

Bearing Grace and Peace
Scripture Reading – Intro to Paul’s Letters
Sunday, November 2, 2025 (All Saints’)

Let us pray: Lord, make our hearts and minds and lives fertile soil where your word can take root and grow. And through that word, nourish us, so that we may help nourish the world, in Christ. Amen.

There is something that we do here every single Sunday, and I realized that it’s been a few years since we talked about it, and some new people have come since then, so they don’t necessarily know *why* we do this. We always start what we are doing here the same way. Every single Sunday, the first thing I say to you and you say to me is, “Grace and peace.” What I want to do today is remind us *why* we say those words and why they *matter*.

This is not just something that we made up. It is a 2,000-year-old Christian tradition that we find in Paul’s letters. Paul wrote 13 letters that we have, and each one of those letters starts the same way. (*Read the opening verses of each of Paul’s letters, how each letter begins with, “Grace and peace.”*)

Everything Paul does begins with “grace and peace.” Do you think that means it’s kind of important? What if everything *we* did began with “grace and peace?”

The word that Paul uses to talk about grace in his letters is the Greek word *karis*. Usually when a person wrote a letter back then, and they wrote it in Greek, they would begin it by saying *karin*, “greetings!” But Paul starts off by saying *karis*, “grace,” a subtle but very meaningful difference that his readers would have noticed. Paul wasn’t just saying, “Greetings! Hey! How you doing? What’s up? How’s it going?” He says, “Grace.” Grace has a number of different meanings and

understandings in Greek. It can mean *favor, thanksgiving, joy, acceptance, sufficiency, fullness, mercy, kindness, pleasure.*

One of my favorite understandings of the word *grace* is simply *unconditional love*. One scholar describes grace as “a favor done without any expectation of return.” Imagine someone doing something for you without any expectation that you will do anything for them; they give you something without expecting that you will give them something in return. “A favor done without any expectation of return.” We have been given a *gift* from *God*, without *any expectation of return*.

One scholar says it this way: “grace is the absolutely free expression of the love of God finding its only motive in the bounty and benevolence of God.” God loves you for no other reason than *that’s who God is*. No strings attached. Nothing wanted. Nothing expected. Nothing else on the agenda. Just love for the sake of love.

That’s how Paul starts off *every single one* of his letters. “Favor, thanksgiving, joy, mercy, kindness, pleasure, acceptance, unconditional love, *God’s* love, and peace to you.” When was the last time you started off a letter or an email or a phone call or a conversation with someone *that way*?

The word *peace* here is the Greek word *eirene*. Now, a lot of times when we think of *peace*, we think of it as the *absence of war*, when two armies stop fighting and now there’s *peace*. But what Paul is talking about is different than that. It’s not just the absence of war. *Eirene peace*, means *harmony, wholeness, everything working together*. It means *tranquility, serenity, contentment, safety, welfare, prosperity, every kind of good*.

There are a couple of ways that we can *understand* this kind of peace. First there is an *external* peace in which everything *around* you is in *harmony* and *order*. The people and the things around you are *working together*, the way they were *created* to. The world around you is in a state of *tranquility* and *serenity* and *contentment* and *safety*.

And then there is an *internal* peace in which everything *within* you is in *harmony* and *order*. Your heart and mind are *working together*, working the way they were *created to*. Your innermost being is in a state of *tranquility* and *serenity* and *contentment* and *safety*, regardless of your circumstances. You have this feeling like, “It’s *good*,” or at least, “Everything’s *going to be good*.” You are content with *who* you are and *where* you are at this exact moment in your life.

It’s worth noting that some of these letters are written by Paul while he is in prison awaiting execution. So it would seem like everything *within* him and *around* him is in a state of turmoil; that there is certainly no *external* peace around him. And yet there is something *within* him that is able to say over and over again, “Peace. Peace to *you*. I have peace, and I’m passing it along to *you*.”

So before he gets into anything else, the *first thing* Paul does in every single one of his letters is to say, “Favor, thanksgiving, joy, mercy, kindness, pleasure, acceptance, unconditional love, harmony, wholeness, contentment, serenity, every kind of good to you. Grace and peace to you.” Everything Paul does, he starts with “grace and peace.” He *speaks* “grace and peace.” He *gives* “grace and peace.” And when I hear what that means, what that *looks like*, I don’t know

about you, but I *need* that in my life. I *need* joy and mercy and kindness and acceptance and harmony and wholeness and unconditional love. I *need* grace and peace.

And what I believe is that grace *leads* to peace. It does that in two ways. First, *God's* grace leads to peace. When we can understand and accept that God loves us *no matter what*; that there is nothing we *have* to do to make God love us more, and there is nothing we *can* do to make God love us less. God loves us simply because God loves us. God accepts us just the way we are, no matter how messed up or broken or not good enough we feel. No matter how smart we are or how good-looking we are or how we dress or how we feel about our bodies, no matter what has happened to us in the past, what kind of little secrets we are carrying around with us, none of that will change the way that God feels about you.

