

Grace is what we need

Eph. 6:18-24

Intro. We come this AM to the closing verses in Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus. It would be easy to overlook these postscript verses, but the closing remarks and benedictions of the NT letters always contain nuggets of truth that are profitable. In these verses we sense the relation between the apostle, his co-workers and fellow believers he ministered to. If the body of the letter is doctrinal and reveals the mind of the God, the closing is relational and reveals the heart of God's servant.

If one word stands out in the salutations and benedictions of the 13 letters written by Paul, it's the word, **Grace!** The grace of God is the dominant theme in Paul's letters. And the benediction of every letter includes his heartfelt desire for God's grace to be real and evident in the lives of his readers. God's grace is what the church needs for a time such as this. We need grace to impact the unsaved. And we need God's grace to stabilize, mature and empower those who are saved already. Having tried all sorts of programs and gimmicks, we need to come to that place where we are thirsting and desperate for the supply of the Spirit. We need God to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves and what He did for the first century believers. Listen to **Acts 4:33 - With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all.** Power to live for Christ and power to fulfill our mission depends on the outworking of **God's grace.** So as we said last time, we need to reopen the old wells like Isaac did, to access the rich supply that has always been there.

So let's not write off these closing verses. Instead let's open our hearts to what God might say to us through them. Remember, **All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness...II Tim. 3:16** - Since God means what He says and says what He means, **All Scripture** must include the postscripts. So with God's enabling grace as the central idea, let's consider four things His grace can accomplish in us and for us.

1. Grace to pray for each other - v.18 - **And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.**

As we found last time, the word **all** appears 4x's in v.18. We are to pray **in the Spirit on all occasions** / with **all kinds of prayers and requests** / we're to **always keep on praying** / and we're to pray **for all the saints**. Like breathing, prayer is the natural and regular expression of people who know how much they need God. How often do you breathe? To survive and thrive as a Christian, the supply of God's Spirit is as necessary as the air we breathe. The cause and effect formula of **Jas. 4:2** is straightforward...**You do not have, because you do not ask God.** Though we know this is true, I've never met a Christian who boasts their prayer life is all it should be. Satan knows where the power is. He attacks us at this very point. His purposes are best accomplished when our supply lines are cut off. So in the context of spiritual warfare, Paul ended his letter with this critical exhortation to **pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests.** Are you doing that? Are you obedient to this command? One thing I particularly appreciate about Life Action is the "action" part of their name. Instead of being just hearers of the Word, they encouraged us to obey the Lord and take action right now! We need to do that with regard to prayer.

Look again at the second sentence in v.18 - **With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.** As Americans at this time in history, we tend to be very individualistic and independent. The pronouns "me", "my", and "mine" are dominant in our thoughts and vocabulary. Secular sociologists separate the generations according to year of birth and defining characteristics. The children of baby-boomers have been labeled GenX. Born between 1965 and 1980, this group is highly individualistic, non-joiners and skeptical of all truth claims. Here's how a research site describes and differentiates GenX from their baby boomer parents.

"GenX came of age in an era of two-income families, rising divorce rates and a faltering economy. Women were joining the workforce in large numbers, spawning an age of 'latch-key' children. Children spent less time with their parents. As a result, GenX is autonomous, resourceful, and self-sufficient. In addition, they don't have much respect for authority."

But lined up behind GenX are the Millennials or GenY, born between 1980 and 2000. According to an article in USA Today, *"Millennials are more civically and politically disengaged, more focused on materialistic values, and less concerned about helping the larger community than were GenX and Baby Boomers. The trend found among them places greater emphasis on extrinsic values such as money, fame, and image, and less on intrinsic values such as self-acceptance, group affiliation and community."* Because the GenY group tends to be self-absorbed and narcissistic it has also been labeled "Gen-Me."

Let me ask...Are these trends in attitude Christian or are they Anti-Christian? Do the values of GenX and GenY line up with biblical values or are they trending away from biblical values? The fact is... each successive generation is moving farther and farther away from God! And as society moves away from God and absolutes it also moves away from the church. It moves away from the concept of community that is so integral to what the church is and how God planned for it to function. The concept of the church as a family and unified body doesn't resonate for a generation who raised themselves as latchkey kids. In the same way, the one another commands of the NT are meaningless to those who aren't interested in group affiliation or community. In the context of the spiritual war we're in, Satan promotes individualism as a strategy to divide and conquer. Regardless of the generation we were born into, **Rom. 12:2** says, **Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.** God calls us to separate from the mainstream and be transformed by the renewing of our minds.

