

WHEN GOD'S HANDS ARE TIED

by David H. Roper

Oliver Wendell Holmes once said, "There is in my life a plant I call Reverence. It needs to be watered about once a week." There seems to be the same cry today for moderation in all aspects of the spiritual life. "Let's not go overboard. Let's be moderate in all things." But it is surprising, really, just how immoderate the Bible is. Biblical statements are very rarely qualified or limited; they are almost always absolute statements without any qualifications to weaken, their force.

I picked up a misquotation of part of the first chapter of Philippians just recently that goes like this:

I pray that your love may abound 'within reason with some measure of knowledge and discernment, so that you may give qualified approval to that which is excellent, and may be moderately pure, and by-and-large blameless for the day of Christ. Being half-filled with fruits of righteousness, I want you to be moderately blameless and somewhat innocent children of God without too many obvious blemishes in the midst of a somewhat crooked and slightly perverse generation, among whom you glow like glow worms at dusk.

That is the way I would write it, but that is not the way Paul writes. The repeated statements of the Scriptures call for unqualified obedience. God is not interested in relative righteousness; his demands on our lives are totalitarian; he wants us to be totally available to him; he wants us to be walking, living, exhibits of the character of our Lord Jesus Christ in an unqualified, unreserved, unlimited way.

We speak often of the abundant life. We quote John 10:10: Jesus said, "*I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more **abundantly**.*" That should be our experience. Yet, frankly, for years I knew nothing of an abundant life, because I knew nothing of an abandoned life, and you can't have one without the other.

Peter Marshall has said, "The problem with most of us is that we are not Christian enough to keep from sinning, but we are sinning too much to enjoy our Christian life." We are caught right in the middle-just Christian enough to be miserable, but not enough to abound in joy. We want the peace, serenity, poise, joy and happiness that the Scriptures promise as a result of our relationship to Christ, but we can't have them unless we are willing to give Jesus Christ every area of our lives, without reservation. We must take down the bars, the little areas of rebellion and resistance that we build which tie God's hands. But once we do, we enter into an experience of rest and peace. We discover that there is available to us everything that we need to face life and its demands.

With that thought as a background, turn to II Corinthians, chapter 6:

Working together with him, then, we entreat you not to accept the grace of God in vain. For he says, "At the acceptable time I have listened to you, and helped you on the day of salvation." Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation. We put no obstacle in any one's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way; through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, tumults, labors, watching, hunger; by purity, knowledge, forbearance, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown and yet well known; as dying, and behold we live; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet

making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

Chapter 2 verse 14 through chapter 5 is essentially a defense of Paul's apostleship, as his right to speak as an agent of God had been attacked. Now in chapter 6 he makes his final appeal to the Corinthian church, "*Working together with him* (i.e., with Christ) *we make this appeal, that you not accept the grace of God in vain,*" That is, that you not accept God's grace and make of it an empty thing, but let it be a full and forceful fact in your life; let grace operate; utilize it.

This word is addressed to Christians. This book was written to a church in Corinth. We apply this passage to non-Christians, but its primary reference is to the Christian. Paul says, "You Christians know something of the grace of God. God's resources have been poured into your life. Everything that God has is available to you. Put it to use! Don't let it become an empty thing. Put it to the very use for which it was intended. Don't resist it; don't distrust it; don't be ignorant of it; put it to work."

Perhaps we need to define the word grace. This is one of those words that we use quite frequently as a part of our Christian vocabulary. Grace is, essentially, an act by which God makes available to us his resources at Christ's expense. Everything that God has-his life, his equipment for living, his character, his wisdom, his confidence, is available to us to utilize in our world, infinite resources for living. That is what grace is.

Paul's point in verse 1 is that it is a travesty to have available to us the mighty resources of God and fail to put them to work, either because we are too stubborn, too ignorant, or too proud to put them to their intended use. Paul says, "Don't cause grace to become an empty thing in your life; utilize it. You are clothed in God's armor, so other is no reason to cower and fear. You are backed by the very wisdom of God, so there is no reason why you should walk in confusion and darkness. You have the power and might of an omnipotent God at your disposal; now venture forth to do the difficult and the impossible thing." How often we fail to do this.

