Spreading Grace

## Understanding Grace

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### Faith Church

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Have you ever thought that perhaps you're not good enough for God to use you? Maybe because of some aspect of your identity? You don't think you're smart enough? You're not beautiful or handsome enough? You think you're too old or you're too young? Maybe you're not the perfect weight or maybe your family history is shaky? You know, you look in the mirror long enough and all you observe is what you can see with the naked eye. You can probably find some deficiency or maybe even a sack full of deficiencies. Maybe you're not good enough. Add to that some aspect of your life that hasn't gone or isn't going so well. Maybe you've concluded that God can't use you because one or more of your children has gone astray. Or because your career did not pan out like you hoped. Or you have a failed marriage on your resume or maybe several of them. There is not a person in this room who will hear the message who cannot look hard and long enough in the mirror at themselves and then at their life resume and have plenty of reasons to conclude, "God may be able to use other people but certainly not me."

Friends, that mentality flies in the face of one of our key philosophy of ministry principles taken from passages like Romans 15:14 where Paul said to the dear members of this church, every one of them, "And concerning you, my brethren, I myself also am convinced," of these three things, "that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able," to what? "You're able to admonish one another." That wasn't written just to the beautiful people of the church. It wasn't written to people who had it all figured out because there isn't anyone like that. Paul believed that spiritual ministry, that's what I'm talking about, admonishing or counseling, helping one another, was to be accomplished by common, garden-variety followers of Christ. Now, that's not to suggest that we're going to make more promises than we can deliver. If there's some kind of a physical problem, sure, we're going to encourage a person to seek the expertise of a physician. But if we're talking about the challenges of everyday living and we all have them and we're around persons who have them, then clearly the message of the Bible is that our powerful, loving, merciful God wants to use you. You say, "You who?" You. You seeing this at Faith East, you seeing this right now at Faith West. I see you out there. God wants to use you in the accomplishment of his work as channels of grace. You understand, Romans 15:14 was not written to pastors. It wasn't written to the elite. It wasn't written to the top 10%. On purpose, it was written to everyone in the church family. God can and God wants to use you.

Tonight we're beginning the 31st annual Biblical Counseling Training Conference. This worldwide movement that we're involved in in many ways began, at least in our era, with the publication of a book in 1970 titled "Competent to Counsel." And it was based on the point of this verse, Romans 15:14. In non-medical situations, problems of everyday living are best addressed by God's people using God's sufficient word to point men and women to God's sufficient Son. And it's very important for us to demystify this process. That's why I don't believe in over-using the word "counseling." We're just talking about being a spiritual friend. You can do that, can't you? We're talking about soul care. We're talking about discipleship. Or using the parlance of this year's annual theme "Finding Grace." What are we actually doing here, friends? We're locking arms with fellow sufferers and we're boldly approaching the throne of God's grace together which means it's not about the perfection of the practitioner. Do we all understand that? It's not about the perfection of the practitioner, it's about the beauty and the sufficiency of the one who has secured our access which is why the writer of Hebrew said, "Therefore, since we have a great high priest," and we do, don't we? Not "since we have a great counselor in ourselves," for crying out loud. You see, you've already got me crying out loud. I'm five minutes into this. It's never a good sign. "Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens." You see, he didn't pass through the veil once a year. He passed through the heavens, "Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin." It's not about the perfection of the practitioner nor is it about the latest and the greatest theory of man that solves problems using human wisdom and effort alone because that text goes on to encourage us to, "draw near with confidence to," what? To Dr. So-and-so? "To the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in our time of need."

Well, if that's the focus then do you realize your commonality, the fact that you're just an earthen vessel, can actually be an asset to the ministry that God has given you? Because when he achieves marvelous things through you in the lives of others, there is no question about who deserves the credit. The Apostle Paul faced the same dilemma, by the way. Individuals who were saying of him, "You know, you're not worth much. You're not worth much." So he actually used that to his advantage. John MacArthur explains the context in his commentary on 2 Corinthians when he said, "As he penned this epistle, Paul was under furious attack in Corinth and false apostles had infiltrated the church there, assaulting Paul so as to create an environment for purveying legalistic heresy. To get a hearing for their demonic lies, they first had to destroy Paul's apostolic and spiritual credibility in the eyes of the Corinthian church. To that end, they launched an all out blitz on the apostle's character and ministry and their attack was merciless, relentless and petty. So low did the false apostles sink that they even resorted to ridiculing Paul's personal appearance, declaring contemptuously that his personal presence was unimpressive and his speech contemptible. Paul, according to them, was not a very imposing figure. He lacked good looks, charm and oratorical skills." Please stop staring. "He may even have had a repulsive eye condition that marred his appearance. The reason so many rejected Paul's message, the false apostles claimed, was that he was an unimpressive, common, run-of-the-mill man." You see, Paul had all sorts of people saying of him exactly what other people might say of us and perhaps – hear me now – perhaps what you might be saying of yourself.

