

Introduction

Today I'm going to preach about the most important formula in the world. Contrary to one of its new ads, I'm not referring to Coca Cola's celebrated "secret formula." I'm referring to God's salvation formula instead, which Paul reveals to us in Ephesians 2:1-10.

The Causes of Sins

Let's start with verse 1 and the synonyms, "**trespasses**" and "**sins.**" A sin is any word, thought, or deed that goes against the grain of God's nature – that's offensive to Him, in other words, and disgusts Him.

An analogy helps explain it. I once saw a boyhood enemy of mine, Tommy Denzel, grab a cat by the tail and slam him repeatedly against the side of his house. Tommy's action goes against the grain of our nature doesn't it? If we have even a modicum of kindness and goodness in us, the very thought of it is offends and disgusts us.

It's the same with God. He has all possible positive qualities of character and has them to the greatest possible degree. And any human words, thoughts, and deeds that go against the grain of those qualities offend and disgust Him. I read that the average person lies five times a week. Lying is a sin because "**it is impossible for God to lie,**" Hebrews 6:18. It's a sin because it goes against His nature and disgusts Him. He is the reference point of sin. Every sin is first and foremost against Him.

That then is what sins are and as verse 1 implies, unsaved people regularly 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 equivalent of "**the world**" to us is popular culture. Paul contends that unsaved people are under its spell and they are. It conditions, even determines, what they say, think, and do.

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 persons and lives of unsaved people. C.S. Lewis' classic book, *The Screwtape Letters*, reveals how he does.

Finally, the third 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 the 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.

The world, Satan, and the lusts of the flesh. They are three of the causes of all the sins that we see everywhere around us.

The Consequence of Sins

Now that we know what sins are, let's examine the consequence that attends them. Paul tells us in verse 1. Unsaved people "**are dead**" in their sins. The present tense makes clear 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 realities. They are dead to them. Just as dogs are dead to reading, so unsaved people are dead to God and His kingdom. They cannot respond to or interact with them.

Several years ago, the public denounced a Christian Congressman for saying that God doesn't hear the prayers of non-Christians. He retracted his statement but shouldn't have. He was right. Unsaved people are as dead to the supernatural realities of prayer as dogs are to reading.

It grieves me to say it but it's true. Unsaved people are dead to God and His kingdom. They are dead to them in this life. And they will continue to be so in the never-ending life to come. That's part of what the phrase "**children of wrath**" in verse 3 connotes. The unsaved are children of wrath because their spiritual death is forever.

Saved

But something astonishing happens when they get saved. According to verses 5, they're "**made alive together with Christ.**" Imagine a dog coming alive to reading. You give your dog a copy of Dostoyevsky's classic novel *Crime and Punishment* and he reads and enjoys it. But that isn't any more astonishing than God making people spiritually alive. Think about it. Unsaved people can't respond to or interact with the dominant realities of the universe, God and His kingdom. But after they're saved, they can. Unsaved people, for instance, can't experience the supernatural realities of prayer. But after they're saved, they can. God through the Holy Spirit makes all saved people spiritually alive.

Verses 6-7 say it differently but the meaning is the same. Father God seats saved people with Jesus in the heavenly places. That's figurative not spatial language. It expresses Him giving them a life and power that are heavenly or eternal, now, verse 6, and forever, verse 7. Do you grasp what that means? Eternity isn't something saved people begin to experience after death, but before death. They experience eternity now - in three ways. #1 - They interact conversationally with God. They actually hear from Him. #2 - They undergo remarkable psychological changes. Love, peace, and joy become their defining conditions. And #3 - God, through the Holy Spirit, acts with them. The result is that the outcomes of their efforts to solve problems and achieve goals exceed what they're capable of.

That then is what happens when people get saved. Father God through the Holy Spirit makes them alive to Him and His kingdom. He brings an eternal kind of life and power to them, now and forever.

By Grace

Now look at verses 8-10. They explain how we are saved. They contain what I call "God's salvation formula." That formula has 3 parts, each of which I'm going to identify and explain.

The first part is in verse 8. We're saved "**by grace.**"

Before we place our faith in Jesus, Father God has only one just option before Him. He must condemn us. But after we place our faith in Jesus, His finished work (His birth, life, death, and resurrection) gives Father God a second just option. He can save us. But He doesn't have to. He still has the first option before Him. He can also condemn us. He loves us though, as verse 4 reveals, and elects to save us.

