

**God's Grace and Our Good Works**  
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Lent 4: March 22, 2009; Ephesians 2:1-10

Earlier this week the Lutheran Men in Mission hosted their first St. Patrick's Day *Corned Beef & Cabbage* dinner here at Zion. As it turned out, that was the same day that our Food Pantry served fifty to sixty area families in need of our help. In typical Jesus fashion, we wanted to make sure that folks unable to pay for themselves would feel welcome to come to this special Irish feast as our guests, and twenty-five did. It was great! So, they got to take advantage of twenty-five donated tickets. The only thing was that no tickets had yet been donated. So, I took the initiative to trust that if I donated the tickets, friends and members at Zion would back me up, and come through with some donated tickets after the fact.

Now, don't get me wrong. I'm happy to donate the tickets; but I've got to tell you that as a long-time Pastor serving Lutheran churches in Ohio, Kentucky, and Indiana, I've really piled up a lot of extra points over the years. So I thought I'd let some others take credit for the good we've done. I understand that we're saved by grace, and not by our good works; but let's face it, extra points have to come in handy somehow. It just makes sense. Sure, we're all sinners and we're all saints at one and the same time. *Simul justus et peccator*: that's how Luther said it. But trying to do the right thing, and actually doing it, has got to count for something. If *we* think that building character is a good thing, then *God* surely must.

Allow me a moment for personal confession. One of the most interesting articles I read while studying Christian Ethics at the University of Notre Dame – the bastion of Catholicism that it is – was an essay on purgatory by Professor Frank Gaffney. Yes, I know that the typical Protestant picture of purgatory is one of suffering souls caught in the middle pleading for us to do the right thing to get them out. I am aware of the fact that the whole concept proved so ripe for corruption that it was rejected for being both unbiblical and completely contrary to the spirit of the gospel of being saved by grace, and not by works, our own or others, unless that Other is none other than God's Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. So, let there be no question about the fact that as a Lutheran Pastor I am completely convinced – and you should be, too – that purgatory does not exist. It was, and is, a creation of human imagination, referring to things about which we can only speculate.

Nevertheless, as a thought experiment, Professor Gaffney's article made it interesting, morally speaking, because it started with the premise that if building character matters to us, why wouldn't it matter to God? Of course, it does. The formation of a self filled with God's love, formed by God's love, dedicated to living God's love is God's desire for each of us. What a wonderful life and what a wonderful world that would be, where faith

is active in love, where Christ is alive in us and living through us. We may be saved by grace – in fact, we are saved by grace alone – but grace does not turn indifference into faithfulness. Grace does not change sinners into saints simply by redefining sin as God’s will. We are saved by grace, first, because that’s how God chose to make salvation possible, namely, as a gift given freely through Christ. And secondly, we are saved by grace alone because there is nothing we can do to bridge the gap that separates us from God. There is nothing we can do to bridge the gap that separates our mortality from God’s eternity. There is nothing we can do to bridge the gap that separates the curse of death that claims each one of us and the promise of life God desires for all. Sure, we might be able to do a little more good and become a little better as a person in the process, but the good we do is never going to erase sin’s stain from the lives we live as sinners in a world where sinners write the rules and break them at will. Only God can take away sin’s stains and transform our world into His kingdom’s reign. That’s our hope, and that’s God’s promise.

But if becoming better is something we value, even though it is not the ground of our salvation, it does not mean that it doesn’t matter. Again, if we think that building character is a good thing, then surely God must, not because it is the way to salvation, but because it is a sign that we’re growing up, morally, socially, personally, and in virtually every way. Building character takes practice, by definition. It takes our learning to do the right thing for the right reason in the right way, which means that it’s done so naturally by habit that it becomes “second” nature, a subtlety that implies that our “first” nature is fallen. We are sinners by nature, by inclination, and, with enough practice, by habit. Sin becomes sins by habit and practice, and our character gets formed by vices rather than virtues. The call to *reform* means turning those vices back into virtues through the hard work of self-discipline, repetition, and practice. It’s a process, not a miracle.

Paul is talking about these same issues in the Second Lesson, only he takes a different tact. Our first three verses in Ephesians 2:1-10 reiterate the fact that we are fallen by nature and by practice. “You were dead through the sins you practiced and lived in, following the ways of the world and the spirit of the age. We all lived that way once.” Then verse four begins: “But God who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through trespasses, made us alive together in Christ, raising us up with him and giving us a seat at the table in heaven in Christ.” That’s more miracle than process. More accurately, that is all miracle in Christ. “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing. It is a gift, the gift of God, not the result of works, so that no one may boast.” It is a miracle, a gift of God, grounded in grace, not works, lest any should boast. My point is that even when Paul talks about the good works that follow from new life in Christ, he’s still talking divine miracle, not human process. “For we are *what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand* for us to walk in as our way of life.” In other words, even good works are all about God – what God intended, created, prepared beforehand, all to set a course that we might live into what God had in mind.

