

## **“A Big Fat Zero”**

Ephesians 2:1-9

“This We Believe” Sermon Series

The Fourth Truth: God’s Love Is Not for Sale

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Have you ever thought of salvation as a business transaction between yourself and God? Of course you have. If you don’t believe me, then ask yourself whether or not you agree with the following statement: “God helps those who *help themselves*.” This familiar saying, which, for the record, is not a quote from the Bible, suggests that salvation is some sort of deal we have to seal with God in order for it to be successful. So we tell ourselves that if we just live morally upright lives, we’ll be able to justify our sins in the end. Then we will receive the big payoff -- the salvation of our souls from eternal separation from God.

This is certainly the end we want. After a life of racking up a personal inventory of failures and successes in our private and professional lives, we expect ourselves to end up on the plus side of the life and love ledger. We want to make sure we do all we can to secure a spot in God’s Book of Life.

I’ve got some potentially unpopular news, however, for we who are Christians of the Reformed theological tradition. Keeping score of our sins and successes in order to try and secure our salvation has but one bottom line in the final ledger of life – and that bottom line is a big, fat zero.

Before I explain the biblical and theological reasons why I’m denouncing this sort of spiritual accounting on our part, consider this story I read a few days ago in Reader’s Digest.

It’s the story of a World Trade Center survivor named Tania Head. You may be familiar with what happened since her story received lots of publicity and to her giving speeches to students, tours of Ground Zero, and being president of the non-profit World Trade Center Survivors’ Network. As senior editor of *The New Republic* magazine, Michael Crowley, recounts it, Tania Head had been trapped in her Merrill Lynch office on the 78<sup>th</sup> floor of the south tower. With her clothes on fire, she miraculously crawled to safety, becoming just one of 19 people to escape from the floors above the impact of the hijacked airliner. On her crawl out, she was handed an inscribed wedding ring from a dying man. Perhaps ironically, she later found out her fiancé, a man named Dave, had been killed in the North Tower.

In 1997, however, this moving and remarkable tale of salvation from evil sparked flames revealed Tania Head to be no more than what Crowley has called a “horror huckster.” Head’s claims to having degrees from Harvard and Stanford were disputed; so, too, any record of her having been employed by Merrill Lynch. As for her fiancé, “Dave” -- that was news to Head’s family and friends who’d never heard of him.

I’m still shaking my head and trying to keep from being sick to my stomach that anyone would take advantage of people’s sympathies and of the desperate need for stories of hope and redemption in the aftermath of a truly evil event. Interestingly and ironically enough, I don’t subscribe to Reader’s Digest. Nor do I have a habit of purchasing it as the checkout lane of the grocery store. The May issue promised, however, that I’d read about thirty-five inspiring people. Those stories are indeed there, but unfortunately so is Tania Head’s accounting of herself and this tragedy. When you add up her story of saving herself from permanent suffering and death, and of all she did in the aftermath to pretty much boast about it, you know what you get? A big, fat zero. I trust God is helping her, because it sure doesn’t seem she’s helped herself.

We are desperate to end up in the winning column. This desperation can lead to both subtle and extreme sinful self-denials and public deceptions. Spiritually speaking, believing we can spin our life stories in such a way as to prove that we’ve had a part in saving ourselves, well, this is also sinful self-denial and deception. In our Presbyterian tradition, we must instead take account that there is nothing we can do to warrant God’s saving grace. Nothing about our lives adds up to the ability to earn salvation.

Our firm bottom line when it comes from salvation is that it is 100% a holy gift. As Pastor Stephen Plunkett explains in the fashion of Martin Luther, we are all but beggars in need of this grace. As he explains in his book, [This We Believe](#), “The only thing that saves us ... is the grace of God – the pure, unqualified, unmitigated grace of God. In fact, it is entirely impossible for any person, no matter how accomplished or intelligent or well-meaning or ‘religious,’ to win God’s favor by good deeds. The monk in the monastery cannot do it; the hard-working businessperson cannot do it; the compassionate pastor cannot do it; the nurturing homemaker cannot do it; the self-giving parent cannot do it; the obedient son or daughter cannot do it; the morality-driven special-interest group cannot do it; *no human being can do it.*”

This biblical interpretation launched the Protestant Reformation. Among other things, the 16<sup>th</sup> century church was selling what were known as “indulgences.” This was

a slip of official papal paper that, once purchased, gave the buyer an official guarantee of salvation. Convenient, huh? Just buy a ticket to heaven!

These days we don't find the sale of indulgences. Yet other theological traditions in the Christian church still nonetheless hint around the need to buy a way to heaven. It's usually more subtle, but the sales pitch for buying God's love sounds like this -- *the more money you give to the church the more abundantly blessed you'll be*. And sometimes this "purchase" doesn't even involve money. You can also "purchase" salvation on the spot by saying a sinner's prayer and confessing Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior.

Now ... of course we must repent of sin and confess Christ. In our Reformed tradition, however, this is not a requisite step to being enfolded in His saving grace. It does not cause it to go into effect. We are not co-purchasers of our salvation. There is no itemized list of things we must do in order to earn and obtain it. Again, it's an unmerited gift of love *from God alone*. Jesus has made the purchase in full and at great cost, once and for *all*. We are but beggars called to Jesus' side to hold out our faithful hands and hearts in order to receive it again and again and be reminded that we cannot save ourselves.

This truth about unmerited salvation is, as Pastor Plunkett and many others have described it, absolutely extravagant. Trying to base "a relationship with God on anything but the outlandishly extravagant grace of God" creates a "theological problem of gargantuan proportions." How shall we live, especially as people who live in a culture of credentials, knowing that nothing we do adds up to saving our souls? What does life within this extravagant gift look like?

This is where reading the Letter to the Ephesians proves helpful to our faithful living. As the Renovare Spiritual Formation Bible points out, this letter of the apostle Paul to the church in Ephesus is "marked by a penchant for prayer and a bias toward action." It's all about shifting from "theory to practice," about living a life of "spiritual athleticism" that urgently summons us to keep accepting the grace in prayer and then rising up to do all things for and in Christ. We hear this, especially, in Ephesians 2:8-10, where Paul wrote, "By grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works."

So let's get up from these pews and get out there to do good works in the name of Jesus. Let's do it without boasting and with a healthy, humble faith. May we never do

it to score salvation points with God. May we instead always strive to make our good works an eternally grateful celebration of the free gift of saving grace we have taken to heart. Exhibit the gift! And above all, let us center our lives in prayer. In a life of “spiritual athleticism,” prayer provides the conditioning to run the race.

We are indeed a congregation that prays and puts our faith in action. We don't care for one another in prayer and presence so we can invest in salvation. We know that we do all we do to gratefully mirror the gift. We live out the liberating love of our Lord. On this count, we are showing the world that we are 100% full of grace! Amen.