

I Commend You to God

From the Book of Acts

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Let's pray together.

Father, thank you, again, for this your Word. Thank you that you are pleased to utilize your Word as a means of grace to build up your people in the faith once for all delivered to the saints. We do thank you that this is the case. We thank you that our reliance is upon you through your Word and the grace which you give us through your Word. We may trust you to give us this grace through this your Word. And so we pray that this would be the case this morning as we take this opportunity to look into the Scriptures that are before us. Bless us now we pray in the name of Jesus Christ the Lord, Amen.

The text for this morning is Acts chapter 20 and verse 32. "And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified."¹

After General Douglas MacArthur was relieved of his duties as commander in Korea he had an opportunity to speak to a joint session of Congress. Some of you may remember that speech. Some of you may have watched clips of it. General MacArthur ended his remarks before Congress with these poignant words from an old army ballad, "Old soldiers never die, they just fade away."

It has come time now for this old soldier to fade away, to step back from the duties that you have been pleased to generously give to me. It has been a great delight and pleasure for me to be among you for these months. But now you have elected a pastor, gratefully, and he will soon be ordained and installed. He will take his position up behind this pulpit week by week to proclaim the Word of God. And on this occasion I set before you, then, these words from the apostle Paul from Acts chapter 20 and verse 32. "I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all [the saints]."²

¹ Acts 20:32.

² Ibid.

The apostle's argument here is that the Church at Ephesus and the elders at Ephesus should not look to him, nor should they look to Timothy whom he left in Ephesus. They should look to God for his grace in his Word. And this is the truth that comes to you this morning from this particular text: Trust God in his Word for his grace. Trust God in his Word for his grace.

You notice the text speaks to those who are sanctified. Look at Acts chapter 20 and verse 32 once again. "And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among *all those who are sanctified*."³

The word "sanctified" here means set aside. And believers like yourselves have been set aside by God for his purposes. As the book of Hebrews rehearses the work of Jesus Christ in the 10th chapter, it indicates that by his accomplishing God's will, believers, men and women, are set aside, sanctified. And this is the case with each one of you. Because of the work of Jesus Christ, his death on Calvary's cross, his preceding perfect life on your behalf, you have been set aside to his purposes.

And the Holy Spirit has also come into your lives. God, by his grace, has caused you to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.⁴ By the application of the work of Jesus Christ to your hearts individually by the Holy Spirit you have, in this world and in time been, been set aside for the purposes of God. And so this text, Paul gives to the Ephesian elders and gives to the Church at Ephesus through the Ephesian elders, applies to you and applies to me.

But it not only applies to you individually. It applies to you as a corporate body. You, as a body, have been set aside for the purposes of God. You, as a church, as a corporate body, have been set aside to the purposes of God. This congregation was organized in 1800. It was set aside for the purposes of God at that time. This congregation has had 11 pastors during this time period. A twelfth is about to be ordained. Praise be to God.

And in this, as a congregation, God has been pleased to set you aside for his purposes. You have gone through some difficult times as a congregation. And some of you who have come to this congregation have gone through some difficult times in previous congregations. But here in this congregation, God has brought you healing. Some of you have testified to me personally that this has been the case. I give thanks to God. This is testimony to the fact that both as individuals and as a congregation God has set you aside to his purposes.

And if you look at the text again, Paul gives us a couple of the purposes. "And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, *which is able to build you up* and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified."⁵

³ Ibid.

⁴ See 1 Peter 1:3.

⁵ Ibid.

One of God's purposes is to build you up in the faith once for all delivered to the saints. And as this is the case as a congregation and as individuals, God is, again, operative in your lives.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism asks the question: "What are the benefits which in this life do accompany or flow from justification, adoption, and sanctification?" Listen to how the Catechism answers. "The benefits which in this life do accompany and flow from justification, adoption, and sanctification are assurance of God's love, peace of conscience, joy in the Holy Ghost, increase of grace, and perseverance therein until the end."⁶

You see, one of God's objectives, one of God's purposes in setting you apart is that you might grow in assurance of God's love. As week by week you sit under the teaching of the Word of God, as God is operative in your lives, and as you then act on the Word of God more and more, you will be assured of God's love in your life.

