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Orcutt Christian Church

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"Come As You Are ... Leave Changed!"

Burning Questions 10

Is it A Sin for a Christian to be Lazy?

2 Thessalonians 3:6-13

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2 Thessalonians 3:6-13 (TLB)

⁶ Now here is a command, dear brothers, given in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ by his authority: Stay away from any Christian who spends his days in laziness and does not follow the ideal of hard work we set up for you. ⁷ For you well know that you ought to follow our example: you never saw us loafing; ⁸ we never accepted food from anyone without buying it; we worked hard day and night for the money we needed to live on, in order that we would not be a burden to any of you. ⁹ It wasn't that we didn't have the right to ask you to feed us, but we wanted to show you firsthand how you should work for

your living. ¹⁰ Even while we were still there with you, we gave you this rule: "He who does not work shall not eat." ¹¹ Yet we hear that some of you are living in laziness, refusing to work, and wasting your time in gossiping. ¹² In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ we appeal to such people—we command them—to quiet down, get to work, and earn their own living. ¹³ And to the rest of you I say, dear brothers, never be tired of doing right.

A charge to keep I have,
A God to glorify,
A never-dying soul to save,
And fit it for the sky.

To serve the present age,
My calling to fulfill:
Oh, may it all my pow'rs engage
To do my Master's will!

Arm me with jealous care,
As in Thy sight to live;
And O Thy servant, Lord, prepare
A strict account to give!

Help me to watch and pray,
And on Thyself rely,
Assured, if I my trust betray,
I shall forever die.

-- **Charles Wesley**

Charles lived and died as a minister in the Anglican Church. When he died in 1788, he had written over 6,000 hymns.

One thing we know for sure about the word "lazy," and that is "lazy" is not a verb!

It's an adjective used to describe one of God's creatures; such as: "I'm very lazy by nature," meaning the person is unwilling to work or use energy.

It's synonyms are pretty descriptive: idle, indolent, slothful, workshy, shiftless, inactive, underactive, sluggish, lethargic; remiss, negligent, slack, lax, lackadaisical.

So, what about it?

Is it A Sin for a Christian to be Lazy?

Proverbs 19:15 (NASB)

15 Laziness casts into a deep sleep, And an idle man will suffer hunger.

Ecclesiastes 11:6 (NASB)

6 Sow your seed in the morning and do not be idle in the evening, for you do not know whether morning or evening sowing will succeed, or whether both of them alike will be good.

Scriptures like these leave us with the definite impression that laziness is no virtue.

And, you know the jokes.

Lots and lots of jokes.

"Who says nothing is impossible? I've been doing nothing for many years!"

"Give a lazy person a fish and he will eat it. Teach him how to fish, and he will sit in a boat and sleep all day."

"They say that hard work never killed anyone, but why take the chance?" -- Ronald Reagan.

However, Zig Ziglar counters with his observation:

"People often say that motivation doesn't last. Well, neither does bathing -- that's why we recommend it daily."

I. Myth of the Overworked American

According to the International Labor Organization, “Americans work 137 more hours per year than Japanese workers, 260 more hours per year than British workers, and 499 more hours per year than French workers.”

And the ILO says: "The decline of the union has led to less paid time off and other leave benefits."

That's the labor organizations slant on our overworked Americans

However, Forbes Magazine counters these bits of labor organizations propaganda.

Forbes analyst, Jeffrey Dorfman, says "In fact, American workers are not particularly hard-working and are working no more today than they were a decade ago. ... The widespread belief of hard-working Americans is much more myth than fact."

According to this Forbes analysis, "only 11.7 percent of American workers work 50 hours per week or more, below the average of 13 percent for the 38 countries studied. In fact, the U.S. ranks only 12th out of the 38 countries for these “overworked” workers, meaning eleven countries have more “overworked” workers than the U.S."

So, I conclude that the Labor Organizations claim that our poor American workers are overworked is just a myth.

II. Times We Need Rest

A. Our Need For Sleep

Just like exercise, the amount of sleep you need depends on your age.

The National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute recommends at least 11-12 hours for preschool-aged children, 10 hours for school-aged

children, 9-10 hours for teens and 8 hours for adults.

If you don't get enough sleep, or good quality sleep every once in a while, you may notice that you wake up feeling groggy, not well rested, and experience difficulty concentrating.

If you consistently do not get enough quality sleep, you are at higher risk for conditions like heart disease, diabetes, obesity, headaches and depression.

Several of our congregation have had sleep apnea studies, and utilize breathing equipment at night to help deepen sleep.

Mental Health America (MHA) – founded in 1909 – is the nation's leading community-based nonprofit dedicated to addressing the needs of those living with mental illness and to promoting the overall mental health of all Americans.

Mental Health America recommends setting a wake and sleep schedule to go by every day of the week, including weekends; and they recommend doing something to release the body's feel-good hormones—serotonin, prolactin, and oxytocin—and lower the stress hormone, cortisol.

I find it helpful to avoid using my computer about a hour and half before I head off to the bedroom.

And, I take a good book and read for awhile.

Seems that the desire to sleep just naturally kicks in.

By the way...

One thing that sleep researchers seem to be pretty uniform on is avoiding naps in the afternoon.

B. Our Need For Prayer

The British Journal of Psychiatry reports that “People who have a spiritual understanding of life in the absence of a religious framework are vulnerable to mental disorder.”

What this means is that those who claim they are "Spiritual but not religious" are vulnerable to emotional problems.

In the British study, SBNRs were found to be significantly more likely to be drug-dependent (77%) and to suffer from phobias (72%) or anxiety (50%).

No wonder they're significantly more likely (40%) than the religious to be being treated with psychotropic drugs.

That being the case, there is definite good reasons to follow the leadership of our Lord Jesus, who had the need to withdraw from time to time for spiritual balance.

Rick Warren say "Jesus Teaches Us: Get Alone And Pray. This was a habit with Jesus and it needs to become a habit in your life."

The Bible says,

Luke 5:16 (NASB)

16 But Jesus Himself would *often* slip away to the wilderness and pray.

If we want to fulfill God's vision for our lives, we must continually hear from God.

We must believe that hearing from God daily is a requirement for us as we move forward toward our destiny.

It is not just a nice add-on to our lives; it is a necessity for fulfilling our destiny.

It doesn't matter where you get alone with God.

You just need to find a place.

You need to have a place that's quiet, a place where you habitually go every time you meet with God.

Make it special and specific.

Luke says Jesus **would *often* slip away to the wilderness and pray**

This was a habit with Jesus and it needs to become a habit in our life.

It's something we need to do every day the rest of our life.

If you want to get God's vision for your life and hear God's voice, you need to meet with him daily.

This means you take the phone off the hook and you remove as many distractions as possible.

Here is how Eugene Petterson says Jesus puts it:

Matthew 6:6 (MSG)

6 Here's what I want you to do: Find a quiet, secluded place so you won't be tempted to role-play before God. Just be there as simply and honestly as you can manage. The focus will shift from you to God, and you will begin to sense his grace.

Just remember, you are not waiting on God, He's waiting on you. God wants to meet with you.

He wants you to know Him as well as He knows you.

If you don't understand this, you are rarely going to go to God for guidance.

There is nothing in your life that God is not interested in:

Matthew 6:31-33 (MSG)

31 What I'm trying to do here is to get you to relax, to not be so preoccupied with *getting*, so you can respond to God's *giving*. 32 People who don't know God and the way he works fuss over these things, but you know both God and how he works. 33 Steep your life in God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions. Don't worry about missing out. You'll find all your everyday human concerns will be met.

III. The Neurobiology of Laziness

Dr. Alison Adcock is a MD, a psychiatrist, and has a PhD in Neurobiology.

Dr. Adcock is doing research at Duke University that is transforming what we know of how the brain works.

What does what Dr. Adcock's research have to do with our question today?

Paul says in verse 6: **Christian who spends his days in laziness**

What she's discovered connects to today's theme announced by Saint Paul when he chides some of the Thessalonian believers for their "idleness" (v. 6).

These researchers have found a sort of *motivational button* in the brain that could help us fight laziness.

Dr. Adcock put test subjects into a machine similar to an MRI diagnostic scanner, a machine that allows them to identify particular areas of the brain utilized for different types of activities. Using this machine, test subjects are able to watch on a screen as certain areas of their brains light up.

These visual cues provide a sort of feedback loop.

As patients experience feelings of being highly motivated, they can note which areas of their brains are engaged with those feelings.

Moments later, they find themselves able to concentrate on getting that same region of the brain to light up again and again, thus sustaining their feelings of motivation.

Paul says in verse 8: **we worked hard day and night for the money we needed to live on, in order that we would not be a burden to any of you.**

Could medical science be developing a way to help us use our brains to leap out of our lethargy, renew our work and resume our responsibilities, so we **would not be a burden to any of you.**

Perhaps.

It's an intriguing idea.

IV, What is Paul's Point About Those Lazy Thessalonians

Look at 8: **we worked hard day and night for the money we needed to live on, in order that we would not be a burden to**

any of you.

We need to look at that verse because it is the clue to Paul's discussion of laziness here in Thessalonians.

Whatever we may think of the apostle Paul, we are unlikely to think of him as a lazy person.

Idleness just isn't a part of his DNA.

It's not who he is.

You get the feeling that he doesn't really think that true believers can also be lazy people.

He says, we hear that some of you are living in laziness, refusing to work, and wasting your time in gossiping.

Some of these Thessalonians are so lazy that if there was work they could do in bed, they'd rather sleep on the floor.

And, what is Paul's response?

In verse 6, he says **Now here is a command, dear brothers, given in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ by his authority: Stay away from any Christian who spends his days in laziness and does not follow the ideal of hard work we set up for you.**

Notice that he's not speaking to the lazy believers themselves.

They're probably too lazy to get to the preaching meeting.

They are too lazy to read his letter.

Too lazy to care.

He's addressing those who are *not* lazy, *not* idle.

It's likely that most of his audience, that is, the Thessalonian congregation, were hard-working, industrious people.

It's not that the church itself at Thessalonica was full of lazy people.

But clearly there were some.

Notice also that Paul "**commands**" these motivated and active

believers to avoid or shun **any Christian who spends his days in laziness**

He perhaps is of the opinion that idleness is contagious.
Hang around lazy people and we're likely to pick up lazy habits ourselves.

We know how important it is to seek the company of those who lift us up, who make us better, who call us to reach farther and climb higher.

Hang too long around the wrong crowd and soon we begin to adopt the same cast and demeanor.

Like the canary that loses its song when slumming with sparrows, we, too, can lose our song when casting our lot with those who care little for spiritual things, who care little for improving the lots of others, who care little for self-improvement, who care little for serving God.

Paul "**commands**" us to watch the company we keep. Good advice.

Thessalonica was almost a welfare city because of its high population of unemployed.

And those on welfare had become accustomed to free loading off the more prosperous, and the government.

Most of Paul's attention is given to those who had given up working and were **living by the charity** of their brothers and sisters.

We see this group in verses 6-13.

But Paul also discusses those who are **willfully** disobedient of his instructions in verses 14-15.

According to Paul, both moochers and disobedient require specific discipline.

These are to be treated as outsiders, no longer a part of the community of God's people, cut off from fellowship with the

church and the benefits which such fellowship entailed.

This pattern of exclusion as a means of discipline had its roots in the synagogues, where unrepentant offenders were cut off from all connections to the Jewish community and, by that token, from the people of Israel as a whole.

As the church believed itself to be the people of God of fulfillment, its method of discipline was much the same.

Most of Paul's concern for discipline in the Thessalonian church is taken up with a **single problem**: those in the church who have abandoned work and are depending on the generosity of other Christians for their support.

Some in the church stopped working simply because they found it possible to do so because of the generous sharing practiced among early Christians.

In the context of the church, Christians of means would have shared with those in need.

Some who began with genuine needs apparently took advantage of such sharing and deliberately avoided supporting themselves even when they had the opportunity.

The idlers were able to give up working because of the radical generosity practiced among early Christians.

Luke tells in Acts chapter two, that Christians from the earliest days of the church were abundantly generous with each other.

Paul says those who fail to work are placing undue burdens on others, violating the bonds of fellowship of which they take advantage.

They also use their free time to interject themselves into others' affairs, causing further disruption of the fellowship.

But he also reminds those who are in a position to share that the irresponsibility of some does not remove from them the obligation

to help those with genuine needs.

Paul's concern here is entirely for the church and its fellowship, where he sees a level of mutual commitment which demands that those with means support those without; but that those who can support themselves should cause no unnecessary burdens to others.

The willfully idle will now stand under a stricter form of discipline.

Paul orders, as he does for others whose sin is blatant and unrepented, that the church withdraw from such people.

While a part of the reason for such a withdrawal is to avoid the disrepute which would come on the church, to relieve Christians of means from any obligation to share with those who refuse to work, and to protect the church from further corruption, the primary motivation is to correct the sinful behavior that has not yielded to less severe measures.

Benjamin Franklin, the printer / diplomat, tells of a man who refused to pay a debt, and the community shunned him until he repented.

Exclusion from the fellowship signifies not just lost contact with Christian friends or even the loss of financial support; it indicates an exclusion, which will become eternal if no repentance is forthcoming.

V. What Do We Do To Avoid Laziness?

11 Yet we hear that some of you are living in laziness, refusing to work, and wasting your time in gossiping.

Here's the definition: not only do they not work, but they don't mind interrupting your work either!

Have you ever known someone like that?

Are you lazy?

Here's how to tell:

If your self winding watch stops often.

If you have to save up energy to take a nap.

If you fall asleep at work and no one notices.

There's a scene in *Fiddler on the Roof* that takes place after the wedding feast has been reduced to a shambles by marauding Cossack soldiers.

Homes have been set afire, tables overturned and china broken.

The villagers are in shock.

They look to the heavens in bewilderment, as if questioning the goodness of God.

Then they look to Tevye.

"What are we to do now?" they ask.

After a long pause, Tevye picks up a chair, saying, "Clean up the mess."

Proverbs 13:4 (TLB)

⁴ Lazy people want much but get little, while the diligent are prospering.

Diligence develops a creative and resourceful attitude.

Some people have the false idea that the world owes them something and has been unfair to them.

But Paul says: **⁸ we never accepted food from anyone without buying it; we worked hard day and night for the money we needed to live on, in order that we would not be a burden to any of you.**

I'm glad our government is sensitive to those who are truly disabled, or to ladies whose deadbeat husbands abandoned them and the kids.

But when able bodied people draw subsidies simply because they can, it's sin.

Paul tells it like it is!

It's a challenge to us all as we strive to be the ideal church, the ideal servants, and to walk the ideal walk until He comes!

Proverbs 26:13-16 (TLB)

13 The lazy man won't go out and work. "There might be a lion outside!" he says. **14** He sticks to his bed like a door to its hinges! **15** He is too tired even to lift his food from his dish to his mouth! **16** Yet in his own opinion he is smarter than seven wise men.

Lutheran scholar, Rev. Dr. Richard John Neuhaus defines contemporary sloth as

“evenings without number obliterated by television, evenings neither of entertainment nor of education, but a narcotic defense against time and duty.”

This is sloth at its deadly best: trying to preserve personal comforts through the candy of endless amusements.

Sloth is a chronic quest for worldly comfort that compounds boredom - boredom with God, boredom with people, boredom with life.

The "**Herald of Free Enterprise**" was a car ferry plying between Dover, England and Zeebrugge, Belgium.

The whole front of the ship opened so cars and lorries could be loaded onto the lower decks.

On March 6, 1987, with the vehicles loaded and 563 passengers on board, Captain David Lewry put to sea.

It was dark, 7 pm.

All went well for a few minutes, but one mile out, the ship began filling with water, and capsized in 90 seconds.

One hundred ninety-three people drowned.

The ship put to sea with its front loading doors wide open.

There was no indicator light on the bridge.

The captain assumed that the seaman responsible for closing the doors had done so.

Instead, he was asleep in his cabin.

Because assistant boatswain Mark Stanley was asleep on the job,

one hundred ninety-three people died.

In Proverbs we are warned about sleeping too much or at the wrong time.

Proverbs 20:13 (TLB)

13 If you love sleep, you will end in poverty. Stay awake, work hard, and there will be plenty to eat!

It is not wrong to sleep, but it is wrong to *love* sleep.
Sleep is not an end in itself, but is a means to an end.
We sleep for rejuvenation so we can work again the next day.

By "work" I am not simply referring to work in the marketplace, office or corporate world.

I accept as a given that the Bible does not charge those who are aged or physically unable to work with idleness.

"Work" includes also those "stay-at-home" moms or "house husbands" who choose to be a parental presence for their children 24/7, especially when they're young.

I recall sharing the story about Rev. Dr. Tony Campolo wife Peggy. Anthony "Tony" Campolo is an American sociologist, American Baptist Minister, author, public speaker and former spiritual advisor to President Bill Clinton.

While Campolo has spent much of his life traveling globally and speaking at conferences, his wife, Peggy, chose to stay home and pour herself into raising their two children, Bart and Lisa.

When Peggy had the rare opportunity to travel with her husband, she'd often be in conversations with some of the most impressive and sophisticated people in the world.

And sometimes she felt intimidated; on occasion, she questioned her own self-worth.

And so Tony said to her, "Well, honey, why don't you come up with something you could say when you meet people that will let

them know that you value what you're doing and think it's important?"

Not long after, they were at a party, and a woman said to Peggy in a rather condescending tone, "Well, my dear, and what do you do?" Campolo said he heard his wife say, "I am nurturing two Homo sapiens into the dominant values of the Judeo-Christian tradition in order that they might become instruments for the transformation of the social order into the kind of eschatological utopia God envisioned from the beginning of time."

The other woman said, "Oh, well, I'm just a lawyer."

What, then, can we take away from all of this?

A. Saddle Up and Move Out

We learn from this text that we should carry on as though the Lord may tarry and never return in our lifetimes.

But we should also live morally, ethically and spiritually prepared as though he may return at any moment.

We know that even Jesus himself did not know the timing of his own return.

Matthew 24:36 (NLT)

³⁶ “However, no one knows the day or hour when these things will happen, not even the angels in heaven or the Son himself. Only the Father knows.

Paul's advice is to get back to work.

So Paul reminds the congregation of a simple motivational rule he's previously shared with them:

"He who does not work shall not eat."

Hunger pangs do have a way of motivating people.

According to a dictionary prepared by Thomas Blount in 1656, a

cavalier was "a knight or gentleman, serving on horseback, a man of arms."

That **meaning** is true to the history of the noun, which traces back to the Late Latin word *caballarius*, **meaning** "horseman."

In the founding days of the Jamestown colony, Captain John Smith used this verse to motivate the colonists.

"He who does not work shall not eat."

