

How many times a day do you say “oops, excuse me”? Count up the number of times you say “hello, how are you”. Try and figure out how much you say “please” or “thank you”. They’re the phrases and words we use naturally. They just come out. Cross paths with someone at the store and you say “oops, excuse me.” Walk past someone in your office and you smile and say, “hello”. Ask someone for something and you say “please” and then “thank you”. And not just once or twice. Day after day they’re your go to phrases.

As we’ve gone through the different letters of the Apostle Paul there have been familiar phrases we’ve read not just once or twice. They’re in almost every letter. Of course the letters do have a pattern, like the letters and emails we write today. Letters of the first century started by identifying the writer then the recipients. After that Paul included an introduction of thanksgiving and praise. This sermon series sought to emphasize the unity Paul highlighted among himself and the letter’s recipients. Oneness in the gospel of Christ brought him together with his readers. That oneness in the gospel of Christ is ours.

One phrase was repeated in almost every letter. More than a catch phrase, more than a greeting like our “dear so and so”. It not only described their present reality but Paul also meant it as a prayer that the blessing from God would continue. Let this phrase be a reminder of the present reality of blessing we have from God and also a prayer that this oneness in Christ be a blessing from God that continues.

Grace to you and peace

The teacher was doing a creative writing lesson. She started a story about an ant and a grasshopper. The ant worked hard all summer and stored up plenty of food for the winter. The grasshopper played all summer and had nothing. Predictably when winter came the grasshopper was hungry and came to beg for food from the ant. Finish the story, the teacher asked each student. Her many years of experience meant she’d seen every possible ending. Many students would write how the ant shared his food and the grasshopper and the ant became friends. Some students would have the ant say no to the grasshopper, scold him for not working when he had the chance, and the grasshopper ended up dying. But one little boy’s ending surprised her. In his ending the ant gave up all his food to the grasshopper. It allowed the grasshopper to live through the winter. But the ant died. At the bottom of his creative writing story the boy drew three crosses.

We have no reasonable expectation that God would do anything for us. We’re a world full of sinful people. From infancy we’re predisposed to do things against him. We’re like awful grasshoppers, in our sinful nature we play all day and store up nothing. We want to take life easy and only then figure out how to get good things. We all too easily lie and cheat and try to wiggle free with excuses and defense mechanisms saying it wasn’t our fault. It wasn’t fair. We didn’t have a chance. We can only come begging God do something that will allow us to survive. And God should have no basis for giving anything to us. Except he did.

The ant who gave up all his food demonstrates what God’s grace is like. Completely undeserved, without merit of any kind, God helped you. God didn’t just give you little scraps to barely eek out an existence. God gave the very best of himself. He gave you everything. Sent the one he loved. It was his only son he gave, sent him to this world for you. Grace caused God to come to this world and give himself for you. Jesus gave up everything for you. Gave up the perfection of heaven. Gave up his comfort in life to face the suffering you face each day. Gave up his own life into death just like you face. That’s grace. God’s undeserved love that he has for all people, including you.

The grasshopper and ant should not have been friends. The ant worked hard, struggled, and provided for himself. The grasshopper did nothing and wanted something for nothing. The ant should have been hostile towards the grasshopper. God should be hostile with us. In our sins he is. He has been perfect, giving, and completely loving towards the world. But we did nothing and want something for nothing. That isn’t a peaceful relationship. Yet look at what we have from God. Love instead of anger. A relationship with him instead of being cut off. We have grace. And God’s grace creates a relationship of peace. Peace is the condition that exists between you and God now. All the reasons for no peace have been removed. Each and every one of your sins is gone. Forgiven in Jesus. Because of this Jesus can announce that you’re in a peaceful relationship with God. Christ Jesus came for you and you have peace. No more hostility. No more war with God. No reason for separation. Just peace for you in Christ.

