

Grace

M. W. Bassford, 7-14-13

One of my favorite hymns in all the wide world is “Give Me The Bible”. It’s simply written, but it has a great deal to say. One of the most profound lines in the hymn is the one that reads, “Precept and promise, law and love combining”. This is a crucial reminder to us to keep our spiritual balance. When we focus too much on the precepts and the laws, we need to remember God’s promises and love, and the opposite is true as well.

It seems to me that in my preaching recently, I’ve been hitting the precepts and the laws pretty hard. There’s nothing wrong with that; we need to be reminded of the high calling of our discipleship. However, we also need to be reminded of the grace of God that covers our sins when we fail to meet that calling. This morning, let’s ponder grace.

Ephesians 2:1-10

The grace of God and its necessity for our salvation is one of the great themes of the New Testament. There are literally dozens of passages that address this topic. However, this morning, we’re going to confine ourselves to one text only: Paul’s parenthetical explanation of God’s great work in Ephesians 2:1-3:13. Logically speaking, the first subdivision of this text is Ephesians 2:1-10. In this sub-context, the first point Paul makes concerns **OUR CONDITION**.

In any human language, there are few words as ominous as the word “dead”. Death is final, the point of no return, a condition that offers no hope. However, this stark term is the one that Paul chooses to describe our spiritual condition outside of Christ. We’re used to the concept of spiritual death, but when the gospel was first preached, I’m sure this one had people scratching their heads. After all, we all know hundreds of unbelievers who get up in the morning every day and do pretty much what they want to do, to all appearances as fine as they can be. Paul wants us to understand, though, that the sinner’s appearance of good health is only an appearance. Really, he’s a dead man walking.

This spiritual death, though, is a self-inflicted one. We killed ourselves through our sins, not merely through an incidental sin here and there, but through constant devotion to sin. Our lives were ruled not by the King of heaven, but by the prince of the power of the air, the devil himself. Under his direction, we gave ourselves to whatever selfish passion and lust struck our fancy. If the flesh didn’t tempt us, Satan controlled us by manipulating our greed and our pride.

When we live in this way, it scars and corrupts us. Just like Lindsay Lohan or one of those other celebrities so clearly bear on their features the marks of hard living, the life of sin leaves its mark on our souls. The practice of sin distorted our very nature, which was created in the image of God, until rather than yearning for God, we yearned for wickedness and invited His wrath. Outside of Christ, we were disgusting creatures indeed. We were dead.

The only thing that has the power to rescue us from this state is **THE LOVE OF GOD**. It’s almost trite to say that the love of God is incomprehensible, but this text leaves us no other choice but to say so. Here we are, wretched and hopeless. By our dedication to the practice of sin, we have made ourselves into everything that God hates. And yet, God looks at us, spiritually filthier than a herd of pigs in a wallow, and loves us, not with a wavering uncertain love, but with a great love. That’s not what we deserve. We deserve swift justice, a confirmation of our spiritual death with an everlasting death apart from God. And yet, God looks at us and chooses to be rich in mercy instead. That’s flabbergasting.

However, the Biblical concept of mercy doesn’t entail looking at someone and saying, “Oh, poor them” and not doing anything. Instead, in Scripture, mercy is always an action. Mercy is something you show, and so it is here. God showed mercy toward us by making us alive together with Christ. There’s a part of Paul’s argument that we’re missing here because we didn’t start back in Ephesians 1. In the last part of that chapter, Paul explains that the working of God’s power in each one of us is equivalent to the power that He revealed when He raised Jesus from the dead. There is nothing subjective about this. It is the miraculous restoration of life to something that should never have been alive again, whether that be Jesus’ dead flesh or our dead souls. We didn’t deserve this spiritual resurrection. It is the result of grace.

However, the work of grace in us doesn’t end with our salvation. We are also raised up with Christ. As His body ascended to heaven, so our spirits ascend to fellowship with God. In heaven, we are seated with Christ. To Him, it is granted to sit at the right hand of the throne of God until all of His enemies have been made a footstool for His feet. We have a similar privilege. We wait in fellowship until the final victory of Christ over His enemies has been accomplished.

