

Introduction

I'll never forget that day when *Randy* and *Domico* barged into my classroom in sixth grade in order to show off their *football* trophies. Everyone in all three sixth-grade classes *knew* they were the best athletes, and now they had trophies to show for it? And trophies to *show off*? And they had to interrupt *my* homeroom in order to rub it in *my*—I mean *our*—faces?

Everyone knew they were great athletes. At recess when we played football, they were always the quarterback and they caught all the passes—don't ask me how that works—and they ran plays for each other and never threw the ball to J-T. When we played basketball they made all the shots and they grabbed all the rebounds and they caught all the passes and never passed the ball to J-T. When we played tetherball they got all the points and got all the hits and never let J-T hit the ball, not even once. Did I mention they could both *sing*, too?

Keep in mind this was the era just prior to *participation trophies*, back when you had to actually win and be good at something. Participation trophies were given to those kids who managed to make the team—and everyone makes the team, while also not getting cut from the team—and no one gets cut from the team. Participation trophies are little more than reminders that “Hey, you were on the team!”

The truth is I didn't even get a participation trophy. Granted, it would have been only for recess, but I played! Sort of. I mean, I ran around and pretended I had a clue, but *I participated*.

The truth is that participation trophies don't fool anyone, including kids. When kids play sports and their participation is recognized, they know which kids were the best athletes on the team. They usually have a strong sense of whether they are actually good at the sport or better at cheering on the kids who are actual athletes. Sports psychologist Jonathan Fader wrote in a “Psychology Today” article about numerous studies that show that people—adults and children alike—tend to be more committed to an activity when they do it out of passion for the activity and not for an external reward such as a trophy.

This isn't only true of sports and other activities. It is also true of walking with the Lord. There are plenty of folk who “obey” the Lord Jesus only to get a *participation trophy*—in this case, they get heaven when they die. Participation really means keeping the rules as well as you can without messing up too badly. They often cling to the idea that once you're on the “team”, you can't get cut from the team, so as long as they put in at least minimal effort, they should be good, and should be “rewarded”.

The only problem with this thinking is it completely misses the gospel. Yes, there are “trophies” handed out, but these trophies are far different from what you might be thinking, and they're not actually given to us. Instead of being given a cheap plastic trophy, we're given something far, far greater that actually creates in us a passion for following the Lord that inevitably will cause us to pursue walking with him with our whole heart. Today we will see that while the trophy is given to someone else, it creates in us the necessary desire

and motivation to work ever harder for that trophy. We will also see that it's not actually us who is working; our role in winning this trophy is truly *participation*, and participation is truly more than simply showing up. We're in Ephesians 2, verses 1–10.

Eph 2:1 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 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. 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.

Ephesians 2:1–10

Trespasses and Sins

Last week we saw Paul's incredible emphasis on the power of God. It is vast and immeasurable, unable to be fully comprehended. The demonstration of this power is clearly seen in this: God raised Jesus from the dead. Jesus' victory over the grave proves his great power. Though he was really and truly dead, he walked out of that grave on the third day.

In today's text Paul contrasts the Ephesians with Jesus, who is very much alive. He declares to them, "You were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked." They were *spiritually* dead. In the fourth century African scholar Marius Victorinus, who was converted late in life, explained Paul's meaning this way:

Death is understood in two ways. The first is the familiar definition—when the soul is separated from the body at the end of life. The second is that, while abiding in that same body, the soul pursues the desires of the flesh and lives in sin.

Marius Victorinus, Epistle to the Ephesians 1.2.1–2

Given the lateness of his conversion, he speaks from experience. Like the Ephesians, he had been *dead* in his trespasses and sins, in which he once walked, or *lived*.

We need to make a distinction between trespasses and sins. Simply put, trespasses are violations of a known moral standard, whereas sins are behaviors and attitudes and values that are unlike God. Paul uses a similar word in Romans 5. There he writes of transgressions and sins, with transgressions being violations of known rules or limits. There he wrote,

Rom 5:12 Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned—¹³ for sin

indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law. ¹⁴ Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come.

Romans 5:12–14

Sin, or *unlikeness to God*, came into the world through Adam when Adam transgressed. There was a known rule which Adam broke. He became unlike God by violating God’s character whereas God would never act contrary to his character, and he became a transgressor by violating a known and established rule. Paul says death came through sin, even though the sins of all the people between Adam and Moses were not transgressions. That is, there was no law between Adam and Moses. This is the reason, by the way, we reject the notion that Sabbath observance is some eternal moral requirement. Either Paul is claiming every single person between Adam and Moses observed Sabbath—there were no transgressions—or there was no known requirement for keeping Sabbath.

Paul is saying in Ephesians 2 the Ephesians were dead in their trespasses and in their sins. They were unlike God, which is spiritual death, and their behavior violated God’s self-revelation and his standards revealed through his people for centuries and even millennia.

This is what it means to follow “the course of this world” and then he paints an even more dire picture by saying they were “following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience”. Prior to faith and repentance, the Ephesians had been following the hostile spiritual force known as Satan, whom Paul calls “the god of this age” in 2 Corinthians 4. They had long held to a significant belief in magic and would have immediately understood the “air” as the domain of these hostile spiritual forces.

Remember, however, Jesus has authority that is far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, which includes the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience. This does not mean these spiritual forces have *no* power, but as we saw last week, their power is *far below* that of Jesus. It is only from our perspective that Satan and his minions have any power whatsoever; from God’s perspective, there is only his power for there is none who can stop his hand and none who can force his hand. Still, the power of sin is great—from our perspective—and it had imprisoned the Ephesians in trespasses and sins, resulting in their spiritual death, their separation from God.

We All

In verse 3 Paul makes a shocking clarification, one that he would have never made when he was a Pharisee and a faithful Jew. He switches pronouns from “you” or maybe more accurately, from “y’all”, to “we”. He says it was among “the sons of disobedience” “we all once lived”. Think of who Paul is. He tells us in Philippians 3 he had been a Pharisee among Pharisees. He wasn’t just zealous for the law; he sought to eliminate any Jew who refused to follow the law. This was because the Pharisees believed that God would fulfill his promises to *ethnic Israel* when all Israel kept the law of Moses. Here’s how Paul described himself:

Phil 3:5 ...circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

Philippians 3:5–6

If Paul could claim he was blameless when it came to the law, in what sense can he also claim what he claims next? He says in verse 3 that “we all”—Jews and Gentiles alike, including him, Mr. Blameless-according-to-the-law—“once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind”? How can he both be blameless according to the law and live an utterly sinful life?

Paul now understands the law is not a list of rules. If it were only a list of rules, he did that. He was good at keeping the rules. As the “Childrens’ Storybook Bible” puts it,

Of all the people who kept the rules, Saul was the best. “I’m good at being good!” he’d tell you. He was very proud. And very good. But he wasn’t very nice. Saul hated anyone who loved Jesus.

Childrens’ Storybook Bible, “A New Way To See”

Sometimes we need to repent for doing wrong things, and sometimes we need to repent for doing right things for the wrong reason. Paul was self-righteous, believing as many Jewish leaders did in the first century that having been chosen by God meant the Jews were *superior* to others. He took great pride in being a Hebrew of Hebrews, of being a Pharisee, of being blameless under the law. When he met true Righteousness, however, he realized he needed to repent of his self-righteousness, for it made him the same as pagans who worshiped idols and indulged in the passions of the flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind.

It was when Jesus met Paul that he realized that being the physical offspring of Abraham was never what God was looking for, that God was always looking for *faith*—and prior to meeting Jesus, he had none. When he says “we all...were by nature children of wrath”, this declaration would have offended any good Jew who sought to be faithful to the law of Moses. They were *children of Abraham*, though Paul now understands that God could, in fact, raise up children for Abraham from these stones, as John the Baptist said in Matthew’s Gospel.

As dark and depraved as Paul paints the Gentiles to be, he acknowledges that he and his fellow Jews were in the same boat, even if the expression of their sinfulness—their unlikeness to God—manifested itself differently. For the Gentiles, their sinfulness showed in idolatry and immorality and violence but among the Jews it was more likely to be shown in their self-righteousness and their arrogance and their pride. This is why ranking sins makes no sense, as if pride is somehow more safe and sanitary than sexual immorality. From a human perspective murder is far worse than stealing a car, but we’re talking about a holy God and his perspective. God is holy and neither pride nor immorality is holy. By changing from “you” to “we” Paul ensures the church in Ephesus understands that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile, for all are in desperate need of a Savior, regardless of how their lostness and sinfulness manifests itself.

The Subject

If you were a member of the church in Ephesus and you were there when the letter was delivered and read aloud to the church, you would have heard verses 1–3, and would have eagerly awaited Paul to reach the *subject* of the sentence. To make it easier to comprehend, translators break it into multiple sentences and make the participles into verbs so they can make complete sentences. For example, verse 1 more literally says, “And you, *being* dead in the trespasses and sins”, but that would make an incomplete sentence so it’s translated as a verb: “And you were dead”.

The subject of the verbs doesn’t show up until verse 4. Everything Paul has said in verses 1–3 has been building up to the subject and the three things—verbs—the subject does. After describing how dark and dreadful the status of the Ephesians had been, and after including himself and his fellow Jews in that darkness, Paul finally gets to his subject: “But God”.

He doesn’t give the verbs right away. He adds more clauses that add further explanation of the three verbs he will use. First, God is rich in mercy. He doesn’t have adequate mercy. His mercy is not merely sufficient. He is *rich* in mercy. Remember Paul’s prayer for them in chapter 1 included his desire they know the riches of his glorious inheritance. Part of those riches is his rich mercy.

Then he gives God’s motivation for the three things he does: “because of the great love with which he loved us”. Again, it’s not just love. He does the three things he hasn’t said *yet because of the greatness of the love with which he loved us*. It can only be great love, for God’s love is rooted entirely in himself even as it is directed toward us.

We’re still not at the verbs. He further clarifies the *timing* of his love is “when we were dead in our trespasses”. That is, before you and I and he and they had made any movement toward him but instead were living in the passions of our flesh, God loved us. As Paul put it in Romans 5, God shows his love for us in that *while we were still* sinners, Christ died for us.

God is the subject, and he is rich in mercy, and because he loved us with a great love, and when we were dead in our trespasses, God did something extraordinary: he united us with Christ. The three verbs are found in verses 4–6, and they’re verbs he appears to have made up to make his point.

First, when we were dead, God “made us alive together with Christ”. He doesn’t merely make us alive, that is, raise us from the dead spiritually. He makes us alive *together with Christ*. This is union with Christ. We have life where there had been no life. What had been dead is now brimming with life—eternal life.

Related to this he says God “raised us up with him”. Not only do we now possess life, we have been raised from the dead *together with Christ*. This is union with Christ. We are united with him in his resurrection. Just as the immeasurable power of God raised Jesus from the dead, so God raises us from the dead together with Christ.

Finally, God has seated us *together with Christ*. Just as Christ was victorious and sat down at the right hand of God, so we are seated with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus. This is our status before the Lord. He sees the fullness of his work in us through Christ. He sees us as the finished product, so to speak, even as he works *to finish* the product.

He continues to pile up his amazing declarations. He’s already said the subject of the verbs—God—has made us alive together with Christ and has raised us from the dead together

with Christ and has seated us in the heavenly places together with Christ, and he's given us God's motivation, which is his great love for us. He further declares that one of God's intended outcomes of uniting us with Christ is that in the ages to come "he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ".

The background of the idea of immeasurable riches is that of the spoils of victory. When an ancient king defeated his enemies, he would capture, say, a king's crown or weapon and put in on display—often in a temple. It was the ultimate bragging right to show off a defeated enemy's sword or crown or any other valuable you were able to take from him in victory.

In light of Jesus' victory detailed in chapter 1 in which Jesus is seated at the right hand of the Father far above all rule and authority and power and dominion and is above every name that is named, do you see the spoils of Jesus' victory? Do you see the trophies he puts on display as the immeasurable riches of his grace? I love how the New Living Translation, which we use for our regular Scripture readings, so helpfully renders this:

Eph 2:6 For he raised us from the dead along with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms because we are united with Christ Jesus. ⁷ So God can point to us in all future ages as examples of the incredible wealth of his grace and kindness toward us, as shown in all he has done for us who are united with Christ Jesus.

Ephesians 2:6–7 NLT

When God desires to show all of creation, including all those spiritual beings over which he is *far above*, he points to *us* as the ongoing demonstrative proof of his goodness and grace. You and I are God's trophies, the spoils of his victory in Christ. Listen: we are not *participation trophies* for God, but trophies *of his victories*. No one plays a whole season of little league baseball or YMCA basketball just for a cheap five-dollar plastic trophy that essentially means, "Thanks for playing". The value of a king's trophy on display is the victory it represents.

Demerited Favor

Our status as his beloved children, his trophies on display, the very ones in whom he delights, is due entirely to his grace. He says God saved us that he might show the immeasurable riches *of his grace* in kindness toward us in Christ. In verse 8 he makes it more explicit: "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this—being saved through faith—is not something you and I do. He says it is the gift of God, not the result of something we have done—or could have done.

The word "grace" is an interesting word because our understanding of it has been shaped by well-meaning folk who have given us a definition of the word that generally controls its meaning and ends up distorting it a bit. You've probably heard that grace means something like "unmerited favor". That's not *wrong*, but it's misleading because it's incomplete. It's a shortcut to understanding but shortcuts necessarily miss details in the bigger picture.

In the ancient world grace was a favorable disposition toward someone and usually implied a gift given. An army general might be favorably disposed toward a soldier or an officer for

some act of bravery in battle. He would give grace to that individual, again, often in the form of a lavish gift. Grace generally was given by the greater to the lesser. A general is far more powerful and far more wealthy than a soldier so the gift given because of his favorable disposition toward the soldier simply could not be repaid. It was one-sided, and in response to something the greater found pleasing in the lesser.

When people say God's grace is unmerited, what they mean is God's grace is not based on something the recipient did. Paul says this, doesn't he? In verse 8 God's grace saves us through faith, and this isn't something we do. He further says it is not a result of something we have done so that no one can boast. A soldier who received grace from a general for his act of bravery has something to boast about, doesn't he? Surely at a party in his honor he would recount his act of bravery, whether he led men into battle against overwhelming odds and won or he infiltrated the enemy camp at great personal risk to learn their battle plans. Whatever he did to earn the general's favor, *he did*, and had grounds for boasting.

Here we see that we have no grounds for boasting, which is to say we did nothing to *merit* God's grace. Again, that's missing a significant point Paul is making. It is in this sense God's grace is *unmerited*. However, to say we do not merit God's grace is to assume we start at a neutral point. We've done nothing to impress him. That's true, but Paul tells a very different story in our text!

Not only have we done nothing to impress God or to earn his favor, we've done the very opposite. We were dead in the trespasses and sins in which we 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, among whom we all 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. Not only did we not merit God's grace, we *demerited* God's grace.

Imagine if Dawnae and I stopped at a gas station and a guy we don't know walks up and says, "Hey, I'm really thirsty; would you be willing to buy me an ice-cold Coke Zero?" This man has done nothing to merit my favor. I don't know him. I don't know what sort of person he is. He's never done anything for me that would cause me to be inclined favorably toward him. If I were to buy him that ice-cold Coke Zero, this would be *unmerited favor*. He started at a neutral point with me and I granted him favor without merit.

Now imagine he came up to me at that gas station and started out by insulting my wife, calling her names and saying terrible things about her, and then, right before I drop him, he says, "Hey, I'm really thirsty; would you be willing to buy me an ice-cold Coke Zero?" If I were to buy him an ice-cold Coke Zero, that would not be *unmerited favor*, for he did not start out in a neutral position with me. If I were to purchase that soda for him, it would be *demerited favor*, for I would have had every reason to have a hostile disposition toward him.

God's grace is not merely unmerited, but is demerited, for God has every reason to have a hostile disposition toward us. Do you see the wonder of his grace? For by God's incredible grace given to those in whom he finds nothing of merit and all sorts of demerit you have been saved through faith—and *this is not your own doing*. It is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

Created For Good Works

If grace is *demerited*, where does the impetus or the cause of God's favor toward us originate? *Not in us*. It is rooted entirely in who God is. His kindness is *toward* us, Paul says in verse 7. When he finally got to the subject of what is a long, meandering single sentence, Paul says it is God, rich in mercy and because of the great love with which he loved us, who unites us with Christ through faith. This union with Christ *is* our salvation, and God is the subject of the verbs.

In verse 9 he says our salvation, our union with Christ, is not a result of our works. Instead, he says in verse 10 we are *his* workmanship. As he put it in his letter to the Philippians, God began a good work in us and God will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. God is the one who works our salvation from beginning to end. God didn't do all this work out of boredom, however. Paul tells us directly one of God's intended purposes in saving us by uniting us with Christ.

We are God's workmanship, which means we have no reason to boast in ourselves for our salvation. As we saw last week, however, while we are saved by faith alone, faith is never alone. We are "created in Christ Jesus *for good works*, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in *them*".

Notice how he frames this entire passage. In verse 1 we were dead in the trespasses and sins in which we once *walked*. The word for "walk" is a Jewish metaphor for how one conducts his life. It's a person's manner of life. Before God intervened and saved us, our manner of life was following the course of this world and following the prince of the power of the air and living in the passions of our flesh and carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, being natural-born children of wrath. That's how we once walked.