That explains what makes salvation "**by grace.**" It's that Father God could justly condemn us even when we place our faith in Jesus. But He elects to save us instead.

It also explains why, according to verse 8, salvation is "**the gift of God.**" I met a woman who volunteers at St. Elizabeth's Hospital so she can "**make enough points to get me into heaven.**" She thinks she can earn salvation but she can't. There's nothing we can do that makes us deserve it, including placing our faith in Jesus. Those who place their faith in Him and those who don't have one thing in common then. It's that neither deserves salvation. But Father God can give it to the first of those and does. That makes it a gift of His, the best we'll ever get.

Through Faith

The second part of the salvation formula, also in verse 8, is "**through faith.**" We're saved through faith. Faith is something we do in response to something God does. That's a vital point that I need to explain.

Suppose that I place a corpse here on the stage. Also suppose I ask you to come and tell it about Jesus and His gospel. None of you would of course because the corpse is dead and can't respond.

It's the same way with us before we're saved. Overcome by the world, Satan, and the lusts of the flesh, we have layer upon layer of thought, feeling, and action that are turned against Jesus and His gospel. We can't respond to Him and it, therefore, any more than the corpse can.

That's where the Holy Spirit comes in. He breaks through all of those layers and brings a new thought to our mind. That thought is that

Jesus is the greatest and best and that we'd profit greatly by being and doing what He wants.

That new thought, as it comes to us, brings a new feeling. That new feeling is a complex one that involves two things. One is longing – for the new thought about Jesus to be true. The other is grief – that our thoughts, feelings, and actions (the totality of our life) are set against it.

We call this new thought and feeling that the Holy Spirit creates “conviction of sin.” We don't hear much about that anymore but we should. It's the first step in salvation, which is impossible without it.

That conviction of sin causes a dramatic change. We now have a choice we didn't have before. We can say “no” to the new thought and feeling. We can decide to keep being and doing what we want. Or we can say “yes” to the new thought and feeling. We can decide to start being and doing what Jesus wants. That decision is the faith of verse 8.

And we have to make it to be saved. Years ago, I talked with a young man who came forward at a revival service to “make a decision for Jesus” as we say it. I learned as I did the decision he made - for Jesus to be “part of my life” to quote him. He'd be and do what Jesus says here in these parts. He wouldn't be and do what He says there in those parts. There is debate about whether or not that decision gets us into heaven. But it certainly doesn't save us as I defined it today. Only one decision does – to be and do everything Jesus wants us to be and do.

For Good Works

There's a third part to the salvation formula, in verse 10. It's “**for good works.**” The Greek preposition translated “**for**” connotes consequence. Good works are a natural outcome of saving faith, an ever-increasing consequence of it. Now, according to Scripture and our own evangelical tradition itself, these good works are comprised of four basic activities, each of which I'm going to identify and briefly explain.

The first is disciplines, what John Wesley called “means of grace.” These are activities that sustain and develop our new life in Jesus. They

include the public ministry of the Word of God, Bible study, prayer, and a range of disciplines that we teach at Bethel: solitude, silence, fasting, worship, celebration, submission, and more. You're doing one of those good works now, listening to the public ministry of the word of God.

Good works are comprised of a second activity. It's the giving of money and goods. One of the great strengths of Wesley's early groups was exactly that. 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 people's needs.

A third activity is witness. This witness is personal. We tell unsaved individuals we know about their condition before God and His provision for them. I mentioned two unsaved acquaintances of mine last week, third generation unbelievers. Telling them about Jesus and His gospel is a good work. But our witness is also public. We support public efforts of evangelization, including foreign missions.

Good works are comprised of a fourth and final activity, standing for truth. Jude 3 says it this way, "**Contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints.**" We promote and defend what is good and right in our own personal worlds and in the world at large. Christian parents I know took their junior high sons out of a *Life Skills* class at school. The class taught an unBiblical process of decision-making and the parents wouldn't allow it. They stood for truth.

The four activities I just identified make up the good works of verse 10. They should be the ever-increasing consequence of saving faith. So let's learn about them and live them out.

Conclusion

So there you have it. The most important formula in the world. In Coca Cola's new ad, it claims that only two people in the whole world know what its secret formula is. But that isn't the case with God's salvation formula. He wants everyone to know it including you and me. We're saved *by* grace, *through* faith, and *for* good works.