

## By Grace, Through Faith, for Good Works Ephesians 2:8-10

These are some of the most-quoted verses in all the New Testament—and that fact reflects how *important* this short text is to the Christian message—and especially how vital these *truths* are in the ministry of the gospel. This is one of a handful of places in the New Testament where the gospel is given in summary form so clearly and in such plain, uncomplicated language that it is almost impossible to miss. There are only three possible responses to a passage as simple and clear as this one: you can *believe* it; you can twist it or misinterpret it and thereby explain it away; or you can simply ignore it. But once you have been exposed to the truth of this text, you *won't* be able to stand before God in the judgment and claim you never heard the gospel. This is the pure, distilled, and undiluted essence of the gospel.

This passage ranks up there with John 3:16; 1 Corinthians 15:3-5; 2 Corinthians 5:21, and a handful of principle New Testament texts where a perfect synopsis of the gospel is set forth in condensed and concentrated fashion. Each of those passages has a slightly different emphasis, but they all do the same thing: they present the gospel in capsule form as plainly and simply as language can express such profound truth. As a matter of fact, if you asked me to name off the top of my head three or four places in the Bible where the gospel is most powerfully summed up in the fewest possible words, those are probably the first texts I would name:

*John 3:16*: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." That stresses the love of God as the *procuring cause* of our salvation. That verse also implicitly acknowledges the incarnation and deity of Christ and the atoning value of His death. (All of that is encompassed in the expression "God . . . gave his only begotten Son.") John 3:16 highlights *faith*, not works, as the instrumental cause of salvation. It clearly indicates that *faith* is the duty of all who hear the gospel—and it seals the promise of eternal life for all those who do believe. The language of John 3:16 also makes it clear that our salvation is not a *prize* to be earned but a *gift* to

be received by faith. And if you really wanted to unpack that verse completely, you'd discover that it sheds light on the wrath of God against sin, the principle of justification by faith, and several other vital gospel principles—including *grace*, and *the glory of Christ*, and His eternal relationship to God the Father. So it would be hard to think of any way to express the whole gospel in such few words any more beautifully than John 3:16 does it.

Then there's *1 Corinthians 15:3-5*: "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures; and . . . he was buried, and . . . he rose again the third day according to the Scriptures . . . and that he was *seen*." That passage outlines the way of salvation using some of the most important *historical facts* of the gospel in Chronological order. It sheds bright light on the *meaning* of the atonement. (Because if Christ's death was "for our sins according to the Scriptures," then the only proper way to make sense of the cross is in light of the Old Testament sacrificial system. In other words, Christ, as the spotless Lamb of God, became the perfect substitute for sinners and took the punishment for sin in their place.) Christ's death was also "according to the Scriptures" in this sense: the Old Testament prophesied the crucifixion in clear, graphic detail in Psalm 22 and in Isaiah 53. So Paul's gospel summary in Corinthians 15 has a kind of built-in apologetic—a defense of the truth of the gospel. Because it reminds us that the death of Christ fulfilled centuries-old prophecies to the letter—and that's a pretty strong proof that the gospel message is trustworthy. It also affirms the literal historicity of the resurrection by pointing to the hundreds of eyewitnesses who saw Christ alive after His crucifixion. And the fact of the resurrection in turn affirms that the sacrifice Christ offered was accepted by God as payment in full. So that gives assurance of eternal life to those who believe.

You see how much truth is packed into those 29 words from 1 Corinthians 15:3-4.

*Second Corinthians 5:21* also packs a lot of gospel truth into even fewer words: "[God] hath made [Christ] to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him. " There you have the truths of substitution, the imputation of our sin to Christ and the imputation of His righteousness to the believer.

But perhaps the single most important biblical summary of the gospel is our text—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,

9 not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

10 For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

That highlights the central role of divine grace in our salvation. It makes clear *how* we are saved and why we can't take credit for any part of it. It highlights the importance of gospel truth—doctrine—and shows why *true* doctrine is absolutely essential. It's not enough just to have a vague sense of positive feeling about some notion of Christ you carry in your head. But it is absolutely vital to have a right view of the true Christ and at least some rudimentary understanding of how He saves us, because if you think there's something you yourself must do to be saved—some work you have to perform, or some ritual you need to submit to—then you're not really trusting Christ alone, and therefore you haven't really laid hold of Him and His salvation in the sense this passage describes.

