

**The Gift of Restoration, by Daniel H. Kuhn, Jr. A1051127**  
**1 Corinthians 1:3-9 and Mark 13:32-37**  
**Elon Community Church, United Church of Christ, 27 November, 2005**

We often decry the premature Christmas displays in the stores. Back in September, we saw employees putting up a display of Christmas trees. Cynically, we say that stores are simply out to make money. After all, fully fifty percent of a business's profits are made during the Christmas shopping season. Our neighbors' homes are decorated, and this church was decorated last Sunday afternoon. It is clear that people get excited about preparing for Christmas, and not simply because we want presents. Getting presents does not fully explain adults' excitement.

We adults get excited over Christmas because we genuinely yearn to be close to God! Christmas symbolizes in such a powerful way, God's reaching out and touching the creation. We want that. We want God to be with us. We want to know that God is near. We want our relationship with God to be restored!

This yearning for restoration is not new with us. The Psalmist says, "Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved."<sup>1</sup> With the destruction of the nation Israel and with the deportation of its citizens into foreign lands, the people thought surely, God had turned God's back on them. If their nation and fortunes could be restored, they would know that their relationship with God would have been restored. It was unfortunate that it took such a tragedy for people to realize that they had turned their backs on God.

We must realize that our relationship with God is also broken. It is not what it should be. We must also realize that God did not break the relationship.

The history of Israel is one of broken relationships with God. The nation was saved from Pharaoh's army. Within days, the former slaves complained that the food was better back in Egypt. The nation prospered under Kings David and Solomon. This prosperity brought jealousy, greed, and division. The people forgot they were God's special servant people. They made military treaties with their pagan neighbors, cheated the poor, mistreated widows and orphans, and watched the numbers of homeless grow.

Time and again, God, through prophets, would call people back into relationship. Finally, God sent God's son, but God's own people abused and crucified him.

The church does not easily recognize its broken relationships. Paul told the church at Corinth that their relationship with God was damaged because of their "jealousy and quarreling and behaving according to human inclinations!"<sup>2</sup>

Through the years, humans, in their struggle for power and authority, have split the church along national and denominational lines. There was the split between Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches, between the Roman Catholic and Lutheran and Reformed churches, then the Anglican split, then the Methodist and Congregational splits, and the Baptists have split and splintered like toothpicks.

Today, denominations are being split by the ways in which Christians interpret the Bible. Episcopal, Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, and United Church of Christ denominations are breaking apart because some members dogmatically exclude gays and lesbians, while other

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<sup>1</sup>Psalm 80:3

<sup>2</sup>1 Corinthians 3:3

members say that the church, as a place of healing and a place to meet God, is open to all people.

As we build any barriers between groups, we build them between us and God. We need restoration. We individual Christians often do not recognize our broken relationships with God. They are broken by a belief in self-sufficiency and rugged individualism, the belief that our wealth is the result of our own work, the belief that we don't need other people, the belief that one more acquisition will bring us salvation, and the belief that we can do the judging better than God.

Our relationships are broken by our trying control and manipulate God into doing what we want God to do. Our relationship with God is broken by not making enough time for God. How many days of ours do we never speak God's name except to cuss or exclaim, "Oh, my God!"

How many days do we not have enough time for doing God's work here on earth? Not enough time to visit a lonely friend or relative?

So, we long for Christmas. We long for restoration of our relationship with God.

Today is an opportunity to restore our relationship with God. God has already reached out to us. The gift of restoration has been given once again in Jesus Christ. We need to reach out and accept the gift of restoration. We do that by recognizing our utter and ultimate dependence on God. Paul wrote to restore the broken church at Corinth with the words, "For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building."<sup>3</sup> This requires an openness on our part to allow God to work in us and through us.

In response to God's gift of restoration to us, we make gifts of gratitude to God. In doing so, we become restored, because we are recognizing the importance of God in our lives.

We can not buy restoration. We can not pay for a relationship with God. It is not for sale, but our giving to the church, to the work of the body of Christ, is a recognition of our willingness to receive that gift of restoration. We give because God first gave to us.

Some of you have heard this "Parable of the Two Seas," by Bruce Barton.<sup>4</sup> It bears repeating. There are two seas in the Land of Israel. One is fresh and fish are in it. Splashes of green adorn its banks. Trees spread their branches over it, and stretch out their thirsty roots to sip of its healing waters. Along its shore children play. The River Jordan makes this sea with sparkling water from the hills. So it laughs in the sunshine. And people build their homes near to it and birds their nests; and every kind of life is happier because it is there. The River Jordan flows on south into another sea. Here there is no splash of fish, no fluttering leaf, no song of birds, no children's laughter. Travelers choose another route unless on urgent business. The air hangs heavy about its waters and neither human nor beast nor fowl will drink. What makes this mighty difference in these seas? Not the River Jordan. It empties the same good water into both. Not the soil in which they lie; not the country, 'round about. This is the difference: The Sea of Galilee receives but does not keep the Jordan. For every drop that flows into it another drop flows out. The giving and receiving go in equal measure. The other sea is shrewder, hoarding its income jealously. It will not be tempted into any generous impulse. Every drop it gets it keeps. The Sea of Galilee gives and lives. The other sea gives nothing. It is named the Dead Sea.

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<sup>3</sup> 1Corinthians 3:9

<sup>4</sup>"There are Two Seas," by Bruce Barton, in *McCall's*, 1928