

To God Alone Be The Glory

Ooo, was there some racial tension in that church! One group lived outwardly good lives. They were model citizens: they helped people in need, they avoided excesses, they were decent people. But they liked to argue the minutest details, and they allowed themselves to want what God didn't want them to want. The other group... well, let's call them the fun-lovin' bunch. A little too much alcohol or too much food... "What's the big deal?" And sometimes they could be a bit coarse. So you can understand why these two groups in Ephesus, the Jews and the Gentiles, didn't always get along well before the apostle Paul brought them the gospel. But GOD'S PLAN was to SAVE THEM ALL BY GRACE THROUGH FAITH.

It's easier to see the sins of others than to see our own sins. That's why the apostle Paul paints such an ugly picture for us: ⁵...*we were dead in transgressions*. You know what dead is. Not alive. If I said to my stuffed animal here, "Get up. Get busy. Do something good. Go out and help someone. Be a good and faithful worker. Make your marriage strong. Raise your children to know Jesus as their only Savior. And do all this to the glory of God"—if I said this to my stuffed animal, well, that's just strange. And why? Because the animal is quite dead. It is incapable of doing anything good.

We were all just like this stuffed animal by nature. But "spiritually dead" is much worse than just "dead." Dead people can't do anything bad or good. Spiritually dead people can do only what God counts as evil. We didn't ask to be born sinful any more than we asked to be born. But it happened. The sin condition got passed down to us from our parents. And now we're stuck with the sinful flesh until we leave this world. What a burden—to keep falling into sin! If the Holy Spirit had not worked saving faith in us, we would not be able to do anything that the Lord considers good. Think about the people you know, and you will notice oodles of transgressions (i.e. stepping over the line between right and wrong). These transgressions are the evidence that people are by nature spiritually dead, that by nature they can't do anything God considers good. Oh, sure, even unbelievers can do things that benefit others, and so to us it looks like they've done something good. But because unbelievers can't do any of these 'good' things out of love for the Savior Jesus, God doesn't count anything they do as good.

Lest anyone think I'm picking on unbelievers, the sinful flesh is still very much active in us believers. It's uncomfortable to look at, but consider some evidence. Think how many people who are affiliated with a church try to get away with doing what God labels wrong. Ironically the same people can

get bent out of shape when others do wrong: “How could anyone do something like that?!?” If you point out where these same believers have gone over the line, they can get defensive: “Stop judging me!” A guilty conscience is a terrible thing to prick. Or they double down: “This is not that bad! Loosen up, would ya, huh?” See how spiritually dead our sinful flesh is? If the sinful flesh were the only moral force active in us believers, we would still be just like the rest of the world.

“*But*,” says the Holy Spirit. How terrifying life would be were it not for this “*but*”! ⁴*But 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.* God did something. Being dead, we couldn’t. So God did, because he is *rich in mercy*. Picture this church filled with cash. Stacks and stacks of it. If you owned that much cash, you’d be rich! Now watch the imaginary cash disappear. Poof. It’s all gone. Isn’t that just like wealth, to sprout wings and fly away? But in its place this church is now filling up with something more valuable: God’s mercy. It’s already ankle deep. Now waist deep. Neck deep. The church is full. But God’s got way more mercy than that! Now it’s overflowing Lake City. It just reached the edges of this County. Now Minnesota is covered. “The earth is full of the goodness of God, the goodness of our God.” God is rich in mercy.

I like to think of mercy as ‘God’s love in action.’ God’s mercy treats us with compassion, even when we have stomped all over his goodness, even when we have done something shocking and outrageous, like not making time for worship so that we don’t have to hear God’s Word or be with God’s people. His mercy reaches out to us because God knows dead people surely don’t reach out to him.

⁴*Because of his great love for us, God*
⁵*made us alive.* Consider this stuffed monkey again: what God did to us (making us alive when we were spiritually dead) would be equivalent to me making this monkey come alive, hop around, make monkey sounds, and eat bananas—only better. ‘Spiritually alive’ means God opened our eyes so we could see ourselves as we really are and see him for the Savior he really is. He gave us the new self, which loves to please God, loves to know how to overcome daily problems in ways that bring God glory, loves to have our shortcomings pointed out to us so we can repent and fix them. No wonder Paul interrupts himself to exclaim: ⁵“*it is by grace you have been saved.*”

But that’s not all: ⁶*God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus.* Just as God caused Jesus to ascend to heaven so that Jesus now sits at God’s right hand, so also God has done this for us. Yes, I know, it doesn’t seem like we are there

yet, but in God's mind it has already happened.

