

## *Beautiful Work* Ephesians 2: 8-10

**First Presbyterian Church  
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

**October 8, AD 2023  
Gerrit Scott Dawson**

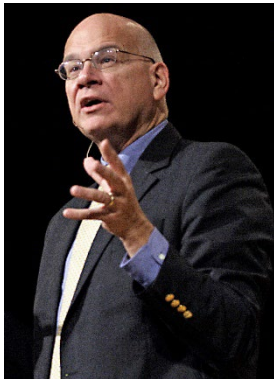
---



The other night I watched some videos of groups I like performing live. I called up Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band's appearance on Saturday Night Live from a few Christmases ago. They did Bruce's song "Ghosts" with such passion and joy that as I watched, I found myself laughing out loud with delight. Wow, those guys can perform.

What people can perform for others can be dazzling, inspiring, daunting, beautiful, wonder-making. From arts to surgeries, from computations to athletic feats, we behold people after years of practice and training perform their specialties. Great performance amazes us.

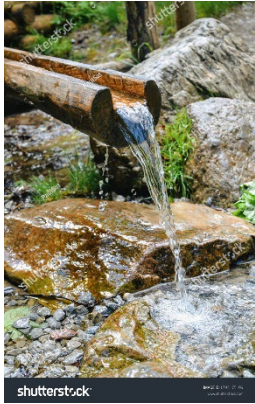
But as a way of life, performing has its pressures. High expectations to keep it up, always keep it up, fall upon sales people and teachers, hosts of feasts and students in school. The response of others to our performance can be life-giving. It can also create immense pressure and a continuous sense of inadequacy.



The late Tim Keller knew something about performing. He consistently preached and wrote at the highest level for decades. He knew the pressure and rose to it. Keller also saw through the game of linking your sense of worth to your last performance of any task. Keller knew the joy of the gospel: "Christianity uniquely offers a non-performative identity—not constantly ebbing and flowing based on your accomplishment and conduct." A non-performative identity. In other words, what if your worth was not measured by your last test, your last creative act of kindness to your spouse, your last award or bonus?

This is just what Paul is saying today: *For by grace you have been saved.* Grace. Unconditional favor. Love that precedes your creation. Acceptance that comes before you can do anything. It's non-performative. It doesn't waver whether you are lying helpless in a hospital gown or at the height of your powers. This

grace is there like gravity. A constant. And grace is not just an abstract word. Grace in Paul's writings is the shorthand word for the event of Jesus Christ. The story of Jesus *is* grace. Jesus' incarnation, life, death, resurrection, ascension and promised return is the grace of God showing up in the world.



The conduit for grace entering our lives is *faith*. Our *trust* in the grace of Jesus is the pipe which brings his living water into our lives. My faith is *not* the water. Jesus is. But my faith opens my life to receive his thirst quenching, clear, cool, grace-filled life offered to me. Such faith is a shift in reliance. I no longer look first to my performance for worth. I look first to the faithfulness of Jesus on my behalf.

Scottish pastor Alexander MacLaren described it beautifully:

. . . it all begins with the act of faith which brings [people] into immediate contact and vital union with Jesus Christ, and which is . . . the act of [our] very inmost self-passing out of [its] own isolation and resting itself on Jesus. It is by the vital and individual act of faith that any soul escapes from the dreary isolation of being a stranger and a foreigner, wandering, homeless and solitary, and finds through Jesus fellowship, an elder Brother, a Father, and a home populous with many brethren.

This faith is the re-locating of the center of our lives. I find my source and center in Jesus and his saving work on my behalf. I connect to him in trust for a vital union. This is a passing from isolation to communion with Christ.

Now Paul makes this even clearer in the next verse. He writes, "And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God." More literally, Paul says, "And this not out of you, the gift of God." This not out of you. Life does not flow from the center of your being if you are just drawing from your own resources. The world lies to us about this. We lie to ourselves about this: "If only a few things would fall my way, I could be great, whole, right, happy in myself. I could be splendid. I could perform my own meaning. I could live out my purpose as I choose." No, being saved from enslaving desire cannot happen unaided. Being saved from the world that consumes you and uses you cannot happen by amassing your own security and power. Finding your truest path, living what you were meant to be, cannot be done alone in yourself. It just can't. For you and I were made by God for communion with God in order to find our highest joy in living for the glory of God. That means receiving from outside of ourselves what alone can fulfill us from the inside out.

This is not of yourself. We can't self-generate grace, acceptance, peace, wholeness. It is the gift of God.

The old hymn said it so clearly, "Nothing in my hand I bring; simply to thy cross I cling. Naked come to thee for dress, helpless look to thee for grace." Such faith in grace alone costs me not less than all my pride, all my self-first, all my desire to be the center of the universe. Such grace demands that I let go of my life while I reach out to lay hold of Christ Jesus' life given for me. It's terrifying. But then so liberating. For just as we realize that we contribute nothing that earns a place with God, we discover that God wants us to contribute to his mission. He wants to work in us and through us. He wants to flow from inside us. He wants to release in us all we were uniquely made to be. But only when we let Christ be the center do we discover how he centers our lives in most life-giving and satisfying way possible.

