

ASH WEDNESDAY  
FEBRUARY 26, 2020

1<sup>st</sup> LUTHERAN, MARSHALL  
PR. SCOTT FULLER

II CORINTHIANS 5:20b-6:2; MATTHEW 6:1-6, 16-21

*“We entreat you not to accept the grace of God in vain.”*

These words from Paul’s 2<sup>nd</sup> letter to the Corinthians are a little...puzzling. Nor does their meaning become any clearer after reading through them a number of times. I know this because that’s what happened to me when I began to prepare for tonight’s sermon.

*“We entreat you not to accept the grace of God in vain.”*

Now, simply saying that the meaning is hard to figure out is the easy part. Explaining why these words are hard to understand is an entirely different matter. It’s kind of like that maddening sensation of trying to recall some forgotten name. I can say with great conviction which name is **not** right: I know that it’s **not** HARRY, or GEORGE, or RICK, or SAM...**BUT**...for the LIFE of me I CANNOT remember what name **IS** right.

Well...I had a similar feeling when I began to study this bible passage. I could say with GREAT conviction that SOMETHING about it did not make sense, but I could NOT say exactly what that something was.

*“We entreat you not to accept the grace of God in vain.”*

Then it finally came to me...

What puzzles me about this passage is that here Paul seems to be warning us against doing something that...seems...impossible to do in the first place. It’s like someone cautioning me: ***Don’t fly too close to the sun!*** or ***Don’t swim to the bottom of the ocean!*** Neither of which are humanly possible to do – I get it.

But how does that fit here??? How could anyone accept the grace of God... ***in vain***??? As I understand it, to accept the grace of God means to believe:

- that God accepts us absolutely;
- that God loves us unconditionally;
- that God forgives us completely; and
- that God inspires us daily by putting us to death in sin and raising us up to a new life in faith – all for the sake of Jesus Christ.

How could anyone accept that gift in vain???

The answer to my question presented itself in the form of a phone call. The shaky voice on the other end belonged to friend – a young man who felt trapped – and yet couldn't really say **why** or **how**. He described feelings of insecurity, loneliness, guilt, anger and fear.

Yet, at the same time (and this is what made the struggle so difficult for him), he also quite firmly confessed to believing that Jesus is the Christ and that God's gift of salvation is meant for all people. Yet here's the tragedy: though my friend could affirm the promise of God's gift of grace for other people...he could not believe that it was also meant...for him!!

Have **you** ever felt something similarly unsettling?? *I know I have...*

The problem is that my friend had never heard God's Word of salvation as a word of Grace!!! Coming out of a faith tradition that concentrates mostly on the demands of God's LAW, he knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that he did not DESERVE God's grace. He could identify the sins of his life - and then quote chapter and verse from the Bible to prove it – he could argue his case very persuasively!

So, here's the problem. Thought it's necessary, important, vital, and good to know God's LAW...the law has to be known in the context of God's grace, or it'll slice us up, chew us to bits, and spit us out like a piece of rotten meat.

To know Jesus as the Sacrificial Lamb, as the King of Love, as the Forgiver of **others'** sins, yet to doubt that his forgiveness can **make us clean**, is to be trapped in a living hell. It was as if this young man could:

- catch a glimpse of the very glory of God's kingdom,
- but only from a lonely place **outside its walls**, even as the gates were being shut to lock him out.

When Jesus says, "*Come to me all who are heavily burdened, and I will give your rest,*" my friend only heard, "*Come to me ONLY if you have NO burdens.*" It was as if his spiritual health and certainty of salvation were sure **only** as far as his **faith** was **firm**, his **conduct** was **correct**, his **thoughts** were **noble** and his **heart** was **true**.

In other words, he could not accept God's grace...until he could prove...**that he didn't need it!** He felt he had to be *sinless*, in order to be forgiven... *loveable* in order to be loved...*faithful* in order to be given God's loving gift of faith. To put it mildly, that's a bit like wanting to harvest the crop **before** the seed has even been **planted**, or like sitting down to eat before the meal has even been prepared.

In his second letter to the Corinthians, the Apostle Paul is struggling with people who have been suffering with this very same problem. Actually, he's battling a group of **intolerant Christians** who are *causing others* to suffer just like the young man who called me on the phone.

They're **telling** people that *believing in Christ* is only the **first step** in the goal of righteous living. What **really** counts is how a person then **follows the law** to **prove** that they're living a life of **sinlessness** and **perfection**...

...How would that work for you??? About the same as it would for me, I'm sure!

I can almost sense Paul's heavy sigh...as he hears from some people like my friend, who feel that they have **accepted the grace of God in vain**. Now, grace can seem like a terribly complicated thing to understand. But in fact, the challenge of grace is that it appears to be too simple, too easy, too good to be true. As the old saying goes, *If it's too good to be true...it is!!!*

But not here, not now, not with this gift from God. Two snapshots of Jesus' crucifixion are forever stamped on my heart as anchors of what God's grace means for you, for me, for all people, in all places, and all times.

The **first** happens even while the soldiers pound their nails into his flesh. As the crowds curse him for being a pretender to the throne, Jesus simply, yet profoundly, prays those amazing words, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing."

The **second** happens just a short time later as he hangs between those two criminals. Where one berates Jesus for not saving himself – and them! – the other simply says to the Lord, *Remember me when you come into your kingdom*. And together we speak the words that Jesus replies,

**TODAY... YOU WILL BE WITH ME IN PARADISE.**

**That** is God's *grace*...**that** is God's *mercy*...**that** is God's *forgiveness*...**that** is God's *love*.

No matter where we are in our walk through life, this word of grace is always valid. For those who are:

- new to the Christian faith to those who've known Jesus' love forever,
- recently confirmed to those who are newly retired,
- newly born to those nearing the sleep of death...

wherever we are, whatever our situation in life, we know that God's Word of grace is always meant for our ears to hear, our minds to accept and our hearts to believe.

So now we enter together this season of Lent, this time to examine our lives as we prepare to embrace the Cross – and to celebrate Jesus' resurrection. During these weeks ahead we pray that God would help us let go of the burden that the Law lays on our shoulders, and let the Holy Spirit fill us with God's peace that passes all understanding.

I still talk every once in a while with that young man I mentioned earlier, that man who felt so lonely, like he had accepted the grace of God in vain. I'm very happy to say that he's not so desperate, not so worried, not so lost anymore. He hasn't found his way back to church yet – he's still wandering in a wilderness in which God's grace seems almost too good to be true.

But that's the beauty of God's grace. It has no expiration date, no best-if-used-by stamp, no statute of limitations after which its promises are rendered null and void. Nor is God's grace something that we have to *seek*, that we have to *figure out*, that we have to *find*.

**Instead**, as Jesus points out so clearly time and time again, **he's** the one who daily *seeks us out*, who *calls us by name*, whose **Spirit** opens our **eyes**, whispers in our **ears**, and fills our **hearts** with the blessings of God's love throughout our lives. As the apostle Paul said in the new Testament passage for tonight, "**Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of our salvation.**"

God's gift of amazing grace is freely given to us forever. Rejoice and be glad in it. Amen.