

“There’s a Big Difference”

Ephesians 2:1-10

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A wife called her husband at work and said, “I have good news and bad news for you.” “Okay, let me hear it,” he responded. “Well, the good news is that when I backed out the car this morning I didn’t hit the side of the garage again.” “What is the bad news?” “Well,” she said, “When I backed out of the driveway, I did hit a car that was parked on the other side of the street.” Friends, this is a joke, because there is really not any good news. There is nothing good about not hitting the garage if you hit another car instead. Friends, the message of Christianity is the opposite, however. It is bad news, good news. Yes, there is bad news, but because of the good news, the gospel of Jesus Christ, the bad news loses its significance. As we continue our journey through Ephesians this morning, we will explore chapter 2:1-10. Paul begins this chapter with bad news, describing the wretched condition people are in without Jesus Christ. Yet, this bad news is quickly overshadowed by good news. The message is that if we are trusting in Jesus those negative words no longer describe us. Today, as we explore the big difference Jesus makes, my hope is we will understand that the gospel message is really good news and that we would desire to experience His transforming grace in our lives. Let’s pause and pray that would happen today.

What are people like without Jesus Christ? What were we, Christians, like before we knew the Lord Jesus. This is the apostle Paul’s description.

Ephesians 2:1-3 And you were dead in the trespasses and sins 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-among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the flesh and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. Wow! Paul paints a grim picture. There is plenty of bad news here. He notes three horrible aspects of the Ephesian’s condition before they become Christians. Now, these folks didn’t have exceptionally wicked backgrounds. They were not drug dealers, sex offenders or axe murderers before their conversion to Christianity. As verse 3 says, he is talking about everyone, “the rest of mankind.” This universal condition.

Whether you are male or female, young or old. Whether you live in the 1st century or the 21st. Whether you live in the Roman province of Asia, China, or the Minnesota Iron Range, this is what we are all like before we know Jesus Christ.

First, Paul says that without Jesus we are simply dead. **Ephesians 2:1 And you were dead in the trespasses and sins.** Paul doesn’t mean that our hearts have stopped beating or that our brain waves are flat. Instead, we are simply dead. This “deadness” is a result of “trespasses and sins.” The Greek word translated trespass means to “stray off the path.” It refers to our specific violations of God’s law. Doing something He has declared wrong. Anytime we lie, steal or have lustful thoughts we trespass against God’s rules for life. “Sins” (the Greek word is “hamartia” literally means “missing the mark.”) It denotes failing to live as God desires. Not loving God, not loving other people, not giving God the glory in all that we do. These are sins. Yet, the worst thing about being simply dead is that there is not a relationship with God. I feel a little uncomfortable at a funeral when I see someone talking to the corpse. It may indicate that individual is not able to accept the fact the person who has died is no longer able to respond. A corpse cannot relate to those who are alive. In the same way, people who are simply dead are incapable of trusting and loving God. Paul is also implying that spiritual corpses are unable to do anything about their condition. They cannot will themselves to life or even desire life, any more than a corpse in a casket can. Being simply dead seems like a hopeless situation.

Maybe you are thinking, “What a second, Pastor Dan. I know people who are not believers in Jesus, and they are anything but ‘dead.’” Yes, a non-Christian can seem very much alive. He may be able to run a 100-meter dash in less than 12 seconds. A non-Christian may have a brilliant mind. She may get straight A’s on her report card. Non-Christians can have really great personalities and spending time with them can be a lot of fun. Often they are nice people who gladly shovel your sidewalk after a snowstorm. They can even show up for church on Sunday and sing the songs with great enthusiasm. They can be very interested in

religion. But, if these folks are not trusting in Jesus Christ they are spiritual zombies. Medical technology is now capable of keeping someone's heart beating, even when the brain is dead. There have always been people whose hearts and brains work just fine, but whose spirits are dead. That is Paul's diagnosis of every human being apart from Jesus Christ.

Friends, Paul's rather negative description of the human condition is not very popular in secular circles. Even many Christians often want a more optimistic diagnosis. They seem to think that without Christ people are spiritually sick, but not dead. Just an injection of a few milligrams of Christianity and they will be fine. The apostle Paul is not nearly so optimistic. He pronounces people without Jesus as D.O.A. and in what seems to be a totally helpless situation.

Second, Paul says that without Jesus people are enslaved. We place a high value on our freedom. We like to think we can do or be whatever we choose. Paul says "Wait a second, without Jesus, you were (verse 2) "following the course of the world." You don't freely choose your values. They are often shaped by the world around you. Friends, the reality is that TV, movies, music, and the educational system have permeated our culture with secular attitudes and values that most folks adopt without even realizing it. The rapid change in attitudes toward same sex marriage in our culture is one example of this. I don't think these attitudes have not changed because people have done serious thinking about this issues. The world around us shaped our values far more than most of us realize.

Another force that Paul says influences us is the demonic that he refers to in verse 2 as "the prince of the power of the air." C.S. Lewis wisely said, that people usually make the mistake of "believing in the devil either too much, or not at all." Though some Christians fall into the trap of going way beyond scripture in their speculations about the demonic, I think most of us make the mistake of forgetting that the demonic realm is very real. Satan is the enemy of our souls. Without Jesus, we are vulnerable to his domination and can easily be enslaved.

Then Paul says without Jesus we are controlled by our flesh or some versions read "sinful nature." **Ephesians 2:3a We all once lived in the**

passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the flesh and the mind. "If it feels good, do it," is the theme of those whose lives are governed by their appetites. Even secular society recognizes this enslavement. They call it addiction. Drugs, alcohol, food, porn, gambling, sex, Facebook. These are all ways our desires enslave us. Now, people don't see themselves as slaves because they are doing what they feel like doing. They have fallen into a pit, but often instead of trying to climb out, they often try to find happiness by digging a deeper hole. Someone who sets her alarm for 2:00 each morning to check her Facebook page, is not really free. A counselor told a young man that he could be free in Christ. He responded, "Do you mean I don't always have to be miserable trying to have fun?" That is right. We don't have to follow our desire. In Christ, we are free to do not just what we want, but what we ought.

Third, Paul says not only are we spiritually dead and enslaved, we are also in danger of experiencing God's wrath. Verse 3, "We were by nature children of wrath." John Edward's famous sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," compared the condition of the non-Christian to that of a spider hanging by a thread over a blazing fire. Many folks today find that description much too severe. Now, I never have, nor probably every will, preach what some would call a "fire and brimstone" sermon that gives a long, detailed, and speculative description of the horrors of hell, with the goal of scaring people to turn to Jesus. I know one pastor who had the ushers turn the thermostat to 85 degrees during his sermon on hell so people could literally "feel the heat." That is manipulative preaching, not biblical preaching. But, just because I don't preach those type of sermons doesn't mean I want you to forget, ignore or doubt what Paul says in verse 3. Apart from Jesus Christ, we are objects of God's wrath. There are no words in English or any other language, that describe how terrible that is. People sometimes say, "War is hell." Friends, that is not true. A veteran might say, "Pastor Dan, you don't know what it is like to be in a steamy jungle or scorching desert and watch your buddy get killed as he steps on a land mine." No, I don't. I imagine it is a horrific experience, far worse than anything I have ever gone through. But it is not hell. Hell, the wrath of God, which lasts for eternity is a zillion times worse than anything we will ever experience on this earth.

Now, at this point some of you are thinking, “Yes, that was me before I became a Christian. I was spiritually dead, enslaved by sin and in danger of God’s wrath.” Others of you are thinking, “Wait a minute, Pastor Dan. I became a Christian when I was 8 years old. I was never a bad person. The worst thing I did was steal a cookie from the cookie jar or put a frog in my sister’s bed.” But, the apostle Paul is not only describing our condition before you became a Christian, but also what you would be like today if you were not trusting in the Lord Jesus. So why does Paul paint such a bleak picture? Many people say they like to go to church because it makes them “feel good.” Maybe that is why you came today. But if you are feeling good after we been talking about these first three verses of Ephesians 2, you have missed something! Maybe you have been napping. Though many of us like to think, “I’m okay, you’re okay,” Paul says rather emphatically, “No, without Jesus Christ we are not okay.” Without Him we are in mega bad shape and in mega bad trouble. So what is the point? Does Paul want us to feel yucky and depressed? No! Remember there is good news that overshadows this very bad news. He has created a very dark backdrop to display the glory of God’s grace in a most spectacular way. The glory of God’s grace stands in marvelous contrast with the wretched life that we would have without Jesus. If it were not for the bad news, good news would not be nearly as good.

So what are people like with Jesus Christ? Ephesians 2:4-10 describes what God has done for us as Christians.

