

“Grace Alone” (Ephesians 2:1–10)

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Most of us had relationships with our grandfathers. A few of us *have* relationships with our grandfathers now. Grandfathers are special people. We have different names for them: Granddad, Grandpa, Grampy, Papa, Pops, Pawpaw. My mother’s father was known to us as Pop-Pop. Pop-Pop was a very influential person in my family’s life. He was very generous to us. I suppose he was generous because he had the ability to give. Though he wasn’t born with a silver spoon in his mouth, he accumulated wealth. He was able to do this because he was frugal (he lived through the Great Depression), he worked hard (he served in World War II as a member of the construction battalion in the Navy, building things in the South Pacific), and he had the good fortune to build houses in northern New Jersey, in the suburbs of New York City, during the Baby Boom, during a time of postwar prosperity. Also, my mother was his only child. So, he could afford to be generous to us.

When my brothers and I were children, my grandparents used to give us money for our birthdays. I think they used to give us a dollar for every year we were alive. So, for my tenth birthday, I would get \$10 from my grandparents. But as Pop-Pop got older, he would give us larger amounts of money. So, when I was, say, 18 years old, he didn’t give me \$18. He might have given me \$100. I don’t remember if that was the exact amount, but his gifts became larger in the last few years of his life. When he gave me these more generous gifts, I would say, “You don’t have to do that.” And he said this to me more than once: “I don’t have to do anything but die.”

“I don’t have to do anything but die.” I suppose if he were a bit more precise, he would say, “I don’t have to do anything but die and stand before my Maker to give him an account for my life.” But, generally speaking, he was right. He didn’t have to eat his next meal or even take his next breath, let alone be generous to me and my family. But he did have to die. That was his way of saying that he realized he didn’t have to give me that money, or whatever gift it was. He was under no obligation to give. And it wasn’t as if I earned that gift. He wasn’t giving me money based on how good of a grandson I was. He didn’t say, “Because you’ve been a good grandson this year, I’m going to give you an extra amount of money.” I’m sure I wasn’t the best

grandson. (Though I think I was a better grandson than son, but that's another story.) No, my grandfather, Pop-Pop, freely chose to give me that gift. He gave it to me because he loved me.

That's a lot like God's grace. "Grace" is one of those particularly Christian words. It's a very churchy word. But we don't often define what grace means, or have a clear idea of how significant the idea is. And in this year, when we celebrate Martin Luther's *Ninety-Five Theses*, which were written five hundred years ago and which kicked off the Protestant Reformation, it is important to remember the concept of grace. (By the way, PBS recently aired a documentary on Martin Luther called "Martin Luther: The Idea That Changed the World." You can watch it online.¹) Luther and the other Reformers recovered the biblical teaching that salvation from sin, death, and condemnation comes through grace by faith. That is, we are reconciled to God, put back into a right standing with him, through God's gift of salvation. We receive this salvation through faith. But, as we'll see, even the ability to have faith is itself a gift.

At the time of the Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church taught that God's grace was necessary for salvation. But they also taught that such grace could be lost, and that such grace needed to be supplemented with good works, namely taking the sacraments of the Church, like penance. Really, to receive God's grace meant to be in the Roman Catholic Church, to be baptized in it, take the eucharist (what we call the Lord's Supper), confess one's sins to the local priest, and so on. Though the Catholic Church has changed in some ways over the last five hundred years, they still talk about merit when they talk about God's grace. We still see this in these statements in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*:

2010 Since the initiative belongs to God in the order of grace, *no one can merit the initial grace* of forgiveness and justification, at the beginning of conversion. Moved by the Holy Spirit and by charity, *we can then merit* for ourselves and for others the graces needed for our sanctification, for the increase of grace and charity, and for the attainment of eternal life.²

2027 No one can merit the initial grace which is at the origin of conversion. Moved by the Holy Spirit, we can merit for ourselves and for others all the graces needed to attain eternal life, as well as necessary temporal goods.³

¹ <http://www.pbs.org/program/martin-luther-idea-changed-world>.

² Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd Ed. (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2000), 487.

³ *Ibid.*, 490.

Notice how those statements say that though God’s grace initiates salvation, we then merit graces needed to attain eternal life. This is not what the Bible teaches.

In order to see that, today we’re going to look in particular at a passage in the New Testament, Ephesians 2:1–10. This passage comes from the apostle Paul’s letter to the church in the city of Ephesus. Paul’s writings were particularly influential in Martin Luther’s theology. Today, we’ll see why.

