



“Take the Upgrade”

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He destined us for adoptions through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of His will, to the praise of His glorious grace that He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace that He lavished on us. (Ephesians 1:4-8)

Family Stone is a movie that follows the holiday misadventures of the Stone family in a small New England town when the eldest son brings home his uptight girlfriend with the intention of proposing to her with a cherished heirloom ring. But the family is unwelcoming. Overwhelmed by the hostile reception of this family, the girlfriend begs her sister to join her for emotional support, triggering further complications.

I was moved by all the unexpected interactions, and later the new connections and relationships, that in turn brought healing to the family despite significant loss. It is always this image of family—with all its complications—that compels me to wonder anew at the radical and beautiful possibilities of church.

We begin this series delving into the letter to the Ephesians for six weeks to explore these wonderful images of church. It is a letter that was widely circulated and therefore clearly an important document for the early Christians. It reveals some of the struggles of a burgeoning community that might be familiar even to us today—distrust, prejudice, judgment. The Apostle Paul understood the need for the community to focus on developing authentic relationships rooted in love. Being the body of Christ—united—was important for the ministry, but it was also an imperative. It was God’s purpose for the church in spreading the gospel. They needed to come together, not for the sake of being some kind of social club, but to fulfil God’s will. But what would heal the divisions among the people?

Some of the letter could feel moralistic and prescriptive. But most of it is meant to be descriptive and illuminate the possibilities of the fullness of life in Christ, specifically, in community. The letter bursts at the seams with praise, like waves crashing over each other,

eager to get to shore. The letter begins with the simple promise that by grace God adopted us, that is, gave us an upgrade, to be brothers and sisters together. By grace. God's unearned, unmerited love is what unites us and binds us together. We never know when it will enter our lives. It's always there; always available, we just never know when the Grace of the Kingdom of God will break in upon us. And it does—over and over again. Sometimes, out of the clear blue, when we least expect, grace happens. Our spirits are lifted. Grace is like having our seats upgraded to first-class when we're flying. When we experience God's grace, it's like flying first-class.

Have you ever flown first-class? I've only had the privilege a few times. The thing I remember about first-class seating is the amount of room you have. The seats feel half again as wide as those back in the business class or economy class sections. The other amenities in first class are awesome.

I think flying first-class, especially when I didn't pay for it, was fun. I also think flying first-class is a metaphor for the kind of life God wants us to live in Christ. The Apostle Paul talks about how God has "lavished the riches of His grace on us," and to me that equates to being upgraded to first-class.

You see, in the world's eyes we're all pretty worthless unless the world can get something from us. But in God's eyes we are all God's children. And God doesn't really want anything more than to "lavish God's love, and the riches of God's grace, upon us." God offers us an upgrade.

I learned from Pastor Billy Stratton that he was flying to a continuing education event a few years ago and was sitting in the first row of the economy section where he could look into the first-class section. As he was watching the passengers board, he noticed an older couple in first-class. They were all smiles and friendliness and looked like the kind of people everybody would want to get to know. He also noticed a couple of soldiers who were just coming back from overseas. When this couple saw them, their faces lit up; they stood up, engaged to soldiers in conversation and then exchanged their first-class tickets for the soldier's economy class tickets.

The soldiers had the most surprised look on their faces and when they realized it wasn't a joke smiled from ear to ear. He said, the older couple had huge grins on their faces too as they went back to the economy seats. As they walked by, he heard the man say to his wife, "I love doing that."

This preacher said he couldn't help himself so, once the flight took off, he went back, introduced himself and asked why. Now here's the cool part. They both acted a little sheepish and shy but had grins on their faces and said, "Oh, it was nothing. But it sure made those soldier's day, didn't it?"

And then he explained, “We’re not bragging, but we do that all the time. We have been so blessed. We love to travel and we love blessing other people. We purposely buy first-class tickets for every trip so we can give them away to service men and women, a young mother traveling with her child, an elderly couple on their 50th anniversary trip. There was this newlywed couple we heard counting pennies for lunch one time, trying go see her grandmother who was sick. It brings them so much joy. And us, too. But mostly it honors God because we've been blessed to be a blessing and that’s one of the ways we try to be a blessing.”

