Working salvation out

Text: Ephesians 2.8-10

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**Scriptures:** James 2:14-26; Jeremiah 18:1-6; Ephesians 2:1-10

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 354, 51b, 347, 468, 525

Series: Ephesians (#9)

Theme: The Apostle Paul expands on the doctrine of salvation by grace alone, explaining that good works are the consequence of life in Christ for those who are new creations in Him.

Proposition: Be saved by grace then live a life of good works.

**Introduction**

In the English language we have a phrase ‘only hearing half the story’ by which we mean if you only know part of an explanation then you are very likely to misunderstand the truth. For example, when there is a dispute between two people, perhaps family members, a husband and wife or church members, there is a great danger in only listening to one ‘side of the story’. If you want to know the truth it is important to hear the ‘whole story’ by listening to both parties as Proverbs 18:17 wisely states: “*The one who states his case first seems right, until the other comes and examines him*”.

Only ‘hearing half the story’ is often the reason why people wrongly interpret the Bible and arrive at conclusions which are not the whole revealed truth of God. Such ‘half-truths’ are not true at all. For example, wrong ideas include: that we need to gain some credit with God through the good works we do, or alternatively that there is no need to live a holy life because we do not contribute in any way to make ourselves acceptable to God. One of the concerns of the Roman Catholic church at the time of the Protestant Reformation can be expressed this way: “*If people think that they are saved through no merit of their own, then they will live like devils*’. Or to put it another way ‘*Just love God and do as you please*’.

In out text today from Ephesians 2:8-10 the Apostle Paul expands on the doctrine of salvation by grace alone which is revealed with beautiful clarity in the previous 7 verses. You can see very clearly that Paul is giving further explanation about this core gospel teaching as he picks up on the key words ‘*by grace you have been saved*’ in verse 5 and repeats these at the start of verse 8; adding the words ‘through faith’. He is giving the Ephesians the ‘other half of the story’ about salvation by faith, carefully explaining the place of good works, which neither contribute to salvation nor are unimportant. We’ll focus in on these beautiful gospel truths this morning under three headings:

1. Salvation by faith
2. Creation in Christ
3. Walking in works
4. **Salvation by faith**

Sweet tasting food is more pleasurable than a bitter meal. In a vision, the prophet Ezekiel eat God’s Word and found that ‘*it was in my mouth as sweet as honey*’ (Eze 3:3). Twice in the first eight verses of Ephesians 2, we find what could accurately be described as the sweetest words ever written. *“by grace you have been saved”.* These words are simple, profound, unfathomable and life-changing for all who receive them into their heart and mind.

As you may well know, grace has been described as ‘*everything for nothing for those who don’t deserve anything*’. It is ‘unmerited favour’ from God. When you work a full day and receive a fair day’s pay – that’s a wage. When you compete in a competition and are rewarded for your performance – that’s a prize. When you are recognized for your long service or high achievements – that’s an award. But if you are a person who is incapable of earning a wage, unable to win a prize and undeserving of any reward, yet you receive a gift, then that is grace.

The bleak words of Ephesians 2:1-3 make clear that in our naturally spiritually dead state, we are powerless to earn, win or deserve anything good from God. We are utterly helpless apart from the unmerited favour of God. We have no spiritual currency with which to buy or contribute towards are salvation; it is 100% a gift.

Grace is free to the recipient, but costly to the giver. God’s grace cost Him estrangement from His own Son. God’s grace cost Him the pain of seeing beloved Son suffer. God’s grace cost Him the life of His Son.

It has been said that ‘*Grace is a difficult, perhaps impossible, concept to understand*’ (Charles C. Ryrie). It’s not easy to believe someone who offers grace. The natural human response is ‘where’s the catch?’, ‘where’s the hidden cost to me?’, ‘It can’t be that simple!’. It is not easy to believe someone who says that he will do something spectacularly and lastingly good for us that we do not deserve.

Grace does not sit well with our natural human condition. We are all so very familiar with systems of merit “Do this and you will be rewarded. Fail to do this and you will be punished”. Knowledge of the Old Testament covenant curses and blessings in Scripture can fuel a merit-based understanding of salvation if taken in isolation from the ‘rest of the story’ about Jesus Christ who perfectly fulfils the Law of God on behalf of others.

