

Sermon Notes of Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley (17-12-1995 Guisborough Evangelical Church)

Ephesians 2 v 8-9
Additional Bible Reading: Luke 17v5-10; 18v9-14

Grace, Salvation and Faith

Introduction

In Chapter 2 Paul returns to the foundation. Reminds the Ephesians of their need for the Gospel, the situation of mankind and what God has done. Pointed out that men are dead, enslaved and condemned. And with the words, “But God”, Paul begins to give God’s answer, because of His love and kindness. These truths are not of academic interest only, but need to be grasped in order to understand the world, society, history and ourselves.

Now Paul goes on to enlarge on God’s remedy for men’s sin. And he does so by bringing three vital words to our attention, three of the most important words in Christian vocabulary and Christian theology – Grace, Salvation and Faith. Then reinforces the truth that, contrary to what men think, we owe everything to God, we cannot save ourselves. Going to look at the positive statement about salvation (v.8a), and then the negative statement (v8b-9).

Positive statement about the Christian position

By grace you have been saved through faith (Ephesians 2:8). Before His birth, God’s Son was given the name Jesus, **for he shall save his people from their sins** (Matthew 1:21). At His birth, the shepherds were told by the angels, **there is born a Saviour who is Christ the Lord** (Luke 2:11). And in the same angelic greeting we find grace – **Peace on earth, goodwill towards men on whom his favour rests** (Luke 2:14).

Sometimes salvation is narrowed to mean “forgiven”, which is only part of what is involved. Salvation is an all-embracing word concerning everything God has done to rescue men from the plight sin has brought on them. Man needs life, because he is dead; man needs release because he is enslaved; man needs pardon, because he is condemned. Salvation embraces all of that – life, release and pardon.

The principal benefits and blessings are ours because He came, died and rose again. **He came to seek and to save the lost** (Luke 19:10). **He came to give his life as a ransom for many** (Mark 10:45). On the Cross He bore crushing load of world’s sin, bore the wrath of His Holy Father, bore the full penalty of sin. Separated from the Father by our sins. Sin has been punished. God’s justice has been upheld. So those who are children of wrath, subject to God’s condemnation, can be pardoned, forgiven, received, welcomed home from a far country.

But more than that, the one who died also rose again and ascended. He is alive for ever more. When Christ lives in the heart, people become alive to spiritual things. They have an appetite and desire for spiritual truth. Change in nature – now lean

towards holiness. They are new people because they are in Christ. New outlook, new values, new standards. And with new outlook comes new power. The devil and the world and the pull of the old nature have met their master. The grace of God changes everything. **If anyone is in Christ he is a new creation. Old things have passed away, and all things have become new** (2 Corinthians 5:17).

This is Salvation, then – pardon for those under wrath, life for the dead – a life that lasts for ever and cannot be lost, and freedom from the thralldom of the world, flesh and the devil. Authentic Christian experience, celebrated in great Christian hymn:

*“He breaks the power of cancelled sin,
He sets the prisoner free.
His blood can make the foulest clean,
His blood availed for me.
He speaks, and listening to His voice
New life the dead receive.”*

The emphasis in Salvation is not on what we have to do, but on what is done to us. N.B. the passive *εστε σεσωσμενοι* meaning “You have been saved” – the emphasis on what God has for, in and through us.

The Gospel begins with God’s initiative and intervention. Our work is to respond to His prior activity.

By Grace. God’s work has nothing to do with what we deserve or have earned. Grace is God’s totally undeserved favour to rebel sinners who deserve total banishment from His presence. We deserve absolutely nothing. We have no righteousness, no standing. When God starts to deal with us, we are ungodly sinners without strength, in fact we are enemies (Romans 5).

Story of a soldier who saw a dying man lying on the ground, badly wounded and desperately needing water. As the soldier came near to help, the wounded man raised his gun and shot his rescuer, narrowly missing. But the rescuer gave him water anyway – that was sheer mercy, sheer grace.

Grace gives all the glory to God. We deserve nothing and that is why the Gospel is so difficult for men to accept. It wounds pride. Ask men to perform great feat or endure great hardship – they would do it like a shot. But to come helplessly and accept a gift from someone who is merciful – that is a bitter pill to swallow.

