

## SERMON FOR THE 6<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

(Cape Town - 22 June 2008)

**Text:** Finally, brothers, pray for us that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honored, just as it was with you. <sup>2</sup> And pray that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men, for not everyone has faith. <sup>3</sup> But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen and protect you from the evil one. <sup>4</sup> We have confidence in the Lord that you are doing and will continue to do the things we command. <sup>5</sup> May the Lord direct your hearts into God's love and Christ's perseverance (2 Thess. 3:1-5).

A university student was seen with a large “K” printed on his T-shirt. When someone asked him what the “K” stood for, he said: “Confused”. But the questioner replied, “You don’t spell confused with a K.” The student answered: “You have no ideas how confused I am.”

President Harry Truman of the United States loved to tell stories. One day he told the story of a man who was hit on the head at work. The blow was severe that everybody believed that he was dead. His family called the funeral parlors and asked the local undertaker to take him away. Early the next morning the man suddenly woke up and sat straight in the casket. Confused he blinked several times and looked around, trying to put the whole thing together. He thought, “If I am alive, what in the world am I doing in this casket? And if I am not alive, who do I have to go to the bathroom.”

Well, we live in a time of great confusion. Statements are made by politicians and others that are so confusing, that we are not sure whether we are still here in our beloved country South Africa, or maybe - God forbid - in hell. The result of this confusion is that we become very unhappy and spend our day moaning and groaning about all the terrible things that are happening.

God realises what we are going through. And he has a great antidote for our daily frustrations. This antidote is called “grace”. The word does not feature in our sermon text, but it is the background of everything that is being said.

We are going to explore God’s grace today as an antidote for two things: First, an antidote for combatting grumbling, and second as an antidote to transform heartache into hope.

### I

The greatest challenge facing a doctor is not to prescribe the right medicine, which is easy, but to make the right diagnoses. There are so many diseases and illnesses today with similar symptoms, that diagnosing the condition correctly is a true science.

But there is one condition with such clear symptoms that a diagnoses is very easy. I am not talking about the normal winter flues that most of us have experienced recently. I am talking about the illness that affects our “inner” hearts and lives.

The symptoms of this heart-illness are obvious. They consist of grouchiness, excessive

complaining, irritability, and bad temper. For this illness of the heart there is one common word, which I would like to call grumble-titis. Grumble-titis, we need to realise, is a hereditary condition - a condition inborn in all sinful flesh.

Grumble-titis affects us in a strange way. It affects our perception. First and foremost it causes us to focus on the troubles and negatives of life. It is a terrible illness. It just by-passes the good and sees the bad all the time. It also changes our perception of one another. Even fellow believers are suddenly seen as a pain in the bud. You begin to despise them, and often feel like ignoring or avoiding them all together.

The next symptom of this illness - in an advanced stage - is isolation. As we think bad about others, we withdraw from serving one another in Christian love. Everything becomes an inconvenience. We become selfish with our time and talents, unwilling to help even in the smallest way. And as a result become very lonely.

If you have felt like this recently, you have grumble-titis, as many others. The apostle Paul often had to deal with this illness. There were times when he felt like despising his fellow-Christians. Some of these Christians were confused, others were constant troublemakers, who were undermining his ministry.

In this situation the apostle Paul was surely an easy target for grumble-titis himself. It would have been easy for him to lose his temper or to lash out, or just to grumble.

But God's grace made a telling difference in Paul's life. God constantly reminded him of his great love and mercy towards "all" people. In this way God transformed thanklessness into thankfulness.

Paul never describes the troubled people of his time as horrible. He doesn't despise them. Instead he thanks God for them. His words are always full of praise and encouragement. We see it in our sermon text. He writes to the Thessalonians: "***We have confidence in the Lord that you are doing and will continue to do the things we command. May the Lord direct your hearts into God's love and Christ's perseverance***" (vv.4-5).

Awareness of God's grace is the cure for grumble-titis. Paul was grateful for the people in Thessalonica, because God loved them, even as he was loved by God. No-one deserves God's love. But God loves us. This is very, very special.

And by the way every congregation is a proof of God's love. That people come together, that people enjoy worshipping with one another, is all a sign that God's love has reached its target. And the reason why God brings people together, is that they are never alone. Christian faith is all about togetherness, about common joy, about common hope.

The opposite of these things is loneliness, despair, and sadness. God combats this illness with the cross of Jesus. Jesus experienced the ultimate loneliness, despair, and sorrow so that we don't have too. Instead he promised us the presence of his Spirit and a life that is reconciled with God.

## II

Secondly, grace is an antidote to transform heartache into hope.

The fact that we are together, is God's way of reminding us that he will never forsake us - not now and not in future. We are together, so that we can share this good hope that we have in Christ with one another. And we need this hope, because grumble-titis takes its toll on the heart. It gives us heartache.

As intimated before, heartache is a chronic condition of all people. Disappointments and let-downs have marked us. In some or other way we all have proof that we have been victims of disappointment and heartache again and again.

But God's grace offers the cure. It transforms heartache into hope. God's grace reminds us that we have been washed clean by the blood of Jesus. This means, salvation is ours, no matter how miserable this world us. In fact, God uses the struggles of this world as a vessel for hope.

The older generation will still know what a "hope chest" is. A hope chest was a box in which a young woman collected, jewellery, clothing, linen and other household items in anticipation of getting married. The box was usually a very plain looking box, but in it were stored mementos of a happy future, a life of joy and hope.

In the same way, the struggles and problems we face every day are like the hope chest. In this chest God places mementos of hope, like the cross, the empty tomb, and the promise of heaven. And suddenly heartaches and problems become opportunities to share the hope of the Gospel with others.

And God sends us to one another. He sends us with the hope of forgiveness and eternal love. In short, he sends us to one another with "grace". And this grace transforms heartache into hope.

In our sermon text, Paul writes some sort of a prescription fo combat heartache and grumble-titis. He writes: "***Finally, brothers, pray for us that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honoured, just as it was with you. And pray that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men***" (vv.1-2).

Did you hear the prescription? "Pray for one another". As God's grace transforms heartache into hope, he leads us to prayer. Paul prayed for his congregations. Sometimes he corrected and reprimanded them as well, but above all he prayed for his congregations.

Here in our sermon text, Paul asks the congregation in Thessalonica to pray for him. Who knows, maybe Paul was struggling. Maybe he had a heartache and found it difficult to do his work. But that is why he says: "Can you pray for me that the word of the Lord may spread rapidly!"

I believe we live in a time, when the world and our country needs the word of the Lord, his grace,

more than ever. And we also live in a time, when Christians need each other more than ever. So let us be a congregation that prays for one another and others. Amen.

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