



There's Grace in the Greeting

The apostle Paul is the self-identified author of thirteen of the New Testament books. In all thirteen of these he both begins and ends his letters with a form of the expression, 'grace to you.' Grace, '*charis*', that most precious of Christians terms, was for Paul both the first and the last word on the matter, *whatever* the matter.

But Paul also frequently used another term of greeting when writing to beloved Christians. It was the word '*aspazomai*'. It is translated by the English word, 'greet' or 'greeting'. In his letters Paul would sometimes send 'greetings', either his own or on behalf of others. You find Paul's use of 'greet' or 'greetings' in ten of his thirteen epistles. It was important to him. Ministering Grace should always be.

This particular word in the original language means, 'to enfold in the arms' and therefore, 'to welcome.' For Paul, the use of this word was not a mere formality. No, Paul was writing to Christians and churches made up of believers whom he loved in the bonds of Christ. Therefore for Paul, there was grace in the greeting. And there should be grace in ours as well.

Many of recently discussed in our Grace Groups the customary, '*How are you*' and we noted that often this is merely a traditional greeting. Yet for the Christian there really should be a concern for the welfare of those whom we are providentially encountering. We should be concerned to be a channel of grace to *whoever* we are speaking. We should learn to view each encounter as an opportunity for 'grace in the greeting'.

Recently a brother asked me, 'How are you?' I replied, 'I am fine.' He thoughtfully looked me in the eye, and with real concern, said, 'No, you're not.' He was right; but I would not give in so quickly! So, trying to be coy I said, 'Why do you say that?' He then noted some evidences that he had detected that suggested that all was not well with me. This then led to a protracted conversation and some transparency on my part; an open sharing that I really needed. And when I left his presence I left encouraged in the Lord. My situation, by the way, had not changed at all. But my perspective had; enormously. This brother's genuine greeting was meaningful. There was a lot of grace in his greeting.

That experience has stimulated my thinking in this regard as well as motivating me to be more thoughtful in *my* greeting of others. I want there to be grace in my greetings. Let me flesh this out.

Making the effort to simply greet someone can be a wonderful channel of grace. We have probably all had the experience of visiting a church where barely anyone at all greeted us, let alone even acknowledging our presence. How did this register with you? Now I am well aware that the 'spiritual answer' is 'Well, it's not about you anyway.' I agree. Yet neither is it all about the seemingly careless congregant. If we all realized that it is in fact all about *Him*, then the love of God will drive us to express His grace by greeting those that He loves as well. Such awareness will move us to express grace *in* our greeting, *by* greeting.

Many, many people live with the sense of social anonymity and relational invisibility. Many people struggle with what is popularly called 'low self-esteem.' They lack confidence that anyone really cares about them; some even conclude that in the 'big scheme' of things that they simply do not matter. But the informed Christian is to know better. We realize that every person is made in the image of God and to greet another human being is to greet a divine image bearer. And this is doubly so for the person who has been born again and justified by faith in Christ. We are 'new

creations' who are being conformed to the image of God's dear Son (2 Cor 5:17; Rom 8:28-30). How dare we not greet one another!

Christian, greet one another! Not merely as the congregation gathers but greet strangers as you 'walk about' your community. I try to greet people as I run. And in the majority of cases I receive a surprised response as though the person assumed that I would simply ignore them (as they me!). But also, in the majority of cases, their face opens up with a smile. I suppose that in some small way they experience grace in the greeting.

Finally, when we greet one another let's be prepared to be a channel of God's grace by a willingness to move beyond the superficial to the meaningful. Like my brother who would not let me off the hook, let us be willing to (appropriately) probe that we might be of help to those who are hurting or bewildered or discouraged or whatever. And as we do so they will sense the wonder of Christian love 'enfolding them in arms' of concern; they will experience grace in the greeting.

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