

The Spotlight of Grace: Learn

March 14, 2021

Ephesians 2: 1-6

¹ You were dead through the trespasses and sins ² in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. ³ All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. ⁴ But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us ⁵ even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ — by grace you have been saved.

John 3: 14-21

¹⁴ And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶ "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life". ¹⁷ "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸ Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹ And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹ But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God".

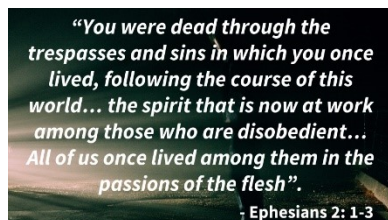


Solitude, prayer, silence. How did you experience these practices this past week as you sought to deepen your connection to God and to the Holy Spirit? The challenge was to spend twenty minutes connecting to the Holy

Spirit. You were also encouraged to continue blessing and eating or sharing the table with others as we sought to live our faith out in the world. This week we turn to another habit that is internally focused: learning about Jesus and about the grace he offers in particular. As we reflect back on this call to engage the Holy Spirit and as we practice the gifts of introspection and reflection inherent in walking through this holy season of Lent, it is my prayer that we each had a brush with the Spirit that again called us to die to self – to let go of that which may be hindering us from being people of faith who bless and eat with others. We begin today in Ephesians 2 as we hear why we and the world needs Jesus and the merciful grace that he so abundantly offers. As we prepare to do so, let us begin with a word of prayer...

When you were a child and got yourself in trouble or in a tight spot, who did you most often cry out to? For most of us, “Mom” is probably the common answer. Later in life, when you find yourself in trouble or in a tight spot - now who do you cry out to for help? In our walk of faith, it is God that we turn to when we are in need of help. Turn with me to Ephesians 2 as we look at our reality and at the response that God hopes for when we find ourselves in a bad place. As we begin to delve into this passage, we must acknowledge the truth that most of the people living in the world are still like the people that Paul talks about in this passage. Truth be told, we must also admit that we too were these people.

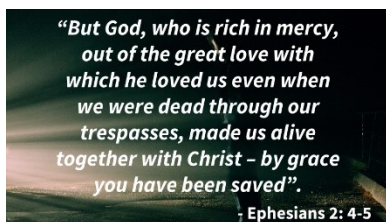
On a deeper level, when we're honest, we recognize that we are still sometimes the person Paul describes in verses one and two. Let me read these verses to you again and, as I do, rejoice in the changes that God has wrought in you. But also admit the truth of verse three. Hear again these words of Paul found in Ephesians 2, verses one through three:



¹ You were dead through the trespasses and sins ² in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. ³ All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else.

Can you remember your old self, that self that was dead in your sin? Can you remember when you chased after the things of this world – the passions of the flesh and the sensations of the world? For many of us, that was our teens or twenties, maybe our early thirties. As you look back on those years of living in darkness, are you joyful that those days are behind you? Do you rejoice in the person that you now are in Christ Jesus?

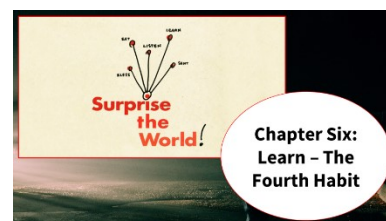
While we can and should rejoice in the new life that we find in Christ, the truth is that we are all sinners. People that we know live in sin and do not know the saving power of Christ. At times we stumble and *"follow the course of this world"* as we are tempted and drawn into sin. But we know the truth of verses four and five. Read them with me as the words come up on the screens:



"But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ — by grace you have been saved".

