

Ray Jones is the Associate Director of Evangelism for the Presbyterian Church USA. But he didn't grow up Presbyterian.

He tells the story that he was raised in a very rigid church environment, what some have called spiritually violent or abusive.

But then in high school he started dating a Presbyterian girl and to impress her parents, he would go to church with them!

He says that it was there, worshipping with Presbyterians, that he first heard a word of grace; first heard someone say “grace” over his life as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Well, that's what this text is about – What Paul is telling us is that there are some people who know how to 'say grace' but there are also some who live spiritually violent lives, who cannot say grace, in any form or fashion, nowhere, no how!

But I also believe that Paul is telling us a little bit about himself - that he at one time was one of those people who could not say grace.

Dr. Karl Menninger, the noted psychiatrist, discussed this negative personality in his book The Vital Balance.

He describes them in vivid terms: “...rigid, chronically unhappy individuals, bitter, insecure...”

What Menninger is saying is that Paul knew what he was talking about: The 'they' in this text, I think, is Saul before Paul - he was one of them who knew God but was not honoring God, not giving thanks to God.

Look at his fear, anger, and violence that were symptoms of his disorder of ingratitude.

These people still exist. These people who do not, who cannot be grateful to God.

Charles Swindoll says you find a lot of them carrying Bibles, spending a lot of time in churches, sometimes in places of religious leadership.

He goes so far as to call them 'killers' – spiritually violent people who do not, who cannot, give thanks to God, just like Saul before Paul.

He says they kill with their words and attitudes – they use words of grumbling, not grace; complaining, not committed – they cannot permit themselves the pleasure of living the life God gives them, unable to honor God.

Look at Paul, called Saul then - a bystander acting as a coat rack when Stephen, one of the first Deacons, was murdered, and then taking up the cause himself as he searched high and low and was on the road to Damascus to find more Christians to arrest and execute.

Then, if you will, Paul was knocked off his high horse of fear and anger and violence and began to walk along the roads of Rome carried by grace!

I have my own picture of grace: Many, many years ago, when I was 19, 20 years old I spent about a year hitchhiking around the South. I was at home for a few days before heading to New Orleans, where I would live for several months. I was packing my backpack, getting ready to leave.

My father walked in and handed me the keys to a Volkswagen van, and said, “I don't want you to hitchhike anymore.”

That van was grace. I drove to New Orleans and a lot of other places the next few years in what a proper theologian, the Princeton professor Benjamin Warfield, called the “free sovereign favor to the ill-deserving.”

I was truly ill-deserving, but I rode in grace.

You can call it a free ride, but that's grace.

Like Anne Lamott says, "I do not at all understand the mystery of grace – only that it meets us where we are but does not leave us where it found us."

I don't know of anything that has the power to change us from within like the freedom that comes from the grace of God: undeserved, unearned, the power of the gospel to transform the way we travel the journey of life.

This is what Paul experienced, and I think he has our reading from the 14th Psalm in mind when he asks: How can you know God, experience God's love, benefit from the divine generosity – how can anyone really know God and not be thankful?

And is that the stark choice we face in our world today: Will we honor God and glorify God or deny God...will we bless life as it arises or will we condemn it...say grace or say grumble?

Since this is Choir Dedication Sunday, let's put it in terms of our music: How often do we allow our worship to be drained of joy and hope by the grumbles of our singing, by making our taste the standard for song, by making music a production rather than an offering?

Or can we, will we experience the joy of singing God's praise with all our hearts, letting our souls sing grace as we listen to preludes and anthems, as we sing old words and new words of praise, as we enjoy the melody and harmony of music offered in worship?

Grumble or grace?

Grumbles focus on what we lack or how we're different, just look at the spiritual violence in our world.

Grace is a focus on the daily gift of life from God, which we all have in common.

I think Mattie Stepanek makes the division between those who say grumbles and those who

can say grace – and aptly so, he calls his poem "Grasp of Truth":

*If you have Enough breath
To complain About anything,
You have more than Enough reason
To give thanks About something.*

This from a young boy who was on a ventilator from his birth until his death at age 13.

Listen again and let these words sink in:

*If you have Enough breath
To complain About anything,
You have more than Enough reason
To give thanks About something.*

Or as the great theologian Karl Barth said, "To believe in Jesus Christ means to become thankful."

True gratitude does not mean being at the top of the heap and saying to God, "Thanks."

Neither is gratitude an affirmation of the way things are. It is a posture of dependence and thanksgiving toward God, what it means to honor God.

When we say grace, we recognize that we are saved by grace, not by our own efforts.

Very simple, isn't it? But that in itself is a major portion in a life of grace. True gratitude is born of simplicity.

I suggest to you that the simple act of saying grace around our own tables can guide us in our own life as Christians, a simple affirmation of faith for a way of living out the grace from God we have received in Jesus: *God is great, God is good, Let us thank him for our food. By his hands we are fed, Thank you, God, for daily bread. Amen.*

In this way, praying for our daily bread is the beginning of our gratitude, a daily practice that helps shape our whole lives as offerings of gratitude.

True gratitude for God's generosity calls all of us to action, that all may be filled with daily bread, that none go hungry, that justice would indeed roll down like waters – a life that honors God, glorifies God.

The presence of grace is God's active goodness in and through any situation. When we live with this attitude, the desire to do good becomes the basis for whatever practical strategy we adopt toward whatever comes before us.

Jesus lived in such a state of mind, one in which every spiritually violent enemy he met, however small, was blessed by the living word of God's grace.

In other words, saying grace is an act of dependence on God, a way of aligning our daily lives with God's purposes in Jesus Christ.

When a word of grace rules our hearts, the desire to love God, love neighbor becomes our beatitude for whatever comes before us...that we walk this day in the kingdom of grace, open-hearted, open-handed, full of generous love, saying grace at every turn.

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.