

Holy Habits: Grace to You, and Peace

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

September 11, 2022-AM Service

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Romans 1:1-7

This morning we begin a new sermon series. It's a sermon series that will take us through the end of October and it will be a little different from some other series in that this series will reflect on worship. For the next six weeks we will reflect on the different parts of our worship service. We will think about why we do what we do in this hour, and we will see how the different parts of our worship are rooted in Scripture. We will also reflect on how the different elements of worship shape us. Because that's what worship does. Worship is a Holy Habit. It shapes you. It forms you. When you come to worship every week, everything we do is being used by the Holy Spirit to shape you.

That's how habits work. All of us have habits and rituals and practices. All of us have things that we do consistently, habitually, every day, every week, every year. These habits shape us. Specifically, they shape what we love and what gets our attention.

Here's an example of how that works, an example that I've used before but I'll use again because I think it shows how this works. When I was ten years old I loved the Montreal Canadiens. They were my favorite hockey team. The Montreal Canadiens had my full attention. I knew the name of every player and knew how many points they scored and I had their hockey cards. Why did I love them so much? My love was fed by a couple of habits. One was a weekly habit. My friend Frank loved the Montreal Canadiens too, so every Saturday night just before 8 pm I would go over to his house to watch Hockey Night in Canada. Frank and I would cheer on our beloved team. It was a weekly ritual a weekly habit. There was also a daily habit. When the evening paper would come, I would grab the sports section and I would turn to the hockey scores and I would study them intently. Who scored, who got assists, where Montreal was in the standings. Together these habits kept my love for Montreal strong.

But when I moved to Michigan, I fell out of those habits. The Montreal Canadiens weren't on TV around here so I never got to see their games. I wasn't over at Frank's house every Saturday; I was out with my new college friends. And the Grand Rapids Press didn't have the hockey box scores, it might have had the Red Wings' box score, but not the Canadian's. Besides, as a college student, I didn't subscribe to the Press. My habits changed. My rituals changed. And guess what that did to my loves and my attention? My affection for the Montreal Canadian's is a pale shadow of what it was. I like them, but I don't pay that much attention. I certainly don't live and die with them like I used to. We are creatures of habit. And the habits we choose, the habits we fall into shape our love, shape our affections and shape our character.

Worship is a special habit. It's a holy habit. When you give yourself to this weekly ritual, the Holy Spirit begins to tap tap tap on your heart. Slowly and gently the Spirit is sculpting you, giving your life a Christ-like shape. And that's why the Bible is always calling us to habits of faith. When the Bible calls us to faith, it doesn't just call us to the ideas of faith – the doctrines, the beliefs. The Bible calls us to the practices of faith, the rituals the habits. The Old Testament calls us to all sorts of holy habits. The law of God prescribed daily prayers, and daily sacrifices. The law of God prescribed annual festivals, and pilgrimages. There were offerings to be made at the birth of children, at the bringing of the harvest. God used these habits to grow faith and build community. The New Testament is no different. Jesus attended all the religious festivals. The Gospels tell us that it was Jesus' custom to worship in the synagogue every week. And the New Testament Christians had the habit of gathering for worship on the Lord's day and breaking bread together.

The central ritual of our life together is Christian worship. When you come here every week and participate in worship and the rest of the community activities surrounding worship, the Holy Spirit works on you, little by little. Over the next six weeks we will think deeply on this holy habit of worship and how it forms us. We will examine all the parts of our worship including the Lord's supper and baptism, but today we will start at the beginning. Today we will think about the opening of our worship.

At LaGrave, we start our services the same way week after week. And the centerpiece of that beginning is the greeting. At every service one of the ministers raises their hands over you and says some version of "*Grace, mercy and peace to you from God the Father, through the work of Jesus Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit.*" You receive those words of greeting and you respond by saying amen. It happens every service.

Of course the greeting isn't the only thing that happens at the beginning of the service, there are many other things going on, but the greeting is the central act of our opening, and you can tell it's important because not everyone can do it. Did you ever notice that not all our liturgists raise their hands when the greeting is given? When Chad and Erin do liturgy, they say the words of the greeting, but they don't raise their hands. Why not? Because while they are seminarians and working to become ordained ministers, they are not yet fully ministers of the Word. Only ordained ministers are allowed to raise their hands. That's because we consider the greeting to be an official act of ministry. We think that something really important is happening in the greeting. We think that it's not just the minister saying grace and peace, but God himself is greeting us in that moment. God himself is bestowing his grace and his peace. It's a word from the Lord.

