

Ephesians 2:1-10 — But God

February 2, 2014

Good morning. We are in a series called, “Who Am I?” It is a study of the book of Ephesians. If you have been here for previous studies in this series, you know Paul began the book with a shock-and-awe campaign just blowing us out of the water by explaining how good God is toward us in Jesus Christ. We are the most blessed beings in the universe because of Jesus. This morning is more of the same, but this time, Paul took it up a notch.

My daughter loves gymnastic. She cartwheels around the living room and walks on her hands. For Christmas, we bought her a balance beam. Her favorite part of gymnastics is



flexibility, in particular the splits. Watching her do the splits is painful. If I stretched my legs apart like she does I would cry like a baby. Let's just say her ability to stitch her legs apart did not come from my side of the family.

In Ephesians 2:1-10, Paul forces us to do some stretching. These verses force us into the spiritual splits. Paul will stretch our understanding of how dead, wicked, and lifeless we were before Jesus and then he will stretch us the other way by telling us how incredibly good God has been toward us through Jesus. Just as the physical splits are painful to watch and even more painful to do, attempting the spiritual splits will be painful for many of you today.

I know a number of you will flat out disagree with what the Bible says about you this morning. You will say, “That isn’t me. I am basically a good person. I just grew up in a bad neighborhood. I just watched too many R-rated movies as a child. I am better than most, just slightly misguided. What the Bible says isn’t true for me.” Each of us has a little protective mechanism in us that likes to think we are better than most. This is why we like the evening news. We get the criminal report and pat ourselves on the back congratulating for not acting as messed up as the guy who made the news. We try to make ourselves feel better by comparing ourselves to the worst. Here is the truth.

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.
Romans 1:18 (ESV)

The Bible says that by nature we suppress the truth about ourselves. We don’t like to hear it. I am calling your bluff on this one before we begin because I know 90 percent of us will step into the trap of thinking we are essentially good. Don’t do that. Trust the text, not your heart.

Before we jump in, let me give you the outline for our study. It is simple. These verses are a contrast, a painful stretch in opposite directions. 1) Am I really that bad? 2) Is God really that good? 3) What should I do about this?

Am I really that bad?

The Bible says that when God started things in the Garden of Eden, they were wonderful. Adam and Eve were warm, naked, eating fruit in paradise and happily married. It doesn’t sound like life could get much better.

When you look at the world today, it doesn't look anything like the Garden of Eden. It is cold. We wear clothes and lots of them. People die. We get sick. People lie. We have contracts, attorneys and courts because people don't tell the truth. Marriages break up. Hearts are crushed. Husbands and wives are unfaithful. Children are unloved. We put locks on our homes, passwords on our computers, and security systems in our houses to keep evil people out of our lives. We buy guns and put them under our beds just in case somebody gets through our locked doors.

We have insurance because we know something devastating that is not supposed to happen will happen and we want protection against it. We have police officers to stop the bad guys, jails to lock them up and when they are really bad we put them to death.

Our biggest fear is someone from another country paying a visit with a bomb in his briefcase. To stop this, we guard our borders. We have armies, planes, weapons, bazookas, nuclear bombs, drones and missiles all to keep the bad people away.

We know we drifted a long way from Eden so we decide to do something about it. We start programs and raise money. We hope money and education will solve our problems. We hire more police officers and build more jails. We create a more expensive health care system and with more medicines are hoping to return things to paradise.

Here is the funny part. The harder we work to solve all the problems, the less progress we make and the more messed up the world becomes. If we go

back 100years we start to wonder if we are any better than our ancestors. Yes, I have an iPhone and my great grandfather didn't, but my great-grandfather could drink his morning coffee in peace while I have to answer 57 text messages before breakfast. We call this progress?

The million dollar question is why are things not getting better? Why are we spending lots of money and time but not fixing anything?

I know many of you will find this hard to believe but the reason things aren't getting better is because in the world we are the problem, not just the solution. It is not the bad guys out there which are the problem. It is the person we see in the mirror that is the problem. When we hear about the nasty, mean, wicked people out there it is always the other guy. We think we are the good guys. Maybe we made a few poor choices but we don't think of ourselves as inherently evil. We are just misguided.

Here is the weird part. If you go to the other side of the world, there are whole countries that are convinced Americans are evil, that we are the problem. They are committed to improving the world by wiping us off the planet. They claim we oppress the world financially and use our military to bully others. In the meantime, we think they are the problem. We are in this situation where everybody is pointing fingers at the other guy and everybody thinks of themselves as a good person fighting the evil in the world. This finger pointing isn't just between countries of the world but it goes down through political parties which are committed to destroying one another and even into marriages where the reason for the divorce is always the other person.

