



**Pelagianism:**  
**Can't We Just Earn Our Way Into Heaven?**  
**2 Timothy 1:1-10**  
Rev. Jenny McDevitt  
February 5, 2023

*Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, for the sake of the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus, To Timothy, my beloved child: Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord. I am grateful to God — whom I worship with a clear conscience, as my ancestors did—when I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day. Recalling your tears, I long to see you so that I may be filled with joy. I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you. For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands, for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline. Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel, in the power of God, who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace, and this grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior Jesus Christ, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.*

I am grateful that you have stayed with me through what is now four weeks of heresy — though, again, I do think it's important to clarify, in talking about particular heresies, we are of course also talking about particular orthodoxies, or particular doctrines, or what the church has come to understand as "right theologies." Sometimes, though, we can learn just as much, or even more, about what we do believe by considering what we don't believe.

So the first week, we looked at Marcionism. And if you remember, Heather nearly staged a coup with our children by "suggesting" she didn't need to read the whole Bible, just the parts she liked. Marcion argued that as Christians, we didn't need the Old Testament — that it was full of the law, while the New Testament was full of Jesus and grace and that was more than enough, thank you very much. That has never been the perspective of our tradition, however. We recognize ourselves as part of a larger story, and we recognize that the God throughout the entirety of scripture, both testaments, is a God who does indeed get frustrated with humanity, but also is a God who stops at nothing to stay connected to humanity and to declare unfailing love for humanity.

The second week, we looked at Arianism. Arius loved God with all his heart, soul, strength, and mind, and elevated God so highly that he ended up arguing that Jesus was not really divine, because, he believed, that would have belittled the God who created the cosmos. God and Jesus are similar, he said, but not the same. Jesus is a really good human, but still just a human.

The third week, we looked at Docetism. And Docetism swung around the other way when it comes to Jesus, saying there's no way Jesus could have been human, because humans have bodies and bodies are,

well, messy and sometimes disgusting, and *that* would be demeaning to God. Jesus just looked human, he wasn't actually human.

Neither Arianism or Docetism made it long within our tradition, though, because both of them, in their own ways, sought to resolve a mystery that our faith insists is central to who we are and what we believe: we believe that Jesus was both entirely divine and entirely human at the same time, and no, we can't actually explain that and no, we can't actually fully wrap our heads around that, and that's where faith steps in. Both Arianism and Docetism were rooted in a deep love of God, and a desire for people to understand more clearly the intricacy and nuance of God. To push too hard in one direction, though, is to suffer loss in the other direction. It matters that God's own self dwelled within Jesus. And it matters that Jesus was fully human, with a human body. Giving up either one of those actually leads us to either a more detached God, or more detachment from ourselves and our neighbors and our collective humanity, and that is where we get into dangerous theological territory. Because God himself or herself walked on this earth — to come alongside us, and if God for a time had a body — then every body has some spark of God still within it.

So that's where we've been — and it's been a heady few weeks, so we're actually going to conclude this series this week, because if we're going to wrap up a heady series about theological correctness, the absolutely right place to do that, is with a conversation about grace.

To do so, we turn to Pelagius, a British monk, and his heretical legacy, Pelagianism. Now, in the interest of giving Pelagius a fair shake, I want to ask you, and you can respond with a show of hands or just in your own mind if you don't want to self-identify here, but I want to ask you:

Who here, when you were a student, liked to get As?

Who here thinks that practice makes perfect, whether it's ballet or basketball or parenting or praying or staying on pitch?

Who here would prefer to avoid group projects, because it's easier to just take responsibility for yourself?

Who here doesn't just believe, but knows, beyond a shadow of a doubt, there is a right way and a wrong way to load the dishwasher?

If you had any moment of self-recognition in anything I just said, first of all, you are my people, and second of all, you were Pelagius' people, too — at least a little bit.

