

God's Precious Gift for a Passing Age

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[0 : 00] Well, if you would turn with me in the Bibles, and we're going to read together in Paul's letter to the Galatians, chapter 5. I think in the Church Visitor's Bibles, that's page 975.

And we're reading from the very end of chapter 5 into chapter 6. So I'll start reading by beginning at chapter 5, verse 25.

Therefore, since we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking one another and envying one another.

Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. And keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.

Bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ. For anyone who thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself.

[1 : 10] But let each one test his own work. And then his reason to boast will be in himself alone and not in his neighbor.

For each will have to bear his own load. One who is taught the word must share all good things with the one who teaches. Do not be deceived.

God is not mocked. For whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption.

But the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. And let us not grow weary of doing good.

For in due season we will reap if we do not give up. So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone and especially to those who are of the household of faith.

[2 : 15] Amen. May God bless us. This is his word. Now, before we pray, and as we let the band find their seats, let me just say why I, for one, will always be grateful for the passage that we're about to study.

You see, the last time I think it was preached in the Tron was exactly 10 years and 6 months and 30 days ago. And I had literally been dragged in off the street by a friend I'd bumped into in Central Station.

And the truth is, I don't remember much about Willie's sermon that night. It was all very new. I'm sure it had three points, all beginning with P, and at least one of them was as plain as a pike staff. But two things that night struck me very hard and never really went away.

The first thing I noticed that evening was something about your minister. I had been in church most of my life, but until that moment, I'd never seen a man so sincerely confident that God had spoken and that what he had said was worth taking seriously.

You could tell by that how he loved the Lord, and you could tell that he wanted you to love him in just the same way. And so listening to Willie preach that night, I realized pretty fast that if I wanted to call myself a Christian, I had to start listening humbly to God's word.

[3 : 42] And the second thing I noticed that evening was something about all of you, because you did something I'd never seen before in a chapel or a cathedral, something that made perfect sense right away.

When the sermon began, you opened your Bibles and got ready to listen as if to say, this is what I've come to church for. You showed me that listening to the Bible wasn't the bit of church you had to endure.

It was the bit you enjoyed. And so I will go to my grave, thankful for those two things. Thank you very much. So with that said, I wonder if you would open your Bibles once again and turn to Galatians chapter 6.

And if you're here tonight for the first time, I think you'll quickly learn that there is nothing at all very exciting about us preachers. But if you're willing to follow along with us in the text and work hard, I can promise that like me, you will start to find the most exciting message anyone in this world can offer you.

So let's pray, shall we? And then we'll get stuck in. Lord God, we thank you for the great privilege we have now to sit together as a family and hear the very words of our Heavenly Father.

[5 : 00] And so we ask that as we come under these words together now, you would shape us more and more by the cross of your Son. Work in us through his spirit of love for the good of your precious church.

In Jesus' name. Amen. Well, there's almost nothing in the world as precious to human beings as a true friend.

You don't make many in a lifetime, do you? And that's instinct to find companionship. A brother in arms. That runs deeper inside us than a knife can cut.

My daughter was only three years old, I think, when I began to notice that. A little girl who had barely known sorrow. But if there was one thing that could make her utterly stricken with grief, it was simply saying goodbye to a friend.

Even a little girl who she'd squabbled with all morning long. And if there's anything at all that human beings fear more than death itself, it's dying alone. Unloved.

[6 : 06] People often mock Nelson's last words as he lay below deck, shot through the spine. Kiss me, Hardy, he said. It sounds so quaint now, doesn't it?

Perhaps it's the sort of thing you expect a stoppy Englishman to say. Except, isn't the tenderness of a friend precisely what all of us would want in that moment?

God seems to have designed us as creatures who need each other. But if you ask us what gift you most wish God would give you to keep you walking with Christ, I wonder how many of us would ask for a good friend.

I think what Galatians chapter 6 reveals is the single most underrated and unacknowledged spiritual gift of our age. It's not the gift of tongues or of prophecy or of any of the things people seem to get all excited about.

