

BECOMING RICH

13th in a Series on Ephesians called, "Messages to the Misfits"
Ephesians 3:7-9

Many years ago one Sunday Laurie had to stay home and miss church because we had sick kids that day. It was near Christmas. When I got home she told me she had watched a movie on TV that was deeply touching. She said the title was *It's a Wonderful Life*. I had never seen or even heard of it. The story was based on a book by Philip Van Doren Stern called *The Greatest Gift* that was published privately in 1943. The movie, which came out in 1946, was directed by Frank Capra and starred Jimmy Stewart and Donna Reed. It performed poorly at the box office and didn't even reach its break-even point. It was a major disappointment and in the eyes of studio executives confirmed that Capra was no longer capable of making popular, must-see, money-making movies.

However, the titles both of the book and the movie pose questions for us. What does it take to have a wonderful life? What would be the greatest gift? The movie itself should make us think carefully about questions like that, because what might at first seem evident about something may not always be accurate. The movie was considered to be a failure, and yet today it is rated by the American Film Institute as one of the best movies ever made. It is still watched over and over, a staple of the Christmas season for millions of Americans, 73 years after it was initially released. Though it seemed a bomb, it turned out to be one of the most successful films ever made. Perhaps the *Greatest Gift* and a *Wonderful Life* may not be what we think at first glance.

The plot of the film carries that message. You know the story. George Bailey has sacrificed to help others all his life and as a result has never fulfilled his personal dreams. Then, through no fault of his own he is accused of a theft and appears to be about to have his life implode. In the final scene, all those he has helped through the years rally around him and give money to save him. His war hero younger brother Harry shows up as all of George's friends are celebrating. Harry toasts him saying, "To George Bailey, the richest man in town."

George, the movie asserts, was the richest man, not because he had the most money, but because he had the fullest life, the most wonderful life. Cynics today view such a message as sappy, but at the end of the day it begs the question, what does it mean to be truly rich? What is the most wonderful life? And how does one gain such riches, such a wonderful life? ...because that's what we all want. The answer is elusive for most, one easily lost track of. We will get some divine insight into the answers to those questions in Ephesians 3:7-9.

PAUL WAS POSSESSED BY THE GRACE OF GOD

Notice in verses 7-8 Paul twice used the phrase "grace given to me." We get a hint of what that actually meant to him when we notice that he described himself as "Less than the least of all God's people." That's a good translation. The phrase "less than the least" is a translation of just one word. The root of the word meant "least," but Paul used a comparative form of the word,

meaning in comparison to the least, I'm even lower. In his mind, Paul wasn't merely the least of all God's people. He was less than that.

Do you ever get discouraged and kind of get down on yourself? Do you ever look around at other Christians and think they clearly are way better than you, that they seem to be much more godly than you are? Do you ever get frustrated and disgusted by some of the thoughts you have and think, "I know other Christians don't think like that. They're better than I am"? Most of us at least have times when we think that. We read Paul's words here and think, "Paul, that is so not true. You were a stud Christian. You did stuff I can't imagine doing. There is simply no way you were less than the least of all God's people because I am that person who is the least, and you were worlds better than me."

One scholar named C. L. Mitton wrote that Paul's description of himself here, "sounds like false modesty...artificial and exaggerated." He went on to claim that these words had to have been the words of a later disciple who wanted to make Paul look super humble. In other words, they weren't written by Paul at all. Of course, there is no evidence that this is true, and other passages seem to contradict Mitton's thesis.

Was this exaggerated, false modesty? Was it uncharacteristic of Paul? Not at all. In fact, it was quite typical of Paul. Consider what he said about himself in other passages. In 1 Corinthians 15:8-9 after writing about how the risen Lord Jesus appeared to all the apostles he said, "Last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born. For I am the least of all the apostles, and do not even deserve to be called an apostle because I persecuted the church of God." There again he said he was the least and didn't deserve to be called an apostle. But actually what he said there was stronger than that.