Well, here's the good news: we have a divinely inspired record of the way Paul addressed that issue and instead of trying to enhance his reputation and instead of trying to secure their approval, he embraced his commonality. There it is: he embraced his commonality and explained how so often God's grace could be unusually, specially spread through the hands and the lives and the ministries of common, ordinary, earthen vessels.

With that in mind, please open your Bible to 2 Corinthians 4. That's on page 141 of the back section of the Bible under the chair in front of you if you need that this morning.

In these first few Sundays of 2015, we've been trying to lay out a foundation for our annual theme by studying really what amounts to an introductory theology of the doctrine of grace; what is it exactly that we're all seeking to find together this year. So we've talked from the book of Hebrews about finding grace. Then we went to Romans 5 and talked about standing grace. Then abounding grace. Last week, from the end of that great chapter, reigning grace. This morning we're going to look at this marvelous chapter in the book of 2 Corinthians which teaches us about spreading grace. Spreading grace. The question before the house is: through what kind of person generally speaking is the message of God's grace best promoted? There it is. And best developed or best spread? Is it through the smartest? The best looking? The one who has a squeaky clean resume? No skeletons in the closet? You see, when the Lord wants to offer a serving of his grace, does he only do it on the fine china? If so, maybe we're not good enough and maybe we need to leave this business of being a spiritual friend and soul care and helping one another to the experts, huh? To the beautiful people?

Well, questions like that are clearly and definitively and I think we would say surprisingly, delightfully answered in this passage of Scripture. Please follow the flow of thought, the argument as I begin reading in 2 Corinthians 4:7, "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels," there it is, why? "So that," note the purpose clause, "the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed." You're not crushed, are you? You're not saying God can't use you, are you? "**W**e are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed." Now, look for the Gospel, "always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus' sake," why? "So that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death works in us," in us, "but life," note the transition logically now, "in you." Well, maybe it's not about us. Verse 13, "But having the same spirit of faith, according to what is written, 'I believed, therefore I spoke,' we also believe, therefore we also speak, knowing that He who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and will present us with you." With you. "For all things are for your sakes." Did you hear that? "All things are for your sakes so that the grace which is spreading to more and more people," don't you love that about God's grace? "The grace that is spreading to more and more people may cause the giving of thanks to abound to the glory of God." I want in on that, how about you? "Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying," boy, he got that right, huh? Man, was that body of yours creaking on the way out of the bed this morning. I heard it over here. "But though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen," you're not doing that, are you? "We look not at the things which are seen but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal."

Don't you love the word of God? We're talking this morning about spreading grace and I'd like us now to trace the argument of that text and seek to find 3 truths to convince us that God can and God wants to use common people like ourselves in the accomplishment of his plan with others. It starts right here, friends: understanding that spreading grace is a matter of dependence. Dependence. These verses we just read are part of a larger passage known as the glories of the ministries section of the book of 2 Corinthians. Think about the argument starting in verse 7, the treasure, what's that? That's the Gospel; the good news of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the free gift of salvation and the potential to change lives that is possible through trusting him as Savior and Lord. The treasure. And by God's grace, the Corinthians knew something about the effect of that treasure. So yes, I understand on one hand it was a church riddled with problems but on the other hand, don't overplay that because on the other hand clearly they were changing. In fact, he emphasized that in the last verse of the previous chapter when he said in 2 Corinthians 3:18, "But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit." Well, why was that? How is it that they were changing? Was it because they were depending on the power of the messenger? Of course not, it was the value of the life-giving and life-changing treasure. It wasn't about the messenger. The Gospel when accepted and applied, results in dramatic life change.

