

Introduction

There’s an old saying that is worth its weight in gold: “consider the source”. The idea is one should think of the person offering advice or correction or instruction. When you *consider the source* you’re asking whether the source deserves even a moment of your time. It’s really good advice for dealing with random social media trolls. When people interact in an aggressive manner online it’s not hard to *consider the source*—and move on.

It is especially good advice when making medical decisions. Sure, there may be a website that argues for a certain thing but you really should *consider the source*. Maybe, and hear me out, maybe the person who went to medical school and then spent several more years in a residency program and then passed a pretty extensive exam knows more about your health than some TV host.

When dealing with skeptics to the Christian faith it’s also really good advice. We’re in that time of year when old claims come up again that try to connect Christmas with a pagan festival. Skeptics claim that in an attempt to control the population Christians changed the pagan festival Saturnalia into Christmas. Those who make this claim should certainly consider the source, especially as there are no actual sources for this. All those who make the claim simply make the claim and have no source for the claim.

When doing serious research having quality sources is essential. This is why your high school or college teacher wouldn’t allow you to cite Wikipedia. It’s great for basic information but given that nearly anyone can contribute, it cannot be cited as an authoritative source. This is one reason I don’t read much at the popular level. While an author may well apply research properly, in a popular-level book I can’t see the research so how am I to know? Far better to read a scholarly work that *is* the research.

Having a good source is essential. What makes a source a good source, though? I think three things make a source a trustworthy source. First, the author is a recognized expert in the field. He or she simply knows what he or she is talking about. Often today that means the author has at least graduate level research in a field and more likely, a PhD in a given field. Historically this was measured differently but expertise must still be widely recognized.

Second, the author writes widely on the topic and continues to contribute in the field. If an author doesn’t publish in his field, why should we think he’s an expert? If he or she is not continuing to publish regularly, how do we know the author is still interacting with other scholars? It’s important for an expert to “keep up” with scholarship.

Third, a trustworthy source has life experience that demonstrates the ability to speak about a particular topic. This goes beyond writing. I follow a number of doctors—both medical and research doctors—who write about nutrition. Part of what makes them experts in their field is they live out what they claim in their books. They *live it*. If they were to claim, “This is what you should eat” but don’t eat it themselves, why would I care what they have to say?

With this criteria, the apostle Paul is a good source. He is a recognized expert in his field, for he received the gospel directly from the Lord Jesus, who called him to be an apostle. He wrote widely to churches and individuals. He certainly lived out what he taught. When he writes something it is wise to give it the weight it deserves, for he doesn't write randomly.

We're in Ephesians 1.

^{Eph 1:1} Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God,

To the saints who are in Ephesus, and are faithful in Christ Jesus:

² Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul, An Apostle

Paul begins his letter to the believers in Ephesus in a standard way. Letters in the first century usually began with the sender's name and the recipients of that letter. We must remember that Paul spent about three years in Ephesus. As we saw last week when he met with the elders from Ephesus he told them they *knew* how he lived among them. They were able to see his life up close. No part of it was hidden from them. His weaknesses and his frustrations, his hopes and his fears, his strengths and accomplishments—all of it was on display for Paul lived among them *as one of them*.

Paul hasn't seen them in a few years. He was in Ephesus roughly from the years 53–56 and then saw the elders in Miletus in the spring of 57. It is likely he's writing this letter around the year 62, about five years after last seeing them. While Paul would have known many of the Ephesian believers, but he would not have known all of them. People come and go. New believers enter the church and mature believers move elsewhere. Surely there are new elders in the church after this amount of time.

While Paul begins this letter in a fairly standard way, it's also fairly formal. He's not "Paul, who is one of you", but "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God". Here Paul identifies himself formally as one of those chosen by the Lord Jesus to serve the church in a formal office that carries significant authority.

