### “Saved by Grace” Steve Finlan for The First Church, March 10, 2024

**Ephesians 2:1–9**

1You were dead through the trespasses and sins 2in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. 3All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses. . . 4But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us 5even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— 6and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, 7so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus. 8For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— 9not the result of works, so that no one may boast.

**John 3:17–21**

17 “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. 18Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. 19And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. 20For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. 21But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.

Welcome, good morning and many blessings on you all.

You have probably heard the saying “you are saved by faith, and not by works.” We have a similar saying here, “by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God” (Eph 2:8). This is from the letter to the Ephesians, which critical scholars tend to doubt was written by Paul. They think a disciple *close* to Paul wrote it, and that this disciple closely followed the teaching of Paul on this subject.

Paul wanted to make very sure that people did not think that they could *earn* salvation by following the Torah. The Torah, or law, is the first five books of the Bible. Many Jews linked their salvation with closely following the statutes and laws of the Torah.

In Galatians Paul says “we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law” (Gal 2:16). Paul felt it was crucial that we recognize that salvation is purely the *gift* of God, and none of our own doing. He didn’t want people thinking they could be so righteous in following the letter of the law that God *owed* them something. This would reduce our relationship with our Father to a transaction: “I’ve followed the law, so now you should save me.”

Paul wanted people to be properly humble and grateful, recognizing salvation as an unearned gift of love, given with grace to us before we have even asked. Again in Galatians, he says that believers receive the Spirit through faith, and not “by doing the works of the law” (3:2). The words of Jesus and Paul on faith are powerful, and many have pondered their meaning and value in making an impact on their lives.

In the 1500s, Luther, in Germany, amplified this teaching of Paul’s, even over-exaggerating it to the point where he said all works are “filthy rags,” that there is no scintilla of goodness inherent in any human being. This is obviously an exaggeration, and we can see it as a distortion of Paul’s teaching. In fact, another line in Ephesians says “we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life” (Eph 2:10).

So we were actually *created* for good works. Neither Paul nor the author of Ephesians would ever make the extreme hostile statements about good works that Luther later made. Luther’s exaggerations were not really necessary, though *he* thought they were, to wage his battle against the Catholic Church.

Luther thought the Church was trying to *sell* salvation through its demanded observance of penitential practices, sacraments, and the sale of indulgences. People thought they were literally paying for their sins. Despite his good reasons, Luther did distort Paul’s teaching on works.

There are many places in the gospels where Jesus clearly places a very high value on good works, and even implies that these good works have saving implications (Matt 10:42; 25:34–35; 12:48–50). Good deeds *matter*. When we act with lovingkindness to one another, we are sharing God’s loving grace toward us. Our good deeds, done with kindness, demonstrate our faith in the Father.

Our next passage, from the gospel of John, is emphasizing belief. It seems to be saying that if your intentions are honest, you will believe, but if you have hostile intentions, you will be inclined to hate the light and to disbelieve. You will also hide from the light (3:19–20). “But those who do what is true come to the light” (3:21).

It seems to be saying that your predisposition either toward truth or toward evil, leads you to either have faith or not. So, once again, good works matter! If you have lived a good life, and been kind, you are probably inclined to have faith. If you have made a habit of evildoing, you will not be drawn to the truth or to faith. So deeds matter not only to those around you, but also as a way of your growing in love. Deeds shape your character, and your character draws you either toward God or toward selfishness and dishonesty.

But let’s look for a moment at those who *do* what is true, who are drawn to the light, and do recognize the truth in Jesus. They are those who experience spiritual growth daily, who get a foretaste of the heavenly life in the earthly life. As the psalm says, “happy are those who strength is in you . . . they go from strength to strength . . . No good thing does the Lord withhold from those who walk uprightly” (Ps 84:5,7,11).

Can life be this experience of going from strength to strength? I think so, spiritually. Even as our bodies age, our minds can grow and our souls can become more satisfied as we find ways to serve others.

I have a friend who has become a shining star as she ages, even though she lost her beloved husband a few years ago. Her service is to lead people in Centering Prayer sessions. This is the practice of silently and simply imagining oneself to be in the presence of God or Jesus, looking into the divine face and allowing God to look at one, possibly choosing a sacred word to help symbolize one’s intentions. If one’s thoughts wander, one calms them and returns to contemplating God, possibly repeating the sacred word. My friend writes that she is “Happy to bring people to our Father any time of the day or night!” Imagine having this experience for yourself, and maybe *sharing* that experience! Would you be willing to try it?

Brother David Steindl-Rast speaks about living gratefully. He says “you think this is just another day in your life? It’s *not* just another day. It’s the one day that is given to you: *today*. The only appropriate response is gratefulness. Notice the things and people all around you. Learn to respond as if it’s the first day in your life, and the very *last* day, then you will have spent this day very well. Others, too, will be blessed by you, by your presence. Let the gratefulness overflow from you. Then it will really be a good day.” ([A Grateful Day with Br. David Steindl-Rast - Grateful.org](https://grateful.org/grateful-day/)). And he has a website called gratefulness.org.

Let yourself receive with joy the loving grace of the Father, who loves you just as you are. You can enrich the world with your presence. Live this day as a gift from God. Take in every moment, adding meaning and spiritual value with your own good works, given with lovingkindness.