And as this is the case you will grow in peace of conscience. You will know more fully the peace that you have from God. You will more fully know the cleansing work of Jesus Christ in your conscience. And you will be able to live more fully in this world before God. And this leads, as the catechism puts it, to joy in the Holy Ghost, joy in the Holy Spirit. As you are assured more and more of God's love and as you experience more and more peace of conscience, a deep joy pervades your heart. And though the tides of the culture, or the challenges of work, or the difficulties of school may mount up against you, there is a deep joy in your heart. You are rooted firmly in Jesus Christ and this joy is increasing. And this is because there is an increase of grace in your life as God works in you. And you therefore persevere in all that you do before God. In these ways you grow in the grace of Christ.

And then you also grow as a congregation. It has been very heartening to me to see individuals stand before the congregation here, as I have had the privilege of being among you, to profess their faith in Jesus Christ. It has been heartening to see families come and bring their children to be baptized. God is building his Church. God is building his Church among you. The promise of Jesus Christ, "I will build my church,"⁷ is being fulfilled among you. And so the words of the apostle Paul in our text, once again, apply in your circumstance.

And you do remember, do you not, the words of the Lord Jesus?

Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.⁸

⁶ Westminster Shorter Catechism 36.

⁷ Matthew 16:18.

⁸ Matthew 28:19-20.

Give thanks to God for the work of missions that this congregation is supporting. Give thanks to God for the work of missions in which some of you yourselves are engaging. It is a good work. And through you God is building his Church. And as your new pastor comes and takes his stand and teaches you, perhaps in this community the rays of the gospel will be focused like the sun focused through a magnifying glass in this community, in this area. The result can be that many others from this more immediate community will come and join you in worship and hear the gospel and be converted. You will see Christ about the business of building his Church and building you up.

And the end, of course, is not simply to build you up as a congregation and build you up as individuals. Look at our text once again. “And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up *and to give you the inheritance* among all those who are sanctified.”⁹

In the end God’s purpose is to give you an heavenly inheritance. Yes, you inherit many good things in this world as you serve Jesus Christ. But God in his mercy and God in his grace is pointing you to an heavenly inheritance. The catechism, once again: “What benefits do believers receive from Christ at death?” What are they? The catechism answers, “The souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness, and do immediately pass into glory; and their bodies, being still united to Christ do rest in their graves until the resurrection.”¹⁰

Yes, when you pass from this life, the teaching of the Bible is that your soul will separate from this body of yours and pass immediately into glory being made perfect in holiness. What a blessing this is!

A good friend of ours in central Kansas recently died, a dear saint whom we remember fondly. When she passed from this life into the next both her husband and her son were standing next to her. And when she breathed her last her son said, “Dad, she is gone.” And the husband confessed quietly, “The souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness and do immediately pass into glory.” What a wonderful testimony this is, a testimony of faith.

But this is not the end of the story. It is very sad that too many, even in Christian circles, believe wrongly that the Body is some sort of encumbrance, some sort of encumbrance that we need to shed in order to be free. This is a Platonic heresy. The catechism, following the Bible, is correct. When we pass from this life and the soul passes immediately into glory, made perfect in holiness, the body rests in the grave still united to Christ. And this is the wonder, one of the wonders of the Christian faith, that the bodies of those who have been placed in the grave *are* still united to Christ. Those bodies are important. And when Christ comes a second time in glory, the dead will be raised incorruptible.

⁹ Acts 20:32.

¹⁰ Westminster Shorter Catechism 37.

Listen again to the catechism. “At the resurrection, believers being raised up in glory shall be openly acknowledged and acquitted in the day of judgment and made perfectly blessed in the full enjoying of God to all eternity.”¹¹ I like those words, “the full enjoying of God to all eternity.”

You see, the disembodied state is not the fullness of joy. The fullness of joy comes with the resurrection of the body. Then in a bodily state, as Jesus Christ exists today in heaven seated at the right hand of God the Father, in a bodily state you will enjoy your inheritance in the new heavens and the new earth. And so part of the purpose of God is to build you up and to give you an heavenly inheritance.

