**Ephesians 2**

Matt Royston

Skagway Presbyterian Church (11 am)

**Title**: The Two Ways

**Other Scripture:**

Father God, open our eyes…

Jesus open our ears…

Holy Spirit, Open our hearts…

Well last week, we began a six-week sermon series on the book of Ephesians. Ephesians, as you might remember is a letter that the Apostle Paul wrote probably to a handful of small congregations that had just come into being. The time is probably about thirty years after the death and resurrection of Jesus.

And just before Jesus had ascended to heaven after his resurrection, in the book of Acts, Jesus told his disciples that they would be His witnesses “in Jerusalem, in all Judea, in Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

When Jesus made that statement, I imagine the apostles would have had a sense that taking the message of Jesus to Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria seemed bold, but reasonable. After all, these were places of largely Jewish descent. God had always been God to the Jews…and so the news of God’s Kingdom…in their minds…was specifically for Jews.

But Jesus tacks on the words “to the ends of the earth”…that would have been very confusing. In those days, the “ends of the earth” would have been short-hand for “the Roman Empire.” The Roman Empire was the known world. And the Roman Empire was full of non-Jewish people.

Now for the original disciples of Jesus…this would have been very nearly impossible because they were all from the area around Jerusalem. None of them were Roman citizens…meaning that moving through the empire would be nearly impossible.

But for this newly converted Apostle Paul, things come together. Because while Paul was of Jewish descent, Paul was also a Roman citizen. Between his citizenship, his descent, and his zeal, Paul is uniquely equipped to carry the message of the Gospel to the “ends of the earth.”

So that is what Paul is doing. Here in Ephesians, Paul is fulfilling what Jesus had predicted would happen. The message of Jesus is reaching the ends of the earth.

Now, you might remember last week, we read that Paul told the Ephesians…this group of non-Jewish people…that while they weren’t born into the family of God like the Jews were. Instead, they were adopted into the family of God.

Now I know several families who have adopted children. And one thing I know…is that it is not always easy to move through the process of helping a child truly become part of their new family. Issues of un-shared history…previous expectations, family norms…the whole sense of identity…takes time to move through. And frankly, sometimes it is messy.

This is true with the family of God too. These newly-adopted Greek-descended Christians, were getting mixed messages of what was expected of them.

This week, we will be continuing on in Paul’s letter. We’re going to read all of chapter two…it will be a bit long. And you’ll notice that there are two parts to chapter two.

The first part will be a discussion about how we are saved…a discussion of works and grace. The second part will be a discussion about being the community of God.

And in between these two parts, there is a word the connects them. The word is “therefore.” These two discussions go hand and hand. So let’s see if we can figure out how they go together.

**Read Chapter 2**

Well throughout the history of the Church, there has been an ongoing discussion about the two topics of works and grace. Usually the discussion goes like this, “how do we know that we are saved? Is it a matter of what we do? Is it a matter of how good we are? Or how nice we are? Or how many people we impact for the better? All of these things we do…are considered works.

For many people, the definition of “religion” is “the things we do in order to earn God’s favor, or God’s love.” Works. And for many people, “getting into heaven” or “knowing the favor of God in this life” is a matter of how well we perform these works! “Obey these rules, and God will make your life better.” **Works.**

OR…

Are we saved by God’s grace? Is it completely a matter of what God does that saves us? So no matter how bad we are, or no matter what we have done, we are not disqualified from God’s favor because we are saved by God’s grace…not works.

And I think most of us would say that it is grace that saves us…not our works. And we would point to passages like Ephesians 2.8 “For by grace you have been saved through faith. This is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so no one can boast.”

And in fact, it is passages like this that were instrumental in launching the great Protestant Reformation, out of which denominations like Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Baptist come.

But if we’re honest, we admit that we still struggle to figure out what the role of our “works” is!

Not too long ago, I was sitting with my nine-year-old son Andrew, and we got into a conversation about God. And somewhere along the lines of the conversation, we turned to the subject of salvation…being saved…and being with Jesus in heaven after we die. And I said to my son, “Andrew, you know that you will be in heaven with Jesus when you die, right?” And he said, “Well, I hope…if I’m good enough.”

When he said that, I was both surprised and not surprised. I was surprised because Andrew has grown up in our home! As best we can, we teach the grace of God! Andrew has been in Sunday School his whole life. He has had good Sunday School teachers. He has had good youth leaders. He has been in worship almost every Sunday of his life. All places where he would have been exposed to the idea that our salvation is based on God’s grace, not our works.

So I was surprised.