I have mentioned before that despite four years of intensive study at a Lutheran seminary and in Lutheran congregations, I learned more about Lutheranism by studying at Notre Dame. You know, winners are generally more committed to a system of winners-and-losers than the losers are. Notre Dame was a community of winners – on the ball field, in the classroom, in the chapel, and in living the Christian life. As a protest movement within the church catholic, Lutheranism offered a critique of Roman Catholicism’s tendencies toward legalistic works-righteousness, which can burden many with the guilt and shame of falling short. Notre Dame was not a place for guilt and shame, but pride and accomplishment. These were folks who prospered and thrived by the rules that made their success possible. Golden Domers were winners. They came from families that won, and were heading toward futures to build upon that success. I’m not complaining, just explaining how difficult it can be to get folks who are winning on the basis of works to focus their attention on God’s grace, and not with God’s grace playing the role of best supporting actor, but its being as the sole ground of everything Christian.

Paul knew this challenge and this problem. That’s what makes our Second Lesson one of the great restatements of Paul’s signature assertion, namely, that we are saved by grace, God’s grace, and God’s grace alone. When it comes to thinking about the gift of salvation, good works have no role to play, none. Even when it comes to the kind of life grace makes possible, the kind of life God desires and intends, we would be remiss not to see what Paul makes clear, namely, that we have got to keep the focus on God and God’s grace, not on what God’s grace makes possible for us. Paul wants to be Christ-centered not self-centered, God-confident not self-confident. He says it more directly in Philippians 3:9. However many accomplishments had been attributed to him, he would give them up gladly and regard them as rubbish in order that he might gain Christ and be found robed in Christ’s righteousness. “I don’t want a righteousness that comes from my works, but one that comes from faith in Christ. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection.” That’s true life, all the life Paul desired.

If Luther thought that there was something salvageable about purgatory, he would not have discarded it as biblically ungrounded and spiritually misguided. It encourages those who would trust their own works to mistrust God’s grace. It may seem that having extra points could be a good thing, but it just encourages a system that turns winners into losers, for in gaining the world through the works we do, we lose hold of the grace God gives. So, I can’t share any of my extra points with you; but I would still like you to think about sharing in the donations of these tickets from last Tuesday’s *Corned Beef & Cabbage* dinner! But don’t do it for the wrong reason, as my way of helping you to get me off the hook for twenty-five donated dinners. Do it for the right reason, because you know God is calling you to step up and into the good work He prepared beforehand, inviting you to share in the good work His grace makes possible, as we learn to live the love God gives ... in Jesus’ name. Amen

[Just for the record, Zion’s members did step up to get the Pastor off the hook for the twenty-five dinners our friends from the Food Pantry enjoyed last Tuesday evening!]



## Friday, April 3: A Meditation by Ruth Elsass, with Martin Luther

**Scripture, Romans 3.28:** “For we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of law.” **Ephesians 2.10:** “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is a gift of God, not the result of works, so that no one may boast.”

“Faith is a living, bold trust in God’s grace, so certain of God’s favor that it would risk death a thousand times trusting in it. Such confidence and knowledge of God’s grace makes you happy, joyful and bold in your relationship to God and all creatures. The Holy Spirit makes this happen through faith. Because of it, you freely, willingly and joyfully do good to everyone, serve everyone, suffer all kinds of things, love and praise the God who has shown you such grace.” (Martin Luther, *Preface to Romans*.)

Verle and I saw our cousin Bernie recently. He told us that he had just rented the movie *Luther*, the 2003 production in which Thrivent Financial for Lutheran had a hand. Bernie was so impressed with the movie and its message that he rented an entire movie theater, and invited all of his Mennonite friends to watch it with him! He felt that strongly about how the movie portrayed Luther that he knew others would receive it as truly good news.

[The movie tells the story of Luther’s call to ministry and his long journey through monastic life, which eventually led to his attempt to help leaders correct some mistakes that were corrupting the church. One of the biggest problems involved local fundraisers selling forgiveness to raise money for church building projects. Everything Luther saw reinforced his basic belief that God loves us and gives us salvation as a gift of grace. As St. Paul said in Romans and Ephesians, “We are saved by grace through faith.”]

Anyway, how wonderful it is that so many people here in Stark County and around the world have been given the opportunity to learn about Martin Luther, and find comfort in the Good News that God loves us, not because we’re so good, but because God is that good. Salvation is a gift. It’s ours, not because we have earned it with our good works, but because God loved us so much that He gave His only Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life. (John 3:16) Praise God!

**Prayer:** Heavenly Father – I give you thanks through Jesus Christ, your dear Son, that you have protected me through the night from all harm and danger, and I ask that you would also protect me today from sin and every danger, so that my life and actions may please you. Into your hands I commend myself: my body, soul, and all that is mine. Let your holy angels be with me, so that the wicked foe may have no power over me. Amen

