

Introduction

Two years ago, three professors at the University of Winnipeg called elementary schools to **"go back to the basics"** of math like vertical addition and subtraction, carrying numbers, times tables, and automatic recall of math facts. Two weeks ago, a prominent coach called his players to **"go back to the basics"** of football like blocking and tackling. We hear that a lot, **"go back to the basics,"** which is what I'm doing today. I'm going back to the basics of salvation, the fundamental truths that underlie it. Paul reveals what those are in Ephesians 2:1-10.

Sins Defined

Let's start by defining the synonyms **"trespasses"** and **"sins"** in verse 1. I know a physician who routinely promotes himself before others – who makes known the good deeds he does. I have two questions. Is that a sin? Yes, it is. Why is it? It isn't because it adversely affects others because it doesn't. It's because it adversely affects God.

The Bible clearly teaches in texts like Psalm 51:4 that the reference point of sin isn't people. It's God. He is utterly good. He possesses all possible positive qualities of character to the greatest possible degree. As a result, certain things that people think, feel, say, or do adversely affect Him. The Bible uses two words to describe their adverse affect – disgust and grief. That fact and that fact alone, that He is disgusted or grieved by them, makes those things sins. The reference point of sin, in other words, is God's nature. So, that physician's self-promotion is a sin because it's contrary to God's nature and thus disgusts Him.

The Causes of Sins

That's what sins are and the phrase in verse 2, **"in which you formerly walked,"** implies that unsaved people habitually commit them. They **"sin in word, thought, or deed every day"** as we say it. Verses 2 and 3 reveal why they do, identifying three root causes of sins.

Paul mentions two of those in verse 2. One is **“the prince of the power of the air,”** which refers to Satan. The other is **“this world,”** which refers to culture set against God, in our case popular culture. He teaches about them that they direct the persons and lives of unsaved people. He explains how they do in verse 2. They **“work in”** them. He defines what their work is in 2 Corinthians 4:4, **“the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving.”** The ancient Greeks had a saying, **“Whom the gods would destroy they first make mad.”** That’s precisely what Satan and the world do. They work in the minds of the unsaved and make them mad, that is, out of touch with reality.

Think of it this way. Reason enables even unsaved people to know the right way to act. It reveals to them what is just, true, and good. But Satan and the world work in them to disorient them. They turn their minds from reason to rationalization, to justifying what they do. Their minds then establish that whatever they do is just, right, and good, or at least necessary – no matter how evil it is.

Paul identifies a third root cause of sins in verse 3. It’s the **“lusts of the flesh.”** The word **“lusts”** refers to desires formed for evil and against God. The word **“flesh”** refers to the human body. We see here that desires and the human body are linked. First, the desires reside in the body, in its parts. And second, the desires are expressed or acted out by the body. The result is that the desires and bodies of the unsaved, together, constitute a pervasive structure of evil. The unsaved are poised to sin, in other words, only awaiting the occasion.

A couple were away from home this past Halloween. So they set a big pot of candy bars on their porch with a sign that said, **“Please take just one.”** They also set up a camera that videoed the trick-or-treaters. A number of children came to the pot, politely took a candy bar, and left. But eventually a mother came with her four children and despite the protests of the children, emptied the whole pot in their bags.

Why did she do that, steal? It’s because her desires and body made her poised to sin, only awaiting the occasion, which the pot of candy

presented to her. Also, Satan and the world have made her mad, out of touch with reality. Her mind established the evil she was about to do as just or at least necessary. Those factors – Satan, the world, and the lusts of the flesh – together were the root causes of her sin.

The Consequence of Sins

Now that we know what sins are and what causes them, let's examine their consequence in verse 1. Unsaved people are **"dead"** spiritually. The dominant realities of our universe are God and His kingdom. Unsaved people, because of their sins, are dead spiritually, that is, are separated from Him and it.

