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 Title: What I have learned about Grace, "Counseling," and Disappointment  
 Text: Acts 20:17-38 (v.32)  
**Theme:** It is the grace of God that builds up and renders certain the sanctified.

### **Introduction:**

Let us remember how Paul uses a very distinct word for "profitable" in verse 20. The word "profitable" in Acts 20:20 means, "to lift up together." What Paul preached help lift the people up. Paul's preaching came alongside his audience and built them up. It does not mean they always heard what they wanted, but it does mean that they always heard what they needed.

### **THE BIG PICTURE**

July 20      What I have learned about the Shepherd and the Sheep  
 July 27      What I have learned about the Word and Ministry  
 August 3     What I have learned about Christ and His Church  
**August 17    What I have learned about Grace, "Counseling," and Disappointment**

### **Its Eternal Value:**

It is only grace that can sustain us in our journey through life to Christ. In the absence of grace, there is no hope, healing, or wholeness.

### **The Present Danger:**

The old bible expositor G. Campbell Morgan correctly notes how "There is no word in the New Testament that more baffles the expositor than this word 'grace.'" (G. Campbell Morgan, *The Acts of the Apostle* [New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1924], 472). I firmly believe this. Therefore it behooves us to preach and know grace.

Although there is a tendency for us to tire in the expounding of Christ, grace, and the cross but the failure lies in our inability to explore and expose the rich veins of truth that sit waiting to be discovered.

There are always two extremes. **First**, we erroneously believe law can correct the flesh and that the flesh can be changed. Thus, our Christian life is marked by a list of do's and don'ts. **Second**, we are afraid of grace lest we tolerate what God hates. Friend we must always forever love the person without loving the problem. We must love those whom Christ loves and even go so far as to love those who would appear to be our enemies. I do not believe you or I can be too excessive in our expressions of graciousness.

### **The Problem:**

Our tendency in life and in ministry is to try and do it our way in our own strength. Yet the only safe haven is to surrender it all to God and His grace. "Amidst all the dangers of the church, when human strength fails or is withdrawn, we may commit that church

to the safe keeping and tender care of God.” (*Albert Barnes’ New Testament Commentary* on Acts 20:32).

Paul did not deceive himself into believing that he was sufficient in himself for the work of the ministry.

### **The Storyline:**

God has always been gracious. There has never been a time when God was less than gracious. Even in wrath and judgment, God is gracious and kind. What God began in grace He will sustain and finish in grace.

### **Questions:**

1. How do you view your failure?
2. How do you view the failure of others?
3. How do you think God views your failure?
4. What should be your response to your failure?
5. What should be your response to the failure of others?

The Holy Spirit is calling to us from this passage to consider three ideas.

**To Know:** The Holy Spirit desires for us to know that God is gracious toward those in whom He has begun a good work and toward those who fail.

**To Choose:** The Holy Spirit desires for us to choose grace as the only right way to respond to personal and corporate failure.

**To Feel:** The Holy Spirit desires for us to feel the joy of living under the reign of grace.

Paul’s entire weight was placed on God and His work, a work of grace to finish what He alone began. The word “commend” speaks of transfer. Paul was depositing the elders and the church into the hand of God.

Notice how this grace is described. It is able to do two things. The grace of God has power. It is able to accomplish what God wants it to do. Let me back up a moment before we move forward. Although we should view Grace, Christ, and the Gospel as all interlocking ideas, there is a necessary distinction we need to note. Grace is an idea or manner. Grace speaks of the manner in which God deals with His people. Grace by definition is unmerited favor. For something to be gracious, it must be free to the recipient. God is the one who is able. Grace is not inherently able. Grace describes the manner in which God acts in the building up of His people and the securing of their inheritance. God’s power flows to His people graciously. This means it flows to them because of who He is and what He has done, not because of who they are or what they have done or are doing. This will become important in just a moment.

