

## **Grace-Driven Effort in 2014**

December 29<sup>th</sup>, 2013

2 Peter 1:1-11

*"<sup>3</sup>His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, <sup>4</sup>by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. <sup>5</sup>For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, <sup>6</sup>and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, <sup>7</sup>and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love."*

I said toward the end of last Sunday's message that the story of Zacchaeus shows us that if there's truly been an experience of Jesus' grace coming into your life through the gospel, that there absolutely will be a new trajectory of your life towards godliness, a pursuit of Jesus and conformity to His likeness and submission to His good and loving rule over your life.

And I said we'd come back to this, because it's so important and yet so complex; So let's get into this by looking together at 2 Peter 1:1-11, which I was planning to dig into as we looked forward to 2014 anyway, even before looking at Zacchaeus and seeing this matter of transformation in Luke 19. Let's read the passage, and I'll explain why.

### **A Call to Grace-Driven Effort**

Around 18 months ago I encountered this quote from Don Carson:

*People do not drift toward holiness. Apart from grace-driven effort, people do not gravitate toward godliness, prayer, obedience to Scripture, faith, and delight in the Lord. We drift toward compromise and call it tolerance; we drift toward disobedience and call it freedom; we drift toward superstition and call it faith. We cherish the indiscipline of lost self-control and call it relaxation; we slouch toward prayerlessness and delude ourselves into thinking we have escaped legalism; we slide toward godlessness and convince ourselves we have been liberated.*

I have returned to this quote over and over again in the past months, because I long to know this experience, and live this kind of life:

*grace-driven effort*. I want to know what that is, and I want to walk it, and I want those I love to walk in it, and that includes you. Is there anything that you will labor for, expend energy and discipline and effort on in 2014, that would be more important than grace-driven effort to grow in holiness? Maybe you have lofty aspirations for 2014: career goals, financial goals, relationship goals, home repair projects, health/weight loss goals, etc. Is there, at the dawn of this new year, a comparable passion and vigilance to excel in godliness?

That's what I long for us in 2014, and I hope this sermon will be a means of grace to you in stirring you up towards that end. This text has been the most helpful to me in understanding what grace-driven effort is, what it aims at, and how it works. So let's get a big picture of the terrain of this passage, by making four observations from it.

### **1. There is in the Christian life a vigilant, disciplined effort to grow in godliness**

We see that clearly and directly in two places in this passage: "5For this very reason (*a phrase that we'll need to return to*), **make every effort** to supplement your faith with virtue..." And again in verse 10: "10Therefore, brothers, ***be all the more diligent*** to make your calling and election sure, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall."

This is a call to grow in godliness, to excel and add and increase in the virtues and characteristics of Christlikeness. And it takes effort and diligence to do that. You, Christian, make every effort to grow in 2014! Don't be passive, casual, flippant about this; this is war! Be all the more diligent! Work! Pursue godliness (1 Timothy 6:11), strive for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord (Hebrews 12:14), train yourself for godliness (1 Timothy 4:7), work out your salvation with fear and trembling (Philippians 2:12), put to death what is earthly in you (Colossians 3:5). Run in such a way as to win the prize (1 Corinthians 9:24-25). This is no isolated teaching in Scripture!

Will you set your energies on pursuing this in 2014? Are you making every effort towards moral excellence? Are you making every effort to increase your knowledge of God's character and His will? Are you making every effort to strengthen your power of self-control and patience? Are you making every effort to cultivate godliness, to develop a heart for God? Are you making every effort to grow warm in your affection for your fellow believers? And are you making every effort to stir up love in your will for the person you dislike the most? Be *all the more diligent* in these!

The Bible does not allow you to pit such exhortations to work and strive and expend effort against the gospel of God's free grace in Jesus Christ. We are emphatically and unapologetically a church that treasures and cherishes that message, that our salvation from sin and hell and death is not the result of human work or effort, but the eternal grace of God richly poured out to us through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

But the Scriptures make clear that trusting Jesus for our salvation and trying hard to grow in His likeness are *not* at odds. And the reason they are not at odds is that the same grace that pardons us from sin's penalty also empowers us to practically pursue Christlikeness in 2014. True Christians do not stop pursuing growth in godliness. They go on. They advance. They apply themselves with diligence to *increase* in these things (verse 8). They don't coast towards heaven; they know they will not drift into holiness.

