

Streetsville United Church
Sunday, March 22, 2009
Rev. John Tapscott

"COMMANDMENTS AND GRACE - Part 2"

Ephesians 2:8-10

We are speaking about the place of commandments and grace in the Christian life. Today our text is the definitive teaching in the Bible about salvation and grace. Ephesians 2:8 "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God..." Now both the Biblical story and our own lives move between the two necessary poles of commandments and grace.

When God gave the commandments to Israel he said to them, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt; out of the house of bondage." Then God gave them the Ten Commandments. Please notice the order, because it is crucial. God didn't say, "Here are the commandments. Obey these and then I'll set you free." No, God saved his people first. God brought them out of Egypt set them on the road to the promised land, then gave them the commandments. The order is so important. Grace first, then commandments. And by giving the commandments, God wasn't restricting the people; these were boundaries which would allow the people to really live and prosper.

In avalanche areas in the Rockies, the authorities put up markers and fences and ropes on the mountains with signs saying, "Here is the limit. Ski or snowmobile within these boundaries and you will be safe; go beyond them and you will be putting yourself at great risk." And that's exactly what the Ten Commandments were like for Israel. They were God's gift of love. Through the commandments God said to Israel, "Here are my boundaries for living; stay within them and everything will go well for you in the new land I am giving you; go beyond them and you will run into trouble; you may even perish." Furthermore, by keeping the commandments Israel would honour God, and give witness to the fact that the Lord was indeed God. And through Israel God was giving the commandments to the whole world, for the blessing of all people.

But of course, the Hebrews didn't keep the commandments perfectly. And neither do we, especially when we hear Jesus say that we must keep them not only in outward action, but also by inward thought. A recent photo in the newspaper showed skiers going beyond the clearly placed boundaries in order to ski in the danger zone. So we all find ourselves outside God's boundaries at some point. We become separated from God. And if we think that we can keep

the commandments sufficiently well to bridge the gap between God and ourselves, we then become filled with spiritual pride which separates us from God even more. The Commandments are great, and we need them, but when we really understand the demands they make on us, and when really we understand ourselves, they drive us back to God's grace again.

Mark chapter 10 records the time that a man came up to Jesus and said, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus said, "You know the commandments - Do not kill. Do not commit adultery. Do not steal. Do not bear false witness. Do not defraud. Honour your father and mother." The man said, "Teacher, all these I have observed from my youth." Now, doesn't that response surprise you? By then the man should have been on his knees, saying, "Lord, if that's what it takes to inherit eternal life, I'm lost. Have mercy on me, a sinner." Instead he was filled with spiritual pride, believing that he could do something to inherit eternal life, and then boasting confidently that he had kept all the commandments. But by listing the commandments Jesus was actually leading the man to grace again. Jesus loved the man and told him that he lacked one thing. Jesus called him to sell everything he had and to follow him. This radical act would teach him to put aside trusting in himself in order to trust God alone, because when you're empty handed, who else can you trust in but God? When the man asked, "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?", Jesus answered by saying in effect, "For what you desire, look to God's grace. Look not to what you have done, but to what God has done."

Now Jesus may not be calling us to this particular act of renunciation, but our need is the same. I can't say that I have kept all God's commandments from my youth. I especially couldn't say that in front of Jesus. Sometimes I have gone beyond the boundaries. And I bet it's the same for you. When Jesus tells us that we must keep all the commandments to inherit eternal life, I am filled with despair. If that's the standard, I know I won't make it. Again, I'm betting it's the same for you. But by listing the commandments, Jesus is actually leading us back to grace again. He is helping us to look not to what we can do; but to what God has done for us. This time Jesus is moving us from commandments to grace. So we come to our text today which is right at the heart of the Christian Gospel - Ephesians 2:8. "By grace you have been saved through faith and this is not your own doing - it is the gift of God."

Now here's the first thing I want us to notice. **You and I are saved not by what we do, but by what God has done.** "It is not your own doing," Paul says. Which of course, means that it's God's doing.