No, the spiritual gift which God most treasures, and we today often seem most ambivalent to, is the church. Brothers and sisters who walk alongside us.

[7 : 18] Now for the past few weeks we've been listening in, haven't we, as Paul spells out a genuine answer to the problem of our flesh, our corrupted and selfish human nature.

He's shown us that the legalistic religious answers being pushed in Galatia just don't work. You can't beat your flesh through your own flesh.

The only way to beat that sinful human nature he's shown us is to wait with patience and trust as God brings about a whole new age.

And while we wait, Jesus' spirit begins a war with our flesh. Being joined to Jesus involves a slow, painful crucifixion of all those things which don't belong in his kingdom.

But here's where Paul's answer starts to become a little more encouraging because thanks be to God, we have not been abandoned to a lonely struggle to simply fend for ourselves against those cravings of our sinful nature.

[8 : 28] No, being joined to Christ automatically means being joined to each other. 14 times as this letter closes, Paul uses words like, one another, anyone, the family of believers, the one who does this and the one who does that.

His answer to sinful human flesh is a very corporate answer. It seems that God, in his wisdom, has designed us as creatures who are not normally able to keep going to the end on our own.

Even after we've come to Christ and had our sin forgiven, in fact, let me phrase it with words I never dreamed I'd say, you and I stand very little chance of making it to heaven unless we belong to a charismatic church.

Now that doesn't mean a church obsessed with weird tongues and prophecy and visions. There's nothing about those in this letter. But it does mean something very supernatural indeed.

It means belonging to a whole church who are walking in step with Jesus' spirit right alongside you. And last week, Paul laid out very clearly what the real spirit of Christ is interested in.

[9 : 48] All sorts of fruits that say no to myself and put other people first. That's real spirit work, isn't it? Fruit which shows that Jesus and his cross have left their mark on us.

Well, you could put it the way Paul does in verse 26. It's just the flip side of the same commands. Walking in step with Jesus' spirit means not becoming proud and provoking and jealous of each other.

The sorts of attitudes which just defy the logic of his cross. So what a wonderful gift of the spirit it would be for us struggling Christians to be joined to a church who are learning to love like Jesus. That's what our passage is going to show us. The people sitting all around you here tonight are God's most precious gift for this passing age. And so as the letter closes, Paul is going to ground all those fruits of the spirit and works of the flesh very practically in the life of a real congregation. Tonight, first he'll paint a beautiful picture of a church walking by the spirit of the cross. Brothers and sisters who understand that grace kills pride.

[11:07] And then next week, as he closes, we'll get a final portrait of the works of the flesh let loose on a living church. So what does Jesus' spirit look like then?

Here among us on the ground in a real church. Well, tonight Paul tells us that if we here at the Tron Church know the uncomfortable truth about our own heart, then we're able to do two beautiful things for each other.

Firstly, we're able to carry each other because we all share in the same struggle. And secondly, we can invest together because the same things matter to us.

That's what it means to be a band of brothers walking with Jesus. So firstly, from verse 26 to chapter 6, verse 5, brothers carry each other through a shared struggle.

It's a paragraph all about how broken people look after each other, isn't it? But Paul's focus here isn't on the one who knows he's messed up and fallen into sin. No, Paul is interested in how the rest of us behave then.

[12:18] Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore that person in a spirit of gentleness. If you've ever found yourself swallowed up by behavior that's crept up on you, well, don't you think that word Paul uses in verse 1 is beautifully gracious?

Restore. Put the pieces back together. That's your job when one of us here falls. It's the word normally used for fishermen, mending their nets, or a doctor setting a fractured bone.

And notice he doesn't give that job to some elite class, to the elders or the specially religious lot.

No, it's you brothers and sisters who do the restoring, you who live by the spirit.

