

**Christ Episcopal Church, Valdosta**  
**“Given Not Earned” (Romans 6:23)**

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In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

There is an often used slogan that goes like this: “Earned not given.” “Earned not given”—this slogan has been used by the United States Marine Corps, by Nike, by the New England Patriots of the NFL, by CrossFit. The concept of “earned not given” is found in classrooms regarding grades, in corporations regarding promotions, and in athletics regarding getting a spot in the starting lineup.

When it comes to how the world actually works there is a lot of truth in “earned not given.” But when it comes to how the gospel of God’s grace actually works, it is the exact opposite.

Today I am preaching on just one verse from the assigned passage from Paul’s Letter to the Romans: “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 6:23). When it comes to the gospel of God’s grace, it is “given not earned.”

This is very good news to some, but very annoying news to others, because again, this is the exact opposite of how the world works. Preaching the gospel of God’s grace rather than preaching Christianity as a means of self-improvement is not always popular. Preaching the gospel of God’s grace rather than preaching Christianity as a set of spiritual merit badges you can earn on your way to heaven—a merit badge for church attendance, a merit badge for tithing, a merit badge for each spiritual discipline you develop—is not always popular. Preaching the gospel of God’s grace rather than preaching Christianity as yet one more arena in which you can prove your superiority over others is not always popular.

And yet “given not earned” is how the gospel of God’s grace works. It cuts against the grain. If you preach the gospel of God’s grace—that you are fully known and fully loved and fully forgiven because of who God is, Love, and because of what God has done, atoned for your sins and assured you eternal life through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as a free gift—that sounds too good to be true.

After all, if you preach this gospel of God's grace, won't people take advantage of it? Doesn't preaching the gospel of God's grace lead people to do whatever they want, to sin as much as they want because it's all good, because God will forgive them anyway? Paul knew this, and so earlier in today's passage he wrote:

You are not under law but under grace. What then? Should we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God that you, having once been slaves of sin, have become obedient from the heart to the form of teaching to which you were entrusted, and that you, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. I am speaking in human terms because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to greater and greater iniquity, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness for sanctification. When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. So what advantage did you then get from the things of which you now are ashamed? The end of those things is death. But now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification. The end is eternal life (Romans 6:14-22).

All of that feeds into the subsequent verse, "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord"—given not earned.

Now please don't mishear me. "Earned not given" is not bad in and of itself. If you have earned good grades, earned a promotion, earned a military rank, earned a spot in the starting lineup, earned the lead role in the play, earned an academic degree, earned your medals and trophies and awards, earned other people's respect—that's all good, and kudos to you, and I mean that sincerely. I am not preaching a slacker lifestyle. But again, when it comes to the gospel of God's grace, it is given not earned, it indeed "the free gift of God in Jesus Christ."

This free gift of God's grace actually changes lives. In one of the best books about God's grace ever written, *Grace in Practice* by Paul Zahl (2007), includes the following story of the impact of unexpected grace on a teenager's life:

Rod Rosenblatt, a Lutheran theologian, tells the true story of wrecking his father's Buick 8 when he was sixteen years old. Rod was drunk, as were all his friends who were in the car. The first thing Rod's dad asked him over the phone was whether he was all right. Rod said yes. He also told his father he was drunk. Later that night, Rod wept and wept in his father's study. At the end of the ordeal, his father said one thing: "How about tomorrow we go get you a new car." Rod says now that he became a theist in that moment. God's grace became real (86).

Right now some of you may be cringing, or perhaps thinking, "What lesson is Rod supposed to learn from that? Was Rod never punished at all, really? Are we supposed to reward dangerous behavior, potentially deadly behavior, with a new car? Are you kidding me?" You are not alone. Paul Zahl continues:

When Rod tells that story, there are always a few people in the audience who get mad. They say, "Your dad let you get away with that?! He didn't punish you at all?" And Rod says, "No," adding the following: "Do you think I didn't know what I had done? Do you think it was not the most painful moment of my whole life up to that point? Do you think the law wasn't cutting me down to nothing?" Rod's father spoke the word of grace in that moment. In that eternal encounter, for it reflected the mechanism of God's grace, there was not law. Grace superseded it (86).

When Rod was completely ashamed, completely distraught, completely devastated by his reckless behavior that had directly led to his wrecking his father's car, his father "spoke the word of grace in that moment." And that word of grace immediately changed the direction of Rod's life. Rod went from being a drunken atheist teenager to a believer in God and a future minister of the gospel of God's grace. Why? Because he had experienced the reality of God's grace for himself, because he had experienced the truth that God's grace is given not earned.

Just like Rod, the same Apostle Paul who wrote, "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" also experienced the reality of God's grace for himself. As a rising star among the Pharisees, who emphasized the keeping of God's Old Testament law above all else, Paul vehemently persecuted the church, a church based on the free gift of God's grace.

But Paul underwent a radical change. In his First Letter to Timothy Paul described his own “eternal encounter” with God’s grace this way:

I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost (1 Timothy 1:13-15).

After his “eternal encounter” with the grace of God, when he experienced for himself that when it comes to God’s grace it is given not earned, Paul spent the rest of his life preaching this gospel of God’s grace throughout the Roman world, preaching again and again and again, “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

In the Gospel According to Luke there is a particularly moving episode in which a notorious sinner who like Rod Rosenblatt and the Apostle Paul had personally experienced the reality of God’s grace given not earned, showed up at a dinner party and did the unthinkable:

A woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that (Jesus) was eating in the Pharisee’s house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment (Luke 7:37-38).

The Pharisee hosting the dinner party and the other guests were indignant and embarrassed at this extravagant act of love. But Jesus knew exactly who she was and what she had been through. Jesus knew she had received the free of God’s grace that is given not earned. And so he tells the other guests:

“Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.” Then he said to her, “Your sins are forgiven... Your faith has saved you; go in peace” (Luke 7:47-48, 50).

Grace leads to love. Extravagant grace leads to extravagant love. The fruit of the free gift of God’s grace that is given not earned is always love.

But enough about Rod Rosenbladt and the Apostle Paul and the woman at the dinner party...what about you?

Maybe you have spent your whole life with a starting point of “earned not given”—and maybe in some ways this has served you well. Maybe you have earned all sorts of accolades and awards and degrees and promotions. Maybe you have earned lots of merit badges, lots of money, the respect of lots of people.

But maybe you have had this same starting point of “earned not given” in the personal relationships in your life, a starting point of “earned not given” in your relationships with your spouse or boyfriend or girlfriend or significant other, a starting point of “earned not given” in your relationships with your siblings or your parents or your children. If you have not learned so yet, an “earned not given” starting point will wreak havoc on your relationships because enough is never enough. An “earned not given” starting point in your relationships will inevitably lead to resentment and disconnect—and a sense of someone owing the other something, be it thanks or credit or an apology or whatever.

On a deeper level, maybe some of you have had a perceived starting point of “earned not given” in your relationship with God. Maybe some of you think if you attend church enough (or right now watch enough church online), or give enough money to the church, or develop enough spiritual disciplines, or read the Bible enough, or pray enough, that maybe then God will actually love you. If you have had an “earned not given” starting point in your earthly relationships there is a tendency to think your relationship with God works the same way.

But it doesn't—never has; never will. God's grace for you is a free gift, a free gift you could never earn even if you wanted to. God's extravagant grace manifested itself most powerfully in the most extravagant act of love ever: Jesus' death and resurrection, the most important “eternal moment” in history.

God's grace for you has always been and will always be “given not earned”—“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” And God's grace for you, “given not earned,” provides a brand new starting point for the rest of your life.

Amen.