

# "Sufficient Grace"

2 Corinthians 12:1-10

July 8, 2018

7<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost

It seems today that professional sports in America is as much about finances as it is competition on the field. No longer can we simply discuss scores, statistics, and athletes' talents. Now, much of the talk is about signing bonuses, guaranteed money, and other financial considerations of the insane contracts being signed by athletes today. At least, they seem insane to us who live in the real world. For example, this past week the big story was basketball superstar LeBron James signing with the Los Angeles Lakers. The stories about this move did discuss the competitive balance of the National Basketball Association as a result of this move but they really focused in on the terms of the deal: four years at \$154 million. This causes us to shake our heads and wonder where this all will end. What do athletes want? One sports radio host when asked, "what do athletes want?", Replied, "More."

More? Even when it appears that they will have more money in a few short years then you or I could possibly spend in 100 lifetimes, they still want more. Why? The answer is still rather easy. It's not as if they need all that money. Their attempts to make a defense of salaries based on need makes them look silly. A couple of decades ago, the former NBA player, Laytrell Sprewell, was largely ridiculed one time when he attempted to defend a several million dollar increase in his salary as being needed because, he said, "I need to feed my family." No, "more" is not about need, but about power and control. People are attracted to more because of the glory and power that come with it.

It's easy to pick on professional basketball players in particular and professional athletes in general when it comes to this desire to have more. The desire for more affects all of us. It is really part of the original sin of Adam and Eve. They wanted more even though God had given them everything they desired and everything they needed. We want more because of the security and power which more give. We want more money in our bank accounts, more floor space in our houses, more horsepower or more mileage in our automobiles, more gigabytes or terabytes in our computers, more data in our cell phones and so on.

We think (and our thinking is reinforced by society's wisdom) that "more" in any of these areas will provide us with the power and security that we desire in our lives, in our jobs, in our devices, and in everything. More will equal better. Better will equal power. And power will grant us success. But is that true? Simply having more does not guarantee happiness or success. The sad stories of athletes who have had lots of money but blew it all and thereby failed at life remind us of this fact. More does not always equal power or success.

Yet this experience in secular matters does not keep us from making the same mistake in spiritual matters. In their faith lives, many people want "more" for their churches and for themselves. They want more in terms of size of their worship facilities, the balance of their bank accounts, the number of programs for every subdivision of their family: wives, husbands, mothers, fathers, use, etc. They want

dynamic Spirit-filled worship services which inspire and thrill people. They want more pastors who will deliver messages that the Lord laid upon their hearts to give to the people through special revelation. With this power and this pizzazz, such a church will succeed, so people think

Likewise, they want more of the same for their personal lives, too. They want their “best life now” as the one popular evangelical preacher, Joel Osteen entitled his book. They want to be able to assure themselves that, with enough faith, they will have the ideal life, free from problems and suffering. And, if anything should go wrong, they want to know that, if they pray hard enough and often enough, their prayers will be strong enough to do away with any suffering or problem which they encounter and restore happiness and contentment once again. More faith and more prayer will ensure more success and more happiness.

Have you ever been tempted to feel that way? Have you ever actually felt that way? We don't see dazzling and flashy miracles much around church these days or even in our private lives.. We often experience suffering which God does not choose to relieve, despite our prayers. Is something wrong? Do we lack faith? Are we not praying hard enough or often enough? It's easy to conclude that there is either something wrong with us or, even more troubling, something wrong with God.

If we fail to see dazzling miracles and other acts of God's miraculous revelation, we may leave the Lutheran Church and seek out something that is a tad bit more exciting. We may seem to be too dull for many tastes. However, if we can't find more excitement, more miracles, and more spirit filled messages, we may decide that we don't want that kind of God.

If we don't experience God's power in our lives through the healing of diseases, the granting of temporal blessings (that is, more stuff), and the answering of our prayers in the way that we desire and according to our timetable, we may conclude that we are not good enough for such a God. We find ourselves lost and confused with the so-called Spirit-filled and miracle-laden content of many popular churches on the one side and our seemingly weak and miracle-less experience on the other side. What are we to do?

