

Great Privilege, Great Responsibility¹

Deuteronomy 31:1–13, Acts 13:26–28

The Lord Jesus was a master of pithy, punchy sayings. One such is this: “to whom much is given, from him much will be required” (Luke 12:48).² His point is that the person who receives great spiritual privileges has a great responsibility to use them wisely. We must be good stewards of spiritual privileges.

In our text this morning the apostle Paul is preaching to the synagogue in Antioch of Pisidia (in what is now modern-day Turkey). He addresses his hearers as “sons of the family of Abraham, and those among you who fear God”—in other words, natural-born Jews and God-fearing Gentiles. Here were people who had great spiritual privileges. The nations around them “walked in darkness” (Isa. 9:2). The Jews alone had the Holy Scriptures and the knowledge of the true God. Paul, himself a Jew, would later recount their privileges in Romans 9, where he would write, “to whom pertain the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service of God, and the promises; of whom are the fathers and from whom, according to the flesh, Christ came, who is over all, the eternally blessed God. Amen.” The Jews were the most privileged people on the face of the earth. Much had been given to them, and from them much would be required.

In our opening Psalter selection this morning the Psalmist reminisces: “I now remember all these things as I pour out my soul within: how with the multitude I went up to God’s house on Zion’s hill. In their procession I would lead as we approached with cheerful song and shouts of thankfulness and mirth among the festive, joyful throng.”³ Here was one of the high points of membership in the covenant people: the annual feasts when devout Jews from all over the known world would return to Jerusalem and process in joyful procession up the temple mount to worship God with the joyful throngs. The “Songs of Ascents” (Psalms 120–134) would be sung on these festive occasions. Truly, to the Jews much had been given, and from them much would be required.

Yes, privilege incurs responsibility. We, too, members of the Christian church, have great spiritual privileges, and thus great responsibility. As we consider the spiritual privileges of Paul’s synagogue hearers, let us consider our own privileges as well. I have three points, first,

¹ Title taken from <https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-25-great-privilege-great-responsibility-genesis-121-3>

² In the original the statement is even punchier: ὧ ἐδόθη πολὺ, πολὺ ζητηθήσεται παρ’ αὐτοῦ, “to whom is given much, much shall be required of him”—a chiasm, a literary device in which a sequence of ideas is presented and then repeated in reverse order for memorable effect. The term *chiasm* comes from the Greek letter *chi* (χ), which looks like our x.

³ Psalm 42B, *Trinity Psalter Hymnal*

1. We have received the gospel.

Paul's sermon in the synagogue in Antioch of Pisidia is the first preaching in Asia Minor, the southeastern part of modern-day Turkey. Luke seems to include this sermon as an example of the kind of preaching that Paul would preach on his first missionary journey. Paul says, "Men and brethren, sons of the family of Abraham, and those among you who fear God, to you the word of this *salvation* has been sent." Just three verses before, speaking of David, Paul had said, "From this man's seed, according to the promise, God raised up for Israel a *Savior*—Jesus." The word for Savior is σωτήρ; the word for salvation is σωτηρία. Both words come from the verb σώζω, meaning *save, rescue, deliver*. In its biblical usage it can mean *save from death*, as in the phrase "save thyself, and come down from the cross" (Mark 15:30). It can mean *save or free from disease*, as in the phrase "Daughter, thy faith hath made thee whole [lit. *thy faith hath saved thee*]; go in peace, and be whole of thy plague" (Mark 5:34). It means *save or preserve from eternal death* in the phrase "Much more then, being now justified by his blood, we shall be *saved from wrath* through him" (1 Cor. 1:21).

Jesus is the Savior who saves to the uttermost those who come to God through him (Heb. 7:25). As the Savior he brings salvation from sin and death and hell. The salvation that Christ offers is all-encompassing: "who forgiveth all thine iniquities; who healeth all thy diseases; who redeemeth thy life from destruction; who crowneth thee with lovingkindness and tender mercies" (Ps. 103:3–4). Whatever physical healing we experience in this life is a result of Christ's work on the cross. Spiritual healing is as well, whether emotional, mental, deliverance from guilt or despair or mental anguish. Our Savior Jesus wants us to be delivered from the power of darkness into the light of his blessed countenance. "The Lord bless thee, and keep thee: the Lord make his face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee: the Lord lift up his countenance upon thee, and give thee peace" (Num. 6:24–26). The Savior says, "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid" (John 14:27).

