

The Gift of the Spirit

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[0 : 00] The theologian N.T. Wright recalls the story of the tightrope walker Charles Blondin. He lived in the 19th century.

He set up a rope across Niagara Falls and walked across several times. So confident did he become that he made the journey backwards as well as forwards.

And he performed various tricks along the way, like sitting on a stool or eating a meal. But the most famous trick was when he asked for a volunteer to be carried over on his back.

And it must be one of the most supreme acts of physical trust, faith ever placed by one human being in another. A brave, or perhaps foolish man, stepped forward and was carried across on this great man's shoulders.

Now, supposing halfway across, the man had said to Blondin, Look here, this is all very well, by the way, but I don't really trust you anymore.

[1 : 11] I don't think I need to trust you. I think I'd just be better off doing the rest by myself. Let me down and I'll walk from here without you.

Now, the professional daredevil and everybody witnessing would have said, You must be nuts. Have you lost your senses? Do you really think that you could take even one step on your own, much less get all the way back?

How did you get to this point in the first place? And this is where we find ourselves in the book of Galatians. A letter to a church somewhere in the province of Galatia, which was in Asia Minor, which is modern-day Turkey.

It's a church that Paul has visited before. He's preached there. But something has changed since Paul left. False teachers have arrived and are adding to the gospel.

The good news that through Jesus' death and resurrection, people from every nation and ethnicity can be a member of God's family.

[2 : 23] These false teachers are saying, Yes, yes, yes, to all of that good news and Jesus and death and resurrection stuff. Yes. But listen, if you want to be a member of God's family and a son of Abraham, then you need to follow the Torah.

You need to follow the Old Testament and all the official teachings surrounding it. And particularly, the men need to get circumcised. And the Galatians are seriously considering it.

And Paul is flabbergasted. So we're going to look at Paul's response here in chapter 3. And we're going to respond to his response with three prayers.

And we've already been praying them, but we're going to pray them again. We're going to pray them three separate times. So, Ben, don't come up until the third prayer. We're going to pray. We're going to pray, Let's start in verse 1.

Can we have that up on the screen, perhaps? Thanks, Emily. Paul doesn't literally say that you've lost your senses. But he almost says that.

[3 : 50] He says, Oh, foolish Galatians. Galatians have suffered a massive failure of understanding or intellect. Paul writes, Who has bewitched you?

When Paul says bewitched, more literally he is saying, Who has cast an evil spell on you with their eye? That's what that means. Or, Who has bewitched you with an evil eye?

And then he continues with the vision motif. It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. That's what Paul writes.

Paul isn't suggesting that the Galatians were eyewitnesses to the resurrection, nor is he saying that he drew a literal picture of the crucifixion for them.

He's saying, My preaching of the gospel was crystal clear so that you could even see it. I preached how Jesus' death and resurrection has set you free from sin and death.

[4 : 52] Before your very eyes, Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. But you've been bewitched. Does Paul really think that an evil spell has been cast on the Galatians?

No. But nor is he simply being metaphorical. Many commentators suggest that Paul believes there to be some kind of dark spiritual force at work here, deceiving the Galatians, exploiting their blind spots.

And I think this is instructive for us here at Church of the Advent. If the church in Galatia could have blind spots, I mean, couldn't we, right? Tommy is a very gifted preacher.

But they had the Apostle Paul preaching there. They endured suffering. They endured suffering. And they still believed.

They experienced miracles worked by the Holy Spirit in their presence. And yet still they lost sight of the truth of the gospel. So surely we could have blind spots, right?

[5 : 59] Surely there could be ways we are failing to apply or believe the gospel. I'll tell you a couple ways how I failed to apply the gospel. The gospel teaches us that Jesus gave up everything for us so that we could have a seat at the table, a place in the family of God.

Therefore, we too have the power to give up our preferences and to prefer one another, showing a radical hospitality to each other. Now, it's generally the experience of persons of color, when they move in white spaces like ours, that they have to give up all of their preferences in order to belong. I'll give you two examples. So my wife and I serve on the board of a homeschooler's co-op. And as part of that, when families come to interview to be part of our cooperative, we discern if it would be beneficial to them, if they align with our beliefs and practices.

And so what we ask, we introduce this by saying, we just want to make sure this is a good fit both for you and for us. And these are questions that we learn from the people that interviewed us. And this is the questions that we've been asking.

So recently, there was an Indian family that joined our board. And they pointed out to us a big blind spot that we had. They said, when you ask persons of color, and when you say to them, we want to make sure this is a good fit, basically what you're saying is you're requiring that they give up everything about their culture in order to belong to yours.

[7 : 37] She said it was true of us, this is how we felt, and this is true across the board of all the persons of color that we've talked to in this co-op. We had no idea. It was a big blind spot, but it doesn't excuse us.