The Bible has a word for this finger-pointing condition where we think we are basically good person when in reality we are by nature evil. It is called spiritual death. That is where we begin in Ephesians 2.

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins... Ephesians 2:1 (ESV)

I know many of you won't agree. You don't like to think of yourself as dead. After all, you put your pants on this morning and dead people don't do that. Why does the Bible say we are a bunch of zombies, the walking dead?

Why are we dead? The Bible says that while our bodies are alive, the internal part of us that connects us to God is dead. This is why nobody knows why we are here. Nobody knows what is right and what is wrong and we see everything as somebody else's problem. We are spiritually dead. We were born that way. Our spirits are as lifeless as roadkill. We may be physically alive and shaving, but when it comes to God, we are dead, just a bunch of zombies.

Some dead people are relatively nice while others are really nasty. Why is that? While everyone is dead, there is a difference in the degree of decomposition of the soul. That doesn't change the fact that everyone is spiritually dead.

Being dead to God doesn't mean you aren't a spiritual person. There are many people who are very spiritual, but spirituality doesn't mean you are connected to God. Many spiritual people are about connecting to themselves or something else in the unseen spiritual world. The Bible says that unless we are connected to God, we are dead, lifeless and hopeless.

This is hard to swallow. I warned you this was coming. There are many apparently kinds of people walking around but according to the Bible they are dead people. Unless someone is connected to God through Jesus, while they are physically alive, their souls are as dead as a bug hitting the windshield.

What killed us? Paul said we are dead in our trespasses and our sins. These are similar words, but they are slightly different. Trespasses are things we fail to do right. Sins are things we choose to do wrong. Sometimes these are called sins of omission and commission. Omission means that we are to do certain things, like love our neighbor, but we fail to get around to it and in so doing, we sin against them.

Pretend I was to invite you over my home to watch the Super Bowl tonight. This is purely hypothetical because I don't have cable so you can't watch the Super Bowl in my home. The drain spout from the roof on my garage exits onto my driveway. That usually isn't a problem until the Iowa winter where the freezing and thawing leaves a large sheet of ice in my driveway. When it snows, the ice is covered and nobody knows how dangerous it is. I usually don't do anything about it because it is right where I park so I know it's there. Pretend I invited everyone over my home for the Super Bowl. You parked in my driveway and slipped on the ice. Who fault is it? It is mine. I sinned against you by not putting down salt on the drive to protect you from injury. That is a transgression, a sin of omission. I failed to love my neighbor as myself.

When you start to think of sin this way, you quickly realize how incredibly sinful we are because we fail to protect and love our neighbors all the time.

Commission means we actively choose to do what is wrong. God makes laws, like the Ten Commandments, and we choose to break them. Ladies, you go to the store and buy a dress. You get home and your husband asks you how much it was. You tell him it was \$40. In reality it was \$49.95, but you chose to round down. You intentionally chose to shade the truth to make it look your purchase better than it actually is. We know things like this are not right but we intentionally choose to do them all the time. We commit sins.

Why can't we stop killing ourselves? Paul said that we are *by nature children of wrath*. That means that while God made us totally good, when Adam and Eve rebelled, it twisted something deep inside their nature. That bend was passed down to us, so we are by nature flawed. Our sins of omission and commission on the outside are just evidence that we are deeply broken on the inside.

One of my hobbies is shooting my compound bow. I love the split second delivery of the carbon arrows and the razor sharp accuracy of the red dot sight. A few years ago, I was in the bow shop watching a man get his recurve fixed. No matter how hard he tried, he just couldn't get his bow to shoot straight anymore. The owner of the store eventually discovered the problem. One of the limbs on his bow was warped. The wood had twisted. It would never shoot straight again, because it was twisted at its core.

That is a good picture of us. While we keep trying to shoot straight, we keep sinning. We sin by omission and commission. The reason we can never

shoot straight is because we are twisted deep inside. Sin is not just what we do, it is a problem with our very nature.

Our situation is bad. We are dead because we are disconnected from God. No matter how spiritual we try to be, it is hopeless. Being spiritual is like trying to move the arms of a dead person. Move them as much as you want but the corpse will never live. The reason we can't stop sinning is because we are bent at the core. From here, things get worse.

There is a war going on against us, and it is being waged on three fronts. We are being attacked by Satan, our own flesh and the world.

...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 body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. Ephesians 2:2–3 (ESV)

Satan

I know this sounds a little out of vogue in our culture but the Bible tells us there is a dark, evil, spiritual being behind much of the carnage, abuse, tyranny, death, starvation and pride on the planet. Satan is not equal in power to God. He is a created being whereas God is the creator. I think the best evidence for Satan's existence is what I call supernatural levels of evil. There are people who find joy in torture. There are people who delight in genocide, horrible acts of evil and death. After a while, you realize that atrocities of this magnitude are not human. They come from another dimension. The Bible talks about demonic influence and demonic possession where Satan and/or his demons begin to actually possess people, causing them to do unspeakable things. When you see

such gratuitous evil, you understand that it is from outside this world. Satan is fighting against us and is committed to our destruction.

