

Grace, Gifts, and Gratitude

Colossians 3:15-17

John Breon

A pastor named Bill tells about the second sermon he ever preached. It was in a small country church and a young boy was sitting on the front row. All the time Bill preached, the boy was kicking his bare feet back and forth and Bill was mesmerized by them. It was so distracting that after about five minutes of trying, Bill gave up. After the benediction, the ten-year-old boy came up and said, "Brother Bill, would you come home with me and have dinner at our house?" Bill thought, "He owes me that!" So he went home with him, met his family, enjoyed a good dinner, then went back to South Georgia College where he was a student, and forgot about it.

Later, Bill got a letter. When he pulled it out of his mailbox, it rattled. In the envelope he found fifty-seven cents in pennies, nickels, and dimes and a letter from that boy: "Dear Brother Bill, I'm sending you my egg money to help you go to school to learn to be a better preacher." Bill laughed and then called the boy's father and said, "I want to send it back. How do I send it back?" The father said, "You can't. He never took better care of those chickens in his life. He's sending you every cent of his profit. He's going to keep sending you his profit, and if you send it back you'll break his heart."

The next week Bill got another gift, and the next, and the months turned into years. There came a time when he didn't laugh any more when he got the letter, but he'd go back to his room, get on his knees and pray, "Oh, God, help me to be worthy of that little boy's sacrifice." Suddenly, getting C's wasn't good enough and just getting by didn't satisfy him anymore. Somebody was laying down everything for him, and he couldn't do anything about it except respond to it (Bill Hinson, *Solid Living in a Shattered World* 94-95).

What gifts have you received in life that move you to be grateful?
What people bless you and you want to honor them with your life?
Recently, we've spent time talking about gratitude. What gifts from God do you have that you're thankful for?

In these verses from Colossians that we're reading, the apostle Paul mentions three gifts of God in Christ. He speaks of *the peace of Christ*, *the word of Christ*, and *the name of the Lord Jesus*. Along with each of these, Paul encourages the church to be thankful, to show gratitude.

Grace is a vital part of what Paul says here. Thinking about grace, I appreciate what Lewis Smedes says in his book *How Can It Be all Right when Everything Is all Wrong?*

Faith does not break loose in my head with a whooping, "Hurrah for God!" Believing sneaks into my soul while my mind is saying, "My God, where were you when I needed you?" ...

We are not talking about "trying harder." If you have the feeling yourself...you will know that it is a gift. A gift of grace? Of course, what else? Good old amazing grace, it is still the bottom line of discovery.

...I do not know how to stage-manage grace. I do not know how to command grace when to appear and how to make its entrance. ...I only know how to recognize the gifts of grace when I see them, strangely and freely given. ...

Grace does come, this I know for sure. (ix, x-xi)

Grace is the bridge from God to us. It's our access to God. It's the bridge from where we are to where God wants to take us.

Grace appears here in a family of Greek words that Paul uses. The root word is *charis*. It's most often translated "grace." Related words are *charisma*, which means "gift"; *charismatic*, "one who has received a gift"; and *eucharist*, "thanksgiving." This family of words can carry the sense of grace, joy, blessing, gift, thanksgiving, thankfulness, or gratitude. We have an example of how those words connect in the various ways we refer to the prayer we say at meals. Some folks call it "giving thanks." Others say "asking the blessing" or "saying grace."

Grace and gifts and gratitude all go together. Grace (*charis*) can speak of favor shown or favor received, an act of giving or an act of receiving. When it speaks of giving, it means "gift or unearned favor." When it speaks

of receiving, it means "gratitude." Since the same term represents both sides of the act, we'd naturally expect grace as a gift to be met with grace as gratitude (Fred Craddock, "Preaching About Giving Thanks," *Preaching*, Nov-Dec 1990, 8).

Both the gifts we receive from God and our giving thanks to God are grace. Will we accept God's grace in the gifts God offers us? Will we return the grace by giving thanks, expressing gratitude? Will we share the grace by sharing the gifts with others?