Where did we get the idea of doing this greeting at the beginning of the service? Why did we think it was a good idea for the minister to raise their hands and say these words? We got it from Paul's letters. We begin our services with grace and peace because Paul begins all his letters with grace and peace. We heard that in verse seven of our passage this morning: "To all who are love by God and called to be his holy people grace and peace to you from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ." Every single one of Paul's letters starts that way. Because it's such a common introduction, we often read right past this part of Paul's letters. We pretty much ignore them. We figure these introductions are just standard boilerplate introductions, that they don't have anything to teach us. We treat it like we treat the letters people send us. If someone sends me a letter and begins it by saying, "Dear Peter," I don't stop and fixate on that word 'dear.' I don't say, 'Oh my!' Dear. Why did they choose that word? How should I understand this person's feelings about me? If I did that you would say, "No, that's just how people start letters! It doesn't mean anything!"

But Paul's greeting is more than a standard greeting. There is something here worth lingering over. There was a standard opening to a Greek letter in those days. If you were a Greek person writing a note to your friend, you would start your letter out with the word *χαρην*, which meant 'Greetings!' It was also how you might greet your friend if you ran into her down at the market, "*χαρην! Greetings! Hey! How's it Going?*" But Paul has taken the word *χαρην* and turned it into *χαρις*. He has changed the word greetings into grace. And to that word grace he has added the word *ειρηνη*, peace. Simple "greetings" have become, "grace to you and peace."

So what, is that change significant? Does it mean anything? Yes, it does. Notice that there's a change in who's giving the greeting. If Paul used the standard "Greetings!" as his opening, who is giving the greeting? Paul is. The power of the greeting comes from him. But when Paul says Grace and Peace to you, who is giving the giving the grace and peace? Now the power of the greeting from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

By starting his letters this way Paul is grounding the church in their true hope Paul starts here, because that's the place where we start. It doesn't start with us. It starts with Him; it doesn't start with our effort; it starts with his grace and His peace. Every one of Paul's letters is sent to different churches facing different situations. Some of them are in crisis, some of them need encouragement, some of them need rebuke. All of them will receive some sort of instruction. Do this. Don't do that. Run the race marked out for you. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor serving the Lord. Paul will give them things to do, and all this doing is important. But whatever Paul asks these churches to do, their hope does not depend on their doing and their striving; they are saved by the grace and peace that comes from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. So right from the beginning, Paul wants to make sure they have the order right. *"I have much to say to you children, some of it is hard, some of it is challenging, but before I say anything else, let me offer the most important thing of all: Grace and peace to from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ."*

The reason Paul starts his letters with grace and peace is the same reason we start our services with grace and peace. In a normal service we will do lots of things. We will confess sins, ask for help, we will sing praises. We will be asked to consider our sins, to change our behavior, we will ask you to give and to volunteer and help. All these things are really important, but before you hear about any of them, before we are given one word of instruction, or rebuke, or correction, God stops us and reveals His heart. *"Here you are! I'm so glad to see you! I've been here working making things ready. I've prepared my house and I've set a table where we can eat together. I'm so glad that you are here. I greet you! Grace to you and peace."*

When we participate in worship, and we hear that greeting week after week, what gets formed in us? How does the Holy Spirit use this Holy Habit to shape us? The Holy Spirit uses this holy habit to ground us in the Sovereign grace of God. We come into this place with our life full of sorrows and sins, with worries whirling in our heads, but then we come into this place and we hear those words that are stronger than any of our troubles: "Greetings children. I'm so glad you are here. I give you my grace. I give you my peace. "It's what we need to hear at the beginning...and not just at the beginning of our worship services. At the beginning of our days, and the beginning of our projects, it's what we need to hear and know before everything we do.

Sometimes people from other congregations will come up to me and the other ministers who preach here and say, "Wow! You have to preach at LaGrave! What's it like to preach to all those accomplished people! All those smart people!! That must be tough!" You know what we say to those people? We say to them: "You know, they're really not that bright." No, that's not what we say. We say to them, all those "smart" people are just looking for the gospel. Whether we are a successful business person, or a brilliant professor, or a five-year-old child wiggling in the pew, we need to know the grace of Jesus Christ our Lord.

And right from the very beginning, that's what we receive in this place. To the parents trying to raise a child plagued by anxiety and depression - grace to you and peace. To the couple desperately trying to hold their marriage together - grace to you and peace. To the college student approaching graduation and completely unsure of what's next - grace to you and peace. To the new high school student trying to sort out the social complexities of high school while dealing with the churn of their own feelings - grace to you and peace. To the widow exhausted from being alone, grace to you and peace. To a church full of people anxious about the future and the state of our world and the state of the church, grace to you and peace, from God the Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ.