

The Things We Get to Do

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell



Ephesians 3:7-21

In your life and in mine there is a dividing line between what you feel you have to do and what you feel you get to do.

Somewhere back to when I was a young teenager I remember a time when my father invited me to go see a movie. It was some kind of adventure movie but I can remember nothing more about it than that. What I can remember is that I was a young teenager and I had copped an attitude. An attitude such that I was not incredibly appreciative that my father wanted to take me to a movie. I know that this kind of attitude is something that none of you ever experienced in your teenage years. So with this attitude I made it known through body language and facial expressions and general demeanor that my dad was kind of lucky that I was assenting to go to this movie with him. Clearly, this was something I had to do. My father caught onto this attitude and at one point leading up to the day we were to go out of frustration he suggested that maybe it would be a good idea if we didn't go. "Oh no," I said in a somewhat martyred tone, "oh no, we'll go." My father bit his lip. But so as to sweeten the pot he offered for me to invite a friend to go along with us. I accepted the offer and one day while walking home from school with my best friend --- I told him that my dad wanted to take me to this movie and that I kind of had to go and would he want to go with us? Now my friend came from a home where his dad did not invite him to do anything. His dad came home each day and sat down with his twelve pack of beer and drank until he went to bed. So when I told my friend about this movie to which I "had" to go with my father imagine my early teenage surprise when my friend said, "Oh man, do you mean it? I saw the previews on TV; it looks like a great movie. You're dad is so cool to want to take you." In an instant I felt my adolescent attitude beginning to evaporate. This movie I felt I

had to go to --- was for somebody else something they felt they got to go to. And isn't it funny how these things work ... now that my dad is 8 years gone and that story is nearly 50 years old, the movie title is no longer up here (brain), but the time with dad is deep in here (heart).

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It's true in so many circles of our life. Sit down with a friend and complain about how you have to schlep your children all over the place from soccer game to orthodontist to the library for research and after you've gone on a while ... you realize that the person sitting across from you doesn't have any children and desperately wishes it weren't so --- and while you "have" to cart your children around ... she would put it another way. She would say: You get to cart your children around.

You crawl out of bed in the morning to go to work long before the sun has even begun to think about rising -- and you lament over what you have to do. You have to get up ... you have to make your way to work ... you have to meet that client you don't particularly want to meet ... you have to get on a plane at the end of the day and not see your family until the end of the week. A little later as you are backing down your driveway still in the predawn darkness your headlights beam onto your next door neighbor's house and you remember that he lost his job four months ago --- and you wonder if he is looking out his window at you pulling out of your driveway and saying, "Look what he gets to do. He gets to go to work today."

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So it has been 500 years since a young German monk took it upon himself to nail onto the door of the Wittenberg Cathedral 95 theses -- 95 protestations about the Church's reading or misreading of the Bible. Little did that young priest, Martin Luther, know that when he pounded his nails into that door, he was pounding a crack into the history of western civilization. The world, and certainly the Church,

would never be the same. Human beings very view of God would never be the same. A dam burst in 1517 -- and the Christian sea spread across Europe, and later the world, in a flood of tributaries each with its own distinct understanding of the nature of God -- Father, Son and Holy Spirit -- and how best to worship God and respond to God. Tomes and tomes have been written about the Reformation and Hmingi and Will Browne have been teaching an excellent class on the history of the Reformation. And so of course one sermon would never suffice to touch upon all the streams that flowed -- including our own Scottish/Presbyterian tributary. Just one drive around town to see the Lutheran Church, and the Episcopal Church, and the Baptist Church and the Methodist Church and the Congregational Church would be lesson enough as to how significant a movement the Reformation was. Even the Catholic Church in many ways changed as a result of this great break.

And I suppose if there was any one idea -- any one reading of Scripture -- that cracked the dam of Christian thought and practice -- it was Martin Luther's claim, Martin Luther's reading of the Apostle Paul -- that we are saved by grace and not by works. "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God -- not the result of works so that no one may boast." Saved by grace alone. Sola gratia.

For 1500 years the Church had little by little been imposing upon her people this notion that if you really wanted to be sure of being saved you had to pay more money, put in more time, say more prayers,

confess more sins -- only in that way would you know of your salvation -- and the salvation of those you loved. But Luther pounded on the door and said, Sola gratia. We are saved by grace and grace alone.

Which is to say that we get to live life not with any sense of what we have to do -- but with every sense of what we get to do. The Reformation drew a dividing line between what it meant to be in relationship with God. And that life in God, life with Christ, was not about what we had to do, but was about what we get to do.

Because you see it was the Reformation that helped civilization to see that from the very beginning of existence life is all about gift. We live our lives out of giftedness. Not out of guilt, not out of groveling, not out of grumbling over what we have to do -- life is lived out of giftedness. Life is lived out of an appreciation for what gifts we've been given. And that means going back to the beginning of your life and seeing that the treasure you were given in your body and soul you made absolutely no contribution to. You did not pick your brain, you did not pick your personality, you did not pick your IQ, you did not pick your talents, you did not pick your ability and capacity for employment. None of that you had anything to do with. You were not consulted. Pure gift. Sola gratia. Grace alone. Whatever life you live you live out of giftedness. And whatever life you and I live in eternity, Luther and Calvin and Zwingli said -- we live again out of giftedness. Our temporal life and our eternal life -- pure gift. Sola gratia. In other words, (and I hate to tell you this), you are a freeloader.

