

LIFE WITH CHRIST

Reflections on Ephesians 2: 1-10

By Mike Frank

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On the cover: Luna Moth, painting by John Motian

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For over forty years it has been my privilege to be the pastor of Broadway Christian Church.

This book is written for all who have shared Christ with me and have allowed me to be their pastor.

PREFACE

We are about to begin a discussion on living the Christian life. This discussion is a bit frightening. It contains this idea: the Christian life means surrendering to Jesus. And that is always scary.

Here, then, is what we always need to remember. Christian surrender is not made to just anyone. It is made to Jesus. It is made to the Son of God who loves us, who died that we might have life with God.

The Christian life begins with repentance. There are no exceptions. All of us, in many different ways, have tried to run our own lives. Repentance says, "I was wrong. I am not God. I will, by God's grace, turn from my wicked willfulness and let God lead me. I will follow Jesus".

Perhaps the idea of surrender is still daunting. Can we really trust God with our lives? It is good, at this point to remember several things. In the first place, God made us. We have no claim on our lives. Instead, God does. But when we read scripture we see that God made us, not for pain and death, but for joy and life and fellowship with Him. It is the good Lord to whom we belong, not just any Lord. His claim of Lordship over us, then, should not be seen as a burden, but as a privilege. And the fact that we are frightened of this Lordship, the fact that we fight this Lordship constantly, betrays how deeply sin is entrenched in us.

Another way to understand the matter is this. We were made to have a Lord. But most of us want, in one way or another, to be our own Lord, to run our own lives. But I am not the lord I was made to serve. In fact, I am a bad lord, and if I continue to run my own life, I will ruin it and, finally, go to hell. The same thing will happen if I let another person be lord of my life, or an idea, or a philosophy, or even a job, a family, a nation. Finally, there is only one

Lord for us, the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the good Lord. Indeed, He is the only good Lord. Now we can see that not only is it true that we can trust God with our lives, but He is only one we can fully trust.

And so we have begun with the hard matters of the Christian life: repentance and obedience, an obedience that involves surrender and discipleship. But, now, we turn to scripture itself in order to understand what life with Christ is all about. We have spoken about changing our behavior, but the fact of the matter is that this changed behavior is made possible, and even a reality, by what God has done in His Son. It is, therefore, best to keep our eyes on Jesus, and not on ourselves. What He has done is the foundation for our life as Christians. His living presence is the enabling power we need to repent, obey and to follow Him. We now turn our attention to Paul's letter to the Ephesians, chapter two, verses one through ten.

EPHESIANS 2:1-10

And you he made alive, when you were dead through the trespasses and sins (2) in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among the sons of disobedience. (3) Among these we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of body and mind, and so we were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. (4) But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, (5) even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), (6) and raised us up with him, and made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, (7) that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. (8) For by grace you have been

saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God—(9) not because of works, lest any man should boast. (10) For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

It should be noted that, unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from the Bible are from the RSV.

Suggested Scripture:

Genesis 1-2

Psalm 23

Psalm 118

Psalm 136

Psalm 150

Luke 1-2

John 3

Galatians

Ephesians 1

James 1:16-18

Chapter One

Why Lance Learned to Ride

Last week, Lance appeared in our church on crutches. Imagine, then, that, after church, someone approaches Lance with a package and hires him to take that package sixty miles to Canton, by Tuesday morning. He then gives Lance the reins to a beautiful horse. Lance takes the package, his cheeks flushed with the joy of being hired to do a job and, also, with the joy of being given a new pet, the beautiful horse. Lance does wonder how his mother will like the horse, but, in spite of the worry, he takes the horse by the leash (for this is what he supposes the reins to be) and walks the horse behind him, on the road to Canton.

But sixty miles is a long way to walk, even without crutches and a horse to tend. And, so, even though Lance is persistent, by the time morning has come, he finds himself miles from Akron, and even more miles from Canton. He knows that the task is beyond his reach. By the time Tuesday morning has come Lance has not even reached Akron. He has, indeed, failed.

The fact of the matter is that Lance has failed the task, because he has not understood the situation. He simply is incapable of walking so far in less than two days, on crutches. What he also doesn't know is that by riding the horse he could have succeeded.

Our situation with God is like the situation of Lance and the task he has been given. For, like Lance, God has given us a task. It is described well in an old catechism: God made us to love Him, to enjoy Him, to serve Him. Paul describes it like this in Ephesians 1:12: we are to "live for the praise of (God's) glory." In Ephesians 2:10 Paul describes our task as doing good works. (Ah, yes, fellow Protestants, good works! The Bible says so.) Furthermore,

the problem we face is similar to the problem Lance faced. We have been given a task that is beyond our capabilities. But, like Lance's employer, God has given us a horse. He has made possible for us the accomplishment of a task that is impossible for us, without His help. That help is described in Ephesians 2:1 when Paul says: "and you He made alive when you were dead." You see, God hasn't literally given us a horse. What He has given us is far more wonderful than that. We will speak of that later.

Furthermore, our situation is like the situation of Lance in another way. Lance needs to understand what his capabilities are and what the capabilities of the horse are. Just so, if we are to become disciples of Jesus, if we are to follow Him, serve Him, be His people, then we must, like Lance, understand where we stand. We must understand what our lives are like without Jesus in our lives and how they will be with Him in our lives.

We begin by attempting to understand our situation without Christ. Paul tells us in Ephesians 2:1 that without Christ we are "dead".

What in the world is Paul talking about when he tells us that outside of Christ we are "dead"? It is obvious that this death does not refer to physical death (although, according to 1 Corinthians 15, there is a relation). What Paul is talking about is spiritual death. And this is, perhaps, best understood if we talk about relationships.

In the first place the natural man (that is, man without Christ) is dead to God. Without Jesus we cannot know God. Without Jesus we cannot love God as we should. Without Jesus we are helpless against the demands of false gods that we honor them. Furthermore, even if the natural man were to know the will of God (e.g. the law), he would do one of two things. He would either flat out rebel against God's will and do just the opposite, or he would obey it for the wrong reasons: that is, to feed his pride and to keep God at arms distance by seeking to win heaven without the help and presence of God.

In the second place the natural man is dead to his neighbor. He is unable to understand his neighbor as God understands him, that is, as someone for whom Jesus came. Thus the natural man is unable to rightly love his neighbor.

In the third place the natural man is dead to himself. He is unable to see himself as God sees him. He does not see that he is gripped by sin, unable to escape. He does not understand his need for Christ. He therefore is unable to love himself as he should. And so, in meeting the demands of sin, he neglects the needs of his soul. In seeking pleasure, he cannot find joy. In seeking what he thinks is lively, he sows the seeds of death. He is under the wrath of God, about to reap hell and he thinks all is well.

In this situation of death everything suffers. Let me give an example using the most intimate of human relationships: the husband-wife relationship. When I am in this situation of spiritual death I am unable to rightly love my wife. For instance, in all likelihood, I will expect her to meet those needs which only God can meet. Sooner or later my efforts to make her my god will doom our relationship. I will grow discouraged and disillusioned with her. She simply cannot meet those needs. And so, I will stop loving her and seek someone else better fitted to meet my needs. Of course, I will never find one who can meet these needs. Only Jesus can meet those needs. It is foolish to expect from my wife what she cannot give (or for the wife to expect this from her husband). If I do, I will destroy our marriage. And, so, I understand that only when Christ is at the center of my life can I receive my wife as she really is: a good gift from God.

Furthermore, in this situation of death, I will be unable to forgive my wife, who is simply a sinful human being whom God loves and sent His Son to save. At some time or other, because she is a sinner, she will surely wrong me. Only with Christ at the center of my life can I understand

this, only with Christ at the center of my life (and, therefore, living under His command to forgive others) can I forgive her.

Furthermore, in this situation of death, I will not understand myself to be the sinner that I am. I will, therefore, be unable to repent of my failures as a husband, failures which will surely occur since, like my wife, I am simply a sinner whom God loves and sent His son to save.

In the marriage vows we promise to cherish our spouse. Real cherishing takes wisdom and effort, neither of which is possible for the natural man. Only in Christ is this cherishing possible. There may possibly be a false cherishing in which the false illusion of the spouse as god is never shattered. But this would be a terrible thing, one which God certainly doesn't will. For, if this were to happen, at the end, when death separates the husband and wife, nothing would be left but darkness and despair. It is only when Christ is at the center of one's life (and the spouse received as a wonderful gift from the God who will never leave us or forsake us) that real and godly cherishing can take place.

To summarize: outside of Christ I am a fool, unable to please God, unable to rightly love my neighbor or myself. I am a slave to sin, dead to God, neighbor and self.

Furthermore, outside of Christ, the things of God will not help me. Caiaphas, the High Priest is a fine example of this. He was the Jewish High Priest when Jesus walked this earth. He knew the law, knew the prophets, knew the stories surrounding Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He was regularly in the temple and, even, on occasion, in the holy of holies, where the Presence of God was most fully manifested. And yet, when the Messiah came, Caiaphas laid hands on Him and gave Him to godless Gentiles to be crucified.

There he stands, Caiaphas, the natural man, steeped in right religion, unable to do the will of God. He stands before us as a mirror. He is the natural man, utterly dead to God, utterly in need of God's saving work in Jesus Christ, a work which makes alive those who are dead. He represents you. He represents me.

At this point someone might ask why it is so important to understand the spiritual deadness of the natural man. There are at least three reasons.

In the first place, we Christians have a tendency to forget. If we do not remember what we are like without Christ, we might return to reliance on the natural man instead of reliance on Jesus. The church of Galatia did that and Paul had to write them a letter. In that letter, Paul reminded them that only faith in Christ puts a man right with God. Only trusting one's life to Christ is the basis for living a new life.

In the second place, when we forget what it was like for us without Jesus, we have a tendency to despise other sinners. It is true—they are wretched men and women, unable to love as they should, unable to please God. Yes! That is what they are without Christ. Just like we were. But the fact of the matter is that our salvation should give us hope for our neighbor. We need to remember where we have come from, so we can love those who have not yet come.

In the third place, to remember that He made us alive when we were dead in our sins, is reason for praise. Come what may, this is true: God Almighty, while we were still His enemies, lifted us from the filth of sin and made us alive, giving us new hearts and the hope of eternal life. In all things, at all times, therefore, praise should mark our lives.

Suggested Scripture:

Psalm 51

Mattahew 19:16-30

Matthew 26: 31-35, 69-75

Luke 5:27-32

Romans 6-7

Chapter 2

Like a Moth to the Flame

We are dealing today with the first two verses of Ephesians 2. Again we must deal with the truth that we are spiritually dead outside of Christ. But, before we do, it is good to remember that this is not a matter of being morbid. Instead, we are able to admit the truth because God has loved us, in spite of our wretchedness. We are able to confess our wickedness because God has forgiven us. Furthermore, we admit the truth, not because we want to feel guilty, but because knowing the truth opens us to the saving love of God which we find in Jesus Christ.

Paul tells us that we were once dead in sins: sins in which we once walked. Here is a great irony. We, who were dead, once lived in sin. We once had a life full of movement and purpose, a life that was dead. We walked in sin. We were shaped by sinful habits. We set goals that were wicked, godless, part of the kingdom of death. We planned and exerted great efforts on behalf of the kingdom of death. Our tongues clacked on and on, our words, shaped by cleverness, maliciousness and death. Every relationship we had was shaped by sin and marked by death.

