

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, May 29, 2011**

**THE BENEFITS OF GRACE:
PEACE WITH GOD**

Romans 5:1-11

Last Sunday, I told you some things I sensed the Holy Spirit wanted me to say. What I said was nothing new. But God had placed on my heart some things I don't say out loud often enough. All of them are things we may think and believe and feel in our hearts, but I (or we) just don't say them out loud enough. We may think they go without saying, but sometimes they really do need to be said.

To refresh your memory, or in case you missed it last Sunday, here are five things I don't say out loud often enough:

1. I love Jesus. I *love* Jesus. Yes, I do!
2. Jesus loves *me*, so much that He died for me. Chris Tomlin's song lyrics say it so well:

I'm forgiven because You were forsaken
I'm accepted, You were condemned
I'm alive and well, Your Spirit is within me
Because You died and rose again.
Amazing love!

It is amazing but true: Jesus loves me. And you.

3. I love the church with all its warts and shortcomings and failures, because it is still God's church. It is, in the words of Timothy Dwight, "the Church our blest Redeemer saved with His own precious blood." And it exists to serve God's purposes in this (and every) generation.
4. I love *this* church. I love *Faith Church*. I love all of you. I long for each of you to experience the amazingness of God's grace, to love and serve God with your whole being – with all your heart and soul and mind and strength, and to become more and more like Jesus through the transforming power of the Holy Spirit at work in you. I long for us as a church to be all that God wants us to be, so that God may be glorified more and more in our life and ministry and witness.
5. I long for God to visit us in a special way with revival. I long for a heaven-sent, Holy Spirit-powered revival to come to our church and to the church everywhere in the world where revival is needed. I pray for revival in the lives of all of us who need it – a revival which will result in true sorrow for and a turning away from every known sin in our lives, a renewing and deepening of our faith in Christ, an increase in our spiritual temperature and our love for the Lord Jesus, a new or renewed passion to tell others about Jesus and His saving

love, a longing in our hearts to know God better, a hunger for more and more of God's Word, and a re-energized desire to love and serve God, to love and serve one another, and to love and serve people who are spiritually lost, in the name of Jesus. I long for God to send revival to the church. Including our church. In our lives individually. And in our life and witness together.

I want you to keep all these things in mind as we begin to consider what the apostle Paul says in Romans 5 about the benefits of having been justified (declared righteous) in the sight of God by the grace of God through faith in the saving work of the Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ, who demonstrated the love of God for us by giving His life for us on the cross, to pay for our sins and to reconcile us to God. In these 11 verses, Paul points out five specific benefits of God's grace. Today we'll look at just the first.

PEACE WITH GOD

It is right there in verse 1, where Paul says: "Since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God." If you have been justified in God's sight, if Jesus has taken the guilt of your sin upon Himself and has clothed you in His righteousness, if you have been declared righteous before God on the basis of Jesus' atoning death for you, then you are at peace with God. You have peace with God.

Peace is a universal human longing. Not everybody acknowledges God. Not everyone knows or believes in God. Lots of people have wrong conceptions of God and what He is like. Not everyone believes in Jesus as the Son of God and Savior of sinners. But everybody longs for peace. Everybody wants to find a way to bring an end to the war taking place in their hearts, the ongoing battle between the kind of people we are and the kind of people we want to be, along with the guilt and shame we so often feel. Everybody wants to know the secret of real peace – peace of mind, peace with other people, and peace with God.

The Bible says there is only one way to have peace with God. There is only one way to be reconciled to God and be at peace with Him. There is only one way to experience the peace that comes from being made right with God. The only way to obtain this peace, Paul says, is "through our Lord Jesus Christ" (5:1). The only way is through Jesus.