Paul writes in verse 8 *“For by grace you have been saved* ***through faith****”.* Notice carefully the word ‘through’. Faith is the **instrument** or **means** by which a person is made right with God. The theological term for ‘being made right with God’ is ‘justification’. However, just as a violin does not produce music by itself, but rather it is the **means** by which the skilled violinist conveys a beautiful sound, so, faith itself does not make a person right with God, but rather is the **means** by which God justly brings law-breakers like you and me into great favour with Himself; so much that we become His children by adoption – as Paul described at the start of this letter (Eph 1:5).

Now this is not just **any faith**, any belief, but only personal, heartfelt faith in Jesus Christ as crucified Saviour and Risen Lord (Rom 4:23-25; 10:8-13). This is clearly revealed in many places in the Bible, for example: “*Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him*” {John 3.36}

Do **you** believe in the Son, Jesus Christ?

Christ is the object of faith; faith is the instrument or means by which the benefits which Christ has won through His perfect life and death on behalf of others as a truly innocent man become the gift of God to the believer. In salvation there is a wonderful exchange: Christ gives His gift of righteousness so that the sinner receives divine pardon and full acceptance by God (Gal 2:15; 16; 3:24) The sinner/law-breaker gives him/herself in faith to Jesus Christ – fully trusting in the Lord for life now and into the eternal future.

Martin Luther understood this gracious exchange about 500 years ago and said: “*When the devil throws our sins up to and declares that we deserve death and hell, we ought to speak thus “I admit that I deserve death and hell. What of it? Does this mean that I shall be sentenced to eternal damnation? By no means. For I know One who suffered and made satisfaction in my behalf. His name is Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Where he is there I shall be also*”

At times Christians have a reputation in the world as being arrogant. Calvinist/reformed believers especially are often seen as somewhat mean, narrow-minded, rude, and haughty. Some people have asked the question *Why do those who subscribe to the doctrines of grace frequently seem so graceless?* After all, the reformed Christian has the clearest understanding of Biblical and systematic theology.

Interesting that the Word of God anticipates the pride of those who only ‘hear part of the story’ and think that theology or church culture are the ‘end goals’, rather than the gracious gift of life in Christ! Let’s listen to the whole of verse 8: *“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast”.* Surely Reformed Christians should logically be the kindest, most gracious, peace-loving, humble and thankful of people on the planet. Why? Because we clearly understand that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone for the glory of God alone as revealed in Scripture alone. We also understand, brothers and sisters, that we have been made new in Christ. Which brings us to our 2nd point:

1. **Creation in Christ**

Sadly, in so many places in the world you will find plastic, in the oceans, on the beaches and in landfills. However, when archaeologists dig up the rubbish dumps of ancient cities, they (obviously) don’t find plastic, but the most common objects there are potsherds – fragments of pottery – bowls, cups, jars etc. Pottery was as familiar to the ancient world as plastic is to us, one of the differences (apart from environmental impact) being that each pottery vessel was handmade by a craftsman, unlike the mass-produced manufactured products with which we are familiar.

The imagery of a potter and the clay he forms into an object of his choice is used in a number of places in the Bible to convey the work of God in changing people (e.g. Jeremiah 18:1-6; Isaiah 29:16; 64:8; Romans 9:21; 2 Cor 4:7). We heard from Jeremiah 18 of the reworking of a spoiled clay vessel in the potter’s house which he makes into something new ‘*as it seemed good to the potter to do*’ (Jer 18:4).

So it is it with us, brothers and sisters in our Lord. *“For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus” (v10).* Paul describes this radical change in what we are to the Corinthians this way: *“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a* ***new creation****. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come*” (2 Cor 5:17).

The **first part** of God’s workmanship is to make new life where no life existed before. When God took the physical elements present in the ground and used them to form the first man, He created new life. “*Then the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being” (Gen 2:7).* God, the Divine Potter, took a lifeless lump of dust and formed Adam. Paul has been describing a similar process of creating life, but in the spiritual realm, in Ephesians chapter 2. “*And you were dead in the trespasses and sins… ButGod, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved* *us…made us alive together with Christ - by grace you have been saved*”

The **second part** of God’s workmanship is to progressively transform a person who has been saved – ‘*conforming them to the image of His son*’ (Rom 8:29). We refer to this process of ongoing moulding and shaping in a person’s life with the theological term ‘sanctification’ – which refers to the process of becoming more and more holy through the work of the Holy Spirit in a willing believer’s life.