Every major facet of gospel truth is either *IM*plicit, *EX*plicit, or otherwise alluded to in this text and its immediate context. And I think you'll get a glimpse of what I mean as we work our way through the text this morning. But the point here is that this is a profoundly *important* text, and its familiarity is well-deserved. If you don't already know it by heart, you ought to memorize it.

The one great danger in studying or preaching on this text is its easy familiarity. Some people tune out and switch off the minute you announce a passage this familiar. They think there can't be *anything* the preacher could possibly say about a passage like this that they haven't heard or thought of before.

Here's what makes that a really bad way to think: these verses are *so* profound, *so* full of truth, *so* vitally important, and *so* amazingly rich with the glory of the gospel that frankly, no matter how much time you may have invested in the study of this text, you haven't really plumbed the full depth of it yet.

In fact, this morning we're just barely going to be able to skim the surface of these three verses, and I'm going to take the best shot I can to give you a clear perspective of the text in a single message.

To be perfectly honest, my highest goal is just to give you enough of a taste for this passage that you'll fall in love with it and want to study it on your own. If you have already memorized it, that's great. *Now* you need to meditate on it, and I think there's enough here to keep you busy for a lifetime.

And I want to outline it all for you in three points suggested by the three key nouns in our text: *Grace*, *faith*, and *works*. Those are the three key words Paul uses to explain how the gospel saves us, and each one of them is vitally significant. It's important not only that we understand the words themselves, but also that we see where each one fits properly into the gospel message as the apostle Paul outlines the way of salvation for us.

And I want you to notice first of all that each of those nouns is associated with a different preposition.

Reach back into those junior-high-school memories you have worked so hard to repress and remember with me what a preposition is. It's one of the parts of speech. Prepositions are usually short words, but they are important. A preposition explains how a noun is related to some other concept. Prepositions are words like *in* and *to*—*under*, *over*, *around*, *on*, *of*—and a host of others. And right away you can see why prepositions are so important. *When a train is moving at top speed, it makes a world of difference whether you are on the train or under it.* So prepositions may be small, but they are indispensable to the meaning of a sentence, and the prepositions in our text are especially significant.

Look at them. Each one is unique. Our salvation is *by* grace *through* faith, *for* works (or *unto* works in some versions). That makes a perfect outline for understanding what the Apostle Paul is saying here: Salvation is by grace, through faith, unto good works. Let's break that down into those three ideas and consider them one at a time. First—

## 1. YOU ARE SAVED BY GRACE.

Verse 8 starts with this statement: "For by grace you have been saved through faith. [And then the verse ends with the very same idea:] And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God."

Now we don't have time to do a full review of verses 1-7, but I need to say something about the preceding context, because the first word in this verse is "For," and that ties it to what came immediately before. Not to sound too much like a junior-high grammar teacher, but the word *for* can be a preposition. In this case, however, it functions as a *conjunction*, which a word in the same family as *and* or *but* or *therefore*. It links this sentence to the idea that immediately preceded it.

So let's take note of what that idea is, in the quickest overview of verses 1-7 I can possibly give you. Starting in verse 1, Paul says we are dead. Period. Spiritually dead, alienated from God (v. 2) "following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air"—that's Satan. Verse 3: "liv[ing] in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind [in other words, in bondage to our own evil lusts], and . . . by nature children of wrath." That's a description of the fallen condition we were born into, and the end of verse 3 expressly applies it to all of humanity. There are no exceptions. That is the natural condition of the human race since Adam fell.

And we're completely helpless to do anything to save ourselves. By definition, we can't bring ourselves back from the dead. It's as hopeless a situation as there ever was. The theological term for it is *total depravity*—total in the same sense that death is always total. Like corpses in various stages of decay, we may not all manifest the same degree of putrefaction, but we are all totally dead. Totally depraved. Unable to do anything to save ourselves from the condition described in those first three verses. To borrow Jesus' words from John 3:18, in our natural state, we are "condemned already."

But the next four verses describe what God did to save us and why He did it. He raised us from the dead, brought us into union with Christ, plugged us into the resurrection power of Christ, and gave us the same legal status and divine favor Christ has (all of which Paul signifies by saying—verse 6—that God "raised us up with [Christ] and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus"). Notice: God did *all* of this. And he

did it (verse 5) "even when we were dead in our trespasses." There's not a word about anything we did to earn it, deserve it, prompt God to do it for us. As a matter of fact, He did it by His own sovereign will, prompted only by His own love (verse 4). We get no credit for it whatsoever. All we get are the blessings of salvation, even though what we actually deserve is the exact opposite.

