

Saved by Grace
Ephesians 2:1-9

Five hundred years go, on October 31 or November 1, 1517, Martin Luther kicked off what has come to be known as the Protestant Reformation as he nailed 95 theses, or debating propositions, to the church door in Wittenberg, Germany. So, why did he do this? In those days, the church door was a bit like a bulletin board, and in that college town, Luther was thus inviting people to consider or debate the things that he had to say. In his theses, he was opposing some ideas that were very common at that time – principally, that there were certain works, or actions that people could take in order for their sins to be forgiven.

At that time, people believed that if they went to a priest and confessed their sins, and then did whatever the priest required them to do, from saying prayers to giving offerings, then they would be forgiven. Luther disagreed. Instead, he believed that people are way too wicked to do anything to contribute to their own salvation.

Now, Luther didn't make this up. He held this view of human nature because of what he read in the writings of Paul, including today's passage. Paul said that all those who aren't Christians are "children of disobedience," and they are under the control of the prince of darkness. Paul says that they live according to the lusts of their flesh and of their mind. They are ruled by Satan, and so they do what they want to.

And that's why we should not be surprised when a Hollywood mogul molests actresses, or when a man guns down people in Las Vegas at a country music festival. We should not be surprised when we hear about ISIS thugs beheading children or when other Islamo-fascists fly airplanes into buildings.

Closer to home, we should not be surprised to read of the latest murders or car-jackings in Jackson. We should not be surprised to read about corrupt politicians at any level of government who act like they are above the law. It is simply the nature of people who are not Christians to act like devils.

That's what Paul is saying, but is he right? I mean, just because someone's not a Christian doesn't mean he's a murderer or a rapist, right? Of course not. And Paul doesn't say so. He simply says that if you are not living in a trust relationship with Christ, you are going to live like you want to.

Isn't that what the young man in our responsive reading did? When he asked his father for his part of the inheritance, he was really saying, "Dad, I wish you were dead so I can have my part of your estate now." He went away and squandered a third of his father's money, while his

father and his brother were left to live on the rest. He impoverished his family for the most selfish of reasons. The prodigal son didn't care. He just wanted to live like he wanted to.

But notice that Paul isn't talking in the third person here. He uses the first person – we once belonged to the family of Satan. We used to do wicked things.

Now, this is ridiculous. We in this congregation have never done anything like shooting up a concert or flying an airplane into the World Trade Center. We're not like that prodigal son. Surely Paul is exaggerating. Surely we have never been that bad.

Now, it is true that all of us have grown up in a civilization informed by the norms of Christianity. It is true that our tastes and our desires have been shaped by the gospel. We have been taught from birth that being nice is a good thing, and so we generally want to be nice people – until we don't get our way. We generally do nice things – when we want to.

But notice that Paul doesn't list all the bad things people do. He simply says that if you live according to what you want – what feels good to you and what seems right to you, that you are living like a child of Satan. Your choice is either to obey your own law or to obey God's law. If you obey your own law, you are acting like Satan's child. If you obey God's law, you are acting like God's child.

Allow me to give some personal examples. When I shrink from taking on new situations or challenges, even though I know God wants me to act, I am acting like Satan – giving in to the sin of fear. When I choose to sleep in rather than get up and exercise and pray, I am acting like Satan – giving in to the temptation of sloth. Things I leave undone are just as deadly as bad things I do, if I am not acting in accordance with God's will.

But doing the right thing for the wrong reason is also sin. If I am nice to someone else just because I want to feel good about myself, that is sin. More broadly, whenever my point of reference is self and not God, I am living like a child of Satan. Whenever my sole, or even my main concern is what I want, I am a law unto myself, living like a child of disobedience.

And Paul says that the children of disobedience are also children of wrath. For living according to our own desires is really nothing less than turning away from God, despising Him, saying that He is not important, rebelling against His law of love. All of that is disobedience, and all those who are disobedient to God deserve His wrath.

No, we may not have gunned down people in Las Vegas or flown airliners into buildings. We may not have told our parents to their face that we wished they were dead. But living according to our own desires is just as disobedient to God. And all such disobedience deserves death.

Now, I know. We Americans really don't like the word, "obedience." We are certified liberty junkies, much more comfortable with the language of rights than of responsibilities. But the fact is that the only real rights in this world belong to God. He created everything and so everything belongs to Him. He created all of us in order that we might glorify Him in every aspect of our lives.

