

**In the Name of the Father and of the ☩ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.**

**Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ and may our Lord and Savior sanctify you in the truth, for His word is truth. Amen**

**Eleventh Sunday after Trinity (2021)**

**Not Our Decision, but God's**

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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 a result of works, so that no one may boast.” (Ephesians 2:8–9, ESV)*

St. Luke begins the Gospel Reading for today writing that Jesus, “told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt:” (Luke 18:9, ESV) Unlike the arrogant, self-righteous Pharisee who at least gave God thanks for his feeling of righteousness, many believe that they have this righteousness as an inherent quality. Believing in the power of the human will they trust in their intellect, their will, and their human power to make a decision for Christ. This was the sin of Pelagius, a monk who in the fourth and fifth centuries taught that man's free will and inherent capacity for good is what saves him. He rejected original sin, insisting that man had the ability to choose good as well as evil and therefore he could choose God as an act of free will. His theology, known as Pelagianism, was roundly refuted by the Church at the council of Ephesus in 431 and again at the council of Orange in 529. But it is a heresy which has continued in one form or another to infect the church since the days of Pelagius. Believing that justifying faith is produced by man cooperating with God, many men believe that it is not by faith alone, but by their works that divine grace is given to them. This is known as synergism, man working with God to affect his salvation. But such teaching is contrary to the Word of God.

The parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector is about two men, two men on opposite sides of the formula of grace. One, thought he earned God's grace through his works, the other never thought he was worthy of God's grace, but beat his breast and pleaded instead, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” (Luke 18:13, ESV) To whom Jesus says, “I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.” (Luke 18:14, ESV) When we believe for a moment that we have merited salvation by what we have done, by what we have accepted, by the decision we have made, we are exalting ourselves, we are boasting. To those God says, He will humble.

Two men, co-workers, let's call them Ralph and Ronnie, are on their lunch break. Both men profess to be followers of Christ and they each attend church on a regular basis, but they are of different denominations. Ronnie turns to Ralph and asks, when did you accept Jesus? When did you decide for Christ? Ralph is puzzled by this question and asks Ronnie, what do you mean? You know, says Ronnie, when did you make up your mind to believe in Jesus as your Savior? When were you saved? Ralph had never thought of salvation in the term of his decision. As for his salvation, he responded like any true Christian would, I was saved on a Friday afternoon about 3:00 o'clock, some two-thousand years ago when my Savior, Jesus Christ gave His life upon the Altar of the Cross for the forgiveness of my sins and the sins of all mankind! Furthermore, I received the blessings of that salvific act when I was baptized as a baby a few days after I was born. In those blessed waters I was forgiven all my sins and made a child of God. I was reborn by water and the Spirit. Oh, come on, Ronnie says, stop trying to be funny. You know what I mean, when did you decide to believe in Jesus?

Ralph pondered the question for a few moments and then remembered what St. Paul had said in his letter to the Ephesians. Turning to Ronnie he said, “I never decided for Jesus, He decided

for me. I do not have the capacity to decide for Christ. St. Paul makes this clear in his first letter to the Corinthians, writing, “The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.” (1 Corinthians 2:14, ESV) I was born a natural person, thus I was born an alien to God, I was a child of wrath, I walked in the futility of my mind, my heart was hardened by the world and turned against God, for all spiritual purposes I was dead in my sins and trespasses, following the world, the prince of darkness, I lived in the passion of my flesh, carrying out the desires of my body, (Eph. 2:1-3). I was a walking dead man when it came to faith in Jesus. How can a dead man decide? My desire was to be of the world. Oh, come on, Ronnie said, do you not have free will? Surely, if you call yourself a Christian, you had to accept Jesus.

Accept. What an interesting word. When we look at the Greek of the New Testament where this word is used regarding faith, we see that the grammatical use of this word is either one of reflection or reciprocating in a passive sense. Thus in 1 Corinthians 2:14, which I just read, and again in Mark 4:20, where Christ in the parable of the Sower uses the word “accept” it is used in strictly in a passive way. Accepting faith from God is not an acceptance by the will of the person to whom God is giving His precious gift of faith, but it is solely the work of God in gifting the person with faith. By the gift of faith, God is raising the dead sinner to life.

