

Theme: “The Gifts of Christmas” – Grace & Peace

Text: Romans 1:1-7

Paul, a bondservant of Jesus Christ, called *to be* an apostle, separated to the gospel of God 2 which He promised before through His prophets in the Holy Scriptures, 3 concerning His Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh, 4 *and* declared *to be* the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead. 5 Through Him we have received grace and apostleship for obedience to the faith among all nations for His name, 6 among whom you also are the called of Jesus Christ; 7 To all who are in Rome, beloved of God, called *to be* saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

“*Grace to you and peace.*” You hear me speak this phrase to you nearly every Sunday before the sermon. In fact I just spoke these words to you before I read our sermon text. This is the phrase Paul used at the opening of his letter to the Romans. He used similar phrases to begin nearly all of his letters in the New Testament: “**Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ**” (v. 7). These words are not just a nice greeting, a kind gesture, or a mere wish. They are words of blessing from Paul to his readers, and from me to you each Sunday. They are also a reminder of two of the “**Gifts of Christmas**” we receive because of Jesus’ coming that night so long ago in Bethlehem: “**Grace**” and “**Peace.**” We pray that the Holy Spirit would bless our study this morning as we take a look at these two very precious Christmas gifts.

We usually define **grace**, in the Biblical sense, as God’s “*undeserved love and kindness.*” It is this “undeserved love” of God that moved Him to save us, despite our sins and despite our unworthiness. Paul writes about this in Ephesians chapter 2: “**But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)**” (Ephesians 2:4-5). **Grace** can also refer to, among other things, the gifts and blessings God freely gives us. Later on in this letter to the Romans Paul would write, “**We have different gifts, according to the grace given us**” (Romans 12:6 - NIV).

We should at least be partly familiar with this concept around this time of year. When we receive gifts from our parents and loved ones is it because we’ve worked so hard to deserve them, or because our good behavior has earned us those gifts? Thankfully no! If that were the case there would probably have been a number of Christmases where we would have received no presents at all! The gifts we receive (and, hopefully, the gifts we give) are given out of love, because someone *wanted* to give them to us, not because we necessarily deserved them or earned them.

Coincidentally, both of these definitions of God’s **grace** (His undeserved love and His gifts of love) find their fullest expression in Jesus! Our Gospel reading for this morning reminded us that Jesus is the one who brought us God’s **grace**: “**And the Word [Jesus] became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth...For the law was given through Moses, *but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ*” (John 1:14, 17). Our text also points this out in v. 3-5, “**...Jesus Christ our Lord, who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh, *and* declared *to be* the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead. Through Him we have received grace...**” It was God’s **grace** that moved Him to send His Son Jesus, the greatest gift of His **grace**, to be “**born of the seed of David**” to pay for our sins and earn our forgiveness.**

That forgiveness gives us **“peace,”** which is the second “gift” we are considering this morning. **Grace** and **peace** go together as cause and effect. The **peace** of God is caused by the **grace** of God. Now, when we take a look at our world today we might wonder if this gift of **peace** from God is...well, broken! We hear frequent reports from around the world of violence and bloodshed, of terrorist attacks, of political and religious upheavals and conflict. We don't have to look overseas, however, to find some very un-peaceful news reports. It's sad to constantly hear and see the hateful and sharp political divide in our country, which only seems to be getting worse. It's frightening and tragic to hear and read about some of the horrible crimes and heart-breaking incidents that happen each day in our own country, or even in our own area. Didn't the angel proclaim on the night of Christ's birth: **"Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!" (Luke 2:14)?** Is there something “wrong” with God's Christmas gift of **peace**?

No, there is nothing wrong with God's Christmas gift of **peace**. It is not broken or expired. The **peace** that God has given us through Jesus' coming on Christmas is not an *earthly* peace. Jesus told us that one of the signs that we are living in the last times is that we will **“hear of wars and rumors of wars” (Matthew 24:6; Mark 13:7)**. He also warned His followers that believing in Him and following Him and His teachings would cause division and strife even amongst family members: **"Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword. For I have come to 'set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law'; and 'a man's enemies will be those of his own household'" (Matthew 10:34-36)**. Because of sin; because of opposition to Christ and His Word there will never be complete physical peace on this earth.

Jesus came to give us an even greater gift of **peace: *spiritual* peace! Peace from God. Peace with God!** Jesus paid the price for all sins. He paid the punishment of hell itself on the cross to appease God's righteous wrath against the world's sins—against our sins—and has therefore created **peace** between God and man; between God and us! Later on in this same letter to the Romans Paul would write, **“Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 5:1)**. The assurance that God has forgiven us and declared us to be “Not guilty” because of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross also gives us **peace** in our own hearts. This is the kind of **peace** Jesus was speaking of when He said, **"Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid” (John 14:27)**. Is there a greater gift than that? A heart filled with **peace** because of Christ's protection and promises. A conscience free from guilt, a soul free from shame, and a life free from condemnation because of the **peace** of forgiveness we have in Christ.

We often don't appreciate or fully realize the value of gifts that we can't see. We are usually enamored with the biggest present under the Christmas tree. Our eyes are drawn to the one with the shiniest wrapping paper. We are often impressed with the most expensive gifts! Well, the **“Gifts of Christmas”** that God has given us, which we have been reminded of in our text today, are not able to be seen or touched. They don't “sparkle;” you can't play with them; and they can't be driven. But they are *priceless*! Their value is without measure! **“Grace and peace”**—and in that order: **Grace** always first and **peace** which follows. These gifts have been given **“to you...from God our Father”**—who by His **grace** gave us the gift of His Son, our Savior—**“and the Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 7)**—who by His suffering and death has given us **peace: Peace** with God; **peace** within our hearts because our soul is washed free of all sins; and the assurance of **peace** forever in heaven with Jesus, our God of **grace** and **“Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6)**. Amen.