For better or for worse — or really for better *and* for worse — Pelagius had high standards for himself and for everyone around him. He believed that perfection was actually possible, at least in terms of living up to every standard set forth by God. If God asks it of us, he believed, then it is possible for us to achieve it. It would not be reasonable for God to ask it of us otherwise. The 10 Commandments, for example, were not just a set of ideals to strive towards — they were all fully within human reach if humans just tried hard enough, with enough willpower and self-discipline. God made us, Pelagius believed, and would not have made us to fail, so it must be possible for us to live a sinless life, if we just do the right things and avoid the wrong things.

The thing about Pelagius, though, was that he didn't just think that for himself — he thought it for everyone, and he thought it loudly. Publicly. Here's why: Pelagius was in and around the church in the 400s, not terribly long after Constantine made Christianity the official church of the state. And so he was in and around the church when the church was being inundated with new converts — some of them joining from a place of genuine piety, some of them joining out of curiosity, some of them joining out of casual "going along with the crowd," and some of them joining from a place of political strategy. And the church, also overwhelmed by the numbers of people, decided it was better to say, "Come on in, and we'll teach you the faith along the way," rather than say, "You can't come in until you you know enough doctrine, or demonstrate enough holiness." Pelagius felt that was leading to a watering-down of the true faith, and so he doubled-down on what he understood to be faithful living. If you are a true follower of Christ, he declared, you will find

within yourself the capacity to do everything scripture lays out for us to do. And doing everything God lays out for us, he further declared, was how one found their way to salvation.

That way of thinking, however, rightly riled up other theologians, most notably Augustine, known also as Saint Augustine. Augustine agreed that as Christians behavior matters, and we are called to pursue righteous living, but took issue with everything else Pelagius had to say. Augustine said that as humans, we are fundamentally incapable of reaching God on our own — that we are dependent up something called grace. Grace, he said, is divine assistance in doing what we cannot do for ourselves, and it exists independent of our own abilities. Grace is a gift, freely given, not something that is earned or accomplished, won or lost. Grace is the reason we baptized Molly Frances this morning — not because she has earned it, but because grace welcomes her.

To make his point, Augustine turned to scripture. Jesus himself, he pointed out said, “The Spirit is willing, but flesh is weak.” In Romans, Paul writes that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God; they are now justified by grace as a gift.” In his letter to Timothy, that Sarah read from, Paul reiterates again that grace was a given as a gift, this time specifying that it was a gift given before the beginning of time, a gift that the world has never not known.

He turned to scripture, but he also to turned to life, real actual life, and asked Pelagius: Have you ever known someone who is perfect? Are you yourself perfect and sinless and beyond reproach? To this, Pelagius ultimately had no good response. It has not happened, he admitted, but it is possible. If that is true, Augustine said, the only possible outcome is that we live ever-separated from God, until the hypothetical day when we maybe get it right. If we are responsible for our own salvation, if we can earn our way into heaven, but it requires perfection — heaven would be desperately and despairingly empty, filled only with a very lonely God and angels singing only to themselves.

Ultimately, the church sided with Augustine, and Pelagius was declared a heretic. Aside from remembering the undeniable importance of grace in our lives, we do well to remember the motivation behind Pelagius’ point of view, and learning from it.

Pelagius really did believe we were capable of being better than we have ever managed to be — and there is something hopeful and lovely in that. But Pelagius didn’t come to his conclusions because he set out to reflect upon God or explore theology. He came to his conclusions because he wanted to protect the church. He put himself in the position of warning against who weren’t acting the way he thought they ought to be acting. In the grand scope of human history, which, by default, includes the grand scope of church history, voices who have sought to protect the church by keeping others out are ultimately not the voices who carry the day or carry the church forward. That is the legacy of grace. *Grace* carries the day and carries the church forward.

One final note, though — our actions do matter. We are saved by grace, not to live lives in which we are careless and casual. We are saved by grace, and we are transformed by grace — and when we understand that, when we *really* understand that — our lives cannot help but reflect it.

We asked Jessie and Graham earlier today — do you understand your child to be loved by God, a recipient of God’s grace? That question, and the response given, shapes everything else that happens with the sacrament.

Do you understand yourself to be loved by God, a recipient of Gods’ grace? May we let that question, and the response given, shape everything else that happens with our lives.