

Pastor Steven J. Cole
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship
123 S. Beaver Street
Flagstaff, Arizona 86001
www.fcfonline.org

SALVATION AND GOOD WORKS

Ephesians 2:10

By

Steven J. Cole

October 28, 2007

© Steven J. Cole, 2007

For access to previous sermons or to subscribe to weekly sermons via email go to: www.fcfonline.org/sermons

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture
Quotations are from the New American
Standard Bible, Updated Edition
© The Lockman Foundation

October 28, 2007
Ephesians Lesson 15

Salvation and Good Works Ephesians 2:10

When it comes to the subject of “salvation and good works,” there are two serious errors that plague the church. One is that of Roman Catholicism, which teaches that in order to gain enough merit for salvation, we must add our good works to what Christ did on the cross. Under this view, you can never know for sure whether or not you are saved, because there is no way to check your “merit balance” to see if you’ve stored up enough. So you have to keep adding good works in the hope of gaining eternal life. Under Roman Catholic teaching, a person could never say what Paul says in Ephesians 2:8, “you have been saved.”

The other error, which is more pervasive in evangelical circles, is that good works have no connection whatsoever with salvation. This view teaches that since we are saved by grace through faith alone, a person may believe in Christ as Savior, but there may not be a life of good works to follow. A person may pray the sinner’s prayer and profess to believe in Jesus as his Savior. Later he may profess to be an atheist and live in gross sin, but he will be in heaven because he made a decision to receive Christ. This view fails to realize that salvation requires God’s raising a sinner from death to life, which inevitably results in a changed life. It divorces repentance from saving faith and teaches that saving faith is simply believing the facts of the gospel. Submitting to Christ as Lord of your life may follow salvation, but it is not a necessary aspect of saving faith, according to this error.

Ephesians 2:10 succinctly answers both of these errors. Paul is explaining (“For”) the previous two verses, where he has said that we have been saved by grace through faith, apart from any works on our part. It is all the gift of God, so that He alone gets all the glory. Now Paul further explains that...

Genuine salvation is entirely of God and it inevitably results in a life of good works.

Sometimes it is said that there is a conflict between Paul and James over the matter of justification by faith versus works (compare Rom. 3:24, 28; James 2:18-26). But both men are saying the same thing from different angles to address different issues. Paul was attacking the Pharisaic idea that our good works will commend us to God. He argues that no one can ever be good enough to earn salvation. God justifies guilty sinners through faith in Christ alone. But James was attacking the view that saving faith does not necessarily result in good works. He shows that genuine faith always produces good works.

That is precisely what Paul is clarifying in Ephesians 2:10. While salvation is entirely of God, so are the good works that follow salvation. God has ordained the entire process. Just as we cannot claim any glory for ourselves in our initial salvation, even so we cannot claim any glory in our subsequent good works. God is behind the entirety of our salvation from start to finish. Thus He gets all the glory. Note five things from verse 10:

1. Genuine salvation involves a new creation that is entirely God's doing.

Paul says, "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus...." "His" is emphatic in the Greek, underscoring the point that Paul has been making throughout chapters 1 and 2, that our salvation was ordained by God from eternity and that we had nothing to do with it. We were dead in our sins, but God raised us from the dead (2:1, 5). Just as God created the universe out of nothing by the word of His power, so God created us in Christ Jesus by His mighty power.

The Greek word translated, "workmanship," occurs in only one other place in the New Testament, where it is translated, "what has been made." In Romans 1:20, Paul writes, "For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse." Paul is referring to the original creation. Just as God powerfully brought that creation into existence for His purpose and glory, so it is when He saves a soul. "Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come" (2 Cor. 5:17).

If you think that I have been emphasizing this point too much in the past few weeks, it is only because Paul emphasizes it repeatedly in these first two chapters. He knows how prone we are to take some of the credit for our salvation. If we can't claim any reason to boast in our salvation, then we'll try to boast in our good deeds after salvation.

