

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of theology today by continuing to examine soteriology, the doctrine of salvation. We are currently discussing the doctrine of sanctification and, more specifically, the means of grace. Last week we finished examining the principle that governs corporate worship, which is called the regulative principle. Dr. Spencer, what would you like to cover today?

Dr. Spencer: I want to begin to look at the responsibility of believers in making use of the means of grace. As we have noted before, regeneration is a monergistic work of God, meaning that he accomplishes it without our aid. God works in those whom he has chosen to draw them to himself and grants them new hearts so that they will respond to his gospel call in repentance and faith, which is conversion. But we are discussing sanctification, which has two aspects; there is an immediate change, which John Murray called definitive sanctification as we noted in Session 185, and there is a continuing process of change in which we must cooperate, which Murray called progressive sanctification. But even then, our cooperation is only possible if we have been born again, so even progressive sanctification is by grace.

Marc Roby: Salvation is 100% by grace.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it is all grace from beginning to end. We read in John 6:44 that Jesus Christ said, “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day.”¹ This verse speaks of both the beginning and the end of our salvation; God drawing us at the beginning, and raising us up at the end. We have noted before that the Greek word translated as “draws” in this verse does not mean to gently woo or persuade, it means to drag, which is how the same word is translated in Acts 16:9 where we read that Paul and Silas were dragged into the marketplace.

Marc Roby: And that same Paul wrote, in Ephesians 2:8-9, that “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.”

Dr. Spencer: Yes, those are classic verses to make the point that our salvation is not the result of our effort. But then Paul follows them, in Ephesians 2:10, by saying, “For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” This verse clearly speaks of our effort. In other words, there are works that God wants us to do and these are called good works.

Marc Roby: The balance between grace and works has been a controversial issue for a long time.

Dr. Spencer: Yes it has. But even though this verse introduces the idea of works, it definitely supports the idea that we are saved by grace alone. John Calvin pointed out this verse proves the

¹ All scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV® (1984 version). Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com The "NIV" and "New International Version" are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™.

previous statement – namely, that it is by grace we have been saved – by making it clear that any good works we have cannot be the *cause* of our salvation because they are, in fact, the *result* of our salvation.² They are the result of the fact that we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works as Paul wrote. When Paul said that we are created in Christ Jesus, he was referring to our being regenerated by the power of the Holy Spirit. Without new birth and the power of the Holy Spirit, we cannot do any “good works”. In fact, apart from God’s saving grace we are unworthy sinners and all we can do is sin. But, once we are saved, we then have work we must do.

Marc Roby: Our good works are also referred to as fruit in the Bible, and in John 15:4-6 Jesus told us, “Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.”

Dr. Spencer: That’s a great passage, and it speaks of our union with Christ, which is brought about by regeneration, or new birth. When Jesus speaks about being *in* him, he is speaking about our being united to him by faith. And when he says that we “can do nothing”, he obviously doesn’t literally mean nothing at all. That would be a stupid statement contradicted by the obvious fact that non-Christians do all sorts of things all the time. He meant that apart from Christ, we can do nothing that is pleasing to God. In other words, no good work. And therefore, getting back to Ephesians 2:10, if a person has any good works at all, they are the result of new birth, not the cause of it.

Marc Roby: And believing in Christ is, in itself, a good work since it is commanded by God. We read in John 6:29 that Jesus said, “The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.”

Dr. Spencer: And therefore, the obvious conclusion is that no one can believe until he or she is born again; new birth comes first. Which is the opposite order from what is taught in most churches today.

But getting back to the topic of our responsibility in making use of the means of grace, I want to first tie this back into our discussion from last week about the preached word being the centerpiece of worship. Christians have a serious responsibility in this regard. We aren’t fulfilling our duty to God, nor are we receiving the grace that is available to us, if we just go to church on Sunday morning, listen to the word that is preached, and then go home and forget all about it.

Marc Roby: I fear that what most people remember from a sermon is a good joke or story, if they remember anything at all.

² John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul to the Ephesians*, pg. 229, in Calvin’s Commentaries, Vol. XXI, Baker Books, 2009

Dr. Spencer: I think you're right about that. But that is not the way it should be. In 1 Samuel 3:19 we read that "The LORD was with Samuel as he grew up, and he let none of his words fall to the ground." We should endeavor to be like Samuel. We should not let any of God's words fall to the ground. That is how we remain in Christ and are enabled to bear fruit for God's kingdom.

