

Monday - Colossians 1:1

One of the reasons we ignore certain statements in Scripture is our misguided belief that they simply don't apply to us. For example, when the apostle Paul introduces his epistles he typically describes himself as "an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God" (Col. 1:1a; cf. also Eph. 1:1; 2 Tim. 1:1; 1 Cor. 1:1; Gal. 1:1). I'm not an apostle and I doubt if you are either. So what possible relevance does a statement like that have for you and me? Before I answer that, let's consider what Paul had in mind for himself. In the first place, this was an expression of his entire theological perspective. He became a Christian "by the will of God." His authority as an apostle is "by the will of God." The power of his ministry, whether in teaching or healing the sick, is "by the will of God." It is only "by God's will" (Rom. 15:32) that he will eventually visit Rome. And whatever more he will achieve before he breathes his final breath is "by the will of God."

Secondly, he needed to make clear to the Colossians (and to us) that they (and we) are obligated to listen to him. The Colossians were being led astray by false teachers, and we are certainly in no short supply of them in 2010. But it is Paul, not they, who speaks with divine authority and sanction. If it is "by the will of God" that Paul speaks in this letter then it is "the will of God" that we heed and embrace all he says in it.

In sum, Paul didn't aspire to, ask or apply for the job (after all, until captured by the grace of God on the road to Damascus he was evidently content with and proud of his status as a revered Pharisee; see Phil. 3:4-6). His ministry as an apostle did not come by human nomination nor did he look for human confirmation. It was by divine initiation, preparation, and authentication, which is to say, "by the will of God."

So what does this have to do with you and me? Everything! Here is why. It isn't simply Paul's apostolic authority in the first century but all things in all our lives at every moment in the twenty-first century that must be attributed to the "will of God." Paul himself

made this clear in Ephesians 1:11 when he described God as the one "who works all things according to the counsel of his will." Did you see that: all things! Not just Paul's ministry but yours as well. Paul was an apostle "by the will of God" whereas some of you are school teachers "by the will of God." Others are housewives "by the will of God" while many are nurses, physicians, lawyers, factory workers, salesmen, athletes, or missionaries "by the will of God." God's will extends to your life and calling and career no less so than to Paul's. Yours may not entail the spiritual authority that his did, but it is no less an expression of God's enablement and calling than Paul's or Peter's or John's or anyone to whom we attribute greatness.

Have you paused to ponder the fact that who you are is "by the will of God," as well as what you do, where you live, how much you own, whatever you accomplish? Needless to say, this excludes your sinful deeds and rebellious attitude and failure to obey the Scriptures. For example, if Scripture declares that "this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality" (1 Thess. 4:3), then we dare not say that sexual immorality (or any other violation of the Word) is "by the will of God."

I take away at least two things from knowing that my life and achievements and efforts and gifts and opportunities are "by the will of God." First, there is an element of security in knowing this. The security is in the realization that my life cannot extend beyond God's grace or capacity to redeem all things for his glory and my good. If all is "by the will of God" then I can celebrate his presence in my life and his hand on all that I seek to do in obedience to his Word. God's "will" encompasses and permeates and infuses all that you and I will ever be or do or say or think. This experience of security especially extends to times of trial and hardship. Suffering for righteousness' sake is also "by the will of God." In fact, Paul declares that "it has been granted" (i.e., graciously given) to us to suffer for his name's sake (Phil. 1:29).

Knowing that such experiences are not serendipitous or chance happenings but are orchestrated “by the will of God” will alone sustain us in the hour of testing.

Second, knowing that God is working all things according to the counsel of his will imparts a dignity not only to Paul’s apostleship but also to your life and ministry, as well as mine. God values who we are and what we do because it is the fruit of his will working and orchestrating all things for the glory and praise of his grace in Christ Jesus. There is no second-rate job or inferior ministry or meaningless endeavor when all is “by the will of God.”

It’s stunning to consider that my wife changes the diapers of my son “by the will of God,” and that I’m typing these words “by the will of God,” and that you are reading them “by the will of God,” and that all of us are simultaneously breathing “by the will of God.”

