

Sermon March 17, 2024
[Hebrews 5:5-10 and Ephesians 2:4-5]

You Vote: Three Approaches to Scripture
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Grace to you, and peace, this beautiful Sunday morning, in the name of God our Creator, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

So at the end of my message today, I'm going to call for a vote, which means I need you to pay close attention. Here's where we start.

I need your help. Probably in a lot of ways – but I need your help specifically concerning our Second Reading. Last week we heard the message of “radical grace,” the teaching, or article, by which Martin Luther says “the church stands or falls.” We heard from Ephesians 2, which, in my opinion, expresses this message of grace better than any other text in the whole New Testament.

According to Ephesians 2:4-5 we hear, “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.” Can I get an “amen” for that? [*Amen!*] in other words: it's been done. It's been done! When it comes to salvation, conditions don't apply. God frees us from having to *earn* God's love, and *because* of that, out of gratitude, we are invited to serve and love God by serving our neighbor. “All we have to do,” in the words of the Lutheran theologian Gerhard Forde, “is shut up and listen.”

It's been done. God loves you. God claims you. God accompanies you. God accepts you, and there's nothing you can do about it.

Today, however, we seem to be hearing a different message than the one we heard last week from Ephesians. Instead of declaring that God claims us, or makes us alive, our Second Reading for today, which is from Hebrews 5, seems to suggest that in order to gain God's favor, we must, as Jesus did, submit to God's will and obey. Only then, the thinking goes, will God embrace us.

In other words, when it comes to salvation, conditions *do* actually apply. Consider verses 7-9 of our Second Reading for today. The author writes, “Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death. And he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a son” – which signifies he had a special relationship with God – “Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered, and, having been made perfect, he became the source of salvation for all who, like he did, obey him.”

Notice the language here. Instead of being made alive, we learned that Jesus had to *earn* God's favor. He was heard *because* of his reverent submission. And we, likewise, it would seem, must also earn God's favor by following Jesus and doing as he says. This is why the majority of scholars – wait for it – suggest that the letter to the Hebrews was not written by the Apostle Paul. The letters to the Hebrews was not written by the Apostle Paul, Some, a minority, of scholars even attribute it to Prisca, who is named as a leader of a house church in Romans 16.

Hebrews 5 seems to place conditions on salvation. That is to say, in order to be reconciled with God, you must do X, Y, and Z. This is the opposite of what last week I called "Luther logic." Luther logic says, not "IF you do this, THEN you will be saved." But instead says, "BECAUSE it's been done, you should THEREFORE go and do as follows." It's a total reversal from IF/THEN, which is conditional, to BECAUSE/THEREFORE – and that single reversal would change the face of Western history forever.

That is why you are sitting in these pews. That is why I am in this call. We have heard this message, which changed Western history, and brought about, among other things, today some 200 million Lutherans across the world, and others who sympathize with their radical message of grace.

But Hebrews does not follow Luther logic. The logic it seems to follow is IF/THEN, which dominates the fifth chapter. IF we obey, THEN God will embrace us.

So, what do we do? Remember, I was under the weather earlier this week, so it took too much for me to come to a solution, which is why I need your help. It seems to me that there are at least three options for how to approach this apparent discrepancy between Ephesians and its message of radical grace, versus Hebrews, which seems to suggest that we must do something to obtain or merit God's favor.

What are these three options? Well, **first**, we can acknowledge that there are discrepancies, or what some scholars call "irresolvable tensions in Scripture" and just in the words of the Beatles, "let it be." Just accept that there are discrepancies, and that there is no problem with that. *Of course*, there are discrepancies! We have a collection of texts that was written over 1500 years, that contains multiple perspectives from varying locales and times in the history of ancient Israel up through the early Common Era. So, of course, the thinking goes, there will be irresolvable tensions; so what? Hebrews has one theology, Ephesians has another. Take a look again at verse 7 of our second reading. It says, "In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who is able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission."

He was heard by God – why? *Because* of his reverence submission. The logic again there is IF/THEN rather than BECAUSE/THEREFORE.

The Apostle Paul, on the other hand, says in Romans 1, that God declared Jesus the Son of God when God raised Jesus from the dead. There's no reference to obedience. There's no reference to how Jesus merited God's favor "because of his reverence submission." And there's no reference to Jesus having been made perfect, which suggests he starts from a deficit. In other words, for Paul, it's nothing, without the Spirit of God, that Jesus did.

