

## FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | JUNE 20, 2021

JOB 38:1-11 | PSALM 107:1-3, 23-32 | 2 CORINTHIANS 6:1-13 | MARK 4:35-41

In the early 1970s, a couple of psychologists wanted to study how religious beliefs motivated moral behavior.<sup>1</sup> To carry out their experiment, they needed a group of people who were ostensibly religious and moral people. So they settled on a group of students from Princeton Theological Seminary. Participants in the study were seated in a classroom and tasked with writing a homily on the Good Samaritan to be delivered in the chapel.

Here's where it gets interesting. As the sermon prep time was wrapping up, a proctor would say, "Oh, no. You're running late. You better get over to the chapel." The students would frantically grab their belongings and sprint across the quad to the chapel where a man was hunched over and coughing, obviously in need of assistance. The two researchers hid in the bushes nearby and counted how many of the students stopped to help the man in distress on their way to give a homily about helping a man in distress. The answer? Ten percent. Not great.

Those students read the story. They understood the story. They could explain the story. They could give some insight into the Greek of the story. But it didn't really change all that much. To use the language of today's reading from 2 Corinthians, they had understood the story "in vain." The Greek phrase here for "in vain" is sort of like "empty" or "come to naught." The concern St. Paul has is that these Corinthian folks will hear the good news, understand the good news, be able to explain the good news, but it won't really change anything.

So the question for us is, how is that possible? How do you accept something in vain? How do you hear the gospel without getting any profit from it?

Well, there are a whole bunch of different ways. In the case of that study, the students heard the story in vain because they didn't have enough time. They were in a hurry. They made it contingent on how they could fit it into their schedule. One of the funniest parts of that study involves the control group that was told they had some extra time to kill once they got to the chapel. And most of them did stop to help the man. Sometimes the difference between embodying the grace of God and accepting the gospel in vain is thinking you can spare five minutes.

The Corinthians actually had the opposite problem. It's not that they thought they didn't have enough time. It's that they thought they had an infinite amount of time. And that's what today's reading is about. Paul's concern here is that the Corinthians have accepted the grace of God in vain by making it all about the future. It's easy to imagine how this might have played out in their context. Paul announces that the grace of God has broken into the world in a radically new way and that the kingdom of God is arriving when Jesus returns, and people go, *That's good. We'll keep that in mind.*

So the whole crux of this reading is about translating the gospel from the future into the present tense. You get that in the invocation right at the beginning. "Now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!" The important word in that verse is "now." The line comes from the prophet Isaiah's announcement of the Israelites' return to Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup> The hungry fed. The captive released. The landless restored.

That day, the prophet and St. Paul tell us, is today. Now. You don't have to wait to encounter God's grace. You don't have to wait to practice justice. You don't have to wait to find your identity in Christ. It's here now. Today.

---

<sup>1</sup> "Take Time to Be a Good Samaritan | SPARQ," accessed June 17, 2021, <https://sparq.stanford.edu/solutions/take-time-be-good-samaritan>.

<sup>2</sup> See Isaiah 49.

But sometimes it can be difficult for us to believe that. Jesus has inaugurated the kingdom of God, and we are ready to get going on that... later. The kingdom of God allows us to relate to others as Christ relates to us... later. We will inspire, strength, and give hope to a world in need... later.

The reason we push things off into the future isn't because we're out to cause problems or we're being selfish, but it's because we have a hard time trusting that we actually have what we need to be faithful today. The image Paul uses in this reading is of setting up obstacles. He calls them "restrictions in your affections."

Those restrictions that prevent us from embodying the grace of God might be a good thing for us to reflect on today. What are the barriers that prevent us from following God's calling on our lives? Let's name some things. Let's start with an obvious one. The building. People always used to tell me that the church wasn't the building, it was the community. Not as many people are telling me that now. Once we're back in the building, then we can embody the grace of God.

Or maybe it's faith itself. We come up with some arbitrary standard of faith and think that unless we have some rock solid, mighty fortress faith, that we can't actually be very useful. Once I feel like I can trust God, then I can really embody the grace of God in my community.

Or maybe it's knowledge. This one comes up more often than you'd think. We think that we could participate in God's mission in the world, but we don't know enough. I don't know enough church stuff. I don't know enough Bible stuff. I don't know enough theology. Once I hit the books, then I can really embody the grace of God.

Do any of those things actually keep us from embodying the grace of God? No. Do you need to be inside to embody the grace of God? Nope. Jesus brought his disciples to faith when he rebuked the wind at sea. You can do real ministry outside.

Do you need some minimum amount of faith to embody the grace of God? No. When you go through our list of commemorations and think, "Oh, so and so had such incredible faith in God." That's not true. Everyone has times when they struggle with their faith and questions their calling.

Do you need some special knowledge to embody the grace of God? Nope. Jesus calls his disciples in the first chapter of Mark's gospel, and you know when they get sent out in mission to proclaim the good news? Chapter three. It's two miracles and a sermon and Jesus says, "You got the idea. Let's get out there."

Go back and read Paul's encouragement. "There is no restriction in our affections, but only in yours." Essentially, you have all these barriers preventing you from living in God's grace today, but you're the ones who put them there. I didn't put them there. Timothy didn't put them there. Silas didn't put them there. And God didn't put them there. "There is no restriction in our affections, but only in yours."

Whenever we put down a barrier between where we are today and where we need to be to embody the grace of God, it's always our own construction. The way we accept the grace of God in vain is not by failing or falling short or messing up. No, the way we accept the grace of God in vain is by thinking that the barriers and restrictions we project onto the world are the work of God's hand.

No, look around and see. Now is the acceptable time. Now is the day of salvation.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor