

Becoming Who We Are: *God's Creative Masterpiece*

Ephesians 2:1-10

Our Scripture passage today culminates with one of the most moving declarations to churches and individual Christians to be found in the entire Bible, i.e., *We are God's masterpiece, created in Christ Jesus to do good works...* (2:10)! With these words, God describes himself to be a creative artist making a masterpiece specifically to do good works in this world and that masterpiece is... well, it's us!

With that in mind, did you know that, according to the Fine Art Expert Institute in Switzerland, well over 50% of the art masterpieces that are currently circulating in the market is thought to be forged or faked. So, a lot of work is being done so that collectors might discern fake art from authentic art. One instrument that's being used to help in this is the Bruker X-Ray Florescent, the XRF: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ajeRpezZ92g>

Since all of us who claim to be Christians are supposed to be parts of God's masterpiece, I wonder whether we might also have a percentage of people who claim to be authentic followers of Jesus but are not. Wouldn't it be interesting to have an XRF device to help us sort out the real Christian from the fake?

Well, we don't have that kind of device – but we do have the passage we come to today, Eph 2:1-10, to help us to discern whether we are authentic in our walks with God. These 10 verses contain a flow of thought that make the point that this “unexpected family of God”, as we've been calling the church, has been created by God for a reason, i.e., to make God known by engaging together in good works. As the Apostle Paul wrote this section of his letter, he wrote of several characteristics that help us identify an authentic work of God from those who might be faking it. What did he say?

God's Authentic Masterpieces:

#1: Are Humble People – owning up to the truth of who we are apart from Christ (2:1-3). *All of us... were by nature deserving of wrath.*

One thing that knits all genuine believers in Jesus together is that we've acknowledged some bad news about our own lives. We've seen over the past two weeks that the Apostle Paul wrote about the two kinds of believers in the Church of Ephesus, i.e., Jewish believers and Gentile believers. In 2:1-2, he began to address only the newer Gentile believers by reminding them that they had been dead in their sins without Christ. But, in v. 3, Paul made it clear that, what he had said about the Gentiles' problem was exactly the same for his fellow Jewish believers. Paul wrote, “*All of us lived that way*” before we came to Christ.

So, what Paul described here was neither just a problem for the Gentiles, nor was it just for the Jews. He described a human problem. When it comes to our standing before God, what a problem we human beings have! Paul took three full chapters to describe this human problem in the Book of Romans. But, here in Eph 2, he boiled our human condition down into three verses. **What's wrong with us?** It's a tough pill to swallow – but he says that you and I (and all people), on our own, are 1) dead, 2) enslaved and 3) condemned.

Apart from Christ, we all are dead (to God) -- *You were dead in your transgressions and sins...* (2:1).

That means that, here in church, we are all physically alive, and, because of that, we are all aware of our physical and material surroundings. But, it is quite likely that some of us are spiritually dead. The Bible tells us that this problem is true of all people before they are “born again” and made alive to God. The reason for this, the Bible says, is our “transgressions and sins”. These are two words that declare that we all go down paths that we know are wrong. We all cross boundaries we know we should not cross. We all do things we should not do and fail to do things we should do. Bottom line: we fall short of living as God has made us to live. Those transgressions and sins separate us from God. Sins may not kill us physically – but they kill us spiritually.

So, spiritually dead people may intuit that there must be a God – but don't know him as Father. So, the person sitting next to you today may be a spiritual corpse. You may be one! The Bible passage we come to today is helping us discern whether we are spiritually alive or not. Apart from faith in Jesus, we are dead.

And, that first problem is compounded by a second.

Apart from Christ, we're enslaved -- The physical part of us may not be alive to God but it is very much alive to the influence of things that will destroy us. To what? Paul mentions the three enemies: the world in v. 2a (*“the ways of this world”*), the devil in v. 2b (*“the ruler of the kingdom of the air”*) and our own human nature in v. 3 (*“gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature”*).

This is quite a powerful trio, isn't it? The effect of their operating in our lives is that, even though we may try to live good lives that Eph 1:4 called “holy and blameless”, we can't do it. We keep falling short – of our own moral expectations and, most certainly, we fall short of the glory of God. The result is that we all have a problem. It's not just the people who never go to church who have the problem. It's not just the really bad people like Hitler. It's all of us! So, we're dead to God because of our sin and we have no power with our own imperfect physical, mental or emotional strength to change things. And, that leads us to our third problem.