Hebrews seems to suggest otherwise. Again, verses 8-9. It says, "although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered." So, he learns. "...and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him."

This is what nerds call adoptionist Christology. (A *Christology* is an understanding of who Jesus was.) Adoptionism suggests that Jesus started from a place of imperfection, but over the course of his lifetime, up through the final years of his ministry, he was conformed to the image of God, you might say. We hear something like this in the Gospel according to Luke, the first chapter, which says, “The child” – referring to Jesus – “grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.”

Now, in a sense, this is good news. It takes the incarnation of God and Christ seriously. He *was* really human. He *learned*. He was *made* perfect. Yet it’s also problematic, because, as I’ve been saying, it places conditions on Jesus, and by extension, on us, at least by implication. We must submit; we must obey Christ, as Christ submitted and obeyed the Father.

The language here is such that we never find it in any of Paul’s actual letters; language that confuses faith – that is, an openness to God’s will, or an attitude of trust – with stark obedience and reverent submission.

So that’s option one. “Let it be,” when it comes to the irresolvable tensions in Scripture. “So it goes.”

Option two attempts to harmonize, or reconcile, these ostensibly contrary perspectives. “Sure,” the thinking goes, “*Jesus* passed the test. He was submissive and obedient to the Father. And because he did it, we don’t have to!” The obedience to which we are called, moreover, presumes the work of the Holy Spirit, that enables us to submit and obey God’s word and will.

Now let’s pause here for a moment. Do you find the language of obedience or submission concerning? Is that a red flag for you? “You must obey. You must submit.” Well, I do. Why? Because I know from experience that this language is easily co-opted by those who, under the power of sin, demand subjugation to themselves.

Once upon a time in the not-so-distant past, I was an intern pastor, and at a Bible study with other pastors, I remember getting into an argument with one of them, who finally slammed his fist on the table and said, “You will submit to everything Scripture says!” I was dumbfounded. And all I could think of was, “Well, no, you’re asking me to submit to *your interpretation* of what Scripture says.” So, it was a power game. Submission to God often invites submission to other people. At least that’s how the language is so easily co-opted.

But maybe on the other hand, the language of submission or obedience has a different meaning in the original Greek. If so, the thinking goes, we could perhaps reconcile Hebrews with, say, Ephesians or Romans. We could show how these two perspectives are not actually contradictory, but rather two sides of the same point.

So that’s option two. We can reconcile or harmonize these perspectives by taking a closer look. We can and should, for example, do a word study to show how what Hebrews means by “obedience” is not so far off from what Paul means by “faith.”

Option three takes a different route. Instead of simply accepting the discrepancies or irresolvable tensions in Scripture, and instead of attempting to harmonize passages so that we have a unified view and scripture, option three prioritizes the Gospel, the Word within the words of the Bible, “the word of salvation,” as Ephesians 1:13 calls it; the message of God’s grace and mercy, which runs across both Testaments, scattered like seeds in the fields of Scripture.

This option comes from Martin Luther himself. Roland Bainton, one of Luther’s most important 20th century biographers, writes the following:

“Luther treated scripture with royal freedom, but not at whim. There was a clear principle that served to determine the Word of God, which is the message of redemption through Christ Jesus our Lord. This is why we say the Bible *contains* the word of God. It’s the message of grace *within* its words, that speaks to us, and that helps us in terms of our salvation, the message of redemption through Jesus Christ our Lord without any merit on our part, and that we are saved solely through heartfelt acceptance of faith or trust.”

Yet despite the recognition of levels within scripture, that is, the prioritization of *some* books, like The Gospel of John, over *other* books, like James, the “literary junk mail” of the New Testament, Luther did treat the Bible as a whole, and shrank from demolishing the canon by excluding James and Esther. ‘The Pope’, he said, ‘might go, but to tamper with the traditional selection of Holy Writings was a step too much.’

This perspective, in other words, acknowledges discrepancies or irresolvable tensions in Scripture, but elevates the passages that lead us to Christ, or that declare our salvation, or that promise grace and mercy, over those passages which don’t. It elevates life-giving passages over law-giving passages. It focuses, in short, on passages that set us free. First Peter 2:16 captures this perfectly. The author writes “as servants of God, live as free people. Yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil. Honor everyone.” Again, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil. We freely serve our neighbor in response to what God has already done and accomplished for us in Jesus Christ.