That is the very picture of divine grace. And that's why this word *grace* is the dominant word in this whole passage. Of the three terms we're talking about this morning, this one is by far the most important. The one supreme thought in Paul's mind as he writes this chapter is his passion to extol the grace of God over human works, the notion of human freewill, and every other expression of human self-righteousness. That's why Paul gave the *bad* news of verses 1-3 in such graphic, horrific terms: because until you see how fallen and hopeless sinners are apart from God, you can't begin to appreciate how profound and how essential the grace of God is.

Furthermore, you can't even begin to understand the role of faith and works in redemption until you understand that God's grace is the fountainhead of everything that is involved in our salvation—including our faith and our works. Faith and works proceed from grace. That's Paul's whole point here, and you're going to understand that better as we unpack the text. But get it fixed in your mind before we go any further.

If you want to understand salvation at all, you *must* lay hold of this idea: "by grace you have been saved." It's not by *God's grace plus your faith*—but by grace, period. Not only your faith but also whatever good works you do as a believer—all of it is the result of God's work in you and for you, and not something you bring to the table in the exercise of your own free will. God is the ultimate source, the sovereign author, and the final finisher of salvation—every aspect of it—including your faith and whatever good works that flow from your faith. He deserves all the glory for it, and you get none of the credit for yourself.

How important is that truth? The entire gospel message is comprehended in it. If you wanted to boil the whole gospel down to one essential idea and state it in the shortest possible sentence, there you have it: "by grace you have been saved."

Now, you have probably already noticed that this same phrase actually appears twice in Ephesians 2—first in verse 5, and then again here in verse 8. And in verse 5, it's an interjection. It actually interrupts the logical flow of Paul's transition from verse 5 to verse 6. Notice: starting in verse 4 until the end of verse 7 is all one sentence. And right in the very middle of that long sentence (at the end of verse 5) you have this parenthesis—an interjection—that doesn't modify any phrase or attach itself to any other word in the sentence: ("by grace you have been saved"). It's just stuck in there almost at a random point in that longer sentence.

Now, this would have been a bad piece of writing if Paul's main goal had been to achieve a polished literary style. But that wasn't his aim. He was proclaiming truth, not doing an exercise in creative writing. And the truth that salvation is completely by God's grace was so prominent in what he wanted to say that it's almost as if he couldn't contain it any longer, so he bursts out with it *early* in verse 5, kind of like opening a steam valve to let off some of the pressure. He was in the middle of a sentence describing what God does to awaken these spiritual corpses, and he was so overwhelmed with the glory and grace of it all that he literally interrupted himself to give away the punch line early: "by grace you have been saved." Not only does God *begin* the process of our salvation by raising us from the dead—*all the rest* of salvation is His doing, too. He does it all gratuitously, freely—by grace.

At that point in verse 5 Paul doesn't stop to elaborate on the statement or develop the thought; he just says it. Then he finishes the sentence he started in verse 4 in verses 6-7.

Now here in verse 8 he gets *back* to that point he was bursting to say (and blurted out already in verse 5), and this time he develops the thought. Verse 8: "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God." The verse starts and ends with the idea of grace—"the gift of God." If you want a theological definition of God, it is "the free and benevolent influence of a holy God operating sovereignly in the lives of undeserving sinners." Notice several aspects of that definition. It defines grace as a *gift*: "free and benevolent." That's just what this verse says "it is the *gift* of God." Not only is it free and benevolent, it is given to sinners who don't deserve it. In fact, the idea is

actually much stronger than that. It's not merely that they deserve nothing good from God. But what they do deserve is precisely the opposite: damnation. What makes grace so amazing is not merely that God gives it to us freely when He might have simply left us alone. It's that God gives us grace when by all rights He ought to have judged us and doomed us to the flames of eternal punishment. Grace is not merely an unexpected blessing we've done nothing to deserve; it's an infinite and eternal blessing when what we really deserved is the exact opposite. So when you see the word *gift* here, don't think of it like a birthday present given in your honor because you're just so cute and lovable. We need to understand it in the light of verse 3, that when we "were by nature children of wrath," God gave us the very *opposite* of wrath, and graciously, gratuitously bestowed on us the favor and blessing Christ deserved—verse 7: "His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus."