Why has the Lord raised us to heaven and seated us at his right hand with Christ? Paul explains: *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.* In other words, if you think we have it good now, standing in God's grace the way we do, just wait till God has us with him face to face and he can show us the incomparable riches of his grace.

The Greek word for incomparable is kind of fun. If we translated literally, this verse would read, "*that he might show the thrown-farther riches of his grace.*" Do you get it? Let's measure God's grace to see how much he loves us. Here; throw this balled up paper as far as you can. Ok, paper was never going to go very far, but paper does less damage than a baseball. Now imagine we go outside and throw a baseball. God's grace is longer than that. "Farther than anyone can throw, that's how far God's love will go. Deeper than the deepest sea, that's how much he forgives me, forgives me." *What good news for anyone who went walking away from God. No matter how far you got from God, he threw his grace even farther so it would be right there in front of your face so that you could say, "God loves me dearly, loves even me." And now here you are, gathered with fellow believers, acknowledging that you would be lost without him, thanking him

for his incomparable grace.

Okay, let's say you're at work. Your boss comes up to you and says, "I have a gift for you," and hands you your pay stub. What are you thinking? "This isn't a gift. I worked for these dollars." Good! You understand the concept of 'earning something you got.' But now let's say someone you never met pulls up to your home with a 63-foot yacht in tow. And when they give it to you, you say, "I earned this!" Hey, way to insult the giver of the yacht! But that's how lots of people treat the Lord. Can you imagine thinking that you had earned God's favor? "I was good today, Father. Bless me." That's not how the Lord sees it. *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.* "Thank you, Lord, for treating me well. If you were treating me fairly, I would have to be away from your loving presence forever. But you blotted out every sin from my record for Jesus' sake. Thank you, Lord."

Picture in your mind the face of a baby. That's not just a random baby. That's your face when you were a baby. Good looking baby! God made that. "*We are God's workmanship,*" God's doing, God's making. Can you picture God in his workshop, you know, your mother's womb, taking the well-drawn plans for a human being and forming you? Now

it's 21 days since you were conceived. Your mother doesn't even know she's pregnant with you yet, but there's your heartbeat. The pregnancy is going by quickly. Look there are your brainwaves, your toes, and your fingers. Just look at you, making a fist. Ooo, God just installed your personality with several very nice abilities. You were just now born. Soon you'll be reading, writing, creating something useful. God has made you amazing. But being God's workmanship goes far beyond our physical make up. This Bible verse is talking about your spiritual make up. God made you alive in Christ so that you could do good works, the kind of good you couldn't do when you were spiritually dead. But now, in Christ, you're spiritually alive. You, O believer in Jesus, can do good works.

“So then we should pat ourselves on the back when we do good, right?” Praise God for these next words: ¹⁰*We are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.* Let's never think of our good works as earning us brownie points with God. If we went to the Lord and said, “Look what I did for you,” he could say, “Yes, I know. I set it all up in advance so it would happen.” There's no way we can take credit before God—not for being saved, not for the good deeds we do. It's all our gracious God's doing.

A seven-year-old boy had become very ill. For some reason he was retaining water. His lungs were filled with fluid, his heart was enlarged, his face was so swollen that he was difficult to look at. In fact the skin of his body was so stretched that he took on a very red color that made him look a bit like a tomato with four appendages. Not only was it difficult to look at his distorted face, he communicated through grunts and shrieks that made the hospital staff shun him. So this sickly boy was also a lonely boy.

One day a doctor was making his rounds late in the evening, and a woman was in the boy's room, sitting on his bed, holding his hand, caressing his swollen limbs, and talking gently and cheerfully. The boy was smiling, and tears of relief were rolling down his round red cheeks. The woman was obviously the boy's mother. The doctor had never seen her during the day because she had to work. She just kept telling her son about her day.

That's a nice picture of how God treats us. Sin has so distorted us as to make us ugly to all but God. Our grunts of discontent and shrieks of rebellion would make it hard for God to serve us, except for his super-abundant grace in Christ Jesus. It doesn't matter who you are or what bad things you've done. **GOD'S PLAN is to SAVE us ALL BY GRACE THROUGH FAITH** in Jesus. Praise

God his plan is working in you!