

"Is Grace, for You, Dead or Alive?"

Text: Ephesians 3:1b-11

Grace, mercy, and peace be multiplied to you in the revelation that Jesus Christ is not just the Savior of the world, he is *your* personal Savior - from sin, death, and eternal torment. Amen.

Dear Fellow Servants of the One True God:

In January of 2008 a Spanish businessman drove over a boy riding his bike at night and killed him. Since the boy was riding without a light or reflectors, the man was not charged. A short time later, however, he sued the boy's family for damages to the underside of his Audi. An enraged public outcry forced him to withdraw the suit.

In 1995 a Chesapeake, VA inmate filed suit against himself seeking \$5million in damages. Since he had committed grand larceny in violation of his own conscience, he concluded that he had violated his own civil rights and that he should be forced to pay. However, since he was incarcerated and could not himself pay the fine, he also sued to have the state pay the damages. Thankfully, he lost. Well, part of him lost – the part doing the suing. I guess it could be argued that the part of him that was being sued also won...

The list of disturbingly ridiculous lawsuits is long and growing. Many of them actually succeed in court. It is a rather obvious symptom of a growing *something for nothing* problem in our society.

Has the "disease" crept into your own life and your own worldview? Ask yourself a few questions to determine if you too have been adversely affected by our growing national tragedy:

Do you feel that you should get more money from your employer just because your boss's salary is greater than your own, or because your company is presently making more money than they did last year? On the other hand, do you feel that your salary should be cut dramatically if your company loses money in any given quarter? Do you believe that you are automatically entitled to a raise at work just because another year has passed, even though your workload has not increased and the cost of living has not gone up? Do you believe that working roughly one third of your life should entitle you to a life of ease for the last third of your life? Do you think that it is fair and just to give your accumulated wealth to your children so that others (taxpayers) have to pay for your nursing home costs and medical expenses at the end of your life? Do you think you

ought to be able to watch television shows for free and that they ought to be commercial free? Do you think it is acceptable to download pirated software or music from the internet at least in part because the companies and artists who produce such things already make plenty of money?

Interesting questions. Often disturbing answers. Go a bit deeper. We expect our religion to provide us with answers to such critical, pivotal questions as the meaning of life, death, heaven, hell, disease, even God himself. How hard are you willing to work to achieve or gain such insights, or do you essentially expect someone else to figure it out and just provide you with an executive summary once each week? How much time and effort are you willing to expend or invest to safeguard the spiritual gifts you have been given? Do you expect others to pay the bills so that your church doors can stay open and that you should be able to gain all of these benefits without cost or effort?

To a certain extent, every single one of us has been infected with a something for nothing mentality. We leave our parent's house with the expectation that our standard of living should start where their's left off – even though they have worked for decades to get where they are and we have done essentially nothing but live off of others.

While this sort of mentality is crippling our society, social problems actually pale in comparison to the spiritual havoc it is creating in the Church. That is the subject – the problem - we examine this morning. The text that will form the basis of our study is found in the Third Chapter of Paul's Letter to the Church in Ephesus:

^{ESV} **Ephesians 3:1b-11** ***"I, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles--² assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you,³ how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly.⁴ When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ,⁵ which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit.⁶ This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.⁷ ¶ Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me by the working of his power.⁸ To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ,⁹ and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery***

hidden for ages in God who created all things, ¹⁰ so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. ¹¹ This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord."

So far the very words of our God. Confident that God will keep his promise to visit us with power and great blessing whenever we study his Word, so we pray, "***Sanctify us by your truth, O Lord. Your word is truth.***" Amen.

Thomas Jefferson once wrote, "*The worst day in a man's life is when he sits down and begins thinking about how he can get something for nothing.*" Pride and greed are obviously at work here. It is *pride* that tells me that I am worth more than I am being paid and *greed* that refuses to be satisfied with receiving only what I have actually earned by the labor of my own hands.

Again, while all of this absolutely destroys lives economically and socially, the spiritual implications are truly terrifying. The consequences there are truly *eternal*.

We are indeed in strange territory here, for we have come to a strange place where our sense of entitlement meets our desire for something for nothing. The result is that the gospel itself is in peril, as are such key Christian doctrines as grace and justification. In fact if we really are deserving of all that we imagine, then grace really is dead.

We define grace, of course, as "*God's undeserved love for sinners.*" He demonstrated that love nowhere more obviously and dramatically than when he sacrificed his Son Jesus to pay for our sins. Yet this sacrifice of the Lamb of God is robbed of its beauty and meaning whenever and wherever mankind imagines that God was in any way *obligated* to do anything at all to secure our rescue, or that we were worthy or deserving in any way. In fact the key word in our definition of *grace* is that word "undeserved" – God's *undeserved* love for sinners.