To be in *the office* of apostle required, first, direct appointment by the Lord Jesus. To be an official apostle required learning directly from the Lord Jesus. Second, it required being a witness to the resurrection. As we will see later in this letter there was a distinction early on between gifted apostles and official apostles. People like Apollos and Silvanus and Barnabas and Andronicus and Junia had the spiritual gift of apostleship, which really means they were gifted *missionaries*, while the Twelve Apostles and Paul were in the *office* of apostle.

Paul here is emphasizing his official role as an apostle of Jesus, declaring he is so *by the will of God*. He did not choose this office; God chose him for this office. He was trying to wipe out those who were preaching Christ when the will of God intervened and saved him and called him to be an apostle.

Paul, as a Pharisee, had been committed to purifying Israel so that God would fulfill his promises to his people. When Christians began claiming the Messiah had come and had been crucified—killed on a tree, which indicated God's curse—he believed this was blasphemy, the very sort of blasphemy that would prevent God's promises from being fulfilled. As a Pharisee Paul had believed that God's promises were entirely dependent on his people's obedience so he actively sought to wipe it out. Then Jesus intervened.

From that moment Paul was committed to *proclaiming* the death and resurrection of the Messiah. Yes, he had come, he had died, and then he conquered death by rising from the grave. While he died under the curse, he did so on behalf of his people and then overcame that curse by rising from the dead. He further demonstrated his power by converting Paul from a committed terrorist bent on wiping out the nascent church to a committed apostle bent on planting new churches everywhere.

The very fact that Paul is an apostle is a miracle of God. It demonstrates God's power to save, to overcome even the most hostile person. Only he can transform a person so thoroughly. Only he can deliver a person from the domain of darkness and transfer him to the kingdom of his beloved Son, as Paul put it in Colossians. When Paul calls himself an apostle he is illustrating the gospel of Jesus.

To The Saints in Ephesus

This apostle writes to the saints who are in Ephesus. He knows most of them, but surely many have joined the church in his absence, yet he can write confidently they are saints. By this he simply means they are believers in Jesus. A saint, despite how much of church history changed the meaning, is one who follows Jesus. The saints are God's holy people. Calvin put it quite well:

No man, therefore, is a believer who is not also a saint; and on the other hand, no man is a saint who is not a believer.

John Calvin

When the Lord saves a person, he saves that person from something and *to* something. He saves them *from* sin and death and he saves them *into* his church. This is why there is no such thing as a free agent in God's kingdom. Believers are called into God's kingdom and are joined to his church, and his church is found in a local church.

When Paul writes to the saints in Ephesus, he knows each is an active part of the church in Ephesus. To be a follower of Jesus is to be part of his church. To be a saint is to be in that process of becoming like Christ and a very basic characteristic of Christ is his commitment to his church.

By calling them saints Paul is making another statement about these believers in Ephesus: they are holy. Keep in mind that Paul is not writing this letter to offer correction to the Ephesians. Unlike many of his other letters, there are "no serious problems or concerns" (Baugh, p. 31). Paul is not aware of serious trouble in Ephesus that needs to be addressed with his apostolic authority. Rather, he writes to them to remind them what he has already taught them.

Part of what he has taught them is they are saints—they are *holy*. However, this holiness is an "already / not yet" holiness. They are already holy in God's sight. When God saved them he declared they are holy, yet the Spirit of God is at work in them, making them holy. They have the status of holy before the Lord yet their actual lives are still on the path to holiness. This doesn't prevent Paul from also declaring they "are faithful in Christ Jesus".

So long as they are on that path of sanctification, of becoming actually holy, they are being faithful in Christ. Faithfulness is not seen in perfection, but in the striving for perfection. Too often we think of faithfulness as having arrived and too often we long to be free

of the struggle with sin, but if you ever stop struggling with sin, you're no longer faithful. Perfection is not achievable in this life. The fight against sin demonstrates faithfulness for it's when we stop fighting that we're no longer faithful.

