

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

It's one of the most beloved children's stories ever told. The three little pigs. I'm sure most of you know how the story goes. The big bad wolf, he's hungry for some ham, so he tries to break into the three pigs' houses. Of course, they weren't going to just let him walk right in so he could eat them, so they locked the doors. And he huffed, and he puffed, and he blew down the first two houses, one made out of straw and the other made of sticks.

And then the wolf comes to the last house, made of bricks. And try as he might, huffing, and puffing, and blowing as hard as he could, the house just would not come down. The three little pigs were safe.

You know what the moral to that fairy tale is, don't you? What do you build your "house" out of? A weak defense won't keep the enemy from "blowing your house down," from getting to you. But with a strong defense, you can't be torn down.

The apostle Paul, this morning, uses another picture in Ephesians, a picture of a body, and you're a part of it. It's the body of Christ. Now, how can we build it up so that our enemy, I think you know who he is, so that he doesn't take us down? Well, God's Gift of Grace Builds Up His Body. He keeps us working together, and he helps us grow stronger.

If you read this section, our verses this morning in the context of the book of Ephesians, especially the surrounding chapters, you'd see a change, a change Paul commonly makes at about this point in all of his letters, in all of his books in the Bible. He makes the shift from doctrinal to practical. What I mean is this. The first half of Paul's book is doctrinal. It focuses on the teaching, the teaching of God's grace, his undeserved love, how that grace saved us, how it made us God's own children, how that grace has united and reconciled us with God.

But now, Paul makes a clear change over to the practical, talking about our response to God's grace, his amazing love. The second half of Ephesians is really all application, how we react to God's grace, how that grace now shows itself in our lives.

Paul's shift to the practical here is quite noticeable. Do you see how he begins chapter 4? "As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you received."

What exactly characterizes this life Paul calls for us to lead in response to God's grace? I see four qualities...humility, gentleness, patience, and bearing with one another. Could you see how those characteristics might play out in the life of a believer, amongst the members of the body of Christ?

Humility, putting others and their interests before yourself, having the mindset and attitude of a servant, just like Jesus, who said, "The Son of man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." Gentleness, letting love shape our demeanor, a kindness showing itself in our every action.

Patience, bearing with each other, being slow to get angry and frustrated with others instead of being quick to judge, giving them the benefit of the doubt, looking for the positives in whatever others say or

do. Completely humble, gentle, patient. Always having those traits, 100% of the time. Those qualities, defining who you and I are.

And they do because they are founded in love. First of all, in the love, the grace of God which gives you those qualities in the first place, and a love in you and me, worked by God, which produces those attitudes in our daily lives.

If we live our lives like that, being completely full of all of these qualities, always being patient, humble, gentle, bearing with each other, do you know what the happy result is? We are united with each other in the body of Christ, in the body of believers. We are at peace.

And friends, how that unity opens the door to so many more blessings for the body, for believers who are working together for the same goal, to live according to God's will and to carry out God's wishes, which are to spread the saving message of the gospel throughout the world.

Sounds pretty wonderful doesn't it? Well, there's just one catch. Paul tells us, "Make every effort to keep the unity..." It takes effort on your part and mine. We can't just sit around and expect that it will happen. It takes effort to stay at peace with each other. It takes effort to always and completely be humble, gentle, patient, loving.

And you know, sometimes, we're just not all that up to putting in the effort. I've tried being patient with my children, or my friends, who are always lying, who say they're going to do something or be somewhere, and they never are. You can't blame me for occasionally blowing my top off and just laying into them.

It's hard to be humble when life is going so well for me because of the smart, responsible decisions I've made while everyone else around me just seems to make all the wrong ones and are now suffering because of them. I admit, I occasionally boast about some of my great accomplishments.

We don't always make that effort on our part to keep the unity between us and others, even with other believers. That unity suffers, and even worse, our unity with God suffers. Every time we sin, we disrupt that unity with God. We break our peace with him because we can't give him the perfection he demands from us. No matter how big of an effort you and I might make, it still falls short of the glory of God because every effort we make is tainted by sin.

But, when our efforts fail, when that unity with God and with others is disrupted, when we try to pull further and further away from God, he brings us together, and he keeps us together. When we stray, God brings us back together, back into a unity, back to being one with him. Do you know how he does that? Paul tells us with an extensive list of the "ones"...one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God.