There is a second part of this appeal in verse 2. Paul says,

At the acceptable time I have listened to you, and helped you on the day of salvation.

This is a quote from Isaiah 49. He reminds the Corinthians of Jehovah's promise to Israel, "There was a time when you needed me, and I helped you. There was a time when you were oppressed by the nations, and I delivered you." Paul picks up this quotation and emphasizes this one point, "*Now, This is the time. Now. Don't delay; don't wait for some time in the future; don't look back to what has happened in the past, but begin to draw on his availability right now.*" There follows after this appeal a statement of Paul's own experience. So frequently Paul uses this technique. He sets forth a principle and then displays his own life as an illustration. Essentially, he is saying, "I am walking on the basis of my appeal. I am walking in the adequacy of his grace."

There seem to be *two* basic divisions in this second section. There is, first of all, the personality that grace produces, in verses 4 through 7:

. . . but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, tumults, labors, watching, hunger. . .

"Through all of these difficult circumstances, through a great siege of trials," Paul says, "I have not lost my patience or my confidence in God."

He endured patiently, first, afflictions. Perhaps he is referring to the emotional pressure that was a result of his physical infirmities. At the time he wrote this he was possibly going home. He bore in his body the marks of those who were the enemies of the cross, He was constantly reminded of his physical limitations. The word that Paul uses here literally means pressure-the emotional pressure of physical debility. We have all experienced this. Paul says, "I have discovered the secret of patiently enduring afflictions."

He endured *hardship*, he speaks of himself in another passage as enduring cold arid exposure, as being homeless, having no place he could call home, yet he has discovered that God's grace is adequate to produce

patient endurance in hardship, or in *calamities*. Here a stronger word, speaking of some of the really traumatic events in Paul's life; he was shipwrecked three times; a day and a night he was adrift, but yet, again, he discovered God's adequacy in this circumstance; through *beatings* --flogged five times, given thirty-nine stripes each time, three times beaten with rods, once stoned, and yet God is adequate through this: *imprisonments* --there was hardly a jail in the Roman Empire that Paul didn't have a chance to inspect from a personal standpoint: *tumults*-- being jostled and mistreated by mobs; *labors* --having to work to support himself, making tents by day in order to be free at night to go from house to house to preach the word; *watchings*-- the sleepless nights of a conscientious servant, the pressures and concerns for the church: *hunger-having* to go without food. Through all of these, Paul said, "I stood the test; I endured; I walked in poise, quietness of heart and peace." It was a staggering load for any man to carry, but yet in chapter 4 of this same book, he refers to these burdens as a slight momentary afflictions, no problem at all, He had discovered that God was adequate to take him through all these circumstances. He endured them cheerfully by drawing upon God's grace.

We read this and we say. "That's Paul the super saint." But when you look at Paul's commentary on his own life, you will discover that he didn't so consider himself. He had nothing in terms of personality, personal strength, or courage with which to meet tests of this nature, but he had discovered the secret. He discovered how to respond when the heat is on. Any of us can be cheerful, courteous, kind, patient, and courageous when things are going well, but how do we react when the pressure builds up? Paul had learned the secret of right behavior under all circumstances. He had learned to tap the resources of God.

This means that we have no excuse for anything less than Godlike behavior under any circumstance. We may fail (and we will), but we have no excuse. We can't blame God. We can't blame circumstances, We have simply failed to draw upon God's grace. It has become a vain thing in our lives. When we become irritable, grouchy, crabby and touchy, it is not because we are tired or overworked; it is not the kids; it is not any circumstance. We have failed to draw upon the resources of God. The second personality trait Paul describes is *purity*, first, endurance, and then in verse 6, purity-a lost quality today. There are very few people today who resist the pressure of the world to squeeze them into its mold. Magazines, books, movies, entice us to set aside our standards of righteousness and to capitulate. But Paul says that in spite of the pressures of the day, we can stand in purity. There is nothing old-fashioned or corny about being holy; it is an attribute of God, and it is available to us today in the same terms as it was available to Paul. The world is essentially no different today; there are no greater pressures today than there were in Paul's time. Paul was a single man in the city of Corinth, which was noted for its immorality. The Greeks coined a word, "to Corinthianize," that described excess in any form, but particularly in terms of sexual behavior. Paul was right in the middle of the moral awfulness of that situation, but he didn't respond to it; he didn't have to respond; he didn't have to go that route, because there was available to him the grace of God to face any situation in that city. Paul says, "God's grace is sufficient to keep me pure. I don't have to bend the knee to the spirit of immorality in this city." And so today God's grace is available to you, wherever you are, under the pressures you face and I face, to live the same quality of life that Paul lived, even as men down through the ages who have learned this principle have lived.