Incidentally, I've said a couple of times that every essential gospel doctrine is either *implicit* or *explicit* in this text. Some sharp-minded seminary student might look at this passage and say, *Where's the doctrine of justification by faith? Where is the imputation of Christ's righteousness?* My answer is that it's necessarily entailed in Paul's whole concept of grace. How else could God bestow the grace of His kindness on filthy sinners who by all that is holy deserved nothing but His wrath? How could He do that without overthrowing and overturning the whole idea of justice? How can God be just and still justify sinners? The doctrine of justification by faith answers that question.

Christ paid everything justice demanded. He satisfied the wrath and the righteousness of God against sin by bearing the sins of His people as their substitute. So the principle of substitutionary atonement is bound up in this as well. He died in our place and in our stead. Then, because God accepted His sacrifice as payment in full, He rose from the dead. And by our union with Him, and the imputation of His righteousness to us, this amazing outpouring of grace is possible with no compromise of divine justice. That is how, in the words of Romans 3:26, God can be "just and the justifier of [those who have] faith in Jesus." Their guilt was imputed to Christ and He paid for it; His righteousness is imputed to them, and they are blessed because of it. Those truths are so much woven into Paul's doctrine that he doesn't pause to explain it here. But



you can be sure that the Ephesians, who had been won to Christ and established in the faith under Paul's teaching, understood precisely all that he meant when he spoke of grace.

Back to that short theological definition of grace I gave you: Grace is "the free and benevolent influence of a holy God operating sovereignly in the lives of undeserving sinners." Notice one more thing about that: it defines grace as dynamic, not static. It's not merely a passive offer of blessing to whoever might exercise enough willpower or brainpower to summon up enough faith out of their own hearts to receive grace. Grace reaches out and does the saving.

In other words, grace is what secures the sinner's response in the first place. That is Paul's whole point here. We were sinners, dead in sin, condemned, hopeless—until God by grace reached out and sovereignly put an end to our death. The power was all His. (Remember it's the same power that raised Jesus from the dead.) He gives us life, pure and simple. That is the theme of this whole passage—resurrection. And the theological lesson Paul draws from it is about the sovereignty of divine grace. We're no more the reason for our own spiritual awakening than Lazarus was for his return from the dead. S. Lewis Johnson used to say, "Jesus didn't look into Lazarus's Tomb and say, "Yes, I see that hand!"

Here's the point: the power of the gospel is not dependent on the sinner's ability to respond. The gospel is the power of God unto salvation even when the sinner totally lacks all spiritual desire, all spiritual ability, and even the capacity for faith. It's not the power of our faith that save us, but (look back at Ephesians 1:19-20) it's God's power—the same *divine* power that raised Christ from the dead. God's power is what unleashes our faith. It is not the other way around.

The expression theologians use to teach this truth is this: grace is efficacious. Grace always accomplishes everything it aims to do. God's grace draws us and awakens us and makes Christ irresistible to hearts that were once completely dead in trespasses and sins, devoid of any Godly desires, in bondage to the flesh and the devil—and devoid of any spiritual life that might energize our faith. But God's grace kindles faith in us, and that is how we become believers in the first place. Totally and completely by grace. Verse 8: "And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God."

So grace is the fountainhead of our salvation; it is the source from which everything that's involved in salvation flows, including our faith. That's really just a brief summary of what Paul means when he says, *You are saved by grace*. We have to move on. Here's key word number 2: *faith*.

## **2. YOU ARE SAVED THROUGH FAITH.**

Now, that word "through" is significant. If Paul had said we are saved *by* faith, he might have meant that faith is the efficient cause of our salvation or the reason for it. Or it could mean we are saved *by* faith might mean that faith is the means of our salvation. Or someone might interpret that expression to mean we're saved because of our faith, as if faith were the condition of salvation, meaning salvation would be a reward or a prize in return for our faith. And there are people who interpret the gospel in all those ways. Lots of people think of faith as a prerequisite for receiving God's grace, as if He were merely waiting for people to believe so that He could bless them.

This doesn't mean any of those things. Faith is not the *means*, or the *condition*, or the *efficient cause* or the *reason* for salvation. It is merely the instrument, the channel through which grace flows into our lives. Remember that grace itself is a dynamic force, and grace basically carves out that channel as it flows from God to the sinner.

In other words, faith is the *result* of grace, not the *cause* of it. Faith does not earn us salvation, pave the way for it, or supply the power of it. Faith simply receives grace, the way an irrigation channel receives the inundation when water is diverted out of a mighty river.

