

May 20, 2012
Psalm 139:1-18 / Isaiah 43:1-7 / Ephesians 2:10
The Believer as God's Workmanship

Today we come to a verse that to some may seem like an "addendum" -- something added on to the previous section that's not quite as important as that which precedes it. And I say that because I know many people who have memorized vv. 8-9, but cannot tell you what v. 10 says -- even though IT is as crucially important to understanding God's saving work of grace as are vv. 8-9.

In fact, v. 10 is probably as pertinent, if not more pertinent, when it comes to the living out of our everyday lives after we come to Christ. Because it's the "filter" through which we can understand everything that happens to us in our lives as well as the place and importance of good works.

So if you've asked questions like: Do I need to do good works to be saved? Are they really necessary in light of a Gospel where salvation is said to be by grace alone, through faith alone and not of works? Do they even matter if God doesn't require them as a condition for salvation?... then listen closely, because we can discern the answer to every one from this one verse!

So let's look at verse 10, and see what it has to teach us about God's plan for us, His gracious work in us, and the good works we are called to do for him. And let's begin **FIRST** with the connection v. 10 has to the previous verses.

Last week we looked at vv. 8-9 as a "grand finale" of sorts. For there, Paul shared both the means of salvation (that is, the grace of God), and the condition of salvation (that is, faith), making sure to add that although faith is the condition for salvation there is no merit in it. That is, it is not something that earns us our salvation, for even it, as he points out, is, "not of ourselves," and "not of works" -
- but all part and parcel of the free gift we call "salvation."

And Paul even told us WHY salvation must be of grace from beginning to end: It's because part of God's purpose in saving us that way is to remove from the heart of every saved sinner -- any ability to boast or take credit for their salvation.

Rightly understood, grace will always nullify our ability to think, or feel, or boast, that it was something in us that somehow made us worthy to receive the gift of salvation. Paul tells us as much when he uses the two purpose clauses that we find in vv. 7 and 9.

In v. 7, after telling us all the wonderful things God did for us, he says that God did them: **"IN ORDER THAT in the coming ages he might show (or display) the incomparable riches of his grace in His kindness to us in Christ Jesus."** That is, God's purpose in saving us as He did was to display to everyone (both now and in the ages to come) the incomparable wealth of His grace -- and NOT any goodness, worthiness, merit or virtue in us.

And again, after telling us of the gracious way in which God saves us, Paul adds in v. 9 that He did it that way: **"SO THAT no one can boast."**

That is, God had a very specific purpose for doing it the way He did. And what was that purpose? To save us in such a way that it would crucify our sinful and self-exalting pride.

Not the pride of accomplishment we get when we do some task well. That's a healthy form of pride endorsed and actually encouraged by Paul in Gal. 6:4. No, the sinful pride of self-righteousness which causes us to think we're better or more deserving of God's love / favor / or blessings than others.

You see, salvation (if it is truly to be salvation) must include a deliverance and rescue or liberation from the caustic effects that human pride has on our relationship with God and others. Or to put it otherwise, a "salvation" which left boastful human pride alive and well / or even en-flamed it by making salvation a matter of doing specific good works -- would not be salvation!

It would simply be the same error put forth by the Pharisees -- which Jesus so adamantly opposed.

And LISTEN: The ultimate goal of God in grace is not to make us feel worthless or make us grovel in our own unworthiness. Its goal is to kill the sinful and destructive entity we call human pride, by removing that which feeds it and replacing it with the godly virtue of thankfulness, and a humble joy, and a heart full of gratitude toward God.

THAT is what grace is meant to do: Kill all self-exalting pride and arrogance and "holier than thou" self-righteousness, and replace it with a humble spirit and a grateful countenance and a heart that's absolutely astonished to discover the undeserved favor it has received -- thus making gratitude and not pride our new motivation for serving God.

If we correctly understand vv. 1-9, the effect it will have on us, is to produce within us a sense of humbled joy, amazement and godly gratitude. We won't have to try and MAKE those godly graces appear. They will simply begin appearing and growing within the soul of any person who understands and accepts what Paul has said about God's grace being given to the undeserving.

Are we to do Good works? Yes. Do they save us? No. Are they necessary and important? Yes (Because God wouldn't prepare in advance needless things for us to do!)

Then **SECONDLY** we can't move forward to a right understanding of this verse unless we remember that it's actually a continuation of that last phrase: "so that no one can boast." In fact, it's so intricately connected to the previous verse that it would be better if vv. 9 & 10 were separated by a comma, rather than a period, so people could see that connection better.

Because when we look closely at that phrase, "so that no one can boast," we see that it not only refers back to the fact that the initial reception of our salvation is a free gift of grace in every way (as Paul says in v. 8), but also refers forward to the fact that our ongoing sanctification is also a work of God's gracious activity in us.

Even our growth in godliness is not entirely of ourselves -- but an extension of God's gracious working in us and gift to us. Which means: As we grow in our faith and see what God is making us into, we still find ourselves having, "no reason to boast." For as Paul assures us here in v. 10, "we are GOD'S workmanship..."

And the word "workmanship" as F.F. Bruce points out, comes from the language of an artisan. The Greek word "poiema" can mean, "work of art" or

"masterpiece." In that sense, Paul is suggesting that we are like a piece of canvas God is painting / a lump of clay God is forming into a beautiful vase / a piece of rock He is chiseling into the form of a statue whose shape and configuration, pleases Him.

We are not the Artist, or Sculptor, or Potter. We're not even His assistant. We're the canvas, slab of stone or lump of clay. And no canvas, or piece of stone, or lump of clay, has any right to boast about the work of art the artist paints on them, the potter makes of them, or the sculptor forms out of them. They are, as Paul says, "**GOD'S workmanship.**" We are the product of His gracious, wise and sovereign labors, and not our own.

In fact, in light of vv. 1-10, we should always get accustomed to saying with the apostle Paul in I Cor. 15:10: "By the grace of God I am what I am." If there is any good thing in me (says the apostle Paul) or any virtuous characteristics in me, or anything praiseworthy in me, God either put it there ordained the providential life-circumstances and situations or cultural environment that helped it to be formed within me or produced through the fruit-bearing work of His Holy Spirit within me.

"Every good and perfect gift," says James 1:17, "comes from above, coming down from the Father of heavenly lights..." God alone is the source of any and all good. If it's there, it's because He, by His grace, put it there.

Meaning that whatever defects you see in me, they come from me! But whatever good you see in me (if it's there), it comes from Him as a result of His work in me! For as Paul makes clear, we are HIS workmanship. A "masterpiece" HE has commissioned the Holy Spirit to create.

It's a thought that flows naturally out of the context of verses 1-7: For since I was dead in sin; whatever there is in me that in any way reflects true life, it came from Him -- for He alone is the sole source of all life and the only source of goodness. Given what Paul has said in verses 1-7, it couldn't be there, and wouldn't be there, unless He put it there. Another reason for humble and grateful praise instead of anything that even comes close to boasting.

Which brings us to our **THIRD** point. Many people read vv. 8 and 9 and think they are the climax of everything he's spoken about in this passage. Because as Gospel-believing people we can often be led to think that once the way of salvation is explained, everything else is anti-climactic -- because the most important message in the text has already been stated.

But that's not true! Vv. 8-9, WERE, as I mentioned last week, a "grand finale" of sorts. But it wasn't the final finale! Like a fireworks display on July 4th, there is often a burst of multiple rockets sent into the air near the end. And you think it's the last surge or volley -- only to discover minutes into it they are sending up yet another intense volley of rockets -- offering the final, final finale with rockets of different, yet equally beautiful color.

"One might imagine," says John Stott, "that by now Paul has made his point and is ready to move on to another topic." Not so! Having addressed the issue of "salvation" he now goes on to explain God's purpose in it -- "we were created in Christ Jesus to do good works which God prepared in advance for us to do."

As Paul told us before in v. 1:4: ***"God chose us in Christ from the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless in Him."***

He did not save us because we DID good works. For salvation is ***"not of works lest any man should boast."*** But as Paul makes very clear in this verse, He DID indeed save us ***"to DO good works which He prepared in advance for us to do."*** They don't earn us salvation, but they do evidence salvation. They do not gain us favor, but they do play an important role.

In fact, while we were yet dead in our trespasses and sins and following the ways of the world -- years before we ever came to faith -- God had already prepared the good works we would do AFTER we came to faith!

While I was still focused on sin, and living in sin -- with little regard for Him and no regard for His glory -- God had already laid out for me the plan He had for my life -- and the good works I would do for Him after I came to faith.

Think of it: When you were merely a fetus in the womb of your mother / or an infant carried in the arms of your father -- oblivious to the fact that your Creator and Savior even existed -- God was there looking upon you / with an eye toward the plans He had for you / after you would come to Christ.

When you were a child, and just starting to learn about Him -- at home, in church, or from what you saw in creation -- He already knew everything about you (and I mean everything!) and had your entire future and everything you would do for Him laid out before Him like a map!

I think of Paul, when He's heading down the road to Damascus. Here he comes with the evil intent of arresting the Christians there and bringing them to trial and possibly having them put to death (as he had done elsewhere). And all of a sudden -- out of nowhere -- Jesus appears to him in a flash of blinding light that knocks him to the ground.

And the Jesus whose followers he's persecuting speaks to him and says to him: ***"I am Jesus whom you are persecuting... Now get up and go into the city and you will be told what you must do."*** He's a man who hates Jesus and all His followers. And what's he told? He's essentially told: ***"Go into the city and wait for your marching orders, because you're now going to serve Me instead of working against Me."*** He doesn't ask him, tells him!

So, shaken and reeling and unable to see, Paul goes into the city -- refusing to eat or drink anything for three days. And after that time was up, God sends a man named Ananias to give him this message: ***"The God of our fathers has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from His mouth. You will be His witness to all men of what you have seen and heard. And now, what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized, and wash your sins away, calling on His name."***

Was Paul chosen because of what he did? NO! He was chosen (seemingly against his will) to do what God had prepared in advance for him to do. God had a plan for Paul's life (which included being an apostle to the Gentiles throughout the Mediterranean) -- while he still hated Jesus, and long before he ever thought of being a Christ-follower.

James Stewart's comments here are very insightful, when he says that Paul saw himself as one: ***"...called to be an apostle, and set apart for the Gospel of God'... he rebuts the insinuations of [others] who charged him with grasping at an office to which he had no claim by declaring that he had actually been predestined to it by God. 'The God who set me apart from my very birth called me by His grace... He chose to reveal His Son to me, that I might preach Him to the Gentiles (Gal. 1:15).***

Here we are at the very nerve-centre of Paul's great thought of election. We shall never understand this doctrine as it appears in the epistles until we realize that it runs back to the personal experience of a man who, by the fact of his conversion, discovered himself to be elected by God, marked out by divine decree for service and ambassadorship... Predestination, in this [sense] is just another name for grace."

It's so true. How could anyone who came to Christ in the fashion that Paul did ever say God chose him because he was seeking Christ, or trying to have faith, or any such nonsense!

No! He was God's workmanship! God's masterpiece! God was forming and shaping and preparing him for his future service to the Gentiles -- from birth! He was born to Jewish parents -- but he grew up in Tarsus, a Greek city located in modern day Turkey (a city that was a centre of learning).

And there in that city he would learn the Greek language / and become familiar with the teachings of Greek philosophy / and Greek culture / and attain the rights a privileges given to all Roman citizens.

He would have been taught Hebrew and Aramaic by his parents / and fed spiritually on the OT Scriptures from birth. And his education under Gamaliel (the most respected of all Jewish Rabbi's of his day) would have made him somewhat of an OT expert and scholar. A man who knew the Scriptures inside and out, and yet also knew the language and the culture and the beliefs and the prominent religions of the people God wanted him to reach, because he had grown up among them.

You couldn't have found a person more suited to be a missionary to the Gentiles! Yet was all that mere coincidence? Did God merely see, as Paul was getting older, that he had the qualifications that would make him such a good choice for the job, and thus chose him as a result? Is that what happened?

Not according to Paul! He says God "set me apart from birth." And that, when combined with the fact that He says, "we are God's workmanship," helps us to see that from birth God was forming Paul into a "work of art" or a "masterpiece" -- a man perfectly qualified to do the task God was preparing him to carry out. So much so that when he went on those missionary journeys, he wasn't going to an unfamiliar or foreign land, he was (in a sense) going home to where he grew up!

To use the words of Prov. 16:9: "***In his heart a man plans his course, but the LORD determines His steps.***" / Or Prov. 21:1: "***His heart was in the hand of the LORD, and He directed it like a watercourse wherever He pleased.***"

Paul made his plans / but when the time was right / and his God-directed preparation was complete / God turned Paul's heart like a watercourse in the exact direction that He, and not Paul, wanted it to go!

LISTEN: As he was growing up Paul may have thought: "***My parents simply chose to move from Galilee to Tarsus for economic reasons. I learned Greek simply because, growing up in a Gentile city, I had to. I learned about Gentile culture and philosophy and religion because that's what's taught in the schools there.***"

To him it probably seemed like there was no over-arching plan behind it -- no greater purpose being worked out through all his life experiences. He may have had no awareness that each thing that happened in his life was preparation -- a stroke of the Master Painter's brush creating out of his life a work of art / and a vessel fit for God's use."

And if he thought that he would have been wrong. In fact, if it wasn't clear before his Damascus road experience, it sure was afterward! Because once he was told he had been "set apart" for this task "from birth," everything that had happened in his life till that point (and everything that would follow) had to

be seen in a whole new light -- a light that revealed that his life was a canvas / and he himself was a lump of clay or a chunk of stone.

Through everything he experienced God was creating a work of art, and a man who could only be called, **"God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God had prepared in advance for him to do."** That statement is autobiographical!

And the same can be said for all of us. Given what Paul says in today's text about our lives being a work of art that God is still in the process of painting, or forming or chiseling away at, what does that tell us about everything that happens in our lives?

It tells us that each life experience we have -- be they joyful, or painful, hardship or victory -- must be seen as a different color, and a different stroke of the painter's brush on the canvas of our lives. The brighter colors are the happier times. / The rich colors are the times of learning and growth. The **darker colors** can be the trials, hardships, mistakes or traumas we experienced in life. The **gold's** are the times we sailed smoothly along in the calm periods of life, the **reds** are the times we were wounded and bleeding, the **greens** signify times of stretching and maturing, the **blues** point to the times when our gaze was turned heavenward and the Spirit blew like fresh winds upon our soul, and the **browns** speak of the times when our minds were enlightened to grasp profound truths from God's Word -- truths that have become rooted in who we now are, making us into "oaks of righteousness -- the planting of the Lord, for the display of His splendor."

My friends - look back on your lives and know this -- God was there each step of the way. You must see that every experience you had, every situation you went through, every lesson learned, and smile you lifted heavenward in gratitude... every struggle you endured, every scar you received, every tear you shed, every burdened anguish of heart that felt would never end, was all part of His plan.

Each event was a stroke of the Master Painter's brush that added to the beauty of the work of art He is painting on the canvas of your life.

We may not like the colors the artist chooses to use on certain occasions. If it were up to us, we may have chosen otherwise, or picked a different color, or wanted a shorter stroke of the brush. But whether you like it or not now, it's all part of the piece of art He's making of your life -- because to paint it that way pleases Him.

And that's the key. The very best of painters paint what is beautiful in their estimation -- not ours. And they use many colors, not just one. For the most beautiful art has a broad spectrum of colors and not just one.

So it is with God: He doesn't make His works of art to please us, but to please Him. They are for His pleasure, and His glory, and to fulfill His plan -- not ours.

And when we are in glory with Him, then we will say every stroke of His brush, and color He chose, and blow of His chisel, and vessel He chose to form as He did -- was right and good and perfect.

"There's a beauty to it we could never see from our earth-bound vantage point. But now, I must confess, I would not want it any other way, especially since we now understand He made it that way because it pleased Him to do so."