So, don’t ever think that because you aren’t an apostle or a pastor or a public figure with power and prestige that you are any less the product of God’s will or somehow on the outside looking in on what he is doing in the pursuit of his redemptive purpose. Lay your hand on your heart and your mind and the fruit of your labors, and above all your salvation in Jesus Christ, and rejoice that it is all “by the will of God.”

Tuesday - Colossians 1:2

There is great and glorious encouragement in the fact that Paul begins his letters by blessing his readers with the "grace" of God. This reference to "grace" is more than a standard literary device by which letters were begun. It is a sincere prayer for the release of divine favor and power into the lives of those to whom he writes. It is also significant that at the beginning of Paul's letters he says, "Grace [be] to you," while the blessings at the end say, "Grace [be] with you." Why? John Piper suggests that

at the beginning of his letters Paul has in mind that the letter itself is a channel of God's grace to the readers. Grace is about to flow 'from God' through Paul's writing to the Christians. So he says, 'Grace to you.' That is, grace is now active and is about to flow from God through my inspired writing to you as you read – 'grace [be] to you.' But as the end of the letter approaches, Paul realizes that the reading is almost finished and the question rises, 'What becomes of the grace that has been flowing to the readers through the reading of the inspired letter?' He answers with a blessing at the end of every letter: 'Grace [be] with you.' With you as you put the letter away and leave the church. With you as you go home to deal with a sick child and an unaffectionate spouse. With you as you go to work and face the temptations of anger and dishonesty and lust. With you as you muster courage to speak up for Christ over lunch. . . . [Thus] we learn that grace is ready to flow to us every time we take up the inspired Scriptures to read them. And we learn that grace will abide with us when we lay the Bible down and go about our daily living (Future Grace, 66-67).

Let me add two additional comments to what Piper has said.

First, this will all make sense only if we expand our understanding of what “grace” is. Divine grace is more than an attitude or disposition in the divine nature. It is surely that, but an examination of the usage of this word in Scripture reveals that grace, if thought of only as an abstract and static principle, is deprived of its deeper implications.

The grace of God, for example, is the power of God's Spirit converting the soul. It is the activity or movement of God whereby he saves and justifies the individual through faith (see esp. Rom. 3:24; 5:15,17). Therefore, grace is not something in which we merely believe; it is something we experience as well. Grace, however, is not only the divine act by which God initiates our spiritual life, but also the very power by which we are sustained in, nourished, and proceed through that life. The energizing and sanctifying work of the indwelling Spirit is the grace of God.

After Paul had prayed three times for God to deliver him from his thorn in the flesh, he received this answer: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9). Although Paul undoubtedly derived encouragement and strength to face his daily trials by reflecting on the magnificence of God's unmerited favor, in this text he appears to speak rather of an experiential reality of a more dynamic nature. It is the operative power of the indwelling Spirit to which Paul refers. That is the grace of God.

Second, if Piper is right and the “grace” of God comes “to” us and abides “with” us via the instrumentality of Holy Scripture and its inspired truths, then we see here yet another example of what theologians have called “the means of grace.” Among the latter have often been mentioned the sacraments or ordinances of the church: the Eucharist and Baptism. But the sanctifying, sin-killing, Christ-exalting, soul-satisfying presence of the Holy Spirit also comes to us by means of the written Word! There can be little if any expectation of triumphant Christian living apart from the grace that is mediated to us and diffused throughout our hearts

and minds pre-eminently through the Scriptures. When the Word, by the power of the Spirit, is heard, embraced, and enjoyed, we are strengthened to resist the flesh and to savor the Son. Thanks be to God for his amazing, abiding, powerful grace!

Wednesday - Colossians 1:5-6

Paul has focused on the hope we all have in Christ as the ground or fountain from which flow both faith and love. Of this hope, he now writes in Colossians 1:5-6, "you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and growing – as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth."

Let me make four brief observations on this text.

First, the content of the gospel, at least in large part, is the "hope" that is "laid up" for us "in heaven." It was when the gospel was proclaimed that they "heard" of this hope. Many today argue that the gospel has little if anything to do with heaven in the future. Its primary focus is earth in the present. I understand their concern. We need to embrace a gospel that provides direction for life on earth, a gospel that transforms relationships and pursues social justice and labors for the expansion of the kingdom in this life. Yes, the gospel is about the lordship of Jesus over all of life now. It isn't merely a way to escape the corruption of this world and "go to heaven when you die."

But make no mistake: the gospel is most certainly (and perhaps primarily) concerned with life after death. It is most certainly concerned with the "hope" that is reserved for us in "heaven" and the glory of spending an eternity in God's presence (see esp. 1 Peter 1:3-6). As Colossians 1:14 will make clear, the gospel is certainly about "redemption, the forgiveness of sins."

Second, the gospel is something the Colossians "heard." This is important, for we are being told that we no longer live in a world where "oral" communication is effective. Hearing the gospel, so they tell us, accomplishes little and must be replaced by presentations that focus on image and sight and color and taste and smell. The video clip has replaced the expository sermon. Theater has replaced teaching. Entertainment has replaced exegesis.

I suspect this may be offensive to some, but so be it. My opinion is that the alleged "ineffectiveness" or "lack of appeal" in the expository sermon is due less to the need of people for a more holistic sensory experience in church (as beneficial as that may be) and more to the laziness and lack of training on the part of pastors to expound and explain and apply the glorious truths in texts like Colossians 1:5-6.

The preparation and preaching of biblical texts that is true to the intent of the biblical authors and relevant to the lives of contemporary folk is hard work. It is demanding both of time and energy. Sadly, fewer and fewer "pastors" are willing to expend themselves in this way for the sake of their people.

Third, the gospel that saves and heals and delivers us from the dominion of Satan (see Col. 1:13-14) is a "word" (logos), a "proclamation", a propositional declaration, a "message." Again, we are being told that we no longer live in a "word-based" culture. But we cannot so easily dismiss the logocentric or word-centered orientation of the biblical gospel. It comes to us as a multi-faceted declaration or statement or assertion of truths regarding the work of God in Christ. Yes, the gospel is a story or narrative of what God has achieved for us in his Son. But the story must be stated, explained, unpacked and applied in words. Such words are more than lifeless abstractions: they are life-giving, soul-saving, comprehensible truths that the Spirit awakens us to "hear" and understand and to trust and enjoy.

Fourth, this "word" of the "gospel" that we "hear" is true! Whether we translate this phrase "the word of the truth, the gospel" or "the true preaching of the gospel" or "the proclamation of the truth which is contained in the gospel," the result is the same: there is truth in the gospel of Jesus Christ that can be discerned, known, and cognitively embraced.

The very concept of "truth" has not fared well in the hands of postmodern critics. They typically say one of three things. Some,

generally the more radical relativists, contend that absolute truth simply doesn't exist. Others say that if it does exist, we can't know it. Such truth, objective and real though it be, is inaccessible to the human mind. Then there are those who concede that truth exists but always in a variety of different and even contradictory forms, depending on the community in which one lives. "Truth" for one community of people, that is to say, what makes sense to them and enables them to function well in the world, may not be "truth" for another. But the consistent testimony of Scripture, such as we find in Colossians 1, is that truth is absolute and accessible and universally relevant for all people in all times. Certainly we must be sensitive in how we communicate it. We must contextualize the gospel in a way that is both faithful to the revelation of Scripture and meaningful to the people to whom we minister. The truth of the gospel is not a hammer with which to oppress those who may disagree, but a key that unlocks the mind from slavery to false idols, a light that dispels the darkness of errant thinking, a power that liberates and delivers us "from the domain of darkness" (Col. 1:13) and transfers us "to the kingdom of [God's] beloved Son" (Col. 1:13).

