

*July 13, 2014 Worship Service*  
*First Presbyterian Church (EPC), Bentleyville, Pa.*  
*Rev. Andrew Scott, Pastor*  
*2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 6:1-10*  
*“Next Wednesday is not the Day of Salvation”*

I don't mean to brag, but I think that I may be one of the finest procrastinators known to man.

It's not that I'm lazy. Laziness and procrastination are two completely different things. In a way, they're almost opposites. A lazy man doesn't want to work. He avoids it like the plague, and spends his time napping or playing games instead. In the end, his work is either half-finished, or completely undone.

The *procrastinator*, on the other hand, does, in fact, work hard, and almost always gets things done – *eventually*. (The fact that I have a sermon at all this week is proof.) He just likes to wait until the last possible moment. In the meantime, he isn't lazy. He puts off work by doing *other* work – admittedly, less important work, sometimes completely unimportant work, anything, really, that avoids the inevitable reckoning, the looming confrontation.

The best example of what I mean is probably my lawn. I *hate* to mow it. And yet I have to. So I start by doing something else: picking up sticks, then checking the oil in the mower, tightening the nuts that hold the wheels on, maybe sharpening the blade, restringing the weed whacker, and only then, if I run out of things to do, and it hasn't rained or gotten dark, and nobody has called, and we haven't had any visitors – then maybe I'll actually cut the grass.

Of course, the trouble with procrastination is that if you miscalculate – if you wait just a little too long – it really *is* too late. Whatever it was that you were putting off just doesn't get done. That might not be such a big deal if it's the lawn, or your dishes, or something like that. But what if it's too late for something important, something with real consequences? You can, if you choose, put off until tomorrow what you should do today. But – and this is really the question that lies at the heart of what Paul is saying here in the first verses of 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 6 – what if there *is no* tomorrow?

“Working together with him,” he writes – the him refers to Christ – “we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain. For he says,” – and here Paul is quoting a prophecy from Isaiah, the 49<sup>th</sup> chapter, verse 8 – ‘In a favorable time I listened to you, and in a day of salvation I have helped you.’ Behold,” Paul adds, and these are his own words, “*now* is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.”

What does he mean by that, when he warns them not to “receive the grace of God in vain”? Here you have to remember a little bit of the history of this church in Corinth. Paul had planted it himself, with the help of a couple named Priscilla and Aquila. For eighteen months they preached the Gospel – the *euangellion*, literally the “good news” of Jesus Christ, about how, out of love for sinners, the Son of God took the sins of his people on himself and died in their place, to secure their forgiveness, and how he rose again on the third day, that they might also

live eternally with him. That message was received with *joy* – many people in Corinth came to faith in Jesus through their preaching, enough to form a thriving church.

Paul and the others *thought* that they had left the Corinthian church in good hands. But sometime after their departure, trouble started. An appalling immorality crept into this church. All kinds of sins were found, not in secret, but out in the open. People argued over who had been baptized by whom, and whose baptism was better. There was dissention and hatred and sexual immorality – stuff that would make the pagans blush, according to Paul. People were getting drunk in church and defiling the sacraments.

And into the middle of this confusion crept new teachers, who claimed to be apostles, like Paul – only much better. They were certainly more impressive than Paul. They had fancy letters of recommendation from Jerusalem. They were handsome and well spoken and they seemed really, really holy. These “super-apostles,” as Paul sarcastically called them, taught that Jesus was good, but that he wasn’t enough. They called on non-Jewish believers to keep kosher – in other words, to follow the Old Testament dietary laws. They urged believers to divorce their non-Christian husbands and wives. They demanded that male Christians be circumcised. In short, they insisted that in order to be saved, Gentile believers had to become law-abiding Jews *first*. And at the same time, they don’t seem to have cared too much about the gross immorality surrounding them. Some people liked them because in some things they seemed to be stricter, more “conservative” than Paul. Others liked them because in some things they seemed more “liberal.” In any case, most people in Corinth seem to have preferred these super-apostles to Paul.

Now, that wouldn’t have been a big deal if it were simply a matter of opinion. But it wasn’t. The message preached by these super-apostles wasn’t simply a better version of the Gospel. It was something else entirely. The gospel preached by the super-apostles basically said that if you try hard, keep your nose clean, and follow the rules – at least the really important ones (we won’t worry about details like sex or greed or slander) – then Jesus will save you. Come to think of it, that’s pretty much what most Americans today believe. Be religious, be good, try hard, don’t sweat the little stuff, and you’ll find yourself in heaven.

