

## The Fourth Sunday of Lent

(Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	2 Chronicles 36:14-16, 19-23
<i>Response</i>	Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you
<i>Psalms</i>	Psalms 137:1-2, 3, 4-5, 6
<i>Second Reading</i>	Ephesians 2:4-10
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.
<i>Gospel</i>	John 3:14-21

The fourth Sunday of Lent for year B takes us to a very famous passage from Paul's letter to the Ephesians 2:4-10. This passage is very famous and consequential, because it sums up Paul's teaching on *how* we are saved and what is the relationship between grace (the gift of salvation), faith (our response to that gift), and also works (our actions that are performed in Christ). And so in Ephesians 2:4-10, we're going to see in this letter, Paul lays out what might be the clearest and most detailed description of how grace, faith, and works go together in the process of salvation. So let's read that together, and then we'll kind of back up and look at how that text has been interpreted in the Catholic tradition, especially in the ecumenical Council of Trent, which defined the doctrine of justification for Catholics back in the 16th century. So let's look at Ephesians 2. This is what it says, verses 4-10. Paul says:

But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with him, and made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God— not because of works, lest any

man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.<sup>1</sup>

Okay, as you can tell, there's a lot going on in this passage. So let's just try to walk through it together, step by step. So Paul begins with God, which is where any discussion of salvation should begin. It should always begin with God. So he says:

God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ...

Okay, so pause there. Notice here that the animating reasons — the catalysts, so to speak — for salvation are divine love and divine mercy. That's why God saves humanity...out of His love for humanity and out of His mercy towards us as sinners.

Now with that said, the next thing Paul does is...notice how he describes sin. He says:

...we were dead through our trespasses...

Sometimes we tend to think of sin as just breaking a rule. Or there's a commandment — I violated it. Here's a rule — I broke it. It's kind of an extrinsic thing to us. But Paul describes sin as spiritual death. We were dead through our trespasses, and then when we became members of Christ, He:

...made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)...

For Paul, being saved is a spiritual resurrection from the spiritual death that was sin that we were all under. Now if I had more time to look at this in depth, you could actually go back to Ephesians 2:1 and following. And you'll see that the context of the spiritual death that Paul is describing here is not just the individual

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

transgressions that any of us might commit at any given point in our lives, but rather what will later go on to be called the power of Original Sin — in other words, that all human beings are born into this world as children of Adam under the power of sin and death.

In fact, let me just read that verse just so you can see the context here. If you back up to chapter 2, verses 1-4, he says this. This isn't in the lectionary, but it's right before this:

And you he made alive, when you were dead through the trespasses and sins 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. Among these we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of body and mind, and so we were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.

And then he picks up:

But God, who is rich in mercy...

So he goes into the verses for today. So notice there what Paul is describing there is not his own personal peccadillos and faults or even just the individual transgressions he might have committed as a Jew trying to keep the Torah...trying to keep the law. No, he's talking about the sins of all mankind who are by nature — who are born into this world — children of wrath who are under the power of the prince of the air. That's a semitic way of referring to the power of the devil. So this is really, really important.

The context of the sin that Paul is describing us being saved from, in Ephesians 2, isn't just our personal sins that we commit, but the state of spiritual death into which all of mankind (all human beings) are born under the power of the devil. And that state of spiritual death into which all human beings are born, the Church will later — under the influence of Augustine — call Original Sin.

Why do I bring that up? Well, because if you don't understand the sin from which we're being delivered, you're going to misunderstand the way we're saved. So the first thing Paul is doing here is emphasizing that our deliverance from the power of Satan and the state of spiritual death that we would later call Original Sin is something that is a pure gift. It's through grace. You were saved by grace. You were raised from the spiritual death of Original Sin and made one with Christ through grace. It's not something you earn. It's not something you did of your own power. It's gift. It's a pure gift. It's *charis* in Greek. It's a gift of grace.

Now, also, in context — although Paul doesn't use the language here — he elsewhere will link this death and resurrection language to Baptism. In Romans 6, he says:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? (Romans 6:3)

So just as we died with him, so too we shall be made alive with him...so use of the image of death and resurrection. So how is it that a person is delivered from the spiritual death of Original Sin? It's through Baptism. It's through the grace of Baptism.

