

## St. Paul: Saturday Session Twenty-one: Grace

Paul popularized grace by enriching this term with meaning and value. His popularization is clear when we count the number of times New Testament authors use this word. In the New American Standard Bible, Matthew and Mark never use it. Luke uses it only once. John uses it 3 times. In Acts, Luke uses it 11 times. In epistles, James employs it once, Peter 10 times, John once, and Jude once. In Apocalypse, John uses it once. But grace is such an important part of Paul's experience, that he uses it 84 times. Clearly, Paul says more about "grace" than all the others put together. In raw numbers, Paul's 84 uses overwhelm all other authors' 29 uses. Why is Paul so into grace? Among the many reasons, we must rank Paul's conversion first. The grace of Jesus struck him so emphatically, and remained in his memory so clearly, that he developed his experience mightily.

Fr. Ceslaus Spicq, OP helps us understand grace in vol 2 of his *Agape in the New Testament*. On p 84, he starts with Rom 3:24: "**being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus.** ... The 'grace' of verse 24 is both the love in which God permanently envelops the Christian, and the gift that infuses the love. It is the common action of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in favor of the Jewish and Gentile converts who are on the way of final salvation in the Church (Eph 2:5-8). In St. Paul's greeting, they are identified by their attachment to Christ, not by their objective adherence to the faith; **Grace be with all those who have a love undying for our Lord Jesus Christ** (Rom 16:24). [Spicq's translation differs from the NASB: **The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.**] The Christian loves the Savior Who has brought him peace. His charity is obviously a religious consecration; it joins him to the Lord as a slave is joined to his master (Mt 6:34). Because charity proves itself in open acts, and devotes itself without calculation, it can be considered a 'profession' of Christianity (1 Cor 16:21). The convert is more than a believer who acknowledges Jesus as the Lord. He is a lover who commits himself to love forever. He 'lives in love'."

Spicq's account shows us that grace starts and finishes in love. No wonder Paul emphasized grace so much! Grace is God's love flooding us, if we accept it. Because God is Love, He gives Himself to us. He is the gift. Love is the Gift as well as the Giver. When God gives Himself to us, He unites with us. We can't completely comprehend this unity, but we love it. When grace envelops us, we are as full as we can be. This fullness is Love. Love increases us as it fills us. So we ever expand if we love being loved by God. Our expanse naturally overflows into loving our neighbor. As our love of neighbor increases, we advance along the way to final salvation in the Church. Not only do all the pieces fit, they blend into one. We and Love unite as One. As we noted in considering *theosis*, God does all the heavy lifting. If we cooperate, we allow Him to make us into Himself, into One. Grace is a fine way to express this overflow of Love. No wonder we convert and commit ourselves to Love forever. Spicq can hardly improve on what happens to each: "He 'lives in love'."

The original Greek that Paul wrote is much richer, more densely meaningful, than English. So Spicq translates the Greek verb as *have a love undying* while NASB translates it as *be*. There's room enough for all these more restricted English verbs there. Spicq alerts us to the love-flow that *grace* conveys. Whenever we see that English word, we should remember that it stands both for the Giver and the Gift, Who is Love. Even more detailed, Spicq adds: "St. Paul uses the phrase *en aptharsai* to modify 'love'. The phrase shows that love is permanent and faithful – as in classical Greek – even though the word *aptharsia* is not easy to translate. It appears seven times in the New Testament, all in St. Paul's Epistles. He uses it to refer to eternal life, which is the reward for good works perseveringly accomplished by the just (Rom 2:7). It is peculiarly the condition of glorified bodies freed from corruption (1 Cor 5:42, 50, 53, 54); their incorruptibility is one of the supreme gifts of the Gospel (2 Tim 1:10). Because whatever is incorruptible is unchangeable, *aptharsia* describes everlasting blessed life in God's presence. The most nearly parallel text is Wisdom 6:18; 'Love means the keeping of God's laws; to observe his laws is the basis for incorruptibility; and incorruptibility (*aptharsia*) makes one close to God'. In our text *aptharsia* has this eschatological meaning. It characterizes the Christian's love for Christ, which is faithful here on earth, and lives forever in heaven (cf 1 Cor 13:8, 13). [That should sound familiar, from our work on love.]

"But 'incorruptible' is not exactly the same as 'immortal', and the word's usage does not limit its meaning to the idea of duration. In Rom 2:7 and 1 Cor 15:42, it is associated with honor and glory. [**Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?** Rom 2:4 illustrates translating *aptharsia* as repentance. 1 Cor 15:42 shows translation as imperishable: **So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown a perishable body, it is raised an imperishable body.**] Moreover, in our text it does not refer to things, but to a living love. St. Paul wants to show the character and condition of love which is imperishable because it is victorious, impervious to the trials and ravages of time (2 Tim 4:8, and by contrast: Mt 24:12). An undying love cannot be destroyed or damaged by difficulty or suffering. It endures, whatever the cost may be. It lasts as long as courage; it is as strong as death; in the end, it will triumph. (cf 2 Mc 9:22, & 17:12).

