

“A Summary of the Gospel”

Sermon on Ephesians 2:8-10

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“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.”

Ephesians 2:8-10

Last Sunday I said that a minister has to be a preacher, a teacher, and a pastor and that a minister needs faith, intelligence, and love in order to fulfill these responsibilities. But since the minister is merely an authorized representative of the church’s ministry as a whole, what is true of the minister is also true of the church’s ministry. Hence, as a congregation we need faith, intelligence, and love in order to fulfill our mission as the gathered church in this time and place.

This morning I am going to speak about the content of what we preach, teach, believe, and strive to live out as Christians: the gospel of Jesus Christ. And as I did last week, so this week I am turning to the apostle Paul for guidance.

A few years ago, this short passage from Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians that was just read aloud caught my attention as an especially clear and succinct statement of what Christian faith is all about. In the margin of my Bible I wrote this note: “the best summary of the gospel in the entire New Testament.” A good summary takes a complex of ideas and distills them into a brief, compact form that is easy to remember. For this reason, a summary is also a good teaching tool. If we can memorize it, we will always have the main points immediately at our disposal. This is what Paul does in Ephesians. He articulates the main points of the gospel in such a succinct

manner that we can easily remember them, preach them, teach them, and—most importantly—live by them.

The word “gospel,” as we all know, means “good news.” But do others know this? Since the purpose of the church is to proclaim the gospel and to live as a community that embodies the gospel in its way of life, we need to be clear just what this good news so that we can share it with others. So, let’s ask Paul, “What’s the news?” and “What so good about it?”

“By grace you have been saved through faith.” Three important words in the Christian vocabulary are brought together in this one compact little sentence: grace, saved, and faith.

The first word, “grace,” means “gift.” The opening words of this verse “by grace” could therefore also be translated: “you have been saved as a gift.” And in the very next part of this verse we learn that what is being talked about is “the gift of God.” The gospel is thus the announcement of the news that God has given us a gift. To give someone a gift is to do something good for another person. Hence, in giving us a gift, God wants to do something good for us. This is not only news; it is really good news, even unheard-of news! Throughout the history of human religion people have believed that it is their duty to offer gifts (e.g., sacrifices) to God or, in the case of polytheistic religions, to the gods. But the New Testament tells us of God’s gift to human beings. This is a reversal of our usual expectations and alerts us that the gospel is unusual and surprisingly good news. God, the awesome creator of the world, wants to give us a gift.

But what kind of gift is it that God wants to give us? To answer this question, we turn to the second crucial word, “saved.” To say that we have been saved implies that we have been rescued from some danger or dire predicament, delivered from some peril or destructive

condition that threatened or jeopardized our well-being. In the New Testament, to be saved is to be brought into proper relationship with God, our creator. Hence, we are saved from not being in a proper relationship with God. Now, someone may ask, “Why is this important?” It is not only important but crucial because, if we are not in right relation with God our creator, we forfeit our authentic humanity; we lose our very purpose for existing in the first place, since we were created for fellowship with God and conscious service of God. And so, this is God’s gift of salvation: to bring us back into right relation to God, so that we do not forfeit our authentic humanity, so that we do not miss the purpose of our existence. Paul reminds us that we did not do this for ourselves: “This is not your own doing,” he explains. Just as we did not create ourselves, so we did not save ourselves. When we talk about grace, we are acknowledging that God is the giver and we are the recipients of God’s gift. Being “saved,” then, is the result of God’s generosity. As creator, God gives us the gift of life; as savior, God gives us the gift of authentic life. Jesus said, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10).

The third word is “faith.” Salvation, which is God’s gift to us, is to be received by us “through faith.” The word “faith” means two things. On the one hand, it means “belief” or “conviction.” On the other hand, it means “trust” or “assurance.” Let’s first consider the meaning of faith as a belief or a conviction. If somebody says “I believe in God,” it usually means that this person believes in the actual existence or reality of God. But faith can also mean “trust” or “assurance.” In this sense, to say “I believe in God” means “I trust in God,” “I count on God,” or “I rely on God.” The New Testament speaks of faith in both senses: faith is both a belief in the reality of God’s existence and an assurance that God can be trusted to be good to us. So, when Paul speaks of faith in Ephesians, he is saying: we believe it is true that God has given us salvation as a free gift; and, for this reason, we trust in God’s goodness. Faith is our

affirmation that, in saving us, God has been good to us. Faith is the posture of open hands willingly receiving this gift from God. Faith is our humble and grateful response to what God has done for us. Paraphrasing this verse from Paul, then, we can say: “God has been good to us by giving us salvation; not only may we believe that this is true but also we can entrust ourselves to God’s goodness, rest assured of God’s mercy, and count on it as reliable.”

Of course, we could have a separate sermon on each of these three words: grace, salvation, and faith. But here, in Ephesians, we have been given a succinct summary of the entire Christian message: the good news from God about God to human beings. This is why we call the gospel “the Word of God,” because it is God’s very own message assuring us of our worth to God (cf. 1 Thess. 2:13). Our creator who brought us into existence is also our savior who redeems our existence. Indeed, everything else we say and do as Christians is merely commentary upon this amazing claim: “By grace you have been saved through faith.”

Much of the time, we human beings don’t trust that God is really good to us, even if we claim to believe that God exists. When evil things befall us, it is easy to lose heart. Sometimes we give up on God entirely and try to rely solely on ourselves to secure everything that makes for a good life. When this happens, however, we become anxious and defensive. Once I come to believe that only my own efforts can make me secure and happy, I am tempted to turn against my fellow human beings whom I now view as my competitors in the struggle of life. From the Christian perspective, love of neighbor is rooted in love of God. But when we lose our trust in God, we can no longer love God. And when our love of God has withered up, our love of neighbor is the next to go. In short, this is the story of human sin to which the Bible addresses itself in both Old and New Testaments. Out of God’s goodness, we were brought forth into existence to live in God’s world. Even though the world is good in God’s eyes (Gen 1:31), it can

often be a scary place for us. Hence, we are tempted to lose faith in God. We cease to believe that God really loves us and cares about us. And so, we turn our backs on God. We turn our backs on our creator. This is what the Bible means by “sin.” Sin is, first and foremost, a religious category. It has to do with our relationship with God. Only in a secondary sense is sin also a moral category, having to do with our relationship with our fellow human beings. But there is a close relationship between them. When I turn my back on God out of a lack of trust in God’s goodness to me, I also turn my back on my neighbor out of an anxious and defensive concern for myself and my well-being. I then become greedy, selfish, cruel, and insensitive to my neighbor.

The unheard-of good news of the gospel is that God has rescued us from this predicament by reaching out to us through Jesus Christ so as to restore our trust, our faith in God’s goodness toward us. In the light of sin, God’s goodness now comes to us as God’s mercy, as God’s forgiveness. Accordingly, faith in the gospel is the sincerely-held conviction as well as the heartfelt assurance that God, through Christ, has forgiven my sins. *Salvation simply is God’s forgiveness and the possibility of a new relationship with God opened up by God’s forgiveness.* And since forgiveness, whether God’s or anybody’s, is always freely bestowed by another, it is not something that can be earned. This is what grace means: it is a gift. No matter how much I have screwed up my life, God offers me a new start. No matter how lost I have been on life’s journey, God finds me and steers me back to the right path. And this gift of a new possibility of life is not something to be awaited in the distant future. It is today, this hour, this minute, now. I am forgiven now. I am saved now. My future life begins now. God forgives me in spite of my sin, in spite of my betrayal of God. The crazy thing about the gospel is that God accepts us even though we are sinners who have turned away from God (Rom. 5:8). “Just as I am without one plea,” as the great hymn “Amazing Grace” declares it so movingly. This gospel of God’s free

gift of grace, to be received simply by our trusting faith, is the heart of all authentic preaching by which the church must ever anew test its ministry. Everything stands or falls on whether we get this right.

But here we find ourselves faced with a difficult question. Don't we have to do good works as Christians? Doesn't the Bible command us to do good works? The relation of faith to works has always been a difficult problem for Christians. As early as Paul, Christians had to face this problem. In another letter, he asks the rhetorical question: "Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?" (Rom. 6:1). If salvation is not earned by us but is God's utterly free gift (grace), does this mean that we do not need to do good works? That's what some people thought Paul was saying. But no serious Christian has ever said that works are superfluous. And yet, the gospel of salvation by God's grace alone to be received by our faith alone has often caused much confusion about this, even among Christians themselves. Here's the problem.

Since salvation is solely the result of grace on God's part to be received by faith alone on our part, it would seem that we are not obligated to do the good works commanded us by God throughout the entire Bible, both Old and New Testaments. Yet surely that can't be right! The prophet Micah, whose words are printed at the top of our order of worship this morning, declares in no uncertain terms that God expects us to live a certain manner of life: "What does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8). Not only the other prophets but also the teachings of Jesus and Paul are full of exhortations that we must live holy and righteous lives, ever prepared to meet the needs of our neighbor with justice, mercy, and love. But if we are commanded to do good works, does that mean that our salvation is conditional on our performance of works? Not at all!

