

“WELL, WHAT DO WE DO?”

Ephesians 2:1-10

August 12, 2018

You may have recognized the scripture passage this morning. I used it last Sunday to get to the heart of all of Christianity. “By grace you are saved, through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God.”

But the passage does go on: “[... it is the gift of God,] not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are ‘what He has made us,’ created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we may walk in them.”

Now, you may remember two weeks ago when I said that there is nothing we are to do but thank God and live in praise and enjoyment of all he has given to us. Sometimes I like to overstate my case so that we pick up something of the truth of it. But we have a paradox here, people.

Paul insists, absolutely and irrevocably insists, that it is by grace that you and I have been saved. We have nothing to do with our own salvation. We have not earned it, and we could never have earned it. It is the gift of God, and all that we can do is accept it in the joy, and with all the praise we can muster, that this free offer of God is true. We’ve been there with Paul all our Christian lives. It’s as central as anything we ever learn that our salvation is given to us, and that there’s nothing we have to do ... nothing we CAN do to get it other than just joyfully receive it.

Our works have nothing to do with earning our salvation. But ... and there is a ‘but’ here, even at the central point of our faith ... But ... that is precisely where it is neither right nor possible to leave the teaching of Paul—and yet that is where it is so often left, and where I’d like to leave it ... most of the time. But Paul goes on to say that we are recreated by God for good works. Here is the Pauline paradox. All the good works in the world cannot put us right with God; there’s nothing we can do. But once we *have* been put right with God there is something radically wrong with the Christianity which does not issue in good works.

There is nothing mysterious about this. It’s simply an inevitable law of love. When anyone loves us, especially if that person is wonderful and awesome,

someone we look up to, we know we cannot deserve that love. To deserve a love like that is quite impossible. It is a gift beyond all deserving. But at the same time we know with utter conviction that we just have to respond with all the love we can muster. It just works like that. We have been given such an astoundingly great gift, and having been knocked to our knees in gratitude, we just want to respond back.

God's free gift is absolutely free, remember. But having been given the gift 'O how great a debtor I'm constrained to be!' I want to fall down in worship, and I want to give more than I can possibly imagine to give because I love Him in response.

God's free gift of grace is such that we can only humbly and gratefully accept; but that doesn't mean that the results of it stop there. It means that from that time forward all of our life is one long adventure in showing gratitude by loving God back. Loving God back isn't earning the great gift of our salvation. It's the relationship that we give ourselves to because of the enormity of the gift. Good works can never earn salvation, but there is something *radically wrong* with a salvation that doesn't produce good works in response—a response of love. It is not our good works which put God in debt to us; it is God's love which lays on you and me the debt, the obligation-by-desire, to love God back.

Oh, I need to say this here. There is a stream of Christian belief that says what we are doing in loving God in return is *trying to be worthy of that love*; that is God's love that lays on us the obligation to show that we trying throughout all life to be worthy of it.

Wrong. Wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong. (Oh, that was a quote, incidentally, by William Barclay, whose Daily Bible Study Commentaries, I use and love, but he's just wrong.) We can never, ever, ever be worthy of God's gift in the death of Jesus Christ for us. It's just not humanly possible to be worthy of that kind of love. If it were possible to be worthy, it wouldn't have taken the death of the Son of God to give us salvation, would it? We'd just work out our worthiness, and come out at heaven after taking the eight-fold path to righteousness or something.

No. The fact that Jesus had to die to save us means that you and I aren't worthy, never could have been worthy, and weren't made worthy by the gift.

That's why it's a gift, isn't it? Hmmm? A gift, you know? unearned. Impossible to *have* earned. But possible to respond to in joy and great gratitude.

"We (are) God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."

The way to look at good works is this. God makes you and me Christian in order that we may do good works. It is not a question of good works leading to Christianity but Christianity leading to good works. There is a design at work here. Look at it.

'Created in Christ Jesus' to do good works, 'which God prepared in advance for us to do.' The design is that you and I are to conform to the life of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Created in Christ Jesus, remember, we are to live in this world and in this life as Jesus did. Joel often tries to discipline Suzanne and me by saying, "What would Jesus do?" It's a valid question, taken in the right spirit, isn't it? Jesus would love neighbors, bear another's burdens. What is it Micah says? "He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God."

What are we to do? Someone said there are two commandments: to love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself. Everything else is commentary. You and I were created in Jesus Christ to do good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

You know what? You know what you and I should do? It all boils down to this folks. We should be servants—servants of Christ, servants of one another, servants of the world. If we were created in Christ, as it says, we were created with his character within us, huh? Created in Christ to do good works—fashioned from the character of Christ to do the things Christ would do, yes? "The Bible says, "The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve." And "the one who would be the greatest among you must be a servant of all." So the chief heading of our task, the good works which God prepared beforehand for us to do are things that serve others, around you here, and serve others around you out there.

Rick Warren, author of *The Purpose Driven Life*, says that our shape, what we were created in Christ and gifted by the Holy Spirit with, some call it our spiritual gifts, that determines our ministry, what niches we serve in. But not completely. Not completely. That createdness in Christ, that gifting of the Holy Spirit, reveals your ministry, but your servant's heart will reveal your maturity. No special talent or gift is required to stay after a meeting to pick up trash or stack chairs. Anyone can be a servant. All it requires is character.

It is possible to serve in church for a lifetime without ever being a *servant*. You have to have a servant's heart. How can you know if you have the heart of a servant? Jesus said, "You can tell what they are by what they do."

You can tell they are by what they do. Created in Christ to do good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

Thanks be to God! Amen.