

“But God...by grace...in Christ”

Series: Reformed School

Ephesians 2:1-10

November 1, 2009

I want to speak with you today about something so essential, so foundational, so crucial that it's impossible to understand what it really means to be a Christ-follower without it. If we don't get – I mean *really* get – what I'm going to share with you today, we won't really get Christianity either. This concept is what is unique about the Christian faith compared to other major world religions. Last week, we began a series of messages on some of the foundational concepts of the Reformed faith tradition, which is the tradition in which we as Presbyterians find ourselves. And we began by talking about how unholy people as ourselves and be in relationship with a holy God. The Bible word for that is 'justification.' If "all have sinned and fall short" of what God intends for humanity, as Paul says in Romans 3:23, then what's a sinner to do? That was our question for last week.

And we said that we are "justified" – perfectly aligned with God, acceptable to God, good and even "righteous" in God's sight – only by faith in Jesus Christ. The theological name for that doctrine is 'justification by faith alone.' Trust in and reliance upon Jesus and Jesus *alone* to provide access to God and a relationship with Him. It is not "good works" that get us in good with God. God makes us right with Him – justified – through faith in Jesus. He declares sinners "not guilty" even though we are, in fact, guilty.

Now, there are other words we use to express this idea of 'justification': words like salvation, conversion, being born again. But then the question is why? *Why* would God do that for me? *Why* does God save us, justify us? Last week, we talked about the 'how.' Today we're going to talk about the 'why.' The 'how' of salvation or justification or being born again is faith. The 'why' is grace. We turn today to one of the most crucial statements in all the Scripture. And I do not use that word 'crucial' lightly. It comes from the Latin root *crux*. That which is crucial is what is important or essential: DECISIVE. These verses from Paul's letter to the Ephesian church are the crux of understanding the how and why of God's dealings with humanity.

So open your Bibles to Ephesians 2. We're going to work through this passage in 3 parts. Eph. 2:1-3. This is the crux of the problem. Paul is describing members of the Ephesian church, himself, and us. The human condition. And it doesn't sound so good does it? This passage describes what one commentator has called the basic tragedy of human existence: that people who were created *by* God and *for* God should now be living *without* God. One of the problems we have with these verses is that we have a hard time believing we were ever as bad as they say we were. I mean, Paul says that at one time we were dead because of our sins. He says that we used to live to gratify the desires and cravings of our sinful nature. Doing just what we want, when we wanted. He says that we used to be "by nature, objects of wrath." That's God's wrath, by the way.

Were we really ever that bad? Well, some of us *know* we were. But we don't like to think of ourselves this way. In fact, we resist this description, we makes excuses. Many of you, when you hear these verses, are thinking, "Well, *I've* never been *that* bad. Maybe some people, but not

me.” We tend to brush this off. But we do that at our own peril. Because grace has no meaning unless you realize the depth of your sin. See, sin is not just doing a wrong thing. We tend to think of ‘sins,’ the wrong actions we take or attitudes we hold. But Paul is describing sin a different way. In the Bible, sin is a condition we are born with. Our very nature – created in the image of God – has been corrupted. Sin is not only stuff we do wrong, it’s who we are, by nature. And unless we get that, we will not get grace. Unless you can see yourself as the Bible says you are—as a hopelessly disobedient sinner—you will never even recognize your need for grace.

Eph. 2:4-6 [leave up]. These verses describe what God has done to solve our sin problem. This is one passage where the NIV has changed the word order a bit from the Greek. In the Greek, verse 4 begins this way: *But God*. We have a problem: Because of our sinful condition, we deserve God’s anger. “But God...” We were like dead men walking because of our disobedience, *but God*. We used to live in sin, doing whatever we wanted to do, when we wanted to do it, *but God*. We deserved God’s anger and punishment, *but God* did something else. God loved us so much that even though we were spiritually dead because of our sin, He made us alive with Christ. (v. 5) And not only that, God raised up with Christ (v. 6) and seated us – where? With Him.

Why? Why would God do that for people who reject Him over and over again and disobey Him and therefore deserve nothing but His anger and punishment? It is by grace you have been saved. We deserve punishment, *but God* saves us. Not because we are so good, but *in spite of the fact* that we are so bad. Why? Because we are such good, religious people? No. Because “of His great love for us.” Grace is the completely undeserved, loving commitment of God to us.¹ The unmerited favor of God. It isn’t because of anything in you, anything you have done that God has saved you, justified you, invited you into a relationship with Him. It is, in fact, *in spite of* you, *in spite of* what is in you, *in spite of* what you have done or failed to do. That’s grace.