Let's hear Paul's encouragement to the church, see some of God's gifts, and let our hearts be stirred with gratitude.

"Let the *peace of Christ* rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful." God made peace through the blood of Jesus shed on the cross (Col 1:20). The sacrifice of Jesus restores us to God. We who are rebels and enemies of God can lay down our arms and find reconciliation and peace with God because God in grace makes the way for us to have peace.

The word for "rule" can mean "to be the umpire." This peace is to "be the umpire" in the church and in our hearts. Christ's peace makes the calls. We each have a mix of opposing desires and conflicting loyalties. But Christ rules in our hearts and ends our inner conflict. We begin to find wholeness when our lives begin to be unified around Jesus as the center. The church doesn't have to be fragmented, but we can have wholeness, unity, and integrity when we're unified around Christ as the center. A hundred musical instruments tuned to the same pitch are in tune with each other. Grace gives us peace and then we express the grace of gratitude.

I'm grateful to be part of this congregation. Durant UMC is a strong church with a great history and exciting potential. God has some great things in store for us here. I'm thankful that you respond to God's call and that you're open to the gifts God wants to give and the work God wants to do.

Next, Paul says, "Let the *word of Christ* dwell among you richly." In chapter one Paul thanks God for the faith and love the Colossian Christians have. He says this faith and love

spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven and about which you have already heard in the true message of the gospel that has come to you. In the same way, the gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world—just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and truly understood God’s grace. (1:5-6)

This is the gospel about Jesus—the good news of what he’s done to restore us to God. It’s the gospel that Jesus proclaimed and taught. We need to immerse ourselves in the written Gospels (and all of Scripture) and let the word of Jesus be alive and active among us. Together, we can always discover more ways to learn from Scripture and apply it. We help each other learn what God wants to teach us.

“The word of Christ” also refers to Christ himself. He’s the living Word. As individuals and together as a church we’re to let Jesus Christ be at home in us and among us. We can know his presence dwelling in us richly and fully. Earlier Paul mentions, “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (1:27).

Christian living is more than trying to imitate Jesus. By itself that will lead us to despair because we just can’t do it. We fully live as Jesus’ followers when we open ourselves to Christ to dwell in us and live his life through us. The risen Lord, through the Holy Spirit, indwells, equips, and empowers his people.

That’s how we can “teach and admonish one another with all wisdom.” That wisdom comes through the Scriptures and grace. Grace as gift and grace as gratitude. We experience Christ’s indwelling presence not just as individuals but also as the church. We need the whole body. We need each other to experience Christ fully. Then together we minister and serve as he leads and empowers us.

We teach each other. We share what we learn in life and the insights we gain through Scripture, study, and prayer. We share our experiences. We can all learn from each other. God can teach you through anybody, if you’re open and willing to learn.

We not only teach; we also admonish each other. What does “admonish” mean? What does it look like in our lives? How do we do it? Paul says we admonish each other with all wisdom. Like with teaching,

wisdom comes from the Scriptures and grace. Our admonishing or correcting each other flows out of what God says and does, not out of our judgmental thinking. This is something the community of faith does, not just each of us alone.

I admit I'm not a very good "admonisher." Probably because I have an image of finger-waving and guilt-tripping people. When I was fresh out of seminary I served as an associate pastor. One of my jobs was junior-high youth leader. One day, I was talking to a woman in the hall outside the church office. I was trying to recruit her to help with the youth program. She turned me down. I said, "O.K." The senior pastor called me into his office and said, "You'll never make it in ministry like that. You've got to make people feel guilty." Well, I didn't agree with that then, and I still don't. I'd a lot rather you be motivated by grace and gratitude instead of guilt.

Still, we hold each other accountable to our commitment to Christ. We challenge each other to grow. We encourage each other to be faithful. In a vital church, all the parts of the body care for each other, minister to each other, and support each other in service that reaches out to others.