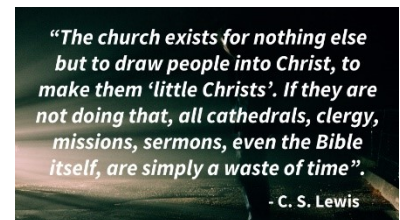
Yes, we are all sinners. But, thank you Jesus, God has already done the work of reconciliation by the grace given to us through Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord. Because he loved us even when we were yet sinners, even when we were dead in our sins, even then God was faithful. In his rich mercy, the incarnate God went to the cross to pay the price for our sins. Jesus became our atoning sacrifice, saving us by his grace. Now, with the indwelling Spirit alive in each of us, we are alive together with Christ. Are you thankful? Are you grateful? Do you believe this good news? Who do you know that needs to hear this good news? Let me ask that again: who do you know that needs to hear this good news?... Finding the opportunity to share that news is the point of these habits of blessing and eating or sharing the table. The point of living highly questionable lives, again, is to be able to have the privilege of one day sharing this good news.

The chapter for this week is called "Learn: The Fourth Habit". Frost begins the chapter by explaining that in the early church "to learn Christ" was the common first step into faith. Prior to their baptisms, new believers would undergo an intense catechism – an intensive study of the person and work of Jesus. It involved learning Jesus' teaching and then seeking to conform one's life more and more to Jesus' will. Frost argues that this practice is one that Christians must continue to undertake today if we are to live highly missional lives.



Frost argues that when we live highly questionable lives, we need to know why we are living that way. To answer people's questions, it is essential that we know the source of our hope, our joy, our peace, our strength, and that we can explain the love flowing from within us. In short, we need to study the gospels – the four biographies of Jesus – to know what and why Jesus would do in any and all circumstances, so that we can do likewise.

Famous theologian C.S. Lewis wrote this: *"The church exists for nothing else but to draw people into Christ, to make them 'little Christs'. If they are not doing that, all cathedrals, clergy, missions, sermons, even the Bible itself, are simply a waste of time"*. Put another way, using our modern Methodist lingo, if we are not seeking to make disciples of all people for the transformation of the world, we are wasting our time.

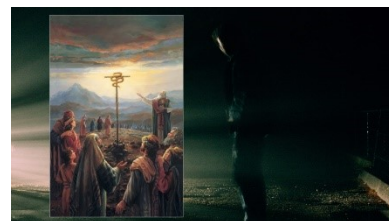


While we cannot literally die for others like Jesus did, we can offer ourselves sacrificially in service of others. "Learning Christ" helps us understand Jesus better and provides the tools for modeling Jesus for others. Once we know Jesus well, we are better able to live as he would in the world. Frost also adds that our mission to the world should be "incarnational". Just as God took on flesh and dwelt among us to help us understand what his love really looked like when lived out in the flesh, we too are called to be "little Christs" or Christians, living and dwelling among those to whom we are sent.

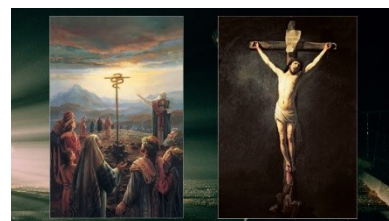


Turn with me now to John 3. The passage from the gospels begins with a reference to an Old Testament event. In Numbers 21, as the Israelites were nearing the end of their time in the wilderness, they complained

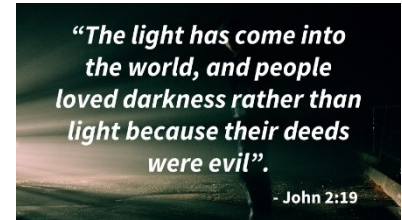
against God and against Moses. God's almost immediate response was to send poisonous snakes. Many Israelites were killed. Recognizing their plight, they quickly cried out, asking Moses to plead with God to save them. When we find ourselves hard-pressed, up against the wall, in way over our heads, we too will cry out quickly to God. In this case, it was their own fault. The Israelites words and their grumbling gets them in trouble. We've all been there. The solution was to look upon the serpent that Moses fashioned on behalf of God – look to God in reality – and the people were saved from the serpent's



bite. Jesus echoes God's love, reminding us that he is now the means to restoration and salvation for all who believe. Today, we look to the cross of Christ just as the Israelites looked to the symbol of God to experience his healing and saving touch. In verse sixteen we read, *"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life"*. John goes on to explain that Jesus did not come to condemn the world, but to save those that believe in Jesus as their Lord and Savior.