This greatly affects a church's culture. If you think a person who struggles with addiction or with lust or envy or pride or laziness or anger or immorality is therefore not faithful because he or she *struggles*, you're not understanding what struggling means. It is the fight against sin that demonstrates faithfulness, not the achievement of perfection. If faithfulness meant a life completely free of sin, only Jesus is faithful and therefore the apostle is simply wrong in his greeting to the saints in Ephesus!

They are saints because of the work of God in Christ through his Spirit, not because of anything they have done. Their status as God's holy people is God's doing, not theirs. Their faithfulness is likewise the work of God in Christ through his Spirit. As God works in them, he is making their lives reflect their status.

Grace and Peace

Paul continues in verse 2 by saying, "Grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ". In ancient letter writing the standard greeting was the verb *χαίρειν*. It means something like "Welcome" or "Good day" or perhaps "I am glad to see you". It's the first-century equivalent of, "Hello".

Rather than the traditional *χαίρειν*, Paul makes a play on words, as he often does in each of his letters. Instead of *χαίρειν*, he writes *χάρις*—*grace*. He means, of course, *God's* grace. It is God's incredible favor, his gift, that enables Paul to be an apostle and enables the Ephesian believers to be saints who are faithful in Christ. Without God's grace none of this would be possible.

Grace is an important concept for Paul. The word is used twelve times in this letter and was a well-understood concept in the first century—though not the way Paul used it. We often think of grace as "unmerited favor" but that is not what it meant in the first century. Grace was a lavish gift bestowed on one who was deserving, who had done something extraordinary.

In fact, in the most-popular Greek lexicon, the first meaning of grace is this:

- 1. a winning quality or attractiveness that invites a favorable reaction, *graciousness, attractiveness, charm, winsomeness***
BDAG, *χάρις*

Grace was given to those who deserved it in some way. For example, a wealthy general might pour out grace on one of his officers for an incredible act of bravery. Perhaps he led his troops to an unexpected victory in a battle and the general wants to reward him for it. This was grace in the first century. There was something in you that caused me to seek to honor you or bless you or reward you with a lavish gift. Often that gift was unable to be repaid, for the giver was usually far wealthier than the recipient, and therefore unable to be repaid, at least *in kind*.

It's not hard to see that Paul uses the word very differently. Scripture is clear there is nothing in us that causes God to move toward us favorably. We were born in sin and we

demonstrate our agreement with Adam’s rebellion against God every time we sin. When Paul says God gives grace to us, he means that God gives grace in an *unconditioned* way. God’s gift is *unconditioned* in us. That is, there is nothing in us that provides the conditions under which God gives grace.

To say this another way, God’s grace is based on God and not on us. Like all grace, God’s grace is based on conditions—there are reasons for it—but those conditions are in God and not in us. It is because God chooses to give it and not because we deserve it in any way. This is where we get the notion that grace is unconditional, though the more precise word is *unconditioned*. His grace is utterly unlike the grace given by anyone else, for his grace is rooted entirely and completely in himself and not in those to whom he gives it.

When Paul cites God’s grace, he does so as the cause, and the effect is peace. *Grace and peace* from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Peace is the result of grace. It is the effect of the cause. Because grace is the cause of peace and because peace is an ongoing reality in the life of the believer, grace is also an ongoing reality. God’s grace is not a one-time gift but an ongoing gift given continuously.

Sit

So often when we read the opening verses to a letter, we gloss over them, wanting to get to the good stuff. I hope you can already see the good stuff in these first two verses! Paul introduces himself somewhat formally, which is a bit of a surprise given he spent the most time in Ephesus out of all the cities in which he planted churches. It was his most fruitful ministry and as we’ve seen, he was very involved in the life of the church. He was not above the church or disconnected from the church, but lived among them as one of them.

