

June 15, 2014

Holy Trinity

Finally, brothers and sisters, rejoice! Strive for full restoration, encourage one another, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you.

¹² *Greet one another with a holy kiss.* ¹³ *All God's people here send their greetings.*

¹⁴ *May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. (2 Corinthians 13:11-14 NIV 2011)*

The Gift of the Triune God

Today is Father's Day. What did you get, dads? A nice tie? A new grill? Some tool you've been wanting for who knows how long? What did you kids give dad for Father's Day? Did he like it? I hope so. Every year in June, we have this tradition of saying thank you to our dads with a present or at least a card. But what about our heavenly Father? Does he have a place on Father's Day? Of course he does. We are people of faith and all that we are is affected by our relationship with him. Our Christian lives really are gifts to him. But in the word of God that we have before us today, the emphasis is not on the gifts we give to God. It's on the gifts our heavenly Father gives to us. And not just the Father. St. Paul specifically mentions the Son and the Holy Spirit as well. They all give us gifts. As it happens, Father's Day this year falls on a festival of the church year: Holy Trinity. Today is all about the blessings we have in knowing the only true God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This "three in one God" loves to give us gifts. There are many different kinds of gifts that he gives us. But you can sum up the gifts that St. Paul mentions today with one word: unity.

I.

The gift of the Triune God is unity with each other. At first, that might be hard to see because St. Paul begins with a string of commands, and we don't usually think of commands as gifts. Paul says, **"Finally, brothers and sisters, rejoice! Strive for full restoration, encourage one another, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you."** God begins by commanding us to rejoice. This isn't like when a dad tells his son, "Go, mow the lawn." We can all go out and see if he's doing it or not. God commands a feeling here, even more, an attitude. Rejoice! Find joy in Christ and his love for you. Find joy in being brothers and sisters in faith.

He tells us to strive for full restoration. In Greek, this phrase is one word and it's quite a difficult word to translate. What it means is to put something in order so that it functions well, either by restoring it or by making it new. But Paul isn't telling us to put something in order. He's telling us to put ourselves in order so that we function well as Christians. He's talking about our Christian life. There's always something more that we need to fix about our lives. On this side of heaven, we're always going to be sinners. We will always have areas of weakness or things that God commands that we don't pay attention to. Paul is calling us here to an attitude of constant striving to put our lives in order so that we live as God calls us to.

He goes on to tell us to encourage one another. That makes sense, if we recognize our daily need to do better. It's easy to get down about how far short we fall. It's easy to be discouraged when we see how many people don't care what God says. It's easy to be overwhelmed by temptation and sin. So God calls us all to encourage one another. And he calls us to be of one mind. He's talking about doctrinal unity. We confess one God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We know one Christ who lived and died and rose to take our sins away. We study God's Word together and learn the truths he reveals and we let God's Word take captive our every thought so that we believe what God teaches.

Being one in confession and faith leads us to live in peace. It's easy for us to fight with each other. It's easy for us to resent the attention that other people get. It's easy for us to be rude and self-centered. God calls us to turn from those sins and live in peace with each other. He is calling us to forgive one another. Asking for forgiveness and giving it are the basis of living in peace of Christ. I admit that what I

did was wrong and sinful and I ask my brother or sister, for the sake of Jesus, to put my sin in the past and leave it there.

All that God commands us. Do we live like that? Do you rejoice in the Lord? Do you strive to live a more and more Christian life, honestly admitting your failures and repenting? Do you encourage the people who are sitting here regularly? Do you study God's word with these people so that you know what God says and cling to it? Do you forgive and ask for forgiveness and live in peace?

I hate questions like that because I know that I fall short of every single one of these commands. I cannot live as God calls me to. My attitude and my life simply are not humble and repentant enough. Too often, anger and jealousy and pride break my fellowship with you. Too often, I'm too lazy to delve deeper into God's Word so that we can be one in faith. Do you have to make a similar confession? If you do, where will our unity come from? That's what St. Paul is describing here. To be one in faith means to confess the same truths, to live in peace, to work together in our spiritual growth and to rejoice together in God's love. Our sin gets in the way, every step of the way. So how are we going to keep these commands?

By the power and grace of God. Jesus died because we simply cannot live the way God calls us to. Jesus paid for every sin we've committed against our unity in Christ, for our laziness and our selfishness and our lack of joy. He paid the ultimate price for our sin: he died on the cross. On the third day, he rose to tell us that it is all gone forever. We are forgiven. We are free. That is God's gift to us, the gift not only of the Son, but of the Father who sent him and of the Holy Spirit who works through that gospel to give us faith in Jesus.