That couple was living a first-class life in Christ. Every day they were flying first-class by upgrading others into first-class. And that’s how grace works.

Let me give you another example of what I mean by this idea of grace and being upgraded by describing a scene from Victor Hugo’s novel, *Les Misérables*.

In this scene, down and out ex-convict Jean Valjean has found lodging in the home of a kindly bishop. Over dinner, Valjean, recounting the harshness of his imprisonment, blames God as unjust. He looks at the priest, thanks him for the food and the bed, and then exclaims in sarcasm, “And in the morning, I will be a new man!”

That night, he has nightmares about prison. He wakes in a panic, and decides that he must do whatever it takes to ensure that he never goes back.

Valjean creeps into the dining room, and starts to steal the bishop’s silverware. The bishop hears a noise and comes out to investigate. Valjean tries to hide, but when the bishop rounds the corner, they are standing face to face. Angry at being caught, Valjean knocks the bishop to the ground and flees.

The next day, the police arrive at the church with Valjean in tow. The bishop approaches and tells Valjean that he is very angry with him. The captain laughs and tells the bishop that he found Valjean making off with the bishop’s silver and that, when asked, Valjean argued that the bishop had given it to him. The bishop replies, “Yes, of course I gave him the silverware. But why didn’t you take the candlesticks? That was very foolish.” He sends his housekeeper to fetch the candlesticks, telling her to hurry as Valjean “has lost a lot of time.”

After dismissing the officers, Valjean appears thunderstruck. He can’t understand what has just happened to him. The priest hands him back his bag with the silverware and the candlesticks inside. He pulls back Valjean's hood so that he can look him in the eye, and says, “Don't ever forget, you’ve promised to become a new man.”

Valjean, stunned, asks, “Why are you doing this?” The bishop tells him that he no longer belongs to evil, “with this silver I’ve bought your soul. I’ve ransomed you from fear and hatred.

And now I give you back to God.”

Jean Valjean, was a thief and newly released ex-convict with a yellow passport during the time of the French Revolution, which meant he had no hope and no future. He received grace at the time of his greatest need. The Bishop took a risk and gave him a gift. But in so doing, Jean Valjean’s life was changed, forever. He received a real “upgrade” to the first-class life. He truly began flying first-class because he truly became a new man through Christ.

The rest of the plot is about Valjean trying to live into the image of being adopted by God, and to be like Christ during political revolution and his own past catching up to him.

Because of the “upgrade” Valjean experienced through the Bishop, he could reach out to others and fly first-class by living a first-class life in Christ.

This is what God desires for each of us. God in Christ offers each of us an upgraded life. Just like the Bishop, Christ ransomed our souls and has given us back to God. Not because God had to; not because we did enough good deeds to earn it; not because we’re the best and the brightest but simply because God loves us and because God can.

Often, we are quick to throw away those things, especially those people, who are damaged or do not meet our standards and expectations. Thanks be to God that Jesus is different or most of us would have found ourselves on the trash heap a long time ago.

Jesus came to reach out to the least, the lost, the lonely. Jesus came to redeem and upgrade those of us who are “banged up a little.” Jesus came for the damaged and the disenfranchised. He came to lift the weak and the outcasts. He spent His time among the rejected. He took the wretched of the world and healed them.

Jesus took the orphans of the world and made them Sons and Daughters of God; Brothers and Sisters with Christ, joint heirs of God’s Kingdom. Jesus took the powerless, and made them a priestly kingdom. He loved them and He loves us, all because He can.

Jesus knows that every one of us, no matter how banged up our lives are, every one of us are destined to become Sons and Daughters of God. And so, He took our place. Because He loves us, He redeemed us. He exchanged tickets with us so we could fly first-class. Why? Because He could.

God has “lavished the riches of His grace on us.” Our challenge is to accept the gift of God’s grace, not squander it. Our challenge is to live a Christ-like life, a first-class life, an upgraded life for the sake of others. But it’s up to us. The offer is there.