

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, July 24, 2011**

**GROWING IN GRACE:**

**2 Peter 1:1-9; 3:18**

**FAMOUS LAST WORDS**

Sometimes, you can tell a lot about a person from that person's last words. Not always, but sometimes.

As you no doubt know, this past week marked the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first Battle of Bull Run, which was the first major skirmish between the Union and Confederate armies in the Civil War. Pity all the re-enactors who took part in the re-enactments of the battle, dressed in their wool military uniforms or other period costumes in the midst of the withering heat we've endured in the last week. Whew!

In its coverage of the anniversary, *The Washington Post* on Thursday reprinted a letter written shortly before the battle by a 32-year-old Union Army Major in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Rhode Island Infantry Regiment named Sullivan Ballou. Anticipating not only the possibility but the likelihood of his death in the looming battle, Ballou wrote this moving farewell letter to his wife back home in Rhode Island from an Army camp here in Washington on July 4, 1861. Seventeen days later, in the clash at Bull Run on July 21, Ballou was mortally wounded, and died a week later. Though it was never sent in the mail, the letter was delivered to his widow after his death, along with the rest of his personal effects.

Ken Burns featured Ballou's letter in his magnificent nine-part documentary film series on *The Civil War*. Burns himself has said: "It's the most beautiful letter I've ever read in my life. It's a Grand Canyon of a letter.... It's all about love ... love of country ... love of government ... love of cause ... love of family."

This letter contains the last-known, last-recorded, last-surviving words of Sullivan Ballou before his death. Along with his service to our nation, these last words are his legacy, which lives on 150 years after they were written.

A person's last words may be a source of inspiration, or cause us to shudder. They may fill us with sadness, give us comfort and assurance, inspire patriotic pride, or deepen our faith. A few examples:

Nathan Hale, just before his execution by the British in 1776: "I only regret that I have but one life to give for my country."

Edgar Allan Poe, not known to be a man of religious devotion: "Lord, help my poor soul."

A famous movie actress, when her housekeeper began to pray out loud for her, lashed out at the housekeeper, saying: “Don’t you dare ask God to help me.” Sad to say, those were her last words.

Pope John Paul II, recalling the words of Jesus in John 14: “Let me go to the Father’s house.”

Mother Teresa’s last words: “Jesus, I love you. Jesus, I love you.”

You remember the last words of Todd Beamer nearly ten years ago now, on the morning of September 11, 2001, just before he and several other passengers stormed the cockpit in a desperate but calculated attempt to take down the terrorists who had hijacked United Flight 93: “Are you guys ready? Let’s roll.”

The Gospel of Luke records the last words of an unnamed dying criminal on a cross, who said: “Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.” And Jesus, in almost His last words from the cross, said to him: “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:42-43). What amazing grace.

The very last words of Jesus on the cross recorded in the Gospel of John were simply: “It is finished” (John 19:30). The work of redemption *was* finished. Mission accomplished. Love’s redeeming work was done.

The last words of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew, spoken after His death and resurrection, are what we call the Great Commission, the mandate given to His disciples to go and make disciples of all nations, here, there, and everywhere (Matthew 28:18-20). Which, of course, is still our commission today.

The last words of Jesus recorded by Luke in the Book of Acts before Jesus was taken up into heaven were these words spoken to His disciples: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Like His first followers, we too are called to be His witnesses right here where we are, and to the far corners of the earth.

Paul’s 2<sup>nd</sup> letter to Timothy, written shortly before his death in Rome, contains his last recorded words. Knowing his martyrdom was imminent, Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 4: “The time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day – and not only to me, but to all who have longed for His appearing” (4:6-8). Dear friends, when the time comes for our departure from this world, may each of us, by the power of God’s grace, be able to say the same.

