

Colossians 2:6-7
Rooted and Built Up: Received Christ Jesus
Rev. Jonathan Cornell
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The Good News of Jesus Christ is only ever good news when it is received with open hands.

What the Gospel proclaims to you and me is NOT that if we do just the right thing, we'll get it. Just the opposite, in fact; that Christ did the only possible thing, and so we have it. All that's left to do is take it with us, try it out, walk around with it.

This morning, we are beginning a new series of sermons that will take us up to Advent. This month, we will be talking everyone's favorite subject, money. But during the next few weeks, we will approach stewardship not from the point of obligation, but rather gratitude. If we understand ourselves as having been given little, we're more likely to hold it close. But if we understand ourselves as the recipients of something incomparably wonderful, that we did nothing to earn, well, then we're more likely to live generously.

So the question before us to consider today is this: is God's grace a zero sum resource, or is it really as recklessly abundant as the Scriptures say? And when it is offered to us, will we be closed handed gatherers or open handed recipients?

The Apostle Paul in writing his letter to the Colossian Church is announcing the dawn of a new age in history. The old age in which life was governed by the looming threat of death and a scarcity of life is gone. What he is saying to them is, "Listen, the rules that you lived by formerly no longer dictate how you need to live your life. Instead, I want you to look to Jesus and see the dawn of a new world. Jesus put to death all the worry, all the anxiety, all the scarcity of the former life. What he has to offer is the dawn of New Creation. And if you want to see what life is like in God's economy, look to Jesus."

And that is what we are going to do for the next four weeks, as we examine our finances together. Because if we believe that Jesus has ushered in a new world, well, then even our pocket books are governed by his grace.

I invite you to turn with me to Colossians chapter 2. For the next four weeks, we are going to look at two verses in expository format, Colossians chapter 2 verses 6-7. I invite you to turn there with me now in the Bible you brought with you or the red pew Bible in front of you. If you are following along in the red pew Bibles, it is found on page 185 of the New Testament. And as you are able, I invite you to stand and read along with me as we read God's Word together.

Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

The grass withers and the flower falls but the word of the Lord lasts forever. Amen, you can be seated and let us pray. ***Let the good news come now, Father, not only in word but also in power and in strong conviction. Remind us that every good thing we have is a gift from your loving hands and show us how to be more faithful in the stewardship of its use. This we pray not in our own power, but in the strong name of Jesus the Christ. Amen.***

A few months ago, we were driving home from a wedding in Virginia. I found myself caught in our nation's most devious forms of cruelty...otherwise known as the speed trap. Coming around the corner, going no more than 11 mph over the speed limit, I actually passed the officer who would later apprehend me.

When he came to the window, he asked if I knew how fast I was going. To which I responded, "Yes, officer, I was going 46 and didn't realize the limit had dropped to 35." Taking my license and registration, he went back to his car. A few moments later, he returned to my window. Now, here is how I imagined this whole scenario playing out in my mind: the officer comes to my window, acknowledges that I am an out-of-towner and gives me a freebie. That would be called mercy. Or even better, the officer returns to my window and instead of giving me a warning of a ticket, he hands me a crispy crème donut. That would be what we call grace. But instead he returned with my license, registration and a moving citation that included not only my violation, but it also included a citation for the fact that I was in possession of a fuzz buster, which unbeknownst to me is illegal in the state of Virginia. That was called justice. Frustrating, discouraging, real justice.

This morning, the Apostle Paul wants to remind this young and budding church in Colossae that what they have been given by the promises of Christ is not the justice they deserve, but the grace they do not deserve. Our verses for today are some of the most beautiful and assuring words in the entire New Testament.

You did not receive the justice you deserve. Instead, this loving God who created you has chosen to make known to you the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. What you've been given instead of justice is grace. Unmerited, undeserving, unrelenting grace.

During the middle of the last century, at a British conference on comparative religions, theologians and experts from around the world debated this question: Is there anything unique to the Christian faith? Is there anything associated with following Jesus that has no other parallel? How about the Incarnation? That didn't fly, since other religions include stories of various gods taking on human form. The resurrection, perhaps? That's not unique to Christianity, either, since others make claims of people rising from the dead.

The debate continued until author and Christian apologist C.S. Lewis wandered into the room. "What's the rumpus about?" he asked. When told that the delegates were trying to identify what, if anything, makes Christianity stand apart from other religious options, he

said, “Oh, that’s easy. It’s grace.” That was the end of the discussion. There is, in fact, nothing else in the world that holds a candle to Jesus’ teaching that God’s love and acceptance are totally free and unconditional.

