

Great Verses of the Bible
Saved by Grace
Ephesians 2:8-9
August 13, 2023
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This is the day that the Lord hath made; let us rejoice and be glad in it! Good morning, Church! I want to read a scripture now, as we continue our series on “Great Verses of the Bible.” This is from Ephesians, chapter 2, verses 8 and 9, Paul writing. He says, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not of works, so that no one can boast.” May God bless the reading of His Word.

A long, long time ago in a land far, far away, there was a kindergarten teacher who asked her students to bring for Show and Tell something that symbolized their faith. The next morning, there were three little boys that went first. The first little boy said, “My name is David. I am Jewish, and this is a star of David.” The next little boy said, “Well, my name is Joseph. I am Catholic, and this is a crucifix.” The next little boy said, “My name is John. I am a Methodist, and this is a casserole.”

There are certain things, certain beliefs, that characterize most faith groups. Baptists are known for believer’s baptism by full immersion, and it must be both of those in that order. Nazarenes are known for what they call “being sanctified,” a second definite work of grace. Pentecostals are known for speaking in tongues. A Methodist’s distinctive is our emphasis on grace. And if I had to pick one reason why I am a Methodist today, it would be that distinctive: our emphasis on grace. Now, from my calculation, since I have been here a little over two years now, I have shared this definition of grace at least 12 to 15 times. That’s going to be a pattern. If the Lord tarries and God wills, you’re going to hear it another 30 or 40 times while I’m here. And when I leave, I hope you will be able to remember the three G’s. Grace in Greek means gift. Grace, Greek, gift. Grace in Greek means gift. Therefore, God’s grace is God’s gift, God’s gift to us. For years I defined grace as God’s unmerited favor bestowed on the undeserving. Philip Yancey, in his book “What’s So Amazing about Grace,” said grace is: “There is nothing you can do to make God love you more, and there is nothing you can do to make God love you less.” God loves you. Get used to the idea. God’s grace to us through Jesus Christ is God’s gift to us.

John Wesley, the great theologian who influenced many a denomination, believed that grace was so important that he further defined grace, and defined different aspects of grace, but it is all grace. He said there is prevenient grace, there is justifying grace, and there is sanctifying grace, but it is all grace. Prevenient grace is the grace of God that goes before. It is the grace of God that prepares the way so that we can have the relationship with God we were created to have. It is the grace of God that is at work in our lives before we’re even aware of it. And it is the grace of God that is at work in your life right now, whether you feel it, see it, or understand it. Have you ever had a situation in your life where you did not feel the hand of God on you at the moment, but you look back and you could see what God was doing? You ever had that experience? That’s prevenient grace. That is the grace of God that is at work in our lives whether we are aware of it or not, before we are aware of God until we take our last breath.

And then there is the justifying grace of God. The justifying grace of God makes us right with God. What we cannot do on our own, what we cannot be good enough to accomplish, God does on our behalf. God created us to have a relationship with Him. We cannot be good enough to achieve that relationship, so God gives us His grace and makes us right with Him through Jesus Christ. I don't care what you call it. Some people call it being redeemed. Some people call it being justified. Some people call it being confirmed in Christ. Some people call it being washed in the blood. Some people call it being saved. I don't care if you call it "getting your Jesus juju on!" But it is God's gift to us that makes us right with God. That is justifying grace. And once we experience justifying grace, then the sanctifying grace of God calls us on toward Christ's likeness. It is active in our life until we take our last breath, drawing us toward what you and I were created to be. So, throughout our lives, the grace of God is active.

Today we want to talk about justifying grace. That is the grace of God that makes us right with God. In our passage, Paul says, "We are saved by grace, through faith, not by works, but for works." We are saved by grace through faith. Paul insists that our salvation is God's gift to us, not something that we earn, not something we get good enough for, but something that God offers us. No one had ever tried harder to have a right relationship with God than the Apostle Paul. The Apostle Paul described himself as a Pharisee of the Pharisees. The Pharisees were the strictest of all Jewish sects. They dedicated their entire lives to following the minutia of the law. And they felt like if they followed it close enough, they could have a right relationship with God. Paul said, "I am a Pharisee among the Pharisees." And what he discovered is no matter how hard he worked, he could not have a right relationship with God. It was only after his encounter with Jesus Christ that He had that relationship. He discovered that you cannot work your way into heaven. He discovered that you cannot get good enough to deserve heaven. He discovered that you can't do anything to put God in your debt. Salvation is God's gift. What you can't do on your own, God does through Jesus Christ. What the law and works could not do, God did for us, on our behalf, through Christ. Our part is faith. Our part is believing. Our part is saying yes to God's invitation. We are saved by grace through faith. We were created to have a relationship with God. We were created in the image of God to have a relationship with God. God offers, but we must accept. We must choose that gift. We can't earn it. If you could earn it, then Jesus died for nothing. Let that sink in. If you could earn it, Jesus died for nothing.