If you imagine that faith is the condition or prerequisite for salvation; **OR** if you think the sinner's decision is necessary in order to allow freedom for divine grace to have its way in the heart of the sinner; **OR** if faith is something *we* must do to initiate the work of grace in our lives—then you have in effect made faith into a work, and salvation becomes a reward rather than a gift.

That whole idea nullifies grace completely, because if faith is something I can do in my own power and by my own free will, then I *do* have something to boast about after all. And that contradicts everything

Paul is saying in this chapter. If I have the capacity to believe before God grants me spiritual life, then I was never really spiritually *dead* after all. Any sinner who can concoct faith out of his own heart must have some spark of spiritual life in him. And he must not be "following the course of this world, [or] the prince of the power of the air" too closely, because neither the world nor the devil has any inclination toward faith.

In fact, if anything ought to be clear from this passage, it is the reality that our faith "is not our own doing" it is a gift of divine grace, just like salvation itself. And that is precisely what Paul is saying in verse 8. At the very least, faith is *included* in "the gift of God" Paul mentions in verse 8.

Now, at the risk of sounding like someone totally obsessed with grammar, I need to explain one major grammatical difficulty in the interpretation of verse 8. Here is that verse in the King James Version. This is the way everyone memorized in back when I first became a Christian, so in *my* mind (at least), this is the most familiar version: "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and *that* not of yourselves: it is the gift of God." Now, the crucial question about that verse is this: *What does the demonstrative pronoun "that" refer to?* From the English text, you wouldn't know there's a problem, because the antecedent seems clear. By the normal rules of English usage, the word *that* would refer back to the closest preceding noun: *faith*. So the sense of the sentence would be, "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that [*faith is not from yourself*]: it is the gift of God." It makes good sense, it says the very same thing I've been saying, and it seems to be exactly what Paul is teaching in the larger context. So what is the problem?

Well, in Greek the demonstrative pronoun and all the surrounding nouns have genders. The word *that* is both neuter and plural, and the word *faith* is singular and feminine. In other words, if you could read this in Greek, you would not get the idea that the word *that* refers to the word *faith*. Practically every commentary mentions it. Some Greek scholars claim there are instances in classical Greek where neuter pronouns refer to feminine nouns, and I'll take their word for it, but those who say that, also admit that it's a pretty rare construction, and I can't imagine Paul deliberately using some arcane construction from classical Greek when he was writing to a church filled with lay-people

whose literary skills were limited. I think we're obliged to interpret this in a plain-sense sort of way, because twisting the rules to make this passage say something more specific than it really says doesn't show Scripture proper respect.

Now you'll sometimes hear someone point out the disparity between the feminine word for faith and the neuter pronoun and use that to argue that faith is no gift after all; faith is a human free-will response to a divine offer of grace and salvation. Arminians love to point that out, for obvious reasons: Their whole system depends on making faith a purely human action—so that faith is the cause or the catalyst that releases God's grace into our lives rather than a *result* of the grace that draws us to God. So Arminians will usually make a big deal out of the grammar here, emphasizing the fact that the neuter pronoun (*that*) cannot be a reference to the feminine word for faith.

But what they generally don't do is identify the actual antecedent to this pronoun, because when you look at the rest of the nouns in this sentence, they all have the same problem. Not only is *faith* feminine, but so is *grace*. And if *salvation* appeared there as a noun rather than a verb, it would be feminine too. Every Greek noun that is either used or implied by this statement is the same gender, so the word *that* doesn't refer to any particular noun in any of the preceding sentences. And when you have that kind of construction in Greek, the pronoun needs to be understood in reference to the whole preceding statement—not a single noun in the sentence, but the message of the sentence, considered as a whole.

So Paul's meaning here turns out to be even more powerful than if he were merely saying that faith is the gift of God. It's not just faith that is the gift of God but the whole process of salvation by grace through faith. "By grace you have been saved through faith. And this [favor you have received—including every distinct feature of it]—is not your own doing." By logical necessity, what Paul is saying is that the whole process—grace, faith, salvation, and the good works we subsequently do—every facet of the whole big picture—is God's doing, not yours.

That is the only thing this can possibly mean, and Paul emphatically confirms that in two ways. First, he says unequivocally that we have nothing to boast about (v. 9) This is "not a result of works, so that no one may

boast." If faith were something I summoned out of my own heart and by my own volition, then I could indeed take credit for it, and I *would* have something to boast about, wouldn't I?