## **2. Apart from this effort, there is no final salvation**

This raises the stakes, big time; this effort to grow in virtue, knowledge, self-control, steadfastness, godliness, brotherly affection and love is not icing on the cake in the Christian life. It's not optional, advanced-stage, super-spiritual discipleship. Without this, there is no entrance into the Kingdom of God:

*"<sup>10</sup>Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to (confirm, or) make your calling and election sure (the idea is not that we bring it about, but that our effort to grow gives evidence that we have been called, and chosen; but, how do we do that?), for if you practice these qualities you will never fall. <sup>11</sup>For in this way (the way of diligent effort to increase in godliness, and this way alone) there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."*

There it is: no effort, no entrance into the eternal Kingdom. Now this is complex, because some of you need a tender word of comfort as it pertains to your sanctification (because you're too hard on yourself, and the sight of your remaining corruption leads you to despair and hopelessness), and some of you need a serious sharking (because you're lazy and have settled into an "at-homeness" with your sin that is very dangerous to your soul's well-being). And I need to trust the Holy Spirit to apply this to you as He knows you need.

It should be unsettling for a kind of person who has a knowledge of God that isn't "fruitful and effective". This text says there's a kind of knowledge that is ineffective and unfruitful. Intellectually, you know truths about Christianity, but that knowledge is not bearing any kind of real, spiritual fruit in your life, and there's no vigilant, striving effort of an increasing measure of Christlikeness in you.

If that's you this morning, this passage is a means of grace by which God Almighty is seeking to wake you up from your spiritual apathy and hypocrisy by showing you the deadly danger of the trajectory you're on. If your life is marked by a habitual disinterest in the pursuit of godliness, if you lack these qualities and have given up the pursuit of them, you're giving evidence that you're moving toward experiencing a fall that will leave you eternally unwelcomed from the Kingdom of Jesus (I can't say for sure, because God may have appointed this text for you today to waken you to the terror of your predicament and get you back on the path of grace-driven effort; Lord, may it be so!).

But for those with especially tender consciences, I would remind you from this text: "8For if these qualities (the virtues we're to make every effort to supplement our faith with) are yours **and are increasing**, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ." If the call is to *increase*, then the implication is that there will be some measure of deficiency, or lack. If there is a need to grow (and *everyone* is called to this, v.12), then you can and should expect struggle to be a part of your Christian experience. And of course, you know that growth is sometimes imperceptibly slow.

So don't despair over the imperfections that remain. The call is to progress, not perfection, and that progress will be lifelong, until the day of Christ (Philippians 1:6). But be assured: apart from diligent effort to increase, there is no final salvation. If that sounds ungracious, we need to move on to move on...

### **3. This effort is driven by divine power, not *mere* human strength**

I emphasize "mere", because we've already seen that there is human strength, effort and work involved. It's not either/or, but both/and. Our work and effort is driven and energized by divine power; this is the logic of godliness. Verse 5 ("For this reason...") drives us back to the previous verses to find the motivation or reason for this effort:

*"8His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, 4by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. 5For this very reason, make every effort..."*

This is why the phrase, "Grace-driven effort," is so important. You make effort, but you're being given (=grace, the heart of God to do you good when you deserve it least<sup>1</sup>, which is *all over* this text) divine

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<sup>1</sup> John Piper, *Five Points: Towards a Deeper Experience of God's Grace*, back cover.

power for everything you need to live a godly life, so that at the same time you are both active and passive in this process. He enables and grants you to become partakers of the divine nature (i.e., growing in His qualities and virtues) and free from the corruption of sinful desires, so that at every point, in every circumstance and temptation, you can say, "I don't have to yield to sin, because I have the very power of God animating, energizing and empowering me to glorify Him."

I want you to feel hopeful about this in 2014...the very power of God given to you that you might grow in His likeness! Jesus bought this for you as part of the New Covenant, which He fulfilled by the shedding of His blood for all who believe. That is why every part of this process is *grace-driven*; every bit of Spirit-empowered effort you make was secured through Jesus' shed blood to write His law on your heart.

