

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, May 18, 2014**

**LIVING DANGEROUSLY**

**Colossians 1:1-14**

I was 7 or 8 years old when I began taking piano lessons. My first piano teacher – I went through several in my “career” – was Miss Mary Nesbit. Miss Nesbit was about 120 years old. At least it seemed like it. She was the music teacher at my elementary school. I remember that she had white hair and always wore it in a bun. My mother arranged for me to have a lesson once a week during lunchtime recess at school. So, while all my friends and classmates were outside playing ball or jump rope or tag, I was stuck inside with Miss Nesbit in the music classroom. I think I have forgiven my mother (☺). As Miss Nesbit listened to me play my assigned pieces, she would slurp her soup and point out my mistakes. At least that’s pretty much the way I remember it.

My brother Gary did not take piano lessons, but he actually had an even more traumatic experience with Miss Nesbit than I did. As Gary remembers it, Miss Nesbit required every student to sing a solo every marking period in front of the whole class. If you could sing well, there was nothing to worry about. If you couldn’t, or didn’t, Miss Nesbit could humiliate you in front of the rest of the class. And Gary couldn’t carry a tune at all. He was completely tone deaf. If you didn’t sing the solo to Miss Nesbit’s satisfaction, she would make you stop and go back and start again. If your singing still did not meet her approval, she would send you out of the room to practice with another student who was a better singer. If, after this tutoring, your singing still did not measure up to her standard, Miss Nesbit would make you come back to the Music Room later and work with her one-on-one, which was something no one looked forward to. Gary always ended up there.

We’ve talked and joked about our experiences with Miss Nesbit in our family over the years. I was reminded of it recently when I was going through some personal papers and came across a sermon Gary preached way back in 1983, when I was ordained as a minister. In his sermon he talked about the trauma of that experience in elementary school and his struggle to overcome it. The title of the sermon was *The Freedom to Fail*.

Gary spent his entire childhood believing he was a failure, at least with respect to music, because he just couldn’t sing ... until, in his senior year of college, a friend took him on as a “project” and set out to prove he could teach Gary to sing in 30 days. And you know what? He succeeded. I’m not saying that Gary is good enough to be on “American Idol” or “The Voice.” I’m not even saying that Adam would necessarily want him to sing in the Choir. But Gary is not afraid to sing as he once was. He wouldn’t be embarrassed if you heard him sing. Nor do I think you would be embarrassed for him. Gary says that, for years, the fear that he would never be able to sing kept him from even trying to learn.

The fear of failure can have a powerful, paralyzing impact on your life. You know it. We all know it in one way or another. Whether it is music or marriage or school or sports or business or career or something else, all of us have areas in our lives where we are desperately

afraid that we will fail. Afraid that we are not good enough and never will be. That we don't and won't measure up. Nobody wants to be thought of as a failure. Nobody wants to be labeled a loser. I sure don't.

In that sermon more than 30 years ago, my brother made the point that “failing, or feeling like a failure, is especially difficult and traumatic in a society like ours which glorifies success. Success,” he said, “is considered as American as baseball, hot dogs, apple pie, and motherhood.” Though we may define it in different ways, success is something we celebrate. And we venerate those who are the most successful in every field of endeavor. Like Miss Nesbit, we judge people on the basis of their performance. If your performance measures up to the standard, you are accepted. You get applause. You are shown favor. If you fail, it is a reflection of your worth, or lack of it.

Let me just say right here and right now: This is *not* the gospel. It is *not* the good news of Jesus Christ. The grace of God – which comes free of charge to people who don't deserve it and never will – is not a reward given to those who are successful. It is not something reserved for those “saints” whose performance of their moral and religious duties meets or exceeds God's standard.

I've gone to Florida for a week in each of the past two Februaries for a conference at Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church in Fort Lauderdale, where Tullian Tchvidjian, grandson of Billy Graham, is now the pastor. Each year the conference focuses on grace, on the richness of its meaning and its applications in preaching, teaching, church life, daily life, relationships, and in our witness to the world. Tullian – I use his first name because “Tchvidjian” is not easy to pronounce – came up with the word “performancism” to describe this almost ubiquitous idea in our culture that your identity and value as a person are determined by your performance – by what you do and how well you do it. It is understandable in society-at-large, where individuals ordinarily receive rewards and promotions based on how well they do their jobs. The problem comes when “performancism” finds its way into our spiritual life and affects the way we think and live as followers of Christ.

