SUNDAY, AUGUST 14, 1983

Book 12

"GOD'S PLEASURE"

LUKE 12:32-34

TEXT: LUKE 12:32 -- "FEAR NOT, LITTLE FLOCK, FOR IT IS GOD'S GOOD PLEASURE TO GIVE YOU THE KINGDOM."

"FEAR NOT!" "DO NOT BE AFRAID!" IT'S AMAZING HOW FREQUENTLY THESE WORDS ARE SPOKEN BY JESUS, NOT ONLY TO HIS DISCIPLES, BUT TO OTHER PEOPLE WITH WHOM HE CAME IN CONTACT. IN THE OLD TESTAMENT, TOO, THESE WORDS ARE HEARD TIME AFTER TIME, AND WHEN THEY ARE QUOTED, GOD IS THE SOURCE.

WHAT IS IT THAT THE DISCIPLES WERE SO AFRAID OF?

WHAT IS IT THAT WE ARE SO AFRAID OF? WE HAVE ALL KINDS OF FEARS. SOME ARE HELPFUL AND PROTECT US, AND OTHERS ARE DAMAGING.

SOMETIMES OUR FEARS MOUNT UP OVER TRIVIA, AND AT OTHER TIMES OUR FEARS ARE GROUNDED IN TERRIFYING REALITIES THAT PARALYZE OUR MIND, BODY, AND SPIRIT.

IN THE CASE OF THE DISCIPLES IN THIS STORY, I THINK THEIR MAIN FEAR WAS FEAR OF THE FUTURE. THEY COULD SEE THE OPPOSITION TO JESUS WAS GROWING, ESPECIALLY AMONG THE

RELIGIOUS LEADERS. THEY HAD GIVEN UP MUCH TO BECOME DISCIPLES. WHAT ABOUT THE FUTURE? THEIRS WAS A FEAR OF THE UNKNOWN.

FURTHERMORE, I'M SURE THAT THEIR FEAR OF THE UNKNOWN, THEIR FEAR OF THE FUTURE, WAS LINKED TO A MORE BASIC FEAR -- THE FEAR THAT GOD WOULD NOT CONTINUE TO LOVE AND CARE FOR THEM. IT'S A FEAR MANY OF US HAVE KNOWN.

IN FACT, IT IS ONE OF THE MOST ANCIENT AND PERSISTENT FEARS OF ALL. IT IS TIED TO THE BELIEF THAT WE MUST SOMEHOW EARN GOD'S LOVE AND FAVOR. IT IS THE MOST PERSISTENT HERESY IN THE HISTORY OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH, AND ITS ROOTS ARE TO BE FOUND WITHIN THE HISTORY OF THE JEWISH RELIGION, AS WELL. UNFORTUNATELY, THIS HERESY THAT GOD'S LOVE HAS TO BE EARNED IS ALIVE AND FLOURISHES TODAY.

MANY TIMES WITHIN THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH THIS FALSE DOCTRINE, WHICH CAUSES THE WRONG KIND OF FEAR, IS STATED IN ANOTHER WAY BY IMPLYING THAT GOD LOVES SOME PEOPLE MORE THAN OTHERS BECAUSE THEY ARE MORE RELIGIOUS THAN THE REST OF US. THIS IS THE MESSAGE OF THE SELF-RIGHTEOUS.

IT'S NOT TOO DIFFICULT TO UNDERSTAND WHY THIS MISTAKEN BELIEF HAS BEEN AND STILL IS SO PERSISTENT. IF YOU BELIEVE THAT BY

PERFORMING CERTAIN RELIGIOUS DUTIES OR BY BELONGING TO THE RIGHT CHURCH YOU CAN GAIN GOD'S ACCEPTANCE AND FAVOR, THEN YOU CAN MAKE YOURSELF BETTER THAN OTHERS.

AND, OF COURSE, THE CHURCHES WHICH PROMOTE THIS HERESY USE IT TO GAIN POWER FOR THEMSELVES. IF ONE CAN GAIN GOD'S FAVOR AND LOVE THROUGH PERFORMING CERTAIN RELIGIOUS DUTIES AND FOLLOWING CERTAIN RULES, AND IF THE CHURCH IS THE INSTITUTION WHICH DEFINES AND PROSCRIBES AND INTERPRETS THOSE DUTIES AND REQUIREMENTS, THEN THE CHURCH HAS A MONOPOLY ON SALVATION.

BUT IF ALL PEOPLE HAVE DIRECT ACCESS TO GOD AS JESUS TAUGHT, AND IF GOD LOVES AND ACCEPTS ALL PEOPLE, NO MATTER WHO THEY ARE OR WHAT CHURCH THEY ATTEND OR WHAT KINDS OF SINS THEY HAVE COMMITTED OR WHAT MISTAKES THEY HAVE MADE, THAT'S A DIFFERENT KIND OF GOD. THEN ALL OF US ARE EQUAL IN GOD'S EYES BECAUSE GOD LOVES US ALL EQUALLY. SO THE PERSON IN PRISON IS LOVED BY GOD AS MUCH AS THE MOST RESPECTED CITIZEN IN TOWN.

