

Date: March 15, 2020

Scripture: Romans 5:1-11

Title: RECEIVE A NEW LEGACY

We're about two months away from high school and college graduation season. It's a very exciting and stressful time for students, teachers and parents. Our prayers are with all our young people as they make the move into jobs or college or some new chapter of their lives.

There's an online company called BrandYourself that claims it has the perfect graduation gift for high school and college students. It's called the "Student Makeover." It's not a beauty and grooming service. It's an online service for cleaning up your social media profiles. For \$99, the company will scour all your social media profiles like Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, etc. and remove what it calls, "risky online references to sex, alcohol, drugs, politics, religion and more." The company also does an in-depth search of the Internet to compile a "reputation score" for each client. The reputation score shows you how "clean" or "questionable" your online reputation is, and what steps you can take to delete troubling posts or pictures.

Cleaning up your social media account is becoming big business these days. A person's whole life, every random thought and emotion and insensitive joke and embarrassing picture, can wind up online. And it's nearly impossible to take this stuff back, unless you hire a company like BrandYourself to delete most of it. But even if you personally, are careful, your friends and family can post all kinds of embarrassing things about you online, and you have little control over it.

Professor Kate Eichorn wrote a book about the dangers of the online world called *The End of Forgetting*. In her book she says that our online information means we can't forget the past or distance ourselves from it.

In an interview about her book, she said, "My point is that there's something liberating about being able to forget the past and reinvent yourself in the present. Much of growing up, is about reinventing yourself multiple times, and that requires being able to forget who you were six months ago, three years ago, 10 years ago. So forgetting is ultimately about freedom." I think there's some truth to her statement. In what ways does our past define us? In what ways does it inspire us or hold us back? And what does it mean to be set free from our past?

I think the Roman church must have felt great joy and gratitude when they finally understood what Paul was telling them in today's Bible passage. They had been set free from the burden of sin and death. Jesus had paid the debt for them with his own life. They were set free from their past, set free from future judgment, and set free for a new relationship with God. And all this was made possible by their faith in Jesus Christ.

Romans 1-4 sets the stage by telling the believers that we are all equally in trouble. We have all sinned and fallen short of God's glory and perfection. All of us.

No exceptions. No “Get Out of Jail Free” card. Your ethnic and religious heritage can’t save you. Your good deeds can’t save you. Your status can’t save you. You can’t achieve moral and spiritual perfection on your own? So, you are destined to spend eternity separated from God, because God can’t share God’s glory with imperfection. And if we’re separated from God, then we are separated from all that God is, life, love, peace, hope, joy, truth, and goodness. Imagine a world that is devoid of these qualities. It would be hell! That’s the whole point. Unending misery and hopelessness. And that would be the end of the story for all of us. Except . . . that God had in mind a different ending for each of us.

Did you know that Ernest Hemingway, one of America’s greatest writers, wrote more than 39 endings for his famous novel, *A Farewell to Arms*? And he kept all those story endings in a notebook. Eighty-seven years after he published this novel, a museum put on a display of all the alternate endings to his book so Hemingway fans could see how much work he put into his writing.

God only wrote one ending to the story of humanity. God knew we couldn’t achieve holiness on our own. We cannot earn a place in God’s kingdom on our own merits. So before the creation of the world, God knew He would come Himself, in the person of Jesus Christ, and give us His holiness, in place of our sin. He would die to give us eternal life. And this overwhelming gift is given to all those who believe in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. All of us have fallen short of God’s glory.

But, through our faith in Jesus Christ, we have been set free from our sins. To be justified means “to be declared innocent or righteous.” In legal terms, we have been pardoned. When the President of the United States offers a presidential pardon to someone who was declared guilty, that person’s criminal record is deleted, and the person receives back their full rights of citizenship. When Jesus gave us his righteousness in place of our sin, he deleted our past and restored our full rights as citizens of God’s kingdom.

I love how Justice Stephen Field describes a pardon: “. . . when the pardon is full, it releases the punishment and blots out of existence the guilt, so that in the eye of the law, the offender is as innocent as if he had never committed the offence . . . it removes the penalties and disabilities, and restores him to all his civil rights; it makes him, as it were, a new man, and gives him a new credit and capacity.” If an earthly pardon is that powerful, how much more powerful is the pardon granted by Almighty God?

When we accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior, we are safe from the power of sin and death. Jesus’ blood paid the debt of our sins and bought us access into eternal life with God.

