

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Eighth Sunday after Trinity, July 25, 2010

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Hymns: 384, 235:6, 373:1-6, 374, 373:7.

Lessons: Psalm 84, Romans 5:1-11, Mark 13:1-10.

Text: Ephesians 1:2-3.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

What a marvelous greeting! What a grand way for Christians to greet one another – or anyone, for that matter! Doesn't it say so much more than some of the casual greetings you hear today? How ya doing? What's up?

Today we are still looking at the greeting portion of St. Paul's letter to the Ephesian Christians. He made it clear that he is an apostle of Jesus Christ, a representative sent out especially to proclaim Jesus Christ to the Gentiles, and he is writing to Saints, that is, the believers.

Notice today the great blessings that come from God and how the Christian is blessed with them.

GREETINGS AND BLESSINGS!

1. **Grace FROM God**
2. **Peace FROM God**
3. **Praise be TO God because God *"has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ."***

We've got two words here which pack a big punch. They are exceptionally meaningful.

Notice how St. Paul wishes and sends blessings from God upon believers. He piles up the blessings. Both grace and peace from God who is our Father through faith in Jesus Christ and from the Lord Jesus Christ are blessings upon Christians.

The phrase "grace and peace" was a standard greeting of the day. At least a dozen letters of the New Testament start with greetings that include the words "grace" or "peace" or both! We are told this is the ordinary term one Greek person would use in greeting another. It is also the word Matthew uses to record Gabriel's salutation to Mary when he announced to her that she would become the mother of our Lord. The Hebrew term "Shalom" – peace – is the standard Jewish secular greeting.

But here, the two words are both much more than secular terms of greeting. When the words "grace" and "peace" are used as greetings for New Testament letters, they are the grace and peace that come from God our Father and the ***"Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."***

Grace means, as you learned in catechism instruction, God's undeserved goodness and mercy. It is God's undeserved love that provides free forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation for all people.

There are no limits on God's grace. Scripture speaks of ***"God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth."*** 1 Timothy 2:3-4.

Grace has been called "an amazing quality in the heart and mind of God that makes him willing, and eager to give." And a state of peace comes to the person who has received God's gracious gifts. These two elements of Paul's greeting to the Ephesians go together as cause and effect. God's grace causes peace in the hearts and lives of believers.

Also note how combining the standard Greek and Jewish greetings and giving them a new, spiritual meaning is the perfect introduction to a letter that will be saying much about how in Christ Jews and Gentiles have been brought together into one body, the Holy Christian Church, the communion of saints.

Grace. That is God's undeserved love and mercy. That is God's undeserved goodness. In the second chapter of this book St. Paul makes it clear that we are saved by God's grace: ***"it is by grace you have been saved, through faith."*** Ephesians 2:8. If the readers or hearers of this letter do not know what grace means, they will by the time they finish this letter.

Grace, God's grace, is an idea which is really hard for us to understand. We live in a world in which we are accustomed to thinking that you get what you work for. Children, perhaps, can better understand grace even though they may not really realize what it is. Children, especially very young children, don't really work for anything. There comes a time when they begin to learn that there are rewards to certain behavior, but even after that starts, for a long time children think of getting everything free, especially if mom and dad and the grandparents keep giving them things. Everything is given to them, and sometimes if they don't get what they want, they throw a fit. So while small children might be recipients of undeserved gifts, they don't necessarily understand the concept of grace.

But the idea of God's grace is really quite foreign to men. They don't quite know what to make of it. Humans are strange creatures when it comes to God's grace, his undeserved love, goodness, mercy. Almost everyone wants something free. People line up for blocks to get something free. People go miles out of their way get something free. But when it comes to something God wants to give them, they don't seem to want anything free. They think they have to and must work to earn God's favor. They think they must earn God's grace or his love. But God's love, his grace, his mercy is free to undeserving mankind. This was an idea which came into Martin Luther's life the more he read the Holy Scriptures. This was an idea that was foreign to Luther from his training and background – as it is to many, many people today. In fact it was a new idea to many in Luther's day that ***"it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast"*** Ephesians 2:8-9, as we read in the second chapter of this letter to the Ephesians.

I don't understand why men want anything and everything free except God's Salvation in Jesus Christ. This misconception obviously comes from the devil, who would like to make us think that we have to try to earn our eternal salvation. That is an idea which I try hard to dispel in Christian funeral sermons: People don't get to heaven by earning salvation. People don't get to heaven by doing good works. People don't get to heaven because of their good deeds. God gives his grace to mankind free, he offers it to all men free. But it is unbelief and rejection of God's grace which damns. ***"Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned."*** Mark 16:16.

Peace. What would the Ephesians think of when they heard the word peace? Would they think of earthly peace, no war and no fighting? That may be something which they – and we! – would like to experience, but we know that earthly peace among men and between nations will never exist on earth, for Christ himself said in speaking of both the coming destruction of Jerusalem and of the end of time: ***"You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places."*** Matthew 24:6-7.

Or would those Ephesian Christians who had come from a pagan background think of a god not being angry with them? Well, this idea is what St. Paul is writing about. Not, of course, a pagan, false god. But pagans were especially concerned about pleasing all of their gods.

In speaking of the true God, St. Paul emphasizes this is not some fictitious peace with a false God, but this peace comes ***"from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."*** And to clarify, he immediately emphasizes the true God again: ***"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ."***

God's grace, given to us in Christ, is the cause for "peace", true peace with the true God. Because Jesus Christ paid the price, because he suffered the punishment for our sins, God is no longer angry with us. St. Paul

writes to the Corinthian Christians ***“if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.”*** 2 Corinthians 5:17-19.

There's the word reconciliation. That means bringing parties together who have been fighting. That means creating peace between those who disagree and are separated. And God and man needed reconciling. Sin created a separation between God and man. Sin builds a wall between God and man. Jesus Christ came to tear down that wall separating us from God. Jesus Christ came to earth to remove that separation. Do you remember the Christmas hymn: “Hark! the herald angels sing, “Glory to the new-born King; Peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled!” That's exactly the kind of peace that God brings to mankind. We are reconciled, brought back to God because Jesus has made peace. God is no longer angry with us, with all mankind, because of our sins. Jesus has made it right. Jesus was punished for all that we – and all mankind – do wrong so that God assures us: your sins are forgiven. You have peace!

The promise of that peace was given many times in the Old Testament, starting with the promise to Satan that his head would be crushed although he would bruise the heel of the Redeemer. (Genesis 3:14-15.) We find the promise repeated many times, in places such as Isaiah 9:6: ***“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”*** We find passages such as this praising those who share the Gospel: ***“How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, “Your God reigns!””*** Isaiah 52:7.

We find warnings in scripture such as this passage which urge us to repent of our sins: ***“But the wicked are like the tossing sea, which cannot rest, whose waves cast up mire and mud. ‘There is no peace,’ says my God, ‘for the wicked.’”*** Isaiah 57:20-21. But the child of God believes God, and thus receives the full benefit of the grace and peace which come from God. And so we join in praising ***“the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.”*** After St. Paul sends us ***“Grace and peace” “from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ”*** he sends praise to God and encourages all to praise and honor him. After all, God has blessed us ***“with every spiritual blessing in Christ.”*** Grace and peace are just two of these blessings, but really hint at and sort of encompass every blessing that God wants to give to us! In Lamentations 3:22 we read of God's grace, here called his “love” and “compassions”: ***“Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail.”*** So today and always we rejoice in God's grace and peace, peace which carries over even to our attitude toward others on earth.

We close today with a benediction from the God of peace, as found in Hebrews 13:20-21: ***“May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.”***