

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, August 12, 2012**

**PERFORMANCE-DRIVEN OR GRACE-DRIVEN?**

**Romans 3:21-31**

**LAST SUNDAY**

Last Sunday, I told you about my sixth grade teacher, Mr. Garmong. I told you about his performance-based classroom seating chart in which each student's desk assignment was determined by his/her grades. I told you how Mr. Garmong's policy, whether intentional on his part or not, contributed to my inclination to lead a performance-driven life – which, I belatedly came to understand, is really the antithesis of the gospel. A life based on performance or personal achievement, a life spent in pursuit of recognition or reward for the good things one has done, is the antithesis or opposite of the gospel. The gospel proclaimed by Jesus and the apostles, and here in Romans by Paul, the gospel that permeates the New Testament from beginning to end – the good news of salvation that comes by grace through faith in Jesus Christ and Him alone – shows the folly, frustration, and futility of a performance-driven life.

**SRA**

I came across something written by another pastor recently that reminded me of another experience in grade school that fueled my inner drive to try to outperform all my friends and classmates. This one didn't involve Mr. Garmong, though. Any of you remember a reading program called SRA from your school days? (I'm not sure what the letters stood for, but I'm guessing the R is for Reading and the A might be for Achievement.) I was introduced to SRA in fourth or fifth grade, I'm not sure which. It worked something like this: There was a box of color-coded cards in our classroom, each color representing a different level of reading acumen. If you were a student in my class, you would go to the box, take a card with the color of your current level of achievement, go back to your desk, read what was on the card, and then answer a series of questions about what you just read. If you scored high enough with your answers, you would move up to the next color. As you moved up the ladder of achievement, you would go from the basic colors, such as red, yellow, blue, and green, to more exotic colors. It became a competition to see who could reach the highest level the fastest. If there was time left over in class after finishing the assignment given by the teacher (in my case, either Mrs. Edwards or Miss Potter), you could go over to the SRA box and get a jump on those who were still doing their math or spelling or whatever.

The purpose behind SRA was to help us to improve our reading skills and comprehension. I'm sure it did what it was intended to do. But, for me and some of my friends, it wasn't as much about the reading as it was about showing that we were better and faster readers than the rest of the class. For me, it was all about proving my worth by my performance. (My memories of SRA were jogged by Kevin Miller's post, *The Journey to Experiencing Amazing Grace*, at [www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations](http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations), posted 7/26/2010.)

## **NOT PERFORMANCE BUT GRACE**

The gospel, though, is not about being better or smarter or faster or more spiritual than others, or being able to pass the entrance test to get into heaven on the basis of your performance. The gospel is a message of grace from beginning to end. It is a message of the unmerited favor or blessing of God. We are saved, as Paul writes in Titus 3:5, “not because of righteous things we [have] done,” not on the basis of any acts of mercy performed or spiritual disciplines practiced, not because of our devotion to daily prayer and Bible study, not because of anything we have done or could ever do to earn or deserve it. It is by grace. It is all by grace and only by grace, which comes free of charge to people who don’t deserve it and never will. People like me. And you. You will never be saved by performing a lifetime of good deeds. You may receive a lot of accolades or awards or recognition for your accomplishments and achievements in this life. Some people do. Some people become famous because of their acts of charity, or generosity, or sacrifice. But their good deeds will never be enough to earn a place in heaven. Nor will ours. Not even if you’re Mother Teresa. Never, ever forget this.

## **MORE TO THE GOSPEL**

Salvation is by grace alone. But the gospel does not end there. There is more to the gospel than this. There is more to being a fully-devoted follower of Christ. There is more to living your life as a deeply-loved, adopted child of God and a member of His family.

We are *not* saved by grace, then left on our own to navigate our way through life. We are *not* saved by grace, then expected by God to perform the deeds and duties of a life that is pleasing to God in our own strength and wisdom. That is *not* how it works. We *are* saved by grace. That is for sure. But we *live by grace*, too. Your value or worth in God’s sight is not contingent upon your performance of good deeds, before or after you receive the gift of salvation. It is not determined by how many years you serve in some ministry or how long you have been a member of the church. It is not contingent upon your most earnest efforts to show God’s love or to do God’s will in your life.

## **A PLACE FOR GOOD WORKS?**

Are these things important? Of course they are. Is there a place for them in my life as a Christian? Absolutely. If we are saved by grace, do good deeds matter? Paul gives the answer in Ephesians 2:10. You probably know what he says in Ephesians 2:8-9:

It is by grace you have been saved, through faith –  
and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God –  
(meaning that faith itself is a gift, lest any of us try to take credit for it)  
not by works, so that no one can boast.

Since salvation is a gift to be received by faith and not a reward to be earned by our works, there is no room for anyone to boast – which is the same thing Paul says again in verses 27

and 28 of Romans 3. But still there is a place for good works in the life of a Christian. An important place. Here is Ephesians 2:10:

For we are God's workmanship  
(God's *poema*, His masterpiece of grace),  
created in Christ Jesus to do good works,  
which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Good works do not have a merely peripheral place in God's plan for our lives. Not a peripheral place, but a central place. We were "created in Christ Jesus" – that is, we were born again by the Spirit of God, we were declared righteous in God's sight, we were justified freely by His grace through the redemption that Jesus accomplished for us in His atoning death on the cross (Romans 3:24-25). For what purpose? "To do good works" (Ephesians 2:10) that serve God's purposes and bring glory to His name.

So then, we do good works not to prove our worth or value to God, but because we are already recipients of God's lavish love and amazing grace – love and grace totally undeserved. We do good works in response to this immeasurable gift of God's grace and love to us. We do good works because we are grateful for all that God has done for us. We are not on our own to do good works in our own wisdom and power. As sinners saved by grace, we do good works through the grace and power of the Holy Spirit who is at work in and through us.

### **THE VERDICT**

As we noted last Sunday, Tim Keller has pointed out that, unlike so much of life in this world, the verdict that ultimately matters – God's verdict – is not determined by our performance. With God, it is not the performance that leads to the verdict. The verdict comes first. God's verdict, in which we are justified or declared righteous in His sight on the basis of the righteousness of His Son – this verdict, which brings acceptance by God, in addition to forgiveness and freedom from the enslaving power of our sin and guilt, comes *before* our performance. In fact, the verdict of God in His grace comes *in spite of* our performance. *In spite of* our unworthiness. *In spite of* the indisputable evidence that we have all sinned – we have all messed up and missed the mark of perfect holiness – and fall short of the glory of God (as Paul says so succinctly in Romans 3:23).

### **MISSING THE MARK**

Know what it means to miss the mark and fall short of the standard? A school bus driver in Houston named Lillie Baltrip was nominated by the school district for a safe driving award. Unfortunately, as she drove a busload of other bus drivers to the awards ceremony where safe drivers were to be honored, Lillie turned a corner too sharply and flipped the bus over, sending herself and 16 of her fellow bus drivers to the hospital for treatment. Fortunately, no one was seriously hurt. Do you think Lillie received that safe driving award? Uh... No. So much for her spotless driving record. It only takes one blemish to miss the mark. And no one has a spotless record of faithfulness and obedience to God. No one.

Maybe you heard about this: Not many years ago, a professional knife thrower “nicked” the head of his female assistant on a live television show in England. A spokeswoman for the TV show said: ‘You really don’t expect that kind of thing from a world record-holder.’ The knife-thrower was attempting to repeat the pace of his world record-setting effort of 120 knives thrown in two minutes. He told a reporter: “In 11 years of performing, I’ve only hit my assistant on five occasions.” Only five, you say? Really? That’s five times too many, if you ask me. He may have been the world record-holder, but he, too, missed the mark. At least five times.

Then, maybe you can relate to this from the world of baseball, even if you’re not a big fan. It happened in a game between the San Francisco Giants and the Atlanta Braves during the 1986 season. I don’t know the date this took place, but Pastor David probably does, because he is such a big fan of the Atlanta Braves, and he knows more about baseball than anyone I know – except possibly for Maryanne ☺. On this particular day, Bob Brenly was playing third base for the Giants. In the fourth inning, he made an error on a routine ground ball. A few batters later, he booted another grounder. Then, after scrambling to get to the ball, he threw wildly past home plate trying to throw out the runner there. Two errors on the same play. A few minutes later, he muffed yet another play to become the first major league player in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to be charged with four errors in one inning. I don’t know, but Pastor David can probably tell you, if Brenly’s record has ever been duplicated or broken.

Even if you’re not into baseball, you can probably imagine how Bob Brenly felt walking off the field at the end of that inning. Perhaps, more than anything, he felt relieved that the inning was finally over. But the game wasn’t over. When it was his turn to bat in the fifth inning, Brenly hit a home run. In the seventh inning, he hit a bases-loaded single, driving in two runs to tie the game. Then he came up to bat with two outs in the bottom of the ninth inning, the game still tied, and he hit a massive home run to win the game for the Giants. His score card for the day included three hits in five at-bats, two home runs, four errors, four runs allowed, and four runs driven in, including the game-winner.

Bob Brenly’s performance that day was a mixture of hits and errors. Good and bad. Hero and goat. Outstanding and awful. Not unlike the way we perform in the course of daily life, for all of our life is a mixture of hits and errors. Which is why we need grace. All of us. And why we are lost without it. We all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23).

But God’s verdict of grace – this verdict of justification in God’s sight by His grace – is applied to everyone who believes the gospel, to any and all who receive it by a living, trusting faith in Jesus Christ, who took the punishment for our sin upon Himself. It is an act of grace, a revolutionary act of grace that is the polar opposite of the way it usually works in just about every sphere of life in this world, where the performance leads to the verdict. The reason I’m spending so much time on this is because it is so counter to the way the world works, and I fear that there are millions of professing Christians here in America and around the world living performance-driven lives, as I did, because they think God must be disappointed in them, or because they think they have to make themselves acceptable to God. Maybe I’m talking about some of you today.

## **ONLY IN THE GOSPEL**

Keller makes the point that Christianity is the only belief system or religion in which you get the verdict before the performance. It is only in the gospel. You don't find this anywhere else, though the Hebrew Scriptures that make up the Old Testament are saturated with grace and anticipate the actual fulfillment of God's plan of salvation in Christ. But Judaism tends to emphasize law more than grace. Keller says you won't find it anywhere else. An atheist, for example, might say that his/her self-esteem or self-worth comes from being a good person. Because he/she is a good person and seeks to do good, the atheist hopes to receive a verdict confirming his/her goodness. So, for the atheist, performance leads to the verdict. The same is true in Buddhism. It is also true in Islam, where one's eternal destiny or reward is determined by the measure of one's submission to the will of Allah.

But in the kingdom of God that Jesus inaugurated, it is not this way. It is not this way in the gospel. In the gospel, the verdict comes before the performance. The verdict is not a reward or punishment based on our performance. It is a gift of grace offered to sinners like you and me who are helpless to do anything to earn it. It is not about what we must do, but about what God has done, and how we can get in on it. It is given, not earned. We cannot achieve it, we can only receive it. We receive it by faith, which, as John Stott has written, "is the eye that looks to (God), the hand that receives His free gift, [and] the mouth that drinks the living water." It is by faith that we receive the gift of salvation that God offers in His grace.

## **WHAT KIND OF LIFE?**

So, let me ask you: What kind of life are you living? Are you living a performance-driven life where everything depends on whether you are good enough or generous enough or spiritual enough? Are you living a performance-based life where you are feverishly trying to prove something to yourself, to your parents, to your spouse, to your friends, to your colleagues, to your boss, or even to God? Or are you living a grace-driven, grace-filled, grace-saturated life through faith in Jesus Christ the Son of God who loved (and loves) you and gave Himself for you?

What kind of life are you living? What kind of life do you want to live? Trying harder to live a grace-driven life is not the answer. Living a grace-driven or grace-filled life involves surrender. Daily surrender. Glad surrender to the sovereign, loving, gracious rule of God in your life. It is not a matter of trying harder or doing more to show God that you are serious in your devotion to Him. It is a matter of joyful surrender. It is a matter of trust in the Lord to do in you and through you what you cannot do yourself. It is a matter of thankfulness to the Lord for the grace He gives at every moment. It is a matter of allowing God to work out His purposes in you through the grace and power of the Holy Spirit.

What kind of life do you want to live? I've had enough of the performance-driven life. I want to live a grace-driven life. May it be so in my life and in yours, to the glory and praise of God. Amen.