If we understand the gospel, we know that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ and Him alone. All that you and I contribute to our salvation is our sin and our need for a Savior. What our new members affirmed publicly this morning is true of all of us: We are all sinners in the sight of God, and without hope for salvation except in His sovereign mercy. There is nothing in us to commend us to God. There is nothing we can do to measure up to God's standard or to make ourselves worthy of His favor. The bar is set impossibly high. We all understand, I hope, that, from start to finish, salvation is a gift from God. It is all God's work. It is all by grace, and only by grace – the grace which, as I have said, comes free of charge to people who don't deserve it and never will. It is free of charge. There is nothing you can do to earn it or purchase it. Absolutely nothing. Even the faith necessary to embrace Jesus as Savior and Lord – the faith to receive this grace-gift of salvation, of sins forgiven, of peace with God, of adoption into “God's forever family,” of the promise and assurance of life after death in the eternal kingdom of God – is a gift from God. We cannot create or manufacture faith in our hearts. Unless God first regenerates our hearts and gives us the gift of faith, none of us will ever truly believe the gospel and trust in Christ for salvation.

I trust that you understand and affirm with both your mind and heart,, and know in your own experience, that salvation is entirely the work of God and the gift of His grace shown to us in the person and work of His Son Jesus Christ, who paid for our sins in His suffering and death on the cross for us. There is nothing we can add to the saving work of Christ for us. Jesus did it all. And *it is finished* (John 19:30). *Finished. Completely.*

Unfortunaely, even knowing and believing this, many Christians fall into the trap of thinking that living the Christian life depends entirely on us. God saved us in Christ, and now it is all about us and what we do or don't do. It is all about our effort. It is all about our performance. It is all about our devotion, discipline, and determination to show that we are really and truly followers of Christ. But this is a perversion of the gospel.

I'm not saying that how you live your life doesn't matter to God, because that simply isn't true. It does matter to God. I'm not saying that once you're saved, you're free to do anything you like and live any way you want, and God will be just fine with it. If you have truly been saved by God's grace, *you are free*. But the freedom for which Christ set you free is not the freedom to live for yourself and to indulge your selfish desires. The freedom for which Christ has set you free is the freedom to love and trust and follow and serve God with your whole heart in the power of the Holy Spirit, who comes to take up residence in your life and to sanctify you. That is, to make you holy. So that the heart, character, and life of Jesus may be seen in you.

If how you live did not matter to God, Paul would not have prayed for the Colossians in verse 10 to "live a life worthy of the Lord and (to) please Him in every way." It *does* matter. But it is not a matter of trying really, really hard to prove our worthiness to God. He already knows we are *not* worthy, and nothing you do or try to do will convince Him otherwise. So, don't bother. It is not a matter of putting forth some herculean effort to show that you're serious about being found worthy of His grace. We have already said that *not* deserving it is a prerequisite to receiving grace. Only the undeserving are eligible. And no matter how long or hard you work at it, no matter how much effort you expend to bring your performance as a Christian up to God's standard, it is not going to happen.

The point of knowing God's will and growing in Holy Spirit-imparted wisdom and understanding, the point of living a life worthy of the Lord and pleasing Him in every way, the point of bearing fruit in good works and growing in the knowledge of God, the point of being filled with God's power and strength, the point of cultivating endurance and patience in the face of life's ordinary or not-so-ordinary difficulties, the point of giving thanks to the Lord with a joyful heart – the point of all these things Paul prays in verses 9-12 is not to make the Colossians acceptable to God or to qualify them to receive the blessings of His favor. That is completely backward.

Paul prays these things for the Colossian believers *because of* what God has already done for them (and us) in Christ. It is *because of* what Jesus did for us, *because of* what Jesus accomplished for us in His incarnation, sinless life, suffering and death for us on the cross, in His resurrection from the dead and His ascension into heaven where now He lives and reigns with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit, one God in three persons, blessed Trinity. Paul

makes this prayer for the Colossians *because of* the finished work of Christ on their behalf (and ours).