In verse nineteen, we connect back into Ephesians. Here John writes, *"The light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil"*. There are consequences to our



choices – to anyone’s choices. The Israelites chose to grumble and complain instead of trusting in God. They chose darkness over light. John explains that the people of the world do not want to come into the light because the light exposes their evil deeds. The light reveals the true motives of each person’s hearts – for good or for bad. For those who do evil, in whatever form that is, they do not want to be in the light. It is hard to perpetuate injustice or oppression or prejudice when the light of truth is shining on their deeds or actions or words. It is hard to take advantage of others or to marginalize the poor or the weak when God’s light is shining on them. Think about last week’s passage, when Jesus tipped over tables and drove out the sellers. Those in the temple did not like being exposed to the light. For those walking in the light, there is a contrast. In verse 21 we read, *"But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God"*. As children of God, we seek to walk in the light because the light reveals a pure heart and elevates the desire for justice and peace and equality and kindness and love.



The Spotlight of Grace: Learn

Just as there is a clear difference between those walking in the dark and those walking in the light, there is also a profound paradox surrounding grace. God’s grace is freely given, without limit. But in order to receive it, one must go through the sometimes-painful process of exposing one’s inner brokenness and sinfulness.

There is no need to seek out mercy and forgiveness until our sins are exposed by the spotlight of grace. Stepping into the light, even though we may understand God's promises of grace and forgiveness, is a hard step. But it is a necessary step that all Christians must take – over and over and over. Although grace is free, stepping into the light sometimes comes with a cost. The cost may be to our reputation or to our self-image, or maybe the sacrifice is financial or political or social in nature.

We are in the season where we are invited to take that step. Lent is a season of looking within, of being honest with ourselves, of owning our brokenness, of taking account of the impact of our wrongdoing. The impact can be on our life, on the lives of the people around us, or on the world. Lent invites us to bring the dark and ugly of ourselves into the spotlight, to the place where we can honestly see our sin. Entering this place is hard, yes, but it is also liberating, freeing, and life-giving. In this place we open ourselves up to experience grace and healing, to once again find a place of restoration and wholeness.

Stepping into the light we receive the profound gift of personally hearing, *"I have not come to condemn the world, but to heal it"*! The first step is ours. We must own our failures and our sins as we bring them into the light. There we begin to experience the pure love of Jesus Christ as he takes away our sin. Reading, studying, learning Christ, we begin to understand the depth of his love for us. The more we learn about and experience that love, the more that love flows from us as we live out our daily lives.

As we learn Christ, Jesus' love is increasingly revealed in our regular habits, in the rhythms of our everyday life. For example, as we learn to practice the habit of blessing others, we become more generous in our lives. This is one expression of our being a "little Christ". And as we learn to practice the habit of eating and sharing the table with others, we become more and more hospitable. As we continue to grow in Christ we also grow in our capacity and ability to draw the kingdom of God near as we practice our Christian faith out in the world.

The challenge this week is again internal. And just as was the case last week, this internal practice is intended to help propel us out into the world. The added challenges this week is to spend at least one 20-minute chunk of time reading and studying the Gospels. The goal is to "marinate" ourselves in Jesus, to take on the image of Christ. As we do so, we will bless those we meet. May it be so for you and for me this week and every week. Amen and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. How does your sense of God's salvation and grace move you to do good works? How will you respond this week?
- 2) *Pray*. The process of bringing our darkness into the light is difficult. Spend some time in solitude, prayer, and silence seeking to hear the Holy Spirit's guidance concerning this hard step.
- 3) *Study*. Read Ephesians 2: 8-10. What is the connection between free grace and doing good works? Why must your faith be a balance of both?