Apart from Christ, We're Condemned -- *We were by nature deserving of wrath* (2:3).

Evil must be punished if we will have a good and just world. Few people disagree with that basic statement. And, God has declared that he will not let evil go unpunished. But, our condition is that we've all engaged in trespasses and sins! That means that, as we are on our own, we're in big danger – eternal danger. That's who we are without Christ: Dead – enslaved – condemned. What a mess we're in!

As Paul begins this section describing the masterpiece God is making, he lets us know of the condition of those whom God is going to redeem and make a part of his work of art. Here's my point: All of us genuinely being re-made as parts of God's masterpiece have owned up to these problems. We know that on our own, we have no hope. Therefore, the authentic masterpiece of God is always a humble masterpiece.

Let me say right now as clearly as I can, unless we as a church are humbled by the reality of our own sin and our desperate need of mercy, we will never become the church God calls us to be. We will never welcome all those God adopts into his family. The humility that comes from owning up to our condition without Christ is the quality that will enable us to be a God-glorifying church. Humility is the first evidence of genuineness.

And, there is a 2nd evidence of our authenticity as followers of Jesus too, i.e., we...

#2: Are Grateful People – rescued by God's grace through faith in Christ (2:4-9). *God... made us alive with Christ even when we were dead.*

Eph 2:3 ends with hopelessness. On our own, we are dead, enslaved and condemned. Then, v. 4 begins with one powerful phrase, i.e. "but God!!" God is ready to make a difference in all our lives. In these deeply moving verses, 2:4-9, we first are told why God has chosen to make available to us what we absolutely have not earned, and we do not deserve. V. 4 simply says, "Because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy made us alive..." So, on the basis of God's Word, I want to declare to you as I did last week, that, no matter what you have done and no matter what you have brought with you to church today, God loves you with an everlasting love. Because of that, God is ready to do in your life what you cannot do on your own.

What Does God Do?

Rescue Action #1: He's makes dead people alive -- *God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in*

transgressions (2:5). This phrase, “*made us alive*” is what the Bible means by being born again. Babies cannot give birth to themselves physically. And, those dead spiritually cannot do anything to give birth to ourselves either. But, God loves us and is ready to do for us what we don’t deserve and cannot earn. This is what the Bible means by “grace” – and it is by God’s grace that we are made alive. When you’re alive spiritually, you’ll know it because the Bible will no longer be just a book but your Father’s loving guiding Word to you. A sermon will no longer be a speech to you – but an opportunity to learn about your God and to hear from Him. Jesus will no longer be just a good man or religious teacher but your Lord and rescuer. God makes you alive to a world you had not formerly known.

Rescue Action #2: He takes enslaved people and raises us up -- *God raised us up with Christ* (2:6a). When you come alive to God, you will begin to sense new moral desires, i.e., you begin to long to know how God would want you to live. And, to accompany that, you will begin to discover a new moral strength to live for God, strength that formerly you did not know. This doesn’t happen as fast as you want it to happen. Being raised up and set free from our bondages and ways of life will require growth – and that takes time. But one of the surest ways to know you’re alive is that you start making “progress” in your love of God, your love of God’s family, and your readiness to obey God’s Word.

Rescue Action #3: He takes condemned people and seats us in victory -- *God seated us with Christ in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus* (2:6b). It’s like we read about in **Rom 8:1** “*There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus!*” Jesus, the only one who lived the life we should be living but don’t, was willing to bear the punishment necessary because of our sin. What do we need to do to come alive to God and to be set free? The Bible says that all this is a gift of God’s grace. We need only to respond to what God has done by faith. We need to receive his gift of life. Hear **Eph 2:8-9**: “*It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast.*”

All that we can say to this is, “Yes, Lord, I place my faith in Jesus.” And, “Thank you. Thank you for your gift of grace purchased by the precious blood of our Lord Jesus.”

So, the foundational change that God’s grace brings about in us, the thing that re-directs everything else, is that it takes away boasting and replaces it with gratitude. Those of us who know that our salvation required the death of the sinless Son of God can no longer be proud. Genuine churches are never griping, grouching churches. They are grateful churches.

#3: Are serving people -- doing good works together with others being re-created in Christ (2:10). *We are God's masterpiece, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*

In v.10, we come at last to the reason why God rescues and re-creates us. God does so because he wants to place something beautiful into his fallen and hurting creation that will make known his love, mercy and grace. His eternal plan has been to put local churches made up of people as different as Jews was from Gentile in Ephesus that will love and serve both one another and the world as Jesus did.