In verses 12-14, Paul gives us a brief summary of what God has done for us in Christ. First, He “has qualified (us) to share in the inheritance of the saints” – the inheritance God promised to His chosen, holy people – “in the kingdom of light,” which is another way of saying “the kingdom of God.” We don’t have to perform up to some impossible standard in order to qualify for entrance into God’s kingdom. In His grace, God Himself has qualified us through the saving work of Christ on our behalf.

Second, not only did God in His grace make us qualified, He also rescued or delivered us from the dominion of darkness where we were held captive to the power of sin and guilt, and to the lies, schemes, and strategies of Satan, the archenemy of our souls. We were helpless to rescue ourselves, but Jesus rescued us through His death on the cross and set us free.

Third, having liberated us from the kingdom of darkness, God brought us into the kingdom of His Son, so that we are safe and secure under His sovereign and gracious rule. We have found our heart’s true home in Him.

Fourth, as it says in verse 14, we have redemption in Him. “Redemption” means that we have been released from bondage or captivity through the payment of a price or ransom. Jesus said that the reason He came into the world was to give His life “as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). In His suffering and death on the cross, Jesus paid the ransom to set us free. Our redemption is our emancipation. And Jesus is the Great Emancipator.

Fifth, in Christ our sins are forgiven. If you are in Christ, if you have been justified by His grace, your sins are forgiven. All of them. Past, present, and future. They are no longer a barrier to separate you from God.

You have probably heard it said that the word “justified” means God treats me “just as if I’d never sinned.” That is a good start to understanding what it means to be justified in God’s sight. But it doesn’t give the full meaning. There is another side to it that is equally valid and important. Not only does it mean that God treats me “just as if I’d never sinned.” It also means God views me “just as if I’d always obeyed” – because the obedience and righteousness of Jesus Christ my Savior have been credited or imputed to me, and I am no longer clothed in the tattered, soiled, sin-stained rags of my unrighteousness, but with the righteousness of the Lord Jesus, whose blood has covered all my sin.

Because of what Jesus has done for me, I am free in Him. I don’t have to spend another second in the “prison of performancism.” I don’t have to spend another moment feeling guilty because I’m not worthy of God’s love and grace. Of course I’m not worthy! That is what makes His grace and love so amazing! If it depends on me and my performance, whether for justification or sanctification, it is no longer grace.

So, what does all of this have to do with my brother and Miss Nesbit and the freedom to fail? Just this: Because of what Jesus has done for you, you don’t have to be afraid to fail. You

don't have to beat yourself up if you fail to live up to somebody's expectations. Or your own. Because you are qualified, delivered, loved, redeemed, and forgiven in Christ, you don't have to worry about disappointing God in your performance. You don't have to live up to some impossible standard of spiritual success in order to prove your worth.

When you mess up, when you sin – as we all do – go to God, confess your sin, and repent of it. But you need not ever fear that God will remove His love and grace from you.

I love the words of this song written by Billy James Foote:

I'm forgiven because You were forsaken  
 I'm accepted, You were condemned  
 I'm alive and well  
 Your Spirit is within me  
 Because You died and rose again

Amazing love, how can it be?  
 That You, my King would die for me  
 Amazing love, I know it's true  
 It's my joy to honor You  
 In all I do I honor You

Because Jesus was forsaken, I am forgiven.  
 Because He was condemned, I am accepted. Forever.

Charles Wesley put it so beautifully:

No condemnation now I dread:  
 Jesus – and all in Him – is mine!  
 Alive in Him, my living Head,  
 and clothed in righteousness divine,  
 Bold I approach the eternal throne  
 and claim the crown,  
 through Christ my own.  
 Amazing love! How can it be  
 that You, my God, should die for me!

As Tullian says:

Because Jesus won for me, I am free to lose.  
 Because Jesus was strong for me, I am free to be weak.  
 Because Jesus was – and is – Somebody, I am free to be nobody.  
 Because Jesus is extraordinary, I am free to be ordinary.  
 Because Jesus succeeded for me, I am free to fail.  
 (Tullian Tchvidjian, *Jesus Plus Nothing Equals Everything*, 24)

If you find yourself trapped today in the prison of “performancism” or any other kind of prison, remember that Jesus came to set the captives free (Luke 4:18). And, if Jesus sets you free, you are truly free (John 8:36).

Lord, let it be so in us, and let the freedom for which You have set us free move us and stir us to sing and shout and live every moment with joyful and grateful hearts, to the praise and glory of Your name. Amen.