

“The Riches of God’s Grace”
Ephesians 2:1-7
October 21, 2001

Text Comment

v.3 Verse 3 is a statement of the doctrine of *original sin*. I didn’t make this point last week in order not to add a second large subject to the sermon, but Paul says here that we are sinners *by nature*. It is in our nature to sin. It is not in our nature to please God or to trust in him, but it is very much in our nature to rebel against him. It is a problem we are born with and cannot escape by our own efforts – even should we want to escape, which we really do not want to do. Sin comes up from deep within us. It is our nature: we breathe it like air and drink it like water. What is more, as Paul says in v. 3, it leaves no part of us untainted; it extends even into the desires and the thoughts. Sin is not a matter of misdeed only, but of the attitude, the state of mind, the purpose with which a person speaks and acts. The only reason we do not think of it in the bleak and deadly terms in which the Bible describes sin is simply that we are so entirely used to it and, given that it is our nature, comfortable with it. Sin is ourselves and we are comfortable with ourselves, entirely used to ourselves. Pascal wrote, “The doctrine of original sin is beyond our ability to explain, but without it we cannot explain anything.” Why is it so hard to teach men to be good, even superficially, but so easy for all of us to be bad? Why, after all his efforts to repair himself, is man today still as selfish as ever he was? Why do people regularly seem better to us at a distance than close up? And why, as Chesterton wrote, is the most universal experience of mankind an uneasy conscience, knowing as we do that we do not live up even to our own standards of right and wrong?

As C.S. Lewis summed up this observation: “First...human beings, all over the earth, have this curious idea that they ought to behave in a certain way, and cannot really get rid of it. Secondly...they do not in fact behave in that way. They know the law of nature; they break it. These two facts are the foundation of all clear thinking about ourselves and the universe we live in.” [*Mere Christianity*, 21]

Augustine, the great Church Father of the 4th and 5th centuries, said that this moral corruption that is part of our nature is both the mother and the daughter of sin. It is the daughter of Adam’s sin, the sin that corrupted his entire progeny, and we have received it, as a kind of genetic moral defect from our ancestors. A woman of unsavory reputation used to be described as “having a past.” Well all of us “have a past,” the entire human race “has a past.” [cf. Garry Wills in Plantinga, *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be*, 198] But it is also the mother of sin, the principle that gives birth to all of our own actual sinning – our thoughts, words, and deeds – and the principle we then hand on to our children.

v.4 In Paul’s Greek “God” is the first main word in v. 4. “But God...” That is, we were sunk in sin and death, we were lost and hopeless, *but God intervened...* This wonderful salvation of which Paul will now speak, it is all *God’s* doing!

v.5 We were dead in sins, so salvation must involve our being made alive and so it did. And it did that by the resurrection of Christ from the dead. As Paul will say elsewhere, we were united to Christ in his death and his resurrection: we died to our sins when he died for our sins on our behalf, and we rose to new life when he rose for us. That is the sense of the verb “make alive together with...” All of that is in a single verb in Paul’s Greek.

“it is by grace you have been saved” is a recapitulation, an underlining of the thought. This salvation is a gift, a free gift to the undeserving. That is the thought of the word “grace.”

v.7 We already read in 1:6 that God predestined us to be adopted as his sons “to the praise of his glorious grace.”

There is a very real sense in which the entirety of the Christian message is summed up in the words that begin verse 4 in Paul’s original: “*But God...*” The previous three verses have described the plight of mankind in sin. Human beings are spiritually dead. They are sinners, rebels against God, by their very nature. No one can change his or her own nature. As long ago as the prophets this fact was preached as the foundation of all true understanding of the human condition: “Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots? Neither can you do good who are accustomed to doing evil.” [Jer. 13:23] Man in sin is dead. And, as the Scripture goes on elsewhere to explain, that means he is blind – he cannot see the truth or the true God – he is deaf – he cannot hear the Word of God so as to believe and act upon it – and he is paralyzed – he cannot move toward God. He lives in this death doing nothing but accumulating judgment for himself.