You were probably as indignant as I when you first learned that union contracts force many companies to continue paying workers for not working when automation or improvements in efficiency made their jobs obsolete. Even though their companies no longer needed their services, the incredibly twisted thought was that these unnecessary workers were somehow still entitled not to a job but to the *pay for that job*. (Jefferson would turn over in his grave.)

Yet when we shift the conversation from the physical to the spiritual, consider that you and I are ongoing beneficiaries of a much sweeter deal. The law commanded every human being to carry out the tireless work of keeping God's will perfectly. We opted not to. God's rescue plan was to have his Son carry out that work in our place, and to have you and I reap the benefit of forgiveness and eternal life. We didn't do even one thing to earn such benefits. Jesus did. Far from deserving, we were the ultimate in undeserving lazy spiritual slobs.

And yet God the Father, in light of what Jesus has done, has declared each of us to be sinless in his sight.

Were any of us deserving of such a gift? Obviously not – which is why grace (and the gospel itself) is such a remarkable example of an undeserved gift. Yet understand well that just as someone has to earn the money that pays for all the "free stuff" being given away in our society, so also the payment for our sins was not "something for nothing." It was and is a gift as far as you and I are concerned, but that gift was earned at great cost by another in our place.

This morning we celebrate two events that also provide insight into God' love and our own undeservedness: the baptism of Jesus and the beginning of the season of Epiphany. Both lose nearly all meaning and significance in the heart steeped in the "something for nothing" myth.

God knew that even with the birth, life, and death of his Son, human beings could not even bring themselves to believe in that Savior on their own. So he gave us the gift of baptism. With the Word of God applied to simple water, God the Holy Spirit promised to work saving faith in human beings young and old. The part that man carries out could not be more simple: God's Word plus water applied to a human being. The part that God the Holy Spirit carries out could not be more amazing: a dead soul is brought to spiritual life. Simply amazing, *and never earned*. It is a pure and holy gift from a merciful, loving God.

Jesus, of course, had no sins to wash away. His baptism was, first of all, an anointing by the Holy Spirit for the work that lay ahead of him. It marked the beginning of his public ministry at age 30. Secondly, by his participation in baptism Jesus gave us an example that we certainly should be eager to follow. Note well – baptism was not a law that had to be obeyed out of fear but a loving invitation to participate in the means of grace – an offer of spiritual life from our merciful God.

On this day we also enter the season of Epiphany. Our typical reaction is a yawn. In other words, while the paraments on altar and pulpit change color, we notice and appreciate little else. It's not that big of a deal to us. Why? Mostly because we take the good things of God for granted, and consider ourselves worthy.

Epiphany is when we celebrate the fact that God not only sent his Son to be our Savior, he also revealed that Son *to the world* as the Savior of all mankind. Our sense of entitlement works against us here in two different ways. First, because we imagine that *of course* God will *reveal* his Son to us as our Savior. Why else would he send him? Yet it is prideful and arrogant for us to take *anything at all for granted* from our God. God owes mankind nothing, and yet he has given us everything.

Second, Epiphany generally flies under our appreciation radar because it is about God revealing his Son as the Savior *of all mankind – not just the Jews*. *"Well of course God sent his Son to save more than just those troublesome Jews. In fact isn't it true that Americans are actually much more deserving of such generosity than the Jews?"* God preserve us from such nonsense. In fact every bit of this sense of privilege and deservedness is sin that irreparably damages the gospel and God's grace.

It is, on the other hand, the very essence of humility to affirm that God owed me nothing. Nothing at all. In fact what I deserved was a life of misery and an eternity of torment. Paul understood this full well, didn't he? He gives evidence in our text when he says, ***"Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me by the working of his power. ⁸ To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ."***

Paul was arguably the greatest Christian missionary of all time. Through his mission efforts untold millions (directly and indirectly) came to hear the gospel and be saved. Yet Paul still referred to himself as unworthy – as ***"less than the least of all the saints."*** Perhaps this is part of the reason why Paul thrilled and rejoiced so at the good news of sins forgiven through faith in Jesus Christ – because he had no sense of entitlement, privilege, or deservedness. Paul recognized it as a pure, undeserved gift from his God – the *undeserved* part brought into sharp, clear focus in his heart by the fact that Paul had once persecuted his Lord and his Lord's Church. Paul's confidence and boldness came not from himself and his own accomplishments or worth but from the underserved love and promises of his Savior.

This is the very spirit that you and I want for our own – a sense of continual awe and thanksgiving at the great things that our God has done for us, for which we were and are *utterly unworthy*. To this end we pray that our God would purge from our hearts every last shred of entitlement and deservedness, even while we stand in awe at the gift that we in no way earned. We also pray that he would fill us instead with humble gratitude for every one of his countless blessings. Only then can God's *grace* be to us the amazing gift it truly is. Amen.