So, let’s turn to Ephesians 2. I’ll read the first three verses.

¹ And you were dead in the trespasses and sins ² in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— ³ among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.⁴

Paul is writing to a group of Christians and he begins this passage by talking about their former condition. Prior to becoming Christians, they “were dead in the[ir] trespasses and sins” and they followed “the course of this world,” the flesh, and the devil. They were not children of God, but children of God’s wrath.

Now, if you’re not a Christian, that might sound strange and extreme. How could these Christians have been dead? Well, obviously they were physically alive before becoming Christians. But they were spiritually dead. To understand this concept, we need to understand why we exist. Human beings were made in the image of God.⁵ That means that we are meant to know God, represent him, rule the earth by coming under his rule, love him, and obey him. It means that we exist to worship God, to glorify him. Our lives should center around him the way the way this planet orbits around the sun. That’s why any human exists. Really, it’s why anything exists.

Before I describe the human condition, let me say this: God didn’t have to create the universe. He wasn’t bored, looking for something to do. And he didn’t have to create human beings. He wasn’t lonely, in need of someone to love. God doesn’t need us. In fact, when Paul was in Athens, talking to people who didn’t understand who the true God is, he said that God isn’t “served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything” (Acts 17:25). The God of the Bible isn’t a manmade

⁴ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

⁵ See the sermon I preached on August 27, 2017: <https://wbcommunity.org/the-image-of-god>.

god, an idol. He doesn't need us and he didn't need to create us. So even the act of creating the universe and everything in it is grace, a gift that we don't merit or deserve. We're not entitled to exist.

But we do exist, because God has made us to be in a certain relationship with him. That's good news, because it means our lives have meaning and purpose. But there's bad news: from the beginning, humans have not related to God rightly. We rebel against him. In short, we replace God in our lives with something else. We try to de-god God, as it were. The first human beings thought that they could become like God by disobeying him (Gen. 3:1–7). And we're really no different.

There are many ways to deny God his rightful place in our lives. One way is to make something or someone else the object of our worship. When we love, trust, and obey something or someone else more than we love, trust, and obey God, that thing or person—whether it's a job, money, a relationship, entertainment, or anything else—becomes our functional god. In Christianity, we call this an idol. I've talked about idolatry quite a bit in the past. But today I want to talk about two other ways that we can deny God his proper place in our lives. One is by breaking God's commands. When we break God's moral laws, the laws that are built into the very design and fabric of creation, we reject God's authority.

This past week, I was reading a book on God's grace by a theologian named Carl Trueman. In his discussion on sin, he writes, "When I break God's law, I stand above God's love, and I feel like I am God, the one in control."⁶ I think that's right. Sometimes, we know we're doing the wrong thing. But there's a certain thrill that comes from breaking the law. It's the rush of feeling that no one can tell us what to do. When we do that, we feel like God. I know I felt that rush a number of times in my 20s. When we disobey God and break all his rules—all the while enjoying the life he gave us—it would be like me taking that \$100 check from my grandfather and using to spend on things he disapproves of and then never talking to him again.

That's one way of usurping God's place. Another way is very different. When we strive to be a good person and don't rely on God's grace, power, or provision to be a good person, we deny God his place in our lives. This can happen with the most religious people, or with people who simply feel like they have no room for religion in their lives because they're generally good people. I know that sounds strange, but think about it: when people busy themselves with doing

⁶ Carl Trueman, *Grace Alone—Salvation as a Gift of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), 60.

good things, trusting in their own efforts to live a good life, they don't think about having a relationship with God. Very religious people can talk about church attendance, how much they've given to charity, and so on, and not talk much about knowing God in a personal way. Nonreligious people can be very similar, focusing on how they're good citizens, good employers or employees, and not thinking they need any help from God. This way of treating God would be like taking that \$100 check from my grandfather on my birthday and tearing it up and saying, "Thanks, but I don't need this. I can earn my own money."⁷

Both ways of rejecting God can be found in Jesus' famous parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15. In that story, a father has two sons. The younger one demands his inheritance while the father is still alive, which is like saying, "You're as good as dead to me, and I don't want a relationship with you. Just give me your money." Then he goes and squanders all that money in a reckless lifestyle. The older son stays home and obeys the father by working hard. When the younger son comes to his senses, he returns home, hoping to grovel in order to be forgiven. But the father rushes to greet him, welcomes him back home, and celebrates the occasion with a feast. The older brother is furious that his father greets his brother that way. He refuses to join the father's feast, because he doesn't feel that his younger brother deserves such treatment. After all, he was the one who stayed home and obeyed his father. Shouldn't he be the one who gets the feast?