The third characteristic is that of knowledge-insight into truth, an understanding of the principles by which God operates. God gives us, as a result of a relationship with him, the capacity to discern, to make decisions. Yet how often we walk in uncertainty and in darkness, wondering what to do next. Still the promise is that we can be taught the principles by which God works and we can make practical application of these principles in our lives. Of course, wisdom comes through an understanding of the Word of God. He has given us two tools by which we can know the mind of God: he has given us the Word of God, and he has given us the Holy Spirit. whose function it is, among other things, to teach us the Word, and to make these truths real in our experience. And so we need continually to expose ourselves to the Word of God. Christ said, "*Sanctify them through truth. That' Word is truth.*" It is the knowledge of these principles that sets us apart and enables us to be the kind of men and women that we must be.

The fourth principle-the fourth personality trait--is forbearance, the characteristic of bearing with people. The first word here, "endurance," means bearing up under things -- circumstances. But forbearance is patience with people, which often is an entirely different story. This is self-restraint that resists attempts to retaliate. It is patience under provocation. It literally means *long* -tempered, *long*- endurance, the kind of personality that

doesn't blaze up when offended or provoked, but *endures* people patiently, forgives them.

Peter once asked the Lord, "*Lord, how many times should I forgive my brother? Seven times?*" Now, that is generous. I think what Peter was saying was, "What are the limits to my patience? I forgive him seven times. That ought to be sufficient, and then I smack him one." But the Lord said, "*Peter, you must forgive him seventy times seven. Four-hundred ninety times -- essentially an infinite number of times, because that is the way God forgives us. There is to be no limit to our patience. How far do we go before we dig our heels in and say, "No further ? "Well, we just keep going; we keep forgiving, because that is what God does with us. Now, that takes grace. We don't like that. That is hard on our ego; it is hard on mine. But Paul says that grace is available to be that kind of person. That not weakness; that is strength. That is drawing upon Christ's strength to take any abuse we are called upon to take, in his name and for his sake. That is a personality trait that is a result of grace.*

The next trait is kindness, simple courtesy. That is very frequently a missing note today-a lack of harshness or austerity or coldness-just being gracious and kind. In the third century there was writer, one of the church apologists, named Tertullian, who tells us briefly something of the attitude the heathen had about the early church. He said that because they had never seen the name Christian written-Christiani, or a follower of Christ, the Messiah -- they misunderstood it to be "crestiana," The word crestiana is taken from the same word that is translated grace - gracious. The word stuck - the gracious ones. What a commentary on their lives! They had problems (that is why these New Testament letters were written) but there were among them those who had gained a knowledge of this principle and were acting in grace, in courtesy and kindness.

As Paul says, it was available then and it is available today. God is not changed. He is the same today as he was then. He can produce the same kind of life today as he produced twenty centuries ago.

The sixth gift of grace is the Holy Spirit. Here he is referring to the ministry of the Spirit in dispensing specific gifts-the toots of the trade by which the church, the body of Christ, is built up-supplying whatever gifts are necessary to minister to the needs of others. A supernatural quality of life is available to us when we have nothing to offer to be able to meet the needs of others. Christ said that in coming to him we find rivers obliging water that flow out from us and are able to slake the thirst of others. This is what he is referring to, the Holy Spirit, given to us, who is available to move through us to meet the needs of others.

Seventh is genuine love, not a sentimental, maudlin type of love, but a genuine love, a faithful and costly love, a love that perseveres and is found genuine in a thousand tests of life.

