
Sunday 21st June 2020 – The Second Sunday after Trinity

Readings: Romans 6:1-11 & Matthew 10:24-39

Romans 6:1-11

What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning, so that grace may increase? By no means! We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Or don't you know that all of us who were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his. For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin – because anyone who has died has been set free from sin.

Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God.

Matthew 10:24-39

'The student is not above the teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for students to be like their teachers, and servants like their masters. If the head of the house has been called Beelzebul, how much more the members of his household!

'So do not be afraid of them, for there is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight; what is whispered in your ear, proclaim from the roofs. Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.

'Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven.

'Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn

“a man against his father,

a daughter against her mother,

a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law –

a man's enemies will be the members of his own household.”

'Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it.

Reflection

I've always been fascinated by the idea of grace, and grateful for it. "Amazing" is an appropriate description.

The beginning of Romans 6 has Paul saying "What then are we to say? Shall I go on sinning so that grace may increase", in many versions it says so "that grace may abound". I love the idea of grace abounding.

But what is grace? Two commonly used definitions are "unmerited mercy" and "undeserved favour". They sound nice, but for me they lack punch, and direct relevance. I prefer a definition that brings us right into the picture; "being accepted when we are unacceptable". It includes us. Who and what we are. Who and what we aren't. It begs the awkward question, am I acceptable? The bible is clear, without Jesus having died on the cross, no. The reality is none of us are acceptable to God as we are. No-one ever has been, apart from Jesus.

This passage is only part of Paul grappling with grace in his letters. Romans 5.20 "the law was added so that the trespass might increase, but where sin increased, grace increased all the more. Galatians 3.24 is more explicit "The law is our schoolmaster to lead us to Christ". The law was added to change our perspective in order to reveal grace, in all its beauty and gentleness, and our need for it. The heart of the gospel. And whatever we do, we cannot make ourselves acceptable to God. Isaiah 64.6 makes that clear, "All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags". Works do not make us acceptable. We can't make ourselves acceptable. Whilst there are a number of ambiguous and uncertain doctrines in the bible, this isn't one of them. Grace makes us acceptable, nothing else. This insight about law and grace cuts to the quick of who we are without God (unacceptable), and who we are in God (accepted and acceptable).

Back to Paul's question, do I need to sin more to increase the abounding of grace? Paul argues that the creation of the law revealed sin and led to the revelation of grace. His love for us, including what he did in sending Jesus, becomes even more incredible yet credible. It is wondrous. As the law reveals the true nature of grace it was a natural question for Paul to ask "should we sin more" (break the law) "so that grace may abound?". Whilst Paul answers immediately saying "by no means!" he needed to make the point that law reveals the enormity and importance of grace. He goes to an extreme, in order to motivate us to live differently from a position of amazement that we've been given the opportunity we don't deserve.

Amongst the current uncertainty, revisiting this passage gave me reassurance and more. The law reveals grace, and grace abounds. Abounding and amazing grace. I quite like the sound of that. It makes such a difference.