

A Priceless Gift

We Are God's Special People

John W. Ritenbaugh

Given 09-Apr-05; Tape #713

This sermon is directly tied to my previous sermon which I titled "Debt and Obligation." That sermon has as its subject a theme I hoped would help us to recognize that all of us are obligated to the Father and to the Son for their payment of a debt that was impossible for us to pay and continue living with hope.

That debt was the penalty for our sins whether the debt accrued was small, because we had tried perhaps very diligently to keep from sinning through a generally rigid life of self-discipline, respectability, and religiosity *before* our calling to be upright and to be civil toward others, *or* instead had given ourselves over to an outright filthy hedonism whether as a drug-dealing, drug-taking street-walking harlot, or maybe one who raped people of their incomes as a cheating, lying, power-hungry businessman or politician. Our debt was nonetheless too large to pay if we wanted to continue with the hope of a quality of life far, far better.

That sermon was formed around Jesus' parable in Luke 7, given the first time as instruction to the respectable Pharisee Simon and the sinning woman, who while weeping anointed Jesus' feet with her hair. I believe that the overwhelming majority of us would fall within the category of the respectable Simon of that parable.

I want you to turn to I Corinthians 11:29 because this verse was the *real* foundation, the motivation, for that sermon that the parable in Luke 7 fit so well.

I Corinthians 11:29 For he that eats and drinks unworthily, eats and drinks damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body.

I think that we all recognize that this is part and parcel of Paul's teaching regarding the Passover and the service that goes with it, but I do not want any of us to fall short because we misunderstand and thus neglect the importance of what Jesus did in our behalf. I am going to read that verse from two modern translations. I think that you will see, if you are listening carefully, that they hit this verse from different angles.

I Corinthians 11:29 [Contemporary English Version] If you fail to understand that you are the body of the Lord, you will condemn yourself by the way that you eat and drink.

I Corinthians 11:29 [Amplified Version] For anyone who eats and drinks without discriminating and recognizing with due appreciation that [it is Christ's] body, eats and drinks a sentence (a verdict of judgment) upon himself.

Now I will read that without the parentheses.

I Corinthians 11:29 [Amplified Version] For anyone who eats and drinks without discriminating and recognizing with due appreciation, eats and drinks a sentence upon himself.

Those translations show that there are two possible understandings of what Paul wrote. The one (the Amplified) focuses on appreciation of Christ's literal sacrifice while actually taking the bread and wine. The other has in mind our overall response in how we conduct our daily life, knowing that we are Christ's body. Both approaches are correct. Neither one of them is wrong and I am sure that God had both of them in mind.

The verse is warning us to have the right attitude *because* we understand, because we discern the sense of what we are participating in when we take the Passover. In more modern language, God wants us to take Passover with a deep appreciation, and with an understanding and a respect so deep, strong, and consistent that it provides motivation for expressing a God-glorifying conformity in daily life.

If that sacrifice has no impact on our daily life—the way we live, what our attitudes are—it is doing us no good. That is a reality we have to address. No appreciation for it when we are taking the Passover can make up for it having an affect on the way that we live. Both of those translations are correct.

This sense of obligation is not a maudlin sentimentality, but is nonetheless of such sincere and intense gratitude that it gives us a mental picture of the standard of selflessness Christ exemplified. We must strive to put that into practice in our life if we are going to be like the Father and the Son and be in God's Kingdom.

John 3:16 says, "God so *loved* the world that He gave His only begotten Son." The Son so loved the world that He gave His life. Now there are the standards we should reflect in our conduct. Put another way, this obligation is to love Them as They love us. This is not in a resigned attitude as "Okay. I will do it because I have to," which issues forth in a low-level "letter of the law" obedience, but a love that issues forth in fervent sacrificial affection like the woman exemplified in Luke 7. This level of love is reasonable because it drives us far beyond mere conformity.

Let us look at what Paul wrote in Romans 12:1-2.

Romans 12:1-2 I beseech you [I beg you, I plead with you] therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God [which He extends to us in Christ's sacrifice and forgives us] that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world, but be you transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

I want us to notice first that Paul says this sacrificial love will serve to transform us and provide the proofs that we need to bolster us in following God's will. When we do that it will present us with the evidence we really are converted. But the sense of obligation does not stand alone as a source of motivation. There is another reality I feel we must understand and appreciate if this way of life we have been called to is going to make better sense and to provide us with a another measure of motivation that will be helpful to overcoming.

