

BluePrints: Gracefully Saved
By Jason Huff
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Genesis 15:1-6; Luke 18:9-14; Ephesians 2:1-10

Friends, our final Scripture reading today is Ephesians 2:1-10. I invite you to turn there in your Bibles and to pull out the insert from your bulletin to fall along. Let's listen together to the Word of God. "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. 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. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."

Over the last few weeks, we've been doing a series called BluePrints. We've gone through the first four essential tenets of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. We've covered Scripture, and we've looked at each of the persons of the Trinity -- the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We've learned a lot together. But we might ask -- why call it blueprints? It's because God is our spiritual foundation, and He is remodeling us into His image right now.

The last few weeks, we've really gotten to know the Architect. We've learned who He is and what He's done and why we can trust His designs. This week, we're going to learn our spiritual situation and why we need God's big renovation plans. That's what our fifth essential answers for us this week. It's a big part of the blueprint that God is doing in us. This essential stings at first, the same way it stings when you learn your home needs a new roof or new plumbing. But we learn how God is going to fix us. This tenet answers the question, "Who are we in relationship with God?" It makes sense of the human condition and it drives us to tell others about God. Here it is:

Being estranged from God and condemned by our sinfulness, our salvation is wholly dependent upon the work of God's free grace. God credits His righteousness to those who put their faith in Christ alone for their salvation, and thereby justifies them in His sight. Only such as are born of the Holy Spirit and receive Jesus Christ become children of God and heirs of eternal life.

In three sentences, we learn our problem, the solution, and who the solution applies to. It's elegant, straightforward, and convicting. Let's dive right in and see what we've got.

What's our problem? *We are estranged from God and condemned by our sinfulness.* If you don't eventually come to believe this, Christianity has nothing to offer you. This is the core of what Christianity confronts. We might come to Christianity asking other questions – how do I live a good life? Handle my family? Deal with my anger? All those questions are part of a bigger one – what's causing my problems in the first place? What's causing problems in my life, my family, my temper? It's that I am estranged from God and condemned by my sinfulness.

Ephesians 2 smacks us with it. “You were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world...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.” Paul writes to a mixed crowd, Jews and Greeks, all sorts of people with all sorts of sin issues. Paul isn't concerned with what sins we commit. What matters is that all of us at one point or another follow our sinful nature rather than God.

When you go to work or school, to the grocery, to the restaurant, out on the freeway, this is the problem we face. Somebody cuts us off and we get angry. Somebody steals our spot, copies our homework, slacks off, steals, does a poor job, doesn't tip, makes a cruel remark. Those are all symptoms of the deeper problem – we are estranged from God.

We turn on the news or read the newspaper or the web, and the same stories pelt us – somebody killed somebody else, this person cheated on that person, this person stole from that person, this company made a mess of that thing. Different names, different faces, but the exact same thing every night. We are estranged from God, and this is the end result. Titus 3:3 describes it by saying, “We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another.”

We're condemned by our sinfulness. That means God has found us guilty, and we deserve His punishment. We like the idea of justice. When we watch the news, we want to know that guilty people are going to get what's coming to them. We just hope that whatever we've done, the penalty is light. But God says that without His intervention, the estrangement is going to get bigger and bigger, and He will eventually cast us out of His presence. He's not going to make a snap judgment. Perfect justice demands it. The nature of God and how God made us demands it. A man unwashed of sin cannot exist in the presence of a sinless holy God.

This should sadden us. We might have anger at people who swear at us or steal from us or hurt us, but we should really have pity. They are lost. In worship, we say we want to reach lost people. What does that mean? Anyone who does not know the love of God, who does not have faith in Jesus, who has not been touched by the Holy Spirit, is lost. They are on the wrong path. They are mixed up, turned around, going the wrong direction. The worst part? They think they're on the right track. Unless God does something in their lives, they will be lost for all eternity. In our love for them, we want to do all we can to steer them in the right direction.

We love them because they matter to God. The lost are our family members without God, our friends, our neighbors, the guy we exercise next to at the Y and the gal who brings us breakfast at Ram's Horn. This affects every one of us right where we live. Do your friends and neighbors know what the problem is? Do you? Do we believe that people are estranged from God? We've got to know that this is the problem if we are ever to look for the solution.

In the midst of that dark problem, we do find the answer: *our salvation is wholly dependent upon the work of God's free grace. God credits His righteousness to those who put their faith in Christ alone for their salvation, and thereby justifies them in His sight.* We love choices. We go into McDonalds and there are 145 items to choose from on their menu – back in 1948 when they started, there were only 9. We like to think that we choose our religion and that we've chosen to follow God, and that God will choose us because we've chosen Him.

But Ephesians 2 told us this afternoon, “It is by grace you have been saved, through faith -- and this [faith is] not from yourselves; it is the gift of God.” This means we are saved by faith in Christ alone, and we're justified by God through this faith – but that this faith is a gift, not an act of our wills. We are saved not because we choose God but because God chose to show His grace to us, and that grace turns us to Him.

We want to think that faith is something we create, something we choose to have, but we don't. It's impossible. You either have faith or you don't. You may go from not having faith to having faith, but you can't will yourself to have faith. Let's prove it.

How many of you have faith that I can read? Probably everybody. You just saw me do it. Now...how many of you have faith that I can read Hebrew, Greek, and Japanese? Some of you. What if I told you that I took college and seminary courses in those languages? Would you have faith that I could read them now?

What about Arabic? How many of you have faith I can read Arabic? You've never seen me read Arabic...I can't prove that I've taken classes in Arabic or studied with anyone who knows it. What do you think? Now do you think that by sheer force of will you could make yourself believe that I could read Arabic? That would take an awful lot of faith, wouldn't it? And most all of you here tonight know me pretty well, but that's not enough, is it? As much as you might want to believe it, there's no reason to. As much as you might want to believe that fact, you can't force it. You might fake it, but I can bet that if your life depended on it, unless all of a sudden I started reading the Quran right in front of you, your faith in my reading Arabic would fall away really quickly.

That's true of faith in God as well. The Holy Spirit gives you faith as a free gift from God...just as free a gift as the gift Jesus gave by dying on the cross for sin. You can't earn faith and you can't will faith. As Christians, we cannot make people have faith in Jesus – because we can't do that. Our job is to introduce people to Jesus, to understand the evidence for Him and lay it all out for others – and then to let the Spirit do His work.

That's how it's a gift of grace. It's absolutely right for us to pray that our family and friends would accept Jesus as Savior and Lord. We ask God about it because He is the only One who can change their hearts and minds and give them faith. What happens when God's grace is in action? We recognize that we need to be saved from sin, and we put our faith in Christ to save us – we don't have faith in ourselves or in good deeds, but just Jesus. God gives us faith; then God credits that faith to us as righteousness. That righteousness makes us justified, not guilty, in His sight. Isn't that amazing?

It's all God's work. God gives us the gift, He gives us the desire to accept the gift, and then when we open the gift, He says, "Because you did that, you're in the clear." That's wonderful. The hardest part of it is simply saying "thank you" rather than trying to figure out how we can justify ourselves or earn salvation.

The best part of the tenet is that God *credits* His righteousness to us. Do you believe that? When you trust in Christ, you are right with God! You have credit with Him! If you were \$10,000 in the hole before you came to church today and then you went to the bank after church and there was a credit of \$50,000, that would be stunning, right? You wouldn't just be even steven, a zero balance. You'd have money in the account! That would be a blessing wouldn't it? That's how God treats us.

Not only are we forgiven our sin, we have the righteousness of God credited to us. And God promises that what the receipt shows will be in the account on the day we can collect. God credits us the righteousness now, and through His work in our lives by the Holy Spirit, He builds righteousness in us until the day we die. When we meet Him, we will be truly right with Him in body, mind, and soul.

That's another reason why we've got to tell people about God, to be a part of that work of grace for others. If someone was giving out \$100,000, you'd let everybody know, wouldn't you? Can you imagine how many friends you'd lose if you didn't tell them that some billionaire was passing out \$100,000 on the street no questions asked? God is offering eternal life, and He starts His work of grace in others through us, by using us to be His vessels to get the grace train started in others' lives. This is not just a nice idea, something we can share if we feel like it. It's so good that you need to share it, if you genuinely have that saving faith yourself.

And here's the key reason why: *Only such as are born of the Holy Spirit and receive Jesus Christ become children of God and heirs of eternal life.* The blessings promised in the tenet are huge. We become children of God and heirs of eternal life. God calls you son, calls you daughter. He's claimed you, adopted you, welcomed you, embraced you, paid for you. You are His heir. You are a part of His kingdom. He's written you into His will, and the good news is, He'll never die, but you still inherit! You get all His benefits, and most of all, you get His presence for all time. PowerBall has nothing on the jackpot we receive when we come into the family of God. As our passage said, "God raised us up with Christ...in order that ...he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus."

But all of those things only hold true for those who are born of the Holy Spirit and receive Christ. Many of you have heard me say this before, but because the world says otherwise, I've got to repeat myself: not everyone is a child of God. Jesus, the apostle Paul, and the apostle John all called various folks children of the devil. We are all created by God, but we do not all belong to Him. If we do not receive Christ as Savior and Lord and follow after Him, if we do not have the Holy Spirit working in us, we are not God's children. We are still stuck back in that estrangement and condemnation we talked about earlier.

Friends, it is essential that we believe that some are in and some are out; some have come into the Kingdom of God and some are far from it. We don't believe it because we like it; we believe it because it is true. If we are honest, we see it around us every day – people living as if there is no God and cursing Him if He does.

We do not boast that we have won the jackpot and everybody else can go to hell. No! When we think that some still stand condemned, it should move us to tears. And it should move us to action. Ephesians today tells us, “For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” Those good works include being kind and loving, feeding the poor, sharing with the needy, and being faithful to our families. But all those good works flow out of the central good work of following Christ and making Him known to others through our lives, actions, and words.

When you go into work and see the person at the cubicle next to you, do you think this is a person with an eternal soul at stake? When you take your car in to get the brakes fixed, do you see the mechanic as a man who needs Jesus? The person beside you in line at the supermarket? You aren't going to reach every one. You don't want to turn them off Christianity with a simplistic witness that makes them think you're crazy. But are you seeing the world with eyes open to the spiritual realities around you? Are you open enough to start trying to reach the people who God has put in your sphere of influence?

I'll admit that this is becoming harder and harder. I honestly think that the most spiritually dangerous habit in our American society is everyone being king of their own castle. We come home, shut the garage, lock our doors, and huddle around the TV. We don't know our neighbors. We don't know our neighborhoods. The only folks we know might be at church or acquaintances we met in school or work years and years ago. It's just as true of me as everyone else. And it scares me.

The last part of the tenet is beautiful and awful at the same time. It makes us grateful for our own salvation, it opens our hearts with compassion, and it makes us long that God would use us to bring more people to Himself. But if we don't know other people, that compassion quickly dies out. Over the coming weeks and months, we are going to explore ways of going out into this community, getting to know people, and ministering to them. We are created for this good work. And we know that the eternities of many people are at stake. We'll talk more about this when we reach our last essential in a few weeks.

Friends, be thankful for God's grace. We were condemned, but now we are declared innocent by the mercy of God. He will bring His mercy to others through us if we are willing. Let's not shrink back but be a part of God's plan of salvation and do our job, the good works we were made to do, and do it well.