### **Outline:**

“The power of God, and his free promises revealed in his word, is the props and upholders of the ministry of the Gospel.” (The 1599 Geneva Bible)

The word power is our English word “dynamite.” It speaks of “an ability to accomplish a stated task.” God through grace is able to accomplish what He promises concerning maturity and glory. **He will take us through the journey and to our destiny.** He will not fail.

Paul persistently preached “the gospel of the grace of God” (v. 24). “This message of the free bounty of God is the word which has the greatest effect on the heart of man, and so it is able to build up the church.” (R.B. Rackham, *The Acts of the Apostles* [London, 1902], ad loc in Bruce, *Acts*, NICNT, 417).

Our text tells us two things. Both are very relevant as it relates to discipleship and disappointment.

- I. The grace of God has power to build up the body of Christ.

**Grace builds up; law tears down.** Word-centered preaching celebrates the grace of God in the kingdom of God. This is the kind of preaching that builds up and renders certain the outcome. It fills the citizens of His kingdom with hope and moves them to endurance.

What is grace? The idea of grace is the outworking of God to His people through the person and work of Jesus Christ. It is the person and work of Jesus Christ that causes the Father to look upon His people with favor. It is the person and work of Jesus from which the Father blesses His people. The operations of God, the economy of God, the administration of God is grace-based. Because it is grace-based, it cancels out performance based acceptance and earned favor or blessing. All of God’s activity toward us is rooted solely in the person and work of His Son; there is nothing we can do to earn it.

Everything I am and everything I have is sourced solely in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Herein lays a dangerous idea. We often think that what we have is earned by our own strength our own wisdom and our own devising. Such is the erroneous thinking of the natural man. Everything you are and everything you have comes to you from God.

What we call spiritual disciplines are simply venues through which we might see God. These venues, however, are not as limited as we might think. How does grace work in the area of problem solving or caring for the failing congregant? There are three thoughts concerning the grace of God and the Christian life.

- A. Grace views each individual as **in Christ** (2 Cor. 5:17).

“Therefore if any man [be] in Christ, **he is] a new creature**: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new” (2 Cor. 5:17). (New Living Translation)

If anyone is in Christ, then this forms their identity.

B. Grace views each complexity as **for Christ** (Col. 1:16).

“For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities--**all things have been created through Him and for Him**” (Col. 1:16) (NASB).

Somehow, in ways I cannot understand, God is working out every situation to His glory and our good. I do not believe God simply waits and reacts to my erroneous decisions. God is working in and through my will for His glory.

C. Grace views each solution as **from Christ** (1 Cor. 10:13; Rom. 8:28).

“No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, **but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also**, so that you will be able to endure it” (1 Cor. 10:13).

Grace understands that nothing is of any consequence apart from the person and work of Jesus Christ. Grace knows that no one apart from Christ is capable of standing before the Father accepted and complete.

There is a second thought in our passage (v.32).

II. The grace of God has power to guarantee the certainty of completion.

Even as savage wolves circle their prey, we can be rest assured that God will finish what He began. He will give us rest in the midst of our storms. Because God begins the work He will finish the work. The end result of His work is not dependent on you.

I hear your protests. I understand the concern. But your ultimate sanctification does not depend on you reading the Bible, going to church, giving your finances, doing good deeds, or any number of thoughts. God alone began your justification, and God alone will finish your sanctification. God will work in you and through you His will so that you do what He looks like, but this conformity to His image is not man-based or man-centered. You are simply the platform through which His image is manifested.

The end of what He has promised sits squarely on God. You might balk at such a simple statement, wanting me to include the activity of the individual will. Yet, God is not bound by man’s will. God works in the will, through the will, in the absence of the will, against the will, and with the will to accomplish what pleases Him.

Paul describes the people of Ephesus as having been sanctified. Although Paul speaks of something that is still yet future, Paul is not so blind as to realize the immediate reality of their sanctification. Our present sanctification, or what we commonly call the

Christian walk or life, is marked by valleys and mountain tops. What do we do in the journey with the various twists and turns of life?