We had perhaps the right intent, but it doesn't excuse the impact. Here's another way that I've had a blind spot in regards to this. As a church, one way to communicate that everyone belongs here is to do music that reflects the cultures and traditions of the people that are already here.

And so you may have noticed over the last eight months that we've been doing more contemporary gospel music than we've been used to doing. And a few weeks ago, one of our African-American members in our Columbia Heights parish approached me one evening and said that she's noticed. She came up to me and said, who's in charge of the music? It's like, I'm in charge of the music. I'm in charge. She goes, well, I've noticed that you've been doing more and more contemporary gospel music in the worship services, and I've noticed.

As a matter of fact, we're now singing this song. The Hammond song, Fred Hammond. Which one is it? Yeah, You're the Living Word. Thanks.

[8 : 51] You're the Living Word. This is a song that her family sang growing up, together, all the time. A cappella. And she said, by doing these songs, I now feel more at home at Advent than I have ever felt.

That's great news. Now, I'm not saying that to pat ourselves on the back. I say it to pat Ben and Lauren on the back. These have been like their introductions. I could have made these changes like years ago.

But I had a blind spot. I wasn't preferring and noticing. And fortunately, I belong to a really gracious, patient church.

Patient with one another who shows kindness. We have further chances to apply the gospel to practice radical hospitality, honoring the preferences of those who historically have had to give up all their preferences in order to belong.

So, before I go on, can we pray this first prayer together? Let's pray. Lord, open our eyes.

[9 : 57] Would You help us to see one another, to hear one another's stories, to prefer one another, to set aside our preferences. Open our eyes to our blind spot so that we can prefer each

other as You have preferred us, setting aside everything to bring us into the family of God.

We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. All right. So, let's come back to the church in Galatia. So, what have the Galatians forgotten? The Galatians have forgotten about grace.

Galatians is a book about God's grace. Galatians begins with grace. It's the very first word Paul uses to address the Galatians.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of God and Father, to whom be the glory forever and ever.

Amen. Galatians ends with grace. Chapter 6, verse 18, Paul writes, The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers.

[11 : 11] Amen. And then from end to end, it is filled with grace. And it shows up in these six verses. The word grace doesn't appear, but the idea is there.

Paul writes, Let me ask you only this. Did you receive the spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Now, Paul here is referring to grace when he uses the word receive.

Another word for grace is gift, right? They are both translations of the Greek word *keres*. A gift is something that is received, not earned.

So what makes a gift a gift? What makes a gift a gift? Well, it depends, right? Sometimes it means that there is no reciprocity required.

Right? And I think that's usually what we in the West think of when we think of the word gift. Like if I'm to give you a gift, and if I'm to expect a gift in return, well, that kind of nullifies the giftiness of the gift, right?

[12 : 21] But that's not true in all cultures, nor has it been historically true. And it's not what Paul has in mind when he writes about gift and grace.

What Paul has in mind and what made his understanding of grace so radical is its incongruity. It's not its lack of reciprocity. You see, in other cultures, if I were to give a gift, I could expect a gift in return, and you give me a gift. The purpose of gifts in that scenario is to strengthen the social bonds between two people, right?

So reciprocity is okay. It doesn't nullify the gifts. What Paul has in mind is incongruity. The gift or grace is bestowed regardless of the worth of its recipient.

That's what makes this grace. This was not an understanding of gift in Paul's time. The recipient of a gift in Paul's time had to be in some sense worthy of the gift because nobody would want themselves tied to people who would degrade their social capital.

[13 : 31] And so whenever you gave the gift, you would discern if they're worthy or not, right? Not so with God's grace. This is not God's grace. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God.

Christ made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant so that we might become God's sons and daughters. You see the incongruity?

But the Galatian men were considering getting circumcised because they were led to believe that in addition to the gift of grace, circumcision would make them worthy of this gift.

What Paul wants the Galatians to remember is that there was nothing that made them worthy of the gift. Sheer grace. Both Jews and non-Jews are called by grace into common belonging to Christ. Their previous evaluations of one another and their traditions based on ethnic distinctions are subverted by an event that has paid no regard to any former criteria of worth.

[14 : 35] This disregard is what makes the good news the good news. Do you try to add to your worth? Do you believe you can provide something that adds to what God has already provided for you?

I know you do, because I do. I do. For one, you can be defensive. Don't be defensive. You can be defensive.

You're criticized and you feel indignant. You cling to your reputation for your sense of worth. And when that sense of worth, that reputation is threatened, you leap to defend it.

You either lash out or you just burn inside. You forget that your only worth comes only from what has been given to you as an act of grace.

God's grace. God's gift. Your union with God. Your sonship. The love the Father has bestowed on you.

[15 : 40] That's what makes us worthy. That's where we find our worth. Ideally. But we often get indignant and defensive.

And, you know, you can be critical of others, too, right? If you compare yourself with another person, you can come out feeling better about yourself, right? I have worth. I eat better than this person.