And it is an *incredibly* hard thing to wrap our minds around that, because that's not the way that the *world* works. That's not what we encounter on a day-to-day basis where our performance or our production defines our value and our worth. Whether in *school* or at our *jobs* or *wherever*, that's just not the way that we experience the world. But what if it *was*? What if we could *change* the way that the world works? Or at least change the way the people around us experience the world. When we can embrace this idea, this *reality* that there is nothing we have to do to *earn* God's favor, that God has *given* it to us out of pure *goodness* and *love*, without expecting anything in return, when we can allow that love and acceptance to fill our lives, imagine the *peace* that that could bring. To know that I don't have to worry about being *good enough* for anyone else, because I am good enough for God. That can free us from a lot of burdens in life.

Have you really allowed yourself to be good enough for God? Have you stopped trying to prove yourself to God? Have you let God give you that gift without feeling like you have to give God anything in return? Or are you constantly trying to live up to a standard? To prove yourself? (“God I am worthy of your love. I *deserve* your blessing. Look what I’ve *done*. Look at all the good and holy things I’ve done. Look at what I’m *trying* to do.”) Maybe *that* is what is keeping you from peace – this constant feeling like you have to *do* and *be* more and more.

So that’s the first way that grace leads to peace. *God’s* grace leads to *our* peace. The second way that grace leads to peace is that our grace with *each other* – our willingness to forgive each other and accept each other just the way we are – *that* leads to peace. When we stop trying to prove ourselves to *God*, maybe we can stop trying to prove ourselves to each other. When we accept that God’s love doesn’t require us to be good enough, maybe we can stop requiring each other to be good enough, to meet our standards and expectations. When we can accept that God’s love is unconditional, that there is nothing we have to do to *earn* it, then maybe we will stop trying to make other people earn *ours*. When we accept that God doesn’t hold our mistakes against *us*, maybe we can stop holding them against one another. When we accept the gift that God has given us, without any expectation of return, then maybe we can give that gift to each other.

Can you imagine the *peace* that would infuse your life if you were no longer holding onto that thing someone said or did to you five years, two months, and three days ago (not that you’re keeping track)? Can you imagine the wholeness and harmony you would feel if you could *forgive your enemies*; if you could *pray* for them? And *not* the kind of prayer like, “God, help them see the err of their ways. Soften their hearts. Change them.” But if you could pray, “God,

bless them. Bless this person who I am in conflict with. Let them experience your goodness and love. May your grace and peace be with *them*.”

What if the next time the two of you started to get into an argument, you could stop and say to him, “Grace and peace?”

What if, when that annoying co-worker really pushes your buttons, you could just say, “Grace and peace to you?”

What if the next time you are tempted to talk or gossip about someone or make fun of someone, you said, “Grace and peace” instead?

What if the next time you find yourself getting frustrated or losing your temper, you could speak grace and peace to *yourself*?

What if every time you interacted with someone, before you did anything else, you found some way to speak grace and peace to them?

What if, just for no reason, you saw someone on the street and said, “Grace and peace?”

What if *we* spoke grace and peace as much as Paul did?

What if grace and peace was as much a part of *our* lives, our *being*, as it was of *his*?

How can we be *people of grace, people of peace* in the world? It's not just ignoring what's going on around you, smiling and saying, "Peace, peace," when there *is* no peace. It's about your very presence *bringing* grace and peace into difficult or anxious circumstances. And it's not just about *speaking the words* "grace and peace." It's about *living* in ways that *bear* grace and peace to the people and the world around us. It's about conveying it with our very being – the way we *are*, the way we are with *others*. Do you convey *acceptance* to the people around you, or are you speaking and acting and *being* in ways that convey *judgment*? Are you abundant with your love, your mercy, your forgiveness, or are there strings attached, conditions to be met? When other people interact with you, do you give them a sense of grace and peace?

Like I said earlier, it is incredibly hard to do. It's a *process* that takes some of us our whole *lives* to get right. And I think *that's* why Paul mentions it at the beginning of *every single letter*. That's why *I* mention it at the beginning of worship *every single Sunday*. Because we need to be reminded of it over and over and over again. Grace and peace. Grace and peace. This is who we *are*. This is who we are *supposed to be* and what we are *supposed to do* – as individuals, as the Church, we are followers of Jesus Christ who came bearing God's grace and peace to us, and our sole purpose, the reason we exist is to do the same, to be like Christ, bearing God's grace and peace to the world. We need to be reminded again and again, because it's *so* important, and it's *so* hard.

God wants joy and acceptance and mercy and kindness and pleasure and wholeness and every kind of good for us. And when we allow ourselves to receive it from God, we can allow ourselves to share it with each other. Grace and peace to you.