

An Acceptable Priesthood

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In the book of Hebrews, we find an interesting verse about serving God. It says, 'Let us have grace by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and fear'. Heb 12:28. Another translation tells us to 'offer to God an acceptable service'. The word 'service' literally means to bring priestly worship. It is the Greek word *latreuo* and it is used elsewhere in relation to the priests who 'served' in the tabernacle under the law covenant. Heb 13:10. Our verse should read, 'Let us have grace that we may priest to God an acceptable priesthood'. I think of sportsmen and women who play their game properly and to the best of their ability, and I imagine that this is what it means to 'priest an acceptable priesthood'. Of course, in the Bible this word 'acceptable' is always used in relation to offering. Like the Israelites, we present the 'first' and the 'best' to God; so an 'acceptable offering' is clearly not just the minimum that we need to give. Furthermore, an 'acceptable offering' implies that God is receiving us!

At the beginning of the Reformation, Martin Luther introduced a doctrine or a teaching which he called, 'The priesthood of all believers'. It was written against the background of Catholicism where the priests performed




all the religious duties. Depending on our church background, we will each have a different understanding of 'priesthood'. In some churches, the priest is the person up the front doing all of the work. When I became a Christian at 17 years of age, I didn't realise that I was becoming a priest; I just came to the Lord in a simple act of repentance. But as the years went by, it became clear to me that I was required to be a priest because, as Peter said in his first letter, all believers belong to a 'royal priesthood'. 1 Pet 2:9. I came into the charismatic renewal and was amazed to observe that people took Bibles to church. I had grown up in a church where the only person who had a Bible was the priest, while the people had prayer books and hymn books. It took me a number of weeks to resolve that when the preacher stood up to preach, the people opened their Bibles to read the Scriptures. They lifted their hands and I wondered what on earth they were doing. They were priesting! They were bringing themselves; they were presenting their offerings. And it became clear to me that they were standing in the presence of God. He is able to make us stand in the presence of His glory.

The apostle Paul beseeches us to present our bodies as a living sacrifice which is our priestly service. Rom 12:1. We noted in the book of Hebrews that we have grace to priest to God an acceptable service or priesthood. The

companion passage in Hebrews says, 'We have an altar from which those who serve [or priest] the tabernacle have no right to eat'. Heb 13:10. This is the language of the apostle Paul in the New Testament. He wanted us to go in and stand in the presence of God. In the Old Testament, a verse in the book of Ezra clarifies the point. It concerns the rebuilding of the temple after the Jews' return from exile in Babylon and says that Levites from twenty years of age were appointed to oversee the work of the house of the Lord. Ezra 3:8. The word 'appointed' actually means 'stood' or 'to stand'. Therefore, it would literally say, 'They *stood* the Levites from twenty years to oversee the work of the house of the Lord'. In the book of Revelation, we read of the martyrs who stand before the throne of God in white robes. 'For this reason, they are before the throne of God; and they serve Him day and night in His temple; and He who sits on the throne will spread His Tabernacle over them.' Rev 7:15. We can catch the pictorial nature of these things. The book of Jude says, 'Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless, with exceeding joy.' Jude 1:24. This literally means that He will 'make you stand' in His presence.

If we receive grace in order to 'priest an acceptable priesthood' it is, therefore, important for us to



understand what a priest is. Both Paul and Peter stated that we are to stand *in* and *by* grace. Rom 5:2 Heb 13:9. We know that a priest is someone who stands in the presence of God and comes in and out of that presence. As Christians, we also come into His presence to serve Him and then go out into the world to live our lives. Those who have not made a commitment to Christ, do not know what it means to stand before God or to come in and out of His presence. And because they have not received grace, they do not know how to bring an acceptable offering to the Lord or how to 'offer to God an acceptable priesthood'. The 'royal priesthood' does not refer to any specific religious group but to those with the right and authority to go in and out of the presence of God. Although we are always in His presence, I like the metaphor of going in and out. As soon as I leave church on a Sunday morning, I'm not conscious of being in the presence of God. In a sense, I go 'out' to do various things but when I pray or study my Bible, I go 'in' to His presence.

In his letter to Timothy, Paul said, 'The Lord stood with me and strengthened me'. 2 Tim 4:17. As priests, we must stand by day and through the night watches, in the presence of God lifting up holy hands. Paul said that men ought always to lift up holy hands without wrath or doubting. 1 Tim 2:8. This gesture is a symbol of

our worship and surrender and is the mandate for every man. As we receive grace and authority to come into the presence of God, He answers our prayers but sometimes the answer is, 'No'. If we think of the language and symbolism of the Scripture, we can't pray unless we are a priest, because only a priest can offer up incense which is the symbol of prayer. Rev 5:8. We receive grace to empower our priesthood; to give us the authority, the right, the enthusiasm and the confidence to draw near to the throne of grace. We read in Hebrews, 'Let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need'. Heb 4:16. In the Old Testament, it was the high priest who drew near to the throne of grace. We have the Lord Jesus Christ as our great High Priest who has gone before us and we are included in His priesthood. We come to the throne of grace through prayer. The Scripture says, 'Let us *have* grace'; not, 'Let us *find* grace'. Let us have it, whereby, we may priest to God an acceptable priesthood. He wants to empower our priesthood. An acceptable priesthood is governed by a number of things. We read in Exodus that we are not to appear before Him empty-handed and the book of Revelation tells us that we cannot go into His presence unless we are clothed in the robes of priesthood which are our righteous works. Ex 23:15. Rev 19:8.




