

**Prayer of the Day:**

Almighty God, we confess that we deserve to be punished for our evil deeds. But we ask you graciously to cleanse us from all sin and to comfort us with your salvation; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen!

**Verse of the Day:**

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)

**Text: Ephesians 2:4–10**

4 But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, 5 made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. 6 And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, 7 in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. 8 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— 9 not by works, so that no one can boast. 10 For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

**Sermon Text:**

Let's get back to the basics! It's time to work on our fundamentals! Both are phrases that we hear often whether on a field or court somewhere or in everyday life. It's hard to build a house if you can't swing a hammer. It's difficult to lead the orchestra if you can't read a note. And you'll never understand the whole of Scripture, with all of its doctrinal overlay, if you don't understand justification and sanctification correctly. Today the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent allows us an opportunity to get back to the basics of God's Holy Word. Back to the basics of salvation as we take a look at our **FAITH FILLED FUNDAMENTALS**. Yes, **IT IS BY GRACE YOU HAVE BEEN SAVED, THAT GOD MIGHT SHOW THE RICHES OF HIS GRACE IN YOU.**

Grace simply defined is God's undeserved love for the sinner. I don't believe you can miss that definition in the words we read from Ephesians chapter two. However, there is an aspect of grace that we often do miss. It is the reality that is wrapped up in the second and final words of our definition: undeserved and sinner. I don't believe anyone is actually arrogant enough to claim perfection. We all know we make mistakes. However, there is always a temptation in self-evaluation to say, "true ... I 'm not perfect, but I'm better than most or at least some and if I am a sinner, then at least I'm not as bad as that guy over there." In short, while we may acknowledge the sinner part of our definition, we forget that grace is completely undeserved. We think we can somehow justify ourselves that we can somehow deserve something from God.

Paul puts that all to rest in the second verse of our lesson as he reminds us that "*we were dead in transgressions*". In fact, if you back up and include the first three verses of Ephesians chapter two you get the full impact of the statement. "*As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.*"

If I were to ask you how you knew if someone or something was dead, what would you answer? The child knows that the fish is dead when it stops swimming and starts floating. Fido is dead when the barking, running, and tail wagging is no more. Our loved ones are dead when the heart no longer pumps or the brain ceases to relay messages to the body. While we might rightly define death as the absence of life, we could also say that death is seen by the absence of action, works, and deeds. Dead in transgression - sin, there are no actions, no deeds, no works to earn or deserve anything before God. Dead in sin there is only the wretched reality of the wrath of God and the hot horror of hell.

Ah, but you are already catching the flavor of why Paul reveals all this to us. Paul doesn't do this out of a ghoulish glee that desires to haul us off to hell. He does it that he might remind us of the real reason we look forward to heaven. *But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.* Lent is all about saving those who could do nothing for themselves. Dead in our transgressions, we were incapable of the work on which many pin their hopes of heaven but Christ changes all of that.

In the seven verses set before us, Paul says “*with Christ*” or “*in Christ Jesus*” four times. The references to grace or mercy, love or kindness or sentences that communicate God's action apart from our works are a perfect seven for seven and then multiple times in each verse. God even uses adjectives to strengthen the point His love is great, His mercy – abundant or overflowing, the riches of His grace – simply incomparable. Do you think perhaps the Holy Spirit in the inspired pen of Paul is pounding home a point? We do nothing because we can do nothing, God does everything because He's the only one who can and He does it all in the person of Jesus Christ whom we watch as God displays His love for a wretched world of sinners. It's precisely because of the mockery, the beatings, the whipping, and the cruel cross of Calvary that we are saved from wrath and seated in the heavenly realms. It's because faith connects us to Christ – seats us with Christ – slaughters, buries and raises us to life in Christ Jesus that we are saved. “*Because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved* (Ephesians 2:4-5).”

When Martin Luther opened up his Bible and God hit him over the head with these truths, Rome went into riot. “If you tell people such things they will stop doing good works. They will live lives of depravity, doing whatever they want whenever they want however they want because what do our deeds matter?” I often wonder if Paul heard the same. The visible church needed to return to the **FAITH FILLED FUNDAMENTALS**. Yes, **IT IS BY GRACE YOU HAVE BEEN SAVED, THAT GOD MIGHT SHOW THE RICHES OF HIS GRACE IN YOU**.

Verse ten brings it home doesn't it? *For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.* Lutheran's don't toss aside good works anymore than Paul did. In fact in the Augsburg confession we hear, “*Hence it is readily apparent that no one should accuse this teaching of prohibiting good works. On the contrary, it is rather to be commended for showing how we can do good works. For without faith human nature cannot possibly do the works of the First or Second Commandments. Without faith*

*it does not call upon God, expect anything from God, or bear the cross, but seeks and trusts in human help. Consequently, all kinds of urges and human designs rule in the heart when faith and trust in God are lacking (Article XX: Final Paragraph)."*

Oh, but Satan is crafty isn't he? Now he begins to twist your mind again. "Oh I see", we say, "we have to do good to keep our faith and get to heaven." Caution again for this is not how Paul paints the portrait is it? We are God's handywork, knit together in our mother's wombs and washed clean in the waters of Holy Baptism as I was buried and raised with Christ (Romans 6) and why? That I might serve Him – do good works – works which God puts in our path so that as the sinful nature and the new man wrestle with one another, we trip over them along the way.

Now, as we speak of work, don't lose site of the grace. One sentence speaks of our response to God in our lesson today. One sentence out of seven and even then who gets all the credit? God does, doesn't He? He saves, it's His grace, His mercy, His love, He creates so we are His workmanship and even the works which come from us are those planned by Him, prepared by Him, put in our way by Him so that those He made would do what He wants them to do. To Paul, God is not only the motivation for the task at hand – he is the task at hand from beginning to end and all we can say is that it is our gracious privilege to have had it put in front of us that God would make us in such a way as to be useful here.

Does that change the way we look at just about everything in life? You bet it does! Ten percent of the people do one hundred percent of the work of the church – what a privilege that God would allow me to do something. I give so much to church and everyone else seems to bring mites and pennies – what a gift that God should grace me with this ability. I'm tired of the diapers and the cooking, the boss who doesn't value me and coworkers who don't respect me – God's mercy is certainly evident in my daily tasks even as he puts me into contact with people among whom I may live my Christian life.

One of the reasons that I love Lent is that these truths are so wonderfully highlighted in this season. It's a great time to regroup, reassess, relearn our **FAITH FILLED FUNDAMENTALS**. May we leave today with them ringing in our ears and may we live each day in the promise of their teaching. **IT IS BY GRACE YOU HAVE BEEN SAVED, THAT GOD MIGHT SHOW THE RICHES OF HIS GRACE IN YOU.** Amen.