

Created in Christ

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[0 : 0 0] If you would like to follow on, if you would take your Bible out and open to Ephesians 2, where Julie has just read to us, page 181. Our focus is just those three verses at the end of the paragraph 8 to 10.

Josh, I want to give these to you today. And Anna, I want you to teach these to Sam. These are some of the most important words in all the Bible, a brilliant summary of what it is to be a Christian.

And if we get them clear, we understand something of the grace of God and what it means to belong to the church and what is happening to us. So Ephesians 2, 8 to 10.

I learned to drive on the left-hand side of the road, which is the correct side to drive. And we would all be driving on the left side of the road if it weren't for Napoleon Bonaparte.

Who decided that France should go right and every country he conquered should go right. So Quebec went right. And although Canada was left and the United States drove on the left until the War of Independence.

[1 : 1 3] And the less said about that, the better, I think, at this stage. When I first came to Canada, learning to drive on the other side of the road was a very interesting experience. And mostly I've got it right.

Although once, after working a long day here at St. John's, I drove out onto West King Edward, turning east towards Oak Street.

And I turned down and I suddenly saw all these angry drivers driving towards me on the wrong side of the road. And I pulled into a driveway. And if it was your driveway, I'm sorry about that.

I often find, when I go back to Australia, the first 15 minutes of driving is very disorienting. It's like being in Disneyland. There are all these other people absolutely convinced what they're doing is right.

And I'm sure they're all wrong, but it's very disorienting. Now, why do I say that? These words, just these three verses, are very disorienting to us because they drive a different direction from the way our culture does and the way we normally think.

[2 : 2 0] I think most people in Vancouver think that Christians in general and the church in particular is a nice diversion for nice people who want to be a little bit nicer.

But I don't need it. I'm a good person. I'm a spiritual person. I give money. Well, sometimes I give money when people are knocking at my door and I can't get rid of them. I pay my taxes.

I make a contribution to society. Christians are good people. They're nice people, but they ought to get out more and do some real practical good. Am I close?

I think that's pretty close. And what these verses say is something completely different. They say two things. And the first is this. They say the church is not just something that God likes.

They say that the church is God's best work. This is the first point and the main point. The church is God's best work. Look down at verse 10.

[3 : 21] For we, plural, we are his workmanship created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

In other words, the church is not a human institution. It's not a collective of volunteers who have a slightly religious bent. It's not something we add on to our lives. It's not something we come to occasionally.

It is God's new creation in Christ Jesus. It's the place where God is at work. It's the place where he's revealing his glory. It is his masterpiece.

And if you are a Christian, you are not someone who's turned over a new leaf. You're not someone who is more spiritually perceptive or spiritual than others. You are entirely the work of God, the creator of his grace.

And that little word, God's workmanship, is the word poema. We are God's poem. It's a word that describes an artistic masterpiece.

[4 : 27] That is what God thinks of us as the church, which is amazing. And I think that's why Paul uses this creation language to describe the church.

Now, we're Vancouverites. We love creation, don't we? We just can't wait to get out of church and get into the other creation. Paul says, actually, the church is the place of great, even greater beauty.

It is his best work. It is even better than his first creation. God has two creations. You know, it is just beautiful in Vancouver right now, isn't it?

You know, the trees and the flowers and the mountains still have snow on them and the sky and the water. But all those things have been put there by God.

And when the Bible opens, God is the sovereign creator who's making those things. As we go through the Old Testament, we find time and time again, God picks up the picture of creation and he says, I am going to do a new thing.

[5 : 28] He says, watch carefully. I'm going to do a new thing. It's going to be a new creation. And he is speaking about the church. And when he sends his son into the world, Jesus lives a life of absolute and stunning beauty.

So beautiful that we have to crucify him because he exposes us. And then God raises him from the dead, starts a new life, a new world, a new creation. And then he takes people and he puts them in Christ Jesus and we become the new creation in him.

And God didn't have any help from us when he made the first creation and he doesn't have any help from us when he makes the second creation of the church. Which means that the shocking beauty of the physical world that we see around us is just a shadow that points to something that's more beautiful to God's masterpiece, God's new creation, God's church.

There are people sitting around you today who trust in Jesus Christ, not because they're spiritually superior, not because they're more perceptive, but because God has begun the work of new creation.

This was Joshua's testimony. He put up all the barriers, the difficult questions, but God drew him through. We have got to begin thinking about ourselves in this way.

[6 : 46] We've got to begin thinking about the church in this way. I know it's not polite to look around at each other. I'm not going to ask you to do it because we're an Anglican church. We don't do things that are impolite.

But as you walk out today, just look sideways at some of the people who are around about you and think to yourself, that person is God's masterpiece, part of the new creation through their faith in Jesus Christ.

I know it's difficult to believe sometimes, particularly... No, no. No, but it is. If you become a Christian and you've been a Christian for a while, it starts to feel like it's just rote and just human institution, and we need to pray that God would open our eyes to the beauty of what he's doing amongst us.

The old creation will one day bow before the new creation, the masterpiece of God, because that is why God has created this world.

And one of the most important implications of all this is that when it comes to faith and believing in church, it is God who is the worker, not us.

[7 : 53] We tend to think that we are the active ones, that God is sitting around waiting for us to make up our mind, waiting for us to make the first move towards him.

Paul says the opposite is the truth. He is the creator. He is the artist. And without asking us, he created the world out of nothing. And without asking us, he raised Jesus from the dead.

And without asking us, he takes us and he brings us into the new creation. And it has got nothing to do with our goodness. It's got nothing to do with anything in us except our need.

Look at verse 8 and 9 for a second. By grace you have been saved through faith, not out of you, the gift of God, not out of works lest anyone should boast.

Salvation is not a bit of my work and a bit of God's work, and we add them together and we come up with salvation. It's not that there's a good angel on one shoulder and a bad angel on the other shoulder whispering to me and when I get to the end of my life, if my good deeds outlast my bad deeds, God will say, come on in.

[9 : 04] It is entirely, salvation is entirely from God's side to us. It is not out of us. It is not God looking at you and responding to something good in you.

It's not God saying that person is so morally fine, I should bring them into this new creation because we were not neutral. We were not even a little bit on the plus side.

Paul says we were dead in our trespasses and sins so that salvation is like a resurrection, like life and death. Look back at the last couple of verses.

Look at verse 5. Even when we were dead through our trespasses, God made us alive together with Christ.

Verse 6. He raised us up with him. He made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus. It's all with Christ, with Christ, in Christ. And how desperately we need it.

[10 : 04] We were dead in our sins, verse 1. Verse 2. In which we once walked following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air.

We thought we were terribly sophisticated and clever. We were absolutely convinced of our own sovereign self-determination. The Bible says we were followers.

We were compliant, gullible followers. Our ethics and our morals and our hopes, they were formed by our world, our culture. We were followers of fashion, not just externally but internally in how we decided what was right and wrong.

We were by nature children of wrath. We couldn't see spiritual truth. We couldn't respond to spiritual truth. But you see, that's why it's such good news.

Because salvation is not based on my seeking or my sensitivity. Salvation in Jesus Christ and the church is a greater miracle than the first creation.

[11 : 11] Because when God made the world in the first place, he had no opposition. And when God raised Jesus from the dead, raised Jesus from the dead, he took him into heaven and he enthroned him at the right side.

And every person who is added to Jesus, every person who comes and has faith in Jesus Christ, is raised from the dead and is seated with Christ in heaven. That's what it means to be in Christ.

If you've been here for the last few weeks, again and again and again, the apostle uses this word in Christ. It's a strange phrase, isn't it? Think of yourself as being in Christ. Christ, it's like my liver.

It's in me. My liver lives a very interesting life. And if I drive on the right side of the road, it will drive on the right side of the road. If I drive on the left, well, you know where we're going.