That emphasis was even apparent in his first letter. Do you remember this in 1 Corinthians 6 where Paul gives and an entire list of behaviors that were terribly offensive to a holy God and then he said what in 1 Corinthians 6:11? "Such were," you've got to love that word, "Such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God." Well, how did that transformation occur? It's because of the beauty of the treasure, of the life-changing Gospel of Jesus Christ. That's what washed them. That's what sanctified them. That's what justified them. It was the precious and life-giving blood of Christ, not some superstar messenger. It wasn't, "You know, we just had mediocre lyrics but the choreography and guitar rift carried the day." It's not like, "Thankfully, we had left shark to save the song." No. In fact, he even reminded them in the early portion of 1 Corinthians, "For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong." How could you say, "God couldn't use me?" "The base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, so that no man may boast before God."

So yes, there was evidence of people dramatically changing their lives. This message was a treasure, no doubt about that, but to be sure, there was never any confusion about why that change was actually occurring. Paul clearly affirms, God purposely uses earthen vessels. Earthen vessels. The obvious point here would certainly not have been lost on Paul's readers. They understood what an earthen vessel was, ostrakinos. "So you're saying that's what I am?" Yup. Yes. I love you. I love you deeply. You're an ostrakinos. And here's exactly what that word means and if this honks you off a little bit, take it up with the guy who wrote the book, namely the God of heaven and earth. And being honked off at him, that's just a really bad idea so just let the Scripture have its work, especially if you walked into this setting with any semblance of the, "God can't use me," thing. Ostrakinos, baked clay; common pots. There it is, cheap, breakable, easily replaceable and virtually valueless. Point being, the treasure is not the value of the pot, it's the value of what the pot contains and the greater the contrast, the easier it is for everybody to ultimately place the glory where it truly belongs.

Now, let's not overstate the point. Scripture is clear that these earthen pots have to possess growing spiritual character, right? And we certainly ought to try to be as equipped as we possibly can to be used by the Lord so we want to be the best pot we possibly can be. But a pot is still a pot, is still a pot. And if we start becoming more concerned with or enamored by or worried about the quality of the pot instead of the treasure that the pot contains, invariably we are going to be out of balance. Let's let the word of God adjust our thinking on that point this morning.

Now, there's another important aspect here. It's not just inherent issues like intellect or beauty or oratorical skill or the lack thereof, there is also the issue of life's situation. This is for those who would say, "Well, God can't use me because our kids didn't turn out the way we hoped." Or, "My marriage wasn't what I wished it was or isn't what I wish it would be." Or, "My business wasn't as profitable as I wanted." That does not disqualify you from being able to spread God's grace. Why? Well, follow the argument of the text: God purposely allows his earthen vessels to suffer. Paul uses some very strong terminology. Verse 8, I was "afflicted," he said, "in every way," meaning, "I was under pressure." He said, "I was perplexed." Paul said that. "I was at a loss." He said, "We are persecuted, feeling like I'm being pursued or hunted down and struck down as with a weapon. I feel like I'm being thrown down in a wrestling match." And you might say, "Steve, that is exactly the way I feel. I'm under pressure. I'm at a loss. I feel like I'm being pursued and hunted down. I feel like I'm being shot with a weapon. I'm being thrown down in a wrestling match. And that's exactly why God can't use me and that's exactly why other people would not be interested in what I have to say." Look, I have to love you enough as your pastor today to tell you that is simply not true. Stop thinking that way.

Paul is very honest about the way he suffers throughout this book. In the beginning, if you know the book, you know he said, "For we don't want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction which came to us in Asia. We were burdened excessively." Did that disqualify him from being used? "We were burdened excessively beyond our strength so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves so that we would not trust in ourselves but in God who raises the dead." And time just doesn't allow us to go through all the different occurrences of thinking like that even embedded in the DNA of the book of 2 Corinthians but it's all over and Paul's detractors would say, "You see, there's evidence he's not an apostle. He's experiencing difficulties." And Paul's response was, "No, the exact opposite is the case because Jesus said his followers would suffer." You say, "My difficulties," do you hear the Gospel here? "Are evidence of my ongoing union with Christ. I am always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus." Why? Why? Well, when an earthen vessel handles an occasion of suffering well, that often becomes the platform for God's power to be displayed. That's the argument of the text. "We have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves." Common pots, often under pressure, are in the best position to be used by God to spread grace.