By what means does the Divine Potter bring about lasting changes in progressive holiness the lives of His adopted children? How are the rough angles and corners removed and how is an earthen vessel suitable for God’s good purposes refined? Firstly, God takes hold of a person as potter holds the clay. He is actively involved in lives of his children – like any good Father. He uses His Word, living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword (Heb 4:12), to shape us. We may experience an unsettling disturbance as we hear the Word of God preached and taught, and as we study the Scriptures individually and in groups. The Holy Spirit works with the Word to convict us of sin (John 16:8) and to guide is into all the truth (John 16:13).

God also trains and shapes us through difficult circumstances. The writer to the Hebrews explains: **“***All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness” (Hebrews 12:11).*

God also, at times, uses people we find ‘difficult’ or who oppose us to sculpt and shape our character as we encounter them. Remember Shimei who opposed David as He fled from Absalom. Shimei cursed David and threw stones at him (2 Sam 16:13) yet David did not put him to death because he cursed the Lord’s anointed (2 Sam19:21). His character had been shaped by his Lord.

God also prepares work for us: both to mould and shape us and also so that, through this process, others may see our progress in holiness (1 Tim 4:15) and most importantly so that ‘*He might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus*’. It is to these good works which we now turn in our 3rd point:

1. **Walking in works**

Have you ever thought of yourself as a perambulating pot? (To perambulate is to ‘walk about’). Have you ever thought of yourself as moving earthenware? I don’t mean like ‘Mrs. Potts’, the teapot or little ‘Chip’ the teacup - CGI characters out of Disney’s Beauty and the Beast, but like a carefully crafted creation of God – a living piece of His Divine workmanship, specifically designed to move along the pathways of life which He has laid out.

Paul expresses it this way to the Ephesians: *For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should* ***walk*** *in them.”* The word “walk” communicates the idea of continuous active service in life. Notice the Scripture does not say “so that we would be walked”, “so we would be led”. Brothers and sisters in Christ we are the ones who are to do the walking with God’s good guidance and strength in Christ!

Walking well is not as simple as it looks! Walking has been described in medical journals as a ‘complex cognitive task’ involving the frontal lobe of the brain, the body’s self-balancing systems, and activating a range of muscle, ligament and tendon groups. To walk requires effort and to go a long way you need perseverance. To walk in the right direction, you need to know where you are heading. To walk without stumbling you need to look where you are placing your feet – especially on rough ground.

Paul will expand on the ‘Christian walk’ later in this letter, e.g. “*I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to* ***walk*** *in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called*” (Eph 4:1); “*and* ***walk*** *in love” (Eph 5:2);* “*for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord.* ***Walk*** *as children of light*” (Eph 5:8); “*Look carefully then how you* ***walk****, not as unwise but as wise*” (Eph 5:15).

As Christian walkers, we are not mere robots, but willing, living servants of our Lord. Psalm 110 verse 3 puts it this way “*Your people will offer themselves freely on the day of your power, in holy garments; from the womb of the morning, the dew of your youth will be yours*”.

So, we could ask the question why ‘walk’ (in good works) if they contribute absolutely nothing to our salvation? Jesus answers in these words: “*So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, you will recognize them by their fruits*” (Matt 7:17-20). James says: “*Faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead*” (James 2:17).

We are saved for good works, not by good works. Good works are the evidence of saving faith. Michael Horton, editor of the Moody Press has written: “*The person who has been justified by God’s grace has a new, higher, and nobler motivation for holiness than the shallow, hypocritical self-righteousness or fear that seems to motivate so many religious people today*”. The gospel of grace frees us to be able to engage in good works of service for our King without fear of condemnation when our work is less than perfect (as it always is). How else could preachers preach the gospel with joy? How else could office-bearers lead with courage? How else could we speak the words of life without anxiety as to whether the people we seek to disciple come to Christ? How else could we serve the Lord daily by walking in the works which He has prepared beforehand without unease?

Brothers and sisters, we have been saved by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ. We are then formed through the good works which we do. Christ modelled this perfectly for us: “*Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered*” (Heb 5:8).

The ‘take-home’ message from this sermon is “*Be saved by grace alone in Christ alone by faith alone then live a life of good works*”. This is the ‘whole story’ about faith and works. If you have not as yet come to Christ in repentance and faith, I implore you do so without delay. If you are already in Christ – praise God for the immeasurable riches of His grace towards you.

Walk in the works which God has prepared beforehand! Do so in the glorious freedom of Christ in whom you already have all you need to be saved and to do good works.

AMEN