

Title: The True Grace of God

1 Peter 5:12-14

12 Through Silvanus, whom I consider a faithful brother, I have written this short letter to encourage you and to testify that this is the true grace of God. Stand fast in it. 13 Your sister church in Babylon, chosen together with you, sends you greetings; and so does my son Mark. 14 Greet one another with a kiss of love. Peace to all of you who are in Christ.

Well, here we are at the end of 1 Peter. We've spent a long time with this short letter... so much time that it may be hard to remember what it was all about. We've spent so much time studying each tree that we might have missed the forest!

The churches in modern-day Turkey who first received this letter would, of course, have gathered together and listened to it being read in its entirety. Imagine being in a home, with people crowded together in the largest room in the house, and others spilling into to smaller adjacent rooms, straining to hear. Imagine the looks on their faces when they hear that have been hand-picked by God to be a new nation. Imagine how the energy in the room would have changed when they got to the household rules, how the servants would look at each other when Peter says they should submit to their masters as unto the Lord. Imagine the words "wives submit to your husbands" are spoken and the husbands, standing on one side of the room, might smile and nod to themselves. And then, just a few moments later, the reader raises his voice a little at, "Husbands, *in the same way*, show consideration for your wives in your life together, paying honor..." and the wives on the other side of the room give a sly glance over to their husbands. The Jewish members, the Gentile members... the elder members and the younger members... as the letter is read, each and every person is recognized both for the contribution they make and the challenge they face. Every person feels seen by God, and therefore seen by everyone else.

Silas, also known by the Greek variation of his name Silvanus, would have been standing nearby. His may have been the person to whom Peter dictated this letter, which would account for the sophisticated writing style. As the one who delivered the letter on Peter's behalf, his very presence would have been a source of encouragement and a living representation of the fact this little gathering of believers had people throughout the known world who considered them to be *family*, just as they were now family to one another as part of the household of God. This family includes the church in Rome, which Peter calls *Babylon* here to reinforce the metaphor of being an exiled, persecuted people in a strange land. No longer seen as one of many sects with Judaism, the Christians were now being singled out by the emperor as the cause for the great fire and Rome and any other social ill that needed a scapegoat. By calling Rome *Babylon*, Peter offers one more reminder that Christians everywhere are suffering for Christ. We are family now. Hold fast to this new life together. Tempting as it may be to go back to your old life, remember: You are not alone. As you continue to pray for us -- that God's grace would get us through -- so we are praying for you.

I have written this short letter to encourage you and to testify that this is the true grace of God. Stand fast in it.

What is Peter talking about when he says, “this is the true grace of God”? I suspect he is talking about the whole letter. That is, Peter believes that the way he has described what God has done -- and how we respond to what God has done – is the way we experience true grace.

“God’s Grace” = POWER
The power that changes us
To change the world

We experience God’s grace – that is, God’s power to be changed and to be agents of change – when our believing, and our behaving, and our belonging are all working together.

If I were to try and sum up Peter’s entire letter in just a few words, it would be this:

As you go through the fires of persecution, don’t lose heart.
God’s got you and God is refining you!
You are becoming Christ to one another
for the sake of a watching world.

In the opening lines of the letter, Peter declares that all of God has all of Us. Whatever hard thing we go through, they will serve God’s purpose of making us into a royal priesthood and a living temple. God has provided all we need to live such lives, therefore we need get our minds right, expressing our devotion to God through holy habits. To be God’s chosen people means we are exiles and aliens in a world driven where arrogance, egotism and self-indulgence are celebrated. We are free from those compulsions, and instead treat others with deference and respect. Unlike the highly stratified culture around us, we know that the vulnerable are precious to God, worthy of honor, and are our teachers who can win outsiders to Christ by their example. Instead of succumbing to the temptation of being belligerent to those who mock us and look down on us, we are called to belong to one another and to give a defense for the hope we have in Christ in a spirit of humility. We live in the knowledge that “the end of all things is near,” so we remain disciplined in our practice of prayer, constant in our love for one another, and eager to show care and hospitality. We know that What the world needs *out there* is first practiced and perfected *in here*. So whether we are boss or employee, husband or wife, elder or newbie, we see it our high privilege and greatest responsibility to be not only bear the name of Christ, but to bear Christ’s image as well.

Experiencing the true grace of God requires that we trust God, and act on that trust. We learn about it, and then we do it.

Believing isn’t enough. That’s why you can’t be a Christian by yourself. You need others to help you work this new way of living out.

Behaving isn't enough. That's why you can't earn God's love by moral perfectionism. That's why you need to be nourished by the God's word in all its forms.

Belonging isn't enough. That's why you can't just show up as a spectator. Hoping to experience God's power by coming to church and watching other people worship is like expecting to get physically fit just by going to the gym and watching other people exercise.

But when we give ourselves to all three – with all our heart, mind, soul and strength loving our neighbor as ourselves – then the divine circuit is closed and God's power flows.

That is why Peter gives one final instruction – a line we almost completely ignore even though it shows up repeatedly in at the end of New Testament letters. Peter commands his readers to

Confirm their intention to live in the true grace of God by greeting each another with a kiss of love.

If you were with us a few months ago when we did a series call the Power of Patience, you might remember that we learned about why the practice of a holy kiss was so important in the early church. It was not only an act that reinforced the idea that the believers now related to one another as family. It also was a sign of reconciliation between members, exchanged before they received the sacrament at the Lord's Supper. It was tied directly to Jesus' instruction that if you are bringing your sacrifice to the Lord and then remember that your sister or brother has something against you, then you should leave the offering there, go be reconciled to them, and then come back and complete the offering (Matt 5:23-24). **You must never allow animosity to come between you or between you and God.**

Again, imagine being in part of this house church and having just listened to the reading of this letter. It probably took thirty minutes to hear it read in its entirety. While it would have been a source of encouragement, it would also have been a cause for conviction. The true state of hearts would have been laid wide open. It would have been time to turn to one another, to ask for forgiveness, to give forgiveness, to be reconciled, and to exchange a kiss of family love and loyalty.

This is a critical part of the refining work of God. If we can't practice forgiveness and forbearance in here, how do we expect to practice them out there? And if the church of Jesus Christ doesn't model this, how will the rest of the world ever learn how to do it?

**As you go through the fires of persecution, don't lose heart.
God's got you and God is refining you!
You are becoming Christ to one another
for the sake of a watching world.**

So love each other. Love each other honestly. Love each other well.

Peace to all of you who are in Christ.

Amen.