



## NOT JUST FORGIVEN

**Ephesians 2:1-10**

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And you were dead in the trespasses and sins <sup>2</sup> in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— <sup>3</sup> among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. <sup>4</sup> But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, <sup>5</sup> even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ— by grace you have been saved— <sup>6</sup> and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, <sup>7</sup> so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. <sup>8</sup> For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, <sup>9</sup> not a result of works, so that no one may boast. <sup>10</sup> For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

### Introduction

Let me raise a question for us to think about this morning. What is it that accounts for the gap between what we are and what we intuitively sense that we should be? Some of the deficit we feel as believers is inevitable. Scripture tells us we await the day of final salvation that the Apostle Paul talks about in 1 Corinthians 15, when the mortal becomes immortal, the perishable becomes imperishable. So we know that God hasn't completed his work in us today. However, sometimes we have a sense that even given that caveat, there is still a deficit between what we should be and what we are.

Why are there more imperfections than should be? How come when we look at North American Christianity it seems at times that we are not that much different than the world. Or perhaps a better question that's a little closer to home is: Why is it that our own local church sometimes doesn't look all that different from the world? Or, the best question and closest to home: Why is it that *I* don't always look that different from the world? We read the Bible's depiction of what a believer's life should look like: Romans 6 about being risen with Christ and sin not being our master, or in 1 John about he who has been born of God does not continue in sin. Yet we look at our lives and see a disconnect. How do we account for that? There are many reasons that speak to this issue, but I think the primary one is that often times we have a

truncated understanding of the gospel. We haven't fully embraced or understood all that the gospel has for us, and all that God gives to us. We have reduced the gospel to the mere forgiveness of sins, and inevitably, we neutralize the power it has to transform our lives.

The gospel is a solution oriented reality. The word *gospel* literally means "good news." Good news presupposes bad news. So what is the bad news? If we misunderstand the severity of the bad news, we will minimize or neutralize the glory of the good news. As I consider my own life, the churches that I have been a part of and, more broadly, the Church, I do believe we have underestimated the depth of the bad news, and consequently underestimated the glorious height of the good news, and that this misstep accounts for much of the reason we seem to fall short in being what God has called us to be.

Ephesians 2:1-10 is a great concise statement of the gospel. Note a few divisions here. In the first three verses of the passage, Paul clearly details the bad news; in verses 4-8 he talks about the good news, and in verse 10 he talks about the results of the good news.

### **The Bad News**

Notice in the beginning of this text how the word of God describes our condition. The bad news is that we were dead in trespasses and sins. Sometimes we think about death as being inanimate; when you die your body become inanimate. But spiritual death is not a lack of activity; rather we see in the text that to be spiritually dead does not mean that our souls stop behaving, but rather they stop behaving correctly. We go on to read that we were dead in our trespasses in which we once walked following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience, among whom we all once lived the passions of the flesh, carrying out the desires of the body, of the mind. In other words we have this condition of death that has come upon us, we are spiritually dead and this death is being acted out in sinful behavior and living. Jesus in Matthews 12:34 talks about this distinction between the condition of sin and the action of sin. He says, "Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks." In other words, what we are on the inside manifests itself in our actions, attitudes and speech.

So Paul sets up right at the beginning a distinction between sinfulness as a condition and sin as a behavior. Of course not everything about us is bad; we can always think of someone who is further down the path of depravity than we are: our spouse, our children or neighbor. We always think "I'm not as bad as I could be," and that is certainly true. We're not all axe-murderers or dictators that are waiting to enact genocide, but the reality is we are carrying out the desires of the body and the mind. The reality is that apart from Christ, we just go along with what we want to do, what our bodies and our minds tell us—we are going along with the course of this world. We're fundamentally just doing our own thing. Martin Luther, the great German reformer, describes sin in this way: "Sin is the will curved back in upon itself." That's an apt description of sin. Basically, at its core, it's selfishness; it's moving yourself to the center of your universe and making everything else orbit around your desires and your wants. Sometimes that manifests itself in rather benign ways: caring for my children, taking care of my family, but the reality is it's still self-absorbed—I'm still at the center. And it gets even worse.