The reason Paul is so formal in his greeting is to give his greeting weight. He is not merely musing about their status as believers. He is declaring the gospel to them. They are *saints*—God’s holy people and because they are saints they are faithful in Christ. This greeting carries apostolic authority. Paul isn’t some random internet dude posting unsolicited comments about them. He is the Lord’s apostle, appointed to this role *by the will of God*. When he says they are saints and are faithful in Christ, it carries real authority.

Paul’s aim in saying this is to point them to God’s grace, for his grace is the very source of their life in Christ. God’s grace is his initiating action in granting salvation and is his ongoing effort in a believer’s life to make him or her more like Christ. The outcome of this grace is peace in the life of the believer. Grace is the cause and peace is the effect.

What is that peace, though? The ancient Greek writer Homer used this word to write about the state of “civil tranquility”, a time in which a city/state was free of opposition and hostility, a time in which prosperity could grow. It’s the idea of general well-being. It *is* the lack of hostility and opposition but it’s *also* the presence of something positive: it is the positive presence of well-being. The Hebrew word *shalom* gets closer to it.

When this letter was first read to the church in Ephesus and when they heard his greeting of “grace”, they would have immediately recognized his play on words. They would have thought, “Oh, that’s clever! He said *χάρις* instead of *χαίρειν*!” But when the greeting continued with “and peace” this would have sounded strange to their ears. New Testament scholar Frank Thielman points out it would have been as strange to their ears as it would

to ours if someone today greeted you with, “Peace”. It’s not a normal sort of greeting. Are there people who do it? Sure, but they’re weird.

What’s happening is Paul, in his role as an apostle, is calling on God to bless the saints who are in Ephesus with his peace, with his ongoing blessing of grace that brings about their peace. This declaration is his appeal to God for his blessing to fall on them, for his grace to fill their lives with his peace.

As I mentioned earlier, Ephesian scholars cannot detect any real problems in Ephesus that gives the occasion for this letter. When he wrote to the Corinthians Paul was dealing with a lot of problems. There doesn’t seem to be any correction or rebuke in this letter. In fact, for the first three chapters—the entire first half of this letter—Paul does not issue a single command to the saints who are in Ephesus.

Instead, Paul issues declaration after declaration of God’s love to us in Christ through his Spirit. Again and again Paul declares what God has done for us. Do you see why he emphasizes his apostolic authority even though there are no significant *issues* in Ephesus? The saints who are in Ephesus need to be reminded to sit in the truth of God in Christ. They must rest in the gospel of Jesus.

Everything in the Christian life is a response to this. Your faith in Christ is a response to what God has done. Your desire to follow Christ is a response to what God has done. Your struggle with sin is a response to what God has done. Your love for neighbor is a response to what God has done. If there is no such response, the only conclusion is that you have not truly experienced the truth of God in Christ. Fix that today!

What we see in Scripture again and again is the indicatives precede the imperatives. An indicative statement declares something that is. An imperative is a command. In Scripture we see the indicatives before we see the imperatives. We see the declaration of what God has done before we see the right response to it. Think back to the giving of the law—a whole bunch of imperatives! The giving of the law begins with the giving of “Ten Imperatives”—commandments. But how does it *really* begin?

Ex 20:1 And God spoke all these words, saying, ² “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

³ “You shall have no other gods before me.

Exodus 20:1–3

God tells Israel, “This is who I am and this is what I’ve done. Because of who I am and because of what I’ve done, here’s what a right response to me looks like: you shall have no other gods before me”. This is the basic format of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. Instead of a single statement of who God is and what he’s done, there are three chapters filled with indicatives for us. He begins his letter with three chapters of declarative statements of the gospel of Jesus, of what God has done for us. Then and only then is there a response called for in chapter 4:

Eph 4:1 I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called...

Ephesians 4:1

Therefore, because of who God is and what he has done, you must walk in a manner worthy of that calling. That is, you must respond to God’s grace in the proper way. Church, it starts by resting—sitting—in the truth of the gospel and then by walking in accord with that truth. This is the Christian life. You must sit before you can walk.