What I am going to give you is not complicated at all. In fact it is simple to those of us who have been called, and it is true, but it is not always easily believed and put into practice. But if it can be believed—and it can be—it can give us significant purpose, impetus, and direction to the activities of our life.

Recall when you were a child and you had an intense desire to do something, but your mother or your father would not give you permission to do so despite all of your emotional pleadings.

Now ladies, I want you to think about this: Maybe you wanted to get permission from your mom to buy a dress and to wear that dress—an item of clothing that was suggestive and considered by all the kids as the "in" thing, and if you had that dress it would make you more acceptable to the group you wanted approval from. But mom said, "Good girls do not do that."

For you men, maybe it was for you to be involved in an activity with a group of children who might have been considered dangerous to your character because they did things or had attitudes that your parents did not approve of. In either case, when you asked your parents *why* *why* you could not do this, they would say, "Because." That would even make you more emotional because you really wanted this, or you really wanted to do that. You could see nothing bad coming from these things.

And then if you pleaded with them, maybe they would say, "Because *I* am your father or mother." They might even go so far as to say, "Because we are of such and such family, and *we* do not do those things." Anyway, it would have left you quite frustrated because you could not get your way, and at the same time you could not see that mom's or dad's explanation was adequate because you could not see any harm coming from it at all.

Are you aware that there is a great deal of this in the Bible? I mean a *great* deal, that this is what God does? He says, "I do not want you doing this," and then He gives us no reason at all. It is not always that way, but the reason may not follow after the command to do something. He just says, "Do it!" So really, He is saying, "I do not want you to do this because."

Do you trust Him? Do you trust Him anymore than you trusted your parents when they said, "Because," or "Good girls do not do that," or "This family does not do that"? Now once in a while God does give us a broad and brief explanation, but either way, whether brief or more, do you still trust Him in a good attitude until a more complete explanation and understanding is provided?

I want us to see what is at the basis of much of this, of why He does this, because it is important to our understanding of life and the way God acts and reacts to many things.

Malachi 3:16-17 Then they that feared the Lord spoke often one to

another: and the Lord hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before Him for them that feared the Lord, and that thought upon His name. And they shall be mine, says the Lord of hosts, in that day when I make up My jewels: and I will spare them as a man spares his own son that serves him.

This familiar scripture contains a word that has important ramifications to this subject that I have introduced here. The English word translated "jewels" in verse 17 is not entirely wrong, but at the same time it is not a precise explanation or a translation of what the Hebrew word really means. Understand me. It is not wrong, but maybe it could have been done better so that we would understand.

That word is Strong's # 5459. Transliterated from Hebrew into English, it is *segullah*. The *Theological Word Book of the Old Testament* gives the following explanation regarding its meaning. I want you to listen carefully because *we*, the sons of God, are being described in this definition. It is not a broad definition, but a narrow one.

Segullah signifies property [a jewel is a property, it is something owned] in the special sense of a private possession one personally acquired and carefully preserves. Six times this word is used of Israel as God's personally acquired (elected, delivered from Egyptian bondage and formed into what He wanted them to be) carefully preserved and privately possessed people.

I am going to read that again to you without the parentheses.

Segullah signifies property in the special sense of a private possession one personally acquired and carefully preserves. Six times this word is used of Israel as God's personally acquired and formed into what He wanted them to be, carefully preserved and privately possessed people.

The simplest usage of *segullah* is to mean "personal possession." Here in Malachi 3 is not the first time that this is used in the Bible. We are going to turn back to this first time, and very interestingly it is in Exodus 19—the introduction to the giving of the Ten Commandments and the Old Covenant.

Exodus 19:5 Now therefore, if you will obey My voice indeed and keep My covenant, then you shall be a peculiar treasure unto Me above all people: for all the earth is Mine.

There *segullah* is translated as "peculiar treasure." A jewel is also a peculiar treasure to the one who owns it. We were shown in Malachi 3: 16-17 as being God's personal possession.

Now I am going to give you a very interesting comment from the Keil-Delitzsch Commentary on

Exodus 19:5.

