

*As God's fellow workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain.<sup>2</sup> For he says,  
 "In the time of my favor I heard you,  
 and in the day of salvation I helped you."*

*I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation.*

*<sup>3</sup> We put no stumbling block in anyone's path, so that our ministry will not be discredited.<sup>4</sup> Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses;<sup>5</sup> in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger;<sup>6</sup> in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love;<sup>7</sup> in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left;<sup>8</sup> through glory and dishonor, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as impostors;<sup>9</sup> known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed;<sup>10</sup> sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything.*

*<sup>11</sup> We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians, and opened wide our hearts to you.<sup>12</sup> We are not withholding our affection from you, but you are withholding yours from us.<sup>13</sup> As a fair exchange—I speak as to my children—open wide your hearts also. (2 Corinthians 6:1-13)*

### **Recognize God's Grace in Your Life**

How can something that trivial matter? Have you ever said that? Maybe to a teenage son or daughter who was getting worked up over some world ending event that you were sure would be forgotten the next week? Sometimes, it's hard to believe that trivial things matter. Think how hard it was for ordinary people 150 years ago to accept that germs cause disease. Even when scientists were convinced, many people doubted that something you couldn't see would harm you. But of course, today, we all know they can. Sometimes, those teenagers are right and that thing that seems so silly to us adults really might affect their lives. Sometimes, things that seem trivial take on enormous significance as we move forward in our lives. St. Paul's words to the Corinthians this morning show us the spiritual side of that truth. Paul looks at things we encounter all the time, things that it's easy to think are unimportant, and he points out that these are the vehicles of God's grace in our lives. My friends, **recognize God's grace in your life.**

#### **I.**

God wants us to recognize what he does for us. But God wants us to see his grace through the eyes of faith. God wants us to trust his word, even when it seems like God's promises can't possibly be true. So again and again, we find that God hides himself. He hides himself behind people and institutions. He hides himself behind nature and science and even society. When it comes to our faith, he hides himself behind the word and the sacraments. Those are the means of grace, the way that God gets his grace to us. **Recognize God's grace in your life. God has given this day of grace.**

Paul says, "**As God's fellow workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain.**" God's grace is love that's there even when we don't deserve it. It's God's favor, it's God's salvation, his gift of eternal life to sinners on their way to hell. That grace is the most powerful force in the universe because it drove God to save us. So if God's grace is so powerful, how could we ever receive it vain? God's grace comes to us in the gospel. Every time you hear about Jesus and his work for you, every time you come to communion and receive his body and blood for the forgiveness of your sins, every time I announce that you are forgiven or you remember that in the waters of baptism God washed your sins away, the grace of God comes to you. That grace always does something. But what it does can be different. When by the power of the Holy Spirit we believe that message, then what that grace does in us and for us is wonderful. God builds us up. God comforts us in hurt and sorrow. God strengthens our faith so that we can fight another day and serve him more faithfully. But if we hear that message and we reject it, the message is still the power of God. But instead of working forgiveness for us, that message condemns us. Because we reject it, we are twice as much the children of hell than we were before.

Now, that could never happen to us, right? We've already believed the message. That's true. But who do you think Paul was writing this letter to? He was writing to the Christian congregation in Corinth. He was

writing to believers. He warned them – as he warns us today – not to waste God’s grace. Not to throw it away. Not to receive it in vain. How could we do that? By getting too comfortable with it. By treating it like an old shoe that you don’t really have to pay any attention to anymore. “Jesus died for me? Heard it before, pastor. Got anything else?” “I don’t really need to get to church that often. I know what I believe.”

My friends, as soon as we think that we’ve heard this message enough and we don’t really need to hear it anymore, we’re in danger of despising the means of grace. We’re in danger of hanging our salvation on our own faithfulness, on our own loyalty to the truth. It’s just a short step from that to thinking that we’re going to heaven because we’re good people. Again and again, I hear people say that God will let them into heaven because they’ve been good. None of us are.

Isaiah reminded God’s people that in the time of his favor, God heard them. In the day of his salvation, God helped them. Paul says, **“I tell you, now is the time of God’s favor, now is the day of salvation.”** God has assigned to each one of us a specific amount of time here. God comes to each one of us in our day of salvation, in our lifetime, and he announces his grace to us. My friends, don’t trample that grace. Don’t treat it like something that will be there tomorrow. Today is the day of God’s grace. Today is the time of God’s salvation. Today, God is coming to you with the message of Jesus.

Have you ever treated that message with contempt? I imagine that most of us have to admit that we have. I certainly do. Wearing this robe does not mean I’m free from the sin and temptation that you all feel. It’s easy for me to get bored. It’s easy for me to want something else. I’ve heard it all before. If you have to admit with me that you are like that, then you know that those thoughts and feelings come from our sinful hearts. The unbeliever inside us wants to be free from all this religion stuff. He runs away from God as fast as he can. Even we who believe have a daily struggle with that unbeliever.