"In this sense, *aptharsia* expresses *agape's* quality of spirituality. The Septuagint had spoken of 'the imperishable spirit of God, the lover of souls' (*Wis* 13:10, and 'the imperishable light' *Wis* 18:4). The Book of Wisdom 2:23 declared: **God formed man to be imperishable; the image of his own nature he made him**'; it presented incorruptibility as the reward of spotless souls. Consequently, spiritual and divine charity must be an exceedingly pure love. Here again is

the typical Pauline opposition between charity and impurity. *Aphtharsia* understood as ‘integrity’ is the opposite of deterioration, ruin (Eph 4:22), and disgrace (1 Cor 15:42-43). As an adjective, it means ‘not corrupted, not spoiled, not damaged’, as in 1 Peter 1:4: God has begotten us anew **that we might possess the inheritance which is imperishable, flawless, unfading**. Integrity and holiness are joined in Titus 2:7. [*in all things show yourself to be an example of good deeds, with purity in doctrine, dignified,*] St. John Chrysostom commented on our text: ‘The very spiritual love of charity is a beautiful love; just as a virgin guards herself from bodily defilement, so this love is preserved from all evil’ (*In Epist ad Eph, PG 62:174*). In concluding his Epistle, St. Paul refers to the example of Christ’s undying love for the Church he purified and sanctified (5:25 ff). Those who love Christ must love him in the same holy, unchangeable way.

“All these nuances of meaning: incorruptibility, immortality, imperishability, purity, beauty evoke the permanence of *agapan* [love]. Perhaps St. Paul would have written ‘with permanence’ instead of ‘in permanence’ if he had not just written ‘with faith’, and ‘with all those’. The phrase: ‘a love undying for our Lord Jesus Christ’, is intended to explain the essence and true nature of Christian charity. It is a religious love, quite unlike earthly love. It is spiritual, pure, and unchangeable. It is faithful in all circumstances, and its constancy triumphs even over death itself. Charity for the Lord Jesus Christ is of itself incorruptible.”

Much of this is familiar to you from our study of love (*agapan*) some months ago. The main point is that Christ reveals love that can’t fit into merely human categories. We have no words for Christ-love, Who is Love Himself. Paul was alive to this difference, and used *agapan* to point at Christ’s inexpressible love. Paul used *aphtharsia* to emphasize all that Spicq lists here. It’s worth repeating: incorruptible, immortal, imperishable, pure, beauty, and permanence. This adverb communicated all these aspects of *agapan* which Christ shows us. And **grace** pours all these riches upon us. Behind the word is all that we have said, plus more that defies speech. Love is noun and verb because it never quits expanding. Love increases all it touches, considering it as a noun. Love increases being, considered as a verb. Christ demonstrated Love to us. He was revelation in the flesh, God in the flesh, Love in the flesh. That’s why He changed history, and why we mark time by His coming. Before Him Love had not come in the flesh. After Him, Love’s coming changes everything.

Grace is the Christian way to abbreviate all that we have said here, expressing it in a single word. Paul’s experience outside Damascus manifested grace stupendously. Spicq (p 407) notes how Paul says it: “**The grace of our Lord was lavished superabundantly on me along with faith and love that [are] in Christ Jesus.** 1 Tim 1:14. [At Damascus Christ overwhelmed Paul’s angry prejudice with Love.] ... He (Paul) has just recalled his life as a persecutor of the Church. Applying the theological principle: **Where sin abounded, grace did more abound.** (Rom 5:20), he stresses two elements in his conversion: God’s choice of him, a sinner, which was absolutely and unpredictably gratuitous (*charis* cf 1 Cor 15:9-10); and God’s mercy, which was an act of magnificent splendor. ... ‘Was lavished superabundantly’ translates the verb *hyperpleonazo*, which is not used anywhere else in the Bible. It is not found in the Greek language before the Psalms of Solomon 5:19, and Vettius Valens (85,17). However, it corresponds perfectly to St. Paul’s love of using superlatives whenever he wants to exalt the generosity of God’s love, or the effectiveness of His interventions among men. He speaks of ‘the grace of our Lord (*charis tou kyriou*) instead of ‘the grace of God’ because it was Christ in person Who converted him on the road to Damascus. Through Christ, God’s grace poured into Paul, and overflowed in him. It continues to live in him in its two principal effects, ‘with faith and love that [are] in Christ Jesus’ (*meta pisteos kai agapes tes en Christoi Iesou*). The wording shows clearly that faith and charity are infused virtues characteristic of truly Christian life, and given in an extraordinary degree (*hyperpleonasen ... meta*). The preposition *meta* indicates both accompaniment and instrument, as it did in 1 Tim 4:14. Faith and charity are concomitant with grace because they emanate and derive directly from it. Paul the sinner has been profoundly changed by these two qualities which have become part of him. He has been constituted a Christian, and the two virtues he has acquired are a manifestation and an ‘epiphany’ of the Lord’s grace. St. Paul presents himself as the type of saved sinner (v 15-16) precisely because, henceforth, he ‘exists in Christ Jesus’ by means of faith and charity. Grace is invisible, but the Christian’s profession of faith and works of charity are not. The Apostle, therefore, looks upon his conversion as a revelation of the mercy of God, or, rather, as a universally valid demonstration of the patience of God toward sinners. **I obtained mercy for this reason, that in me first Christ Jesus might display his perfect patience as an example of those who would later believe in him, and thus attain eternal life.** 1 Tim 1:16. [NASB: **Yet for this reason I found mercy, so that in me as the foremost, Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience as an example for those who would believe in Him for eternal life.**] In the New Testament, patience is presented as the first response of *agape* (1 Cor 13:4). In God it extends credit, in a sense, to the sinner, so that he will not suffer total loss. God suspends the breath of his wrath, given him time to repent, and ‘prolongs’ his mercy, instead of punishing him on the spot. More specifically, the Incarnation of Jesus is ordained to the manifestation of God’s love, the essential object of the Church’s credo: **For I am the least of the apostles, and not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me.** 1Cor 15:15-16. What a grace!