This manifestation of the love of God formed only the prelude however to that gracious union which Yahweh was now about to establish between the Israelites and Himself. If they would hear His voice and keep the covenant, which was about to be established with them, they should be a costly possession to Him out of all nations. *Segullah* does not signify property in general, but valuable property that is laid aside; hence, a treasure. (emphasis added)

I think you should begin to see what we *mean* to God. He is telling us what we mean to *Him*. To Him, we are something *special!* Above all people on the face of the earth there is nobody on earth that gets the consideration that He gives to you and me. There is nobody on earth that gets the attention as He gives to us.

I want you to note how God emphasized *segullah* in order to impress upon Israel, and now us, of its importance. Guess how He did this in verse 5. He closed off that verse by this phrase: "For all the earth is Mine." Do you know what He is saying there? He is telling you and me, "I could have picked anybody else on earth. Everybody on earth is My creation. I could have taken them, but instead I took *you*." What does that mean to you?

The great God who made this earth and has that awesome power—enough to do anything He wants to do—took *you*, not your next-door neighbor, and made *you* a part of His family. Does it mean anything to you to be personally chosen by the great God to be part of His family?

I want you to think about this as we approach Passover, because His Son died for *you*—the one He picked out. But there is much more to this than just that. The implication is that God made special effort to possess us, and because we mean so much to Him He will make special effort to protect and preserve us. Is that not what people do with their jewels? They put them in a safe to make sure no one steals them, and they put on their special jewels as an adornment so others can look at them. The person who is wearing them is glorified in what people see in the jewels. Are you getting a little bit of the feeling that God has for us?

In this next verse David is the speaker.

I Chronicles 29:3 Moreover, because I have set my affection to the house of my God, I have of mine own proper good, of gold and silver, which I have given to the house of my God, over and above all that I have prepared for the holy house.

The word *segullah* appears in this verse, and it is translated into the English "proper good." In the context is the preparations that David made for the building of the Temple so that Solomon could do the actual construction. David is explaining that from his own personally obtained and set-aside treasure he gave such-and-such silver and gold, and whatever was necessary. It was his own to give. You might say he earned it and he set it aside. It was precious to him and so he was sacrificing it so that others could benefit through the use of the Temple.

Thus far we have seen references from the Old Testament and there are still more, but we want to go to the New Testament. We are going to go to I Peter 2:9. We have to understand that the word *segullah* does not appear in the New Testament because it is a Hebrew word; however, the *sense of segullah* does appear in the New Testament, and Peter is one of those men who used the sense of it.

I Peter 2:9 But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people, that you should show forth the praises of him who has called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

I am going to give you the definition of this word "peculiar" from out of the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*. It is from the Latin *peculium*, and it means "private property." The word "peculiar" properly means, "pertaining to the individual." In modern English the word has usually degenerated into a half colloquial form for "extraordinary," but in *biblical* English it is a thoroughly dignified term for "especially one's own." Brethren, it means "especially one's own." Peter is using the sense of "*peculium*" here. Even though the word that Peter used was from the Greek, it has the same meaning as the Latin word *peculium*.

If you have a marginal reference in your Bible like mine does, it renders that term "peculiar people" as "His own special people." Thus we are seeing the same concept as we saw in the Old Testament, but now it is being applied directly to the church. It is now being applied from Israel the nation to the spiritual church.

From here we are going to go to the writings of Paul in Ephesians 1. We have already seen it from Peter and now we are going to see the same sense from Paul.

Ephesians 1:13-14 In whom you also trusted after that you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also after that you believed, you were sealed with that Holy Spirit of promise, which is the earnest of our inheritance until the redemption of the *purchased possession*, unto the praise of His glory.

In Ephesians, the entire first chapter extols the uniqueness of the church, and it is referred to here as "the purchased possession." While we were in the Old Testament we did not search as to how Israel became God's own personal possession, but in an overview, it was through the destruction of Egypt, and more importantly, with the killing of the Egyptians' firstborn as the price for Israel's liberty.

What we are seeing taking form is a special and unique people because even though all of mankind owes its existence to God as their Creator, the church is both special and unique because it belongs to God in a way that others do not. It is important that you get this difference. The reason it is so is because God has *purchased* these people—that is, "*us*"—at an awesome cost, and thus came into possession of them.

We have become His property, and becoming His property has given us certain liberties and

much more besides. The uniqueness of the church is that its members have been set apart—freed from the rest of mankind and its ways—and *sealed*, because they have been given the Holy Spirit.