As Paul preaches in the synagogue in Antioch on this day he tells the congregation, "to you the word of this salvation has been sent." The *word of this salvation* is the Gospel, the Good News. The word of God's salvation was sent to the Jews in Pisidia. For that word to get there the Holy Spirit had to move Paul and Barnabas out of a comfortable and fulfilling ministry in Antioch of Syria, where they had assembled with the church and taught a great many people. The gospel was bearing great fruit there. Lives were being impacted. A congregation was being built up. A church was being built. God had called together prophets and teachers—Barnabas, Simeon, Lucius, Manaen, and Saul. This group of godly men got along well together, worshipped together, served together. They were

ministering to the Lord and fasting when the Holy Spirit said, “Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” Then, having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them away. Barnabas and Saul had to leave a comfortable ministry and begin to travel—travel that involved walking on foot, sailing across choppy seas in wooden boats, climbing over rough terrain, fording rivers, being on the lookout for robbers and highwaymen, as well as wild animals. Paul speaks of the difficulties he faced in his second letter to the Corinthians: “Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea . . . in weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness.” Paul did not take up the call to be a missionary out of a desire for glamour and adventure. Last week I talked with a girl who loves to travel. She posts photos on her Facebook page of herself with elephants and big game in South Africa and other exotic locations. The apostle Paul was well aware of the dangers he would face in taking the gospel to Asia Minor. But God had called him, and he was obedient to the heavenly calling. Hardship and sacrifice on the part of these early missionaries were part of the Spirit’s work of sending the word of Christ’s salvation to the members of this synagogue way off in Pisidia. Yet, in spite of the difficulties, to them “the word of this salvation” was sent. Little did the congregants present on that occasion realize the hardship and difficulty that were involved, and little do we in the 21st century appreciate the sacrifice and hardship experienced by the early preachers of the gospel—even more, what was involved when in eternity past the God of heaven determined to send his only-begotten Son into the world so that the world through him might be saved. The Savior left the glories of heaven to go on a dangerous mission. He, the Creator, came into a sinful and dangerous world where he would be hated, shunned, vilified, rejected, misunderstood, spat upon, beaten and crucified. “He came unto his own, and his own received him not.” Those who were the beneficiaries of his love and mercy did not appreciate him, nor did they appreciate the great love that the Father had shown to them in sending his Christ. “By foes derided, by thine own rejected, O most afflicted.”⁴ Yes, brothers and sisters, we each may experience affliction in this life, but none of our afflictions will ever match those experienced by our Savior, Jesus. To us as well, the word of this salvation has been sent. It is our privilege to gather each Lord’s day to hear Christ’s gospel. As we meet with Christ in fellowship with his church we hear his word to us, “I am the Savior. I

⁴ “Ah, Holy Jesus” (*Trinity Psalter Hymnal* 337)

bring salvation. I am the one who saves. Trust me, commit your life to me. I will safely lead you to heaven.”

Brothers and sisters, *we* have received the gospel, the good news of Christ. Receiving this gospel is a great privilege. Not everybody gets the opportunity to receive it. The natural man is spiritually dead. He “receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor. 2:14). But when, upon hearing the gospel, the blessed Spirit of God opens up a hardened heart, the light comes on. The Spirit convinces us of our sin and misery, enlightens our minds in the knowledge of Christ, renews our wills, and persuades and enables us to embrace the Savior of the world who is freely offered to us in the gospel.

Receiving the gospel is a great privilege, and with it comes great responsibility. We must not keep it to ourselves, bottled up. Each one of us knows plenty of people—family members, friends, neighbors, co-workers—who do not know Christ. The word of his salvation has not yet come to them. Perhaps they have never considered that there is a holy God before whom we must all one day stand and give account. Their god is self; they make all their decisions on the basis of what will give them the most happiness and satisfaction. Or perhaps they are adherents of a false religion that teaches some variation of salvation by works. Perhaps they are convinced that they have within them the power to earn their own salvation. They have not yet heard the good news that it is “not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us.” They have not yet been invited to get off the treadmill of trying in their own strength to earn the favor of a holy God and get onto the solid ground of trust in the finished work of Christ. God has sent the word of his salvation into the world, but you or I may be the human messenger through whom the message of salvation comes to our loved one. You and I have received the good news of Christ. With that great privilege comes the great responsibility to tell our family and neighbors, as did Mary of old, “He who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is His name” (Luke 1:49).

