

Church life mission

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Preacher: Debbie Gould

- [0 : 00] Last week, Steve opened up Ephesians for us all and showed us the greatness of God, the wonderful and lavish spiritual blessings that are for those who are in Christ Jesus.
- Being adopted, being redeemed, forgiven, lavished with spiritual wisdom and understanding, the Holy Spirit, power and a guarantee of a future for all those who are in Christ Jesus.
- That small word in, we were reminded, means for those who are connected by faith to Jesus. What a great beginning to a letter.
- We could nearly stop there and be able to meditate for weeks and weeks on all that one chapter gives us. There's great truths.
- And in this chapter that we're looking at today, in chapter two, it follows as for you. Giving the hint that there is something important that is about to be said.
- [1 : 09] A contrast is set before us. It's a before and an after contrast. It's a little bit like the before and after pictures that you see in magazines and on TV.
- You know the ones where people are really overweight and they take some special pill and then they're very, very slim. Or if you have watched a particular show, which I suspect none of you have watched, but I must confess I have.
- A show on TV that transforms an ugly duckling into a beautiful swan. A woman who looks as if she's not clean to teeth nor her hair for many, many weeks.
- That she's in very daggy clothes. She's not wearing any makeup. She's looking like something that the cat had dragged in. And she puts herself into the hands of a style gurus.
- Well, multiple style gurus. She goes and has her teeth straightened and whitened. She is put on a better diet. She has a gym instructor and a routine.
- [2 : 21] She sees the hair and the makeup stylist. And they do their wonder. And then a whole new wardrobe of clothes is bought for her. And she is stunning.
- The transformation is radical. You're hard pressed to recognise the woman is the same person from the before and the after.
- If you've ever seen that show, it's absolutely amazing. Well, Paul gives us a similar radical transformation picture for us in this passage.
- Maybe not a swan, but something heaps better. Verses 1 to 3 is the before picture. What one was before knowing Christ.
- And the after picture is in verse 4 to 7. That's the transformation after coming to Christ. He then brings it all together in verses 8 to 10 and tells us what the goal of this comparison is to be.
- [3 : 28] The before picture is actually not very flattering. In fact, it's hard to imagine that it can get much worse. The first word Paul uses is dead.
- It doesn't get much worse than that, really. Apart from Christ, in our pre-conversion state, we are spiritually dead.

That is the result of sin. Sin kills, it destroys. Let's read those first three verses again. As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of the world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.

All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts.

Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. You name the sin and I bet I could probably give you an example of it somewhere where it's been glamorised and made to look appealing and normative.

[4 : 48] Lust, you could look out on billboards out in the street. You could look on buses. You can look in the magazines. Greed, well, greed, our economy is based on greed, built on greed.

Self-centredness, well, movies and televisions and magazines are all based around self-centredness. Self-help books have as a theme someone trying to get what they want.

I could go on, but I'm certain that you get the picture that I'm trying to build. And I love how J.B. Phillips, great theologian, paraphrases Romans 12 too.

The familiar verse that says, do not be conformed any longer to the pattern of this world. And Phillips says, do not let the world squeeze you into its mould.

Paul means here more than sexual sins when he says flesh. In Galatians 5, 19 to 21, he mentions sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery, idolatry and witchcraft, hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, orgies and the like.

[6 : 13] But let me say, one person's sin or sin weakness might be different to another person's sin or sin weakness.

One person might struggle with their own body and have sexual temptations. Another might be ambition and pride. Another might be jealousy and greed.

The flesh is anything in us that gives sin a chance. It is human nature without God.

Broth is a strong word. It's God's holy anger against sin and the judgment that results. And that is the word Paul uses to describe God's response to our sinful state prior to coming to Christ.

God's wrath is not something we like to mention, but it is real. Often when talking to friends, we prefer to talk about God's love.

[7 : 17] I am absolutely convinced and certain that when I've talked about God, if I was going to look at percentages, I talk about God's love far more than God's wrath.

