



...but God

Rev. Dr. Peter G. James
Vienna Presbyterian Church

Ephesians 2:1-10

January 24, 2021

I grew up thinking that everything in life had to be earned. Good grades had to be earned. Respect had to be earned. Money had to be earned. So, I figured God's love had to be earned also. I must somehow prove myself a worthy recipient of God's love and acceptance.

Then, at age 19, I discovered grace. Before that time, I thought grace was only something you prayed before meals.

During the last season of my ministry at Vienna Presbyterian, I am preaching on *What Matters Most*. Grace matters most to me. I am saved by God's gift of grace through Jesus Christ. Grace is God's gift to us.

Kids, you may be wondering about this gift. Listen for the word "gift" in today's sermon. Grace is God's gift to us.

I read for you ten verses from Paul's letter to the Ephesians. This portion of his letter is densely packed and hard to understand. For starters, the first seven verses of this second chapter constitute a single 124-word sentence in the original Greek.

Let me attempt to simplify this difficult passage for you. I observe three principle movements in these ten verses. Paul begins by reminding these believers in Ephesus that they were once dead to the things of God. He tells his readers in the middle verses that God has now made them alive together with Christ. He then concludes with what might be called the "so-what difference Jesus can make in their lives." Let's walk through this passage together and apply it to our lives.

The first section consists of verses 1-3. Paul's opening words are stark and abrupt, "As for you, you were dead in trespasses and sins" (Ephesians 2:1). The people to whom Paul is writing are not dead, they are very much alive. He's speaking about their former lives as unbelievers. The death he references here constitutes a spiritual death. Before they came to know Christ, they were dead to the things of God.

I get it. For the first 19 years of my life, I was dead to things of God.

Paul compiles a list in these first three verses of unflattering phrases to characterize their lives without God. "They were dead in trespasses and sins" (Ephesians 2:1). "They loved the ways of the world" (Ephesians 2:2). "They followed the ruler of the kingdom of the air" (Ephesians 2:3), which is code for the devil and his angels. "They gratified the cravings of their flesh" (Ephesians 2:2-3), meaning their sinful desires. Paul closes this section out with the stinging indictment, "They were deserving of God's wrath" (Ephesians 2:3). It's not a pretty picture. So much for earning our way into God's favor.

The second section contains verses 4-7. A major shift takes place, signaled for the reader in the phrase, "but God." "**But God**, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ" (Ephesians 2:4-5). Everything pivots on the conjunction "but." If someone says, "I love you, but..." pay attention to what comes after the conjunction. It may cancel out everything that precedes it. This great-love-for-us, rich-in-mercy God "has made us alive with Christ." Paul goes on to say, "God raised us up with Christ...so that we may show the

incomparable riches of His grace, expressed in His kindness in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 2:6-7). The contrast is between dead and alive. Once, you were dead. Now, you have been made alive with Christ. This aliveness is entirely God’s doing.

Paul then adds the all-important phrase, “It is by grace you have been saved” (Ephesians 2:5). Grace is God’s unmerited favor. Grace cannot be earned. There is nothing we can do to merit God’s love. Salvation cannot be attributed to us. Those of you waiting for my weekly C. S. Lewis quote, here it is, “God loves us, not because we are lovable, but because God is love.”

Grace is God doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves. Think of it as the difference between do and done. God’s acceptance of us is not contingent on what we do for God. Our acceptance is the result of what God has already done for us in Christ.

The third section consists of verses 8-10. Paul begins by repeating the words, “For it is by grace you have been saved” (Ephesians 2:8). Only this time, he adds the prepositional phrase, “by faith” (Ephesians 2:8). By faith, we receive God’s grace through Jesus Christ. Faith equates to trust. We trust by faith what God has done for us in Jesus Christ.

Paul adds two important qualifiers at the end of this grace-by-faith declaration. First qualifier, “This grace is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God” (Ephesians 2:8). Kids, are you still with me? Grace is God’s gift to us. God’s gift of grace must be received. Unwrapped. Opened. I’ll come back to God’s gift of grace a few moments from now.