They're separated now. I was with my mother when she died. I hugged her many times before she died and she always hugged me back. But when I hugged her after she died, she didn't hug me back because she couldn't. Just as a corpse is dead to the material world, so unsaved people are dead to the spiritual world of God and His kingdom. They're unable to act upon Him and it. They're also unable to be acted upon by Him and it. They're separated from Him and it now in life on earth.

They're also separated from Him and it later in life after life on earth. Verse 3 states that the unsaved are **"children of wrath."** At the Second Coming of Jesus, God's wrath will come against them. He will give them resurrection bodies and then judge and punish them for their sins. Their punishment will be eternal separation from Him and His kingdom. They will live in a material world and a human society that are completely devoid of God's presence so that everyone is left to his or her own devices. It will be a world and society that are bereft of His common grace and restraint of evil that so richly bless them now. The result is the **"weeping and gnashing of teeth"** of which Jesus spoke.

Spiritual death – now and forever. That is the consequence of sins.

Salvation Defined

But the good news of the gospel is that it doesn't have to be. We

can be **“saved”** instead to use Paul’s word in verse 8. He defines salvation in verse 5. God makes us **“alive,”** or as verse 6 says it metaphorically, **“raises us up”** with Jesus **“in the heavenly places.”** That means the Holy Spirit makes us spiritually alive. He infuses a new supernatural power and life in us that create two remarkable changes. First, we desire to act on and respond to God and His kingdom. And second, we’re capable of doing just that. We call that **“regeneration.”**

Regeneration is just as central to salvation as forgiveness is. Forgiveness in fact is subordinate to it. The Holy Spirit gives us the new power and life and in light of that, our sins are forgiven as well. At that point, regenerated and forgiven, we begin to engage God and His kingdom. Doing so transforms what we are, giving us the increasing power to win over sin and to live abundantly. We call that increasing power **“sanctification.”**

The testimony of a 20 year-old who got saved illustrates what I mean: **“Nothing happened. No bolt of lightning came out of the sky. I didn’t sprout wings, and I didn’t dash out to buy a harp. But in six months to a year, my entire life was revolutionized. I started seeing changes in about six to eight days.”** He goes on to describe ways his life was revolutionized: the calming of his restlessness, the taming of his temper, and the turning of his hatred into love. He had hated, despised, his alcoholic father, for instance, and even tried to poison him twice. But during that six months to a year, he came to love him and shocked him by telling him so. That is a profound psychological change. What explains it? It’s that God regenerated, forgave, and was sanctifying him. He saved him.

But salvation reaches beyond life now to life **“in the ages to come,”** to quote verse 7. It will be a life of **“riches”** with Jesus – a breathtaking life that’s as good and large as He is, and that never ends.

How We’re Saved

Now, this salvation, according to verse 8, is a **“gift of God.”** And

like all gifts, we must take it. How do we take it? It's **"through faith."**

This saving faith, like all faith, involves a readiness to act as if something is so. In this case, that something is that Jesus is a real and living person and that He's the greatest and best, utterly competent and good. We're convinced of that and act as if it's so. What action is consistent with the conviction that He's utterly competent and good? It's to arrange all of our affairs around becoming what He is and doing what He says. Saving faith in other words has two components. One is belief – that Jesus is the greatest and best. The other is action – arrange our affairs around becoming like Him and doing all that He says.

Let's go back to the 20 year-old that got saved. He describes what he did this way: **"I got down on my knees and prayed, 'Thank you, Lord Jesus, for dying on the cross for me.' Then I told God that I knew I was a sinner and asked Him to forgive me. Then I prayed, 'Jesus, I invite You to come into my life as Savior and Lord. I exchange my will for your will.'"** Believing in the goodness and greatness of Jesus, that young man made the will of Jesus, that we become like Him and do what He says, his will. That is saving faith.

