

The 10th Sunday after Trinity
August 16, 2009
Jeremiah 7:1-11 • Luke 19:41-48 • Romans 9:30—10:4

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“Grace, mercy, and peace be to you, from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.”

“A state of grace.”

It's a phrase that's sometimes thrown around in certain quarters of the Church. But it's a dangerous phrase, when wrongly applied.

“I live in a state of grace!” one might hear.

But it's an idea that Christians also misuse, to excuse everything from cheating, to staying away from church, to unscriptural divorce. And the phrase doesn't have to be spoken, either. Even the unarticulated thought is a dangerous thing.

“I know I shouldn't be doing this, but no one's ever going to know; and anyway, I live in a state of grace!”

“I know I should be in Church more often, but I believe; and anyway, I'm in a state of grace.”

Now, there's certainly a time and place to talk about a “state of grace,” especially in regard to our baptismal life.

But the comfort we seek by assuring ourselves that we are in a “state of grace,” when we simultaneously forge ahead with willful sins, is nothing but a deadly illusion... as if true faith in God's grace—(along with the fruit that necessarily follows such faith)—were non-existent. We look for peace of mind, and peace with God, in all the wrong places, instead of looking to Christ who alone is “the end of the Law”... Christ alone who supplies “the things that make for peace.”

That basically sums up God's Word to us today from Jeremiah, Romans, and Luke—all three of which readings we would do well to consider.

God's just indictment of our sinful “state of grace” thinking is expressed most pointedly in today's Old Testament from Jeremiah chapter seven. Listen again to these verses:

The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: ...

...much like our Sunday Scripture readings, by the way. We pastors don't choose them; they come to us “from the Lord” through the appointed lectionary of the Church. And, through the variety of these centuries-old selections, used in common throughout the Church, God keeps pastors from preaching only on their favorite topics, and lays before His people the whole counsel of God's Word, and repeatedly brings to us His Word “from outside of ourselves,” words that we might well not choose to speak to ourselves.

The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: “Stand in the gate of the LORD's house, and proclaim there this word, and say, Hear the word of the LORD, all you men of Judah who enter these gates to worship the LORD.

Notice. This Word that God commands Jeremiah to speak is for the church-goers. It's for the believers, the “active Christians” so to speak.

Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Amend your ways and your deeds, and I will let you dwell in this place. Do not trust in these deceptive words, [saying]: ‘This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD!’

In other words, stop taking false comfort in the fact that you consider yourself religious, or may even be church-goers, if at the same time, you are ignoring God's Word and will, and stubbornly choosing your own sinful desires instead.

[The LORD continues] *“For if you truly amend your ways and your deeds, if you truly execute justice one with another, if you do not oppress the sojourner, the fatherless, or the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own harm, then I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your fathers forever.*

And, of course, to that list of “if you do not's,” we could add all of our habitual sins, and all of those selfish, mean, rude, and uncaring things we do or don't do to others every day... all the while excusing them as just being part of our personality.

[Again, the Lord continues] *“Behold, you trust in deceptive words to no avail. Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, ‘We are delivered!’—only to go on doing all these abominations? Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes? Behold, I myself have seen it, declares the LORD.*

What more needs to be said? We all stand guilty before God on this account. All of us—church-goers and non church-goers alike, active Christians and inactive Christians together. All of us are exposed by these words for the sinners that we are. But it's not just about being sinners. It's about being comfortable with that, and claiming a “state of grace” to go right on sinning. It's about presuming on God's grace, and refusing to “turn from our sinful ways, and live,” (Ezekiel 18).¹

When we think, and act, and live this way, we make the house of the Lord into a “den of robbers,” to use God's own phrase from Jeremiah, a phrase which our Lord also takes up and uses in today's Gospel. (And thus this phrase is the connection between today's Old Testament and today's Gospel.)