And, then, into this hopelessness, into this death, *comes God!* God intervenes. He takes action. He unleashes his mighty power! He does what must be done for doomed human beings. And why does he do this? Ah, there is the great and wonderful mystery! See how Paul piles up the terms, a superabundance of benevolence. It was God’s *mercy*, he is rich in mercy; it was God’s *love*, his great love; it was God’s *grace*, an incomparably rich grace, and, all of that not being enough, Paul adds that it was God’s *kindness*. This intervention on our behalf, this coming to our rescue that was to cost God so dearly – the dignity, the happiness, then the life itself of his beloved Son – came from deep within the divine heart, from the bottomless well of perfect goodness that is found in the heart of Heavenly Father. Nothing more can be said in explanation of salvation than this: God is love and, loving us, he intervened to give us life when we were dead.

Mysterious and wonderful as this is, it is the explanation of everything. The Christian faith is an invitation, a summons for men and women to look away from themselves up to God. To consider him intervening on behalf of dead sinners to grant them life again. The gospel, the good news, the Christian message is about *what God has done*, how He has saved us when we could not and would not save ourselves.

And, may I say, it is a message about what God has done for all sorts and kinds of people. All human beings, of whatever race and nation, are dead in sin. And God loved and showed mercy to all kinds of people. Paul was a Jew and a very patriotic Jew at that. But he gave his life to

take this message of God's love and God's intervention in man's horrible plight to the Gentile world. Just as sin is no respecter of persons, so the grace, love, mercy, and kindness of God are no respecter of persons. Before it all men are the same: Afghani and American, Israeli and Palestinian, Pakistani and Indian. In this matter a man's race, his language, his nationality, his politics matter not at all. He is dead in sin and depends entirely upon the possibility of God's kindness to him. In this that determines his eternal destiny as a human being he is exactly like every other human being.

He or she was dead, is dead, *But God...* In the ancient world that was a still more powerful way of speaking than it is today. In that era people saw death much more frequently than we do today. In all my life I had never seen a dead person except in a mortuary until I went to India. I saw many dead in the mortuary where I worked through the three years of seminary. How different the dead look. How plainly, unmistakably lifeless they are. The pallor, the slackness. The vital principle gone and with it all heat, all color, all motion. But, still, I had seen the dead only in the mortuary. In my one month in India, in 1975, and we did sight-seeing only on the weekends, I twice saw dead bodies along the way. Indeed, the day I saw the Taj Mahal, a building that for beauty and splendor actually exceeds its reputation, I saw a dead man. From the back of the Taj one looks down on a shallow, dirty river, and the day I was there we looked over the parapet and there, lying face down in the water, on the far side of this river, was a dead person, with a dog rooting at the body. Since that time I have had occasion to view the dead from time to time and twice I have actually been at the bedside at the moment of death and seen the change that steals over the body as life departs. But I am a modern person. I am not accustomed to death as people elsewhere in the world are still today and as all people used to be.

Remember Ezekiel's powerful image of a valley of bones, of human skeletons, dry and dusty, all that was left of an army that had perished there in battle years before and whose bodies had decomposed and whose bones had been bleached under the hot middle eastern sun. And then God told Ezekiel to preach his Word to those bones and as he did the bones came together and tendons and flesh and skin and then breath itself and then these men stood to their feet, a vast army of living men. That would have been an immensely powerful image to someone who had seen human bones bleaching in the sun as many of the people of that day had seen them.

Well, you have something like that here. Death, lifelessness, slackness, pallor, skin growing dry and then taut, *But God...* Suddenly a Christian preacher came among them with a message they had never heard before. Suddenly one of them came to life and then another and then many others until there was a vast army of the living. God had granted life to the dead. No one else could have, no one else would have; but God did!

