

# FAITH OR WORKS?

## Ephesians 2:8-10

*This is a copy of the sermon preached by Dr. Paul Mims, Pastor, Cornerstone Baptist Church, October 23, 2011*

There were only a few hundred communists in the world when Karl Marx wrote his *Das Capital*. He convened the Third Communist Internationale in London in 1903. The meeting centered on a discussion of “Who is worthy to join us?” Some expressed the opinion, “We need everybody that we can get because we are small in number, we have no money, and we are persona non grata from everywhere. Let anyone who wants to join—join us!” In that discussion a well spoken man stood up with a different vision. He stared at the crowd and said,

“Are you out of your mind? We will never conquer the world with the partial loyalty of anybody. We are interested in total dedication or nothing. A communist is not one who gives a little part of his substance to the cause. A communist is not even one who is willing to die for Communism. A communist is one who has already died, and who lives the balance of his life on borrowed time. A communist is a dead man on furlough. If you believe that come with us, and if you do not get out.”

That is what Karl Marx said. And most of the group got up and walked out. There were only eighteen people left. He said to them, “Gentlemen, you are people of destiny. You can conquer the world. History has laid its hand of destiny on your shoulders. We will move out in ever widening circles. We will capture nation after nation, and finally, the world, and a transformed future will be ours.”

Marx was right that it does take passion to make an impact on the world. But that was wrong with the message that he wanted to tell. He knew what it required and was willing to give his all to the cause.

Jesus said something similar to the man that we know as the rich young ruler whose story is in Luke 18:18-30. He said to Jesus, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Understanding his heart, Jesus reminded him of the Ten Commandments, which as a Jew, he said, “All these I have kept since I was a boy.” Then Jesus said to him, “You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” When he heard this, he became very sad, because he was a man of great wealth. And he walked away.

Jesus did not establish that as a norm for all to be his followers, but he knew what would keep this young man from giving all his heart and life to him. So he said that his followers must be willing to remove anything that would keep them from complete loyalty to him. This same principle is required of us.

The burning questions of all religions are: What do I have to do to be accepted of God and gain eternal life? All of the major world religions have a different answer. In Christianity, the question was asked by the Philippian jailor to the Apostle Paul: “What must I do to be saved?”

“Saved” and “Salvation” are terms that we frequently use in Christian discussions. What does “Saved” mean? In Christian thought it means to be taken out of a consequence that is going to happen. An unredeemed person is on his way to a life apart from God which will result in an eternity apart from God—which is Hell. To be “saved” means that a person is saved from a life that misses God’s purpose, and a destiny that requires God’s punishment.

The next question then is “How?” How is a person saved? How does one come to the point that he or she is willing to give everything to Christ and remove anything that prevents this? The Bible answers this question for us.

### **SALVATION IS A GIFT OF GOD (verse 8).**

*“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.”*

It all begins with God’s love for us. In our study of Ephesians Chapter 1, we learned that God saw us, loved us, chose us, planned for our redemption, before the foundation of the world. He saw us as sinners with a fallen nature

and that this would separate us from him in this present life and in the world to come. It was a barrier that would prevent us from having fellowship with him. There was nothing we could do to have fellowship with him. He realized that we were helpless and could not save ourselves. We were moving away from him. It was like we were caught in a powerful stream that was washing us out to sea and nobody was able to rescue us. We were going to drown and sink to the bottom of the ocean. But God provided a rescuer for us. But before he could rescue us, he had to give his all—his very life. It is like Jesus dove into the river to save us and lost his own life. But the Father raised him up from the dead. It was like as he was being raised from his death, and he said to us, “If you will trust me and give your life to me, you can come with me to eternal life.” And that is the grace gift.

God sends the gift, but it is transmitted through our faith. This faith is our complete belief in Christ that he will put us in a right relationship with God. Our faith allows us to connect with him and he pours into our lives a strength and a desire and a will for us to let him live in and through us. This is what Jesus meant in his talk with Nicodemus in describing being born into the kingdom of heaven.