In our text for today, Paul very excitedly shares an important secret which he found that answers these questions. First, Paul discounts the importance and relevance of miraculous experiences and direct revelation. He begins by talking about some mystery man who had experienced being caught up to the third heaven and also up to paradise. Whether these were bodily experiences or out of body experiences, Paul didn't know. But Paul knew that they had happened. Many believe that Paul is referring to his own personal experiences here but does not wish to brag about them. Paul admits that they are true and that, if he bragged about them, he would not be telling a lie. Paul wants the people to know that such miraculous events as being transported to heaven and receiving direct revelation from God can be divisive and a reason for bragging. They are not essential for the Christian life.

As far as receiving what you wish through the power of prayer, Paul has a rather different experience. Paul says that a thorn was given to him in the flesh – something he refers to as a messenger of Satan to harass him and to keep him from becoming

conceited. We don't know what this "thorn" could be. (It can also be translated as splinter.) However, it seems to be some form of suffering which was not fatal or devastating, but annoying and painful.

Paul says, "Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me." This should have been a no-brainer. It is something that should be done quickly and easily. After all, it is St. Paul himself making the request and the Lord God Almighty to whom the request is made. St. Paul seems to be a worthy candidate for having his request answered and the Lord God is certainly able to grant the request. But he doesn't. Why?

The Lord said to Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." We have been laboring under false assumptions, caused by the corruption of sin. We have assumed that more – more glitz, more glamour, more miraculous – is always better and that power always wins the day and always should win the day. This is not how the Lord works, either in St. Paul's life or in our lives today.

God works in weakness, not by accident but by design. As He said to Paul, "my power is made perfect in weakness." When He sent His only Son into the world to rescue us, He did it in a very non-glamorous way.

Jesus did not come as an all-powerful earthly monarch, born in a palace, to conquer the powers that be through military might and force. Jesus came as a peasant, born in poverty to a peasant girl, to take on sin, death, and Satan (all formidable foes), but in a very weak way full of suffering. Jesus won His victory over sin that we might be forgiven; over death that we might live; and over Satan that we might belong to God through His temptation, through His suffering, through His death on a cross. When Jesus died, most people probably didn't even notice. There was no chorus of angels to announce it, no trumpet fanfare to celebrate it, and no declaration from heaven to explain it.

But there was success. God's grace – His undeserved love for humanity – was shown through weakness and suffering. By Jesus' death on the cross, forgiveness was secured; death was overcome; and Satan was defeated. Jesus needed no fancy affirmation or powerful proof in order to do this nor do we.

God continues to work through non-flashy, seemingly weak ways, to extend that grace to us. He washes away our sin and adopts us as His children through the application of water with His promise in Holy Baptism. He give us His full forgiveness time after time through His Word, read from a book or preached by a sinful human being. He feeds and nourishes our faith through a simple meal of bread and wine to which He adds Jesus' body and Jesus' blood. These "means of grace" as we refer to them lack pizzazz and seemingly lack power. However, according to God Himself they bring to us His grace.

As the Lord said to Paul, so He says to us as we experience the thorns in our flesh – disappointments, suffering, pain or any number of things, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." If we possess all of the wealth of this world, but lack the grace of God, then we really have nothing. However, even if we are lacking in the things of this world, continually bothered by annoyances and

disappointments, or even suffering serious setbacks, but have the grace of God, then we have everything that we need.

For “more” is coming. Jesus has been raised from the dead to life. He is ascended to His throne on high in heaven. And he will return to raise us from the dead, give us the final victory which His grace has won for us, and bring us to be with Himself in heaven forever.

When Paul heard the Lord’s words to him, he said, “For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” In His weakness, the Lord accomplishes great things. When we understand our weaknesses, we can have a like-minded view toward the sufferings of this world, as well as confidence in the Lord’s ability to work through those weaknesses to accomplish great things.

We don’t need “more” of anything. We have everything that we need to live as individual Christians and to work together as members of His Church. We may not have flashy facilities, experience magnificent miracles, or receive powerful answers to every prayer. We may continue with budget problems, the everyday problems of life, and the weakness which sin causes us. However, when we have the grace of God, we have everything. When we view our problems through the prism of that grace, we rejoice in worship, gladly serve God by serving our neighbor, and eagerly look forward to our Lord’s return. For when it appears that we are weak, then we know that we are truly strong. Amen