

Ministering to Each Other as Heirs of Grace

1 Thessalonians 5:25-28

Halifax: 17 December, 10:30 AM

Introduction

Last week, we came to the concluding section of Paul's first epistle to the Thessalonians.

- We saw that being set apart to God in Christ is still at the forefront as he presents a closing prayer in the last part of that concluding section (vv. 23-24).
 - In that prayer, he asked the LORD to continue His great work of sanctifying them completely in their whole being—that they might be preserved blameless when Jesus comes....
 - Not that anyone will be perfected in this life, but rather that they will be blameless in the sense of being found as those who truly are in Christ, being sanctified in Him.
 - Paul encourages them that the God of peace will be faithful to do this.

As those who belong to Christ, we are all heirs of the grace of God, jointly receiving His grace that transforms us into the likeness of Christ day by day.

- This is the joy and delight of the true people of God, and it has a tremendous unifying effect on us.
 - We are drawn together, from all different walks of life, as one family in Jesus.
 - It causes us to have a mutual regard and interest in each other as those who have the same eternal hope and who are loved by the one true eternal God.
 - We are compelled to support and encourage each other as we see the day of His return drawing near.

In Paul's closing lines (vv 25-28 which we are looking at today), he calls the Thessalonians to do those things that those who are jointly receiving God's grace ought to do.

- Receiving grace is different than receiving the world's treasures, because we benefit not only when we receive His grace, but also when our brothers and sisters do.
 - The more you receive the grace of Christ, the more you show me of Him and the more you love me and the rest of the body of Christ...
 - And so I have every reason to want all of you to receive more of Christ, and you have every reason to want me and all the other members to receive it as well.
 - Paul is calling us to do things for each other that will keep us flourishing in Christ and in His grace.

Listen now as I read these things to you from 1 Thessalonians 5:25-28.

- Actually, for the context, let me begin in 1 Thess 5:23 which we covered last week.
- Here is the holy and infallible word of God.

1 Thessalonians 5:23-28: Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴ He who calls you is faithful, who also will

do it. ²⁵ Brethren, pray for us. ²⁶ Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss. ²⁷ I charge you by the Lord that this epistle be read to all the holy brethren. ²⁸ The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Amen.

May the Lord add His blessing the reading of His holy word.

I. To keep each other flourishing in Christ and in His grace, pray for those who minister the Word.

- You see Paul's simple command in verse 25: **Brethren, pray for us.**

A. Paul was an apostle who spoke the very word of God to the people of God.

1. Paul, as well as the Thessalonians, knew that the word that Paul spoke was the very word of God.
 - We saw that in chapter 2, verse 13, where Paul said: **For this reason we also thank God without ceasing, because when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe.**
2. What a marvellous thing it is to have the God of heaven speak to us.
 - It means everything to us.
 - Here we have the promises of our loving Father—such as we saw last week—that He will continue to make us like Jesus until Jesus comes.
 - And the promise that His kingdom will come—that Jesus will raise the dead in Him, and will crush the head of Satan.
 - And the promise of the forgiveness of sin.
 - And in the word of the apostles, our Father reveals Himself to us—He tells us how much He loves us—so much that He sent Jesus.
 - He reveals His justice and wisdom, His power and authority, His mercy and grace, His wrath and judgment, His perfection and holiness, His truth and faithfulness—His pure goodness and glory.
 - And in the word, He reveals to us the way that we ought to live—
 - How we by His grace can become beautiful gracious image-bearers of Him who are like Jesus Christ.
 - We have His commandments and ordinances, all spoken to us in grace and love so that we might grow in them, even as our sins are exposed.

B. And this great apostle who speaks the word of God to us is the very one who pleads for the Thessalonians' prayers.

1. We find him frequently pleading for the prayers of God's people—in most of his epistles he asks for this.
 - There are no pretensions in him about his greatness.
 - He knows that he is a great apostle who has been used to deliver the word of God to His people—he knows that...
 - But he also knows that it is only by the grace of God that he can do anything at all.
 - He knows that left to himself, he is a blasphemer, murderer, and an insolent man as he calls himself...
 - It is only by grace that he is able to minister the word of God.
 - And that is why he pleads for prayer.
2. Praying for him was surely something those who love Christ and His grace did.
 - They were the beneficiaries of this man's grace for his apostleship.