Marc Roby: And what is it we should do to avoid letting God's words fall to the ground?

Dr. Spencer: We should prepare in advance for Sunday and, in particular, we should prepare to hear the sermon God has ordained for us to hear. If we know the scripture passage to be used in advance, then we should prepare by prayerfully reading over the passage and thinking about it before the sermon. And, if we don't know the specific scripture in advance, we should still pray and prepare ourselves to listen attentively and we should ask God to speak to us specifically. Then, after the sermon, we should go back over it, think about it and see how to put it into practice in our life.

If the sermon was preached by a true man of God, then he prepared that sermon with the help of the Holy Spirit and there is something in there that the Holy Spirit will use to speak to us individually. True preaching is a wonderful thing. It isn't just some person standing up and speaking. It is God speaking to his people through the God-called, equipped and sent minister.

Marc Roby: And when God speaks, we would be well advised to pay careful attention.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, we would. And so, when we said last week that preaching is the centerpiece of a true worship service, that is not just true from the perspective of the minister, it should be true for us as Christians sitting in the pews as well. If we find ourselves more interested in the singing and fellowship, there is a problem. There is nothing wrong with those things of course, they are good and it is right for us to enjoy them and be built up by them. But the sermon is more important and should receive more of our attention. And given that Sunday, the Lord's Day, is to be the highlight, or focus, of our week, and the sermon is the centerpiece of worship, it becomes clear that the sermon should be the highlight of our week!

Marc Roby: I don't think many Christians view it that way.

Dr. Spencer: I'm sure they don't. But we should strive to do so. Worship is a great privilege, but it is also a responsibility. It involves sacrifice. We must surrender to God. We must surrender our priorities, our time, our gifts, everything. We should go to church on Sunday wanting to receive whatever God has to speak to us and our greatest desire should be to hear from him and then go forth and do what he is commanding us to do.

Returning to Ephesians 2:10, it says that "we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."

Marc Roby: Therefore, there is work we are to be busy doing. We aren't just passive recipients of God's grace.

Dr. Spencer: No, we aren't to be passive at all. In his commentary on this verse, Sinclair Ferguson wrote that "There is a beautiful spiritual balance here. Faith is a gift, yet we exercise it. Good works do not save, yet we cannot be saved without beginning to *walk in the good works*,

*which God prepared beforehand.*³ Ferguson is giving a more literal rendering of the original Greek in Ephesians 2:10. It actually says that we are to walk in good works. It requires effort, just like walking. We have to put one foot in front of the other and move. And saving faith, while it is a gift, and is impossible without regeneration, which only God can do, is nonetheless something that we do also. We must personally believe in Jesus Christ. God doesn't do it for us.

Marc Roby: And then, having believed, we must go out and walk in good works. In other words, we must be obedient to God.

Dr. Spencer: That's right. Obedience is not optional. It is not the *basis* for our salvation, but it is a necessary concomitant to it. No one who has been born again will fail to be changed. We will be sanctified, both definitively and progressively. As Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:17, "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!"

In Romans 12:1, after spending the first eleven chapters telling us the glorious gospel of salvation, Paul wrote, "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship." True worship does not end when the worship service ends on Sunday. True worship is the whole of life for a Christian. It is the proper response of the new creation to God's amazing love.

Marc Roby: And the classic verse to show that is 1 Corinthians 10:31, where we are commanded, "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God."

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that's a verse that I hope all of our listeners will memorize and put into practice. It is a one-sentence summary of the Christian life. As we noted in Session 215, to worship God and to glorify God are, essentially, synonymous. And worship does require effort on our part. Every means of grace that God provides to us requires effort on our part if we are to benefit from it. And, although we are specifically speaking about corporate worship and the preaching of the Word right now, I would be remiss if I didn't note that we must also give careful attention to our daily Bible reading and family devotions and so on. God speaks to us in all sorts of ways.

Marc Roby: And we don't want to let any of his words fall to the ground, no matter how they come to us.

Dr. Spencer: No, we don't. In 2 Timothy 3:14-17 the apostle Paul exhorted Timothy by saying, "But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."

Marc Roby: And since proper preaching is based on the Word of God, it should also be useful in equipping people to do the good works God has prepared for them to do.