Second qualifier, this gift of grace is “Not by works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:9). Good works do not save us. We contribute nothing to our salvation. Our good deeds do not earn us favor and merit with God.

The 16th century debate between Catholics and Protestants centered on whether we are saved by grace or good works. Someone asked the Protestant reformer Martin Luther, “Isn’t there something we can contribute to our salvation?” Luther famously replied, “Yes, we contribute sin and resistance.”

There is something for us to do in response to God’s grace. Paul writes in verse 10 that we are created in Christ Jesus to do good works. Given that we once were dead, God had to recreate us in Christ Jesus. This little phrase, “to do” appears twice in this last verse. “We are created in Christ Jesus **to do** good works which Christ prepared for us **to do.**” The essential proof of this new life with Christ is the work we do for God.

So what difference does this sermon make in our lives? Following are two questions to ask ourselves as we seek to apply this passage to our lives.

First question: Have you received God’s gift of grace through faith in Jesus Christ? Have you ever said to God in so many words, “I receive your gift of grace”? Grace is God’s sheer, unmitigated, undeserved, unconditional gift to us. It cannot be earned or merited. It can only be received or denied.

Now, about this gift. The tag addresses it to Joshua from Aunt Becky and Uncle Andrew. This gift has had a fascinating journey. Son Andrew and daughter-in-law Becky bought this gift for their nephew, Joshua, for Christmas three years ago. Becky learned from her sister that Joshua already had an Etch-a-Sketch so she bought him another gift and kept this gift in reserve. When our family vacationed together the following summer, Becky brought this gift along, thinking that her three kids and two cousins, our five grandchildren, could play with it on a rainy day. Well, it never rained so Becky left this gift in the closet and forgot about it. The couple who owns this house is active in our church, and found this gift in the closet. They brought it back with them and returned it to me one Sunday. I promptly put it in the Communion prep room and forgot about it. When Gerri was organizing this room, she found it and returned it to me. It has been in the corner of my office ever since.

What good is a gift if it remains unopened? For a gift to qualify as a gift, it must be opened. I'll tell you what. I'll just open the gift for Joshua, to verify its contents. Becky is right, it's an Etch-a-Sketch. We'll make sure it gets to Joshua.

God's gift of grace is offered you. Have you opened the gift? Do not leave the gift unopened. Tell God today you want by faith to receive God's gift of grace through Jesus Christ.

Let's go to the second question. This question is for any of you listening today who have opened your lives to God's gift of grace. What are you doing with God's gift of grace through Jesus Christ? Salvation does not mean living on

easy street. There is something God wants you to do in gratitude for this gift of grace.

In some Christian communities, it's all about what you are saved *from*. We are saved from sin and death, debts and trespasses. While this is true as far as it goes, there is more to it than that. This passage not only emphasizes what we are saved *from* but what we are saved *for*. Salvation is not some sort of fire insurance to rescue us from the torments of hell. God has good work he wants done through us. Jesus enlists us to join him in his great work.

Jesus once lamented, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Pray that the Lord of the harvest will send more workers into his harvest field" (Luke 10:2). Jesus is recruiting more followers to join him in his work.

God has work he wants you to do. It is undoubtedly related to the way God has already made you. You have been given skills and passions that need to be unleashed through you. There are people to feed and clothe. Children to educate. Friends and family to introduce to Jesus. Racial issues to address. Injustice to challenge. Neighbors to invite to church.

At a recent Session retreat, elders discussed this season of our church's ministry. One word kept resurfacing: invitation. These 18 elders testified that they are active in following Jesus because people took the initiative to invite them to something in this church. In this season of COVID, newcomers aren't coming to our church nearly as often. We must invite them: Invite them to worship, learning communities, Bible study, or helping with Bags of Love.

Have you opened your life to God's gift of grace through Jesus Christ? Our closing prayer is intended to help you receive the gift. What are you doing with God's gift of grace right now? Ask God to show you what he wants you to do.