You know, this counseling, soul care, being a spiritual friend, whatever you want to call it, it's often best in just casual conversations for sure, but it can also occur in more formal counseling type relationships. That's why we've had for 35 years now biblical counseling centers where we just make ourselves available to people in this community who are struggling in any way. Somebody is struggling with their marriage. Somebody is struggling raising their kids. Struggling with finances. Struggling with anger, worry, fear, depression, whatever it might be. We just make counseling services available to people in this community free of charge. We've been doing that for a long, long time. You say, "Well, who actually does the counseling?" Well, several of our pastors are involved: common pots for sure. Notice I'm not going to say "cracked" because that wouldn't go well but you understand. Other people with specialty training in other areas. But quite a few of the people, they're godly lay persons. That's what they are: men and women, godly lay persons who serve with us. And each one of those individuals would say what Paul said in the previous chapter when he wrote, "Not that we're adequate in ourselves to consider anything coming from ourselves." In fact, they would have said when they first started: their knees were knocking under the desk. They would. But I can't tell you. The older I get, the more times I've seen this happen and I love the way the Lord does this. I can't tell you how many times where we're right at the beginning of a person's ministry, one of the first relationships, the first cases that God gives, it just could not have gone any better where the counselees place their faith and trust in Christ; the counselees make dramatic changes. Frankly I say this tongue in cheek: so much so that if I had known that case was going to go that well I would have just taken it myself. I'm kidding when I say that. But why do you think the Lord would allow that to happen? It's so the point of that verse could be completed, "not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves but," what? "Our adequacy is from God." And when occasions like that happen, no one is tempted to say, "What a powerful counselor." Huh? Seriously? It's the pot. Don't be getting excited about the pot. "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God." It's from God, "and not from ourselves."

Here's another piece of this puzzle: it's amazing how often our sovereign God matches that person who struggled with his or her children in the past and found grace to make it through, now they are matched with another person or couple, surprise, surprise, surprise, who are struggling with their children today. And there's a kind of sensitivity, a kind of wisdom that only comes through the crucible of failure. That only comes through the crucible of hardship. That only comes through the crucible of trial. That's why Paul said, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort who comforts us in all our affliction." Have you got any of that going on? Have you had any of that going on? Have you concluded that that disqualifies you from being used of God to spread grace? Friend, it's the polar opposite of that. "Who comforts us in all our affliction so that we may be able to comfort." Comfort, co-fortitude. "To comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort which we ourselves are comforted by God."

I'm convinced if we went around the room this morning and asked you to name the 5 spiritual interactions that made the most difference in your life last year, we'd be amazed at how many of them were just conversations with a friend; conversations with a small group of people where you were just talking about life and God used a man or a woman, many times who was speaking out of the crucible of failure, who was speaking out of the crucible of trial, of hardship, of suffering, to talk about how God had given them grace and you walked away from that conversation so helped, so encouraged, so edified but you did not walk away and say, "They're a wonderful person." You walked away and said, "That person has a wonderful God." I wonder how many people hearing this message today have been underestimating how God could use you. In fact, I hate to sound all pastoral with you: you may need to repent on this point and today would be a really good day if you do because if you have been underestimating how God could use you because you thought you were just too common, you're just too ordinary or you have too many things that aren't going well or haven't gone well, friends, the fact of the matter is that's exactly the kind of vessel God typically uses to spread his grace around. It's a matter of depending. Do we have this? It's a matter of depending not on your pedigree, not on your preeminence, not on your perfection, not on your position. You're depending on the amazing power of your God.

Now, move further in the text. Spreading grace is also a matter of focus. Doubting whether God can use us is often due to an inordinate amount of attention being given to our resources and our situation where we wrongly believe that if we're the best at everything and we're the most successful in every way then we can really make a difference. This passage suggests asking a different set of questions. Will you let the word have it's work in your heart right now? What kind of questions should we ask ourselves if this text is true? Well, one question is: what will put me in the best possible position to minister to others? And knowing that's the transition and the logic here, "knowing that He who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and will present us with you." With you. "For all things are for your sakes." You see, if your suffering is what put you in the best position to serve others, then what? Bring it on. If your commonality is what put you in the best position to serve others, then embrace and be thankful for your commonality.