N.B. This is distinguishing feature of the Gospel of Christ, unlike other religions of the world. If we want to be saved, we must pocket pride and become a debtor to someone else who has, of his own generosity, paid every penny of our debt. The Gospel brings men to the end of themselves. It strips them naked. Final humiliation that mediator must bear punishment and do all for them. A true Christian knows he is only that because of God’s grace – “*A debtor to mercy alone*”. Grace means bowing the knee to God’s grace, or not be saved.

Through faith. This is the means by which we make Christ our own. Not saved by our faith – we are saved by Christ. Faith is not the cause of salvation, but the means or

channel or instrument. Faith is trust. Faith is reliance. Faith understands the way of salvation. It believes it is true and perfectly suited for its needs. Then faith acts and relies on the Saviour. Accepts the Saviour, leans on Him, leaves self in His hands, clings to Him.

Faith is the cup receiving water from fountain. Faith is the coupling joining the locomotive of grace to the carriage of the soul. Faith is the blind man holding on to the hand of his guide. It is the trust of a child has when he jumps from a wall into a father's arms. Faith is the drowning man grasping a rope thrown to him. Faith is the patient having confidence in the physician prescribing medication or the surgeon operating. For many, the simplest definition is simply clinging to Christ in total helplessness.

You may say, "My faith is very small". It is not the amount which matters but the fact that it is there. We are not called to have faith in faith, but to have faith in Christ. Rely on Christ, not on your faith.

These three great words, therefore, salvation, grace and faith. Salvation is deliverance from death, condemnation and slavery. Dealing with most fundamental need. By God's Grace – sheer mercy and favour to undeserving. Received by simple reliance or clinging. We can cling when we can do nothing else.

*"Nothing in my hand I bring,
Simply to thy cross I cling"*

Here is positive affirmation about God's dealing with us. But then Paul strengthens, reinforces and underlines it with the negative. The negative drives it home, gives the positive statement a grip, provokes a reaction more than the positive statement.

Negative statement reinforcing his position

And this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God. (Ephesians 2:8). This statement is sometimes taken as a reference to faith. That, of course, is true, for faith is a gift of God. Salvation is not a transaction where God contributes grace and we contribute faith. Certainly it is God who enables us to believe. **It is given to believe in him** (Philippians 1:29).

But this is not Paul's point here. The Greek word for "that" is the neuter *τουτο*, whereas the word for "faith" is feminine *πιστις*. So Paul is saying that the whole of the previous sentence, "By grace you have been saved through faith", the whole event and experience, is God's free gift to you. Not only faith (though that is included), but everything is a gift.

No room to be proud. The whole thing reflects glory on God and not on ourselves. We are nothing, He is everything. In heaven there will be no self-display, but a wonderful display of God's love and kindness through Christ.

Then Paul brings in a second negative and gets nearer to the bone. He really spells it out. **Not by works, so that no-one can boast** (Ephesians 2:9). He specifies the very thing that men normally trust in until their eyes are opened. Till people see what

Christ has done, they look to themselves – their good living, church attendance, observing of the sacraments, their doing their best. This is one reason why the Pharisees, most religious and moral people, hated Christ and eventually crucified Him – because He challenged their reliance of themselves (Luke 18:9-14). They were the achievers, how could Christ prefer the tax collector?

This is why, in church history, those who have most resisted the Gospel and persecuted it have been religious people, because the Gospel has undermined what they relied on. The Gospel makes us paupers, strips us naked, condemns us, and people do not like that, especially when they have a good record! Take their works away, and they have nothing.

But why are good works not good enough? Why only Christ and His Cross? Reason – until man is regenerated, his good works are not good enough for none are done out of love for God or desire for His glory. They cannot be, because unregenerate man does not know God, and in fact resists Him. Also, even if we did all the good works possible, that would be nothing special, nothing more than we ought to do anyway. Only doing duty, no special merit in that. And what of the times we have failed and failed again? We ought to be thankful that our Salvation does not depend on our good works.

Conclusion

This is so important and crucial. Where do we stand with God? What do we rely on to be accepted by Him? Do we glory in the grace of God? Or are we still clinging to little “me”? One is the route to acceptance, life, peace and assurance. The other is the route to uncertainty, doubt and ultimately rejection. It is God’s way, or not at all. Stark choice. Simply Christ or self. Boast in Christ or in self.