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By Grace You Have Been Saved

Ephesians 2.1-10

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Have you ever wanted to be in a group or a club, on a team, or part of some circle of relationship because you felt it would be fun, beneficial, or helpful? How does it feel to be on the outside looking in? If being on **the outside** leaves you cut off from all the benefits of being on **the inside**, being outside isn't a place you want to be. When I was a freshman at Colby College, I was an unrecruited walk on trying to make the baseball team. There was no freshmen or junior varsity team, just the varsity. I made it to the final cut but didn't make the team. As badly as I felt about not making it after a lot of time and effort, I knew I had another chance the next year. The seniors and juniors who were cut, including one who lived on the same floor of my dorm, were devastated. The senior on my floor kindly encouraged me not to give up hope of playing and talked with me about the pain of being told by a coach he wasn't good enough to be a part of the team even though he'd been on it for a couple years. As tough as it is to have a coach or the director of a musical group or a play tell you that you're not good enough, there's another feeling that can be even harder to face.

Have you ever felt like you weren't good enough to be loved or accepted by God? Have you ever thought, "*God could never love someone like me?*" Did you ever think, "*If I just help enough people, study the Bible more, attend worship more, pray every day, give generously of my resources, if I'm a really good person, then I'll be loved and accepted by God and get into heaven when I die?*" Perhaps you haven't felt this way, which is a blessing, but I know some people have. Christians don't believe that a person must be good and do good to be loved and accepted by God. **We believe we're loved and accepted by God, and that's why we want to be good and to do good.** Our scripture for today, Ephesians 2:1-10 teaches that you don't have to earn God's love or approval; in fact, there's no amount of spiritual activity or good works you can do to deserve salvation or entrance into heaven. God is the one who takes the initiative. The good news is that even though **outside of Christ** we're all, both Gentiles and Jews, dead in our sins, **in Christ** we're saved by the grace, kindness, and mercy of God. Grace is a gift that's free and available to all. Ephesians also tells us how we're to live as Christians who have been saved by grace. Listen to **Ephesians 2:1-10.**

2 **You were dead** through the trespasses and sins 2 in which you **once lived**, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. 3 **All of us** once lived among them in the **passions** of our flesh, following the **desires** of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, **like everyone else**. 4 **But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us** 5 even when we were dead through our trespasses, **made us alive together with Christ**—by grace you have been saved— 6 and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in **Christ Jesus**, 7 so that in the ages to come he might show the **immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness** toward us in **Christ Jesus**. 8 **For by grace you have been saved through faith**, and this is not your own doing; **it is the gift of God**— 9 not the result of works, so that no one may boast. 10 **For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.**

Saved by grace through faith, is a theme Paul repeats over and over throughout his teachings. Salvation is a gift, and it cannot be earned through works. What a joyous message for the Ephesians to hear. God is not like the pagan gods; God doesn't demand unreasonable works to get his favor. Yet in an almost paradoxical way, God's children are created to do good works. It's in our very nature and DNA to do good works. God's people cannot help doing good works, which God prepared "*to be our way of life*," especially when it glorifies God whom they love. I want to share with you today from Ephesians 2, the situation for **Humanity Outside Christ, Humanity in Christ, and What it Means to Be a Christian who is Saved by Grace**.

Verses 1-3 describe the situation for **Humanity Outside Christ** and it's dire whether one is a Gentile or a Jew. Paul says all people are dead in their trespasses, sins, and disobedience, living selfishly, slavishly seeking to fulfill every passion, desire, or whim of their body and senses. "*I want what I want when I want it*," sums up humanity's approach to life outside Christ. Even after we become followers of Christ, we need to make sure that this is not our approach to life; that the self is not at the center of all things. The result of this kind of life, Paul says, is we deserve God's righteous judgment, and he says this is the way "*in which you once lived*." The past tense tells us

that's where the Ephesians started, but it's not where they are now. Their manner of living has changed because of God's grace in Christ.