But Paul is saying that the entire process is from God. It comes from His eternal, sovereign choice to save us and from His mighty creative power. Just as the physical creation cannot claim any grounds for boasting in its beauty, so neither can we who are God's new creation in Christ claim any grounds for boasting in our salvation or in our good works. "In Christ Jesus" (see the same phrase in 2:6, 7) shows that everything God has done for us comes through Jesus Christ. Apart from Him, we have nothing. In Him, we have every blessing in the heavenly places (Eph. 1:3). He gets all the glory.

Many Christians confuse making a decision to accept Christ with genuine salvation. Certainly, everyone who is genuinely saved receives Christ or decides to trust in Him. But, not everyone who makes a profession of receiving Christ or trusting in Him is genuinely saved. When God genuinely saves someone, that person becomes a new creation in Christ. God changes his heart of stone for a heart of flesh that is obedient to Him (Ezek. 36:26-27). He changes the bent of our lives from hostility towards God to submission to Him (Rom. 6:17-18; 8:1-13). While genuine believers do sin, they hate it and fight against it. If there is no change of heart, then the person needs to question whether he has been created anew in Christ Jesus.

2. Genuine salvation inevitably results in a life of good works.

Those who argue that there is no necessary connection between saving faith and subsequent good works believe that they are defending the Reformed doctrine of salvation by grace alone, apart from works. (See, for example, Zane Hodges, *Absolutely Free* [Zondervan], pp. 207-208; 222-223). But the Reformers would be aghast at the view that a person may be truly saved and yet live a life of sin. C. H. Spurgeon, who firmly held the Reformed view of salvation, said (*All Round Ministry* [Banner of Truth], p. 310), "We have

been clear upon the fact that good works are not the cause of salvation; let us be equally clear upon the truth that they are the necessary fruit of it." John Calvin said (*The Institutes of the Christian Religion* [Westminster Press] ed. by John McNeill, translated by Ford Lewis Battles, III:XVI:1, p. 798), "Christ justifies no one whom he does not at the same time sanctify."

We are not saved *by* good works, but we are saved *for* good works. Those different prepositions make all the difference in the world! Good works are the evidence of salvation, not the cause of it. If there are no works or change of life to follow salvation, then it should be questioned whether the person is truly saved.

Jesus taught this very plainly. In warning about false prophets (Matt. 7:15-17) said, "Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes nor figs from thistles, are they? So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit."

Paul makes the same point in Titus 1:16, in a warning about false teachers. He says, "They profess to know God, but by their deeds they deny Him, being detestable and disobedient and worthless for any good deed." He goes on to show the relationship between saving grace and good deeds. He explains (Titus 2:11-12) that God's grace instructs us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires. Then he adds (2:14) that Christ "gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds."

Throughout the book of 1 John, the apostle emphasizes the same point against the backdrop of false teachers. In 1 John 3:7-10, he writes, "Little children, make sure no one deceives you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous; the one who practices sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. The Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil. No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God. By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious; anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother."

The Book of James (especially, 2:14-26) makes the same point, that genuine saving faith manifests itself in good deeds. If a person claims to have faith but has no resulting works, his claim is suspect.

What are these good works for which we were created? Spurgeon summarizes them as, *works of obedience, works of love, works of faith, and acts of common life* (*Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* [Pilgrim Publications], 31:152-153). By *works of obedience*, he means obeying the commands of Scripture. *Works of love* includes both love for God and love for our fellow man, with an eye to God's glory. *Works of faith* refers to all that we do in reliance upon God and His promises. By *acts of common life* he meant whatever we do at home, at work, traveling, or on a sick bed, that we do all to the glory of God. In other words, the entire bent of our lives after we have been saved by God's grace should be lived with a God-ward focus, to please Him.