We see a very, very important significant process taking place. We have become God's own purchased possession. The price He paid was through the death of His Son. Because we have faith in it, and have believed it and have begun to respond to it, God then *seals* us. We are not just theoretically, but we are in actuality, in reality, sealed away from the other people on earth. We have been put, as it were, into a jewel box through the receipt of His Holy Spirit. In one sense, brethren, *this* is the place of safety.

That term "sealed" is very important. I think you understand that in the old days whenever letters were sent, a drop of wax was put on them. A man would then seal it with a stamp, which was usually on his ring. That stamp was unique to that person. That seal, first of all, represented ownership. Remember, we have been sealed by the Holy Spirit. This stamps us with the imprimatur of God Himself. He owns us. Not only that, it identifies the sender. The sender is God with that seal, and that seal renders the contents secure from prying eyes, and thus guarantees that the contents—us—will reach the intended destination. Everything is in place, and we are the only ones who can escape out of that box through a will that is not set toward obeying God.

God's children may look no different from other people on the outside, but God has given His children something *inside*. It is something spiritual that makes them different and special to God from others. Another way of putting this, brethren, is that once we have this seal, we are no longer common. We are no longer one of the herd of mankind. It is just like a rancher or cowboy who separates a cow or a sheep from the herd. We are set apart. We may look just like all the other sheep out there but because we have been set apart we are now marked as *different different* in the mind of God.

I want you to understand that this is something God has done, and because of what He has done, it also makes us, at one and the same time, His *treasured personal possession*.

I cannot emphasize this word "treasured" enough, because that is the word God used. It is not just a mechanical thing He has done. There is *feeling* in it. There is affection in it. There is desire in it for the relationship to grow. There is great hope in Him that He will be able to spend eternity with those He is separating away from the herd, and He will do all in His power (and He has awesome power) to make sure that this comes to pass.

But we have to make choices, and we have to yield. That is our part. We are going to get to that in just a little bit. This sermon is going to begin to take a bit of a turn because with that awesome blessing comes responsibility. But we are not done with the blessing yet.

John 1:11-13 He came unto His own, and His own received Him not. But as many as received Him, to them gave He power [or privilege or right] to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on His name: Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.

That power is the power to believe the Word of God. The power He has given us is the power to *believe* and that begets us. It starts off a process, and it imparts knowledge of God. It imparts faith. It imparts the knowledge of His purpose. It imparts the fear of God, the love of God, and more, more, more besides.

Brethren, there are huge numbers of people who have access to the Bible. They read it. They call themselves Christian and then ignore and disobey huge amounts of it, not living by every word of God. They say they have faith. They say they believe. They say they believe that the Bible is God's Word and cannot even yield enough to keep one of the most obvious of the Ten Commandments—the fourth one—thus proving they are not Christian, except in word.

We are going to see another step in this. It is part of *why* God has done this. We have already seen part of it, but we are going to look at it from God's point of view. We are going to go back to Deuteronomy 7:6.

Let us just reflect back to where near the beginning of this sermon I said your parents said to you, "Well, we do not do those things. We in this family do not believe in doing those things." God is doing that right here in Deuteronomy 7. He is saying:

Deuteronomy 7:6 For you are a holy people unto the Lord your God: the Lord your God has chosen you to be a special people [*segullah*—a treasured possession] unto Himself above all people that are upon the face of the earth.

One of the reasons I used this verse is because "segullah" is attached to another term that we are more familiar with, and that is the term "holy." We are a *holy* people.

What we are going to begin to see as we go through this context are some of the blessings and the responsibilities of holiness. The word "holy" literally means, "set apart," and being a special treasure has set us apart from other peoples. Others without this advantage are *not* set apart. When this principle from the Old Testament in Deuteronomy 7:6 is combined with what we just read in Ephesians 1, we can understand that it is the blessing of having God's Spirit that makes us special, different, and holy. This, brethren, is what makes us a Christian.

It is not having the Bible—the Word of God—available to us that makes us holy. It is not even reading it, nor even studying into it. There are people who know large amounts of things in and about the Bible, but they are not Christian. They do not have the Spirit of God. They have a lot of knowledge, and they may generally be of good character, but unless one has the Spirit of God he is not a son of God. It says that in Romans 8.

If one does not have the Spirit of God, he is not a son of God. It is the Spirit of God that imparts faith *in* and the love *for* God beyond what the natural mind is capable of. Do you know what those with the Spirit of God will do? They will sacrifice themselves to God in God's behalf. We will see more of that as we get to the end of this sermon, but now we are beginning to see that being blessed as a special holy people has also imposed responsibility that we are required—indeed commanded—to meet. Brethren, it requires growth to meet them.

