Coming Alive

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Ephesians 2:1-10

October 1, 2017
This past summer, our pastoral staff preached on “Go-To” verses in the Bible. We talked about our favorite Bible verses that we go to whenever our backs are against the wall and we need encouragement.

I inaugurated this series of sermons back on June 11. Of all of the 23,145 verses in the Bible, I chose this verse from Ephesians, “It is by grace you have been saved through faith” (Ephesians 2:8).

I grew up thinking everything in life had to be earned. Good grades have to be earned. Respect has to be earned. Money has to be earned. I figured God’s favor had to be earned also. Somehow, I have to prove myself a worthy recipient of God’s love and acceptance.

Our church read Gospel in Life by Tim Keller some years ago, subtitled Grace Changes Everything. He describes two basic narratives or beliefs that shape the way we live. He identified one set of beliefs as the “Moral Improvement Narrative.” The essence of this narrative is contained in the statement: “I obey; therefore I am accepted by God.” My obedience is what earns approval and acceptance from God. Keller contrasts the “Moral Improvement Narrative” with the “Grace Narrative.” Grace starts in the opposite direction: “I am accepted by God; therefore I obey.” My acceptance is not contingent on what I do for God. My acceptance is the result of what God has done for me in Christ. Gratitude for this acceptance motivates me to practice a life of obedience.
I operated by the Moral Improvement Narrative in my early life. I went to church and tried to live a moral life, so I figured I must be a good person. I used the Ten Commandments as my yardstick, especially the last six. I tried to honor my parents. I have not murdered anyone or committed adultery. I did my best not to lie, steal and covet what belongs to my neighbor. I must be, by definition a good person.

How good do we have to be to warrant God’s approval? I always seemed to compare myself favorably to people who did not measure up to my standards. I never compared myself to people who were morally superior. The whole process seemed so arbitrary.

Grace was something my family said at meals. Faith was trying harder to win God’s approval. Spiritually speaking, I was dead. I did not know I was dead. I lived with the illusion that I was very much alive. Yet, I was dead to the things of God.

Last Sunday, I preached on the concluding verses of Ephesians 1. Paul prays for believers to know three things—the hope to which God has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance and the incomparably great power for us who believe (1:18-19). God demonstrates His incomparably great power by raising Jesus from the dead and exalting him to his right hand.

I pray that you may know

The hope to which He has called you
The riches of His glorious inheritance
The incomparably great power for us who believe

Eph. 1:18-19
Paul shifts the focus to believers in chapter 2: “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins” (2:1). I know our spiritual condition without Christ is bad, but I didn’t know it was this bad! Paul repeats this same dismal thought in verse 5, “We were dead in transgressions.”

Without Christ, we are dead in the water, dead to the world, dead to the things of God. John Piper says in a sermon that we are not only in the doghouse with God over something we have done. We are in the morgue. Our spiritual condition is fatal. We are dead to the things of God.

Paul does not let up in verses 2-3: “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. We gratified the cravings of our flesh, following its desires and thoughts. We were by nature deserving of wrath.” Was Paul having a bad day? What a dire prognosis. He says our condition without Christ is terminal.

Everything pivots in verse four with the conjunction “but” as in the words “But God….” When people tell me, “I liked your sermon but…” I know that everything that follows the conjunction but will cancel out most everything else that is good about the sermon.

The conjunction but changes the whole trajectory of the passage. “But God, being rich in mercy because of the great love with which he loved us, even though we were dead in our sins, made us alive
together with Christ—it is by grace you are saved” (2:4-5). Paul employs at least three sets of contrasts in this passage.

First, he contrasts “dead” with “alive.” Once we were dead in our transgressions and sins (verses 3-4). Now we are made alive together with Christ (verse 4).

The second contrast is between “wrath” and “love.” We were deserving of wrath (verse 3) but God shows love to us (verse 4). Paul accentuates this contrast by substituting a number of related words for love in subsequent verses. He references mercy in verse 4, grace in verses 5, 7 and 8 and kindness in verse 7.

The third contrast is between the phrases “by grace” and “by works.” God saves us by grace (verse 5, 8) and not by works (verse 9). Acceptance with God is not a matter of good behavior on my side. God’s grace alone saves me.

Later this month, we will celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. The five Solas listed on your screen are Latin phrases that have come to characterize the Reformation. We consider these five affirmations as central to Reformed theology and practice. Let me highlight the first three on the list.

Sola Gratia translates as grace alone. “It is by grace you have been saved.” God’s grace in Jesus Christ alone saves us.
Someone asked the 16th century Reformer Martin Luther, “Is there not something we can contribute to our salvation?” Luther famously replied, “Yes, we contribute sin and resistance.” Paul would have concurred. We contribute sin and Christ supplies grace.

*Sola Fide* refers to faith alone. Verse 8 expresses that grace is the cause of our salvation and faith is the means by which we receive it. Faith equates to trust. Grace is God’s gift I receive in faith and trust.


So what difference does this Ephesians passage make in my life?

First, a word to our guests, those of you who are new to faith and this church. Everybody has to start somewhere. Like anything else in life, we start at the beginning. Maybe this morning you are ready to begin a life of faith and trust in God’s provision of grace through Jesus Christ. You are ready to acknowledge Jesus as your Savior from sin. You are ready to say yes to God’s gift of grace and follow Christ. If this expresses your intention, I will give you an opportunity to stand during the closing prayer to express your intentions to God. I will not call you out on this one.
This decision is one you announce to God today through prayer.

Second, a word to our regulars, to those of you who have trusted God’s gift of grace through Jesus Christ. Paul concludes this passage in verse 10, “For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works which Christ prepared in advance for us to do.” While grace is a sheer gift, there is something for us to do. Notice the words “to do” repeat in verse 10. God not only saves us from sin, God saves us to do good works.

You are here for a reason. God has purposes for you in mind. God has created and shaped you for ministry and service. We use the acronym SHAPE in our church to describe the way God has created us. Let me walk through this acrostic with you.

“S” stands for spiritual gifts. What are your spiritual gifts? God equips every believer with spiritual gifts to benefit others in the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12). There are 30-plus spiritual gifts listed in the New Testament to illustrate the many ways God gifts believers for ministry and service.

“H” stands for heart. What do you most love to do? Maybe you are passionate for people who do not know Christ. Maybe you care about people who are poor, hungry or victims of sex trafficking. Perhaps your heart breaks for people suffering from loss or deep pain.
“A” stands for ability. What are you good at doing? Abilities are natural abilities with which we are born. Maybe you are good with words or numbers. You may be skilled at working with groups of people or working with your hands.

“P” stands for personality. What temperament do you bring to the table? Some of you are extroverts; others of you are introverts by nature. God has hardwired you for a purpose. You may work well with an individual assignment or with a team of people.

“E” stands for experiences. What experiences have you had, positive as well as painful, that you can use to help somebody? God never wastes an experience on anybody. Even difficult experiences we have had can positively benefit someone else.

Ephesians concerns itself with two primary themes: identity—who am I, and purpose—why am I here? I am who God says I am. God saves me by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. I am here for a reason. I am here for a purpose. God has good work for me to do.