Paul tells us that in living thusly we were following the ways of the world. Now, the ways of the world appear a bit differently in every generation. For instance, “a prim and smug cruelty” might have defined the spirit of the Victorian age. For our generation the words “unfettered” and “unbridled” might better fit. In our generation, we simply want to believe that there are no rules. Thus, for instance, each person is encouraged to discover his or her unique makeup and to embrace it. And, we are told, our uniqueness is not to be governed by any outside notion of what it means to be human. Certainly God’s revelation is to have no place in this modern search for the self.

Thus, to give an extreme, but far too common, example, we find high school students encouraged to wonder whether or not they are heterosexual or homosexual. It is a great quest, filled with thoughtless experimentation. The only thing that seems to be certain for those experimenting is that there are no external rules that apply, certainly not from God.

The notion that this quest is valid and can provide a real understanding of who we are is, of course, a great foolishness which can be revealed by pressing the issue. For instance, what if I should discover, lurking within the depths of my being, pedophilia? What if I should discover a tendency to cruelty or pyromania? Or drug addiction? Or gluttony? Or pride? Or sloth? Or a hunger for power over others? Should I embrace these things because they seem to define who I am?

Of course not. What I should do is throw up my hands and cry out for mercy, because I have discovered that deep within me there is nothing good, only sin and death.

Paul also tells us that, while walking in sin, we have followed the ruler of the kingdom of the air. This is, of course, Satan. He is described as ruling the kingdom of the air. He is not described as ruling an island or a cave or a small country. No, he rules the air. And, thus, we see that his influence is everywhere. It is impossible for us to escape him, as long as we are outside of Christ.

What a great irony this is. Having sought to free ourselves from every authority we have become slaves to the great Enemy, slaves to the one who wants only to hurt us and, finally, to destroy us. How different Satan is from Christ. Satan seeks to molest and steal and destroy. Jesus, on the other hand, poured out His life that we might live.

How does God see us when we are dead in sins and trespasses? Perhaps He sees us as zombies. We are men and women who have been brainwashed, men and women who cannot see things as they really are, men and women

who are slaves to a foreign and malicious will. We are like drug addicts who promise one thing and, then, with great purpose, seek out more drugs. We are addicts to sin, to self. We cannot help ourselves. Outside of Christ, we are bound to sin, bound to the spirit of this age, to Satan himself.

Perhaps we are like a great silk moth flying in the forest. On the edge of the forest he senses a fire burning and turns toward it. He begins to fly. Faster and faster he flies. He cannot stop himself. He will find the fire and cast himself into it.

In the book by JRR Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, the hobbit, Frodo Baggins, is carrying a ring to Mount Doom. There he must throw the ring into the fiery bowels of the mountain and, thus, destroy it. On the side of the mountain the brave hobbit falters. He can walk no more. But he cannot go back. If he does there would only be terrible pain and slavery and destruction for himself and all of Middle Earth. And so, his faithful friend, Sam Gamgee, carries him the rest of the way.

It is like that for the Christian. We cannot go back. God has made us alive. And behind us is only the horrible slavery and death in which we once walked. And, so, we press on with our Lord Jesus. We press on to the final goal. We may, like Sam and Frodo, have to carry one another. We may discover that Jesus Himself is carrying us. But we press on to the final goal: that time when we will see God face to face, when the life we now have with Him by faith will find its fulfillment.

Suggested Scripture:

Luke 9:62

Romans 6

2 Corinthians 4-5

Chapter 3

The Twins Learn to Ride

In chapter one, Lance found that he needed to learn to ride. We can imagine that his efforts were met with great derision by his twin sisters, Sabrina and Samantha. But the third verse of the second chapter of Ephesians has shocking news for these dear, young ladies: they also need to learn to ride. For, in that verse, Paul tells us that “all of us” were once dead to God, all of us were once outside of Christ, walking in sin, following Satan. “All of us” includes the Apostle Paul. It includes Peter, the chief apostle. It includes John, the beloved disciple. It includes the Ephesians, who first read the letter. It includes everyone: our moms and dads, charming sisters such as Sabrina and Samantha, it includes you and me. All of us were once dead in sin, and, if we have not come to Christ, we are still spiritually dead. For, outside of Christ, we are incapable of doing the will of God. We need the help God offers us. We need Christ. All of us. Lance needed to learn to ride. We need to be saved.

The Pharisees in the time of Jesus didn’t know this. They were puzzled when Jesus ate with sinners. They grumbled when he allowed a wicked woman to wash his feet with her hair. Even when He explained the situation by saying that he had come, not for the righteous, but for sinners, they did not understand. They did not comprehend that they, too, were sinners, dead to God, in need of a savior.

Most of us know the story of the Prodigal Son. Some of us relate to the Elder Brother in that story. He was the good son, the one who stayed home and didn’t squander his money on wine and women. But the fact of the matter is that all of us have, at one time or another, been the Prodigal. When we assume the attitude of the Elder Brother and despise the Prodigal, it is not because our

righteousness has made us stuffy: it is because we have forgotten the dark death from which God has rescued us.

All of us, Paul tells us, have been caught up in sin which was our own choosing, sin which reaped death and merited hell. All of us.

In this same third verse Paul describes the nature of our sin vividly. The NIV has captured the poignancy of this description by translating the verse with words like “gratifying”, “cravings” and “desires”. What is described here is an addiction. Our relationship to sin is like an addiction.

Indeed, the urge to sin is like an itch that will not quit, an itch that demands to be scratched, an itch that gets worse after the scratching. It is like a hunger that makes even vile food taste good. And, although the sinning itself may involve skill and cleverness, wit and agility, there is, nonetheless, a stupor involved in the sinning. We are a bit like a con who skillfully lies to get money, and having gotten the money is compelled to use it to purchase drugs. There has been a kind of stupor to all he has done. His conning, skillful as it is, has been driven by one urge, the urge for drugs. He is aware of nothing else.

To be sure, there are many different forms of sin: some of them physically destructive, some of them socially abhorrent, some of them almost rooted in goodness. But they all have a common core: they separate the sinner from God, they come from the effort to live without God.

We recognize many forms of sin. For instance, it is obvious that addiction to alcohol, drugs, sex or gambling are forms of idolatry. That these are ways of being spiritually dead is also obvious. Likewise, the thief and murderer, the man obsessed with pornography are obviously people gripped by an addiction to sin that can easily be described as spiritual death. Some other forms are less obvious. Like, for instance...

Mrs. Tittletattle is a religious lady, but one given to gossip. She is a lively, interesting, hurtful gossip. Mrs. Tittletattle cannot help herself. She is the self appointed church critic and story bearer. She is addicted to self righteousness and has a streak of cruelty.

Mr. Abrasive has a tongue like a dull sword. And he enjoys plunging it in, crudely hacking away with it. He is a bully. He is addicted to pushing people around, to having his own way.

Mr. Subtle is suave, speaking the right word at the right time. He dresses impeccably, speaks words that are smooth and oily. His words, like the words of Mr. Abrasive, kill, but the victim is breathing his last before he spots the sword. Mr. Subtle is really no different than Mr. Abrasive. He, also, is a bully, addicted to having his own way. Mr. Subtle is very good at making money. He gives much of it to his church. He is, nevertheless, walking in sin.

Other forms of sin are more difficult to recognize. Patriotism that puts country before God is one. The love of family that results in the abuse of neighbor is another. The love of race in such a way that racism is the result is another. The love of ones work more than God is another. In these instances sin results from loving the good gifts of God more than God.

For instance, children are a gift from God. They are to be treasured. They are to be nurtured. They are to be loved. A parent needs to encourage them and let them know they are loved. They certainly are not to be abused. But they also need to be disciplined. An overweening doting on ones child will almost always result in a parent allowing that child to abuse another person in one way or another. In other words, someone who loves his children more than God will surely raise them up thinking that they are the center of the world. Too bad for anyone who gets in their way.

A church building is a good gift from God. But it is meant to be used. It is not meant to be protected as if it were more important than the people who use it, than those people for whom Christ died.

The law was a good gift from God. And yet, Paul, before he became a Christian, used his obedience to it to feed his self righteousness. It thus became for him an occasion to sin.

So we see that there are many forms of sin, some obvious, some cloaked because they imitate right behavior. But all bring spiritual death. All are evidence of an addiction to sin. And we, in one way or another, have been laid low by them. We who belong to Jesus should be the first to admit this. For the truth of matter is, as Paul says, that “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners” (1Timothy 1:15).

Paul concludes verse 3 by reminding us that we were all once “by nature objects of (God’s) wrath”.

Being under the wrath of God does not reveal a mean streak on God’s part. It is not a matter of whim. It is more like this. God’s wrath has always been directed against anything that would hinder his love and our joy. We have made ourselves into men and women who do just that. We hinder His love, and, thus block our eternal joy. Now, God is jealous for the well being of His people. But we, by our very sin, have become instruments of hurt directed against the well being of his people, against our own well being.

It is good that God is a jealous God. He is jealous over those He loves. He is jealous over those He seeks to bless. Our well being rests on the strength of that jealousy, on that wrath. It is our protection. And yet, we are fools. Instead of being protected by His jealousy, we have become “objects of wrath”. We have, by choosing sin and, therefore, spiritual death, contradicted the good will of God. We have, by choosing sin over God, become wicked role models for others, demonstrating contempt

for the glory God has sought to give. We have, then, endangered the possibility of the joy God wants to give to His people.

Our foolishness is unbounded. We have chosen to eat garbage instead of steak. We have denied our humanity, and become robots incapable of choosing to do what is good and true. We are fools. We have chosen to be fools. We are addicted to being fools. As such, we are objects of God's wrath. All of us. All of us have tasted of this darkness.

Some of us are still in it. For only Christ can draw us out. Only Jesus can give life where there was once death. That is why He came.

This, then, is the good news. This is the light which the darkness has not overcome. God has reached down to rescue us. His love is that great. And, thank God, it is powerful. More powerful, as we will see, than the treachery of our own hearts.

Suggested Scripture:

1 Timothy 1:12-17

John 1:1-18

Luke 15

Chapter Four

The Wonder of Riding

In the first three verses of chapter two of Ephesians, Paul describes the horrible situation in which we once found ourselves. “Here we were”, he says, “stuck in sin, serving Satan, objects of God’s wrath. Here we were, going to hell in a hand basket, unable to stop the fall. Here we were, gleefully going to hell in a hand basket: ignorant, defiant, spiritually thumbing our noses at God as we went.’ Reading this, we might wonder who could possibly rescue us.

God. “But God...”, Paul tells us in Ephesians 2:4. Here we were, stuck in a dangerous, indeed, hopeless, situation. But God has acted. God has made us alive when we were dead (alas, “gratefully dead”). God has acted. And He has succeeded. For what is impossible with man is possible with God.

He who made the world out of the chaos of nothingness has given to us, who were once dead in sin, life. He who gave the boy David victory over the giant Goliath has made us, who were once no people, His people. He who brought a man-child from the Virgin Mary has, while we were still His enemies, loved and redeemed us. He who is almighty, all knowing, all present has acted on our behalf. He who is holy and will not tolerate the presence of sin has made the coward Peter brave, and has made him His own. He who is holy and will not tolerate the presence of sin has made the killer Saul of Tarsus a gentle caretaker of His people, the Apostle Paul. He who created all things has called your name and mine, and has made us His own.

“But God”, Paul tells us, “is rich in mercy...” How else could we heed His summons to come to Him in the first place, covered as we are with the filth of sin. How else could we dare to come to Him daily, marked as we are by

imperfection and failure. He is rich in mercy. That is why we can come. That is why we do come.

God is rich in mercy. How else could we admit the truth as Paul describes it in Ephesians 2:1-3? How else, having admitted the truth, do we dare to come to God? But the truth is what it is, to our great shame. Nevertheless, in the very teeth of this truth, we are to come to Him. We are commanded to come. Therefore, come we must, as many have—because God is great and rich in mercy.

God is rich in mercy. And, so, He has opened eyes that were once, by our own choice, blind. God is rich in mercy. And, having had our eyes opened, we know God, we know Him as Father, our Papa. And we know ourselves as His children. Imagine that! His children! We who once hated God, who were once His enemies, who were once objects of His wrath have, by His mercy, become His children!

God is rich in mercy. And so we dare to do great things for God. We dare to hear the call of Jesus and follow Him. We dare to obey Him and do His will. And we dare to do this with confidence. Because God is rich in mercy, even though He calls us to do what is beyond our reach, we are confident, because nothing is beyond His reach. And by His mercy we will do what we have been called to do.

See, now, what Paul says: “But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which He *loved* us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive...”.

God has made us alive when we were once dead toward Him. God has shown us rich mercy. Why? Did we cry out to Him in such a way that He could not ignore us? No! Did we set our feet toward finding Him? No! Did we do a great work that pleased Him? No! Did we turn from that sin which brought us death? And did we do this well? No!

God has done for us what He has done because He loves us. But why does He love us? It is certainly not because we are lovable! What is it then? He loves us

simply because He loves us. That is what He has chosen to do. To love us. Steadfastly. Even when the cost was greater than we can imagine. He loves us simply because He has chosen to love us.

“Well, golly,” someone might say here, “if this is true, what do I have to boast about? What do I have to be proud of?” Nothing! Sadly, in light of our wretchedness (Ephesians 2:1-3), we have nothing to boast about. Happily, in light of God’s mercy and love (Ephesians 2:4), we don’t need to boast about ourselves.

What are boasting and pride and arrogance about, anyway? Are they not simply an effort to assert oneself, an effort to say to those about us: “Hey, I am somebody. I am a great somebody. I count. In fact, I count more than you.”

But the fact of the matter (the wonderful fact of the matter) is that we don’t need this self assertion. God has made an assertion instead. He has said: “You are mine. You are my child. Indeed, you are royalty, eternally royalty. You are a child of the King. Not just any King, but the King of Kings. That is what it means to be my child. I love you.”

So you see, by His mercy and love He has exalted us. If we must boast, then, we ought to boast about Him.

To return to the metaphor of riding: God has made us alive when we were once dead. He has made us able to do that which, once, we could not do. He has enabled us to know Him, have life with Him, live for Him. This is a great wonder, a great gift. Indeed, it is like a pearl of great price which a merchant found, and in his joy sold all that he had and purchased it and counted himself fortunate.

We cannot purchase the gift of being made alive. We can only receive it as a gift. But, having received it, we can, like the merchant, treasure it and use it as God intends. As with the horse Lance received, we ought to learn to ride.

Suggested Scripture:

Luke 1-2

Matthew 13:44-46

Chapter 5

Hi Ho Silver

We have finally made it to the fifth verse of the second chapter of Ephesians. The sentence began in the fourth verse, where Paul begins to tell us something good. Hard on the heels of the first three verses, which graphically and darkly described the horrible situation we were all in, before we came to Christ, Paul shifted gears and began to tell us the good news of the love of God. He said: “But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which He loved us...” But now Paul continues: “even when we were dead through our trespasses...” That is to say, Paul is reminding us (again!) that God has rescued us and loved us in the very teeth of our defiance and rebellion and hatred.

Look, Paul tells us, God is rich in mercy. His love to us is great. Please, understand the quality of this mercy, the quality of this love. It meets us in Jesus Christ. It is costly mercy, costly love. Indeed, God’s mercy is so rich that He showed it to us even when we hated Him and mocked His mercy, “even when we were dead through our trespasses...” His love is so great that it persisted even when the victory of this love demanded the crucifixion, precisely because we were “dead through our trespasses...”

God’s mercy and love have wrought a miracle. He has made us alive when we were dead in sin. This miracle is startling and awesome as are other miracles. As when God created the world from nothing, by speaking a word. As when Jesus physically raised Lazarus from the dead, by speaking a word. As when Jesus drove the demons out of the Geresene demoniac, by speaking a word. All of these miracles are awesome and point us to the power and concern and love of God for His people.

But this miracle of God which makes us alive even though we were once dead to God, serving Satan, slaves to sin --- this miracle cost God a crucifixion. In it we clearly behold His power and His love. In it is revealed His heart.

Paul will not let us forget why this miracle was so costly. He will not let us forget the dark death from which He has rescued us. Why? Because, like Lance in our first talk, we have been given a wonderful gift. (Our gift is more than wonderful. It is inestimable.) Should Lance forget the reason for the gift of the horse, he might forget to care for his horse. He might forget to ride the horse. Should we forget our grim past, we might forget to cherish and nurture the life God has put within us. We might forget to use it.

Now Paul continues. "Even when we were dead in our trespasses, (God) made us alive, together with Christ". So we see that these words of Paul, these dark descriptions, are not primarily written to those who need to be made alive, to those who have not repented and believed in Christ, but to those who have come to Christ, to those who have found in Christ the forgiveness of sins, to those who have already been made alive in Christ. Paul wants us to understand what has already happened to us in Christ. Thus we can become what we are in Christ.

We have been (spiritually) raised from the dead, Paul tells us. We who were dead to God have been given life with God. We who were dead to our neighbor have been given a heart to love our neighbor. We who were dead to ourselves, wallowing in shameful acts and attitudes, without God and without hope, have been given the gift of repentance, the hope of eternal life. That is, in Christ, we find a new reality that defines who we are. The time will come in this passage (vs. 10) when we will be encouraged to live as those who have been given new life. Like the

man who could not walk and was healed by Jesus, we will also be encouraged to take up our mats and walk.

“[God] made us alive TOGETHER with Christ.” One aspect of the new life we have been given by God is our life together as Christians. God calls us one by one, but part of that calling is the summons to come together as the people of God, as the Church. The truth of the matter is that, when one becomes a Christian, the natural response ought to be to meet with other Christians and, in this setting, let God work to mature in our new life with Him.

This is exactly what happened to CS Lewis. When he was a stubborn atheist, God pounded down, in many different ways, the intellectual walls Lewis had built up to keep God out of his life. Then, when Lewis began to believe in God, he went to church even before he understood who Jesus was. He went because he knew it was the right thing to do, because he knew he needed to be with those who believed. When the Holy Spirit finally brought him to real Christian faith he regularly participated in the worship services for the rest of his life.

“[God] made us alive TOGETHER WITH CHRIST.” The Christian life is always with Christ. It is not a matter of Jesus introducing us to this life and then leaving us. Indeed, the Christian life is life with Christ. And the more we grow as Christians, the more we discover how necessary Jesus is.

There are those who refer to our need for Jesus (and His subsequent help) as a crutch. And, truly, this is the case. Jesus doesn't come to us to teach us to do things on our own. Indeed, that has been the problem all along. We have tried to do things on our own. But, the fact of the matter is that we were made by God, to have this crutch. Actually, it is more like a leg than a crutch, a leg we were made to have, a leg we have cast off. And, if the world wants to mock this central core of the Christian life, let

them mock. The world is full of fools, those unable to admit their own need, or the great good that has been offered them. They seek a life which is really death. (We were like them, once.)

So, then, this is how it is with us. We have been given life through Jesus Christ. In a real sense He is our life. In Him we find our true identity. By Him we have been brought together to live as God's people. Let us, therefore, turn our backs on the works of death and darkness. Let us, therefore, in the power of Jesus Christ, live out our lives together as children of God.

Suggested Scripture:
Ephesians 1

Chapter Six

The Grace of God

Paul now concludes the first five verses of the second chapter of Ephesians with a comment that should be obvious, but does not seem to be. Having described the horrible situation of death in which we once found ourselves, having told us that God Himself has changed the situation by making us alive when we were once dead, Paul now describes how we should see this change of events. He tells us “it is by grace that you have been saved.”

I say that the fact that we have been saved by grace should be obvious, but isn't, for two reasons: in the first place, Paul repeats this fact in verse eight even more strongly. In the second place, in spite of the obvious mercy of God in making us alive when we were once dead in our sins, we are still easily filled with pride.

And, so, we need to ask ourselves: what is this grace of God that Paul thinks to be so important that he interrupts his discussion on what God has done for us to insist that all of this doing of God has been grace?

First, let us consider the grace of God as “a kind of gracious welcoming”. Gracious people have this quality. They make us feel welcomed. They make us feel like we belong. They make us feel that they are glad to have us in their presence. They even make us glad to be there. This graciousness is a rare and wonderful gift, one that certainly should not be scorned, since God has shown it to us in Jesus Christ.

I remember a scene from the movie *Gone With The Wind*. In the movie, during the Civil War, the good women of the South are gathering money and staples for the soldiers of their army. A whore brings some money to donate. The women are scandalized. Except for a woman

named Melanie. She has always epitomized graciousness to me. She accepts the money with such gratitude that the whore understands her gift to be deeply appreciated.

We are all a bit like that whore, filthy with sin (this fact, alone, ought to make us gracious to even the most obvious sinner). And yet, in Jesus Christ, God has welcomed us into His family. He has gladly welcomed us. All of heaven knows this. That is probably why the angels celebrate when we come home to God by repentance and faith in Jesus Christ.

Not only has God invited us and welcomed us, but he has provided us the clothing we need to be in His presence. He has not left us in the situation of the poor man invited to the wedding feast, who didn't have on the right clothing and was therefore thrown out of the party (Mt. 22:11). God has invited us and welcomed us and dressed us. Truly, He is the gracious One. All human graciousness, in a very real sense, is simply a faint reflection of God's graciousness.

Someone might ask: "what is the clothing we need to be in the presence of God?" It is the righteousness of Jesus Christ. It is the obedience of the Son of God, accomplished for us by Jesus, in our place. It is the gift of holiness, the holiness of Jesus, which has been given to us and covers us like a garment. This clothing is given to us by the mercy of God, which we find in Jesus Christ. It is mercy we do not deserve. It is mercy that makes us alive when we were once dead. This mercy is the grace of God.

