

## INTRODUCTION

People have always been fascinated with rags to riches stories. One of my favorites is the fascinating story of Colonel Harlan Sanders. Harlan Sanders quit school after the seventh grade and worked in a series of odd jobs until he was in his forties. That’s when he opened a gas station near Corbin, Kentucky. He had always loved cooking, so he perfected a special batter using 11 herbs and spices, and cooked his chicken in a pressure cooker. For years he sold his chicken to people who stopped to buy gas. Soon, his chicken became more profitable than gasoline. When the Interstate bypassed Corbin, Colonel Sanders’ business suffered, and he was forced to auction off his gas station property. After paying his bills, he was broke and at age 65 was reduced to living on his Social Security check of \$105 a month. But he believed his chicken was something special, so he went on the road selling franchises for his fried chicken. His only requirement was that the restaurants pay him a nickel for every piece of chicken they sold—and he sealed the deal with a handshake. Those nickels soon turned into millions of dollars. And as they say in most rags-to-riches stories, the rest is history. Colonel Sanders died in 1980 at age 90. He was buried in his trademark white suit and his plantation necktie. Today, surveys have revealed that Colonel Sanders’ southern gentleman persona is THE most recognizable face in the world because his likeness appears on over 12,000 restaurants in over 80 countries.

Don’t you just love rags to riches stories? This message is a riches to rags ... to riches story. Let’s remember that in this passage, Paul is asking the Christians in Corinth to participate in an offering to help the suffering saints in Jerusalem. He writes about the generous giving of the Christians in Philippi, Berea, and Thessalonica and these were Christians living in poverty themselves. In contrast, Corinth was a thriving, economically healthy city where the believers were wealthier. But as Paul makes his appeal, he goes beyond the grace-full example of the Macedonian Christians and appeals to a much greater example of grace-full giving—the grace of Jesus Himself!

2 Corinthians 8:7-9. “But just as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us—see that you also excel in this grace of giving. I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others. For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.”

I know I’m given to superlatives, but 2 Corinthians 8:9 is really one of the most powerful verses in the entire Bible. The message of the entire New Testament is contained in a single sentence. People often complain that the Bible is too deep and mysterious to understand, but I can’t help but marvel at the profound simplicity of God’s Word. This verse is so rich with meaning, but in the English version it contains only 31 words—all but four are single syllable.

Every part of the verse is important. He begins by making a powerful assumption, “You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.” The word “know” doesn’t mean to have head knowledge of something, it means to “know intimately; to experience.” Do you really *know* the grace of Jesus? Like many of you, I’ve been experiencing a grace awakening in the past few years. I’ve always

heard about grace, but for years I almost took it for granted and did not realize what the Bible calls the "riches of God's grace."

Now, I love talking about grace. Have you heard the funny story about the guy who died and stood before the gates of heaven and asked the guard angel, "Hey, how can I get in this place?" The angel said, "You need 1,000 points to get in, so tell me about your life." The man said, "Well, I always paid my bills and I never cheated on my taxes." The angel consulted his chart and said, "Umm, let's see, that's worth 1/100th of a point." The man said, "Well, I attended church every Sunday, I read the Bible through seven times in my life, and I tithed my income to the Lord's work." The angel said, "Okay, let's see, that's worth another 1/100th of a point. What else?" The man said, "Well, I gave up my job and went to serve as a missionary in a foreign land where I lived in poverty until I died." The angel said, "Great! That's another 1/100th of a point." By now, the man was getting frustrated. He said, "At this rate, it'll take the grace of God to get me into heaven." The angel said, "That's worth 1,000 points." One of my favorite books on grace is Phillip Yancey's volume entitled *What's So Amazing about Grace?* Phillip grew up in the church, but there was a time when he grew disenchanted with the church. In his book he wrote, "As I look back on my own pilgrimage, marked by wanderings, detours, and dead ends, I see now that what pulled me along was my search for grace. I rejected the church for a time because I found so little grace there. I returned because I found grace nowhere else." (*What's So Amazing about Grace?* p. 18)

Do you know the grace of Jesus? As we talk consider grace, I'd like to share with you about both the cost of grace as well as the value of grace.

