

"Sinners Need Saved" **Ephesians 2:1-10**

INTRODUCTION

Several months ago, an interviewer asked one of America's most celebrated pastors a question. Are people sinners? He answered that he has a positive ministry that uplifts, not tears down. So, he doesn't call people sinners. He may not but God does. God says in fact that each of us either was or is a sinner who needs saved and that's what I'm going to preach about today. Turn to the passage I read, Ephesians 2:1-10.

SINS AND THEIR CAUSES

Let's start with verse 1 and the synonyms, "*trespasses,*" and "*sins.*" Trespasses or sins are all the things that people think, feel, say, and do that disgust God. An analogy helps explain it.

I once saw a boyhood enemy of mine named Tommy Denzel grab a cat by the tail and bang him repeatedly against the side of his house. That thoroughly disgusts all of you and the question is why does it? It's because you possess certain qualities of character including kindness, goodness, and love. Those qualities cause that act to disgust you.

It's the same way with God. He has all possible positive qualities of character to the greatest possible degree. Those qualities in turn cause certain things that people think, feel, say, and do to disgust Him. And that fact alone, that He is disgusted, makes those things sins.

I know a physician, for instance, who constantly promotes himself before others. That is a sin for one reason and one reason alone. It disgusts God. He and He alone is the reference point of sin.

So that's what sins are and as verse 1 implies, unsaved people constantly commit them. They sin in word, thought, or deed everyday.

Verses 2 and 3 explain why they do. It's because of three things.

The first is found in the phrase in verse 2, "*according to the course of this world.*" The word "world" refers to what we call today "popular culture." Paul teaches us here that unsaved people are under its spell. The widespread use of filthy language, tattooing, and

body piercing and our pervasive materialism are vivid examples of that.

The second cause of sins is also found in verse 2, *“according to the prince of the power of the air.”* That refers to Satan. Satan works profoundly in the person and life of unsaved people. C.S. Lewis’s classic book The Screwtape Letters helps us understand how he does that.

Finally, the third and most common cause of sins is what verse 3 calls “the lusts of the flesh.” The word “flesh” refers to the human body formed in the ways of evil and against God. The word “lusts” refers to the body’s deformed desire system. Putting those two together, Paul is saying this. The body of unsaved people is poised to sin, only awaiting the occasion. Thus, an attractive woman walks by and a man stares. Or a woman gets together with her friends and gossips. Or a man is thrust into office politics and lies to get ahead and so on. They do those things because their body is poised to sin, only awaiting the occasion.

Those then are the causes of sins – the world, Satan, and the lusts of the flesh.

THE CONSEQUENCE OF SIN

Now that we know what sins are and their cause, let’s examine their consequence. Paul tells us what that is in verse 1. It’s death. As he says it in Romans 3:23, the wages of sin is death.

He’s talking about spiritual death. The dominant realities of the universe are God and His kingdom. But their sins separate unsaved people from those. Or as Paul says it here, they are dead to them. Just as dogs are dead to language, so unsaved people are dead to God and His kingdom. They cannot respond to or interact with them.

Take the still small voice of the Holy Spirit, for instance. As saved people do, I’ve experienced it many times in my life. The Holy Spirit has given me flashes of insight, led me to do things, spoken words of comfort, and more. It’s a wonderful thing. But unsaved people are just as dead to that still small voice as dogs are to language.

That shows the consequence of sins. It makes people spiritually

dead. They aren't able to respond to and interact with the only realities that can give abundance, meaning and joy – God and His kingdom.

That's the consequence and it's an eternal one. Unsaved people are spiritually dead in this life and in the never-ending life to come. That is part of what the word "wrath" in verse 3 connotes. Unsaved people's spiritual death is eternal, meaning "now" and "forever."

What a grievous thing that is. It's so grievous that I don't even like thinking about it let alone preaching about it. But I have to because it's the truth. Unsaved people are sinners who need saved.

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE SAVED

And they can be. That's the good news in verses 4-7. Unsaved people can be saved.

Paul tells us what being saved means in verses 4. It means being made alive. Imagine a dog coming alive to language. You give you dog a copy of Dostoyevsky's classic novel Crime and Punishment and he reads and thoroughly enjoys it. What an astonishing thing that would be. But it isn't any more astonishing than God making people spiritually alive. Think about it. Before we were saved, we could not respond to or interact act with God and His kingdom. But now we can. Before we were saved, for instance, we could not hear and understand the Holy Spirit's still small voice. But now we can. All saved people are spiritually alive.

And because we are, according to verse 6, Father God seats us with Jesus in the heavenly places. That connotes several things, one of which is this - increasing abundance, meaning, and joy in this life and perfect abundance, meaning, and joy in the never-ending life to come.

That then is what it means to be saved. God makes us spiritually alive and gives us abundance, meaning, and joy, now and forever.

