

Practicing Resurrection...Truly Amazing Grace!

Ephesians 2:1-10

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For the last two Sundays, Paul has provided a big-screen view of God's redemptive purpose. We unpacked his over-the-top celebration of God's predestined path by which chosen people receive great news for everyone. Last Sunday we heard Paul's prayer, that we *know Jesus Christ better*, and that our spiritual *eyes open* to the *hope*, the *riches*, and the *incomparable power* that we have in his resurrection. In chapter 2, Paul gets personal---he tells us that we are worse off than we thought, but that God is kinder than we ever could imagine.

The first three verses offer a dismal diagnosis of life without Christ. When I first studied for the ministry, one of my professors used to say, "The good news is bad news before its good news." In verse 1 Paul said *as for you*, meaning the Gentile believers, they had been spiritually *dead in their sins*; they *used to live* as pawns of Satan. And in verse 3 he challenges his fellow Jews, despite knowing the true God, Paul writes that *all of us* used to *gratify the cravings of our sinful nature...following its desires and thoughts; like the rest* [the Gentiles] *we were by nature objects of wrath*. Even when believing in the truest religion, it's not possible for sinful people to make themselves worthy in God's eyes. As he wrote in Romans 3:23: *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*.

As I said last week, a yawning chasm is a great way to illustrate the reality that all people fall short of the glory of God. The universal human tendency is to want to connect with God, to commune with God, receiving His blessing and His eternal life. But the problem is the chasm between sinful people and the holy God is far too vast for people to enter God's Kingdom through their own effort. The Gentiles worshipped idols in their desire to connect with God. But if you're worshipping a false god of your own making, no matter how sincere you are, the effort ends in separation from God, which results in death. If you're trying to honor the true God, you come closer to God, but the distance is still so great, making us unworthy to commune with God. Likewise, doing good deeds, being a moral person, being a generous person, if they are the way you try to make yourself worthy of God, no matter how sincere, they end in death. Please understand, we are not saved by good works or deeds, many persons, including many Roman Catholics and Protestants seem to think that they will go to heaven because they've tried to be a good person. Please heed the scripture—there is no hope of salvation in being good person. And we're not saved by our faith, some Protestants think that it's by believing in God and believing in Jesus that we're saved—it's not. We're not saved by our faith. The Gospel is bad news before its good news. But don't miss the good news:

⁴But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.

What people can not do, God has done. His overflow of love makes dead people alive, by sheer grace, as he shares his resurrected life. He also shares His authority. Verse 6 says that *God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus*. Scholars debate what this means; most likely it's a metaphor to portray the church as a colony of heaven on earth. Not only will we be seated with Christ after we die, we commune with him now, our fellowship on earth is a glimpse of heaven and a sign of salvation, used by God *in the coming ages* [to] *show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus*.

Then Paul gives what I think is the most important summary of Gospel in the Bible. It's incredibly helpful because it's short and precise, protecting us from distortions that "put the cart before the horse."

⁸For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—⁹not by works, so that no one can boast.

What people could not do; God has done. Anticipating our tragic efforts to connect with Him, God predestined a pathway of salvation. In making the Jews His people, sending His Son as their Messiah, letting him become a crucified Messiah, then raising Jesus from the dead, God has built a bridge from heaven to earth. The bridge was built by sheer grace; simply because God loves us and wants to love us into eternity. We are saved by grace. The Gospel is the announcement of God's gift—there is a bridge to heaven across the chasm—Jesus Christ!

To understand God's grace, think of the grace that we sometimes experience from people. A little girl brought home a chocolate teddy bear from a gift exchange at her school. The next day her mother opened her bedroom door, only to catch her three year old son red-handed, chomping down his sister's chocolate teddy bear. He began to sob his confession. The mother said, "You'll have to tell your sister when she gets home."

The afternoon was torture. When his sister got home he ran to the door and with a torrent of tears cried out, "I'm so sorry, I ate your teddy bear." And his big sister took him in her arms, kissed him, and said, "It's OK, I love you anyway and always."

Though he was still crying, the little boy began to giggle; tears of regret became tears of joy, and he gave his sister a big bear hug.

That's grace. Between people, grace restores relationships and deepens peoples' love. God's grace is truly amazing, because there is nothing we can offer Him other than our willingness to receive. And when we receive it, it restores our relationship with God, enabling us to live with Him forever. And we find ourselves loving God in return, even trusting Him with our lives.

Receiving this grace and growing in trust is called faith. We are not saved from separation from God and death by our faith; we are saved by God's grace, through faith. Faith is necessary for a relationship to happen, but our faith does not make salvation happen; our faith allows us to benefit. As I said last week, a rich uncle could predetermine that you are to inherit \$10 million. You would become a millionaire by sheer grace; yet if you won't cash the check, you die a pauper!

And as God's grace enables our faith, God's grace also empowers good works. Good works don't save us; we are saved by grace, through faith, for works. Friends, the way to preserve the Gospel is to get your prepositions right—I call this "prepositional theology" ...by...through...for. Make sure you let the scripture determine where you put those prepositions: by grace...through faith...for works. Think of a train. A passenger car or caboose cannot pull the locomotive! Re-arranging grace, faith, and works destroys the Gospel message, turning Christianity into just another religion of trying to get God to like us.

Paul crowns this marvelous section by turning the concept of "works" on its head, he says what matters most are the good deeds that God does. Look at verse 10 on the screen:

¹⁰*For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*

So turn to someone right now and tell him or her "You're a piece of work." Actually, it would be better to say, "You're God's best work!"

On this Father's Day, I remember when Michelle was little, and I would say "You're my best girl." I said that because I hugged so many kids at church, I wanted her to know that her Daddy loved her most. When Deborah came along she also was my "best girl," Michelle became my "best big girl."

Our Heavenly Father doesn't love some people more than others. All are precious, even those who won't trust Him or love Him. God created each person unique. When we enter into union with Jesus Christ he restores us and prepares us for wonderful lives. He creates us for good works, because it's our great joy to be useful, to bless the world with deeds of love.

When Jesus began his ministry, he went to the home of Simon and Andrew. Andrew's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, *so Jesus went to her, took her hand, and helped her up. The fever left her and she began to wait on them.* (Mark 1:31) The joy of being healed was exceeded only by the thrill of serving the healer! What joy we have when the healing grace of God gives us the faith to serve Him with good works. That's why Trinity church not only shares God's grace; we also help people discover their ministry in the church and their mission in the world. Most importantly, we want to help you learn to discern the good works God has *prepared in advance for you to do* as you go about everyday, ordinary life. God loves going ahead of His people to prepare situations where they discover that God has put people in their path who need their help. If we allow Him to show us who we are to help, He also shows us how we can help, along with the resources He has already arranged that will allow us to give that help. Whenever we discern that God is calling us to do a good work, we can trust that He has prepared the provision in advance because *we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*