Although it's interesting here...Paul doesn't see the grace of salvation just as being raised with Christ. He actually sees Baptism as a kind of spiritual ascension into Heaven. Because he says there, He:

...raised us up with him, and made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus... (Ephesians 2:6)

Notice he doesn't say, "One day you *will* sit with Christ in the heavenly places." He said He *already* made us sit with Him in Christ Jesus in the heavenly place. That's kind of a weird thing to think. Most of us do not associate our Baptism with the grace of being made to sit in the heavenly places. But what he means there is this...although we are obviously still here in this world in our body, as he'll say elsewhere in Philippians:

But our commonwealth is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ... (Philippians 3:20)

That's where we belong. That's where...our citizenship is like a green card or ID card that tells us where our home is. It's where we belong to.

Okay, so beautiful, powerful passage that Paul is describing the grace — the initial grace — of deliverance from Original Sin of being forgiven and being united to Christ as a resurrection and ascension from the dead, through the gift of grace. So then he continues:

...that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. (Ephesians 2:7)

So notice, that's the second time — actually the third time — he talks about being either *with* Christ or *in* Christ. Very important, essential concept for understanding the letters of Paul. If you look at the Pauline letters in the New Testament, over and over again Paul doesn't refer to...he doesn't use the same language that we tend to. So like today, if we're going to talk about a Christian, we're going to tend to call them "a believer." Or in Catholic circles, we might say "a practicing Catholic," like you're trying to get better and better and better at it...so you practice.

Paul's term of choice when he wants to address what we would call believers, he calls them "saints" and he calls them "those who are in Christ." "In Christ" is his favorite word — *en christo*. And what he means by that is the idea that through Baptism in faith and through the grace of salvation, we are united with Christ. We are made members of His mystical Body; that's why he can say we're ascended into Heaven. Because where is the Body of Christ? It's not on Earth. His human body is in Heaven in the Ascension. So as members of His mystical Body we're united with that, that's what Paul is saying here in Ephesians 2. So those who are in Christ Jesus is another way of referring to those who are saved through grace.

Now in verse 8, in the next verse, this point is so important that he reiterates it. He says it again:

For by grace you have been saved...

And now he adds something new:

...through faith...

Now the Greek word there for faith, *pistis* — it has a range of meanings. It means “belief” — that’s the normal way we tend to use it — but it also means “trust.” It means “fidelity,” “trustworthiness.” It has a whole range of meanings. So we are saved by grace (which is God’s gift) through faith. And then look what he says here:

...and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God— not because of works, lest any man should boast. (Ephesians 2:8b-9)

I cannot stress enough how important the verses we just read are — verse 8 and 9 — for Catholics. And why do I say that? Well, in the last 500 years (in the west in particular), in the wake of the Protestant Reformation, obviously there’s been a schism in the Church. And Catholics are still in very many ways reacting to the forces that let loose that division within Christianity that took place at the time of the Protestant Reformation.

And so one of the things that the debate that was happening at the time of the Reformation was about was over the role of faith. And of course, Martin Luther very famously trumpeted his clarion call of being saved *sola fide*, through faith alone. And in response to that, for the last 5 centuries, Catholics have often emphasized, “No, no, no, no. We’re not saved by faith alone.” If you look at the letter of James 2 for example, James says very clearly in chapter 2, verse 24:

You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.

So Catholics have been at pains for centuries to emphasize the role of works in salvation. And that’s very fitting to do so, because if you look at James carefully, you’ll see. The letter of James is very clear that faith alone is dead and that if a person professes to be a Christian but doesn’t actually live the faith out and

perform good works, then James will say, that faith does not have the power to save him.

So justification is by faith *and* works. And Paul himself is going to say in Romans 2, that we will be judged according to works. So final judgment will be not just according to faith but according to works as well. So sometimes Catholics want to emphasize the role of works to such a degree that they forget — it's easy to forget, and I've done this myself, years ago when I was starting to learn — that Paul also says, however, that when it comes to the initial gift of salvation in the deliverance from Original Sin (the grace of Baptism, in particular, coming to faith), Paul also says that that initial grace of salvation is pure gift and that works have no role in it whatsoever.

