

Grace And Peace

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[0 : 00] Lord, we thank you for your word as revealed to us through the Bible. As we focus on one book, namely the Epistle to Titus during this Lenten season, help us to discover its message for us today and give us the strength to apply it to our lives so people will know that we practice what we preach.

To your honor and glory. Amen. It seems that in a reverse and evil kind of way, according to the verses we read from Titus a short time ago, that the people on the island of Crete were practicing what they preached.

And if you'd like to turn to that in page 200 in your pew Bible, you can follow what I'm trying to say. In verse 10, we are told that they talked wildly and led men's minds astray.

They ruined whole families by teaching things they should not. And as someone has said, all for making money. And then when you move to verse 12, it was a Cretan prophet, one of their own countrymen, who said, Cretans were always liars, vicious brutes, lazy gluttons, and he told the truth.

Well, there may be a few people in Vancouver who qualify for the terrible reputation of the Cretans. But I don't know of any here in the congregation this morning, or for that matter, at the parish weekend in Parksville.

[1 : 37] I would note in passing, though, that there is a danger that Vancouverites, and I think this would include some Christians, at least may become like the Cretans in one aspect.

And this is how one of the commentators puts it. Money is so highly valued among them, and in fact, greed and avarice are so native to the soil in Crete that they are the only people in the world among whom no stigma attaches to any sort of gain whatever.

In other words, I guess it's everything that the market will supply or a profit at any price. And I'm afraid that greed is just as real as in Vancouver today as in Crete.

In fact, Billy Graham says that the number one sin in society today is greed, which is all the more reason for the Bible, or at least for the gospel, to be proclaimed and to be practiced.

Yes, the Cretans were notorious liars and cheats and gluttons and money grabbers. But here is the wonderful thing. Knowing that and actually experiencing it, Paul did not say to Titus, Leave them alone.

[2 : 51] They are helpless and everyone knows it. He says, you can see it there in verse 13, All the more reason for you to go and convert them. Few passages so demonstrate the divine optimism of the Christian evangelist who refuses to regard any person as hopeless.

The greater the evil, the greater the challenge. And it is the Christian conviction that there is no sin too great for the grace of God to conquer.

And I want to say a little bit more about grace a little later on. But first I want to say something about the last two verses of today's reading from Titus, namely verses 15 and 16, which I find rather difficult to get a handle on.

Now you have that translation before you on page 201. I want to read another translation, the New International Version of Scripture, which is just a little different, not much.

So you look and then I'll read. To the pure, all things are pure, but to those who are corrupted and do not believe, nothing is pure. In fact, both their minds and consciences are corrupted.

[4 : 11] They claim to know God, but by their actions they deny him. They are detestable, disobedient, and unfit for doing anything good. Now first of all, let's just look at that opening phrase, to the pure, all things are pure.

You find that reflected because Paul said it once before in Romans 14, verse 20. And it was addressed to those who are constantly involved in the Jewish law about clean and unclean foods.

It may well be, says one commentary, that this phrase is not only a proverb, but an actual saying of Jesus. When Jesus was speaking about these countless Jewish rules and regulation, he said in Mark 7, verse 15, nothing outside a person can make him unclean by going into him.

Rather, it is what comes out of a person that makes him unclean. Now, of course, one doesn't take that exactly literally, but in other words, the point Jesus and Paul are making is that it's our hearts, our hearts, our inner being, which makes all the difference.

And I wondered if you noted from the Holy Communion service how often the word heart comes to the fore. Quite a few times, actually. A good exercise sometimes is just to go through and count the number of times that the word heart appears.

[5 : 40] Now, if we are pure in heart, our deeds and actions will be pure. And as Sarah was making evident to the children, if our hearts and motivations are not pure and right, then we will claim to know God, but our actions will deny him.

Certainly, we will not be practicing what we preach. It seems to be the problem with some of our TV evangelists in recent years. But it's also a problem for every Christian and every congregation that separate belief from behavior and faith from works and evangelism from social action.

At the International Congress on Evangelism, World Evangelism, held in Lausanne, Switzerland, just about nearly 15 years ago. And I might note in passing that a second congregation, or at least conference, will be held in, I think it's near Manel in the Philippines, in July this year.

And there in these great worldwide conferences, evangelism and social action are very much held together. And as John Stott expressed it in one of the books that he wrote on this World Conference, in the past, especially perhaps in 19th century Britain, evangelical Christians had an outstanding record of social action.

In this century, however, we have tended to divorce evangelism from social concern. And then he goes on to make this very important point, which certainly Paul also made to Titus, but the salvation we claim should be transforming us in the totality of our personal and social responsibilities.

