

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, March 13, 2011**

IT'S A GRACE THING

Ephesians 4:17-32

INTRODUCTION TO SCRIPTURE READING

Last Sunday, I told you the heartbreaking story of a family caught in the vice of ungrace, passing on a legacy of hardheartedness, of bitterness and alienation and unforgiveness from one generation to the next. I then shared with you the Bible's prescription (God's Rx) for breaking the cycle of ungrace in our lives. It is found in Ephesians 4:32, where Paul says: "Be kind and compassionate to one another, *forgiving each other, just as God in Christ forgave you*" (emphasis added). I told you that the word for *forgive* means *to act in grace toward (another person)*, which means that we are to *act in grace toward others, just as God in Christ acted in grace toward us*.

It's a grace thing, which means it is a God-thing. It is the only way to break the cycle of ungrace.

I want to continue to explore this grace thing with you today by looking at the same passage of Scripture we read last Sunday. But I want to use a wider lens today. Instead of beginning at verse 25, as we did last week, I want to go back to verse 17. As we look at this passage of Scripture together, I want you to think about Paul's teaching from the perspective of the grace you have received in your life. I want you to look at it in the light of Paul's earlier declaration in Ephesians 2 that salvation is by grace alone. It is a gift of God's sovereign and all-sufficient grace (2:5, 8, 9). The message of the gospel is that in spite of the mess we have made of our own lives, in spite of the mess we have made of the world, in the person and work of His Son Jesus Christ, God has acted in grace toward us to forgive all our sins, to set us free from the tyranny of sin and guilt in our lives, to make us new persons from the inside out, to restore us to fellowship with Him, to give us a new identity as His very own adopted, beloved children, and to give us an eternal inheritance in His kingdom in heaven.

In His grace, which comes free of charge to people who do not and cannot and will not ever deserve it, God has acted in grace toward us. And He continues to act in grace toward us, because that is just the way God is.

Now, because of His saving grace in our lives, because of His grace that daily sustains us and keeps us in His care, the grace that protects us so well, as the Heidelberg Catechism says, that not even a hair can fall from our head apart from His will, the grace that gives us strength when we are weak – because of the extravagant, overflowing, prodigal grace we have received from God, what are we to do? We are to live grace-filled lives. By the enabling power of the Holy Spirit who is not only with us but actually resides in us, we are to incarnate God's grace in our thoughts and attitudes, speech and actions. That is what this passage of Scripture is about.

Let's look together at God's Word from Ephesians 4:17-32. With trusting and expectant hearts, let's give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God's holy Word.

THE MAIN POINT: LIVE LIKE A BELIEVER

With Daylight Saving Time beginning last night, you may have time on your mind (if not on your hands) today. Like me, you might wish you could have that hour back without having to wait until November. Not likely to happen. Speaking of time, though, one thing I want you to notice in our Scripture reading today is that the apostle Paul doesn't waste any. He doesn't beat around the bush. He gets right to the point. What is the point? The main point in this passage is that Christians are not to live like non-Christians. Believers are not to live like unbelievers. Followers of Christ are not to live the same way that people who don't know Him as Savior and Lord live. If you belong to Christ, Paul says, if you have come to know Him as Savior and Lord in your life, you've got to stop living like an unbeliever and start living like a fully-devoted follower of Christ. If you have experienced God's amazing grace in your life, if you have been saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone (which is the only way to be saved), you are called to live a grace-filled life. Having been saved by grace, you are now to live by grace. You are to act in grace toward others, just as God has acted in grace toward you in Christ.

Because of grace, you are no longer the same person you once were. Because of grace, I'm no longer the same person I used to be. Praise God for that! Because of grace, we are not what we used to be. We are different. We have been made new by the regenerating and transforming power of God's Spirit. Because of God's grace and the difference it makes, we are to let go of our old sinful way of life. We are to leave it behind as we go forward in faith as followers of the Lord Jesus. We are to get rid of our old self (4:22) with all its self-indulgence and lusts, all its intellectual and spiritual futility, all its pride and bitterness and ungrace. We are to get rid of it all like an old set of torn, tattered, stained clothes that no longer fit.

In their place, we are to put on the new self, which is a gift of God's grace to us in Christ. Having received the gift of new life in Christ, we are to put on the clothing of a Christ-like character – what Jerry Bridges calls “garments of grace” – a wardrobe fit for men and women (boys and girls, too) who have been called and equipped by God to live grace-filled lives.

