

*Ephesians 2:8-10 (NRSV)*

<sup>8</sup>For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— <sup>9</sup>not the result of works, so that no one may boast. <sup>10</sup>For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

*James 2:14-18(NRSV)*

<sup>14</sup>What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? <sup>15</sup>If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, <sup>16</sup>and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? <sup>17</sup>So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

<sup>18</sup>But someone will say, “You have faith and I have works.” Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith.

*Matthew 7:24-27 (NRSV)*

<sup>24</sup>“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. <sup>25</sup>The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. <sup>26</sup>And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. <sup>27</sup>The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!”

*John Wesley described his own theology as “practical divinity.” By this he meant that theology is to be our way of creating people of God. This was Jesus’ way and it is still the way of United Methodists.*

Jesus spent two and a half years or so with his disciples. Teaching them by way of parables and more. Enacting for them the arrival of God’s kingdom. Showing them what it really means to live in God’s way. Why? Why so much teaching and doing? Because Jesus was making them into disciples, genuine apprentices learning to be like the Master. They weren’t to be just hearers of Jesus’ words, but doers of them. And before Jesus returned to the Father, he told them, in the Great Commission, that they were to go out and *make* still more disciples (Matthew 28:19). We are re-born into Christ, but we are *made* into disciples.

I put the two Scripture passages from Ephesians and James side-by-side for a reason. Too often, Christians feel forced to choose between them. Doesn’t Ephesians say that we are saved by faith, not works? But then doesn’t James ask sarcastically, “Can faith save you?” Paul, the writer of Ephesians, seems to make it all about faith while James, Jesus’ half-brother, seems to make it all about works. We wonder, which is it?

But, as in much Christian theology, we don’t have to and, indeed, must not choose between them.<sup>1</sup> As Roger Olsen puts it, salvation is both gift *and* task. Our re-birth into

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<sup>1</sup>The Christian faith is built on a series of “ANDs” not “ORs.” God is three AND one. Jesus is fully God AND fully human. Salvation is gift AND task. Salvation is instantaneous AND a process. And so on. We fall into error when we feel like we have to choose one or the other. Roger Olsen’s excellent book, *The Mosaic of Christian Beliefs*, is an overview of the history of Christian theology and is organized into twenty-two chapters, each one devoted to a theological “AND.” Coming to embrace the ANDs and not feeling forced to choose between the ORs is essential to grasping all of the biblical message.

God's family<sup>2</sup> is all about God's grace and his grace alone. We don't contribute to it or assist in any way. AND . . . this gift of faith is embodied in how we live, i.e., our "works." Both Paul and James would embrace this AND. Both knew that genuine faith in Christ *must* result in good works, or, as Paul put it, the "fruit of the Spirit."

Faith and works. When we come to faith in Jesus Christ by virtue of God's saving grace, we are re-born. But we still have to be made into disciples, for what we do (our

### The Sermon on the Mount

This week's passage from Matthew closes out Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. This is the largest single block of Jesus' teaching in the NT, spanning chapters 5-7 in Matthew.

The teachings spell out, often very directly, what it means to live a life under the rule of God. In other words, it describes living in the Kingdom of God. Jesus had more to say about God's kingdom than any other subject. In these three chapters, we have the fullest statement of what life in the kingdom is really like. And it is profoundly counter-cultural.

The Sermon on the Mount turns the world on its head. Up becomes down. In becomes out. Power becomes weakness. Jesus is not laying out some idealized picture of what life might be like someday when he returns. No . . . Jesus is setting out his expectations of his disciples. They are, as we are, a community formed by God and empowered by God's Spirit. The Sermon on the Mount is a sort of guidebook to life in this community.

It is always helpful to remember how Jesus closes the sermon. He tells the story of two people who build homes (see Matthew 7:24-27). One builds the house on rock so that it could withstand the storms. The other builds on a foundation of sand that is easily washed away. The one who builds on rock is the one who hears Jesus' words and does them. The one who builds on sand is the one who hears Jesus' words but does not do them. The choice is clear and ours to make – though the power to make the right choice comes not from the teachings, but the teacher.

"works") is the embodiment of our faith It isn't so much that the good works are an "ought," but that they are the inevitable outworking of genuine faith. Thus the NT writers can speak of salvation as both gift *and* task, as instantaneous *and* as a process.

### *The Holy Club*

While at Oxford, John Wesley and his brother, Charles, recognized that even though many of their peers professed faith in Christ and could get an "A" on any theology exam, you'd never guess it from how they lived or what they did. Many Christians, embracing the Reformation slogan of "faith alone," thought they could sever what they believed from how they lived. It was, and still can be for many, the perspective that coming to faith in Jesus gets one's ticket to heaven punched and anything that follows is just gravy – good to do, but certainly not part of the business of salvation.

It was Charles' idea to form a small group of Christians who would pursue lives of genuine discipleship. The group, which never exceeded twenty-five, was mockingly referred to by fellow students as the "Holy Club."

The "Holy Club" members fasted until 3 PM on Wednesdays and Fridays, received Holy Communion once each week, studied and discussed the Greek New Testament and the classics each evening in a member's room, visited prisoners and the sick, and systematically brought all their lives under strict review.

Later, the Wesleys' methodical approach to discipleship and holy living led to the tag, again meant mockingly, "methodists." This "Methodist" movement within the Church of England grew and spread to the American Colonies, where Methodism began as a lay movement. After the revolution, John Wesley

<sup>2</sup>Though "born again" is often used to denote some particular group of Christians, that is a mistake. In the Bible, all Christians, i.e., all those who have faith in Jesus Christ, have been born a second time, or born again. Jesus' conversation with the Pharisee Nicodemus in John 3 sets forth the essence of this claim and Paul develops it further in his letters.

put in place the tools and mechanisms that would ultimately allow the Methodists in America to separate from the Church of England and become an independent church. John sent to America a prayer book with orders of worship and twenty-five articles of faith. John even sent over two lay preachers that he ordained himself.

Thus, from our beginnings, Methodists have always emphasized the living out of one's faith. The stated mission of the UMC is simple and reflects the Great Commission

### Is It the Teachings or the Teacher?

Too often people, including non-Christians will think they can live by Jesus' teachings while ignoring Jesus. J. Budziszewski calls this "The Second Tablet Project."<sup>1</sup> When Moses brings down the two tablets, the first speaks to our relationship with God (no other gods, for example) while the second tablet speaks to our relationships with others (no coveting, for example). Thus, the "Second Tablet Project" is an attempt by many in our world to live according to the second of the tablets while disregarding the first – trying to live by the teachings while ignoring the teacher.

But, as Ellsworth Kalas, so aptly puts it, "the teachings did not prove the greatness of the teacher; Jesus proved the greatness of the teachings."<sup>2</sup> Jesus' disciples acknowledged that these teachings came with an authority greater even than Moses because of what they saw in Jesus, not what they heard in the teachings.

These teachings are not capable of transforming us, only Jesus transforms. Left to ourselves, we could never love our enemies. To the extent that we can do so at all is because the Spirit of Christ (Romans 8:9) works within us. Jesus is more than our teacher. He is our Savior. He is the way, the truth, and the life. Trying to live out the teachings of Christ without the power of Christ is a project doomed to failure.

But by the grace of God, we are not on our own as we strive toward true kingdom living. God's Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, works with us, transforming us into ever-truer disciples of Jesus – in all things.

<sup>1</sup>His essay, "The Second Tablet Project," is available on-line at *First Things* journal, [www.firstthings.com](http://www.firstthings.com), in the archive.

<sup>2</sup>from Kalas' reflections on the Sermon on the Mount in *The Grand Sweep*.

given us by Christ: "to make disciples of Jesus Christ." Here, at St. Andrew, we embrace seven holy habits, seven Christian disciplines: *inviting, worshiping, learning, praying, caring, giving, and serving*.

And we Methodists embrace a practical theology – or "practical divinity" as John Wesley put it. Here is what the UMC says about our theological task:

"Our theological task is essentially practical. It informs the individual's daily decisions and serves the Church's life and work. While highly theoretical constructions of Christian thought make important contributions to theological understanding, we finally measure the truth of such statements in relation to their practical significance. Our interest is to incorporate the promises and demands of the gospel into our daily lives.

Theological inquiry can clarify our thinking about what we are to say and do. It presses us to pay attention to the world around us.

Realities of intense human suffering, threats to the survival of life, and challenges to human dignity confront us afresh with fundamental theological issues: the nature and purposes of God, the relations of human beings to one another, the nature of human freedom and responsibility, and the care and proper use of all creation."

A word of caution – by "practical" we mean that we put our theology, our beliefs, into practice. We don't mean a utilitarian, "whatever works," sort of faith (see the text box on the next page for more on this).

We mean simply that our rebirth in Christ must be borne out in how we live. Do we build up the body of Christ? Are we a good witness to Jesus in all that we say and do? Do we seek to help those in need and minister to those who suffer? Do we build our houses on sand, only hearing Jesus' words or do we build them on rock, on being doers of the Word?

## *Am I What I Do?*

Yes, we are to be doers of Jesus' words, not mere hearers of them. But are we defined by our doing?

We Americans are a pragmatic bunch. Always have been. Visiting the U.S. in 1830, Alexis de Tocqueville observed, "I think there is no country in the civilized world where they are less occupied with philosophy than in the United States. . . . The Americans have no philosophic school of their own." But that changed about 70 years later with the development of "pragmatism," the only philosophic tradition born in America. The general "pragmatist" view was that something is true insofar as it works.

Americans are practical people, interested in results. We believe in what works. After all, some say, look what scientology has done for John Travolta; there must be something to it. Never mind the whacked-out stuff about the planet Xenu, body Thetans, and the rest of it. If it works, go for it. Regrettably though, our pragmatism feeds our wrong-headed notion that our identity comes from what we do or what we have or even what people think about us. If we are focused solely on actions and results, it is a small step to seeing ourselves only in terms of those actions and results.

*Am I what I do?*

I'm not very good at social chit-chat. When I meet someone for the first time, I'm often tempted to ask, "What do you do?" as if that is a synonym for "Tell me about yourself." Of course, it isn't, but my MBA training shaped me into a pretty results-oriented, bottom line guy. I remember one rather poetic friend in business school who was shocked that after one year at Harvard, his first response to every problem or situation was to get to the "bottom line." Harvard Business School is called the West Point of capitalism for a reason. In the business world, it is very tempting to see each person as a bundle of certain skills and experiences that can be put to work for the business. And once you see others that way, it becomes easy to see yourself in the same way.

The same problem is at work in our Christian discipleship. We know what God wants from us: to love God and to love neighbor, all the time, without fail. A simple idea. But we also know that every day we fall far short of this simple standard. We get impatient with others. We gossip. We get angry. And sometimes it gets much worse.

But in addition to calling us to truly love others, Jesus also wants to lift burdens from us, including the burden of thinking that we create our identity. I am not merely the disciple who fails to love as I should, I am God's. We are God's. It is in God that I find my true self.

When Peter writes to the Christians, he reminds them that they *are* a holy nation; they *are* God's people (1 Peter 2). Not that they are becoming, but that they *are*. Though we fall short of living as holy people, set apart by God, we are still God's people, reborn by his Spirit.

## **Questions for Discussion and Reflection**

1. Discuss the simple statement, "It is the teacher who transforms, not the teachings." Do you see what point I am trying to make? Do you agree? What has been your own experience in life? Do our problems really stem from ignorance or do they stem from our inability to do the things we know we ought to do and avoid doing what we know we ought not do. Paul writes that he doesn't understand his own actions. He doesn't do what he wants to do and does the very things he hates (Romans 7:15; also see chapters 1 and 2). Has this been your own experience? Have you seen this in others? How do we become better doers of Jesus' teachings?
2. In the UMC, there is a General Board of Discipleship whose "primary purpose [is] to assist annual conferences, districts, and local churches of all membership sizes in their efforts to win persons to Jesus Christ as his disciples and to help these persons to grow in their understanding of God that they may respond in faith and love, to the end that they may know who they are and what their human situation means, increasingly identifying themselves as children of God and members of the Christian community, to live in the Spirit of God in every relationship, to fulfill their common discipleship in the world, and to abide in the Christian hope." There is a lot packed into this statement! Were you aware that such a group existed in the UMC? If you were in charge of this Board, how would you go about helping local congregations in the task of disciple-making? You can check out their website at [www.gbod.org](http://www.gbod.org).

## Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p><b>Monday, Matthew 28:16-20</b> Jesus gives his disciples the Great Commission.</p>	<p><b>Tuesday, Micah 6:6-8</b> What does God require of us?</p>
<p><b>Wednesday, Leviticus 19:1-18</b> God instructs Israel on love as caring. See esp. v.18</p>	<p><b>Thursday, Luke 6:27-36</b> Jesus talks about loving those who are the hardest to love.</p>
<p><b>Friday, John 13:1-20</b> Jesus washes the feet of the disciples at the last supper.</p>	<p><b>Weekly Prayer Concerns</b></p>