But in fact, the two are not opposites. They actually need each other. God cannot be completely loving if he does not hate the things that rob us of knowing full lives.

Similarly, he cannot be wrathful if he didn't care about us. Because if he didn't care, he would be ambivalent. Now, many of us do not think of lost people as objects of God's wrath.

For many people, the truth of the gospel has been watered down. We think that people are generally moral and God is just, so maybe it won't really matter and won't be so bad on judgment day.

Many feel more comfortable believing that being a good person will be enough for God to love them and to accept them into heaven.

[8 : 32] Well, that would be absolutely wrong. God's wrath says that they are dead, enslaved by nature objects of wrath.

God's word, sorry. That doesn't mean without any value, though. If lost people weren't invaluable to God, he wouldn't have sent Christ to die for us.

No, it's because of how valuable they are that this state of death, slavery, wrath is so wrong.

And understanding the true state of people without Christ must motivate us to share the good news with them. A friend just this week, at the launch in actual fact, he's just retired, and he said to me, I have come to the realisation I have less years ahead of me than I have behind me.

He said, and so because I have less years ahead of me, it has made me more passionate to share the gospel in a more passionate way now because I only have a little bit of time.

[9 : 43] Now, for a few of you, you might have more years ahead of you than behind. But for the bulk of us, we actually are in that category.

We have less years ahead of us, and so we need to be passionate about sharing Jesus because those who do not know Jesus are under God's wrath. The harsh reality is that they will perish eternally.

People we care about, people we love, desperately need to know the truth. Let's read verses 4 to 7.

But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ, even when we were dead in transgressions.

It is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

[10 : 55] Verse 4 begins with one of those great words in Scripture. But. Don't you love it how we can be reading along, starting to feel hopeless, helpless and discouraged, overwhelmed by how far we are from God's standard, and then we come to this little word, but.

All I have just said is true, but you are not without hope. But there is more. But God.

The next three verses describe the change that comes through Christ. This is the after picture, contrasting and demonstrating the change that takes place.

The first verse in this after section, verse 4, places the focus squarely on God, where it needs to be.

It's God's great love and it's his rich mercy that we are made alive and raised with Christ. That is our testimony. Once we were spiritually dead and now we are spiritually alive.

[12 : 15] The very same power we saw last week in chapter 1, verses 19 and 20, that raised Christ from the dead is the very same power that transforms you and me from being spiritually dead to being spiritually alive.

And I hope that excites you to know that the very same power that has risen Christ is what is the power within us. How wonderful is that?

Remember, we all have all the spiritual blessings that God gives us. And yet, so often, we think that God is holding out on us. He's forgotten us.

He's not helping us. We're going through trauma or change, broken relationships, and we say, where is God in all of this?

And frankly, I have to say to myself, how dare you even question God with everything that he has given you? How dare I? How amazing and how absolutely wonderful is that?

[13 : 31] God has raised us up with Christ and all the power that Jesus controls is ours to access also. It is no wonder that Paul began this picture in chapter 1 that we saw last week with a focus on the great love and the rich mercy of God.

Who are we to sit with Christ around his throne? Well, we are God's children. We have been raised up because of God.

We belong there. That is where our citizenship is. That is where our loyalty and our life and worship belong, seated in heaven with Christ.

Why would God do such a thing? The answer is in the next verse, in verse 7. And I'll read that.

God did it to show the world what he is like.

[14 : 40] And let me ask you. When the world looks at you and looks at me, do you think the incomparable riches of his grace expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus?

Do you think they see that? Do you think they see life, as in verse 5? Do they see us focused around Jesus' throne in heaven?

Well, God saved us so that the world would know what he is like. When people look at you and me, what is it that they see? These verses are to encourage you.

They're to encourage you to see the gospel for what it is. It's about who God is. What Jesus has done for us. It's about the power that raises Christ from the dead is in us.