And yet when we are not actively or passively disobeying Him, we all too often ignore Him. Even if we confess His existence with our mouths, we often live our lives as if God were a figment of our imagination. Like the prodigal son, we make up the rules for ourselves as we go along, preferring our pleasures to the pursuit of piety. So, if we are honest about the situation, we have to admit that God has every right to call us children of wrath. God has every right to cast us away from Him into eternal punishment. We have no right to anything but damnation.

And yet we get grace. By definition, grace is extended toward those who don't deserve it. After all, if we deserve something, then getting it is not because of grace. If we deserve something, it is our right. If I pay for food in a restaurant, I deserve good service. I have a right to it. I thus have a right to be indignant if I don't receive it. I have a right to display my anger by leaving no tip.

But hear the good news: sinners like us do not get what we deserve – instead God gives us grace. Instead of pouring out His wrath, the wrath that we deserve, God pours out His love upon those who hate Him. Like the father of the prodigal son, God opens His arms to the wicked, the sin-stained, the rebels against His righteous rule. He runs to embrace those whose only desire was to run away from Him. He says, "Come to Me, all you who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest."

But here we see a problem. We know that everyone starts out as a sinner, doing what he wants to do. But if the whole world is living according to its desires, why should it care if God opens His arms to them? Why should the cross matter to sinners, if they are like the prodigal son, doing as they please? Why would anyone listen to the preaching of the good news of repentance if they are satisfied with sin?

The key question for us is this: what was it that made that prodigal son come to his senses, and realize that he could in fact go home? In fact, why did any of us listen to the gospel? Why did any of us ever place our trust in Christ? Why did we ever turn from doing what we want to doing what God wants?

Paul makes this question even more baffling. He tells us that before we were saved, our condition was so bad it was like death. We were dead in our trespasses and sins. We were

totally under their power. We not only wanted to sin – we couldn't help ourselves. We were completely helpless, more helpless than the alcoholic before the bottle, more helpless than the habitual gambler before the video poker machine.

This is why Martin Luther had such a problem with the whole idea of doing penance in order to be forgiven: the Bible says that we are helpless in the face of our sins, as helpless as dead men. Can you think of anyone more helpless than someone who is dead? There is nothing he can do for himself. He can't hear warnings. He can't see miracles. He can't decide to change his life. He can't exercise faith. He can't even want to change.

And so we find in today's passage from Ephesians that we are not only in need of grace because we are sinners. We are not only in need of grace because we don't deserve it. We were also in need of grace because we were dead. We were unable to respond to God's offer of salvation.

Grace is thus not simply something given to those who have not deserved it. It is also something given to those who have not earned it, and who cannot earn it. Paul tells us that it was through His grace that God raised us from the dead, through the person and work of Jesus Christ. God through His grace has seated us in the heavenly places in Christ. And this is only the beginning of His blessings, which will be poured out even more fully in the age to come.

No, we did not deserve any of this. And we could not have earned any of it. But the good news is that God gave us His grace anyway. Paul clearly tells us that salvation is completely of God, not of man. It is God Who saves sinners – we do not save ourselves. We are His workmanship, not our own. It is God who gives His children new hearts to love Him. It is God who gives his children new minds to desire His will. It is God Who gives His children new life to follow Him.

And if God is the One Who has turned you around, if God has chosen you to be one of His own from before the foundation of the world, what greater assurance could you possibly seek? You did not grab hold of God – God grabbed hold of you. Who could snatch you out of His hand? What could possibly persuade Him to let you go?

But what if your trust in Christ is not what it should be? What if you are plagued with doubts and fears, tripped up by besetting sins? Look into the face of Christ, the face of Your God, and trust Him. Yours is a God who runs to meet those who have despised and rejected Him. Yours is a God who welcomes sinners, adopting them as His children, wrapping them in a robe of righteousness, feasting and rejoicing that they have come home.

But don't just listen to the words of Jesus, to His promises of grace. Look at the pain and suffering He chose to endure for you. Knowing that He went to the cross, how can you doubt His love? Knowing that He died for you, how can you doubt His welcome?

And then look at the empty tomb – the undeniable proof of Jesus' glorious resurrection. How can you doubt His power to save you and to make you holy? Today, right now, He is seated at the right hand of God, with all authority in Heaven and on earth in His nail-scarred hands. Does it really make sense to go on living for yourself? Doesn't it make more sense to live your life for Him, to devote yourself to His glory?

Do you need more faith? Don't try to muster it up within yourself - ask your gracious Father for it. Do you need victory over a besetting sin? Don't try to do some sort of penance – ask your gracious Father for it. Do you need to live more for Him instead of for yourself? Ask your gracious Father for His cleansing power. For by grace are you saved through faith – it is the gift of God. Trust Him, and take the gift He offers you.