



**North Shore
Congregational
Church**
FOX POINT, WI

From the Pulpit...

“Responding”

Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching

Ephesians 2: 1-10; Luke 18: 18-28

January 16, 2022

Those of you who worshipped with us, last Sunday, may recall that I shared a few comments, at our prayer time, about Tom and Gisela Chelimsky, who are in the process of moving to Virginia. In fact, as I drove into the office on Thursday morning (my typical day for putting words to the page for Sunday), I saw the moving truck parked in their drive. Anyway, in some ways, this note is an ode to Tom and the heart and spirit that he shared with the church – and it stems from a dialog that he and I shared after worship last week.

You see, one of the things I will most miss about Tom, and his presence in our church, is that Tom had this constant drive to just continue to push a little bit further. He would push our prayer life to be a little deeper. He would push our fellowship to be that slight bit richer. And, yes, he would push on our sermons – always wanting us to go that next step. Never critically, persistently filled with grace and the hope of the Spirit’s ever-growing presence in our church, but always pushing that little bit further in our life as a community of faith.

Now, certainly, there were times that Tom’s ‘next step’ for a sermon was simply not the point we were trying to make that week, which is often why we didn’t go there. But, sometimes, he would share insights, connections, or comments to which I would not have an immediate response, and on which I would need to reflect in the days that followed. And, sure enough, last week, as Tom said his goodbyes, we had one of those exchanges.

If you were here last week, you may recall that I spent a few moments reviewing my Christmas Eve message regarding the three things we do with the gifts we receive, and how those same possibilities connect to what we will do with the gift that we have received in the Christ-child. Will we pitch it out as that which doesn’t really matter? Will we shove it on a shelf so it gathers dust with all of the other sentimental collectibles that never see the light of day? Or, will we embrace the blessing of the gift and incorporate it into the living of our daily lives? That was the heart of our Christmas Eve message, and a sidebar to what we talked about last Sunday. As Tom approached me after worship, however, he said, ‘You know I have to say something!’ ‘I liked the analogy of your three things we do with gifts,’ Tom said, ‘but I think there’s a fourth group that I would add to them. The fourth group are those who receive the gift and think they have to pay it back.’

We chatted, for five minutes or so, on that comment, and Tom's fundamental notion was that our salvation... our holiness... our righteousness in God... is a pure gift, but that some struggle with that notion. Some, he suggested, don't see it as a gift, but as an obligation – something they need to earn and/or something for which they owe some sort of moralistic remuneration. He was echoing that deep and foundational conviction of grace – that unmerited gift that we receive in the birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. So, as we chatted, there was a part of me that kind of tacitly agreed with what he was saying. There was second part of me, honestly, that was saying, 'Yeah, but that's not really a fourth group, that's really something else altogether and doesn't fit.' But, then there was another part of me that was feeling the tension of my simultaneous agreement and objection to the point he was making – and that tension continued to stir in my heart in the days that followed.

In short, I can say that I wholeheartedly agree with the point that Tom was trying to make. At the same time, however, I think the Biblical message is a lot murkier than that, and we have to own some of the nuance that begins to come into play in this question of what we 'owe' for this gift we have received. And, that's why I selected these two passages that we shared this morning. If we really look at these two passages, you can quickly see that we begin to unveil two distinct, if not diametrically opposed, arguments on this very question.

That passage from Ephesians is one that has come up a couple of times in the past year or so, but it is one of the clearest and most unequivocal statements about the nature of God's grace that we find in Scripture. *"8 For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— 9 not the result of works, so that no one may boast."* (Ephesians 2, selected verses) You really can't get more clear than that! Said another way, 'You had nothing to do with this.' This passage, in every way, affirms Tom's point – the gift of our salvation... of our holiness... of our righteousness in God... is exactly that – a gift! We didn't earn it, we don't have to pay for it, there is no moralistic remuneration expected for it. There are no strings attached. This passage could not be any clearer on that point.

Then, of course, we turn to Luke and that heartburn-inducing passage about how hard it is for some to go to heaven. In this passage we have Jesus speaking to a crowd, when a wealthy man approaches him with a question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Take careful note of the question, here. "What must I **do** to inherit eternal life?" In the context of what we just read in Ephesians, you'd think the answer would be 'nothing.' You'd expect Jesus to turn back and say, 'You don't **do** anything! You'd expect Jesus to respond by saying, 'Salvation is a gift from God, you just receive it.' But, that's not what we get. It starts with the commandments, 'Do all of those things you were commanded to do.' And, then it keeps going, 'Sell everything have, give it away, and then come and follow me.' Think about that, this man asks Jesus what he has to **do** in order to gain eternal life, and Jesus responds with a number of things that he has to **do**...that he has to follow all of the commandments, sell everything he has, and follow Jesus. Said another way, this man asks Jesus what it takes to earn salvation and Jesus responds with a whole list of things it takes to earn salvation.

In these passages we have two stories that seem to reflect completely different, and in many ways mutually exclusive, theological perspectives on salvation. On the one hand, we have Ephesians suggesting that grace... is grace... is grace... is grace. Then, on the other, we have

Jesus offering this man a moral checklist of what he has to **do** in order to **earn** salvation. I think this issue of grace vs. works is a murkier question, biblically, than we sometimes acknowledge.

There's a key, however, that emerges as something of an afterthought in that passage from Luke, but I think it is one that is essential to our understanding of the biblical perspective on this question as a whole. After this whole exchange between Jesus and that wealthy man – after the man walks away dejected and Jesus makes that exclamation about how hard it is for a rich person to go to heaven – the people are scared. 'If it's that hard, then how are any of us going to be saved?' They ask. And it's to that that we see Jesus reply, "What is impossible for mortals is possible for God."

This is where Jesus brings these two seemingly opposing perspectives together. While Ephesians keeps proclaiming that grace... is grace... is grace... is grace... Jesus brings this jarring dialog in Luke around to that same point by saying, 'In the end, you can't do it, but God can. And, that's why grace... is grace... is grace... is grace.' In these words that seem almost like an afterthought to the story, Jesus makes clear, once again, that Ephesians is right. We don't earn this. We don't gain this through our merit. It is not on us to obtain this gift through our character and behavior. It is a gift. As murky as the question can become, I do think that the biblical narrative is clear on that.

Where I think it gets a bit more convoluted, however – and where I continued to find some tension with Tom's analogy of those who feel obligation upon receiving a gift – is that I think the 'no strings attached' notion is not perhaps quite as clearly delineated in this grace-filled gift that we receive in Jesus. I think you can make a fairly strong argument that the biblical message is that grace is grace. It is a gift. We don't earn it. We don't gain it through our merit. It is not on us to obtain it through our character and behavior. Grace is grace. We can't read this story of Luke, however, nor many of the other similar tales in which the grace and mercy of Jesus is attached to a call to follow him – without acknowledging that the question of what 'strings' are attached to the gift is a slightly more complicated consideration.

That's the thing I've been toying with in my mind all week. And, in the end, the best way I've come to frame it – particularly in the context of the gift giving and receiving analogies that I've used in recent messages – is (as simplistic as it may seem), the thank you notes that so often follow the gift. Now, if I'm 100% honest, I have to admit that I'm horrible about sending thank you notes. It's not that my parents didn't raise me right or anything like that – I'm just bad about doing them. They always fall down the list of priorities. The problem with that, however, is that those notes are the way that I acknowledge the blessing of the gift that I've received. It's not that the gift comes with a contingency that I must write a note. It's not that the gift will be revoked if a note isn't sent. And, while there are exceptions to the rule, in most cases it's not going to keep a gift from coming again next year if my note never goes out this year. It is, however, the way that the giver knows it's appreciated. It's how the person sharing that gift knows that it matters to me. It's how they know that I know how blessed I was to receive their gift.

It may sound simplistic, but the more I've thought about it this week, the more I think that's about as clear as we can make the biblical message about this whole murky grace vs. works thing in our faith. Grace is grace – period. We don't earn it. We don't gain it through our merit. It is

not on us to obtain it through our character and behavior. God's presence with us today, and our presence with God in life everlasting, is a gift – period! The question is one of our response. I am convinced that we don't receive this gift with a contingency. I am convinced that the gift will not somehow be revoked if we don't respond accordingly. And, yes, I am convinced that this great God of love is going to keep on giving and giving regardless of what we've done with it, for it, or about it. None of that, however, erases the fundamental fact that how we respond is how we show our gratitude for the magnificence we've received. None of that erases the fact that how we respond is how display what this thing we call faith means to us. None of that changes the fact that how we live in light of the gift we've been given is how we show to God, and to the world, that we truly know how blessed we are to have received this incomparable gift that we've been given.

Grace is grace – period. We don't earn it. We don't gain it through our merit. It is not on us to obtain it through our character and behavior. The question is never, ever, what we need to do in order to earn eternal life. The question is forever and always what we will do because that life is already ours.