That is the first thing here: the supernatural character of salvation, the message of a divine work done that no man could have or would have ever done, a message of the dead being made alive. There is a great deal of Christianity in the world today that concerns itself with anything and everything but this stupendous reality of the dead coming to life by the supernatural intervention of God. But this is Christianity, this and nothing else. This is the message, this is the love, this is the joy, this is the hope: that the dead may live because of God's love and mighty power. We make no more capital mistake in life if we do not understand and appreciate that this is *by far* the most thrilling thing, the most wonderful thing, that ever a human being can hear or know. This

and this only is what the world must hear and know, this and this only is the meaning of human life and existence, this and this only our hope for the happiness and the eternity our human hearts crave.

But there is a second thing here in Paul's account of the dead coming to life. God does it, that is clear and does it out of love. But Paul says more than that. He explains *the way* in which God effects the awakening of the dead. "He made us alive *with Christ...*" "He raised us up *with Christ* and seated us *with him* in the heavenly realms *in Christ Jesus.*" His kindness to us was "*in Christ Jesus.*"

Here is Paul's entire theology of salvation in a nutshell. It flows from and originates in the love of God the Father. But it is accomplished, it is brought to pass, it takes place in the work of God the Son. In other places the Apostle elaborates this thought in great detail. When Jesus Christ came into the world he came to live, to suffer, and to die *on behalf of, in the stead of, in place of* those whom the Father had given to him. He said this himself time and again. He came to give life to those whom the Father had given to him. And, in consequence, he being our representative, what *he* did we did *in him* and *with him*. When he died, because he died in our place, because he was acting on our behalf, *we died with him*. That is the very language Paul uses in other places, Romans 6, for example. When he rose from the dead, we rose *in him* and *with him*. When he ascended from the world to the Right Hand of God, *we ascended in him and with him*. That is why Paul can say that Christians are, even now, "seated with Christ in the heavenly realms." What happened to Christ happened to us because we were included in him, he was representing us. This is Paul's doctrine of the believer's union with Christ and salvation by union with Christ.

Now, to be sure, that salvation that Christ achieved on our behalf, that death and resurrection and ascension in which we share because he did it for us and in our place, is not yet ours in its entirety. Christians in Paul's day and Christians today are seated in the heavenly places because Christ their representative is seated there. We are obviously not yet in heaven, but, because Christ is already there, we will certainly be there in due time. The deed that settles the matter for us has already been done by our representative.

Christ's history is our history and so becomes our history. Our sins can be forgiven now and will be finally destroyed and our lives purged of them entirely because Christ suffered and died for them, paid the price of them, and carried them into the grave. We have new life, the life that is worthy to be called life, now already in principle and in the bud and will have it eventually in full flower because Jesus Christ rose from the dead to resurrection life and did so, not for himself, but for us. We have right and title to heaven now and will someday enter it to live forever because Christ went there *for us*. What Christ did, we did, because he did it for us.

But there is an outworking of this in individual history and then in the history of the world. The fulfillment of all that Christ did for us awaits a later day. That is the sense of v. 7 and the phrase "in the coming ages..." The work of Christ for us was already past when Paul wrote this letter, but it has a future. That future has been definitely and decisively settled by what Christ has done in the past. The salvation is settled, though only in the coming ages will it be thoroughly revealed for what it is. Christ having met the demands of God's law and conquered sin and

death for us on our behalf, we will be saved completely, must be saved completely, and cannot run the hazard of being anything else but saved. Jesus Christ is *already in heaven and he is there for us!* As surely as he came out of the grave and as surely as he ascended to heaven, so surely must we. As Paul puts it slightly differently in Colossians, at present our lives are *hidden with Christ* in heaven but only when he comes again will they be revealed in their full glory.

