

Genesis 15:1-6 Romans 1:16-17; Galatians 3:6-9; Ephesians 2:1-10
October 29, 2017 500th Anniversary of the Protestant Reformation
Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

**LIVE THE VISION
SAYING GRACE BY FAITH**

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Do you say grace?

A number of years ago I was a commissioner from New Hope Presbytery to the meeting of the Synod of the Mid-Atlantic. Several hundred people attended. The evening meal was buffet style. Unfortunately, I was near the back of the line. By the time many of us finally filled our plates, many other people had already finished supper. Someone tapped a glass to get our attention. He said in light of the fact that people were finishing their meals at different times, he wanted to say an appropriate grace. "Let us pray," he said. "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and ***all that is within me***, bless his holy name. Amen."

Do you say grace? Do you ask/say a blessing before you begin eating? Do you say grace when you are in a restaurant? What grace/blessing do you use?

"God is great, God is good, let us thank him for our food. By his hands we all are fed, give us, Lord, our daily bread. Amen."

"Bless us, O Lord, and these thy gifts which we are about to receive from thy bounty, through Christ our Lord. Amen."

"For this and all we are about to receive, make us truly grateful, Lord. Through Christ we pray. Amen."

"Bless, O Lord, this food to our use and us to thy service, and keep us ever mindful of the needs of others. In Jesus's name. Amen."

"Come, Lord Jesus, our guest to be and bless these gifts bestowed by thee. Amen."

The apostle Paul said grace a lot – and I'm not really talking about at meal time although, as a good and faithful Jew, I'm sure he did. No, Paul said grace a lot to his fellow believers:

"To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." (Romans 1:7)

"To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." (1 Corinthians 1:2-3)

"To the churches of Galatia: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forever and ever." (Galatians 1:3-5)

“To the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” (Ephesians 1:1-2)

“To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” (Philippians 1:1-2)

“To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.” (1 Thessalonians 1:1)

Yes, Paul said grace a lot. He took the customary Greek greeting in letter writing of his day (*charis*, sort of like our “Hello!”) and gave it a theological depth as he greeted his fellow believers. When Paul says, “Grace to you from God our Father,” he doesn’t just mean that God is saying “Hi!” to us. No, “Grace to you from God our Father” means God has done something on our behalf which we don’t deserve – he loves us unconditionally in Jesus Christ! So why wouldn’t we say grace, gracias, grazie to God? Not just before we begin eating, but all of the time, in everything we do?

As we think about what kind of response we will give to God’s grace in our lives, with our time, our talents, and our treasures, we can say grace again and again for all that God has done and is doing for us. Our saying grace comes in response to God’s gift in Jesus Christ. Listen to another way the apostle Paul said grace: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.” (Ephesians 2:8-10)

Saying grace by faith is an important part of everything we do as believers in Jesus Christ, especially as heirs to the Protestant Reformation. Five hundred years ago Tuesday, on October 31, 1517, Martin Luther, a monk and professor at the University of Wittenberg in what is now Germany, nailed a piece of paper to the chapel door at the Wittenberg Castle. He had written 95 theses on the paper – propositions about the church that he wanted discussed. Luther probably picked the day we know as Halloween because it was All Hallows’ Eve, the day before All Saints Day. Luther knew many people would come to the chapel on November 1 to worship and they would see his list of theological topics about his beloved church. Martin Luther didn’t set out to start a new church. He was interested in reforming the church he loved. And his concerns had a lot to do with grace.

On a personal level, Luther struggled with the reality of God’s love and grace. Johann von Staupitz was Luther’s confessor. Luther was so wracked with guilt for his sins before God, he wore out Staupitz. One time Luther confessed for six hours! It is said Luther would return to his spartan monk’s cell after confessing, only to remember sins he had forgotten to confess. Von Staupitz told Luther he was making religion too hard – “All you need to do is love God.” Luther’s response was, “I was myself more than once driven to the abyss of despair so that I wished I had never been created. Love God? I hated him.”

