

## From Mess to Bless (Ephesians 2:1-10)

This passage of scripture contains one of the anchor verses of Christian conviction, one that you likely have stored in your memory: for it is by grace you have been saved, through faith, and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God, not by works, so that no one can boast. We could likely spend our entire time together this morning on this thought, but I think it better to understand how this fits into Paul's thought within the entire passage. It's not like Paul wrote this down thinking, "they'll really like this one..."

This passage is a nitty-gritty assessment of the state of humanity with no holds barred that paints a grim picture at the outset. The reality of the world's plight is filled with desperation, dysfunction and destruction brought about by virulent self-interest exhausting its energy for life untethered to its source for life in God. Incapable of changing its focus, destiny and outcome, the world is dead humanity conjuring up the appearance of life in any way it can, but in vain, for its systems, its pursuits, its values pit persons against one another to manipulate and exploit whatever energy and resources it can harbor to sustain the semblance of life in a dying cause.

This cycle of futility is what Christ followers have been delivered of through the power of God—which Paul calls grace—the divine intervention of life implanted in the world through the cross that broke the power of sin which had set the world's face against God. Like a defibrillator that delivers its charge to a dying heart, on the cross Christ discharged his life into the dying world so that the spark of God's life would ignite its pulse to once more beat with the energy of God's love that discovers its identity and purpose in union with God and finds its focus in blessing others.

This is what the NT calls salvation, and it is all God's doing. The verbs in this passage are all connected to God who: 1) made us alive in Christ, 2) raised us up with Christ, & 3) seated us with Christ in the heavenly realms. Faith is our response to God's action, faith meaning confidence that God can be trusted to deliver what has been promised. Faith delivers God's life to us through the Holy Spirit who comes to dwell within us.

All of God's action towards us is prompted by God's love—God's desire for our well-being, that we might receive all of God's goodness, which God designed for us to live within from the very beginning that stretches then into the vast expanse of eternity. It was God's pity, God's mercy that reached out in kindness, which means doing what is needed. We don't receive this salvation because we deserve it, but because we need it. Having received it, we are now in a position to join God in the work of setting the world right—we have the capability of doing good in the world which is in keeping with God's plan for all.

Christ is the pivot point of history, the change agent whereby the world may once again turn its face towards God and receive the quality of life intended for it. This set of ten verses, actually one long sentence in the original language, is Paul's elevator speech on the state of the world that gives a diagnosis, establishes the cure, and offers a prognosis for recovery. It is truth, because truth means describing something as it actually is, and this truth is relevant today for the world is still caught up in a mess of its own making, the cure is still effective, and countless lives bear witness to the optimistic prognosis. This truth is universal—everyone on the face of the earth is represented somewhere on that continuum: living dead, experiencing the cure, or thriving in new life. As followers of Jesus, we would be counted in the thriving in new life category, but because we often leave off vs. 10 when we think about this, we're not sure what thriving means, especially when what we have considered thriving in life to be eludes us.

You'll recall that vs. 10 says, "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." Moments ago I referred to this as having the capacity to join God in the work of setting the world right. Engaging in this is the means to thriving in new life, but understand that setting the world right again is a work in progress. The present state of the world is not the best there is—this is not the final outcome, but it doesn't move towards that outcome apart from followers of Jesus doing good in the world. What is good? That which is beneficial, which creates value, which appeals to the

nobler impulses of humankind, which brings out the best in others. It can be captured in the phrase: to bless. To bless is to bring God's goodness to bear on the world. The world is a bit abstract, so let's make it more concrete to say persons or people in the world.

Even in Jesus' day, the world as it was, with all its imperfections, violence, fear, and oppression didn't change instantly by his appearance. Jesus didn't eradicate leprosy, but he did heal lepers. Jesus didn't crave political power or popular acclaim, yet the truth he introduced through his teaching sent shock waves up and down the political spectrum and crowds gathered where he appeared because they were hungry for truth. Jesus revealed the larger reality that opened minds and imagination to a life where God is a relevant partner and presence in day to day living. He called this the kingdom of God, and the currency of this kingdom is God's love expressed through blessing—doing good, to the place where the crowds having witnessed his actions exclaimed that God had come to help his people.

Friends, grace doesn't remove you from the world in its decay, but it makes you different in this world among its people. You live in that larger reality where your mind and imagination is opened up to a life where God is a relevant presence in your daily life and the currency of your life isn't your 401K, your net worth, or your career path, it's the love of God expressed through you blessing others around you. And, as we discovered last week, you have available to you God's incomparably great power—remember, that's grace to use in doing good wherever you are in whatever is before you.

Just this week the local news ran a story featuring Rick Steves, whose travel company has ground to a halt in the face of the pandemic. He's got 100 employees who work in his company—right now they have no travel work to do. In fact, they had to refund travel deposits to thousands of travelers who had previously booked trips with him. In the news feature, Rick explained that he cared about the welfare of his employees, he valued their work for him, he wanted them available to continue their work when the travel industry could resume, so he's kept them all on his payroll, but instead of reporting to his office, they are doing community service, working in food banks, clearing hiking trails, serving in thrift stores, working phone banks encouraging people to vote all on Rick's dime. It's costing him money, but, he said, the travel industry has been good to him for 30 years, he wanted to use his profits in a way that helps others. That's blessing others, that's doing good, that's as much God's work as what I'm doing right now.

The kingdom of God is not Disneyland or Willy Wonka's chocolate factory for the amusement or entertainment of believers. The kingdom of God sees the world as a fixer-upper that needs some TLC to restore it to its full potential and brilliance where the glory of the Lord will cover the earth as the waters cover the sea. The world in its present state is not what it could and shall be, but we don't get to choose the time in which we live. We do get to choose how we live in the time and culture we're given, and in its present reality it is our call to live as disciples of Jesus agreeing with him on the best way to live life in the full currency of God's love tipping the world towards its ultimate end when the larger reality of our existence becomes the actual reality of our experience.

You have been rescued from a self-absorbed life to a life absorbed in and with God. You've been saved from selfishness to generosity and liberality. You've been delivered from virulent self-interest to the larger interests of God through Christ. You have new vision, new purpose, and new power that channels the energy of God's life and love through you to those around you. Nothing about your circumstances changes any of this—it remains true now and forever. Where, how, and who can you bless in the life of limitless possibilities you've been given in Christ? AMEN