

Salvation by Grace

Fight The Urge To Fit In (part 5)

Summary: We believe that salvation is by God's grace alone through faith and that people cannot save themselves by works of righteousness but that works of righteousness are products of the Holy Spirit who indwells believers by faith.

Scripture: Romans 12:1–2; Romans 3:21–26

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Introduction

In or Out and When?

Can anyone tell me what is the most boring book in the Bible?

If you guessed *The Book of Leviticus*, then you are firmly in the majority. Not that *The Book of Numbers* isn't also boring, it's just that if you are trying to read the Bible all the way through, once you get to *Leviticus*, then you likely just give up, even before you get to *Numbers*.

If you are reading the Bible books from *Genesis*, and are paying attention as you grind it out, you just might notice something very interesting as you go from one book to the next.

The Book of Exodus ends with the story of the ancient Israelites and their debacle with the two golden calves. Through Moses, the Lord God gave to the Israelites instructions on how to worship, which included the construction of a large Tent of Meeting, and various decorations and implements to be used for their worship.

Once all the work was finished, we read these words:

The cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. Moses was unable to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud rested on it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. (Exodus 40:34–35)¹

This is the closing scene of *The Book of Exodus*. God's glory and presence filled the Tent of Meeting. He was present to the ancient Israelites in the form of a cloud and a fire, and in this way he led them through the wilderness to the land he promised to Abraham and Sarah.

Now, if you were paying attention, you will have noticed that Moses, the mediator between God and the people (Ex 20:18–21), was not able to enter the Tent of Meeting. If you read the passage too quickly, you are bound to think this was because God filled up every space, so there was no room for Moses.

And how silly would you be to think that?

In actual fact, the express purpose of the Tent of Meeting was precisely so that God could be with his people and they could be with him. While God is present everywhere, all the time, all-powerful, and all-knowing, he desires to be in a close, personal relationship with his people.

As a temporary and portable temple, the Tent of Meeting was to be the place where God could be present with and to his people, where heaven and earth would overlap.

So why couldn't Moses go into the Tent of Meeting? Because the sin of the golden calves had not yet been redeemed. Moses and all the people were tainted with that sin, and if he or they were to get to close to the tent ... well, let's just say it wouldn't be good for them.

God's holiness and justice cannot countenance our sin and depravity. Moses and the people needed to be redeemed.

We then turn to the opening verses of *The Book of Numbers*:

The LORD spoke to Moses in the tent of meeting in the Wilderness of Sinai, on the first day of the second month of the second year after Israel's departure from the land of Egypt (Numbers 1:1)

Woah Nelly! What's going on here? Something has changed. Two Bible books later, Moses is now able to go into the Tent of Meeting and be with God in that place. Just imagine that for a moment...

So what happened in the story between the end of *Exodus* and the beginning of *Numbers*? *The Book of Leviticus* happened. And these are that book's opening words:

Then the LORD summoned Moses and spoke to him from the tent of meeting (Leviticus 1:1)

Notice that at the beginning of *Leviticus* Moses is not yet able to go into the Tent of Meeting. Even so, the Lord God spoke to Moses from inside the tent and gave him a whole series of instructions that make the book rather boring to read, yet oh so necessary for us to understand.

According to commentators,

Leviticus is God's guidebook for His newly redeemed people, showing them how to worship, serve, and obey a holy God. Both access to God (through the sacrifices) and fellowship with God (through obedience) show the awesome holiness of the God of Israel.²

The Book of Leviticus is boring to read because it is filled with instructions, given in a context we cannot fully appreciate, yet they describe how salvation works: God **wants** to be with his people and created a place **where** he could be with his people, yet his people are sinful and need to be redeemed. The sacrifices and obedience and thanksgiving were their part of the equation of salvation, what the ancient Israelites had to do in order to be in God's presence.

But they could not even get all that right!

I hate, I despise, your feasts! I can't stand the stench of your solemn assemblies. Even if you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; I will have no regard for your fellowship offerings of fattened cattle. Take away from me the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice flow like water, and righteousness, like an unfailing stream. (Amos 5:21–24)

All the sacrifices, rituals, and other instructions God gave through Moses, to redeem the people, so they could be with God, turned out to be worthless because the people did not live lives of mercy and compassion. Their minds were not renewed, their thinking was not transformed.

Some other great work would be need for humankind to be saved.

What & Why?

Therefore, brothers and sisters, in view of the mercies of God, I urge you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God; this is your true worship. Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what is the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God. (Romans 12:1–2)

This fallen and sinful world will tell you you don't need God, you can find your own way in the world, you can define your own truth! The consequences and carnage of that way of thinking is all around us ... maybe you have already experienced some of that carnage and chaos yourself?

Like the chameleon whose skin colour changes to reflect its surroundings, we are urged to fit in with the spirit of this world.

But our creator God invites you to see the world in a new light, to come into his presence through worship and obedience, that you might think like he does and act like Jesus did. That is the Way of Life and Love!

I want to encourage you to fight the urge to fit in, to be a friend of Jesus by believing what is essential to believe.

What Is Essential About Salvation by Grace?

The past two weeks in this sermon series have reinforced just how much we need Redemption, which is a biblical image of being saved from our guilt, shame, captivity, ignorance, indebtedness, that we are deserving of death, all because we are alienated from God. The reconciliation and new life of all people is made possible only through the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus.

There is more to this story though.

Now let us consider what is essential about Salvation By Grace:

We believe that salvation is by God's grace alone through faith and that people cannot save themselves by works of righteousness but that works of righteousness are products of the Holy Spirit who indwells believers by faith.

We have already considered how we are all incapable of saving ourselves from the curse of sin and death. This statement then tells us four things:

Salvation Is by God's Grace Alone

The first, and perhaps most important, thing we learn is that **salvation is by God's grace alone!** As it is written,

For while we were still helpless, at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly. For rarely will someone die for a just person—though for a good person perhaps someone might even dare to die. But God proves his own love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:6–8)³

We are neither just nor good, despite our best efforts, we are helpless sinners, but our creator God loves us anyway. This is hard to comprehend.

Think of it this way: How does it make you feel when someone cuts you off in traffic?

You're minding your own business, driving home from work or school. You are keen to get home, toss off your shoes, have your dog wag his tail at you, your kids to greet you with an appreciative smile, your significant other to treat you as if you are actually significant to them.

Traffic is busy and likely backed up but, no matter, all will be well with the world once you pull into your driveway...

And then some !#@% swerves into your lane because they are impatient and almost takes off the corner of your car!

How does it make you feel when someone cuts you off in traffic; takes your chair at church; eats the last of your favourite biscuits; doesn't respond to your question because they are texting a friend on their smartphone; does not edit their own writing, spelling "single" as "signal"; or steps boisterously between you and your friend while you're calmly talking together, and doesn't say, "Excuse me"?

How does it make you feel?

Let me guess: you want to land on them with a flying elbow drop? And no one does it better than Macho Man Randy Savage!

In the presence of such inconsiderate people, you would be justified in exacting justice —'bringing down the storm', so to speak. But if you did so, your road rage would very likely turn a moment of inconsiderate cutting off into a terrible tragedy on the motorway. And your reputation would be ruined far more than the impatient driver.

Another person's transgression deserves retribution, but it is a sign of grace to open up a space in front of your car for others; to find another seat; to buy more biscuits to share; to get someone's attention with a gentle touch on the shoulder rather than sarcasm; to gently point out a typo; to use your own polite manners in every situation.

Our creator God would be fully justified in destroying humankind for its sin, according to the terms of holiness and justice. He did create us after all. Yet because of his love for his creation, God instead extends to us grace we do not deserve.

But you, Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in faithful love and truth. (Psalm 86:15)

Grace refers to mercy, love, compassion, favour, goodwill shown by a more powerful person toward another. God is all of this and more.

He has not dealt with us as our sins deserve or repaid us according to our iniquities. (Psalm 103:10)

That we can be rescued, redeemed, reconciled, and restored at all is something we do not deserve. That we can be saved from our guilt, shame, captivity, ignorance, indebtedness, our deserving of death, all because we are alienated from God, is only due to the Father's grace.

And how thankful we are for his grace!

Salvation Is Through Faith

But are we thankful for God's grace?

It is written,

But God, who is rich in mercy, because of his great love that he had for us, made us alive with Christ even though we were dead in trespasses. You are saved by grace! He also raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavens in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might display the immeasurable riches of his grace through his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God's gift—not from works, so that no one can boast. (Ephesians 2:4–9)⁴

If we really understood God's mercy and love, and how undeserving of it we are; if we really understood we are dead in our sin, and then understood the immeasurable riches of his grace and kindness available to us; if we understood this gift, then wouldn't we accept it?

