

# By Grace You Have Been Saved

Ephesians 2:1-10

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

By: Ryan Dueck

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I've been thinking a lot lately about the gospel, what it is, what it isn't, what people need, what they don't, where hope comes from, where it doesn't, etc.

It's probably not surprising to hear a pastor say that they think about the gospel. You might even expect this to be the case.

And yet, that word, "gospel," is a slippery one. Even those who ought to know better can and do mishandle it.

One of the enduring human temptations is to fashion idols in our own image and to serve our own preferences. And we so easily reduce a big and expansive and hopeful word like "gospel" to the smallness of our own selves.

Last year, Richard Beck wrote an interesting series of seven blog posts called "The Gospel Minus X Equals ???"<sup>1</sup> I've quoted Beck before. He is a professor at Abilene Christian University in Texas.

In the series, he was essentially asking the question, if you strip away your values, your morals, and your political views (which we so easily equate with the gospel), what's left?

An interesting question, that one.

Beck is a self-described progressive Christian who is critical of progressives.

For many progressive Christians, he says, once you take away values, morals, and political views, there isn't much left of the gospel. "God" functions as little more than "the thing

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<sup>1</sup> <https://richardbeck.substack.com/p/the-gospel-minus-x-equals->

that justifies my convictions about love and peace and justice and equality and care for the environment.”

I think he’s mostly right here. I would add that more conservative Christians also seem quite happy to use the word “God” or “the gospel” to justify their own politics, morality, and causes.”

But we are all, at times, prone to making the gospel less than it could be or should be.

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The word “gospel” means “good news.” So, what kind of news would count as good?

Our text this morning uses some strong language when talking about human nature and about the world that the good news “lands” in.

Ephesians 2 begins:

You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient.

All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else.

Dead. Children of wrath.

I’ll confess that I spent some time this week trying to soften some of this language. Maybe I should say, *This is just Paul’s exaggerated way of saying that sin has consequences*, or some such thing.

I certainly didn’t want to stand up here and tell you that you were by nature children of wrath! You’re all such nice people!

This is stark language. It makes us squirm. It doesn’t fit with how we understand ourselves in the twenty-first century.

We know that our behaviour is affected by genetics and environment and upbringing and cultural influences beyond our control. We know that there are all kinds of forces at work in the world that lead us down destructive paths.

We can produce long lists of reasons for why we don't act in the way that we should.

But there is no getting around the blunt language of the Bible. We might think it is antiquated or harsh, we might wish that Paul would be a little bit more nuanced with how he describes things, but this is not the Bible we have.

It's not the world we have either.

We don't have to look very far in our newspapers, our televisions, even our own communities to see the reality Paul talks about in Ephesians in living colour.

How else to explain the lust for power and tribalistic violence that still defines geopolitical realities around the world?

How else to explain the degrading and dehumanizing treatment of women in so many parts of our world (including our part of the world)?

How else to explain the ugly divides along racial and religious and ideological lines that dominate our discourse?

How else to explain a culture addicted to brutal violence as one of the chief forms of entertainment that we demand?

How else to explain the selfishness and greed that keep people isolated and entertained in their own little private castles while people around the world go hungry?

How else to explain the culture of bullying that still prevails in countless schools and workplaces, despite all the policies, all the well-intentioned advertising campaigns that have been going on for decades?

How else to explain the many ways in which sex is cheapened, commodified, and commercialized, while families and relationships descend into chaos and conflict, all in a culture that claims to be "sexually liberated?"

When we stop to think for a minute, maybe “light/darkness” and “life/death” aren’t such inappropriate ways to refer to the world we live in or our very selves!

**One of the key truths of the gospel is that Jesus didn’t come to make basically good people better or even to make bad people good. He came to make dead people alive.**

Our text this morning contains one of the more explicit descriptions of this truth. But there are other examples in the NT as well.

- Romans 4:17 – God is the one “who gives life to the **dead** and calls into existence the things that do not exist.”
- Colossians 2:13-14 – And when you were **dead** in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross.

But that’s just Paul, right? Paul was kind of a grouch and seemed to forever be going on about sin. We’ll take our cues from Jesus not Paul, thanks very much!