## **1. THE COST OF GRACE: Jesus surrendered Heaven's riches for me**

"though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor..." We often say that grace is free, and it is for us. Grace is free, but it isn't cheap. Grace comes at a high price, but fortunately, for us, Jesus willingly paid it all. In Dietrich Bonhoeffer's wonderful book called *The Cost of Discipleship*, he writes about the difference between costly grace and cheap grace. He writes, "Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance. Grace is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son. And what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us." (p. 47) In order to understand the high cost of grace, we must understand the price the Lord Jesus Christ was willing to pay. Consider:

### **(1) HIS RICHES: Before Bethlehem, Jesus enjoyed all the benefits of being God**

If Jesus was rich, we have to ask, "When was He rich?" Because it's obvious Jesus never experienced any kind of worldly wealth during the 33 years He walked on this planet. There is a vibrant debate today about "When does life begin?" Does it begin at conception, or when the child in the womb is viable? I'm not going to address that issue at this time, but I want to use it as a springboard to ask the question, "When did the life of Jesus begin?" If you think it was in Mary's womb, or in the manger at Bethlehem, you're wrong. *Jesus has always existed*; He is ageless and timeless because He is God. During His earthly ministry Jesus clearly made claims

that point to His pre-existence before the Incarnation. He said, "Abraham saw my day, and was glad." (John 8:56); again He claimed, "Before Abraham was, I am." (John 8:58)

On the night before He was crucified, Jesus prayed, "Father ... I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began." (John 17:4-5) That's when He was rich. But another question to consider is, "How rich was He?" What constituted His wealth? Simply stated, as God, Jesus possessed everything in heaven and on earth. The Bible says, "For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him." (Colossians 1:16)

His was the wealth of unlimited glory, unrestrained power, and unending authority. He had only to speak to bring light out of darkness. He had only to flick His omnipotent finger to hurl stars and constellations into their places. He was rich beyond the ability of our puny minds to even imagine. But remember I told you this was a riches to rags story...the verse doesn't stop with His riches, it goes on to speak of His:

## **(2) HIS RAGS: Jesus put on the garment of humanity so that He could die for me**

Although He enjoyed the riches of heaven, Jesus chose to step down off His throne and become a human being. There's an old Andre Crouch song that says, "He left His mighty throne in glory; to bring to us redemption's story." Can you imagine what it must have been like to leave the perfection of heaven to come down to a sinful place like earth?

This riches to rags process is described this way, "Jesus, who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing...being made in human likeness...and being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!" (Philippians 2:6-8)

Not only did Jesus experience the poverty of humanity after being God, He literally lived in poverty for His 33 years on earth. He was born in a stable and his first bed was a feed trough. His parents were so poor that the when He was dedicated at the Temple, they could only offer two doves, which was the sacrifice of the poorest people. Jesus said, "Foxes have holes and birds have nests but the Son of Man has no place to lay His head." (Matthew 8:20) Jesus was so poor that when he wanted to prove a point about paying taxes He had to ask to borrow a coin. When it came time for Jesus to pay His taxes, He had to send Peter to catch a fish that contained a coin. He used a borrowed burro to enter Jerusalem, and when He died, He was buried in a borrowed tomb, which was fine to borrow, because it wasn't going to use it very long.

Mark Twain was an important American writer during the last part of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, and one of his most popular novels was *The Prince and the Pauper*. It's a story set in London about two boys born on the same day. One boy was Tom Canty, who lived in the slums and was forced to beg for food and wear tattered rags. The other boy was Edward Tudor, the Prince of Wales. One day Edward sees Tom at the gate and invites him in to eat. As they talk Tom relates the kind of activities he enjoys such as running, fighting, and swimming in the Thames. Prince Edward had lived such a sheltered life that he longed to enjoy the same kinds of activities. They decided to

switch clothes and roles for a short time, but, alas, once the Prince gets outside the gates, he can't get back in because no one believes he is the Prince. They treat the prince as a pauper, and within the place Tom Canty, the pauper, is treated as a prince. But when Tom Canty tries to explain he is but a pauper nobody believes him and thinks the prince is only temporarily insane.

The plot describes the humorous but miserable plight of Edward, the real prince, who was jeered and bullied constantly. But through all of his misery, Edward behaved like the prince he truly was. Eventually, toward the end of the story Edward was restored to his rightful place as king. And from his position of restored authority, he elevated Tom to a position of nobility. As King, Edward ruled with wisdom and benevolence because his time of temporary poverty had given him a compassionate understanding of his subjects. This time of poverty helped him rule with a kindness that he would have never have known if he had remained in the palace.

