

X Marks The Spot

³*Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.*
(Jude 1:3. ESV)

¹⁷*I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them.* (Romans 16:17. ESV)

¹*But as for you, teach what accords with sound doctrine.* (Titus 2:1. ESV)

Faith And Works
February 3rd, 2013
Ephesians 2:8-10
James 2:14-26
Rev. Paul Carter

Introduction:

Good morning! We are at week 5 of a 14 week series called “X-Marks The Spot” in which we are exploring some of the real and seeming tensions we discovered in our Walk Through The Bible journey in 2012. In the first four weeks of this series we dealt primarily with some of the tensions that exist within the immensity of God’s character and identity. How can God be three and one? How can God be merciful and just? How can God be Sovereign and yet hold human beings morally responsible? This week we turn our attention to some of the seeming tensions in the Bible with respect to the matter of our salvation. Are we saved by faith alone or by works alone or by some combination of the two? That is a very good question too. Turn in your Bibles to Ephesians 2:8-10 and we’ll look first at one of the classic Scripture texts that seem to suggest that we are saved by grace through faith.

Saved By Faith?

Paul writes:

⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹not a result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (Ephesians 2:8-10. ESV)

There are six really key phrases in that passage that we need to understand; the first phrase is the most important:

1. **By grace you have been saved**

Grace, as I've told you many times before means "gift". You are saved because God gave. Let's be very clear, it isn't works or faith that saves you, ultimately, it is grace. You are saved by what God gave and the Bible says:

¹⁶“For God so loved the world, that **he gave his only Son**, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16. ESV)

You are saved by the gift of God in Jesus Christ – not your faith in Christ. Jesus saves you, not your faith in Jesus. Now you might say: “Pastor you are playing word games” but I'm not, this is actually very important because many people who have weak faith can actually begin to doubt their salvation. But the strength of your faith is not what determines the reality of your salvation, rather it is the worth of what was given that determines the reality of your salvation. Think of it like this, how well illuminated a dark room becomes when you bring a lit candle into it does not depend on the strength of the hand that holds the candle; rather it depends on the strength of the candle that is lit.

That statement “by grace you have been saved” is a very strong statement in the original Greek. The words “you have been saved” are the English translation of a single word in Greek: *sesomenoi* which is a perfect passive participle. Perfect verbs or participles in Greek are very important. They describe a completed action in the past the effects of which are experienced on an on-going, continual basis. That's the kind of specificity you can get in Greek. Paul is saying that your salvation was COMPLETED in the gift of God in Jesus Christ. He did it. It is FINISHED. You add nothing to it. It is 100% DONE. You can't diminish it, you can't increase it. It is FINISHED and the effects of it are on-going in your life. You can grow in your awareness of it, you can grow in your exercise of it, but you cannot grow or shrink the reality of it.

If you want to grow your assurance of faith spend more time contemplating the reality and significance of what God did in Christ upon the cross and less time taking your own spiritual temperature and you will know much greater peace and progress I assure you.

The second statement comes immediately after the first; by grace you have been saved...

2. Through faith

The Greek there is *dia\ pi/stewv (dia pisteos)* which is in the genitive of means. So Paul is saying that the MEANS by which you take hold of the GIFT of salvation is through faith. Faith is the hand that takes hold of the candle, to carry on the previous analogy. Faith is not the candle, it is the means by which we take hold of the candle. Let me switch analogies, let's think of salvation as being like a pill that saves us from a horrible disease. Grace is the pill that we are given to swallow. The glass of water is the means by which we swallow the pill. But the glass of water is not itself salvific. Drinking the water without the pill would not heal us. So it is here. It is not the fact that we take hold of something that saves us, it is WHAT WE IN FACT TAKE HOLD OF that saves us. Faith is how we take hold of that which God gives us in order to save us. But before you become too impressed with how good you are at taking hold of things, let's take a look at the next critical phrase:

3. Not your own doing, it is the gift of God

Now Biblical scholars have had a fairly intense conversation over the centuries as to what "it" is in this sentence. Is "it" the "faith" by which we take hold of grace? If so then Paul is saying that even the faith to believe is itself a gift from God. Others have said that the "it" refers to the whole process of salvation from start to finish, including faith to receive, is itself a gift. Paul is saying: "Before you start thinking that you have contributed anything critical to the process, understand that the entire process of your salvation is all of grace and therefore there is no cause for boasting." The two sides are not saying different things, it's just that one side is saying more and I think they are right. Paul has been making the argument that human beings were simply too lost and too corrupted to save themselves and so a complete work of grace was required for

which saved individuals can claim no credit whatsoever. He was making that point earlier in the chapter. Look at how he begins chapter 2:

¹And **you were dead** in the trespasses and sins ²in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience... ⁴But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵**even when we were dead** in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— (Ephesians 2:1-5. ESV)

Paul is saying that we were 100% dead in sin. Our salvation was not a partnership – not even a 90 – 10 partnership where God does MOST of the work but we help out a little bit. No Paul is saying we were too far gone for that kind of approach. We were DEAD in our sins. Here is why this is important, we often talk about our salvation in terms of a rescue. We say: “I was drowning in sin and the waves were billowing and rolling over me and I had almost lost hope. And then God threw me a life preserver and I grabbed it and held it tight and God pulled me safely to the shore.” But that is not at all what the Bible says. The Bible says it more like this. “You were drowning in your sin and you sank to the bottom and died. You were dead. You had drowned. Your lungs had filled with water and your heart had stopped beating. You were dead. And God in his mercy reached down from heaven and he touched your heart and made it beat, he grabbed you by the arm and pulled you to the surface and set your feet upon the rock.” By grace you have been saved.

Paul is saying that even when you grabbed onto God while he was dragging you to the surface – understand that he gave you the strength to do that! You were dead! He started your heart. You may have grabbed onto him but you did it in the strength that he gave. You were saved by grace.

4. So that no one may boast

Paul is saying here that the reason you were saved in the way and manner that you were saved is so that God alone will be glorified through your salvation. He told us that in the verse that immediately precedes verses 8-10:

⁷so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. (Ephesians 2:7. ESV)

This verse is the answer to two very important questions, one that we ask a lot and one we don't ask nearly often enough. It answers the question "Why was I saved and not that person?" and "why was I saved in the way that I was?" The answer to both is the same. So that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. You were saved as a trophy of God's grace. You may have been selected simply to enhance the fame of God's grace. The angels may look at you in eternity and say: "Wow! We know what he would have been like without grace and now we see what he has become because of grace; great indeed is the grace of the Lord in Jesus Christ!" You were saved as a display of his grace. That is the why and that explains the how. He saved you in such a way so as to ensure that he alone gets the glory. You don't get to feel smarter than the other people who did not put faith in Jesus – you aren't any smarter, even your faith to believe was given to you as a gift. You are what you are not because you were smart enough to become a Christian, you are what you are because the Father loved you from before the foundation of the world and condescended to show grace to you in the person of his Son Jesus Christ and to seal those benefits to you for all eternity in the person of his Holy Spirit. Apart from grace you would be just as dead and lost as everyone else you may be tempted to look down on. There indeed but for the grace of God go I.

Lastly we need to hear Paul saying that we were thus:

5. Created in Christ FOR good works

Far too many people have the first two verses memorized without this last one:

¹⁰For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus **for good works**, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (Ephesians 2:8-10. ESV)

Paul is saying that this whole process of re-creation – a work of God's grace from start to finish – has as its terminus, its end point, restored human living. You will live increasingly and one day exactly as God intended you to live. You will do good works and by these good works give testimony to the power of God's grace in you. Jesus said:

let your light shine before others, so that they may **see your good works and give glory to your Father** who is in heaven. (Matthew 5:16. ESV)

Good works that bring glory to God are the necessary product of a truly saved life.

Let's see if we can summarize that visually by means of an equation. Paul is saying that we are saved BY GRACE, through faith. So $G/F = S$. He is saying that this whole thing is of grace and therefore no cause for boasting so in brackets beside the "S" we might put $(G - B)$ and then he says it necessarily results in good works so we might end the equation by adding $+W$.

$$G/F = S (G-B) + W$$

This we are told is the equation by which the glory of God in our salvation and in our lives, for all eternity is advanced. This equation explains the means by which the glory of God is advanced in the salvation of sinners. He has saved us by grace, through faith, all of which is a gift and no cause for boasting with resulting good works that serve the advancement of his glory among men and indeed throughout eternity.

Now let's take a look at a passage in the Book of James that some say presents something different. Some liberal scholars suggest that James and Paul did not see eye to eye on salvation and they quote this passage from James to make that point. Look in your Bibles at James 2:14-26. Let me read it to you in full and then let's see if we can't figure out what James is trying to say and if what he is trying to say in any way destroys or challenges the equation we have developed from Ephesians 2. This also is the Word of the Lord:

Saved By Works?

¹⁴What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? **Can that faith save him?** ¹⁵If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, ¹⁶and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? ¹⁷**So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.**

¹⁸But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. ¹⁹You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder! ²⁰**Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless?** ²¹Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? ²²You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; ²³and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"—and he was called a friend of God. ²⁴You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. ²⁵And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? ²⁶For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also **faith apart from works is dead.** (James 2:14-26. ESV)

Alright it is very clear that James is addressing in this passage a very specific problem. What do you do with people who are professors of faith who are clearly not possessors of faith? What do you do with people who SAY they are Christians but who do not look like Christians? You hold them up to the test of works. James is not saying that works APART from faith save us, neither is he saying that faith does not save us, he is saying that faith apart from works is useless and he is saying that real faith manifests itself in proving works. Faith if it does not have works is dead, faith apart from works is useless – that is what he says in those verses. Is that in conflict with what Paul says in Ephesians 2? No! James is simply asking: “Is this equation still true if we take out the W”? Is this a viable equation?

G/F = S (G-B)

No, because it does not result in glory for God and therefore it does not serve the purpose for which it was conceived. If it is not seen and manifest that the power of God has been at work in a life then how can it result in God’s glory? It can’t and it is therefore not a useful equation. It must be false, it must be useless. That is what James is saying and he is absolutely right and he is singing from the same song sheet as Paul and far more importantly as JESUS. Jesus also said that we should hold professors of faith to the test of faith. He said:

¹⁶You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. ... ²⁰Thus you will recognize them by their fruits. (Matthew 7:16-20. ESV)

Jesus, Paul and James are all saying the same thing here. They are saying that if a person is truly saved BY GOD’S GRACE accessed by faith – James never questions the first part of the equation – if a person is truly saved in the way people are saved, all agree that the saved person will necessarily manifest proving works and if they don’t then they were never saved. James is not assaulting the equation, he is using it to prove that MERE faith if not accompanied by proving works cannot be SAVING FAITH. It is not the faith of a truly saved person. It might be the orthodox faith of demons but it is not Christian faith.

Defining The Tension

So where can we turn to find a simple statement and definition of how we must manage this tension? Well thankfully you don't have to turn to me. The Reformers wrestled with the Roman Catholics over this equation 500 years ago because they feared, justly so that the doctrine of salvation had become hopeless obscured by Catholic traditions and rituals. It might be there somewhere but the average person could never find it and the average priest didn't know it. So they came up with the five solae of the Reformation. They are as follows:

1. Sola scriptura ("only the Bible" is ultimately authoritative)
2. Sola fide ("through faith alone")
3. Sola gratia ("by grace alone")
4. Solo Christo ("because of Christ alone")
5. Soli Deo Gloria ("glory to God alone")

Because the Catholics also taught that people were saved by faith – though they meant something very different than the Reformers – John Calvin further specified what we mean when we say "through faith alone". He said "It is faith alone that saves us, but the faith that saves us is never alone". By faith alone we grab hold of God's grace, but if that is real Christian faith and if by it we have grabbed hold of the real grace of God then it will never be alone, it will of course be accompanied by proving works. It is faith alone that saves us, but the faith that saves us is never alone. That is a very handy way of defining this seeming tension in Holy Scripture.

Implications and Applications

Now as we've said many times before we study God's Word to know who God is and also to know how we should live before him. Orthodoxy should lead to orthopraxy – right doctrine to right living; so let's turn the corner here and end by looking at some of the reasonable implications and applications of these truths.

1. No works, no faith

That is the point that James is trying to make and it is a very important point. James is saying that if people don't live like a grace filled, transformed by Jesus kind of person then the only logical conclusion is that they are not grace filled, transformed by Jesus people. He is saying that

professing to be a Christian is simply not the same as actually BEING a Christian. That's why he can say: "I by my works will show you my faith" (James 2:18). James is saying "Look at my life! Think of who I was and look at who I am now! The change that you see is the proof of my faith."

