

I. Set Up:

A. This is week 2 of our series on Ephesians, called Sit. Walk. Stand. The letter, which was written by Paul, starts with some very important theological truths. It ends with very practical advice. But it starts with the basics, the big ideas.

B. Today is one of the biggest. How can we be reconciled to God. How can we be saved?

C. Let me read chapter 2:1-10

II. Intro

A. “Are you ready to now say that you are a Christian?” That is a question that was used by a great English preacher, Dr. Martin Lloyd Jones. I’d love to hear your answer, but not yet. We’ll come back to it.

B. Let me start by backing up to the events that happened one night back in 1738, a group of friends gathered to listen to a book being read. Though they had been the leaders of the Holiness Club at Oxford, though several of them were ordained clergy, though one of them had already served as a missionary in the American colonies, and though they would all eventually become famous for helping launch the Great Awakening<sup>1</sup> - when that night began, they were not yet Christians.

1. This was their later assessment, not mine. To be clear, when that evening began they thought they were Christians. But they would later say that when they gathered to read Luther’s commentary on Galatians they had not yet trusted Christ.

2. They were very religious, but that is quite a different thing.

C. So... what happened on that night? Why was it so special? William Holland, who was one of the men there, wrote the following in his journal:

1. “[as] Mr. Charles Wesley read the Preface aloud...there came such a power over me as cannot well describe; my great burden fell off in an instant; my heart was so filled with peace and love that I burst into tears. I almost thought I saw our Savior! My companions, perceiving me so affected, fell on their knees and prayed. When I afterwards went into the street, I could scarcely feel the ground I trod upon.”<sup>2</sup>

D. What was Luther writing about in the preface of his study of Galatians? The Gospel. He was explaining what God did to rescue us. He was unpacking the plan of salvation. He was explaining how we can be reconciled with God.

- E. As you may know, the basics of any discipline – i.e., the foundations of an academic field - are often simple. We learn that  $1 + 1 = 2$  before we try to solve an algebra problem. We learn our ABCs before we try to read Shakespeare. We learn the Law of Supply and Demand before moving on to monetary policy.
- F. We master introductory ideas before moving to complex ones. And, as a general rule, the beginning ideas - the foundational building blocks - are simple.
- G. Theology is an exception. When it comes to studying about God and faith, the basic claims are weighty, disruptive and counter-intuitive. The first principles are claims that - if not hard to grasp, are hard to accept. And so many get them wrong. And so, much of what gets built on top is wrong as well. Today's topic is a basic one. We are estranged from God. Our hope is to be rescued. Jesus is the rescuer.
- H. Some of you do not believe this. Some of you do not think this is fair or right. Some of you do not think you are in trouble. Some of you think you can fix yourself. Some of you think there are many paths to God. My hope is that you would understand God's offer. My goal is actual more modest. I just want to be sure you understand the
- I. My goal today is to help you understand and affirm this.
- III. You just heard the first part of Ephesians 2 read. Let's walk through it slowly.
- IV. **As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins,**
- A. There are several different Greek words for sin. At one end you have *agnoeo*, which refers to "innocent mistakes." (Doing the wrong thing without understanding that it's the wrong thing). At the other end are more serious terms that imply active rebellion. It is those we find here. The most common term for sin is *hamartia*, which means to miss the mark. The Greeks used it to refer to the fatal flaw found in the hero in a Greek tragedy. In the Bible it refers to missing the mark, sometimes by falling short, but often by shooting at the wrong target.
- B. The point to be grasped is, sin's impact is massive. It's not a flesh wound. It's a fatal flaw. Paul describes us as spiritually dead in our transgressions and sins."
- C. He's not saying you drove 32 mph in a 30 mph zone and need a warning. He says we've stiff armed God and have been spiritually cut off.
- V. **V2: you were dead in your transgressions and sins – V2 - In which you used to live –**
- A. He uses the past tense, implying that he is talking to people who have stepped over the line **when you followed the ways of this world**. I think the Greek term translated "follow" is better understood as "mastered." He says "you were mastered by the spirit of the age. You were addicted. You became slaves to sin."

B. A few weeks ago I mentioned an important conversation with a mentor. I asked him what he was thinking about, and he said, I keep pondering the idea that “we are most human when we are most holy.” That we are most joyful and free when we are obedient.

**VI. As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air,**

A. Now, “kingdom of the air” reminds me of the book I have coming out this week. Lakelight is introducing some very short books. Fifty pages. Books that can be read on a flight. Books we hope you will read. This one is called *On the News* and it’s free.

1. Many authors will say – if they are honest – I don’t care if you read the book. I just want you to buy it. I am saying the opposite. You don’t have to buy it. We are giving it away – both an audio and a digital version. I wrote it because I could not only see that the news was making people angry and anxious, I realized that my casual, sort of passive consumption of the news was not but because not always very accurate news rather than the Gospel.

2. So, if you get my Friday newsletter, you can expect the book to be sent your way. If not, use the QR code to sign up for that.

**VII. That aside, the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient,** is not an allusion to the news. It is an allusion to evil. Personal evil.

A. It’s been a while since I was asked if I believed in Satan. I do, not only because it’s taught here (and I believe this book is true) and not only because Jesus clearly did (and I am trying desperately to think his thoughts after him. To conform my views to his). But also because there have been times when evil has been real and present.

B. I don’t think the statement “the devil made me do it” is right very often. For starters, the devil is not God’s equal but opposite. He’s not everywhere. He’s a finite being, and I don’t think I warrant his attention. He does have help. There is an army of fallen angels spreading his chaos and hate. And we may bump into them more often. I’m in the camp that thinks my heart is dark enough to get myself in trouble without any supernatural help.