Paul says, in Christ we're made alive. In Christ we're raised. In Christ we're enthroned. We live in Christ. If you come in Christ, you have a new Lord, a new life, a new direction, a new destiny.

[12 : 17] But that raising of Christ happened 2,000 years ago outside of us and now he invites us to be part of his masterpiece and he recreates us and he brings us into the Lord Jesus Christ.

That is why if you want to be part of the new creation, you must go to Jesus Christ and ask him to receive you. Do it now. Ask him to receive you. He will. And all our works and all our good things outside of Christ and before Christ are irrelevant to salvation because it comes as a gift which we receive by faith.

For by grace you are saved through faith. Ah, but you say, there it is. I have to do something. I have to have faith. Well, I have not seen the movie The Polar Express but Dan Gifford has 23 times.

And he has promised to sing the theme tune after the service. I haven't seen it but the basic message of the movie is this, that if you believe strongly enough in something, it's got to happen.

I'm so glad my sons are 18 and over and that I don't have to go and see these Disney movies that keep saying the same message again and again and again if you believe hard enough it will come true.

[13 : 39] Have you ever thought of what a desperately cruel view of faith that is? It puts me at the centre. It makes me do the work and the object of the thing I'm believing in is absolutely irrelevant.

It's not the Bible view of faith. Faith is not my work where if I have enough of it God is somehow forced to accept me. Faith is like this.

It's empty hands receiving the gift that he gives to us. I had a birthday last month, another birthday and my sons banded together to help extend my musical taste which they often do and amongst some of the gifts they gave me were a couple of music CDs.

Now how do I receive, what do I do to receive that gift? This is what I do. I open my hands, I take the gift, I unwrap the gift and then I say this is what I've always wanted.

That's Christian faith. You look at Jesus Christ, you hear the word that God offers you, new creation, new life, eternal life and you say it is too good to be true but Father, God, I want to trust your words.

[14 : 57] Everything depends on what your faith is in. If it's in Jesus Christ, it doesn't matter if your faith is weak and wobbly or strong and sturdy, if it's in Jesus Christ, you are saved by grace through faith.

And until you grasp that, we will always be either arrogant or anxious spiritually. You think about the word grace, that I just give you this lovely jewel.

Grace is different from mercy. Mercy is when you come across someone in need and you're compassionate and you give to them. They don't deserve it but you give them, you're nice to them, you somehow help them.

Grace is when someone's done something against you and you do the same thing. So if you come to someone and they are in need and you give them money and you help them and you establish them, that's mercy.

But if you find the same person and they've broken into your house and they've taken everything that they could find in the house and they have beaten you and then you come across that person and you say, I forgive you, he'd take more resources, that's grace.

[16:10] And we are saved by grace through faith. And that is why the church is the best work of God. We are the work of the completely free and sovereign grace of God in new creation, in Jesus Christ.

And God has placed our life, he's given us a new life and he's raised it up and he's placed it in Jesus Christ and our new life is in heaven. Nothing can take it away. So that's the first thing Paul says here.

This is the first thing that drives the opposite direction from what we thought. The church is made, the church is the best work of God. Secondly and very briefly, Christians and the church are made for good works.

Verse 10, we are his workmanship, his poem, his masterpiece, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

And the problem is that in Vancouver when you hear the word good works, you think of something vaguely heroic and beyond the normal. Buying a hospital wing, creating an orphanage in the third world or creating an eco-sustainable, green, environmentally organic company.

[17:27] That is not what the Bible means by good works. The cultural view of good works makes good works inaccessible for most people. But in the New Testament, good works are everything I do in Jesus Christ, everything I do through Jesus Christ, everything I do in the power of Jesus Christ.

That's what a good work is. Just turn right in your Bible to Colossians. There are four or five pages right. Colossians 1, verse 9, 188. He says, Paul again, from the day I heard of it, I haven't ceased to pray for you, asking that you'll be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, to lead a life worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.

Here, good works are everything to do with the growth of what it means to be a Christian. Even growing in the knowledge of God is a good work. We'll turn back again to Ephesians 4, on page 183.

