

“What a Deal!”
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Ephesians 1:3-14

Years ago I heard an inspiring story on National Public Radio that’s stuck with me. It was about a young man who started with a red paper clip and gradually traded up to a house. Maybe you heard it or read about it and remember it, too. As you might imagine, there were plenty of intermediary trades between one and the other, and the along the way, I suspect this young man met some foolish people and much larger number of sympathetic, generous people. The house he wound up with wasn’t elaborate: a 1,100 square foot fixer-upper in Saskatchewan. But he achieved his goal through persistence and persuasion, but more importantly, through the kindness of others.

I think his story touches all of us. Our lives are full of bargaining, whether it involves trading in a car to get a new one or buying a house or negotiating for a raise or forging a contract at work. We want to be fair with others, yet get the best deal we can. It feels good to do well, and it’s very upsetting when we feel cheated or taken advantage of.

Of course, few of us have the ability or the inclination to attempt what this enterprising young man did with a red paper clip, but when it comes to our covenant with God, we find ourselves very much like that young man. We start with next to nothing, and in exchange for that, we find a home, a place to dwell.

The first chapter of the Letter of Paul to the Ephesians outlines our covenant with God. We receive adoption as children of God through Jesus Christ, which places us in

line for a spiritual inheritance. Paul doesn't specify exactly what that inheritance is, but we can imagine that it might include a heavenly home, a place to dwell.

In addition, "we have redemption." Now redemption is a word we hear a lot, but don't talk about often, so let's take a minute to break it down a little. Think of a grocery store coupon. Any coupon-clippers here? If you take a magnifying glass and read the fine print – yes, I'm that type of person – a coupon's face value is one-twentieth of a single cent. The intrinsic value of a coupon is basically nothing, but in relation to a canned good or a box of detergent, the coupon can be redeemed, saving us fifty cents or a dollar. That's much more than the coupon itself, which is essentially worthless. A coupon finds real value only in connection with something else, like a particular product on a grocery store shelf.

We, like that otherwise coupon, find value only in our relationship with Jesus Christ. It may make us uncomfortable to consider that all our worth is tied up in Jesus, but that's the way it is. We can be redeemed only in relation to him, but unlike a grocery store coupon, our value soars infinitely once we have been redeemed by forging a connection with Jesus Christ. But that's not all. There's more to this covenant deal with God.

We also receive special wisdom and insight into the mystery of God's Will, and this heightened quality of perception enables us to discern how to best live our lives in a holy and blameless fashion. We hate getting cheated in a deal, but there's really no worse feeling than not knowing what to do with our lives. The insight we receive as part of our covenant with God helps us better understand how to live our lives day by day, and in that day to day living, we gain a clearer sense of our overarching life purpose.

Almost sounds too good to be true, doesn't it? Like one of those late-night infomercials you watch when you can't sleep, where for just four easy installments of \$29.95 you too can own three bottles of a magical formula that will clean your carpets, patch your roof, and make your cat have kittens.

Well, there are two sides to any agreement, including this glorious covenant with God, and just as the benefits to us are three-fold, namely adoption with the promise of inheritance, redemption and forgiveness of sins, and wisdom and insight into God's holy mystery, so also our responsibilities are three-fold. We are called "to be holy and blameless in love," "to gather up all things in God," and "to live for the praise of his glory."

The amazing thing, however, is that we don't bring these things to the table up front. Remember we started with a red paper clip. We started as a coupon worth one-twentieth of one cent prior to redemption. Yes, our side of the covenant, far from being the product of our own initiative, is covered by God's grace as well. In effect, God pays for both sides of the bargain. The challenging part for us is humbly accepting the gift of God's grace and exercising it, and that can be challenging.

We're proud people. We like to pay our own way. I'm sure that most of us here have wrestled with a friend or family member over a restaurant tab. Most of our motive for doing that comes from the noble desire to do something nice for someone, but part of what impels us to pick up the check is a healthy streak of independence that wants to show, "I can handle this. I can afford it." The problem is, when it comes to our covenant with God, our checking account is empty and our credit cards are maxed out.

It's not that God created us bad or inadequate. Nothing could be further from the truth. It's simply the impact of sin on our lives. Our separation from God, which is the true essence of sin, that separation from God bankrupts us spiritually. Sin hollows us out, empties us, and the only way to reverse that process is to accept God's grace. Once we do that, we can be holy and blameless in love. We can gather up all things in him, and live for the praise of his glory. Again, we're dealing here with some things that might be unfamiliar, so let's take a moment.

What does it mean to live holy and blameless in love? Well, to be holy means to be set apart, not in the sense that we become isolated from others. Far from it, for we are to be holy in love, and love involves connection, not isolation. No, the holiness of which Paul writes involves being set apart in terms of distinction, not distance. Much in the same way that our Holy God present with us yet also wholly other, different in the highest degree from what's most familiar to us, we also are called to be unusual, even freakish if you will, in the quality of life we lead. And that holiness is achieved in equal degree to the love we share.

To the extent we are holy and blameless in love the second part of our covenant naturally follows. Love empowers us "to gather up all things in God." God so desperately wants to be reconciled to the world. Despite all the betrayals and rejections and failures over the eons, God keeps on coming. Covenant after covenant, God stays faithful. Even now, 2,000 years after sending his Son to die on a cross, God waits patiently for people to embrace the new and everlasting covenant written by the blood of Jesus Christ. Part of our covenant is to collaborate with God in this process of reconciliation by helping "gather up all things in him."

As we do that, we will fulfill the third aspect of our covenant. If we live holy and blameless in love, then we will be able to gather up all things in God, and that process of reconciliation will naturally lead us “to live for the praise of his glory.” We love others and draw them to God, not only for their benefit and our own joy, but primarily because serving in this way praises the glory of God.

In fact, everything we do in life is meant to praise the glory of God. We may tend to think of that as a Saturday-night or Sunday-morning-only activity, but when we worship God, we ascribe God worth. That’s where the word worship comes from. Worship literally means “ascribe worth,” and so our worship, far from being limited to a single-hour session on Saturday night or Sunday morning, is something we are meant to do every moment of our lives.

Just imagine what it would be like to live in such a way that every moment praised God’s glory. It’s seems as impossible as trading up from a red paper clip to a house, but fortunately for us, God helps us along, providing us with the spiritual capital we need to live daily in a worshipful way.

And that’s the deal. It may seem too good to be true. Sometimes, other items on offer – like wealth or power or prestige – may seem like a better deal. But it doesn’t get any better. The relationship we have with God is like none other we can possibly know. We bring to the table next to nothing, and yet we get everything, just because God loves us. And our side of the covenant is really more a natural result of the blessings we receive than it is a product of our own original efforts.

It can be hard sometimes to be holy and blameless in love. Some days, the work of reconciliation is a real drag, especially when we’re tired or upset, and people are using

us as a punching bag. Living for the praise and God's glory can feel like a tremendous burden. We're terribly busy. But what we have in our covenant with God is really the best deal we can make, even better than trading from a red paper clip to a house in Saskatchewan, much better than redeeming a veritably worthless coupon for a fifty-cent savings on a box of detergent.

And the good news is: it's not a limited time offer. You can get on your knees anytime, day or night, so if you've not yet struck this once-in-a-lifetime deal with God, what wait any longer? And for those of us who made this bargain with God long ago, each day brings a fresh opportunity to review the terms and renew the deal, because God's covenant is as good as it gets. Amen.