But second, notice verse 10: Paul says definitively, "we are his workmanship" and even the good works we do as believers with regenerate hearts are works God has "prepared beforehand"—foreordained—"that we should walk in them."

Now don't get the wrong impression about this. It doesn't mean God believes for us. Faith is still *our* faith, involving the exercise of our mental, volitional, and emotional faculties. It's not some kind of robotic or hypnotic state. And even though (as Scripture says in John 1:13), we are "born [again], not of . . . the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God." this doesn't involve any kind of violence to the will of the creature. It's not coercion on God's part. He draws us to Christ, not by force against our wills, but by making us willing, and by making the truth itself compelling to us. That's why we sometimes call it "irresistible grace." No duress or constraint is involved; but Christ becomes irresistible in a gracious sense.

Scripture pictures it as the implantation of a new heart. Ezekiel 36:26-27: "I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules."

"This is not your own doing; it is the gift of God."

Three more observations about faith, and then we have to move on. First, faith is not only the channel through which divine grace enters our life; it is also the channel that establishes our union with Christ. In Ephesians 3, just one chapter from here, where Paul is praying for the Ephesians, he prays (verse 17) "That Christ may dwell in [their] hearts by faith." When God brings us into union with Christ, faith is the instrument that enables us to lay hold of Him and binds us to Him in that mystical spiritual union. Notice, by the way, that Scripture sometimes speaks of Christ in us, and other times says we are in Christ. Both things are true, so perfect is that Spiritual union.

Here's a second thing you need to grasp about faith: faith is not some nondescript amorphous kind of religious feeling. Some people think any

kind of superstition is faith. It's not. And some people equate faith with any kind of positive feeling—good vibrations, a positive self-image, lots of self-confidence, or an optimistic outlook on life. None of those things are true faith; they are all dangerous counterfeits.

There's that ridiculous quasi-religious song about faith you sometimes hear: "I believe for every drop of rain that falls, a flower grows . . ." Warren Wiersbe use to say, "*If that were true, we'd be up to our armpits in flowers.*"

Faith is no better than its object. What Paul is describing here is not some kind of rosy outlook on life, but a vital connection to Christ by faith that trusts in Him and Him alone. The faith through which we are saved is not an aimless, general, positive attitude about God; it is a faith that receives Christ and rests in Him alone as Lord, Savior, and Substitute.

Here's a final thing about faith: true faith involves all the faculties of your mind, heart, and passions. It's not just a casual assent to the academic facts about Christ. *real* faith involves love for Him as Savior, loyalty to Him as Lord, and fidelity to Him as the Way, the Truth, and the Life. A truly faithful heart is a yielded, humble heart. You don't have faith at all if your only relationship with Christ consists of a purely rational assent to the facts about Him—especially if you have never truly known the fear of the Lord; if you've never had any kind of authentic love for Him; or if you've never had the slightest concern about His honor. If you are one of those who said a prayer and asked Jesus into your heart at some point along the way—but nothing significant in your life really changed; if you have no concern about holiness and no place for Christ in your private life, then you don't really have faith at all, and you need to pray right now, where you sit, that God will open your heart and give you authentic faith.

You might be thinking, *Well that sounds pretty harsh and judgmental.* Actually, it's right in line with Paul's view of salvation by grace through faith as he outlines it in this very passage. And I think you are going to see that when you see where he puts works into the equation.

Let's review our outline: You are saved by grace. (That's point one and the key point of the whole passage.) Point 2: You are saved through faith. And now,

### **3. YOU ARE SAVED *UNTO* GOOD WORKS.**

Verse 10 is the forgotten verse in this passage. Verses 8-9 are standard verses in virtually every beginners' scripture memory packet ever made. But verse 10 is absolutely *essential* if you want to get the full sense of Paul's gospel summary. It's only half the truth if you stop at verse 9. Verse 10 is the one that answers all the questions left dangling in your mind once you have worked your way through the passage to this point. And the theme of this verse is *works*. "For we are his workmanship [and in the Greek construction that pronoun is emphatic: we are **HIS** workmanship], created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them."

Now Paul has already had a couple of important things to say about works in verses 8-9, and we more or less skipped over them on the way to verse ten. I wasn't *ignoring* them, I was just saving them till we got to this part about works. But notice: without verse ten, you might get the impression that Paul had no place for works at all. In reality, he elevates good works to their proper status, taking them totally out of the realm of self-righteousness. Let's look quickly at the negative side of good works, and then we'll look at the positive side.

