

Romans 12:3 (1Timothy 1:12-16) Grace and Humility

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

Grace is a favourite word of Paul's. He uses it 21 times in Romans alone, and 96 times in his letters. It means favour, God's undeserved favour, and is closely related to the word *rejoice*. We rejoice in hope (Romans 12:12) because of the grace of God in Jesus. The Scriptures say concerning God's people during the time of the Exodus, *the Lord gave favour to his people before the Egyptians* (see Exodus 11:3, 12:36). This means that he gave them grace. But the full extent of God's grace is found in Jesus, *For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ* (John 1:17). This is the grace of God we have been learning about as we have been going through Romans (e.g. Romans 3:23-24, 5:2).

Paul received this grace of God in his own life, a *grace and apostleship he had received to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations* (Romans 1:5). In Romans 12:3 he reflects on this grace again, and it is good for us to pause and to think about God's undeserved favour in our lives as well.

As we read 1 Timothy 1:12-16, where Paul shares his testimony, we see that God's grace in his life really was undeserved. He recognises in particular how he was the most unlikely suspect to be an Apostle to the Gentiles! Before the grace of God overflowed into his life he was *a blasphemer*. We think of this as swearing, but as a religious Jew Paul would have been most careful not even to have uttered God's name on his lips. What he meant here was that he did many things to oppose the Name of Jesus Christ (see Acts 26:9). He says, *I was a persecutor and insolent (violent man)*. He used force to persecute Christians and have them thrown into prison. As Paul reflects on his sins he exclaims, *Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners--of whom I am the worst* (1Timothy 1:15).

It's only as we acknowledge our sin that grace starts flowing, and grace becomes grace. Paul put it like this, *But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life* (1Timothy 1:16). God's grace is such that it sets us free from our sins and gives us a new life in Christ. For Paul this new life included the calling to be Apostle to the Gentiles.

It is in this capacity that in Romans 12:3 he speaks to the Gentiles, *I say to everyone of you. I say unto you* was a common rabbinic way of making an authoritative statement. Jesus used it (Matthew 5:39). With the authority the Lord had given Paul as Apostle to the Gentiles he was about to give a strong apostolic exhortation, even a command: *not to think of himself more highly than he ought, but to think we sober judgment*. This is an exhortation to humility.

Paul had already warned the Gentiles in Romans 11, twice, against arrogance. First, in 11:18, *Do not be arrogant towards the branches. If you are, remember it is not you who support the root, but the root supports you*. The Gentiles (who had received the grace of the Lord Jesus) were being arrogant towards to natural branches (Jews) who had not received the grace of God in Jesus. But God's grace

is not supposed to make us arrogant. It ought to humble us and make us more graceful. Grace should work the virtue of humility into us (1Peter 5:5-6).

In 11:25 Paul warns Gentiles a second time against a prideful attitude, *Lest you be wise in your own conceits, I want you to understand this mystery, brothers, that a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in, and in this way all Israel will be saved.*

But what was this mystery that would guard against conceit? It was this, that the hardening of Israel meant salvation for the Gentiles! Paul says, *until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in, and in this way all Israel will be saved.* I think we can read *fullness of the Gentiles* to mean not only the quantity of Gentiles, but also the quality of the faith of the Gentiles with faith in Jesus. Paul was very concerned about the witness of the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous (11:11), with the hope this would lead to the salvation of some (11:14). Pride and arrogance in Christians doesn't attract people to the faith. Although we long for the salvation of those we love, sometimes God has more work to do in our lives first, to bring us to fullness. Although we are praying for revival in the UK, I personally believe God has more work to do in His people first, since there is so much of the world in the church.

It seems that this quality of Christian witness was lacking in Rome, and this is why so much of chapter 12 focuses on Christian living. For example, Paul teaches, *let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection* (Romans 12:9), and, *Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be conceited* (Romans 12:16). It is good to take time to read the whole of chapter 12.

But what is it that makes us humble. Some bright spark said, "Mirrors!" Muhammad Ali admitted he struggled with humility, "When you're as great as I am, its hard to be humble!" Humility is a curious virtue because it's not something we can boast about. And we can overdo humility, and it becomes false humility, which says, "I'm a failure, I'm worthless, I can't do anything, no-one likes me." That's not humility. Humility is not belittling ourselves or feeling inferior, or timidity, or being overly concerned with what others think about us.

So what is true humility? I think it is to align ourselves with God's truth about God and ourselves. Paul says we should measure ourselves, *in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you.* We usually read this to mean that God has given some more faith than others. But this meaning doesn't fit the context well. I think Paul means that every believer has received exactly the same measure of faith (for salvation), and it's this we should measure ourselves by. We shouldn't compare ourselves with others, or with ourselves. Such an approach will always lead us to pride (thinking of ourselves more highly than we ought), or to inferiority, (which is really a form of pride.) Instead we should measure ourselves by the standards given to us by God according to our faith. Our faith teaches us many things, but in particular it teaches us two liberating truths. First, that we are all sinners in need of the grace of God day by day; and second, we are beloved of the Father; He loves you! Only as we measure ourselves with these truths of our faith will we have a proper estimation of ourselves.