

HOW TO STRIKE IT “RICH”
ENCOUNTERING INCOMPARABLE RICHES
Ephesians 2:4-10

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A little over 100 years ago things were hard for Americans. Economic depression caused many banks and businesses to fail. The average family had a hard time making ends meet. It was about that time that someone discovered gold in Alaska. People by the thousands made their way to this treacherous northwest territory trying to strike it rich. If you have visited Skagway, Alaska, and taken a ride on the White Pass Railroad you have seen first hand the tremendous sacrifices people made searching for a richer life.

Perhaps there is something in all of us that wants to “strike it rich.” How else can one explain our compulsion with gambling, our obsession with the stock market, our insatiable search for more? A quick click on the Web will offer you numerous sites guaranteeing you the chance to get rich on the Internet.

Unfortunately, most of the people who got rich in the Alaska gold rush were not prospectors trying to better their family. They were promoters, con men, and self-proclaimed experts who were more than willing to take a person’s life savings for a tip that often proved to be false.

Over the next few weeks I’d like to talk about “striking it rich.” I want to lead us not on a gold rush, but on a soul rush, where we may experience the incomparable riches of God’s grace. I call us not to a con game but to the kindness of Christ Jesus—the one who satisfies our greatest hungers and quenches our deepest thirst. Or as Luther Bridges said over 100 years ago “Come let us feast on the riches of God’s grace.”

CONSIDER THE PREVENIENT GRACE OF GOD

Prevenient grace is the love of God that will not let us go.

Max Lucado tells the story of Maria, a single mother in Brazil trying to raise a family on a very limited income. Maria did the best she could, but it became evident that her oldest daughter, Christina, was hungering and thirsting for a better life. So, one day Christina caught a bus from their small village and headed for the big city. Maria knew Christina had little money. She also knew that being a beautiful teenage girl, she was destined for disaster. So, Maria went down to the drug store and had as many pictures taken of herself as she could afford. Then she caught a bus in search of her daughter. Once in Rio de Janeiro, Maria visited every bar and cheap hotel she could find searching for Christina. In phone booths and bathrooms Maria posted pictures of herself hoping against hope that Christina would see one. Out of pictures and low on hope, Maria went home.

Time passed. Then one day Christina stepped into the bathroom of a cheap hotel

and suddenly saw the picture of her mother on the mirror. Christina took the picture and found written on the back these words: “Whatever you have done, whatever you have become, it doesn’t matter. Come home.” God is like Maria. He loves us with an everlasting love and searches for us with reckless abandon.

Prevenient grace is love that is unanticipated, unexpected, surprising.

What some people call coincidences, I call God-incidences. I was preaching last Sunday among the ruins of Ancient Corinth where Paul spent a good deal of time. As we searched for shade and a few benches at which to hold the worship service, we came upon a couple of Asian ladies having lunch. We asked their permission to invade their privacy with a Christian Worship Service. They readily agreed to our request. Then we discovered they both attended a Methodist church in Singapore. In fact, one was the pastor. “I guess you are God’s way of making sure we don’t miss worship today,” joked one of the ladies.

Prevenient grace is free in all and for all.

‘Free in all and for all’—that’s how our founder John Wesley described it. God does not elect some of his children to be saved and others to be damned. God does not love us every now and then. He loves us with a love that won’t end. And He loves us each and every one, equally the same.

CONSIDER THE JUSTIFYING GRACE OF GOD

Some call this saving grace or converting grace. It is the means by which we are made right with God. Justifying grace is the love that sets us free.

Sandy and I have both been stopped by the Brentwood police for speeding in front of the church. I got a ticket costing me \$118.00. She got a warning costing her nothing. I got justice. She got a pardon. I paid the price. She was set free.

So we sometimes sing:

Mercy there was great and grace was free
Pardon there was multiplied for me.
There my burdened soul found liberty,
At Calvary.

We cannot make wrong-right, pain-gain, transgression-triumph, or trespassing on another’s personhood anything but a tragedy. But we can be forgiven. We can be pardoned. We can be set free. We can be saved. Justifying grace is love that brings new life. We can be born again. We can have new life in Christ.

Just as we had little to do with our physical birth, so our spiritual birth is not something we accomplish, but new life we receive. In Ephesians 2:8 Paul says, *For it is by grace that you are saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.*

The Bible is explicit on this subject — Sin kills us.

We Are Estranged From God. Adam and Eve hide in the Garden. The last person they want to see is God coming to visit them.

We Have Deserted Our Ideals. “There are no sadder words of tongue or pen, than those which say ‘I might have been.’”

We Have Lost Our Will. *For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do* (Romans 7:15). Who in their right mind has not experienced these woes of St. Paul?

Christ Saves Us. Paul says in Ephesians 2:4: *But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ, even when we were dead in our transgressions.*

Charles Wesley wrote “He speaks, and listening to His voice, new life the dead receive.” You can be alive, abundantly alive, fully alive, completely alive, eternally alive. Life is God’s precious gift to us.

The Choice is Ours. The love of God is such that he will not force himself upon us. That’s why I cannot believe in the doctrine of universalism—the notion that the grace of God saves everyone. Grace is not sentimental. It is not cheap. It is resistible. While it is the will of God for all to be saved, our freedom is such that we can choose our own destiny.

Which will it be for you?
Deal or no deal?
Repentance or resistance?
Salvation or stubbornness?

CONSIDER THE SANCTIFYING GRACE OF GOD

Wesley compared grace to a house in which we live. In this analogy prevenient grace is the porch. Justifying grace is the door. Sanctifying grace moves through all the rooms of the house until Christ is welcomed everywhere.

A little boy fell out of bed one night. When his mother went to comfort him, she asked what happened. The frightened little boy said, “I guess I fell asleep too close to where I got in.”

It takes grace to relieve our fears. It takes grace to get through the dangers, toils and snares. It takes grace to put on the mind of Christ, to see as Christ saw, to think as Christ thought, to love as Christ loved.

So Wesley liked to ask the question—Are you going on to perfection? Are you earnestly striving for it? Do you hope to be made perfect in this life?

Christian Perfection is not pride—it is ultimate humility.
Christian Perfection is not accomplishment—it is all grace.
Christian Perfection is not arrival—it is constant growth.

What is perfect for a 4-year-old is hardly perfect for a 40-year-old and is not even admissible for a 60-year-old.

Christian perfection according to Wesley is “living into the grace we have and believing grace to be sufficient for every need.”

We come into contact with this radical grace of God when we:

Pray without ceasing.

Study the Bible without prejudice.

Receive the Sacraments devotedly.

Fast from the things of the world regularly.

Align ourselves with some group that will hold us accountable.

Grace—it’s all about grace, folks. Are you feasting on the riches of God’s amazing Grace? You can. In fact, you can start right now.