But he does not win. Jesus has indeed come into this world to live and die for you and for me. Jesus came and he won eternal life for us. He paid for the sin that comes from that sinner in our hearts. He paid for our boredom and our longing for something different. He paid for all the times we treated God’s Word and God’s grace like comfortable old shoes that we don’t need to think about or wrestle with. He paid for it all. Then he rose to say that God has wiped all that sin away. That is God’s grace. When you hear that message, that is the day of God’s grace. My friends, today is that day.

## II.

You might be surprised to learn that a discussion of that grace leads to a discussion of something that I always find hard to talk about. Any guess what that is? It’s not the law, although it certainly is hard to confront someone’s sin. It’s the ministry. Whenever I talk about the blessings of the ministry, I feel a little self-conscious. When I talk about supporting the ministry, then I really struggle, because I’m afraid it sounds self-serving. But God does talk about supporting the ministry today. He does not say one word about money and I’m not going to either. But he does speak of the ministry as the way that he gets his grace to you. **Recognize God’s grace in your lives. He sent servants of grace.**

When Paul talks about the service that he and his missionary team had given to the Corinthians, he says that they commend themselves, in other ways, they demonstrate that they’re faithful servants. He mentions a long list of ways they do that. He starts with all the personal sufferings that they had endured. That had lived through riots. They had been thrown in prison and beaten and driven out of various cities. They had worked their fingers to the bone and none of them were getting rich doing it. In fact, they knew very well what it was like to miss a meal.

All that suffering goes along with the ministry because the ministry takes place in a sinful world. Today, we talk about “burn out” and maybe you’ve known pastors or teachers who were very negative about their ministry. But that evil is the price of admission to seeing the glory of God. Paul reminds the Corinthians of the incredible things God does. He gives gifts to people of faith – patience, purity, knowledge. Paul speaks of the incredible power that God places in the ministry, the power to overcome sin and offer comfort. The power to lead God’s people to serve their Lord. The power of the gospel which changes hearts.

But that power is something you only see by faith. Paul says, **“through glory and dishonor, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as impostors; known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed ...”** We pastors and teachers don’t often seem to be smart or important. Many people figure we’re just a bunch of hypocrites. And some of us are. But the Holy Spirit

works through the word and he takes sinners like me, sinners like every pastor or teacher who has ever served you, and he does things that no unbeliever can understand.

God works through us. Paul says that they were, “**sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything.**” There are so many things to be sorrowful about in the ministry. Every time we Christians fight and argue, every time someone chooses the easy way instead of the hard road of faithfulness, every time sin wins, we ministers are sorrowful. But every time the gospel wins, we rejoice. There are times when I wish I had done something else with my life. But you know what? One of the greatest joys of my life is to sit next to a Christian and help them. To build them up to face another day here. I rejoice every time God calls me to do that. In this life, I’ll never be a rich man. But I get to make you rich every Sunday. I will get to live and reign with Christ forever.

I would never compare myself to St. Paul. I haven’t got his gifts or his faith. And I can’t bring myself to say with him that I commend myself in all things as God’s servant. But God did call me to be his servant and to be your servant. God did call me to make you rich with the gospel. I pray that when he sends hardships, he gives me a faith that rejoices. I pray that you experience his grace through my ministry. I know that you deserve a much better pastor than me. But God has called me here. God sends his grace to you through the imperfect servants he sends because they proclaim his gospel.

### III.

That grace creates a fellowship of believers here. When that fellowship is healthy and strong, the love and concern that people see among Christians amazes them. But when the fellowship is hurting, then it’s harder to believe that it’s a blessing. Yet this congregation is a blessing. **Recognize God’s grace in your life. He has provided a fellowship of grace.**

We could spend a lot of time this morning talking about how love is supposed to prevail here and how our own sinful weakness keeps that from happening. But in these verses, Paul especially dwells on the love between ministers and members. There are many ways that we ministers can and should show love to you. But the best way that I can love you is by showing you Jesus day after day. The best way that our teachers can love our children is by bringing them to the cross over and over again. While we are sinners and we certainly could do better at that, I hope and pray that you have experienced that kind of love over and over again here at Peace.

Paul criticizes the congregation in Corinth for failing to show the same love to him. Some people in the congregation resented him. They had liked other pastors better. They were unfairly critical of his methods. Paul urges them to repent of that sin and receive him in love as a worker sent by God. I’ve only been your pastor for 15 months, so I’m not going to stand up here and criticize your love for me. I’m not going to judge your love for the teachers in our school. But I am going to ask you to search your hearts. God calls his people to love the servants he sends because they come in his name to proclaim his gospel. Have you done that? Have you loved even that teacher that you don’t see eye to eye with? Have you accepted the pastor or principal or teacher serving you, even though you can think of someone else that you’re sure would do a better job?

Those are hard questions. Only God knows the answer in your heart. But if you have to confess that you have not loved them as you should – even as we pastors and teachers often have to admit that we have not loved you as we should – if you are making that confession in your heart, then my friends, know this: Jesus died even for your failure to love his servants. Jesus rose to take that sin away. Jesus gave you and me and all of us here today this fellowship of believers so that we can live in love and study his word together and grow in faith until we reach eternal life. Let us move forward today in love and forgiveness. Amen.