

I have really good news for your spiritual life. Fanfare please! You can stop trying to measure up to win God's approval. If you think winning God's approval is what Christianity is all about, you've got it exactly backwards. This good news for your spiritual life is not too good to be true; it's just good, and it is true.

I'd like to illustrate it with a story. Many years ago, a young woman told me this story in a letter. It is a little long, but it is worth hearing. So, put your feet up, get lemonade and cookies, and be prepared to be amazed. Here's what she wrote.

"For as long as I can remember religion has been a regular part of my life. I was born into a family where you went to church each Sunday and holy day unless you were ill. The sermons I heard usually were recitals of what God expected of me – what kind of person I should be, if I wanted to go to heaven. Occasionally, I heard that God was a God of love, but more often it seemed, He was a God of wrath, ready to pounce on me for failure to keep the rules and regulations my church imposed.

"I was a dutiful child who always wanted to do the right things, so I tried to do all I should, but as I grew older I became more and more aware of the fact that as hard as I tried to do the right things, and as good as my intentions were, I fell far short of what I heard preached on Sunday mornings. I seemed to make the same mistakes over and over, and as soon as I got one problem under control, a new one popped up to take its place. As I grew to adulthood I could see that at least I was not worse than most of the people around me, but the doubt grew that perhaps my idea of 'good' was not as good as what God expected for me to earn eternal life.

"I continued my usual religious practices, but was sure something was missing. God seemed impersonal and very far off, and there was always the nagging doubt that perhaps all my church going and good intentions were not enough, and maybe I could still go to hell.

"Then a year ago, I heard a priest speak about God's love for me, and how he died for me, and about His desire for a personal relationship with me. As a direct result of hearing this priest, I started going to prayer meetings, and for the first time I learned that my relationship with my church was not what would determine my eternal destiny, but my relationship with Jesus Christ.

"When I started reading the Bible, I learned that Jesus had already paid the penalty for my sins. For the first time the burden of doubt lifted. God knew I could never consistently be good enough to earn heaven because I'm human, and so he sent his Son to die for me, and the only thing I have to do is to believe that He is God and accept Him as the Lord of my life.

"I still make mistakes and I always will, but I'm not afraid any more. I'm always ready to say 'I'm sorry, I'll try again, not because I'm afraid of you, but because I love you.' To me the Good News is that I know I'm going to heaven, because Jesus earned it for me and I have his promise that faith in him is all I need."

The Smile of God

Think of her story as a commentary on our text for today, Ephesians 2:8-10. Here's the text: **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. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in**

advance for us to do.

Listen again to the tipping point in that young woman's experience of God. "Then a year ago I heard a priest speak about God's love for me, and how he died for me, and about His desire for a personal relationship with me." Her focus changed. Once it was all about her "failure to keep the rules and regulations my church imposed" and how she "tried to do the right things" and how she "fell far short of what I heard preached" and her "nagging doubt that perhaps all my church going and good intentions were not enough." Her new focus became "God's love for me, and how he died for me, and about His desire for a personal relationship with me."

She experienced what Ephesians calls God's grace. Before the tipping point in her experience God frowned. After the tipping point in her experience God smiles. The shorthand definition of the biblical word **grace** is just that: God smiles. That is shorthand, and it is not enough. If that's all I give you, it's like giving you a candy bar instead of a cargo of gold. So in flashing colors let me paint a more complete picture of grace.

First, God's grace means His favor. It is an act of kindness. Second, it is an act of kindness toward people who are doomed without the kindness but don't deserve it. Third, it is an act of kindness that required great sacrifice on God's part. He is kind toward people who rebuff kindness, who may return kindness with cruelty, who may kill the one who shows kindness. Good Friday defines God's act of kindness. Jesus Christ is the grace of God in flesh and blood.

So God smiles on people who don't deserve it, and there was a time when lashes, punches, spit, and nails defaced the smile on His face. I say this to praise His glorious grace and to give voice to hundreds of us, who have made the turn from a frowning God to a smiling God. We made that turn, because the love of Christ made mincemeat out of our moral arrogance, religious pride, and secular blindness.

The next time someone talks about the grace of God, you will know it means the kindness of God, which He extends to people who don't give a rip, and for whom He went out on a limb, had the limb sawed off, but held on to them and fetched them from the pig sties of a far country and brought them home to eternal halls in His Father's House. That is grace.

Faith

You can stop trying to measure up to win God's approval. We have made the turn from a frowning God to a God who smiles. There is a name for the turn we made: **faith**. **For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith**. This is a good time to stop again on our journey through Ephesians and pay attention to something we usually hurry past. We hear the word *faith* and use it many times, and we treat it like Mr. Cellophane in the musical *Chicago*. Did you ever hear that song?

I tell ya
Cellophane
Mister Cellophane
Shoulda been my name
Mister Cellophane
'Cause you can look right through me

Walk right by me
And never know I'm there. (<http://www.lyricsondemand.com/>, accessed
6-10-13)

We can do better than that with faith. What does it mean to believe in Jesus Christ? There are three ingredients in biblical faith: conviction, loyalty, and time. First, believing in Jesus Christ is the conviction that the message about Christ is true. The Christian message says that Christ died for our sins, rose from the dead, and will return to earth some day to put things right. Jesus is the most powerful way God says to enemies like us, "I love you, and I want you back home as my children." There is no faith in the Christian sense of the word, if you refuse that message or reject that message as false.

Second, believing in Jesus Christ is being loyal to Jesus Christ. There is still no faith in the Christian sense of the word, if you are not loyal to Christ. Loyalty to Christ starts in your soul, out of sight, but it always goes public: when you get baptized, when you take the vows of Christian marriage, and when you worship faithfully with a congregation of believers in Jesus. Faith goes public in some people when they become pastors, missionaries, or martyrs. It goes public when you are tempted to step away from Christ, but you remain loyal to Him; that gives your loyalty a taste of suffering for Christ.

There is a third ingredient in faith. It is the one we forget. It is time. Believing in Jesus Christ endures across time. Conviction endures across time. Loyalty to Christ endures across time. Listen to this cautionary passage from the Bible: **We must pay more careful attention . . . to the message we have heard, so that we do not drift away . . . how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation?** (Hebrews 2:1, 3a)

The words **drift away** shine a bright light on the besetting temptation of American Christians. We are free to do anything we can get away with. This constant beckoning to let yourself go, get a life, have a little fun, and live it up has produced an American church that suffers from almost terminal distraction. How did we get here? We just drifted away. Little by little, people stopped praying; they were too tired. They stopped worshipping together; they were too busy. They stopped reading Scripture; it was too mundane. Faith in Jesus in the biblical sense endures; it doesn't drift away. It sees the drift and resists the drift away from God toward the abyss.

Listen to another cautionary passage from the Bible: **God has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation – if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel.** (Colossians 1:22-23a)

The apostle knew it was all too possible for people not to continue in faith. He knew it was all too possible for people to be moved away from the hope held out in the gospel. Faith in Jesus in the biblical sense endures; it continues; it is not moved.

There is a power that keeps faith loyal and enduring, you know. It is love. Love endures; love continues; love is not moved; love is loyal, it **always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.** (1 Corinthians 13:7) But we love God like that, because we believe that God first loved us like that. His grace is not theory. It is the glad thrust of beatitude into the bilge of human life. You can stop trying to measure up to win God's approval. We can't win His approval. He is not offering approval. He is offering forgiveness, a place in His chosen

people in covenant with Him, and an enduring hope.

God's Workmanship

What results when the grace of God, pushing relentlessly down into human life, meets the faith of Man, reaching reluctantly up to take hold of Christ? Two words in verse 10 tell us: the outcome is **God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus**. Paul has talked about God's workmanship previously in Ephesians, but not by that name. He has called it: **the saints, the faithful, the chosen, his sons, God's possession, us who believe, the church, the body of Christ, the fullness of Christ, us alive with Christ**, and now **God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus**. And there is more to come.

Ephesians showcases God's workmanship. It's as if Paul takes us on a tour of the construction site and says, "This is God's masterpiece. Look at it from this angle. Now, look at it from this angle and this angle and that angle. Can you start to see the shape of what God had in mind when He made the decision to create a community on earth He could call His people? Can you see what the union of grace and faith is bringing forth in the world?"

Paul went on to say in verse 10 that we are **created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do**. But He said nothing here about what those good works are. Can you think of any passage thus far in Ephesians where Paul tells the Ephesians to do their moral duty? It's not there. He said a lot about Christian behavior in Ephesians 4-6, but not in Ephesians 1-3. Why not?

Here's why. Ephesians 1-3 is a magnificent summary of **God's workmanship**. The good works God has in mind for us make sense, only when we know what God is building. You don't know why you should be patient and gentle until you know God's purpose for patience and gentleness. You don't know why you should be sexually obedient until you know how that obedience fits into God's workmanship. You don't know why you should do good work for a bad boss, until your work in this world fits into God's workmanship in this world. We have much to look forward to.

Take Aways

So, could we take stock for a minute? Do you believe that Christ died for our sins, rose from the dead, and will return to earth some day to put things right? Do you believe that was the most powerful way God says to us, "I love you, and I want you back home as my children?" If you don't believe that is true, would you change your mind and believe it? You can signal your change of mind by saying to Christ, "I heard what the man said today, and I say Yes to you."

Second, are you loyal to Christ? Have you gone public with your faith by being baptized? Are you determined with God's help to resist the drift away from prayer, scripture, and public worship that afflicts American Christians?

Third, is your faith enduring? Faith endures through the seasons of life. Christ looks one way when you are 10; He looks different when you get your first job and have your first child and become empty nesters and face cancer and unemployment and children who disappoint you

and death. He doesn't change, but He looks different, because we discover at each stage how much bigger Christ is than we ever imagined.

If the Spirit has moved in your heart this morning, I want you to respond in one of three ways. 1. "I heard what the man said today, and I say Yes to you." 2. I will resist the drift away from Christ in our nation. 3. I will bring my faith in Christ up to date. If you make any of those responses to Christ, raise your hand and put it down. I'll pray for you.