- Neglecting to pray for him would bring harm to themselves—and in fact to the whole church!
 - We should be thankful that they prayed for Paul and the other apostles and prophets because without them, we would not have the scriptures today...
 - Because we are all the beneficiaries of their ministry that was sustained and upheld by God through the prayers of His people.
- C. My brothers and sisters in Christ, you know how to apply this command of the apostle today—***Brethren pray for us.***
1. You are no longer to pray for the apostle Paul—
 - You can give thanks for him, but his ministry on earth is done and he is with Christ in glory now—
 - You do not need to pray for him.
 2. But there are two things that you who love the grace of God in Christ can do to obey this command...
 - a. First, you can pray for the word of God itself to increase in its influence.
 - Part of what they were praying for when they prayed for Paul and the other apostles and prophets was that they would be able to preach the word faithfully in churches and in places where Christ was not known.
 - That should be our desire today—that churches would be fed with the word—that the word and its influence would increase among them...
 - And that it would spread to those who have not yet heard and that they might repent and believe the gospel, receiving the message of grace, seeing and delighting in the beauty of Jesus Christ.
 - b. Second, you can pray for those who minister the Word of God today.
 - They need your prayers just as much as the apostles needed the prayers of the saints in their day.
 - 1) Surely there were many who prayed for R. C. Sproul over the many years that he ministered...he went to be with the LORD last week.
 - So many of us were blessed by his ministry in answer to the prayers of God's people.
 - Pray for other Christian ministers and leaders that you know.
 - 2) And here in the local church, I need you to pray for me.
 - I am not sufficient to preach the word of God—I will go all wrong if left to myself.
 - I need God's grace, and you need to pray for me fervently and daily as your minister.
 - So often, we hear of ministers falling away and bringing reproach on Christ—some fall into false teaching and some into corrupt living.
 - They will have to answer to God for it to be sure, but I wonder how many prayer-less Christians will have their own answering to do.
 - 3) We are in all of this together.
 - We are a body and we are dependent on each other.
 - A faithful ministry of the word will bring Christ to you and to your brothers and sisters...

- If you love them and if you love Christ and Christ in them, then pray for the ministry of the word among us.
- That is what we ought to do as heirs of the grace of Christ.

TRANS> And there is more in our text that we can do...

II. **Second, to keep each other flourishing in Christ and in His grace, greet one another in love.**

- In verse 26, the apostle Paul says: **Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss.**

A. Let me begin by saying there is no need to get weirded out by this.

1. In the East, they do this kissing thing where they kiss each other on the cheek as a delightful way of expressing their commitment to another person.

- This was a standard customary greeting among the Jews and Greeks when Paul wrote this—
 - In Luke 7:45, Jesus notes the neglect of His host to kiss Him when He came to eat with him, when His host complains about a grateful woman who kisses Jesus' feet.
 - **You gave Me no kiss, but this woman has not ceased to kiss My feet since the time I came in.**
 - A kiss by the host was customary at a meal and it was an insult to neglect it.
 - So Paul was not asking the Thessalonians to do something that was culturally weird, but something that was perfectly normal and expected.
 - They would kiss in friendship, to confirm a contract the way we have customarily shaken hands, and of course to greet family.
 - Of course they had romantic kissing as well which was something different.
 - This is called a *holy kiss* to distinguish it from a family kiss or a business kiss to seal a contract as a kiss expressing a commitment to each other as believers.

2. But we do not need to feel constrained to take up this customary way of eastern greeting with each other.

- In our culture, it would be weird indeed to enter a church and see the members all kissing each other.
 - Just as ministers who are commanded to say, "**The LORD bless you and keep you**" when they pronounce the benediction are not compelled to use the words of the original Hebrew, but are actually commanded to use the language of the people,
 - So we are not commanded to use the language of greeting that the Thessalonians used to greet one another when Paul says "Greet one another with a holy kiss."
- This understanding of scripture is important.
 - It applies to the passage in 1 Corinthians 11 about women wearing head coverings that many people struggle with.

