

I invite you to open your Bibles to this morning's scripture text, which can be found in the book of John 1:14-18. This can be found on page 750 in your pew Bibles.

Our Fathers Word

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

John testifies concerning him. He cries out, saying, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'" From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known.

The Word of God for the people of God

John cries out, saying, "... From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another... grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

These days, the world is full of people arguing over the truth. People argue about "truth" on social media. In politics, our nation is divided over what is "true." Sadly, international terrorists are willing to kill, in order to promote their "truths."

But the opening of John's gospel reminds us of what is special about Jesus. He came from the Father, "full of grace and truth." In Jesus Christ, grace and truth are joined. His life and his message show the beauty and the power of grace and truth, walking hand-in-hand. From Jesus, we can learn something about how to walk and speak in the world today, through grace and truth.

This morning, in the final week of our four-week series on God's grace, we should learn from Jesus about the power of a message spoken in grace, peace, and truth. Some people emphasize grace. Others emphasize truth. But Jesus showed us that apart from grace, we cannot really speak the truth, and apart from the truth, we are not really speaking words of grace. The peace of God comes when grace and truth are joined. And in Jesus, we see our perfect example.

John's gospel continues with words of grace. "From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace" (John 1:16 NRSV). The NIV substitutes "one blessing after another" for "grace upon grace." But why argue over translation?

I believe John was searching for a way to communicate that God's grace is multi-layered. If we walk with him 50 years, we will discover again and again the God who beckons us (in C.S. Lewis' happy phrase) to come "farther up and farther in."

But take note: if we are determined to think of grace as merely a ticket to heaven, there is no farther up and farther in, either in this life or the next. Why come to the shores of God's grace only to dip our toes in the ocean?

One sure indicator of a religiously-closed mind is the firm conviction that we have this "Jesus thing" figured out. The religiously-closed mind is only interested in exporting its brand of spirituality. We need to discover that it's impossible to drink in God's grace if we do nothing but tell others how to live.

James 4:6 reminds us, "But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.'" More grace. Greater grace. All the more grace. I believe James was speaking from experience, not theory. I think he discovered the multi-layered grace of God as he learned to humble himself again and again. When we humble ourselves, we position ourselves for greater grace. And when we humble ourselves, we create an atmosphere of peace that allows us to speak the truth, filled with grace.

Did you know that the apostle Paul opened each one of his letters with the very same greeting? Thirteen times he says, "Grace and peace to you." Each one of Paul's letters opens with these words. Thirteen times! Whether Paul was writing to the people of a church, to his "true son in the faith," like Titus, or even when he was writing to discuss the difference between slavery and brotherhood, his blessing was always "grace and peace."

The apostle Paul opened every letter with the words "grace and peace." Some people might think these words are a formality, but these words—even if they were formalities—were breathed out by the Holy Spirit. In the New Testament epistles, even the greetings are part of the inspired scripture!

Why would this man of God greet everyone in this manner? What is so important about grace and peace that Paul feels the need to speak the words immediately? Perhaps we could start here: Paul greeted everyone with “grace and peace” because he understood our ongoing need for both of them. He was writing to believers, yet he wished for them more grace and more peace.

I believe Paul gave each congregation grace and peace because they were his to give. Jesus had instructed the original twelve, “*Whatever house you enter, let your first words be, ‘peace to this house’*” (Luke 10:5). Jesus had in mind something more than words. He observed that a greeting of peace could rest upon the people in that house or return to the one that gave the greeting. This peace Jesus instructed the disciples to give was something real, something tangible, no less tangible than handing someone a loaf of bread. Decades later, Paul, a follower of Jesus, wrote to the churches of God scattered across the Roman world, and his first words are “grace and peace.” Paul possessed grace and peace. Apparently, he had a surplus; he could give it away! In many cases Paul was the founder of the church to which he wrote. He wrote to encourage what was good in these churches and to offer correction for whatever needed help.

How often do we look upon correction and teaching as sources of the peace and grace of God? For those who have given it any thought at all, God’s grace and peace should be prized above almost anything else in our lives. Many of Paul’s churches faced persecution from the outside, and some experienced disagreements on the inside. All of them needed grace and peace. They were so important that Paul presented these gifts up front, just as a guest would before entering a house.

Paul wanted his friends to experience God's grace and peace, and when necessary he brought powerful words of reproof. From our perspective, centuries later, we understand that each letter was the Word of God, then and now. Those people who first heard the words of Paul read aloud in the congregation had a choice: They could listen beyond the mere words of the letter, and in so doing receive the grace and peace offered them. Or, like the householder in Luke 10, they could refuse to receive the grace of God and the peace of God as it appeared to them.

How often does God's grace or peace appear to us in some form we may not recognize? We should ask ourselves: Do we receive the words of loved ones as God's grace in our lives? Do we ever consider that the instruction we receive from those in authority has the potential to bring God's peace?

Paul's words were not only about receiving; his greetings were examples of what we have to give. Have we received some measure of grace? Of peace? Jesus had straightforward instructions to his followers, "freely you've received, therefore freely give" (Matt. 10:8).

If we have received any grace from God, then we have grace to give. Don't worry, you won't run out! Paul's famous words from Romans 8:1, "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus," were not words he claimed exclusively for himself. He was speaking them over those who were listening to his letter. Many believers have quoted this verse on their own behalf in order to fight off guilt and condemnation. Have we ever quoted them on behalf of others?