Peter said, 'This is the true grace in which you stand'. Paul told the Romans, 'We have access by faith into this grace in which we stand'. 1 Pet 5:12. Rom 5:2. Paul wrote to the Colossians regarding Epaphras who was always labouring fervently for them in prayers so that they might stand perfect and complete in all the will of God. Col 4:12. In the book of Revelation, John said, 'For the great day of His wrath has come. Who is able to stand?' Rev 6:17. He wants us to stand in faith and grace in His presence. We need to lift up holy hands like Epaphras to pray constantly. Peter said that the God of all grace has called us and will perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish us. 1 Pet 5:12. He is calling us to be a priest. That's not someone in black or white or red robes. It is a believer; someone receiving grace who has access to the throne of grace, which is also a mercy seat, when they have troubles, requests and needs. He is a merciful God. We just need to come into the throne room, the most holy place, and find grace. Heb 4:16. We are to stand in His presence and have confidence to make our requests known. As we stand before Him, He stands with us. I love the practicality of the verse, 'The Lord stood with me'. We find another reference to 'standing' in the letter to the Galatians where Paul encouraged his readers to 'stand fast therefore in the liberty [or freedom] by which Christ has made us free'. Gal 5:1. The throne of grace is truly marvellous because we can come and find more

grace. He gives greater grace. James 4:6. If we wish to stand before the Lord, we need to find grace so that we might present to God an acceptable priesthood because only a priest can go into His presence. And of course, when we go into His presence we will find that He is strong.

In the book of Revelation, John wrote concerning the woman who is the church. 'It was given to her to clothe herself in fine linen, bright and clean: for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints.' Rev 19:8. When we consider white robes, we often think of brides who wear white dresses to symbolise purity. But the white linen robes mentioned in the book of Revelation are robes of priesthood. This is the interesting anomaly of the book of Revelation. Never before had a woman been clothed in white robes or been permitted to walk into the most holy place and stand in the Ark of the Covenant! We are a kingdom of priests. We have works to do which He has appointed for us and we need grace to perform them.

The grace of Christ is the exertion of His power as our Redeemer. And it brings us right across to our individual place as a son, and then a priest, where we begin to have an active service in His temple. Therefore, grace is the means and the authority by which we serve




God. The parable of the talents teaches us that God gives grace according to our ability. Matt 25:15. The literal interpretation of that word 'ability' is *dunamis*, which means 'power'. It's where the word 'dynamite' comes from. So the verse actually reads, 'He gave talents according to power'. Therefore, it is not 'ability' at all in the primary sense of our language. But nor is it our personal strength. Some people may feel more powerful than others. There are those who are more aggressive, while others are more passive. We can be emotionally stronger or weaker than another. Our power is our predestination, life and natural ability. Although the Lord gives talents or grace according to our power, we find that He constantly wants to weaken us. He brings us to the end of ourselves because as Paul said, 'Power is perfected in weakness'. 2 Cor 12:9.

Peter said that the God of all grace who has called us would establish us after we 'have suffered a little while'. 1 Pet 5:10. Suffering is an interesting thing. Having been involved in pastoral work for a long time, I note that, mostly, suffering is the ongoing contradiction of life where things are not evolving as we thought they would. We are gradually disempowered because our morale drops, our expectations fall, our hopes are deferred and our heart becomes sick. Prov 13:12. There are, of course, many more extreme forms of suffering than this, but

His grace is sufficient for them all. We may be severely suffering or we might be simply struggling. But He gives more grace so we can confidently go before the throne of grace. As our work increases and our confidence grows, we need more grace. We've found access by grace and were saved by grace, but we need more grace to exercise our priesthood. God is calling us to be men and women of prayer who tarry before the throne of grace and intercede for others. The definition that we have according to our ability, will diminish. As He gives more grace, the defining factor in our lives is His grace rather than our natural ability. Grace will overtake our ability and the percentage that is us and the percentage that is Him will eventually change.

The parable of the talents begins with, 'A man was going to a far country and he called his own slaves and entrusted his possessions to them'. Matt 25:14. We own our ability. It's intrinsic; it's inherent; it's us. But grace is never *us*. It is the riches of His grace bestowed upon us. He is the Master. He has gone to a far country and He has called His slaves together and committed His own possessions to them. Perhaps we are not coping; we may be struggling, downcast and losing heart. Or perhaps, we are confident and proceeding because of our ability and power. This, of course, is the greatest enemy of all. In either situation, He wants to bestow



more grace upon us. He wants to equip us with His possessions according to our predestination but, at the same time, He is weakening us. Paul knew salvation by grace and he knew the grace of priesthood. He went in and stood in the presence of God. He prayed and fasted and sought the Lord three times concerning the thorn in his flesh. 2 Cor 12:7-9. We can also have an intrusion in our flesh; something stuck in our foot, hand or our side or as it says in the Old Testament, a thorn in our eye. Num 33:55 Josh 23:13. Paul sought the Lord three times concerning the thorn. But the Lord said, 'It's all right. You'll live. You'll cope. No, I'm not pulling the thorn out. My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.'

For Paul, this was not his first infusion of grace. But he gained more grace, where he learnt to receive it in a new way. He had been a very strong, powerful, articulate, confident and capable man but, all of a sudden, he was weakened. He had to find grace another way. We may also need to find grace in our weakness. Many of us have done things a certain way according to ability and that has been right and proper. But the Lord wants to bring an increase of grace. We, therefore, have to adjust our perception of our abilities to receive the possessions that Christ is committing to us. If we won the Lotto and received riches all of a sudden, we

would have to adjust our life! We would live in a different way. This has been an ongoing journey for me through the course of my Christian life and service. I've had to adjust to the grace that has come to redefine me. We are no longer defined by our original ability but by our priesthood; by the right and authority to come into His presence and to stand there. This is the grace of life!