Here's a story similar to that of the man who came to Jesus. A chaplain said to the soldiers in his company. "There are two possibilities following death. Heaven and hell. If you would like to know your destination I will be happy to give you a little test." They all said, "Okay. Give us the test." They found some pencils and paper and the chaplain told mark off ten spaces. Each question would count ten points and each soldier was to grade himself between 1 and 10. Question one was, "Have you always loved God above all else and not put anything else before Him?" Number 2 was "Have you ever misused God's name or made light of Him?" The chaplain went through all Ten Commandments. When the test was completed, the men added up their scores, which ranged between 55 and 75. Everyone figured they'd passed. But the chaplain said, "The passing grade is 100." The men shook their heads. "What's the use of trying? No one can be that perfect. We're all doomed." The chaplain said, "The purpose of the test is not to score 100 but to recognize our need for God's help. I've got good news for you. There is mercy and grace for all who receive it. There was a man who walked this earth and scored 100 on the test. His name is Jesus. He took your place and died for your sins on the cross, and now if you ask God, He will substitute Jesus' score for your own. Because of what he has done, we are accepted by God and given a place in heaven."

That's it. You are saved not by what you do, but by what God has done for you in Christ. Paul tell us that "we were dead in our trespasses, but God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, made us alive together with Christ - by grace you have been saved." As Paul puts it in 1st Corinthians - "Christ died for our sins, was buried, and raised on the third day." I believe that if we could have paid for our salvation, God would have let us. All that Jesus suffered and went through would have been avoided. But we couldn't pay for it, so God did it for us in a wondrous act of grace. Israel was saved from the clutches of slavery by God's mighty act, so we are saved from the clutches of sin and death by what God has done for us through Christ. "It is not your own doing, it is the gift of God, not because of works, lest anyone should boast." Please grasp the essence of the Gospel - you are not saved by what you do, not by keeping the commandments, not by your good deeds, not by anything you have done or can do, but by what God has done for you in Christ.

Now there is one little thing we do, and that is to believe that it's been done for us. It is for you to look at Christ on the Cross and say in your heart, "My Saviour." That's what those two words "through faith" are all about. And even the faith we need to receive the gift comes from God as we hear the Gospel message proclaimed. "By grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God."

Now here's the second thing we need to see. Let's listen to all of verses 8-10, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God - not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life."

You and I are not saved by our works, but by God's grace. Grace always comes first. **But make no mistake - God gives saved people plenty of work to do.** In fact, once God saves us by grace he moves us back to the commandments again. He swings us back from what He has done for us to what we can now do for God. We not only seek to follow the Ten Commandments; we seek to obey the commandments which Jesus says are the greatest of all - to love God with our whole being and to love our neighbours as we love ourselves.

God has created us and saved us in Jesus Christ for this very purpose - so that we may do the good works he has prepared for us to do. Imagine that - God is so gracious that he has even prepared beforehand works for you and me to do and gives us the strength to do them. God knows what your gifts and talents are - he gave them to you, and has laid out works for you - works to serve God and to help your neighbour and to help the Kingdom of God grow and flourish. God has prepared works specifically for you and you don't have to feel badly if your works and your gifts are different than someone else's. There will always be people who tell you what you ought to be doing. But don't let anyone tell you that if you know you're already doing the work God has prepared for you.

Now if you don't do those works or if you sometimes falter at them, God is not going to take away your salvation. You can sit and do nothing. But if that's your attitude, your life will feel very empty and unfulfilled and the Kingdom of God will be diminished. Someone has put it like this, "You may as an act of grace, be accepted as a partner in a business, but once you are you're not expected to just sit there in your corner office and enjoy the view. You are expected, even required, to help the business grow and prosper."

So it is for God's Kingdom. You and I have been saved by God's grace in Christ and then we are expected to get to work and do something. And those who have been saved by God's amazing grace and wondrous love are most eager to do so, as a way of honouring and thanking the Giver. We do good works not to earn our salvation but to say "thank you" for the grace by which God has saved us. We serve God not in glum duty, as if we're trying to earn a wage but with joyful, grateful hearts and eager, willing hands. May God grant us grace and strength to answer his call.

