

“We then, as workers together with him, beseech you also that ye receive not the grace of God in vain. (For he saith, I have heard thee in a time accepted, and in the day of salvation have I succoured thee: behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation.) Giving no offence in any thing, that the ministry be not blamed: But in all things approving ourselves as the ministers of God, in much patience, in afflictions, in necessities, in distresses, In stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labours, in watchings, in fastings; By pureness, by knowledge, by longsuffering, by kindness, by the Holy Ghost, by love unfeigned, By the word of truth, by the power of God, by the armour of righteousness on the right hand and on the left, By honour and dishonour, by evil report and good report: as deceivers, and yet true; As unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and, behold, we live; as chastened, and not killed; As sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things.”—2 Cor. 6:1-10

THE GRACE OF GOD NOT IN VAIN
A Sermon By Theodor Zahn

THIS is the first Sunday in Lent, and, in accordance with the directions of our Church, we ought to keep the day as a day for repentance. May God grant us a double measure of grace, that it may be for us not only a day of strict self-examination, but also a beginning of better things, by the help of His Holy Spirit!

Ever since a long series of days was set apart by the Church of Christ as a time of preparation before the celebration of the Death and Resurrection of the Lord, it has been kept as a season for repentance and self-discipline by devout Christians. The Cross, on which our Saviour died, preaches, it is true, repentance to all the world, but more especially to those who know and believe that Jesus gave Himself up to suffering and death for their sins. The only Righteous, the only Holy One, who had no other part in our sin and guilt, but that which He took for sinners in holy, voluntary, self-sacrificing love, was delivered up to death by God. Men put Him to death as a criminal; but what can human wickedness do without God's will! God put Him to death and condemned Him; and yet He was and He remained the beloved Son of God, with whom the Father was well pleased. The sentence of God which fell upon Him was not His, but that of the men for whom He suffered as their Brother and Fellowman. By the death of Jesus, the severest judgment was passed; yea, a judgment was passed upon the world and upon all natural life in the world which has not yet been atoned for and sanctified by Christ. This judgment of God will never be silenced, and will never be carried out, till all sin has been done away in those for whom Christ suffered and offered up His life. But because we believe in this sacrifice and its power, we do not the less feel the judgment of God that is seen in the death of Christ. No, for that very reason, every participation in the sin, which caused the death of Jesus, only pains us more deeply. Real repentance can only take place where faith exists in the reconciliation of the world on the Cross. It is this faith that first gives us courage to bring all our sin and weakness to God, that He may forgive them, for by it we first realise how much forgiveness is to be found in God.

Now the exhortation, “ See that ye receive not the grace of God in vain!” is also addressed to those who hold fast their faith in the reconciliation of the world. We are thus exhorted by the Apostle at the beginning of our text, and he does this by pointing to the Cross; for immediately before our text, he had written the grand words: “God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation. Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us. We pray you in Christ's stead be ye reconciled unto God.” So, too, the Apostle preached to the heathen, who did not trouble themselves overmuch about sin and righteousness, and yet could not rid themselves of questionings about the unknown God, from whom they had become estranged. So he preached, also, to the Jews, who knew

well the God who punished sin, and who yet imagined they might cover their sins with their own righteousness, and who were unable to find peace in the works of the Law. But the Word from the Cross was not only made known to the unreconciled world, in order to tell it that it was reconciled, and to beseech it to accept the peace offered by God. The Word from the Cross had a meaning, also, for those within the community of Jesus Christ; it had further something to say to the individual Christian, who rested in conscious faith on this Word. Therefore the Apostle continues: “ But we also admonish you, ye Christians of Corinth who have received the grace of reconciliation. We are not only the ambassadors of God to the unbelieving world, we are also workers together and fellow-labourers with God, in the community of the faithful in whom God has begun His work of grace. We beseech you that ye receive not the grace of God in vain.”

Such exhortations were made necessary by the life of the Christians in Corinth; and although Paul does not go on to tell us in so many words, in our text, all that was condemned by the Cross of Christ in the life of this Christian community, and that was incompatible with the grace received, yet we understand what he means. For, in describing his own and his companions’ ministry and conduct during their lives, he draws a picture for us of the form of a human life, in which the grace of God had not been in vain.

My beloved fellow-Christians! we wish to examine ourselves to-day, while listening to the Word from the Cross. This is ultimately a matter which must take place between each individual soul and its God; but still it is our common concern, and one in which we can and ought to help one another. The Apostle, whose words we have gathered together to hear, is a well-trying fellow-worker by the grace of God amongst us. If we do not scorn his help, the grace of God will be with us, and will lead us to fruitful repentance. In order that it may serve to this end, let us consider—

First, *that we may receive the grace of God in vain; and then—*,

Secondly, *let us meditate on the form of that life which does not receive the grace of God in vain.*

I.