Isn't that an interesting way to tell who the spiritual people in church are? We all have our own ways, I think, of trying to gauge that, don't we? Deep down, I think I must believe that the Holy Spirit lives on people's bookshelves.

That's why the first time I'm in someone's house, I'll have a nosy at the books they're reading.

Maybe we think of the spiritual ones as the most gifted speakers, or the bravest evangelists.

[13:33] But that's not at all how this letter measures maturity. To be spiritual in this letter simply means you're an ordinary Christian who walks in step with Jesus.

A spiritual person is someone who shows how deeply they've understood all those doctrines of justification by the way they love and care for other people in church, especially the ones who belong to a different clique or class, or, verse one, who've fallen into some sort of sin and disgrace. Because if it's Jesus' spirit ruling us, well, we'll know what it means to care for someone gently and tenderly, won't we? Isn't that how Christ deals with you?

This is what the fruit of his spirit looks like when they're put to work in a real church. Patience, kindness, gentleness. Surely Jesus' people ought to be the gentlest people on earth because we know exactly how low we can sink ourselves and how deeply the Lord Jesus waded into the filth to rescue us.

The flesh, of course, might look a little different in me to the way it looks in you, at least I hope for your sakes it does. But human flesh is always ugly. So surely we Christians know that that struggle with the flesh is a struggle we all share.

[15:03] Or at least you'd think we'd know that, wouldn't you? But there's one thing that Paul worries about here which can stop us Christians being any earthly use to each other, and that is pride. Conceits.

Or as he puts it in verse three, being self-deceived. Thinking where something, that there's something special about me, which means that I'd never fall as far as him.

That's an utterly graceless attitude, isn't it? Christless. And the really ironic thing is that these people who prided themselves on how seriously they took God's law compared to other Christians were actually flying in complete contempt of it.

Paul's had a lot to say in this letter about the law, hasn't he? But to a proud religious Galatian, I think the most offensive thing he says is actually the really simple point he's making here in these last two chapters.

If you want to take God's law seriously, he's been saying, well, here's how. Not by burdening each other with rules and trying to perfect yourself with religion.

[16:07] No, you take the law seriously when you face up to its loving purpose. So verse two, the real way to fulfill Moses' law, Jesus' law, is to bear each other's burdens, to get your hands dirty in each other's lives, knowing that these are brothers and sisters who Jesus loves.

So you can see the trap, can't you, of religious pride. It is possible for us to talk all the talk about holiness, holiness, but utterly miss what God really wants.

And what use is a proud, graceless Christian, a verse 26 kind of person, when God's work is all about restoring his precious people?

If I'm still so utterly blind to my own heart, well, what business do I have messing with anyone else's? I wonder if you remember the story.

It was in the papers a few years ago about the fresco on the walls of an old Spanish church. I think we've got a picture of it up on the screens. Sunday by Sunday, people would look up and see that fading painting of Christ crowned with thorns on the walls of the church.

[17:24] But one day, a parishioner in Herates decided that that fresco needed a little bit of restoration. And so unknown to anyone else and full of confidence in her own ability, this elderly lady barged in with her big paintbrushes and got to work.

And I wonder if you can imagine the horror on the next Sunday morning when people arrived at church and looking down at them on the walls, this is what they saw. It's a little like those finger paintings that my kids seem to bring home from nursery week after week.

And what's that, darling? You're supposed to ask them all proudly. Is it a gorilla? Is it Uncle McCutcheon? And full of indignation, they look at you and say, no, Daddy. That's Jesus, of course. Well, oh dear, how did it go so wrong? Her problem was that she'd forgotten what a tender, delicate job restoration is supposed to be.

And so the more and more she worked on that fresco, the less and less human it began to look. And of course, the newspapers had a lot of fun with the story because tragic though it was, at the end of the day, it was just a painting.

[18:36] But then we have to remember what damage that sort of pride could do to God's precious church. He's in the business of making us into Christ's image, isn't he?

And what a grotesque thing it would be if that image became a mockery like the picture on that wall. I think that's what happens if the way of the cross is pushed aside by our pride.