So Paul's letter to the Ephesian believers is all about the Church...how blessed it is by God / how precious it is to Christ / and how necessary it is for those who trust Him. In this letter and throughout the NT the Church isn't a building or religious organization...the Church is a living organism. It's a body where Christ is the head and every believer is joined to Christ and to every other believer by spiritual joints and ligaments. We are family. We are members of one another. We're a team...an army. We're citizens of a heavenly kingdom. As Paul wrote in **I Cor. 12:25, 26** - **...there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.** Can you see why this teaching is foreign to the mindset of GenX and GenY? It takes a miracle of God's grace to turn them from skepticism and self-sufficiency to commitment to the body of Christ! It takes a miracle of God's grace to turn us all from disengagement and independence to concern for others! Yet the church is most attractive when the lives of it's members can only be explained by the grace and power of God. **II Cor. 5:17** - **Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!**

So how does God affect real change in us? He affects change by His grace. Listen to what Paul wrote in **I Cor. 15:9, 10** - **For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them--yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.** It was the grace of God that turned Paul from a self-righteous Pharisee and persecutor of God's people to a faithful servant of Christ. It's hard to imagine change more dramatic than what Paul experienced! To get him to the place where he could receive God's grace and fulfill the ministry God planned for him, Paul had to be humbled. And that's the formula we must keep in mind. **I Pet.5:5b, 6** - **"God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."** **Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time.**

So how do we do that? What does it mean to humble ourselves? It means to come to terms with our weakness and inadequacy and lean hard on God. It's giving up the idea that we can do this or that in our own strength. It's relying on God for everything. It's reopening that old well where grace is available in abundance as we humbly seek it through prayer.

So what I'm saying in this first point is simply this...given the "me-centered" climate of our times, we must ask God to change our hearts and give us the desire to pray for each other as we should. We must ask God to move us away from self-centeredness to genuine concern for each other...concern that is moved to action in intercessory prayer.

2. Grace to testify boldly - vs.19, 20 - Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.

Paul wrote, **Pray also for me...** Now let's remember...the one asking friends to pray for him was the greatest evangelist the world has ever known. Paul wrote, **Pray...for me** because he faced his limitations and knew how much he needed God's grace to enable him. By asking for prayer he admits he can't will himself to be a fearless witness of Christ. He admits he isn't wise enough or courageous enough to pull it off. He exemplifies the humility that depends on God for everything. As we found a moment ago, God gives grace to the humble. Humility prays, "God I need you. I need you to do in me and for me." Now if I was clever I would have called this message, 1-800 Need Him.

Today we have a 12 step program for just about everything imaginable. AA has twelve steps for Alcoholics. If your issue is clutter, CLA has 12 steps for you. OA has 12 steps for over-eaters and UA has 12 steps for under-earners. I'm not knocking any of these self-help programs. But while so many admit they need help, few turn to God whose name is Helper. (**Psa. 118:7 / Heb. 13:6**) Instead of 12 steps, the Apostle recommends just one. And this one step is the opposite of self-help. Paul admits, what I need more than anything is God's help...God's enablement. So **Pray for me.**

"OK, we agree that prayer is good. It's always a good idea to cover all the bases. But Paul, you're an educated man. You know the Scriptures better than the most learned Pharisee. You have credential and a wealth of experience. On the Road to Damascus, you met the risen Christ. You were given special revelation. If this isn't enough, you were caught up to the third heaven. You heard things and saw things you were forbidden to tell anyone about. If any man was competent to speak boldly for Christ it's surely you!" But listen to what he wrote in **II Cor. 3:5 - Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God.** Convinced of his own inadequacy Paul wrote, **Pray also for me.**

Look closely at Paul's prayer request and ask whether it resembles any on our prayer sheets. When Paul wrote this letter he was under arrest. He was chained to a Roman soldier. But he didn't ask his friends to pray that he would be acquitted and released. As MacArthur observes, He didn't ask for prayer that *"his ankles, raw and sore from his shackles, might be healed."* He didn't seek relief as we do in so many of our prayers. Instead, he wrote, **Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.** Paul was concerned he would yield to the temptation to be silent about Christ. He was already in trouble with the authorities. Why rock the boat further? But Paul knew what God called him to do and he was determined to obey the Lord. He asked his friends to pray he would speak fearlessly when he was given opportunity. He asked for help in his struggle against Satan who wants to silence those who proclaim the Good News. He blinds the minds of unbelievers to keep them from the Gospel and he does all he can to silence those called to speak for Christ.

