

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Paul regularly greets the recipients of his epistles with a well-known phrase: “*Grace to you and peace.*” Mostly it’s grace and peace “*from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*” (Rom. 1:7, 1 Cor. 1:3, etc.), but the words vary. “*Grace to you and peace.*” The words ring in our ears. The phrase is so popular that many Lutheran pastors begin their sermons this way — I don’t, but many do.

“*Grace to you and peace ... from ... the Lord Jesus Christ,*” that is, from Him who said in our Gospel, “*Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.*” That poses a bit of a conundrum — it deserves a bit of investigation.

In thinking about Jesus’ words to us today, I think it’s important to note that Jesus continues with this saying in our Gospel right after calling believers to confess Him: “*everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven*” (Matt. 10:32-33). Immediately, He continues by saying, “*Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.*” I submit, therefore, that this lack of peace must be inextricably linked with confessing Jesus.

Two weeks ago, three young people confirmed the faith into which they were baptized, having heard Jesus’ exhortation to confess Him before men. And whom were they confessing? They had heard His name through the years. They were confessing Jesus, “*the Prince of Peace*” (Is. 9:6); they were confessing Him who was welcomed as an infant to earth by the angel’s song, “*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace*” (Luke 2:14); they were confessing Him who died and rose from the dead on the third day, and who visited the disciples with words of peace, “*Peace be with you*” (John 20:19); they were confessing Him who, they heard on that Sunday, had just sent out the disciples to proclaim “*the kingdom of heaven*” (Matt. 10:7) to the cities and to bestow peace upon those homes that were “*worthy*” (Matt. 10:13), a word that figures prominently in our text today.

But these young people were also confessing the Jesus who said, “*Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.*” Now, let me be clear. Jesus did not make a mistake, nor did the angels, nor did the prophets and evangelists. Both assertions are true. The Prince of Peace came to establish peace; and yet, He came not to bring peace but a sword. How can these be reconciled?

The answer, I think, surely lies in answering the question “peace with whom?” Jesus is the Prince of Peace, and the peace He came to establish was with God.

That's what St. Paul says, "[*Righteousness*] will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification. Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 4:24–5:1). So Christ by the mystery of His incarnation, by His holy nativity, by His baptism, fasting, and temptation, by His agony and bloody sweat, by His cross and Passion, by His precious death and burial, and by His glorious resurrection and ascension, established peace between God and man; and by His sending of the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, to call us to faith in Christ that peace becomes our own (language from the Great Litany prayer).

In another place, St. Paul says it like this: "*God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting [our] trespasses against [us].*" Again, "*God ... through Christ reconciled us to himself*" (2 Cor. 5:18-19); that is, God Himself reestablished those friendly relations we had with Him in the garden before Adam's sin, and He did it in Christ by forgiving us our sins through His blood (Heb. 9:22).

Nevertheless, Jesus also came with a sword, for Scripture also teaches that our God demands a kind of fidelity that tolerates no rivals. It's a first commandment issue. "You shall have no other gods" is the way our catechism puts it now, along with Luther's explanation: "We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things."

I was asked the other day about why our catechism has the First Commandment in this form, and not the way it is in Exodus or Deuteronomy, namely, "*You shall have no other gods before me*" (Ex. 20:3), which is probably closer to the way you may have memorized it. After a bit of sleuthing, I discovered that "You shall have no other gods," is actually how Luther had it in his catechism. So it's a translation of Luther. Regardless, whether it's "You shall have no other gods" PERIOD, or "*You shall have no other gods before me*" or "*besides me*" or "except me" (LXX, πλην ἑμου; Heb. עַל-פְּנֵי) the meaning is the same. There is one God; He will accept no rivals.

And that's what Jesus is saying to His disciples. Remember, Jesus would later tell the disciples that the first and greatest commandment is to "*love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind*" (Matt. 22:37). So, to confess Jesus as God and Lord is necessarily to love Him above all things. And that means more than mother or father; that means more than son or daughter; that means even more than your own life. Anything less, He says, is "*unworthy of [Him],*" that is, of who He is. And remember, Jesus told His apostles, "*if [the house] is not worthy, let your peace return to you*" (Matt. 10:13).

Such Christian demands, of course, often do result in “no peace,” for those who do not share the faith and confess Christ: *“a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law.”* For even though man is but a created being, man often seeks and demands, or offers to another, the adoration that is reserved to God alone, a sinful idolatry that brings conflict and not peace.

Truly, families are often divided on account of Jesus (much of the language in the next two paragraphs comes from Jeffrey A. Gibbs, *Commentary on Matthew 1:1-11:1*), not because we seek it, but because when it comes to who Jesus is, and what He did for us, and how we are saved through faith in Him alone, there simply is no middle ground. A Christian cannot deny Christ and remain a Christian; a Christian cannot return to his old way of life or cave in to family pressures to reject Christ and His work, for he would thereby lose the only real life there is: eternal life with God through Jesus, as Jesus says, *“Whoever finds his life will lose it.”*

Even more paradoxically, when a Christian accepts this sword, carries the cross, and suffers the loss of his former relationships and status, even unto death (as we all confessed in our confirmations), all for the sake of Christ, because he clings to Jesus in faith, that believer will discover that he has found real life forever—*“whoever loses his life for [Jesus’] sake will find it”* along with the peace that passes all understanding (Phil. 4:7).

And so, confessors of Christ, *“grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”* Live in the grace and peace that is Yours in Christ Jesus. And in your families, as the Apostle says to the Corinthian congregation, as much as possible without compromise, *“aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you”* (2 Cor. 13:11), and His peace *“will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus”* (Phil 4:7).

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.