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You are a freeloader.

I hope that gets your attention what I just said.

You are a freeloader. You got what you didn't pay for.

That's the first half of the story, according to the Reformation. But the second half of what the Reformation said is that joy comes – real joy comes – when you recognize your giftedness – the giftedness of your life and everything about your life – including the eternity of your life – when you recognize the giftedness of your life – and all of a sudden life becomes not a matter of what you have to do, but a matter of what you get to do. I not only get to live, but I get to live in response to the giver.

A freeloader takes without giving. A joyful child of God receives the gift and then says, "Look what I get to do. I get to live in response. I get to employ the gift. I get to show my gratitude."

And here is the amazing thing – in this amazing life of "get to" and not "have to" – there ain't nobody who is here to tell you what you have to do. No preacher. No teacher. No parent. No child. No TV evangelist. You are born with the freedom to do what you will with what you have.

Paul says, "Of this good news I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given me by the working of his power." Of this good news ... of this grace alone ... of this sola gratia ... I have become a servant. Oh, not because I have to, but because I get to.

The story is told of two young girls who were given the chance along with their parents to visit the famous opera singer Beverly Sills before her performance at the Metropolitan Opera. And so after a brief visit and a picture, the father said, "OK girls we better go, Ms. Sills has to sing tonight." Almost immediately Beverly Sills replied, "No, I don't have to sing tonight." "Really?" said the father, "But the program says you're singing tonight." "No," said the star, "no, I don't have to sing tonight." "But the program. Is this a misprint?" "No. No. I don't HAVE to sing tonight. No. I GET to sing tonight. I GET to stand before a hall of people and I GET to use my voice like few others

get to. No, my friend, I will never have to sing. I will always get to sing."

So can I get personal with you? 500 years ago a monk pounded a bunch of statements on the door of a church – and the result of it, 500 years later, is a place and a people like the one we have right here. A place we call "church". And you know ever since I was a baby I got to come to a place called church. And it was at this place called church that I was told that God loved me unconditionally. God loved me into being. God loves me into living. And God will love me until the end of time. Church was where I came to be reminded that my life was all about the love of God. Receiving it and giving it. Not because I had to – but because I got to. And church was where I got to go – and I got to sing!! – not because I had to or because I had a good voice – but because I got to. I got to sing to the Lord a joyful song. Church was the place I got to go to pray and to listen and read the good story – of Jesus and his love. I got to go to Sunday School and youth group – where you could have good clean fun. A place to go to so that I wasn't other places doing stupid things. Church was the place I got to go to find out that life wasn't just about you. Life was about your neighbor. Life was about folks who didn't get the same cards dealt to them as were dealt to you. And that life wasn't about how many cards you had in your hand, but how many cards everybody had in their hand. Church was where we got to go in order to laugh with those who laugh and weep with those who weep. Church was where you got to go to figure out really what God wanted to do with your life.

Oh, of course, there were those times when like that movie – I felt more like I had to go than I got to go. So when I was in ninth grade, during the height of the Cold War, and my parents took me behind the iron curtain into the heart of the Soviet Union – Moscow and Leningrad – and my dad made a point to walk me up to all these beautiful churches to show me how they were boarded up and locked and empty – because there was no freedom of religion. And don't you ever, ever, ever, take what you do on Sunday mornings for granted. Because you know religion dies when it's something you have to do. Right?

Which makes me wonder why religion is dying in America. At least Christianity. It baffles me – unless this is of course what you think you have to do. That church is somewhere where you have to go. And money is something you feel you have to give. And time is something you feel you have to sacrifice. But that's missing the whole point. Right?

No, we get to be a part of a church that wants to make a difference. We get to worship freely and sing joyfully. We get to study our Bibles. We get to hand out food and tutor children. We get to build Palms Centers where the next generation of kids will come and learn that God loves them without question or condition. We get to partner with missionaries across the world in dangerous places. We get to hear the pastor say that next year is going to be a huge challenge for us because we are going to try to do more than we have ever tried to do with our facilities and our ministries. And we get to wonder what more can I give? What more can I do and give to make sure that religion doesn't die on this corner. But grows and thrives and changes people's lives. Sola gratia. Grace alone. It's what I started with and it's what I'll end with – and life gets to be about how I live with it in between.

500 years ago --- bang, bang, bang it went up on that door. Saved by grace. Sola gratia. 500 years. And here we are saying it again. Why? Because it never gets old. Good news never gets old. And we'll never get old either – if every morning we wake up and take in the gift again – and say, "What do I get to do today!"



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October 29, 2017


Church of the Palms

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