Secondly, let us consider the grace of God to be "God doing for us what we could not and can not do". It is like the splitting of the Red Sea. The Israelites had left Egypt with great gusto and celebration. The Egyptians wanted them to leave. The Egyptians gave them gifts so that they would leave. But the Egyptians changed their minds and sent an army after them. And so, here were the Israelites, the Red Sea before them, the Egyptian army closing in on them. They were helpless. They could not escape. But

God provided an escape for them. By His mighty arm He opened the Red Sea. The Israelites passed through. And, when the Egyptians tried to follow, the waves came back upon them and they were destroyed. This was solely the work of God, exerted on behalf of His people.

We were like the Israelites, trapped between the wrath of God and the power of sin. We could not escape. We were helpless. God's wrath was upon us because we had chosen sin and, therefore, death, and now could not come to Him. So God did for us what we could not do. He took upon Himself, by the crucifixion of Jesus, the wrath we deserve, He loosened the bonds of sin, He freed us from the fate we had chosen, He made us alive when we were dead in our trespasses and sins. All this He did through the work of His only Son, Jesus Christ.

No wonder God speaks and says to us: "be still and know that I am God" (Ps. 46:10).

Thirdly, let us consider the Grace of God to be "God doing for us what we could not and can not do: God doing this without our cooperation". Grace is first and foremost the work of God. That is why Joseph was not included in the birth of Jesus. Mary received Jesus into her body in the same way we receive Him into our hearts, not by any work she had done in cooperation with Joseph, but by believing. Even when Jesus was surrounded with his disciples they did not help Him, but in fact, opposed Him in His great work of salvation. Again and again, in one way or another, when Jesus spoke of His sacrifice they thought only of their own greatness. It was only after the fact of the crucifixion and the resurrection that the disciples were able to serve their master.

God gives us grace in spite of ourselves, and in the giving of that grace He says: "fear not, I have overcome your stupidity and inability."

Fourthly, let us consider the Grace of God to be "God doing for us what we could not and can not do: God doing

this for us when we absolutely do not deserve it”. Jesus came to bring salvation and the knowledge of God to the Gentiles. And yet the Gentiles nailed Him to a cross. Jesus came to His own people, the Jews, and yet the Jews turned Him over to the Gentiles. Jesus called to Himself the twelve. He lived with them, taught them, did countless miracles before them, and yet, one of them betrayed Him, one of them denied Him three times and all the rest fled when He was arrested.

And, if we look into our own hearts, we will certainly see that we are no better than were the people who lived when Jesus walked this earth. We, too, are filled with rebellion and godlessness. Truly Paul was right when he said “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners” (1 Tim. 1:15).

God gives us grace in spite of ourselves, and in the giving of that grace He says: “fear not, I have overcome your wretched heart.”

So, then, the Grace of God is His “undeserved mercy which comes to us in Jesus Christ.” It is costly mercy, for it comes to us through the crucifixion of the Son of God. It is also a mercy that brings to us a treasure greater than the whole world, a treasure so wonderful, that, if, in our life with Jesus, we suffer even death in order to remain faithful, we count the whole matter a privilege; we count the loss and suffering as nothing compared to the joy of eternal life in the presence of God.

Grace is the final word for those who will receive it. Our sins are not the final word. Death and the sad way of this world are not the final word. The horrible and hurtful things we might have innocently suffered are not the final word. Grace is. Jesus Christ is. His victory for us over sin and death and hell. His resurrection and ascension. Our life with Him. Our unshakeable hope of eternal life with Him. This is the final word for all who will allow it to be.

“Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain” (1 Cor. 15:58).

Suggested Scripture:

Deuteronomy 9:4-5.

John 1:1-18.

Luke 15

Luke 17:7-10

Hebrews

Raised and Seated with Jesus

We come now to the sixth verse of Ephesians 2. In it we are reminded that everything that Jesus did, was for us. His incarnation embraces and changes us. His death on the cross embraces and changes the reality of who we are. And, as Paul clearly indicates in this verse, so does the resurrection, so does the ascension of Jesus.

Jesus is the New Adam, and His history becomes our history, that is, the history of those who by faith become one with Him. Thus, for example, when Jesus stills the storm, we see Jesus, the New Adam, assuming the Lordship of the creation which was given by God to the Old Adam, a Lordship which was lost when the Old Adam sinned. The time is coming when we will share with Jesus in this God-given Lordship. Indeed, there are moments when the reality of this Lordship breaks in and surprises us. (Many of the stories about St. Francis are just such an in-breaking.)

Paul has spoken about this new reality in the first five verses of our text. He has told us that once we were dead and now we are alive. He has told us that this being alive is not a goal, but a reality, in Jesus Christ. In the sixth chapter of Romans he tells us that this reality has been accomplished by the death and resurrection of Jesus. Indeed, if there is a goal for Christians (which there certainly is), it is this: to become what we already are in Jesus Christ.

Now, in the sixth verse of our text Paul says: “and God raised us up with Christ and seated us with Him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus” (NIV). Here we clearly see a reference to the resurrection (“raised us up with Him”) and the ascension (“seated us with Him in the heavenly realms”). We will look at each.

According to Romans 6, when Jesus was raised from the dead, He was raised completely free from the sin He carried to the cross. He died to that sin. Thus, He is now utterly alive to God. And this reality of being dead to sin and alive to God counts for us, when we come by faith to Jesus. Paul tells us that we are sealed by this reality in baptism. Buried in the water, we are buried with Christ and, thus, are marked by the reality of His death. Raised from the water, we are raised with Christ and, thus, are marked with the reality of His resurrection. Therefore, we who have believed have been raised with Christ in order that we might have life with God.

As we shall see later, the reality of this life with God should mark our lives now, as we walk through this world as pilgrims. It should mark our lives with love and obedience, with sharing with Christ in bearing the Cross.

Furthermore, we await the fulfillment of the reality of this life as we await the resurrection of the body. Then the glory of our life with God, which we already taste, will be seen physically in our new bodies. Then we will physically reveal an eternal glory, we can only now begin to imagine.

But, what about this strange notion that the ascension of Jesus into heaven also determines our identity? This is a far stranger notion than that of the resurrection determining our identity. But, here it is, right before us, in verse six. How are we to understand this notion that Jesus is seated at the right hand of the Father for us? We remember the line from the Apostles Creed that tells us “He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father.” But how is that “for us”?

In the first place, He is there, at the right hand of the Father, as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. For the right hand of the Father is the place of authority. It is the place of Lordship. This Lordship Jesus wields for our sake. Come what may, He is ultimately in control. And so we fear

nothing. The early Christians certainly feared nothing. They went singing to their deaths. They feared neither the Emperor nor his soldiers, neither lions nor their pagan neighbors, neither life nor death. For their Lord was there, at the right hand of the Father, for them. What is really wonderful is that someday we will share with Jesus in this awesome Lordship (Rev 2:26, 3:21).

In the second place, the right hand of the Father represents “the best seat in the house”. It is the place of favor, the place of glory, the place of joy. Jesus is there, as the beloved of the Father. He is, in a real sense, “saving us a seat”. He is there for us. And the joy we will know, when, finally, we are with Him, is beyond our wildest imagination. Those moments we now consider to be moments of supreme happiness will be seen to be as a drop of water compared to the joy we will know then. Then, when we are with Him at the right hand of the Father, the joy that fills us will be, in comparison, like Lake Erie!

In the third place, our lives are hidden with Him at the right hand of the Father (Col. 3:3). He represents the reality of who we will be there, at the right hand of the Father. Jesus, the Son of God, honored and glorified at the right hand of the Father, is also the New Adam. And, as such, the reality of who He is, as the New Adam, at the right hand of the Father, determines who we will be (and where we will be) on that Last Day. We await that time with great anticipation.

It is by faith that we learn to walk in this new reality. We are like the cripple who has been healed by Jesus and told to take up his mat and walk. Slowly we take up the mat and slowly we learn to walk. But walk we can, and walk we will. Some of us learn very quickly, walking and leaping and praising God immediately (Acts 3:8). But not all of us. Those who learn more quickly must not despise those who learn step by step. Instead, they must bear with them and help them (1 Cor. 12:22f).

So, then, the alcoholic will rise up in the morning and pray: “Lord Jesus, because of what you have accomplished for me, because of the glory that awaits me, because you are with me and for me, I will not drink this day.”

And the porn addict will pray: “Lord Jesus, because of what you have accomplished for me, because of the glory that awaits me, because you are with me and for me, I will, this day, choose purity and be your servant.”

And the one afflicted by self pity will pray: “Lord Jesus, because of what you have accomplished for me, because of what awaits me at the right hand of the Father, because you are with me and for me, I will, this day, choose the truth and praise you for your great and tender love.”

And the one who has learned quickly will pray: “Lord Jesus, because of what you have accomplished for me, because of the glory that awaits me, because you are with me and for me, I will, this day, be patient with my brothers and sisters. I will speak the truth to them in love, I will be for them, as your servant.”

So may we learn to pray in all things.

Suggested Scripture:

Romans 6

Romans 8

Colossians

Chapter 8

“Just You Wait”

We have now reached verse seven of the second chapter of Ephesians. In this chapter we will deal with this verse, phrase by phrase.

IN ORDER THAT These three words call to mind all that has been done for us by God, in Jesus Christ. Paul has described what God has done in the first six verses. For instance, we who were once dead in our sins have been made alive for life with God. We have been raised with Christ in His resurrection. We have been seated with Jesus in the heavenly realms. This has been done by God, so that He can richly bless us.

IN THE COMING AGES We have tasted the goodness of God already. We have been removed from the place of wrath. God has and is freeing us from self destructive habits. Relationships have been healed. We are learning to forgive, and thus the horrible imprisonment of bitterness toward others has been lifted. Our lives, which were empty, have been given meaning. We are sons and daughters of the living God. We are servants of the King of Kings. The threat of death has been destroyed. We await, with great expectation, that time when we will be with our Lord, face to face, forever.

And in this fact of waiting, we see that we are really pilgrims in a world which is still in rebellion against God. We live in a veil of tears. We know heartbreak and suffering, our very own flesh still rises up against our rightful Lord. We still await the “coming ages”. We have tasted the goodness of God, and it is better than anything this poor world can offer. And yet we have only tasted. We await the banquet. We await a joy which will be full,

which will not be sullied by sin or sorrow. We await that time when that which God has done for us in His Son will be fully revealed. It will be God's good pleasure to do this.

HE MIGHT SHOW The word "might" is crucial. There was a time when God could not show this kindness of which Paul speaks. This was not because God is less than God. It was because our hearts were closed to God, hardened by sin, unable to receive His love. That is why He sent us His Son. We needed new hearts, hearts that are able to receive God's love. We who were dead to God's love needed to be made alive.

By the grace of God, we have been made alive. And, in this new life with God, we are able to rightly receive the "immeasurable riches of God's grace in kindness".

THE IMMEASURABLE RICHES The riches which are spoken of here are from God. They will not pass away. They are eternal. These riches are not simply for the adornment of the body. They bless the receiver from the inside out. One aspect of these riches we have already received: a heart which is able to receive them. But the jewel of the crown, that gift which is above all gifts, that treasure which beggars every other treasure is this: God's gift of Himself. Now we know Him by faith. But someday we will see Him face to face. On that day we will know joy beyond our wildest imaginings.

These riches are "immeasurable". Worldly gifts, even those gifts which come from God and thus point us to His love and prepare us for the gospel, are not immeasurable.

For instance, the gifts of coal, oil, and natural gas which warm our bodies, are not immeasurable. Some day they will be gone and we will need to develop a new source of energy. The gift of sun is not immeasurable. Someday, if our Lord tarries long enough, the sun will stop being the sun that can give life to our earth. It will wear out.

Human love is not immeasurable. It cannot bear the things God has born for our sake. Human love will fail us. Indeed, we fail one another all the time. But God's love is immeasurable. It has borne all things for our sake. And someday it will carry us to the Fountain of all glory.

OF HIS GRACE IN KINDNESS In case we have forgotten, these riches come from the grace of God. They come from His unearned, undeserved love and mercy. And in case we still haven't gotten the point, the grace of God is kind, kind to those who really have deserved punishment. Kind to folks like us.

TOWARD US Who does Paul mean by "us"? He means all who have turned their lives over to Jesus Christ, all who have come to Him and said yes to God's saving act in Him. "Us" means those beggars who have found bread and opened their mouths to eat.

Is this "us" a closed fellowship? No. Jesus Christ died for all. God takes no pleasure in the death of a sinner. Let all who will, come.

IN JESUS CHRIST Jesus Christ is the source of this grace, of this kindness. If we would know the forgiveness of sins, if we would enter into life with God, if we would escape the wrath to come we must come to Jesus, we must trust our lives to Him.

There are those to whom this "exclusiveness of source" seems to be unreasonable on the part of God. But that is nonsense. Imagine a town where there is a plague. Nothing seems to help cure the sickness. So a medicine in a far city is developed, and, at great expense and hardship, it is sent to the town. Messengers go out to all the town's people, encouraging them to take the medicine. But there are some who think it ludicrous that only this medicine should work, and so they continue taking the herbs that

have failed them up to this point. What would a reasonable person make of this? Only that those who refused to take the medicine have no reasonable complaint, when they die of the plague.

In the same way, sin is like an illness that we cannot shake. Indeed, it is a sickness unto death. But God has provided the medicine, the only medicine that can ever work. He has provided this medicine at great cost and hardship to Himself. And He begs us all to come, come and take the bread of life, come to the waters of healing: Jesus Christ Himself.

Suggested Scripture:

Psalm 8

Psalm 42

2 Peter 3

Chapter 9

Grace: the Gift of God

We are dealing today with verses eight and nine of the second chapter of Ephesians. This is the third time grace has been mentioned. It was mentioned in verse five, in verse seven and now in verse eight. It is mentioned again because the Christian Life cannot be rightly understood, let alone rightly lived, outside of the notion and reality of grace. It is so important that we find Paul saying in the twenty second verse of the eleventh chapter of Romans: “note... the kindness of... God to you... provided you continue in that kindness.”

This is a poignant and remarkable notion. We enter into life with God because of His kindness, because of His mercy, because of His grace found in Jesus Christ. But not only are we to enter by God’s undeserved mercy, we are also to continue in that mercy. That is to say, the kindness of God has freed us from the power of sin, the stain of sin and even from the law of God, which occasioned and revealed our sin in the first place. Having been thus freed by the mercy of God from slavery to sin, having been freed to enter into life with God, we find that this kindness, this mercy, this grace continues to be necessary for us, as we live out our lives as children of God.

As we shall see in the coming chapters, as a Christian I am called and freed to do the will of God. But I can do it only by continuing in the kindness of God. Never again will I find myself confronted by the law of God in the same way I was before I came to Christ. Never again will I be called upon to do the will of God by myself, in my own power. It is grace that first freed me from guilt and it is grace “will take me home”. Now we can begin to see the sense of that strange and marvelous verse found in the book of Romans: “God has consigned all men to

disobedience, that he may have mercy on all” (Romans 11:32).

We were created by the mercy of God. God’s goodness, mercy and kindness shaped the Garden of Eden for Adam. And it was this same goodness that gave Eve to Adam and Adam to Eve. Adam and Eve had no claim on God at any time. What should have been natural to them was to walk in His kindness always. But, when sin entered the world, Adam and Eve, and, then, all of mankind, moved away from living under and in the kindness of God. Sin shaped our hearts in such a way that we bore our lives as a burden for which we were responsible. In our own strength we strove to till the ground, raise children and serve God. We abandoned the mercy and kindness of God. So God, in His utter kindness, allowed sin to master us, so that we could understand our need for His mercy and, thus, be restored to that kindness that makes us human, to that kindness He intended from the beginning. No wonder Paul insists on grace over and over.

Paul tells us in today’s text that grace is a gift from God. It is not our own doing. Just as the Psalmist tells us that God made us, and not we ourselves, so Paul tells us that God has redeemed us, and not we ourselves.

This reminder from Paul was one he had to make over and over. The entire letter to the Galatians is shaped by this reminder. The Galatians were a people who had received their salvation as a gift, a people whose lives had been powerfully remade by Jesus, a people who, after all this, began to think that the gift of salvation in Jesus was not enough. So they showed contempt for the gospel Paul had preached and embraced the law, as if they, by themselves, could win their way into heaven. In doing this they not only showed contempt for Paul and what he had preached, but, even more importantly, they showed contempt for Jesus, the Son of God, whose life and death and resurrection had won them this salvation.

The Corinthians, also, showed contempt for the grace of God. After they had believed in Jesus, the Holy Spirit gave many of them gifts, strange and wonderful: gifts they were to use in building up each other's faith. Instead of humbly doing this, they treated the gifts as if they had earned them, as if they could boast in the gifts and use them to belittle those who didn't have them. Thus they showed contempt for God, the Giver of the gifts, and for the brethren, whom they were to love, for whose sake they had been given the gifts in the first place.

Even to the Philippians, Paul had to write a warning. So we see that the devil has worked and does work to make God's people forget the origin of their faith, the source of their Christian Life: Jesus Christ, who is the grace of God.

Paul tells us that the fact of grace leaves us no room for boasting (1 Corinthians 1:31). Instead, the appropriate response of the Christian should be humility. Now, by humility we do not mean a kind of craven, fearful humility. In fact, Christian humility is just the opposite. It is founded, not on weakness and fear, but on strength and joy. Christian humility says: "by the grace of God I really am a child of God." Furthermore, Christian humility understands that the certainty of our status as children of God and our hope of heaven is based, not on works (which would fail us in the long run, anyway), but on the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus (which will never fail us). Therefore, Christian humility is confident, though everything around us seems to be falling apart.

So it was, in the early church, that we might find a slave who loved God more than he feared his master, and no longer simply sought to look good before his master, but actually became a humble, honest, hardworking servant. At the same time, loving God more than fearing his master, the same slave would refuse to obey his master when he was commanded to do something contrary to the will of God.

Paul tells us that we should not boast. One kind of boasting sets us over and against God Himself. It is the kind of boasting that Satan must have done in heaven when he saw his own splendor, not as a gift, but as a sign of his own greatness. When this happened, Satan despised God and wanted to replace Him. This is the kind of attitude many deeply talented people have, especially those whose minds are clever and quick.

Another kind of boasting is designed to keep God at arms distance. We say: “hey, God, see how well I am doing. See how well I am obeying your law. By myself. On my own. I really don’t need your help. (And I certainly don’t want you messing around in MY life, laying waste to MY plans.) So, God, keep your distance. I’m doing fine. See you in heaven.” This is completely the opposite attitude of what a right understanding of grace should bring to the Christian. A right understanding of grace should cause us to seek the presence of God, to take refuge in Him, to live by the power of His mercy, the power of His grace.

Boasting betrays an attitude that sets us over and against God, and, also, over and against our neighbor. We will look at two ways in which this attitude shows itself. One is simply by being hyper-critical. If you find yourself always criticizing someone and never praying for them, then you had better reconsider your understanding of grace, and, by the grace of God, seek some humility.

The second way is found in the notion that I can do things to my neighbor that I would not want him to do to me, because I am better than he is. In other words, I can use him like I would use a tree or an animal. How else can slavery exist? How else can factory owners treat their workers like property instead of human beings? How else can the con artist thrive? How else can one person rob another? How else can prison guards brutalize prisoners? How else can racism exist? How else can we see certain people as being beyond salvation? And treat them as such.

Let me give one example of the latter. Homosexuality is a big topic today. And the fact of the matter is that the practice of homosexuality is sin. But many Christians see those in the grip of this sin as being beyond the pale of hope, as being a different sort of person than they ever were. The fact of the matter is that a person in the grip of homosexuality is a person in the grip of sin, just as we all once have been. Sin is sin, and it is only by the grace of God that any of us have not been consumed by it. And it is by that same grace that a person in the grip of any serious addiction, including homosexuality, can begin to find recovery and freedom.

I want to close with this thought. Paul tells us that the grace of God is a gift. Well, it is the kind of gift that makes us new men and new women. And part of being that new man or woman is the ability to see everything as a gift from God: not just saving grace, but all of life: the very fact of life, talents which enable us to make a living, family, friends, flowers, birds and even bad things that happen to us. It is the mercy of God that has created us, sustained us and redeemed us. It is the grace of God that can and will make all things work for the good of those who love Him (Romans 8:28).

To see the world thusly is what God wants from us, what He is doing in us. Let Him do it.

Suggested Scripture:

Psalm 46

Romans 7-11

Chapter 10

God's Workmanship

If we take seriously what Jesus says about murder and adultery in Matthew 5, most of us will find that we have broken all of the Ten Commandments. Not just one or two of them, but all of them at one time or another. Furthermore, if we are honest, we will admit that we, left to ourselves, are ready to break the commandments again.

And yet, we are the ones Paul speaks of in the tenth verse of Ephesians 2: “(we) are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (NIV). Now we can understand why the central content of the grace of God is the Cross. It is only grace this potent that could take men and women like us and make us into children of God who are able to do works which are good, works which are pleasing to God.

Let us now look at verse ten.

FOR The word “for” helps us to relate verse 10 to verses 1-9.

Looking forward to the rest of verse 10, we see that all that that has been described in the first nine verses is now given a goal. For us who were once dead and now have been made alive, God has a goal. That goal is good works. To us who are recipients of the grace of God, there is a goal to this marvelous grace given to us. That goal is good works.

Looking backward, verses 1-9 tell us that we, who find ourselves shaped by attitudes which are new to us, who find ourselves now engaged in good works that are strange and marvelous, must understand that it is grace that has made this mighty change in us.

WE ARE This phrase “we are” does not point us to a possible future. Instead, it makes clear the present reality of what God has already done for us in Christ. Whether we know it or not, we who belong to Jesus really are God’s workmanship. Whether we have stepped out to live the Christian life or not, we who belong to Jesus have been created in Christ Jesus to do just that. That is who we are. And not to have begun living as a Christian is a horrible denial and contradiction of the reality of what God has done for us.

Paul does not say “we will become”. No, he says “we are”. He is laying before us the reality of what life as a Christian is all about. This reality will not change. Instead, our lives need to conform to the reality. Indeed, given what it means to be a Christian, how could we possibly become Christians if the reality were not already an accomplished fact in Jesus Christ, if He had not already won the battle for us? The puzzle of the Christian life is that we need to become what we already are in Christ Jesus.

GOD’S WORKMANSHIP What is the work of God? It is Jesus Christ: His coming, His life, death and resurrection. It is His ascension and life at the right hand of the Father. But this work of God in Jesus involves us. By this work, God has remade the reality of who we are. We are, therefore, His workmanship.

Furthermore, in this work for us, God had a goal. From the foundation of the world, to the creation of Israel, to the sending of His Son, to the sending of the Holy Spirit to bring us to faith, God had a goal for us. It is our life as His people, our life in doing His will. We are His goal. We are His handiwork. Created to do good works.

The forgiveness of sins is only a beginning. Life with Him and for Him is the goal of His work. Thus, it must be said that eternal life is not just a future event, but, because eternal life means life with God, it starts the moment the

Christian believes. This eternal life reveals itself in those good works God has made for us to accomplish in our life with Him.

CREATED IN CHRIST JESUS Here, again, we are reminded that it is in Christ Jesus that we find grace. It is in Jesus that we find the forgiveness of sins, life with God and the Hope of the resurrection. It is in Jesus and nowhere else.

In this reminder, the possibility of idolatry is twice ripped from us. In the first place God has come to us and revealed Himself to us in Jesus. We are not to look to the god of the philosophers, let alone to the gods of false religions. It is in Jesus that we find God and life with Him. Or, to put the matter another way, it is in Jesus that God has reached down to us and seized us and brought us into life with Him. Through His work in Jesus, we have become His workmanship.

In the second place we know ourselves, as Christians, to be the creation of God. We are not our own creations. Because we are becoming men and women able to please God, because we are becoming men and women able to do good works, able to love God with all our hearts, able to love our neighbors as ourselves, we acknowledge this new reality to be the will and work of God, accomplished for us and in us through Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Thus this phrase “created in Christ Jesus” forbids us from worshipping either strange gods or ourselves.

TO DO GOOD WORKS Created in the image of God, we are creatures who act. God made us to be creatures who act. But we were not created to act in just any kind of way. We were not created to act wickedly. Instead, we were created to do good works. But sin has made that impossible. It is only in Christ that we can begin to act as God intends us to.

This doing which is to mark our lives is not a rebellious doing. It is not like the work of a sculptor, who fashions an idol and then worships the work of his own hands. It is not like the work of those men and women who fashioned the tower of Babel and attempted to gain heaven and immortality outside of the will of God, by the work of their own hands. It is not like the work of wicked men who fashion a plan to trap their innocent neighbor and harm him. This kind of doing is all too familiar. It marks the lives, in petty or grand ways, of all who are still dead to God.

Nor is the doing which is to mark our lives a false kind of doing. It is not the wicked kind of doing that denies God and yet attempts to love the neighbor. This wicked kind of doing is remarkably dangerous. For it does what seems good and, yet, seduces a person away from the central reason for their existence: life with God.

The kind of doing which is to mark our lives is a good kind of doing. It is doing everything before the face of God. It is doing which is done for the glory of God, doing which is done in gratitude to God. Finally, it includes all that we do, whether that means cooking a meal or preaching a sermon. It is doing which recognizes the grace of God in all our doing: either the creative grace of God which gives us life, energy, intelligence and skills or the redemptive grace of God which gives us the fruit of the Spirit and the ability to nurture someone in their life with Christ.

This doing is pleasing to God. I remember one young man helping to serve our Church's monthly homeless meal at the University Settlement. When we were finished he said, vigorously, that serving the meal was the most rewarding activity he had ever done. He sensed the pleasure of God. One also remembers Eric Liddell's comment in movie Chariots of Fire, that God made him fast and, when he ran for God's glory, he could feel God's pleasure.

WHICH GOD PREPARED IN ADVANCE FOR US TO DO The works we do for God are not from nothing. Only God can create from nothing. The works we do have been prepared by God for us to do. We do them for Him and through Him. We are not alone in our doing of them.

In the gospel of Mark, when Mary visits the empty tomb, she is met by an angel who sends a message, through her, to the disciples of Jesus. She is to tell them to go to Galilee and meet Jesus there. He will already be there. So it is with the works we do for Jesus. He is already there for us, even before we start the work. Therefore, even (and, perhaps, especially), when we suffer for our Lord, He is already there.

In the knowledge of this, then, we can confidently set our hand to doing the work He gives us. We do not do it alone. We do it with Him, and, because this is the case, we can boldly “be steadfast and immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that, in the Lord, (our) labor is not in vain” (1 Cor. 15:58).

Suggested Scripture:

Luke 18: 18-30

On Being a Disciple

When we read about the lives of some Christians we are haunted by a question: How could they live like that? How could Peter and Andrew, James and John leave their jobs and their families and follow Jesus? How could Matthew leave his tax tables, a source of great wealth, and follow Jesus? How was it that those early gentile Christians left their parties, their carousing and their friends and lived a new kind of life even when it brought them into great conflict with those who did not believe the good news of Jesus Christ? How could the apostle Paul leave behind his hatred for gentiles and learn to love those same gentiles and live among them and teach them the good news of Jesus Christ?

In the sixteenth century there was a sizable population of Christians in Japan. But the time came when they were arrested and given the choice of renouncing their faith or dying a hard death. One report tells of a large group of these Christians, many of them mothers and small children. They chose Jesus and were burned. As the flames licked up about them, the small children, held in their mothers' arms, cried out, "Jesus, receive our souls." How was this hard obedience possible? To hear of it leaves one in fear and trembling, wondering what we would do if confronted by such a situation.

Life with Christ involves many things, but in this chapter I want to suggest two facets of the Christian life that enable obedience.

First is the gift of sight. When God makes us alive, when God lifts us from spiritual death caused by sin, one of the things that happens is that our 'spiritual' eyes are opened. What we see is the goodness and the wonder of the glory of God. This is why, for instance, we read that

praise is the natural response of those who stand before the throne of God in the fourth and fifth chapters of the book of Revelation.

The fact of the matter is that the driving force of all Christian discipleship is not the threat of hell, although this threat should surely get our attention and make us attentive to the Christian message. Nor is it the fear of God, although this response to the presence of God is appropriate and indeed, a good start. Instead, the driving force of Christian discipleship is the glory and the goodness of God and our subsequent response of love to His unsearchable love.

The God who has come to us in Jesus Christ is not just any God. He is the one, true God. He is the One who made us, the One without whom we are lost, the One without whom we are empty, our lives futile. He is the One who loved us when we hated Him, the One who loves us even now in our imperfection and halting obedience. He is the author of all real glory: the glory of the rose and the sunrise, the glory of a spouse and friend, the glory which awaits the fullness of His presence in eternity. In this broken world He is the One who stands beside us when we are crushed by disappointment and tragedy, the One whose coming we await, the One who will make all things new, the One who will make this broken world whole.

It is this God who calls us to Himself. It is this God who summons us to life with Him, to victory over death, to that time when we will stand before Him, when we will see Him face to face, when we will taste the fullness of the riches of his love. It is this God who even now seeks to take us in His arms and protect us from the ravages of sin and Satan, this God whose Son offered Himself for us and for our salvation, whose Son, even now, stands with us and shares our pain and tears, whose Son will someday take us before the Father, pure and spotless, that we might live with Him as His dear children.

How can we not love Him? How can we not want to serve Him? How can we not want to glorify Him in

all that we do and say? How can we not want to be His disciples? How can we not come to Him and seek His Son, Jesus, as our strength, our obedience, our Savior, as well as our Lord? It is in this love, in this seeking that we find the stuff of discipleship.

The second facet of the Christian life that helps us to be disciples is learning to walk with Jesus one day at a time. This insight should not surprise us. It is how life works. When I was married promises were made, before a group of people, before a pastor, before my wife, before God. A relationship was forged. In a real sense the relationship was now permanent, because it was forged before God, because the will of God is that this relationship should be permanent. But to say that a relationship now exists, to say that a relationship is permanent, is not the end of the matter. It is just the beginning. The task set before the husband and wife is now to learn to live in this relationship day by day. It is not the sort of thing that can be done in one, fell swoop. It is a bit like raising a child. The relationship of parent and child, which already exists, is revealed and lived out task by task, bottle by bottle, diaper by diaper, cold by cold.

In the same way, when we trust Jesus for our salvation, when we trust our lives to Him, when we say yes to Him as our Lord and Savior, when we understand that God has come to us in Jesus Christ, when we say yes to Jesus, to all that He has done for us, to all that He is, a relationship is established. We have become a child of God. We find that our sins really are washed away, that we really do have the hope of eternal life, that we really are a new creation. But this relationship is one that claims us day by day. It is one that can only be lived one day at a time. This is how Jesus gives Himself to us. This is how we serve him. This is how we receive what we need to be His disciples.

So it is, for instance, that we begin each day by listening to God in our reading of Scripture. So it is that

we turn daily to Him in prayer, making our needs known, rendering appropriate thanksgiving and repentance for what has taken place in that day.

So it is, that, when we face a temptation, we say, “Lord Jesus, today, in the face of this temptation, I recognize you as my faithful Savior and in your power I turn from this temptation and say ‘Yes!’ to your Lordship.”

So it is that, when we are given an opportunity by God to serve Him, we say: “Lord Jesus, today I set my hand to this task because you are my faithful Savior. Today, in the power of your salvation, I will serve you as my dear Lord.”

My wife and I have friends who are missionaries to Chad. They have told us stories of the dangers and sudden hardships they have faced while over there. I once told them of my wonder that they could face these things. They answered that had they known, beforehand, the things that were about to take place, they would have faltered. But, they said, these things happened when, in small things, they were already walking with Christ, already leaning on Him. When the hard things came, there they were, already walking with Christ, already leaning on Him.

One day at a time, beloved, that is how it works.

Suggested Scripture:

Matthew 4: 18-22

John 6

Matthew 6:25-34

Ezekiel 18

Psalm 118

The Church

We might ask the question, “Why should I go to church?” This is really a superficial question. It is, in a sense, a bit like asking why one should go to a movie, or, perhaps, attend bridge club? But, even if we pose the question in this fashion, there are reasons we can give for weekly church attendance. There is, for instance, a command in the book of Hebrews that we “forsake not the gathering together of ourselves.” There is the fact that, after Jesus had ascended into heaven, the disciples gathered together regularly for prayer. There is the example of the first Church, those first Christians who came to faith on the day of Pentecost, regularly gathering together for teaching and prayer.

Nevertheless, when we examine Scripture as to what the Church really is, we see that our relationship to the Church is more than the weekly attendance of a meeting. Our relationship to the Church is more like breathing oxygen or eating food, it is more like being a member of a family, or being part of a body, like a hand is part of a body.

1) When we look at the second half of Ephesians 2 (verses 11-22), we understand that the Church is not a building, but a people. She (that is, the Church) is the people of God. She is a people who are one people, even though she is made up of many races and nationalities. There was a wall once separating the Jews and all other nationalities. This wall was built by God Himself, to protect the Jews from the idolatry and immorality of the Gentiles. God built this wall by giving to His people the law which is found in the Old Testament. But even this wall has been broken down. Jesus has broken it down, by fulfilling the law and giving us a new way to come to God: the way of grace. In Christ there is a new fellowship,

a new people, a people who have come to God by faith in Jesus Christ. The reality of this one people is what we are referring to when we refer to the Church.