Because of God's gift of grace, we have been made members of one body, Christ's body, the body of believers. We became members of Christ's body because of one Spirit, the Holy Spirit, who called us, who made us a part of that body through the waters of one baptism, the baptism Jesus commanded.

The baptism which washes our sins away because of the one Lord who lived, died, and rose for us, Jesus, our Savior.

That one baptism by the one Spirit leads to one faith, a saving faith, that faith in Jesus which grabs hold of the blessings of God's grace, forgiveness of our sins and also the one hope, the sure anticipation of eternal life in heaven. All of that, the one Lord who saved us and the one Holy Spirit who created one faith in us through one baptism so now we are part of the one body of believers, united in Christ.

United in his body. Now, I know last week we talked about being united with Christ, but we used a different picture, one of a building, a church. Do you remember what the cornerstone is? Of course, it's Jesus, along with the foundation of the apostles and prophets, or rather, who they pointed to, again, the cornerstone, Jesus.

You and I, we are stones of that building. We are members of the church, members of God's heavenly family. And today, each of us is a part of the body of Christ. Now, as you know, for every body there are different parts, each with its own function. The eye sees, the ear hears, feet help movement. The same is true in the body of believers. In Christ's body, you each have your own function. That's what Paul means when he says, "To each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it."

This isn't talking so much about grace as the underserved love God has given us, but instead, the other meaning of grace, a gift. In his church, in his body, Jesus gives each believer gifts, and different ones at that.

Now, you may not be an apostle, a prophet, an evangelist, a pastor, or a teacher, as Paul mentions here. But don't think he's not talking to you. In your body, every member has value. Every member is important. All of your body parts are needed to help you function as best as you can.

The body of Christ is no different. You might be an ear, given the gift of listening. How you could serve Christ by being a friend to those in need. Or you might be a hand, able to do physical labor. How you could serve the body of Christ by helping with maintenance around the church. Each of you is vital in making the body of believers go.

That's why Paul is so adamant about urging you and me at the beginning of our verses to "live a life worthy of the calling you have received." You know all about that calling. Chosen by God to be his own before you were ever created. Adopted as his child because Jesus redeemed you by paying the ransom of his own life on the cross. His death, to reconcile you with your Father in heaven. And the Holy Spirit, has given us new life, a New Man, to live as members of God's family, and to live lives worthy of our status as believers, members of Christ's own body.

When we live our lives like that, God-pleasing lives, that builds up the body of Christ, strengthens it, so we continue to grow in our faith, and so the other members of the body grow in their faith, so they can grow closer to the Head of the body, Jesus.

But that growing is a process. Our lives of sanctification, of living as believers in Jesus and growing in our faith in Jesus, that will never be complete, at least on this side of heaven. Until that time, all of us have maturing we can do in our faith and in our faith lives.

So, how can we get from being infants to mature adults in our faith? By staying connected to the body, especially the head, to Christ. And, we grow in the body of Christ by staying in his Word. Can you see the importance of being in your Bibles? Paul warns us what can happen if we're not.

If you're avoiding the one thing which can help you to grow in your faith in Jesus, don't think Satan won't jump on that. He sends the storms and waves of deceitful and false teachings to push us off course, which, if we're only infants in our faith, could be easy to do.

Or, like the cunning sales-person. I can tell you about those times where I've been this close to making a major purchase, like a car, because the salesperson made the deal sound too good to be true, only to be talked out of it by my wife. Those lies of Satan in our lives can sound so good, but giving in to them will only hinder and threaten to stunt our spiritual growth.

No, only a steady diet of Jesus, his grace, his forgiveness, and his Word can help us to mature in our faith. God works through all of that to make you and me stronger, and to keep us more firmly attached to the body of Christ so we can live our lives as those who are worthy of the gracious calling he's given us as a gift of his love.

It truly is only a gift of God's grace that he attaches us to his body, that he's given us the gift of faith. On our own, we would be as helpless as those three little pigs, certain to come to our demise when the devil, the big bad wolf came after. But we live lives worthy of our calling because God gives us the ability to do so. He keeps us all united, working together for the good of his church, his body. He helps our faith in him to grow stronger through the nourishment of his word. Because of him, we are built up. Because of him, his body is built up. And that is a building the devil won't blow down. Amen.