

“Saved by Grace through Faith”

Ephesians 2.1-10

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason First Presbyterian Church

Mason, Michigan

April 8, 2018

We are turning our attention this morning to a classic, foundational teaching of the Christian church: the reality that we are *saved by grace through faith*. The critical verse is here in chapter 2 of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. The CEB says, “You are saved by God’s grace because of your faith;” the NLT says “God saved you by his grace when you believed;” a more traditional – and more literal – rendering is: “by grace you have been saved through faith” (RSV, NRSV, NKJV, ESV, NAB, NASB). There is a *lot* packed into those eight words. Three of them are somewhat tricky to define. What, exactly, is *grace*? What, exactly, does it mean to *be saved*? What, exactly, is *faith*? Historically, there have been some strong divisions between the different branches of Christianity regarding the proper understanding of this all-important teaching; thousands upon thousands of pages have been written about the nuances between the Reformed/Presbyterian understanding vs. the Methodist understanding vs. the Baptist understanding. These days most of us don’t feel that the nuances are worth arguing about. Me, I’d be glad if every Christian had at least a *basic* understanding of what Paul is getting at here, because it can truly *change your life*. So I’m going to try (try!) this morning to explain this to you.

Let’s approach this very the way Paul himself does, with the lead-up in the preceding seven verses. “At one time you were like a dead person because of the things you did wrong and your offenses against God.” (Ephesians 2:1) Remember that Paul is writing to Christians in Ephesus, a great Roman city in what is now western Turkey, famous for its magnificent temple to the Greek goddess Artemis, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Most of the Christians in Ephesus had probably converted from the worship of pagan gods and goddesses. Paul had spent two whole years in Ephesus, so he knew these people well; he knew what kind of lives they had before they chose to follow Jesus Christ. “You used to live like people of this world. You followed the rule of a destructive spiritual power.... All of you used to do whatever felt good and whatever you thought you wanted.” (Ephesians 2:2-3) Those words apply just as well to *any* of us who have ever failed to follow the ways of Jesus Christ, regardless of whether we are new to the faith or have been lifelong Christians. For who among us has lived a life free from sin? Who among us has never acted contrary to God’s will?

So the starting point here is that all of us have failed to live a life totally and completely *for God*. God has every right to be angry at some (or many) of the choices we have made. Paul says: “you were children headed for punishment just like everyone else.” (Ephesians 2:3) But the gospel story is fundamentally not a story about bad news, but rather *good* news. The good news is that “God is rich in

mercy.” (Ephesians 2:4) The good news is that “he brought us to life with Christ while we were dead as a result of those things we did wrong.” (Ephesians 2:5) Jesus took every single sin we have ever committed, or ever will commit, upon himself when he became “the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world,” the sacrificial offering on our behalf, the *scapegoat*, as we talked about a couple weeks ago. “He did this because of the great love that he has for us.” (Ephesians 2:4) Christ stretched out his hands in suffering, in order to *release* from suffering all those who place their trust in him.

On Good Friday, a week and a half ago, when we got to that point in the service where we re-tell the moment of Christ’s final breath on the cross, and the people were coming forward, with nails in their hands, representing all their sin or waywardness or estrangement from God, and laying in them in the basket at the foot of the cross, I was sitting here, eyes closed, greatly moved by the emotion of the moment, trying to pray, but also noticing that with each nail that went into the basket, there was a sound: *ka-chink, ka-chink, ka-chink*. Sin was compounded onto sin. *Ka-chink, ka-chink, ka-chink*. I was reminded, once again, of the magnitude of what Jesus did for us. He took them *all*. Every single last one of them, for every single last one of us. “God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God.” (2 Corinthians 5:21) And he did it all out of his boundless love for us, his undying *grace* towards us. “You are saved,” Paul says, “by God’s grace.” (Ephesians 2:5)

Over in his letter to the Romans, Paul puts it like this: “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” yet “they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” (Romans 3:23-24) *Justification* is that fancy word that means that God declares us to be *righteous* in his sight, despite the fact that we ourselves have done *nothing* to deserve that gift. It’s free, unmerited *grace*. God saves us from the judgment that we rightly deserve. We have been *saved by grace*.

But not *just* saved by grace. Saved by grace, *through faith*. What does *faith* have to do with this? Paul could have just said, *you have been saved by grace*. But no, he adds a bit more. In Romans, he says Christ’s sacrifice is “effective through faith” (Romans 3:25); in Ephesians, he says we have been “saved by grace, through faith.” (Ephesians 2:8) What does *faith* have to do with our *salvation*?