Through that message, God gives us unity. Paul told the Corinthians to greet one another with a holy kiss. To us Americans, kissing often implies a romantic relationship. But that's not the case in every culture. At this time, it was just a greeting. Paul wanted concrete expression of unity because the expression means that the joy, the confession, the encouraging and the peace all lie underneath. It's good for us to also find concrete ways of expressing our unity, even though we might not be totally comfortable with kissing on the way out of church today. We can find other ways. But the important thing is to trust God's promise that when we hear about Jesus, the Holy Spirit works in our hearts to make our unity ever purer and stronger.

II.

So did you notice the big truth here? Being one with each other really depends on being one with God. The closer we get to God, the more we understand what he says, so the more we have one mind. In fact, we can only be united in our confession when we unite around what God says. Because God teaches us to love, being of one mind leads to all those other ways that we express our unity to each other. So it all comes back to our relationship with God and that, too, comes from him. **The gift of the Triune God is unity with him.**

St. Paul gives us here one of the best known passages of Scripture. We sometimes call it the apostolic blessing: **"May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all."** This is one of the basic texts that we use to prove the doctrine of the Trinity. We worship one God in three persons. In this blessing, each person is named. Notice the order of the names. We usually speak of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, because that's the way Jesus said it. Sometimes in the Bible, the order of names is really important. Some people might think that putting the Father first means he's the most powerful or the first to come into existence or the chairman of the divine board. But that's not what the order means, because the Bible uses just about every possible order you can put three names into. Here, Jesus comes first, then God – which means God the Father – and then the Holy Spirit. The order varies because they are all equal in power and glory. None is more important than the others and none existed before the others. All three are eternal, which means they have no beginning and ending. They always have existed and they always will exist.

They are three persons but one God. All three persons of the Godhead work together for our benefit. St. Paul summarizes their gifts here. He prays that the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ would be with us. What is grace? If you took my confirmation class, you'd blurt out right now, "God's undeserved love." With that definition, I try to teach the kids that grace means a gift, it means something undeserved. On

Father's Day, do dads deserve the gifts they get? I think most of us would say yes. A good dad spends the best years of his life providing for and teaching and protecting his children. He shows them what it means to be a Christian man. The benefit for the children is beyond any funny tie or expensive power tool we might give. The Father's Day presents we dads open today are *not* a good example of grace. Rather, the love the fathers showed the children from the moment they learned their wives were pregnant is the kind of thing God is talking about. That baby in the womb, that child that comes home from the hospital, that toddler and school age child and teenager has not earned his or her father's love. The father simply gives it. That is grace. Jesus gave us true grace. He offered his life on Calvary for all people, even for those who would never believe it. Jesus died for us before we were born, for no other reason than that he loved us. His love is ours, whether we ever deserve it or not.

St. Paul prayed that the love of God the Father would be with us. How is this different? This word emphasizes the fact God's love always does what is best for us, without thinking about himself ever. This word means to sacrifice what I want for the good of the one I love. A number of years ago, there was a commercial in which a dad was listing all the things he paid for. Each time he did, he said, "You're a dad. That's your job." God's love pays and pays and never counts the cost. God the Father did that when he sent the Son that he loved and treasured to die for us. God the Father does that every day as he rules all things for our good, and decides when to send pain and when to give joy. We human fathers are imperfect in our love. Sometimes, we withhold love that we should give. Sometimes, we do expect something in return. Sometimes, we aren't willing to make the sacrifices we should. But God's love for us was perfect and it won eternal life for us.

St. Paul prayed that the fellowship of the Holy Spirit would be with us. Fellowship means being one. We are one with the Holy Spirit. Because of Christ, we are no longer God's enemies. We are his friends – we are his children. We will live with him in joy for all eternity and right now, we have fellowship with him. We can't always see it on this side of heaven, but it is absolutely true. Think about the ties of a family. If a dad or a mom is in the military and they get deployed to Afghanistan, do they stop being one of the family? No. Even though we can't see the Holy Spirit until we get to heaven, he gives us fellowship with him even now.

God is the source of all those gifts. Today is Father's Day. What do you fathers want? What do I want? Stuff, right? I always enjoy the month of June because Father's Day and my birthday fall very close together and I get to open lots of presents. But as much as I do enjoy stuff, what do we fathers really want? We want our children to love each other and their moms and us. We want them to live in harmony and to help and encourage one another. We want them to know their Savior and live their faith and reach eternal life. You know what? God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit wants all those things, too. It doesn't happen very often, but it is a real blessing that Holy Trinity and Father's Day fall together this year, because all the things our fathers do for us are just a pale imitation of what the Triune God does for us. All that we fathers want for our children comes from what the Holy Trinity wants for us. What great gifts our God gives us! Amen.