

**On “Receiving the Grace of God In Vain”**

The First Sunday in Lent

(from the Epistle: 2 Corinthians vi. 1)

*WE then, as workers together with him, beseech you also, that ye receive not the grace of God in vain; (for he saith, I have heard thee in a time accepted, and in the day of salvation have I succoured thee: behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation;) giving no offence in any thing, that the ministry be not blamed; but in all things approving ourselves as the ministers of God, in much patience, in afflictions, in necessities, in distresses, in stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labours, in watchings, in fastings; by pureness, by knowledge, by long-suffering, by kindness, by the Holy Ghost, by love unfeigned, by the word of truth, by the power of God; by the armour of righteousness on the right hand and on the left; by honour and dishonour, by evil report and good report; as deceivers, and yet true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as chastened, and not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things.*

This is a remarkable passage, for in it the Apostle lists at least a few of the characteristics of one who has made most of the grace that God has imparted to him. Later in this same letter (11:22 f.) St. Paul specifies the fearful sufferings that had been part and parcel of his appointment to apostleship.

Why is Paul exposing himself in such a confessional manner to these believers? If we read both Corinthian letters, we can distill an impression of this early church made famous by these epistles. Along with many positive qualities (ref. 1 Cor. 1:4-7 [spiritual giftedness], 11:2 [they kept Paul’s oral traditions], 2 Cor. 7:11 [zeal in repentance]), the Corinthians also entertained a very high opinion of themselves (1 Cor. 4:7,8), proudly promoted unchristian behavior (1 Cor. 5), favored false teachers instead of Paul (2 Cor. 3:1, 5:12, chap’s. 10-13), along with a host of other issues that led Paul to label them as *carnal*, or fleshly and immature, probably the last label they would ever have chosen to apply to themselves. The church in Corinth thought it had much to be proud of until the apostle, in godly Christian love, subjected them to measurement by those standards that certify the presence of real Christian faith. Rather than joining them in boasting of spiritual attainments, or flamboyant demonstrations of supernatural gifts, or a strutting pretense of high station in the church, he turns their attention to the miserable unseemliness of true sainthood, as evidenced by his own suffering. Scorn, rejection, ill treatment, indifference, anonymity, thanklessness are the dregs with which he and others like him are left, along with the patient demonstration of the highest virtues, in spite of such treatment (*kindness, love unfeigned, long-suffering, purity*, etc.). The godly apostle, in spite of the doubts of the Corinthians who should have known much better, could point in good conscience to his own life as an apt demonstration of what it truly means to be *Christian*.

*We... beseech you also, that ye receive not the grace of God in vain.* Paul is speaking to a group who would, in their pride and self-love, *never* have admitted to *receiving the grace of God*

*in vain!* They considered themselves a showcase church, one which God must surely have placed on the highest shelf of his cabinet of trophies. But the apostle not only is unimpressed with their array of credentials, he is imploring them to consider that there is always the real possibility that God's grace may not have worked anything in them of consequence, at all. That is a frightening thought.

What might all of this mean for you and me today? How might I *receive the grace of God in vain*? Does the fact that I attend church certify me as a Christian? Is it that I prayed a "sinner's prayer" way back when, at a particular date, in a certain place? Is it that I don't "dance, drink, smoke, or chew, and never go out with girls that do"? Is it the approval of my denomination, or the number and color of my vestments, or my erudition in discussing church history? No, says Paul, the evidences that God's grace is actively converting me is seen in far different ways: in humility, in service, in self-sacrifice, in fervent virtue, in deliberate obscurity, in patient endurance of suffering for Christ's sake.

Is God's purpose in granting us grace merely to transport us to heaven some day as part of some privileged class? No, heaven is only a much anticipated and eventual result. But in the present, He is seeking *workers*, those who are prepared to get in harness and pull the Gospel plow in the desperately hard soil that is today's America. There is no place for us to sit silently and inactively, smugly clutching a Christian membership card, enjoying the view, so to speak, and delighting in ourselves.

Just how uncomfortable is your profession of Jesus Christ making you? Does it require anything of you? Is it calling you to acts of self-sacrifice? Is it disturbing the plans you've made for yourself? Are its requirements forcing you to call out in God for faith to meet them? Does it occupy the place of honor in your heart and life?

This is Lent. We need to be asking ourselves such questions. We can bar the door against them, keep them outside, pull down the shades so we can't see them, send them off to the other side of the world, but they will only return again, still needing an answer. Time on this earth is *the only time* that we are given to make the most of these things. That is why the Apostle cries out *behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation*. Once time is exhausted, there will be no more chances for putting these things to work. Whatever we've done with God's grace — His very expensive grace, secured by the death of His Son upon the Cross — will be signed, sealed, and delivered before the judgment seat of Christ.

Now... is *now*. A bunch of *nows* add up to an hour, and a bigger bunch to a day, and more of them produce a month, and yet more, a year, and finally, a lifetime. This is both a cause for very sober reflection for the Christian, and also for great joy. The world is never satisfied with *now*. It is always reaching desperately forward into the future: "Together we'll build the best

America we've ever had!"; or, "I can't wait 'til summer vacation!"; or, "There's only one day I anticipate, and that's the day I'll retire!". Or it looks wistfully at the past: "Things were a lot better then. I wish we could just turn everything back the way it used to be!" But the wise believer lives for God fully, completely, passionately, in the moment. The result for him is not only the joy and pleasure of pleasing his Heavenly Father in the present, but the enrichment of his eternal existence. He receives a double benefit from all of the *nows* which fill his life upon earth.

Perhaps Lent will assist us in focusing on the present. We really have nothing else other than the moment. St. Paul is urging the Corinthians to neither rest upon their perceived laurels — their past accomplishments —, nor to procrastinate in their fulfillment of their Christian duties, putting off the practice of virtue and pursuit of holiness until some more convenient time, when they feel more like doing it. How filled with the grace of God he was, and how much he made of it! Earlier he had written to this very same church about his rightful inclusion among the apostles:

*But by the grace of God I am what I am : and his grace which was bestowed upon me was not in vain; but I laboured more abundantly than they all: yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me. (1 Corinthians 15:10)*

What will I do, *now*, with my family, my job, my ministry? Will I *approve myself as the minister of God*? It will take controlling my anger. It will take lots and lots of patience. It will take swallowing my pride. Accepting disappointments. But it will also require the cultivation of those traits of godly character that I know are required of me. Glory to God! In the long run, I can be assured that the trials and tribulations I endure plus my own proactive efforts at encouraging growth in Christian character will some day make me into a person of virtue. But that's exactly what the Apostle was saying, although the list of the experiences that have shaped our own lives will surely differ from his. Perhaps it will be parenthood. Or marriage. Or a variety of health issues. Or a lifetime of dedicated employment. No matter what the details, a life lived for God will be rewarded with His *approval*.

This is very hard work. Few have a taste for it. If anything comes easily, this is not among them.

But that's why we're here this morning.

*In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.*