

Words mean things: “GRACE”

“For by grace you have been saved through faith. This is not of yourselves. It is the gift of God, not of works, that no one may boast.” (Eph. 2:8-9).

These words of Holy Scripture, as we all know, triggered the Lutheran Reformation.

The Analytical Greek Lexicon tells us that grace (*charis*) is derived from the word that stands for joy. In the context of what Paul is writing, by inspiration, that joy produces a state of grace. Our version of an analytical lexicon, called a dictionary, tells us that our word, grace, comes from the French which means favour, and in English means (first definition) ‘*unmerited divine assistance given man for his regeneration or sanctification.*’ Webster, 1981, pg. 494. Wondering what the parents intended, it is sometimes also used in naming a female baby.

Biblical theology goes beyond that. According to the analogy of faith and the summation of biblical usage of the word, it means the unmerited gift. As we say, “*without any merit or worthiness in me.*”

The writer of Ephesians certainly knew what he was talking about. Paul had been a persecutor of the church, the bride of Christ, His people. While on a trip to Damascus to arrest any who were followers of Jesus, he got knocked off his high horse, literally and figuratively. There in the dust of the Damascus Road, certainly not by any work or worthiness of his own, Jesus came and transformed this man full of hate and anger, into a man and messenger of peace, love, and joy (note the connection with the original Greek, *charis*). His writings from Romans, Corinthians, and the Pastoral Letters, are all permeated with the unworthiness of man, and the overwhelming and unmerited grace and mercy of a God of grace.

Where Luther had learned by bitter experience that nothing – nothing that he could do or offer, was or would ever be enough, adequate, to satisfy a conscience permeated by guilt, shame, and fear, he found in the grace of God a peace which washed over him like a flood, and the joy and peace which surpass all understanding.

The key here is ‘undeserved.’ If we got what we ‘deserved,’ as Luther, and you and I well know, God might squash us like a bug on the sidewalk. Total depravity deserves total destruction, and we know it. Most religions, by far, have an emphasis on earning one’s way to heaven, or whatever else they may call it. But the practitioners (and leaders?) of these quasi-religious groups are confronted by a god who is always angry, and never satisfied.

Grace upon grace, our God is a God of grace, who has sent His Son to be the all-availing sacrifice in our place (it’s called substitutionary atonement) and ‘FOR US.’ Hear those words in the words of institution, “*..shed for us for the forgiveness of our sins.*”

What additional joy (*charis*) it is then, to begin our Sunday worship with Confession and Absolution! After an opening hymn we go directly to the Confession, in which we admit not only that we are sinners, but that we have really sinned by what we have said, done, and in our thoughts.

Then, from the very throne of heaven, God speaks (through the voice of our Pastor) and assures, reassures, and reassures again of the ABSOLUTE forgiveness of ALL our sins. That’s Absolute (we call it the ABSOLUTION), and it means we are ABSOLUTELY forgiven, NO MATTER WHAT, because it depends entirely upon the GRACE of God, without any merit or worthiness in me.

Now we are ready to worship. Now we are worthy to worship, and we break out into the glorious praise of this, our loving, GRACIOUS God and Father. “*By grace I’m saved, grace free and boundless...*”

This what grace in action, grace in practice, grace from God to me, unmerited as it is, looks like, acts like, feels like. When used as a girl’s name one hopes that the joy and unmerited kindness inherent to the name will follow. When used in my relationship to my Heavenly Father the implicit joy of knowing the unmerited forgiveness which flows from that grace, fills one with comfort, peace, and, yes, joy.