C. The main point being made here is different. It’s focused less on how we got in this mess and more on making sure we understand the mess we are in and how to get out of it. We are spiritually dead. Our problems are not small. There are some who think they can fix themselves by trying harder to be good. There are some who think that we can fix everyone with just a bit more time and education and a few more laws and UN resolutions. No. We are far more broken than we like to admit.

D. I think people are waking up to that. I think there are fewer people who believe in the perfectibility of humankind than there were back when I went to college. But I am not sure many take an honest look at both the world and at their own heart and realize that we cannot fix this problem without God's help.

**VIII.** Paul goes on. He says to his readers - who used to be lost, who used to be being carried along by the stream of culture and by evil but who are now Christ followers – V3b: **Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath.** We deserved justice, which would be punishment. The wrath of God.

A. Let me note, this is one of those starting points – one of those introductory ideas I mentioned at the beginning – that many do not accept. Many do not think they are bad. Others think that bad doesn't matter. That God should write it all off.

B. Let me say again, it's hard to see ourselves accurately. Indeed, it's in the nature of bad people to think they are good. CS Lewis captures this in *Mere Christianity* when he writes: "When a man is getting better he understands more and more clearly the evil that is still left in him. When a man is getting worse he understands his own badness less and less."<sup>1</sup>

C. We don't see ourselves very objectively. Martin Luther used the Latin phrase *incurvatus in se* to argue that our standards are off.

D. And just to make this more vexing yet. Being self-centeredness often makes us very moral – because this is the way to get ahead. I want to look good or earn god's favor and so I am going to do the right thing - serve the needy. Be a good parent. Be generous. Be religious. – but for the wrong reason. We are doing it for our own sake. More than that, we are doing it to control God. We are serving God to put him in our debt. Our self-centeredness clings to everything.

**IX.** V4: **But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace** (this is the free gift. Justice is getting what we deserve. Mercy is not getting the punishment we deserve. Grace is the scandalous idea that we are going to get good we do not deserve).

**X.** **It is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, 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.** V8: **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.** <sup>10</sup> **For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.**

A. So..., if we are not reconciled to God by how good we are. If we do not win God's favor by being moral or nice. If we don't earn his love by our accomplishments, how does it work? The answer is – vs 4: **because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, makes us alive with Christ,**

B. We are saved through Christ because of the love of God.

C. We do not earn, we receive. We are rescued and brought back to life. We don't do anything but humbly accept. Which is why we stop boasting. Because we realize, it's not about me. The only thing I could boast in is Christ.

1. This is what Paul says in Gal. 6: **May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.**

XI. OK, so much more to say and so little time.

A. It is worth noting that many today who think they are Christians are Moral Therapeutic Deists – that is,

B. It is worth noting that many people today think the equation is **F + W = S** - i.e., that belief in God plus Works (acts of charity and kindness) leads to Salvation (heaven when we die). No. **F = S + W** (We see in verse 10 that: **we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.** And of course, **James tells us that faith without works is dead. It is not real, saving faith.**

C. It is worth noting that salvation is an event not a process. We do not always know the moment – I did not. I did not have the experience some of my friends described, or that Paul has.

D. It is worth noting that sin is putting ourselves where God deserves to be. Salvation is God putting himself where we deserve to be. He not only died my death for me, he bore the wrath of God – verse 3. He went into our seat so we can go into his

XII. I am going to set all of that aside and trust that you will discuss all of this in your small groups. I want to double back to the question I asked back at the beginning. Are you ready now to declare that you are a Christian.

A. Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones often used a diagnostic question to determine a person's spiritual understanding and condition, noting that many hesitate, stating: I do not feel that I am good enough [to say that I am a Christian].

B. At which point he noted that they still did not understand the Gospel. They were still thinking in terms of themselves; their idea is still that they have to make themselves good enough to be a Christian, which sounds very modest but it is the lie of the devil and a denial of the faith.

C. Part of becoming a Christian is understanding that we will never be good enough to earn. We are saved by grace through faith.

D. Men and women, this is not a small matter. One of the most significant fights in church history took place between a pious Brit named Pelagius and one of the great leaders in Christian history, Augustine, the Bishop of Hippo. In the early fifth century, he fled Rome and turned up in northern Africa. There he settled under the preaching of Augustine, the Bishop of Hippo. Not long after he arrived, Pelagius argued that Augustine's preaching contained a major error.

E. Pelagius claimed that Jesus was a wonderfully unique moral guide, but not fully God. And he complained that being offered salvation by grace meant that people would not try hard enough.

F. So, what does it mean to be a Christ-follower? Some say a Christian is someone who affirms the right views about Jesus. Others say it's someone who has prayed a prayer or had a spiritual experience. A third group says it's those who are engaged in good works.

G. The Bible suggests all three answers are correct, but incomplete. A Christian is someone who lives in the dark zone of the Venn diagram. It is a person who affirms Christ's claims and teaching, and has embraced him as their savior, and who is trying to love and serve others.

H. I am going to be offering my skeptics study again. It's six weeks long – and if you find yourself doubting Jesus or the Gospel – let me encourage you to sign up.

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<sup>1</sup> The Great Awakening was a series of revivals that happened in both Europe and the United States during the 17th and 18th Centuries. Quite a number of people gave their life to Christ.

<sup>2</sup> Cited from Dallimore, George Whitefield, p, 183.