- In that passage, Paul tells the women in Corinth that they should wear head coverings because it was a symbol of respect to their husbands, and not doing so was a symbol of rebellion.
- But then after saying that to the Corinthians, he speaks of the Jews and says, **1 Cor 11:16: But if anyone seems to be contentious, we [the Jews] have no such custom, nor do the churches of God.**
- I find it odd that many of those who insist today on head coverings for women do not insist on the holy kiss between all when it plainly says, **Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss.**

B. But what should we do with this call to **Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss**?

1. We should obey it according to our own customs.
 - a. We should be diligent to express our commitment to each other as brothers and sisters in the body of Christ.
 - We should be eager to express warm greetings as appropriate to each other as those who are heirs of the Christ and His grace.
 - b. This has its own challenges in our day because our culture is changing.
 - It used to be that it would be rare for men not to greet one another with a handshake—and this was also used to seal contracts in business.
 - In former days, men did not customarily offer their hand to a woman unless she offered her hand to him first.
 - This custom carried over into churches as well.
 - However, in recent times, there has been much more fear of spreading diseases by touch and some are uncomfortable with touching others for other reasons...
 - And it has come about that partly for these reasons and partly for others, the handshake has fallen out of use.
 - It is not typically a way of expressing commitment among the younger generations.
 - It is still there to some extent and I for one am happy to use it, but I am getting old...
 - and as it has lost its meaning and has the problem of making some uncomfortable there is no reason to force it.
 - c. But failure to have a strong customary symbol of commitment makes it harder for us to do what this passage is calling for—to visibly express our commitment to each other!
 - We need to look for ways to do that—and of course extending a warm greeting to each other is a good way to begin.
 - Those who are enemies are not able to express warm greetings—at least not without hypocrisy...
 - A holy kiss or a holy greeting between brothers and sisters should never be done with hypocrisy.

➤ That is really the main point here!

2. As those who are heirs of the grace of Christ we should always be *for* each other; never *against* each other.
 - a. There should never be another person in the congregation that you are unable to wholeheartedly greet and express your commitment to.
 - You must be careful that you do not do wrong to them so as to turn them against you...
 - And you must be careful to go to them when they have done wrong to you to work it out...don't allow bitterness to develop in you...as it says in Ephesians 4:26, **Be angry and do not sin, do not let the sun go down on your wrath.**
 - In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told us to deal with offenses before we come to worship.
 - b. What a marvellous thing it is when church is a place where you know that everyone there is *for* you.
 - Of course there will be hypocrites in any church, and we have to accept that this will be so,
 - but you who know the Lord should endeavour, as Paul says in Ephesians 4:3, **to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.**
 3. This can only be done as we all keep our eyes on Christ our Master.
 - When you consider how much He loves you and how much He loves your brothers and sisters in the church,
 - how could you possibly be *against* them?
 - Realise that you can't turn against *them* without turning against *Him*.
 - Certainly there will be those who are harder for you to love than others,
 - but remembering how important they are to Christ will make all the difference.
 - And it will encourage you to frankly confess the struggles you have with others to Him and to plead with Him to help you.
 - And you can be sure that when you do that, He will be glad to help you.
 - And then look for tangible ways to express your commitment—ways that will be meaningful in the language of our culture.
 - Greet not just some, but *all* the brethren with a holy kiss.
- C. This will do much to keep the grace of Christ flowing among us.
- Psalm 133 tells us that the place where the brethren dwell together in unity is the place where God commands His blessing!
 - **Psalm 133:1-3: Behold, how good and how pleasant *it is* for brethren to dwell together in unity! ² *It is* like the precious oil upon the head, running down on the beard, the beard of Aaron, running down on the edge of his garments. ³ *It is* like the dew of Hermon, descending upon the mountains of Zion; for there the LORD commanded the blessing—life forevermore.**
 - We will all be looking for ways to honour Christ our high priest when we are for each other.
 - Instead of speaking rotten words, we will speak edifying words to that will impart grace to the hearer.