First, through Christ, we are alive. **Ephesians 2:5b Even when we were dead in our trespasses, (God) made us alive together with Christ, by grace you have been saved.** We are not sick people who have been healed, but dead people who have been made alive. **Second**, we are saved. “By grace you have been saved.” We have been rescued from our enslavement to the world, demonic forces, and our own flesh or sinful nature. Most important, we are saved from God’s wrath. That is a spectacular event, but it is not all. **Third**, we have hope. We have confidence that we will one day experience all sorts of marvelous joys through Jesus. **Ephesians 2:6,7 And (God) raised us up with Him and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages He might show the**

immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

Wow! Friends, God’s grace is for real. What Paul says is true. There is a story of an older woman in the checkout line of the grocery store. When she opened her purse to pay for her milk, eggs and loaf of bread, she found she had forgotten her check book and credit cards at home. She asked the clerk to put the items away, but the man standing behind her said, “Oh, ma’am. Take your things with you. I will pay for them.” He then paid for her items and his own merchandise. A week later, the woman came back to the store and the clerk told her, “Ma’am, maybe you would be interested to know. That man’s check... it bounced.” Friends, God’s check never bounces. When He promises us something, we will receive it. Incomparable riches await those of us who are believers in Jesus Christ.

But why, many ask has God been so good to us? The first answer to that question is grace, God’s undeserved love and favor. Paul says, **Ephesians 2:4 But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us.** Someone might say, “Well, I’m a pretty lovable person.” But remember, we were in a terrible condition before we trusted in Jesus. God doesn’t love us because of our intelligence, charm or good looks. He doesn’t love us because of who we are or because of what we have done. Instead, Paul says, **Ephesians 2:8,9 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.** Grace, totally unmerited, undeserved love.

It is difficult to find human analogies to describe God’s grace toward us. I remember a western movie where a doctor took a bullet out and saved the life of a man who had murdered his son. There is a good example of kindness. But to be an accurate parallel of what God has done, the story would have to have gone further. After taking out the bullet, the doctor would have needed to have gone to jail in place of the murderer. He then would have needed to have adopted that man as his own son, making him an heir of all the he had. That would be a far-fetched plot, but it is what God has done for us. God’s grace is totally amazing. It has nothing to do with who we are, but it is not an accident. God has a purpose. Remember **Ephesians 2:7**, God has shown us His

love, **so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.** God's plan is to extend His love to people like you and me so that our lives would be living proof of His grace. He apparently desires to hear the angels cry, "Look who God has saved! That man totally deserved His wrath. That woman in no way should have ever received His grace."

A second reason God has been so good to us is so our lives would demonstrate His power. **Ephesians 2:10 For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.** Martin Luther said, "We are not saved by good works, but for good works." The Lord has saved us so we might live for His glory. He wants to show how someone who was spiritually dead, has been made alive, how someone who wanted nothing to do with God, can now call Him father and delight in worshipping and serving Him. The big difference Jesus makes in our lives is not to be religious talk, but the reality of transformation. One of my favorite examples is Charles Colson. For years, this man was an agnostic, whose goal was political power and who was willing to lie or do almost anything else to attain it. After becoming a Christian, he became one of the world's most articulate spokesman for biblical Christianity, even though he had no formal theological training. Rather than devoting himself to attaining power, he devoted himself to serving God and other people, especially the powerless people in prison. Chuck Colson's life was a marvelous testimony to God's grace and power.

But he is not unique. Each one in this room, who is a genuine Christian, can testify that the Lord Jesus has made a difference, a big difference, in his/her life. Oh, often the changes occur over time, rather than overnight. Many times the changes are more internal than external. Yet, in your life, death, slavery and hell, have been replaced by life, freedom and hope. That's a big difference. There is a big difference between someone who knows Jesus Christ and someone who doesn't.

So, how do we respond to God's word today? For some, this message is primarily bad news, because you have not yet experienced God's grace in your life. You are still spiritually dead. Perhaps you

have always known you are not Christian. Or maybe you have thought you were, but now realize you are not really trusting in Jesus as your Lord and Savior. Either way, you need to turn to Jesus Christ because He is the one who offers life, salvation and hope. Now, unless the Holy Spirit is working in your life, you are not going to be able to do that or have any desire to do that, and what I have said today will mean absolutely nothing to you because basically I have been talking to a dead person. But, if what I am saying is starting to make sense, if it is connecting, then I encourage you to talk to me or someone who can help you understand what it really means to receive God's grace and trust in Jesus Christ.

For those of us who are Christians, we need to be thankful for the big difference Jesus has made in our lives. This week, sit down for a bit and think about what your life would be like if you were not a believer in Jesus. Think of some of the spiritual differences that Paul mentions and think of some of the practical things which may be unique in your situation. Maybe without Jesus you would be doing time in prison, or maybe you would be a nice, religious person, mistakenly thinking that you will get to heaven because you are better than most people. It is important that we see there's a big difference in our lives because of Jesus. We better not take Him for granted. May the Lord help us to be grateful and thankful for all that He has done for us through Jesus. Christ.