### **THE LAST WORDS OF PETER**

The last recorded words of Peter, which we read in 2 Peter 3:18, consist of an exhortation to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,” and a doxology of praise to Him. I like what Chuck Swindoll has written about this: “This final doxology to

His Savior stands as a profound testimony from a man who had once fallen from his own steadfastness, only to be restored to a place of spiritual strength (and service)... Peter grew from a headstrong Galilean to a humble apostle, from a simple fisherman to a legendary fisher of men” (*Insights on 2 Peter*, p. 330). By His amazing grace, through the power of the Holy Spirit, God did a truly remarkable work in the life of Peter, prompting Peter to leave us with this reverberating note of praise to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ: “To Him be the glory, both now and forever [lit., to the day of eternity]. Amen.”

### **IT’S ALL ABOUT JESUS!**

You see, Peter understood what our kids were taught at our SonSurf Beach Bash VBS this past week, which is: “Dude, it’s all about Jesus!” It’s *all* about Jesus. Life is about Jesus, and real life is found in Him. It is about knowing Jesus, trusting Jesus, following Jesus, loving Jesus (and loving others with the love of Jesus), obeying Jesus, serving Jesus (by serving others in His name), and telling others about Jesus. It’s all about Jesus. And it is all for His glory. He is the One to whom all glory and honor and praise belong. It is like it says in Psalm 115:1:

Not to us, O LORD, not to us  
But to Your name be the glory,  
Because of Your love and faithfulness.

### **IT’S ALL ABOUT GRACE**

It is not *to* us. It is not *for* us. It is not *about* us. It is all about Jesus. And, dear friends, it is all about grace, which comes free of charge to people who do not deserve it, and never will. It is all about grace, the free and unmerited favor, love, and generosity which God showers upon us. From beginning to end, what we often refer to as “the Christian life” is lived by grace. Jerry Bridges makes this point in his book *Transforming Grace*: “We are brought into God’s kingdom by grace; we are sanctified [made holy] by grace; we are motivated to obedience by grace; we are called to serve and enabled to serve by grace; we receive strength to endure trials by grace; and finally, we are glorified by grace. The entire Christian life is lived under the reign of God’s grace” (p. 21).

So, it is by grace that we are saved (Ephesians 2:5, 8). It is by grace alone, apart from any merit or contribution on our part. As I heard a preacher say not too long ago, the only thing you and I contribute to our salvation is our sin. The only thing we bring to it is our need – our need of forgiveness, our need of cleansing from our sin, our need of justification and sanctification, our need of grace, our need of the Savior, our need of the presence and power and leadership of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Nothing in our hands we bring. Nothing but our sin and our need for God in His grace to do in us and for us what we are totally unable to do ourselves. It is by grace and grace alone that we are saved.

And it is by grace that we live. The grace of salvation, says Bridges (p. 89), is the same grace by which we live as followers of Christ. It is, as Paul declares in Romans 5:2, “the grace in which we now stand.” We breathe the air of grace. We drink the water of grace. Grace-land

is where we live. It is our new home address. It is by grace that we grow in the things of God. It is by grace that we grow in our knowledge and understanding of who Jesus is and the incomparable amazingness of His saving love. It is by grace that we grow to know Jesus better. It is by grace that we grow to become more and more like Jesus in our character and attitudes, in the way we think and act and speak and love. So, the more we grow in grace, as Paul Cedar says, the more like Jesus we will become, the more of His grace we will experience, and the more His grace will flow from our lives to others. And, I would add, the more God will be glorified in us. This is what I want in my life. I hope it is what you want in your life. There is no question in my mind that it is what God wants in the life of each one of us.

If it were not the case, Peter would not have said what he says here in 3:18 the way he says it. He would not have said it as a command. “Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” is not a suggestion. It is not a request. It is an imperative, which means it is something we are to do. It involves initiative on our part. It calls for action in response to the grace we have received and in which we now live. From beginning to end, salvation is by grace alone through faith alone. But the process of sanctification, through which we grow to become more like Jesus and to reflect His character, is a gracious work of God in which we cooperate with the Spirit of God at work in us. We don’t just sit back and passively wait for God to make us spiritually mature. It doesn’t work that way. Having saved us by His grace, God calls us to grow in His grace, and to grow in our knowledge of Him, too.