In verse 8 the phrase "one abnormally born" translates the Greek word *ektroma*. Paul used that word with the definite article, so it literally read "Last of all he appeared to me also, as to the *ektroma*." Fine, what's an *ektroma*? In his commentary on 1 Corinthians Gordon Fee wrote, "The word literally refers to any kind of premature birth (abortion, stillbirth or miscarriage). Thus the word comes to be used figuratively to refer to something horrible or freakish." Paul said, "Last of all, Jesus appeared to me, the abortion, the freak, the horror."

Wow, Paul seemed to have an issue with self-esteem. Perhaps he could have benefitted from some counseling, maybe some work on his self-image. It might seem so, because he was consistent with that negative message. In 1 Timothy 1:15 he wrote, "Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance, Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the worst." So in one passage he said he was the least of the apostles and didn't even deserve to be called an apostle, then in Ephesians 3 he said he was less than the least of God's people, and now he says he was the worst of sinners! So if we take these verses chronologically

Paul went from being the bottom of the barrel of the apostles, to the bottom of the barrel of God's people, and finally to the bottom of the barrel of sinners. He was getting worse! Poor guy's self image had pretty much hit rock bottom as he got near the end of his life.

Notice what the root of the problem was in 1 Corinthians 15:9. Why did Paul feel so unworthy, why did he see himself as The Freak? It was because he persecuted the church of God. In 1 Timothy 1:13 he says, "I was once a blasphemer, a persecutor, a violent man."

Think about what it must have been like for Paul. Acts 7 recounts the story of Stephen, a great, godly man who loved people and loved God. He was a man of tremendous character, and people loved and respected him. He was a leader people eagerly followed. Acts 6-7 tells the story of how he was arrested because of his faith in Jesus and made to stand trial before the highest court in Israel. In his trial he told the truth about Jesus, and the court members went berserk. Acts 7:54 says they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. But he calmly said he could see the Son of Man, Jesus, "standing at the right hand of God." That did it. That was a bridge too far. The fury exploded. Verses 57-58 say, "At this they covered their ears and yelling at the top of their voices, they rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul." Saul, also named Paul, may not have been throwing the rocks, but he was probably one of the leaders of the pack. He let others do the dirty work, but he was an instigator. That's why the rock throwers put their cloaks at his feet. Maybe he was just kind of a bystander, just watching. No, if you read on a few verses in Acts you see the truth about him. In Acts 8:3 Luke wrote, "But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison." He shows up again in Acts 9:1 where it says he was "still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples."

The incident with Stephen tells us that Saul's murderous threats were not empty. He wasn't like that parent who warns a child about the consequences if the child doesn't obey then says, "I'm going to count to 10, and then you'd better do what I say." The kid, of course, pays no attention because the child knows the parent won't carry through. No one had any doubts about whether Saul would carry through. He'd already done it. He was going from house to house, searching for believers in Jesus, and when he found them he took them to jail. Man, woman, husband, wife, father, mother, son, daughter, it didn't matter. If they followed Jesus they were hauled off to jail, and none too gently either. They would be incarcerated, likely beaten, and maybe even put to death. Saul was not just involved in this. He was the ringleader. This was his life passion. He pursued it with a single minded focus that eclipsed everything else in his life, because he was doing it for God! And he did it violently according to his own words.

Laurie and I have served in ministry for a long time in this area. One result of this is that we often encounter people who used to be in our church. This past week it happened while we were checking out at the grocery store. Recently we spent a day in San Clemente taking care of

our granddaughters. The plan was at the end of the day we would drive home and that evening we would go out to eat to celebrate Laurie's birthday. But when it was time to leave we discovered that the southbound freeway was backed up for miles due to a bad accident that had happened earlier. We were looking at a couple of hours of sitting on the freeway that was imitating a parking lot. Instead of enduring that, we decided to stay in San Clemente and go out to dinner at a restaurant our kids have all told us they really like. So there we were, having a nice dinner in another city when a person walked up to our table and said, "Well, if it isn't Rick and Laurie Myatt!" It was a guy who had attended the church we used to serve years ago. We can't even get away from it when we're out of town. It is usually good to see people and renew an acquaintance, but every time it happens it causes me a little twinge of pain. It's not a big deal, but it is a little reminder that my previous ministry ended with failure, people telling me they didn't want what I had to offer. Mostly I just ignore that, but it is there.