Not getting what you deserve: that’s justice. Not even *not* getting what you deserve: that’s mercy. Grace is getting what you *don’t* deserve. And ironically, just as we do not believe we are as bad as Paul says we are, or were, in vv. 1-3, we also have a hard time believing God is as good as Paul describes in these verses. But He is. And God has a purpose in lavishing His grace on us. V. 7. God wants to show off His grace, “the incomparable riches of His grace,” and He does it through, of all people: US. We are trophies of God’s grace. We are examples to a watching world of how God’s grace can change a life.

Vv. 8-10. It’s such an amazing thought that Paul has to say it again: “It is by grace you have been saved, through faith.” And even this isn’t something you do for yourself, Paul says. Even our faith isn’t a “good work” we do. Even our trusting in Jesus isn’t something we do to earn God’s love and grace and forgiveness.

Now, faith was the subject of last week’s message, so I’m not going to redefine it here. [Get the CD or listen online.] But I do want to say this about faith, because Paul says it. Our faith is not the cause of salvation. *Jesus* is the cause of salvation. We have to be very careful here. We are not saved by *our* faith. We are saved by Jesus. Our being “saved” – being *with Christ, in Christ* -

¹ Klyne Snodgrass, *The NIV Application Commentary*, p. 103.

is entirely God's work, not ours. "Not by works." Eugene Peterson says it this way in *The Message*: "Saving is all His idea, and all His work. All we do is trust Him enough to let Him do it. It's God's gift from start to finish!"

Listen: It's not your efforts that make you right with God, acceptable to God. It's not your good life, the good things you do, keeping God's rules, that "justify" you in God's sight. It's not even your decision to believe in Jesus, to trust Christ. It's totally what God has done. Not "I became a Christian because I decided to believe in Jesus." Not "I have decided to follow Jesus," like it's something *we* do.

Now, we *do* have to decide, we *do* have to accept God's offer of a relationship with Him through Jesus, but what Paul is saying here is that *even that decision* is something that God does in us. God gives us the grace to make that decision to trust Jesus. Even your faith is a gift of God, and not something you did for yourself. "We are *God's* workmanship," Paul says. *God's* masterpiece. *God's* work of art. We are created and designed *by God for God*. We are not told in this passage to *do* anything. We are told what God has done for us in Christ.

However, the implications of what God has done for us and in us *in Christ* have *huge* implications for what *we* should and must do, and how we should live. After the message last week about justification by faith, somebody asked me this question on their way out: "If it's all about faith and not what we do, what's the motivation for doing "good works"?" It's a great question. And it's answered right here. "Not by works," does not mean you don't have to do anything. "Salvation is not *from* works, but it is surely *for* works..."² The "good works" we were created to do are simply, and profoundly, this: live a life that reflects God's love and grace. Because we are so grateful for God's grace to us, we should be grace dispensers. We should go around being good to people who don't deserve it, just as God has been good to us.

Sometimes I think we Christ-followers are grace 'junkies': once we experience the love and grace of God toward us, we just sort of wallow in it, want more of it for ourselves. We're grace junkies. But what we *really* need to be are grace dispensers. Just as God has given us what *we* don't deserve, we should be doing that for others. You know, you can tell somebody about the love of God, the grace of God, all day long. But what's really gonna make them believe it is if you show them. Forgive somebody who, in your mind, doesn't deserve it. Help somebody without expecting anything in return. Just because. Just because that's what God did for you. Just as God has lavished His love and grace on us, we should be lavishing that love and grace on others. "How great is the love the Father has lavished on us that we should be called children of God!" 1 John 3:1.

The Christ-following life is grace from beginning to end. It's a 'by His grace' life. By His grace, God called me into a relationship with Him before I was even aware of it, before I even desired it or could respond to it. By His grace, God enabled me to accept His offer of a relationship – to say "yes" to God who had already said "yes" to me. And by His grace, God continues to empower me to live in that relationship, to grow in faith and love, becoming more and more like Jesus. To be a grace dispenser. It's all by grace.

² Snodgrass, *NIV Application Commentary*, p. 107.

We see God's grace most powerfully and poignantly in the cross. God's grace poured out *on* us in Christ, as Jesus' blood is poured out *for* us. Grace flows down to us from the cross. That's the crux. You know, the words 'crux' and 'crucial' come from a Latin root meaning *cross*. The crux of the matter is the cross. It is decisive. Crucial. "There is no such thing as salvation without Christ at the center."³ There is no such thing as salvation, justification, being right with God, acceptable to God, in relationship with God, without the cross. That's what we remember when we gather at this Table.

[Sacrament of Holy Communion follows...]

³ Martyn Lloyd-Jones. *God's Way of Reconciliation: An Exposition of Ephesians 2*.