So having taught in seminary for years, I've encountered some Catholic students (cradle Catholics) who are made very nervous by this verse from Paul, because to them it sounds Protestant. One of my students said this..he said, "I try to like Paul, but he sounds Protestant." And what he meant is if you look at this verse, Paul says:

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God— not because of works, lest any man should boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

Now wow, doesn't that sound like Martin Luther? Well, no, if you understand the difference between what Luther is saying and what Paul is saying. And the difference is this: according to Paul (I'll try to put this as clearly as possible), salvation is a process. It's not a one-time event; it's a process. It has a beginning, a middle, and an end. And so the initial grace of justification at the beginning of salvation is pure gift, and it's not in any way related to any works that we perform. That's what he's saying in Ephesians 2.

In other words, your deliverance from the state of sin and transgression (spiritual death) that all human beings are born under — what we call Original Sin — is not something you earn. It's not something you do. There's no works that you can perform that would earn that initial gift of salvation...so it is by grace alone,

through faith, apart from works. However, for Paul, that process of salvation doesn't stop with the initial gift; it continues throughout. And after you're baptized and you are *in* Christ, you will be judged at the end and final justification, not just according to that initial gift of faith but also according to your works.

And there are many passages I could show you this. Go look at Galatians 5 and 6, for example, or 1 Corinthians 6, where Paul will make very clear that even those who are baptized, if they commit certain sins — like grave violations of the Ten Commandments — can be cut off from Christ. In Galatians 5, Paul says that very clearly, that you can be cut off from grace. So works after Baptism *do* matter. They are consequential for salvation. And I should actually quote Paul just so you can hear it. You don't have to take my word for it. Listens to Romans 2:6. This is Paul in Romans:

For he will render to every man according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are factious and do not obey the truth, but obey wickedness, there will be wrath and fury.

And then again, chapter 2, verse 13:

For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified.

Now you see, in those contexts, Paul is talking about the final judgment. In Ephesians 2...so in Romans 2 he's talking about the final judgment and final justification. In Ephesians 2, the reading for today, he's talking about initial justification and the initial grace of salvation at the beginning of life in Christ. He's talking about Baptism.

And you can't do anything to earn that grace. And we as Catholics should actually know that very well, because we baptize infants. There's no clearer sign of the pure gift of grace that is Baptism than the Baptism of an infant who can't even ask for the gift themselves, but it is given to them gratuitously.



Alright, so when it comes to initial salvation, initial justification, Paul says:

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God— not because of works, lest any man should boast.

And then there's one more verse, and I'm so glad that the lectionary includes this, because it shows that works *do* have a role in the process of our salvation. If you have any doubt about this, just read the context. He ends by saying:

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

So according to Paul, although our initial salvation is not because of works — the works don't cause us to receive that gift of grace — the gift of salvation is ordered *for* good works. It is given so that those who are in Christ (who are members of the Church, who are members of the mystical Body) can in fact perform good works through the grace given to them by Christ in the Spirit.

So although it might seem a complicated passage, in a nutshell, I would sum it up this way: that according to the Catholic doctrine, we are saved by grace, through faith, for works. That's how Paul is describing it in Ephesians 2. And that's just good Catholic theology.

And you don't have to take my word for it. You can just look at St. Thomas Aquinas and the Council of Trent. So if you look at Thomas Aquinas...the greatest medieval theologian and for some, if you're a Dominican, the greatest theologian of all time. In his *Commentary on Ephesians*, listen to how Aquinas describes what Paul is saying here about process of salvation:

[T]o be saved is the same as to be justified... But this salvation is of grace and is "by faith" in Christ. In the justification of an adult who has sinned, the movement of faith towards God coincides with the infusion of grace...