Look what it says at the end of verse 3: Paul talks about how we're dead in sins, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and then he says that we "were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind." The Greek word that underlies the English word, *nature*, functions very similarly to how we would use the term *nature*. In this passage it carries this idea: the sum of innate properties and powers by which one entity differs from another. For

example, we might say, “It’s the nature of the young man to crave adventure,” meaning there is just something about the way a young man is hardwired that he craves excitement and adventure. Or we would say, “It’s the nature of a dog to bark at a mailman,” or, “It’s the nature of the cat to be indifferent” (which is why I don’t care for cats much). So each entity has a different sort of nature, a different sort of hardwiring. Thus we can say the nature of an animal is different than the nature of a human is different than the nature of an angel is different than the nature of God. So we might even say that this term nature is the idea of our being or essence or, if you were a philosophy professor, you might say our *ontology*. You see what this means then, when Paul says we are by nature children of wrath. He is saying that, based upon who and what we are, we are under the wrath and condemnation of God. He is not saying that God’s wrath is primarily or fundamentally upon us because of the bad things we do. He is saying that God’s wrath is upon us because of the bad thing that we’ve become.

This is an important distinction that we often miss. I imagine that most of us have seen the movie, “Old Yeller.” If you haven’t, this is going to be a plot spoiler, so just be warned. “Old Yeller” is a movie about a young boy, Travis and his dog, Old Yeller. In the climactic scene of the movie Old Yeller fights a rabid wolf. In fighting the rabid wolf, he saves Travis and the family. But Old Yeller is now threatened with having contracted rabies himself. So mom tells Travis to take Old Yeller and put him in a pen and lock him up. They are going to have to wait and see if Old Yeller has fallen prey to the rabies. Day one goes by and everything is fine. Day two goes by and everything is fine. Day three comes and Travis goes to feed Old Yeller, and Old Yeller has sadly succumbed to the rabies and is frothing at the mouth. He has become something different than what he was the day before. Travis shoots Old Yeller and puts him down.

But I’ve always thought that was unfair of Travis. After all, Old Yeller hadn’t done anything wrong yet. I would think it would have been more equitable if Travis would have just let Old Yeller out and given him a chance. If he mauls a small child, now you’ve got a case. But you see that is ridiculous, right? Because once a dog has gone rabid, you don’t wait for the dog to do something bad. The judgment we bring on a rabid dog isn’t because a rabid dog has behaved improperly, even though rabid dogs, if given a chance, do behave improperly. But rather, the judgment that falls upon a rabid dog is because the dog has become rabid, and is completely independent of anything that the dog has done or will do.

In the same way, God’s wrath is upon us, not primarily because we have broken a bunch of rules. The problem is more deeply about what we’ve become, what sin has made us. We don’t think about this oftentimes, partly because we conceive of God the same way we conceive of a human judge. When a human judge judges a person who comes into his court, the judge doesn’t look at the person and try to determine what kind of person they are. The judgment isn’t based upon the condition of the person; judgment is based upon whether the person committed the crime or not. So even if the judge thinks the person is despicable, if the person hasn’t committed the crime, the person is let off, because in a human court, we don’t judge the condition of a soul; we judge behavior. But God’s judgment stretches beyond the behaviors that we do, and goes right to the very condition of our soul. And it’s the condition of our souls—as dead souls that have been separated from God that are curved back in on themselves—that warrants God’s wrath and his judgment.

We are by nature, by what we are, because of what sin has made us—we are by nature children of wrath. Let me drive this home with one last text. In Romans 5:12-14 Paul writes, “Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man (meaning Adam), and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned—” Then he pauses here to make

another point; he says, “for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law.” In other words, when God created Adam and Eve he gave them one law: don’t eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil; Adam and Eve disobeyed; they were expelled from the garden; and from the time of the expulsion from the garden to the time of Moses there were no other laws from God. He had not given any commands; so therefore, there were no commands to break. So before the law was given sin is not counted; God wasn’t condemning people between the time of Adam and Moses because they were breaking laws. Yet look what he says: “Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam.” In other words, they hadn’t sinned by breaking the law and yet death still reigned over them because the wrath and the judgment of God isn’t upon us because we’ve *done* bad things; the wrath and judgment of God is upon us because we have *become* bad things—because we ourselves have become corrupted and perverted by sin.

Milton in his *Paradise Lost* gives us a good picture of depravity in the account that he wrote of Satan upon his release from hell, referencing Revelation 20. Milton writes this about Satan:

Now rolling boil in his tumultuous breast,  
And like a devilish engine back recoils  
Upon himself; Horror and doubt distract  
His troubled thoughts, and from the bottom stirs  
The Hell within him; for within him Hell  
He brings, and round about him, nor from Hell  
One step no more than from himself can fly”

In despair Satan cries,

Me miserable! Which way shall I fly  
Infinite wrath and infinite despair?  
Which way I fly is Hell; myself am Hell;”