Be encouraged with this. You are not alone. You cannot and will never be able to do anything left to your own devices.

[15 : 44] But God can and God has and God will. Well, that leads us to verses 8 and 9. For it is by grace you have been saved through faith.

And this is not from yourselves. It is the gift of God. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

This is the heart of the gospel. And what is often seen as the heart of the book of Ephesians. Many of us have memorised those verses. And with good reason.

They are succinctly and powerfully stating the incredible message of salvation. It is really simple. Salvation is by grace through faith.

What more needs to be said with that? God's grace offers it. We receive it in faith. And so we don't go off and think that we have something great because of the exercise of our faith.

[16 : 52] The verse continues quickly to say, It's not of yourselves. It is nothing that we have earned. It is simply a gift to be believed and accepted.

This is the incredible simplicity of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Because of his great love for us, God offers us a gift of salvation by his grace.

All we need to do is have faith. It's all about God and what God did and what God does. The focus is on him.

He is the central character. He is the one who pours out grace and saves us. This is so simple and yet so hard for so many people.

There is a saying that I hear often and that is, There is no such thing as a free lunch. I'm sure you've heard it. Meaning that in some way we end up paying for everything.

[18 : 01] Well it's not true here. There is absolutely nothing we can do to earn salvation. There is nothing we can do to make ourselves come alive spiritually.

It is by grace. That word we hear so often and yet abuse so regularly. We just need to respond in faith.

Faith being the instrument through which the benefits and blessings of the cross come to us. Don't be mistaken though. That faith is a form of earning something from God.

No, Martin Luther has this great phrase that says, Faith is not a work. It is a resting in what God has done.

Faith is not a work. It is a resting in what God has done. And I love Paul's bluntness and how he puts us in our rightful place.

[19 : 02] Simply put, he says, This salvation has nothing to do with what you have done in any way, shape or form. We have nothing to boast about because it is all God.

Well, all too often we memorise verses 8 to 9 and we leave out verse 10. And verse 10 says, For we are God's workmanship created in Christ Jesus to do good works which God prepared in advance for us to do.

If we leave that verse 10.

Being created in Christ. And if you are anything like me, I struggle daily to believe that I am a masterpiece.

That I am a work of art that the creator of this world has made. Why do I struggle? Well, because I constantly fall back to thinking it's all about me and what I can do to earn approval.

[20 : 30] And I step back into behaving as if I am in the before state. And I will fail every time when I do that.

Because it is all about God and what he has done. What is essential for us to know is included in verses 8 to 9.

Works don't save us. They don't make us more holy or more spiritual or more important to God. But works flow naturally out of what we have been made to be by the craftsmanship of God.

We are not saved by works. But for works. So they are important. They are crucial.

But they do not earn us salvation or any more of God's love. Our works flow out of who we are created to be.

[21 : 34] They are a result of salvation. Not a cause of salvation. And it is critical that we grasp that. There is something radically wrong if salvation does not produce good works.

It's not that our good works put God in our debt. Rather, God's love lays on us the obligation to try throughout all of our life to be worthy of the love he gives us.

So we read, created in Christ Jesus to do good works which God prepared in advance for us to do. This effectively is our mission here at St Paul's.

To know Jesus. To treasure Jesus. Represent Jesus for God's glory and the joy of all people. How I long personally and also corporately to be that testimony to that statement.

That's what we pray for here at St Paul's. As we end, the question I ask us both is, is your spiritual life sitting in the before state, the before picture or in the after picture?

[22 : 54] Don't fall for the temptation to live in the before when in fact you have been given absolutely everything by God's grace to live the transformed beauty that Christ won for you.

And finally, anticipate the good works that God has prepared for you this week. Take your focus off yourself and look around to see what opportunities God has for you to show the incomparable riches of his grace expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

Live the mission. Know Jesus. Treasure Jesus. Represent Jesus. For God's glory and the joy of all people.

Amen.