Scripture Readings

^{ESV} **Isaiah 49:1-6** Listen to me, O coastlands, and give attention, you peoples from afar. The LORD called me from the womb, from the body of my mother he named my name. ² He made my mouth like a sharp sword; in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me a polished arrow; in his quiver he hid me away. ³ And he said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified." ⁴ But I said, "I have labored in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my right is with the LORD, and my recompense with my God." ⁵ And now the LORD says, he who formed me from the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him; and that Israel might be gathered to him-- for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD, and my God has become my strength-- ⁶ he says: "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

^{ESV} **Mark 1:4-11** John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶ Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ And he preached, saying, "After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. ⁸ I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." ⁹ ¶ In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

ST. PAUL EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH

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Epiphany Sunday / Baptism of Jesus – January 11, 2015

The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

The Opening Hymn – 119 (Red Hymnal)

"Great God, We Sing That Mighty Hand"

The Order of Service – Supplement page 12ff. (Brown Hymnal)

The Scripture Lessons: (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

The First Lesson: (Isaiah 49:1-6) We combine two observances on this Sunday – the Epiphany of our Lord and His baptism. Our first reading deals with His Epiphany or manifestation. Jesus not only came to save us, He revealed Himself as the Savior of all mankind – both Jews and Gentiles. We never want to take such blessings for granted.

Psalm 8 (Supplement page 27) (Brown Hymnal) (Read Responsively)

The Second Lesson: (Mark 1:4-11) Our New Testament reading is the account of Jesus' baptism. Though Jesus had no sin from which He needed to be cleansed, by His baptism He demonstrated His willingness to fulfill every aspect of his Father's will for you and me. In every way, Jesus did what you and I should have done. He then credited that perfect obedience to our accounts and has thereby paid for our sins.

The Confession of Faith -

The Nicene Creed – page 5. (Brown Hymnal)

The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 129- (Red Hymnal)

"Hail Thou Source of Every Blessing"

The Sermon – Text: Ephesians 3:1b-11 (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

"Is Grace, for You, Dead or Alive?"

The Offertory – (Supplement page 16 insert)

The Offering followed by the Prayers

The Pre-Communion Hymn -163 (Verses 1-4) (Red Hymnal)

"The Death of Jesus Christ, Our Lord"

The Preparation for Holy Communion (Brown Hymnal page 17)

The Distribution -Hymn 306- (Red Hymnal)

The Nunc Dimittis and Thanksgiving (Brown Hymnal page 20)

The Benediction

The Closing Hymn -134 (Verses 1 & 5) (Red Hymnal)

"Songs of Thankfulness and Praise"

Silent Prayer

Welcome! - We warmly welcome any visitors worshipping with us this morning and invite you to join us each Sunday at this time. We are glad you are here! **To our Visitors seeking an altar at which to commune** – Since we desire to follow the words of our Savior, we practice "Close Communion" – a practice that is not new to confessional Lutherans. This practice stresses both our concern for others, not wanting them to receive the sacrament to their harm (1 Cor. 11:27-30) and the importance of unity in confession and faith (1 Cor. 10:16-17). For this reason we ask that anyone who has not established this unity through membership in a CLC congregation please first meet with the pastor to discuss this Scriptural doctrine before communing. This is a practice that we follow out of love and concern for you, and out of obedience to God's Word.

Attendance - Sunday (40) Average (50)

This Week at St. Paul:

Today	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday School and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service w/ Holy Communion
	-11:15 a.m.	– Fellowship and coffee time
	-11:45 a.m.	– Church Council meeting
Tuesday	-6:00 p.m.	– Confirmation Class
Wednesday	-7:00 p.m.	– Midweek Bible Study
Next Sunday	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday School and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Sunday Worship Service

CLC News – Pastor Frank Gantt has returned the call to Calvary of Marquette, MI. Pastor Matt Hanel has returned the call to Redemption of Lynnwood, WA. Resurrection of Corpus Christi has called Pastor Vance Fossum.

Church Council Meeting – The Church Council is scheduled to meet after the fellowship hour this morning. During the Council meeting, those that are able will be taking down the Christmas decorations. Lend a hand if you can.

Membership Application – In accord with our constitution, announcement is hereby made that Phil and Angela Pfennig, together with their minor children, have applied for membership at St. Paul. What a blessing it is when our God **"gathers the solitary into families"** – based always and only on the unity of faith that he himself has established.

Baby Shower – A reminder of the Baby Shower scheduled for Sunday, January 18, for Martha Holte. Please consult the announcement card in your mailbox for more information.