

**“What Have You Learned as a Church?”
John 14:1-7; Ephesians 2:1-10**

1 As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins,
2 in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world
and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.
3 All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh
and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath.
4 But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy,
5 made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.
6 And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus,
7 in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace,
expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.
8 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves,
it is the gift of God—
9 not by works, so that no one can boast.
10 For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works,
which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Introduction

For my penultimate and ultimate messages for 1st Presbyterian Church, I want to ask two questions. Today, “What have you learned as a church?” during my time as pastor here. And, next week, “What have I learned?” in my 35 years as a pastor.

Here we have one of the most expressive, most loved passages describing the uniqueness of Christian life and faith. “It is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast.” The passage contrasts the former way of life (life without knowing the Lord Jesus Christ) and the life of faith in God’s merciful salvation in Christ. “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins... But now God, who is rich in mercy, has made us alive with Christ... it is by grace you have been saved.”

As far as we can tell, the apostle Paul spent about three years in Ephesus on the eastern shore of the Aegean Sea in present-day Turkey across from Athens, Greece. It was a cosmopolitan seaport on the major trade route of the Mediterranean. So, Ephesus was a strategic place for establishing a church and became a center for spreading the gospel. Now Paul writes from prison in Rome, never to return to the many churches he planted in Greece and Asia Minor. But his influence and his preaching did not end while he was in prison. He wrote letters to the churches. His letters became a substantial part of the New Testament. Ephesians was most likely a circular letter to be shared with many congregations in and around Ephesus.

As far as I can tell, I’ve spent about 18 years and gave about 800 sermons in Salt Lake City, a mountain west city where this long-standing church will continue to offer the Christian message and

experience. Along with John 14 that we read this morning, I've taught and preached on Ephesians 2 multiple times.

I. Dead or Alive? (vs. 1-7)

In my time at 1st Pres, have you experienced and learned the contrast of life without God and life with God? Dead or alive? "As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins." Without the grace of God, we human beings are trapped in that old stagnant, polluted way of unbelief and disobedience. "Like the rest, he says (notice how everyone is included in this description!), we were by nature objects of wrath." It's a wonder that God hasn't lost his temper and done away with the whole lot of us.

Over against the kingdom of God, "The kingdom of self is heavily defended territory" (Peterson). Many of us are willing to pay our respects to the Lord, but we don't want him invading our turf. "Gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts" is what dominates life without Christ.

From the time of Creation, the Lord warned us, "You must not eat from the tree of knowledge of good *and evil*, for when you eat of it you will surely die" (Genesis 2:17). In Romans 6, Paul writes, "The wages of sin is death" (6:23). Left unchecked and unforgiven, sin will get its way.

It is like an incredible three-page time-lapse photo in *National Geographic* taken from a mountain peak during a heavy thunderstorm. It captured a brilliant lightning display taken throughout the storm's duration. The time-lapse technique created a fascinating, spaghetti-like web out of dozens of individual bolts. What a striking sight!

In some ways, I think this is how our many individual sins present themselves before the Lord. Where we see only isolated or individual acts, God sees the overall tangled web of our sinful nature. What may seem insignificant to us passes with hardly a notice. A much more dramatic display is seen from God's timeless, panoramic viewpoint. Psalm 19 prays it: "Who can discern his errors? Lord, forgive my hidden faults. Keep your servant from presumptuous sins" (Psalm 19:12-13).

After pounding away at the awful side of human experience, Paul offers the change of direction through that one little word in verse 4, "But". "But God, who is rich in mercy, because of his great love for us," embraced us, took hold of us, "made us alive with Christ... raised us up with Christ," picked us up and set us down in the highest place in the company of Jesus our Messiah Savior.

"The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord" (that's in Romans 6:23). I surely hope you have learned this gospel. Dead in our transgressions and sins, but made alive is Christ – that's the transforming power of Jesus Christ in the biblical message.