There is a common misunderstanding here, a misunderstanding that in order to win God’s approval and acceptance, we have to *have faith*. That we have to first *believe in God*, or *believe in the Bible*, or *believe a certain set of doctrines*, and *then* God saves us. That is not what Paul is saying here. *Faith is not a prerequisite for salvation*. Christ’s saving death on the cross is true *regardless* of what we believe or don’t believe. Many churches recite a creed in worship every week, a classic creed of the church like the Apostles’ Creed, and sometimes people get stuck on certain lines. “I’m not really sure I believe in the virgin birth.” “I’m not really sure I believe that Christ descended into hell.” Et cetera. You’ve probably heard people say things like that; maybe you’ve felt that way at some point in your own life. Sometimes people make the mistake of thinking that *having faith* means *being able to recite every line of the creed without reservation*. That’s actually not what faith is. Faith, pure and simple, is *trust in God*. *Confidence* in God. An ability to look towards God and say, “*I trust you.*” “*I believe that your heart is good.*” To be able to look at what God does and recognize that God is fundamentally *for us*. That there is no deception on God’s part, no hidden agenda, no capacity for betrayal *anywhere* in God’s heart. God is not going to change his mind about us – that we are fundamentally *worth loving*,

fundamentally *worth saving*, despite the horrible things we humans are capable of, and often do. That God intends *good* for us. That he is *gracious* towards us, *kind* towards us, *merciful* towards us. That he *loves* us with an *overwhelming* capacity for love, so much that he was willing to give *everything* for us.

Now this kind of faith, this kind of trust, can't just be manufactured; you can't just wake up in the morning and say, "Now I'm going to have faith in God." No, it comes with *experiencing* God's love and trustworthiness. Perhaps it begins with the awareness, first and foremost, that Jesus died on that cross *for you*. That he offered himself up, because *you* are worth it – *despite* the mistakes you've made, *despite* the ways you have acted in the world, *despite* the hurt and harm you have caused, *despite* your selfishness or self-centeredness or greed, *despite* your bad habits, *despite* the times you rebel against God. *You* are worth it, despite *all* of that. *You* are fundamentally worth saving. That was a conviction written on God's heart long before you were ever *born*. *You* are worth saving, worth loving, worth dying for. *By the grace of God, YOU have been saved*. That knowledge, that awareness, is amplified when we experience God's grace in the waters of baptism; when we are nourished with the bread of life and the cup of salvation; when we experience the redemptive power of God's forgiveness as we confess our sins to God or to one another; when a brother or sister lifts us up in their prayers; when we experience healing mercy; when a sudden and unexpected blessing brings us great joy – *any* of that can cause faith to grow in our hearts, *trust* in God's utter and complete goodness toward us, *confidence* in God.

But we don't have to *generate* that faith in order to receive salvation. The classic theologian Robert McAfee Brown put it like this: "The gospel does not say, 'Trust God and he will love you;' the gospel says, 'God already loves you, so trust him.'" We don't have to *manufacture* faith, as if it were a necessary precursor to receiving salvation. It is not a *work* that we have to perform. Faith comes as a gift, when we stand in awe before God's goodness, grace, love, and mercy, and all we can say is, *WOW*.

So we are *saved by grace through faith*. Faith is the *vehicle* through which we *experience* God's lavish gift of salvation. The fact that we are saved by grace is *done*, it is an accomplished *fact*. How we *receive* that good news, how we *experience* its power in our heart, how it *changes* our attitudes and our actions – that's *faith* at work. God saved us two thousand years ago, on the cross, but we *experience* that salvation in the midst of our daily living, and that causes faith to *arise* in our hearts. To be sure, there can be obstacles in the way. Maybe we mistakenly think we're not *worthy* of God's love. Maybe we have come to think that God can forgive everybody else, but God could *never* forgive *us*. Maybe there have been circumstances in our lives, or messages we have received from other people, that have caused us to believe that it's just not true. Sometimes these false beliefs can be deeply embedded and can only come out through extensive conversation with wise Christian friends or mentors, or through prayer. This is deeply personal stuff, and some people have an easier time accepting God's grace than others. That's one of the reasons why we do Christianity in *community* with other people, so that we can build one another up in faith. One of our jobs as Christians is to help other people experience the *goodness* and *grace* of our magnificent God. Helping people to have an ever-greater understanding of *just how much God truly loves them*, so that their *faith*, their *confidence in God*, will continue to grow.

Saved by grace, through faith. God did the hard work 2000 years ago. Receive the *gift, now*.

© 2018 Rev. Bill Pinches