Our own flesh

The Bible says that each of us also has a propensity to rebel against God. We are born with it. We have a propensity toward rebellion, obstinacy and hard-heartedness.

You see this when you are parenting children. What is the first word they learn? It has only two letters. No! Even though you are committed to loving your kids and you would give your life for them, they are intent on rebelling against you.

Our flesh has physical appetites. While hunger is good, it leads us to be gluttons, to obesity and to death. The sex drive of our flesh is good but it can lead us to fornication and adultery. Our own flesh fights against us.

The world

This is the flesh and the enemy working together. The world is the general state of the collective mass of humanity in rebellion against God. It is the pond we swim in. It is the culture we know. It is the values, the government, the television. Last night was my son's birthday. His sister gave him a DVD. It turns out it was one he already saw, so we went to Walmart looking for a new one. You know how hard it is to find a decent God-honoring movie? Most movies are just unholy. Everything around us in the world fights against us. Some of you were told that when you became a Christian, life would get easy and you discovered that is far from the truth. Honoring God at work leaves you passed up

for a promotion. Refusing to take money under the table means you can lose your job.

Before you were a Christian, it wasn't hard to live in the world. All you had to do was be like a dead fish and float downstream. Just go with the flow. Now that you are new in Christ it is hard because you have to keep swimming against the flow.

We live in a world with Satan, our flesh and our society warring against us. Don't you think God should stop this? He will.

Do you struggle with God's plan to punish Satan? I think we are all pretty good with this. Satan rebelled. He harmed many people. He is a liar. He is an enemy. I think most of us are good with God punishing Satan.

I think we are also good with God being angry at the world. The world's value systems and the world's ways are killing us. They are evil. We think God should be mad at lying, cheating, stealing, rape and adultery. We are all good with God's wrath against all the people who deserve it.

The problem is that the Bible says *you were by nature children of wrath like the rest of mankind*. We are fine with God being angry at Satan and the world but we don't like it when God gets mad at us even though we are part of the problem. We like to think we are all victims. We are basically good. The Bible says, "No, you are basically bad and deserve wrath."

You see if somebody steals your car, mugs your wife or throws a rock through your window, you are good with the police catching them and giving them what they deserve. When we are guilty, we think wrath is overdone.

Here is reality. We are really, really bad folks. We are so screwed up we think we are the good guys when we really are the bad guys. It is a really sick world we live in and if you seriously ponder how messed up we are for any length of time, it should result in a prescription for Prozac because it is not a pretty picture.

Lest I leave you depressed, I told you this text was a stretch. It is the spiritual equivalent of the splits. When we get to verse 4 there is good news. “But God...” Those two words are probably the best words in the Bible. We are so incredibly messed up but God did something about it through Jesus. Just as we stretched to realize how bad we are, now we will stretch the other direction and understand how good God is toward us.

Is God that good?

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus... Ephesians 2:4–6 (ESV)

What is the heart of God? Justice for sin or grace and mercy? The answer is both. Justice and mercy meet at Jesus. God came down as a human being in Jesus. He was tempted in every way, just like us. He did not sin. He died. The Bible says that he died in my place for my sin. All the punishment I deserve was placed on Jesus and according to 2 Corinthians 5:21 all of Christ’s perfection and purity was put on me. Now God’s justice is met and his grace and mercy is displayed in me and through me all because of Jesus.

When we die, if we are in Christ, we don’t have to worry about punishment from God. Jesus already took all the wrath I deserve. I don’t have to pay for my

sins. I am not going to stand before God and try to explain my dumb choices. Jesus took care of it all.

Here is the best part. Jesus did not stay dead. After Jesus died paying for our sins, death could not hold him. He rose from the dead, and it says that when Jesus rose 2,000 years ago, I rose with him. The Bible is saying I was literally *in Jesus* when he rose from the grave 2,000 year ago conquering death and sin.

It is all done. I don't deserve this. I wasn't even born yet. I hadn't even asked God to save me. This was a few thousand years ago. I hadn't even tried to do anything to contribute to saving myself. It is not like Jesus does 90 percent and I do 10 percent. Jesus does it all. I don't need to be good. I don't need to be holy. I don't need to be spiritual. All I need is Jesus, who did it all for me.