I'll read this paragraph. These are the good works that Paul tells us to do in Ephesians. Let me read it quickly. Therefore, Paul says, putting away falsehood, let everyone speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another.

Be angry, but do not sin. Don't let the sun go down on your anger. Give no opportunity to the devil. Let the thief no longer steal, but let him rather labor, doing honest work with his hands, so that he may be able to give to those in need.

[19:00] Let no evil talk come out of your mouth, but only such as is good for edifying, as fits the occasion, imparting grace to those who hear. Do not grieve the Holy Spirit in you, the Spirit of God, in whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.

Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. Be imitators of God as beloved children.

Walk in love as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. Fornication, impurity, covetousness must not be named among you as is fitting among the saints, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

These are the good works. And in one sense, they're very ordinary and very pedestrian. And in another sense, they are extraordinary, miraculous and supernatural because they come out of living in Christ.

Living in Jesus Christ. Let me say this. It doesn't stop you building a hospital wing or an orphanage. That's a very fine thing to do. But if it's a grand gesture, often you will receive just a temporary reward.

[20 : 04] But good works in Jesus Christ, the thing about them is this. Some of them are absolutely invisible to anyone but Christ. Some of them will be applauded and appreciated by others and some of them will be misunderstood and you'll be thought of as just a little bit weird.

But if they are doubting Jesus Christ, it doesn't matter how mixed you are in your motive, they are acceptable to God. It's the lovely thing about belonging to the new creation.

There's no action that I do that is not marked with sin somewhere. There's no such thing as an utterly pure motive. But if I do things in Jesus Christ, God receives them through him and he delights in them and in me and in you.

That's what it means to walk in good works. It means to live a life like Jesus on the path that Jesus trod, being conformed to his image.

And those who have baptized this morning, you're brought into the church, and you have a lifelong commitment now to be made like Jesus Christ.

[21 : 16] And all the good works that God has for you, he's prepared beforehand for you to walk in them. Every obedience, every good thought, every good work and every good deed comes from him in the first place.

And that doesn't mean you get up in the morning and you think, what are the 323 good works God has for me to do today? I must find them or else I'm in trouble. It means that as I live and serve the risen Christ, I find that my life is like a road.

It's like a way. And some days it's very hard to take one step and put one foot after the other. But if the direction is set by Jesus Christ, we do not walk alone.

So although our works play no real part in our salvation, true faith in Jesus Christ, if it's true faith, will always show itself in concrete good works.

On Friday, my son graduated from UBC. He's now a graduate of UBC. It was the best graduation address I've ever heard, which is not difficult, I must say.

[22 : 26] And you need to know that they graduated 10 PhDs and 20 Masters and 150 Bachelors and there were two speeches and it was 59 minutes long. Which means we've got something to learn here at St. John's.

The speaker's theme was freedom. And he said, now that you have your degree, you have a freedom that you didn't have before. That education is about giving us freedom, giving us choices and helping us to think in different ways about the world.

And I wanted to stand up in my balcony seat in the Chan Centre and you'll be glad to know that I didn't and say something like, yes, yes, but there is, there's a much greater freedom which is bigger and wider and longer and deeper that comes from the magnificent kindness and grace of God in Jesus Christ.

because if you come into Jesus Christ, you can be free from following the course of this world, you can be free to live for others, you can be free because your life is based on the absolute grace and kindness of God and the grace and kindness is going to outlast eternity, it will make you into a new creature, if only you would open your hearts to God now.

But I didn't. But maybe I should have. And why does God do all this? Back to verse 7 in chapter 2 and we finish here. He does all this so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace and kindness toward us in Jesus Christ.

[24 : 06] If we are a new creation in Jesus Christ, we no longer live for ourselves but we become the thing through which God advertises his grace to the world.

When God made the church, when he made this church here, St. John's, it is like he began writing a letter to be read by Vancouver.

