

God Gives Grace

Proper 20

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James 3:13-4:10

Grace, peace, and mercy be to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

God is the giver of gifts. Creation—a gift to be used by humanity. Life—a gift. Grace—the gift of God found in Christ Jesus—His death and resurrection. And because of God’s gift of redemption, He gives us the gift of new life, which we live in the wisdom He gives us from His Holy Spirit.

“Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct, let him show his works in meekness and wisdom.” How do we live as new creations? In wisdom. But what does that mean?

We turn for our answer to both our epistle text from James as well as the Table of Duties which Luther provided with his Small Catechism.

Verse 1

“Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth.”

In his Table of Duties Luther has gathered a number of Scripture passages to speak to how to live wisely in several vocations. He led pastors to recall Paul’s letters to Timothy, to be “temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome...” To Officials in Civil Government, Luther reminds them of Paul’s letter to the Romans, that they are “God’s servant(s).” Citizens Luther also directed to Romans: “submit to the authorities,” and “pay taxes.” To Husbands, Luther guided to listen to Peter: “treat (your wives) with respect...and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life.” “Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord (Ephesians 5:22).” Parents, “do not exasperate your children; instead bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.” To Workers of All Kinds, “obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ...Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord.” To Employers and Supervisors: “treat (your workers) in the same way...since you know that He who is both their Master and yours is in heaven.”

(As an aside, the Scriptures put the term “slaves” rather than “workers;” but “slaves” in the Scriptures were not the same as what we think of when we hear the word slaves. The slaves of the New Testament era were more like indentured servants or serfs—ones who sold themselves into work—not ones who were necessarily taken by force.)

Luther continues pointing both youth and widows to the Scriptures. “Young men...be submissive to those who are older...because ‘God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.’” “The widow who is really in need...puts her hope in God...But the widow who lives for pleasure is dead even while she lives.” To sum it up for Everyone: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

By demonstrating good conduct, you show your wisdom. but if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition for pleasure—from pastor to widow alike—“This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice.”

Verse 2

“But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.”

In reminding people in vocations of all kinds of the Scriptures, Luther was reminding them who they were as the people of Christ. The people of Christ are made to be pure, peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere” by the Holy Spirit. Christians are called to be peaceful, then, and submissive to the authorities, because even the authorities are given their authority by God. Thus we strive to maintain peace and order.

“What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.”

While we are new creations in Christ Jesus and are being made new by the Holy Spirit, out of hearts come all kinds of evils. These evils stir up quarrels and fights—against which Luther referred us to the Word of God in the Table of Duties. Out of your evil hearts come desires to break the law and disobey the authorities. This is the war going on within you right now—the war between submitting to the authorities out of reverence for God and so that you may be at peace with your neighbors and disobeying the authorities for your own selfish gain. Remember the warning to the widows which applies to us all: “the widow who lives for pleasure is dead even while she lives.”

The world pushes you to be yourself and listen to your heart—your evil heart—and to fight the law and the system and the quote-unquote “man.” “Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God?...whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.”

Remember, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, that you were bought with a price. Jesus gave His very body and blood for you to live. And when you were brought to faith, you received His Holy Spirit so that you might live that new life.

Verse 3

“Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, ‘He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us’? But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, ‘God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.’ Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.”

So what do we do about our hearts with their evil intentions? We repent. We let our laughter be turned to mourning and our joy to gloom. We resist the devil.

These are each things that we of ourselves cannot do. Our hearts are evil. But when we hear God’s Word and receive His Sacrament, the Holy Spirit works in us to enliven the new creation God has made of us. God gives grace. He gives the grace of the forgiveness of sins in His Son’s death and resurrection in your place and mine. He gives the grace of new life in Baptism. He gives the grace of His Holy Spirit to enliven us. And He gives us the wisdom only He can give so that we might live as new creations in service to one another and to His glory.

When we repent through the Holy Spirit, God will exalt us. Here's how the commentators of the ESV Study Bible put it: "After repentance comes God's forgiveness, new life, and ultimately the crown of life...Jesus teaches that those who humble themselves before God will be exalted (p.2142)." All this we receive—grace free and boundless—for the sake of Jesus Christ, His death in our place and His resurrection assuring us of our own eternal lives. In Jesus' Name. Amen.