I'm more fit. I can't believe people eat that. I can't believe people would belong to that political party. I can't believe people would raise their children that way.

I can't believe my housemate won't pick up after themselves. Boy, I pick up after myself. I belong to the right political party. I feel worthy.

You know, perhaps you wrestle with feelings of guilt and shame. You know, when you do, you, too, are tying God's grace to your worthiness to receive it, or, in this case, your unworthiness to receive it.

[16 : 52] Martin Luther had a thing or two to say about shame, for he, too, wrestled with this. And he gives you advice for those occasions when the devil accuses you. And he tries to convince you that you are unworthy of God's grace.

In a sermon that he delivered on Galatians chapter 1, Martin Luther says, You should tell the devil, Just by telling me that I am a miserable great sinner, you are placing a sword and weapon into my hand with which I can decisively overcome you.

Yea, with your own weapon I can kill and floor you. For if you can tell me that I am a poor sinner, I, on the other hand, can tell you that Christ died for sinners and is their intercessor.

You remind me of the boundless great faithfulness and benefaction of my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. The burden of my sins and all the trouble and misery that were to oppress me eternally, you very gladly took upon his shoulders and suffered the bitter death on the cross for them.

To him I direct you. You may accuse and condemn him. Let me rest in peace. For on his shoulders, not on mine, lie all my sins and the sins of all the world.

[18 : 17] Before I go on, pray with me. Lord, open our hearts to your gift of grace.

Lord, help us to hear with faith. Help us to believe. Help us to trust. To trust in you for our worth, for our righteousness.

Lord, forgive us for being defensive. Lord, forgive us for being self-righteous and pharisaical. Lord, heal our guilt and shame.

That we might experience a loving relationship with you, Father, day to day. As your children, recipients of your good gift of grace.

Amen. All right. One last way we try to add to our worth is by relying on ourselves and not by being completely dependent on the Holy Spirit.

[19 : 23] Now, when Paul talks about grace, he often uses a part to describe the whole. We call this a synecdoche, right? And so, throughout Galatians, he's going to refer to the death of Christ.

Well, he means often the death of Christ, the resurrection, and the coming of the Holy Spirit. And when he says the resurrection, he means all of that, too, at the same time. And so, he's doing the same thing here.

You've received the Holy Spirit. So, he's referring to the whole gift of God's grace. And yet, he's also referring to the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, in particular.

It was the Holy Spirit who hovered over the waters and through whom the world was created. And now he is bestowed.

As his children, the Holy Spirit is bestowed on you. And he who created everything is living in you, creating new life, reminding you of your adoption as sons and daughters.

[20 : 23] He fills you and brings newness to your life. Where you feel weak and inadequate, he gives you power. When you experience bondage and addiction, he sets you free, breaking chains, habits, addictions, things that would keep you spiritually bound.

He's the counselor, the helper, the gift giver, the guide. He softens our hearts, taking away our hearts of stone.

And he gives us hearts of flesh, moving us to love others and help those in need. The poor, the brokenhearted, the captives. We tend to go about our day-to-day lives going it alone.

When things seem manageable. Going it alone when things get tough. And only when things get really tough do we then perhaps pray. Do we then perhaps ask the Holy Spirit for help.

We're like orphans. We're like orphans, forgetting what the Holy Spirit is reminding us. That we have a Father who we can call on for help. A Father who has received us as his sons and daughters.

[21 : 35] A friend was telling me about a girl who was adopted from overseas. And she was adopted into a very loving family. And as part of this family the parents communicated to this adopted daughter.

Well, as part of this family we have some house rules. You know, you need to clean your room. Keep it clean. It's just part of being a family. Having life together. Like, okay. So the daughter cleans her room like spotlessly.

The parents come back in and the daughter says, My room is clean. Can I stay now? The Holy Spirit reminds us that we don't have to keep our rooms perfectly straight.

The Father accepts us. We can have a loving relationship. We can always ask him for help. But we go day to day forgetting to ask for help from the Holy Spirit.

Have we lost our senses? Did we, this morning, ask for help from the Holy Spirit? Just to get out of bed. Just to get out the door.

[22 : 43] Tomorrow, yeah, some of you did, yes. Good job. Well done. I didn't. I confess.

Tomorrow, when I start my job, am I going to sit down at my desk and first thing to say is, Come, Holy Spirit.

Help me. I need your help. Just to do these emails. You know, these things tend to be things I feel I can manage on my own, but they're not. This is what Paul is rebuking the Galatians for, in which we need to heed.

We need to ask the Holy Spirit for help all the time. And so our last prayer together today is, Come, Holy Spirit. Let's expect, also, when we pray that, to hear something back.

Pope John Paul II said that the Spirit is always awesome when He intervenes. He arouses astonishing new events.

He radically changes people and history. Let's call on Him now to come. Okay? Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray.

[23 : 56] Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray.