

Ephesians 2:1-10

Goodness Grace-ious

I spent a lot of time with my out-of-town family this week. My parents were from little towns in the southwest corner of Arkansas, and I still have a lot of relatives there. So, after a one-week visit with my bother from New York, we made a quick, end-of-the-week trip to Ashdown, Arkansas.

I don't know about you, but every time I go "home" so to speak, my accent becomes more exaggerated, and so do my figures of speech.

For instance, at one point I heard myself tell a cousin, "I'm sweating like a stuck pig."

Where I'm going with this / is that it's from these southern family members that I learned the versatility of the phrase "Goodness gracious!" Inflection makes all the difference.

If you say, "Goodness **gr**acious!" you're implying a certain degree of awe, like, "Goodness gracious, Nicholas, I've never seen a five-year-old make a goal before!" Or "Goodness gracious, Stacey, 5th in your class? That's wonderful!" Or "Goodness gracious, Stan, that's a beautiful table you made!

But if you say, "**Good**ness **gr**acious!" you're implying some impatience and maybe even disdain-- like me on viewing my toddler son's crayon artwork on his wall: "Goodness gracious, Grant, I don't care if it's a perfect rendering of Uncle Richard's teeth. It's in orange crayon and I may not be able to get it off!" Or "Goodness gracious, Puppy Princess, I've told you 1000 times not to piddle on the rug!"

Whether “Goodness Gracious” has anything to do with grace usually depends on your vantage point. And grace is a tricky concept to begin with.

Enter the Apostle Paul in our text today. He tackles grace head on as he writes this letter from prison, speaking of our God who is rich in mercy.

He tells us that someone who is “alive in Christ” is more prone to recognize grace than someone who is “dead through the trespasses and sins in which [they live].” In other words, one who has had their eyes-of-faith opened / can more easily see grace in their own lives and in the lives of others.

“By grace you have been saved through faith.”

- So, is our faith all God’s doing, by God’s grace?
- Or do we have some part in generating faith and keeping it alive?
- Where does one start and the other end?
- And can you reason your way to faith in Jesus Christ?

Think about these questions as you listen to today’s passage from Ephesians 2:1-10.

[Ephesians 2:1-10]

Paul writes to his beloved church in Ephesus, “You were [once] dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived.” This is, of course, what Jesus was sent to the world for: our salvation. Perfect people need not apply.

That’s an interesting notion in itself. Jesus couldn’t have made it more clear in his own life. He didn’t have much time to spare for those who thought of themselves as spiritually perfect.

His mission was to teach us that *none of us* is perfect, and not even salvation makes us that way. What salvation does is mark us as God's own, as Jesus so beautifully illustrated in his own baptism by John.

Out of our trespasses and sins, we are claimed by God, who graciously reaches down and rescues us.

And going forward from this time of rescue, we recognize just what has happened— Jesus has snatched us up, out of what Paul calls “the course of this world” where we followed the winds of culture.

Having saved us, Jesus immediately goes ahead, looks back over his shoulder, and beckons to us. He calls us to follow him and live our saved lives out in the world and in perpetual gratitude to our Savior God.

It's not a “once and done” kind of thing. Most of us who have been saved by grace through faith, know that we are being saved every day. That's because it is so easy to slip back into a kind of living that follows “the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air”—living happily among all those who are tethered to the course of this world without a sense that there is a larger, free-er world on offer.

I can't remember who it was who said that / when they're asked / when it was they were saved, they reply, “Every morning.” Every morning we are saved from our own blinded sight and meager ambitions, not to mention “the passions of our flesh and senses” Paul refers to. Those who are saved by grace through faith know this.

Presbyterian minister Frederick Buechner compares salvation to the experience of love. He says,

“When you love somebody, it is no longer yourself who is the center of your own universe. It is the one you love who is. You forget yourself. You deny yourself. You give of yourself, so that by all the rules of arithmetical logic there should be less of yourself than there was to start with. Only by a curious paradox there is more. You feel that / at last you really *are* yourself.

“The experience of salvation involves the same paradox. Jesus put it like this: ‘Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it’ (Matthew 10:39).

“You give up your old self-seeking self for somebody you love and thereby become yourself at last. You must die with Christ so that you can rise with him, Paul says. It is what baptism is all about.

“You do not love God so that, tit for tat, he will then save you. To love God is to be saved. To love anybody is a significant step along the way.”

However, I’m always a bit miffed by people who say, “Oh, deciding how to live as a Christian is easy. Goodness gracious, it’s all about love! We just have to base all our decisions on love.”

But isn’t love sometimes hard? Doesn’t it sometimes mean taking the hard road? Think about Jesus overturning the tables in the Temple last week, and tell me *that that* looks like the kind of love that our American Christian culture so often promotes.

Sometimes the “course of this world” looks for all the world / like love, when in reality it is simply toleration and peacefulness. Christ’s love can be judging and shocking, for the sake of those he loves.

No, sometimes living out of Christ's love looks more like defying the "course of this world and the ruler of the power of the air" that our culture is so soaked in.

We must ask the question, then— who gets to define love? Is it Hallmark cards or Jesus?

To live as a Christian—as one who has been saved by grace—is to *know Jesus, to love, and to follow him*. It doesn't mean . . .

- getting better at Bible reading or
- learning to be better at forgiving others or
- following a set plan of confessing our sins or
- even getting better at imitating Jesus.

Living as a Christian doesn't even mean saying "yes" to a certain set of beliefs. We can't reason our way to Jesus.

Frederick Buechner said, "SALVATION IS AN EXPERIENCE first and a doctrine second."

To live as a Christian means to know Jesus and live our lives out of his life. If we live like that, all those other things will come.

The great theologian Karl Barth once said that when Jesus discloses and reveals himself to an individual, it is a call to discipleship. He says, "It has the form of a command of Jesus directed to them. It means the coming of grace" [and it is for the sake of the world]. We are graciously able to come to know Jesus for the reconciliation of the world—so that the world might be saved through him.

Barth goes on to say that “grace has the form of command . . . it requires that [followers] could do something.” The grace that we sinful creatures are given is a command.

He continues, “The call to discipleship binds a person to the One who calls him. He is not called by an idea of Christ, or a Christology, or a christocentric system of thought, let alone the supposedly Christian concept of a Father-God. How could these call him to discipleship? They have neither words nor voice.” We can’t be argued into following Jesus as a disciple.

Barth concludes that “the only possible content of this command to ‘Follow me’ is that this or that specific person to whom it is given / should come to, and follow, and be with, the one who gives it.”

All of this is true whether it applies . . .

- to the one who can name a particular time when they came to know Jesus or
- to the one who grew up in the church and gradually came to know him.

To those who grew up in the church, I would say, search your heart to look for the time when / that faith you grew up in /was activated. I guarantee you, there was a time when Jesus became real for you.

I think that too many of us in the church believe that the faith expressed in the doctrines of the church is sufficient—without really knowing the author of our faith who enters into our lives in astounding ways.

You may have noticed that this second chapter of Ephesians follows Paul’s premise stated in the first chapter: Christ has blessed us with “every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ

before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will.”

It’s all about grace and not our own doing.

If you’re hearing this and don’t know yourself saved, don’t know yourself already “raised up with him and seated . . . in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus”, consider this a nudge from the Lord himself.

Consider how you might know Jesus better, how you might draw nearer to him. Ask him to help you have a sense of his heart beating in your chest.

There can be no greater movement on your part this Lent than living your life out of Jesus’ own life, given graciously for you, a sinner. Goodness gracious, friends, Jesus died for you!