Then he goes on to describe some errors of people who are already interpreting Paul in ways that you'll see in the Reformation. People have misconstrued Paul; Paul is complicated. And Thomas goes on to say:

*The second error he [Paul] rejects is that anyone can believe that faith is given by God to us on the merit of our preceding actions. To exclude this he adds “not of” preceding “works” that we merited at one time to be saved; for this is the grace, as was mentioned above, and according to what is written: “if by grace, it is not now by works; otherwise grace is no more grace” (Rom 11:6).<sup>2</sup>*

That's from Romans 11:6. And the whole quote is from Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Ephesians*, paragraph 293 and 296. So in other words, what Aquinas is saying here is that some people might think that we can merit the initial gift of salvation. But in Ephesians 2, Paul is rejecting that idea as an error, because he is saying we are saved by grace, through faith, apart from works. It's not anything that we can do to merit that initial gift. Otherwise, it wouldn't be a gift; it would be a reward. That's the idea.

And then the Council of Trent, in response to reformers like Martin Luther and John Calvin (the Protestant reformers), reaffirm this teaching of St. Thomas and stated it even more starkly in the *Decree on Justification* in the Council of Trent. And if you're interested in the topic of justification and salvation and how we're saved, and you haven't read the *Decree on Justification* from the Council of Trent, I cannot urge you strongly enough to go and read it...if you want a sound Catholic understanding of soteriology, the theology of salvation. This is what the Council of Trent says:

[W]e are said to be justified gratuitously because *nothing that precedes justification, neither faith nor works, merits the grace of justification*; for “if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise (as the same apostle [Paul] says) grace would no longer be grace” (Rom 11:6).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Ephesians*, no. 293, 296; trans. F. Larcher and M. Lamb

<sup>3</sup> Council of Trent, *Decree on Justification*, Chapter 8

Now I want you to think about that, because many people — many Catholics and non-Catholics — are under the assumption that it's Protestant theology that emphasizes grace while Catholic theology emphasizes works...or the Protestant theology emphasizes faith and we emphasize works. That's just wrong. The Council of Trent, in its ecumenical and authoritative *Decree on Justification* says... nothing that precedes that initial gift of salvation of justification in Baptism, whether faith or works — so neither one of them — merits the gift of salvation, otherwise grace would no longer be grace. It's pure gift from God.

And we should know that as Catholics, because the idea that you could earn the initial gift of salvation is a heresy. It's called pelagianism. It was rejected by the Church at the Council of Trent and rejected centuries earlier by St. Augustine, who wrote a number of treatises against a British monk named Pelagius, who was reported to have taught that as his ideas, his doctrine of salvation — that a human being could, through their effort alone, merit the grace of the forgiveness of Original Sin...the forgiveness of the sin of Adam and be delivered from that.

And Augustine wrote lengthy volumes against pelagianism. And then of course, the Council of Trent ratified that and promulgated this teaching here. It's very important...there are a lot of Catholics out there. At least in my experience as a teacher, there are a lot of Catholics who are either pelagian or semi-pelagian, and they don't even know it. Because in their rush to emphasize the importance of works against the errors of someone like Martin Luther, they fail to make the distinction between the initial gift of salvation and justification, which is pure grace, and then final justification or final judgment, which will be according to works.

So even those works are still the result of God's grace...but our actions do play a role in our final judgment in a way they do not in our initial gift of salvation. And this is the teaching of the Church to this day. Some people might think, "Well, wait. That's the Council of Trent. That's hundreds of years ago." The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* — and I'll end with this — makes it very clear in paragraph 2010:

Since the initiative belongs to God in the order of grace, *no one can merit the initial grace* of forgiveness and justification, at the beginning of conversion.<sup>4</sup>

And that, my friends, is the Catholic doctrine of justification, which of course is just Paul's doctrine of justification...which is given to us by the Church on the fourth Sunday of Lent, especially as we prepare to celebrate the Paschal Mystery of Jesus' Passion and Death and also the Sacrament of Baptism, which many people will receive on Easter Vigil as they come into the Church and receive that gift of salvation through Baptism which is a gift of grace, through faith, and not because of works, so that no one might boast.

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<sup>4</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par 2010