

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
www.lutheranlccf.org
First Sunday In Advent, December 1, 2024

✠ ✠ ✠

(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 449, 444:1, 453, 447, 444:4.

Lessons: Psalm 119:33–40, 1 Peter 5:8-10, Matthew 5:13-20.

Sermon Text: Philippians 2:12-23.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

How is it that you have been saved? How is eternal life made yours?

There should be no doubt about that. Scripture repeatedly tells us exactly what you learned from Ephesians chapter 2: ***“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.”*** (Ephesians 2:8–9, NIV84)

So why does Paul write what he did here? Doesn't it almost sound like you are to earn your own salvation? Yes, it might sound that way if we don't read all of what Scripture says. ***“Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.”***

Well, is Paul telling you that you must cooperate with God for your salvation? **NO!** There is no cooperation with God – the theological term is “synergism” which means “working together with God to earn our salvation”. Jesus Christ accomplished it all. That is the glorious Gospel message.

The unscriptural doctrine of synergism contends that salvation depends not only on God's gracious working, but also on man's works, man's endeavor. It argues that man's own efforts are needed to help God; are needed to help work faith in us. But God does it all. God saved us and God worked faith in us to receive his salvation.

But remember that as a Christian, as long as you are on earth, you will have enemies to fight. And that is why we must be alert so that Satan doesn't snatch our salvation out of our hearts and lives. Today let's ask and answer again the question

HOW ARE YOU SAVED?

- 1. You are saved by grace alone.**
- 2. There is no cooperation with God for your salvation,**
- 3. But we must be on our toes lest we lose this salvation.**

We are saved by grace alone. Grace is God's undeserved love and mercy. God gives us his grace from his Word through baptism and conversion and gives it to us repeatedly as we read and study the Word of God. The new life is born in us and is fed and nourished by God's Word to give us greater spiritual strength. This strength from God is to be used constantly in what God calls 'working out our salvation.' Saved by the working of God's grace alone, the danger for believers is always that they grow lazy and secure, and thus through their own fault lose the salvation given to them by God. There are many admonitions in Scripture to stir up and arouse the new man so that we do not fall victim to Satan's attacks. The fact that God has worked faith in us doesn't mean that we no longer need to be alert so that we don't throw that faith away.

Let's try to think of an earthly parallel. If you were to inherit ten million dollars and that were safely invested for you, you would never have to work again if you chose.

We have received from God a treasure infinitely more valuable than ten million dollars. But because we always have sin around us and in us, we must continue to fight sin. We are to be constantly working, to keep on working so as to actually receive the results of that faith. God saved man. But man can throw that salvation away.

John Calvin, who died in 1564, 16 years after Luther died, was one of many who taught the unscriptural doctrine of “once saved, always saved”. To this day, many Reformed churches still teach this doctrine. This is the unscriptural belief that from the moment anyone becomes a Christian, they will be saved from hell, and will not lose salvation. That horrible teaching is a man-made poison which teaches that if you have once come to faith in Jesus Christ as your Savior, you can never fall away. That is completely false. We must always be on our guard and be aware of false teaching and evil influences and fight against all the enemies of faith.

This verse is the complete antidote to the false, unscriptural idea “once saved, always saved.”

“Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.” This holy fear trembles at the thought of doing something or omitting anything that will sin against God, or lead us away from God, and thus endanger our salvation. It is a fear that we may after all be damned because of ourselves. It is a fear that leads us to fight against all carelessness in faith and in life.

This is the same fear and trembling that is mentioned in Ephesians where we read **“Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ.”** (Ephesians 6:5, NIV84)

It is the kind of fear and trembling that Joseph showed us when he was tempted by Potiphar’s wife to break the Sixth commandment. His response was **“No one is greater in this house than I am. My master has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?”** (Genesis 39:9, NIV84) Joseph was horrified, afraid that he would sin against God. He recognized the temptation that Satan had placed in his way. He recognized the temptation that this worldly woman had placed in his way and he fought it, he worked through it, fearing that he would give in to that temptation. That is the attitude of our new man.