I can't help but notice the powerful parallels between Prince Edward and the Lord Jesus. Their stories were both riches to rags to riches. The Lord Jesus stepped off His throne in heaven to live among us. When He made claims He was the Son of God, He also endured insults and ridicule from men. But through all the suffering He endured at the hands of evil men, Jesus always acted like the Prince of Peace He really was. And finally, those people took Him and stripped Him of his meager clothing and beat Him and nailed Him to a cross. And after He endured the agony of the cross, God raised Him and restored Him to His place at the right hand of God the Father. And from His position on the throne of grace, Jesus rules and reigns as One who understands the poverty of our human condition.

That brings us to the question, "Why?" Why would Jesus leave the riches of heaven to take on the garments of humanity? Well, God can't die, so Jesus needed a human body so He could die for us. To me, the "why question" is answered by these three simple words in 2 Corinthians 8:9, "for your sakes." In other words, He did it for me and for you.

Another song describes it this way: "Oh, the love that drew salvation's plan; Oh, the grace that brought it down to man; Oh, the mighty gulf that God did span; At Calvary." But beyond the high cost of grace, there is also:

## **2. THE VALUE OF GRACE: Jesus offers Heaven's riches to me**

Oscar Wilde once wrote that "a cynic is someone who knows the cost of everything but the value of nothing." Do you understand the value of grace? The reason Jesus went from riches to rags is, "... so that you through his poverty might become rich." That is why this message is a riches to rags...to RICHES story. If the story of Jesus is riches-to-rag, our story is just the opposite—from rags to riches.

### **(1) MY RAGS: Compared to God's holiness, my best behavior is like dirty rags**

We sometimes think our worst behavior is like filthy rags, but the Bible teaches that compared to God, even our good deeds are like rags. "Is there any hope for us? Can we be saved? We're all sin-infected, sin-contaminated. Our best efforts are grease-stained rags." (Isaiah 64:6 *The Message*)

How many of you grew up poor, but you didn't really know it until after you were grown? A few years ago, when we were driving to Florida, we took a detour through Florida, and when I drove by the house I grew up in I thought, "Wow, that's a tiny house." Being poor is a relative term anyway. I can remember my mother would worry about money more than my dad. She would sometimes complain about how much money we'd spend on candy and cokes. She'd say, "If you keep spending like that, we'll end up in the poor house." Now, I never actually ever saw the "poor house" and I never knew anyone who actually went to the "poor house" but I knew that there must have been people poorer than we were if they had to live in a poor house. But spiritually and morally, without Jesus, we're all in the poor house. Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit." That means before we can experience God's grace, we must admit we are spiritually bankrupt without God. No matter who you are, everyone's story begins with a story of rags.

## **(2) MY RICHES: In Christ, I have access to all the riches of His grace!**

The Bible says, "In him we have redemption ... according to the riches of God's grace." (Ephesians 1:7) I have to insert a warning at this point. When the Bible says Jesus became poor for our sakes so we might become rich, it's not talking about material wealth. There are some radio and television preachers who proclaim a health, wealth, and prosperity gospel. They say something like, "You see, here in 2 Corinthians 8:9 it says God wants you to be rich. So if you'll just send me a seed gift of \$1,000, God is going to make you rich." And these guys are laughing all the way to the bank. There's a word for that kind of teaching: Garbage. It is not gospel, it is garbage.

Yes, we're rich: Rich in God's grace. Here's my definition of being rich: "Having all your needs met and having the capacity to enjoy life." By that simple definition, most of us are rich indeed.

Americans are obsessed with the lifestyles of the rich and famous. For the past 13 years, Microsoft Founder, Bill Gates topped *Forbes Magazine's* list of the wealthiest people in the world. But this past March, investor Warren Buffett surpassed Gates as the richest man in the world, with a net worth of about \$62 billion and change. Mr. Buffet lives simply and gives away a lot of his money to philanthropic causes. He lives in the same house in Omaha he bought in 1958 for \$31,000. (Of course, that same house is worth \$700,000 now). He is considered to be the smartest investor in America. If you had invested \$1,000 in Berkshire Hathaway shares when he bought the company in 1965, and then not invested another penny, your original \$1,000 investment would now be worth over \$2.2 million. But his stock portfolio is nothing fancy. Warren Buffet says that he likes buying stock in things like Snickers candy bars, because people have always eaten Snickers and they will be eating Snickers next year. So, his company owns stocks like Coca-Cola, American Express, and Wal-Mart.