Once that victory is completed, we will live for age after age as its monuments. Here’s what this makes me think of: Back when nations still had kings, those kings would often have royal courts with hundreds or thousands of people in them. Some of those people had jobs; many of them didn’t. They just hung around, eating the king’s food, spending the king’s money, for no other purpose than to promote the king’s glory. After all, if you have so much wealth that you can squander it on people who have no other role than to show how important you are, you must be a great king.

So too it is with God and us. God doesn’t need us. We don’t do anything useful for Him. What’s more, we’re really expensive to keep around. After all, we cost Him His Son. The amount of grace that God spends on each one of us is literally immeasurable. However, when God can do a thing so great, it puts His glory beyond all question.

Finally, in this portion of the text, Paul explains **THE GIFT OF GOD**. His point here is that we must be careful not to confuse the statement of God's importance and worth with a statement of our own importance and worth. Let's go back to our court of the great king of long ago. I'm sure that back in the day, the king had some toadies who thought they were there because they deserved to be there, that he fed them and cared for them and protected them because they were really special. Not hardly. In reality, their status only gave glory to the king.

The same thing is true of our status. When we have been seated in the heavenly places with Christ Jesus, that's nothing for us to thump our chests and brag about. We didn't earn that; we're not entitled to it. Instead, we are in the court of the King of heaven because we believed His promise and accepted His invitation. It is His gift to us.

However, even though God doesn't need us for anything, there are still things He wants us to do. He didn't make us alive when we were dead in sin so that we could go right back to serving His enemy, the devil. That wouldn't glorify God at all. Instead, our new lives give us a second chance at living right, at doing the things that God has always intended we do. We're not outside the borders of the kingdom with the bandits and the rebels anymore. Instead, we are in the kingdom, serving God and proclaiming His glory by lives filled with good works.

Ephesians 2:11-22

The second main division of our text this morning is Ephesians 2:11-22. We'll use it to prepare our minds for the Lord's Supper. This passage begins with a description of the Gentiles' **SPIRITUAL SEPARATION**. Once again, this is an ominous description. Just look at the words that Paul uses to describe the Gentiles before Jesus: separated, alienated, strangers, hopeless, godless. These aren't people who chose to run off and join the rebels and bandits in the forest. These are people who were born in the forest and have no choice but to be a rebel or a bandit. They can't get into the kingdom of the great king. It's got a wall around it that keeps them out. They're stuck in the forest whether they want to be or not. What's more, they have a pretty good idea that sooner or later, the great king is going to come out from behind his wall and kill them all. He's not going to be merciful to them. They're not his people. That sounds like a grim position to be in, but it was precisely the spiritual position of the Gentiles. It was the position of all of us.

However, the Gentiles were rescued from this hopeless position by **CHRIST, OUR PEACE**. They who were far off were brought near by the blood of Christ. Let's put things back in terms of our illustration. The blood of Christ was so precious that it enabled God not merely to bring the citizens of His kingdom into His court, but also to go outside of His kingdom and invite even the rebels against Him to join Him.

There's a problem with this, though. Here, Paul identifies the wall of our illustration. It was the Law of Moses. The Law, because of the things that it required God's people to do, kept Jews and Gentiles apart and kept the Gentiles out of the kingdom generally. What's more, just like we would expect the kingdom-dwellers to despise and fear the bandits, and the bandits to envy and hate the kingdom-dwellers, so the Jews and the Gentiles were hostile to one another.

What Jesus did, though, when He died on the cross, was to tear down that wall. He did away with the Law of Moses so that Jew and Gentile could now be in the kingdom together. Let's explore the implications of this for a little bit. Back in the day, cities had walls around them for one reason: fear. The inhabitants of the city were afraid that nomads or barbarians or some other enemy would attack and sack the city. Only the very greatest cities of the ancient world, like Rome at the peak of its imperial power, could go without walls, because only the mightiest of nations had no fear of enemies. The people of Paul's day would have understood Christ's wall-demolishing as a similar display of power.