A. What do we do with failure? How are we to understand failure?

1. Failure is a real part of everyone's regular experience (1 John 2:1, 2).

<sup>1</sup> "My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. And **if anyone sins**, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; <sup>2</sup> and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world" (1 John 2:1, 2).

John does not desire for you to fail; neither does he make provision for you to fail, but when you do, you are not to lose heart or hope.

2. God has provided a person and path for continued victory (1 John 2:1, 2; 1 Cor. 10:13).

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"No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, **but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also**, so that you will be able to endure it" (1 Cor. 10:13).

Although failure is inevitable, so is your deliverance and God's provision for it. Your failure is not about you, but about Him. Even in your failure, God shows Himself mighty to save.

3. Apart from Christ you can do nothing (John 15:5).

"I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, **for apart from Me you can do nothing**" (John 15:5).

Nothing about the Christian life is about you; it is about Him. The Christian life is the Christ life. Our life is not an imitation of His, but a participation in His. Your success is His success, and your failure is for the purpose of driving you to Him. Each failure teaches you that you cannot, and only Jesus can.

4. Everything in your life is working for your salvation (Rom. 8:28).

"And we know that **God causes all things to work together for good** to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose" (Rom. 8:28).

There are no accidents in the purpose of God. There are no wasted moments. Everything about your life is a part of His redemptive purpose for you and those around you.

5. God is faithful to keep His promises even when you must live by faith and not by sight (1 Thess. 5:23, 24; Jude 24, 25; Phil. 1:6; Heb. 13:20, 21).

These are some of the richest verses in the New Testament.

<sup>3</sup>“I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, <sup>4</sup>always offering prayer with joy in my every prayer for you all, <sup>5</sup>in view of your participation in the gospel from the first day until now. <sup>6</sup>For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus” (Phil 1:3-6).

<sup>12</sup>“So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; <sup>13</sup>for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure” (Phil 2:12, 13).

<sup>23</sup>“Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>24</sup>Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass” (1 Thess. 5:23, 24).

<sup>20</sup>“Now the God of peace, who brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep through the blood of the eternal covenant, even Jesus our Lord, <sup>21</sup>equip you in every good thing to do His will, working in us that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen” (Heb. 13:20, 21).

<sup>24</sup>“Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy, <sup>25</sup>to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen” (Jude 24, 25).

By faith I believe God will complete the work He alone began. What does this look like? Let us take the true child of God: At times this individual might look pretty sad. This Christian might be consumed by worry, in bondage to addictions, lusting after forbidden fruit, a social misfit and perhaps a total and utter financial failure. We look at this individual and we do not think, “He must be living the victorious Christian life.” But as a true child of God, they are living the victorious Christian life. By faith we believe the promise of God. Grace is at work in their lives. It might not look like something we would expect, but it is looking like something God is doing.

- B. What should be our response towards those who fail?
1. Believe that God is working repentance, faith, sincerity, and devotion in their hearts. There is no one in whom God is not working.
  2. Come alongside the individual and speak grace to them. Assure them of God's love without condition, acceptance without requirement, forgiveness without limit, and service without reward.
  3. Come alongside the individual and walk with them through their failure. Do not give up on them. What this looks like might be far different than you and I might think. Perhaps it means separation, perhaps it means open and honest communication, but no matter how it might look we must not give up on the individual.

Each and every day we need to be commended and to commend others to God for the building up of their soul and the securing of their inheritance among the sanctified.

**SHEPHERDING THE PEOPLE:** (What's the NEXT STEP?)

1. Because you know the grace of God, you need to stop beating yourself up over past and present failure.
2. Because you know the grace of God, you need to come alongside those who fail and seek to build them up in the journey to Christ.
3. Because we know the grace of God, we need to be a place where grace reigns and hope, healing, and wholeness are freely and openly dispensed.