

“Now Is the Time”

Isaiah 49:8-13 • 2 Corinthians 5:21-7:1

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX
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History is filled with countless significant moments that have changed the world forever. The COVID-19 pandemic over the last year and a half has changed the way we shop, work, and interact with people. The attacks on the World Trade Center in New York twenty years ago continues to affect the way the world deals with terrorist threats. The fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989 was a momentous event that changed the face of Europe. Even today the Renaissance in Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries affects the way we think about science and art and faith.

Sometimes, though, events that seem insignificant at the time turn out to have a long-lasting impact. Those events that don't make the news and aren't even noticed by most people can change the world forever. On December 17, 1902, Italian inventor and engineer Guglielmo Marconi and his staff made the first successful two-way radio communication across the Atlantic ocean from Nova Scotia to Scotland. Think about how important radio communication is to your daily life. Your cell phone, WiFi, even your water meter all use radio to communicate. But on that winter night 119 years ago only a handful of people even knew it had happened. A year later it was the same with the Wright Brothers. When they made their first powered flight in North Carolina the only witnesses were from the local lifesaving station and the nearby village.

Sometimes we can be in the middle of a significant moment in history and not even be aware of it. This is what the Apostle Paul is trying to tell the Christians in Corinth because he doesn't want them to miss it. As we talked about last week, Paul explains to the Corinthians the great exchange that Jesus makes with us. “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we

might become the righteousness of God.” On the cross, Jesus took your sin and my sin and in exchange gave us his perfect righteousness. But remember that even though God has declared that we have that righteousness, we are at the same time still sinful. You and I must continue to grow into that identity. God has declared that we are part of the new reality, the Kingdom of God, but it comes alongside the old, earthly reality, which keeps trying to drag us back.

So Paul warns the Corinthians, “Working together with Jesus, we beg you not to receive the grace of God in vain.” Then he quotes from Isaiah 49, which we heard earlier. The passage from Isaiah is one of God's promises to restore his people after they have been taken to exile. The promise is twofold: to restore them to their land and to be present with them. In other words, God promises that He will love and comfort His people and He will provide for their needs. He calls this “a time of favor,” and “the day of salvation.” There are also a number of other passages in Isaiah and the other prophets that make the same promise and over the years God's people recognized that God was pointing them to the Messiah that would come and make all things right.

You can almost hear Paul shouting at this point. He says, “LOOK! Pay attention! Open your eyes. Now is the favorable time. This is the day of salvation that God was talking about. You are living in this historic moment that God said would happen!” That's why he begs them not to receive the grace of God in vain. The Bible presents us with two kinds of grace from God. One is what we call “common grace.” This is the grace that He shows to everyone. At the end of Matthew 5, which is the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say

to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.” This is common grace.

But the Bible also shows us that God provides an extra measure of grace to some, what we call special grace or particular grace or saving grace. Through the Holy Spirit, God calls you, makes you alive in Christ, helps you to understand the Scriptures and to know that Jesus is truly God in person and that through his death and resurrection you are completely forgiven and your relationship with God is restored. You no longer have to carry around the burden of guilt or shame. You are a new creation. The old you is gone.

So what does it mean to receive the grace of God in vain? It means professing your faith in Jesus as your Savior and Lord but continuing to live as if it makes no difference. The way you treat other people, the way you handle your money, the way you spend your time should all be different if Jesus really has changed you. It also means that you shouldn't receive the “means of grace” in vain. What are the means of grace? Those are the ways that God communicates his grace to you so that you can know how much He loves you. As one author put it, “The means of grace are God's appointed instruments by which the Holy Spirit enables believers to receive Christ and the benefits of redemption.” And what are these means of grace? The Scriptures, especially the preaching of the Word, the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, and prayer. In other words, it is in public worship that God communicates his grace and blessings to you. That's why our worship is so important. Please don't receive these means of grace in vain!

In the next section of this passage Paul returns to defending his ministry against the

so-called false apostles who said Paul wasn't authentic because he suffered so much. His answer is that his suffering *is* the evidence of God at work in his ministry. He points out that the mark of true faith and ministry is “great endurance.” He and his fellow workers have endured all kinds of afflictions, including beatings, imprisonment, riots, sleepless nights, and hunger. This is all detailed in the book of Acts. He then tells us that the way to endure these things is by purity of thought and actions, knowledge of God, and most of all by the support of the Holy Spirit. The hard truth is that you and I should expect to experience trouble because we follow Jesus. But you can endure those hardships the same way Paul did – by remaining fully devoted to Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

The result will be, as verse 6 says, “genuine love.” The idea here is sacrificial serving, which is what genuine love is. People who have been changed by Jesus will genuinely love other people and will want to serve them. They will want to help others know the truth of Jesus and will do whatever it takes, at great personal expense, to make sure they hear the good news.

Finally, Paul says in verse 14, “Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers.” Somehow these days most people think this verse is a warning against being married or in a relationship with an unbeliever. It's not. In the previous section Paul was showing us the evidence of God at work in our lives. Here he's showing us the evidence that we have accepted that work and are participating with God in our transformation. He's talking about our life together in the church.

This is a warning for the church not to be unequally yoked to unbelievers. The image is from yoking two animals together for plowing. It was important for the two animals to be similar in size and strength but also training. They need to pull the plow in the same

direction. Paul is saying that the church, which is part of the new reality ushered in by Christ, should not be unequally yoked to old-reality thinking and acting. The leadership of the church should all believe the truth of the Bible. Lots of churches have been torn apart by leaders who did not believe in Jesus as God in person. They drifted away from the Bible and instead followed worldly ways. God says we just can't do that because together we are his temple, not a temple built out of stone and wood but a living temple where God dwells with us and walks among us. He promises to be our God and we shall be His people.

“Since we have these promises, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of the Lord.” Let's be the people God wants us to be, trusting Him, not receiving His grace in vain. Let's love people the way He wants us to love them – serving sacrificially. And let's help each other to grow in faith and knowledge and purity so that others will want what we have.

Amen.