II. Alive in Faith, Good Works, God's Plan (vs. 8-10)

Then Ephesians 2:8-10, the cornerstone verses describing this unique Christian faith. Memorize it, pray it, thank the Lord for it, live in it: “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”

Saving us is God’s idea, and it’s his work. All we have to do is trust the Lord enough to let him do it. Have you learned this? We don’t play the major role. If we did, writes Paul, we’d probably go around bragging about it. No, we could never save ourselves. God does both the making and the saving. He re-creates each of us in Jesus Christ to join him in the work he does, the good work he has gotten ready for us to do. This is the good news. Here is authentic Christianity. Someone said, “Love is the reason; mercy is the motive; grace is the gift.” Say that with me: Love is the reason... Mercy is the motive... grace is the gift.

Jesus Christ is uniquely different from every other religious experience in the world. The major religions in the world today command people to do good things in order to please the gods or fulfill the purpose of life: obey the Torah or the Ten Commandments, follow the Koran, seek Oneness with the whole created order, enter the Temple Order for prayer and meditation. Our American cultural religion says: be tolerant and accepting, celebrate diversity, be nice, live by the golden rule.

Jesus would say that some of these things may indeed be good to do. But if you think for a moment that you can establish and maintain a relationship with God through them, you’re dead wrong. That would be dead in your transgressions and sins. You and I can do nothing – absolutely nothing – to atone for our sins, gain entry into the favor of God, or show ourselves worthy. Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God has provided everything as a free gift – “it is by grace you have been saved” – Paul says it twice for emphasis.

Even the good works that Christians in the church seek to do have been prepared in advance for us by God himself. With thankful hearts for all God has done, we want to participate in loving service with the kindness and compassion of Christ in the world today. But be careful! The good works are never there to give payment or earn God’s grace, forgiveness or favor.

In Jesus Christ, God has taken all the necessary action to reverse our condition of sin and death. There is nothing you or I can do to make up for the rebellion and failures of our lives. God is the one who does it not because we tried to be good, or followed this rule or that, or were nice or sincere people.

Immense in mercy and with an incredible love, the Lord embraces us. He takes our sin-dead lives and makes us alive in Jesus Christ. He does it on his own with no help from us. All we do is trust him enough to let him do it. This is the unique message of the Bible; this is unique to Christianity. No other religion or philosophy or way of life will offer it.

Conclusion

So, here it is. The message that has been proclaimed for generations in part of our world. A message that every person needs to hear so that life in all its fullness can be found. Paul writes to remind the churches he founded with his preaching of Jesus Christ. And I preach today to remind you of the essentials of the gospel. We become Christians through God's unmerited grace, not the result of any effort or ability or intelligent choice, or any act of service on our part. However, out of gratitude for his free gift, we seek to help and serve others with the benefits of Jesus Christ to serve the Lord and build up the church. We are God's work of art, his masterpiece. Our life in Christ, both saving grace and loving service, is God's gift from start to finish. Let us pray together.

A Prayer of Faith

"God, thank you for the blessing and gift of life. You are the one who created me and gave me a mind, heart, soul and body; a life to live.

But I admit that I have too often turned away from you and sought my own way. I may have learned what is good, right, helpful and holy, but I still reject your ways and rebel against you in my thoughts, speech, and actions. For this I am truly sorry.

I understand that you, Jesus are the Son of God and you have come not only to offer forgiveness and salvation to the whole world, but for my own life. I pray to accept your death on the Cross for my sins (past, present, and future). I want you to be my Savior. Lord Jesus, by your death, you have conquered death; and by your resurrection, you promise life, deep, lasting, eternal life to all who trust in you.

Come into my life now. Save me from death to life – that I may be the person you created and redeemed me to be. I accept you as both Savior and Lord. I want to live in your grace every day of my life. Amen."

John 14:1-7

1 "Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me.

2 My Father's house has many rooms;

if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you?

3 And if I go and prepare a place for you,

I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.

4 You know the way to the place where I am going."

5 Thomas said to him, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?"

6 Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

7 If you really know me, you will know my Father as well.

From now on, you do know him and have seen him."