We saw a classic example of this principle, by the way, last Sunday evening. I know what you were doing last Sunday evening. In the morning you were in the Lord's house, right? Worshiping God, doing a great job and then all afternoon long you prayed, prayed, prayed, did all kinds of spiritual things. Then in the evening you had time for a little frivolity, didn't you, and you watched the Super Bowl. Yeah, you watched the Super Bowl and it looked like New England was going to win. Remember that? Yeah, it did. Then Seattle came roaring back including right at the end of the game. Seattle is down, I think it was 28-24, something like that, and Russell Wilson, the quarterback of the Seahawks throws an unbelievable pass. Do you remember this? Do you want to see it again? Okay, fine. Here it is. Watching football.

Broadcaster: Russell in the pocket. Russell for Kearse and it's broken up again.

That's the catch right there. Did you see that? Oh, you want to see it again? Okay, we'll watch it again.

Broadcaster: I think Butler hit it and it fell right back down to the ground.

I want to see it again. I want to see that guy. I want to see it again. Here we go.

Broadcaster: Unbelievable. That's exactly what happened, isn't it?

Broadcaster 2: Right, well, Kearse goes for it. It's still not on the ground. Whoa, look at that.

Look at him concentrating on that ball like a Christian concentrates on the sermon. Look at that right there. Something like that. Now, you may not know that Russell Wilson, the quarterback of the Seahawks is an outspoken Christian and the Lord doesn't often use superstars, sometimes he does, but not always in the ways we would expect because after that play, it's right at the end of the game and now the Seahawks are right on the goal line. Everybody now thinks the Seahawks are going to win. I mean, how can you not win that game? No, you've got the greatest running back ever. Let the guy run the ball in, right? I mean, I'm not much of an expert but I know that much. Pound it in. Were you screaming at your television too? And we might have thought this: what a great platform this is going to be for Russell Wilson, an outspoken follower of Jesus Christ to succeed again. To quarterback his team to back-to-back Super Bowls. What happened next? The Seahawks' coaching staff calls a passing play. Seriously? On the goal line, "Let's pass the ball." You know what happened. The evil Patriots quarterbacked by He-who-will-not-be-named, the Patriots intercepted the ball and won the game.

But here's the point in case you're wondering: you can make the argument that that stinging defeat became a far better platform for Russell Wilson to demonstrate the grace of God than had they won because it's amazing the way Russell Wilson as a Christian responded to all of that. Instead of criticizing the coaching staff, he manned up and took responsibility for throwing the interception. That's what Christians do. Then he immediately, do you know this, he immediately went on Twitter right after that game and thanked God for the privilege of playing in the Super Bowl. A few minutes later, he started quoting verses from the Bible on his Twitter account. What I'm saying is: sometimes it's in the midst of our weaknesses and our defeats that others can be best served which raises an interesting question, by the way, I think: would you embrace a trial or a failure or a weakness if that's what would put you in the best position to minister to others? Ask yourself: what's the best occasion for God's grace to spread?

"For all things are for your sakes." It's not, I got a little ahead of myself there, it's not about me. "For all things are for your sakes, so that the grace which is spreading to more and more people." Aren't you glad God wants his grace to spread in that way? And isn't that, by the way, a great way to think about life and ministry anyway? "What are you all doing around here?" Spreading grace. "What are you trying to do next week?" Spreading grace. "What were you trying to do last week?" Spreading grace. Spreading grace. That's what we're trying to do in our soul care ministries. That's what we're trying to do in our discipleship. That's what we're trying to do in our outreach. That's what we're trying to do in our more formal biblical counseling. Spreading grace. Spreading grace. But the message of this text is that we make a terrible mistake if we conclude that God only does that through beautiful people living air-brushed, pristine lives. It's usually the polar opposite. It's the earthen vessels, not the beautiful people, ministering in the crucible of heartache and failure and suffering.

I think I need to point out that what we're seeing in this text is dramatically different than what is commonly known as the health and wealth theologies around our world, the prosperity Gospel which certainly has its proponents in affluent America, not surprisingly. But it's even gaining traction around the world so you have a pastor who can justify his extravagant lifestyle by teaching that God wants you to be healthy and rich and so if you just have enough faith, you're going to receive all those blessings in this life and therefore my affluence becomes the platform for ministry, the proof of godliness. We need to affirm this morning that that is a terrible heresy that violates all sorts of passages of Scripture and can certainly take you out of ministry because of a wrong conclusion that is simply wrong theologically.

The first time I came across this I was living in New Jersey. I was working on my doctorate. My wife and I were there and Bethany had just been born. I was a Christian school administrator. In the spring of the year, we were processing new students for the upcoming school year and a mother comes in and she enrolls her daughter for the 8th grade. So I'm just walking her through that process administratively as quickly as I could. She mentioned on the way out, it was probably the month of April, she mentioned that her daughter had been diagnosed with a tumor on her arm and she asked if I would be praying but she said, "We're going to be fine because we have faith that God is going to heal her." Well, by the time she got that much out of her mouth, she was already practically out the door and I didn't think that was the appropriate time or place to challenge that belief. Honestly, I forgot pretty quickly about that conversation until just a couple of months later in the summer. Her daughter hadn't even come to school yet but it was in the summer and I was down at the Children's Hospital in Philadelphia trying to minister to another family from our church that had a child that was struggling with cancer. I was walking through the waiting room and I got the feeling that someone was kind of looking at me. You know how you're walking through a group and you just kind of look over and I didn't recognize the person. I've learned in ministry, especially in the hospital, that in a situation like that if you think you might recognize someone, it's always better to just go up even if you make a fool of yourself and possibly have an opportunity for ministry then it is to walk by and miss that opportunity. So I kind of turned and I'm trying to think, "Who is that? How do I know her?" Thankfully as I was walking to her, she told me who she was and called out my name. Then it dawned on me why I didn't recognize her. Even though it had been just a month or two since I had seen her last, it looked like she had aged 10 years. So I sat down and I began talking with her and she explained that that day they were there because her daughter's arm was going to be amputated. Then she hung her head in guilt and shame and said, "I just didn't have enough faith. You see, God would have healed my daughter. I just didn't have enough faith." It was one of those moments where if the pastor who taught her had been present, I might have attempted an amputation without surgical instruments.

But do you see how that flies in the face of what this passage is teaching? And I understand, yes, sometimes God's grace is spread to more and more people by divinely healing someone, by taking the thorn away. I understand that and then allowing you the privilege to glorify his name. That can happen. That does happen. But frequently it happens when one of God's children goes through hard times, goes through suffering, goes through failure and finds grace and power that only God can give to suffer well, often that's the platform where God's grace is best spread. And I just want to say to everybody who will hear this message today: please don't believe for a second that the presence of failure, the presence of suffering, disqualifies you from spreading grace. Often suffering is what positions you to best minister to others.

Thankfully, by the way, in that particular situation, that young girl went ahead and came to our school that fall. Imagine everything that just goes into being a new student at a school in 8th grade and then having the additional stigma of having just had your arm amputated and in her case, also having lost her hair because she had by that time started chemotherapy. I was so thankful for our student body who just loved on her and accepted her right into the mix. And we always started our school year by having an off-site retreat and the speaker that year talked about grace and talked about how God does not mete out blessings or trials based on the size of someone's faith. I'm happy to tell you that at that retreat, that young girl accepted Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord on the basis of grace alone. Through faith alone. In Christ alone. According to the truth of the Scripture alone. To the glory of God alone. By the way, I hope you've done that. I hope you have done that. And the Lord allowed her to develop a vibrant testimony because of the way he enabled her to respond to that trial. And her focus became on what was the best occasion for God's grace to be spread.

I would encourage us to ask ourselves: what will give others cause to give thanks to God and glorify him? That's the argument of the passage, "all things are for your sakes." Your sakes. "So that the grace which is spreading to more and more people may cause the giving of thanks to abound to the glory of God." You see, think about that verse in light of our annual theme as a church. That's what we want to see happen: locking arms as just common people, earthen vessels, clay pots but locking arms with those around us who are also struggling and going together to the throne of grace. Whether it be in a time of temptation or a need in our families, our marriages, our struggles at work. And this passage says, "Grace will be spread to more and more people." Isn't that what we're aiming for? Isn't that what we're praying about? "Grace will be spread to more and more people causing the giving of thanks to abound to the glory of God."

