I am an unashamed “dumpster diver.” You cannot believe some of the things I have found in dumpsters: brand new vacuums, several hundred collectible Christmas ornaments, adjustable metal shelving that fills my closets and garage, a collector comic book, pieces of furniture, and much more. I don’t always keep what I find; Sometimes, I sell it. I am not exaggerating when I say that I have made over $2500 selling things that others were throwing away.

Now, it’s awesome to make money from things people are throwing away, but it isn’t my biggest incentive in dumpster-diving. I am most driven by my passion to reclaim things. I hate to see good things go to waste; It kills me. When I see an old building that is abandoned and falling into disrepair, I want to restore it...every single time. I think about what the original builder of that house planned for it, and how it would kill him/her to see it falling apart. It’s where my brain goes. When I pull something out of the dumpster, I am “saving” it from a landfill or a fire. But that is never enough for me. I want to get that rescued thing back into use. I think, “surely there is someone who could use this. I don’t want to “rescue” something from the landfill and then just have it rot away in my garage. I want to see it put to use.

God has a far greater passion for “restoration” than I do. His great passion is to restore broken people. He wants to “save” them. Some have the idea, however, that God’s goal is to simply save people from destruction, save them from the “landfill” if you would. There is a fire of judgment for sin, and God saves us from the “fire.” Salvation, as some see it, is simply saving people from the landfill. But God has more in mind. Salvation, as God sees it, is restoring you to your “original” use and condition. You were made to do good and make a difference. God wants to see that happen. A part of salvation is God rescuing you from destruction, but that is just the start. The other part of salvation is God returning you to usefulness. Paul, writing in the Bible, puts it this way:

Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose. (The Bible, Philippians 2:12-13, NIV)

“Continue to work out your salvation.” God’s rescue of you includes ongoing restoration. Salvation is an ongoing process; it is a restoration project. You and I were originally made to love God and people, but we’ve messed that all up. In our broken condition, we tend to resist or replace God and we tend to love people selectively. It is a huge restoration project to change that. Question: Who does the work of restoration, God or you? Here is Paul’s answer: “continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you. Both you and God are the contractors. Salvation is us working out what God is working in.
I want to be very clear about this, however: It all starts with God. Salvation is impossible apart from Him. There is a part of salvation that you and I cannot possibly do on our own. We cannot make ourselves good. We can only live out what He does inside us. God starts the whole restoration project. God chose to take the judgment of our sin on Himself. God extends grace and forgiveness to us. We no longer live under the weight and condemnation of our broken choices; we can now live out of hope and freedom. He gives us insight as to the kinds of choices that are good and healthy. Through Jesus, He gives an example of how to live the good life. These are the things that only He can do. What falls to us, then, is to live out the good life He has begun in us. We put into action on the outside what God has done in us on the inside. Our work is to take what God is doing on the inside and put it into action. It is our work to act on what we believe.

The restoration that God wants to do in us starts on the inside and works out. God’s restoration work is thorough. Here is where I am different from God. My idea of restoring something is making it work again or making it look better. You can tell this just by looking at my Toyota Previa van. When the driver’s side door was damaged, I just got a door from the junkyard and threw it on. Never mind that it had a roll-up window and the other door had an electric window. Never mind that my replacement door was maroon and the rest of the car was blue. It’s not hard to find cheap blue spray paint, as anyone who has seen my car can tell you. When it comes to restoration, my core values are fast and easy. I am happy to do a surface job on my car, just as long as it drives.

My friend, Mark, is different. A couple of years ago, he showed me a car he had just bought, a Cutlass Supreme from the 70’s. He told me he was going to restore it. I’m thinking, “it runs fine and it looks nice.” That’s all the “restoration” I’m interested in. That’s not Mark. Two weeks ago, Mark showed me this same Cutlass Supreme. It was absolutely gorgeous. I am sure it didn’t look that good when it was brand new! He opened the hood. Every single part, no matter how significant, was cleaned and painted. He talked about the work he did to find original parts. There is not a single part of that car he did not restore.

God restores people like Mark restores cars. God has no interest in a surface job. God’s restoration goes far deeper. He doesn’t just want me to do good; He wants that good to flow from a changed heart. God wants me to choose to do good because it’s right. He wants me to do good as a response to the grace He extends to me. He wants me to do good because it’s what He first created me to do. He wants me to do good based on my heart and not my circumstances. God wants to shape goodness in me that will last regardless of how my circumstances.

God doesn’t just want us to become people who do good; That’s surface restoration. He wants to restore deep inside us a heart to do good. He wants us to be people who do good whether we are required to or not, people who avoid evil whether there is a consequence or not, people who do good whether people are watching or not. Paul says that he wants the people at the church in Philippi to do good whether he’s there or not. He wants them to live what they believe. He gives a specific example:
Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life—in order that I may boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor for nothing. (The Bible, Philippians 2:14-16, NIV)

He continues making his point. Put what you believe into action. Live out the good that God has begun inside you. Live in a way that is blameless and pure. I think back to Mark’s Cutlass Supreme; It was flawless. It was stunning. It’s what God wants others to see in us, people beautifully restored by His grace. Our work is to live out what He is doing deep under the hood. Our work is to put God’s heart into action.

