

Throughout the summer I'm preaching a number of sermons that focus on central themes of the gospel in the morning worship services. In the pm services we continue our series of sermons on the book of Acts. In the fall I will begin a new series in the morning services. But for now, in the morning, we will look at key texts which teach the basics of the gospel.

Our text for this morning's sermon is one of those. It is quite a familiar text. Many of you probably know it by heart. It is one of those texts that is familiar to most Christians. And for good reason. It is a wonderful summary of some key aspects of the gospel message. Ephesians 2:8-10, "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. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them."

Now this text is about salvation. "For by grace you have been saved." In order for this text to be interesting for us, salvation must be a matter of concern for us. If we are not concerned about being saved, the good news of salvation in Jesus will be of little interest. And there are lots of people like that. Perhaps they don't believe that God exists. Perhaps they believe that God does exist and that they don't need saving because they think that they are pretty good people. Perhaps they believe in a completely different religion with its own doctrine of salvation.

The Bible teaches that there is one God and one way of salvation in Jesus Christ. Acts 4:12 makes the point that "there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." According to the Bible there are only two eternal destinies for human beings. Those who are saved will spend eternity joyfully praising and serving God in a renewed heaven and earth. Those who are not saved will spend eternity enduring eternal punishment for their sins. That means salvation is very important. We need to be saved because apart from salvation we are under the wrath of God because of our sins and unless we are saved we will experience the fullness of that wrath forever in hell. In Galatians 3:10 Paul writes, "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them." John writes in 3:16, "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."

We are all sinners in need of salvation. We break God's laws. Even if we are nice decent people, we fall far short of what God requires of us. He requires that we love him with all our hearts and none of us do that. He requires that we love our neighbor as ourselves and none of us do that perfectly. Failure to obey God perfectly is rebellion. We are God's enemies. We deserve to die. We deserve to go to hell. This is some of the background to the biblical teaching about salvation. We all need it. It is in fact our greatest need. This is a foundational principle for understanding ourselves in biblical perspective. We are worthy of hell and salvation is to be saved from that horrible penalty for our sins.

Now the people to whom Paul wrote in this letter to the Ephesians had been saved. They were no longer living under God's wrath. They were now living under his favor. And one of the great points that Paul makes in these verses is that when people are saved it is not of their own doing. It is rather a gift of God – an undeserved gift.

Verse 8 says, "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God...." Grace means undeserved favor. Every single person who is saved, does not deserve that God should show him mercy. We are all alike in that what we all deserve is hell. That is true of every single person who ever lived except Jesus. Ephesians 2:3 says that we "were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind." We and all the rest of mankind are under God's wrath unless we are saved.

And grace means that God shows favor to those who deserve the opposite of favor. Grace means that God saves people who do not deserve to be saved. So you have all of us deserving eternal suffering in hell. We are enemies of God. We refuse to obey him. We insist on our own way. It is to such people that God shows grace when he saves them. And we do not contribute anything to our salvation. All we contribute is our sin. All we can do is increase our debt. Those who are saved do not contribute in any way to their salvation. God comes to us in grace – with undeserved mercy and he rescues us from ourselves. He gives us the gift of salvation. Nothing about salvation is our own doing.

And it must be that way because we are not able to save ourselves. There is nothing we can do to change our inner direction. One of the ways the Bible makes this point is by describing us as "dead in the trespasses and sins...." (Ephesians 2:1) We are physically alive, but we are spiritual dead. We are dead in sin. And we can not give ourselves life. We must be brought from death to life – spiritual death to spiritual life. And that is what God does for his people when he saves them. Ephesians 2:5 says, "[E]ven when we were dead in our trespasses, [God has] made us alive together with Christ." This is the first thing that happens when God saves someone. He raises him from the dead. He gives spiritual life where before there was spiritual death.

And that is why Paul writes as he does in verse 8, "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God..." Paul is making the point that we do not save ourselves – that we do not even contribute to our salvation. It is a gift which is received. It is only by grace – undeserved favor – we can't earn it.

The whole of salvation is a gift of God. And that includes faith. We are saved by grace through faith and all of that is the gift of God. Now how this works is very mysterious. Faith is a gift of God and at the same time we must exercise faith. God gives us the gift of faith, but he does not believe for us. We only know that he has given us faith if we actually believe. This is a mysterious area where God works in us and we believe by the power of God working in us. When God calls us to believe in Jesus, we are not to wait until God gives us faith – we are to believe – but when we do believe we know that God has given us the gift of faith.

Now this great contrast between what we deserve and the amazing grace of God in salvation is reason for us to worship and praise the Lord. We deserve punishment and God gives us undeserved favor in Christ – that is reason for praise and thanksgiving. God’s grace to sinners is amazing grace. It is reason for us to love and adore God with all our hearts - to think that he showed such grace to us in the light of our sin and rebellion against him. All sin is greatly dishonoring to God. All sin is a rejection of God’s rule over us. And yet God shows grace to us in Jesus. He sent his only Son to save us from our sins. He sent him to suffer the penalty that we deserve for sin. Jesus died in our place so that we might be saved. That is marvelous grace. Paul expresses this idea in 2:7 where he says that the great purpose of our salvation is “that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.” That is the verse that introduces our text. By saving sinners God shows the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. Thinking of God’s grace to us should move us to worship and adore God for the immeasurable riches of his grace.

