

# “This Grace Given”

a sermon by

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**Text: “For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.” (Romans 12:3)**

Several weeks ago the Wall Street Journal published a review of a new biography of the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer by Eric Metaxas entitled *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*. In this biography the author attempts to discredit the revisionist views of Bonhoeffer that make him out to be a “humanist” or an ethicist for whom religious doctrine was easily disposable. In the 1960’s many theologians commented on Bonhoeffer’s use of the phrase “religionless Christianity” to hint that he had given up on his basic beliefs as a Christian. Metaxas, in his biography of Bonhoeffer, seeks to portray Bonhoeffer as a devout Christian who was willing to give his life in an attempt to follow Jesus Christ and to refuse any form of “cheap grace.” As Reinhold Niebuhr astutely observed, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in giving his life in resistance to Hitler’s rule in Germany deserves a place in the modern day ‘Acts of the Apostles.’”

## I.

This morning we read from Paul’s letter to the Church at Rome. This letter follows a pattern that is typical of Paul’s New Testament writings. He begins the Letter to the Church at Rome with a section (Romans 1-8) in which he defines the Christian faith in terms of God’s presence in Jesus Christ. Then in Romans 9-11 Paul deals with what was a very difficult problem for him, the situation of the Jews. He concludes his letter with a section on the Christian life (Chapters 12-15).

As Christians and as Presbyterians, we are all concerned with the Christian life. The Book of Order of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) expresses that one of the primary emphases of our governance is that “truth is in order to goodness.” John Calvin, the founder of the Presbyterian Church, did not believe in speculative theology. For him, the Christian faith was tied to human life. Or to put it another way, to what avail is our faith in God if it does not – at some point – express itself in our life.

Certainly that is consistent with the teachings of Jesus. It was Jesus who said that by ‘their fruit you shall know them.’ (Matthew 7:20) For Jesus there was an intimate connection between what we believe and how we live. That is also found in the Sermon on the Mount when Jesus observed that “not everyone who says, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the Kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my father in heaven.” (Matthew 7:21ff)

So, what are the key components of the Christian life?

## II.

First of all, as Christians we are called to “deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Jesus.” John Calvin in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* uses these words of Jesus to define the Christian life. For Calvin, the basic sin is unbelief, lack of trust and confidence in God the Father. The primary manifestation of that sin is in pride or self-centeredness. We cannot get beyond ourselves. For Calvin the sin of self-centeredness is overcome by the practice of self-denial, which is becoming alive unto God and to one’s fellow human beings.

Several years ago I came across the biography of Sir Thomas More by Peter Ackroyd. Thomas More has always held a fascination for me. He was certainly a remarkable figure of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. He was a close friend of the King of England, Henry VIII. He served as Lord Chancellor of England. By every standard he seemed a man who loved life and enjoyed every aspect of it. He was revered by his family and his home on the Thames River was a welcoming place for many of the most important people in Europe.

But there was something about Thomas More that sets him apart from so many people and makes him an enigma to us. He had a conscience and a strong sense of himself. When King Henry divorced his wife Katherine to marry Anne Boleyn, the king required every citizen of England to take an oath supporting his action and his break with the medieval church. But Thomas More could not take that oath. Even when the king urged him to take the oath, even when his own family urged him to take the oath, he refused. He was finally placed in prison, tried for treason, and beheaded at the tower of London. His final words to those who stood at his execution were these: “I die the king’s good servant, but God’s servant first.”

Thomas More is in the only person in English history who was recognized as a Knight of the Round Table, a Saint, and a Martyr. Some years ago Robert Bolt wrote a play about the life of Thomas More that he entitled “A Man For All Seasons.”

And yet, there is a sense that More is particularly a person for this season for he represents something that is almost impossible for us to grasp: a person who was willing to die for something that he believed. I wonder how many of us here would find something that we believed in so strongly that we would die for it?

## III.

Then, too, there is another dimension of the Christian life, which is the confidence that our lives are rooted in the purposes of God and that God works for good in all things for those who love him.

Herbert Butterfield, a distinguished historian, once made the following observation: “For let us be sure of one thing – in the long run, there are only two alternative views about life or about history. Here is a fact which was realized thousands of years ago and is still true as ever. Either you trace everything back in the long run to sheer blind chance, or you trace everything back to God.”

