

John 14:15-17, 25-31

Romans 8:18-27

May 24, 2015

Day of Pentecost

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

GOD'S DOWN PAYMENT

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Here is an explanation of the “down payment” required to buy a car at the C&P Auto Center in Los Angeles (taken from their website):

“Down payments are hard to give on this page. Each individual will have different down payment requirements. The amount down that is required is a function of your overall credit tier, and the car you want to buy. We will work hard to make sure that your down payment is as affordable as we can make it. Be realistic, if you have a fresh repossession, or two, your down payment requirements will be higher than a person that has paid off a car loan recently. The down payment is also determined by the car you pick out. If you just had a repossession, and you only have \$1000 down, please do not expect to buy a lifted F250 Diesel or a BMW Sports car. We can get you approved, but the vehicle will be dependent on your down payment. If all you have is \$1000 and have had 2 Repossessions it will be basic reliable transportation, not a luxury car.”¹

Well, that certainly makes sense — the bigger risk you are, the higher the down payment your lender might require. Or, to put it another way, the lower the down payment you can pay, the lesser car you can expect to buy.

A simple definition of “down payment” is “a part of the full price paid at the time of purchase or delivery with the balance to be paid later.” Strictly speaking, the down payment obligates both the lender and the buyer to honor the terms of the sales agreement: the lender to provide the balance of the loan, the buyer to make regular payments until the loan is paid off. Certainly there is an element of trust along with that sense of obligation.

Based on our own experiences with making down payments on automobiles and houses, it's kind of strange to talk about God making a down payment. If you go to the bank to borrow money to buy a car or a house and make a down payment, the bank has what you need — the rest of the money you need to buy what you want. So what does it mean to talk about God's down payment? Are we saying that, somehow, God is in debt to us? Are we saying that we have what God needs or wants and God is now obligated to us? How can that possibly be?

On this Day of Pentecost, we focus our attention on God's Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity. The Apostles' Creed puts it very simply: “I believe in the Holy Ghost.” Today's Affirmation of Faith, which is a litany to the Holy Spirit, spells it out in more detail: The Holy Spirit is the Lord, the giver of life. The Holy Spirit was there at

creation before time began. The Holy Spirit spoke through the prophets of old. The Holy Spirit surrounded the waiting church with the wind at Pentecost. The Holy Spirit came upon the first Christians as a holy fire. The Holy Spirit pours out rich and varied gifts. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth, the Counselor. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of God.

The apostle Paul calls the Holy Spirit “God’s down payment.” Actually, in our epistle lesson this morning from Romans 8, Paul talks about “we ourselves who have the first fruits of what is to come.” First fruits is another way of describing a pledge or a guarantee of what is to come. Three other times, Paul uses another word to talk about God’s Holy Spirit that really does mean “down payment.” That word is *arrabon* and it means “a pledge or guarantee, a first installment of a purchase, down payment, or deposit, that required further payments but gave the payee a legal claim to the goods in question.”

Listen to how Paul describes God’s Holy Spirit:

In 2 Corinthians 1:21-22, Paul says, “But it is God who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us, by putting his seal on us and giving us his Spirit in our hearts as a first installment/down payment.”

In 2 Corinthians 5, Paul writes about the promise of a heavenly home, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. He then gives this assurance, “He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee/down payment.” (2 Corinthians 5:5)

Finally, in the opening verses of the letter to the Ephesians, Paul writes about the spiritual blessings we have in Christ, and holds out this promise, “In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge/down payment of our inheritance toward redemption as God’s own people, to the praise of his glory.” (Ephesians 1:13-14)

The footnotes in my study Bible describe “the seal of the promised Holy Spirit” as “a sign of authentication or confirmation [which] designates ownership, and therefore protection, by the Holy Spirit.” The “pledge” is described as a “down payment securing the entirety of what is promised.”