The language here is a great comfort for us as we struggle with remaining sin in our lives. When we are saved by God’s grace we do not become sinless. We are changed. We are given new hearts that want to obey. And we do obey God’s laws. But not perfectly in this life. We are not yet completely free from sin. And so we struggle with sin. We want to obey, but we fall short of full obedience. And that can be very disturbing. We may wonder whether God’s grace is great enough to continue to forgive us when we sin again and again and again. We may wonder if perhaps our sins are too great to be forgiven. The way that Paul describes God’s grace is a great comfort. He speaks of the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. The extent of God’s grace is immeasurable. Think of what that means! Something that is immeasurable is beyond our ability to count – like the stars in the sky or the grains of sand on the seashore. God’s grace is beyond what we can imagine or conceive. We need to know that when we come asking for forgiveness when we are overwhelmed with how great our sins are. Our sins are great. But God’s grace is greater.

Now one of Paul’s concerns in this passage is has to do with the role of works in our salvation. Verse 8 says that God’s gift of salvation is “not a result of works, so that no one may boast.” This is a key subject in the NT teaching concerning salvation. We are not saved as a result of any works that we might perform. A work is anything that we might do that is good. In other places Paul uses the phrase “works of the law.” So a work is any form of law-keeping. Keeping the Sabbath is a work. Not committing adultery is a work. Being content is a work. Helping someone in need is a work. Being a hard worker is a work. Anything that is pleasing to God is a work.

And Paul is saying here that we are not saved as “a result of works.” God does not forgive our sins and accept us because of anything good that we do. He does not save us because we are nice decent church-going people. He does not save us because we are kind and helpful to other people. He does not accept us because we give tithes of all we possess. He does not save us because we pray and read our Bibles. He does not save us because we sin less than other people. None of these things count as far as being saved is concerned.

There are a number of reasons for this. Nothing that we can do can make up for the sins that we have already committed. Every single sin we have ever committed deserves eternal punishment. Galatians 3:10 says “Cursed is everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.” If we break the law even once we are under the curse of the law. The penalty for even one sin is death. God made this very clear to Adam and Eve in the garden. The sins we have committed are immeasurable and nothing we can do can ever make up for that so that God could receive us on the basis of any good thing that we do. On top of that no act of obedience is perfect. We never love God with all our being. We never are perfectly unselfish in our interactions with others. The best of our works are tainted with sin because sin involves our hearts, our motivations, our desires. And so we daily add to our guilt. So our works do not help save us because they cannot save us. We cannot come close to making up for our sins. From our side there is nothing we can do to save ourselves.

What we need is a way of salvation that is given to us without any contribution on our part. And that is what God has provided in Christ. Jesus lived a perfect life and his perfect record is placed on our account before God when we believe in him. Jesus paid the penalty for our sins when he died on the cross and that perfect payment for sin is placed on our account when we trust in Jesus. The life that brought Jesus from the dead in the resurrection is given to us in salvation so that we are raised from the dead, spiritually.

The fact is that we are utterly helpless when it comes to contributing to our own salvation. We are so helpless that we can’t even want salvation apart from God changing our hearts. We can’t change ourselves from rebellious sinners to submissive followers of Jesus. And so any works that we perform can’t even begin to contribute to our own salvation. It can only be an undeserved gift. When it comes to salvation we contribute nothing and as completely helpless sinners, we receive everything we need to be saved as a gift of God on the basis of what Jesus has done for us.

This is why Paul in verse 9 writes, “not a result of works.” And the result of that is that there is no place for boasting on our part. We have nothing to boast about. The proper attitude of saved people is humility. We must confess our weakness and our helplessness and our sinfulness. We must confess our total inability to save ourselves. We must confess that we are absolutely and completely dependent on the grace of God. And there is no place for being proud of ourselves. The focus in salvation is the glory of God. The proper attitude towards God is always to be humble before him and to focus on his glory.

We have already seen how the great purpose of salvation is to “show the immeasurable riches of [God’s] grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.” Paul makes the same point a number of times in chapter 1 of this letter. Verse 6 of chapter 1 says that we have been adopted as sons “to the praise of his glorious grace.” Verses 7 & 8 say that we have forgiveness in Christ “according to the riches of his grace which he lavished upon us....” Verse 12 says that we have obtained an inheritance, “so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory.” Verse 14 says the same thing. One of the great principles of the

Bible is that God does what he does to display his glory. And anytime we seek our own glory we are robbing God of his glory. The great purpose of our lives is to give glory to God. And that is the great purpose of salvation as well. Spiritual growth involves growing in humility and pointing away from ourselves and pointing to the glory of God. Spiritual growth involves not boasting in ourselves, but giving glory to God.