Do you think Paul ever encountered people whom he dealt with in his previous "ministry"? In other words, did he ever run into people he had persecuted? I suspect he did. He wasn't in the same area, but the church was a relatively small community at first. I imagine he bumped into his former victims on occasion. He also would have run into people who had a friend or family member that he had treated badly. How do you think that felt to him? I don't know Stephen's family situation, but can you imagine what it must have been like if Paul ever encountered Stephen's widow, or his children? How awful that must have been. It would be nice to think the first Christians were perfect, as quick to give grace and forgive as our Lord is, but we know they weren't. It's a pretty safe bet that there were people who were never able to let go of their bitterness toward Paul and what he had done. Paul never could get away from the guilt of his actions. To make it worse, he knew he had done it in his distorted certainty that he was serving God more than anyone else. I know that he asked himself, "How could I have gotten it so wrong, so completely backward?"

So yes, there was a considerable amount of self-loathing in Paul, and deservedly so. What he had done was horrifying, inexcusable, and he could never completely get away from it. But this passage makes something very clear. Paul had loathing and regret for what he used to be, but not for what he was in the present. When it came to what he was when he wrote the letter he was filled with wonder and gratitude.

He said he was the servant of the gospel of Christ by the gift of God's grace. Then he said it again as though in amazement, "Though I am less than the least of God's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ." You can almost see him shaking his head in disbelief and joy as he reflected on the fact that God had forgiven him the seemingly unforgiveable, and then on top of that, commissioned him to tell Gentiles about Jesus. That was nothing but 100% pure, grade A divine grace.

If I were in Paul's sandals I would have felt that any bitterness or anger he might have encountered from believers was entirely deserved. Not only would I feel I deserved it from people, I deserved it even more from God himself. It would be inconceivable grace if God forgave me of my horrific previous life. But God did more than that. He not only forgave Paul, he gave him a direct commission to serve him by bringing the good news of Jesus to the Gentile world! He commissioned him to be a leader in the church! Who would ever have seen that coming? Paul certainly didn't.

In 1 Corinthians 15:10 he said, "By the grace of God I am what I am." He didn't deserve to be an apostle, but he was one. He didn't volunteer for the position. He didn't run for the office of apostle and get elected. He surely didn't earn it. God gave him the privilege of being the apostle to the Gentiles. Paul was thrilled that God chose to use him to build his kingdom. He should have been disqualified because of what he had been. At the most he could maybe imagine being let into God's kingdom as the last draft choice. Instead God said he was making him a first round draft pick!

Have you ever felt truly awful, sick in your heart, over something that you have done? Have you ever known horrible regret over something and wish with all your being that you could rewind life and undo that thing? I have that kind of regret. You have all heard about the incident. It was something that happened more than 15 years ago. It was the infamous bungee cord incident. When we were helping Carissa move while she was in college, due to my mistake a bungee cord slipped off the rail on top of the car, fired out like a bullet and smashed into Laurie's face, cutting it open. That was an awful moment. That whole night was a big grief for me as I sat with Laurie in an emergency room with blood on her, fearing I had damaged her right eye and scarred her for life. It is a huge relief for me that today that her eye was fine and you cannot tell by looking at her that it ever happened. I don't know what I would do if that had scarred her. But to this day I cringe when I even hear the words "bungee cord." I have been terrified of even touching one since that awful incident. I seriously hurt the person I love most in the world, the person I love more than life itself. I am ashamed of it, I feel guilty to this day over it and it makes me feel a little sick when I recall it, even now. But what blows my mind is that there has never been even a hint of anger or bitterness at me from Laurie. Not once has she held that against me even in the slightest. She could, you know. "Hey, how about vacuuming the carpet, O Bungee Master!" "Hey, I'd kind of like some new bling. That's not too much to ask for a victim of an unprovoked bungee attack, is it?" Every moment since it happened Laurie has showered me with love and grace. I hate that I was responsible for what happened. But man am I thankful for the love and grace that Laurie gives me. I revel in it. I am secure in it. I never, ever forget that I don't deserve it, but I enjoy it to the maximum. And that is how Paul felt about his situation. He hated what he had been responsible for. He had been an enemy of the One he thought he loved the most. He had done severe harm to people who were now his brothers and sisters, and in some cases did the ultimate harm to them. He was deeply, and continually grieved by it. But God had given him grace. He never, ever said to Paul, "Hey, after

what you did to me and my people, don't you think you owe me?" He just forgave him, loved him, and gave him the grace gift of being an apostle.

