

Thirtieth Anniversary Celebration

This is Amazing Grace!

1 Peter 2:2-12

Mark Vroegop

² Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation— ³ if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good. ⁴ As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, ⁵ you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. ⁶ For it stands in Scripture: “Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.” ⁷ So the honor is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe, “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,” ⁸ and “A stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense.” They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do. ⁹ But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. ¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. ¹¹ Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. ¹² Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation. 1 Peter 2:2–12 (ESV)

Anniversaries are important moments in life because they offer an opportunity to celebrate, remember, and recommit. There is something special about reflecting on the past, and this is especially significant considering the fact that our natural and cultural orientation is more toward the future. We view history differently in the United States than people view it in Europe.

For example, when we were in Edinburgh, Scotland, we toured St. Giles Cathedral, where John Knox served as pastor during the Scottish Reformation. We found a tour guide who was explaining the stories behind the amazing stained glass windows. When I asked about one particular window, which he had left out of the tour, he said, “Oh, that’s one’s not very old, so I don’t talk about it much.” When I asked him how old that particular window was, he replied, “The 1800s.” What is historic in the United States is barely worth talking about in Scotland.

On the scale of church history, thirty years is a small sliver of time, but it is still worth celebrating because it is good to reflect on God’s amazing grace to us. The longer I live, the more time I spend with people and look at my own life, the more amazed I am that any church makes it – let alone for thirty years! The fact that any group of snarky, sinful, and self-centered people can grow together into the likeness of Jesus is a miracle.

So, my aim today is not to celebrate us. No way! My aim is to have us look around and say, "This is amazing grace!" It is amazing that in the providence of God, He birthed a people called College Park Church. In 1985 a group of Baptist Churches wanted to reach the city of Indianapolis, and with their help, College Park was birthed. There have been seasons of great faith, seasons of great growth, seasons of testing and trial, and seasons of expansion. And God has been faithful through them all.

This thirtieth anniversary celebration is a good time to remember who we are and what we are really committed to. In other words, what is it that makes a church special? And what should we keep focusing on as we look to the future?

I chose 1 Peter 2:2-12 for our text because I think that this text captures the characteristics of an amazing group of people who call themselves a church. As I look back on our history, as I think about how God has blessed College Park, and as I look the future, here is my prayer: **That God would continue to help us to be a Word-craving, Christ-exalting, grace-experiencing, gospel-proclaiming, and obedience-living people.** I pray that thirty years from now, and at my retirement party, we will still be known for the Word, Christ, grace, the gospel, and obedience.

Five Characteristics of an Amazing Church

The book of 1 Peter was written thirty years after Pentecost to believers who were living in modern-day Turkey. The Roman government, under Nero's leadership, had begun to turn against Christians, and Christians were facing increasing opposition and persecution. The book was written to help followers of Jesus know how to navigate a hostile culture. (By the way, 1 Peter is a book that we are going to study in the second half of next year.)

Chapter One is focused mainly on the heavenly plan of God as Christians face trials and the future hope that awaits them. Chapter Two bridges the spiritual and the practical. It focuses on the connection between who we are in Christ and how we should live. In other words, God's amazing grace creates an amazing group of people. What are they like?

1. Word-craving (vv. 2-3)

The first characteristic that I want you to see in the text relates to one's orientation to the Word of God. Peter wanted these believers, whom he calls "exiles and sojourners" (v. 11), to have an urgent passion for the Scriptures.

In verse 2 he uses the metaphor of newborn infants to describe the kind of craving that he desires them to have. A newborn, milk-desiring baby is relentless in his or her passion for milk. Just think of the last time you fed a baby. When hungry, a newborn will cry loudly, piercingly, and without regard for timing or convenience. When hungry, a newborn will relentlessly search for milk from a pacifier, a finger, the back of his own hand, or (in the case of our twins) the forehead of his brother. A believer in Jesus is to eagerly and frequently desire the Word of God.

Believers are to "long for the pure spiritual milk." They are to have a strong desire (like a deer panting for flowing streams in Ps. 42:1) for the truth of God's word. In calling the Bible "milk," Peter is not

saying that they are to desire merely elementary truths (as in Hebrews 5:12-13); rather, he means that the Word of God is spiritual nourishment. The followers of Jesus are to be marked by a passion to know the truth.

Central to why they are motivated this way is because 1) the Word is the means by which they grow up into salvation, and 2) experiencing the truth of God's Word is a re-tasting of God's goodness. The Scriptures provide the spiritual resources for us to grow in spiritual maturity. God's plan for His people is make them increasingly look like Jesus, and that only happens through the Word. What's more, as people encounter the truth of the Word, they taste again and again what God is like. And in so doing, they are reminded of God's goodness, His mercy, and His grace.