Captain John Smith used it to force the haughty cavaliers under his command to cease their idle gentlemanly pursuits and start planting corn.

The Bible's advice, then, to us is to continue "planting corn" and to be faithful in our relationships with God and each other.

2 Thessalonians 3:4-5 (NASB)

⁴ We have confidence in the Lord concerning you, that you are doing and will *continue to do* what we command. ⁵ May the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God and into the steadfastness of Christ.

B. We Should Not Tire In Our Labors

Just before bestowing the benediction that ends his brief letter, Paul sums up his motivational advice in proverbial form:

¹³ And to the rest of you I say, dear brothers, never be tired of doing right.

Often, it's hard to persevere in doing what is honorable and right, even necessary, when there is apparently no reward for doing so.

Perhaps, this is why the apostle wrote to the Corinthian believers, **1 Corinthians 15:58 (NASB)**

⁵⁸ Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not *in vain* in the Lord.

Yes, our work is not in vain.

The Bible offers abundant reassurance that the faithful will have their reward.

Paul writing to the Colossian Christians says:

Colossians 3:23-25 (NIV2011)

²³ Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, ²⁴ since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. ²⁵ Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for their wrongs, and there is no favoritism.

So, Paul's word to the Thessalonians, the busy ones and the lazy ones, is,

¹³ And to the rest of you I say, dear brothers, never be tired of doing right.

Christians are not lazy people.

It's not in their DNA.

They understand that there's value and virtue in decent and honest work.

They understand that as a follower of Jesus they are to labor in the fields harvesting souls.

They understand that they are to work for justice and to endeavor to lift up the oppressed.

They understand that they are not to expect others to support them.

Paul makes it clear that he has a job.

They understand that their mission is to be servants to others in the name of Christ.

Failure in any one of these points calls into question a believer's commitment to Jesus and his or her understanding of the gospel.

Christians are not lazy people.
Christians are hard workers.
Christians get it!

They get it without using neurobiology.
All they need to do is to get away and be with God, and be refreshed.

The more they get into His Word, the deeper their resource of being motivated.

They will find there the wisdom, power and motivation to live in the light of his coming, while at the same time fulfilling their commission.

Matthew 28:18-20 (NASB)

¹⁸ And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. ¹⁹ "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

There is your commission and your motivation!

2 Thessalonians 3:13 (GW)

¹³ Brothers and sisters, we can't allow ourselves to get tired of doing what is right.

Prayer and Invitation

Great Love

Devotional Reading: Ephesians 4:1-6

Background Scripture: Ephesians 2:1-10

EPHESIANS 2:1-10

1 As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, **2** 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. **3** All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. **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 is 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 handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

KEY VERSE

[God] made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.—Ephesians 2:5

Introduction

A. Saving Ourselves

Some years ago, my father and I had a disagreement that was almost fatal. We were traveling together in a borrowed car across a high mountain pass in the dead of winter. It was a bright, blustery day, but the temperature was well below freezing, and there was lots of snow on the ground. Unbeknownst to us, the car we were driving had a defective fuel gauge, and we ran out of gas. There was no cell phone coverage in this remote place. We both knew we were in trouble, for the next town with services was miles away. My father knew that the state patrol made regular rounds on this

highway, so we would eventually be spotted, but I was impatient. After about 30 minutes, I decided to walk to a service station. My father protested, advising that I would freeze to death before I reached help, but I stubbornly refused to listen.

I had walked about 50 yards when I felt him bear-hug me from behind. When I turned and saw the look of panic in his eyes, I was persuaded to return to the car. Soon a truck driver with gas stopped, shared it, and followed us to the gas station. As we drove, I realized it was farther than I had thought. I doubt I would have made it.

People like me seem to be programmed to think we can always save ourselves, that we can fight our way out of any problems, that we don't need help. How foolish we are! When this is applied to our relationship with God, the foolishness is magnified manyfold. We are doomed to destruction if we seek to save ourselves. But God has made a way we can be saved from eternal destruction—a way that does not depend on our own efforts. Today's lesson looks at one of the great texts of the New Testament in that regard.

B. Lesson Background

Paul's letter to the Ephesians is considered one of his "prison epistles," because he speaks of physical confinement as he writes (see [Ephesians 3:1](#); [4:1](#); [6:20](#)). He does not mention the location of his imprisonment, but Rome is likely. This would be the house arrest situation where we find Paul at the end of Acts, awaiting his hearing before the Roman emperor (see [Acts 28:16](#)), and therefore dates the letter to about AD 63.

Ephesus in Paul's day was a commercial hub and a Roman government administrative center, one of the largest cities. It was (in)famous for its massive temple to the Greek goddess Artemis, known as Diana to the Romans. This temple was one of the so-called Seven Wonders of the Ancient World (see [Acts 19:27](#)). Ephesus had a synagogue where Paul preached successfully for a time ([Acts 19:8-10](#)). Paul's ministry in Ephesus was one of his longest ([19:10](#); [20:31](#)).

Jews of the day had a long history of despising Gentiles. But this fact didn't seem to be nearly the problem in Ephesus that it was in

other places regarding church unity. Even so, Paul took care to show that Christ had removed any necessary division between Jew and Gentile, resulting in a single body of the people of God (see Ephesians 2:12-18; 3:6; 4:3-6). Salvation for neither Jew nor Gentile was earned through keeping the Jewish law, but found in the grace of God.

In Ephesians 1:15-23, which precedes today's text, Paul celebrated the implications of the resurrection of Christ. He reminded readers that the raising of Christ from the dead was a display of great power (1:19, 20) and that the risen Christ reigned in Heaven with his Father. Following that, he shifted the focus to the letter's readers.

I. Past Life: Living Death

(Ephesians 2:1-3)

A. Suicidal Sin (v. 1)

1. As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, With the opening *as for you*, Paul moves from God's display of power in Christ to the results for humanity. As the dead Christ was brought back to life by God, God has also given us a resurrection from death.

How to Say It

Artemis *Ar-teh-miss*.

Ephesians *Ee-fee-zhunz*.

Ephesus *Ef-uh-sus*.

Gentiles *Jen-tiles*.

The immediate result of this transaction is not immunity to physical death (such death is overcome later; see 1 Corinthians 15). Rather, the new life at issue in the passage before us is spiritual in nature. Spiritual death is a consequence of our *transgressions and sins*.

Only here and in Romans 5:20, 21 (as "trespass" and "sin") do the Greek nouns behind this phrase occur in such proximity to one another. It's as if Paul is making sure the Ephesians don't miss the point: we are guilty of rebellion against God, deserving of death; therefore, we are without life spiritually (see Romans 6:23).

We may not want to admit it, but we are committing spiritual

suicide when we sin. Those having been made alive in Christ should entertain no longing for that previous state.

What Do You Think?

What are some practical, specific ways for a Christian to demonstrate life in Christ?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

In terms of doing, saying, and/or thinking what was not done, said, and/or thought before

In terms of not doing, saying, and/or thinking what was done, thought, and/or said before

B. Devilish Disobedience (v. 2)

2. 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.

Before Christ became their love, Paul's readers may have believed themselves to be free. But such was not the case. Before Christ they actually were in bondage to three closely related influences. First, they had *followed the ways of this world*. That means they had chosen to act as if God's standards for living were not valid. Today we still hear voices that call us to selfish sin, to moral failure and dishonesty. The world wants to direct us by its standards. If we let it, we are neither free nor godly.

Paul connects this with serving *the ruler of the kingdom of the air*. Paul and his readers are acutely aware of the evil influences that attack them. The phrase *of the air* does not refer to a specific location, but to the spiritual nature of this evil. The letter to the Ephesians addresses this reality more than any other writing of Paul.

Even so, Paul is confident that Jesus has authority (and therefore victory) over all the spiritual forces that are in rebellion against God (see [Ephesians 1:21](#)). But this is an ongoing battle (see [6:12](#)). *The ruler* of these spiritual forces of evil is unnamed here, but identified as the devil later ([6:11, 12](#)). The spiritual beings who are in rebellion against God are not our friends, but seek to destroy us and keep us far from fellowship with the Lord. This leads to Paul's

third element.

C. Rebellious Children (v. 3)

3a All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts.

The third element that promotes sin lies within us. *All of us* (Paul includes himself) had been driven *at one time* by personal *cravings of our flesh*. Paul clarifies by indicating that such behavior includes both *desires and thoughts*. If one's body indicates that something feels good, the person may do it despite moral consequences. If one's mind wanders far from what is pure and holy, the person may excuse himself or herself by claiming privacy of thought life. As with the influences of the world and the devil, those mired in sinful desires think themselves to be in control, but they are not. They are slaves to passion and lust.

3b Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath.

Paul's summary of that former life includes the fact that he and his readers had been *like the rest*. This refers to all who do not yield control of their lives to Christ. The characterization of unbelievers as being *by nature deserving of wrath* is quite striking, the phrase being seen as a landmark in the New Testament (compare [Ephesians 5:6](#)). What does Paul mean by this?

First, we should note that the phrase *the rest* is inclusive. It is not just pagan Gentiles who deserve God's wrath. Jews outside of Christ do not get a pass. Without Christ, they too are children of wrath.

Second, Paul's use of the word *nature* indicates something fundamental about us. As a result of our inherent tendency to sin, "there is no one righteous, not even one" ([Romans 3:10](#)). We need not debate the possibility of living a perfect life, thereby earning our salvation. It does not happen. It will not happen. Pride, part of "everything in the world" ([1 John 2:16](#)), keeps us from admitting that we deserve God's wrath. Such was our former life: infatuated by the sinful world, beset by temptations from the evil one, and controlled by out-of-control passion for the forbidden fruits desired by body and mind.

What Do You Think?

How can we discuss God's wrath in such a way as to get a fair hearing?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

With fellow believers, who accept the authority of the Bible

With unbelievers, who do not accept the authority of the Bible

II. Future Life: Exceeding Riches

(Ephesians 2:4-7)

A. Lavish Love (vv. 4, 5)

4. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy,

Having characterized one's pre-Christian past as consisting of infatuation with worldly influences, devil-driven disobedience, and indulgence in sinful passions, Paul now moves the discussion to his readers' future life. This shift is signaled by movement from the "as for you" of verse 1 to the *but ... God* of the verse before us. Any hope for us must begin with God's *mercy* and *love*. Even while deserving God's wrath, people still bear his image and likeness (Genesis 1:26, 27). God has gone to great effort to save his lost image-bearers (Luke 19:10; etc.).

Paul is given to large statements when it comes to the nature of God. We see a great example in the description here of God's attribute of being *rich in mercy*. This may bring to mind an image of wealth such as a pile of gold coins. God is an ultrabillionaire when it comes to mercy and compassion (compare Romans 2:4; also Ephesians 2:7 [below]).

Paul expands on this imagery by describing God's mercy as *his great love for us*. This may seem repetitive in English, but what is redundant to us is emphatic for Paul. He seems barely able to contain his excitement! God spends his inexhaustible supply of "golden mercy coins" on us freely and lovingly. "His love endures forever" is the repeated refrain of Psalms 118 and 136.

5. made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.

Life before Christ was one of being *dead in transgressions*. But as

Christ has been raised from death to resurrected life, so too are we *made ... alive* (also Colossians 2:13). We, the former children of wrath, have been given a new life, the children receiving God's great love.

The "afterthought" appearance of the statement *it is by grace you have been saved* may lead us to believe that this affirmation is somehow secondary to the thought at hand. But what is mentioned so briefly here serves two purposes: (1) it anticipates a fuller explanation of salvation by grace a bit later and (2) helps paint the fuller picture of God's attitude toward his wayward children as his *grace* is considered alongside his *mercy* and *love*.

Since Paul had spent so much time with the believers in Ephesus, we can easily imagine that they hear his voice in the statement *by grace you have been saved*. Doubtless it is something he told them many times in person. This is a most fundamental thing. How salvation by grace is possible is summed up in this easily remembered acronym: Grace is God's riches at Christ's expense.

B. Prime Seats (v. 6)

6. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus,

Our spiritual resurrection from the death of sin is followed by an ascension. Christ ascended to Heaven after his resurrection (see Luke 24:50, 51; Acts 1:1-9; etc.), and following our resurrection from spiritual death we are positioned *in Christ Jesus in the heavenly realms* (compare Colossians 3:1-3). Believers are even pictured on thrones in Revelation 20:4. Having front-row seats in the glorious light of the presence of Christ and his victories means we no longer fear the spiritual darkness.

THE BEST SEAT

Vertically challenged. Shorter than the average pygmy. Squatty body.

As one reaching the five-foot-nothin' mark on the measuring stick, I have heard all the jokes and jabs about short people.

Living at this "lower elevation" has its challenges, and if there is one thing I've learned over the years, it's the need to get a good

seat. The experience of attending a performance or event is greatly diminished for me whenever I end up in a bad seat because I arrive late or pay less. Many times I have not been able to see the very thing I traveled to see.

An astonishing revelation in today's Scripture is the fact that we each have the best possible seat right now: in the heavenly realms! In Christ, the view is unobstructed, and we are spiritually able to see things from God's point of view. Now the question is, what are we going to do with this front-row seat?—V. E.

What Do You Think?

How does the spiritual reality of being seated alongside Christ encourage and inspire you?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

In terms of confidence in the present

In terms of expectations for the future

C. Giant Grace (v. 7)

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.

Paul gives an eternal reason for God's rescue of sinners from spiritual death: that we might serve as a demonstration of his marvelous grace forever. The era that begins with salvation through faith in Christ is not an intermediate stage in God's plan. Rather, it is for all time, a plan for *the coming ages*. Again, Paul pictures God's grace as inexhaustible wealth (*incomparable riches*). To this is added the element of God's *kindness*, a word that implies essential goodness (compare Romans 2:4). *His grace, expressed in his kindness* is not God's response to anything meritorious we have done; rather, it is an offer that should draw a response from us.