People can learn a lot from geese. Geese fly together in a "V" formation. The flapping of the birds in front creates an updraft for the ones behind. They can fly much farther together than they could alone. They rotate leadership. The lead goose will sometimes drop back to let the lift of the others help it and another will move up in its place. Geese honk to encourage each other. Whenever a goose becomes unable to fly because it's sick or injured, two other geese fall out of formation and stay with their fallen comrade until the impaired goose is able to fly or dies

(<https://blog.gembaacademy.com/2009/04/21/the-way-of-the-geese-5-leadership-lessons/>).

We sing together along the way. Maybe this is like the geese honking to encourage each other. Music is a great way to express gratitude to God and a great way to teach and encourage each other. When the message is sung, we not only hear the content, but we also feel its effect on us.

We experience grace in music. We sing with *the grace* in our hearts. We sing and give thanks because of God's grace that creates and sustains us, that enables us to turn to God and puts us right with God, that keeps us

growing, and that provides all we need. How can we hold it in? We must express our gratitude in response to this grace. We can't hold it in. Don't be like the old fellow who said, "I love my wife so much, sometimes it's hard to keep from telling her."

I've always liked the song, "How Can I Keep from Singing?" Our choir has sung it and several artists have recorded it.

My life flows on in endless song
Above earth's lamentation
I hear the sweet though far off hymn
That hails a new creation
Through all the tumult and the strife
I hear the music ringing
It finds an echo in my soul
How can I keep from singing

What though my joys and comforts die
The Lord my Savior liveth
What though the darkness gather round
Songs in the night He giveth
No storm can shake my inmost calm
While to that refuge clinging
Since Christ is Lord of Heav'n and earth
How can I keep from singing

I lift mine eyes the cloud grows thin
I see the blue above it
And day by day this pathway smoothes
Since first I learned to love it
The peace of Christ makes fresh my heart
A fountain ever springing
All things are mine since I am His
How can I keep from singing

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Li2hddmy63U>

"Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all *in the name of the Lord Jesus*, giving thanks to God the Father through him." We can't box up our Christian faith in a separate compartment of our lives. Everything we say and do is to be in the name of our Lord Jesus. If you're trying to decide if some action is the right one or a statement is something you should say, ask whether you can do or say that in the name of Jesus.

Someone told me recently, "It is always scary or eye opening whenever you end a statement with *in the name of the Lord Jesus*. It's a reality check on everything you just said."

This doesn't have to be a fearful, guilt-ridden approach to life. But it's a reminder that we're in Christ and we bear his name. In another place Paul says, "...whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31). We want everything we do to honor God, to reflect his glory, and express his grace. One thing this leads us to do is to be prayerful about all our actions.

The phrase "the name of Jesus" speaks of the character and nature of Jesus. To do something in Jesus' name is to do what's consistent with his character. When we pray in the name of Jesus, we're praying the way Jesus would. We're asking God to filter our prayers through the character of Jesus. In all we do, we give thanks to God by acknowledging Jesus as Lord and living, working, playing, relating to others in ways consistent with Jesus as Lord. And in all of that we give thanks to God the Father through Jesus.

A pastor was on a train in England. Two young men were riding together in the same car with him. One of the young men had an epileptic seizure. The other man helped him and cared for him. The pastor later talked with them and found out that this man stayed with his friend and cared for him all the time. When the pastor asked why, the man told a story about the two serving together in the Army during wartime. The man who now had seizures had saved the life of the other man. The man whose life had been saved said, "After what he's done for me, there's nothing I wouldn't do for him." (Jim Buskirk, First UMC, Tulsa, audiocassette, no date)

What has Jesus done for you? He's given us life. He's given his life for us, to set us free and make us whole. What would you not do for Jesus? What would you not give up for him? His grace deserves our best response

of thanks and commitment. With Christ's peace ruling in our hearts and Christ's word dwelling in us, everything we do becomes a song of praise and thanks to God in Jesus' name.