Then truthful speech-the capacity to speak the truth, no matter what the consequences may be. It is 'wrong to act as if a lie is an abomination to the Lord, but a very present help in time of trouble! Paul says that we are called upon to speak the truth, to speak it in love. These two go together-love and truth are the instruments, the weapons, God has made available to us in the world. No matter what consequences may befall us, we must be truthful. It is difficult. It is almost impossible in some circumstances, but Paul says grace will keep us truthful.

This is the power of God. This is not so much incapacity to work miracles and do great supernatural deeds, as we often think, but, more, it is the supernatural activity of impact on lives -- the capacity to face someone and to see his life change for the better as a result of God's power being manifest through you-the capacity to stir others up to love and good works power that strikes with such force on another that they are never the same. This is something we all long to possess. We don't want to impress people, or to use them, or to wield power over them, but we do want to be used as a channel of God's blessing to see other people change and become better people because they have come in contact with us. Now that is the personality that grace produces.

The summary is given in the last part of verse 7. ". . . with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand (that is, the offensive weapons) *and for the left* (the defensive weapons) . . . "

In the way this passage is constructed, Paul is essentially saying that these nine character traits are the weapons of righteousness. Paul says the weapons of our warfare are not fleshly, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds. Have you ever asked yourself, "What are the weapons which we have?" Well, here they are. These are the nine weapons in our armament, to be used and wielded in the world as God makes his grace

available to us. They are the weapons that will bring down every argument, every tower, every bastion of rebellion; resistance will be torn down as we wield these instruments in God's strength.

We were talking in a Bible study over at Stanford last week about the problem of reaching a campus. How do you do the job of sharing the message of Jesus Christ in a place where very often people sense no need to know Christ? We had to come back to this passage; these are the weapons. What happens when people see you in your fraternity, or in your home or in your office, or your dormitory, or wherever it may be, as the pressures begin to move in on you? How do you react? Well, if you respond with patience and endurance, they are going to listen to what you have to say, because they know that they cannot explain you merely in terms of your personality. There must be something to what you have to say. What will be the response when we begin to exercise genuine love in every circumstance, when we are patient with people, when we don't retaliate and defend ourselves and try to justify ourselves? People will listen. It is a weapon. What happens when we speak the truth, or when we have an understanding of God's principles and 'we share them with people? People are going to be alerted to the fact that there is something behind our lives. These are the weapons that we can employ. These attributes of personality are the result of contact with his grace, putting it to work, not allowing it to become a vain thing.

There is a second division in this section, from verse 5 through verse 10. Here is *the perspective that grace maintains*, the balance that comes as a result of the knowledge that God is in our lives and available to us.

Ted Smith was telling us last weekend that he was flying up from Los Angeles in his little plane, and as he neared the Fresno airport, he discovered it was all fogged in. He was trying to find a hole in the clouds so that he could come in visually. He was dipping and bobbing around in the clouds, but he couldn't find a hole. The more he bobbed about, the more disoriented he became, until finally he couldn't decide whether he was flying right side up, or sideways, or upside down, or whether he was going to auger right straight in. He was completely disoriented. But then he looked at his instruments, and they showed him exactly where he was in relation to the ground. He was able to bring the plane on in by trusting his instruments. We have the same sort of reference system in God. He stabilizes us no matter how disorienting circumstances can be.

Note that in verses Paul says, ". . . *in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute.* " We keep on displaying the grace of God. Honors don't balloon our ego, because we know who is responsible for righteous behavior on our part. But, on the other hand, criticism, dishonor, and ill repute don't bother us either, because it is God's honor that is at stake. He has to justify himself. We don't need to run about trying to set everything right and to stop everyone's mouth. We can realize that he is adequate to take care of the problem. It can be dishonor; it can be defamation. That is God's problem. He is responsible for our justification and honor.

Second, he says, "*We are treated as impostors, and yet are true.*" The world looks upon us as the great deceivers -- as if we are trying to degrade man's humanity, to take away his self respect, to say he can't do it by himself, as if we are attacking the very pillars of his humanity. Yet we know from personal experience and from what the Scriptures have told us that man is *not* adequate that he was never created to face life on his own, but that he was created with a capacity to contain God, and it is God who is available to live life out through man as man was intended to live it.