Psalm 115:1 expresses the right attitude of saved people when it says, “Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to your name give glory.” The way we flourish as human beings is to be humble before God and man and make it our passion to give glory to God.

And the role that faith plays in salvation underscores this point. We are saved by faith. We receive salvation by believing on Jesus. Faith itself is a gift of God. But faith is also an acknowledgement that we cannot save ourselves – that we cannot even contribute to our salvation. Faith is often contrasted with works. When we believe in Jesus we are placing our trust in him instead of ourselves and our good works. Faith is accepting the gift of salvation. It is itself a gift, but it is also the act of receiving the gift. It is not a work. It is placing our trust in God to fulfill his promises in Christ.

Consider the definition of faith that we find in the Westminster Shorter Catechism A.86, “Faith in Jesus Christ is a saving grace, by which we receive and rest on Him alone for salvation, as He is offered to us in the gospel.” “We receive and rest on Him alone for salvation.” That means that we are not resting in ourselves. We stop resting and trusting in any works that we do. We acknowledge that there is nothing we can contribute to our salvation and that our only hope is in receiving it as a gift of underserved mercy from God in Jesus.

Now that raises the question, what about works? What about obedience? What about living according to God’s commands? If works play no role in saving us, does that mean that we can live wicked lives and still be saved? Paul answers this question in verse 10 of our text. “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” Paul has made the point that salvation is “not as result of works.” It is a gift that is received. But now in verse 10 he makes the point that salvation results in works. We are not saved by works, but we are saved for good works. We are saved for obedience. We are saved to love God and our neighbor. We are saved to live lives that are pleasing to God.

Let’s look at the language that Paul uses. “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works....” Paul is alluding to the creation story. Human beings are God’s workmanship. God formed Adam of dust from the ground and he formed Eve from one of Adam’s ribs. God created us to serve him in obedience and to flourish in so doing. Paul here is alluding to the original creation, but he is not referring to the original creation. He is referring to renewal of creation in Jesus. Salvation is a renewal of the original creation, which has been devastated by sin. It is a new creation and it begins with renewing human beings. When we are saved, we “are [God’s] workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works.”

Salvation has to do with the forgiveness of our sins. It has to do with saving us from hell. But it also has to do with saving us from sin – from the power of sin in our lives. It is about the renewal of our nature so that we want to please God by doing good works. It is about a change of heart so that we learn to love God’s law because it is a reflection of God’s character. It is about being part of the new creation that God has begun in Jesus Christ.

This is humbling because we are the results of God’s workmanship. We do not exist on our own. And we do not exist as Christians on our own. God is the potter and we are the clay. But this is also exhilarating because we have a most glorious purpose. We know what we are and what we are for. We are God “workmanship, created in Christ Jesus” and we are for good works. The purpose of our lives and our salvation is good works. We exist and are saved to please God by living lives of worshipping and serving God. And God is not a tyrant. He is our absolute ruler, but by obeying him we experience fullness of life. We are saved to find our great delight in worshipping God and serving our fellow man. A life that is focused on self-indulgence is empty and futile. A life of good works is the way of joy and satisfaction and fulfillment. That does not mean that there is no struggle and pain, but it does mean that there is the beginning of the joy, satisfaction, and fulfillment that we will know in perfection when our salvation is consummated after our time in this life is over.

Verse 10 goes on to say that God has prepared beforehand the good works that he created us to perform. This has to do with God’s eternal plan. Earlier in this letter Paul had written that God “works all things according to the counsel of his will.” (1:11) The good works that we do as a result of being created in Christ Jesus for good works have been prepared by God beforehand – that is before the creation of the world. In chapter 1:4 Paul wrote that God “chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.” Here in our text we learn that the God has prepared beforehand the very works that he saved us to perform.

But this does not make us puppets. Even though God has prepared beforehand the very works that we are to perform by his grace in our lives, we are called to do them by walking in them. We only know the works God has prepared beforehand for us to do when we live our lives seeking to please God in all that we do. The very works that we do have been prepared beforehand by God and yet we do those works by choosing to do them making real decisions to live and to act in a way that is pleasing to God. We can’t understand how those two truths fit together, but we don’t have to. But it is motivating for us to do good works because we know that God has prepared beforehand the good works that he has created in Christ Jesus to do.

So Paul in this text gives us two fundamental perspectives on good works. On the one hand we are not saved by them. That is a wonderful truth because it means that we not have to do anything to make ourselves presentable to God. When we come to Christ we come with our sins – not our works. God accepts us and forgives us and saves us as underserving sinners who depend completely on his grace in Christ. But then we are equipped and called to do good works because we having been given hearts to love God and want to

please him. Those good works do not contribute to our salvation. They are the fruit of salvation. One of the ways of thinking about salvation is that we are God's "workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works."

So let us think clearly about good works according to Paul's teaching in this text. To do so is vital for our comfort and it vital for living the Christian life. Living life to the glory of God is motivated, not by the need to earn God's favor, but because Christ has earned God's favor for us.