

*God of mercy, be with us as we seek your Word, as Nicodemus did. Let your Word guide us through our whole lives. Amen.*

Last Wednesday, a group of young adults from Lake Edge met in the basement room of Glass Nickel Pizza, just down the road. At the request of one of our members, the discussion topic was the TV show [The Good Place](#).

Have you seen that one?

It's a fantastic comedy starring Ted Danson and Kristen Bell, that recently finished its second season. The premise of the show is that Eleanor, Kristen Bell's character, has died.

But it's OK. She's in the good place. She's got lots of wonderful new neighbors, including her soul mate, Chidi. There's bottomless frozen yogurt, and you can drink as much wine as you want but never end up with a hangover. Eleanor should be set!

Except, it's clear from the get-go that Eleanor does not belong in the good place. There's been a mistake. So, what should she do now?

The reason Eleanor knows she's in the wrong place is that the whole thing is based on a point system.

For example, telling a woman to smile is negative 53.83 points. Sexual harassment will cost you 731.26 points. Hugging a sad friend is positive 4.98 points, and giving out full-sized candy bars at Halloween gains you 633.59 points. Committing genocide is negative 433,115.25 points, while ending slavery is positive 814,292.09 points!

Michael, Ted Danson's character, seems to think that Eleanor spent her whole life as an activist for human rights, earning lots of points.

But she didn't. Eleanor could hardly have been more self-centered.

Based on the judgment system, she knows that she doesn't belong.

That's why we were discussing this show at a gathering of church folks.

*Does our eternal destiny depend on our earthly actions?*

*If so, how can we ever be *good enough* to make it to the good place?*

*If *not*, why bother being good at all?*

*And what does the Bible have to say about all this?*

Well, it turns out that the Bible's answers are complicated and sometimes contradictory.

In Matthew 25, Jesus is portrayed as a majestic arbitrator, sitting on a throne, judging all of humankind. Those who spent their lives caring for others who were hungry, thirsty, marginalized, poor, sick, or imprisoned, go to the right of the throne, into eternal life. And those who did not care for these vulnerable people go to the left of the judge, into eternal punishment.

In Revelation 20, Jesus is again seated on a throne, and the scroll of life is opened in order to judge the dead, based on what they had done in life. Those whose names aren't on the scroll are thrown into the lake of fire... which is presumably a bad thing.

Based on these passages, it seems like the point system in *The Good Place* has some merit.

But then Colossians tells us that if we died in Christ, we are also raised with Christ. Our life is hidden in Christ, and only revealed when Christ is revealed, and we are revealed with him in glory. (Col 3:1-4)

This is a whole lot of words to basically say that our salvation relies on Christ alone.

Romans 14 tells us that if we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. Christ is the Lord of both the dead and the living, and we are not meant to judge others. So God is the only one who has any say in our eternal fate, and our faith in Jesus is more important than our actions on earth. (Rom 14:7-13)

Jesus also tells us that in his Father's house there are many rooms, and he will come to bring his followers to the room prepared for them. (John 14:1-4)

And in Matthew, Jesus encourages his followers by telling them that their burden is heavy to carry in life, but that his own yoke is easy, and his burden is light. (Matt 11:28-30)

These verses don't necessarily tell us *how* we are judged, but at least they give us some promise of comfort in the afterlife.

The messages in the Bible are not consistent.

It seems like our actions in this life matter, at least on some level.

But are they the deciding factor in our eternal life or punishment? It's hard to tell, since Scripture also gives us images of unconditional comfort and peace.

And anyway, what kind of God would create humankind in the divine image, but then allow for some of those people to be separated from God for all eternity? How does that fit with the truth we know, that God is love? (1 John 4:8)  
Depending on your interpretation, salvation could be based on a wide range of things, from our own actions in life to God's own discretion.

And then there's the passage from Ephesians today.

For 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. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

Compare that with Romans 3, verse 28:

We hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.

These are the passages that formed Martin Luther's understanding of God's relationship with humanity.

After spending years believing that he was not good enough to deserve God's love, Martin Luther became an incredible Bible scholar. He taught himself Greek and Hebrew – and let me tell you from my personal experience, that would have been no picnic – he taught himself the languages in which the Bible had been written, in order to re-translate the whole thing for himself and for other German speakers.

Luther gained a more intimate understanding of Scripture than most people.

Studying the Bible turned his theology from one of judgment to one of grace.

He became convinced that God's love for humankind is unconditional.

It is based on grace.

It does not depend on our own good works, like the point system in *The Good Place*. Instead, God's love, and our salvation, is purely a gift from God – a gift we can learn about through our faith in God and God's Word.

Praise God!

This means that our responsibility is to follow God as closely as we can, but not to worry too much when we fail to miss the mark. We will certainly have another chance to try, and maybe next time we'll do better.

Even though there are Bible passages that teach something different than salvation by grace through faith, *this* is the interpretation that we, as Lutherans, choose to believe.

In fact, this is the understanding of eternal life that nearly all Protestant Christians believe in.

Though there are various interpretations of God's love and eternal life throughout Scripture, there are good reasons that so many of us follow this one.

Salvation by grace through faith is the way that God has most consistently related to humankind throughout history.

Consider Abraham.

He followed God. But he messed up.

Abraham doubted God's promise of descendants, so he took matters into his own hands and fathered a son by a woman who was his employee, which by definition, qualifies their relationship as rape. And then, when they became inconvenient, Abraham sent his firstborn son and his mother away, without any kind of protection or security.

But God still cared for Hagar and Ishmael. They still received God's blessing. And God eventually granted Abraham a child by Sarah, and descendants as numerous as the stars.

That's grace.

Though, Abraham almost messed the whole thing up again. When Isaac was somewhere between infancy and adulthood – old enough to carry a heavy load of firewood – Abraham took him up a mountain. And he prepared an altar for sacrifice, with the wood that Isaac had carried, with the intention of sacrificing Isaac on that altar.

Abraham almost killed his son, the child of promise.

But God stayed Abraham's hand.

That's grace.

Or consider Joseph.

He bullied his brothers and made their lives intolerable. So they tricked him and faked his death, and sold him into slavery. But many years later, both Joseph and his brothers had a chance at repentance and reconciliation. Their

forgiveness of one another saved the Hebrew people in that moment, and made possible God's act of salvation to come in the book of Exodus.

That's grace.

Or consider King David.

He raped another man's wife. He impregnated her. David killed the woman's husband to hide his crime. And yet, David was the greatest king ever to rule over Israel. He did great things, he repented of his sins against Bathsheba and Uriah, and God still blessed his reign despite his tremendous errors.

That's grace.

Similar stories could be told about God's followers from Moses to Mary Magdalene, from Paul to Mother Teresa, and about every one of us.

We try our best. And we mess up.

Like Nicodemus, we are sometimes ashamed of God, and so we seek spiritual guidance when we think no one else will notice – in the middle of the night. Under the cover of darkness.

Like the Hebrew people, we sometimes lose faith. Instead of looking to God for help, we need the equivalent of a serpent on a pole to be our guide, to bring us back to faith.

And God loves us anyway, just as God has loved countless faithful people throughout history, even those who have made massive mistakes.

We believe that we are saved by God's grace, and not by our own works!

We do our best to follow God, because we know that is what God would want. But when we fall short, we also rest assured that God still loves us.

No matter what.

That's grace.

For by grace we have been saved through faith. This is not our own doing; it is the gift of God. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

Thanks be to God.

Amen.