From this passage we also understand how important the existence of the Church is to God. It cost Him the death of His Son to make this fellowship a reality. He didn't make it with brick and mortar and a lot of sweat. He made it with horrible suffering, torn flesh and spilled blood. By the crucifixion of Jesus, the Church has become a reality. Thus, for the Christian to ignore the importance of the Church is to show contempt for God.

In the first ten verses of Ephesians 2 Paul talked about life with God. In the second half of this chapter, beginning with verse 11, Paul reveals that he understands fellowship with other Christians to be part and parcel of life with God. There is a sense in which this part of chapter two simply re-describes what was described in verses one through ten. This second half of chapter 2 also tells us what it means to be alive to God because of what He has done for us in Jesus. But, in this half of the chapter, Paul speaks not to the individual, but to the Church. In this case, to the gentile Church. "Once", Paul tells these Gentiles, "you were without God. But, now that you have been made alive, you know Him. Once you were without hope. But, now that you have been made alive, you have the hope of eternal life. Once you were no people, but, now that you have been made alive, you are the people of God." We see, therefore, that Paul does not tell the Gentiles to join a Church because they have been made alive. What he says is that part of their new life is life in the fellowship of God's people. Thus, for the Christian to ignore the importance of the Church is to show contempt for God's gift of life with Him. Really, to ignore the Church also shows contempt for ourselves, for it is to deny ourselves that which is costly, good and life giving.

2) Not only is this fellowship we call the Church part and parcel of the Christian life (i.e. life with God), created and given to us by God, but this fellowship is the place where God gives Himself to us in a special way. It is the place where we find “Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone” (Eph 2:20). It is “a dwelling place of God in the Spirit” (Eph. 2:22). Jesus Himself tells us that, where two or three are gathered together in His name, He is also there (Matt. 18:20). In 1 Corinthians 14, Paul describes a stranger who comes into a Christian worship service. Paul says that “he will worship God and declare that God is really among you” (vss. 24-25).

In the worship service itself, then, God is present in a special way for His people. He is present in the fellowship and teaching. He is present in Holy Communion and Baptism. He is present in the reading of Holy Scripture, in the singing, in the praying, in the praise. He is present for His people. To neglect worshipping together, then, is to cut oneself off from this special presence of God and to endanger the vitality of one’s life as a Christian.

Coming together to worship, then, should be a matter of great expectation. God is present. We come like deer in the desert come to a pool of water. We come like a laborer comes at the end of the day to his dinner. We come like members of a scattered family come to sup together. This hour is not just an hour. It is that anticipated hour toward which we have been pointing. It is food for the famished. It is instruction and teaching for the foolish. It is cleansing for the filthy. It is life saving rebuke for the wayward. It is comfort for the bereaved, healing for the wounded. No wonder praise should always mark our worship. For, in our gathering together, God feeds His people. And He feeds us well.

Of course, God is present in our fellowship outside of the act of worshipping together. As we shall see, He is present to His people in all of our life together. But

worship is the center of all of our activities. It is the hub of the wheel, the hub from which come all the spokes that determine the shape of our life together.

3) Ephesians 4:16 is remarkable. It says: “from (Christ) the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work” (NIV).

First, we see that Christ gives Himself to each member of the Church in such a way that we enable Christian growth in each other. This is a remarkable notion. Not only is God present in our midst, but He is present in such a way that we are able to build each other up in Christ. So we see that we need each other. We see that without each other we will not grow in our Christian life as we are supposed to grow.

Secondly, we note the image which Paul uses is that of a body. The Church is like a body. Elsewhere Paul calls the Church the body of Christ. We are parts of that body. This means that we are not all the same. Some of us are like hands, others like feet, others like ears, etc. We have different functions, but, working together, as one people, we function as a body, as Christ’s body, as His representatives on earth.

This means two things. In the first place, it means that the Church needs you. Just as the body needs the hand, needs the foot, needs the eye, so the Church needs you. Without you, the church can get along, but she will be incomplete.

In the second place, you need the Church. Just as the hand needs the body to live, so you need the Church to grow in Christ. Without the Church, your life with God will shrink, become weak and, perhaps, die.

It is important for us never to forget who we are. We are members of the body of Christ. We are important members. We must always be ready, then, to function

as a member of the body, to bring a blessing to the body and to receive a blessing from the body. We must not see ourselves as self sufficient in terms of our life with Christ. God has given us the body, that is, the Church, for a reason. Nor are other Christians self sufficient without us. God has placed us all in the role of servant and in the role of needing service. One must never function simply as a giver or a taker. The giver who never receives will eventually become unable to bless. The taker who never gives becomes a kind of leech sapping the life from the body as does a tumor. (1)

So, then, we are members of the Body of Christ. That is to say, we are members of the Christian Church, for the sake of one another. We all have different tasks, different gifts. Some are bible teachers, some are chicken fryers. Some are preachers, some carpenters. There are those who clean and type and prepare. There are those who do mighty works by the Holy Spirit. There are those who minister through prayer.

But all efforts, all gifts, all tasks are given and enabled by the Spirit of God. All are given and enabled for the well being of the brethren and the glory of God. All are given and enabled by the love of Christ and are to be utilized in love for the good of the whole Church.

4) When we look at a passage like Ephesians 4:1-6, we notice Paul beginning to describe some of the virtues involved in the Christian life: virtues like meekness, lowliness and patience. These are virtues that have to do with life together. The patience Paul describes is patience with one another. The meekness Paul speaks of has to do with following our Lord in such a way that all power struggles are eliminated. The lowliness he mentions has to do with the fact that Christians see themselves as servants of each other. Living together in this way is described in

verse one as a life worthy of the calling to which we have been called.

In verses 3-6 of this passage Paul vividly describes the unity God has given to the Church. The virtues he has mentioned (and ones he mentions elsewhere) enable this unity. We are individuals, it is true, but the manner in which we love one another, the manner in which we follow our Lord gives to the Church a unique unity, as it should. For God has given to the Church unity of Spirit, He has made the Church one body, there is one Spirit, one hope, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all.

In conclusion: The Church is that body of believers God has called together to serve Him. In our life together, God is present to us in a special way, growing us as His people. In our life together, God gives each of us gifts and tasks by which we are to build each other up in our new life. In our life together, we are the body of Christ, and as such represent Him to the world.

Thus, to ignore this new fellowship, fashioned by Christ in His crucifixion and resurrection, is sin. By ignoring our life in the church we harm the entire fellowship, we harm ourselves, we deny the world the witness it needs to see, we disobey God.

Footnote

- 1) There are, of course, situations where a person has been rendered incapable of doing anything. By reason of illness or birth defects that person must simply be cared for. In such cases we must not consider that person to be “so much dead baggage”. Instead, he is to be seen as one whose value can only be seen in the cross of Christ, as one whom Christ loves, as one who provides for us an opportunity to witness to the love of Christ and the worth of those whom He loves, by our care for these people. They also remind us that our own true value is found not in ourselves, but in His love for us. Their value to the Church is, therefore, immense.

Suggested Scripture:

Ephesians 2
John 17
1 Corinthians
Acts

Chapter 13

God With Us

Martin Luther once spoke of the grace of God as a gift. We are simply to receive it. He also said that the grace of God enables us to receive this gift. The grace of God enables us to reach out our hands to take the gift. Our relationship to God is like that. We need Him for everything.

To look at the matter another way: in Jesus Christ, God has created a new reality that now defines us. We have simply to walk in that new reality. But God doesn't stop there. He not only creates the new reality, but He helps us to walk in it.

This help which God gives involves His Presence in our lives. We come to Christ by faith because we are moved by His Presence, the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. We then live as God's people because God Himself makes His home with us by the work of His Spirit.

Jesus speaks of this reality many times in the Gospel of John. He says "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit" (15:5). He says "if anyone loves me, he will obey me teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him (14:23)." He says "if you love me, you will obey what I command. And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Counselor to be with you forever—the Spirit of truth" (14:15-16).

The Apostle Paul also speaks of this reality. He says "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me" (Galatians 2:20). He also says to the Philippians "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you to will and act according to His own good purpose" (Philippians 2:12-13).

The point is that there is never a time when God leaves us on our own to serve Him. We just can't do it. Furthermore, it is fair to say that the Presence of God in our lives is exactly why Jesus died. Before Christ died for us, we were unfit, because of our sin, to come into the Presence of God, let alone to find our lives a dwelling place for the Spirit of God. So Jesus died to deal with the sin that so effectively made us unfit.

At this point we need to remember the book of Acts. After Jesus was taken up into heaven, before the disciples were allowed to begin serving Jesus, they were told to go into Jerusalem and wait for the gift of the Holy Spirit. They gathered together and waited and prayed. And the Holy Spirit came. Their lives were changed. Peter the coward became brave. And their work became powerful. Peter preached the first sermon and three thousand people believed and were baptized. Furthermore, all who were baptized were given the Holy Spirit. And their lives were changed. The reality of the work of Jesus was seen in how they loved one another, as well as in their devotion to God. God had made His home in the hearts of the believers.

Let me try to say the same thing a little differently. The Spirit of God begins to work in our lives and brings us to faith in Jesus Christ. So, we believe and are baptized. Then the Spirit of God makes His home with us. He teaches us and enables us to live by faith in Christ. He takes all that Jesus did for us and makes it ours. Thus, the righteousness of Jesus becomes ours. By the work of the Spirit in our lives, by our faith in Christ, we learn to walk in the righteousness of Christ. Thus, for instance, Peter the coward learned to walk in the courage and obedience of Jesus.

What we should see from this description is that the central task of the Holy Spirit is to bring a person to Jesus and to keep him there. The message of the Holy Spirit is Jesus. (This is how we can "test the spirits to see if they

are from God". 1 John 4:1) For what matters is not how exotic our Christian experience is, but whether or not the person and work of Christ are taking hold of our lives. If this is the case, then the Holy Spirit is at work. If this is not the case, then, no matter what kind of experiences we are having, we are either not dealing with the Spirit of God or we are resisting Him.

Finally, it should be clear that we need the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God, to work in our lives. By the Spirit (who is one with the Father and the Son), God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, makes His home with us and enables us to live the Christian life.

And so I want to close with two promises given to Christians everywhere. One is the promise that the Holy Spirit is intended for all Christians. Peter says, in the book of Acts, concerning the Holy Spirit, "repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call" (2:38-39).

The second promise meets us when we feel weak in the faith, victimized by fear or sloth or temptation. We feel as if we were empty, as if the Holy Spirit were water and we had leaked all the water. Jesus tells us, in the gospel of Luke, that the Father will honor our prayer for the Holy Spirit. (cf. Luke 11:1-13) So we should regularly and confidently pray to our heavenly Father to fill us with His Spirit and, having prayed the prayer, confidently continue in our walk with Christ as His disciples.

Suggested Scripture:

Acts 1-2

Galatians

1 Corinthians 12

Chapter 14

The Virtues

A virtue is a bit like a good habit. To have a virtue is to have a behavior that defines how we choose, how we behave. One can confidently come to a man who has the virtue of kindness and know that he will not unnecessarily strike out to hurt you. His behavior is shaped by the virtue of kindness. A vice, on the other hand, is a bit like a bad habit. To have a vice is to have a behavior that defines how we chose, how we behave. Thus, one does well not to deal with someone who is gripped by greed. His behavior is shaped not by what is right, but by what he wants. Virtues are dispositions which result in choices and behavior that are good. They reveal to us how God wants us to live. Vices are dispositions which result in choices and behavior that are bad. They reveal to us the brokenness of sinful man.