This truth is found in the "gospel", in the good news that God has become human in Jesus Christ and has lived and died and risen from the grave for the redemption of his people. This truth is now embodied and expressed for us in the written Word of God, the Scriptures. Hear it. Study it. Ingest it. Relish it. And above all else, by God's grace, let it transform your heart and renew your mind and govern your steps each day.

Thursday - Colossians 1:12

There is a slight difference between being "unqualified" and being "disqualified". In the former case, I may simply lack a talent or attribute or sufficient education to fulfill a task. There's really no shame or fault in being unqualified. We can always work harder or go to school to cultivate the necessary characteristics for whatever it is we desire to achieve.

But to be "disqualified" means you are unfit for the task, you are excluded because of specific failures or vices or behaviors that prove you to be morally unworthy of some high office or responsibility.

Now, maybe I'm pressing too far the distinction between these two words, but I want to make a point. You and I, in our natural, sinful state, apart from divine grace are not merely unqualified for the kingdom of God, we are profoundly disqualified. It's not as if God says to us, "If only you could perform this task or solve that problem or answer some question, then I would grant you entrance into my kingdom." Rather, he says to us, "By nature and choice you are the kind of person who is prohibited from entering my kingdom. You think thoughts and commit deeds that warrant exclusion from my presence. It's not simply that you would be admitted if you could do this or that, but you are excluded because you are the moral and spiritual antithesis of what is required of any who would share my fellowship."

Ouch!

But thanks (joyful thanks!) be to God who has "qualified us" or "fitted us" or "made us sufficient" to inherit the blessings. How did he do it? By redeeming us (v. 14a) and forgiving us our sins (v. 14b) and clothing us in the righteousness of his Son (1 Cor. 1:30; 2 Cor. 5:21). Whatever qualifications we formerly lacked, we now have. Whatever deeds may have disqualified us, they are forever forgiven.

Whatever feelings of inadequacy or sense of shame or depths of despair may have crippled you till now, God has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light! If you found yourself saying, "I'm not up to the task. I'm a miserable failure. I'm a hell-deserving wretch. I don't deserve to stand in God's presence. The only thing I should inherit is death," God now says to those who are in Christ: "Qualified! Forgiven! Adequate in Jesus! Righteous in my Son! Come and receive and enjoy your inheritance together with all the saints in the life-giving, soul-cleansing light of my kingdom!"

And what is this inheritance in which all believers share? Ruling angels (1 Cor. 6:3)? Inheriting the earth (Mt. 5:5)? A glorified body (Rom. 8:17-25)? The kingdom of God (1 Cor. 6:9-11)? Yes, and much, much more.

But none of this means anything if God isn't there. Not the forgiveness of sins, nor a glorified body, nor the new heavens and new earth, nothing, if God isn't there. Our inheritance is God! He is our exceeding great reward. John Piper said it best when he wrote that "the highest, best, final, decisive good of the gospel, without which no other gifts would be good, is the glory of God in the face of Christ revealed for our everlasting enjoyment. The saving love of God is God's commitment to do everything necessary to enthrall us with what is most deeply and durably satisfying, namely himself" (God is the Gospel, 13).

Or again, "If you could have heaven, with no sickness, and with all the friends you ever had on earth, and all the food you ever liked, and all the leisure activities you ever enjoyed, and all the natural beauties you ever saw, all the physical pleasures you ever tasted, and no human conflict or any natural disasters, could you be satisfied with heaven, if Christ was not there?" (15).

I hope the answer is No.

Oh, God, fill us with joyful and glad-hearted gratitude for having qualified us to inherit you . . . your presence, your beauty, your glory forever and ever.

Friday - Colossians 1:14

Jesus Christ, the one into whose kingdom we have been transferred (Col. 1:13), is also the one, indeed the only one, "in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Col. 1:14).

It isn't in the keeping of New Year's resolutions that forgiveness is found, nor in the therapy of a psychiatrist's counsel. Neither good works nor good intentions nor the cultivation of a healthy self-esteem can wipe clean the slate of our souls. Forgiveness is found only in Christ.

And when it is found, it is found now and forever. Note Paul's use of the present tense, "we have." The forgiveness of sins isn't just a future hope, something that will one day be ours. It is ours now! It is an existing, ever-present, liberating and life-changing reality in the present moment.

