception of the false disciple, the son of perdition, namely Judas who from the beginning was a devil, Jesus said, never a true gift from God.

You notice the language here is all about the Father giving them and the Son receiving them. Verse 24, "Father, I desire that they also whom You have given Me be with Me where I am that they may see My glory." Father, I'm going to be separated from You, I'm going to come back...I want You to make sure You hold on to them and bring them to glory that You have given Me.

It is true that God loves sinners. It is true that God loves the world. It is true that He loves His own in a special and marvelous way. But that love is only an intermediary love. He loves us in order that He might express that greatest of all loves that He has for the Son by giving us as a bride to Him. And what do we do in heaven? We serve the Son, we praise the Son, we glorify the Son, we honor the Son and one more thing, according to Romans 8:29, we literally are made like the Son...we are made like the Son. That is the stunning promise.

He predestined us to become conformed to the very image of His Son, so that He would be the prototokos, the premiere one among many brethren. As much as glorified humanity can be like incarnate deity, we will be like Christ. This is the supreme compliment, is it not? The supreme compliment is imitation and the Father makes us like Christ. We won't be God, we won't be deity, we

will be glorified humanity but we will reflect His glory. We will possess His holiness. We will be an all-glorious bride.

This is why I love the church. I love the church because this is the work of God, this is the redemptive work of God in the world...the only thing our Lord ever built is the church. The only living organism. He only has one body, the body of believers who share His common life. And in the end, we get a glimpse of what will happen, if you want to look at 1 Corinthians 15 for just a moment, there's a couple of verses there that I think are powerful. First Corinthians, as we get down to verse 20 and following, Paul is talking about the final end of all things, verse 24, then comes the end, then comes the Kingdom. All other rule, all authority, all power is abolished. Verse 25, "Christ will reign. All enemies will be put under His feet. Death will be abolished." That's at the end of the Millennial Kingdom, the end of all things, just before the eternal state.

And then verse 27, "For He's put all things in subjection under His feet." In the end, everything is brought in to subjection to Christ. And when He says, "All things are put in subjection," it is evident that He is accepted who put all things in subjection to Him. Everything is subjected to Christ except God. And then verse 28, "When all things are subjected to Him, to Christ, then the Son Himself will be subjected to the one who subjected all things to Him so that God may be all and in all."

What is that? In the end when all the redeemed are gathered, all redemptive history is over, all are brought to Christ, the bride is complete, consummate, all in glory and the Father will say, "All belong to You. The Son in a reciprocal act of love will take the bride and Himself and give them back to the Father so that God may be all in all."

The Father loves the Son and collects a bride. Gives that bride to the Son. The Son in turn loves the Father. Gives Himself and the bride back to the Father. Staggering reality to understand the unfolding story of redemption. It is all about the love between the infinite holy Father and the infinite holy Son. I love the church because of what it is. It is the bride of Christ chosen by the Father.

Now, I want to give you a second point to think about. This makes the church the most precious thing on earth. This makes the church the most precious thing to our Lord. Not precious to the world, they don't like us, they don't understand us, they resent us. We are a rebuke to them. We sting their consciences. We irritate them. And I'm talking about the true church. But we are the most valuable commodity on the planet. And how do you know that? Because for us the highest price was paid, right? We were redeemed not with corruptible things like silver and gold, 1 Peter 1, but with the precious blood of Christ, a Lamb without blemish and without spot. The price paid for us was greater than any price ever paid for anything. Acts 20:28, the church of God, Paul said, purchased with His own blood. And it wasn't the physical death of Jesus, it was the sin-bearing. It was the darkness, remember the darkness when we were ending up in Luke and the time when all the wrath of God against all the sins of all the redeemed of all the ages, all the wrath for all those sins was poured out

on Christ in a few hours? And that infinite person suffered an infinite judgment in just a few hours. The price was paid. You're not your own, Paul tells the Corinthians, you're bought with a price.

Since the price was the highest, that which was purchased must be the most valuable. We are precious. That is why in Matthew chapter 18 we're told not to cause another believer to stumble, you'd be better off to have a millstone around your neck and be drowned. Don't look down or disdain another believer no matter how small they may appear to you. Don't hold a grudge against another believer, make sure you forgive. How you treat other believers is important because Jesus said in Matthew 18, whoever receives one such little one, receives Me. Christ takes up residence in every believer. And how you treat another believer is how you treat Him. The church is precious.

I am fully aware of that. Always aware of that, that when I'm dealing with the church, when I'm dealing with the individuals in the church, I'm dealing with Christ in them. "He that is joined to the Lord is one." I love the church. It is the only spiritual entity our Lord is building and it is the most precious thing on earth. One, because the highest price was paid for it. And, two, because the greatest person in the universe lives in every believer. How precious are they?

Yes, "He became sin for us who knew no sin that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him." He made us His own. He made us His body. He took up residence in us. We become the temple of the Spirit of Christ who dwells in us.

I don't...I don't want to tamper with the church. I don't want to cause any believer to stumble. I want to do everything I can to instruct and to teach and to show love and respect for the bride of Christ. I love Him. I love His bride. I love Him, I love who He loves. This is the most defining reality in my understanding of ministry. I can't build the church, it's His to build. I can't save people, they're His to save. But I have been given this tremendous responsibility, like the Apostle Paul, to be a messenger of Jesus Christ for the faith of those chosen by God and to teach them the truth which produces godliness and to make sure that I build in them the shining hope of eternal life.

In the process of their sanctification, I have to realize that they belong to the Lord in such a special way that if I were to ever cause them to stumble, I would be better off to be drowned. I can't treat any believer with disdain for even the holy angels look at the face of the Father who shows concern about how each of His individual children are treated. I have to be aware that God created holy angels not only to worship Him but also to minister to these saints so that the Father and the Son and the Spirit and the holy angels dispatched by the Trinity to the care of the saints tell me how important they are. The church is the most precious thing on earth and who wouldn't love those whom God so greatly loves?

Well there are a few more points that I wanted to give you and will do those next time. Let's pray.

Lord, it’s all so transcendent, it’s all so massive, it’s all so infinite, staggering, stunning and yet it comes down to us in such wonderful, personal ways. How shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall the preacher go unless he’s sent? Thank You for making us a part of it, letting us be the voice that speaks the gospel, for letting us be the people who send others to carry the gospel near and far, to the ends of the earth. We are so blessed, Lord, to be the church. Give us a great love for the church, the true church. We grieve in our hearts over the false church, the corrupt church, those who claim Christ and have no relationship to Him at all, who cloud the world’s understanding of what the true church is. But, Lord, may our disappoint with those kinds of things and our concerns for those kinds of things never diminish our true love of the true church. We thank You that You’ve made us a part of it. There are no words. We will spend forever and never be exhausted praising You when we enter into the glory that awaits us. Give us a love for Your church, a love for those whom You love savingly. May we understand how precious the church is based upon the price that was paid, based upon the very presence of Christ in every believer, based upon their usefulness in the Kingdom. May each of us as individuals bring joy to Your church and bring truth to Your church, bring peace and unity to Your church and bring purity and holiness to Your church. And in that same chapter in Matthew 18, You said when one sins, we need to go, confront because You want Your church to be pure. We understand that because You love Your church. And because we love Your church, we desire what You desire, as well. Lord, thank You for all that You have allowed us to experience together as a congregation and we thank You for how this testimony of Your grace worked out in our unworthy and weak lives has sent a ringing testimony of Christ around the world. Give us many more wonderful years ahead to serve You together, we pray in Your Son’s name. Amen.

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