Milton gives us a correct insight here about the pervasive, corrupting influence of life lived apart from God. The corruption of hell is not something that is simply out there, a place that we go to, but rather, the smoke of that barren waste has drifted into this world. It has filled our lungs and our pores, and it has wrecked and is wrecking our humanity. Athanasius and the other church fathers would speak about humanity as though it was dissolving, as though it was a painting that has gotten water on it and all the colors were beginning to run; that humanity fundamentally is not what God intended it to be; that we have in a sense, become rabid; that rabidity has fallen upon us through sin and it has curved our will back in upon ourselves and we lack the capacity now to live with each other in a way that God has called us to live. And the reality of God’s judgment upon us due to our sinful condition is the great scandalon, the great offense of the gospel. Who among us finds it difficult to admit that we occasionally do some

wrong things? Every religion acknowledges the fact that we occasionally make mistakes. The idea that we sin often is not a distinctly Christian doctrine; but how much more devastating to our pride is the Christian insistence that we ourselves are fundamentally broken and that this brokenness itself is sufficient to warrant the just wrath of God; that quite apart from anything we do, we're condemned.

The great damnable problem of sin is not wrongs committed but even more fundamentally, the hell within. Fly whatever way we will there is no escape. I "myself am Hell." The most basic question of repentance is not whether we will repent of our sins but whether we will repent of ourselves. It's one thing to admit that we've screwed up; it's quite another to admit that *we* are the screw-up. This is the great challenge of repentance that the gospel calls us to, not just to repent of some deeds done out there, but that we ourselves have become something we were never meant to be; there is something fundamentally broken about us!

Well, this has been a happy sermon so far, has it not? And indeed if we end it there, it would be a despairing sermon. However, the good apostle goes on to speak in the subsequent verses about the salvation that God brings to us in light of the condition in which we find ourselves. Verses 4-8:

<sup>4</sup>But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us,  
<sup>5</sup>even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ— by  
grace you have been saved— <sup>6</sup>and raised us up with him and seated us with him in  
the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, <sup>7</sup>so that in the coming ages he might show the  
immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. <sup>8</sup>For by grace  
you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of  
God, <sup>9</sup> not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

Notice that the solution here to the problem is new life in Christ, "but God being rich in mercy because of the great love with which he loves us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ." There is a tendency for us to reduce the gospel to the mere forgiveness of sins, as though what it meant to be saved was 'I got my parking ticket cleared,' or 'I got my fine paid for,' or 'I had my legal issues resolved'—as though that were the only problem that we had between us and God. The problem goes much deeper than the deeds that we've done wrong. It goes to the very core of who we are. And so when Paul is talking about what the gospel does in our lives, though he does talk elsewhere, and often, about the forgiveness of sins, when he's talking about it here, he's addressing what I believe is the most core, fundamental issue that the gospel addresses. He doesn't say, "But God, being rich in mercy forgave us of our sins;" he says, "But God, being rich in mercy . . . made us alive with Christ" because most fundamentally, it's not the deeds that we do, but rather the heart that gives birth to the deeds that we do, that needs to be fixed.

So then, the solution that the gospel brings to the bad news is not forgiveness of sins alone, but rather, new life. Indeed, forgiveness of sins alone is not sufficient for inheriting eternal life. Think about John chapter 3; Jesus is talking to Nicodemus, and Jesus says to Nicodemus "unless a man is born again, he shall not enter the kingdom of God." And all of 1 Corinthians 15 talks about the resurrection, the glorification of the believer, and he says, "the perishable must put

on imperishable, the mortal must put on immortality.” In other words, we must become something different than what we are if we are going to be in relationship with God. God in the gospel is looking to restore his relationship with us. And if he wants to relate to us, he needs to address the core part of where all of our rebellion stems from.

Let’s go back to our rabid dog illustration: if we have a rabid dog, we don’t just forgive the rabid dog for all the maulings and terrible things that it does and just go on living with it. Because, if our desire is to be in relationship with the dog, then the dog has to be fixed: it has to become something other than what it is in its rabidity. If God desires a relationship with us, and he does, he can’t just forgive us and let us go on in our merry sinful way. He needs to begin to address and to fix the core issue that caused sin to arise in the first place.

So the heart of the gospel is not just the forgiveness of sins, but it is new life in Christ; it’s being raised up to be something different than we were. This is accomplished of course through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. In Ephesians chapter 1:13-14, Paul says,

In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.

In other words, God has given himself in the Holy Spirit; the life of God has come into our hearts and is beginning to make us different than what we are in our natural selves so that we are no longer by nature children of wrath. As sons of God through Jesus Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, we are by nature children of love and affection. And this is the hope of the gospel: “Christ in us the hope of glory” (Col. 1:27); this is the good news of the gospel—not simply that God forgives us and leaves us as we are—what hope is that? where is the joy in that?—but that God forgives us and begins to make us the kind of people that can relate to him and to his creation properly.

