



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Gracious
Dr. Jim Gilchrist

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Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone (Colossians 4:6).

When Luke summarizes Jesus' early ministry he comments on how "All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth." Paul urges the Colossians to "Let your speech always be gracious," and he begins most of his letters with the words, "Grace and peace to you" A sense of grace and encouragement to be gracious were woven into the church from the very beginning, so this morning I want to say a few words about the importance of our being gracious.

To be gracious is to act with grace. Our word grace comes from the Latin *gratia*. It's related to *gratis*, which describes a gift freely given, without cost to the one who receives it. And the response to *gratia*, of course, is gratitude. When someone gives us a gift, we're grateful. You see the same pattern in New Testament Greek. Grace is *charis* in Greek, and the gifts of grace are called *charismata*. When we say someone is charismatic, we mean she's gifted with a winning personality. And then again, the response to *charismata* is *eucharistein*, to give thanks. You may recognize in that word another name for the Lord's Supper. It's called the Eucharist because in the sacrament we give thanks to God for the grace we find in Jesus Christ.

It's clearer in Latin and Greek than it is in English, but the whole of Christianity turns out to be one great cycle of grace and gratitude. God is gracious, and out of God's grace flow gifts freely given, and our response to God is a life of grateful service.

Now grace is all about the giver's generosity, not the receiver's deserving, which is why people who know grace tend to be grateful and those who think they deserve everything tend not to be. After all, if you think you deserve every good thing, perhaps because you've worked for it, you have no one to thank but yourself when things are going well. And people with a strong sense of deserving tend not to be very generous either, because if they really are entitled to everything, why should they share very much with anyone else? But people who are filled with gratitude see things very differently.

You might say that being gracious is about treating people better than they deserve. That won't make any sense to those who think they deserve every good thing, but it makes perfect sense to those of us who know our own shortcomings and know that we've been richly blessed in spite of them. It makes sense to anyone who understands the gospel, because we know that God treats us better than we deserve. Every good thing in life comes ultimately as a gift from God, and God is present to see us through the hard times too. We know that we're only saved by grace through faith, and if there's any hope for us at the end of this life, it's not because we are good but because God is good.

We know that God is gracious, and part of our gratitude is wanting to practice grace ourselves, because we were made in the image of a gracious God.

The tone of our culture these days, and of the world in general, is not very gracious, is it? So many people are quick to caricature one another and scorn anyone who sees things differently, because it's so much easier to label other people than to listen to them. It's simpler to sort everything into boxes of black or white than to recognize all the subtle

shades that truth comes in.

One of the most striking things about the Pope's recent visit was how many people were drawn to this man, in spite of the fact that almost everyone disagrees with him about one thing or another. Some people, of course, tried to shoehorn the Pope into simple categories like "liberal" and "conservative," but for millions of others he managed to touch upon all sorts of sensitive subjects in a spirit that invited us to rise above the simplistic dichotomies of the culture wars.

Francis has an air of humility about him, and an obvious concern for individual human beings beyond the level of policies and polemics. One of his most famous lines was "Who am I to judge?" People long to be heard and understood, to be loved rather than labeled, and to be treated better than we deserve because the truth is that we're all standing in the need of grace. Many people saw signs of the grace they long for in Pope Francis.

No one should think that grace is a sign of weakness. Some people imagine that to be strong means to give no quarter to those who see things differently, but that's not true. God is the strongest Person of all, and God is nothing if not gracious. The truth is that gracious people are always strong. They're strong enough not to react thoughtlessly to what other people do, strong enough to look beyond self-interest to see what another person needs, and offer what's needed wherever they can.

Grace is a liberating thing because it frees us from the wearying preoccupation with our own needs and wants. That's why gracious people often have an air of freedom about them. Grace creates a space where people don't have

to be defensive or hostile, because grace offers forgiveness instead of condemnation and seeks reconciliation rather than retribution. People respond to grace as plants respond to a gentle rain. We drink it up because grace is one of the things that give us life.

Gracious people are a joy to be around, and they make us want to be more like them. Grace is contagious, and a church made up of gracious people will draw others in because grace is something that every soul longs to find. The grace of God, reflected in God's people, is what this world needs most of all, and the church of Jesus Christ needs to be a community filled with grace. That's the kind of church we want to be, and the kind of people we want to be with one another, by the grace of God.



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