There has been a discussion among Greek scholars as to whether or not the word “this” modifies “faith” or the whole process of salvation including faith. If so, it says, “this faith is not of yourselves, it is the gift of God.” Or, this whole process is the gift of God. It really doesn’t matter for the Holy Spirit draws us to Christ, shows us our need, leads us to repentance, and stimulates faith in our hearts. Either way, it is all of God and not of ourselves.

Suppose that someone went out and bought you a gift and presented it to you. You pull out your wallet and attempt to pay for it. “No, No,” your friend says, “It is a gift for which I paid for you.” What would you do? You would receive it on the trust in his word. It works the same way with faith. God says, “I have a free gift for you, all you have to do is receive it.” You open the gift and find that you have an inner peace that you never had before, a love that you never knew existed, and a purpose in living that empowers your soul. We love gifts that make a difference in our lives. This gift makes a difference also in our destiny. “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus, our Lord.” Romans 6:23. In 2 Corinthians 9:15 he wrote: “Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift.”

This is positional in placing us in the body of Christ and writing our names in the Lamb’s Book of Life. There is not one single good work or a multitude of good works that could bring this about.

**THE INADEQUACY OF WORKS TO BRING ABOUT OUR SALVATION (verse 9).** “...*not by works so that no one can boast.*”

Well then, you may ask, “If Christ demands that I give him first place in my life and serve him supremely isn’t that working for him? Am I not to live a life of good works?” The answer to that is “Of course.” But this is after you have been saved and not in order to be saved. Being saved is POSITIONAL. A lifetime of service is PROGRESSIVE.

You see, you cannot do good works to please God in an unredeemed state. But after you are redeemed and have already secured your salvation, you can truly please God and he will shower upon you his blessings of divine favor. So the works come after the initial faith that leads to salvation. This is why the Apostle James says, “What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no works? Can such a faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him ‘Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.” James 2:14-17. James is not saying that we have good works in order to be saved, but because we have been saved.

Jesus has high work requirements for his followers. In his parable on the Sheep and the Goats he said, “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’

“Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and gave you drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you

sick or in prison and go to visit you?’

“The King will reply, I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’

“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’

“They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger, or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’ “He will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’ “Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.” (Matthew 25:34-46).

**WE ARE GOD’S NEW PEOPLE—HIS WORKMANSHIP (verse 10).** *“For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God has prepared in advance for us to do.”*

When you create something don’t you love to show it off? We see it in our children who when they have drawn a picture say, “Look Mommy, I have drawn a picture of Daddy!”

God loves to show us off to the unbelieving world saying, “Look what I did in saving this man. Look how I rescued him from his way and put his life back together. I saved his marriage. I gave him new desires. I made him a servant who delights in helping others. Before, he lived only for himself. Look at the good he is doing the world. I am proud to call him my son. By my grace I have done this.

The only people that can please God with their good works are those whom he has recreated in Christ. We are his spiritual handiwork.

The world recently paid tribute to Steve Jobs who created the Apple empire. His handiwork was to give us technology that affects all of our lives through the various means of communication. Likewise, we as Christian believers are the handiwork of God and his plan is to use us to affect the lives of many people. We were made new people in Christ with a view to the good works that God prepared beforehand and spread into the dark areas of the earth.

I read about a company that tried to sell an instant cake mix, but no one would buy it. The company could not understand why people were not interested in their instant cake mix. Then they realized that the public was wary of a mix that required only water. It was too easy and didn’t sound tasty. So the company changed the formula and added eggs to the mixture. The changed worked and sales increased.

Some people react to salvation the same way. For to them to be saved by grace through faith is too easy. So they feel that they have to earn it in some way by doing good works. They feel that they have to change God’s plan of recipe for salvation. This cannot be done. The doorway into life abundant and eternal is all of grace through faith. But one you have entered, you have to go to work in the Kingdom.

An American Indian was asked why he loved Christ so much. The Indian didn’t reply with words at first. He gathered a few handfuls of dry leaves and made a circle of them. Then he placed a worm in the middle of the circle. He set fire to the leaves. When the blaze threatened the worm he lifted him out. Then the Indian explained, “That is what Jesus Christ did for me. He rescued me. That is why I love him so.

Praise Be To His Name!