Then God intervenes and unites us with Christ and the intended outcome of this union with Christ is we should walk in good works. Our manner of life should be one of good works. That is, the manner in which we live our lives should be one of service to the Lord and to others. But notice when God prepared these good works: "beforehand". Before when? Think back to the beginning of this letter. Paul tells them in chapter 1 verse 4 they were chosen in Christ "before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him".

Before the world was created God chose to save his people from their sin and determined they would be transformed by him with the result that their lives would be holy and blameless before him, and *filled with good works*.

When God begins a good work in a person, drawing that person to himself in faith and repentance, God saves that person on the basis of his or her faith alone, but the faith God gives is never alone. It is always accompanied by growth and progress in sanctification brought about by his Holy Spirit, whom he gives to each and every believer. The sign and the seal of the new covenant is the presence and activity of God's Spirit.

This growth and progress in sanctification is neither steady nor fast. It spits and sputters, it lurches forward, it stays put for a time. It is most often seen only in hindsight whereby a believer—and his or her church!—can look back and see the growth that has taken place, but it is always able to be seen over time.

Remember what Paul has said in this paragraph. God points to those upon whom he has poured the riches of his grace and has claimed as trophies of his goodness and mercy.

Would it make any sense for God to point to a “trophy” that does not actually declare his victory? Would an ancient general who met another general in battle claim, say, someone’s first-century equivalent of a sandwich wrapper, and put it on display as a trophy? “And what is this sandwich wrapper here?” “Oh, that’s something I found on the battlefield.” “Did you defeat the guy whose lunch it came from in hand-to-hand combat?” “No; I just found it like that and claimed it.” “Why are you displaying it like a trophy!?” “Oh, it shows that *I was at the battle*.”

No general would do that! He would show off something that *demonstrates* his victory. “I took that crown off his head myself.” “I claimed that sword from his dead fingers after I defeated him in battle.” Why should God be any different? When God shows off his trophies—that’s us!—he shows what his victory really means, and his victory over sin and death and his grace poured out on us in Christ reveals itself in a lifetime of good works. These only come about because his victory is total, and his victory means our transformation. It is our transformation that shows off the totality of his victory. I love how Marius Victorinus put it:

Does Paul mean “good works” in the future tense or those which we now perform? Taken either way they are good for us to walk in. They are witnesses to Christ’s working in us.

Marius Victorinus, Epistle to the Ephesians 1.2.10

New Testament scholar Harold Hoehner helpfully points out these good works are for us to *walk in*, not *work in*. God is the one doing the work. We walk in good works, which means as we walk with Christ, he works in and through us and even as we engage in good works we are simply walking in what God himself is doing through us. This is what Paul says directly in Philippians 2:

Phil 2:12 Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling,¹³ for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Philippians 2:12–13

This is one of those verses where Paul is extra wordy. It’s cleared up a bit in our translation but he says “the one who works the working in you is God” (Moisés Silva). Notice what he says next: “both to will and to work for his good pleasure”. Here we see the new passion we are given. Just as we no longer walk in the passions of our flesh, but in the good works God is doing, so we are no longer motivated by these passions. Instead, God works in us to change our very will. It becomes our strong desire and delight to follow the Lord. Those who are passionate about an activity are those who are the most committed to pursuing that activity.

When God grants us the faith necessary to believe and be saved, he saves us on the basis of faith alone, but he never gives faith alone. He creates in us the desire to serve him, to love him even as we are loved by him. What Paul does here for the Ephesians and for us is he lays out the extraordinary beauty of the gospel of Jesus Christ, knowing full well the

motivation you and I need to live our lives for his glory can only come from the beauty of the gospel. I'm reminded of one of my favorite quotes that, while not a theological declaration, is nevertheless true about how we pursue faithfulness in Christ.

If you want to build a ship, don't drum up people together to collect wood and don't assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea.

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

Paul is calling the Ephesians “to build a fleet of ships”—to follow the Lord, to live lives that demonstrate his goodness and grace. He roots this call entirely in the gospel of Jesus, knowing that the gospel will transform their hearts with the result being they would do anything for the Lord in response.

We're being given this same vision from the same Spirit who inspired Paul to write this to the Ephesian believers. We must look to Christ and see him and his glory and the more we see him, the more we will be drawn to him and the passions of our flesh will be driven out by an ever-increasing passion for his glory.