

Titus 3:4-7

First Sunday after Epiphany (Baptism of our Lord)

January 9, 2022

We just completed the season when we think of gifts. I hope you received items that you like or can make use of. Today as we hear of the baptism of Jesus, we also think of our baptism. As we view this gift there is no question about its suitability. It is exactly what is needed and truly where one size fits all. It is of lasting value.

YOU HAVE RECEIVED GOD'S GRACE

- I. By God's saving love
- II. By the Son's work
- III. By the Spirit's power

The terms for God's saving love fill the one sentence text we consider today. The first word mentioned was "kindness." It expresses goodness, generosity, strength blended with a giving nature. It is God's good will toward us.

The concept of love may seem familiar to us. This usage is actually the origin of our word "philanthropy," which we think of as charitable giving, but it literally means "love of mankind." God has affection for us. He made us and cares about our well-being.

He shows mercy. That feeling denotes pity for our miserable condition. Sin is what produced our plight and brought the deserved results into our existence like weeds and woes, troubles and sadness, frustrations and failures and ultimately death now and eternally in hell.

Last on the list is "grace." We commonly define it as God's undeserved love. It's really the opposite of what we deserve, which is even greater than a gift.

The verse preceding this text sums up what our life is like. "At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another." That's not a pretty list, but it is accurate. We were full of the opposite of God's qualities. We were self-centered, evil and mean. We deserved something all right: death and eternal punishment.

That sad condition is why the Apostle Paul stated, "He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy." We had done nothing to

deserve God's goodness. At times we may be upstanding in the view of the world around us, but that only reflects its sorry state and low standards. We were in no way meeting the approval of our holy God who sees our hearts and our motives.

God took action by those qualities listed earlier, his kindness, love, mercy and grace. He didn't just sit and bemoan the miserable condition of what he beheld. That's what Christmas is all about—what his grace did for us and for all people.

II.

The Son agreed with that eternal plan and came. You have received God's grace by the Son's work. We review his being. He is God from all eternity. He is one with the Father and the Holy Spirit. As such, he knew everything and was involved in planning the divine response. He agreed fully with it.

His concurrence is why he became a human being at Christmas. That miraculous event was especially when "the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared." People saw in person what God was like when Jesus walked this earth. "Kindness and love" were highlighted. Think of his dealings with the sick and suffering, how he showed compassion and met their needs, both physically and spiritually. He spent time with outcasts and known sinners: think of the tax collector Zacchaeus or the Samaritan woman. He took time with them as individuals and showed patience in dealing with them. He didn't gloss over sin but called for repentance and a change of heart and assured them of forgiveness. He put a human face on God's love.

We look at his work and marvel. He lived sinlessly under God's law for us. We saw his obedience to his parents as a twelve-year-old in the Gospel reading of a recent Sunday. That behavior was not a rarity but went on throughout his life. He obeyed government authorities and called for payment of taxes, even though he was later falsely charged with encouraging rebellion and of being a rival to the Roman Caesar. He followed God's laws in their entirety. He filled that role as our substitute. We receive the credit, which he was able to provide since he was God.

His work reached a climax with his death on the cross. He had none of his own sins to pay for. However, he took on the debt of sin owed by the human population of this planet's entire history. Imagine the enormity of the load. Think of your personal guilt and then of the total mass of humanity that has and will walk this earth. No wonder he was in agony during those hours of suffering on Good Friday. He experienced the awfulness of hell many times over. But he managed to pay the complete penalty, as he announced, "It is finished," before he breathed his last. God's justice was satisfied. Again, he was able to make that monumental

achievement only because he was true God. But he succeeded. His Easter resurrection was the Father's stamp of approval, showing the world that the debt was truly paid in full, that he had won the victory for you and me and for everyone else.

It is no wonder that Paul speaks of love. Look what it cost him. What he did and what he accomplished was beyond what any other being could do.

III.

His work for the world was brought to you and me by the Spirit's power. "He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit." It was a washing that gave us rebirth. Those sins mentioned earlier were a sign of our spiritual death. It was the way we entered the world. When babies are born and as they grow we look for traits of their parents. "Oh, he has his dad's nose; she has her mother's curls," people will comment. There's something more that came from both Mom and Dad. Each child born of human parents has inherited sin, also known as original sin. They are spiritually lost, with no interest in God, no powers to approach him and no merit to claim before him.

As we grow up other traits become visible. It might be the way of walking or expressions, both facial and verbal. Many an adult has been embarrassed by things the kids said which had to have originated at home. More than embarrassment, there is the shame from the bad behavior of sinful actions. That is why our standing with God is "not because of righteous things we had done." Oh, we would like to claim credit for something we did or decided or that we were more disposed to God and faith. "There has to be something about me that caused God to love me. I was attractive to him in some way," our sinful self likes to boast. That is not at all true. "There is no one who does good, not even one," is a statement repeated in the Word of the holy Lord.

But that same Lord did something about it. We already noted what he sent Jesus to do. He has also reached out to you personally to make that work your own. "He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit." He gave us a whole new start. It was the same matter Jesus once talked to Nicodemus about when he said, "You must be born again" and then explained to his incredulous visitor that it wasn't entering again into his mother's womb but being born of water and the Spirit, in contrast with our physical birth. He was talking about baptism. In today's Gospel reading we heard about Jesus being baptized. He did not receive it for the same reason, for he had no sins to deal with. For him it was an anointing with the Spirit, sort of like an inauguration as he then set forth on his public

ministry. For us it is to wash away our sins. It gives to us personally the forgiveness that our Savior won for us on the cross.

The active agent in baptism is God the Holy Spirit. He planted the faith in Jesus that received the benefits of his work. Our slate is wiped clean, not only of our original sin or sins of the past. Even those sins not yet committed are forgiven. What a blessing! That gift is why we bring our children for baptism soon after birth. They illustrate the fact that our salvation is by grace and not by works. They do nothing except maybe squawk a little as the water is applied. They merely receive what God does. We are glad this sacrament is available for those too young to educate about the love of their Savior. For adults who have been trained in God's truths baptism affirms what their faith has received through the Word.

St. Paul also mentioned the action of renewal. Baptism is a one-time event but it has a lasting effect. We return to it daily as sins keep occurring in our lives. Baptism's assurance of forgiveness provides strength to fight sin. Far from encouraging more sinning, being forgiven creates the desire to put down sin in our daily life. So we keep receiving the gospel and keep fighting. It is a daily process. The text described this gift of the Spirit as being "poured out on us generously." His gospel overflows with forgiveness and power to live for him.

There is also an end result of baptism and the faith it plants. "Having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life." We have a gift from our loving Father. It comes not at his death (for he does not die) but at ours. It is eternal life, that is, heaven with all its wonders and joys. We will sin no more so won't have to deal with its effects and consequences. We will serve our Savior with joy.

The Apostle termed heaven our hope, not because there is anything iffy about it. It's just that we are not there yet. It awaits us in the future, but it is sure. That is why it is so important to claim no personal role in obtaining salvation but to look solely to Jesus. He has completed the work so that it is ready and waiting for you when earthly life is over.

God's gift in baptism is something to cherish, to celebrate and to use. Baptism planted faith in your heart. You have received God's grace. Live in it and rejoice!