Since we have received God's saving grace in Christ, since God has acted in grace toward us, God wants you and me to live like believers. That is the point. God wants us to live grace-filled lives. God wants us to act in grace toward one another, and toward people who don't share our faith. God wants us to be people of grace. Applied to the church as a whole, God wants us to do our part both individually and collectively to “pipe the tune of grace,” as Philip Yancey says, and to make our fellowship “a haven of grace in a world of ungrace” (*What's So Amazing About Grace?*, pp. 42, 14). It's a grace thing.

GRACE-FILLED LIVING

When we come to verse 25, we find that Paul moves from theological considerations of grace to concrete application, giving us several practical examples of the difference grace makes, and what a grace-filled life looks like.

1. No More Falsehood

The first application is in verse 25: “Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor.” No more falsehood.

This is pretty basic. We all know we’re not supposed to lie. We know that the commandment against bearing false witness is included in God’s original “Top Ten” (Exodus 20:1-17; see 20:15 for this particular commandment). So we know it is important. But Christians aren’t always very good about being honest with one another about what’s going on in our lives. Church people aren’t always very good about admitting our struggles or problems or questions. Too many times we try to give the impression that we’ve got it all together, when we’re really falling apart on the inside.

The church is meant to be a fellowship where Jesus is Lord and everybody counts, a family in which we are all connected to one another as brothers and sisters in Christ, a place of grace where we can stop pretending and be honest with each other about faith and life. Dishonesty, putting up a false front, hiding the truth from each other and/or lying to each other – in one way or another, all of these impede or disrupt or fracture fellowship in the body of Christ. They undermine unity and trust.

Don’t misunderstand: Paul is not giving permission to say anything you want anytime you want to anyone you want in any way you want. He is not saying it is OK to spill your guts and tell your life story whenever you feel like it. Nor is he giving permission to unleash an angry barrage of criticism against someone, as long as you do it in the name of truth. No. Truth matters. We are to speak the truth to one another. But, as Paul says earlier in Ephesians (4:15), we are always to speak the truth *in love*. Truth and love always belong together. People who take pride in the ability to be brutally honest are sometimes just that – brutal. That is not a grace thing. Knowing we can be real with one another and providing a safe place for others to be real with us – that is a grace thing.

2. Handle Anger with Care

For the second application, look at verses 26 and 27: “‘In your anger do not sin’ (Psalm 4:4). Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold.”

Anger is not inherently wrong. It is possible to be angry without sinning, as the Scripture says. There are times when it is right to be angry. Some things in this fallen world ought to make us angry. But we must handle anger with care, for it can easily degenerate into sin. If we don’t handle it properly, it can produce a root of bitterness that grows up to cause trouble

not only in us but in our relationships with others (Hebrews 12:15). That root of bitterness, as we have said before, is a prime example of ungrace.

While anger can be either righteous or unrighteous, depending on what we get angry about, along with the motivations of our heart and the way we express our anger, John Piper says that “good anger among fallen people is rare,” which is why the Bible tells us in James 1:19-20 to “be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry, for man’s anger does not produce the righteous life God desires.”

- Quick to listen.
- Slow to speak, especially when we just want to give our opinion or to offer unsolicited advice.
- Slow to get angry, like God Himself who is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love (Psalm 145:8).

Handle anger with care in your life. Don’t allow it to block the flow of grace. Paul gives three pointers about handling anger with care. First, he says, when you are angry, don’t let your anger turn into sin. Don’t deal with your anger in a sinful way. Don’t let your anger degenerate into sin.

Second, he says, don’t let the sun go down while you are still angry. In other words, don’t let your anger fester. Don’t allow the seeds of bitterness or resentment to take root in your heart. Deal with your anger and the situation which has led to it as soon as you can. Today, if possible. Before the sun goes down.

Third, he says, make sure you don’t give the devil a foothold. Not even an inch. When you nurse a grudge or harbor anger in your heart toward someone – anyone – you give the devil a prime opportunity to move in and cause that root of bitterness to grow up and instigate trouble in your relationships and to create division, which is what Satan loves to do.

Handle anger with care, so that it does not lead to ungrace.

3. No More Stealing

The third application is in verse 28: “The one who has been stealing must steal no longer [must stop!], but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, in order to have something to share with those in need.”

There is no place for stealing in the Christian life. You can be a Christian teacher or a Christian student, but you cannot be a Christian thief. You can be a Christian nurse or doctor or businessperson or diplomat, but you cannot be a Christian robber or extortionist. Stealing from your company or your boss, stealing from your employees or co-workers, stealing from a friend or neighbor or family member, stealing from a store or a restaurant, stealing from the government by cheating on your taxes or milking the system in order to get benefits you should not receive lawfully – stealing anything that does not belong to you is incompatible

with your life and profession as a follower of Christ. After all, the commandment against stealing is right up there in the original Top Ten. It is #8 on the list (Exodus 20:15).