For a right relationship with God, perfection is necessary. Let me say that again. For a right relationship with God, perfection is necessary. To achieve it, perfection is necessary. Now, I know that there are a few women who are perfect. But what all women will tell you is, there are no men that are perfect. That's still supposed to be funnier than it is! Because me saying that there are some women that are perfect, folks, that's hilarious! Perfection is necessary. We can't achieve that on our own. It is God's gift to us. What we cannot do, God says, "Here, I'll give it to you." Now, this goes against everything we learn in life. We are taught with our mother's milk that there's no free lunch. You get what you deserve. You have to earn everything you get. Pull yourself up by your own bootstraps. Yet God offers us this grace, this gift. And even after accepting this grace, many Christians say there's got to be more to it than that. There's got to be more to it than that. And for whatever reason, and I'm looking at a lot of faces out there that I know that I know that I know have a military background, and military folks go, "Well, I got to make that next grade. I got to take that next step. There's got to be more to it than what I've got. There's got to be more to it." No. We are not saved by works; we are saved by grace.

Justifying grace is being made right in the eyes of God, no matter what you call it. It may be a moment; it may be a movement. Let me say this again: It may be a moment; it may be a movement. There are people who say, "I can tell you the moment it happened." And for other people, it is a movement. It is a period of time. It is a process in their lives. I remember one guy who told me, when I asked him about his relationship with God, he said, "Well, God and I are dating. God and I are dating." Later on, he said, "We're married." What he told me was he was in the process of making that decision. It's a moment or a movement, but there's a time when we know that we know that we know that we are in right relationship with God. If we have accepted His invitation, if we have said yes to God's gift, then that gift is ours. I want you to hold on to that. You hear what I said? If you have said yes to God's invitation, if you have said yes to His offer, you have been made right with God. That gift is yours. Now hold on to that. We'll be back in a minute.

Paul goes on to say that we are saved by grace, through faith, not by works. But if we are saved, we will work, not out of obligation, not out of debt, but out of gratitude: gratitude for the moment, gratitude for the movement, gratitude for the redemption, gratitude for the confirmation, gratitude for the knowledge of salvation, gratitude for being saved. We are not saved by works; but if we are saved, we will work. It is evidence of salvation. In the South we would say, "If you were put on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?" Paul insists that if one has faith, they will work. You cannot have one without the other. The half-brother of Jesus, James, said, "Faith without works is dead." You see, contrary to popular belief, James and Paul agree. James says, "I see the fruits. I know that the roots are there." Paul says, "I see the roots. I know the fruits are going to be there." They're saying the same thing.

Now, right relationship with God: Do you have it? Have you said yes to God's invitation? Have you said yes to God's gift? If you have said yes to God's gift, you have that gift. You excuse me for just a moment, this gets my dander up a little bit. There are some who say, "If you didn't have the experience I had, then you don't have it. If you didn't say these words, at this time, in this order, and have this experience, you don't have it." I would like to say, "Hogwash!" but I'm not going to. I'm going to say they have the right to be wrong if they want to be. As I read scripture, God has never done the same thing the same way twice. And your experience of being made right with God is your experience, and it is unique to you. Y'all hear me? All right. If you have said yes to God's invitation, if you have said yes to God's gift, then you've got it. Now, what is yet to be determined is the intensity or the superficiality of that relationship. That is up to you. You were created in the image of God to have a relationship with God that is fulfilling, that is meaningful, that is intense, not in the sweet by and by when you die, but right here and right now. The prevenient grace of God is at work in your life, preparing the way for that relationship. The sanctifying grace of God is at work in your life, moving you toward what you were created to be. But whether or not you follow that is your choice. It's like any other relationship that we have. If you put nothing into it, guess what you're going to get out of it? But if you put a lot into it, if you make it a priority, if you spend time on it, it can be fulfilling and moving and transforming. And you can have the life that God wants you to have. You can be who God created you to be here, now. That is your choice. How intense it is or meaningful it is, is up to you. How superficial it is, is also up to you. So, what is your relationship with God? Are you happy with it? It can be what you want it to be.

Let's pray. If you have not said yes to God's gift, you can say yes right now. If you have said yes to God's gift, you have been made right in God's eyes, not because of your goodness but because of God's gift. And if you have that relationship with God, is it what you would like for it to be? If not, now's the time to renew that relationship. Let us pray.

Lord, we are so grateful for grace. We are so grateful for this gift that keeps on giving. Lord, we are grateful for our relationship with You. And Lord, help us in our commitment to deepen that relationship, to intensify that relationship, so that we might be what we were created to be. In Christ's name, amen.