In Paul's mind, the chains were incidental. In fact, in his letter to the Philippians, he spoke of his chains as an asset not a liability. He wrote, **As a result, it has become clear through-out the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly.** - Phil. 1:13, 14 *"When life handed Paul a lemon, he made lemonade."* He saw God working in and through his circumstances. He wasn't concerned to be relieved of inconvenience or discomfort, but that he would be faithful to make the most of his calling as Christ's ambassador. We know prayer is effective when our requests are aligned with God's will. Here's a great example of that. Suffering is a part of life for all of us. It's unrealistic to think we'll skate through life without some of it. Rather than pleading with God to relieve his suffering, Paul asked others to pray that God would keep him faithful at the task of spreading the Good News of salvation. Paul made God's priority his priority. But is that our priority? Are we so burdened for the lost around us that we pray we will be faithful more than we pray for our own comfort?

But where does a burden like this come from? It's not natural for selfish people. When we're tempted to remain silent so as to not offend anybody or not come off as an extremist or something, where does holy boldness come from? It comes from God. That's why Paul asked his friends to pray. We don't need 12 steps to be a better witness. We need to ask God. If we really want to speak boldly for Christ, we need to get some people to pray that God would give us grace...grace that supplies the words and the courage to speak them.

3. Grace to encourage each other - vs. 21, 22 - Tychicus, the dear brother and faithful servant in the Lord, will tell you everything, so that you also may know how I am and what I am doing. I am sending him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are, and that he may encourage you.

There's a strong picture of discipleship and Christian fellowship in these verses. Paul knew the believers at Ephesus couldn't pray specifically or intelligently for him without information. So he sent Tychicus to them. We're first introduced to Tychicus in **Acts 20:4 - He (Paul) was accompanied by Sopater son of Pyrrhus from Berea, Aristarchus and Secundus from Thessalonica, Gaius from Derbe, Timothy also, and Tychicus and Trophimus from the province of Asia.** Though we don't know a lot about him, we know **Tychicus** was a **dear brother and faithful servant in the Lord.** He accompanied Paul to Rome and he carried these letters from Paul to the churches. The relationship between Paul and Tychicus was strong and intimate. From Rome, Paul sent him to Ephesus. But the point of these verses center on why he was sent. Paul wrote, (he)...**will tell you everything, so that you also may know how I am and what I am doing. I am sending him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are, and that he may encourage you.**

One of the great obstacles to fellowship is the fact that Christians don't know each other. The single thing we seem to know about each other is the fact that we're all "fine". I mean, that's the answer we typically give when asked, *"How are you doing?"* We say, *"Fine...everything is just fine."* Rachel Oliver has written and illustrated a book that addresses this tendency of ours. Our world may be upside down and coming unglued, but we're *"fine."* We may be struggling in our marriage / grappling with some sin of the flesh / failing in prayer / or hanging by our fingertips financially...but our answer is the same...*"I'm fine."* That isn't Christian fellowship! That isn't even honesty! We can't pray for each other if we don't know what the other is dealing with! Consequently, our fellowship is as deep as rain on a sidewalk. That isn't what Christ intends for His Church. The 29 **one another** commands mitigate against superficiality. Why would we encourage each other when everyone is "fine?"

Just as our brains receive information about the toe we just stubbed, **I Cor. 12:25, 26** indicates what fellowship in the body of Christ should be like.

It says...there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.

Last Sunday, during the SS hour we encouraged you to become a part of our Life Group Ministry. Life Groups are designed to help our fellowship get beyond "the fine and dandies" to reality. It's a ministry designed to help us connect and know each other in a more meaningful way. In a group of not more than about a dozen believers, a Life Group typically meets twice a month. It's called a Life Group because the objective is to do life together. In a meeting that typically lasts about 2 hrs, the groups discuss Bible truth / pray for each other / encourage each other / and hold each other accountable. We can't accomplish that in our worship time. We can't do it in a SS class dedicated to instruction from the Word of God. We can't even accomplish it in the church hallways or during the 20 or 30 minutes of our "Coffee Fellowship." It takes significant time spent together to learn to love and trust each other enough to get honest about our issues...and we all have them. And by the way...don't we know someone who used a format like this? Wasn't this the way of Jesus with 12 men? For 3 years Jesus did life with these men. They learned His will and His ways as life happened. So Life Groups are a venue where life action is encouraged. Right now, at the beginning of this new school year, I want to encourage you to consider joining one. Pick up a flier at the Welcome Center to be better informed. Then contact Pastor Dale or the church office and tell them you want in. They'll match you up with a group that meets at a time and place that is most convenient for you.