Now, lest anyone mistake the powerful point that Paul is making here, lest anyone be lulled to sleep by the sound of this familiar language, let us remember that, at the time, the Jews and the Gentiles alike, and ever since most people have found this message unpalatable, displeasing, offensive, and unsophisticated. Whether it is because the picture painted of man in his own natural state is so bleak and dark – “dead in transgressions and sins” – whether it is because the salvation that is described is entirely the gift of God the Father and the achievement of Jesus Christ and does not leave a place for the accomplishment of man, or whether it is because the awakening of man from death in sin is made here such a supernatural event – the incarnation of God the Son, his death on the cross and then his resurrection from the dead, his bodily ascension to heaven, and his coming again some day – this message has been often and boldly spoken against. In the church itself it has times without number through the ages been shaved and softened, given an altered shape and sometimes completely redefined – in a way as to make it unrecognizable to the Apostle Paul – all to make it more palatable to the generality of human beings. Paul admitted that his message was a scandal to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles. My goodness, that didn’t surprise him. He had been scandalized by that message himself before he knew the truth. He never thought that he was dead in his sins until God spoke the truth to his heart. But now he knew better, and this knowledge burned in him as a living thing, this knowledge of a salvation that was from the love of God and by the work of Christ and so was the power of God to salvation for every human being.

And let a man or a woman, no matter where in the world, no matter the day or time, no matter their wealth or poverty, let them know themselves for the first time that they are in fact dead in transgressions and sins, and then they will suddenly understand, as by a light shining in their minds and hearts, that no other salvation could possibly make them alive and alive forever except that salvation that originates in God’s love and is accomplished at terrible cost by no one less than the Son of God himself, dying, and rising again and ascending up into heaven carrying a great host of human beings with him.

The story is told in Aberdeen, Scotland, where Florence and I lived for three years, of a Unitarian minister preaching to an open-air audience in a poor section of the city. His humanistic message was one of self-help and self-improvement. Of course, he made no reference to Christ or to the cross or to the resurrection or to God’s love and power to save sinners. There was nothing of Paul’s “you were dead in transgression and sins, *But God...*” There was a prostitute in the crowd who was listening carefully. After a time, she called out, as people will to open air preachers in poorer parts of town, “Your rope is not long enough for me.” She knew enough to know that what she needed she could not herself supply; that no man could supply. “Your rope is not long enough for me.” Those are good words to remember. It is a good thing to remember to say the next time a Jehovah Witness or Mormon calls at your door. Your rope is not long enough for me.

But God's rope and Christ's rope are long enough to reach down to the very bottom of the human race, to its very worst, and draw them up out of the pit of death to the heights of heaven itself. Divine grace, love, mercy, and kindness; the stupendous achievement of the Son of God, these can make the dead live again!

The preaching of this good news cannot be made too tangible. It should be like offering to a child a bright red apple or a colorful piece of candy; or offering to a very thirsty man on a hot, hot day a glass of cold water; or offering to a very hungry man some tasty food; and saying to each "Wouldn't you like to have this?" No one wants to be dead. Tennyson was right.

Whatever crazy sorrow saith,
No life that breathes with human breath;
Hath ever truly longed for death;
'Tis life, not death, for which we pant,
More life, and fuller, that I want.

And we Christians know where that life can be found. No man can find it by himself or obtain it for himself. He is dead by nature. *But God...* No woman can give herself life, *But God...* We cannot surmount the grave, either the grave that is already with us in this life or the grave into which we must come when our life here is done. But men and women can be made alive together with Christ! And countless have.

Listen to this peroration from a sermon of Charles Spurgeon, the great preacher of Victorian England:

"Ah! The bridge of grace will bear your weight, brother. Thousands of big sinners have gone across that bridge, yea tens of thousands have gone over it. I can hear their trampings now as they traverse the great arches of the bridge of salvation. They come by their thousands, by their myriads; e'er since the day when Christ first entered into his glory, they come, and yet never a stone has sprung in that mighty bridge. Some have been the chief of sinners, and some have come at the very last of their days, but the arch has never yielded beneath their weight. I will go with them trusting to the same support; it will bear me over as it has borne them." [Cited in I. Murray, *Forgotten Spurgeon*, 164]