We know God is faithful and is constantly guarding and protecting us, but just as a man cannot stand on the train tracks in front of a speeding train and be saved, so a Christian cannot constantly put his faith in danger and never expect that he will lose it because of his own sins.

Is this a completely hopeless fear that Jesus is never watching over us? Of course it is not.

The Christian does not fear God, that is, be terrified of God who gives him the life-giving gospel but he does fear the poison of sin that robs him of strength to feed his soul with God’s Word. This kind of fear does not kill the Christian’s joy in the Lord, but this fear increases his joy by increasing his assurance that the Lord is with him for his salvation.

Because Paul wrote several verses earlier **“Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others”** (Philippians 2:4, NIV84) we are certainly not to work only for our own salvation. The more we work to fight the devil, the world, and our flesh, the more we will also help others by our example and by the concern for them that naturally goes with the concern for ourselves. The more we seek to live according to God’s will and commands, the more we will be Christ’s light in the world.

By living as God’s children we are constantly struggling, and afraid, as it were, of running the race in vain.

We do not work out our salvation by any kind of work-righteousness. We dare not confuse the cause and foundation of faith itself with fruits of faith. Paul refers to the constant, faithful use of Word and Sacrament. These means of grace renew and increase our hold on salvation, because the Gospel **“is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.”**(Romans 1:16, NIV84)

This use of the means of grace is the vital part of the working. A living man must eat to remain alive and strong. God’s Word and Sacrament are our spiritual food and strength. Only as the result of this food can we have what are called “good works.” Only as a result of this can we continue the fight against sin, temptation, error, and all efforts to serve God. Scripture even tells us: **“So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God— even as I try**

to please everybody in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved. Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.” (1 Corinthians 10:31–11:1, NIV84)

There is no contradiction between *“it is by grace you have been saved, through faith”* (Ephesians 2:8, NIV84) and *“continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling.”* Scripture immediately tells us why: *“for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.”*

If God is the One who works in us both the willing and the working, then we Christians must always go to God whose continuous grace will move us to will and also to translate the willing into deeds. The Word of God here is an assurance, the one assurance we Christians need for retaining the salvation we have obtained as a gift of God.

We are fighting every day, as you learned from Ephesians chapter 6, where you were told to put on the full armor of God. We are fighting an enemy who wants to totally destroy us. We are fighting Satan and his allies. *“For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”* (Ephesians 6:12, NIV84)

Satan and all the forces of the evil world and even sin within you are all constantly trying to take your salvation away from you. As we fight this battle every day, we must remain vigilant.

Sometimes when we speak of our spiritual enemies as “the unholy three” – “the devil, the world, and our own flesh” we don’t even think about what is included in “the world”. We must daily be alert and fight all the enemies who want to destroy us by leading us into sin and doubt here on earth. We are to fight every enemy, not give in to every desire of our sinful human mind.

Just as a soldier in battle may not have been shot by the first bullet that comes at him but must remain alert for additional attacks, so the Christian must be alert and watch out for the next attack and the next and the next. Driving your car is another example. You must stay alert, not just one time! If you avoid one crash, you must stay alert, not just once, but you must be constantly alert, and in all of life, we must always be alert to dangers.

But this word of Scripture tells us we must be alert to much more, and more alert to things and ideas much more serious than our driving skills.

Be on your toes. Be alert. The apostle Peter writes *“Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings. And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen.”* (1 Peter 5:8–11, NIV84) *“Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour:”* (1 Peter 5:8, KJV)

We, too, are to be sober, self-controlled and vigilant. As we are constantly alert to our enemies and fighting them, we pray with the Psalm-writer: *“Teach me, O Lord, to follow your decrees; then I will keep them to the end. Give me understanding, and I will keep your law and obey it with all my heart. Direct me in the path of your commands, for there I find delight. Turn my heart toward your statutes and not toward selfish gain. Turn my eyes away from worthless things; preserve my life according to your word. Fulfill your promise to your servant, so that you may be feared. Take away the disgrace I dread, for your laws are good. How I long for your precepts! Preserve my life in your righteousness.”* (Psalm 119:33–40, NIV84) Amen.