

Ephesians 2:4-10

As we move farther into the Lenten season, the cross seems to get larger and more important. That's not really surprising. Whenever we travel forward, we are getting closer to our destination. It was on that cross that the love and mercy and grace of God reached their peak. Both the Old Testament and the Gospel readings for today hold the cross before our eyes. The Old Testament showed us Moses placing that bronze snake on a pole and it provided life in the face of death. And the Gospel referred us to Jesus as the fulfillment of that picture. Jesus was lifted up in order to save us and all others. You might say our Epistle lesson for today takes us "behind the scenes" and shows us what motivated our God to sacrifice his Son. The word "grace" explains "why" God did what he did and "Christ," the Anointed One, reminds us that Jesus was prepared from all eternity to save people.

In the first three verses of Ephesians 2, Paul reminds us of what we were before Christ came and what people without Christ still are. It is not a pretty picture! He says we were **"dead in transgressions and sins."** As a result, we were **"by nature objects of wrath."** We were enemies of God and deserved only God's anger and punishment. Once again that's not a comforting picture. What follows in our text, however, shows what a difference exists between what we were without Jesus and what Jesus makes us. My friends – **"YOU ARE GOD'S WORK."** Hear the Word of the Lord in Ephesians 2:

⁴But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. ⁶And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, ⁷in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. ⁸For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— ⁹not by works, so that no one can boast. ¹⁰For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

"What have you given up for Lent?" Has anyone asked you that question lately? I have heard of people who give up chocolate for Lent. Others give a little extra cash to a food bank to help others. I have even heard of some people who pass up a meal or two during Lent. Fasting or giving up something you really enjoy was and still is a Lenten tradition for some people. If going without something brings a person closer to Christ because it removes a distraction, then it is good. But if we concentrate on ourselves, our devotion, our holiness, our sacrifice, then what good are we doing? We are concentrating on the wrong thing. Rather than looking at what *we* do, Lent is the time when we watch Jesus, as he comes down from the heavenly heights of glory and shows us a love that willingly suffers on our behalf. St. Paul in our text is carried along by the Holy Spirit to see what our human eyes so easily miss. The suffering Savior is true God and true man. In 2 Corinthians, Paul wrote, **"So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer."** (5:16). As we consider the work of Christ, know that there is more happening than we can see with our eyes.

When we look at Golgotha, we see Jesus, dying on the cross. But look closer. We died there. We were lost and without God. We were as good as dead, because by nature we were objects of God's anger. We stepped over the line. We said, "Yes," when God said, "No." We were transgressors. We suffered from the terminal disease of sin, inherited from our first parents. We were punishments waiting to happen.

Now some people say that they made a decision to come to Christ, but nothing could be farther from the truth. We were totally unable to make a move toward God. If there was going to be any relationship between sinners who are dead, and God, who is totally alive, it would have to be based on pure mercy. So the most merciful God made the move. The Son came to be one of us. Jesus took upon himself the whole responsibility of getting us out of death. Jesus Christ, true God, died on that cross. I *could* describe Jesus as a hero who enters a burning building, risking everything to get everyone out, but that's not really what happened. In the case of Christ, there was no possibility of his getting out alive. Jesus came knowing that he would die to get us out. This was no accident. It was a carefully calculated decision on the part of our God. In so doing Jesus ambushed death! Jesus defeated our death by his death. Death fell victim to God's mercy. Jesus died because you were

dead in sin. You are his work. Jesus did all your dying for you. He willingly took the blame for our sins. He freed us from eternal death. And through Baptism, we are made children of the heavenly Father.

Because we know what Scripture says, God's work in us comes as no surprise. But actually there is a surprise. We continue to sin. That's a disappointing surprise. You might say it's a genetic defect passed down to us from Adam and Eve. **"For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me"** (Psalm 51:3). How can Jesus put up with us? Ah, there we see the extent of his mercy. Jesus knew who he was redeeming when he died on the cross. He died for sinners, who constantly need encouragement from his Word. And Paul gives us that encouragement. Our being saved is not about us. It's all about Jesus.

Paul writes, **"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast."** After outlining for us what God's love and mercy have done, Paul now centers our attention on God's grace. It's almost as if Paul takes us into the mind of God. God is willing – even eager – to give us, undeserving people, a very precious gift. Substitute the words "undeserved gift" for the word "grace" and you begin to catch the sense of what Paul is telling us. **"It is an undeserved gift that through faith you have been saved, for God gave you saving faith as a gift."**

Faith is trust and confidence that takes God at his word. But we were by nature dead. We couldn't bring ourselves to faith. We couldn't decide to trust God's promises. With two negatives and a positive Paul leaves no doubt whose work this is. He says, **"not from yourselves," "not by works,"** and **"gift of God."** Our being saved is all God's doing. So **"no one can boast,"** as if he or she did something to contribute to salvation. What we do doesn't earn us God's favor.

But there is one more important truth the apostle gives us. **"For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."**

God created us in Christ Jesus that we might be saved. Yet God also has another purpose in mind. He created us for good works. Believers are the kind of people who do good works. Just as God created the sun to shine and apples trees to produce apples, so he created us to do good works. God's purpose in creating us was to do good works. God even prepared these good works in advance for us to do. In his goodness God provides us with the opportunities to do that which pleases him. Martin Luther once pointed out that the Christian maid scrubbing the floor is doing a good work because she is faithful in the work God gave her to do. Scrubbing the floor was an opportunity the Lord has prepared for her.

Stop and think. There is no such thing as boredom in the life of a Christian. As each day begins, we look forward to the opportunities that God gives us to do good works, works which God prepared in advance. But these opportunities become good works only when we seize them. Jesus reminds us, **"Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them"** (John 13:17). Faithfully carrying out our responsibilities at work, working hard in school, being a good friend, returning a portion of our time, talent, and treasure to the Lord – God gives us endless opportunities to reflect the love that he has shown to us. Strengthened by the Lord, we are able to respond to God. As redeemed children of God, we are able, although imperfectly at this time, to do what God wants. It's not that we have to, but rather that we want to do what God wants. The good works that flow from faith are simply an opportunity to show our appreciation for all that Christ has done for us. The apostle John says it well, **"We love [God] because he first loved us"** (1 John 4:19).

Our salvation is totally and completely a gift of God. We did nothing to earn it. We don't deserve it. We certainly have no reason to boast. We are God's work. When Jesus died, he cried, **"It is finished"** (John 19:30). Our sins were forgiven, but God's love was not finished. His mercy is never finished. The surpassing riches of his grace never runs out. His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus is something he continues to show us.

Give God the glory as you farm or go to your job, as you sing, as you cook – in everything. Your good works are not inventions of your devotion, but opportunities from God. Our giving thanks for all his benefits, our serving him in willing obedience is the Holy Spirit's work. God's grace is one-sided. God gives; we receive. God is merciful. During this Lenten season see your sins lifted on a pole. See God remove the curse that condemned you. Look and live and love for **YOU ARE GOD'S WORK.** Amen.