Paul didn't have a poor self-image. He had an accurate self-image. He saw himself for exactly what he had been and what he was currently. He wasn't down on himself. He was down on what he had been. But as for how he saw himself in the present, he was relieved, he was at peace and he was thrilled by what God had done for him. He was an apostle, directly commissioned by the Lord! Some people said he didn't deserve that. He said, "You're absolutely right, I don't. But in his grace God has given this gift to me anyway." God's grace had given Paul life, hope, joy and purpose in a whole new way, a way he had never experienced before in his life. His heart grew more than two sizes when that happened. It expanded and came alive in ways he never even imagined.

If Paul had tried to base his worth, his identity and his position in what he had accomplished, where would he have been? He would have only had shame, guilt, humiliation, regret and disqualification. It would have destroyed him. But he based his worth, his identity and his position in the grace God had given him. As a result he had peace, unbounded joy, security, passion for life, a mission, and courage.

We are faced with the same stark choice that Paul had. We can try to base our identity, our worth, our role in this world on what we do. We try to do that all the time. When we do that we will get the same thing that Paul would have gotten. Shame, guilt, humiliation, regret and failure. But there is another option. It was the option Paul lived in, basing his identity, worth, his role, in what God did in his grace. When we rest in God's grace, something we deserve no more than Paul did, then we have peace, joy, security, passion for life and courage. We will have those moments when we see our selfishness, our inconsistency, our failure and for a moment we think maybe we are hopeless, useless. But then we say with Paul, "By the grace of God I am what I am." I am a child of God, one of his people, a member of his kingdom not because I deserve it. I know I don't. But I am a child of God by his grace. What a relief that is. I rejoice in this incredible gift. It is the grace of God that makes a wonderful life.

PAUL WAS AMAZED BY THE RICHES OF CHRIST

Paul had the incredible gift of making "plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages was kept hidden in God." Um, okay. What does that mean? The administration of this mystery is Paul's way of saying, "the way this mystery was brought about and revealed." What mystery did he mean? He told us specifically in verse 6. "This mystery is that through the gospel, Gentiles are heirs together with Israel." In his previous life as a Jewish rabbi, a Pharisee, he would have considered that idea utter heresy. The Jews were God's chosen people, and their covenant with God was based on the Law of Moses. There was no way Gentiles, who had nothing to do with that Law, could ever have been part of God's kingdom. To even suggest such a thing was sacrilege.

The only way for Gentiles to be in God's kingdom was through a whole new arrangement, a new covenant, the one established by the gospel of Christ. The cross of Christ changed everything and brought Gentiles into the kingdom of God on an equal footing with Jews. In 2:16 Paul wrote that God reconciled both Jews and Gentiles to himself "Through the cross." God used this one man, Paul, this formerly violent man, this previous enemy of Christ, this despiser of Gentiles and hater of Jesus people, more than anyone else to force the church open to Jew and Gentile alike. He was the one that God used to force the first believers, who were all Jewish, to accept Gentiles in the church.

But the only way he could do that was to push them to actually grasp the meaning of the cross. He was the one who had the greatest impact on causing people to truly understand the gospel of grace and its revolutionary implications. Paul more than anyone else made it plain to people that the gospel of Christ was a gospel of grace, thus good news for every human being. Imagine where we would be without the books of Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians. It is in those books that we understand the true gospel of grace. It is in the writings of Paul that we understand that we are no longer under law, but under grace. We can gain some sense of that from other New Testament books, but it is in the writings of Paul that we get the fullest and clearest picture.

Paul was right. It was given to him to make plain to everyone the administration of the mystery. What that really means is that it was given to him to make plain to everyone the real meaning of the gospel of grace and all of its implications. Without Paul there would have been a lot of confusion that would have continued to this day.