But I was also not surprised. Because in our culture, the idea of a free gift is really totally foreign to us.

Nothing in this world is free, right? There’s no such thing as a free lunch, my Dad taught me. You get what you earn. If it’s to be it’s up to me.

We value hard work and we get real concerned about the idea of a handout.

Well hard work may be an American virtue, and it has created and allowed many good and important things. But hard work is not what God’s salvation is dependent on.

Then…what is the place of our works?

Well, right after Paul says we are saved by grace, not our works…he then says we are God’s workmanship created in Christ FOR GOOD WORKS! Somehow, it’s not really just one or just the other. Somehow, works and grace go together.

One of the reasons we get so confused regarding the place of works and grace, is because we have a limited understanding of what salvation really is. For so many…and for us so much of the time…salvation is ALL about going to heaven when we die.

Salvation is certainly that, but Paul insists (and Jesus insists)…that salvation begins now!

So yes, We are saved from an eternity of emptiness…and we are saved FOR the purposes of God here and now.

We are saved FOR God’s workmanship…prepared in advance for us to do!

The Christian life…is not just a life of sitting around and waiting to die so we can go to heaven. It is a life of living into the salvation that God has given us NOW…today!

And that means…that there is work for us to do!

What kind of work?...God’s work. Kingdom work. God has begun building His Kingdom here on earth. The resurrection of Jesus signaled the beginning of the redemption of all things…and God invites US to be the builders of that kingdom. We work to bring God’s grace to the world.

Eugene Peterson gives us a wonderful metaphor which I think helps us figure out how this holds together. He says that our work is the vessel that holds the grace of God. Grace is the content, our work is the container.

Last week, we talked about the calling God has given to each of us…individually and collectively. And we said that for each you personally, God has given you work to do. That work takes a variety of forms. You might be an electrician, you might be a carpenter. You might be an engineer or a teacher or an accountant. You might be a parent or a spouse or the child of an aging parent.

Each of these things are an aspect of your vocation…the collection of things God has given to you to do…

And we mentioned, that its tricky business figuring out how some of what we do brings about the grace of God to the world.

I remember well, back when I was in the business world…trying to figure out how my day-to-day work brought about God’s grace to the world. There were days I stared at a computer screen and interacted only with spreadsheets and email. There were days where I did interact with people…but only to be the bearer of difficult news.   
“Your job performance is unacceptable”, or “The company has decided to close the plant in Iowa because it is cheaper to outsource labor to China.” Or “The internal layoff is necessary because the board is demanding a higher profit margin.”

There were times I remember thinking that my work was actually hindering God’s grace…but as a middle manager with a career and family to consider, I felt very stuck. Even today, When I look back, I’m not totally sure why God had me there…but I’m pretty sure He did.

And I bet you have felt that too. I bet you have had…or have today…situations you believe God has put you in…but have no idea why.

And while I don’t know that this passage gives us a good answer as to how these difficult situations hold together, I’m very thankful for where the passage takes us next. The passage tells us that the work God has for us to do…is to be done IN COMMUNITY!

“You are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people…members of God’s household,” Paul says.

The Christian life…as confusing as it can be…and maybe because it can be so confusing…the Christian life is meant to be lived out together! IN Community! More like a family than an organization.

To go back to Peterson’s metaphor…the CHURCH is the container that presents the grace of God to the world.

This chapter tells us two reasons that the church exists. And we can apply these reasons to our own situation. This church…The Presbyterian Church of Skagway exists so that each and every one of you have a place to belong. You need a congregation to be a part of and you need a community with whom to live out the Christian life. You need others to worship with. And you need people who can challenge and encourage you…folks who can help you figure out what God’s desire is for your own life. So that is part of why this church exists.

But what we often forget…is that you exist for the sake of Skagway, Alaska. As an outsider, I don’t know entirely what your collective purpose is here at this church. But what I do know…is that God called you particular people together…at this particular stage in history…in this particular town…for a purpose.

This language of temple at the end of the passage. The church…the community of believers…with Christ as the cornerstone...rises to become a temple…a dwelling where God lives.

The temple…throughout the Old Testament…is the place in which heaven and earth meet. The temple is the cross-section where the holiness of God intersects this real, earthy, broken world.

The temple was a sign and a signal…that there was more to this world than what we see. The temple reminded the people that there was a holy God who created them, who loves them, who desires to be known by them.

And today…that Temple is YOU. You, Skagway 1st Presbyterian Church…as a congregation…are a temple…a sign to this place and these people…that there is a God who desires to redeem all He has created….even them.

Let’s pray.