So keep looking in the mirror, says Paul. Keep watch on yourself and let each one of you test your own actions, verse 4. Don't compare your performance with your stumbling brother and let yourself feel all complacent because there is one test coming where each one of us will have to face the examiner on our own.

When we answer to the Lord Jesus, verse 5, it'll be for our own works and nobody else's. Each will have to bear his own load on that day. And if there's any boasting to be done then, it'll be for what his spirit has done for us.

No other brother will be able to carry us through that final judgment, only the Lord Jesus himself. And only if we remember that will we be able to carry each other now.

[19:59] I find that this little paragraph describes something that I desperately need from my fellow Christians, but it also tells me something I don't much want to hear myself.

It tells me that crucifying my flesh means crucifying my sense that I'm something special, that my ministry or my family or my grand plans or personality make me something.

We all want to believe that, don't we? We all want to believe that we're special. But God wants us to be something far more ordinary, far more supernatural, in fact. He wants us to be the sort of broken people that other broken Christians could turn to when they are so full of shame that they can't turn anywhere else.

And then together we can learn how to walk again in step with his spirit. And that ought to be an incredibly practical lesson. For me, I think it means that somehow I just have to be better at making time and opportunities to care for someone else.

Because we've got to be realistic, I think. It's not all going to happen on a Sunday as we're rushing in and out of church and busy with 101 other jobs. But if we take this responsibility seriously, well, it has to happen sometime, doesn't it?

[21 : 24] My guess is that for many of us, the kitchen table will be the most valuable ministry tool we have. Somehow we've got to make use of the opportunities we get there, don't we?

Often it's around food that love is shown and restoration happens. Perhaps some of you workers just have to get up early every so often to meet with a few other men before work.

There's nothing complicated or overly spiritual about that, is there? Just spending a little time talking about how things are going at home or in the office and spending some time praying for each other. And if someone's got into a mess or into trouble at home, then he knows the others will be there chasing him up, making sure he puts things right. That's just being brothers, caring for each other through a shared struggle.

Well, secondly, thankfully, Christians have a lot more in common than just our sinful natures. And as a church, we all have a shared hope, don't we? A shared destiny, which means that the things we value now will be shaped by the future we share together, where we invest our time and our money and our efforts are going to be driven by what really matters to us in the long term.

[22 : 43] And I think that's the message of verses 6 to 10, which we'll look at much more briefly. Brothers invest together in a shared salvation. Now, what on earth is the link between verse 6 and everything Paul's been saying so far?

One who is taught the word must share or partner in all the things with the one who teaches. It seems like a bit of a bolt from the blue, doesn't it? Perhaps it's just a bit of special pleading from the pastor's union.

Better pay for the Galatian Bible teachers. Or perhaps Paul has a reason for needling them a little bit about how much they value people who teach them the truth.

Remember, this is written to a real church somewhere, isn't it? And he introduced this whole section with verse 26. Let's not become conceited. And right after this verse, he's going to warn them a second time about the danger of being self-deceived and proud.

So the question we have to ask ourselves is, what's the link between people who tended to be proud and blind to themselves and people who didn't really value Bible teaching?

[23 : 56] Well, you can work it out, can't you? A proud Christian doesn't think he needs to hear uncomfortable truths. It's not really the pastor's pay Paul's worrying about sharing or partnering goes a lot deeper than that, doesn't it?

We partner with our ears. We partner with our hearts. If that's not happening right now as I'm speaking, well, I'm standing up here on a beautiful Sunday afternoon, wasting my time giving a pointless lecture.

This is partnership, isn't it? But isn't it so easy to fool ourselves into thinking that that message is never for me? So Paul wants us to know that God is not that easily deceived.

He will give us exactly what we've invested in. When harvest time comes, you'll reap whatever it was you sowed. Isn't that a beautifully straightforward illustration?