Ronnie, Ralph says, listen, I am going to read you something from St. Paul’s letter to Titus, maybe this will help you understand how a person is brought to faith by God. St. Paul writes, “For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another. But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.” (Titus 3:3–7, ESV) Now, where in these words of St. Paul, as he describes how we are brought to faith, does he give any credit to man? Uh, Ronnie says, he doesn’t. That’s right says Ralph, but if this isn’t enough to convince you that it was not your decision that brought you to faith to believe that Jesus is the Son of the Living God who died on the Altar of the Cross for the forgiveness of your sins, then let’s look at some other passages of Holy Scripture:

First, we turn to the Gospel of Matthew where Jesus asked the apostles, “Who do you say that I am?” And St. Peter responded, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Undoubtedly, St. Peter was proud of himself for having come to this knowledge, but to dash any hope that he would think that this was his own doing, Jesus said to him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.” (Matthew 16:15-17, ESV) Then we turn to the Prologue of the Gospel of John where St. John writes, “He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.” (John 1:11–13, ESV) Moreover, if you’re still not convinced, let’s look at some additional words of Jesus. To the Jews Jesus said, “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.” (John 6:44, ESV) and to His apostles He said, “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you.” (John 15:16, ESV)

Now, turning to St. Paul, he says to the Thessalonians, “We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth.” (2 Thessalonians 2:13, ESV) God

chose you, you did not choose Him. Again, St. Paul reminds us, “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.” (1 Corinthians 1:27–29, ESV) Finally, St. Paul reminds us, “For 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, so that no one may boast.” (vv. 8–9)

The conversion of man, or his return to God is solely the plan and work of God. When Adam fell in the Garden of Eden, all men from that day forward are brought into this world aliens to God. But God would have all “people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” (1 Timothy 2:4, ESV) Therefore, God leads us to Christ who is the Book of Life. He, “has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved.” (Ephesians 1:3–6, ESV) This blessing is brought to men through the preaching of the Good News of the Gospel. The Word of God enters the ear of man and changes their hearts. God says, “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.” (Ezekiel 36:26–27, ESV) All this is God’s doing without any effort on the part of man. He who made you, justifies you through faith in His Son, Jesus Christ, and places you on the path of sanctification by the indwelling Holy Spirit. Nowhere in God’s work of converting men is man’s effort to be included. Man is simply a passive recipient of God’s grace which gives man this marvelous gift, faith in His Son, Jesus Christ.

Oh, wow! Ronnie says. I never looked at salvation in those terms. I was always taught we must make our decision for Christ. We must answer the altar call. We must recite the sinner’s prayer. We must seek Christ to be saved. I was taught that salvation comes by our effort, our works, for by those works we merit God’s grace. Thank you for setting me straight. To which Ralph responds, you’re welcome, but don’t give me credit, give all glory to God and to His Son, and to the Holy Spirit, for they are speaking to you through His Word.

Unlike the Twelve and St. Paul, we are not called immediately by God, but mediately. It is through Means that God calls people to faith. The first of those Means is His Word of the Gospel. The Holy Spirit makes this clear, saying through St. Paul, “Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.” (Romans 10:17, ESV) So look at what God has done for you. He saved you by sending His pastors into the world to proclaim the Gospel that you might hear and be saved. Again St. Paul says, “Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says “Jesus is accursed!” and no one can say “Jesus is Lord” except in the Holy Spirit.” (1 Corinthians 12:3, ESV) Thus, it is not of yourself, or your decision, but the gracious will and decision of God that you were brought to faith. It is through Him, through His means that you are saved by grace through faith. Indeed, if it was of yourself, you would have something to boast about, but if you begin to boast, you are no different than the Pharisee in the parable, a proud, arrogant, self-righteous man. Moreover, He strengthens your faith through His Means of Grace, Baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and Absolution. For through those means He comes to you and pours out His grace on you, forgiving you all your sins for the sake of His beloved Son, Jesus Christ. So it is not because of your merit that God’s saves you, but rather, it is solely because of the merit of His beloved Son, Jesus Christ.

Therefore, regarding our salvation, our righteousness of faith before God, we believe, teach, and confess unanimously in accord with Holy Scripture and our Christian faith that a poor sinner is justified before God (that is he is absolved and declared utterly free from all his sins, and from the verdict of well-deserved damnation, and is adopted as a child of God and heir of eternal life) without any merit or worthiness on our part, and without any preceding, present, or subsequent works, by sheer grace, solely through the merit of the total obedience, the bitter passion, the death, and the resurrection of Christ, our Lord, whose obedience is reckoned to us as righteousness (SD, Art. III; the Righteousness of Faith before God). Christ is the source of our salvation. He, and alone earned the victory over sin, death, and the devil and it is because of His merit and His work, that God pours out His grace upon us and makes us His children. "By grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God" (v. 8). This is most certainly true. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

May the Peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.