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Always Given, Never Earned

By the Rev. J. Randolph Alexander, Jr.

While driving the other day, I passed an 18-wheeler advertising the United States Marine Corps and boldly displaying their motto, “EARNED. NEVER GIVEN.”



I have several family members and acquaintances who have been Marines, and I have great respect for their rigor in training and *esprit de corps*. One *earns* the privilege of being called a Marine.

While I understand and appreciate the Marines’ recruiting slogan, it occurred to me when I saw that truck that their motto is the absolute opposite of our Christian belief about our salvation.

Yes, there have been diversions and renegades in the Christian tradition who have sought to base our relationship with God on works we have to perform or favor we have to earn. Yet, the central, orthodox Christian faith

holds that it is all about God's *grace*, rather than earning our salvation through works.

As we read in the New Testament, "In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and gave his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins." (1 John 4:10).

The author of the letter to the Church in Ephesus drives the point home: "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." (Ephesians 2:8-9).

The late Bishop E. Don Taylor, whom I respected very much and was one of my bishops when I served in the Diocese of New York, made a point that I will always remember. He spoke movingly of how, once a person had really felt forgiveness, grace, and acceptance deep in one's bones, that person could never be the same again.

This grace is not the end of the story, though. While we do not earn our salvation or God's grace, we are called to live in light of it and to build upon it.

I like to think God's grace is like finding a Christmas gift under the tree with my name on it. I can't earn it because the gift has already been given. But I can *open* it; I can *thank the giver* for the gift; and then I can *put it to use*. I might still dishonor or take the gift for granted from time to time and then need to ask forgiveness of the gift-giver. And then I would start putting it to good use again.

I don't think we could ever talk enough about God's grace; it is an inexhaustible topic. This lavish, extravagant grace also has volumes to say about our identity as beloved children of God, of worth far beyond what we could ever earn or deserve.

This should buoy us in moments when we feel of little worth, or that we are somehow unforgivable, or that God couldn't really have any personal interest in us.

It all starts and ends with God's love, as the Gospel would have it: "God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten son that those who believe in Him should not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16).

“EARNED. NEVER GIVEN.” might be the right motto for the Marine Corps. Thanks to the immeasurable and limitless gift of grace, it does not describe our relationship with God.

A hymn we know so well and dearly love tells the compelling story of God’s amazing grace. Take a moment – listen and believe in the boundless gift of God’s grace.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p5NCyuRhoGY>