Let’s go back to taking out a loan. Many of us here today have taken out a loan that required a sizable down payment of 5%, 10%, 15%, or even 20%. When you put that money down, you pledged your good faith to continue making payments until your obligation was fulfilled. A good-faith relationship was established between you and the seller. Just as the seller could count on you honoring your pledge of payments, you expected the seller to protect the car or house or boat from other prospective buyers. Your down payment obligated you, but also staked a legal claim to the object you were buying.

You can always push a metaphor too far when you’re trying to describe God’s marvelous ways with his people, but this idea of a down payment — “the first fruits” — on our future is helpful. Think about when you signed those papers at the closing and

wrote that down payment check. That's a big deal! Now, think about God making a down payment for you and me with his Holy Spirit. That's amazing!

God's down payment of his Holy Spirit means God has obligated himself to us to make further payments by fulfilling his promises. And God's credit score is off the charts! The God who owed us nothing — the God who **owes** us nothing — has made a commitment to us because he is the God of grace, mercy, and love.

God's down payment of his Holy Spirit also means that God has a claim on us, who have been rescued from the powers of sin and death. Last Sunday afternoon, at the PEP end-of-year program here in the sanctuary, Rachel Ann came over and sat down next to me on the front pew. She said, "You looked like you were about to cry this morning when you baptized me and Mary Kellan." I said, "You're right, I was. That happens to me every time I baptize someone." Last Sunday morning, when I baptized Rachel Ann and Mary Kellan, I said those familiar words, "Child of the covenant, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." I also said, "Rachel Ann — Mary Kellan — child of the covenant, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism, and marked as Christ's own forever." That's enough to make you want to cry!

We haven't assumed any of the risk in this relationship with God. There's nothing we can sign over, there's no amount of earnest money we can put down that can save us or restore us to a right relationship with God or make us God's own people. God has done that for us, in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. God's Holy Spirit is God's solemn pledge to us, a pledge that will never be broken.

That pledge, that down payment, the first fruits of God's Holy Spirit are not just about the future, however. God's down payment gives us hope "for the living of these days," even and especially when the "living of these days" is very, very hard.

Sometimes life overwhelms us and we have trouble finding the right words — or any words — to express how we're feeling.

Sometimes life overwhelms us with its beauty and majesty and joy — and words fail us.

Sometimes life overwhelms us with its tragedy and suffering and challenges — and words fail us.

Sometimes words fail us. There are times when we don't know what to say to each other. There are times when we don't know what to say even to God. Listen again to what Paul says God's Holy Spirit does for us right now: "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God." (Romans 8:26-27)

Two thousand years ago, that Greek word I talked about a little while ago — *arrabon* — meant something like "pledge, guarantee of what is to come, down payment." Two thousand years later, that word in modern Greek — *arrabon* — means "engagement ring." Think about that! When a couple comes to me to talk about get-

ting married, they are already engaged. The wedding may still be three months, six months, even a year away. But the ring on the finger is a pledge of their commitment to one another, a sign not only of their future hopes, but also of their present promises to one another.

I know it's reading a modern meaning back into history, but listen to Paul's words again but in a different way: "We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have God's engagement ring of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience." (Romans 8:22-25)

Car commercials sometimes say, "No down payment? No problem!" Maybe so, but don't expect to get a lifted F250 Diesel or a BMW Sports car, just basic, reliable transportation.

On this Day of Pentecost, we celebrate God's Holy Spirit coming upon his people like the rush of a mighty wind and with tongues as of fire. We praise God that he **has** made a down payment with his Holy Spirit, not just on our future but for our lives today.

As we affirm in "A Brief Statement of Faith" in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), "In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit, we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks and to live holy and joyful lives, even as we watch for God's new heaven and new earth, praying, 'Come, Lord Jesus!'"

Let us pray (adapted from St. Augustine of Hippo, 354-430 A.D.)

Breathe in us, O Holy Spirit, that our thoughts may all be holy. Act in us, O Holy Spirit, that our works, too, may be holy. Draw our hearts, O Holy Spirit, that we love what is holy. Strengthen us, O Holy Spirit, to defend what is holy. Guard us then, O Holy Spirit, that we always may be holy. Amen.

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