The Gospel that Paul preached, on the other hand – and remember, it wasn’t something he made up; he insists that it was revealed to him directly by God, and not coincidentally was the same message preached by Peter and James and John and the other apostles who had been with Jesus, and yes, in the Gospels, by Jesus himself – isn’t a gospel of being *good enough*. It’s exactly the opposite – it’s a Gospel of God’s grace toward the wretched and helpless. It isn’t a set of instructions about how to *earn* God’s love. It starts with the plain declaration that we *can’t*. All have sinned, and unless God himself does something about it, the wages of sin is death. The good news – the *real* good news – is that while we were dead in our sins and transgressions, unable to do anything to save ourselves, Jesus lay down his life for us, and that it’s by *faith* in the promise – in his sacrifice, once for all – that we’re saved, in spite of ourselves. Christ Jesus came into the world, Paul wrote to Timothy, to save *sinners*, not to pat good, religious people on the back.

Those two messages aren't just different; they're irreconcilable. If Paul was right – and remember, the prophets, the other apostles, and Jesus himself taught the same thing – then the message of those false teachers in Corinth wasn't just wrong. It was deadly. It gave a *false* assurance to people who in reality were *perishing*, because they trusted in their own religiosity, in outward ritual, rather than in Jesus and Jesus alone. It *denied* the life-changing power of grace, the ministry of the Holy Spirit, and falsely assured people who remained trapped in sin that so long as they kept kosher and got circumcised, they'd be fine. It wasn't *another viewpoint, or another opinion*. It was a lie from the depths of hell. Paul had already spent one whole letter, a painful visit, and part of another letter making that clear.

And yet some people still wavered. It's hard to tell what they were waiting for – maybe they thought that if they gave it a few years, they could see how it all turned out. After all, they didn't want to be hasty.

Paul's point is simple: either you trust in yourself, in some sense, for your life and your salvation, or you trust in the Lord. You have to decide, and don't think you can put that decision off until tomorrow. Because in the grand scheme of things – at least when it comes to salvation – there is no tomorrow. There is only today. It was the same message delivered by Peter at Pentecost, when he insisted that with the resurrection of Jesus, the so-called “last days” spoken of by the prophets had arrived, and called his listeners to repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins. It was the same message delivered by Jesus in the third chapter of the Gospel of John, when he declared that “whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned *already*, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.” (John 3:18) It was the message spoken a millennium and a half earlier, by Joshua, who called on Israel to “choose this day whom you will serve,” either the Lord, or the false gods of the land. (Joshua 24:15)

That call wasn't just to the Israelites, or to the believers in Corinth. It's to every one of us. And it seems to me that it has two applications, depending on how we interpret this line about “receiving the grace of God in vain.”

The first is the most obvious. “Receiving the grace of God in vain,” can mean *hearing* the Gospel, hearing the *truth*, hearing the call of the shepherd of the sheep, and not responding. Not really, not in faith. I'm not talking – at least, not right now – about folks who hear the Gospel and simply don't believe it. I'm talking about people who hear the Gospel, the call to trust in Jesus and to follow where he leads, and respond by saying, “*not yet*.” Maybe you're just not sure. Maybe you're worried that there's too much in your life that would have to change. There is, of course, though part of the good news is that it's Jesus who changes it, not you. Maybe you're hoping that sitting here will suffice, that showing up in church and giving a few dollars to charity and generally being a so-called “good person” will get you by. Well, it won't, any more than it did for the Corinthians. Maybe your life's a mess, a real tangle of sin, you're not sorry for it, you don't *want* to repent, you just want to sit here and hear me tell you that it's okay and that you're going to heaven anyway. I can't do that, because it's not true. There is no true faith without repentance. The good news is that repentance, like faith, is a gift from God. Ask for it. But don't wait. Don't put it off until tomorrow. Because there may not be one. Even if the sun does come up in the morning – and it probably will – you may not be here to see it.

You may be like the man Jesus spoke of, who was told, “this night your soul is required of you.” (Luke 12:20) Today – not tomorrow, not next Wednesday – is the day of salvation.

There is a second application here, though. It’s for those who *have* genuinely trusted in Jesus – for believing Christians – but for whatever reason have delayed in setting about his work. In that sense, “receiving the grace of God in vain” is genuinely to receive saving grace, through faith in Christ, but to produce no particular fruit, or at any rate less of a harvest than you should. Maybe you’ve thought, “I know the Lord wants to use me, but I’m not ready.” Maybe you’ve held back when you had the opportunity to share the Gospel, hoping for a better time – and let’s be honest, we’ve *all* done that. Maybe you’ve felt for a long time like you should be more engaged in missions to the poor, or to the homeless, or to those in prison. Maybe you’ve felt led to visit the sick, or to get involved in ministry with young pregnant women, or abused children. Maybe you’ve thought about tithing, or about supporting a missionary, but you’ve put it off.

Next Wednesday is not the day of salvation. Tomorrow is not the day of salvation. *Today* is the day of salvation. The day when the Lord intends to do great things for, and through, his own, his redeemed, his elect in Christ. Don’t put it off. Tomorrow may not come. And even if it does, what are you waiting for? Amen.