That is what it means to have faith, to know and to appreciate God's grace in making salvation possible and available to us, to accept this work through the cross and resurrection of Christ Jesus, and trusting his promise of a free, full, and forever life.

Salvation is by God's grace alone AND **salvation is through faith!**

Does this seem unreasonable to anyone?

If, at Christmas, a coworker draws your name and shows up at the staff party with a gift for you, then you are likely to think, "Great! Another box of Cadbury's *Favourites* chocolates." If at the end of the night, the gift remains unopened on the Secret Santa table because you have not collected it, then have you in fact received the gift offered?

It's right there, on the table, with your name on it. It's yours but if you don't collect it, then it's not really yours at all. It's been freely offered but not freely received.

The gift may or may not be your least favourite chocolates but you will never know until you claim it and unwrap it to find it is, in fact, a box set of all the Marvel Cinematic Universe movies on high-definition Blu-ray discs, what you've always wanted!

You can know the gift is yours but if you don't appreciate its actual value, what it cost God to offer this salvation to you, and what real life difference it will make to you now and for eternity, then you have not received the gift by faith. It is written,

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. We have also obtained access through him by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we boast in the hope of the glory of God. (Romans 5:1–2)

The redemption Christ Jesus accomplished through the cross and his resurrection is for everyone everywhere, in all times and places, but **is not effective** for anyone until they accept it by faith, believing it is theirs and trusting its value.

Salvation Is Not By Works

The problem is we are not very good at receiving free gifts, are we? We always feel a compulsion to reciprocate, to offer something in return, to do something or act a certain way so as to earn the gift.

The third thing we learn from this statement is **salvation is not BY works**.

In *The Letter to Titus*, we read,

But when the kindness of God our Savior and his love for mankind appeared, he saved us—not by works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy—through the washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit. He poured out his Spirit on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior so that, having been justified by his grace, we may become heirs with the hope of eternal life. (Titus 3:4–7)

As we have already discussed there is nothing we can do to redeem or save ourselves.⁵ It's not for lack of trying; it is just not possible.

The situation created by our sin is so dire that salvation is not even possible by keeping God's law! It is written,

You who are trying to be justified by the law are alienated from Christ; you have fallen from grace. (Galatians 5:4)⁶

Our human condition is so twisted and warped that when we do the right thing, we end up doing it for the wrong reason. We can become 'puffed up' by our good behaviour, even arrogant in our saintliness.

Following the rules for the rules' sake is seeking to be right with God on our own terms. This thinking presumes our good behaviour will force God into accepting us. The Bible refers to these attitudes and behaviours as "works" and salvation is not by works. There is nothing we can do to earn our salvation,

Salvation Is to Works

HOWEVER, the final thing we learn is **salvation is TO works**. That concept can bamboozle your mind but there is a difference that makes all the difference.

The apostle Paul wrote,

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared ahead of time for us to do. (Ephesians 2:10)⁷

There is nothing we can do to earn our salvation, but there are things we can do because we have been saved. "What are those works?", you might be wondering.

In Jesus' 'first sermon', he characterised his own public ministry, using the words of the prophet, by declaring,

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour. (Luke 4:18–19)

Jesus did all of this through his preaching and teaching, his healing and miracles, his compassion and mercy, but then went on to say,

Truly I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do. And he will do even greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. Whatever you ask in my name, I will do it so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it. (John 14:12–14)

If we commit the whole of our lives to worship and obedience, then our minds will be renewed. We will think as God thinks and know his good, pleasing, and perfect will, what is the right thing to do in all situations. And his will is that you and I and we all bear his image and reflect his likeness into the world by following Jesus' example, in and with his power.

We can preach and teach, heal and perform miracles, show compassion and mercy, just as Jesus did. That is what we are saved to. And in such is found joy and peace.

Salvation is by grace alone, it is a gift from God. We receive it by faith and by faith it becomes effective for us.

Salvation is not something we could ever accomplish on our own, not even any works of righteousness, but salvation does free us to perform works of righteousness for the sake of the lost and to the glory, honour, and praise of God's name and his kingdom!