Which brings us to another truth Paul is trying to teach: through our faith in Jesus Christ, we have peace with God. Before we came to Christ, we weren’t just ignorant of God or indifferent toward God. Paul writes in verse 10, “For if, while we

were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!"

Did you hear what Paul writes, "We were God's enemy." In a war, peace is achieved in one of two ways: one side is entirely defeated, or one side surrenders to the other. In the same way, Jesus defeated the powers of sin and death by giving up his life, and we can have peace with God, if we surrender our lives to Jesus as Lord.

But what does it mean to have peace with God? The Greek word used here refers to having peace, prosperity, to be at rest, or to be one with something. It means that there is no more hatred or opposition between us. We are one with God. We can rest in God's character, God's will, God's promises, God's provision. True peace with God means there is no reason for fear or conflict or anxiety.

And finally, Paul is trying to teach us that through our faith in Jesus Christ, we now stand in God's grace for eternity. Grace means loving-kindness. For the rest of eternity, we live in the hope and joy of God's loving-kindness. This grace is what gives our life meaning and purpose, even when we go through doubts and failures and suffering. God's promise of loving-kindness means that God can use every part of our lives, even the sins and suffering of our past, for God's glory. That's why Paul tells the Roman believers to glory in their sufferings. Our suffering is no longer about us. With God's grace, our suffering produces perseverance, and perseverance produces character, and character produces hope. Jesus suffered, died and rose again to show us that God is working out His glory and His plan in every circumstance of our lives.

Shannon Ethridge had just started her junior year of high school. She was driving herself to school one morning. She took her eyes off the road for just a few seconds to adjust her rearview mirror when she hit something in the road. To her horror, Shannon saw a woman lying in the road next to a mangled bicycle.

By the time an ambulance got to the scene, the woman in the road had died from her injuries. Young Shannon was in grief and shock. She immediately began considering suicide. Why should she live when she had killed an innocent woman?

She discovered that the woman she had hit was named Marjorie Jarster. Marjorie's husband, Gary, was out of town, so a neighbor had the heartbreaking task of calling him to tell him that his wife had been killed in a senseless accident. That neighbor then called Shannon to tell her of his conversation with Gary Jarster. He reported that Gary's first reaction was to ask how the driver was, whether she had been injured. Then he had asked for Shannon to come see him the evening before Marjorie's funeral.

Shannon was so afraid of meeting Gary Jarster. What could she possibly say or do to make up for killing his wife? Would he hate her? Have her arrested? How could he even be in the same room with her after what she had done to him?

But the evening before the funeral, Shannon went over to meet the Jarster family. Shannon cried as Gary Jarster opened his arms wide to hug her. Then he told her about

his wife. She had been a devout follower of Christ who had worked with the Wycliffe Bible Translators to translate the Bible into obscure languages so that as many people as possible all over the world could hear the word of God. As he described her, “There was no limit to how much Marjorie loved the Lord.”

Then he said, “You can't let this ruin your life, Shannon. God wants to strengthen you through this. He wants to use you. As a matter of fact, I am passing Marjorie's legacy of being a godly woman on to you. I want you to love Jesus without limits, just like Marjorie did. I want you to let him use you for his glory.”

Shannon would learn later that Gary's insurance company wanted him to sue her parents, but he refused. The district attorney wanted to press charges against Shannon, but Gary insisted that all charges be dropped. He wanted Shannon to get a second chance at life, a chance to live in God's grace and mercy. And that's exactly what she has done. Today, Shannon Ethridge is a best-selling Christian author, speaker and counselor. Without Gary's forgiveness, Shannon's life could have been ruined. Because of that forgiveness, her life is a beacon of hope to others.

Instead of hating Shannon or suing her or arresting her, Gary Jarster bestowed on her a new legacy: that of a woman who loves Jesus and lives for God's glory. And that grace and mercy, that new legacy, changed Shannon's life.

Through Jesus' death on our behalf, we received a new legacy too: a life of freedom and peace with God now, and the future hope of living eternally in the glory of God. But these blessings are only available to those who put their faith in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. Jesus is the way to God, and to all the blessings of God's loving-kindness. If you have not given your life to Jesus in faith, please ask God to speak to you and show you the truth. If you have given your life to Jesus, then go tell others of this hope and freedom and peace that God is offering. Trust, Believe, and have an Active Faith in God making disciples of Jesus Christ in the transformation of the world. Amen.