There was a movie a couple of years ago (2009) called *Get Low*, in which Robert Duvall starred as Felix Bush, a Depression-era recluse, an eccentric loner who lived in the backwoods of Tennessee. Felix wanted to throw his own funeral party while he was still alive. Early on in the movie, he visited a local minister, a black preacher named Gus Horton, seeking the pastor's help to arrange his funeral. Placing a wad of cash in front of the pastor, Felix said: "It's time for me to get low." Rev. Horton didn't know that to "get low" was a way of talking about dying and having your body laid low in the ground. When he asked Felix what he meant, Felix said: "Down to business. I need a funeral." When the pastor asked who the funeral was for, Felix said: "Me."

Rev. Horton was bewildered by the request. It's not every day that a pastor is asked to conduct a funeral for someone who is not dead. And Horton had heard plenty of stories about

Mr. Bush. People liked to talk about him. He was the topic of lots and lots of gossip, most of it not true (as is usually the case with gossip).

Acknowledging that he had heard stories about Mr. Bush, the pastor said: “My mother used to say that gossip is the devil’s radio. What matters is when you come to the end of your life that you’re ready for the next one. Now, have you made your peace with God, sir?”

“I paid,” said Felix. What he meant is that he had spent most of his adult life trying to atone for his sins. In particular, he was referring to something which had happened 40 years earlier. Felix had had an affair with a married woman. When the woman’s husband found out about it, the husband became enraged and ultimately killed her. But Felix blamed himself for her death, and spent the next 40 years “paying” for it by cutting himself off from other people, and depriving himself of the blessings of a wife and children. For 40 years, Felix Bush had lived alone, deep in the woods, cut off from relationships and the possibility of love, all in a relentless but futile attempt to pay for his transgression. Now, after four decades of this self-atonement project, he hoped he had finally paid off his debt.

But Rev. Horton said to him: “Mr. Bush, you can’t buy forgiveness. It’s free. But you do have to ask for it.”

That was not what Felix wanted to hear, so he angrily grabbed his wad of cash and stomped out of the church.

Dear friends, listen to Rev. Horton. You cannot buy forgiveness. It is free. It has already been bought for you. It has already been purchased for you. Jesus paid for it. Jesus paid it all. It is a gift of God’s grace. Instead of trying somehow to earn it or buy it, instead of trying to impress God (or other people) with how good and commendable you are, what you must simply do is to admit that you need forgiveness, and receive it by faith, trusting in the Lord Jesus and what He has done for you.

You cannot buy peace with God. It is not for sale. It is offered and given as a free gift to everyone who comes to Jesus, when you repent of your sins and trust in the Lord Jesus alone to forgive you, to deliver you from the unbearable weight of your sin and guilt, and to give you peace. The only way to obtain and experience real peace with God is through Jesus (5:1). In fact, the Bible says in Ephesians 2:14 that Jesus Himself “is our peace.” “Through His blood, shed on the cross,” it says in Colossians 1:20, He has made peace for us with God. In addition, He has made peace for us with one another in the fellowship of His church by breaking down the barriers that so often separate us from believers from other races or cultures or traditions.

Through Jesus and Jesus alone, we have peace with God and with one another. Without Jesus, there is no peace with God. But, if you have been justified by God through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, if you have been declared “not guilty” in the court of God’s perfect justice, then you have peace with God.

GRACE AND PEACE

If you have read the letters of Paul in the New Testament, you have probably noticed that at the beginning of each of his letters, from Romans to Philemon, Paul includes a greeting with these (or similar) words: “Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 1:3). *Grace and peace*. It is always in that order. It is never *peace and grace*. Do you know why? It is because peace is the result of grace. Grace comes before peace. Peace with God comes through the grace of God. The grace of God precedes the peace of God. Peace with God is a gift of God’s grace. As I have already said, you cannot buy peace with God. It is not for sale. Even if it were, no one in the world could afford what it would cost. You cannot “do” anything to prove you deserve it. You can receive it only by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, grace which is given free of charge to people who don’t deserve it and never will.