It is difficult to think and hard to say, and yet it is true; it must be thought and it must be said, that it is possible to receive even the grace of God in vain. This grace of God which is so firmly rooted in God’s eternal will, and which will last throughout eternity for those who fear God; this grace of God, which was procured for us even before we came into being, which has surrounded us from the day of our baptism, which has outlasted and overcome so much error and transgression, and that has formed and upheld, until now, all that is good and holy in our lives—this holy and eternal power of the love of God for us sinful men, may yet be in vain for us; for we can make its work in and for us of none effect. Even that which is good and holy and powerful in itself, and which, for a time, filled our hearts with the absolute certainty that it was of lasting worth and eternal duration, may yet be useless and in vain. All will at last be useless and in vain that comes and goes, but leaves behind no fruit which will last to eternal life. Therefore an upright man is often obliged to call vain much to which he had clung with his whole soul, and at which he had worked with all his strength. It was of a full and important life that we find the bitter truth proclaimed in Solomon’s writings: “Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do, and, behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun.” And like the Jewish king so judged also that pagan emperor of Rome, who said: “ I have been everything, but nothing avails.”

We do not applaud when those who have not as yet done much or experienced much, when the young anticipate these bitter truths, and stifle in themselves, before their time, the delight of being and doing,

and we are not inclined hastily to blame those who put their whole energy into the first thing that excites their minds, and who use all their strength to obtain it, as though it were their one and only aim: those reckless men who do not give themselves time to pause for a moment, and to say, when looking back over a portion of their life's work: That also was vanity. It is not merely a delusion which leads us men to be always filling our bottomless barrels, and to be rolling up stones, which always escape from our hands before we reach the top of the hill. It is a divine instinct which bids us wrestle and strive. We should have no incentive to act, if there were nothing which made it worth our while to work and to strive, if there were not an eternity that we must seek for in time, and that we can gain. But a man in whose heart God has awakened thoughts of eternity need not have been the King of Israel or the Emperor of Rome, he need not have a long life, full of useless work and disappointed hopes, behind him, he need only have pondered seriously over a few decades of the life of mankind, and of his own life, to be able to acknowledge: All that man makes and does by himself is vanity, and to most men God's gifts are given in vain. A religious man also confesses: "It is sin which makes everything so vain and useless; it is God's anger with us, for He both knows and punishes our unacknowledged sins. This is why the gifts of God are such transitory blessings. This is why our labour is so useless, our work so unavailing, our whole lives so fleeting."

But God has looked down upon all this misery with merciful eyes. It is not in vain that He has loved us from all eternity, and that He has so richly blessed us ever since the creation. It is no vain imagination that God again and again causes fresh life to spring up in the emptiness of natural life, and a many new powers to quicken, while He bestows such manifold gifts on the children of men. It is not vain illusion and deception when God creates so much that is lovely and beautiful in nature for man, and in art by man, so that the heart of man may forget his misery, not only in vain pleasures, but also in the more serious joys of life. Surely the goodness of God is here. But all these riches of the creative goodness of God are in vain for the children of men when they only serve to hide sin from them, and to help them to forget death; when they do not help them to attain the most important object—that they may examine themselves and repent, and, instead of desiring the blessings of this life, may seek the grace of God which saves from death.

The love which God manifests to the children of men in the realm of His creation would be incomprehensible, if it did not finally reveal itself as grace which saves from sin and death. We know it, as Christians; the grace of God has appeared, it has become a reality in the Son of God, who became our Brother that He might bear the burden of our sins as His burden, and shed His blood for the forgiveness of many. It is also impossible for a Christian to imagine that the saving grace of God could ever have appeared in vain, that God could have given His Son to the world in vain, or that He could have allowed His intercession for sinners to be unheard. It would be useless for us to rack our brains in investigating this awful possibility. It can never become a reality. All the Christians who have lived as the reconciled children of God, and who have departed in peace, are the fruits of the grace of God which has appeared in Christ. They are now saved, and no evil power can ever make all that God has done for them in vain. And the higher they stood, and the more clearly they acknowledged their condition in the sight of God during the time of their earthly life, the more clearly they testified that they owed all that they were to the grace of God alone. Therefore, at all events, the grace of God is not in vain, and yet all who have been partakers of it are concerned in the earnest entreaty, that they should not receive the grace of the Creator in vain, like so many who do receive the goodness of God in vain. Man may receive much grace, and yet go forth empty. Even the grace of reconciliation may be in vain, in vain even for those in whom its work has been really and successfully begun.

