

“You’re Grounded!”

For most of us, hearing the words, **“You’re Grounded!”** while growing up was always negative. We were not allowed to go places we considered fun or do things we wanted because we had *“lost our privileges”* through something we had done which, in fairness, we probably knew we shouldn’t be doing.

The part of us which remembers reprimands, mistakes and negative estimates of our ability and worth **turns out to be stronger than is either reasonable or good for us**. It is said we need *seven positive interactions* to overcome *one negative*. The math may be flexible, but the principle holds. Neuroscientists tell us negative interactions result in the production of **cortisol** – the famous root of “fight or flight.” This puts our body in emergency mode, and *we do not reason or connect well with others*. Which is fine if you really are in a life-threatening situation...but most of the time we are not. When we get some **metaphorical sugar** and positive input, our bodies produce oxytocin, and we are *more able to reason and connect with others*. The problem is the good stuff – oxytocin – **metabolizes faster** than the fight or flight cortisol. Our positive experiences, which give life, leave us sooner. And our negative encounters, which take life away, hang around longer. It sure seems like physiology isn’t our friend here.

This is often true when we think about *our connection with God*. If you were raised in a tradition where the pastor was a **master finger wagger**, and you left each Sunday feeling you better straighten up or God was going to make you pay, *it can be hard to believe God loves you*. We are more likely to imagine God may give us a break if we make good choices which outweigh the bad.

At the heart of our passage today is the phrase, **“Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.”** This is hard for us to process because just like Jesus’ contemporaries we tend to equate the category of **“sinners”** with those who are and *always will be* on the “outs” with God. Remember the criticism the leaders of the time leveled against Jesus? **“This man welcomes sinners...and eats with them!”** It was considered beyond reasonable to welcome someone who had made life choices which were considered beyond the pale.

And yet, there was Jesus...**welcoming and encouraging “sinners”**. He didn’t seem to think their status was either permanent or reason for avoiding them.

Paul uses himself as an example today. He tells us ***if God can redeem and use him – well, there is no telling what God can do with us.*** That sounds to us like a professional athlete saying, “If I can do this – so can you.” And we know better.

The power of today’s passage is it ***hits us right where we need it.*** It hits us in the places we thought were *beyond the reach of God.* Too many of us believe God is not able to overlook what we have done. We imagine we are sitting where ***God will never be able to reach.***

When we feel that way – God’s life in us can be revived hearing today’s words, ***“the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.”*** Paul didn’t feel worthy either. The word “overflowed” here is crucial. Sure, we all believe there is faith and love out there...***but is there enough for me?*** God says, “yes. ***More than enough***”. Overflowing means grace overwhelms our need – it isn’t even close.

But it doesn’t necessarily feel that way to us. This is one positive reminder of God’s seeking us out in Jesus and we have so many *negative life experiences* which lead us to believe otherwise.

Today’s text leads us to a deeply important choice. Life tells us we have been grounded. We can accept that we are being punished and limited...or we can believe, by the grace of God, ***we are grounded for living in the life of God.*** We can accept faith and love have washed over us and given us a new lease on life.

We need to know; ***we are not simply defined forever by the worst mistake we have ever made.*** We are not captive to poor decisions or past mistakes. We sometimes live with consequences – but remember – ***God’s life overwhelms us with love and faith – and that changes who we are.***

Our text ends in wonderful praise to God – ***whose goodness is beyond our sight and imagination: goodness which isn’t by nature ours.*** Thanks be to God we are grounded in God’s goodness. Thank goodness our lives will be molded and shaped for the better. Congratulations, you are grounded...in God... forever.