Application

When you fully appreciate the immeasurable riches of God's grace through his kindness to us in Christ Jesus, you will understand there is nothing you can do to earn it, but you can show your gratitude for it in everything you do.

But let justice flow like water, and righteousness, like an unfailing stream.
(Amos 5:24)

When we walk humbly with our God, our lives are to overflow with love and joy and mercy and peace into justice and righteousness (Mic 6:8).

Your enthusiasm in this moment might compel you to run out and join the marches, to picket and sing the songs calling for justice for the marginalised people group or issue of the day.

But love, joy, mercy, peace, justice, and righteousness start with our minds being renewed. We have to think about people and issues as God thinks about them, from a bigger and grace-filled perspective.

I am certain I have shared this before, but a good practice that will renew our minds and change our thinking about people is to bless them.

Bless and do not curse. (Romans 12:14)

Blessing is the involving of God's spiritual power for the benefit of those addressed.

So how can you take the first step into blessing another person?

A great place to begin is by examining the most well-known blessing in the Bible, the Aaronic Blessing in Numbers 6:

May the LORD bless you and protect you. May the LORD smile on you and be gracious to you. May the LORD show you his favor and give you his peace.
(Numbers 6:24–26, NLT)⁸

“The Lord bless you.” That means, “God bring good consistently into your life.”

“The Lord bless you and protect you.” That means, “God protect you. God build around you his safekeeping. The blood of Jesus and the Spirit of Christ be over you and keep you.”

Emphasize “you”. This needs to be very personal.

“The Lord bless you and protect you; may the Lord make his face shine on you.”

Now, most English translations use the phrase, “may the Lord make his face *shine* on you”, which is a concept that can seem a little unusual to our modern ears. If you have trouble with the shining face idea, find a grandparent somewhere and watch their face shine on their grandchild when they smile at her; that can give you a little idea. Your face is meant to smile, and when you smile, your face shines. Glory is meant to be shared from God to human beings. Glory always shines.

For memorising then, I recommend using *The New Living Translation's* version of this verse, included above.

Begin to shape your thinking about, praying for, and speaking to other people around even this first part of this blessing. And what you think about other people will begin to reflect our Creator's grace and compassion, love and truth.

When someone cuts you off in traffic, bless them; when someone takes your chair at church, bless them; when someone eats the last of your favourite biscuits, bless them; when someone doesn't respond to your question because they are texting a friend on their smartphone, bless them; when someone does not edit their own writing, spelling “single” as “signal”, bless them; when someone steps boisterously between you and your friend while you're calmly talking together, and doesn't say, “Excuse me”, bless them.

When we bless and do not curse, we take the first steps toward bearing God's image and reflecting Christ's likeness, we begin to make a difference in this world.

Conclusion

And keep in mind the Aaronic Blessing expresses God's grace and compassion for ALL people, everywhere, all the time, even for you.

May we all receive this salvation by grace alone, through faith, not BY works but TO works. May we each receive it and live in it all our days, in all our ways, for all people, at all times.

Endnotes

- 1 Unless otherwise noted, all scripture quotations are taken from *The Christian Standard Bible* (Nashville, TN, USA: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017).
- 2 Bruce Wilkinson and Kenneth Boa, *Talk Thru the Bible* (Nashville, TN, USA: T. Nelson, 1983), pg 20.
- 3 See also Ro 9:14-16; Eph 1:7; 1Ti 1:15-16 See also Ex 33:19; Ac 4:12; 20:24; Ro 5:15-17; 2Co 6:2; Col 1:13-14; 2Th 2:16; Tit 2:11; Heb 7:23-25; Rev 7:10.
- 4 See also Ac 15:7-11; 16:30-31; Ro 3:21-24; 4:14-16; 5:1-2; Heb 4:16.
- 5 See also Lk 18:9-14; Ro 11:5-6.
- 6 See also Ro 5:20-21; 6:14; 8:1-4; Gal 2:21; 3:17-18; 1Ti 1:9.
- 7 See also 1Co 12:4-7; Jn 7:37-39; Ac 1:8; 2:4; 4:31; Ro 5:5; Gal 3:5; Heb 2:4.
- 8 Tyndale House Publishers, *Holy Bible: New Living Translation* (Carol Stream, IL, USA: Tyndale House Publishers, 2015).