

Sermon – 04/05/2008 am

Grace Not Works

Study Text: Ephesians 2:8-9

Many years ago a boy was sharing his testimony of when he became a Christian. He said that at home he had a card on which he had written his name when he had decided to believe in Jesus. Some cling to their baptism certificates or just the fact of their baptism as proof that they have become a Christian. Is there any thing wrong with such testimonies? Is this how you declare that you are a Christian? Is this the assurance you have that you are a Christian? What do we learn from the apostle Paul in this matter?

Grace through Faith

In the second chapter of Ephesians we come to the very heart of the gospel. Paul began this letter with a doxology exalting the triune God for who he is and what he has done in us and for us. He went on to pray for the saints at Ephesus that God would enlighten their hearts concerning the great blessing they have in Jesus Christ, namely knowledge, wisdom, hope and power.

In chapter two he is writing as it were the testimony of these Christians. He reminds them that they were dead in their sin, enemies of God and under the wrath of God. In such a state did they decide to follow Christ when they heard the gospel? Do you see the word ‘decision’ here? Paul does not write ‘but you’ – he writes ‘but God’. *But God* made you alive in Christ.

By grace you have been saved. This is what Paul put in parenthesis after stating the great love of God in making us alive in Christ (2:5). He comes back to this statement, repeating it in verse 8. He is ready now to further explain this great truth. We come here to one of the most well known verses in the Bible – and it is well known for good reason. It is the very heart of the gospel.

This verse is like Paul’s version of John 3:16. ‘God so loved the world’. Paul has just pointed to God’s great love (2:4). In this verse God’s love is spoken of as grace, love for the unlovely, or unmerited favour. ‘God gave his only begotten Son’. Here is grace personified or grace embodied. *Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ* (John 1:17). Paul writes of the gift of God. ‘That whosoever believes in him (Jesus)’. Faith is the same as believing – it is literally the same Greek word. And finally ‘should not perish but have eternal life’ means to be saved; saved from death.

What does it mean to be saved? We have people on our beaches each summer called ‘surf life savers’. They are there because swimmers get into difficulty and drown. The waves are too powerful for them and they get swept away to their death. The lifesavers keep watch over the swimmers. They race out to save anyone overwhelmed by the waves and in danger of being drowned.

Jesus saves. God sent his Son Jesus Christ into this world to save us from sin and death. Sin entangled us; the darkness of death surrounded us as we lived in this fallen world. We were powerless to help ourselves. We could not free ourselves from sin and death. But God!

Through the Cross of Jesus Christ God saved us. He took our sin, he set us free, he washed us clean, and he set our feet upon the rock. Jesus is the rock of our salvation. It was all by grace. *Of his (Jesus) fullness we have all received, grace for grace (John 1:16).*

If you look at verse 8 in the NKJ you will notice that the second half is separated by a comma. If you look in the NIV however you will notice is put between dashes. Charles Hodge actually put it in brackets. This may seem insignificant, and really it is, but there are two grammatical options with regard to the 'that' in this verse. Does the 'that' qualify 'grace' or 'faith'? In other words is that which is *not of yourselves but the gift of God* 'grace' or 'faith'?

Some argue that it refers to 'grace' because the 'not of yourselves' parallels the not of works – and hence should not be bracketed as in the NIV. The relevance of this is that such people use this argument to separate faith from the qualification of being a gift of God. Some turn their faith into a kind of work. This is actually the thrust of much preaching today. The gospel is presented in a man-centred manner. Salvation depends on you making a decision for Christ. Hence the focus upon the day and hour when 'I decided' – through a response slip, through going forward at a rally or at my baptism.

The truth is that grace is the gift of God and so is faith. It is by grace that you are saved, the grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. 'Through faith' means that this grace is appropriated by faith or belief. We must believe in Jesus Christ but it is the Spirit of God who moves or makes alive our dead hearts to believe. *We have received the Spirit who is from God that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God (I Corinthians 2:12).*

Not of Works

Verses 8-9 of Ephesians 2 were central to Reformation teaching because they clearly proclaim that salvation is by grace through faith, with no place whatsoever for works. The Reformers preached salvation by grace alone through faith alone.

The Church of Rome at that time, and still today, teaches salvation by grace plus works. At that time this doctrine led to the abomination of indulgences, paying money to get souls out of Hell. Church leaders too easily slip into teaching some component of works because this gives them power over the people. They will emphasize keeping the law or the sacraments, for in this way they can exercise control. See what happens in any cult – and many of these come out of a church.

If salvation is by grace plus works then assurance of salvation is forfeited. If salvation is the gift of God, as it is, then we can have assurance of salvation because it is not of us but of God. We do not enter into doubts about whether we have done enough good works to merit God's favour. We do not enter into doubts about whether we really did believe that night we decided for Jesus.

If faith is our work then such doubts will come – and our assurance will go. Moreover to think that works have any place in our salvation is dishonouring to God. There are those who go all the way saying it was not necessary for Jesus to die on the Cross – but still they call themselves Christians.

Paul was writing as an inspired apostle, but he also knew from his own experience that what he was writing was true. He was a zealous Jew, properly circumcised, following all the rituals and diligently keeping the Law of Moses. In his effort to do good works he persecuted the church. Paul was highly educated. He knew the Bible backwards. Did his good works save him? Did they contribute to his salvation? Did Paul examine his life and decide to follow Jesus. Did he make an intellectual decision to follow Christ? No, no, no. He was saved by grace alone through faith alone.

The righteousness which Paul had gained from keeping the law was totally useless. He did not count such things towards his salvation but counted such things a total loss. He counted them as rubbish. He counted them loss for Christ. Salvation is all of Christ. It is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith (Philippians 3:9).

Our salvation is initiated and completed by God alone through faith in Jesus Christ. We were dead in sin. We can make all the decisions we like but will remain dead unless and until God makes us alive in Christ. You will of course know when he has done that and you will praise and glorify him as your personal Lord and saviour. You will be a new creation in Christ Jesus and will walk in the wonderful light of the word and the Spirit.

No Boasting

Works not only allows church leaders to exercise control over the people, telling them they must do this or not do that if they want to go to heaven, it also allows personal boasting. Boasting comes from pride which resides in our sinful nature. Many people refuse to accept the truth that nothing good resides in them. *No one does good, no, not one* (Psalm 14:3, Romans 3:12).

‘What good thing must I do to be saved’ they ask, just like the rich young ruler (Luke 18:18f). Jesus pointed this young man to the Ten Commandments, and like Paul he claimed to have obeyed them. Jesus told him to sell all he had then come and follow him. You know the account. It is a tragic story. Jesus told his disciples how hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God. But God! With God all things are possible.

Imagine if Jesus had accepted the testimony of this rich ruler. How wonderful he would have felt. But he would have gone home rejoicing not in the wonderful grace of God but in his own good works. He would have gone to church boasting of how he kept the commandments. He would have condemned those who did not live the upright life that he lived.

Where then is boasting asked Paul of the Romans (Romans 3:27). It is excluded. It is totally out. It has no place. Works have absolutely no place in your salvation so you cannot boast in them. You are saved by grace through faith. Let all your boasting be only in the Lord Jesus Christ. *God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ* (Galatians 6:14)

Rev. Dr. Dennis K. Muldoon