

By Grace Alone

What do we usually think of when we encounter the word “grace”? Perhaps we think of gracious people—folks who are not easily irritated, but patient, understanding, generous and well-mannered in their interactions with others. Maybe “grace periods” come to mind—those times sometimes offered when we’re late paying a bill or fulfilling a responsibility. No doubt the word brings with it a sense of goodness, kindness, and compassion.

In the Lutheran understanding of grace, the word means “undeserved love”. The Apostle Paul used the word “grace”, when writing to the Christians in Ephesus, to describe the means by which we are saved from the wrath of God. He said, *“But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ.... For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God....”* (Ephesians 2:4-5a, 8) The bottom line, then, is that on our own we just aren’t capable of being good enough to earn our own righteousness. We’ve all experienced this reality: We do something we think is a good thing, and then discover there are negative consequences we didn’t expect. Or someone does or says something that hurts our feelings or puts us in harm’s way, and we lose our tempers. Sometimes we even get so focused on the way we want something to be that we ignore everyone else’s well-being, and even the Commandments of God, in order to “do it my way”. Our Lord Jesus tells us that even if we don’t commit a sinful act, just thinking it or being angry with another person makes us guilty (Matthew 5:21-32).

As we consider this inability to ever be good enough, we may feel like the person who is always told that he or she never does anything right and will always be a failure. We get a sense of this from the Apostle Paul, one of the great “giants of the faith”, in his letter to the church in Rome: *“I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.... For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.... Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?”* (Romans 7:15, 18-19, 24) This is where we all stand without the grace of God! Thankfully, this was not Paul’s last word on the subject, because God’s unconditional love was great and steadfast enough to send His Word—Christ Jesus, God’s “Word made flesh”—to provide for us what we could never provide for ourselves. Paul’s next sentence: “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”

So, how does this amazing grace of God work? Paul says earlier, in Romans 5:8, that *“God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.”* Way back in the third chapter of Genesis we read that Adam and Eve rebelled against the Lord God by their disobedience—eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They looked at what was forbidden and it delighted them. They listened to the tempter’s voice telling them they wouldn’t die, even though the Lord had warned them that they would. The bottom line—the Lord who created us knows what’s best, and following our own wills is not it. Like the owner of a new appliance who tosses out the owner’s manual with its warnings and directions, our first parents thought they could do better on their own. And we continue to follow in their footsteps! Ignoring the Lord’s warnings made us sinners from the beginning—and the consequence is death.

But from the beginning the Lord loved us, and put a plan into action to make up for our sins. “While we were yet sinners” our heavenly Father loved us, in spite of ourselves and our continued waywardness. This is what grace is all about. And when the time was right, *“God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law....”* (Galatians 4:4-5a)

Christ Jesus, fully divine from the heavenly Father, and fully human from His mother, Mary, is the only one who could redeem (buy back) those who were condemned under the law of God, because only He had the ability to live the law perfectly, the authority to take the punishment (death) for all the sins of humanity upon Himself, and the power to destroy death through His resurrection. Thus, Jesus is, as He says to Thomas, “... *the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me.*” (John 14:6) Whoever puts their trust in Christ—the embodiment of God’s grace—has eternal life, as He told Nicodemus: “*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.*” (John 3:16) Grace indeed!

As we begin a new year, we long for grace and graciousness in our world. There is a hymn that speaks to our responsibility to be peace makers: “Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me.” But grace and peace cannot succeed if it begins with us—it must, and always does, begin with our crucified and risen Lord Jesus. As those who have received His gift of grace, we are called to share that gift with others. This undeserved love we have received from God is to be given, through us, to those we encounter each day. It isn’t always easy—Paul tells us, yet again, that “*Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful....*” (1 Corinthians 13:4-6) Just as Christ, at great cost, embodied this gracious love to reconcile us to God, so we are entrusted with the privilege and responsibility of embodying it in His name to the world. God’s grace in Christ is the greatest treasure there is, and our only hope for life in the here—and the hereafter.

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