

Christ Died for Sinners! Therefore we have peace, joy, hope, and certainty.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

When we think of gift-giving, what season typically comes to mind? Christmas, right? If there is any season that doesn't bring to mind gift-giving, it would probably be the season of Lent, right? Many Christians give up some pleasures of this world during this season. It is the time we remember Christ's suffering and death on the cross. Giving gifts just doesn't seem like the thing to do.

And yet, today's sermon shows us that Christ's suffering and death on the cross really was all about gift-giving. Our heavenly Father gave us some amazing gifts... gifts which the world cannot give. Let's take a look today at the amazing gifts we have from God this season of Lent because Christ died on the cross. (In Christ, we have peace, we have joy, we have hope and we have certainty that we are saved.) We read from Romans chapter 5.

"Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God."

"You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation." (Romans 5:1,2,6-11)

After the first World War, many people declared that it was "the war to end all wars." Many thought peace would last on earth. But we know well that just a couple decades passed before the whole world was once again at war. Today wars and armed conflicts continue all around the world. Terrorism is a new threat that has destroyed peace in this world. Right here in Omaha the lack of peace is evident every day in the news. More shootings. Another robbery. But often times we don't even need to look outside our homes to find fighting and a lack of peace.

There is this lack of peace between human beings has its root cause in a lack of peace between man and God. Sin separates man from the holy God. God's wrath is deserved. There is hostility between God and man. And we are powerless to change this horrible reality. But we read in our text that God has done something about it. It's the first Lenten gift we will talk about: the gift of peace. *"Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."* Peace with God. How? Because we are justified by faith in Christ. What does this mean?

The word "justified" conjures up the picture of a courtroom. We, the accused, stand before God the Father, the perfect judge. We are charged with countless sins. The list of charges are on a long roll of paper that extends across the large courtroom. We can say nothing in our

defense. We are guilty as charged. But then our lawyer steps in. He is the judge's son. He is our Lord Jesus Christ. He publicly declares that he has taken full responsibility for all our wrongs.

Now what makes this even more amazing is that we, the guilty, didn't ask Jesus to do this. In fact, our daily sins mean we're enemies of the judge and enemies of his Son as well. Ever little or big sin we commit every day is a declaration that we despise God, his rule, and his rules.

What is God, the righteous judge's reaction to our rebellion? "*But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*" Christ died for us, his enemies! Isn't that amazing? We've all seen movies where the hero takes a bullet or suffers harm or even death for the person he loves. Human being sometimes will do that for those they love and who love them in return. But God shows his love for us in a different way. For us sinners, Christ died! I don't ever recall seeing that scenario in the movies. Imagine a hostage situation. The SWAT team gets a bead on the ring leader. A hostage jumps in front of him and takes the bullet to save the bad guy. I don't recall seeing a movie like that. But that's exactly what Christ did. While we were still in a state of sin and rebellion... while we were enemies of God... Christ died for us.

The Father, then, has accepted the punishment for our guilt. When the judge considers all his Son has done, he swings the gavel and declares his decision: "Not guilty!" The long list of charges is signed at the bottom in the blood of Christ: Paid in full. Through Jesus, then, we have peace with God. A peace which is a gift from God.

There was a time when I used to wonder, "What if Jesus returns to judge us, and I am sinning at that particular moment. I don't have time to repent. Doesn't that mean I'll go to hell?" That's a scary thought isn't it? The truth is we will be sinning when Christ returns or when we die. Sinful thoughts fly into our heads almost all the time. Sinful words, actions and attitudes occur regularly, don't they? But our reading answers this question. Peace with God isn't something we have and lose many times a day as we sin and repent. Our text says, *Through Jesus we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.*"

In ancient times, the throne room of the king is not a place where the common man had access. People were shut out. And if you forced your way in, it usually meant death. But this passage tells us the by faith in Christ and in his death for our sins, we have gained access to God because we are standing in the sphere of Christ's grace... his undeserved love. Can you visualize this? By faith we are in Christ Jesus, we are in his grace. It's like a big sphere or bubble all around us... always. So just as it's accurate to say we are always sinning, we can also accurately say that by faith we are always standing in grace. Surely we would not say that we fall into unbelief and come back to faith with every sin. Even as believers, we do sometimes sin in weakness. But by faith in Christ, we are still standing in grace... we are still at peace with God... we are in a state of forgiveness. Thanks God for his gift of peace!

