

Living with New Eyes

St. Paul's Letter to the Ephesians

Study 4 | Ephesians 2:1-10

"The Gift of Good Works"

- 1. How does Paul describe mankind outside of Christ in verses 1-3? How do you feel about this stark description of fallen mankind? Which descriptions resonate with you and your experience? Which offend you and why?**

While Chapter 1 gives us a cosmic and eternal view of the salvation wrought by God for the world in Jesus Christ—we are taken up to the “heavenly places” and told what has happened “before the foundation of the world” in Christ—Chapter 2 describes that same salvation in terms that gave unflinchingly upon our day to day lives. Twice Paul in this passage uses the idiom of “walking”, a term used to describe the everyday actions of life, “suggesting continuing progress in time and in a chosen direction.” (*Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*). Here in verse 1, it is clear that the walking done by those who have not been made alive by God in Christ is not to good, to say the least. They are variously termed to be “sons of disobedience” and “children of wrath”, but maybe the most indicting and theologically significant descriptor used by Paul is “dead” (which he uses twice).

By using this word, the reality of the human heart is laid bare before us. To be dead, of course, is to be absent of life, cold and still, unable to move or speak or think or to even know what those realities might be. To be dead is anti-reality. It is clear that Paul understands this death to be primarily spiritual—he has already described as “walking—but the picture painted by him is of “walking” dead who have no ability of their own accord to obtain forgiveness of their sins or attain to eternal life (v.5), understand and experience the kindness of Jesus (v.6), or live lives of redemptive and joyful service to God (v.10).

While it can strike us as spiritually arrogant to say that without Christ we have no ability to know God and be spiritually alive, the testimony that many of us would give about our own spiritual lives as disciples: God has been the initial and sustaining power for everything we have experienced and done.

- 2. How does Paul describe Christ's work and the state of Christians in verses 4-7? How does this description encourage and motivate you personally?**

The contrast between those who are in Christ, and those who are not, could not be more stark: the former are “alive” and the latter are “dead.” As is stated again and again in this passage, this transformation from death to life is shown to be solely because of the power of God in Christ, named here several times as “grace.” Horatius Bonar, the Scottish churchman and poet, describes this grace in all its glory

But how far has this grace come? It has come the whole length of a sinner's distance from God. It did not wait till the sinner sought it, ere it came forth. It came unbidden and undesired. Nor did it wait till some of the distance had been removed, or some of the hindrances surmounted by the sinner himself. It traversed the whole distance itself, and over-leaped, or rather leveled every barrier. It burst forth spontaneous from the bosom of eternal love, and rested not till it had removed every impediment, and found its way up to the sinner's side, swelling round him in full flow. It does away the distance between the sinner and God, which sin had created. It meets the sinner on the spot where he stands, and it approaches him just as he is. It does not wait till there is something to attract it, nor till there is some good reason in the sinner for its flowing to him. No; unattracted, and without any reason in the sinner, it pours itself forth in all its fullness towards objects whose only title is their utter worthlessness, and their possessing nothing for the holy eye of God to delight in.

3. How does Paul describe the relationship between grace, faith, and works in verses 8-10? Do you “walk in good works”? What does your answer tell you about your grasp of how grace, faith, and works operate together?

This passage is famous for emphasizing that salvation is not by “works.” Of course, this is true: our salvation belongs to God from first to last. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. But notice the word play in verse 9-10 that Paul uses in order to tell us that while our salvation is not by works, our salvation is for works, since we have become the workmanship of Jesus.

In other words, if we believe that the source of our salvation is by our own works, then we are saying that we are in some way self-made: we are our own “workmanship.” But if we have come to know that we are saved apart from our own works, then that will confirm that we are the workmanship of Jesus, and we will then be prepared to humbly walk in the works that he has prepared for us to do.

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