And as Paul puts it in our text this morning, all of this comes about by grace. Look again at our text. “And now I commend you to God and to the word of *His grace*, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.”¹²

It is always by grace, is it not? It is by grace that you are saved through faith. And that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not of works, lest anyone should boast.¹³ There is no boasting to be had in the Christian faith. The boasting, if there is any, is in Christ and in the work of Jesus Christ. Even the faith that you exercise as you trust in the Savior is a gift of the Holy Spirit.

And it is by grace that you are built up. Paul indicts the Galatian church and says, “Oh, foolish Galatians.”¹⁴ Then he questions the Galatian Christians. “This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?”¹⁵ Paul is saying, I want you to think about something. Was it because of your own doing that you received the Holy Spirit? And the answer to the rhetorical question is obviously not. It was not because of any works you performed that you received the Holy Spirit. And so how do you expect to continue on in the Christian life? Is it going to be by the works of the flesh? Not at all. It is going to be by the grace of God through the work of the Holy Spirit.

Paul reminds the church at Philippi that this is the case saying: “Work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.”¹⁶ And so it is God by his grace who is in you, not just to give you a willingness to follow him, but to actually work in you for the doing of his will. According to this text you are not be in the posture or in the position of saying, “The good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want.”¹⁷ Paul is emphatic here.

¹¹ Ibid., 38.

¹² Acts 20:32.

¹³ See Ephesians 2:8-9.

¹⁴ Galatians 3:1.

¹⁵ Galatians 3:2-3.

¹⁶ Philippians 2:12-13.

¹⁷ Romans 7:19.

God is at work in you both to will and to do his good pleasure.¹⁸ You need to realize that this is the case, dear friends. This is the grace of God for you.

And then when you think about this heavenly inheritance, is this not also brought to you through the grace of God? Think about death just for a moment. Except in extraordinary circumstances none of us is in control of the time of death. And when you slip from this mortal life into the next and open your eyes in the presence of the Savior, it will be by grace that this takes place. And you have no control over the coming of Christ a second time in glory. And you have no control over that future resurrection. When it comes, it will come in his time and you will be raised by his grace. And, again, bodily you will enter into glory.

But our text is not quite finished. Look, again, at what it says. “And now I commend you to God and to *the word of His grace*, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.”¹⁹ “I commend you to God and to *the word of His grace*.”²⁰ How does this grace come to you? It comes to you, friends, through means. It comes to you through means. Look in your bulletin again, would you please, and to the catechism questions we read earlier.

What are the outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption? The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption are his ordinances, especially the Word, the sacraments, and prayer, all of which are made effectual to the elect for salvation.²¹

How is the Word made effectual to salvation? The Spirit of God maketh the reading, but especially the preaching of the Word, an effectual means of convincing and converting sinners, and of building them up in holiness and comfort, through faith unto salvation.²²

What are the means? The means include not only the reading of God’s Word, not only prayer, not only the sacraments, but the preaching of God’s Word. Our being in circumstances such as these here this morning. And as you appropriately approach the *means* of grace, as you appropriately understand the *means* of grace, God’s grace will be operative in your lives. This is why Paul says, “I commend you to God and to *the word of his grace*.”²³ That grace comes to you through specific means.

And so the catechism goes on to ask the question:

¹⁸ See Philippians 2:13.

¹⁹ Acts 20:32.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Westminster Shorter Catechism 88.

²² Ibid., 89.

²³ Acts 20:32.

How is the Word to be read and heard that it may become effectual to salvation? That the word may effectual salvation, we must attend thereunto with diligence, preparation, and prayer, receive it with faith and love, lay it up in our hearts, and practice it in our lives.²⁴

We must approach the means of grace with anticipation understanding that through his Word, through these ordained means, God is pleased to bless us. God is pleased to build us up in the faith once for all delivered to the saints.