- And our Lord will see that these words truly do bring grace to our brothers.
- We will all be the beneficiaries.

TRANS> Now let's look at the third way Paul shows us...

III. Third, to keep each other flourishing in Christ and in His grace, see that all among us hear the His Word.

- That is what is called for in verse 27 where Paul says: **I charge you by the Lord that this epistle be read to all the holy brethren.**

A. Paul uses surprisingly strong language here to insist that this should be done!

1. To be charged by the Lord is to be put under oath to do something.
 - It is a way of saying that if you don't do this, you will have broken your commitment to Christ.
 - An authoritative charge in the name of the Lord binds you the same way a vow binds you.
2. Notice that Paul is calling for it to be read to all.
 - He did not want anyone to miss out on this letter that explained how God had worked in them,
 - this letter that encouraged them to keep on going,
 - that explained how Paul and the others had ministered to them,
 - that expressed their desire to minister and how they had sent Timothy when they could not come,
 - that called them to abound more and more in their walk with God,
 - that called them to sexual purity and brotherly love,
 - that encouraged them about the return of Christ,
 - that called them to live in harmony in the church,
 - that told them of how God would continue to work in them.
 - It was so wrong for the church under the pope to withhold the word from the people at the time of the reformation.
 - So many of our reformers were tortured and executed simply for translating the Bible in the language of the people and making it available to them.
 - 1 Thessalonians 5:27 shows clearly that the Bible is written for everyone in the congregation of God's people, not just for the leaders.
3. Not only is this something that is permitted to be done, but it something that the leaders of the church have a solemn obligation to do...
 - to see that everyone in the congregation hears the word of God.

B. So what does this mean for you?

1. It means that we should all be diligent about attending a church where the Bible is read and preached...
 - And that all of you should be involved in encouraging each other to hear the word of God.
 - And fathers, you should be diligent about bringing your children to church—
 - Do not allow sports or school or just laziness to encroach on either your church attendance or on reading the word in your home.

- We are seeing more and more that slackness in family worship is common feature of children who do not continue in their faith.
 - Think what a horrible father you would be if you did not provide for your children the things they need for their physical bodies when it was in your power to do it...
 - How much worse is it to deprive them of the food they need for their souls!
 - No child should be deprived from hearing God's Word each day!
 - But don't provide this with the attitude of one who has been forced to a miserable task.
 - Do it as one who loves God's word and who is enthusiastic about it.
 - If you are not, then ask God to change you and to give you contagious enthusiasm as one who sees how precious God's word is.
2. There are so many practical things you can do to encourage each other to receive the word of God.
- You can offer a ride to those who are not coming to church.
 - You can call them or write to them and tell them that they have been missed and you can remind them about how important it is to hear.
 - You can talk to others about what you have been reading in the word or about how God has been speaking to you in the sermons...
 - You can tell them of what you are learning of Christ and of His calling and about how He is using His word in your life.
 - And you can ask them what they have been reading in God's word and what they have been doing in family worship.
3. Remember, this is such an important matter that Paul charges the Thessalonians to see to it that nobody is excluded from hearing!
- This is the way that the God of heaven speaks to us.
 - This is the way that He tells us of His love and grace, of what He has done in Christ, and of how we may live for Him.
 - It is a travesty for anyone to be excluded.

TRANS> We cannot flourish in Christ if we do not continue in the hearing of the Word.

IV. But above all, to continue to flourish in Christ we must all receive the blessing of His grace.

- Paul concludes his epistle to the Thessalonians with such a blessing in verse 28: **The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ *be* with you. Amen.**

A. Surely this is what we all need!

1. The grace of Christ is the blessing that we have from Him—from being in Him as our Lord and Saviour—as the One the Father sent from heaven to bless us.
 - He is the One who came from heaven, being the Son of God from eternity.
 - He came here in order to bring grace to us—God's grace—His saving help that we desperately need and that we do not at all deserve.