In that story, when the younger son returns home, the father says, "this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found" (Luke 15:24). In other words, he was as good as dead, because he didn't have a relationship with the father. At the end of the story, we wonder if the older brother is as good as dead to the father, because he refuses to join the feast.

That is what is meant by being dead in our sins. Our relationship with God is fractured. We're as good as dead because we don't relate to him rightly. And because of the power of sin in us, we are completely unable to live for God. Instead, we obey the world, which means the forces opposed to God. We obey our flesh, which doesn't mean our bodies, but our moral weaknesses, our evil desires. And we obey Satan, the "prince" of this world.⁸ When we think of

⁷ This "two ways to reject God" concept comes from Timothy Keller, particularly his *The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith* (New York: Dutton, 2008).

⁸ See Matthew 9:34; 12:24; Mark 3:22; Luke 11:15; John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11. Apparently, he is called the "prince of the power of the air" because the air was associated with the demonic in Jewish thought. See Clinton E. Arnold, *Ephesians*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 131–132.

Satan, we often think of over-the-top evil, like Adolf Hitler. But Satan often doesn't work that way. He just wants us to deny God, to doubt God's goodness, and to live for some other cause. When nice people do good works but don't have a relationship with God, they are doing something pleasing to Satan, the mysterious, evil spiritual being who is opposed to God.

Again, all of this may sound extreme to non-Christians. But this is the human condition. And the longer I'm alive, the more I am aware of the darkness of my own heart. I'm also aware that most "good" people have some secret sins that they hide very well. And I'm aware that we don't really seek after God the way that we should. We're not able to desire God because of our sinful nature. And for that reason, we're "children of wrath" before being Christians. That means that we are destined to receive God's right, holy, just condemnation for our rebellion against him. That's how all of us start out in life.

That's all bad news. But then Paul gets to the very good news. Let's read verses 4–7:

⁴ But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us,
⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—
by grace you have been saved—⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with
him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷ so that in the coming ages he might
show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

"But God"—those are two very powerful words. We once were lost—"but God." We once were dead—"but God." God, because he is merciful, doesn't give us over to what we have earned, which is condemnation, and because he loves us, he made us alive with Christ. Remember, Paul is talking to Christians. He doesn't mean everyone is made spiritually alive. But those who have a relationship with Jesus Christ have that relationship not because they earned it. No, while they were spiritually dead, unable to seek out God, they were rescued and made alive by God. And Paul makes it clear that this is God's gift—"by grace you have been saved."

Jesus, the Son of God, is the only person who lived the perfect life. He didn't take what was God's and squander it, living for himself. He didn't ignore God by focusing on his own efforts. No, he always lived for God the Father, loving him, obeying him, and trusting him—even to death on a cross. He was crucified, which was a torturous way to die. And beyond the physical pain, he experienced God's wrath. For the first time in his eternal existence as God's Son, he felt like he was separated from the Father. He experienced hell on earth, not because he deserved it, but because we deserve it. He took that so that whoever comes to him in faith will

not experience condemnation. And whoever has a relationship with Jesus is credited his perfect life.

Jesus didn't just die. He rose from the grave in a body that is imperishable. It is impossible for him to die again. And he is now in heaven, in the direct presence of God the Father, reigning above all things. And Paul says that we Christians are seated with Jesus in heaven. Obviously, we're still living on the earth. But our true life is with Jesus and all that he has is ours. We may suffer in this life, but truly we are kings and queens. That is, if we know Jesus.

The purpose of this salvation is to display God's grace. In the first chapter of Ephesians, Paul says that God saved us "to the praise of his glorious grace" (Eph. 1:6) and "to the praise of his glory" (Eph. 1:12, 14). For all eternity, God's grace—his gift of salvation that we are not entitled to, that we did not earn or deserve—will be celebrated. Grace is often defined as God's unmerited favor. Think of it as a gift that we don't deserve or earn. It's not something God is obligated to give. The fact that he would give it to unworthy people who weren't seeking after him is amazing.

In the next three verses, Paul further explains this gift. Let's read verses 8–10:

⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰ For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

We are saved from God's wrath and put back into a right standing with him not through our efforts or good works. No, salvation is a gift. And it is received through faith, which is trusting in God. It's trusting his promises. In short, it's trusting that Jesus is who the Bible says he is and that he has done what the Bible says he has done. It's agreeing with God that we are in a terrible predicament because we're dead in our sins, and it's agreeing that the only way to have real and eternal life is through Jesus.