The Bible refers to virtues as the fruit of the Spirit. They are perfectly found in Christ, they are counted as part of that righteousness which God “imputes”(1) to all who have trusted their lives to Jesus. By the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives these virtues actually begin to appear.

In this chapter we want to deal with what the church has called the cardinal virtues. These are virtues that have been lifted up as important even before the coming of Christ. They are of such beauty and importance that they have always been honored and sought. They are prudence, temperance, courage and justice.

a) Prudence is the wisdom to know the suitable action in a specific situation. It is therefore the wisdom to know what is dangerous and what is helpful. A prudent man will not drive as fast on an icy road as he will on a dry road. A prudent man is wary of a “loose” woman. A prudent

woman is careful not to fall in love with a drunkard or a man who has a history of “loving them and leaving them”. A prudent doctor reads the latest literature in her field of practice. A prudent truck driver checks his oil and his tires regularly. And so forth.

This kind of practical wisdom is something God encourages. If He didn't, we wouldn't find, nestled between Psalms and Ecclesiastes, the book of Proverbs. This kind of practical wisdom is available to anyone.

However, when a person is a Christian, there are some things which must be determined as either dangerous or helpful in light of the Gospel. They must be determined in light of the promise of eternal life and the danger of hell. It is in light of these things that Jesus encourages His disciples to be prudent. They are to fear God before they fear man. They are to lay up treasure in heaven before they lay up treasure on earth.

This does not mean that the prudence that is known to all thoughtful people, Christian and pagan alike, is to be cast out. But it can never be the bottom line. Jesus is always the bottom line. And knowing Him can change our notion of what is helpful or not, what is dangerous or not. Thus, for instance, when the early Christians were asked to burn incense to the Emperor, as if he were a god, they knew it would be dangerous to their physical well being not to do it. But they also knew the great danger and darkness of cutting themselves off from the living God, in whom alone there is escape from hell. Therefore, they did not burn the incense, gladly dying rather than casting off the truth of their faith. Thus, for instance, an ordinary Christian in America will spend countless hours loving and serving his brothers and sisters when there is no profit in doing it. What I mean is that there is no profit in the eyes of the world. In the eyes of the Christian, however, there is always great profit in doing God's will, in doing His work.

So prudence, which is a good virtue for everyone to learn, a virtue which raises mankind above the animals by its demand for radical impulse control, is, in the eyes of the world, oddly shaped for the Christian. Its content is determined not simply by a worldly “bottom line”, but by the content of our faith.

b) Temperance is defined by the Oxford English dictionary as the “habit of restraining oneself in provocation, passion, desire, etc.; rational self restraint”. So, we might think of it as the “golden mean”. It can be understood, therefore, as “not too much, not too little”. I will eat the candy bar, but I will not eat six. I will drink the soda, but I will not drink the entire six pack.

I want to suggest, in light of the coming of Jesus, a different way to understand temperance. Temperance, for the Christian, means to understand that all we have is a gift from God and, because they are gifts from God, how we receive them and how we understand their importance is determined by our relationship with God.

For instance, work is a gift from God. We are to do it as if it were for God Himself—even what appears to be the lowliest work. But the family is also a gift from God, a gift more important than the gift of work. I am to love my wife as Christ loved the Church. I am to work to enable the well being of my family. Therefore, if work claims me in such a way as to destroy my relationship with my family, then I need to change my relationship to work.

For instance, food is a gift from God. And, when we eat, a kind of joy and gusto is appropriate. But food is not more important than my health. Therefore, if I am eating in such a way as to undermine my health, then I need to re-evaluate my relationship to food.

When I receive a gift from God, then, I must allow Jesus to determine when and where I use this gift. I must also allow Him to determine when and if I am to give up

the gift. If I do not, the gift becomes an idol. But, when I am obediently receiving the gift, I should not worry about the restraint of enthusiasm. This notion that temperance means restraint in all things is neither biblical, nor is it Christian. If the gift of a lilac bush in bloom is set before me, it is no sin to drink deeply and joyously of the scent. Indeed, it would seem to be contempt of the Creator if I do not. However, when the Christian has rightly received and faithfully enjoyed a gift from God, there remains something else to do. And that is thanksgiving and praise to the Giver of the gift.

For the Christian, then, temperance does not mean a less rich emotional life. Indeed, it should mean a richer emotional life. For when our emotions are properly ordered by the Lordship of Christ they can be more spontaneous and range more deeply than ever before. For now they are appropriate and subject to the One who can keep them from destroying our lives. Gusto, when gusto is appropriate. Pleasure, when pleasure is appropriate. Even anger, when anger is appropriate. And underneath it all, never failing, even in times of self sacrifice or suffering, times of plenty or want, times of grief and mourning, joy: a joy that is rooted not in the gifts of creation, but in the Giver of all good things, a joy which is rooted in God who has found us and claimed us in Jesus Christ, in God whose love for us in Jesus Christ will never leave us.

c) Courage in its simplest form means doing something that we would rather not do, something that is not easy, something that might cost us or bring us into danger, something we might be afraid to do.

But, for the Christian, the kind of courage commanded by God in Joshua 1:9, means more than I have just described. Courage isn't simply doing something brave, it is doing something brave that is the will of God. Some things that are brave (that is, dangerous to do) are also

wicked. A cat burglar is brave. He is also a thief. A man who thumbs his nose at the emperor is brave. But he is also a fool. Indeed, he will most likely soon be dead. On the other hand, a man who refuses to burn incense to the emperor, because that is an act that should be rendered only to God, is brave in a Christian sense. He has counted the cost and obeyed God. Like the man who thumbs his nose at the emperor, this man will most certainly soon be dead. But there is a world of difference between his notion of bravery and the fool's notion of bravery.

There is a sense in which the virtue of courage is necessary for all the other virtues to work. Temperance often means disciplining our errant passions. It can mean saying no to the flesh. Christian prudence can sometimes mean walking by faith and doing what no one else is doing. Patience and steadfastness can require longsuffering, etc. All of these things require courage.

Thus, courage is not a virtue to be despised. As indicated above, it is, like all the virtues, a gift from God, a fruit that is borne in our lives when we walk daily with Christ, when we have life with God, when we are filled with the Holy Spirit. Peter thought he had the virtue of courage apart from his life with God. He boasted about it. But he didn't have it. When crunch time came, he denied Jesus three times. But, after Jesus had died for him, after Jesus was raised for him, after Jesus ascended into heaven for him, after the Holy Spirit fell upon him, Peter became a new man filled with courage, and by that courage he did the will of God.

d) Justice has to do with fair play. Even children have a sense of justice. But it almost always has to do with their rights. When we are young, we sense that there are such things as rights. We are anxious that someone is getting more than we are, that someone is using a toy that belongs to us, that someone is licking the frosting

bowl while we are being forced to take a bath. It isn't fair! We howlingly demand what is just and right.

For the Christian, justice is a far more complicated matter. It embraces my neighbor. I am to treat him with the same fair play that I feel I am due. I am, in short, to love him as I love myself. So it is that justice involves other virtues like honesty and promise keeping.

Finally, then, the vision that enables, indeed, demands that we be just to our neighbor, involves seeing our neighbor in light of the Incarnation. Our neighbor is someone Jesus came to save. Our neighbor is someone Jesus died for. Our neighbor is someone who is valuable because his humanity has been given value by the coming of the Son of God, who came into this world as a Man, as one with us. In God's eyes my neighbor has the same rights and value I do. Furthermore, I have been commanded to treat him as I want to be treated.

Furthermore, the fact of the Incarnation shapes the content of our notion of what is just and what is unjust. The unborn child is valuable because of the Incarnation. Abortion is, therefore, not a just act. The elderly man or woman who is terminally ill is valuable because of the Incarnation. We are not permitted to dispose of them. I am valuable because of the Incarnation. I belong to God because of the crucifixion. I have been purchased, so to speak, by the blood of Christ. It is, therefore, a terrible act of injustice for me to dispose of myself. Thus we see that abortion, euthanasia and suicide are all acts of horrible disobedience and injustice.

Justice, then, involves doing the will of God. It involves treating others according to the will of God. For the Christian, this even has to do with things like sexual intimacy. The Christian understands the will of God to be that this kind of intimacy belongs only within the relationship of marriage between a man and a woman. For me to be intimate with someone outside of this relationship,

even if that person is consenting, is an act of injustice, because I have treated that person as if the will of God did not pertain to her. In other words, to act toward a person outside of the will of God is an unjust act. It is an act which is either a denial of a person's rights, or an act which helps to distance a person from a right relationship with God.

Now, injustice needs to be corrected, sometimes by punishment. If I have cheated my neighbor I need to restore to him what I have taken. And vice versa. We want to live in a society which encourages justice and which punishes injustice. And, insofar as we are in the position to shape the society in which we live, we need to encourage a just society.

But in my personal relationship with my neighbor there is one complication. It is such a serious complication that one must never seek to simply be a just person. Instead, one must seek to temper justice with mercy. This is a divinely mandated demand.

This complication comes from our understanding of the death of Jesus. For Jesus died for us precisely because we have not been just, precisely because we have disobeyed the will of God, treating ourselves and our neighbor as if God had nothing to do with us. The fact of matter is that hell would be an appropriate and just punishment for the dark injustice that has ruled our lives.

But God has acted in such a strange way. He has shown us mercy by taking upon Himself the suffering of hell. He sent Jesus, His only Son, who bore our punishment for us, who brings us the forgiveness of sins and a new life.

And so our notion of justice must be tempered and shaped by mercy. What is just for my neighbor and what is just for me? Hell. What is the will of God for me and what is the will of God for my neighbor? Life with God now and the sure and certain hope of eternal life.

So it is that my neighbor must see reflected in my life not only fair play, but also mercy. Thus the reality of Jesus Christ is revealed in me for my neighbor.

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I hope that in our description of these four virtues you have noticed several things. In the first place, I hope you have noticed that the virtues do not work separately, but they work together, especially for the Christian. To allow one virtue to be eroded is to endanger a whole constellation of virtues at work in our life.

In the second place, I hope you have noticed that these virtues, lived as Christian virtues, are the fruit of the Spirit. They occur in our life with Christ. They come, not so much when we seek them, but when we seek to follow Jesus, when we learn to see the world in light of His coming, when we allow Him to live out His life in us.

In the third place, I hope that you have noticed that our understanding of what a virtue means comes from our understanding of Jesus, who He is and what He has done for us. Paul speaks about taking every thought captive for Christ. And this is exactly what we are to do as we attempt to come to grips with the virtues God wants us to have in our lives.

Footnote

1) “Impute” means to count something as belonging to a person that really is not his. In this case God counts the righteousness of Jesus as belonging to all who come to Him by faith.

Suggested Scriptures:

Amos 5:21-24

John 15: 1-8

Galatians 5:16-26

Revelation 13