

Scriptures: 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13; Luke 21:5-19

Methodism and Grace

I chuckle every time I read that first reading we had this morning, from Paul's second letter to the church at Thessalonica. If you've been on an Emmaus walk, you know that they talk extensively about God's grace. There are at least three talks about grace I can think of, off the top of my head. Well, several years ago, I was an assistant table leader on a Men's walk, and one of the guys sitting next to me, looks at me during one of the talks on grace, and says, "These Methodists talk too much about grace. What about 'if a man will not work, he shall not eat?'"

When we cherry-pick verses to fit our narratives, and to support our own preconceived ideas, we lose sight of God and His grace poured out for all people. Paul wasn't telling the Thessalonians to ignore the needy – to not be merciful to people on welfare. Welfare wasn't even an idea in those days. You have to read on, to see what Paul's getting at. "We hear that some among you are idle and disruptive. They are not busy; they are busybodies," (2 Thess. 3:11). What he was driving home was the fact that if people are saying they believe in Jesus Christ, but they're running around stirring the pot and causing trouble, they better do some self-examination, because they aren't really going about doing the Lord's work.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, wrote many sermons discussing how central the idea of grace and mercy is to Jesus Christ. Jesus does the hard work, the heavy lifting, of taking our burdens away at the cross, and He replaces our sinfulness with His own righteousness and holiness in the eyes of God. He does it. Now we may try to live into that – as His followers we should strive to live into that – but there's nothing you or I can do to gain righteousness or holiness. It's all from Jesus. That's something John Wesley preached, and that the United Methodist Church today continues to teach and preach. If you have a Bible or Bible app handy, turn with me to Luke 21:5-19. **Read Luke 21:5-19.**

Open-Mouthed Tourists

Talk about a lot of work! The temple in Jerusalem was really something to see. In our Gospel reading, Jesus and His disciples were visiting Jerusalem, the city which was the center of their world. At the center of town was the temple. It was so beautiful, it overwhelmed them. Luke records, "Some of His disciples were remarking about how the temple was adorned with beautiful stones and with gifts dedicated to God," (Lk. 21:5). Kendra and I were married in Wilmington, North Carolina, in the summer of 2007. We had been down there about five months earlier, and the people treated us like royalty.

When we got there in August, 2007, during the height of their summer tourist season, I was shocked! The royal treatment was non-existent. They treated us like open-mouthed tourists, there to see all the summertime sights, which we were. We

spent half a day trying to figure out where the courthouse was just so we could purchase our marriage license! The disciples walking around the temple compound with Jesus that day most certainly looked much like open-mouthed tourists!

The temple those guys were looking at that day was the third one to stand on the site. The first one, built by Solomon, had lasted four hundred years until it was destroyed by the Babylonians. When the remnant returned from the Babylonian captivity, they rebuilt the temple – you can read about it in Ezra and Nehemiah. It stood for roughly five hundred years before it was desecrated by Antiochus Epiphanes, a Greek whose family ruled that area after Alexander the Great had defeated Persia. The third temple had been rebuilt about fifty years before Jesus and His disciples came for their visit. It was double the size of the second temple. Ten thousand people were put to work in building it.

They finished most of it in ten years, under Herod the Great – who really should have been named Herod the Terrible – but the fine detail work was still going on when Jesus and His followers showed up that day. The whole town was centered on the activities that occurred at the temple. People sold animals, made perfumes to be used during worship, and exchanged money – I know you know this, because we've talked before about the time when Jesus went in and cleaned the temple out. It's been estimated that up to 20,000 people were involved in the day-to-day goings on in the temple in Jerusalem, not including priests or Levites. To the chief priest, and the Sanhedrin, the Jewish people entrusted the supervision of ritual and sacrifice, the operation of a financial system, and the maintenance of a temple police force. In a real way, Jerusalem had become a temple with a city attached. A religion had become an economy.

Third Temple Demolished

Into all the visually stimulating trappings of religion, Jesus spoke a prophetic word. He said, "As for what you see here, the time will come when not one stone will be left on another; every one of them will be thrown down," (verse 6). And of course, that happened around AD 70, when the Roman army demolished the entire temple complex. What you sometimes see on television today called "the Wailing Wall," where many Jewish people go to pray, is actually a retaining wall which was used to keep the temple from collapsing down into the city streets.

This prophecy shocked the disciples. "'Teacher,' they asked, 'when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are about to take place?'" (verse 7). Jesus doesn't give them an answer they expect. When we see Him interacting with people throughout the Gospels, He rarely says or does what we, as people, expect.

He tells them, "Watch out that you are not deceived. For many will come in My name, claiming, 'I am He,' and 'The time is near,' Do not follow them," (verse 8). It seems almost unbelievable that anyone would claim to be Jesus, but there have been some who did. Back in the 1990's there was a kook down in Texas who claimed to be Jesus. That guy ended up building a compound, holding his people hostage, and had to be taken out by the ATF and FBI. Mental illness is a real thing!