Can we talk about this power for a moment? I immediately think of Hebrews 1:3, "He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power." That's *a lot* of power, because the universe is not small!

The universe is big. The farthest thing ever measured in it is 13 billion light years away (*one* light year is 5.88 trillion miles). In the midst of all that, a little galaxy called the Milky Way exists (about the size of a peanut in this big room), with hundreds of billions of stars. One of those stars is our sun (a speck on that peanut), which revolves around the center of the Milky Way every 250 million years. One of the planets circling the sun is Earth. At this moment, Jesus is upholding it all with His omnipotent word. And it's that divine power (cf. Romans 8:11, Ephesians 1:19-21) that has been given to you all things pertaining to life and godliness!

This is why we fear and tremble as we work out our salvation (Philippians 2:12-13), because God Almighty is so close to you that

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your working is *His* working! Tremble at this breathtaking thought, that *God* is in you, engaging all of His infinite energy and power to produce in you what is pleasing in His sight. Is that not incentive to make every effort to grow in godliness in 2014? Your continuous, sustained, strenuous effort is not just being carried out with His blessing, but it is the very continuous, sustained, strenuous effort of God Himself, the Upholder of the universe who triumphed over death!

So God is calling us, in 2014 and beyond, to exercising grace-driven effort to pursue growth in godliness, unto the praise of His glory (3:18). But what do we actually do? What does this look like? What should you give yourself to in order to see this reality take place. Finally:

#### **4. The divine power given for this effort (which makes it *grace-driven*) comes through the knowledge of God**

Let's go back to the greeting at the beginning of the letter; we sometimes pass over these so quickly, but verse 2 is giving us a glimpse of what Peter really wants to see happen because of this letter:

*"<sup>2</sup>May grace (that's what we need in 2014: grace!) and peace be multiplied to you in (by means of) the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. <sup>3</sup>[as] His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence,"*

The grace that makes our effort *grace-driven*, the power that is granted to us to energize and empower our diligence and striving, comes through the knowledge of God. There is no experience of grace and spiritual power by which we might make effort to grow in the likeness of Jesus without knowledge of Him, so that the single greatest object of our (grace-driven) effort is not ridding our hearts of sin, but filling our hearts with God, which will expel from our hearts the love of sin.

Earlier in the week I handed my daughters a chocolate-covered pretzel, and Halle said with glee, "You're the best dad ever!" She made a statement of who she saw me to be, based on her experience of what I

had done for her. And I said to her, without thinking, “Remember that the next time I tell you something you don’t like.” And I explained to her what I meant by that. She would be more self-controlled, steadfast, loving, etc, if she trusted in the goodness of my will for her, being convinced of it by remembering what she has already learned to be true of me based on what I’d done for her. Do you see the dynamic here?

It was an attempt to help her understand the logic of godliness, which is the obedience of faith (Romans 1:5). Isn’t that the logic of this passage? All the effort to add begins with faith (v.5). “<sup>9</sup>For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, *having forgotten* that he was cleansed from his former sins.” We know who God is, and what He’s like, we have confidence in the reliability of His precious and very great promises, because of what we we’ve seen Him already do. And it is this knowledge, which gives birth to faith (Romans 10:14), that multiplies grace and peace to us, the grace that drives and empowers our effort and diligence to grow up into the image of Christ.

Where knowledge of God’s glory and excellence languishes, grace does not flow. Grace-driven effort is effort that flows from the joys and wonders of worship, which flow from knowing God truly, which happens most clearly as we behold the amazing gospel of God’s grace.

So, JCF, let us press on in 2014 to know Him! And there is no more precious and significant way to know Him than in His Word. That’s why we want to encourage everyone to devote themselves to this [simple Bible reading plan](#), so that corporately we might experience grace and peace being multiplied to us in the knowledge of God, and of Jesus our Lord, in 2014. Whether you already have a regular plan to read or not, would you commit to this in the new year? I want to stir you up to this especially next week.

<sup>10</sup>Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to make your calling and election sure, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall. <sup>11</sup>For in this way (i.e., the way of grace-driven effort) there will be richly

provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."