Thus, genuine salvation involves a new creation that is entirely God's doing. This new creation is made for good works. Also,

3. God prepared these works before He saved us.

Concerning these good works, Paul adds, "which God prepared beforehand...." *What* does he mean? The only other use of this verb is in Romans 9:23, where after writing that God prepared vessels of wrath for destruction, Paul states, "And He did so to make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory." So Paul taught that God not only predestined our salvation, but also the works that follow. We already saw in Ephesians 1:4 that God "chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless...." So this continues the same idea, that God's sovereign plan does not stop with salvation, but also includes a life of godliness, leading to final glorification (Rom. 8:29-30; 2 Thess. 2:13-14).

But *why* does he add this phrase, that God prepared these good works beforehand? It seems to me that there are two practical applications. First, if God not only planned my salvation before the foundation of the world, but He also planned my good works, I have no grounds to boast in anything that I do for the Lord. When you understand it properly, there is no more humbling doctrine than that of predestination. In *The Institutes*, John Calvin argues that

a main practical application of the doctrine of sovereign election is humility, because it gives all the glory to God and none to us (III:XXI:1, pp. 921-922). He also argues that it makes us feel how much we are obliged to God and it is our only ground for assurance (*ibid.*). So when we recognize that God predestined both our salvation and our sanctification, it humbles our pride.

Second, the fact that God prepared these works shows that we are not to engage in *our* projects and good deeds, but rather to seek God for what *He* wants us to do. Some of the false teachers in our day tell people to dream their own big dreams. They promise that God will help you succeed in whatever you want to do. But that puts us in control of our lives and God merely becomes our helper to achieve our goals. That is completely backwards! Rather, we should never engage in any service for the Lord without first waiting on Him as to what *He* wants. If He is directing, then we should follow. He is the Lord and we are only His servants, seeking to do His sovereign will.

Some wrongly conclude from the doctrine of predestination that we can then sit back and do nothing. If God has ordained it, it will happen whether we do anything or not. But this is fallacious, because God not only foreordains the ends. He also foreordains the means to those ends. Thus,

4. Although God sovereignly ordained these good works before time began, we are responsible to walk in them.

Paul says that God prepared these works beforehand “so that we would walk in them.” Harold Hoehner explains the balance (*The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, ed. by John F. Walvoord & Roy B. Zuck [Victor Books], 2:624), “The purpose of these prepared-in-advance works is not ‘to work in them’ but ‘to walk in them.’ In other words, God has prepared a path of good works for believers which He will perform in and through them as they walk by faith. This does not mean doing a work for God; instead, it is God’s performing His work in and through believers.” He then refers us to Philippians 2:13, where after telling us to work out our salvation, Paul adds, “for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.”

Walking in these good works which God has prepared for us implies a lifelong process. Once we are saved, the direction of our lives should be to walk on the path of obedience to God in everything. Also, walking in good works does not mean that we dabble in them in our spare time, when we don't have anything better to do. We don't "volunteer to serve" God when we get a little extra time on our hands. Rather, serving God becomes the bent of our lives every day in every situation. There is no division between the sacred and the secular for the Christian. When you're at work, you serve God there (Col. 3:23-24). When you're with family, you serve God there. The same applies to church. Every Christian should be seeking to serve the Lord in accordance with his gifts and desires in every situation of life.

Note that the walk in good works closes the paragraph that began with our formerly walking in trespasses and sins, according to the course of this world (2:1-2). The contrast is stark and deliberate. Either you are walking in sin in accordance with this evil world or you are walking in good works in accordance with God's work of salvation in your heart. Also, in 2:3 Paul mentions Satan's working in the sons of disobedience. But here it is God working His good works that He has ordained in us.

The application is, if God has saved you by His grace, He has saved you for a life of good works. If you are not engaging in these works, you need to confess your self-centered lifestyle to the Lord and seek Him for how He wants you to serve Him. He doesn't save anyone so that they can live for themselves. He wants everyone who has tasted His grace to engage in a life of good works.