Johann von Staupitz resigned his position as professor of Bible at the university and appointed Luther in his place. Luther had been lecturing on theology and had not

spent much time in God's Word. Von Staupitz wanted Luther to wrestle with the Word. As Luther did, he came to realize the truth of God's love and grace for him personally and for the world. Some Bible verses significant for Luther are ones we heard this morning: "And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness." (Genesis 15:6) "For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith . . . For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, 'The one who is righteous will live by faith.'" (Romans 1:16-17) "And the scriptures, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, declared the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'All the Gentiles shall be blessed in you.' For this reason, those who believe are blessed with Abraham who believed." (Galatians 3:8-9)

It has been said that Thesis #62 in Luther's list is the heart of what he believed and what he wanted the church to live by: "The true treasure of the church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God."

As heirs of the Protestant Reformation, Presbyterians hold fast to what are traditionally called the "Five *Solas*." You will find them scattered throughout today's bulletin in the margins: *Sola Gratia*, *Sola Fide*, *Solus Christus*, *Sola Scriptura*, and *Soli Deo Gloria*. I put these five *solas* next to the corresponding parts of our worship service as a reminder of how God's grace and love shape our lives. In our October newsletter, I wrote about identifying as a Christian, Protestant, Reformed, Presbyterian, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and a part of the Wallace Presbyterian Church. As many of you have heard me say over the years, one of our seminary professors professed, "Being Presbyterian is not the only way to be a faithful Christian, but it is a good and scriptural way to be a faithful Christian."

On this Reformation Sunday, two days before what is regarded as the beginning of the Protestant Reformation, it is good to be reminded of how God's love and grace and mercy in Jesus Christ shape our lives. The distinguishing characteristics of the Christian life in the Reformed tradition include recognizing the majesty of God and praising him ("There is a God, and it's not you!); leading an ethical life conformed to the will of God; being put in right relationship with God because of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, and striving to live as forgiven (not perfect) people; using our minds in the service of God, so we can interpret God's Word for ourselves and be productive and faithful citizens in our community; the preaching of God's Word; being part of the community of faith; and leading a disciplined life of simplicity.

Presbyterians believe that what we profess and how we live are to be integrally related. That's what Paul meant when he said grace – "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God . . . For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life." (Ephesians 2:8-10) Notice how important it is to get the order right – we have been saved through faith by grace, ***in order*** to do good works as our way of life, ***not the other way around***.

Which means, because of God's grace toward us in Jesus Christ and our faith in him, we are called to lead lives of worship, service, stewardship, and faith. We are

called to put our love in action, acknowledging the Lordship of God, and thankfully receiving the gift of God's grace. We say grace by faith by leading a life of thankfulness in return.

At the end of last week's sermon, I mentioned the session's encouragement to all of us to participate in our "faith-based budgeting." You can read more about that in my article in the November newsletter. As an important part of our saying grace/thanks with faith because of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, the session is asking all of us to make a commitment to God for 2018 – a commitment of how we will use our time, our talents, and our treasure in thankful response to God's grace in Jesus Christ. Next week the session will distribute packets of stewardship information to everyone, either in person or through the mail. In that packet you will find a two-part pledge card. You are asked to fill out both sides – Time and Talent on the lefthand side, Financial Commitment on the righthand side. You will also find a plain envelope in your packet. You will be asked to put your financial commitment pledge card in that envelope, seal it, and address it to yourself. On Sunday, November 19, you are invited and encouraged to bring your envelope forward and dedicate your commitment to God by placing the envelope on the communion table. All of the envelopes will be collected, but not a single one will be opened. Eleven months later you will receive your envelope in the mail as a reminder to fulfill the commitment you made to God and his church.

In the spirit of the Protestant Reformation and good Presbyterian tradition, ask yourself: How does my life express my faith in Jesus Christ and my thanks for God's grace? What will I do with all that God has given me? How can I say grace with faith?

When Karla e-mailed me the choir's anthem for today, I responded and said, "Karla, the anthem is great for my sermon on Sunday. Thanks." As you come to the Lord's table this morning to celebrate the Lord's Supper, think on the choir's words as you say grace by faith:

*Come to the table, come and be blessed.
Come to the table, God's gift of grace,
For there is mercy in His embrace.
Bring Him your worship, Bring Him your praise,
Come to the table, God's gift of grace.*

Let us pray: Generous God, thank you for the gift of salvation through the grace of your Son, Jesus Christ. You bring joy to our hearts! Help us to respond to your grace by sharing our faith, talents, and monetary blessings through the ministries of this church. May your loving Spirit shine through all that we say and do. Accept these gifts that we offer through Jesus, our risen Lord and Savior. Amen.