[7 : 27] Faith without works is dead, or to put it in the words of Paul to Titus, they claim to know God, but by their actions, they deny him.

One of the main reasons that I find Titus such a helpful book to study is that it has this essential balance of belief and behavior, of faith and action, of evangelism and social action, which brings to the fore what could be called the fullness of the gospel.

And that's one of the key factors we've been struggling with in the outreach committee of this parish. And it's now being reflected in the process, policy, and program of our outreach ministry. And this was shared at the church committee on Wednesday night, and the plan is to involve the congregation in it in the near future. Undoubtedly, one of the best illustrations of how the fullness of the gospel is being lived out in today's world is through what John Vanier and others have accomplished by developing a worldwide network of Christian communities where mentally handicapped people live and work.

There was a good article on this on the front page of Thursday Sun, which perhaps some of you read. And it celebrates the 25th anniversary of this ministry.

[8 : 51] And John Vanier's philosophy is simple yet profound, a call to conscience and urging of what he calls the values of the heart. And he goes on to say, a society which discards those who are nonproductive and weak, such as the feeble elderly, becomes a society without a heart, without kindness, and given to competition, rivalry, and finally violence.

And Vanier regards his work as a call from God, and it has brought an abiding sense of peace and purpose and certainty and certainty to his Christian faith.

With this in mind, I want to focus the balance of this sermon on what I regard as the two key words, not only in Titus, but in the Bible, namely, grace and peace.

In Titus, you probably have noted that they are found in chapter 1, in the last part of verse 4. Grace and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus, our Savior.

I'm convinced that the more we learn about the biblical meaning of grace and peace, the more we will know and live the fullness of the gospel.

[10 : 08] While grace is only a five-letter word, volumes have been written on it, and so I'm hard-pressed to even define it in a couple of minutes, but here goes. One definition, and many, perhaps, of you are taught this, is simply to take the five letters and link them with the word which begins with each one of the letter.

And so you'll have the G for God, the R for riches, or if you wish, resources, the A for at, the C for Christ, and the E is for expense.

Grace, then, is God's riches or resources at Christ's expense. Another definition, grace is God's freely given, saving power at work in the world and in us.

The Bible says a great deal about this grace, which God shows towards us and gives to us. I'm sure you've already heard it a few times in the communion service.

We understand the grace of God better when we think of it in three ways. The first meaning of the grace of God is the undeserved love and favor Almighty God offers to his people.

[11 : 20] And in the Old Testament, this is especially evident in the Israelites who God chose to carry on his mission. And through several centuries, God's grace continued to be offered to his people in spite of their disobedience.

And the Old Testament is a record, a history of God's grace, God's undeserved love and guidance to those people. Now, the second meaning of grace is familiar to us in the words, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And God shows his special love and favor to us through all that Jesus Christ was and said, through all that he did and what happened to him. And this meaning lies behind his words in John 1, verse 14, and the word became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth.

Since Jesus died on the cross and rose from the dead, the grace of God is more evident than ever before. It shows the depth and the wonder of God's love. The same love of the very same God who had chosen Israel and had been so patient through the long years before Christ came.

And in Jesus Christ, we see the special love and favor that God has towards us. The third meaning of God's grace is that God's love and kindness are working inwardly in our hearts.

[12 : 51] And by God's grace, we are given power and discernment to act in ways acceptable to him, which is much of what the epistle to Titus is about, I believe. In many of our prayers, we ask God to give us grace to resist temptation and to do his will.

There are prayers for God's power, for his spirit to work through our lives. And God's grace also comes to us through the love and help of people around us.

Our church, our Christian community, with its worship and fellowship, is the place where this should happen. In fact, God's grace is guaranteed to us through his sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion.

And that's why they're called means of grace in the prayer book. And it's interesting to note that it was at the 8 a.m. Holy Communion service held in Archbishop de Pontier's house that gave birth to this parish over 60 years ago.

And so we thank God for his grace and the many ways in which it is manifested. He also gives us peace, according to Titus, and many other scripture passages would note the same thing.

[14 : 07] In Hebrew, the word for peace is that beautiful term shalom, shalom. And the root meaning of shalom is to be whole, sound, and saved.

And fundamental to the idea of shalom is totality, the fullness of life is involved. In the New Testament, shalom is most often translated peace, though no single word, either in Greek or in English, can adequately express its meaning.

It's the kind of peace which is both vertical and horizontal. It stands for right relationships with God and right relationships on earth among people who are learning to walk together.

It means peace with God through the person and work of Christ, whom, as you know, was also called the Prince of Peace. Peace and Peace among people who live by the Spirit and do God's will.

It really is the life of the kingdom. And the mission of the church is to live peace and proclaim it, doing both within the context of a world that resists or denies the reality of God.

