

Epaphras: He was a Grace-filled Minister

[Colossians 1:1-8; 1:12-13](#)

Unsung Heroes and Heroines of the Faith

Dr. Thomas A. Erickson

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In the hallway between the Chapel and the Lounge you can see portraits of National's pastors dating from 1946: Edward L. R. Elson, Louis Evans, Jr., Bryant Kirkland, and Craig Barnes. The portraits of earlier pastors are being repaired at the moment, and will soon hang in the mezzanine hallway. Never pass those portraits without thanking God for their legacy. You are the heirs of skillful, intelligent, Christ-honoring leadership.

Had there been such a gallery at First Church in Colossae two thousand years ago, you would have seen a picture of Epaphras, because he was their founding pastor. People had a lot of good things to say about Epaphras, and Paul echoes those sentiments: Epaphras worked hard for the believers at Colossae. He wrestled in prayer for them. He was, Paul says, a faithful minister on their behalf. But in my judgment the most impressive thing about Epaphras is this: He taught his congregation truly to comprehend the grace of God. That is, he taught them that their eternal salvation has nothing whatsoever to do with the strength of their faith, or the size of their contributions, or the number of their good deeds. Rather, as Ephesians 2:8-9 puts it, "By grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, lest anyone should boast."

My wife remarked just the other day that she grew up singing "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me." But her church put the emphasis, not on "amazing grace," but on "a wretch like me!" She was reminded every Sunday that she was not good enough for God, and in order to become good enough she must remove all her jewelry, wear no makeup, play no card games, and never, never go to a movie or a dance. It was as if they had rewritten Ephesians 2:8-9 to read, "By your own personal merit you must be saved, through self-denial." But Paul will have none of that. "By grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not the result of works, lest anyone should boast."

What could be more clear? God saves us, we do not save ourselves. Salvation is God's gift, not our achievement, and Epaphras was known in Colossae as a grace-filled minister. He taught people truly to comprehend the grace of God. Yet deep down, many of us don't believe in grace. We remain convinced that we must earn our way to heaven, like the Pharisee in one of Jesus' parables. (Luke 18:9-14) The Pharisee showed up in the sanctuary one day to pray. He was as good as they come: a faithful husband, an honest businessman, a disciplined believer, a generous contributor to the church. So he stands up by the chancel and thanks God that he is more righteous than others, and certainly better man than the publican, whom he spots skulking in the shadows back in the narthex.

And the publican? Well, publicans back then were tax collectors, and most of them were as dishonest as the Mafia. Publicans would squeeze taxes out of their own grandmothers if necessary, and then skim a healthy percentage off the top before passing it along to the Roman authorities. Now this publican has the temerity to show up in church and the audacity to pray, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." Yet Jesus says that this man, not the Pharisee, goes home justified, forgiven, accepted by God. OK, you say, God forgave the publican because he was repentant, and didn't forgive the Pharisee because he was so self-righteous. But now imagine that the publican returns a week later, and nothing has changed. He's still gouging the owner of the local Hallmark store, he's still overcharging the guy who carves olive wood crèches down in Bethlehem, he's still building a million dollar house on the Mount of Olives with his ill-gotten gain. Now here is again, eyes downcast, beating his breast, and mumbling "God be merciful to me a sinner." If you were God, would you forgive him this time? Well, perhaps you would, but what if he came back every week for fifty-two weeks? If I were God I would sooner or later tell the publican, "That's it! You've had all the chances you're going to get. Since you haven't changed I won't forgive."

Which betrays my real conviction that publicans and other sinners like me get saved by our works, and not by God's grace. God may let us off once or twice, but then we must become worthy of God's grace, we must earn God's favor, we must prove that we are acceptable to God by our consistently good behavior. But in fact God doesn't mend his forgiving ways even if the publican doesn't end his dishonest ways.

I hear your objection: surely converts ought to make some moral headway. It's only reasonable to expect some alteration of dishonest business dealings, some correction of lustful tendencies, some improvement in the jokes people tell. One would hope that the indwelling Holy Spirit would help us clean up our act. Yes, but! Even if we are candidates for sainthood, we dare not parade our virtues before God, for then we are no better than the Pharisee who pretended that he no longer needed God's grace. No, the God who asks us to forgive people seventy times seven times (which means an unlimited number of times) does not stop forgiving this publican and (here is the Good News!) God will not stop forgiving you and me. We are saved by God's grace, not by our goodness.

I recently heard a delightful parable that may help you truly to comprehend the grace of God. God and Satan were locked up in a scoreless baseball game. It was the bottom of the ninth, and God's team was coming up to bat. Epaphras was in the stands, and he was worried that the game would go on forever, with neither side scoring the winning run. Faith stepped up to the plate, and Epaphras cheered, because if anyone could handle Satan's wicked curve ball it would be Faith. Sure enough, Faith led off with a solid single to right field. Then Hope singled to center and there were runners on first and second. Love followed with a single to shallow left, and the bases were loaded. Finally Grace strode to the plate to face a very angry Satan. The count quickly went to 3 and 2 and Epaphras was biting his nails. Did Grace have the right stuff? Satan reared back and threw the hardest fast ball he could muster. Grace promptly hit it out of the ballpark for a grand slam, and God's team won. After the game God asked Epaphras what he thought of his lineup. Epaphras admitted that he had a lot of confidence in Faith, Hope, and Love, but he wasn't sure about Grace. And God replied, "Faith, Hope, and Love have a lot on the ball to be sure, but it takes Grace to bring everybody home."

It takes Grace to bring everybody home. Yes, we must have faith in God. Yes, we need to express hope in God's promises and show love for God and for one another. But all the faith, hope, and love in the world will not save us. Only grace can bring us home, and in fact, "By grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God."

I'm told they will add my picture to the wall outside the Chapel (right next to the fire alarm!). And I hope that when you see it you will say, "Tom worked hard while he was here. He prayed for us. He was a faithful interim pastor." I hope even more that you will say, "Tom never ceased to remind us that God accepts us, not because of what we have done for God, but because of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. Like the Colossians under the ministry of Epaphras, we learned truly to comprehend the grace of God." If that can be my legacy to National Church, I will be sincerely grateful, because you will be at rest in the unfailing, unfaltering, unremitting grace of God.