I hope this is not an issue for any of us. But if it is, take this admonition to heart. If you're stealing in any way, stop. Do not pass go and do not collect \$200 (as in Monopoly). Stop right now and repent. My heart goes out to those who are unemployed and want to work. I'm not talking about you. I'm talking to anyone who is taking unfair advantage of another person(s), anyone taking unfair advantage of the "system" because they don't want to work.

God is full of compassion and grace, but He also expects those who are able to work to do their best to provide for themselves and their families. In addition, as we see in verse 28, God calls us to engage in honest labor in order to be able to bless others by being charitable and generously sharing what we have with those in need, whether they are part of our church family, or victims of circumstances or catastrophes beyond their control, such as the people of Japan in the aftermath of this monumental earthquake this past week. The income we receive from honest labor presents us with the opportunity to act with grace and kindness to others in their need. It really is a grace thing.

This, too, is a grace thing: A little more than 100 years ago (1906), a great revival swept across Wales. Thousands upon thousands of lives were changed by the power of the gospel. Along the southern seacoast of Wales, stretching from Swansea to Cardiff, were several shipyards. For years, it seems, the men who worked in those shipyards had stolen tools for their own use – items ranging from hammers to wheelbarrows. When the revival came, men who were touched by it were convicted in their hearts that true repentance required that they return what they had taken. So many of them brought back stolen goods that the shipyards were soon overwhelmed. According to J. Edwin Orr, one of the foremost historians of the revival, at some of the shipyards signs were put up which said: "If you have been converted during the recent revival and are planning to return things you have stolen from this shipyard, please do not do so. Keep what you have stolen. We have no more room for stolen goods." (Tony Campolo, *Stories That Feed Your Soul*, p. 97)

How about that! That is one of the fruits of true revival. Without a doubt, it is a grace thing.

4. Watch the Way You Talk

Fourth, look at verse 29: "Let no unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen." The paraphrase of this verse in *The Message* begins this way: "Watch the way you talk."

As we have already seen, our Father in heaven wants us to be done with falsehood and dishonesty in our relationships. God wants us to speak truthfully to one another – but always in love. In verse 29, we see that there is no place for foul or profane language which can have a corrupting influence upon us. There is no place for contemptuous, slanderous, demeaning, vulgar talk in our lives. Why? Because words have immense power, incredible power, to hurt or to heal, to give hope or to destroy it, to build up or to tear down. And because, as Jesus said in Matthew 12, our words are a window into our hearts. It is out of the overflow of

the heart, He said, that the mouth speaks (12:34). So, a vulgar mouth is a sign of a dirty heart. If you constantly criticize or tear others down, it is a sign of a judgmental heart where ungrace abounds. Not good, my friends.

Because of God's grace extended to us, because God has spoken and continues to speak graciously into our lives, we are to speak grace into the lives of others. In fact, verse 29 tells us to build others up with our words – not with false flattery but to encourage and inspire them with the truth – so that our words, literally, might give grace to those who hear. The words you speak can be a grace gift to the people God has put in your life. In another place, in Colossians 4:6, Paul says much the same thing: “Let your conversation be always full of grace.” Always full of grace. God can actually use the words we speak and the spirit in which we speak them as a means of grace to minister to people in special need of His grace. It really is a grace thing.

5. Don't Grieve the Holy Spirit

Let's look at verse 30 very quickly, and then we're done: “Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.”

I don't know about you, but I don't want to grieve the Holy Spirit. There are lots of different ways we can grieve God: By living a lie and deceiving one another (4:25), by allowing our anger to turn into sin and poison our heart (4:26-27), by stealing from others and refusing to work (4:28), by the words we speak (4:29), and by all the things Paul mentions in verse 31 – bitterness, rage, ungodly anger, provoking arguments and quarrels, slander (which is speaking evil of others, often behind their backs), and malice (which is wishing and possibly plotting evil against others). They are all the fruit of ungrace.

And I'm sure of this: Ungrace grieves the Holy Spirit. Ungrace grieves the heart of God. But when we show kindness and compassion to one another, as Paul says in verse 32, when we do the hard work of forgiving each other, when we act in grace toward one another, just as God has acted in grace toward us in the saving work of His Son Jesus Christ on the cross for us, it is a beautiful thing – a grace thing – that blesses the lives of others, and brings a smile to God's face and joy to His heart.

May we live such grace-filled lives by the power of His grace at work in us that it may always be so, to the glory of His name. Amen.