The situation for people outside Christ should motivate us to try and help people we know who are outside to get inside so they move from sin, disobedience, death, and judgment, to mercy, grace, and kindness. It's a movement from self being at the center to Christ being at the center. This is why it's important for all of us to be able to share clearly, concisely, and compellingly the gift of God's grace. One way to do that is to describe a group that's incredibly beneficial for everyone who's a part of it, and it's not an exclusive club, anyone is invited.

In verses 1-3, things look bad for everyone outside Christ, but everything changes in verse 4. ***“But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us,”*** I know there are lots of people who struggle to believe in God for all kinds of reasons. Good people, intelligent people, have their reasons why they don't or can't believe. But I believe that the God who is described in Ephesians is worth believing in, even in those days or seasons when we find believing difficult. For me it starts with the character of God who is rich in mercy and motivated by great love. I have asked people, *“If you did believe in God, would you want to believe in a God who is rich in mercy and motivated by great love?”* People almost universally say, “Yes.” That's the God we believe in. A God who loves us not because we're good, wonderful, fabulous, easy to love people, but a God who loves us ***“even when we were dead through our trespasses.”*** God sees us in our worst sins, failures, and mistakes, and God loves us still. And this same God who is rich in love and mercy and raised Jesus from the dead, has ***“made us alive together with Christ.”*** God's power is displayed in changing our condition from death to life and raising us to be with Christ in the heavenly places.

And this is a gift —***“by grace you have been saved.”*** It's stunning when you think about it. You're an undeserving outsider, yet God graciously and generously invites you to become an insider who is raised from death and judgment to life, love, and grace and to enjoy all the benefits and blessings of being in God's family.

What's So Amazing About Grace is the title of an excellent book by Phil Yancey. One of my favorite stories in the book comes from a 1990 article in the Boston Globe about an unusual wedding banquet. Accompanied by her fiancé, a woman went to the

Hyatt Hotel in downtown Boston and ordered the meal. The two of them pored over the menu, made selections of chine and silver, and pointed to pictures of flower arrangements they liked. They both had expensive taste, and the bill came to \$13,000. After leaving a check for half that amount as down payment, the couple went home to flip through books of wedding announcements.

The day the announcements were supposed to hit the mailbox, the potential groom got cold feet. ***"I'm just not sure,"*** he said. ***"It's a big commitment. Let's think about this a little longer."***

When his angry fiancée returned to the Hyatt to cancel the banquet, the Events Manager could not have been more understanding. ***"The same thing happened to me, Honey,"*** she said, and told the story of her own broken engagement. But about the refund, she had bad news. ***"The contract is binding. You're only entitled to \$1,300 back. You have two options: to forfeit the rest of the down payment, or go ahead with the banquet. I'm sorry. Really, I am."***

It seemed crazy, but the more the jilted bride thought about it, the more she liked the idea of going ahead with the party – not a wedding banquet, mind you, but a big blowout. Ten years before, this same woman had been living in a homeless shelter. She had got back on her feet, found a good job, and set aside a sizable nest egg. Now she had the wild notion of using her savings to treat the down-and-outs of Boston to a night on the town.

And so it was that in June of 1990 the Hyatt Hotel in downtown Boston hosted a party such it had never seen before. The hostess changed the menu to boneless chicken ***"in honor of the groom,"*** she said - and sent invitations to rescue missions and homeless shelters. That warm summer night, people used to peeling half-gnawed pizza off the cardboard dined instead on chicken cordon bleu. Hyatt waiters in tuxedos served hors d'oeuvres to senior citizens propped up by crutches and aluminum walkers. Bag ladies, vagrants, and addicts took one night off from the hard life of the sidewalks outside and instead sipped champagne, ate chocolate wedding cake, and danced to big-band melodies late into the night.

When we hear a story like that, its good to ask ourselves, where did we see our self in it? Did you identify with the bride, the groom, the Event Manager, the wait staff, or

as one of the surprised guests? The good news of the gospel is that **in Christ** we're all like one of those persons on the street who is an unexpected beneficiary of grace.

Outside of Christ – we're dead in our trespasses, sins, and disobedience and deserving of God's righteous judgment. **In Christ** we are the beneficiaries of God's mercy, kindness, grace, and love that are offered to everyone as a gift, not because of anything that we have done or could do and not because we earned it or were worthy of it or deserved it.