Our text lists two more gifts from God that are ours this Lenten season as we contemplate Christ's death on the cross. We'll take them together. It says, "*We rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.*" Joy and hope. Maybe at first glance the connection between joy and hope isn't evident. We have joy now because of a sure hope of what's coming in the future.

Long ago, there was an American submarine that sank with its crew on board. Ships rushed to the scene to try to save the men. A diver listened to the hull for signs of life. He heard a tapping... a trapped crewman was sending a message by Morse code. He kept repeating the same message, "Is there any hope?" Indeed, life is unbearable if we have no hope. If that trapped man had heard the message, "You will be rescued within 15 minutes." Would he not have immediately been filled with joy... and remained that way until his rescue?

If we are to have joy now, we must have hope for the future. And that's exactly what God has given us. He assures us over and over again of his love for us. He demonstrated his love in sending his own Son to die for us. We have been declared not guilty by God almighty. He has promised us an eternal place at his side. We don't yet enjoy that blessing, but we know it's coming. We know it's ours. That sure hope of glory which is ours gives us joy now that cannot be taken away. So hope and joy are two more Lenten presents that ours because Christ went to the cross.

One more thing we have which God has given us. It is the gift of certainty... a gift we will see is also related to our hope and our joy. In that example I gave you about the submarine crewman who would have joy if he had hope, perhaps a thought crossed your mind. "But if his rescue was not certain... if he had doubts, both his hope and his joy would be diminished." That is very true. So many things in life are uncertain. In fact, Benjamin Franklin said, the only things that are certain are death and taxes. Too true, isn't it? Today we may be healthy, tomorrow sick. Today we have enough money to make ends meet, but tomorrow we don't. Today, we enjoy a good relationship with our spouse or children. Tomorrow, an argument could ruin it all. Because nearly everything in life is uncertain, perhaps we hesitate to believe that salvation from God is certain. In fact, many churches teach that salvation from God is not certain at all.

I had an opportunity once to speak to a Catholic man about his religion. He was a very well-educated Catholic and he knew his church's teachings very well. We talked about salvation, and he insisted that in order for us to be saved, we must do many good works. I pointed out that if our good works earn salvation, then we can never really know if we have done enough. So we never know if we are going to be saved or not. We never know if we'll be in heaven or hell. He answered, "That is absolutely correct. God does not **want** us to be certain. He wants us to always be in doubt so that we will work harder and do more good works."

I felt sorry for this man. From his words, I realized that because he did not have certainty, he also did not possess the other gifts we have talked about: peace, joy and hope. He could try hard to be a good Catholic, but he still wasn't sure if God loved him and accepted him.

God gave us his Holy Word to reveal to us with certainty our standing with him. His loving purpose was to remove our doubt and not be afraid. He gave us his words so we could *know* and be saved.

The world offers us uncertainty and doubts. God gives us certainty and confidence. But how can we know that we are forgiven and God has accepted Jesus' sacrifice? God points us to Christ's resurrection for our certainty: "*For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!*" What comfort! Follow Paul's logic: We were God's enemies, so what did God do? Sent his Son to die for us. Christ's death for his enemies is proof of God's love and our peace with God. If Christ's death means all of these things, how much more does his resurrection mean! Since Christ rose, the penalty must be paid in full. He's done being punished. He lives! Ours sins are done being punished. Therefore, Christ's resurrection is the final and absolute proof that we have peace with God. Therefore we have certainty which means our hope cannot be taken away, and our joy is complete.

Truly amazing gifts from God we celebrate this Lenten season! Grace, mercy, peace, hope, joy, and complete confidence. Amazing gifts. Kids, after church today, ask your parents if you might exchange gifts this Lenten season. We've got a lot to celebrate! Amen.

"And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."