If God has given us peace in any area of our lives, we can give that peace, as well. One disciple may have learned the secret of contentment with respect to financial matters. Another may have learned how to place everyday fears at the feet of Jesus. Do we ever consider that the peace we've received in our walk with God might be the very thing we can teach others? He blesses us so that we can be a blessing to others.

Our everyday lives are no different than the times in which Paul wrote his letters. Words of grace and peace are not mere formalities, they are ours to give. We have something to give. We can give grace and peace. And the world desperately needs grace and peace.

Grace is abundant and free. It's the deal of a lifetime—no, of eternity! When we understand God's grace for what it is, we all want in. Who could be opposed to grace? And yet there are obstacles to grace. Even more startling, we ourselves are sometimes the opponents to grace. In order to bring grace and peace, we should examine ourselves in two areas.

Our conflicts with grace are like storm fronts in our hearts. I've had a few such storms in my own heart. Here are two examples of obstacles to grace. I wonder if either of these applies to you today.

Bitterness “See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled” (Heb. 12:15). Bitterness is an obstacle to grace. The wounded heart draws inward and avoids even grace itself. I want to be alone, alone in my pain. But this aloneness is an illusion. This passage from Hebrews warns us that, apart from the grace of God, our bitterness and unsettled scores seep into those around us.

My bitterness can defile others. We need grace to endure suffering, even in the everyday slights of life. In our pain, when we refuse grace, we defile many. All the while, we think we are suffering in silence and solitude, unaware that when one member of the body suffers, the whole body is in pain.

Scarcity “Scarcity” is a terrible word, except that I can think of no other. This second opponent of grace is my fear that grace is a zero-sum game, that somehow grace comes prepackaged in fixed amounts. My mind has yet to inform my heart that “his mercy endures forever,” and comes in limitless supply. I am the frightened sparrow who thinks his own small breaths will consume all the air in the sky. I think whatever grace I find, I must keep for myself. Who knows where I’ll find more?

Yet, if the Father clothes the flowers of the field and feeds the birds of the air, how much more will he provide the life-giving freedom of grace? Here is the supply of heaven: when I share the grace I’ve received, I discover the Source of all grace, who gives the Spirit without limit.

Part of the good news is that there is more grace; grace for today and grace for tomorrow. Grace for more than forgiveness. God wants to provide grace in the everyday; grace for growth and grace to sustain. Grace and peace represent more than our need. They are the need of everyone we meet. Do we wish grace and peace on others? Do we have it to give?

Community of Grace Finally, we should understand that there is a place to cultivate grace, peace, and truth. Grace grows in community, but not just any community. This is a difficult message for many people these days because by community I mean church. The same Father God who adopted us into his family intends that we should live together as family.

This is a difficult message because in modern times, the church of Jesus is largely out of joint. We have created a Christendom where we can choose churches the way most people choose restaurants, according to our individual tastes. By most estimates, there are more than 25,000 Christian denominations worldwide. Not individual churches, denominations. How can we grow in grace when we are free to wander from one family to another?

It's an old story. Ask nearly any Christian and you'll hear stories of church drama, church fights, and church splits. But it doesn't have to be like this. Listen carefully to the apostle Peter: *Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen. (1 Peter 4:8–11)*

It's easy to miss the word grace in this passage, but you'll find it right in the middle, which is where grace always belongs. Our words and actions are the practical expressions of God's grace. God wants to show his grace through the love, hospitality, encouragement, and service in the community of faith. We extend grace to others precisely because we've received grace from God. Among our families at home—and among the family of God—we are called to be caretakers of grace. Too often, we have become merely consumers of grace, and it has led to a church for every taste and preference the consumers can imagine.

Not only does grace grow in the community we call church, it grows in the most unlikely places of the church, among our shortcomings, our hypocrisies, and failings. If everyone in the church had his or her act together, what need would there be to extend grace? Look closely at the passage above.

The apostle Peter calls us to use our gifts in service toward one another. We steward the grace we have received by the way we speak and act toward others in the church.

Have you thought about grace as a stewardship? If not, here's a wonderful exercise: try reading the parable of the talents (it's in Matthew 25 and also Luke 19) as a teaching about grace. The master leaves something of great worth with his servants (substitute grace for gold), and when he returns, he looks to see whether we have used his gift wisely.

Best of all is our reward. In Matthew's version of the parable, the master not only praises the good stewards, he extends an invitation, "Well done, good and faithful servant!" says the master. "Come and share your master's happiness!" When we distribute the grace of God, we will receive his praise, and something more, an invitation to enter into his joy. Through grace, joy increases for everyone.

Heavenly Father

Thank you for sending your Son and paving the way for our lives to be set free through Jesus' death on the cross.

Thank you for what this day stands for - the beginning of Holy Week, the start of the journey towards the power of the cross, the victory of the Resurrection, and the rich truth that Jesus truly is our King of Kings.

"Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord..."

We give you praise and honor for your ways are righteous and true.

We give you worship for you are holy and just. We will declare that your love stands firm forever. For your lovingkindness endures forever.

Thank you that your ways are far greater than our ways, your thoughts far deeper than our thoughts.

Thank you that you had a plan to redeem. Thank you that you make all things new. Thank you that your face is towards the righteous, and you hear our prayers, and know our hearts.

Help us to stay strong and true to you. Help us not to follow after the voice of the crowds, but to press in close to you, to hear your whispers, and seek after you alone.

We praise you, we bless you Lord! Thank you that you reign supreme and we are more than conquerors through the gift of Christ!

In the Mighty Name of Jesus,

Amen.