That leads to the third and final point, **What does it Means to Be a Christian who is saved by Grace**. How do I live as a Christian saved by grace? Paul writes in verse 7 that in Christ, we are blessed by the "*immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.*" God's grace and kindness are immeasurable, and they are reaching out and extending to all. Verses 8-9 highlight that we are saved by grace through faith. "*and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— 9 not the result of works, so that no one may boast.*" These verses motivated Martin Luther, the sixteenth century theologian who began the Protestant Reformation, and other great reformers of the church, who emphasized that being saved by grace is the gift of God, it is not the result of works so no one can be prideful and say, "*Look at me, look how good I am, look how much I serve, look at how much time I give, look at how much money I give, that's why God loves and accepts me.*" One of the things Martin Luther was so upset about was the church selling indulgences. Think of the Get Out of Jail Free card in the boardgame Monopoly. The idea was you could give the church money and buy your way out of your sin. So, you could do whatever you wanted, live however you wanted, then you could pay the church money and receive forgiveness. This is a perversion of grace.

As I said at the beginning, Christians don't believe that a person must be good and do good to be loved and accepted by God. **We believe we're loved and accepted by God, and that's why we want to be good and to do good.** It may seem confusing to some people that in verse 9 we're told we're not saved by our good works, and then in verse 10 Paul writes, 10 "**For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.**"

The difference is our **motivation** for being good and doing good. If we're seeking to be and to do good to **earn** love, acceptance, or approval from God, we're doing it for the wrong reason. If we're striving to be good and to do good out of gratitude for the love, grace, kindness, and mercy that God has generously given us and to reflect and share with others the love, grace, kindness, and mercy that God has shown us even though we didn't deserve it, we're on the right track.

One of the situations that's being addressed in Ephesians is that there were some ways of thinking Paul wanted to correct. One was the idea we can earn or merit God's love and approval by what we do. Another was since we're saved by grace, we can do whatever we want, and God will still love us and accept us so there are no ethical boundaries I need to be concerned about. A third was an approach called Gnosticism which taught that the body and what we did with it is irrelevant because all that matters is our spirit.

To all these Paul says no. You can't earn God's love through good works, but you can't just do anything you want with your body or your life because what you do in and with your body matters because we're called to be good and to do good because that was God's plan for humanity from the very beginning. It's in our nature to want to do good works, and that's to be our way of life, but we do them because of our love and gratitude to God for all God's done for us in Christ. God's grace is God's gift to you. The life you live in response to God's grace is your gift, your thank you, to God.

It feels bad to be on the outside of a group, wishing you could be a part of it and enjoy all the benefits and opportunities that come from being on the inside but not having the talent, qualifications, money, or the invitation to come in. Many businesses, organizations and clubs emphasize their exclusivity by demanding expensive entrance fees, or special abilities to be a part of them.

To be in the family of God, we're asked to confess that we are sinners in need of God's grace, that we trust in Jesus Christ whom God raised from the dead, that we receive with gratitude God's immeasurable, mercy, kindness, grace and love, and that we devote the rest of our lives to living as Jesus taught, being and doing good with gratitude and praise at being invited to the party. It's a good deal and worth accepting.

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. How does Ephesians 2:1-3 describe the plight of human life outside Christ and untouched by the influence of Christ's message? What is the result of people being alienated from God and making moral choices not in harmony with God's will?
2. What does Ephesians 2:1-10 tell us about God's mercy, love, grace, and kindness? Where are they mentioned and what do they do for us?
3. How does Ephesians 2:4-6 describe hope that all humanity, Jew, and Gentile, has in Christ thanks to God's mercy and love? What great changes have occurred in the human condition because of God's gracious initiative and action?
4. How would you describe what it means and how it feels to be saved by grace and not by anything of your own doing?
5. What does Ephesians 2:7-10 say about what it means to be a Christian?
6. In Ephesians 2 we're told we're not saved by works (verse 9), yet we were created by God to do good works (verse 10). How would you describe the balance of recognizing that we can't contribute to our own salvation, it can only be received as a gift, with the exhortation to walk in the ways of goodness and holiness now that we are in Christ?