Look back in Ephesians 2:8 “for by grace you have been saved,” a classic text that many of us would have learned as young children. So often we read that text and we think immediately of grace as meaning forgiveness of sins alone. Rather, *grace* here means the restoration of who we are back into the image of God.

<sup>8</sup>For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, <sup>9</sup> not a result of works, so that no one may boast. <sup>10</sup>For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works.

“Created in Christ Jesus”—what is that? Does it mean when we were born first time? No! It means when we were born a second time. Not everyone is created in Christ Jesus. To be created in Christ Jesus is the unique privilege of those who have come to God for salvation through Christ. Created in Christ Jesus for what?—for good works.

So we move back to the original question, which was: How come it sometimes seems that our lives don't always match up to how we know we should be living? Why is there this deficit? Well, maybe part of the reason is because we have conceived of the gospel too narrowly to include only the forgiveness of sins. That is, when we think about the life that we should live to please God, we have forgotten where the power for that life comes from. The power for that life doesn't come from the forgiveness of sins in isolation from the rest of the work that God does for us in the gospel, but rather, the power to live the kind of life that is pleasing to God comes from the fact that God has begun to change us on the inside, and make us the kind of people that are pleasing to him. He has "created (us) in Christ Jesus for good works."

So the main point of application that I want to leave both for myself and for you is that the power for an obedient life comes from salvation—salvation being fully understood in its broadest sense to include new life in Christ; that the fundamental issue between us and God is not our behavior but the condition of our souls, and that God is most concerned in salvation, not to deal with the things that we've done wrong, but to deal with the condition of our heart. And that thankfully, because of God who is rich in mercy, he has made us alive in Christ, and that this is the hope that we have.

Two final points of application and then we're done: as you communicate the gospel to those that you encounter, don't leave out or truncate the bad news. Don't get fixated on behavior as though that's the real thing that God is all worked up about. Go right to the core as Paul does here to the condition of the heart. People ultimately need not to repent of the *bad things* that they have done; they need to repent of *themselves*. And until they've repented of themselves, they will not be able to embrace the gospel in all its fullness. So if you preach the gospel, preach the whole gospel but start by preaching the whole of the bad news as well.

I remember when I was in high school I prayed with a number of friends to receive Christ. This was after one of my friend's father had died and the gospel was given. And a number of my friends, I believe it was four or five, came to me afterwards and they wanted to pray to receive Christ for the forgiveness of sins. So I lead them in the sinner's prayer and they prayed that God would forgive them of their sins and then they went on their merry way, living as they had lived before. What was wrong there? What happened there? As I came to reflect on these things later, it was very clear to me that what they wanted was forgiveness for all the bad things they have done so they wouldn't end up in hell. But they didn't want to be changed; they didn't want God to mess with them; they wanted to be able to go on with their life as it was and just not have to suffer the consequences for it. They were, in a sense, asking forgiveness for their deeds but they were not asking forgiveness for themselves; they were not submitting themselves to the salvation that God offered, which was to re-order their whole lives and to point them in a different direction.

And it is quite possible that many of us in the church have come to God for only half of salvation. We've come to God because we want our sins forgiven, because who does not want their sins forgiven? And because, frankly, forgiveness of sins doesn't cost anything—or so we think. We are not looking for God to change us. We don't see that the real problem is me—who I am. So we ask God to come and forgive our sins but then we stiff-arm the work that his Spirit would want to do in changing us so that we don't go on living a life of sin. And it could be that in a church our size, that there are some who have been coming week after month after year to

church, and what you've looked for from God is essentially the forgiveness of sins but you've stiff-armed the renewing work of grace in your life.

If that's where you find yourself today, then it needs to be said to you as pointedly and as graciously as possible, that the gospel comes together as a whole or it doesn't come at all. And there is no forgiveness of sins without a transformed life because the Spirit that is in us is the Spirit that wants to transform us and make us the kind of people that don't want to continue on in a life of sin. If you are trying to receive God's forgiveness of sins without receiving the gift of the Spirit that makes us new people, you will end up with neither. God has given us so graciously, in his Son and in the gift of his Spirit, new life in Christ, forgiveness for all the crazy, dumb, sinful things that we have done and will ever do, and he has deposited himself—his very own self—in our hearts through the Holy Spirit, that we will become something different than we are. And praise God for the grace that he has given us in Christ that raises us above ourselves and makes us new creatures. This is the great hope of the gospel.

Amen.

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