Then he says we are treated "*as unknown, and yet well known,*" it just depends on your perspective. We all know who the President's wife is; she is known all around the world. But I wonder if the world has ever heard of Carolyn Roper. But if you go to our house and ask around that house who is the most important person in the world, they will tell you-we'll all tell you. You see, what counts is your perspective, your reference system. There are people among us who are completely unknown, and yet their lives are given over to a ministry of intercession. In God's eyes they are well known. You may be unknown in the world, but in terms of God's evaluation, which really counts, you are most important. That is the strange paradox of the Christian faith.

Paul goes on, ". . . *as dying and behold we live* - constantly being given over to death, constantly giving up our own plans, our goals, our lives, putting them on the cross, reckoning ourselves to be dead, setting aside our lives, burying ourselves, but yet living, find through dying a new life. Christ said that if a seed is planted

and it dies, it brings forth life. And he said that if a man tries to save his life, then he will lose it, but if *"he loses it for my sake he will find it"*. "That is the perspective that grace gives-dying to our own ambitions, dying to self, and yet finding this a key to life. ". . . *As punished, and yet not killed* -always under the disciplining hand of a loving, heavenly Father, but never abandoned, never left to our own devices." . . . *As sorrowful, yet always rejoicing* alert to the needs of people around US, sensitive to their concerns, sorrowing because they are sorrowing, and yet seeing the sovereignty of God and rejoicing at his ability to work every circumstance out according to the plan that he is unfolding.

As poor, yet making many rich poor in terms of material values, yet having the power to bring spiritual wealth to many. Think of the apostle Paul who never had anything in terms of worldly wealth, but think of the great spiritual wealth he has bequeathed to us through his life and writings. Finally, *having nothing, and yet possessing everything*. " Perhaps penniless, owning nothing, but enjoying everything. The world is ours to enjoy. In another place Paul writes to the Corinthians, who lived in a city where wealth was everything. " *All things are yours in Christ*. "You don't have to look to the world for your wealth; you have a wealth that far surpasses anything that the world could supply.

This is the personality and perspective that grace gives. God's grace is available to us, and the result will be the kind of personality that Paul has outlined here, the kind of perspective that he has *described-unless* we receive it in vain; *unless* we refuse to accept what the Lord has given us.

I was speaking last week to a jet pilot who was describing his helmet. The minute he puts his head gear on, certain things happen immediately. The first thing is that he becomes aware of certain sounds, because he has microphones which are tied into the tower, so that he receives sounds which he ordinarily would never receive. The second thing of which he becomes aware is that there is a little gadget in front into which he can speak, so that he can respond to that tower (no matter how far away it may be) and he can speak to men in other planes, communicating back and forth, receiving and sending. All this becomes available to him immediately when he puts this helmet on. There is a flow of oxygen across his face piece immediately; he is hooked into another source of life so he can operate in a hostile environment. Then there is protection for his head that becomes his the moment he puts it on. He has a sight right in the helmet which is tied into his guns. So he has both defensive and offensive weapons fully available. What a marvelous illustration this is of the principle of grace.

We come to Jesus Christ and make ourselves available to him and say, "Lord, I am a sinner; I need your grace; I cannot go it alone; I have tried; I have discovered my inadequacy; I need you." We accept by faith the provision of the cross, and *immediately* his grace becomes available to us *right then*. What folly to refuse to use it, to try to venture forth into this hostile environment without his provision for life, or to try to meet the problems of life without the protection of his grace. Paul says, "*Don't receive the grace of God in vain.*"

Our loving Father, how thankful we are that you have given yourself to us, and that it 's not by measure that the Holy Spirit is given. He is not poured out little by little, but is given to us in fullness of strength and power. It is folly to try to operate apart from your grace. We thank you for the provision of your word that stirs us to action that drives us to open our hearts and receive your grace. We want this week and this year to be a time in which your hands are untied so that you can display yourself in power through us, so that these attributes may be ours today in fact and not in theory. We ask this in the name of Jesus, who has given us all we possess. We thank you in his name. Amen.

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