Don't Be Frightened

Jesus goes on telling His disciples, "When you hear of wars and revolutions, do not be frightened. These things must happen first, but the end will not come right away," (verse 9). In other words, all the violence which we see on the news is not an indicator that Jesus' return is going to happen in 2022, or 2023. "Then He said to them: 'Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes, famines and pestilences in various places, and fearful events and great signs from heaven,'" (verses 10-11).

The violence throughout the whole creation which we see shouldn't surprise us, friends. He tells us this is to be expected. The world's a mess. It has been ever since Adam and Eve ate the fruit in the garden in disobedience to the Father. The whole world, the entire universe, is broken and sin-sick. A while back NASA launched a rocket that was supposed to smash an asteroid or change its course or something. Did you see that on the news? I guess it worked. The asteroid didn't smash into the planet.

Pay attention, though, to what Luke records Jesus tell His disciples next. "Before all this, they will lay hands on you and persecute you. They will deliver you to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of My name. This will result in your being witnesses to them," (verses 12-13). Friends, there are folks who have hood-winked the evangelical wing of the Church in America. They've lulled the Church into a sleepy apathy by sensationalizing every theory they can come up with regarding the end times.

They write books. They make movies. And they hold the Church hostage with views not supported by Scripture about what they think the return of Christ will be like. And they make millions of dollars doing it. Friends, if your faith is dependent on Jesus secretly appearing in the sky and whisking you out of here so that you won't have to suffer, I have some bad news for you – that's not Biblical. If you're following Him, you will suffer. It's guaranteed.

Persecuted Saints

Jesus tells us this right here, today. And on the day He first said it, to His disciples, again, it was a prophetic word. Only John died of old age in exile working the mines on the island of Patmos. The rest were killed for their faith in Jesus Christ, and for telling people He is the Son of God, who died for sin, and resurrected three days later to life eternal.

There are Christians today, this Sunday morning, being herded into pens, prison cells, and camps. We have brothers and sisters who are dying at the end of guns held by people working for the governments under which they live in various countries around the world. If Jesus were going to whisk anyone away secretly, wouldn't He whisk those saints away? Shame on us, for always wanting the easy way out!

I love reading about the saints of the Church, especially those who put their lives on the line by following Jesus. Look what He says to them. "But make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict," (verses 14-

15). We aren't to worry about what to say. He'll give us the words. I'll admit, church, I have a hard time with that. I am a worrier. I worry. And sometimes I think people probably view me as ineffective and indecisive.

Faith Is Personal

You may have even thought that last Sunday afternoon during or after our meeting. That's okay, because I know I'm not perfect, and I've never claimed to be. I am simply a willing servant of Jesus Christ, to be used in whatever capacity He sees fit. And I analyze things, usually after the fact. Our faith is one which requires a personal relationship by the individual with Jesus Christ. I realize that for all the efforts I put in to trying to lead you into deeper relationship with Jesus Christ, I can't build your relationship with Him for you.

If you have one with Him, I can't break it, either. And friends, that's true of any person who ever filled, or will ever fill, this pulpit here at New Hope. They cannot make or break your faith. Only you can do that. If you have and keep Jesus Christ as your focus – you let Him lead you – you won't have to worry about any of the junk going on in the world, or even in the larger church, because He's bigger than all that stuff.

He tells us today, like He told His disciples on that day, "You will be betrayed by parents, brothers and sisters, relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death. All people will hate you because of Me. But not a hair of your head will perish. By standing firm, you will gain life," (verses 16-19). Charles Wesley, John Wesley's brother, penned a hymn in 1749, which we'll sing in a moment. In it, he wrote, "What troubles have we seen, what mighty conflicts past, fightings without, and fears within, since we assembled last! Yet out of all the Lord hath brought us by His love; and still He doth His help afford, and hides our life above."

If You're Plugged In, No One Can Unplug You

Only Jesus gives that. He's the Source of Life. If you're plugged in, no one can ever unplug you. If you aren't plugged into Jesus Christ, the Source of Light and Life, what are you waiting for? He loves you! He paid the price for you!

He desperately wants relationship with you, and He died on the cross to prove it. His promises are true – we can take it to the bank – because on Easter morning He rose from the dead. And even now He pleads on our behalf at the throne of the Father. He is a God so amazing, so glorious, so bigly huge – to borrow one of Donald Trump's phrases – how can we even consider wasting time on trivial, human quarrels, when we have Him to focus on and make known?

Prayer: Lord, Your creative power is everlasting. Even when fires, wars, revolutions and unaccountable violence destroy everything that we have built, Your loving intention of a world without harm remains. Thank You, Father, for Your sustaining interest in us. Strengthen our tired bones and flagging spirits. Help us to focus on our work so that we are a part of creating the new earth which You see. Risen Christ, Your power is never-ending. You never fail. In thanks and praise to You we ask it, Amen.