From its very beginning, College Park Church has been deeply committed to the Word of God. Our second Core Value is the Authority of the Word, which means we believe that the power for life change comes not from our opinions, our skill, or our ingenuity, but from the Word of God. Just look at how many pictures in the Atrium show someone teaching the Bible. You'll see it in people's hands, on an overhead projector, and on slides. We have been a people marked by a craving for the Word.

When Sarah and I were considering coming to College Park, Dr. Jim Grier told me that this church was his favorite place to preach. Now Grier preached all over the world, including in Spurgeon's church, and yet he loved preaching here. When I asked him why, he said, "Because the people lean in to listen and they receive the Word with enthusiasm." And when I visited here, I found that to be true. In fact, in the smaller sanctuary, you could actually hear people respond with an "Ummm" when a meaningful point was made.

From the beginning, this church has been marked by a craving for the Word. Let's never lose our hunger or our passion to taste the goodness of God through the Word of God.

2. Christ-exalting (vv. 4-8)

The second characteristic relates to the centrality of Jesus in the life of the people of God. To make this point, Peter uses temple-like language to refer to these believers so that the role of Jesus is clearly and wonderfully observed. Let me give you a few highlights:

- "As you come to him" is language reminiscent of coming for worship as one draws near to God.
- Jesus is called a "living stone," which picks up the building/temple metaphor and extends it beyond a physical structure.
- Jesus is rejected by men but chosen and precious to God – something that will mark the people of God in the future.
- Christians are themselves "like living stones" and are being built up to be a new temple and a new priesthood for the worship of God.
- This new spiritual entity and new worship is only possible through Jesus Christ.
- Three different Old Testament texts are cited in verses 6-8 to demonstrate the importance and significance of Jesus being the cornerstone.

The point of these verses is to introduce the beauty of the grace of God (more on that next), but to anchor it in the person and work of Jesus. It is as if Peter wants the church to look around at the beautiful place of worship that they have become but also to remind them that this amazing new reality is only because of the work of Jesus. He's the cornerstone, the foundation, and the beginning of everything in the Christian life.

Our mission statement is simply "igniting a passion to follow Jesus," and our first Core Value is the pre-eminence of Jesus. The reason that you see the name Jesus so prominent in both our mission statement and our values is because Christianity is about a personal relationship with Jesus. We are a people who have been changed by Jesus, who sing about Jesus, and who love to tell others about Jesus. We are Jesus-people. He is everything to us.

My first series at College Park in 2008 was on the book of Colossians, and we called it the Core. I chose that series because I had heard from many people in the candidating process that they came to College Park because of Kimber or the teaching or the fellowship, but they stayed because they met Jesus. I chose Colossians because of its vision of the centrality of Christ:

¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. ¹⁶ For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. ¹⁷ And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸ And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. Colossians 1:15–18 (ESV)

For those of you who have been around College Park for a while, you will know that it was often said that "The main thing is to keep the main One the main thing." My prayer for us, and my goal as a pastor, is that at the end of day you look more like Jesus because of this church. Our Elders want you to look like and love Jesus. He is why we exist, and He is what we are striving for.

3. Grace-experiencing (vv. 9a and 10)

The next amazing characteristic of the people of God relates to who God has made them to be through His grace. Followers of Jesus are people who have experienced God's grace, and it has transformed them at their deepest level. Because of Jesus, they are a different people.

In fact, that is why Peter calls them exiles and sojourners. Their location or their nationality or their background does not make them exiles in their culture; their Christian-identity makes them outsiders. So what Peter shares here is both glorious and defining.

Prior to verse 9, there is a strong word of judgment regarding those who reject Christ: "They stumble [over Christ] because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do" (1 Peter 2:8). And with that backdrop, Peter says, "BUT YOU!" Pennant

What does he say about them? He uses the kind of language that formerly was applied only to the nation of Israel. He uses covenantal words to describe the way that they have been graced:

⁹ But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession... 1 Peter 2:9a (ESV)

Peter is using Israel-like language to describe the followers of Jesus. What characterized God's exclusive love for the people of Israel has now, through Christ, been extended to those who are not ethnically a part of Israel. As the people of God, they belong to Jesus. And they are completely undeserving of that love and affection.

Verse 10 makes this even more evident: *¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy (1 Peter 2:10)*. The people of God are those who understand the beauty of God's mercy. They are a grace-experiencing people.

This church was planted in 1985. Do you know what was going on in 1985? Ronald Regan had just been sworn into office. Nelson Mandela was still imprisoned in South Africa. Mikhail Gorbachev became the General Secretary for Soviet Union. Coca-Cola changed its formula to New Coke. *Back to the Future* was the highest grossing film. The first Nintendo game console was released. "We are the World" song and concert attempted to raise money for a famine in Ethiopia.

