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## A Short Sermon Series on Ephesians II. Through Faith

Ephesians 2:1-10 from The Message translation. 1 It wasn't so long ago that you were mired in that old stagnant life of sin. 2 You let the world, which doesn't know the first thing about living, tell you how to live. You filled your lungs with polluted unbelief, and then exhaled disobedience. 3 We all did it, all of us doing what we felt like doing, when we felt like doing it, all of us in the same boat. It's a wonder God didn't lose his temper and do away with the whole lot of us. 4 Instead, immense in mercy and with an incredible love, 5 he embraced us. He took our sin-dead lives and made us alive in Christ. He did all this on his own, with no help from us! 6 Then he picked us up and set us down in highest heaven in company with Jesus, our Messiah. 7 Now God has us where he wants us, with all the time in this world and the next to shower grace and kindness upon us in Christ Jesus. 8 Saving is all his idea, and all his work. All we do is trust him enough to let him do it. It's God's gift from start to finish! 9 We don't play the major role. If we did, we'd probably go around bragging that we'd done the whole thing! 10 No, we neither make nor save ourselves. God does both the making and saving. He creates each of us by Christ Jesus to join him in the work he does, the good work he has gotten ready for us to do, work we had better be doing.

Romans 3:21-22a (Revised Standard Version) But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it, 22 the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.

There are those who will try to tell us that things like spelling, grammar, and punctuation don't really matter as long as you get your point across. There are even those, I've discovered, who take a kind of perverse pride in their unorthodox spelling and disdain those who think that it's important to use the language with precision. You know who those folks are; they're the ones who, when such an error is brought to their attention tend to say "*Why are you making a big deal out of it? You know what I meant.*"

Well, sometimes yes and sometimes no. For those that think, say, that correct punctuation or spelling is unimportant and even the sign of a certain prissiness, well, consider these examples. If, for example, you were to write that you would be coming and bringing a housewarming present, it could lead to an embarrassing

misunderstanding if you said you were coming “baring gifts” instead of “bearing gifts.” A Tennessee newspaper, reporting on – one presumes – the military news in the area, wrote that the “278th Armored ‘Calvary’ Division would be deployed later this year.”<sup>1</sup> Someone responding to this story noted that if more folks in the world were paid attention to Calvary’s good news about about God’s unfailing love, there might be less need in the world for cavalry. Or consider the following sentences:

*Dear John: I want a man who knows what love is all about. You are generous, kind, thoughtful. People who are not like you admit to being useless and inferior. You have ruined me for other men. I yearn for you. I have no feelings whatsoever when we’re apart. I can be forever happy--will you let me be yours? Gloria*

What beautiful sentiments. But now hear that **identical** arrangement of words with nothing changed but the punctuation:

*Dear John: I want a man who knows what love is. All about you are generous, kind, thoughtful people, who are not like you. Admit to being useless and inferior. You have ruined me. For other men, I yearn. For you, I have no feelings whatsoever. When we’re apart, I can be forever happy. Will you let me be? Yours, Gloria<sup>2</sup>*

One of the reasons that it is so very challenging to translate the Old Testament is that the Hebrew language contains neither punctuation marks nor vowels.

But it’s not just punctuation and spelling that can get us in trouble, that can obscure rather than elucidate meaning, it’s also that old bugaboo for most of us – grammar. In fact, I am going to go out on a limb here and say that if I had to name one fundamental, theological mistake that too many Christians have made – a mistake that can in fact lead to a life of misery, anxiety, and fear – it is a mistake that is based on an

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.theleafchronicle.com/article/20090719/OPINION03/907190327/1014/RSS05>

<sup>2</sup>This example can be found in hundreds of places on the internet. I don’t know its original provenance.

ambiguity of grammar. Our scripture for this morning, part of the letter to the Ephesians, is a kind of summation, as we saw last week, of what is important and essential about Christian faith. As Eugene Petersen translates it: *“Saving [us] is all [God’s] idea, and all his work. All we do is trust him enough to let him do it. It’s God’s gift from start to finish!”* I am using Petersen’s very fresh translation this morning, but I would suspect that some of you may be more familiar with the more traditional translation that renders the verse this way: *“For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God.”* And, similarly, in the Letter to the Romans, Paul writes these lines: *“[There is] a righteousness from God [that] comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe”* (Romans 3:21-22, NIV translation).

So, you are thinking, what’s this terrible problem and how is it a problem derived from an ambiguity of grammar? Well, just this: In the Ephesians line, *“you have been saved through faith,”* it is simply not clear **whose** faith. And in the line from Romans, *“faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe,”* it is also not clear **whose** faith. Are you beginning to see? This is the first time I have ever put a cartoon on the bulletin cover,<sup>3</sup> but I think that it cuts to the chase: On the one hand you have a man with a sign saying *“Will work for heaven”* and on the other hand you have a man simply opening the scripture, presumably pointing thereby to the Good News of the Gospel that it contains. And what is that Good News? Just this: **Our salvation, the very meaning of our lives for both all eternity and now, is a gift from God through Jesus Christ.** Our salvation, the meaning of our lives, our security, lies **NOT** in what **WE** can do, think, or believe. We don’t have to “work for heaven”; no, it is God’s gift to us and the world.

So that grammatical ambiguity, then, is this: too many folks seem to think and act as if those phrases *“faith in Jesus Christ”* and *“saved through faith”* are talking about **human** faith, about your faith and my faith. But my friends, they are not, they are not.