Yes, to us as well “the word of this salvation has been sent.” We have heard the gospel. We will be held accountable for what we do with this knowledge. If we keep it to ourselves, we sin. As the four lepers outside the starving city of Samaria, who discovered that the enemy camp had been abandoned, said, “We are not doing right. This day is a day of good news, and we remain silent” (2 Kgs. 7:9), so we who have the gospel—spiritual food—and fail to tell others about it do not do right either. God does not ask us to go in our own strength; he promises to strengthen us in every good work to do his will. Oh, let us pray for opportunities to share Christ, and let us pray for grace and strength to take advantage of those opportunities. God will certainly answer such heartfelt prayers. We have received the gospel, second,

2. We have access to the Holy Scriptures.

Verse 27 makes reference to “the voices of the Prophets which are read every Sabbath.” Here Paul refers to the synagogue practice of the public reading of the Holy Scriptures. Synagogues sprang up in remote places where it was impractical to get back to the temple in Jerusalem, where the sacrificial worship was being carried out by the priests and Levites.

The public reading of the Holy Scriptures has a long and rich history. In our Old Testament text, Deuteronomy 31, as Moses was advanced in years and preparing to die, we read that Moses wrote the law “and delivered it to the priests, the sons of Levi, who bore the ark of the covenant of the LORD, and to all the elders of Israel.” He gave the command: “At the end of every seven years ... at the Feast of Tabernacles, when all Israel comes to appear before the LORD your God ... you shall read this law before all Israel in their hearing. Gather the people together, men and women and little ones, and the stranger who is within your gates, that they may hear and ... learn to fear the LORD your God and carefully observe all the words of this law.”

This is remarkable. Every seven years the whole Torah—the first five books of the Old Testament—was to be read aloud to the people of Israel. In the Bible I am using this morning the Torah takes up 193 pages. Each page has about 800 words. The Torah, then, contains about 146,000 words in English. By contrast, one of my sermons is about 4,000 words and takes a little over a half hour. If the Torah were read publicly at the rate 8,000 words an hour, that would be over 18 hours of reading. Clearly the reading of the Torah would require probably three days of reading with multiple readers, with breaks for water and meals. And this wasn’t just for heads of families. Moses commanded, “Gather the people together, men and women and little ones.” Children were taught to behave and pay attention. What the Levites were reading was the word of God. It must be read aloud—audibly, clearly, distinctly. Its commands and precepts were to be learned and followed.

There’s an example of this in Nehemiah. The people that had returned to the Land from the exile “gathered together as one man in the open square that was in front of the Water Gate; and they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded Israel. So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly of men and women and all who could hear with understanding on the first day of the seventh month. Then he read from it in the open square that was in front of the Water Gate from morning until midday, before the men and women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law.”

And so it is today; public worship includes the reading of the Holy Scriptures. If it does not, God’s people are shortchanged. Our Confession of Faith, listing the

elements of worship, includes this element: “The reading of the Scriptures with godly fear, the sound preaching and conscionable hearing of the Word . . . with understanding, faith, and reverence.”⁵ Though private prayer and Scripture reading are certainly appropriate (we are told to “pray without ceasing” and “search the Scriptures”), the emphasis in Scripture is on communal, public worship. God reveals himself to his people through the reading and preaching of his word, and his people respond with understanding, faith, reverence and obedience. Modern education and the media have dumbed us down, so to speak; they have made us impatient, self-centered, always asking “what’s in it for me?” If there’s no immediate relevance, we go on to something else. Modern man does not like to stand—or even sit in a comfortable pew—listening to the public reading of Scripture. Even if he is converted he is likely to say, “Get to the point. I can read this myself when I get home.”

But the public reading of the word of God in worship is biblical. This may be seen in the proof texts that are adduced to the statement in our Confession, “The reading of the Scriptures with godly fear”: **Luke 4:16–17**. And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up: and, as his custom was, he went into the synagogue on the sabbath day, and stood up for to read. And there was delivered unto him the book of the prophet Esaias. And when he had opened the book, he found the place where it was written . . . **Acts 15:21**. For Moses of old time hath in every city them that preach him, being read in the synagogues every sabbath day. **Col. 4:16**. And when this epistle is read among you, cause that it be read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and that ye likewise read the epistle from Laodicea. **1 Thess. 5:27**. I charge you by the Lord that this epistle be read unto all the holy brethren. **Rev. 1:3**. Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein: for the time is at hand.

Some churches have accommodated the spirit of our age by shortening up the Scripture reading. Some churches have substituted movie clips for the reading of God’s word. I have heard sermons by good Reformed preachers where they did not read a text of Scripture but just got right into the sermon. Faithful churches are to have Word-saturated worship. The born-again person has an appetite for the Scriptures. He has a genuine interest in hearing from God, an eagerness for the Word.