## **My "Grace Portfolio"**

But as a follower of Jesus Christ you and I are far richer than even Warren Buffett. Because in 10,000 years Coca-Cola stock is going to be worthless, but grace is going to be even more valuable! I've decided to invest in grace. My "grace portfolio" contains riches that all the money

that Bill Gates and Warren Buffett could never purchase. This isn't everything in my grace portfolio; this is just some of the highlights:

**(1) A relationship that can never be broken!**

The Bible says, "Behold what manner of love the Father has given unto us that we should be called the sons of God." (1 John 3:1) I have the joy of not just knowing about God, I can know Him personally. God is my Father, and I am His child, and nothing in heaven and earth can ever separate me from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus my Lord. I also have

**(2) A life that will never end!**

Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies." (John 11:25) Long after the sun has stopped shining and the stars have been plucked from their places in the sky, I will continue to live on with my Savior.

**(3) A peace that can never be comprehended!**

The Bible says, "And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:7) When all the world around me is falling apart, I have the inner tranquility and serenity that comes from knowing the Prince of Peace lives in my heart! In addition to these riches, I also have

**(4) A home that will never be destroyed**

Jesus said, "In my Father's house there are many rooms...I am going there to prepare a place for you." (John 14:2) We spend all our lives moving in and out of temporary residences. But there is waiting for us a home in the heavens, not made by human hands, but fashioned and prepared for us by Jesus. When we die, we know we shall be absent from the body but at home with the Lord. We are rich indeed!

**CONCLUSION**

If you are a follower of Jesus, your life is a rags to riches story. The first church I served out of seminary was Tallaweka Baptist Church in Tallassee, Alabama. That's a little town between Montgomery and Auburn. I didn't know much back then, but I knew I needed to pray, so I asked a couple of guys to pray with me on Sunday mornings before church. So every Sunday morning, Reid Hornsby, Red Yates, and I would kneel in the little sanctuary and pray for about an hour before folks arrived for Sunday School. We had some powerful prayer meetings. We would walk up and down the empty pews asking God to bless the people that would be seated in those pews. (Just as I have done many times in this building.) Red Yates was a giant of a man who was about 6'8" and probably was a couple of burritos over 300 pounds. He was an auto mechanic and he had fingers that would forever carry the grease stains Lava Soap could never remove. But Red would get to praying and get to crying at the same time, and it was really something to hear him pray. One day I was visiting him in his shop and he said, "Preacher have you ever heard my rags to riches story?" I looked around the rundown shop and wondered where the evidence of his

riches was, but I said, "No, tell me about it." Red said, "I used to drink something terrible. I wasn't an alcoholic, I was a drunk. I used to keep a liquor bottle hidden under a pile of rags on my tool chest. Several times an hour I would go over to the rags and have a drink. But one day, Jesus saved me and cured me of my craving for whiskey. I threw away the bottle, and replaced it with a Bible." We walked over to the pile of rags and, sure enough, he pulled out his Bible. With tears in his eyes, he said, "And that's my rags to riches story. From the rags of sin where I hid my bottle to the riches of God's grace I find in His Book."

So, be encouraged today that God loves you so much that He would allow you to be a part of redemption's story. It's a riches to rags story. Jesus laid aside his riches for the rags of humanity. It's also a rags to riches story, because of Jesus we can experience the riches of his grace. You're rich! So go out and share your riches with others!

## OUTLINE

### 1. THE COST OF GRACE: Jesus surrendered Heaven's riches for me

"though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor..."

#### (1) HIS RICHES: Before Bethlehem, Jesus enjoyed all the benefits of being God

"Father ... I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began." *John 17:4-5*

#### (2) HIS RAGS: Jesus put on the garment of humanity so that He could die for me

"Jesus, who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing...being made in human likeness...and being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!" *Philippians 2:6-8*

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"... so that you through his poverty might become rich."

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"Is there any hope for us? Can we be saved? We're all sin-infected, sin-contaminated. Our best efforts are grease-stained rags." *Isaiah 64:6 The Message*

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The Bible says, "In him we have redemption ... according to the riches of God's grace." *Ephesians 1:7*

My "Grace Portfolio" includes:

- (1) A relationship that can never be broken!
- (2) A life that will never end!
- (3) A peace that can never be comprehended!
- (4) A home that will never be destroyed





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To put it in Texas terms, “You’re mighty welcome to use any and all of my ingredients; just make your own chili!”

For the Joy...  
Pastor David Dykes