



# Grace be with you all

*“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”*

Each Sunday we are blessed with these words at the end of the divine service. What do these phrases mean? And why did the Apostle Paul conclude his letter to the Corinthians (2 Corinthians 13:14) with this benediction?

In the first century, Corinth was a bustling trade center, positioned on an isthmus that separated the Gulf of Corinth from the Saronic Gulf, and further the Aegean Sea. Because traveling around the southern coast of Greece was treacherous, ships or their cargo would be hoisted ashore and transported on the *Diolkos*, a paved track of sorts, to the other side. This concentration of goods and trade made for a prosperous city.

When Paul established the congregation in Corinth, it was most likely a group of house churches, made up of a wide stratum of people from varying social classes; from the very wealthy and educated, to freedmen and slaves. The writings we refer to as first and second Corinthians are actually embedded in a flurry of letters written back and forth between Paul and various members of the house churches in Corinth, specifically around the topic of division. Seemingly, the congregations in that city had found myriad topics to disagree over: “favorite” apostles, philosophy and rhetoric, resurrection,



issues of sin, marriage, and relationships, being “special”, and even the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. Throughout the letters, Paul prompts them to different actions aimed at overcoming their disagreements, mainly, to modify their individual behaviors to accommodate the other.

In the disagreement on the celebration of communion, Paul writes, “*For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgement to himself, not discerning the Lord’s body*” (1 Corinthians 11:29). When we show no concern for others, we neglect the body of Christ. In the next chapter, Paul leans in to the image of the body of Christ: while each part is distinct, all are necessary, all are connected, and further, God has *given greater honor to that part which lacks it, that there should be no schism in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another* (1 Corinthians 12:24-25). This was completely contrary to the customs of Greco-Roman society. Wealthy, noble, honorable persons always expected deference from those of lower classes – they expected to receive better food, better treatment, better everything. The clothes they wore outwardly expressed their rank so everyone would know what was due to them. In a few words, Paul turns this world upside down.

Between 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians, we know from references that more letters were sent, and Paul visited Corinth and planned on visiting them again. From 2 Corinthians, we can see that the divisions have still not been fully reconciled, and some in the congregations have even turned against Paul,

who we can see defending his apostleship in chapters 10-13.

Yet, in all this tension, Paul ends his letter with what would come to be known as the Apostolic Benediction...

*“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”*

*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ...* the ordering of the Persons of the Trinity may strike us as peculiar. Usually, in a list, we speak first of the Father, then the Son, and finally the Holy Spirit (as in the Great Commission – Matthew 28:19). This order aligns with God’s self-revelation to humanity. However, here, Paul starts with the Lord Jesus Christ, who invites us into the knowledge of and participation in the triune God. Grace is a quality of God; a benevolence towards humanity, bestowed freely; the undeserved, unexpected, unimaginable goodness of God. It is grace that we can know God as the Father, Son, and Spirit, and this we learn from the teachings and Person of Christ. It is grace that we are reconciled with the Father through the Son. It is grace that through the Father and the Son, the Spirit is sent to earth to work through and sanctify the church.

This is all accomplished by *the love of God*. God’s love is at the heart of the gospel, the

story of our salvation. God loved the world in such a way that He took the consequences of our sin (death) and turned it into redemption through Jesus Christ on the cross. Because of God's love, we experience the undeserved grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Finally, *the communion of the Holy Spirit*. First, we can understand this to be the abiding presence of God in our lives. We are sent out into the world, knowing that through the gift of the Holy Spirit, the power and life of God, He is with us wherever we go, whatever we do. But there is a second meaning that gets to the heart of Paul's message to the Corinthians. When we receive the sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Sealing, we are united to Christ through the Spirit, and by virtue of this also united to each other as His body. The communion of the Holy Spirit should lead us into a fellowship of grace with one another.

The underlying issue that Paul is addressing with the Corinthians is a lack of grace, love, and harmonious fellowship in their churches. This benediction, then, points us to the qualities immanent in the presence of God, that need to *become* immanent in the congregation. A transformation must take place that leads to a community that embodies grace, love, and fellowship. The blessing empowers the congregation to become what is it supposed to be.

In our sealing we accept "the calling to become a firstling" (CNAC 8.3). This means we are preparing to spread the gospel in the kingdom of peace and point humanity to

Jesus Christ. Therefore, the essence of our congregational life, already today, should be proclaiming the gospel – the story of God's love for humankind, caring about others above ourselves, and striving to be in perfect unity and fellowship with Christ, and through Him, with each other. This is what a grace-filled congregation looks like.

Grace, love, and communion are a picture of the triune God, but also an image of congregational unity. Through Jesus Christ's self-sacrifice, we experience God's love for us, and we experience the Spirit's power to transform and shape us as a church, into a unified body. Receive these words as a blessing, but also a responsibility to become the body of Christ in a broken and divided world.



# A life of Sent-ness

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What does God send us to do? How can we embrace this calling?

We can start with our Vision and Mission statements. Our Vision statement tells us who we are and why we're here and the Mission statement tells us what we do. The verbs in these statements give us the purpose God has called us to!

Our Vision is to create a church in which people *feel* at home and, *inspired* by the Holy Spirit and their love for God, *align* their lives to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and thus *prepare* themselves for His return and eternal life.

Our Mission is *reaching out* to all people in order to *teach* them the Gospel of Jesus Christ and to *baptize* them with water and the Holy Spirit. *Providing* soul care and *cultivating* a warm fellowship in which everyone shall *experience* the love of God and the joy of *serving* Him and others.

So we are to align, prepare, reach out, teach, cultivate, and serve (to name a few).

How can we help others experience the love of God? John 3:16 reminds us: *For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.* God so loved the world, that He sends us out into the world. This means that our lives Monday-through-Saturday are not separate from our lives on Sunday. Whether you are in God's house, or

out in the world, either way God is with us and He wants to work through us. In all that we do, the Lord is actually shaping us so that we can reach out to and serve very specific people that we encounter in our lives. There are certain hands that you can hold. I can't, but maybe you can; the Lord fashioned you to hold those hands. You are specifically chosen (1 Peter 2:9).

How can we embrace our sent-ness? Before Christ sends us out, He brings us in. We come to church to strengthen our relationship with Jesus Christ so that we can do His will. But first, we have to realize our inadequacy. This is part of the transformative work of being a disciple of Christ. Recognizing our inadequacy strengthens our reliance on God and allows Him to work through us. **He brings us in, to send us out.**

But we have to decide to accept this calling, to say like Isaiah: "*Here I am, send me.*" This means stepping out of our comfort zone; it takes risk and sacrifice. God gives us the assurance that He's with us in the uncomfortableness, in the mess, and in the struggle. We encounter His presence in a whole new way, which strengthens us and enables us to continue to serve.

God has chosen you. He brings you in, blesses you and asks you to sacrifice. He gives you a message and a purpose. And then God sends you out. ***Embrace your sent-ness!***