

# A Grace-Community Church

Ephesians 2:1-10

February 28, 2016

In Ephesians chapter 2 Paul teaches us something very important about the church. The church is designed to be a Grace Community. These gatherings of people in various places around the world and throughout time are intended to be communities who pull together around **one central idea**:

We are all saved by grace through faith in Jesus.

This morning, we'll focus first on the church in Ephesus but we'll also consider the shared ramifications for the body of Christ gathered this morning. I'd like to us to think about the Evangelical Free Church in Bemidji.

## 1. A Grace-Community Church Contemplates Its Humble Beginnings. (vv. 1-3)

The first thing that Paul teaches us about being a Grace-Community Church is that we should CONTEMPLATE our humble beginnings. After building up the Ephesian believers in chapter 1, Paul now takes them back in time with a sobering reminder of their life before Christ. This Ephesian Church Community, that had been saved by God's grace, was being reminded of why they needed grace in the first place.

In 2:1-3, the Apostle Paul writes us a description of what it means to be dead in sin. He says, "remember that you used to be spiritually dead." He paints an odd picture of these Ephesian believers who used to walk around...dead, set apart from the life of Christ. Paul blatantly points out their not-so-attractive past.

He summarizes the way they "used to live" with 3 ideas:

1. You followed the ways of this world.
2. You followed the ruler of the kingdom of the air.
3. You gratified the cravings of the flesh and followed its desires and thoughts.

First of all, they used to live in a way that followed the "ways of this world." Some Bible versions translate it "the course of this world." The idea here is that they used to follow the world system. The Ephesian believers were walking around living worldly lives that fit in with the trends and culture of their day. They were going with the sinful flow.

The second way the Ephesians believers used to live was by following "the ruler of the kingdom of the air." This is none other than mankind's arch enemy, the devil. The devil used to be their ruler and lord. He used to be at work in them causing them to live in disobedience, to rebel against God's good and holy ways.

The third way that the Ephesian believers used to live was by following the desires and thoughts of their flesh. By "flesh" Paul means something more than the skin and bones that hold our bodies together. Paul is saying that we each have a sin nature. Quite bluntly, Paul points out the painful reminder that they used to live in fleshly passions and carried out earthly desires. He doesn't get specific here but each of them had their own personal list of sins and acts of disobedience.

Each of us this morning can probably think of our own personal list of sins, of ways that we used to disobey God.

Paul ends v. 3 by saying, "Like the rest, WE were by nature deserving of wrath." Did you see what just happened in the grammar there? Paul had begun in v. 1 with "you" but now in v. 3 he

switches to “we.” Paul now openly includes himself in the “all of us.” The point Paul drives home to the Ephesian believers is that, “at one time...like the rest,” all of us were under God’s wrath.

Let’s consider an important comparison between three little phrases:

“used to live” in v. 1

“NOW at work” in v. 2, and

“at one time” in v. 3

Do you see how “NOW at work” is sandwiched in the middle there? It’s important that we catch the ramifications of this. This FORMER reality for the Ephesian believers is a CURRENT reality for the not-yet-saved people living in Ephesus.

Though this walking death from verse 1 is in the past for the Ephesian believers, it is still a reality for the not-yet-believers walking around Ephesus. Verse 2 says that Satan is “NOW at work in those who are disobedient.” In fact, those apart from Christ are still living not only under Satan’s rule but are also being deceived into following the ways of this world and are captive to the cravings of their own fleshly natures.

Therefore, right now, all of the people walking around Bemidji who w/o Christ are in a really tough spot. There is so much stacked up against them.

If you have your sermon insert out, I want you to fill in the blank that is sitting between the two arrows.



On my line, I put the year 1979. This is the year when I gave my life to Christ. The arrow pointing to the left represents my life before I decided to follow Jesus. The arrow pointing to the right represents my life since Christ. So, don’t write 1979 on your sheet unless that’s when you began following Jesus. Write your own year. When did you begin following Jesus?

Now, I want you to consider what that left arrow represents. Can you remember how you “used to live”? Can you remember being trapped in the world system? Being ruled by the devil? Following the cravings of your flesh?

>> Those were not the “good old days” were they?

I realize that some of us came to Christ at a very young age. Our left arrow is really short; there’s not much to it. What a blessing to be spared from the pain of living apart from Christ for very long. But even you can imagine how rough it would be to live the way the Ephesian believers used to live. All of us can imagine how hard it must be right now for the thousands of people living in Bemidji who do not yet have Christ in their lives.

What a blessing for us to be part of the church, the body of Christ. If you are here this morning and you are not yet a follower of Jesus, I’m hoping that one day soon, perhaps today, you’ll be able to write “2016” in your blank.

As you consider that idea, let’s take a look at verses 4-9. Paul shifts from his sobering flashback of how the Ephesian believers used to live to the current reality of their new lives in Christ. So, now we take a closer look at life on the right side of the blank.

## **2. A Grace-Community Church Celebrates the Riches of God’s Grace (vv. 4-9)**

The second thing that Paul teaches us about being a Grace-Community Church is that we should CELEBRATE the riches of God’s grace. In stark contrast to his previous talk about sin and death and wrath, Paul now moves us to the important truth of God’s great love for us. There’s an interesting Greek construction here that uses the noun form for the word love and the verb form for the word love in the same phrase. So we see some Bible translations referring to God’s “great love with which he loved us.” The range of meaning for this word includes the idea of taking

pleasure in something.<sup>1</sup> So one could translate v. 4 something like, “But because of God’s great love which took pleasure in us.”

Regardless of the exact translation we chose, it’s important for us to understand that God’s love for us is in no way forced or minimized. God’s love for us is great; He takes pleasure in loving us. Paul mentions a related idea earlier in 1:5, “He predestined us for adoption... in accordance with his pleasure and will.” Our God is especially fond of us! Your God is especially fond of YOU.

Paul now brings in the beautiful contrast to mankind’s spiritual death walk: God’s rich mercy! He is rich in mercy because of his great love for us. God took these spiritually dead Ephesians and made them alive with Christ. Here in v. 5, God takes people who were dead in transgressions and makes them alive together with Christ. And He can do that for anyone living here in Bemidji just as easily.

At the end of v. 5 Paul declares, “it is by grace you have been saved!” But, it’s actually a little too early in his argument for this. Later on, in vv. 8-9, Paul more smoothly transitions to his main idea that we are saved by grace. But, in v. 5, he seems to almost blurt it out, like he just can’t wait to proclaim this idea and pound this point home. He actually interrupts his own flow of thought because he is so excited about this important fact: it is by grace that we have been saved!

In v. 6 he gets right back to his original flow of thought with his reference to being “raised up with Christ.” God raises us up from spiritual death and seats us with Christ in the heavenly realms. The believer’s privilege of being seated in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus refers not so much to a physical location as to the important relationship that we have with Christ.<sup>2</sup> And so, we go from the pitiful state of the walking dead to the heavenly state of the seated living.

Verses 5-6 display a great triplet of “WITH Christ” realities:

In v. 5 God “made us alive WITH Christ.”

In v. 6 God “raised us up WITH Christ”  
and God “seated us WITH [Christ].”

Verse 4 tells us that God did all of this because of His great love for us but v. 7 adds that it was also “in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace.”<sup>3</sup> A Grace-Community Church celebrates the riches of God’s grace. And God who is rich in mercy shows the incomparable riches of His grace expressed in His kindness to us in Jesus! He does not spend w/ paucity or reluctance. He’s rich. There is plenty to go around. Back in Eph. 1:8 Paul tells us that God lavished His grace on us. God has an abundance of grace that he willingly, even gladly, spends on people.

As Bible scholar Peter O’Brien points out, it’s amazing that God expresses his kindness to us in Christ Jesus especially “given that the recipients of this generosity had been enemies of God and liable to his wrath.”<sup>4</sup>

Wow! Can you say Amazing Grace!?

Verse 7 uses an interesting phrase, “in the coming ages.” Notice that ages is in the plural, not referring to one particular age. Paul is talking of things that are already happening in the time that he’s writing to the Ephesian believers but he makes it clear that in the days to come, even up until today in Bemidji, God is demonstrating the riches of His grace. Bible scholar F.F. Bruce puts it this way:

---

<sup>1</sup> BDAG 2<sup>nd</sup> meaning for ἀγαπάω

<sup>2</sup> On p. 109, Lincoln expresses it well, “those who have been seated with Christ in the heavenlies are at the same time those who must walk in the world.”

<sup>3</sup> Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999. p. 173, gives a helpful emphasis to the phrase ἐν τοῖς αἰῶσιν τοῖς ἐπερχομένοις (in the coming ages) noting that “what God has done for those in Christ is a reality, but only in the coming ages will it be fully seen for what it is.”

<sup>4</sup> O’Brien, p. 172.

“Throughout time and in eternity the church, this society of pardoned rebels, is designed by God to be the masterpiece of his goodness.”<sup>56</sup>

And so, in verses 4-7, we have such an encouraging affirmation of the character of God: We see Him acting our behalf:

With great love (v. 4),  
With rich mercy (v. 4),  
With incomparable riches of grace (vv. 5, 7),  
With expressions of kindness (v. 7).