³ Sinclair Ferguson, *Let's Study Ephesians*, The Banner of Truth Trust, 2005, pg. 53

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it should. But if we don't do our part as the hearers of the preached word, we can forfeit the grace that should be ours. The preacher may preach a wonderful sermon, but if we simply let those words fall to the ground, they will not produce the benefit that could be ours. None of the means of grace that God provides will be of any spiritual benefit to us if we approach them carelessly or with wrong motives. The Rev. P.G. Mathew correctly said that "Authentic spiritual worship is costly, for it demands nothing less than the entirety of our being surrendered in worship to our great God and Savior Jesus Christ."⁴

Marc Roby: People don't like that word surrender; it sounds like we have failed in some way.

Dr. Spencer: But surrendering to God achieves the greatest victory that can ever be ours. We cannot defeat our enemies on our own. Satan, sin and world are too powerful for us without God. But by surrendering to Jesus Christ, we become partakers of the victory that he has already won.

When Paul reflected on the work of Christ in securing our salvation and the glory that will be ours in the resurrection, he wrote in 1 Corinthians 15:57, "thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Marc Roby: And the victory that Christ won becomes ours when we are united to him by faith.

Dr. Spencer: Which is why the apostle John wrote, in 1 John 5:4, that "everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith." The Puritans used to speak of leading a victorious Christian life, which is a phrase that I like and think we should bring back.

The Christian life is a battle. When churches focus on making us feel good about ourselves and making this life a little better, they are completely missing the point of Christianity and are not true churches. God's purpose in sending Jesus Christ was to save his people from their sins.

Marc Roby: Which is very different from saving people *in* their sins.

Dr. Spencer: It is as different as night and day. We are to be transformed; we are to be holy.

Marc Roby: Do you have anything more you want to say about the preached Word?

Dr. Spencer: Yes. The importance of the preached Word of God was a very important aspect of the Reformation. In a Roman Catholic Church, the center of worship is an altar, symbolizing the sacrifice. In fact, the mass is called a sacrifice since the church of Rome believes that the bread and wine truly become the body and blood of Christ.⁵ But the reformers rejected that unbiblical view and went back to the teaching of the Bible. Communion is a *remembrance* of the sacrifice of Christ, not a repetition or continuation of that sacrifice. Therefore, protestant churches have a pulpit, rather than an altar. The pulpit signifies the centrality of the Word of God. Christ's sacrifice is critically important of course, but we only learn of Christ's work and God's plan for us from the Word of God in the Bible.

⁴ P.G. Mathew, *Daily Delight*, Grace & Glory Ministries, 2015, pg. 233

⁵ e.g., see W. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1994, pp 991-992

Marc Roby: And the Westminster Confession of Faith, which is one of the most celebrated of the protestant confessions, begins with the Word of God for the same reason. Chapter One of that confession is entitled, *Of the Holy Scripture*.

Dr. Spencer: That's a good point. The reformers also talked about the marks of a true church. The first mark is the preaching of the Word of God. John Calvin wrote in his *Institutes* that "Wherever we see the word of God sincerely preached and heard, wherever we see the sacraments administered according to the institution of Christ, there we cannot have any doubt that the Church of God has some existence".⁶

Marc Roby: And, of course, whenever the Word of God is properly taught, believed and obeyed, the church will exhibit all the other marks of a true church as well.

Dr. Spencer: And the members of the church will be built up in their faith and enabled to live lives that please and glorify God. The Word of God is our only rule for faith and life. It isn't just central to corporate worship, it is central to all of Christian life. We need to be in a church that faithfully preaches the Word and puts it into practice. We also need, as we discussed in previous sessions, to be diligent in our personal devotions. Our private prayer and Bible study are also very important. All of these are means of grace and are to be diligently used by us so that we can lead overcoming, victorious Christian lives.

We need to remember God's purpose in saving us. In Ephesians 1:3-4 the apostle Paul wrote, "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight." It is only by carefully putting the Word of God into practice that we can be made more holy in this life.

Marc Roby: Of course, ultimately, we only truly become holy and blameless after this life is over.

Dr. Spencer: That is true, and something wonderful to look forward to. But we are called to work at it in this life. In our next session I want to start looking at how it is that we are to work out our salvation in this life.

Marc Roby: I look forward to that. But now let me remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org and we'll do our best to answer.

⁶ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Translated by Henry Beveridge, Hendrickson Publishers, 2008, (4.1.9), pg. 678