

Eph. 2:8-10 - The Beauty of the Proper Emphasis

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[0 : 00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

Amen is right. Thank you, guys. That's a huge ministry to our hearts to have you prepare us like that. What a glorious song. What a glorious thing to look forward to as well.

So, we come to the portion of our service where you're used to seeing the bulletin say, Preaching of the Word. We call it a sermon. I thought it might be worth just a few seconds this morning stopping to ask the question, why? Why do we always do this besides that Will likes to talk a lot? So, we give him a few minutes and we humor him. Why always a sermon? Why is that part of a worship service? We talk about our giving of tithes and offerings as a part of worship. Why is listening to God's Word a part of worship? First and foremost, that's why we do it because the King of Glory that they just sang about is worthy. If He is that King of Glory, if He's that glorious and that great, then what He has to say to us is much more important than what we might think for ourselves. So, we set aside time and say, God, we're coming to Your Word. What You would have to speak to us is of vital importance. It's foundational for our lives because You're the King. So, we worship You by listening to what You have to say. And also because our hearts and our lives need to be evaluated, need to be shaped. We do this in worship because we come saying, I don't have it all figured out.

I need to be challenged. I need to have my thoughts and my heart corrected. So, first, because He deserves it. And secondly, because we need it. That's why we open God's Word together. Turn back this morning to Ephesians 2. We'll start at verse 8.

[2 : 07] Hear God's holy Word. Pray with me.

Father, that's true that we're here before Your Word because You're the one that we trust. Only these words are ones we can count on that we know are true, that we know will direct us rightly. We know Your Spirit would use them to teach us, to instruct us. And Father, we do this as a part of our worship. We love You. We're so grateful for how You have loved us. We want to hear from You. Would you speak? Would you speak clearly? In spite of the words of this preacher, would You speak to our hearts?

We ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Many of you know that I was an English major in college. So, among other things, that means that I'm a word guy.

I love words. I used to be a journalist. All of that usually makes me described as a grammar nerd. That is what people prefer to call English majors, like me.

[3 : 40] But one of the things that's very important to me because of that background is emphasis. Where is the emphasis put in words? If you don't keep the emphasis in the proper order, you can completely change what you're talking about. Let me give you a couple examples of this.

You have the word produce, where if you say it that way, you're laboring and working hard to make something. Or you have produce, if you emphasize the first syllable. You have a lot of fruit, which is very different. You have incense. You might even smell the incense wafting up to your nose. Or you can incense someone and make them very angry without changing a letter, just by emphasis. You have a very content person who's calm and happy. Or you could be talking about the content, if you emphasize the first syllable. What's making up the book or the story? All of this seems not to matter much at this point. When you string some words together, you can really, really change things, though. This is my favorite. You have a wonderful Thanksgiving dinner. Let's eat, grandma. Or let's eat, grandma.

And so, all of that and grandma's life hanging in the balance, all on your matter of emphasis. That first comma here on let's eat, grandma, is known as the comma that saved grandma.

It is there for people who love grammar to say, see how important commas are? Can save your life. Emphasis is important. When you reverse the emphasis, it's not just a minor matter of emphasis. You actually change the thing you're talking about altogether. That's what we see in this passage this morning when we think about God's works and our works. In biblical Christianity, the emphasis, the focus, the priority is on God's works. They always come first rather than our works.

[5 : 48] And in fact, when we reverse the order of emphasis between the two, between our works and God's, we lose biblical Christianity altogether. It's that serious. It's that significant a change. In Christianity, the emphasis is on what God has done for you, not on what you do for God. The story is first and foremost about His glory, right? Not ours. So whenever our actions become more important, get more in the spotlight than God's, we miss Christianity. It's not a matter of I say tomato, you say tomato, but it's all the same thing. It's a matter of emphasis that actually changes what we're speaking of altogether. Now, those are big words to say that a matter of emphasis could change Christianity altogether and we could lose it. Let me show you what I mean in the text this morning.

Remember what Chad preached last week in this wonderful passage. It's so beautiful all the way back to verse 1 of chapter 2. It's our story of being dead and then verse 4, but God, but God, verse 5, made us alive. It's about what He has done. We were dead, but God made us alive.

By grace, you have been saved. End of verse 5. It's multiple times in this passage. Your salvation is based on grace, on what God has done by grace alone. And it's not just one time at the beginning of your salvation, the first time you're made right with God. It's salvation from beginning to end, focusing on what He has done. Look, verse 6, all the way to glorification where He's raised us up with Him, seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus. Because we're connected to Christ, because of our union with Christ, salvation from beginning to end is about what God has done, connecting us to Him. And then He makes clear what's the purpose of all of our salvation. Is it so that we'll be safe? Is that the only goal to rescue us? It certainly does that, but the goal, what's He doing? Verse 7, so that He might show the immeasurable riches of His grace and kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. His purpose wasn't even so much about us. The goal of it, yes, we would be saved for the purpose of His grace and His kindness being magnified. It's about how great He is. It's about

Him. Then we get to the verses we're looking at today, and it just continues. By grace, you've been saved, not your own doing, the gift of God, not a result of works. So don't boast. Do you hear Him being redundant there? Not what you've done, what God did, not what you've done. He's redundant for emphasis.

Don't boast because it's not about you. It's all about Him. He couldn't be any clearer where the focus is, where the emphasis is in this story. And He keeps going. This passage is beautiful. It's like preaching all the solas of the Reformation at once. A hearing from Scripture alone that salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, with the goal being the glory of God alone.

[9 : 12] Oh, it's great. This is wonderful. We should stop and just have a review, and that would be good enough for today. It's good news, right? Salvation by grace alone. He's doing it. It's His gift to you.

It's good news for all of us. Salvation from beginning to end, it's especially good if you've never heard it before. Hear it again for the first time, Southwood. But God, you were dead, but God made you alive. You were without hope apart from Him. Nothing you could do that was part of the story Jonathan Edwards said, the meditation we used this morning, we brought to the table nothing for our salvation except our sin that made it necessary. That was our contribution. We made it necessary for us to be saved, but God's the one who accomplished our salvation. And then we get to verse 10.

I want to tell you how I've always read verse 10 since I was a young boy. I read it to be saying, yes, isn't that wonderful? But don't forget, what you do matters too. Your behavior is important. God cares about your works too. And it does say that. We're going to talk about that in a minute, but I want to tell you I'm convinced that's not primarily what it says. It's not mostly why that verse is there. The primary function of verse 10 is to strengthen and further explain the point Paul is making, not to offer a contrasting or balancing statement in this passage. It's actually further explaining verse 9 why we shouldn't boast. Why is it that no one may boast? It's for. It's because God's workmanship we are. That's actually the emphasis in the Greek text that we lose in English.

It's emphasizing the primacy or priority of God's work. Again, it would read, if we translated italics in our English Bibles, it would say for His workmanship we are. So don't boast even when your works come up. We're works come up. We're His workmanship. He's the one working. Then He says we're created in Christ Jesus. Who does the work in creating? Who's the one active there? That's God, right?

[11 : 44] He takes a dead person and makes him alive, makes him into a new creation in Christ Jesus, uniting us to Christ, making us new again. It's His work again getting the emphasis. So don't boast even when your works are so good. They feel so new and so different, but don't boast. He's the one who's done that.

And then the final nail Paul drives home is that the works we do are works that God prepared beforehand. He's the one who planned it. Do you feel like you've done these wonderful things? God planned those for you. He had it in mind all along. It was His idea. He designed them. He gets the glory, not us. So don't boast even on your best day is what Paul's saying. Do you see how that understanding of verse 10 fits with the rest of the passage? It's still about God's glory, about His incredible grace to come to us.

And it would have to be since the salvation being described, remember, is from beginning to end about what God has done for dead people. So we say not to us, not to us, O Lord, but to Your name be glory.

That's biblical Christianity from beginning to end of this book. Every single page. Not about our glory. It's about yours. It's about what He has done. God gets the glory. His work comes first. The relationship that we have by His grace always precedes our obedience to Him. In grammatical terms, grammar nerds would tell you. The indicative, the statement of truth comes before the imperative, the command to obey. This is, as I said all through the Bible, Paul's epistles are often framed this way. Ephesians is no exception. We're going to read three chapters telling us what God has done in these great theological truths. And chapter 4 will then begin, therefore, walk in a manner worthy of the calling you've received. Romans, Paul spends 11 chapters telling us what God has done and the glorious things that God has done on behalf of His people. And chapter 12, verse 1, therefore, in view of God's mercy, because of the things that are true, what does he say? Offer your bodies as living sacrifices and many other things that come after that. It's not just something Paul invented in the New Testament.

Go back to the Old Testament. What's the classic example of God's commands to His people in the Old Testament? The Ten Commandments, right? Where does God tell us what we're supposed to do? Where our works come in? The Ten Commandments, which He starts by saying, I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage, and here, therefore, in response to my works, have no other gods before me, and so forth. God moves first. He delivers. He establishes a relationship with His people and says, you're mine. I brought you out of Egypt to be my very own. Then He tells us how to respond and live in relationship with Him. The relationship God establishes by His grace is always the motivation for our obedience. You'll hear people say that there are 50 plus motivations for obedience in the New Testament alone. And at one level, that's true. But hear me, don't be confused.

[15 : 21] Not a single one of those ever, ever, none of those motivations ever comes apart from or outside of the relationship God established first. Never. That story of His grace, His work first, is biblical Christianity.

That's what it is. Do you see how you can't reverse the order of emphasis on those things and maintain biblical Christianity? It would be a religion where I get the glory, where it all rests on me, where I actually have reason to boast because I've done something, where I'm responsible to see that salvation is completed. I own my own good works and all the credit for them. You'd have a shredded Bible if you tried to cut out all the places that pushed back in the other direction. God coming to us versus our coming to Him is the story of Scripture from cover to cover. If you reverse the order of emphasis, you may still fit the story that you tell into Mormonism. You may be able to fit the story you're telling into Islam, but you won't fit it into biblical Christianity. God gets the glory. He acts first.

My dad and I, as I was growing up, loved watching the good old TV shows like Andy Griffith, Leave it to Beaver. I still love watching those. I love that they still show them.

I was surprised one Sunday because I knew how much my dad loved those shows, especially Leave it to Beaver. That was a favorite of his. I was surprised to hear him preaching and saying

there was a potential danger in these kinds of shows. I thought, no way, we've been watching them for years.

He said there's a potential danger. He said it was that the focus can become on man's works. You know, the Cleaver family, all nice and moral and put together and just the way they ought to be, and that's all that mattered. So there was a danger in emphasizing morality without the power to live a moral life. A danger in offering changed lives without offering the change agent, the one who could actually empower such living. A focus becoming on man's works.

[17 : 47] The mere morality was a wrong emphasis and actually was not just a kind of a wrong emphasis. It was sub-Christian when it becomes the focus. Mere morality, just living a little better, is sub-Christian when that's the focus. Donald Gray Barnhouse was a Presbyterian minister of a previous generation.

He spoke on a radio program about what he thought things would look like in Philadelphia if Satan took control of the city. And you might have all sorts of ideas of what he would say would happen if Satan were in control. Here's what he said. All of the bars would be closed, pornography banished, and pristine streets would be filled with tidy pedestrians who smiled at each other.

There would be no swearing. The children would say, yes sir and no ma'am, and the churches would be full every Sunday where Christ was not preached. People living their lives and coming to church every Sunday to be affirmed in how they were living and not hearing of Christ.

Barnhouse said Satan would be okay with our works being a little bit better, with us looking a little more moral than we did last year, as long as we lost sight of God's work. As long as the emphasis on the cross of Jesus Christ went by the wayside, Satan would be delighted with that.

How do we do that? How do you and I lose the right emphasis? I know we don't have it on the books that way. You know that. We've said it all morning. Nothing that we teach or claim as our confession of faith would teach that. What does it look like in our lives to reverse the order of emphasis?

[19 : 39] I think the most obvious way is being prideful. Verse 9 addresses that directly, doesn't it? The whole reason behind God having salvation this way, that it's not of works but by grace, is so no one may boast. So when you hear in your own words or recognize in your own thoughts that you're better than others, be careful. Whom do you think you're better than? Perhaps a better Christian than? Watch out. In biblical Christianity, boasting is excluded. It has no place.

We do it by being fearful too. It's the other side of the coin of pride where the focus is on our works but instead of thinking we've been really successful, we're afraid we've failed God.

The focus is on my works but I haven't come through. When have you worried that God wouldn't bless you because you did something bad or failed to do something good, I'm not ignoring the consequences of foolish living or the blessings of wise living but our relationship with God is not based on our works. He doesn't treat us as our sins deserve, does He? He's not one for one matching up His response with what we have done. Third way we do it is being judgmental. Closely related to being prideful, looking down on others but what I particularly mean is think about what you lead with in your relationships with others. Where's the emphasis in your relationships? Do you relate to people as God has related to you with grace leading? Does the grace, the relationship really come first or do you start with judgment? Do you move toward people in compassion or do you make sure they feel that they don't measure up so you can feel a little better about yourself? Parents, do you lead with grace with your kids? Do you make sure your kids feel the reality that your love isn't based on their performance or is it sometimes easier to leave them wondering? I had to read that because I needed to hear it. Do you make sure your kids feel the reality that your love isn't based on their performance or is it sometimes easier or more helpful to get through the night by making sure they're not certain?

Christians, do you lead with grace with your friends? Do you make sure your friends feel the safety of your relationship no matter what? Or is it sometimes easier to leave them feeling they could never measure up to you? Never be quite as good? I'm not talking about compromising on sin. I'm talking about demonstrating biblical Christianity that says the focus, the emphasis is on God's work, not yours. His grace leads, our obedience follows. Southwood, it must be more important to us to see our neighbors experience God's love for them than to see our neighbors live a life that resembles love for God. It must be. That has to be our heart because that's how God came to us. He didn't come to us and say, start living a little bit more like you love me. He said, I want you to know how much I love you. I've moved towards you. We've got to show our neighbors that kind of

love if we want to be offering them Christianity at all.

If we reverse the order of emphasis between our works and God's, we miss biblical Christianity altogether. But when we maintain the emphasis on God's works, our works can be beautiful.

[23 : 29] This is, I said we would get here, verse 10 is an acknowledgement of the importance of how we live, of good works. It's there as long as we have the emphasis correct.

The Bible and biblical Christianity doesn't ignore or denigrate our works. Rather, it dignifies them within the proper emphasis. This is the only way, in fact, that they're properly appreciated. Read our Confession of Faith chapter on good works this afternoon. It says they're fruits or evidences of our faith in Christ. They're the consequence, the outworking, the result of our salvation that is by grace through faith from beginning to end. So our works are not, you'll read the Confession say, meritorious with God at all. Not earning anything with Him or from Him.

And so just as in other New Testament books, Paul isn't establishing the importance of good works in this verse. He's assuming it. Of course we're going to live differently after all God has done, he's saying. Of course there are these good works. I know you already have those categories in mind. I want you to remember it doesn't change whose works are emphasized and who gets the glory.

What does this verse say about those good works? Specifically, three new things words for the believer in verse 10. We're a new creation. A new creation in Christ Jesus.

[25 : 02] Whereas beforehand we were dead, verse 1, in our sins. Now connected to Jesus, we're not the same dead person we once were. We're alive. We've been given new life. And as a result, we have a new master.

Remember verse 2 says, we followed Satan and served our sin as slaves. As we wandered after Satan, now no longer is that the case. God's created us. He's the one who's given us life. He's our master. He's recreated us in Christ and dwelt us by His Spirit. We serve Him, not sin and Satan. And so finally we have a new walk. This is the word that ties the contrast together. The works which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in those good works. That word walk is in verse 1 too.

Back when we were dead, when we walked, when the pattern of our life was following after the sons of disobedience and rebelling against God and following after Satan, now our walk is different. Rather than dead people doing dead things, serving destruction instead of life, we now have good works. Verse 10, that God has prepared for us to walk in them. Different footsteps to follow. A holy lifestyle, righteous ways. Righteous ways. Following the pattern of Christ. Because God's recreating us in His image, right? For walking like that. He's created us in Christ Jesus for good works.

[26 : 36] They're called good works for that reason. Don't make it too complicated. Don't get confused. They're actually good works. They're meant to be beautiful. This is meant to be a beautiful picture of what God's recreating you for. Not the ugly, evil things that we used to follow after and be driven by.

They're good works. New works are a given for the Christian. They cannot be left out. They're so fundamental to someone captured by God's grace. You know how fundamental they are? That God goes ahead and prepares them ahead of time for you. That's how connected they are to who He's making you. He prepares the works for you to do. I love the beauty of that verse. It's so encouraging.

That God has prepared works for you to walk in. Isn't that awesome? I mean, think about what that means. To be fully human. The way He made us to be and intended us to be. God made works not for God to walk in.

Oh, He could have done it that way. He would take care of it without us. But He's chosen instead to dignify us. What an exciting way to live. The way He created us to. He designed us ahead of time. Specific good works with you and me in mind. Things for us to do that bring glory to Him. That advance the cause of Christ in the world. He made those things for you. In addition to being a grammar nerd in high school, I was an offensive lineman.

[28 : 10] What you may not know, there aren't a lot of grammar nerds who are offensive linemen. It doesn't go together a lot. In football or basketball, you may know that you can design and call plays to get the ball to a particular player. Typically, you're fast, athletic guys who are going to do something really good with it. Not typically offensive linemen getting plays called for them. And so having spent many years as a lineman, I get especially excited when I'm watching a football game and there's a tackle-eligible play called. For those of you who don't watch football, that means that the play is designed to get the ball to a lineman who would usually never see it. And I'm excited

because it may be the one play of the season or even of his career where he's actually supposed to touch the ball. And you get really nervous when this happens because it's your one chance. But you're excited. You can't wait to run that play. You've practiced it. And there's a dignity and honor in them saying, we actually want you to get the ball in this play. Usually that's not at all the case. And so there's a play designed for you and you feel important and excited and you can't wait to run that play. Listen, God didn't need you or me to show the world his glory. He could have done it differently to tell them who he is and how much he loves them. But he's chosen to dignify us, to honor us with being a part of his work. He wrote each of us a role. He called the play for you. He's prepared for each of us good works to do.

I don't have to tell you what they all are. All sorts of things. Hurting people to serve. Broken systems to improve. Tarnished aspects of creation to renew. The question is, are you open to doing what he's prepared for you? More than that, more than just being open, are you zealous to run the play he's called for you? Do you feel like you would if you were an offensive lineman getting the ball headed your way? Are you brimming with excitement and thanksgiving that you get to be a part of the work God is doing? What a great opportunity and privilege. Something really worthwhile. Something finally a chance to invest in something that will last. An opportunity to play on the winning team. That's what he's given us. Each of us should be zealous for that. Actively looking for ways to love God and love neighbor. We should also be spurring one another on to love and good works, right? This means challenging the sin in each other's lives. The ugliness that we see still being lived in. It means highlighting the gifts we see God having given to our brothers and sisters to encourage them toward the good works he has specifically for them.

It means celebrating the beauty of seeing someone walk right in the pathway God has prepared for them. Listen, you'll know who gets the glory, right? It's not about them getting the glory. What a privilege, though, to be watching intentionally so you can actively encourage each other. One of the great gifts of being part of the body of Christ. Watching to see where God sets someone else up and the works he prepared for them to walk in. Encouraging them, celebrating with them. Where do I see God at work in and through you? A great opportunity for encouragement. Spend a whole night as a small group or with your friends. Celebrating how God is using each of you, the things he's prepared for you to do.

Southwood, let's together celebrate the beauty of our being able to work now that all the pressure is off. The focus is on God and his works, not on us. Let's celebrate that beautiful opportunity to work as he's called us to. One last thing and we'll come to the table together.

[31 : 56] Father, how is it that you experience or imagine God when he is calling you to obedience, to good works?

What's the emphasis in his voice when he asks you to obey? Is it, if you love me, you will obey my commandments? Or is it, child, if you love me, you'll obey my commandments? How many of us have lived years and years trying to measure up? Hearing the frowning, doubtful words of God, if, I guess we'll see, living under that burden of proving ourselves and our love again and again. It's not true, Southwood. That's not the God of the Bible.

In Jesus, we find his commandments are not burdensome. There's a joy in following the commandments of the God smiling upon us because we're his beloved children. If you love me, you'll obey my commandments.

He's not asking you to measure up. He's telling you where life is found. We get to do good works, not we have to do good works. That's the beauty of the proper emphasis. Remembering that because God's works get emphasized, he's now satisfied. He's offering you the opportunity to be a part of it. If you know the glory of God's grace having been lavished upon you in Christ Jesus, the way we've been reading every week in Ephesians, if you remember that is the essence of Christianity, then the pressure's off. The yoke becomes easy, the burden light, and you can rejoice in the works that God has prepared for you, especially for you. And so God has set before us a table where we're regularly supposed to come for the purpose of being strengthened for good works. He wanted to give us something where week after week, month after month, we would be fed and strengthened towards the good works he's prepared for us. And so it's a table, very appropriately, where we remember the emphasis is on his works. That's what we celebrate here at this table. Listen to how Paul wrote it in 1 Corinthians 11.

I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he'd given thanks, he broke it and said, this is my body, which is for

you. Do this in remembrance of me. In the same way also, he took the cup after supper, saying, this cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this as often as you drink it in remembrance of me. For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. Do you hear what he's saying? He's saying this is not Southwood's table. This is not a Presbyterian table. It's my table where we come and celebrate what I've done. It's his body and his blood, not ours. It's his work on the cross where we deserve to be, that we remember here. It's his perfect performance that invites us to the table, not ours. If you know him, if you've publicly professed that you're dependent on what he's done by being baptized and joining a body of Christ that professes that together, then come.

[35 : 36] Come and eat and feast on him. If you're here today but you don't yet know Jesus, if you don't know what it would mean to trust his works instead of yours, if you came today thinking, I just need to balance the scales a little bit, I need to do a little bit more so that I might come out on the right side with God in the end, let me invite you not to come to this table but to something that could be for you so much more beautiful and joyful this morning. To come to Jesus and to have it be finished.

To have the exhausting treadmill of trying to improve yourself and trying to prove yourself to God, be done in his works. To have the focus be on what he's done rather than on what you need to do. Let me pray and we'll come to the table.

Father, these elements are not ones that we've offered but ones that you have given in your son, his body and blood. Would you keep us ever mindful of that? Would you set them apart that they would indeed spur us on to love and good works because of what you have done for us? We ask in Jesus' name.

Amen. The Lord Jesus on the same night in which he was betrayed took bread and he broke it and he gave it to his disciples as I'm ministering in his name, give this bread to you. And he said, take, eat, this is my body given for you. Do this in remembrance of me. In the same manner after supper he took the cup and said, this cup is the new covenant in my blood which is shed for many for the remission of sins. Drink from it, all of you. Our host team members will usher you to the tables forward and back and we will celebrate together.

For more information, visit us online at southwood.org.