How great is our God! God does not approach people begrudgingly or out of mere duty to His character but rather it is with kindness. Openhandedly and willingly God pursues mankind with His exceedingly great grace.

In vv. 8-9 Paul is now repeating and expanding on the statement he made in v. 5 “by grace you have been saved through faith.” This is clearly a main point that Paul wants to drive home to the Ephesians. Paul contrasts this most important idea of salvation by grace with its antonym, works.

He repeats a negative 3 times in close succession:

Salvation is NOT from yourselves,  
Salvation is NOT by works,  
and NO ONE can boast in their salvation.

This salvation reality is a GIFT! Paul also sets up this phrase “SO THAT no one can boast.” He leaves no room for confusion among the Ephesian believers: there was nothing that any of them did so that they had room to brag. Even as they were ALL ALIKE under wrath in v. 3, so also they were ALL ALIKE saved by grace through faith.

This celebration of God’s rich grace comes right on the heels of Paul’s reminder of our humble beginnings. This sobering reminder of our own desperate need for grace should cause us to reach out to our lost community with empathy and spiritual passion. There is no place in a Grace-Community for a judgmental spirit toward “sinners.” Eph. 2:8-9 is a clear equalizer. Not a single person in our church has earned his/her salvation. We are all equally indebted to the kindness and mercy of God. Therefore, we all stand on level ground at the foot of the cross.

Why did the Ephesians need this teaching? This reminder? I know why we do. We need this reminder because we grow too comfortable in our happy, righteous lives. We grow content and lose our gratitude. We become not only complacent but also rigid and judgmental. We become so polished and holy that we lose touch with our past sinfulness and lost estate. We forget how awful it was to be enslaved to the devil.

**And we forget our commission to go and make disciples of all nations.**

What is it that unites a gathering of Christians on Sunday morning? Is it a shared theology? A common morality? A social club? Perhaps many of us would say that we are united by a salvation by grace through faith. I would agree with that one for sure. But this morning, I would also add that any gathering of Christians should be united by a common understanding of our once lost condition; that at one time each one of us were dead in sin, following the ways of this world, with the devil at work in our lives, and gratifying the cravings of our sinful thoughts and desires.

There is a famous quote by a Christian martyr named John Bradford.<sup>7</sup> He exclaimed this quote one day while watching some criminals being taken to their execution. Here is what he said, “But for the grace of God there goes John Bradford.” John had a keen and humble understanding that his own holiness was not the result of his own strength or character or morality. His own holiness was the result of only one thing: the incredible power and riches of

---

<sup>5</sup> F.F. Bruce, p. 288

<sup>6</sup> This would be a sweet name for a Christian band, “The Society of Pardoned Rebels.”

<sup>7</sup> Burned at the stake in 1555. *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations, Third Edition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979. p. 91.

God's grace in his own life. Indeed, all of us who are a part of this Grace-Community called the church should join in proclaiming:

**"But for the grace of God there go I."** Will you say it together with me now?

### **3. A Grace-Community Church is Created to do Good Works. (v. 10)**

Paul now wraps up his argument from verses 1-9 by stating that a Grace-Community Church is CREATED to do good works.<sup>8</sup> The Ephesian believers were God's handiwork. God had prepared good works in advance so that this Ephesian Grace-Community had a mission and purpose.

**And He has prepared good works for our church here in Bemidji too.**

But what does Paul mean by "good works." He seems to be intentionally broad in his thinking. He doesn't specify. And that's actually a helpful thing because each one of us who follows Christ has different gifts and abilities. Ultimately, God's good work IN us is designed to produce God's good work THROUGH us.

So we are not given the option of contentedly waiting around for Jesus' return. Nor should we be given to lethargy or laziness or worldly distractedness. Rather, we should be seeking after whichever particular good works God has prepared for us to do. We bring God glory by enjoying the good work he's prepared for us to do!

The Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji started back in the early 1920s with a Sunday School class in a one room schoolhouse. Out of that small Grace-Community, the Carr Lake Bible Chapel began. Over many years, through several key leaders, and a few building projects it has become the church that it is today on the corner of Carr Lake and Washington.

**Are the best days for this Grace-Community in our past or in our future?**

I believe the answer to that question is some of each. We've had some really great ministry over the past almost 100 years. But I believe that God has more ministry for us to do. **May the words of our closing song be the prayer of the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji this morning.**

This sermon was preached at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji  
on February 28, 2016 by Pastor Jerry Johnson.

---

<sup>8</sup> See Ephesians 1:4, 9-11