

Grace To You And Peace

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the second Sunday of Easter, April 19, 1998. Scripture lessons: Acts 5:27-32; Psalm 118:14-29; Revelation 1:4-8; John 20:19-31.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Every Sunday morning I greet you with the words *grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ?* The writer of the letter which we know as the book of Revelation greets his readers by saying, *Grace to you and peace.* At the end of his letter, in chapter 22, he says, "The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints." His words are a good summary of the whole Book of Revelation. Whatever worries, fears, and anxieties we bring to the sanctuary, the book of Revelation reminds us that what we need most is grace and peace from God the Father and from Jesus Christ. If we have God's grace and peace we can face all the earthquakes, plagues, and diseases that John writes about in his revelation. Assured of God's grace and peace we can face anything.

The word *grace* has so many meanings in modern English. *Grace* is a woman's name. We say *grace* before we eat. We look at the skater gliding over the ice and we notice how she moves with such *grace*. Your book is overdue at the library. Don't panic. They're giving you a *grace* period. We receive an invitation, "Would you *grace* us with your presence at our daughter's wedding." Grandmother reaches down to pick up her three year old granddaughter and says, "Goodness, *gracious*, you're getting big." *Grace* is a commonplace word.

And it never was a particularly Christian word. *Grace* was a common word two thousand years ago. Most pagan Greek letters began with the greeting, "*grace* to you." A man lifted a glass of wine to a stranger he met at a bar and said, "Here's *grace* to you." It was a cliché. A commonplace word. But Christian writers rescued this commonplace word and gave it a distinctively Christian meaning. Nearly every letter in the New Testament begins with the greeting, "Grace to you and peace."

But what does *grace* mean? I thought of definitions of *grace* I learned long ago in Sunday School. One definition is that *grace* is *God's unmerited favor*. God favors us not because we're good. Not because we've earned his favor (We haven't earned his favor. In fact

we've earned his displeasure and condemnation). Nor does God favor us because he sees our human potential for good (We do have great potential for both good and evil, but God doesn't favor us because of our potential). He favors us for no apparent reason other than he loves us. *Grace* is God's unmerited favor. Again, GRACE is an acronym for God's Riches At Christ's Expense. God has given us great riches. He makes us his children. He washes us from our sins. He's made us a kingdom. He's made us priests. All these riches are free for us. But they come to us at Christ's expense. Grace is God's riches at Christ's expense.

Grace as *God's unmerited favor* and grace as *God's riches at Christ's expense* helps me understand a little better what the word *grace* means. But what I really want to do is not explain what *grace* is - but somehow *experience grace*. What does *grace* feel like? If I had to make a choice, I'd rather experience God's grace than be able to explain it. When the Titanic was sinking 80 years ago what those on board needed were not explanations but salvation. And as helpful and good and needed as theological definitions are what we need most is to experience ~~God's grace and peace.~~

What does *grace* feel like? Grace feels like when somebody you love is with you in a dark and scary place. Grace feels like your mother's kiss when she tucked you in at bedtime as a child. Grace feels like the first day of summer vacation with no chores to do. Grace is being asked to the prom by the most beautiful person in the world, somebody you didn't even think knew you existed. When you forgot your wife's birthday, and you feared the worst, grace is hearing her say, "You're the best birthday present I could ever get." Grace is being held like a little baby knowing that you'll never be dropped. Grace is the feeling of being picked up and embraced as a child after we've fallen and skinned our knees. Grace is the feeling we had as a little child, when we came home crying, all muddy, having fallen in the creek after disobeying mom and, instead of spanking us, mom picks us up, puts us in nice hot bath water and washes us. I'm not talking about the doctrine of grace but the experience of grace.

John tells us, in the book of Revelation, *grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come... and from Jesus Christ... who loves us and washed us from our sins by*

his blood. Grace pardons us. Many of us live lives that are dominated by guilt. We don't live up to *our own impossible standards.* We're constantly reminded by family and friends of how far short we fall from *their standards.* We watch TV and discover that we fall short of *our culture's standards* for beauty and sex appeal. We compare ourselves with others and come out on the short end of the stick time and time again. And it's even worse when we measure ourselves against *God's standards.*

When we fall short of any of these standards what we need to hear more than anything else is the Word of God saying, *Grace to you and peace.* I remember a young man many years ago. He was a deeply committed Christian who had gone to college with my seminary room mate. He taught high school in Philadelphia. But he didn't know anybody down there in Philadddlphia and he got lonely so he'd come up a to the seminary and visit us. He always seemed so depressed. "I can't understand why I do what I do. I can't understand why I feel the way I feel." But he never told us what he did or what he was feeling. Years later someone spoke to me about him, "Did you hear-about so-and-so? Did you know that he's a homosexual?" I hadn't known. But all of a sudden I understood why he felt so miserable. He discovered he was unable to live up to the standards of his friends and parents, his church, and his God. He was tormented by his failures. I haven't seen or heard from him in more than thirty years. But if I run into him I'd like to say to him more than anything else, "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ. Grace to you and to all of us when we don't live up to standards!"

Lewis Smedes, one of my favorite writers, wrote an article about grace. He said four things about grace that I want to mention very briefly. First, *grace contradicts our conscience.* Conscience condemns us. Grace contradicts our conscience. Conscience says, "You're wrong. You've sinned. You're a failure." And grace says, "It's all right even if you are wrong." Secondly, *grace is always surprising.* It doesn't come as a surprise that God wants us to be like Jesus Christ. It's not surprising that God wants us to be honest, fair, decent, pure, and kind. The surprising thing is that, by God's grace, Christ loves us and washed us from our sins. Thirdly,

Smedes writes that *grace does not make us better by bullying us*. Religion and parents can bully or nag us to *do* better and to *be* better. Bullying and nagging usually ^{don't} ~~doesn't~~ make us better. But God's grace doesn't bully or nag us. God's grace loves and accepts us when we're wrong, when we have failed, and when we have sinned. Fourth, *grace goes against common sense*. *Common sense tells us that we're sinners*. We're too wrong to meet God's standards. Grace tells us that it's all right in spite of so much in us that's wrong. *Common sense tells us that we're too weak, too human* to change for the better. Grace gives us power to become a better person - not because we *must*, but because we *may*. *Common sense tells us that we're caught in a rut, there's no escape, no way out*. Grace promise that we can trust God to have a better tomorrow.

Finally Smedes urges churches and ministers to emphasize grace. And he anticipates a criticism that's leveled against churches that emphasize grace that they preach cheap grace. He says, "Grace-based churches are not dispensing cheap grace. They call sinners to repentance, and they call saints to service. But they put grace up front, center stage, at the raising of the curtain and keep it there until the curtain falls."

So the curtain falls on this sermon. As it falls hear once more God's Word to us. "Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come... and from Jesus Christ... who loves us and washed us from our sins by his blood."

Let us pray: God of grace, no one is beyond the reach of your love or outside your limitless mercy. Move us toward those the world despises and people reject so we may venture to follow Christ and risk showing his love. Stand with those who are outcast; strengthen them in peace, encourage them by your presence, and use them to build on the cornerstone of Christ. Amen.