But while we call it **"saving"** faith, in reality, it doesn't save us. Grace does. Paul makes that clear in verse 8. We're saved **"by grace."** You know what grace is. It's giving someone something good he or she does not deserve or not giving someone something bad he or she does deserve. In verse 8, it's God who does that. We're saved by His grace. Without His grace, our faith wouldn't save us.

I'd explain it this way. Consider two facts about those of us who have saving faith. One is that all of us have sinned. God, as a result, can justly damn us even though we having saving faith. Another fact is that Jesus took all of our sins into Himself on the cross and paid the penalty for them that we should have paid. God, as a result, can justly save us because we have saving faith. He has two options, in other words, and because He loves us, chooses the second. He chooses not to give us the bad thing we do deserve, damnation, but the good thing we

don't deserve, salvation. That's grace and we're saved **"by"** it.

Now that that we know how we're saved, by grace and through faith, let's look at what we're saved **"for,"** excuse my English. It's **"good works,"** verse 10. Our evangelical tradition of John Wesley called these good works **"testimony."** It rightly contended that if we're truly saved – if we're regenerated, forgiven, and being sanctified – our lives will tell it, through our good works. There are four such works.

One is what Wesley called **"means of grace."** These are spiritual practices that sustain and develop the new power and life that are in us. They include solitude and silence, fasting, study, prayer, worship, fellowship, purposeful obedience, thanksgiving, and the practice of the presence of God, to name a few. Those are mediums of sanctification.

A second good work is the giving of money and goods to build God's kingdom on earth and to meet human needs. Wesley formed small groups and required everyone in them to give something, no matter how little. Giving as much as we can materially is an expression of sanctification.

Witness is a third good work. We present the gospel of Jesus and His kingdom at hand through private and public efforts. We tell the unsaved about their condition before God, His provision for them through Jesus, and how they can take that provision of His.

And finally, a fourth good work is standing for truth. We defend and promote what is just, true, and good in society and in our own lives. Overcoming evil with good is a primary component of this good work.

Those are the good works and as Paul declares in verse 9, they do not save us. But they do testify we're saved – that we're regenerated, forgiven, and being sanctified. They're an integral part of salvation.

Conclusion

That then is the message of verses 1-10, which teaches us what we should do. Arrange all of our affairs, the totality of our lives, around Jesus. We've gone back to the basics of salvation if we do – by grace through faith for good works.

THE SALVATION OF ABRAHAM

Many professing Christians misunderstand the Old Testament standard and experience of salvation. They've absorbed the notion that the Old Testament saints were saved by works – by keeping God's law. But they weren't. They were saved in the same way we are – by grace through faith for good works.

Abraham illustrates what I mean. Paul makes clear in Galatians 3:6, for instance that he **“believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.”**

He was referring of course to the text David read, Genesis 11:31-12:3. This text reflects the essential salvation formula we find in the text we'll read later in the service.

First, Abraham was saved by grace. 11:31 reveals that he lived in Ur and from there settled in Haran. Based on Joshua 24:2 and the fact that Ur and Haran were centers of moon worship, we can infer that Abraham was a worshipper of the moon god Sin when God called him in 12:1.

My point is that Abraham didn't merit God's call. There wasn't anything about his person or life that earned him that call. God gave him something good, to be the father of a great nation, that he didn't deserve. We call that grace – in this case God's grace.

The unknown author of Hebrews records how Abraham responded to God's grace. He writes in 11:8 of his book: **“By faith, Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance.”** Abraham responded to God's grace with faith. He came to believe that Yahweh was the only true God, utterly great and good. That belief of his involved the readiness to act as if it were so.

And he did act. He ceased believing in and serving the moon god Sin. He also did what God told him to do. According to Genesis 12:4 he **“went forth as Yahweh had spoken to him.”** He left his relatives in Haran and went to a land completely unknown to him – enduring the labors and hardships of doing so. Simply put, he did the good works God called him to do.

We see then the basics of salvation in Abraham’s life. He was saved by grace, through faith, for good works.