We will not conceal the seriousness of this truth from ourselves. The text does not refer to Christians who were placed under the influence of the grace of God when unconscious children in baptism, and then were lost in the stream of life, and forgot that they had ever been made Christians. The Apostle is warning confessing Christians. Having grown up in heathenism, they had allowed themselves to be

won over by the Word of the Cross, so that they were sorry for their sins, and loved the grace of God, which forgives sins, above all else. They had been reconciled to God, they had found peace in faith in Christ, they had been more richly blessed than other Christian communities with the gifts of knowledge and doctrine. They were diligent church-goers like ourselves; they were communicants like ourselves. What was wanting [lacking] in them? What made the Apostle so fearful for a community so richly blessed? And what is it which makes the exhortation necessary for the faithful of all times, that they receive not the grace of God in vain? It is the manner of their lives. And it is the manner of our lives that bids us prove ourselves to-day. There can be no question for Evangelical Christians like ourselves as to whether we are saints who deserve heaven, because of our own righteousness, because we feel that we have perfectly fulfilled the law of God, or because we deplore our human weakness a little more or a little less. The only question for us is, whether we carry out in our lives the principles impressed by the word of reconciliation on those who truly believe, and who walk in that faith. See how the Apostle exhorts us. He does not refer to any other word than the word of reconciliation, to which a Christian ought to listen, and which he ought to follow. He does not preach a new Law as well as the Gospel. He says nothing about works, by which we ought thankfully to respond for the grace given. No, it is the undeserved grace of reconciliation itself that we have to accept aright. The *one* gracious Word of God, the love of God, revealed on the Cross, must do all for us; we must accept it again and again, and allow it to work in us that for which it has the power. Then our lives will also show forth the fruits of grace.

II.

But what is the form which the reconciling grace of God gives to the lives of Christians in the world? We see it in the Apostle, who describes in wonderful antitheses his own conduct and that of his fellow-workers in the world. He does not set himself up as a pattern in this text, but he is a pattern for us. He wishes to say only that he has a right to exhort us not to receive the grace of God in vain. When he promises all God's blessings to those who place themselves under the full operation of the grace of God, he speaks from experience; for him it had not been in vain; and to it he owed all that he was as a Christian and as an Apostle. We see first the minister of the Divine Word, who submitted, in his especial calling, to everything that this calling brought on its followers in the way of suffering and distress. We see there the confessor and martyr, who could not be brought to silence by force and imprisonment, or even to denial of the truth. We see there the man, who had held a prominent and important position, submitting to all kinds of slander from men, and obliged to console himself with the gracious judgment of God, and with the loving judgment of those who were religiously minded. And, lastly, we see only the Christian as he is in every position of life. Then it flashes upon us that it is the Word of the Cross which gives its peculiar form to the Christian life. Let us hold fast to this.

The Word of the Cross, before all things, makes us the *poor who yet make many rich*; it makes us people *who have nothing and yet possess all things*. Do we recognise ourselves in this picture? There is poverty enough amongst us, and not only poverty amongst those who stretch out their hands to beg. We need not go far to find people wanting what they think needful. Want of spiritual blessings, even to wretchedness, is spread widely enough amongst us. But where are the riches which ought to be united with Christian poverty? the unbounded riches whereof the Apostle speaks; the fulness of blessings which, by overflowing, impart themselves to all who surround their possessor? Perhaps we are not poor enough to live in the midst of such riches. Perhaps we possess too much to be as poor and bare as God would have us. We cling to things which we call our own property, and not least indeed to our mental possessions, to our knowledge and ability, and also to the position we have, in consequence, acquired amongst men. We make great demands on life, and imagine we are justified in so doing by our position, our endowments, or our achievements. We are offended if what we imagine to be our due does not fall to our lot. But when others make demands on us, there is not sufficient for all. Our

time, our strength, our outward means, our intellect, our love—we need them all for ourselves; and even then we have not enough. We wish to be devout Christians while retaining all the ballast of our external and our mental possessions, and also our needs and expectations; and if we were to find ourselves suddenly in difficulties, we should be very glad for the grace of God to supply our need. But the one thing is no more possible than the other. The grace of God will not fill up gaps. It will have free course, and it only gives all to those who have nothing.