Paul said he was given the privilege of preaching "the boundless riches of Christ to the Gentiles." The Greek word translated "boundless" is an interesting and colorful one, but something of a tongue twister. The word is *anexichniastos*. The root of the word is *ichnos*, which meant "footstep." From there a preposition was added that changed the meaning to "to track footsteps." Last year one day when we had our granddaughters with us Ella and I went to the grocery store. On the grocery list Laurie gave me was chocolate covered almonds that the store sold in bulk. They have plastic bags that you fill with however many you want. They had them right by the entrance, so I got a bag full of them, then Ella and I continued shopping. Soon I noticed someone had dropped one of those chocolate almonds on the floor, and then another. When I saw a third I began to think that curious. I stopped and looked around and I saw a trail of them, leading to me. I was the one dropping them. The plastic bag had a hole in it. You could have tracked me through the store by following my trail of chocolate almonds. You would have been doing what that word means, tracking my footsteps. Finally a letter was added to the front of the word that appended the word "not" to it, and an adjectival ending was tacked on. So it came to mean the quality of not being able to be tracked. Literally, "footsteps that cannot be tracked."

So Paul said he had the privilege of telling people about the riches of Christ that are so vast they can't be tracked, or measured. They are riches so immense they exceed the capacity of human understanding to measure or comprehend them. Currently the richest man in the world is Jeff Bezos, the CEO of Amazon. I have no trouble believing that. Every time we go to Toby and Anna's home or Michael and Carissa's home there are Amazon packages sitting on their porches. And now Laurie has become an Amazonian too. It seems like our family is adding daily to Mr. Bezos' bottom line. The latest figures I've found peg his net worth at \$140 billion. That is wealth that cannot be tracked. Well, maybe not literally, since people do track it, but it is a number so huge we can't really comprehend what it means.

Suppose that Mr. Bezos decides he wants to start an airline. He wants to beat Southwest Airlines at its own game, so he decides to buy a fleet of Boeing 737-800's, steering away from the troubled 737 Max. He could buy those for \$50 million a pop. With his net worth he could buy 2800 of them. Southwest Airlines has 706 planes! He could have a fleet 4 times the size of Southwest's!

Maybe that doesn't do it for you. Imagine it this way. Suppose you had Jeff Bezos' wealth and you decided to really enjoy it, to go on a spending spree. So you set out to spend \$1 million every day. That's hard to imagine. What would you buy that you would spend \$1 million on every day? I guess it's not hard for our government, since they will spend \$4.7 trillion this year, which works out to almost \$9 million a minute. But since we're not buying aircraft carriers, a million a day is an absurd sum of money. How long is it going to take you to spend all of Jeff Bezos' money? Obviously it will be way more than a year, because in one year you will have only spent \$365 million. It will take more than 10 years. Way more. It will take you 400 years at a \$1 million a day to spend all that money. I can't imagine what you're going to spend it on, but the big problem for you is it's actually going to take you longer because you'll be getting returns on investments that will mean in the end you'll have to spend even more than the original \$140 billion.

That is an inconceivable sum of money. We can intellectually quantify it, but we don't really comprehend a pile of money that vast. But that huge sum pales in comparison to the riches of Christ that cannot be tracked. The riches of Christ is not money. Oh, he has more money than, well, than Jeff Bezos. He has more money than a thousand Jeff Bezoses. In fact, Jeff Bezos and all his money belongs to him. But the riches of Christ are not found in money. When we talk about wealth and riches we naturally think it terms of money, because most people feel that money is the answer to everything. Money is power in this world, and it makes life a lot easier and often more enjoyable. It is natural for people to think that what they need most in life is money, that it can fix their problems and make their life full and enjoyable.

But we need to think about the limitations of money. Jeff Bezos has essentially an unlimited supply of money. But money cannot give him peace. It cannot relieve him of guilt. It cannot give his life meaning or purpose. It cannot make God accept him and love him. It cannot really bring him love at all. In fact, it introduces the problem of knowing if he is really loved for who he is, or if he is “loved” for his money. Money can’t buy him true meaning for his life. If he had a child who became gravely ill and ultimately died, his money could not bring the child back. It could not keep him from aging and eventually dying. It could not give him eternal life. You may be able to buy tickets to Disneyland and go to Star Wars Galaxy Edge, but you could not buy your way into the kingdom of God. In other words, when it comes to the most important parts of life, the parts that are essential to peace, joy and fullness of life, money cannot help at all.