- He came to gather us to God when we had broken away and were in bondage to sin and Satan.
 - He came to establish a kingdom for us—
 - a kingdom of righteousness where we could be restored to God and to the blessing of God.
 - a kingdom where He Himself earns God’s favour as our King for all who enter this kingdom.
 - a kingdom where He Himself provides a sacrifice for our sin to completely atone for it—and where that sacrifice is the only sacrifice that really can take away our sin—the sacrifice of Himself.
 - a kingdom where He gives us the Holy Spirit to change us so that we will even be interested in Him—and come to Him for this salvation.
 - a kingdom where He works in us by that same Spirit to transform us so that we are able to more and more live for God...
 - a kingdom where He tells us of the Father and His love and mercy, or His glory and justice, or His wisdom and power, and where He Himself reveals all of these things.
 - a kingdom where He brings us all together in Him so that we are enabled to love one another with pure heart fervently.
 - a kingdom where He has secured for us an eternal inheritance in glory...
 - a kingdom where He has conquered Satan and will crush him at the last day, completely releasing us from his tyranny.
 - a kingdom where He will restore the whole creation from the curse that we brought upon it so that we may live with God forever in paradise.
 - a kingdom where He preserves us and keeps us and continues to forgive us and work in us as He grows us for God.
2. Without Christ, all you have is condemnation...
- You are cut off from the true God forever by your own sin, without hope, without God in the world.
 - Without Christ, you are headed for eternity in the Lake of Fire and you have no way to escape except by coming to Him.
 - You will die in your sin and perish forever.
 - You will never be able to enjoy the glory of God; it will be your torment.
- B. These word, **the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you**, are a benediction. Do you know about benedictions?
- It is not just a way to tell us that the worship service is over!
1. Numbers 6:22-27, we are given instruction about benedictions.
- This is what it says: ²² **And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying:** ²³ **“Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, ‘This is the way you shall bless the children of Israel. Say to them: ²⁴ The LORD bless you and keep you; ²⁵ The LORD make His face shine upon you, And be gracious to you; ²⁶ The LORD lift up His countenance upon you, And give you peace.’ ²⁷ So they shall put My name on the children of Israel, and I will bless them.”**

- Notice several things here.
 - First, it is to be done by the priests.
 - That is because they are officially speaking for God. People were to see it as coming from God Himself.
 - In the New Testament, it is the ministers of the Word who speak for God, and we have benedictions by them in the scripture.
 - Second, notice that how God describes the pronouncement of the benediction as the minister putting God's name upon His people Israel.
 - Those who are baptised in Christ are the Israel of God in our day, and in this way God attests and affirms that they are His people.
 - To put His name upon them means that they are associated with Him so that His reputation, His name, is bound up with how He treats them.
 - Of course if they are wicked, as Israel was at times, it means that because His name is upon them, they will be dealt with before the nations...but for those who are truly in Him, it means that God will be gracious to them for the sake of His name.
 - His glory is tied together with how He treats them.
 - Thus we are assured that He will be faithful to us.
 - Third, you see how the LORD adds the words "and I will bless them."
 - He does not tell lies when His blessing is pronounced on people.
 - What He says is to be done, shall be done.
2. As those who are among God's people it is your duty to joyfully receive the benediction.
- You are to welcome the grace of God into your life, and to rejoice in His promise to bless you and your brothers and sisters with Christ Himself.
 - The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you.
 - Christ with whom we have union by faith is the place where the blessing of God comes from.
 - It is the grace that, as we saw earlier, we stir up by praying for those who minister the word, the grace in which we flourish when we are able to sincerely greet one another; and the grace we receive when all of us are hearing the word of God.

Conclusion: All through Paul's letter we have been encouraged to cherish our relationship with Jesus Christ.

- How can we not when He is a Saviour who has so much grace and love to give us?
 - His grace be with you all.