

The Gospel is Free but Never Cheap

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[0 : 00] And tonight we're going to look at Ephesians chapter 2 verses 1 to 10, which is what you just had read to you, a bit of a giveaway.

And I want to start just by doing an introduction which was provoked by me looking at and listening to Russell Herbert on Sunday, something in the chapter that goes before, where Paul talks about in verse 13, he says this, hang on, I've just lost my place, good start.

But he talks about how the Ephesians heard the gospel and gave themselves to it.

And I just wanted to say a word about the gospel. And before I start proper, I do just want to say that I'm going to give, you know, what they would call in a university a trigger warning, which I don't really believe in.

But I just thought I would. And that is that what I'm going to do this evening is give some kind of exposition to these verses. And what you need to know is quite, some of this is quite hard stuff.

[1 : 31] And all I'm trying to do is give my feeble understanding of what I think is plainly written in scripture.

Unfortunately, I think it's widely accepted today. And if you don't want to accept it, I mean, that's down to you. I can't make you believe anything. But just to warn you that some of this is, I think, difficult teaching and difficult for us to kind of think about.

One of the things that's very clear to me about the gospel message is this, that you can't add to it, neither can you subtract from it by distorting it completely.

In the early church, the early fathers of the church spent lots and lots of time trying to sort out what was heresy from what was mainline teaching.

You have to understand that those early fathers didn't have the canon of the Bible in its complete form. It's one of the things that I think mystifies a lot of Christians today is that the early apostles only had the Old Testament to preach the gospel from.

[2 : 49] I mean, you all imagine that, you know, how would you go about it? I mean, don't put your hands up, but, you know, that's a good question. And the emphasis on the gospel in these verses and throughout the New Testament, as a matter of fact, is it's about an audio experience.

It's about hearing. And all the way through the New Testament, the emphasis on the gospel has to be heard. As we'll see as we go through these verses, there's nothing that you can do to save yourself.

But it's hearing the gospel, I suppose, the kind of main place for, I mean, there's several places, but I picked this one because I think it makes the point very, very clearly.

Romans chapter 10 and verse 10 or thereabouts. And Paul says this. He says, consequently, he's talking about the gospel and he defines it earlier in chapter 10.

If you confess with your mouth Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. And then he goes on and asks a really good question.

[4 : 20] He asks in verse 15, I think. He says, and how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, how beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news.

He says, but not all the Israelites accepted the good news. Isaiah said, Lord, who has believed our message? Then Paul says, consequently. That is, as a consequence of this question, how will people ever get the gospel if nobody preaches it to them?

Paul says this. He said, consequently, faith comes from hearing the message. And the message is heard through the word of Christ.

So the emphasis here is on hearing. And you know that in history, some of you will have heard this and very lightly, quietly applauded in your hearts this.

But do you remember, for instance, St. Francis of Assisi, the kind of strange, spiritual Dr. Doolittle who taught to the animals. He said, preach the gospel at all times and if necessary, use words. [5 : 42] Why is that wrong? Faith comes through hearing. Words are important in the whole of scripture, but in particular, words are important in relation to the gospel.

And today, we hear this stuff, I hear people doing all the time, kind of claiming the authority of the gospel to underline their personal cause and interest.

See, the ramifications of the gospel, of course it has ramifications for the environment, but the gospel is not the gospel of the environment. There are many of you involved in doing great things, as far as I can best tell, in relation to social action.

I heard an American preacher the other day, we need to display the fact that the social gospel is the gospel.

It's not. The gospel is about Jesus Christ. And the reason why it's free but never cheap is that on the cross of Calvary, Jesus took what we deserve, died and rose again.

[6 : 57] And this is a very much, I was looking through a Sunday magazine recently and there was an advertisement for plastic surgery.

And I wasn't considering it, but I looked at it and there were two photographs. And one was a picture of this lady before she had plastic surgery.

It was her face, not anything else. And then next to that was a picture of her after plastic surgery. And I'd have to say, you know, she did look a bit better, if a little stretched.

And this kind of before and after picture is very much, I think, what Paul is talking about in Ephesians chapter 2.

And he starts out with these words, which if you give me a minute, I'll recover. He starts out with these words, which are not entirely encouraging, are they, for us?

[8 : 08] He says that, here we go, sorry, how do I tighten this up? Somebody help me. It's like watching a guy put up a deck chair.

Is that all right? Yeah. Got it. Thank you. So, you didn't realise you got cabaret as well, did you?

He starts out by saying this. For, sorry, as for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins. I mean, that's a pretty wild thing to say to people who aren't dead.

And Paul uses two very different words here. Transgressions is a translation of the Greek word *paraptoma*. And it basically means overstepping a mark, overstepping positively, willfully overstepping the mark.

So, an example would be, when I was at college, only fellows at the college could stand on the grass in the quadrangle. And a big sign's up saying, you know, do not step on the grass.

[9 : 31] Well, of course, that was just a temptation to everybody. You know, people would stand there doing that, just to touch the grass. Well, that's *paraptoma*. That is willfully disobeying a regulation in the way that you overstepped the mark.

That's what the word transgression is. The other word is your sins. And Paul here, many of you might know this, borrows on a word from the world of archery.

And, as you know, archers load their bows and then fire and hopefully hit the target. And *hamartia* was the word when you missed the mark, missed the target.

And here, I'm going to come back to that in a minute because I think it also reminds us of something else important. Paul says this, I've heard about, sorry, you're dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of the world and the ruler of the kingdom of the air.

And it's a clear reference to Satan. And the reason why this is important is that this is very much a before and after.

[10 : 50] I said to you last week by way of introduction that this gospel, if you could just give me a moment for a brief recap, this gospel is, sorry, this epistle is about who we are in Christ.

And I said that is our primary identity as Christians. Then I said it tells us what we were before we became Christians, and this passage very directly speaks into that.

And it tells us how we're supposed to live in the light of God's spiritual blessings. And then I asked the question, based on the end of verse 10 of chapter 1, is are we focused enough on God's promised future?

Or are we, in the Western church, very this worldly? So Paul is basically telling them here that they've got big problems.

And of course, just to remind you that the framework of these verses, you could put in these terms, diagnosis, prognosis, and cure.

[12 : 13] The diagnosis really fulfills what Paul's on about in the first three chapters of Romans, where he concludes by saying, all have sinned, no exception, all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

That's the diagnosis. The prognosis is death. And of course, medieval theologians banged on about this.

We're really talking about two deaths, if you're Lazarus, three. The first death is the death that the writer of Genesis talks about.

When you remember in Genesis chapters 2 and chapter 3, there they are in this marvelous garden, more beautiful than any garden you've ever been through in your lives.

And God says to the man, the woman hasn't arrived at this point, he says to the man, you can do whatever you like in this garden, but you must not eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

[13 : 29] Do whatever you like, but don't do that. Then the word tells us it wasn't good for man to be alone, and so he came up with women.

And it was in the garden, and one thing they couldn't do, and when God threatened this, he said, if you do this, you will surely die.

So as we know, the fruit gets picked and eaten, and then the devil shows up in chapter 3. He says this, before the fruit is eaten, he says, you can't, you don't believe God.

You won't die if you eat this fruit. Go ahead. So they do. And of course, part of the mystery is, they don't die.

They stay on the planet, and in a very long chain of cause and effect, that's partly why we're here today. But they died spiritually.

[14 : 42] Their relationship with God was impaired. All have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God.

You don't meet many people, do you, who claim to be sinless? Though I did meet one. I used to visit with his wife, who wasn't very well, and he was a kind of jobbing laborer, I guess.

And he used to tell me, I've never sinned. I'm like, well, that's interesting. He said, yeah, I've never sinned.

So I was going out through the door, front door, and there was all this wood stacked up by it. And we were just doing a bit of a refurb on what we call the crypt at the church I was serving at the time. So I said to him, any chance of some of that wood? His wife said, don't take that. He stole it from work. Look, so the diagnosis is we've all sinned.

[15 : 46] The prognosis is this two death thing. Your sin, unless it's dealt with, means that your relationship with God is broken.

The second death, where we die physically, of course, in Christ, death won't be a brick wall for us. It will be a gateway into heaven.

So Jesus in his death deals with, in his death deals with both these deaths. For as in Adam, all die. As in Jesus, all will be alive. So what human failures is Paul dealing with here?

Well, the first thing is, he's dealing with delusion. See, I wouldn't mind a guess that most of us in this place, and in most churches ever, are slightly deluded by kind of comforting ourselves, even though we know we are sinful.

[16 : 59] We kind of play it down, oh, well, everybody does that, you know? We tell lies and then persuade ourselves there was something called white lies.

Not saying that, you know, you might never tell a white lie, but on the whole, I think you're in a tricky area when you do that. And under delusion, I include the word denial.

I think sometimes, a bit like Jack the Builder I was just talking to you about, we can be in denial about who we are and about the way we behave.

I found this particularly true when I was a chaplain in a psychiatric hospital dealing with people who had addictions. You might be somebody with an addiction.

You will know that lying becomes second nature to you when you have an addiction. And you even deny there's a problem. I remember once trying to offer a little corrective therapy to my sister who was going through a hard time in life, who seemed to me to be a little over-dependent on white wine.