We are seated with Jesus in the heavenly realms. Now it gets even better. God is the one who made us alive through Jesus. In many ways, we are just along for the ride. It is all about God's grace. Now imagine this. God seated us with Jesus in the heavenly realms. There are a number of places in the Bible where it talks about us being with Jesus forever in heaven because we are so identified with Jesus. This passage is the most explicit of all of them. The picture is that Jesus has a throne in heaven. From other places in Scripture, we know Jesus is seated at the right hand of God. Jesus is God's right hand man. This is amazing. It says we are seated with him. I don't know all the details of how this works but I picture what I used to do with my kids. I would have them sit on my lap because they are my kids. I didn't let other kids sit on my lap but my kids have the position of privilege and authority and they sit with me in dad's chair.

What I see here is we are sitting on Jesus' lap with him in his chair because we are his kids. We are sitting on the throne with him and he has his hand on our back and we have this place of safety, comfort, privilege and authority because we are sitting with our dad.

...so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. Ephesians 2:7 (ESV)

The picture is that for all of eternity we are on display like the clothing models on a runway, except we are not showing off the latest fall fashions, we are showing to all the spiritual being in the universe what it looks like for God to show his maximum amount of kindness to anyone or anything.

God's kindness doesn't just end when we get to heaven. All the angelic beings of the vast uncharted spiritual world will not just be forever staring at us like we are some freak of nature behind glass in a museum. This is not just a one time event where after a few thousand years things get boring.

When a man first gets married, he loves his wife's meatloaf. After 20 years of the same meatloaf, he gets tired of it. He wants something fresh and new.

God's display of his kindness toward us in Christ, it is a good book. When you finish one chapter, you can't wait to start the next because the story keeps getting better. You think God's grace to you is amazing when you die and go to heaven and sit on Jesus' lap, just wait 1,000 years into it when you have another 100,000 things to thank God for through Jesus that you didn't when you first got there. You have to understand that God likes freshness. He loves creativity. He loves it in the church. We will experience fresh grace forever from God.

Here is what Paul was beating into our heads. We did nothing to deserve this, absolutely nothing. We are the most deserving of wrath and yet God, through Jesus, adopts some of us and makes us the greatest display of mercy the universe will ever see and it is like a never-ending carnival where the rides just keep getting better.

How should I respond?

Get rid of my ego and boasting.

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. Ephesians 2:8–9 (ESV)

God saved us completely by his grace. We did nothing to contribute to it. Don't try to take an ounce of credit for any of God's goodness in your life. Taking credit is offensive to God. It is insulting to Jesus. It is worshipping yourself instead of God. Paul said we are saved by grace through faith, and this is not of your own doing. It is not just the grace that is not our own doing but the faith we have in Jesus Christ this morning is even not our own doing. Even our faith to trust in Christ and be saved by him is a gift from God. Some of you like to credit yourself by thinking you were so smart you chose God. You are much better than your friends at school because you chose Jesus and your friends foolishly didn't. That is so wrong.

Any good thing in our life is a gift of God. Remember your heart is dead. You are a walking zombie, an internal piece of roadkill. Your heart is by nature so dead that God's love for you through Jesus makes absolutely no sense apart from God working in you. Your heart will not naturally respond to God because it

cannot respond. The only reason that you trusted Christ is because God softened your heart and gave you faith.

This week, whatever you do, don't do a Richard Sherman and give yourself an ounce of credit. Give God all the credit for every good thing in your life, especially for your faith, which is a gift from him. No boasting, especially if you know Jesus. Understand what you were and who you are and all of it from first to last is a gift from God and it is the biggest gift in the universe. It is the biggest stretch in the universe. It is the spiritual splits, the ultimate reversal. Enjoy it, praise God for it but don't you dare take an ounce of credit for it.

Let my living on the outside reflect the new life in my heart on the inside.

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. Ephesians 2:10 (ESV)

It says we are God's workmanship. That word workmanship is a great word. It is the Greek word *poemo* from which we get our English word poem. It means work of art or masterpiece. We are God's finest work in the universe.

We began spiritually dead. We began by constantly committing sins of omission and commission. We couldn't shoot straight to save our lives. We were bent on the inside. Now we are recreated by God for the purpose of doing good works, not sinful works. In fact, God planned in advance for us to do them that we should walk in them. If you are a Christian, every day God puts in your path good works for you to do. He has put in your path things to do that display your new life in Christ that you don't deserve. There will be people to help, meals

to cook, broken hearts to listen to, friends to pray over, children to cry with, Bible studies to have, people to encourage.

With broken and dead hearts we couldn't shoot straight. We couldn't stop sinning. Now with our new living heart we can finally do good works because we can shoot straight.

Conclusion

As we go, we need to remember who we were before Christ and now who we now are because of Jesus. It is the ultimate stretch, the spiritual splits. We are God's masterpiece. Who we now are through Jesus is a greater work of God than the creation of the entire universe.



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