Paul gives a real specific example of this beauty and good we should live out. He reminds his friends in Philippi: “Don’t be negative, divisive people. That’s not the heart of God. That’s not the way of Jesus. It’s not consistent with what you believe. It’s not what you were made to do. Complaining is selfish and ugly: “I’m not getting my way, so I’m going to whine.” Arguing is ugly and selfish. It comes from the broken desires to control or look better than others. That’s not the heart of Jesus, and Paul reminds them that it has no positive impact on our world.

Paul uses the image of stars on a dark night. You can’t miss the stars. God wants us to live out His heart fully, in a way that cannot be missed by others. Why is that? Because God wants to restore them too. God wants people to come to Him for restoration work. (By the way, God does not force His restoration work on anyone. We have to come and ask; that is a part we must do.) Christians that live out the goodness of God are hard to miss, like Mark’s Cutlass Supreme. People in our world need to see in Christians the beauty of grace and humility and compassion. When they do, they are far more likely to come to God to restore them too. Put it this way: “If Mark and I drive into a car show and tell people we can restore their cars, who are they going to listen to?” People need to see what we believe, not just hear it.

The television show, “House,” is a story built around a brilliant doctor who is egotistical, abrasive, and obnoxious. He also lives with severe pain, which leads to an addiction to pain killers. In one episode, he resorts to stealing pain-killers, which puts him in the cross-hairs of an aggressive prosecutor. True to form, House doesn’t back down, until he realizes that he may be in more trouble than he first thought.

There is this moment when he barges into the office of the prosecutor, who fully expects to again be berated and abused. Instead, House walks up to him and soberly says that he is sorry, going on to explain how his unrelenting pain clouded his judgment, that he shouldn’t have acted as he did. When House finishes, the prosecutor eyes him for the longest time and then says something like: “I can’t imagine how hard it was for you to say that….even though you didn’t mean a single
word of it.” He then adds these words: “I’ve never been interested in what you say, only in what you do.”

That is the real world. People “listen” to our actions more than our words. Words really are “cheap.” They are easy. Our choices reflect what we really believe. So, I ask you today: “Do your actions match what you believe?” Many of us in this room would say, for instance, that we believe Jesus is God. Do we live that way, however? Do we take His instructions seriously? Do we seek to treat others like He treated them? This is something of what Paul means when he says to “work out your salvation.” Live what you believe.

Paul then mentions two people who live out what they believe:

*I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, that I also may be cheered when I receive news about you. I have no one else like him, who takes a genuine interest in your welfare. For everyone looks out for his own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. But you know that Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel. I hope, therefore, to send him as soon as I see how things go with me. And I am confident in the Lord that I myself will come soon. But I think it is necessary to send back to you Epaphroditus, my brother, fellow worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger, whom you sent to take care of my needs. For he longs for all of you and is distressed because you heard he was ill. Indeed he was ill, and almost died. But God had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me, to spare me sorrow upon sorrow. Therefore I am all the more eager to send him, so that when you see him again you may be glad and I may have less anxiety. Welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honor men like him, because he almost died for the work of Christ, risking his life to make up for the help you could not give me.* (The Bible, Philippians 2:19-30, NIV)

I’ve mentioned that Paul is under house arrest and will be going to trial soon. He does not know how the case will go. He does not know if he will see his friends in Philippi or not, but he is concerned about them. He’s thinking about sending a couple of guys to care for them in his absence. What you immediately see about these guys is that they live what they believe. These are guys who are taking what God is doing on the inside and putting it into action.

Here is Paul’s take on Timothy: He has proved himself. Most people look out for themselves. Not Timothy. He lives out the heart of Jesus. He is more interested in serving than being served. If Paul can’t come and meet the needs of his friends in Philippi, he wants to send someone who will. Timothy has proven he is more than talk. He is a true servant.

Paul then mentions another guy he wants to send to look out for them, a guy named Epaphroditus (one of the great names in the Bible, by the way!).

His was an interesting story. Apparently, he was a member of the church in Philippi. Paul, after starting the church in Philippi, left to start churches in other
communities. But the church in Philippi loved Paul and was committed to keeping up with him and meeting his needs. When they discovered that he was imprisoned in Rome, they wanted to send him money or food to help meet his needs. FedEx was not an option then; They needed a personal courier. Apparently, they wanted someone who would stay and help care for some of Paul’s needs. Guess who volunteered? Epaphroditus.

He sacrificed to serve Paul. You would have to think that he left his job. He took a lengthy trip to visit Paul. Perhaps it was on this long trip that he became desperately ill. He almost died in order to care for Paul’s needs. He had a deep heart to care for others. You can see it in his actions.

Here’s where I see it. Paul says this: “Epaphroditus was especially concerned when you heard he was sick.” That’s unusual. When I’m sick, I’m usually thinking about me, about what I need. It’s nice to get some sympathy. Epaphroditus gets sick and he’s concerned that his illness will worry people. This guy is the real deal. That’s why Paul wants to send him back. When you can’t be there to help someone you care about, you want to send someone who will care as much as you do. Epaphroditus didn’t talk about serving others; He lived it.

Is that you? When it comes to following Jesus, is there more talk than walk? Let me ask it this way. If you had a neighbor or friend at school who became disillusioned with his life and began to believe he needed something different in his life—more hope, more peace, more compassion, more purpose. If he was thinking of someone to talk to, would your name come to mind? Would the way you live out your faith catch his attention? In living what you believe, are you more like my Previa or Mark’s Cutlass?

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