Consider the Source

We can have no greater source for this truth than holy Scripture written by the apostle who was chosen for this task by the Lord Jesus himself. Far from being mere boilerplate for beginning a letter, the apostle drops gospel truth for the saints in Ephesus and therefore for us as well.

But let’s consider the source, shall we? Think of Paul’s life. Early on he lived a somewhat privileged life. He was raised in a faithful home, committed to the law of Moses. He received a formal education under the famed teacher Gamaliel. He became a Pharisee. When we hear this we often fail to hear the real impact of it. The Pharisees were held in high regard. This is why it was so shocking when Jesus publicly criticized them for hypocrisy—he was criticizing the most pious and “godly” people around!

Not only was Paul a Pharisee he tells us he was advancing among the ranks of Pharisees. In the early first century there were only about 7,000 Pharisees in total. They were already the cream of the crop, so to speak, and Paul, while a young man, was rising to the top. He was going places. He was an influential young man. He even oversaw the stoning of Stephen.

This zeal for “protecting” the law of Moses against blasphemers like those who claimed God’s Messiah died on a cross earned him a favor with the authorities in Israel. Luke tells us in Acts 8 that Paul, also known as Saul, was given official sanction to hunt down Christ followers and bring them to justice. He tells us that Paul repeatedly entered into homes and dragged men and women off to prison for their “crimes” of proclaiming Jesus is the Messiah.

Luke describes him as “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord” in Acts 9. He was filled with zeal. He was filled with a remarkable sense of his own importance. Remember, the Pharisees believed that God would fulfill his promises to Israel when Israel fully and completely obeyed the law of Moses. Since the law of Moses declared that anyone killed on a tree was cursed by God, anyone who claimed Messiah had come and was killed on a tree was blaspheming, for how could God curse his own Messiah? The only way to bring about God’s blessings was for his people to be perfect, and Paul sought to be perfect.

He also sought to force others to be perfect so he chased down those making these claims about the Messiah. Understand that when Luke says he was “breathing threats and murder” he’s not exaggerating. Consider Paul’s own words recorded later in Acts.

Acts 26:9 “I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. ¹⁰ And I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them. ¹¹ And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities.

Acts 26:9–11

We should not gloss over what it means that Paul persecuted the church. How many of God's saints had lost their lives because of Paul? How many had their backs ripped open with whips because of Paul? How many had been beaten and tortured in an attempt to make them openly blaspheme God, which in Paul's mind would have justified everything he was doing? Don't gloss over the language here. He was *breathing threats and murder*. In *raging fury against* the saints he persecuted them.

When it wasn't enough to do this in Israel, he traveled to foreign cities. Due to the nature of the synagogue system and the legal exemptions Rome had given to the Jews to govern their own affairs in the synagogues around the empire and given the earliest Christians still identified as Jews, Paul could travel to foreign cities and continue his extermination plan against all the "Jews" who were blaspheming.

Then on his way to Damascus, the crucified Messiah appeared to him. *Alive*. This shattered Paul. The very one he had been aggressively and violently opposing as a fraud appeared to him very much alive. In this moment Paul recognizes everything he had been doing had been in opposition to God's true Messiah. Had he been crucified? Yes. Does this mean he died under God's curse? Yes. Then how can he be alive again? God raised him from the dead. Why would God do that if Jesus *remained* under the curse?

Paul was suddenly a follower of Jesus. He who had caused immeasurable suffering to followers of Jesus—to those for whom Christ died—was now worshipping that same Jesus. He was responsible for countless lives lost in faithfulness to Jesus. Lives had been torn apart as he carted off men and women to prison. Lives had been shattered in the torture this terrorist inflicted while hoping for the victims to blaspheme God in the midst of their suffering.