The riches of Christ are true riches, the riches that we really need that we mistakenly attribute to money. The riches of Christ includes grace that makes it possible for even the worst, most seemingly hopeless person to be forgiven, to be welcomed by God into his kingdom. It includes having infinite, unassailable worth in Christ. It includes eternal, unconditional, unfathomable love from God. It includes God’s wisdom that enables us to understand ourselves and at least some of the world. It includes God’s direction on what life means and on what is right and wrong. It includes God’s Spirit within us. It includes the certainty of eternal life. It includes an eternally significant meaning to life, and a countless plethora of other blessings.

It is these things, these riches, that bring us peace, that mean we have a love relationship with God, that he is with us forever, that give us hope in every situation in life. These are the riches that make a life joyful, full and meaningful. They are riches beyond measure. It is these things that are the greatest gift, that make us the richest people on the planet.

APPLICATION

BE WHO YOU ARE BY GRACE

Paul could have been buried by the guilt of what he had done. Even after he was confronted by the risen Lord and came to understand the gospel, he could easily have wallowed in relentless guilt over the horrible things he had done and felt there was no way God could really love him. He could have decided if somehow God miraculously could forgive and love him that he deserved only to be a lowly tentmaker in some out-of-the-way place, feeling like he had no right to take any kind of leadership position. He didn’t deserve it and surely was not worthy of it. And there were many people who surely thought exactly that about him.

But Paul lived in the truth of grace. He was who he was by grace. A common theme in movies is about people trying to prove themselves, trying to gain acceptance. All of that is rendered unnecessary by God’s grace. You don’t have to get approval from anyone. In Christ we can rest in the grace of God and simply be faithful to be who God has made us to be.

At the reception following a wedding I performed recently a woman said to me after she had met and talked with Laurie, “Do you know what a lucky man you are to be married to her?” I said, “I think of that every day of my life.” Imagine what it would be like if I got it into my head that Laurie married me and loves me for some reason in me. Imagine that I thought she loved me because I am more handsome than any man she has known, or because I am so big and strong, or because I am wittier and more charming than anyone else, or because of my vast wealth, or for any other reason. It would be awful. I’d see pictures of myself and think, “Oh, no, I’m just an old man getting uglier by the day.” I’d panic, and have to try to think of some way to get prettier. Or I might fear she would tire of my wit and charm, which would be easy to imagine since at this point she knows every witty thing I’m going to say before I say it. That thinking would introduce fear, panic, desperate efforts to keep her from seeing the obvious, total insecurity. But I have the luxury of knowing Laurie loves me for some inexplicable reason, and I do not deserve and will never deserve her love. She loves me by grace. And that means I can be at peace in her love. And that is what the gospel of grace does for us in God’s presence.

VALUE THE REAL RICHES

The NIV Application Commentary on Ephesians says, “All of us live out of a system of values, often so unconsciously that we cannot even analyze whether the values deserved to be valued... Too often Christians merely adopt the value system of the surrounding culture... For us, the truly great value, the ‘pearl of great price,’ ought to be God’s revelation in Christ.”

What does our culture value? The lead actors of the TV show *Big Bang Theory* are paid \$900,000 per episode, so \$20 million per year. Manny Machado is getting paid \$30 million this year to bat a measly .242. When I was a kid there was a period when I and my friends obsessed over marbles. It was all about who could get the most and the best. It was of earth shaking importance. So we expended great energy and emotion in amassing collections that I now see as worthless. That is what humans tend to do. Let’s not do that. Let’s value what is valuable.

What we should take away from this passage more than anything is that in Christ, ours truly is “A Wonderful Life.” We are the richest people on the planet, not because we have more money than others or better circumstances than other people, which we don’t, but because we have the glorious riches of Christ. And that is the source of the best life we could ever have. So let’s value that, let’s be thankful for that, let’s rejoice in that.

C. S. Lewis wrote, “Christianity, if false, is of no importance; and, if true, of infinite importance. What it cannot be is moderately important.”