The Christian witness is that the last word in every human situation is the grace of God. God’s grace is not only forgiveness and renewal but also, as Reinhold Niebuhr observed, “God’s providential working in history by which he makes the wrath of man to praise him and transmutes good out of evil.” On one occasion God spoke to the Apostle Paul these words: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” (II Corinthians 12:9) The human situation can become very difficult but there is always hope. Again, the Apostle Paul wrote, “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not conquered.” (II Corinthians 4:8-9)

One of the books that I keep at my house and find myself turning to on many occasions is the biography of Winston Churchill by William Manchester entitled *The Last Lion: Alone (1932-1940)*. In this book Manchester writes of what Churchill called “The wilderness years.” He was the lone voice in the House of Commons who urged his fellow countrymen to arm themselves against the Third Reich of Adolph Hitler.

From the very beginning Churchill knew that Hitler would not stop until all of Europe and England was in his grasp. But Churchill was a lone voice crying in the wilderness. He was ridiculed, laughed at, teased, and mocked. But in that terrible May of 1940, when the Low Lands succumbed to the force of Hitler’s *Wehrmacht* and when France fell as well, the King of England turned to the one man who had predicted every single event that had happened and the only person to whom England could turn, if they were to avoid the terrible ignominy of defeat.

Churchill writes of that May evening when he was summoned to Buckingham Castle and asked to form a new government. On his way home Churchill told his driver and bodyguard that he believed that everything that had happened to him in his life had prepared him for this moment: every disappointment, every defeat, every ridicule, every setback.

That is a remarkable statement about the power of God to work for good in human life. It is rooted in the confidence that our lives are not an accident but that we belong to the God who created us, redeemed us in Jesus Christ, and who governs and provides for our lives.

#### IV.

There is another element to the Christian life and it is characterized by a sense of the freedom and joy that is given to us in Jesus Christ. The great reformer Martin Luther certainly understood this. One of his most famous writings of 1520 was entitled “The Freedom of the Christian.” In that writing Luther crafted a remarkable statement that went as follows: “The Christian,” wrote Luther “is master of all and servant to none.” Then he added the statement that “the Christ is master to none and servant to all.” In that paradox Luther pointed to the freedom and joy of the Christian life. Because we have been redeemed by the gift of God’s grace in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we have a certain freedom and joy. We can enjoy the world that God has created knowing that our salvation is ultimately in God’s grace and not in our own

achievements. To use the words of the Shorter Catechism: “Our chief end in life is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.” This freedom gives the capacity to seek the kingdom of God while at the same time knowing that we will never fully find it.

As Christians, we believe that life is meaningful and good because that is the way that God has created the world. When one asks, “What is the worst thing that can happen to a person?” it is not tragedy. Tragedy can bring out the best in a person. The worst that can happen to a person is the loss of meaning in life.

That is an issue that Christianity faces head on. We believe that God gives meaning and purpose to our lives. Sigmund Freud, the founder of modern psychiatry, once lamented what he called “the senseless life.” Contrast that to the Apostle Paul who, though in prison facing death, could write, “Rejoice in the Lord. Again I say rejoice.”

As Christians, we are often known for our seriousness, our rigidity, our hypocrisy, and often by our extreme sense of judgmental attitude. But I wonder how many of us are known for our sense of wonder and joy – not only about the beautiful world around us – but also for the great sense of the power of God to work his grace in us and to redeem us from the power of sin and death?

I began this sermon with a note about the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and I would like to end it on this note as well. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was imprisoned by the German Gestapo for being a part of the conspiracy to assassinate Adolph Hitler. He was imprisoned first in Berlin and then later in Buchenwald, Schonberg, and finally in Flossenburg.

On April 8<sup>th</sup>, 1945 prisoner Bonhoeffer conducted a brief worship service and communion service for some of his fellow prisoners. All of the prisoners knew that the war would soon be over. They could hear the sound of the Allied forces. He had hardly finished his prayer before two S.S. troopers came to the door of the cell in which he stood and said, “Prisoner Bonhoeffer, get ready to come with us.” Those words “Come with us” were the most dreaded in the camp because they meant one thing only – the scaffold. Bonhoeffer turned to one of the men with him and said, “This is the end, but for me it is the beginning of life.”

On the next day, April 9<sup>th</sup>, 1945 Bonhoeffer was hanged – just two days before the camp was liberated by Allied troops.

In this letter to the church at Rome the Apostle Paul calls us not to be conformed to the world but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds.

It is this grace that gives us great hope in life and in death.

Amen!