

Ephesians 2, 1:10

2 And you were dead in the trespasses and sins **2** in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—
3 among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body[a] and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.[b] **4** But[c] God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, **5** even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— **6** and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, **7** so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. **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 a result of works, so that no one may boast. **10** For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

We humans love to add to things. We love having the last word. We love to make things more complicated, bigger and better. We dream big dreams and having realized them, we reach further. This was how we were created. God created us very special from the rest of the universe. Only we bear God's image, and only we were invited to be co-creators with God. I have no doubt that God delights in our imaginations, that still reflect God's own image. When we write a book, when we paint a picture, when we sculpt or craft or garden, or even tell a story or a joke, we are creating, we are exercising the gift of creativity that God blessed us with.

The problem is, we never know when to stop.

I dabble in painting. If you go to my office you'll see a painting of the Eiffel Tower with some pink flowers. I did that off of an online painting tutorial. I am no Van Gogh. But one of the hardest parts for many painters, both hobby and professional, is knowing when to stop, knowing when there's nothing more to add to a painting, it is complete, and when fiddling with it more will actually degrade it.

Christians from the very earliest church have also had this very problem of not knowing when enough is enough. Jesus had no sooner ascended into heaven than Christians started making up rules for how one should live.

How to live as a Christian is important, and it is a lifelong process, but the problem came when how to live became how to be saved, and the rules started piling up.

The Jews had 613 commandments from the old testament, or so Bible scholars say. This is nothing compared to what some Christians lay on themselves or others.

In my younger years I had closer relationships with people who had come from a particularly sect in Christianity that is now commonly thought of as a cult. Not a denomination like Baptist or methodists, but a sect, just to clarify. In this particular sect you were constantly expected to follow an ever growing set of rules in order to keep your salvation. Basically, Jesus granted you salvation by grace but boy did you have to work to keep it. Some of the 613 laws from the Old Testament were kept, and a whole host more. Cabbage patch dolls and furbies, common toys, were sinful and used by the devil to lead people astray. Women could not cut their hair nor wear pants. Every decision you made was subject to your spiritual authority who claimed to hear directly from God. All instruments were banned except for the piano and the violin. Dancing was strictly forbidden. There were endless rules about what one could do on Sunday, and TV was so censored as to be hardly worth watching. And there were other things about spiritual authority that typically ended in abuse of power and a general atmosphere of fear.

Now, if you take issue with any of those things, that's in the realm of Christian freedom and you should do as you feel best. I've had people ask if I wore a lot of dresses for religious reasons, but the truth is I just hate pants because I love pizza. The problem is when we try to take these areas of Christian freedom and use to them to try and add to our salvation.

The people of this sect believe I am damned. Probably most of you, too. They believed salvation was a bit like a life preserver in the open sea, something that you must constantly cling to in order to be spared.

Paul tells us that salvation is not the life preserver that you cling to, but more like being lifted from the sea by the coast guard and transported to dry land. There is nothing that you can add to your rescue. You can clutch your life jacket as you sit on solid ground but it isn't adding anything to your rescue. Your rescue was long since accomplished.

Now, I suppose one could argue these endless rules are a way of keeping people from marching straight back out to sea, and trust me, we humans would do just that. There's a popular film of a farmer rescuing his sheep from a ditch, and I mean that sheep is wedged in there. The farmer frees it and it bounces away for about three steps before becoming wedged in that same ditch. The caption reads "actual footage of Jesus rescuing me from my bad decisions." That's us, we'd wade right back out if we could. Thankfully Jesus tells us that none can be removed from his hands. This is one of the tenants of the Reformed Faith - the perseverance of the saints. Your faith can't be lost. Try as we might, once we are saved, we cannot fling ourselves back into the sea.

That's not to say we can't make plenty of problems for ourselves on dry land. We can commit sins and make problems for ourselves in this life, even as we try to live out our faith. There are some choices that are better than others. There are better and worse things to do with our Christian freedom. But nothing we do can separate us from God, or contribute to the victory that has already been won and freely given to us. You won't get extra points for donating more than your neighbor. You won't get a better address along the streets of gold if you don't listen to rock music. There is no express line at the pearly gates for those who swear less than their brothers and sisters.

Take a moment and think back to when you were at your worse. When you were enslaved to sin more so than any other time in your life. Think back to your rock bottom. Maybe this was years ago, maybe it was last week, maybe it's right now. While you are absolutely at rock bottom and trying to dig through the basement, Jesus died for you. When you had nothing to offer in return, when you might've spit in his face or even helped nail his hands to the cross, Jesus died for you. Maybe you are in a very different place now, trying to follow, doing your best. Jesus would still die for you this very moment. Nothing you can do can change that or add to it. Jesus paid an infinite price for you. Throw all the pennies you like into the void, but it will never add up to the infinite price that was paid for you, and given freely.

So go, and do good works, not because they save you because they don't. Do good works because God gave you a gift out of infinite love, and infinite love changes us. It drives out fear, it compels us to be the best we can be. Do all that. Give freely and often, do great works, follow your conscience in areas of Christian freedom, avoid sin as far as it can be found, but never

ever think that you can buy or sell your salvation. This is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. Go, and live in joy, be patient with the journey of sanctification, knowing that you are saved by grace through faith alone.

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