There, in Luke chapter 19, Jesus is speaking to a very similar situation some six centuries later. Again, the setting is Jerusalem where the temple of the Lord is. And again, the Lord is speaking to “church-goers,” to active religious people so to speak—His own fellow children of Abraham who lived in Jerusalem. Jesus is approaching Jerusalem for the last time. And He weeps because

¹ Ezekiel 18:23

of the mass of religious people, the so-called “believers,” who just didn’t get it... who didn’t understand that God was visiting His people in Christ, who failed to take to heart His daily preaching and teaching in the temple, who didn’t believe in Him who truly “makes for peace.”

Rather, (just like the people of Jeremiah’s day), these contemporaries of Jesus also made the Lord’s temple into a “den of robbers”—a place full of religious people who robbed God of His glory,

by false belief,

by thinking they could have faith without love,

by thinking that faith could co-exist with their stubborn / habitual sins,

by looking to their own “state of grace” assuagements, rather than clinging to Christ and His forgiveness, for peace with God.

These people were spiritual robbers. And their misuse of God’s house made it into a “den of robbers” a place where they, as robbers of God’s glory, could be comfortable with their lives and fool themselves into false security.

Again, what more needs to be said? If it could happen in Jeremiah’s day, and in Jesus’ day, it can happen in ours too. And it does... even among religious people, even among church-goers, even among “state of grace”-minded Christians!

But all is not hopeless! Let us not despair, or tune out God’s Word in order to protect ourselves. Rather, see and behold with wonder that the Lord is reaching out to us once again today with His love, and grace, and favor. Though we, like sheep, constantly go astray and trust in deceptive words, God is visiting us again today in Christ Jesus. And it is a gracious visitation. He is visiting us in this very temple, this house of God where Jesus Christ Himself is present through His Word and Sacrament. He is visiting us again today with the forgiveness of sins which He distributes daily and richly in His Church,

through the declaration of Holy Absolution (“I forgive you all your sins!”),

through the preaching and teaching of His Word,

and through His Word of forgiveness joined to His body and blood in Holy Communion so that we might also “*taste and see that the Lord is good*”!²

For you see, “*Christ is the end of the Law for everyone who believes!*” He has perfectly kept the Law of God in our place, though we constantly stray from it and try to have faith without love. Christ IS perfect love. The litany of sins that Jeremiah laid before God’s people never stained the sinless Son of God. He perfectly trusted. He perfectly loved. He perfectly served the poor, the needy, and all people. He perfectly prayed to the Father (in His house of prayer) and obeyed the Father’s will. And, in Christ—united to Him by faith—you also perfectly do these things! Christ is “the end of the Law” for you who trust in Him! God the Father does not judge or condemn you for your sins that you know so well. But He sees you as He sees His own dear Son. He loves you with a love that just won’t stop.

These are “the things that make for peace.” Today is again the time of your visitation by Christ Jesus. And neither you nor I know when His gracious visitation might end.

² Psalm 34:8

Dr. Martin Luther once said it this way:

“Beloved Germans, buy, as long as the market is in front of the door. Gather together, as long as the sun shines and there is good weather. Make use of God’s grace and Word, as long as it is there. For you ought to know this: God’s Word and grace is a swiftly passing downpour, which does not come back again to where it once was.”³

So hearken to His voice while it is still today. Listen to the Lord teaching in the temple. Hang on His every Word. Throw yourself on the mercy of Christ who is the end of the Law.

For He has paid for your sins. And He has promised to forgive you. And, through your Baptism, Christ and His Spirit will dwell in you, producing fruit in keeping with repentance.

And thus, God’s promise to the people of Jeremiah’s day is His promise of heaven to you:
“Then I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your fathers forever.”

O God, You declare Your almighty power, above all, in showing mercy and pity.
Mercifully grant us such a measure of Your grace that we may obtain Your gracious promises and be made partakers of Your heavenly treasures.

In Jesus’ Name. Amen.

³ To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools (1524)