See what Paul goes on to say. "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." The mystical mystery of our faith is what Paul said elsewhere, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation" (2 Corinthians 5:20). When we release our lives to Jesus, he makes us new. We become the work of the master craftsman. His shaping of our lives releases our fullest potential. We've been refashioned in Jesus precisely so we can live, do, be and enact good things.

No longer slaves to destructive passions, no longer chained to performance based acceptance, we can live in gratitude. Psalm 116 asks, "What can I render to the LORD for all his benefits to me?" What can I give back to God to express how grateful I am for all the ways he delivered me? The Psalm answers, "I will offer to you the sacrifice of thanksgiving . . . I will pay my vows in the presence of all the people." In other words, I will worship and I will live to adorn your glory with doing good things.

In another place, Paul speaks of these good works using a word that can just as easily mean *beautiful* works (Titus 2:14). Jesus said of the woman who anointed his head with expensive oil, "She has done a beautiful thing for me." A costly gift, an act of service, motivated by gratitude and love. This is what we get to do. Each one of us uniquely. As God's hand-crafted, exquisitely designed people, we get to participate with him in his mission to the world. These beautiful works can be anything and everything that we do intentionally in thanks and service to God. All of daily life, all the stuff we have to do can be done as an offering of praise. Our

distinct talents, our particular training, our desired vocation and our required toil, all of it can be a beautiful work.

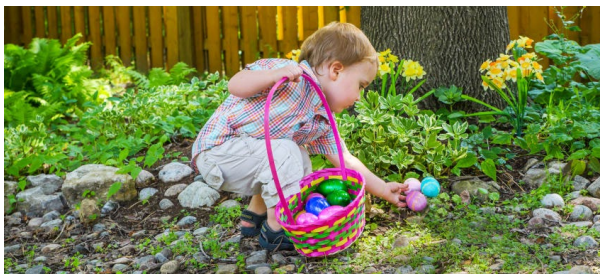


The psychiatrist Curt Thompson has been meditating on the importance of rendering beauty to our flourishing. He talks about how children love to create things. But essential to their joy in creating is showing what they've done to a parent or teacher, and hearing the reply, "Oh, that's so beautiful. Thank you." That child goes away beaming with acceptance. He rejoices to participate in creating something that adorns God's creation. Something that

blessed those who love him.

God shares his beautiful grace through his people. His glory gets made known through all the ways we offer back from what we have received. This can be service or teaching. Hospitality or administering. Preaching or cleaning. Changing babies or singing. Giving money or spending time. Studying or painting. We give glory to our glorious God as we adorn him through the ways we offer back ourselves.

That's what our fall focus is all about. We're calling it, Give Glory: Stewarding God's Grace. One of the joys of being a community of Christ is how we all can participate. So every week we're hearing our church mates speak about how they enact what it means to be God's workmanship created for good works.



Let's turn this sparkling passage one more way. Paul says that we were "created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we might walk in them." There are beautiful works for each of us to do. God has already planned for them. They are

waiting for us to see the opportunity and engage. This makes me think of little children hunting Easter eggs. I love how you can just put an egg right in the middle of the grass. They come upon it with surprise and then joy. Oh, look! An egg for my basket. Discovery is ever new.

That's what Paul is talking about. We can start expecting that each day there will be beautiful works God has planned for us. We get to look for them. We enter each day with eyes peeled. Life is full of surprises. We anticipate that God will show us some way to love. Some way to shape, fashion, order, create something that makes the world better. We can do that as an offering of praise to God. This day, God will show me something he has for me to do. It may be just what is required of me already at school, home or work. Or within that ordinary work, there may well be someone I can love, something extra I can do, some way I can contribute.

Paul is very clear. God has prepared these works. We don't have to manufacture them. Just ask for eyes to see them. It's not about performance in order to gain acceptance. Paul says that we get to "walk about" in these good works. Not pushing. Not driven. Not urgent. Not trying to make grace dependent on us. But peacefully opening our hearts and eyes and hands to what God will put before us.

That means when we are living not out of ourselves but out of Christ, every day is an adventure. We're not trying to whip up our gloriousness. We are watching for how we can adorn the glory of God. In the tiniest or grandest ways.

There's an Anglican prayer I love. We ask God to "transform our toil into an offering of praise." There's no escaping toil. We all have stuff we gotta do. For many, just getting upright, dressed and out of the house is big work. The routine of requirements can feel burdensome. But then we realize that nearly everything we do can be a beautiful work for God. Anything that is good, wholesome, or life affirming, from bathing to writing software, from pulling weeds to driving carpool to running a company can adorn his glory. Instead of thinking, "Dang, I have to . . ." think, "Praise God, I get to . . ." So we could pray:

*Father, transform my toil into an offering of praise. Let me show you what I am doing like a child bringing a drawing to a parent. Let me see how you consider it all a beautiful thing. Set me free from performing to gain acceptance. But out of your glorious grace of acceptance in Jesus, let me perform all my work in thanksgiving. Let me do a beautiful thing for you this day.*