

Sunday, August 9, 2026
Sermon: "A Real Hugger"
Romans 10:5-15 NRSV

Where we're heading in today's message: How do we earn God's grace? If we believe we have it coming as the result of some good deed we've done, we might be missing the point.

In his book about biking across America with his brother, Stan Purdum remembers being in Oregon early in the journey and discovering that, even though it was summertime, they should have packed some cold-weather clothing. After camping for the night in Prairie City, they set out heading east. The days so far had been quite hot, though chilly in the mornings. Here's how Purdum described what happened next:

"Although we were soon wet with sweat under our tights and jackets as we ascended the first of the three mountains, the rapid glide down the mountain proved so chilling that we had to stop and pile on additional clothing. The wind striking my chest proved so cold that I removed the map from the handlebar bag and slid it up under my jacket for additional insulation. Our frigid hands made us wish that we had brought full gloves in addition to the fingerless riding gloves we wore in summer.

"Eventually we came to a café and store. Thoroughly chilled, we decided to eat lunch even though it was still early. The café had not yet opened, so we hurried into the store, where we were able to buy hot drinks, microwave food and gloves from a disgruntled man who obviously considered customers an inconvenience. When we lingered over our sandwiches, he said, pointedly, 'Will there be anything else?' We got the message and moved to the bench outside."

What happened inside the store was a transaction. The Purdum brothers handed the storekeeper some cash, and he provided them with food, drink and gloves. It wasn't a very pleasant experience, but it met the immediate need of the cyclists and added to the store's income for the day. It was a transaction, but only minimally so.

A transaction is commonly defined as an agreement between two parties: a buyer and a seller. In a transaction, the seller supplies

either goods or services in exchange for a payment from the buyer. We likely participate in transactions frequently, perhaps even daily, but unless you are a business owner or banker, you probably don't think about the word "transaction" very often.

Transaction almost seems like a dirty word in the Oregon store example, but it's really a neutral term. We could hardly get by in life without engaging in transactions. They not only help us meet basic needs for food and shelter, but they also assist us in obtaining all sorts of things from entertainment to healthcare to new shoes. A transaction is even taking place when we vote for a candidate. We're saying, "I'll vote for you if you promise to ..." (pick one or more): fix the economy, support my social values, protect us from enemies, lower my taxes, handle immigration differently, etc. The fact that some candidates break their campaign promises after being elected or fulfill them in a way that benefits only a chosen group does seem to soil the whole idea of transactions.

There is one place where the word transaction is implied but misinterprets the spirit of what actually happens. It's in the realm of what the church calls "works righteousness." This is the belief that we can achieve a right standing with God primarily through our good deeds, obedience to divine laws, and our practice of religious rituals, rather than solely through God's grace. Or we may believe that our participation in enough sit-ins, protests, boycotts and speaking truth to power can move up God's schedule for when the kingdom of God is to arrive.

Clearly, the New Testament calls us who seek to follow Jesus to do good deeds and behave like citizens of God's kingdom, but Scripture does not tie such works to our salvation. And most of us who have spent time reading the Bible know that - even though we sometimes fall back into transactional thinking regarding the Christian life.

Even Christ's death on the cross has been thought of as a transaction, with some Christians arguing that Jesus had to die to pay for the sins of the world - his death serving as one side of some kind of deal (though with whom is unclear).

In some places, works righteousness has been stretched to cover our decision to follow Jesus, which, starkly put, can be stated as, "I'll repent of my sins and follow Jesus; in return, God will give me eternal life." Sounds a lot like an expected transaction.

This brings us to the words of the apostle Paul in Romans 10. Paul contrasts "the righteousness that comes from the law" (v. 5, his term for works righteousness, drawn from Leviticus 18:5) with "the righteousness that comes from faith" (v. 6, alluding to Deuteronomy 30:11-14 and applying it to faith in Christ).

Paul goes on to say that righteousness by faith only comes by the work of God, given to humans by God's grace. But Paul's reasoning, as worded in the NRSV (and indeed in many other Bible versions), is dense and not easy to follow. But hear verses 8-10 from *The Message* (and note especially the two sentences we've italicized):

"It's the word of faith that welcomes God to go to work and set things right for us. This is the core of our preaching. Say the welcoming word to God - 'Jesus is my Master' - embracing, body and soul, God's work of doing in us what he did in raising Jesus from the dead. That's it. You're not 'doing' anything; you're simply calling out to God, trusting him to do it for you. That's salvation [emphasis added]. With your whole being you embrace God setting things right, and then you say it, right out loud: 'God has set everything right between him and me!'"