### **GROWING IN GRACE**

How do we grow in grace? That is the million dollar question! (Or one of the million dollar questions, anyway ☺.) In coming weeks, when I’m back from vacation, I want us to explore together specific ways to grow in grace, specific means or measures God has given to us by which we can grow in our understanding and experience of His grace, and, just as important, in being instruments of His grace in the lives of others. I hope you will make every effort to hear these messages and to work them into your life, not because I am such a wonderful preacher (I’m not), nor because I have such brilliant insights (I don’t – but God does). Rather, I hope you will stick with me as we continue to learn about the amazingness of God’s grace because we all need to grow in grace. None of us has arrived at a place in life where we have no more growing in grace to do. In addition, we can help each other to grow in grace. We can encourage one another to grow in grace. We can pray with and for one another. We can come alongside one another and walk with one another on the road of grace-filled Christian living. We can preach grace to one another and show grace to one another and spur one another on to a life of grace-filled love and good deeds. The more we are in this together as a church family, the more we devote ourselves together to grow in grace, the greater the impact it is likely to have in our lives individually *and* in the effectiveness and attractiveness of our witness to people outside the church, who need grace as desperately as we do. So, let’s pursue this together.

How, then, do we grow in grace? One thing is for sure: We don’t do it by ourselves. We don’t do it on our own. We don’t do it by simply trying really, really hard. Bridges says that God in His grace does not first rescue us from the penalty of our sins, furnish us with some

new spiritual abilities, and then leave us on our own to grow in spiritual maturity. He does not bring us into His kingdom by grace, and then leave us on our own to grow (*Transforming Grace*, pp. 21, 135). No way! In Philippians 1:6, Paul expressed his confidence that God will finish the gracious work He has begun in our lives. What *He* has started in us, *He* will bring to completion.

If you think it is all up to you, if you think it depends on living by some legalistic list of rules, you are doomed to failure and frustration. Legalism is not the answer, and never will be. That is not God's way. If you substitute duty, demand, and unrelenting obligation for a loving and grateful response to God's grace, you will never know how liberating and amazing grace really is.

Does it require something of us to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ? Of course. Go back to the beginning of 2 Peter, where, starting in verse 5 of chapter 1, Peter urges his readers to "make every effort" to build on their faith by cultivating such qualities as:

- goodness or moral excellence
- knowledge of God and His will
- self-control, which is really about bringing every aspect of life under the Holy Spirit's control
- perseverance
- godliness, which involves a right heart attitude toward God and a right attitude toward others
- brotherly affection (Greek, *philadelphia*)
- *agape* love, which is the kind of love God has shown us in Jesus, and the kind of love with which we are to love one another.

Notice that Peter begins with faith, without which, the Bible says, it is impossible to please God (Hebrews 11:6). And he ends with love, which is to be the distinguishing mark of our lives as followers of Christ (John 13:35).

Yes, we are to "make every effort" to develop these virtues or graces. Yes, we are to give ourselves to it wholeheartedly. Not so that by our efforts we may win God's approval and favor (which can't be done). Not to somehow earn God's grace (which can't be done either). To the contrary, it is because we have already received God's grace. It is because we are already recipients of His undeserved favor. We do it not in order to get something from God, but because, as Peter says in verses 3 and 4, God in His grace has already given us everything we need – *everything* – to live a godly, grace-filled life. It is all by His grace. The "growing in grace" is our glad and grateful response to the grace God has lavished on us in His love.

### **THE LAST WORD**

Dear friends, remember Sullivan Ballou and the last words he wrote to his wife before he gave his last full measure of devotion on the battlefield. Do not forget the devotion of men like Nathan Hale and Todd Beamer. Remember the love and faith expressed in the last words

of Mother Teresa and Pope John II. Never ever forget the redeeming love of Jesus, His precious promises and great commission to us.

And do not forget the last words of Peter. Instead, take hold of both his exhortation and his doxology, and, with unceasing gratitude to God, let us make every effort in the power of the Holy Spirit to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory now and forever. It's all His. It all belongs to Him. It's all for Him. It's all about Him. And it always will be.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.