Friends, do you realize how counter intuitive this is? There are no yeah buts, no however’s, no exceptions. Jesus says God loves you, period. End of story.

But we are industrious, hard-working, resourceful people. In one way or another, all of us have learned that to be an American is to be a productive contributing member of society. Every one of us has to do our part. Certainly God can’t be expected to do everything for us. Perhaps if we just help God out a bit by easing his load, we don’t want God to be put out on our account.

In an old episode of the classic television comedy *The Simpsons*, Homer is invited to experience a free weekend getaway. And his response is to ask over and over again, “How much is this free vacation?”

From the very beginning of time, humanity’s response to God has been, What can we do to earn God’s favor? Beginning with prehistoric expressions, ancient people would seek the benevolence of the gods by offering sacrifices to remain on their good side. That has been the case all down through history, even up until this very day. There is still something programmed within us that asks: “How much is this free grace?”

So are we willing to give up our endless attempts to prove our worth, earn our way, and let God be who he says he is?

Paul begins this part of his letter by reminding this budding young church that they *received* Christ Jesus as Lord. Grace is not something we select on our own; it is only ever given as a gift, and as such all we can do is receive it. The Greek verb Paul uses for receive is the word *Paralambano*. Say that with me. *Paralambano* is in the aorist tense. Everybody say aorist. *Paralambano* is a word that implies an action that has taken place and is complete in and of itself.

This is why we read and stay close to the original texts, because of critically important grammatical points like this one. There has, for many years, been a part of our American Christian narrative a prevailing idea that the only way the gospel can begin to work in our lives is when we decide to let Jesus in. Now, don’t hear what I’m not saying. I’m not saying that Jesus isn’t longing to have that personal intimate and transformative relationship with you. He is, and we get that elsewhere in Paul. But what happens when we simply receive and live into the Christ is that we begin to see how Jesus has been at work in our lives, all along, even before we could decide for ourselves. This verb, *Paralambano*, has a very different connotation. What we have here is a word of truth, passed down from age to age, of an event that took place in the past, but has present impact and value.

You were given this gift. It was that, it was a gift. Now continue to bask in the sunlight of its effects in your life. Jesus shows up in our lives and chooses you, acts for you.

Jesus had encounters like this one all the time. It is sort of Jesus' modus operandi. Walk into the life of a person in deep need, a person who had some sense of their own bankruptcy, and appear with good news. That news came in the forms of physical healings (paralytic, hemorrhaging woman, blind man, the centurion's servant) and spiritual healings (the thief on the cross, Zacchaeus the tax collector, Nicodemus the Pharisee, the author of the very letter we're reading Saul of Tarsus).

Jesus always appears out of the blue. Any other way and you and I would be tempted to think that we had some part of it. And he says, "I've got something new for you, and your deficiency will be a part of your recovery, your limitation will be a part of your transformation, your weakness will be a part of your witness to me." And the only way that you can experience this good news, this transformative power, this healing virtue is to simply receive it. We strip it of its power when we try and take it for ourselves.

How do we respond to Christ Jesus? By doing what comes naturally when our weaknesses are swallowed up in his wholeness. For the paralytic, it meant running and jumping and dancing. For the woman caught in adultery who thought it was death, or at the least a life of perpetual shame, it was walking away with her head held high. For that Pharisee of Pharisees, Saul of Tarsus...well, let's just say with his connections and abilities, the world was his calling.

What about you? What was your response when Jesus Christ came into your life? Because for each of us it is different. We are all healed of something different. How we respond is simply like taking new legs, legs that haven't been used in 38 years, and taking them for a walk, jumping, and dancing even.

So how will we respond? Where have you received the healing power of the resurrection in your life? Where are you still waiting to see it? Are your eyes still closed to it?

That's what this church is all about. We are the broken, the mangled, the torn up, the ill, the needy who have simply been found by the healer. For no reason other than but by the grace of God, Jesus has walked into, or is walking into our lives, and is speaking good news and inviting us to try it on for size. How will you respond?

Generosity begins by understanding provision. God didn't give sparingly. God's economy is not a zero sum game. Giving more does not mean that we will have less; in fact, it is just the opposite. When we respond to God's abundance in kind, what God reveals is that the storehouses don't diminish, they runneth over.