[18 : 16] Let me say, she didn't say, Mike, I really appreciate your feedback. She was mad. Denied it. Didn't want to know. But I thought a bottle and a half of white wine every night wasn't headed in the right direction.

She thought I was a killjoy. The second human failure that Paul deals with here is comparison. So we said that the word for sin is that word hamartia.

It means when an archer misses the mark. And what I want to ask you is, I mean, suppose you were, I mean, you can go to center parks and never go with archery, right?

I mean, be careful. And suppose you had a go for the first time and you fire ten arrows and nine of them missed. And one of them stuck in the target right on the edge, right?

And then somebody who knows about archery came, did ten arrows, nine of them straight into the bullseye and one of them just in a lower place. What we do is, very often, we think, okay, you know, I sin, but there are plenty of people who are worse than me.

[19 : 36] You know, I can name them, I mean, not me, but I mean, you can name them if you like. But the point that is implied by this word is, it doesn't matter how many arrows you hit the target, if you miss with one, you've sinned.

And comparison, I mean, my granny used to say to me, comparisons are odious. So if I console myself simply by comparing myself with somebody who I judge to be worse than me, what is that saying?

I don't get to say very much, do you? All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. And there's something slightly more complicated, what I call distorted anthropology.

And that is what the Bible teaches us, sorry, what anthropologists teach us about human beings' basic nature. First thing is that we have to bear in mind, and just let me say before you start to choke, I am not in any way writing off all psychology.

Okay? But I think I have to say that one of the distortions of anthropology has come from the world of psychology.

[21 : 08] psychology. There are, I was reading an article in the Journal of Psychology, and basically the person was saying that one of the ideas that contemporary psychology supports is something I think is a really bad idea, particularly when it comes to ethics, and it's the idea of autonomy.

Autonomy, you know, is a makeup of two Greek words, auto and nomos, which means self-rule. Autonomy is the kind of thinking in social ethics which says I can do whatever I want as long as it doesn't harm anybody else.

Wrong. I mean, you can never, ever, ever assess what your behavior's impact will be on another person. And this article, the guy wrote this, he said, autonomy makes our moral behavior more effective.

I mean, pardon me, I wanted to say, what planet is he coming from? There are a lot of more conservative psychologists and anthropologists who think that part of our problem today is too much autonomy in the name of personal freedom.

Second thing that I think 20th century psychology has had an influence on is the idea of universal goodness. Bible says all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God from the very earliest days, the days of the man and the woman in the garden.

[23 : 00] No, no, no, say 20th century people, you're good. And you need to focus on the fact that you're good. And you could even, I've read this, you know, some people will tell you, stand in front of a mirror in the morning and tell yourself how brilliant you are.

I mean, you know, I don't know whether Stephen Hawkins did that or Elon Musk or any of these people. But, I mean, not only this, but very often now in schools this kind of child centred teaching I think can have the impact of implying to our children that they're not only good, but they're great.

And people like Hillary Clinton can go around, sorry, Michelle Obama can go around schools telling people very popular kind of misconception I think that we live with in the 21st century.

You can be whatever you want to be, right? I don't know if that's dangerous, but it clearly isn't even true.

You can't be whatever you want to be. We've all got our limitations. I would not make a prima ballerina. You don't even sit there imagining it.

[24 : 32] And then this guy Frank Ferreidi who I read his book and it was called Therapy Culture.

And I liked the book so much that I shamelessly used my membership at the House of Lords to invite him out for dinner so I could talk to him and pick his brain.

And actually I still agree with his book. It's just I didn't get it off. It wasn't easy. I don't think he had much time for religion and I was slightly scornful for some sociology.

But he basically complained that the world has become a place where everything is processed through the past.

So whatever's wrong with you, it's somewhere in your past. I mean even Job had to be subject to that from his three friends, didn't he? You've got to search your heart, Job. There's something there.

[25 : 35] And yet the Bible describes Job as a righteous man. There wasn't anything there. And therapy culture, I think, is a way of basically, my problems are a product of my past lived experience.

And some of them are. There's no doubt about that. Some of you have had horrible things happen to you. And you can't pretend that that's not going to affect you.

I mean, it doesn't have to affect you forever. But it's going to affect you short-term, medium-term, and without Christ might affect you forever. The fourth failure that Jesus deals with here is legalism. Legalism is this idea that if I can, it basically lies behind the idea of earning my salvation.

If I do this, if I behave like this, even if I put up a mask like this, I'll be okay.

[26 : 50] me. And Paul absolutely nails that. He says, it's by grace you've been saved, not by works. A work of the law is anything that we do that we think allows us to make a claim on God.

Paul emphatically says here, and throughout his epistles, this is not the way you are saved. You are saved through the grace of God. And I think, I mean, you know, I've been around churches for years, some of you are saying too long, but I've been around them a lot.

And one of the things I've discovered is grace is an idea that people find really difficult to lay hold on. They understand what it means.

They've been told many, many times from the pulpit, it is God's love shown to you even though you don't deserve it. And yet somehow, they still feel they got to earn it.

You see what Paul says here. He says that you're not saved by works so that you can't boast. One of the things that really shocks me about social media is the number of clergy who go on it basically self-promoting.

[28 : 17] I mean, am I wrong to be cautious about that? You know, I couldn't imagine, you know, I would put a big advert on social media if I was going to go and speak at some church, maybe yours.

It just would never occur to me to do that. I feel, you know, that. I don't think that kind of self-promotion, I don't find that easy to square with my understanding of the gospel.

Okay, I mean a measure of that, you know, if you become a new grandparent, you know, fine, have a photograph of yourself with a little bundle, you know, and I think my wife and I are a bit blasé with that now, we've got 16 grandchildren.

He boasted. Look, legalism is a massive problem in the churches. No, I'm not talking about unsaved people, I'm talking about people who are saved.

Just what I said earlier, if you add to the gospel, you take away from it. And finally, spiritual malaise.

[29 : 32] I, you know, Paul says this, right at the end in verse 10, he says you've been saved for a purpose. In fact, he says, you are God's, on the reading we had, it said God's handiwork.

Most versions of the Bible say you're God's workmanship. You know, the psalmist wrote that we're fearfully and wonderfully made. I don't have a problem with you standing in front of a mirror and reminding yourself of that, because when you understand that, it might make you a notch more humble.

Fearfully and wonderfully made. And you're fearfully and wonderfully made for God's purpose. In Christ, you have been remade.

And you will not be saved by your good works. Paul's very clear about that. But you will be saved for the good works that God has prepared for you in advance to do.

I'm always shocked about the weight that a lot of clergy colleagues have on their shoulders. I don't often make special pleading for the clergy.

[30 : 55] But I do understand this, that in most churches, we've talked about this here, talked about it in lots of places, at the 80-20 rule. 20% of the people supply 80% of the money.

20% of the people supply 80% of the horsepower. And 80% watch on, maybe gratefully, week by week.

Not saying they don't do some good works beyond the church, of course not. And I want to say, you know, if you're involved in a major charity which takes up a lot of your time outside the church, well God bless you, that's good, that is a work that God has prepared for you in advance to do.

But the church needs more of you to step up and fill some of those vacancies which nearly every church has. You really need to break a threshold of about 250 members as a church, active, saved members, before you can be certain of supplying people to do the ministries that you feel called to do as a church.

I think some of you need to think a little more carefully about whether you really understand that the workmanship that God has put into you has a purpose.

[32 : 20] And the purpose is this, that you would understand his grace and you would understand that you are saved by his grace.

Somebody wrote these words and they said, grace means the end of earning, but not the end of effort. that's just mirroring, I think, in the minds of the person that wrote it.

What's written in Ephesians chapter 2 verse 10, and it's this, that we are saved not by good works, but for good works.

I wonder if the Holy Spirit isn't speaking to you about that, that actually there is something, you know, I mean I may be preaching to the choir, I don't know, but we do in an effort to bring the gospel I talked about at the beginning to this world which is broken and breaking.

We do need people to step up and fulfill the ministries. When I was a curate, it was just when the season of family services was starting, you know, I mean, frankly, as a clergy person, it would have been my personal nightmare, you know, getting everybody together, trying to say something through a kid's talk that might provoke something in the adults, you know, it's a rare gift.

[34 : 17] And I was in an archdeaconry, it's quite, you know, quite a large area, subsection, and there were only three curates around, and the assumption was, if you're under 40, you must be great at family services.

so every Sunday I was shipped out from our parish church to go and do family services here and there, the vicar got me to do our monthly family service every month, I read a book that taught me to draw cartoons, and you know, I became a bit, you remember Rolf Harris used to talk and draw, well, it's the only similarity to Rolf Harris I want to go into, talk and draw, and you know, okay, that worked okay, and, and, so, I would do these family services, and, I have to say, you know, I kind of wondered about them, I wondered whether really they were the right thing, and it was only when I said to the vicar, I think there may be people in the congregation who might have more of a gifting for this, and more of a passion for it than

I do, it looked at me as I was completely bonkers, so he said, do you have anybody in mind, so I reeled off a few names, so he said, okay, you go around and visit them and ask them, so I did, they all said yes, and our family services, I think, took a turn for the good, not just in our church, but across the archdeaconry as well.

Friends, I want to ask you three things this Lent for you to take away with you tonight. First thing is this, do I really get that my sins are forgiven, or do I still live under a cloud of guilt?

Let me let that one settle for a moment. Do I really know that my sins are forgiven, or do I still live under a cloud of guilt?

[36 : 51] I remember a lady called Pat in my first parish, where I was a cure, the same parish I've just been talking to you about, who did the most amazing job of looking after her mum.

She gave up her job, took a pittance of a pension, and really looked after her mum, and trust me, her mum was not easy. She looked after her and looked after her, and went on for two and a half, three years, and at the end of it, the mother became so difficultly ill, doubling incontinency and all that, she had to go into hospital.

Pat lived with guilt for years after that, because she promised her mum, I'll never let you go into hospital.

for different reasons, there'll be a few pats in the house tonight. People who know the facts of the gospel, but don't know the healing power of the gospel.

One of the things, one of the reasons I was telling you about these family services was that one of the things was I used to think, you know, we can't go through a lot of dull liturgy with these kids.

[38 : 20] So what I would do is I get a blackboard and I shout out to the kids, what have you done wrong this week? And, you know, kids would shout out stuff like, I wrote a rude name on the back of a teacher in chalk.

I stole snacks from mum's store. All this stuff, I write them on the board. And I say, right, are we going to say sorry now, children?

All say sorry. Say a little prayer and then I would get the board rubber and rub all the sins off. I say to them, that's what Jesus had done for you on the cross of Calvary.

It doesn't always work, you know, a girl said to me, a little girl said to me, she said, why did you say God was cross at Calvary? Shut up.

Listen, I want you to think about this, this Lent. Do I really know that my sins are forgiven? and the one way that I will really know is whether I can let go of guilt in my life.

[39 : 40] I mean, there may be some reasons why you really ought to be guilty and you've not confessed that guilt to God. Maybe this Lent, maybe this Lent, you could come clean.

It's not that God doesn't know about it, it's just that he needs you to tell him about it. Second, can I truly accept God's grace?

Or is there something lurking in me that wants to earn my way into heaven? Which is by grace you've been saved, so that none of you can boast?

Can I truly accept the nature of God's agape love for me? That though I don't deserve it, God loved me enough to send his only son onto a cross of Calvary to suffer the most violent way of killing somebody ever invented?

And the third thing is, you think about you and your church, I'm so thrilled that different churches are represented here tonight.

[40 : 58] Am I working hard on those good works God has prepared in advance for me? Do you know what?

Just focusing on those three questions in Lent creates an agenda for you and for your church which is so exciting. Things will be different if you allow God to speak to you through those questions.

So I just want to hold a moment there and I'm going to read those questions out to you again and then I'm going to say a prayer and then I'm going to ask you to turn to somebody hopefully you don't know and just maybe have a brief discussion about what do I make of these questions?

Is there anything there where I feel God is just prodding my soul? Here they are. Do I really know that my sins are forgiven or do I still live under a cloud of guilt?

Can I truly accept God's grace shown in Jesus Christ shown supremely on the cross of Calvary?

[42 : 30] Three, am I working hard on those good works God has prepared in advance for me? Our gracious Father, we thank you that though we don't deserve it, you poured out your love for us on the cross of Calvary.

I sometimes think about the cross and close my eyes and try to see those cruel nails and crown of thorns and Jesus crucified for me.

Lord, it is so amazing, it is almost unbelievable. So we pray for that gift of faith, Lord, open our eyes, reveal yourself to us in new ways this Lent.

Lord, we're so glad that we're saved by your grace because if it were down to our efforts, frankly, they'd be a little patchy.

And Father, we pray that you would help us understand that you've designed us, you've created us, we're your workmanship.

[44 : 07] And in us, you are preparing us for the good work you want us to do in your church and in your kingdom. Lord, would you touch touch your people tonight, those who are ready, Lord, to receive your touch.

Praying, Lord, for those who don't know if they're saved. Praying for those who know it in their heads but doubt it in their hearts. Praying for those who are still stuck with the idea of earning their way into heaven.

Futile effort. And Lord, praying for those whose malaise means that they sit in church and watch on while other people exhaust themselves.

And Father, as we learn later in this amazing epistle, you have given all your adopted children gifts. Gifts that they may honour you, that they may serve the church, and Lord, that they might be used to be your presence in the world.

So, Father, thank you for your word. Lord, help us to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest it, that it may show forth in our lives to the glory of your wonderful name.

[45 : 50] Amen.