The grace of God produces peace *with* God and the peace *of* God (Philippians 4:7), which God will place as a sentinel to guard your heart and mind against the enemy of your soul who wants to rob you of your peace, and replace it with fear and guilt and worry and doubt. Remember what God in His grace has done for you and the peace He has won for you through the blood of Jesus, shed on the cross. Remember, too, that Satan, for all his devious scheming and flat-out lies, is a defeated enemy. His doom was sealed at the cross. Remember, as it says in 1 John 3:8, that the reason the Son of God came was to destroy the work of the devil. Remember, too, that through Jesus we are more than conquerors, and nothing the devil or anyone else can do has the power to separate us from His love (Romans 8:35-39). Remember that the One who is in you – God the Holy Spirit – is greater than the one who is in the world (1 John 4:4).

Peace with God comes through the grace of God. Without the grace of God, there is no peace with God. But for all who have been justified in the sight of God by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ the Son of God, we have peace with God. Not just in heaven after we die. Right now. Peace with God is a present reality. It is our present possession as the redeemed children of God.

This peace with God is not the only benefit of grace we receive from God. There is much, much more. It is, however, the first of many blessings of grace God gives. This peace is not the result of a deadened conscience which no longer troubles us no matter what we do. As Paul makes clear in Romans 6, the grace of God which produces peace with God does not liberate us from all moral and spiritual restraint. It does not give us permission to live just to please ourselves, to do whatever feels good, or to sin with reckless abandon. No way! Go down that road, and you will forfeit the blessing of communion and peace with God. It is when you give up control of your life, when you entrust yourself wholly to God, when you submit willingly in faith, love, and obedience, to God’s gracious and sovereign rule in your life, that you will experience the fullness of His peace.

Do you have peace with God today? I pray you do. Do you long to be at peace with God and know His peace? Do you long to know that your sins are forgiven and that you have been made right with God? Is there some roadblock of sin in your life that needs to be removed?

Do you need and long for a fresh start in your relationship with God? This blessing of His amazing grace is available to you today. It is available to everyone who is willing to receive it. But you can only receive it on God's terms – by His grace alone through simple, trusting faith alone in the saving work of Jesus Christ alone. Let Jesus be your peace (Ephesians 2:14). Let His peace rule in your heart (Colossians 3:15).

BLOOD IN THE BOMOKANDE RIVER

I will close with this. In 1964, a missionary named J. W. Rucker was attacked and killed by a mob in what was then the Belgian Congo. After killing him, they took his body, threw it in the back of a truck, and drove to the Bomokande River, where they tossed his lifeless body to the crocodiles. The Bomokande River flows through the territory of a tribe called the Mangbetos, a people with virtually no knowledge of the gospel. During a time of civil war, the head of the Mangbetos appealed to the national government in Kinshasa for help in dealing with the violence. In response, the government sent a highly-respected policeman known as the Brigadier. Shortly before he was killed, the missionary, Tucker, had introduced the Brigadier to the Lord Jesus. Now the Brigadier had a burning desire to spread the gospel to the Mangbetos, knowing that Jesus was and is the only way to peace. Though he did his best to witness, at first he got no response. Then he learned of a Mangbeto tradition which said: "If the blood of any man flows in the Bomokande River, you must listen to his message."

The Brigadier called together the head of the tribe and all the elders, and said to them: "Some time ago a man was killed, and his body was thrown into your Bomokande River. The crocodiles in the river ate him up. His blood flowed in your river. But before he died, he left me a message. This message concerns God's Son, Jesus Christ, who came to this world to save people who were sinners. He died for the sins of the world. He died for my sins. I received this message, and it changed my life." As the Brigadier spoke, the Holy Spirit came upon the assembled crowd, and many of them came to faith in Christ. Since that day, thousands of Mangbetos have come to know Christ, and churches have been established, as a result of the message from the missionary whose blood flowed in the Bomokande River, a message about another man – Jesus, the very Son of God – through whose blood, shed on the cross for you and me (Colossians 1:20), we have peace with God. For He is our peace.

This is an amazing gift of grace from an amazing God!

Are you at peace with God today? Let Him give you the gift of His peace. Dwell securely in the assurance of His peace. For, as the Bible says in Isaiah 26:3, He will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, unshaken and unshakeable, because they trust in Him.

Lord, let it be so in us, now and always. Amen.