

Gratitude Sunday
“There is no condemnation in Christ”
Unshakable Hope Chapter 9
Philippians 4: 6-7 Acts 9: 1-12, 17-19 CEB
November 22, 2020
Pastor Heather

God’s Promise: “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus”
Romans 8: 1 NIV

My Promise: I will find forgiveness in the finished work of Christ.

In chapter 9 of *Unshakable Hope*, Max Lucado opens with a description of the U.S. National Debt Clock. It stands on the corner of the Avenue of the Americas and West Forty-fourth Street. Have any of you ever seen it when you’ve visited New York City? I haven’t but a close friend says she was overwhelmed to see the sign 25 feet wide, and weighing 1500 pounds. It uses 306 bulbs to declare the U.S. debt and each family’s share. The original clock wasn’t built to run backward, but that feature has seldom been needed. Plans to install an updated model that can display some quadrillion dollars have been discussed. It is mind boggling how much we each owe.

Max goes on to reflect that as a pastor, he has a concern that when people owe more than they own, there is usually trouble. I would agree with him from my years of pastoral counseling - debt and differences in how to spend money are at the top of the list for discord in many marriages today. When persons share with me why they can’t afford to support the church - sometimes for really good reasons - loss of job, high medical or legal bills. I usually ask them to pray about a commitment they could make - one that would say they believe in the ministries that are making a difference and are willing to give up a pizza or 2 lattes a week for the Kingdom. The act of commitment, to making a sacrifice, no matter how small it is can be the turning point in their personal finances. It is a starting point, and from there they can grow the amount they give weekly. We are one of the churches that offered Financial Peace - the Dave Ramsey biblical model for prioritizing and getting your finances on track or back on track so that you are able to give more and save more on your income. Our country, with the National Debt Clock needs a financial makeover as well.

Max Lucado transitions to asking: What if heaven had a debt clock - measuring not our fiscal debt but our spiritual debt? Having financial liabilities is one thing - but scripture refers to sin as a debt. It separates us from God. Isaiah 59: 2 “Your iniquities have separated you from God, your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear.”

The realization of our moral debt causes much anxiety within many persons. Max continues: “The sad truth of our state as members of the human race is that we owe a greater debt than

we can ever repay. Every sin we commit moves us further into the red on the balance sheet of heaven and further from Jesus' command to 'be perfect . . . as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Matthew 5: 48). Heaven is a perfect place for perfect people, which leaves us in a perfect mess. What is the solution to this conundrum? Adding more good works won't help to tip the balance sheet in our favor. Nor will pretending it doesn't exist and giving in to unbelief. Legalism only leads to weariness. Atheism only leads to loneliness. No, the only answer is the one the apostle came to realize when the risen Jesus met him on a road in the desert. Paul came to understand that *all* have fallen short of God's standard. So the only solution was to put his faith in the one who had never fallen short of the standard. He put his life into the hands of the very same Jesus who met him in the road. He trusted in the one who had given up His own life to pay the penalty for all of humanity's sins. When we do the same and accept God's *grace*, our debts are wiped clean. There is truly no condemnation when we belong to Christ." What a wonderful promise.

Paul understood what a life of gratitude was. He was a man who was beaten, jailed, mocked, shipwrecked and laughed at for what he believed in - all after he was struck blind on the road to Damascus. Yet he was a man who was filled with gratitude. Paul was grateful for the call God placed on his life to preach the Good News to the Gentiles. He was also grateful to live a life honoring God. What he shared with the Corinthians, we need to hear too: From 2 Corinthians 4: 15b "as grace increases to benefit more and more people, it will cause gratitude to increase, which results in God's glory."

God's grace is abundant and available to each of us. God has poured His grace out into our lives and He has given us His spirit to guide and direct us. When we seek to follow Jesus and be obedient to His call, He is there for us . . . with "now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8: 1).

When we mess up, God's grace is available to set us back on the path that leads to Him. When we fall short - maybe holding back on sharing our resources with Him, God's grace is enough to forgive us. Do our lives reflect this outpouring of grace? Do we show others respect instead of impatience and frustration? We have the wonderful opportunity to help others experience grace and love in the midst of all the strife Covid-19 has brought the past 9 months. We are able to do this by Giving 100% of our time, talent and treasure this Gratitude Sunday! Paul knew how to do this and that is why he could proclaim that as grace increases, gratitude will increase resulting in God's glory. Paul was a risk taker . . . and I began to think of other risk takers that I have known. My husband Dick was one - always living on 80% of our income no matter what financial challenges we were facing. 10% went off the top to the church, and another 10% went to savings. There were some months that was really hard . . . but God blessed our faithfulness and we were able to do some amazing things on the income we had.

Another risk taker was Walt Disney. When you hear that name what comes to mind? The "happiest place on earth?" A man who created fabulous theme parks? A dreamer who became a movie mogul?

In reality, Disney was one of America's greatest risk-takers. He faced so many challenges and setbacks in 1921 that he was forced to dissolve his first animation company. At one point, he could not pay his rent and survived by eating dog food.

We all know how his story ended. His dream succeeded because he did what few of us are willing to do. He took the risks required to produce immeasurable rewards.

God expects us to take risks. God expects us to walk by faith. Why? God turns a great risk into a sure thing.

Don't be afraid to take a risk with God's resources. God has given us resources of time, talent and treasure for God's purposes. God's mission of reconciliation and forgiveness extends to all people. What we have received comes with God's expectation that we will generously use it for God's purposes.

When we see things from God's perspective, the only financial risk we truly face lies in not investing the money God has given us where it can do the work God intended it to do.

Take a risk. Trust God. Give generously.

What seems like a risk to us, is a sure and certain promise with God. So let's all give our time, talent and treasure at 100% this year.

Amen.