Thus, in the way of righteousness by faith, people are not accounted by God as righteous because they have succeeded in a scrupulous keeping of the laws or because they've entered into a bargain with God to follow Jesus in exchange for eternal life, but because salvation is a gift of God, freely given.

The understanding of salvation being a gracious gift of God rather than a deal with God goes back to at least the fourth century, when a 34-year-old teacher of rhetoric named Augustine began struggling against the idea of becoming a Christian. He found Christianity attractive and admired the lives of Christian martyrs and monks. But he had an active sex life that he didn't want to curtail. One afternoon in a garden in Milan, he heard a voice like that of a

child saying, "Take it and read." So he picked up a Bible and read the first passage he saw. It was from Romans 13, which said, "... put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires." Writing later about this experience, he said that as soon as he reached the end of that sentence, "it was as though my heart was filled with a light of confidence, and all shadows of my doubt was swept away."

Augustine went on to say that while he had been busy resisting God with all his might, God saved him anyway - by divine grace. He eventually became a strong leader of the church. However, one of Augustine's contemporaries, a British monk named Pelagius, considered Augustine's conclusion a big mistake. He said Augustine's position would encourage people to just relax about eternal salvation and instead wait for God's grace. Yes, Pelagius said, we need grace, but God will give grace only to those who have been working hard for it on their own. Augustine argued that sinners are so trapped by their sin that they cannot break away from it on their own without God's grace. And grace that we earn - or, as we might say today, is simply part of a transaction - is not really grace at all.

The argument between Augustine and Pelagius has continued right down to today, but our position is that Augustine got it right.

One problem with focusing on salvation as an undeserved grant from God is the idea that redemption not requiring a transaction would give the most villainous and predatory people a free pass. That's a mistaken assumption, however, and Jesus told a parable that helps us understand that.

It's found in Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23 and is usually called the parable of the sower. Jesus invited his hearers to picture a farmer with a bag of seed, striding across his land. Using the planting procedure of the day, he slung handfuls of seed to his right and left as he walked. The problem was that not all the ground around him was suitable for growing plants. Some seeds fell on the hard-packed path, where birds could scarf them up. Other seeds landed on rocky ground, where the soil was too shallow to support their growth once they germinated. Some seeds fell where thorns choked them out. But

some seeds landed on good soil, where they grew well and yielded a healthy harvest.

This method of sowing seed is remarkably inefficient, and we might want to tell the farmer to be more selective about where he drops his seeds. But as Jesus explains the parable, it becomes clear that the sower is a stand-in for God himself, who has no shortage of "seed," which is a metaphor for God's grace - and God has an inexhaustible supply of that. It is good seed, but whether it takes root and grows depends on the "soil," the human heart.

At that level, some people allow no room for God's grace to implant itself. God's grace is freely given, but not everyone is willing to receive it. Those who accept it, however, have new incentive to walk in the way of the Lord.

Another way to view God's grace comes from a 5-year-old girl we know. We'll call her Christi (not her real name) to protect her privacy. At ages 3-4, she attended a preschool for children with intellectual disabilities. Christi is not a special-needs child, but her mother was unhappy with some programming at the regular preschool Christi first attended. Christi's mom learned that the special-needs school welcomed a few kids each year who had no intellectual disability. The school's experience was that kids with higher skill and learning abilities - identified in preschool jargon as TDPs (typically developing peers) - help the special-needs kids achieve more. So for two years, Christi went to classes with the special-needs children. One benefit to her is that she now sees such individuals as "just kids" and potential friends. She is not standoffish with them or with other kids - or even differently abled adults - she meets for the first time.

Christi has now graduated from that school. She is naturally outgoing and a ready hugger, and it's not uncommon for her to welcome new kids - including those with intellectual disabilities - in church or around town with a big hug. One could turn down such hugs, but it's unlikely that it would deter Christi from offering them.

No human example can convey all that God is, but have no doubt that there is grace in Christi's hugs.

Sin is a pretty big disability for all of us, but it doesn't stop God from hugging us and offering us redemption. And for those who accept it, the imbalance created by that gift is motivation to live faithfully, loving God and neighbor. Alleluia, Amen.