That's what we're hoping to see achieved in this Biblical Counseling Training Conference. I mean, what is this? Well, it's nearly 2,000 earthen vessels assembling to hear a handful of other nondescript earthen vessels talk about the beauty of Christ and the sufficiency of Scripture. Why? So that all those churches that are represented can be better equipped to help hurting and troubled people in their communities lock arms and go together to the throne of grace whether it be a time of temptation, a need in their families, their marriages, struggles at work. Why? So that grace can be spread. Think about the churches that are going to be represented on this campus. Grace can be spread to more and more people causing the giving of thanks to abound to the glory of God.

It's a matter of dependence. It's a matter of focus. And it's also a matter of perspective. I realize you might say, "But the trial that I'm involved in, it seems like it's never going to end." Really? Friends, our hearts can be renewed even while our bodies are decaying and they are decaying. That's why you had to brush your teeth this morning. Do you understand that? That's why everything was creaking this morning. It was amazing how noisy that hot mess of yours was. Therefore we don't lose heart. We're not going to say that's disqualifies us. Paul says "our suffering seems light in comparison to the eternal weight of glory, a momentary light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory." Even in the case of some of our church members and friends who are facing tremendous difficulties. In light of what can be and is being accomplished in eternity, God's spreading grace puts all of that into perspective if you'll let it. If you'll let it. Friends, there are unseen eternal issues at stake here. We don't want to miss the opportunity for God's grace to be spread through us, do we? "While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal."

We've had a special opportunity to experience that as a family and I need to just let you know about something that is happening with us. Some of you may know that my wife, Chris, has been struggling physically now for the last 15 months. It's a long story. She's been fighting severe abdominal pain and problems with her heart rate and her blood pressure, extreme chest pain, bleeding, extreme undesired weight loss. If you've seen her recently you know what I'm talking about. I'm very thankful for all of the medical care that we've received locally but these episodes are becoming more intense, they are becoming more frequent and we've been advised to seek help at Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota. Initially our appointment was in March but because of some of the contacts we have here at our church and a recent cancellation, an appointment became available for this week. For this week and because of the severity of my wife's symptoms, we have decided to take that appointment. Now, obviously that means a lot to a lot of people and I appreciate Pastor Green, I appreciate Idris Olsen, I appreciate Jeremy Vector. Thankfully, several of the sessions that I typically teach at the conference were already videoed and we're going to ask our guests if they would just allow us to show those videos in my place. We also shot, I've been scurrying around this week, shot quite a bit of video of my sessions this week in an empty auditorium. At first I thought, "Well, that will feel kind of weird." Honestly, I loved it. I absolutely loved it. It's just me and Jesus. The clay pot and the Treasure. That's all it was. Nobody was messing with their phones and I'm happy to tell you, no one went to sleep the whole time. I thought it would be shorter. I told the sound guy, I said, "Listen, they're hour sessions. I'll probably be 45 minutes in this kind of a setting." An hour and 5 minutes, every one of them. I had a great time. I'm going to start doing Sunday's messages on Thursday night.

Anyway, we've got a lot of that in the can now and then a number of our speakers are also picking up some of my other sessions as well. It's possible, not likely, that if Mayo's work wraps up by Wednesday, if Chris felt like it, we would drive back Wednesday night and I would be able to pick up my sessions on Thursday and Friday which are some of my more important ones anyway. I'm also very thankful for my daughter, Karas and her husband Austin who are going to be caring for our son Andrew this week. It was interesting, Karas and our daughter Bethany and her family who were up in Minneapolis, were actually kind of fighting about caring for the Bear and I'm very thankful for all of that. We would appreciate your prayers as we travel and what we're looking forward to is all these earthen vessels in Rochester and here hopefully being used to spread God's grace.

Would you stand with me for prayer?

*Father in heaven, thank you for the beauty of this passage. Lord, thank you that in some ways it puts us in our place and we need that. We need that. Lord, we want to praise you for the power of the treasure. Thank you for the impact it's had on us. And Lord, I pray that you would forgive us for ever mentally disqualifying ourselves from being used by you because of an inordinate attention on us and so, Lord, may we work on holiness. May we try to handle trial well. May we try to be equipped. But Father, in the midst of that process, I pray that we would focus on our Savior and we would focus on the surpassing power that is available through him. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*