Just think of where you were in 1985. I was in 8th Grade at South Christian School. Two years earlier, I had officially dedicated my life to pastoral ministry. My family was growing spiritually at Berean Baptist Church, and I would have never imagined standing here on this Sunday. Could you have imagined where you are today? Just think of all that God has brought you through. Think of all the joys, the sorrows, the experiences, and the lessons. Think of all the grace that God has bestowed upon us. What mercy we have received! The people of God are marked by the experience of God's grace.

4. Gospel-proclaiming

The fourth characteristic is found in verse 9b. Peter adds this purpose statement that we dare not miss. He tucks it into the middle of some wonderful material on God's grace, and it is worth being reminded that our purpose is not just to receive grace, but it is also to proclaim the gospel.

Why has God been so gracious? Why does He call us a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession? Here's why:

... that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. (1 Peter 2:9b)

Don't miss this! The aim of experiencing grace is the proclamation of the gospel. The purpose of grace being poured out on a people is not so that they can glory in themselves, but so that they can glory in the excellency of God. Grace was meant to be declared! It was meant to be shared.

Tonight at our Fresh Encounter Service, you will be blessed by hearing the testimonies of thirty-five people who are going to be baptized. Over and over we are going to hear about God's mercy, His kindness, His rescuing grace, and His pursuit of undeserving people. Baptism is the first official moment where you "go public" with your faith. And for the rest of your time on earth, you are called to proclaim the gospel.

The mission and purpose of this church is to make the gospel known. Whether at North Indy, Fishers, Brookside or the Caspian, Southeast Asia, Nepal, or India, our mission is to proclaim the glory of God. Some of you came to faith directly because of this church's witness in the community or because of someone in this church. We never know how God is going to use the proclamation of His word.

For example, I received this encouraging email from a man in Michigan:

I have been witnessing to a coworker at my job for the past 2 years. I have been using your podcasts on the series in Romans lately. He has been listening to your sermons at least 2-3 times, sometimes four times each. Recently I confronted him and asked him if he understood Grace, and he said yes. I then asked him what was keeping him from receiving Jesus Christ as his personal Savior. He then told me that a few days earlier, when he was talking with his wife, they had both prayed and received Jesus Christ as their personal Savior. I want to thank you, and I will continue to use your ministry of podcasts. I listen to them too and have been growing in my own faith as a result of them too.

God's grace is worthy of proclaiming.

5. Obedience-living

The final characteristic is one that we all need to personally consider, especially in light of our rapidly changing culture. I'm sure that the charter members could hardly have imagined that kind of moral and societal issues that the church is facing today. And it does not look like it is going to get any better. The American Evangelical Church is fast becoming an exile in its own culture.

1 Peter 2:11-12 speaks directly to this issue:

¹¹ Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. ¹² Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation. 1 Peter 2:11-12

Their status as the people of God, and their receiving all of the amazing grace of God, should serve as a motivator for obedience, righteousness, and holiness. The strategy for living in a world in which you are an exile is to pursue godly living.

Peter knows that lurking under the heart of every Christian are passions that are central to the brokenness of the world. Peter says that these passions wage war against your soul. There is an inner battle over what is going to control and rule your life, and the followers of Jesus are called to abstain or to keep away from the passions of the flesh. Being a follower of Jesus means resisting the normal, sinful desires that dominate our culture that desire to take over our lives.

What's more, Peter envisions a "day of visitation" in the future. This could be either a coming judgment of God or a day when a person becomes a Christian through the witness of the church. Peter admonishes this church (and us!) to be godly – keep your conduct honorable – so that the witness of the church is undeniable in the future. Let even your critics be silenced by your righteousness.

This is where this text becomes very personal and extremely applicable. I said at the beginning that it is amazing to me that any group of sinful people could make it thirty years. But let me also say that I am so thankful for godly, righteous, and faithful people who have been a part of this church for years. I'm grateful to God for godly Elders and Pastors who are faithfully following Jesus. We are not a perfect church, but I am thankful for godly men and women who have made this day possible.

That also opens a door for a challenge as we look to the future. Can I just remind you that your godliness matters? Without obedience the gospel is gutted of its power and attractiveness. And as our culture continues to slide further and further, we need people who are going to be godly.

My standard answer when someone asks, "Is there anything I can do for you, Mark?" is this: "Just be godly. Stay out of the discipline committee. Follow Jesus until your very last breath." Do you know why I say that? Because God's grace is too lovely, the cross too costly, and eternity is too real for the followers of Jesus to mess around with disobedience.

Let's be a people marked by obedience.

College Park, my prayer for us is that these five characteristics would continue to mark us as church for the next thirty years. God has been very kind to this church for three decades of ministry. We do not deserve anything that we have received.

May God help us to continue to be a **Word-craving, Christ-exalting, grace-experiencing, gospel-proclaiming, and obedience-living people** for another thirty years – one year at a time.

©College Park Church

Permissions: You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce this material in any format provided that you do not alter the content in any way and do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction. Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: by Mark Vroegop. ©College Park Church - Indianapolis, Indiana. www.yourchurch.com