Furthermore, Christ didn't merely bring the Gentiles into the kingdom with the Jews. He invited them all to be in the court of the King Himself. From time to time, we'll hear conservative politicians and commentators sarcastically anticipate the day when nobody in the U.S. will be working or paying taxes. Instead, everybody will be living off the government. That sarcastic vision for America is realized without a trace of sarcasm in the church. God is so wealthy, so great, and so powerful that He doesn't need anybody working for Him. He doesn't have to worry about His collection of courtiers overwhelming His resources. Instead, He invites anybody who wants to to enjoy His grace. To this day, 2000 years later, Jesus still makes the same appeal. We are Christians because we have taken advantage of it.

The result of God's invitation is **SPIRITUAL UNITY**. What a change this text reveals! Before Christ, the Gentiles were strangers. Now, they are citizens. Before, they were aliens. Now, they are members of God's royal household. Before, they were godless. Now, they have access to God and may even call Him Father. Basically, the bandits and rebels out in the forest have been adopted as sons and daughters of the great king himself.

At this point, Paul switches metaphors a little bit. Before, the only structure he had introduced was the wall of the Law of Moses. Now, he introduces a second—a holy temple. The wall was a symbol of exclusion. It kept people out. The temple, by contrast, is a symbol of inclusion. The very people whom the wall kept out are the substance of which the temple is constructed. Before, the wall separated people. Now, the construction of the temple joins them together. Before, none of the people on either side of the wall could come to God. Now, they become a dwelling place for God to inhabit. Note, though, what the foundation of this inclusiveness is. It's the prophets and apostles, with Jesus

Himself as the chief cornerstone. This temple must be constructed on Christ's terms, not our own. Sure, people in the world love to talk about inclusiveness, but all their inclusiveness succeeds in doing is excluding God.

Before we share in the Lord's Supper, then, let's think about these things. Paul in this text is speaking of the church generally, but it is equally true that every congregation is its own holy temple, its own place for God to dwell. If Christ had never died, we would have nothing to do with each other, and we would have nothing to do with God. Both types of fellowship, horizontal fellowship and vertical fellowship, are possible only through Him. The Lord's Supper is a symbol of that fellowship. When we partake of it, we join with God, we join with one another, and we do it by partaking of the bread and cup that He instituted so long ago as the emblems of His offered flesh and blood. As we partake, we look back to the cross and forward to the day when our fellowship is fully realized, when He comes again. This is no small thing, friends. This is the greatest thing that anyone has ever done for any of us. Let's remember as we partake.

Ephesians 3:1-13

The final section of this book that we'll be considering this morning is Ephesians 3:1-12. It begins with a discussion of **PAUL'S POSITION**. Let's pause to note that the opening words of this chapter are "for this reason". Everything that Paul is about to say we should understand in the context of what we've already talked about: God's great mercy in making us alive from the dead and the work of Christ in uniting us with one another and with Him, even at the price of His own blood. Those are amazing things, and they are Paul's explanation for his conduct.

First, he learned about this mystery by revelation. Even though our revelation takes a different form than Paul's did, the same thing is true for us. Second, Paul describes himself as a steward of God's grace for the Ephesians. God had put him under obligation to tell them about the mystery. Even though we don't receive the same direct shoulder tap that Paul did, we are stewards of that grace too, and responsible for sharing it with others. Third, Paul reveals that he is a prisoner for Christ Jesus. Paul is most likely writing this from Rome during his first imprisonment, so he was speaking literally. As the Scripture reveals, this imprisonment did not come as a surprise to Paul. All through the last half of his third missionary journey, his arrest was predicted in great detail. Yet Paul continued on. He believed that the work he had to do was so important that it had to be carried forward, even at the cost of his own freedom.

This is where our records tend to diverge from Paul's. We have the same revelation, we have the same stewardship, but we usually don't display the same willingness to declare it to others regardless of consequences. I think, though, that our struggles with that aren't located in Ephesians 3. They're located in Ephesians 2. We don't share the gospel because we don't get the gospel. We don't grasp how greatly God has blessed us, so we don't feel any urgency to tell others about it. Paul faced what he faced because he understood. If we understand, we will be more willing too.