But how does one describe the forgiveness of sins? Have you ever fooled around with an "Etch-a-Sketch"? It's that toy with what looks like a television screen and two knobs that enable you to sketch whatever fits your fancy.

I never was much good at it. I'm not an artist by any stretch of the imagination. The "Etch-a-Sketch" was made for people like me. If you don't like what you've "drawn" and especially don't want to be embarrassed should anyone else see it, you simply tip the screen and your work of "art" vanishes!

It's a crude and simple illustration, but that is a lot like what God does with your sin when he grants forgiveness. Through the course of our earthly existence we sketch an ugly scenario of sin and rebellion and ingratitude and jealousy and lust. There it is, vividly imprinted on the screen of our souls.

But when we confess our sin, God's loving and gracious hand tips the toy and the slate is wiped clean! No matter how often we return to deface our lives with ugly pictures of hatred and anger

and pride and envy, God is faithful to tip the screen. All it takes is confession. All it takes is the blood of Christ.

But don't take my word for it. Listen to what God himself says: "I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more" (Isaiah 43:25). When we confess our sin and plead the blood of the Lord Jesus, God promises never again to bring it up, either to himself, to you, or to others. That's forgiveness!

God's not finished yet. He's got another illustration to make his point. Hezekiah put it this way: "Surely it was for my benefit that I suffered such anguish. In your love you kept me from the pit of destruction; you have put all my sins behind your back" (Isaiah 38:17).

God has taken your sin and placed it out of sight behind his back. All he sees now when he sees you is the blessed righteousness of his own dear Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Such is the love of forgiveness.

Still not good enough? Still not convinced? Still afraid that your sins will do you in? Then pay close attention to the word of the prophet Micah. He has something important to say about the kind of God we have: "Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy. You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea" (Micah 7:18-19).

How much more graphic do you demand God to be before you enter into the joy of his forgiving love? All vestige of condemning guilt is gone. Again, "just as God said he put our sins behind his back, so here he says he will hurl them into the depths of the sea. They will not 'fall overboard'; God will hurl them into the depths. He wants them to be lost forever, because he has fully dealt with

them in his Son, Jesus Christ" (Jerry Bridges, *Transforming Grace*, p. 40).

Like you, I watched with amazement as the latest underwater technology scoured for remains of the Titanic, recovering from the bottom of the sea what everyone thought lost forever. No! No! It won't happen with your sins! The submarine has not been made that can submerge that deep. The equipment has not been found, and never will be, that can retrieve the slightest vestige of your transgressions. God forbids it. Such is the quality of his forgiving love.

I don't know how all this affects you, but I agree with David when he says (shouts?), "Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven . . . Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord does not count against him . . ." (Ps. 32:1,2).

All hope for happiness is contingent on the forgiveness of sins. The word "blessed" in Psalm 32, by the way, is plural! As Charles Spurgeon has said, "Oh, the blessednesses! the double joys, the bundles of happiness, the mountains of delight" that abound to the forgiven (Treasury of David, 1b:82).

Having experienced for himself the joy of forgiving love, David encourages others to seek God's pardoning favor: "Therefore let everyone who is godly pray to you while you may be found; surely when the mighty waters rise, they will not reach him. You are my hiding place; you will protect me from trouble and surround me with songs of deliverance" (Ps. 32:6-7).

God is like a high rock on which we stand when the flood waters of adversity begin to rise.

God is a hiding place, a shelter in whom we find safety and protection from all that threatens the soul.

And remember, all this for men and women like David who have spurned his ways and transgressed his will.

What accounts for this willingness in God to forgive? To what do we attribute the peace and release and joy that flood the pardoned soul?

David puts his finger on it in Psalm 32:10 - “Many are the woes of the wicked, but the Lord’s unfailing love surrounds the man who trusts in him.” God’s love is the bulwark of our lives, the bodyguard of our souls, the atmosphere of immutable affection in which we move and live and breathe.