In Ephesians we learn that while we are expected to do good works, these *works are not the basis of our salvation*. Rather, *works are the result of our salvation*; the consequence of salvation, not its cause. We do good works *not in order* that God may save us; no, we do good works *because* God has saved us. This is the odd logic of the gospel. Note how carefully Paul makes this point:

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and *this is not your own doing*; it is the gift of God—*not the result of works*, lest anyone should boast. For we are God's handiwork, *created* in Christ Jesus *for good works*, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

If salvation were by works and not by grace, then we would be tempted to boast before God. But precisely this is what is excluded by recognizing that salvation is God's gift to us. Presumably this is also what Micah had in mind when, after reminding us of our obligation "to do justice, and to love kindness," he quickly added "and to walk humbly with our God." Those who are recipients of God's gift of salvation are not proud and boastful, but humble and grateful, since a gift is never something earned or merited like a paycheck in exchange for work performed. Still, our salvation—given by God's grace and received by us through faith—puts us back into right relationship to God; and once we are thus realigned into proper relationship with God, we are *not only commanded but* find ourselves actually *enabled* to live out the purpose for which God created us in the first place: "For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life." God gives us salvation as a gift so that we can become the people we were meant to be in the first place: created in the image of God to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God our creator and our savior.

The subtlety of the gospel is often lost on people inside and outside the church. Before we can become the people God expects us to be and to do the things God expects us to do, we have to open the hands of our hearts to let God give us a gift which is none other than salvation itself. The paradox of the gospel is that we only find our true, authentic selves when we are willing to receive them as a gift of God who created us. We cannot earn God's salvation. We cannot be rugged individualists in relation to God. We have to let go of our frantic efforts to secure ourselves in the face of insecurity and trust that the God who created us really cares about us and loves us and wants our fulfillment as human beings. The stumbling block, the offense of the gospel, is that we cannot secure our existence by our own efforts; rather, we have to let God do this for us, which God has already done in and through Jesus Christ. God's grace always comes before our human response, yet *genuine faith always issues in works of love*. Using the traditional language of theology, we are justified (saved) by faith alone in God's grace alone in order that we might then be sanctified (perfected) in love of God, neighbor, and self. But, as the great Protestant Reformers Martin Luther and John Wesley understood, we do not first have to become sanctified or perfected before God accepts us, forgives us, justifies us, or saves us—or whatever terms you want to use. Both Luther and Wesley put great stress on the importance of good works, yet they knew that *good works flow from our acceptance of God's grace*. Faith in God's grace leads to a change in our hearts, so that we trust God once again and this issues in a new love for both God and our neighbor.

We live in a time when there is more confusion than clarity about what the gospel is, what faith is and what grace is and thus what salvation is. We live in a time when the brand "Christian" has been sullied by serious misrepresentations and distortions. Many intelligent and sensitive people I know reject the church and Christianity altogether. Moreover, some of these



people have been badly hurt by the church or rejected by the church. As a result, they identify Christianity with hatefulness and bigotry, with anti-intellectualism and outdated ideas. But whether they truly understand the real nature of the gospel is questionable. You see, there's a lot of bad theology out there parading itself as "Christian," which makes it hard to preach Jesus Christ as "good news." This situation has prompted one Methodist theologian, John Cobb, to write a book entitled, "Can Christ Become Good News Again?"

We live in a world of bad news, full of hatred, despair, fear, confusion, and injustice, a world in which suffering people are yearning to hear something new that is really and truly good on which they can depend and rely. Yet what news could be more joyful than that God wants to give us the gift of salvation, of authentic human life, so that so that we find our true fulfillment as human beings? Precisely this is what the church has to offer the world, a message that is genuinely new and fresh for those who have never heard it aright, no matter how many times they may have heard the old words with their ears. This is our challenge here at Christ Church. We have to proclaim the gospel to our community with conviction and assurance so that people in Newport Beach can hear it as the good news that it really is, as the message that can transform lives today, just as it once converted Saul into Paul, freed Luther from a bad conscience, and strangely warmed the heart of Wesley.

And so, my fellow Christians, never forget this summary of the gospel: "By grace you have been saved through faith." And one more thing: Please share this good news with all others you meet, for there are many who desperately need to hear news that really is good news.