But here's where it gets interesting. Paul says that the whole process of being saved by grace through faith is a gift. Even our faith is a gift.⁹ The ability to receive the gift comes from God. Without God making us alive, we wouldn't be able to receive a gift. After all, how many

⁹ Acts 18:27 says that Paul "greatly helped those who through grace believed." Paul says that faith is granted (he must mean by God) in Philippians 1:29.

dead men have opened up their hands to receive something? I could have rejected the gift my grandfather gave me. But the gift of salvation is different because God changes our nature so that we receive the gift. He changes us so that we want to receive the gift. Otherwise, we would reject it.

Last week, Ron Bridge referred to John 3, where Jesus says that unless we are born again, we can't even see the kingdom of God, much less enter into it. And that process of being born again, of becoming a new creation, occurs when the Holy Spirit, the third Person of the one true God, comes upon us and gives us the eyes of faith to see our true condition and the only solution, which is Jesus. God causes us to be born again so that we can have faith. This is not something we generate on our own.

As I was thinking about all of this, another image of salvation came to mind. When we talk about God giving us a gift, we think of something like my grandfather, holding out a gift that I could either take or reject. But God's salvation is more like this: because of our own foolishness, we had overdosed, and we were choking on our own vomit. If left alone, we would surely die. But God stepped in and rescued us. He changed our position so we wouldn't choke to death. He cleaned us up. He got us sober. And he gives us the power not to destroy ourselves through our reckless living.

If faith were something we did without God's help, then we could boast about it. Yes, we could boast if going to church, following the rules, giving to the poor, and so on reconciled us to God. We could say, "Look what I did!" But if faith is something that we do, we also could boast. We could say, "I looked at all the evidence, and I chose to trust in God. I'm very wise, because I made the right decision. Look what I did!" We could look at others who considered the same evidence, those who don't have faith, and say, "Well, obviously they're not as smart or as good as me. If they were smart, they would make the right decision."

The whole process of salvation is God's work. "Salvation belongs to the Lord" (Ps. 3:8; Jon. 2:9; Rev. 7:10; 19:1). Consider what Paul writes in another one of his letters, Romans. This is Romans 8:28–30:

²⁸ And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. ³⁰ And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

God calls people, which is Paul's way of saying he saves them. He doesn't just call; he also gives us the ability to answer. God predestined Christians. He chose them before he created the world (Eph. 1:3–6, 11–12). He did this because he foreknew them, which means he set his love upon them. And then he called them. He brought the message of Jesus, the gospel, to them and he gave them the ability to answer. He also justified them, which means that he gave them a right standing, not on the basis of their works, but entirely on the basis of Jesus' works. Christians are now being "conformed to the image of his Son." We're becoming more like Jesus, growing in our obedience and moral purity. And one day we will be glorified. We will receive resurrected bodies that cannot die again and we will live in glory in a new creation with God forever. Paul already sees this as a done deal, because the whole process is God's work. This is grace that cannot be lost. "[H]e who began a good work in you will bring it to completion" (Phil. 1:6).

Does that mean we sit around and do nothing? No. The reason that we are given the gift of salvation is so that we can do the good things that God has prepared for us. When God predestined Christians to salvation, he had in mind things that we would do upon receiving salvation. While verses 8 and 9 are justly celebrated, we shouldn't forget verse 10: "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." We were created and recreated for God's glory, to display his greatness. We are saved by grace to display God's kindness and love. And when we do what God wants us to do, we also glorify God. Of course, these works are also empowered by God's grace, by the work of the Holy Spirit. As Augustine said in his famous *Confessions*, "If anyone lists his true merits to you, what is he enumerating before you but your gifts?"¹⁰ When we live for God, we are returning his gifts to him. If I were a great grandson, I could have used some of that \$100 to buy my grandfather a birthday gift. After all, his birthday came a month after mine. (But I wasn't a great grandson, so I didn't do that!) In light of the gift of salvation, we should want to obey God and do what is pleasing to him. We should love God more, and we express our love for him by obeying him.

Now that we've looked at this passage, what does it mean for our lives?