THEN, TOO, THE CHURCH IS IN REALITY A DIFFERENT KIND OF INSTITUTION. IT IS NOT A BUSINESS WITH A MONOPOLY ON SALVATION, OR GETTING PEOPLE TO HEAVEN OR CONDEMNING THEM TO HELL, OR WITH A MONOPOLY ON GOD'S LOVE. RATHER, THE CHURCH IS A COMMUNITY OF PEOPLE WHO HAVE ACCEPTED GOD'S LOVE,

PEOPLE WHO ARE OPEN TO GOD'S POWER AND WANT TO TELL OTHERS AND INCLUDE OTHERS IN THIS COMMUNITY OF JOY AND FORGIVENESS. THEN THE CHURCH BECOMES INCLUSIVE, RATHER THAN EXCLUSIVE.

HERE IS A DIFFERENT CONCEPT OF GOD. JESUS REVEALED A GOD WHO MAKES THE SUN TO RISE ON THE EVIL AND THE GOOD AND SENDS RAIN ON THE JUST AND THE UNJUST. THERE IS NO PLACE WHERE GOD IS NOT. GOD'S LOVE CONTINUALLY SURROUNDS US AND DWELLS WITHIN US, WHETHER WE KNOW IT OR NOT.

THUS JESUS SAID TO THE DISCIPLES IN OUR SCRIPTURE TEXT FOR TODAY, "FEAR NOT, LITTLE FLOCK, FOR IT IS GOD'S GOOD PLEASURE TO GIVE YOU THE KINGDOM." IT IS GOD'S GOOD PLEASURE TO GIVE. WE KNOW WHAT IT MEANS TO YIELD SOMETHING TO ANOTHER PERSON GRUDGINGLY, OR TO GIVE AWAY SOMETHING IN AN ANXIOUS MOOD, WONDERING WHETHER OR NOT WE ARE EVER GOING TO GET IT BACK. BUT THINK OF THESE BEAUTIFUL WORDS WHICH DESCRIBE GOD'S GIVING TO ALL OF US: IT IS GOD'S GOOD PLEASURE TO GIVE YOU THE KINGDOM. GIVING FREELY IS IN THE VERY NATURE OF GOD. GOD CANNOT HELP BUT GIVE AND FORGIVE, FOR GOD IS LOVE.

IT'S ANOTHER WAY OF SAYING THAT IT IS GOD'S PLEASURE TO GIVE EACH ONE OF US ALL THAT IS GOOD AND NECESSARY FOR OUR LIVING. THIS

IS ALSO TO SAY THAT ALL OF CREATION, LIFE ITSELF, IS A GIFT -- A GIFT FROM A LIFE-LOVING, LIFE-SHARING, LIFE-ENJOYING CREATOR.

YOU DO NOT HAVE TO DO ANYTHING TO EARN GOD'S FAVOR. THEREFORE, YOU NEED NOT FEAR. YOU CAN TRUST GOD COMPLETELY. YOU ALREADY HAVE GOD'S LOVE AND ACCEPTANCE AND FORGIVENESS. YOU ONLY HAVE TO ACCEPT IT AND BE OPEN TO IT. YOU ARE BELOVED OF GOD SIMPLY BECAUSE YOU EXIST. IN FACT, YOU CAN BE DESCRIBED AS THE ACTIVITY OF GOD LIVING ITSELF OUT INTO EXPRESSION AS YOU.

ALL OF THIS IS WHAT WE CALL GOD'S GRACE. THE WORD "GRACE" IS A WAY OF DEFINING THE ACTIVITY OF GOD'S LOVE WHICH WORKS FOR US AND IN US CONSTANTLY. SO WE CAN SAY, "BY THE GRACE OF GOD, NO MATTER HOW MUCH YOU KNOW YOU HAVE DONE WRONG, NO MATTER HOW MANY MISTAKES AND FAILURES ARE A PART OF YOUR LIFE, YOU ARE STILL LOVED AND FORGIVEN AND ACCEPTED BY GOD." GOD'S GRACE IS NOT SOMETHING YOU HAVE TO WORK FOR. YOU CAN'T STOP IT OR START IT. IT SIMPLY IS.

SO WE CAN SEE WHY JESUS SAID SO OFTEN, "FEAR NOT! DO NOT BE AFRAID! IT IS GOD'S GOOD PLEASURE TO GIVE YOU THE KINGDOM."

THIS MORNING, THEN, AS YOU RECEIVE THE ELEMENTS OF HOLY COMMUNION, SIMPLY ACCEPT THE FACT THAT YOU ARE ACCEPTED AND LOVED

BY GOD, NO MATTER HOW UNREMARKABLE OR UNWORTHY YOU MIGHT FEEL. GOD INVITES YOU TO THIS BANQUET. YOU ARE ACCEPTED AND LOVED AND FORGIVEN. THIS MEAL TESTIFIES TO GOD'S GRACE.

"FEAR NOT, LITTLE FLOCK, FOR IT IS GOD'S GOOD PLEASURE TO GIVE YOU THE KINGDOM."
AMEN.