I don't know about you but I can look back over my life and recall countless times where I can say, "Why did I say that?" or, "Why did I *do* that?" So many mistakes. So much harm caused. You know what I've never done? I've never tortured anyone. I've never killed anyone. Yet I can still be filled with mental distress at what I *have* done—a distress that leaves me empty and without any sense of peace.

Try to imagine Paul writing this letter. We know he's in prison. Most likely it's the two years he spent in Rome. The one who was whipped and tortured believers for their faithfulness in Jesus has himself been whipped on five occasions for that same faithfulness to Jesus. The one who had once tracked down and dragged off to prison countless men and women for their faithfulness to Jesus is now himself in prison for his faithfulness to Jesus. The one who had once been responsible for the execution of men and women for their faithfulness to Jesus now sits in prison wondering when he will be executed for his faithfulness to Jesus. While Paul won't be killed this time, when he returns from his Spanish church planting mission he will be arrested in Rome again and then his own life will end when he is beheaded sometime in the mid-60s.

I know how much I struggle at the thought of things I've done and the harm I've caused, yet I haven't—as far as I know—caused physical harm to others. How many times in Paul's travels did he come across some believer in some city only to find out that he knew that person's uncle—one of those Paul had killed? How many times did he meet someone whose husband or mother was gone because of Paul's zeal? How many times did Paul meet a fellow believer in Christ who bore the scars Paul himself inflicted on him?

Whether he was alone in his prison cell reflecting back on his life or had one of those awkward encounters where he remembered a face—and the terrifying cries associated with

it—or was simply overwhelmed at the kindness of God shown him in spite of it all, Paul had to remind himself yet again that God’s grace is different from anyone else’s, for God’s grace is rooted entirely in God.

The love of God, Paul knew, was not rooted in his people’s ability to keep the law. His kindness and favor for his people was not based on their ability to perform. God’s love, God’s grace was rooted in something within God. Because God never changes, the basis for his love and grace never changes, so God is able to pour his grace on his people *forever*, for there is always reason for his grace to be given.

Surely, whenever Paul reminded himself of this truth, or whenever one of his fellow believers reminded him of this truth, the effect was peace entered into Paul’s soul. The only way Paul could have peace after all that he had done was God’s grace was the initiating cause of God’s favor and the effect was peace. A sense of well-being, even while in a prison cell awaiting his execution, would have flooded Paul’s soul every time he thought about God’s grace.

Application

Providentially we are in the second week of Advent—the week in which we remember the peace of God in Christ. While I do plan out my sermon series, I could only dream of planning it this exactly. It just so happens, in God’s timing, that we find ourselves here, dealing with peace.

If Paul of all people could call on God’s peace to be poured out on his people then surely Paul himself experienced that same peace. Here we see something significant about the peace of God: it is given in the midst of circumstance, not by a change in circumstances. God’s peace is the change *you* experience in the midst of difficulty, not a change in the difficulty itself. When you are changed your perception of your circumstances is also changed, but the circumstances themselves will not be.

This means that the peace of Christ can fill you even if that relationship cannot be mended. The peace of Christ can transform you even if the financial struggle continues. The peace of Christ can permeate every area of your life even as you wait for the results of that biopsy—results you should have received *days ago*. Peace is not the result of a change in circumstances, but a change *in you* in your circumstances.

This is true because there is one who actually could change his circumstances—and did. The Son of God changed his circumstances by leaving behind his throne in glory to enter into our disordered and broken world where he would enter into our mess, the problems and the pains that we cause, the dysfunction and brokenness that are hallmarks of this world. He changed his circumstances by entering into ours, that he—the Prince of peace—might rule in our hearts and so become our peace.

He lived a faithful life, died a cruel death, and then rose from the dead in complete and total victory. The result of this is his peace is poured out in full upon his people. Let us not look for a change in our circumstances, but for a change *within* our circumstances. Let’s let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts today. And when the circumstances continue to rage against us, let us cling to the promises of God, knowing he is faithful, for if he could do it for Paul, he can do it for us.