Thus, genuine salvation involves God creating something new. It inevitably results in a life of good works because God ordained such works before He saved us. But the fact that God foreordained these works does not absolve us of responsibility. We must actively engage in such good works. There is one final idea:

5. The good works that we walk in should be done in a corporate context.

Our American culture inclines us toward independence. We tend to idolize the "self-made man," who goes it alone. But Scripture teaches that when God saves us, the Holy Spirit baptizes us

into the one body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13). We are individually members of this body, each with a role to perform. But we must work in coordination and cooperation with other members of the body. Paul uses three words in verse 10 that point us towards this corporate aspect of these good works:

**We*—He means, “We Jews and Gentiles together, who make up the body of Christ.” This sets the stage for 2:11-22, where Paul shows the blessings that have been poured out on us corporately as members of this new entity, the church. One real danger in the early church was that it would split along racial lines, with the Jewish and Gentile Christians separating from one another. Paul strongly opposed this tendency, writing that in Christ, the new man which God has created, “there is no distinction between Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and freeman, but Christ is all, and in all” (Col. 3:11). The local church should be multi-racial and multi-cultural.

**Workmanship*—We get our English word “poem” from this Greek word, which means “something that is created or made.” A poem consists of words carefully crafted to fit together so that the whole presents a beautiful picture that the individual words cannot convey in isolation. Even so, the church as God’s poem or new creation shows forth His nature and glory as the various parts work together in harmony.

**Created*—This points us to the church as the one new man (2:15). We are the body of which Christ is the head. What was lost by the first created man, Adam, God is recovering through the new man, Christ and the church.

The practical application is that we need to learn to work together more closely in the local church. As members of the body, we need to think and work interdependently. Many times I hear of people who launch new ministries or mission endeavors independently of the local church. Often these people have been hurt by a local church. Rather than working through their differences, they just go out on their own, usually without any coordination or cooperation from a local body of believers. It’s easier and they don’t want the hassles.

But I believe that God's program for this age is the local church. That's primarily why I am a pastor, rather than launching "Steve Cole Ministries, International.". While there is a legitimate place for independent mission or evangelistic agencies, I think that they need to be much more closely tied to the church. Together, we can reflect Christ to this community in a way that we cannot if we act independently of one another.

Conclusion

In closing, there are two main applications. First, make sure that you are a new creation in Christ. Have you *truly* been saved by His grace through faith in Christ alone? Spurgeon (*ibid.*, p. 150) pointed out that the only way you can become a Christian is by being created. He anticipated the objection, "But we cannot create ourselves!" He answers, "It is even so. Stand back, and quit all pretence of being creators; and the further you retreat from self-conceit the better, for it is God who must create you. How I wish that you felt this!" He then anticipates the reply, "It would drive us to despair!" He answers, "It might drive you to such despair as would be the means of your flying to Christ, and that is precisely what I desire. It would be greatly to your gain if you never again indulged a shred of hope in your own works, and were forced to accept the grace of God." The point is, you cannot work *for* God until God first has done His work of saving grace *in* you.

Second, if you have been saved, the focus of your life should be, "Lord, what will You have me to do?" Paul asked God that question immediately after his experience on the Damascus Road. The Lord answered (Acts 22:10), "Get up and go on into Damascus, and there you will be told of all that has been appointed for you to do." God had already prepared beforehand Paul's future ministry! Paul had to learn God's plan and walk in it. So do you!

Application Questions

1. Why does Paul keep emphasizing that salvation is totally God's doing? What is his practical aim?
2. If someone said, "I've accepted Christ as my Savior, but I haven't decided yet to make Him my Lord," what would you say?
3. What is Paul's practical point in stating that God prepared beforehand the good works that we should do?
4. God is sovereign and yet we are responsible. How do we maintain the proper biblical balance here?

Copyright, Steven J. Cole, 2007, All Rights Reserved.