First, I want to address an issue that both non-Christians and Christians might have with what I've said. Some non-Christians might say, "If I'm not a Christian, it's because God didn't

¹⁰ Augustine, *Confessions* IX.xiii (34), trans. Henry Chadwick, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 177.

predestine me. Then how can God judge me if I don't have faith, since he didn't give me that gift? That isn't fair." If that's your attitude, let me point out two things. One, by saying that something isn't fair, you're judging God. And by judging God, what you're doing is taking the place of God. You're again trying to de-god God. The root of our rejection of God is pride. You're not God, and neither am I. We don't have the right character, the wisdom, and all the evidence before us. Therefore, we're in no position to judge God. As a Christian, I trust that God has good reason for what he has done. Two, you are right that it isn't fair, but not in the way that you think. God would be perfectly just to condemn the whole human race. He was under no obligation to send his Son to rescue any of us from condemnation. We have rightly earned God's wrath, because we choose to reject him. What's amazing is that God would save any of us, changing our hearts so that we desire him.

I know that Christians struggle with the same thoughts. They may think that the concept of God electing and predestining and granting faith isn't right or fair. Again, I think pride is the main issue here. I once heard a Christian say that he can remove himself from the grace of God. Well, I would say this: The Bible says otherwise. I can point to many, many passages to demonstrate this truth. If the Bible says that salvation is, from start to finish, the work of God, then to say we can thwart God's plan for our salvation is to claim we are stronger than God. Again, this is pride. It's not just a wrong theological position. It's something to repent of.

Here's a second thing I want to say, and this is directed to any non-Christians who might be listening. If you're here today and hearing about how God is gracious, about how he can save the worst of people entirely on the basis of what Jesus has done, and you find yourself desiring to have a relationship with God, then I want you to know this: God is at work within you. If you want to know God truly, to feel his love and acceptance, and to live with him forever, you can. God has ordained the preaching of his word to bring people to salvation. If you're hearing this message and you find yourself warming up to a relationship with God, I would urge you to follow Jesus. Turn to him and trust him. Turn away from your old ways of rejecting God, whether that comes through breaking all his rules or by striving to be a good person on your own. The opposite of pride is humbling yourself before God. The opposite of striving to earn something from God is resting in Jesus and the work that he's done. I would love to talk to you more about this if your heart is warming up to this idea.

Now, if you are a Christian, I want to say two more things. First, be grateful. The opposite of entitlement is gratitude. God had no obligation to save you, but he has. And this is not your own doing. You can't boast at all. God didn't save you because you were so lovable, or good. He didn't save you because you were better than others. He saved you because he loved you.¹¹ Thanks be to God!

It's so easy for us to look at the world and see all the negative things, the things that aren't right. And it's so hard for many of us to be content. Some people look at the glass half full, and others look at the glass and see it's half empty. There are many times when I say, "Wait, there's a glass?!?" If we truly know the human predicament, which is being dead in sin, and if we truly know that we're not entitled to anything, and yet we also know that God has saved us by giving us a priceless gift, how grateful should we be? We should see all of life as a gift. So, be thankful.

And be humble. Tim Keller, a pastor and author, often says that the gospel tells us that in our sin we are far worse than we suppose but in salvation we are more loved than we could imagine. The gospel humbles us and makes us grateful. In short, the gospel shatters pride but also inspires love for God. We can't boast in ourselves, but we can boast in Jesus and God's gift of salvation.

Here's the second thing I want to say to Christians. God's grace should change the way we treat others. We often treat people according to merit. We think other people have earned our respect or love, or they deserve bad treatment from us. But remember God's grace. He gave to us though we deserve only judgment. And we should treat others not according to what they deserve, but with grace. That doesn't mean there's no place for punishment of crimes, or for consequences of wrongdoing. But it means that we should treat people better than they deserve.

It's often said that respect is earned. I suppose there's a bit of truth in that, in the sense that people who are respected have often earned trust. But the Bible tells us to honor people and submit to them not because they have earned it, but because their position requires it. We're not told, "Honor your father and mother if they're good parents." We're not told, "Submit to political authorities only when they do everything right." We're not told, "Submit to your husband if he's a good husband and father," or, "Love your wife when she treats you the way you want her to." No, we're told to do these things because it is right, because it is part of God's design.

¹¹ This concept is seen in God's words to Israel in Deuteronomy 7:6-8.

And we're told to give to those in need not because they deserve it, but because God has been gracious to us. When Paul wrote a letter to the church in Corinth, he urged them to give to Christians in need. And what was the motivation he used? It was the example of Jesus: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich" (2 Cor. 8:9). Jesus humbled himself by becoming a human being. And he gave his life to unworthy people so that they could be reconciled to God. He became poor so we could be rich. Therefore, we can and should give our riches to help the poor, not because they deserve it, but because God's grace has transformed our lives.

Let us be humble, not proud. Let us be thankful, not entitled. And let us be gracious.