And Vancouver is going to make a verdict about the riches of God's grace in Jesus Christ by looking at us. because the church is not just the result of his grace, we are the instrument by which he advertises his grace.

The very fact that we exist as a church, the very fact that we seek to live Christ-formed lives brings glory to God.

And how deeply we need to pray for each other. We need to pray that God would open our eyes, that we would begin to see the magnificence of what he's doing in those people around us and in us as his people.

[25 : 14] We would see we've been raised to new life. That we'd see ourselves and the church as the miraculous new creation. And that we would live in a way, such a way that we would hold out Jesus Christ and the hope of real freedom not only to Vancouver but to the world.

So let's begin and pray for one another, shall we? Let's kneel. who has saved us not because we deserved it or because through anxious striving we in any way achieved your approval but because of the riches of your love toward us in Christ.

We bow before you this morning thanking you for your great work of salvation, a rescue mission that is your work of love from beginning to end.

We were spiritually dead and we're now alive to you because of that great love. And we enter boldly into your presence through the shed blood of Jesus as you've invited us to do full of thanksgiving that we're alive at all instead of dead.

And even more that we're alive to do the good works you have planned for us to do. We take joy in the sign of that new life and the baptisms we witnessed this morning and we pray that you would fill Joshua and baby Samuel with your Holy Spirit.

[26 : 51] Oh Lord, fill us all with your Holy Spirit and help us to live lives of love, to shed the habits and actions that belong to the darkness and to live daily as new creatures in Christ as your masterpiece displayed to the world.

Lord, in your mercy. Amen. And Father, we bring before you the needs of that world this morning, a world rocked by earthquake and cyclone, by the tumult of war, the devastation of disease.

We have only to look outside the door in our own city or at our own families or into our own hearts to know that the world is not as it should be. And we pause in the stillness to remember that your great work of salvation embraces this real world, that your steadfast love reaches to the heavens, that your justice is like the deep, deep sea.

The nations rage, the kingdoms fall. You lift your voice and the earth melts. We pray that the people of Burma would have full access to the relief they need, that you would provide aid and comfort to the victims of the earthquake in China.

And that in these and in all places of intense suffering and conflict in the world far away and in our city very near, many acts of mercy would be done in your name, that your people everywhere would shine like stars in the universe as we hold out the word of life.

[28 : 46] We pray for the missionaries supported by St. John's and ask that you would make them bold to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ and that you would give them much wisdom in their different ministries.

In particular, we pray that you would strengthen and provide for Sharon Thompson with Wycliffe Bible Translators in Burkina Faso, for Heather Bellamy with Samaritan's Purse in Afghanistan, and for Marian Maxwell in Genesis Vancouver.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. Father, we pray for the Anglican Communion throughout the world, a communion whose fabric is torn at the deepest level.

Lord of the Church, we pray that you would guide all those in leadership who seek to take faithful action in a confusing time. We ask that you would use the Global Anglican Future Conference in June and the Lambeth Conference in July to work out your kingdom purposes for Anglicans everywhere in ways that are far beyond what we could ever ask or imagine.

Thank you for the protection you have given us by Archbishop Gregory Venables and Bishop Donald Harvey. We pray that you would seek to protect those who seek to protect us and that you would enable them and our own clergy, David, Dan, Jim, to labor without losing heart, inwardly renewed day by day as they carry out the ministries which you have entrusted to them.

[30 : 27] Lord, in your mercy. Father, we pray for those in our midst who are suffering. We ask that you would be their refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

We pray especially for Rowena, Deborah, Chris, Fiona, Erwin, Johanna, Janet, and Margaret.

In a moment of silence, we lift up to you those dear to us who are in need of healing, hope, or your saving grace. Lord, in your mercy, we pray the collect of the day together.

O God, the strength of all them that put their trust in thee, mercifully accept our prayers. And because through the weakness of our mortal nature we can do no good thing without thee, grant us the help of thy grace, that in keeping of thy commandments we may please both, please thee both in will and deed, through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

And let's say the grace together. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all evermore.

[32 : 12] Amen.