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<sup>3</sup>See cartoon on last page

What Paul is talking about is not our faith, but **God's** faith. What does such faith on the part of God mean here? Well, think about what it means in our *human* context. You sometimes hear the phrase "*Keep the faith.*" What does that mean? It means to act in accordance with what you said, or did, to be *true* to what you said you would do. There's a line in the United States Constitution that talks about each state giving every other states' actions "*full faith and credit.*" What does that mean? It means that you can act with trust in those actions. When the wedding vows say "*and being faithful only unto you,*" what does that mean? It means you intend to behave as one who will keep your promise, that you will do your very best to honor the promises you have made.

So, we might say: to be faithful means to act in strict accord with what you have said you will do. To be faithful means to act in a consistently trustworthy way. To be faithful means to keep your promises. With all that in mind, do you begin to see why it would just be the most depressing thing in the world to think that you or I were saved by **our imperfect human** faith? For I am all too aware how I sometimes fail to act in accord with what I said I'd do. I know that despite my best intentions I have sometimes failed a trust placed in me. I know there have been times I have broken a promise I have made. So hear this: **if our salvation, our ultimate destiny, the meaning of our lives, our truest security now and forever is based on our ability to be faithful people, our ability to completely and consistently believe, then we WILL fail.**

Do you see, then, why – whatever the grammatical ambiguity – Paul **can't** be talking about your faith and my faith? Do you see how terrible it would be to think that your relationship with God, now and forever, was dependent on the consistency and constancy and steadfastness of **YOUR** faith? No, what Paul is talking about here is **God's** keeping faith with what **God** said He would do – *always, perfectly, constantly, without fail.* And for us Christians, God's clearest and most definitive sign of that faithfulness is Jesus Christ. Christ's life, and death, and resurrection are God's ultimate

signal to us that not even the worst of human evil and pain and hurt can make God change the Divine mind or can defeat the Divine intention to keep the faith with what has been promised. Way, way back when the Hebrew people were just beginning to become acquainted with God, God said *"I will be your God and you will be my people."* In Jesus Christ and in **everything** that God does in every moment God keeps the faith with that intention. God, unlike fallible human beings, will not change the Divine mind. God won't get bored and renege on what has been promised. In its own much more pithy way, that's what our bulletin cover's cartoon is getting at: you don't have to work at having faith enough in order to be assured of salvation and meaning and hope. You simply have to know and trust that God has already done the work that needs doing, done in perfectly and unfailingly.

But let's clear up something. If I have convinced you, if Ephesians has convinced you, that doesn't mean what you do or think or believe doesn't matter; it does! There's a kind of paradox to this, and it is this: we are freed to do good things, to do the best we can, to go on seeking to be the best people we can be despite the fact that sometimes our lives are jumbled and imperfect precisely **because we don't have to**. We don't **have to** do those things **in order** to earn God's love. We don't have to do them to secure our place in heaven. Those things are already there, already a given through **God's** keeping faith! And so just as the old formula for the communion table has it – "We come not because we must but because we may" – so too the formula, if you will, for living a life where you and I are both freed **from** and forgiven **for** our tendency to be defensive and blame others. We are freed from our tendency to either give up in the face of our guilty feelings or decide to perfectionistically do the impossible – not because we must, but thanks be to God because we **may**.

Do you hear this seemingly paradoxical and yet very good news here? You don't have to be perfect in order for God to love you and offer you salvation – but that very fact

frees you to try to be a better person than you have been! You don't have to simply give in to guilt and be immobilized by the way your imperfections and sin keep you from fully living out your own intentions – you can simply acknowledge those guilty feelings as a sign that God will be with you as you try to do better. You don't have to turn on other people in fear or in anger when you realize your own shortcomings – you can be gentle with yourself and with others knowing that God indeed loves you as you are and in gentle grace calls you to be more than you are. Here's the way one preacher sums all this up; what Paul is saying is this: *“God is gracious. We are already loved and nothing we can say or do can cause God to love us more. [We are freed from believing we have] to earn God's love, we need only accept and respond to it.”*<sup>4</sup>

So on this beautiful Sunday morning, if you are one who deep down thinks that you are, as it were, working on commission for God and that if you don't do, believe, or think enough of the right things, then you won't earn your commission into heaven, then – give it up, give it up. It isn't easy, I know. And it may be those are the best people, those who are the most responsible with their lives who have the most trouble giving up a secret belief that they have to earn their salvation. Writer Anne Lamott says these very profound words: *“I really think it's the hardest work we do. ...[L]etting go, letting go, letting God, letting go. I've always said that everything I've let go of has claw marks on it.”*<sup>5</sup> How perfectly put. But, my friends, nonetheless, if you are one who thinks that you must earn your salvation and significance through your own faith, then, indeed, let it go, let it go. And you will find that your fingers stop hurting from grasping so hard to that claw-scarred belief, you can find that your soul stops being terrified. Not because you must, but because, thanks be to God, you may, you may. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup><http://www.lectionarysermons.com/SL628.html>

<sup>5</sup>[http://www.beliefnet.com/story/192/story\\_19235\\_3.html](http://www.beliefnet.com/story/192/story_19235_3.html)



Thanks to Mikel Rice (See Ephesians 2:8-9)

08-26-2002

I WISH YOU SHOWED ME THAT EARLIER