If what you stick in the ground in spring is a bunch of potatoes, then it'll be a bunch of potatoes you pull out of the ground when summer comes around. Now, I'm no gardening expert, as Willie reminds me every summer when he crows about his bumper crops.

[25 : 09] But even I can more or less grasp that you get out of the ground basically the same thing that you put in. What sort of a fool would I be to plant a cheap shriveled old seed potato and then wait with glee for a pineapple tree to pop up in August?

You'd have to be a fool, wouldn't you? But then I'll spend a lifetime, verse 8, investing in my sinful flesh, living proudly and complacently, making a thousand tiny selfish decisions, putting myself above others at church, and at the end of it, I'll expect a healthy reward.

Because at each little choice, I'd manage to convince myself that God is either too stupid or too indulgent to take any notice. I think the question we're really being asked here is which age matters most to us?

Is it this age, the age of our flesh, or is it the age Christ came to deliver us into? Invest together in this age, so to our selfish natures, and the rewards are instant.

We can have whatever we want. The praise, a reputation for godliness, our own little admirers club at church. We just have to remember that investments go down as well as up.

[26 : 37] And one day, verse 8, this age is going down. It's heading towards death and decay. So is that really where I want to stake everything?

The reward God gives us is going to be the great giveaway, isn't it, of what it is we've really cherished. If we cherish this age, we'll perish right alongside this age.

But if we keep going, verse 9, because what matters to us most in the world is what's to come, the new creation, well, one day, at the proper time, something beautiful will grow, something eternal. And right now, of course, we won't see much of it at all, maybe just a little green shoot sticking up out of the muck. That's what it's like, isn't it, with seeds, to believe that you and I are going to grow into something beautiful.

That takes a lot of trust and a lot of patience. But if you believe that the new creation is where the real value is, well, you'll plant those seeds in the ground and wait patiently and gently nurture whatever grows.

[27 : 51] And notice, Paul immediately puts that in practical terms. What does it mean to sow to the spirit and wait patiently for God's harvest? Well, verse 9, it means looking after each other.

Once again, that is what Christ's spirit asks for. Putting others before ourselves, just like Christ does. Doing good, verse 10, to everyone, and especially to those people who are actually in our lives, the people who are heading where we're heading.

Sometimes it can seem so much easier to give money to Oxfam, can't it, than to love the people close to us, the ones in the church family who's stumbling and struggling we actually have to live with.

But that's when it counts, when it's irritating and frustrating and it's costly. That's when patience and kindness and gentleness make all the difference.

Well, let's draw a little application together as we close. Every so often, I find I read the Bible and I'm reminded that God sees right through me. He knows exactly what I am.

[28 : 58] In fact, he knows better than I do. He knows what I've deceived myself into thinking I am. He knows just how much room and excuse I make for my flesh.

He knows how little time and practical love I give to others. He knows how tight I am with my money. He knows how much more I'd value a new watch or a new pair of shoes than a meal with a brother who needs a little encouragement.

Just notice as we close that at no point in this paragraph does Paul directly talk about money. Doing good to all will certainly be costly, won't it?

But Paul just seems to think about cost in a different way to me. It's not cash that you spend on a brother's needs and then lose.

No, it's a seed that you plant in the ground, you invest, and then you wait patiently for the harvest. Until one day, all that time and effort and the tears we've spent on each other, one day in the blink of an eye, that will be all that's left.

[30 : 10] We'll look at each other and we'll be astonished at what Christ has made of us. And we'll thank the Lord for the brothers and sisters he gave us to keep us on the road.

Let's pray. Our loving Heavenly Father, we thank you again for the cross of your Son. Where our curse was taken away and our brokenness covered over. We thank you for the gift of each other, that you've placed us within a church with brothers to share our struggles and our hopes.

And we ask that you would make us more and more conscious of the truth about ourselves, that we would be in our own eyes just what we are in yours. So that now with generous, patient love, we can help each other live by your word and so to your spirit.

For Jesus' sake. Amen.