First, on the negative side, notice that he makes works antithetical to both grace and faith. As means of salvation, grace and works are opposite principles. Verse 8: "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." He is talking there about our own works of our own—works performed in our own energy, for our own benefit, and with a view toward earning merit with God or winning His approval.

Once you have sinned—and we all have—it becomes impossible to win God's approval with any works, because good works cannot atone for sin, and our sin has already condemned us. So good works—even our best works—are utterly worthless for regaining what we lost in the fall. In fact, they incur further condemnation, because the person trying

to earn God's favor is in effect refusing to acknowledge how lost he really is.

The "works" Paul has in mind here in verse 9 would include everything from the most lavish philanthropy of the world's wealthiest person to the creepiest superstitious practices of the most grotesque pagan false religions—and everything in between. It would also include the practice of rituals that were prescribed under the Old Testament law, starting with circumcision and the whole sacrificial system. Those things were fine in their place if they were expressions of obedient faith, and symbols of the object of our faith. But the activity itself didn't earn any merit with God—even if it was done in faith, and *especially* if it was divorced from faith.

All "works" such as those are actually expressions of self-righteousness, and that's *evil*, not good. Which is what Isaiah 64:6 means when it says "we have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a [stained and] polluted garment." Self-righteousness is no righteousness at all. It adds to our guilt.

And that underscores the utter wickedness inherent in all false religion. Religion is *not* the most lofty idea the world has ever devised; it's the most immoral and debauched. And human religion is *always* shot through with self-righteousness. You could say that self-righteousness is the natural religion of the fallen heart.

That's why the singular error lying at the core of every false religion is the belief that sinners can be saved by their own *doings*. Paul says as clearly as possible here that that's a lie. Good works have no meritorious value in our salvation, because every aspect of our redemption is *God's* work.

And this sheds some light on the nature of authentic faith: It means that when a sinner comes to faith in Christ, he is stripped of all his *own* righteousness. Paul himself is a prime example of this. In Philippians 3, he recites a long list of things he once counted on for merit in the eyes of God, and these ranged from his bloodline as a member "of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews;" to his personal accomplishments as a Pharisee, so full of zeal that he led the persecution against the church and so fastidious in his external obedience to the law that he considered himself blameless. What did authentic faith prompt Paul to do with that



laundry list of personal virtues and meritorious works? He threw it on the garbage heap. Paul says he considered it as worthless as dung, and he cast it all aside for the sake of knowing Christ Jesus as Lord and having His righteousness imputed. Philippians 3:9—Paul says he was not interested in "having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith."

And it's either/or, not half and half. It's not God's grace plus my works, but God's grace alone, because as Paul says in Romans 11:6: "If it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace."

That, by the way, is the whole point of controversy between Rome and the Reformation. The heart of the difference between the teaching of Roman Catholicism and a biblical view of the gospel boils down to this one question: *Are sinners saved by grace alone, or do the merits of our own works somehow figure into the equation?* Scripture is clear: if it's not all grace, it's not grace at all. And that means if your faith is not Christ alone, without any backup plan, your faith is not really in Christ at all, and you have no hope of salvation at all.

So what about the positive side? Does this mean works are so inherently evil that we should give up doing good works altogether? No. It's not good works that Paul was opposed to, but trusting in good works. There's a prominent place for good works in the gospel we preach—but they are works as the *fruit* of faith.

Truly good works are not a *supplement* to faith—as if we needed to fill up something lacking in the righteousness of Christ. They aren't the energy that drives our faith. They aren't part and parcel of faith itself. (That's what some people want to say.) Authentic good works are the natural, expected fruit of faith. That's what Paul is saying here, and that's why he talks positively about good works only *after* he has established the proper order of salvation:

God's grace initiates it by opening our hearts to the truth and giving us faith as a gracious gift; our faith appropriates Christ as Savior and we are united to Him and energized by His resurrection life. And works are the result.

So good works are the fruit of God's grace in the same way faith is. Not the cause of God's grace or the reason He shows us grace—but the *result* of it. Look at this: Our works are the proof that He loved us and chose us before the foundation of the world, because He foreordained those works to characterize our walk.

There really is much more to say about this, but we have run out of time, so let me close by asking the same question Paul raises in Romans 3:27: "Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith."