



## DEXTER UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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### THE GIFT

Scripture: Ephesians 2:1-9

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#### INTRODUCTION

In the religious marketplace (i.e.: where people go to find “*the way of salvation*”) there are many competing deities. God, through the mouth of Isaiah, calls people foolish “*who pray to gods that cannot save*” [Isaiah 45:20]. . .then declares, “*There is no God apart from me*” [v. 21]. “*Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other*” [v. 22].

Salvation is for all nations, not just the Israelites. God wants all people to follow Him, not just the Israelites. **Israel** was to be the means through which the whole world would come to know God. Now **the Church** is to be the means through which the whole world hears about God. . . and is invited into a saving relationship with Him.

That being the case, as part of Christ’s universal church, we need to be clear on what that means:

1. In our own personal experience

There may be many in the church who do not know the basic message of salvation;  
And who have never experienced its liberating, life-transforming reality.

- **John Wesley**, our forefather, was raised in the church (his father was a pastor).
- **Apostle Paul** was a very “religious” man before his Damascus Road experience.

2. In the (Gospel) message we preach – both corporately from the pulpit and one-on-one in personal conversations about faith.

What if someone comes up to you and says: “*What does it mean to be a Christian?*”

Are you going to say: “*Well I was baptized way back when?*” [But it’s just a symbol.]

“*I’ve been a member of the church for x-number years?*”

[Going to church every Sunday doesn’t make you a Christian, just as standing in the garage doesn’t make you a car.] ☺

What if someone asks you: “*Just how do you become a Christian? I’ve been thinking about it.*” Do you say “*I’ll get back to you*”, then run to the phone to call the pastors.

So I am preaching a simple *salvation message* this morning. It may become an annual sermon. At the first of a New Year, it’s always good to get back to the basics (i.e.: “*first things first*”).

It’s a sermon that attempts to answer several questions:

- “*Just how do you become a Christian?*”
- “*What does it mean to be ‘born again’?*”
- “*How is a person ‘saved’?*” OR, “*What must I do to be saved?*”  
[The question asked by the Philippian jailer in Acts 16]
- “*How does one get to heaven?*”

- “How can I ‘get right’ with God?”
- “How can I find real meaning / purpose in life?”  
[This was the question asked in the “40 Days of Purpose”]
- “How can I have Christ in my heart?”

Really, all these are ONE question, put several different ways (depending on your mindset). Many these days are not asking questions about heaven & hell; that’s not on their minds. But they are asking questions about what brings connectedness to something beyond themselves. While you might have trouble with the concepts of heaven & hell (not debating that today), I thought it might be appropriate to begin with a *pearly gates story*. . .

## JOKE 😊😊😊

Three blondes are at the pearly gates of Heaven. [I had to get permission from my blonde wife to tell this.] St. Peter tells them that they can enter the gates if they can answer one simple question: “What is Easter?”

The **first blonde** replies: *"Oh, that's easy! It's the holiday in November when everyone gets together, eats turkey, and is thankful."*

"Wrong!" replies St. Peter, and proceeds to ask the second blonde the same question. . .

The **second blonde** replies: *"Easter is the holiday in December when we put up a nice tree, exchange presents, and celebrate the birth of Jesus."*

St. Peter looks at the second blonde, shakes his head in dismay, tells her she's wrong, and then peers at the third blonde: *"What is Easter?"* he asks with a sigh.

The **third blonde** smiles confidently and looks St. Peter in the eyes, *"I know what Easter is."*

*"Easter is the Christian holiday that coincides with the Jewish celebration of Passover. Jesus and his disciples eat a last supper and Jesus is later deceived and turned over to the Romans by one of his disciples. The Romans take him to be crucified and he is stabbed in the side, made to wear a crown of thorns, and hung on a cross with nails through his hands. He is buried in a nearby cave which was sealed off by a large boulder."*

St. Peter smiles broadly with delight.

Then the third blonde continues: *"Every year the boulder is moved aside so that Jesus can come out. . .and, if he sees his shadow, there will be six more weeks of winter."*

## SCRIPTURE – Ephesians 2:1-9

Now let’s turn to the Scripture passage for today. It was written as a testimony. We will read all nine verses, but come to rest on vv. 8-9. . .

*<sup>1</sup>As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, <sup>2</sup>in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. <sup>3a</sup>All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts.*

Does that last sentence mean that only Christians are good? do good? Of course not!

- Many are born with an innate sense of right & wrong; they “get it” early on.
- Many are by nature easy going, compliant, others- centered.
- Most people are law-abiding, moral, downright good people.

If you are comparing such people to a sub-group (e.g.: criminals), they come out on the high side—very deserving of life’s best. But on God’s absolute scale, **no one is good enough to earn salvation**. We all flunk that one! We all fall short of the absolute perfection, the absolute glory of God. We are all “*dead in (our) transgressions and sins*” [v. 1].

*<sup>3b</sup>Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.*

Like the rest, like everyone else, we are all out of fellowship. . .out of sync with the God who made us. We are all lost in sin (which separates us from God), and cannot save ourselves.

*<sup>4</sup>But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, <sup>5</sup>made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. <sup>6</sup>And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, <sup>7</sup>in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.*

These verses describe what God has done about it. Both the *penalty* and the *power* of sin were destroyed by Christ on the cross.

Now we come to vv. 8-9, which is a summary (one of the many in the Bible) of God’s marvelous *plan of salvation*. It’s the answer to all the questions [listed earlier]. . .

*<sup>8</sup>For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—<sup>9</sup>not by works, so that no one can boast.*

There are two key words in v. 8: *GRACE* and *FAITH*. Actually there’s a third: *GIFT*. What is the gift? The gift is salvation. The gift is eternal life. The gift is a right relationship with God. The gift is having done for us what we could never do for ourselves (i.e.: the removal of sin and the associated guilt). The gift is a meaning & a purpose in life far beyond what this world offers.

How does it come to us? That’s where **GRACE** comes in. Grace is GOD’S PART. Grace is God providing this costly gift at no cost to us (i.e.: it’s free to us, although it cost Him everything). Grace is God reaching out to us even though we don’t deserve it. None of us do. Not even if I spend my whole life trying harder, trying to measure up, trying to make up for all the wrong I’ve done. Salvation has nothing to do with my effort, my ability, my intelligence, how much good I’ve done. Being a Christian has nothing to do with being born into a “Christian. nation”, “Christian. home”, or being part of a “Christian. church”. Grace is God’s unmerited (unde-served) favor == His decision to love, forgive, redeem, and adopt us (as His children).

Is that all there is to it? Then am I just “in” automatically? NO! The gift is free, but you’ve got to receive it. You’ve got to open it. That’s where **FAITH** comes in. Faith is OUR PART.

When someone gives you a gift, do you push it away saying: “Oh, I don’t deserve this.” “I didn’t earn this.” Of course you didn’t; it was purchased for you. It’s amazing how many people — people who’ve been in the church all their lives—feel obligated to work their way to God. They can’t just accept what He freely offers us.

Here’s where many of us get tripped up. We look at all that’s wrong in our life. We figure we can’t clean it up. That makes us afraid to enter a life-changing relationship with Jesus, because we fear we won’t be any different than before. So, why be a hypocrite?!

We’ve got it all wrong!!!

God’s job is to forgive us. God’s job is to clean us up. [FISH: We catch ‘em. . .He cleans ‘em.] His job is to deal with the past—no matter how bad. The Holy Spirit’s job is to change us.

Your job is to simply receive it (as a gift) with gratitude. . .to trust that God will do His part. . . and become willing & open to let it happen.

We get tripped up in our “religious language”:

- Which is it, “*committed Christian*” or “*born-again Christian*”? Doesn’t matter. . . it’s both!
- Well, you say, I’m not sure I buy all that language in Ephesians 2 about “*the ruler of the kingdom of the air*”. People in Paul’s day saw Satan as a ruler. They believed that he & his spiritual forces inhabited the region between earth and sky in a 3-storied universe. Your cosmology (i.e.: how the universe is structured) might be a little different. But. . .
- Whether you call the enemy of your soul “*Satan*” (which means “accuser”) or “*the Devil*” (evil spirit) doesn’t matter.

Let’s not trip up on terminology. Let’s get the reality, the spiritual truth right!  
The fact is, you & I are separated, alienated, estranged from God.

ADAM the father of the human race made a terrible choice when he and EVE joined together in doubting their Father’s word and ignoring his instructions.

The result was that our relationship with God was broken. We, their sons & daughters, live in the aftermath of this failure—because all of us have inherited “spiritual DNA” that is flawed, contaminated, diseased. By our very nature plus the choices that come out of that nature (that bent to sinning), we sin. . .we fail morally. . .we live distanced from God.

If we die still alienated from God we will experience the horrible reality of His judgment == eternal separation from God.

But you know what, even though we breathe and have life in this world, we are still dead *spiritually speaking* (v. 1) if we are alienated from God. Jesus Christ is the only one able to restore the relationship lost to us—and make us alive unto God.

But, like everyone else, I want to “fix it myself”. I want to be able to say “I did it my way”. But I can’t take away my own sins. I remain isolated in them no matter how good a life I manage to lead.

We need Jesus! Jesus is God—God who came in human form and took our place of judgment for sin in order to put us in his place as a son of God.

So, there you have it: Ephesians 2:8-9. A relationship with God is a GIFT. We don't earn it. We don't buy it. It is given freely out of love—God's love for His estranged creation. It is a gift which cannot be earned. It must be received. If you would like to receive this gift (i.e.: eternal life, a restored relationship with God), receive it by faith == by believing.

I would like us to bow our heads, and I'll pray a prayer which expresses this "faith" / this "believing". I'm not wanting to put words in your mouth, but if in your heart of hearts you resonate with this, then I invite you to pray it along with me (silently) as your prayer. Remember, it's not the words that matter, but the attitude of your heart (which God sees).

LET'S PRAY. . . . .

*Lord, I'm coming home. Please make me Your son / daughter. I turn from all sin (major-minor, big-little) and accept Your forgiveness made possible through Jesus' death on the cross and His resurrection from the grave. I place my faith and trust in Jesus Christ alone for salvation, for eternal life. I take Him as my Savior and my Lord. I want to follow and serve You all the days of my life. Please let me have the assurance that I am your son / your daughter—a member of your family. Let there be no guessing on this one issue—that I will spend all eternity living with You. It is in Jesus' name (for He is the One who has made my salvation possible) I pray.....AMEN!*

If you believed in your heart and mind in Jesus and received His gift to you, then WELCOME to the Family of God. This is what truly makes you a Christian. . . a member of the church!

Remember, it is a gift. But now, it is your responsibility to nurture this relationship. I would ask you to consider two things:

1. Join a small group (e.g.: Men's Prayer Breakfast or Women's *Explorer's Bible Study*).
2. Be baptized! I would like to schedule an adult believer's baptism soon. See Matt or me.