

God's Work in Us

Ephesians 2:1-10

(Expanded Sermon Notes)



One summer during my college years, I worked at a lumber yard in Pittsburgh. As you can imagine, I worked with a whole host of characters. One of the areas I worked in was the staging yard, where we would assemble large orders for new construction. Often, those loads would include enough lumber to frame an entire floor of a house or trusses and sheeting for an entire roof. Often, they were so large that it took two forklifts to pick them up and load them on a flatbed. It was like synchronized swimming, but lumber yard edition! One day in the staging yard, I needed one of the large forklifts moved so that I could start building an order. However, I had not been trained to drive the forklifts yet. So, I went over to one of the characters that I worked with who was forklift certified and asked him to come move the lift. He was on his way out for lunch and told me, “Sometimes, when you need a drink of cool water, you can wait for someone to bring it to you, or you can get busy digging yourself a well.” I ended up going to get the manager, who trained all the forklift drivers and asked for a quick lesson. An hour later, I was able to drive the lifts around the yard without too much risk to life and limb! While my coworker’s response wasn’t expressed in a helpful posture, his words have stuck with me. A passive approach to life might get you what you need, but more often than not, it is going to cost you far more than it will give. While a purposeful and proactive approach may mean you’ll make more mistakes, you are going to learn a whole lot more, and you will be rewarded far more.

The same is true in our spiritual lives. We were created to know God and enjoy him. The process of knowing and enjoying God is not a passive one. Sure, you can get to know God by passively being present in church and church activities. But will it lead to the profound joy that actively and purposefully pursuing God does? Absolutely not. Back to my coworker’s words, “Sometimes, when you need a drink of cool water, you can wait for someone to bring it to you, or you can get busy digging yourself a well.” In other words, **our new life is to be purposeful and not passive.**

1. Natures

- a. The two natures presented in this passage... God & Us.
 - i. **God is... sovereign and gracious.**
 - 1. This is something that we saw in chapter one when Paul laid the theological foundation explaining the character and nature of God.
 - 2. Let's review that foundation. He first told us that it was God who had blessed us, revealed himself to us, saved us, sealed us, and all of this was according to his will and purposes. Then Paul, in a densely worded sentence, reminds us of who Jesus is, as the one who has all authority, is above all things, and is greater than all names in this age and the age to come. The simple truth that Paul sets forth in chapter one that God is strong enough, gracious enough, and determined enough to redeem broken humanity, and that is praiseworthy!
 - ii. **We are... rebellious and needy.**
 - 1. This is the contrast to whom God is. Yes, we are created in God's image (Gen. 1:26), however, we like Adam before us, have chosen rebellion and our own autonomy over relationship with God.
 - 2. **This contrast between God and us is actually really important.** We might read passages like this and feel as if Paul's words are hurtful or demeaning rhetoric. But that only comes from a man-centered perspective. If we have a God centered perspective, Paul's words are actually wonderfully good news! Remember, something you have heard me say is that, the Bible is a lens and mirror. A lens to see God clearly and mirror to see ourselves clearly. This is one of those passages that brings clarity in spades. Let's explore why Paul's words are such good news.
- b. EFCA SOF – Humanity → "By nature and by choice."
 - i. ***The Human Condition* – "We believe that God created Adam and Eve in His image, but they sinned when tempted by Satan. In union with Adam, human beings are sinners by nature and by choice, alienated from God, and under His wrath. Only through God's saving work in Jesus Christ can we be rescued, reconciled and renewed."** – EFCA SOF Article #3.
 - 1. The first two verses make our position before God clear.
 - a. **V.1 - It was necessary that the readers should be raised to life, because they were spiritually dead, severed and alienated from God, the source of true life. Their spiritual death was the result of their "trespasses and sins"**—two words which are used as synonyms in the Pauline writings. Etymologically they may mean respectively "falling aside" and "missing the mark," but in practice they are interchangeable (in the plural, at least). NT parallels to the use of "dead" in a spiritual sense here and in v. 5 are found in Rom. 11:15; Eph. 5:14; Col. 2:13.¹
 - b. **V. 2 – "Age & World" - Doubtless the two words are used together for emphasis here. As John Stott puts it, both words 'express a whole social value system which is alien to God.** It permeates, indeed dominates, non-Christian society and holds people in captivity. Wherever human

¹ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1984), 280.

beings are being dehumanized—by political oppression or bureaucratic tyranny, by an outlook that is secular (repudiating God), amoral (repudiating absolutes), or materialistic (glorifying the consumer market), by poverty, hunger, or unemployment, by racial discrimination or by any form of injustice—there we can detect the sub-human values of “this age” and “this world”.²

2. Paul makes it clear, we are by nature and by choice alienated from God. Again, this can be a difficult thing for us to wrap our minds around as it seems contradictory. How can we be rebellious by nature and by choice?
 - ii. **“A chip off of the old block.”** → My dad and I look the same. In fact, we not only look the same, we have the same mannerisms, the same posture, and we even clear our throats the same way. Odd fact, I know, but it is true. At one event my dad I were standing next to each other, and out of the corner of my eye I realized we were standing in the exact same position! Not close, not similar, the exact same position. Realizing this, I quickly changed my position! I am in many ways a chip off of the old block.
 1. I am just like my dad and yet I chose to stand in the same position that he did. It is both by nature and by choice.
 - iii. **This is what the Bible means when it talks about the “sons of disobedience” and “were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.”**
- c. **Truth and Grace**
- i. Grace is only significant and formative if the truth of God’s nature and our nature is clear.
 - ii. **Grace** - One of the central concepts of the Scriptures, grace speaks of God’s loving actions toward creation and toward humankind in particular. Grace is the generous overflow of the love of God the Father toward the Son, Jesus Christ. This love is most clearly demonstrated to humans through God’s selfless giving of Jesus to enable people to enter into a loving relationship with God as the Holy Spirit enables them.³
 1. *Common grace* speaks of God’s extension of favor to all people through providential care, regardless of whether or not they acknowledge and love God.⁴
 2. *Efficacious grace* refers to the special application of grace to a person who comes by faith to Christ for salvation. It is the special act of God that brings about the true salvation of a person.⁵
 - iii. If grace is truly unmerited favor it means that there is a standard to be held accountable to. That standard in the Biblical view is the Holiness of God. God is in ethical terms, the ultimate good, and anything against that is evil. Without this standard, grace means nothing because grace is not needed. On the other side, grace is what makes truth digestible. If grace was not present and the Bible only told us of our cosmic rebellion

² Francis Foulkes, *Ephesians: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 10, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 77–78.

³ Stanley Grenz, David Guretzki, and Cherith Fee Nordling, *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 56.

⁴ Stanley Grenz, David Guretzki, and Cherith Fee Nordling, *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 56.

⁵ Stanley Grenz, David Guretzki, and Cherith Fee Nordling, *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 56.

that resulted in our brokenness and offered no hope, it would be absolutely cruel. Instead, it gives us grace and truth and points us to the persistent love of God.

2. Persistence

- a. V. 4 - “...because of the great love with which he loved us...”
 - i. There is a way of release from the hopelessness of existence in alienation from God—an existence which is no better than death—and it is provided by God, because he is “rich in mercy.” This characterization of God is frequent in the OT: he “abounds in mercy” (Exod. 34:6; Ps. 103:8; Jon. 4:2, etc.); indeed, he “delights in mercy” (Mic. 7:18). With his mercy is conjoined his love: “the great love with which he loved us”—Gentiles and Jews together. The pronoun “us” here is comprehensive, not exclusive—not “us in distinction from you” but “us together with you,” “all of us alike.” Men and women owe their salvation to the mercy and love of God. “God shows his love for us in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8).⁶
 - ii. Again, our eyes are drawn away from ourselves and towards God. And the God that Paul speaks of is one that is distinctly different from the other gods of the Roman world. They were fickle and vengeful. The God Paul speaks of is loving and gracious and persistent. His love was never predicated on our action, but it was extended over them by his will and character to do so.
- b. **The grace of salvation. (vv. 8-10)**
 - i. Coming out of the opening verses of this section, we now we can appreciate why Paul so excitedly emphasizes that we’re saved by grace alone (**v 8–10**): “It is by grace you have been saved ...” (**v 8**). Our salvation is entirely God’s generous and costly gift. We receive it “through faith ... the gift of God” (**v 8**). God’s grace is the whole origin of our salvation—the faith created in us by his work is what enables us to receive his salvation. Like any good preacher, Paul clarifies with a negative: it is “not by works ... no one can boast” (**v 9**). We’re not saved as a reward for our good deeds, our religious performance, or our church ministry. We’ve nothing to boast about (except the cross of Christ, Galatians 6:14)—whether in cocky self-confidence before God, arrogance towards unbelievers, or competition with other Christians. We were not saved, and will never be kept saved, by our good works of service, but by Christ’s good works of service.⁷
 - ii. It was by God’s persistence that we have experienced his grace.
- c. **Grace is our motivation. → Obedience is God’s love language.**
 - i. Grace received is always to be the motivation for faithfulness in the life of a believer.
 - ii. The Christian has the opposite motivation than those who are in the world. We operate out of received love not earned love.
 - 1. But the good works of Christ have saved us *for* doing good works in gratitude, for we are now “created in Christ Jesus to do good works” (Ephesians **2:10**).⁸

⁶ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1984), 285.

⁷ Richard Coekin, *Ephesians for You*, ed. Carl Laferton, God’s Word for You (The Good Book Company, 2015), 56–57.

⁸ Richard Coekin, *Ephesians for You*, ed. Carl Laferton, God’s Word for You (The Good Book Company, 2015), 57.

- iii. **Identity – Achieved or Received?**⁹
- iv. **An Achieved identity** is always constructed on your ability in the face of someone's failure.
 - 1. Sports, business, and academics are all in this area. My success or performance is not simply evaluated on its own basis. But its significance is directly compared to those who have done worse or better than myself.
 - 2. This so often turns into pride and arrogance. → You are only happy because you are better than others.
 - 3. The Pharisees had an achieved identity because they were better than others based on their holding to the law.
- v. **A received identity – This is an identity that is established by having the esteem of someone that you esteem.**
 - 1. This is the Bible's message the whole way through. Adam, Abraham, Moses, Noah, David → Received identity.
 - 2. The point of the law was to remind us of our need for a received identity and that the God of the universe not only loves us but can redeem us.
 - 3. This changes everything for us and positions us to be servants.
- vi. Our motivation is one of the key markers of the transformation that has occurred and is occurring.

3. Transformation

- a. By grace we are saved from our sin and for good works. (vv.8-10)
 - i. If we rewind back to week one, we talked about what we were saved from and saved for.
 - 1. Saved from – Our rebellion and sin.
 - 2. Saved for – Righteousness and good works.
 - ii. The key in understanding these good works is that they were prepared for us by God, and they come out of our transformation. That is, they are not merely done out of our flesh, but out of co-working with God.
 - iii. Here is how one commentator expresses it, **"We've been recreated by God's Spirit through the gospel because of a reason and for a purpose: the reason was God's grace expressed in Christ's life of good works unto death for us, and the purpose is the good works prepared for us to do in gratitude to him.** Understanding this distinction is enormously important. To know I am saved completely by God's grace in Christ liberates me from the pride of imagining I can save myself, and from the terror of realising that I can't! And to know that I've been saved for good works prepared by God liberates me from a lazy and loveless disengagement from the needs of the world, especially for the gospel, and also from ever feeling insignificant or useless. God has prepared good and different things for every one of us to do, as members of his gathering church."¹⁰
 - iv. R. W. Dale puts it, **'As the branch is created in the vine, we are created in Christ; as the fruits of the branch are predetermined by the laws of that life which it receives from**

⁹ I first heard this idea via Tim Keller. But you can find much on this from different psychologists (Erik Erikson, James Marcia, Jean Piaget, etc.).

¹⁰ Richard Coekin, *Ephesians for You*, ed. Carl Laferton, God's Word for You (The Good Book Company, 2015), 57.

the vine, so our “good works” which are the result of our union with Christ, are predetermined by the laws of the life of Christ which is our life ...¹¹

b. How are we intentionally serving?

- i. This is a key question for our lives. The question of intentionality.
- ii. God didn’t save us so that we might go on living as if all that has changed is the destination of our eternities. We are transformed into totally new people who are to live lives not only with a new perspective, but also new purposes.
- iii. However, God does not force us to follow him in his purposes. That is it is entirely possible to put our faith in Christ, and totally miss out on the good works he has prepared for us. How does this happen? → By not being intentional.
 1. **Intentionality is not about doing everything.**
 2. **Intentionality is about living purposefully within godly limits.**

c. Intentional & Purposeful → Prepared for good works.

- i. **You have been given a gift.**
 1. What do you get excited about? What do others tell you that are uniquely good at?
- ii. **Your gift is for God’s glory.**
 1. Who are you trying to make famous, yourself or God?
- iii. **Effective gifts require purposeful responsiveness.**
 1. Your “yes” is always a “no” for someone else. One of the greatest lies in the kingdom of God is that we need to do everything. What we need to do is be people who are purposeful and intentional in the seasons we’re in.
 2. There are some of us here today that need to stop doing two or three things that we are currently doing. And there are some of us here that need to start serving in our giftedness to the glory of God.

d. Intentional & Purposeful → Being purposefully responsive.

- i. **Resources:** Time, Talent, Treasure
 1. How am I investing my resources in the work of the kingdom?
- ii. **Margin:** Urgent or important?
 1. Am I reactive or proactive in my life? That is, do I spend more time reacting to urgent matters or proactively working to accomplish the truly important things? The key is understanding that not all that is urgent is important.
- iii. **Effort:** Obedience is never accidental.
 1. If you want to be obedient and purposeful in your walk with Jesus, it won’t accidentally happen. We know this is true in life just as much as it is true in faith. And we don’t need to overcomplicate it. Just take one obedient step at a time.

¹¹ Francis Foulkes, *Ephesians: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 10, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 85–86.