Suppose you are an unmarried person but become attracted to one of the opposite sex. You get acquainted and you begin to spend time with that person. The more you see of each other, an ever-strengthening bond grows. What is happening through this process is that you are becoming *special*—a *special treasure* to each other. During the course of this, the other becomes so special that you feel blessed and you want to spend a great deal of time with that other person. And now the specialness has reached such an intense state that you are completely set apart for each other by marriage.

Now a question: When two marry, does not that blessing of marriage also bring with it responsibilities that did not exist before? So now, you and the one you marry are special to each other above all other people on earth, and so much so that God says regarding marriage, "That for this cause shall a man leave father and mother and cleave to his wife." One special bond is broken and another bond is made. Your specialness to each other overrides responsibilities to all other people, and the only One to whom you have responsibilities of being special and set apart for that are greater is God. This is the principle that is involved in this sermon.

Now let us read verses 7 through 11.

Deuteronomy 7:7-11 The Lord did not set His love upon you nor choose you because you were more in number than any people: for you were the fewest of all people: But because the Lord loved you, and because He would keep the oath which He had sworn unto your fathers has the Lord brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you out of the house of bondmen, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Know therefore that the Lord your God, He is God, the faithful God which keeps covenant and mercy with them that love Him and keep His commandments to a thousand generations; and repays them that hate Him to their face, to destroy them: He will not be slack to him that hates Him, He will repay him to his face. You shall therefore keep the commandments?.

There is the responsibility. Is that not what a husband and wife, who are special to each other above all other people on earth, are to do? They are to keep their responsibilities to that other person above that to all other people on earth. Nobody but God supercedes that responsibility. This is what marriage is all about. In one sense it is about proving to that spouse that he/she is indeed the most special person on earth, not your job, but your wife or your husband. Not even your children, but your wife or your husband. That specialness supercedes everything else, but unfortunately far too many marriages fall apart because the people do not continue to live up to that responsibility and so the curses come.

Deuteronomy 7:11 You shall therefore keep the commandments, and the statutes, and the judgments which I command you this day, to do them.

You all understand that God is drawing us toward a marriage with Him. In one sense we can say He is laying down the law right here. "If you are going to be My wife, you are going to have to submit to Me." That is what He is saying, and He has every right to do that. He owns us. He purchased us. He paid for us through the death of His Son for the privilege of marrying Him.

Now He does something else here that is important for us to understand. He is clearly stating in these five or six verses that the foundation of the relationship is completely based in what He is within Himself, or the relationship would not have ever even gotten past the casual stage of acquaintance.

Do you realize, brethren, that this is the way the world is and that this is the stage that those in the world who call themselves Christian are in? They are indeed acquainted with God but they are proving daily by not submitting to Him that the relationship has never gone any further than acquaintanceship.

God nails this all home with a warning. Because the excellence of the character is in Him and He has chosen us, He then warns us that He in Himself is the faithful God, meaning, "I am going to keep My words, My vows to you. I will be absolutely faithful to you." He wants the same thing in return. That is why He says, "I am the faithful God." He then warns them "I am a God of justice." In other words, no lawbreaking is going to get past Him.

Now He is very merciful. We do not have to worry that He is going to ride us so hard or anything like that. He is going to be very patient with us, and kind and supportive of us. He is going to do everything in His power to build the relationship and help us, make us, cause us to grow, and to give us whatever gifts we need to make sure that the relationship with Him gets better and better. Marriage, which is a covenant and is made before God, binds us to this intense faithfulness.

I want us to go back again to I Peter 2: 9 because this is one of the places where it says, in a broad generality, what He wants to get out of this.

I Peter 2:9 But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people, that you should show forth the praises of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.

Our responsibility in this relationship that He has called us into, purchased us for, is to glorify Him. We are to "show forth the praises of Him who has called us out of darkness." That is what keeping the commandments does. It shows forth the praises of God because unless He had done what He did, it would not change our lives. We would continue to be part of the world. We would be acquainted with God but we really would not know Him, and we really would not be submissive to Him. If we are really serious about this responsibility, it will produce the fruit of obedience. It will produce right attitudes, kindness, goodness, generosity. It will produce conduct similar to that of