Do you remember what Jesus said in **Mk 10:42-45** to those who would become leaders in his church? *“Those regarded as rulers in the world lord their authority over their people. Not so with you! Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”*

And, do you remember what Jesus did for his followers just before he gave his life for us all? He washed their feet. Then, he said, *“Do you understand what I have done for you? You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you (Jn 13:12-15).”*

This life of service is at the heart of what Paul meant by “good works”. We are not saved *by* good works, but we are saved *for* good works. We are created by God's grace through faith in Christ Jesus, ‘to do good works’...” That is the purpose God has eternally had in mind for us. So, why does God save us? It's not just so that we get to go to heaven. The purpose of salvation is that we will do the kinds of good works Jesus did, works that make known what God is like! Our privilege, responsibility and calling is to do good works. We serve in our church family. We show love to our neighbor. We help people in our community who are in need. This is the heart, soul, and daily way of life of the authentic Christian.

So, we are ready to put the 10 verses of Eph 2:1-10 together now. A genuine masterpiece of God is marked by humility. When we live as if we don't desperately need the mercy of God, then we look down on others different from us. But, when God's grace meets us, we get our identity only by looking up to the only one who could have boasted. And, when we do that, when we look up at Jesus, we see that he who was in very nature God but was willing to serve us, even die for us (**Phil 2:5-11**).

And, that makes us grateful, so grateful for his grace that we ask, “Lord, how would you have me live. And, he says, “I've saved you to make my glory

known. I want you to love and serve those I bring into your church family. I want you to love and serve those I bring across your path.”

What does that life of service and good works look like? On an individual and personal level, I think it calls for a different way of approaching each day and each encounter with people. I’ve asked a number of people in our church family about how that kind of approach to living might look on a daily basis. Let me show you just one response from LAC member, David Packer.

“My main goal each day is to be an encourager for those I see daily or weekly. I try to do so daily with those in the leasing office where I live. A word of encouragement; a smile; a prayer. Definitely I should be a good listener. Help others with chores. Volunteer at a care facility. Visit a shut in. Be with someone to support them as they go through the grief journey-or send a letter, card, text, or email. I seek to do these things with the goal in mind to glorify God and thank Him for His grace by caring for others.”

This way of life is what some theologians have called “the inner effect of the Gospel.” It refers to the ability God works in us to set us free from our usual sinful ways while we still touch and bless the people of the world. We live lives of good works in the world without engaging in the sin of the world. Do you know any examples of this? Does Jesus cross your mind?

But, let us remember that, in first respect, this message that we become God’s masterpiece is not so much a message to us individually but to us as a church family. We are people called to be one in Christ. And, one of the main ways this unifying happens is when we serve one another as well as serve alongside one another in our world. Nothing bonds people together more beautifully than when we serve one another. So, it’s clear to me that a life of service begins right here in our church family. When you come to church, you should always come with the mindset that says, “How would God have me serve my brothers and sisters?”

The Bible says this life of doing good works is what God has created us to be engaged in. We will be seeing in Eph. 4 that God gives each one of us gifts for the building up of the entire family. When we actually do this, i.e., live lives of serving one another within the church family, the world will see our life of loving service and know God is at work here. They will know God is re-creating us into his masterpiece.

Have you found the place God would have you serve this family? Many, many of you have. But, if you feel you are not serving as fully as God has created you to serve, we want to help you today. We will have tables in the lobby – tables at which pastors and church leaders will be present to talk with you about opportunities to make a difference here. If you are serving, something will be

missing from this masterpiece that is LAC. We will be like a jigsaw puzzle with a



piece missing!

My ministry colleague, Nancy Smith wrote this last week: *If any one of us doesn't serve, then the Body of Christ is missing a piece of the puzzle – God's masterpiece. Our talents and gifts aren't for our own benefit, but for the benefit of others. We need each other to complete the picture! It is a joy to serve alongside people who have figured that out! From singing to discipling, from praying to greeting, all gifts can be used to show God's love and bring people into the Kingdom.*

The evidences that we are a part of the masterpiece God is creating are these: 1) humility because of our condition apart from Christ, 2) gratitude because God loves us and by grace rescues us through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and 3) good works of service wherever we are, works that bring blessing to others and glory to God. Are those true of you? Are they becoming more and more true of us here at LAC? Let us become who we are created to be – God's creative masterpiece doing good works that bring blessing to our world, joy to our lives, and glory to God.