I am going to tell on my family a little bit here. On vacations we would often drop into a church along the road and my family would sometimes say, “Oh, dad, do we have to?” And I would frequently say to them, “You pay attention to what is going on in this worship service and pay attention to the reading of the Word and pay attention to the preaching of the Word and you will learn something.” And this is the case. This is why Paul speaks these specific words, “I commend you to... the *word* of His grace.”²⁵

And it is not, you see, the instrument that is important, whether it be me or whether it be your pastor who will be ordained soon. It is God who is important. It is God in his grace who is important. It is his Word which is important. You must trust God in his Word for his grace. You see, this is the lesson. And this is why Paul then says, “*I commend you to God* and to the word of His grace.”²⁶ Paul does not say, I am anything in myself. In fact, he is adamantly opposed to this kind of thinking. What is Paul? What is Apollos? Paul and Apollos are simply servants through whom you happen to have believed.²⁷ Is Denny anything? No. Is John anything? No. It is God who is everything.

And so Paul says, “*I commend you* to God and to the word of His grace.”²⁸ The word “commend” here is quite interesting. It bears the idea of setting you before God. And, as you think about it, this is rather strange. Paul is in essence saying to the Ephesian elders and I am saying to you this morning, “I commend you to God and to the Word of his grace.” In other words I set you, my purpose is to set you before God and to set you before Jesus Christ. And why is this so important? It is important because if you really come into the presence of God, if you really come into the presence of Jesus Christ you will inevitably be changed.

Do you remember Moses, Moses saying, “Show me your glory”?²⁹ And God says, “I’ll show you my glory. I’ll pass by and you will be able to see my back.”³⁰ Seeing the effulgence of his glory would be too much. I will put my hand over the cleft of the rock and pass by and you will be able to see my back. And Moses came down from that mountain glowing himself with the glory of God.

²⁴ Op. Cit. 90.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ See 1 Corinthians 3:5.

²⁸ Acts 20:32.

²⁹ Exodus 33:18.

³⁰ See Exodus 33:19-23.

This is the whole idea of the benediction at the end of the service. I am always quite interested to see how people will react to the benediction. As I have had opportunity here to pronounce the benediction you have observed me slowly and purposefully pronounce that benediction. And the reason I do so is that it is a real blessing that comes from God. It is a means of grace. It is not just an exclamation point at the end of the service. And I often notice there are quizzical expressions on people's faces as I pronounce the benediction. They are not used to a more purposeful blessing. But it is God's means of grace. And in the benediction, you trust God for his grace in his Word. And this is the lesson for this morning. Trust God in his Word for his grace.

Look at our text again. "And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified."³¹

William Greenhill was a Westminster divine. He wrote a quite excellent commentary on the book of Ezekiel. When he comments on chapter 37, which speaks of the valley of dry bones and the request to Ezekiel to prophecy over those dry bones, Greenhill makes this comment. "We must not neglect means, and leave all to God, that is tempting the Most high...."³² In other words, don't think that God will work outside of means. This is tempting him. God has ordained particular means through which he will work. So don't tempt God. "[N]either must we trust to the means when used, that is to idolize the creature...."³³ In other words, don't put all your eggs in the basket of the means and idolize the creature, or idolize the preacher, or idolize the means that are used, or idolize the particular kind of music that is sung, et cetera, et cetera. No.

But rather, Greenhill says, "[W]e must use means and look to God to be all in them...and if we make him all in the means, we shall make him all after them." Do you get it? If you make God all in all in the means of grace you will make God all in all after the means of grace. That is the great objective. Jesus Christ, God incarnate, is to be all in all. Trust God in his means for his grace. Trust God in his Word for his grace. You see, there is the lesson.

Hear the text once again. "And now [dear friends in Jesus Christ] I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified."³⁴ Trust God in his Word for his grace. Trust God in his Word for his grace.

Let's pray.

Father, this is a Word I need. This is a Word all of us need. And as I have the privilege now of taking leave of these particular duties to which you have assigned me and pastor Tweeddale has the privilege of taking up his duties among your people, may it be that all

³¹ Acts 20:32.

³² William Greenhill, *An Exposition of Ezekiel* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1994), 741.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Acts 20:32.

of us will trust you in your Word for your grace. May this be the case now. May this be the case next week. May this be the case next month and next year. And as the time goes by, grant that we may hear these words of the apostle Paul, "I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance which is for all the saints." Grant that your people will trust you for your grace in your Word. This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.