Next, this text describes **PAUL'S INSIGHT**. The content of this passage is important—it's more discussion of the extraordinarily significant idea that Gentiles could become part of God's people too—but the process of revelation that Paul describes may be even more important. According to Paul, here's how it works. Jesus knew the mystery: that the Father planned to reconcile the world to Himself through the death of His Son. Jesus revealed that mystery to the Holy Spirit. In turn, the Holy Spirit imparted the mystery to apostles and prophets, such as Paul, through the process of inspiration. Paul recorded his insight into the mystery, that it applied to Gentiles too, when he wrote the epistle to the Ephesians. Then, finally, the Ephesians read Paul's letter and were able to understand it. The text doesn't say that they needed some special operation of the Holy Spirit to grasp his point. They didn't need some pastor with a doctorate in divinity. They didn't need some church hierarchy to read the mystery for them and then interpret it. Instead, they, with no more understanding than God imparts to ordinary human beings, could read and make Paul's insight their own.

Today, this is the foundation of our faith, that ordinary Christians can read the Bible and understand it, just like the Ephesians 2000 years ago could. We don't need the Holy Spirit, some pastor, or some denomination to interpret it for us either. For that matter, you don't even need me. I'm nothing more than an ordinary Christian myself. I have a whole lot more time to meditate on the things of the spirit than most of the brethren here do, but the process by which I learn is the same as the process by which any other Christian learns. Because the mystery of Christ has been faithfully handed down to us, every one of us has access to everything that God wants us to know. All we have to do is study.

Third, this portion of the text outlines **PAUL'S WORK**. The last subheading was about what we know. This one is about how cool it is that we know it. Chronologically, Paul starts off here by describing himself as "the least of all the saints". It's weird for us to apply that description to Paul, who is one of the most famous Christians ever, but let's think about it from his perspective right after he obeyed the gospel. Sure, back when he was Saul the persecutor of the church, he was super-important, but once he put on Christ in baptism, he slammed the door on all that. He was not going to get his old life back, and his new life didn't start out so well. He was still haunted by the memory of his past sins, and because of his evil reputation, his new brethren avoided him. It's hard to imagine a lesser saint than Paul.

However, least of all the saints though Paul was, God revealed His grace to him, not by saving him—God had already done that, otherwise Paul wouldn't be a saint at all—but by giving him the opportunity to preach the gospel. Paul

had trashed his life pretty thoroughly, but God gave him the chance to make something out of what was left. He could tell everyone about the unsearchable riches of the great King who wanted them to join His family.

I don't know how everybody here feels about their lives. Maybe we're pretty satisfied with the choices we've made. Maybe, like Paul, we feel as though we've made a mess of things. However, like Paul, God has favored each one of us with the opportunity to do something extraordinarily important. We too can reveal the plan of the mystery that God kept secret for ages. And if we think that most people in the Joliet area know it, they don't.

Finally, Paul presents **GOD'S PURPOSE**. This is a text that provides us with a useful reminder that we can't ever understand all that God has purposed. My dad likes to say that the reason why God created the universe was so that He could defeat the devil. I certainly don't think that is the only reason, but there is some Scriptural support behind the idea that it is a reason. This is one of the places where that support appears. According to the text here, God expects the church to make known the mystery not only to other people, but to rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. Who or what those rulers and authorities are, I don't know, but they aren't any friends of ours. Paul says in Ephesians 6 that our spiritual warfare is against them, so we can safely assume they have lined up with the devil instead of with God. When the church proclaims God's wisdom so that they are confronted with it, that's not an incidental benefit. It is according to God's eternal purpose. From before the foundation of the world, it was God's plan to use us to enlighten them.

Bringing us back to Him was apparently not God's only goal in sending Jesus. However, it was a goal, because through Jesus, we have not merely access, but access with boldness and confidence. None of us could have laid out a plan that would have accomplished even one of God's objectives, but God is so great He did it all simultaneously.