What is your attitude toward hearing the word of God read? Do you get impatient? Does your mind wander? Or do you eagerly cling to every word as part of God’s love letter to his people? Brothers and sisters, we in the Christian church have access to the Holy Scriptures. This is a great privilege. It is not something that every man has. Some live in places where there is no Christian church. Some live

⁵ Westminster Confession of Faith 21.5

in places where there are no Scriptures in their own language. Some are brought up in false religions or countries where the Bible is prohibited. But *we* have access to the Holy Scriptures! Brothers and sisters, let not take this for granted but let us recommit ourselves to listen attentively to the word. “Thy words were found, and I did eat them; and thy word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of mine heart.” We have access to the Holy Scriptures, and this is a great privilege. Thirdly,

3. We know the justice of God.

Paul pulls no punches. He says, “those who dwell in Jerusalem, and their rulers, because they did not know Him, nor even the voices of the Prophets which are read every Sabbath, have fulfilled them in condemning Him. And though they found no cause for death in Him, they asked Pilate that He should be put to death.” Who is the “Him”? Paul has just spoken of “the word of this salvation.” This is a reference to his previous words “God raised up for Israel a Savior—Jesus.” The citizens of Jerusalem and their leaders “did not know Him.” What an indictment! Jesus himself said, “this is life eternal, that they might *know* thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent” (John 17:3). Life eternal is to know Christ! To not know Christ is to miss out on life eternal. The citizens of Jerusalem did not know Christ. Here he was, the Messiah of God, the one who came to seek and to save the lost and take them to heaven to be with himself. These were the covenant people, but they did not know Christ! Furthermore, these people did not know the Prophets which were read every Sabbath in the synagogue service. So what did they do? “Though they found no cause for death in Him, they asked Pilate that He should be put to death.” Here is an interesting phrase: “though they found no cause for death in Him.” This is legal language. It implies that the civil magistrate may only execute a man when there is a just cause for the death penalty. Though the civil government indeed bears the sword (Rom. 13:4), the word of God strictly limits whom the civil magistrate can lawfully put to death. A magistrate cannot lawfully put a person to death for just any reason—or for a trumped-up reason. Civil government’s primary duty is to protect innocent human life. The civil magistrate incurs guilt when he executes an innocent person. To execute an innocent person is an unjust use of civil authority.

Jesus was an innocent person, and the Roman governor had no authority to put him to death. No cause for death was found in him. Pilate himself acknowledged this: “I find no fault in this man.” That statement is recorded three times.⁶ The Jews had no legal reason to demand, “Let him be crucified, crucify him, crucify him!” The Roman overlords in Judah should never have allowed Jesus to be put to death. They had no just cause. It was a travesty of justice. Jesus was unjustly crucified, the Just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God. It was an injustice from

⁶ Luke 23:4, John 19:4, 6

man's perspective, but something required by God's justice in order to accomplish his purpose to save sinners. "Stricken, smitten, and afflicted, see him dying on the tree! ... Tell me, ye who hear him groaning, was there ever grief like his? Friends through fear his cause disowning, foes insulting his distress; many hands were raised to wound him, none would interpose to save; but the deepest stroke that pierced him was the stroke that Justice gave."⁷ When Jesus was crucified, the Father could not look upon his own dear Son, for he bore our sins in his own body on the tree. Christ "suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God." He, the just one, suffered and died for unjust sinners, that he might bring us to the Father. As he hung on the cross in agony, about to die, he cried out, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" He already knew the answer: he, the sinless one, was forsaken so that we, guilty, unworthy sinners, might never be forsaken but be acquitted at the final day and ushered into the presence of God eternally.

Yes, in the gospel we know the justice of God. His justice reaches to the heavens, exquisite in its beauty. God is not unjust—can never be unjust. He cannot allow a sinner into his holy presence, but he cannot exclude a sinner whose sins are washed away in Christ's precious blood, and who is covered by the perfect righteousness of Christ.

Sinner, you cannot save yourself. If you want to go to heaven you must come through Christ. "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all ... By his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities."⁸ We know the justice of God, and this is a great privilege.

Brothers and sisters, we are Christians, members of the body of Christ, the family of God. We, like the Jews to whom Paul preached, have received the gospel, the good news of salvation in Christ. We too have access to the Holy Scriptures, God's infallible word. We know the justice of God in Christ. These are great privileges, and with them come great responsibilities. Let us use them well. Amen!

⁷ Thomas Kelly, 1804 (*Trinity Psalter Hymnal* 342)

⁸ Isa. 53:6, 11