BY GRACE

Now that we know what it means that God saves us, let's look at how He does. Paul tells us in verses 8-10.

First, according to verse 8, He saves us **by** grace. That means that He saves us even though we don't deserve it. Let me explain.

We talk about the finished work of Jesus. That refers to His birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven. That finished work of His is the basis of our salvation. Upon the basis of it, when we place our faith in Him, Father God can justly save us and does.

But there's something that we need to understand about that. He could also justly condemn us. Before we place our faith in Jesus, He has only one option. He must condemn us in order to be just. But after we place our faith in Jesus, He has two options. He can condemn or save us. He can do either and still be just. He loves us though, as verse 4 reveals, and so chooses to save us. That makes salvation "by grace."

It also makes it, according to the last line of verse 8, a gift of God. What I just explained shows that there is literally nothing we can do that makes us deserve salvation, including placing our faith in Jesus. Those who place their faith in Him and those who don't have one thing in common then. Neither deserves salvation. But Father God can give it to the first of those and does. That makes it a gift of His, the most spectacular gift in fact that any of us will ever get.

THROUGH FAITH

But even though it's a gift, we have to receive it and Paul tells us how to do that in verse 8. We're saved through faith. Faith is something that we do in response to something God does. Let me explain.

Suppose that I put a corpse in the Sunday school classroom off the narthex. Also suppose that I ask you to go in and tell it about Jesus and His gospel. None of you would do that of course because the corpse is dead and can't respond.

It's the same way with unsaved people. Overcome by the world, Satan, and the flesh, they have layer upon layer of thought, feeling, and action that are turned against Jesus and His gospel. Consequently, they can't respond to Jesus and His gospel any more than the corpse can.

That's where God the Holy Spirit comes in. He breaks through all of those layers and brings a new thought to their mind. That thought is the good news of Jesus and His gospel. The Holy Spirit helps them understand that and its implications to them.

That new thought, as it breaks through, brings a new feeling. This new feeling is a complex one that involves two things. One is longing - for the new thought to be true. The other is grief - that their thoughts, feelings, and actions are set against it.

We call that new thought and feeling "conviction of sin." We don't hear much about the conviction of sin anymore but we should. It is the work of the Holy Spirit and absolutely essential to salvation.

That conviction of sin causes a great change to take place in unsaved people. They are now capable of a choice that they weren't capable of before. They can say "no" to the new thought and feeling and decide to keep being and doing what they want. Or they can say "yes" to it and decide to start being and doing what Jesus wants. This decision to start being and doing what Jesus wants is the faith of verse 8.

That implies several things, one of which is this. We have to make that decision to be saved. I once met a woman who volunteered at St. E's Hospital and who explained to me one of the reasons that she did. She wanted to make sure that she earned enough "points" to get into heaven. That's actually the word she used, "points." As verse 9 makes clear though, our works or points don't save us. But our faith does. We must make and carry out the decision to be and do what Jesus wants.

FOR GOOD WORKS

Notice the consequence, in verse 10, if we do - good works. We are saved **by** grace **through** faith **for** good works. The Greek preposition translated "for" connotes consequence. It teaches that good works are a natural expression of saving faith. They are part and parcel of it. Now, according to Scripture and our own evangelical tradition itself, four basic activities comprise these good works. I'll briefly explain each one.

The first is disciplines. John Wesley called these disciplines “means of grace,” that is, activities that sustain and develop our new life in Jesus. They include the public ministry of the Word of God, Bible study, prayer, and the whole range of disciplines that we teach here at Bethel – solitude, silence, fasting, worship, celebration, frugality and all the rest.

The second activity that comprises good works is the giving of money and goods. One of the great strengths of Wesley’s early groups was exactly this. Everyone was supposed to give something, no matter how small, when his or her group met. The group then used what was given to build God’s kingdom and meet human needs.

The third activity is witness. This witness is personal. We tell the unsaved people that we know about their condition before God and His provision for them. But it’s also public. We support public efforts of evangelization including missions around the world.

The final activity that comprises good works is standing for truth. Jude 3 articulates this well, “*contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints.*” We stand up for what is good and right and just in our own personal worlds and in the world at large. This includes the giving of time, talent, and/or money to political and social efforts – locally, nationally, and globally.

Those then are good works of verse 10. And as I’ve pointed out, they’re a natural expression of saving faith. They’re the ever increasing consequence of deciding to be and do what Jesus wants.

CONCLUSION

I’ve said a lot in a short period of time today but the bottom line is this. There are no degrees of salvation. It’s either 0% or 100%. Each and every one of us is one of two things. We are either sinners who have been saved or sinners who need to be saved. If you’re the second of those, there’s something that you need to do right now – come to Jesus in faith just as you are.