Every one who has ever lived through a blessed Lent, and has followed the Saviour in spirit on His way to the Cross, will have been touched in conscience by the words: “If any man will come after Me, and be My disciple, and receive the blessing of My suffering, let him leave all that he hath, let him deny himself, and take up his cross.” All earthly possessions after all are but unrighteous mammon; all honour which only comes to us from man is useless honour; and the longing for possessions, honour, and power has always made men the enemies of God. How can we want to hold fast to all these things, if we wish to be reconciled to God, if we look to the Cross of Christ for forgiveness of our sins and peace of mind? He only who is ready to lay his last penny and his last trinket at the foot of the Cross, so that he has nothing left but a longing after righteousness before God and peace with God, he only can really receive the grace of reconciliation. Though to all appearance he still retains all the earthly goods and faculties that he possessed before, though outwardly he still remains in the position God appointed for him in the world, he is inwardly free and rid of all. All is ignored by him, his goods are a loan, and the only possession left to him is the grace of God. He who is reconciled is content with this, though all else be taken from him. In this he possesses all things; for he can pray to God as a child entreating his Father. All is at his disposal; if he needs it, it must be his. He has always something over for others; and of the riches of his inner life especially, the fulness of spirit and the fulness of love, he can impart something to all who come into contact with him. And if, at the end of his pilgrimage, the Lord, or one of his fellow-Christians, were to ask him: “Hast thou ever been in want? he would answer Never from the bottom of his heart.”

But of whom am I speaking, my beloved? Of Paul, or of myself, or of some other Christian? Or of an ideal that has never been seen and never will be seen? When we ask ourselves whether we are amongst the poor who make many rich, our consciences reply: There is nothing to prevent our being such people. It makes us sorrowful, therefore, when we do not recognise ourselves in this picture of a Christian. But it is not sad that we should be made sorrowful by such a reason. It is the grace of God that makes us sorrowful, and to be sorrowful is an essential feature in the character of the real Christian. The Lord said: “Blessed are the sorrowful.” And it is in this sense that Paul says, “*sorrowful yet always rejoicing.*” There is indeed sorrow enough in the world, from the small and trivial vexations of everyday life to consuming heartache and lifelong despair. Therefore no day of repentance, and no Lent, can be needed to provide the necessary amount of melancholy. There is also plenty of gaiety in the world, from the harmless pleasure of children at play to the wild and boisterous extravagances of their elders. But this kind of gaiety and this kind of sorrow exclude each other. They replace each other in sudden alternations. The sorrow is inconsolable, and the gaiety has no stability. The life of a Christian is never completely free from sorrow; but it gives birth again and again to a joy that never dies. A reconciled Christian is constantly repenting; it grieves him daily that he is not more full of love, that he is not stronger and richer in faith, and that through his own fault. It also grieves him to see that sin around him never ceases to deceive, to destroy, and to disfigure all that might be so good and beautiful. He prays daily for the forgiveness of his guilt, and, also daily, that the kingdom of God may come, in which there will be no more sin to make Christians sorrowful as long as they are in the world. But such sorrow has never made any one too sorrowful, and no one has ever repented of it. It makes room for pure and everlasting joy, and is itself already the beginning of that joy. For is it not holy joy to be freed from self-deceit, and to receive truth instead? to be put to shame by the love of God and Christ, which only condemns us to raise us up again? Oh that the grace of God might make us right sorrowful to-day! We should then go on our way rejoicing. And if God were obliged to chasten us, we

should recognise His love therein, which would transform and sanctify us, but would never destroy. As *chastened yet not killed*, as sorrowful yet always rejoicing, so may we live in good as well as in evil days, if we allow ourselves to be judged by the word of reconciliation.

But one thing more, my beloved! It is possible for a man, who has passed through many days of penance, and who has often gone to confession, to be embittered by the salutary sorrow of repentance, and to find his consolation in the forgiveness of sins lessened when he says to himself: "It is always just the same as of old. I believe as a Christian, and I sin as a man; I repent and receive forgiveness of sins; I seek strength in the Lord's Supper, and then live in weakness again as before. And after this has gone on for a few decades, I shall die; and the clergyman who accompanies me to the grave will praise me as a devout Christian, and a faithful member of the community. And the world will say of me that I had a good deal of character, because I was always the same, a man of principle, who, however, never made any one uncomfortable, and never offended any one." It is not the fault of the grace of God if that is a Christian's course of life. The Word of God is still living and powerful. It is not only a judge of thoughts, it is also strong enough to carry out its judgments. It can kill and it can make alive again. It can and will kill in us all that makes us sorrowful on a day of repentance, and all that makes our resolutions to improve so powerless in our lives; and it can and will make alive in us all the powers of eternal life that have been planted in us by the grace of God. The grace of God in His word will kill the old man in us, that the new man may grow strong in us and get the mastery. It is only *as dying that, behold, we live*. Therefore, do not let us content ourselves, to-day, with pious thoughts, with the sadness of remorse, with the desire to follow Christ. If the grace of God has helped us thus far, let us hold it fast till it crowns its work in us by abiding blessing. Let us submit to it, till it has destroyed our perverted inclinations and our vain desires, so that they have become as unfamiliar to us as the follies of our past lives. This is a dying before death, certainly often more painful than physical death, but always a blessed dying and an entrance into life. And dying thus, behold, we live! Amen.