But this is what Paul was doing. God's grace at work in his life urged him to know and be known by others. And Tychicus knew all about Paul because he was there in Rome with him. He knew Paul's heart. He knew where Paul hurt and what issues he struggled with. In our SS hour this AM we'll be talking about disciple-making and the strategy of sharing Christ with one or two others. **vs.21, 22** illustrate and instruct us in the way the church should function. Church by God's design isn't a place where members are islands to themselves. It isn't a society where everybody harbors personal issues while pretending to be "fine." The world may be trending toward individualism and isolationism, but the Church must swim against the current and trend the other way. Here's what the Lord says to His people. **Heb.10:25 - Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another--and all the more as you see the Day approaching.**

We found obedience to this command among the believers in Alaska. Alaskans tend to be very private and reclusive. Many of them fled something unpleasant in the lower 48. (like back taxes, a bad marriage, or unpaid bills) Seeking privacy, they typically situate their houses at the back of their property. They have no interest in curb appeal. They post signs that read, "*No Trespassing*" and "*Forget the dog, beware of my Smith and Wesson.*" But when these fugitives and recluses get saved, they come out of hiding and love to be together. We've heard stories of some who got saved and returned to the lower 48 to settle their debts. But during the winter months they huddle together and do church from about 10 AM to 3 PM. That's what God grace does for those who embrace Christ. It tears down barriers, removes antagonism and brings us together.

Church attendance is good and necessary. Worshipping and learning together are important. But God's grace creates a fellowship the world knows nothing about. It's a fellowship distinguished by openness, love and genuine community. In the purest sense, the NT word *koinonia* involves sharing our common life and faith in Jesus Christ. And once again, it's God's grace that sets us free to be transparent and honest with each other. Do you know what is most appealing to GenX and GenY and really, to every generation? Authenticity...honesty...people who are real. Outsiders see through Christian hypocrisy. They recognize people wearing masks when they see it. They're tired of people who make big claims that aren't substantiated by the way they live. But they just might take a second look if they were to find some people in community who really love and accept each other.

Listen to **Titus 2:11-13** - **For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope--the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ...** Notice the pronouns **us** and **we**. Me, my, and mine aren't found here. Instead we see **us** and **we**. "Geese gaggle, fish school, bees swarm, birds flock, bikers rally, and what do Christians do?...we church." God's grace changes us. It teaches us a new way to live. God's acceptance allows us to take off our masks and be honest and transparent. It's His grace that impels us to love, encourage and support each other. God's grace is what the church desperately needs for a time such as this. This grace appeared when Jesus was here, but the supply from His Spirit is continuous for those who will humble themselves and receive it.

4. Grace to grow deep - vs. 23, 24 - Peace to the brothers, and love with faith from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace to all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with an undying love.

As John MacArthur observes, Paul's benediction resists analysis. The best we can do is to extract the elements and consider them individually. The **first** is Paul's wish for **peace**. Along with grace, this letter has much to say about the peace that comes to us from God. It's first mentioned in **1:2 - Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ**. Then in **2:14, 15** Paul wrote, **For He Himself (Christ) is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace...** Then in **4:3** he exhorts the church to **Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace**. Among God's people, personal peace and the pursuit of interpersonal peace gives strong evidence that God's grace is at work in us and among us. Where grace isn't, turmoil and conflict is! But **grace and peace** travel together.

The **second** element is found in the phrase, **love with faith**. According to the NT, faith inspires love and love inspires faithfulness. But at the root of all we are as Christians is a deep and abiding faith in God...a faith that goes beyond mental assent...a faith that motivates and transforms our attitudes and behavior. Remember, the demons believe in God but they certainly don't believe in a saving way. Bible faith is active...it's trusting obedience. It shows up as faithfulness to God and faithfulness to others. Paul prayed that **love with faith** would be found among the believers at Ephesus.

Finally, notice the element of **love** is mentioned 3 x's in this benediction. **Love** is the highest and deepest ideal in the world. In **Eph. 3:19** Paul prayed that we might **know this love that surpasses knowledge--that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God**. Now he desires **grace** or divine favor might be given to and received by all who reciprocate and **love our Lord Jesus Christ with an undying love**. Once again, in these closing words, we find the dynamic the church is most in need of. We need God's grace. This letter that opens with Paul's desire for grace closes the same way. **1:2 - Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ**. The divine power that saves us is the same resource we must access for life and ministry to others. It's a gift God is eager to give if we will humble ourselves and ask.

So having encouraged us how to stand in God's armor in the face of spiritual conflict, Paul ends with the exhortation to pray. As we pray **in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests...for all the saints...** we will experience grace to intercede / grace to testify boldly / grace to encourage each other / and grace to grow deep. Do you sense a need to do better in these areas? Better in interceding for others / better in your witness / better in encouraging others / better in personal growth? Have you asked God to help you? This closing section turns the focus of prayer from temporal comfort and physical relief to spiritual matters we often neglect.

What are you asking God and asking others to pray God will do for youi?