That’s your reality. Grace from God. Peace in your relationship with him. We live in this reality. We understand this reality. **“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ”** means grace and peace between you and God. It also means grace and peace between you and each other. Anything that might tear at this grace and peace fabric and cause division is sin. But sin has been dealt with. We confessed and heard that much at the beginning. We witnessed a baptism where sins were washed away. Grace provides a relationship with God. Peace now stands at the heart of your relationships with each other.

Grace to you and peace has led to some wonderful expressions of unity and fellowship and oneness in the past. **"I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, because I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints."** I don't need to remind you. Unity working among you through the proclamation of Christ of former pastors. Each one working to maintain a doctrinal heading that would keep you connected closely to the Word of God. Keeping you close to God's grace. Working to remind you of God's peace in Christ. Teachers in the grade school who faithfully served the littlest among you with law and gospel, sin and grace. They showed Jesus in what they taught and how they lived. You've had numerous volunteers who led Sunday school and Vacation Bible School. God's grace and peace on display to children and adults alike. Members who were led by God's grace to respond to calls for help. Money, cleaning someone's house, providing food, clothing or a place to stay. Whatever was needed you did it, together. Workers helped clean the church, mow the lawn, and maintain the property. The list of God's grace effecting faith filled actions in your lives is long. Each brought individuals together, a oneness in Christ that showed itself in peaceful relationships and service.

Growing in God's grace and peace is also what Paul prays for and what I pray for. **"I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ."** Oneness is under attack in our world today as it always has been. But there are plenty of things that would seek to pull us apart. Maybe it's misunderstandings. Maybe it's outside activities or groups. Maybe it's simply our perceptions of other's actions. Let's be reminded that God poured out his grace on us and gives us his peace. Grace and peace with each other. Let God's grace bring us together. Let peace with God unite us together.

United we'll continue to see God's grace and God's peace in action. There are teachers willing to step up for Sunday school this year. The student numbers might be small, but these volunteers see every child as valuable to teach about Jesus. So they joyfully prepare lessons and materials to engage young minds in God's grace in Jesus. In future summers volunteers will step forward to help with Vacation Bible School. It's a lot of work and it may not always look like what it has in the past, but these volunteers know that God's Word is powerful and the only place God's grace is found. People are seeing the LINC member email. Prayers are being said more frequently and specifically. We're sharing hurts and needs. We're sharing joys. Food is being provided for families in need. People are asking how they can help, who they can visit, where cards can be sent for encouragement.

Paul wrote this letter to a man by the name of Philemon. It was a personal letter from one brother in Christ to another. Paul wanted Philemon to do something. But he didn't just come out and tell Philemon what to do. He didn't command him, though he had the authority of Christ as an apostle. He didn't make him feel bad till he got what he wanted. Paul reminded Philemon of God's grace and peace. He reminded Philemon of what Christianity is all about. God's grace and peace with God leads a Christian to be able to do what is asked of him.

We're reminded daily through God's Word of God's grace and peace. That's what it means to be a Christian. To be brought to the reality of our sinfulness and the joyful reality of our Savior. The more we're reminded of that the easier it is to live our Christianity. For us as a congregation that means being together regularly. It means growing in our fellowship opportunities. It means taking the time to get to know each other. Pray for each other. Talk to each other. Encourage each other. Be the sounding board for someone else. Bring someone back to what it means to be a Christian if they have wandered or are starting. Grow in the oneness we have in Christ. Grow as brothers and sisters in Christ. **"Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."**

The little boy's creative ending to the story of the ant and grasshopper was a surprise. Sacrifice like that seems hard, almost impossible. But remember the picture he drew, the three crosses. It's the answer. Jesus occupied the middle cross for you. Grace had him hanging there, giving his life, dying for you. And God's grace raised him from the dead so you have peace. God's grace and God's peace, that's what makes you God's child. That makes you brothers and sisters to each other. God's grace and God's peace unite you as one. God's grace and God's peace bring out your actions of love. For that I am thankful. For that I rejoice. **"Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you...have refreshed the hearts of the saints."**

To continue becoming united, growing together, loving each other we need God's grace and God's peace every day. Only there will we have what is ours in Christ and gain what is still to come. Grace to you and peace.