Everything else Scripture says, according to this third option, is secondary. It’s less important, even though it’s not our job to remove it from the Bible. In other words, Luther is cherry-picking, but he’s doing it in a way that most people don’t, and that is: he’s conscious of it. He knows what he’s looking for when he reads Scripture, which is the message of justification by grace, instead of simply accepting every word as equally important and trying to flatten out or harmonize the discrepancies.

So, there you have it. Three ways of approaching the contradictions or irresolvable tensions in Scripture, using Ephesians 2 and Hebrews 5 as a test case. You can simply acknowledge the tensions and let it be, that’s the first option – that’s the Jewish option. So, in the early centuries of the Common Era, or the first centuries of the Common Era, the phrase came to be, “two Jews, three opinions”, which is to say, they didn’t see contradictions as a threat. They thrived on contradictions. That’s what helped spur

conversation and multiple strands of interpretation. I like to think of the same here at Queen Anne Lutheran Church, especially at our council meetings. "Two Lutherans, three opinions." That's the way it goes. And that's a good thing.

So number one, you can simply acknowledge the tensions and let it be, even seeing them as something good. An early theologian named Origen of Alexandria who was influenced by the Jewish approach to Scripture said that God actually *put* the contradictions in Scripture to occasion a deeper understanding on your part and mine. (He would not have been welcome among contemporary Protestant fundamentalists.) So for example, Origen argued that we have, of course, two creation stories in Genesis 1-3: the seven-day story, and the Adam and Eve story, and Origen recognize that there is a discrepancy between these two. The order of creation differs in each one. But Origen, instead of seeing that as a threat that needed to be harmonized, instead saw it as an opportunity to plumb the text for a deeper meaning. And here's what he found. (Nobody agrees with him today, but I'll tell you anyway.) The first creation story is about our spiritual lives before God. So it's the spiritual world, the realm above, you might say. The second creation story is about the soul descending into matter, and this is symbolized, Origen says, by the fact that Adam and Eve put on animal skins; that is symbolic of the matter that the soul is adopting, to be part of this world. So, there you have it. Two ways.

Let's go to the third. You can also prioritize passages, as Luther did, that make the most of Christ, or declare your salvation, over those that set conditions for salvation, acknowledging real differences while leaving oneself open to the discovery of the Gospel in books that you may never suspect, like James. (I disagree with Luther here; there *is* Gospel in James.)

Like Revelation! Luther himself moved to a place, after rejecting the book, and arguing that he couldn't determine if the Holy Spirit even inspired it, to saying 10 years later, "What we see here is the message of God's ultimate victory over the forces of death and evil." So there's Gospel even there, even, possibly, in Hebrews.

Now, among these three approaches, the Jewish approach; the second, which I call the Protestant-evangelical, or Evangelical-Protestant approach; and the Lutheran approach, you can probably guess which approach *I* emphasize in my preaching and teaching, even though I acknowledge the validity of the other two.

But here's where you come in. Here's where I need *your* help. Which of these approaches do you favor, and why?

By show of hands: Option A. How many of you prefer this option when it comes to simply acknowledging the real differences and discrepancies in Scripture and letting them be? Raise your hand. Nice. All right.

Option B. How many of you have favor the attempt to *harmonize* apparently contradictory passages in Scripture? Raise your hand. One, two...maybe three. All right.

Option C. How many of you have favor reading the Bible through the lens of the Gospel, favoring passages that give life or that contain the message of grace and mercy above those that say otherwise? Okay, that's good. That's really good. Oh, thank God, I'm in the right church. Okay, I was really worried how that might go... It's not that you all need to agree with me, but I'm glad that many of us are on that page.

Of course, the fact that we have diversity here is also a fantastic thing. And as I pointed out earlier, there are relative merits in the approach of each of these. So here's what I invite *you* to do. I invite you to take a few moments to ponder which of these approaches speaks to you and resolves the discrepancy we see between Ephesians and Hebrews. Then after the service, I invite you to tell me your preference and why. That way, I can figure out what to do with our Second Reading for today.

In Jesus name, Amen.