III. Current Life: Saving Faith

(Ephesians 2:8-10)

A. God's Gift (v. 8)

8a For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—

The concept of being saved *by grace*, introduced in verse 5, is now

explored in greater depth. Salvation by grace expects and requires a response. The salvation God offers is of no effect unless accepted *through faith* on the part of the one who is dead in sins. Faith is often defined as “assent plus trust.” In other words, assent is accepting the gospel facts as true. Trust, on the other hand, is surrendering control of one’s life to Jesus on the basis of who he is and what he has done (John 3:16; Acts 10:43; 16:31; 1 Timothy 1:16).

8b and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—

Paul wants to be sure his readers understand that there is something they have no right to take credit for. That “something” is signaled by the words *this* and *it*, which point back to verse 8a. Here’s where a technical issue of the original Greek must be considered, an issue that is not apparent in our English translation. Every Greek noun and pronoun has a grammatical gender: either masculine, feminine, or neuter. So the gender of one or both pronouns *this* and *it* in verse 8b must match the gender of one or both nouns *grace* and *faith* in verse 8a to determine the antecedent. But there is no match. The nouns are both feminine, while the pronoun *this* is neuter. The pronoun *it* does not actually exist in the Greek text; it has been supplied in English for smooth reading. We conclude, then, that verse 8b is not referring to any one particular element of verse 8a, but to God’s system of salvation as a whole. Salvation is a *gift*; it cannot be earned. We are not partners with God in bringing salvation. We are recipients of this rich *gift of God*.

B. Excluded Bragging (v. 9)

9. not by works, so that no one can boast.

If salvation resulted from our own efforts, we could be justifiably proud. Paul knows well the danger here. Before he met Christ, Paul’s seemingly spotless life was a source of pride to him, evidence of his moral superiority (see Philippians 3:4-6).

But there are no *works*, no actions we can take, that make us worthy of being self-excused from our sins. The best of us still have lapses and failures; we still yield to self-centeredness and

gratification of lusts. We have no room for boasting, only for humility.

What Do You Think?

What steps can we take to help someone overcome a mind-set of salvation by works?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

When a fellow believer has the problem but is blind to it

When a fellow believer admits to the problem

When a fellow believer embraces the mind-set and uses James 2:24 to defend the position

Other

C. Intended Purpose (v. 10)

10. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

In the spiritual world of righteousness, then, there is no such thing as a self-made woman or man. Our spiritual resurrection is God's *handiwork*. To use another biblical image, he is the potter and we are the clay (Jeremiah 18:6).

Our new life has purpose, and this is part of God's design. We have been rescued from spiritual destruction so that we might be instruments of *good works*. Yet we must realize that living the life that pleases God is not how we are saved. Good works are not a condition of salvation; they are the result.

What Do You Think?

How do we identify the good works that God wants us to do right now?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

In light of personal desires

In light of spiritual giftedness

In light of needs around us

Other

WHAT I GET

Our young speaker said it—those words often heard from ministers and missionaries who share testimonies about God's work: "Of

course, all the glory goes to God.”

The Holy Spirit must have started working in me at that moment, for I was being very honest with myself as I thought *I want some glory, some credit for some of the things I do*. My mind lit on an accomplishment I was particularly pleased about. *Ha!* I thought. *I did that!*

Then it hit me: my success had come about through various circumstances that I did not control. There was my own contribution to be sure, but the skills I brought into play were given to me through God’s design. He was the one who had set me up to succeed. The speaker was right—all the glory rightfully goes to God. Taking credit or glory for oneself is dangerous (compare Daniel 4:28-33; Acts 12:21-23).

But what do I get? I still wondered. At that moment a beautiful image came to mind that answered my question. I pictured the loving Father looking directly into my eyes with pleasure as in Matthew 25:21. I realized I was not equipped to handle glory. But in the end I will be lavished with something far more precious: the pleasure in his eyes.—V. E.

Conclusion

A. Living with Purpose

Having interacted with Bible college students for over 30 years, I often find them questioning their purpose in life. In counseling, we discuss life’s big questions: *Who am I? Why am I here? What should I do?* All of these are wrapped up in purpose. Here are the Bible’s answers:

Who am I? You are a beloved child of God who has disobeyed him through your sin. Yet you are now saved from the consequence of sin and from spiritual death by God’s grace.

Why am I here? You are not an accident of genetics. You are created by God to serve him and glorify his name.

What should I do? Having made peace with God through Jesus, you are ready to give your life back to him in service and love. Sin causes us to be spiritually dead. God’s merciful grace gives us spiritual life in order that we might properly serve him in good works. If we submit to his will, he will use us in mighty ways, and our purpose in life will be clear. Is yours?

B. Prayer

God of grace and life, we are humbled when we realize that our part in our salvation is to accept it. We are amazed when we stop and contemplate your great love for us. We are excited when we anticipate your plans for us, both as instruments of your grace to others in this life and as participants in your glories in the future. In Christ's powerful name we pray all this. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Don't try to work for what God has already accomplished in Christ.

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