Think about that for a second. Think about the last 5 years of your life. Based on the evidence of the last 5 years of your life, could you be convicted in a court of law on the basis of evidence that you are in fact a Christian? Assume for a moment that being a Christian in Canada was illegal; today this is just an illustration, in 5 years it may not be, but for now, imagine that it was illegal to be a Christian in this country. Could your neighbours or could your wife bring a credible accusation against you and prove that accusation by presenting verifiable evidence that you are in fact a born again Christian? If the answer you hear whispered in your soul is "no" than you should be very afraid. In the quiet place of your own mind right now, try and build a case against yourself on the basis of evidence. Try and marshal proof that you are saved. Pretend you are the Prosecuting Attorney attempting to convict you of Christianity. What proof can you bring before the judge? Could you point to any victories over addiction? Could you say: "Your honour, Bob was an alcoholic or a drug user or a porn addict 5 years ago and now he is not. That your honour is proof of grace." Can you say anything like that? Could you say: "Your honour, 5 years ago Bob was a liar, a bragger and a self promoter but now he tells the truth, he encourages others and he delights in humble service. That your honour is proof of grace." Can you say "Judge, 5 years ago Bob spent 105% of his income every year on himself. He ended every year with more credit card debt than the year before and he never gave more than \$400 in a year to a registered charity. This year, your honour, according to his tax return which I put before the court as Exhibit A he gave \$7000 – that is 11% of his gross income your honour. That is proof of grace. I rest my case sir." Can you say anything like that? If you can't then, what is the good of your faith? Can such faith save you? How is God glorified by your so called salvation? According to Jesus, Paul and James, the proof is in the pudding. No works, no faith.

2. There is no boasting in works or in faith

Paul was concerned to make this point in all his writings. I've read to you what he said in his Letter to the Ephesians, this is what he said in his Letter to the Romans, right after saying in Romans 3:24 that we are justified by his grace as a gift he goes on to say in verse 27:

²⁷Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. ²⁸For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law. (Romans 3:27-28. ESV)

Paul is very concerned to clarify the left side of this equation:

$$\mathbf{G/F = S (G-B) + W}$$

He is saying: “There are no works of the law on this side of the equation (the left side); there are no works of the law that EARN or MERIT salvation.” That is Paul’s concern. James, when he writes is concerned to correct an over application of that, he is concerned to show that while there are no works of the law that EARN salvation there is no salvation that does not result in proving works. James is busy over here on the right side of the equation. Together they agree that the whole process is of grace and therefore there is no cause for boasting. You must not boast in your faith – that itself is a gift from God, and you must not boast in your works – those too are only the result of God’s grace at work in you. There is NO PLACE FOR BOASTING.

I want to confess and convict and I suppose I should start by confessing. I confess that I am tempted to boast in my faith. I sometimes look at myself and then I look at other people that I grew up with, that I went to school with or sometimes even people I minister to here in Orillia and in my flesh I think: “What idiots they are for not believing in Jesus Christ. What morons they are for putting more faith in science than in the Word of God! Science changes its mind every time a new pail of dirt is dug out of the ground somewhere – the Word of the Lord stands forever! What stupid fools people are who try and figure out right and wrong for themselves instead of simply trusting in the commands of God! Why can’t they be as smart as me in seeing that God is good and his ways are to be trusted?” I catch myself thinking that a lot. I confess it to you as sin. I confess it to you as arrogance and as forgetfulness. I forget when I say things like that where I came from and how I got here. I was not smarter than everybody else. God opened my eyes and started my heart and lifted me out of my sin. I was saved by grace and even the faith to believe was a gift I received from his hand. I repent.

Now I need to convict. I think most of us are more inclined to boast in our faith. But some of us, are more inclined to boast in our work. These people are easier to spot. People who boast in

their faith tend to do in internally. We just look down our noses at people and that may or may not get noticed but those who boast in their works are constantly telling us about it. They want us to know how many hours they spend each week at the soup kitchen, or how many sick people they visited at the hospital or how many souls they've won for Jesus in the last 6 months. Every time you talk to them that's what comes out of their mouth. Stop. That is boasting. You only do what you do because of what God has done in you. You are what he has made you, created in Christ Jesus to do good works which he prepared in advance to be your way of life. Therefore, where is boasting? Not in faith and not in works. Let he who boasts, boast in the Lord. And all God's people said, amen.