[15 : 22] And thus, peace is attacked and undermined in thousands of ways. And therein lies the root of much of our problem, both in the church and in the community at large.

The mission of the church is to proclaim, promote, and demonstrate peace amidst all the attacks which sin throws against it. As people of God, as peacemakers, we are agents and ambassadors of shalom in the midst of this church and city.

And to carry out this mission, we must understand the following implications of the peace that we are called to help establish and to maintain.

First of all, peace from God is what creates community. Loneliness, which results from lack of community, is an indication that life is not being fulfilled.

And the city, yes, and even the churches are full of lonely people. You can be lonely even in a crowd or in a congregation. And where shalom, where peace exists, each individual, no matter what their age or sex or color or education or income and so on, each person is important.

[16 : 41] Yea, each person is precious and has a part to play and knows that there is meaning and purpose to his or her life. In other words, they count.

They really count. And the warmth of Christian community relationships dispels the cold loneliness of insignificance which so many people experience today.

Believe me, there is no substitute for koinonia or Christian fellowship. Secondly, peace from God means concern about the material and physical well-being of people.

The presence of poverty, poor housing, unemployment, abuse, and an endless list of social problems is evident that life has gone wrong and shalom has been violated.

Jesus didn't tell the parable of the Good Samaritan simply to improve his TV image and attract more votes. He knew that God's mandate for him and his church is to bring peace and that includes the physical and material well-being of people.

[17 : 50] it also involves righteousness, justice, and forgiveness, and many other things. In conclusion, let me say that shalom, above all else, means peace with God and reconciliation with the Creator and the Savior of the universe.

That involves both grace and peace, which brings us back to the fullness of the gospel as expressed by Paul, not just in Titus, but in many others of his epistle.

For instance, in Philippians, he says, grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ and in Titus, verse 4 of chapter 1, we read, grace and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Savior.

And by accepting God's great gifts of grace and peace, which are very much at the heart of this Holy Communion service as well as the real purpose of the Lenten season which we are now well into, we become children of God.

And as John expressed in the opening chapter of his gospel, as many as received him, to them gave he power, that is, he gave them grace and peace to become children of God.

[19 : 10] And this power to become which Christ brings to us is not instant perfection of character, but it certainly is the power to become far beyond what we now are and more like Christ.

And the more we grow, the more we realize how much more we have to grow. And so, in a sense, we are not just human beings but human becomeings as grace and peace work in our lives.

And thus, may we become a lot more than what we are as the Lenten season unfolds and as we learn more about the epistle to Titus.

Let us pray. And John Cochran is going to lead us in our prayers this morning. shall we pray?

Shall we pray? Our Father, as we come into your presence, we recognize how backward we are to pray.

[20 : 28] Help us to pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. We know that where there is prayer, there is restoration of spiritual health.

And where there is absence of prayer, there is spiritual dryness and defeat. Father, teach us to pray.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. as you taught the disciples of old, we would pray, our Father, how that word, Father, reminds us that we are but children, dependent upon you for everything.

We thank you that you are our gracious, patient Father, who, like the father of the prodigal, waits for us to return from our wayward ways.

We thank you that you are the father of light, in whom there is no variableness or shadow cast by turning. Our Father, thy will be done.

[21 : 49] We pray, our Father, that your will would be done not just in the world, but in us. May each of us do your will.

We confess that we go astray, we follow the desires of our heart, and yet we know deep within us that your will is best.

Help us to do your will. May we not only desire your will, but may we also discern your will.

Lord, in your mercy, give us this day our daily bread. We pray for all those who lack the necessities of life.

We pray for those throughout the world that are suffering deprivation at this time. May they have food and clothing and a place to live.

[23 : 05] We pray for those that are currently unemployed. Help them to find work that will utilize their skills. we pray for those within our own parish here that are seeking meaningful employment.

Encourage them and bless them, our Father. And for those of us that do have work, we pray that we might see our work as a divine vocation given by you so that we might glorify you.

help us to hold lightly our possessions. As we have been instructed this morning, preserve us from greed.

Spare us from the twin dangers of both poverty and riches. Give us this day just our daily bread.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

your kingdom come. May it come to pass that your name be hallowed, your will be done, and your kingdom come.

[24 : 24] May the light of the knowledge of the glory of God be shed abroad in the world. Lord, we long for the day when your righteousness shall cover the earth as the waters cover the sea.

may your kingdom come. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. And now may we spend a moment in silent prayer, praying for the parish weekend at Parksville, and then for those matters that are personal to each one of us.

Earl barber, he will be Yoshihiki, to Louise, hear my bunny, someday hear my son, or John ■■