Well, in Jesus’ most famous parable, the story of the lost son, we see the same theme. We know the story. I preached on it a month ago, so I won’t tell the whole thing again.

The younger son runs off with his inheritance, blows it all in reckless living, and comes stumbling home in shame and resignation.

Then the son said to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” But the father said to his slaves, “Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for...

- this son of mine was misguided, but he has been steered back on the right path?
- this son of mine was ignorant but he was educated?
- this son of mine was a bit prejudiced, but he got some diversity training?
- this son of mine had mental health issues and was prone to addictions, but he went to rehab and got some counselling?
- this son of mine was theologically naïve but was enlightened?
- this son of mine was the victim of political misinformation and manipulation, but he was persuaded to join the right team?

This is not, obviously, how the story goes.

The words Jesus puts in the father's mouth are, "This sone of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!"

Just to make sure we get the point; Jesus says it twice. The father repeats it to his grouchy older son:

When the father said to him, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. <sup>32</sup> But we had to celebrate and rejoice, **because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.**"

This is the good news. This is what we have to offer the world.

**Jesus didn't come to make basically good people better or even to make bad people good. He came to make dead people alive.**

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Perhaps you are beginning to wish you had stayed home from church today ☺.

All I can say is that the season of Lent is about looking reality squarely in the eye.

Lent is about being honest with ourselves, about confessing that we are people who cannot save ourselves, and of repenting and turning back to God.

Speaking of being honest with ourselves, Will Braun, editor of the *Canadian Mennonite*, had a fairly blunt editorial in the most recent issue. Perhaps some of you read it. If you haven't, you should.

It may not be quite as grim reading as the first part of Ephesians 2, but I think he made many readers squirm.

(He *certainly* made many conference leaders squirm!)

Braun talks about attending the recent AGM of Mennonite Church Manitoba. Here's what he says:

I find those events both energizing and demoralizing, which is why I have attended only a few in my life. You visit with good people, listen to inspiring words, weather the budget anxiety, then leave with the hollow feeling that key realities were not confronted.

I posit two such realities. First, large chunks of our denomination are fading and we don't have an effective plan to change course.

Second, the cultural and theological gap between the dwindling and vital churches is wide.

He goes on:

[T]he AGM felt like a troubling indicator of a general posture.

The seats at the Friday evening service were about half full. As I left the church, I saw the sign of the non-denominational church kitty-corner to the one that graciously hosted us. The sign was bold: "8:30, 10:00, 11:30." They pack the place, in large part, with ex-Mennonites.

I plan to visit that church. From what I hear, it will be a big, theologically troubling show, but I'd sooner see if there is something to learn there than sit smugly in a declining church, watching the list of the deaths in the previous year utterly overwhelm the number of births [and I would add, baptisms], a fact my 16-year-old son—who seemed to be the only teenager in attendance that evening—noted.<sup>2</sup>

I have been pondering these words since I read them on Friday, and I will be thinking about them next week as some of us make our way to the MCA Delegate Sessions in Edmonton.

This will be the thirteenth (I think?) MCA AGM that I attend, and I can say that I absolutely recognize the reality that Braun is describing. I think he is explicitly naming some things that many of us have been noticing and thinking about for a while now.

Fading churches. A huge theological gap between "dwindling" and "vital" churches. These are realities that we would rather avoid than address. And they have been for a while.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://canadianmennonite.org/stories/longing-transformation>

Because addressing them is really, *really* hard. It means asking uncomfortable questions of ourselves. It means naming hard things honestly. It means acknowledging our feelings of sadness and helplessness. It might even mean admitting that we're wrong about some things.

I don't claim to know all the specific strategic answers to the problem he is describing. But at the very least I am convinced that at least part of the remedy for fading churches and a widening ideological gap between "vital" churches and "fading" churches can only be to make the main thing the main thing.

The gospel. Not a social agenda or a set of causes to make sure we're on the right side of. Not a moral or political checklist.

These things have their place, but it is always and only underneath the good news that Jesus Christ has come to save sinners, to make dead people alive.

Jesus Christ has come to proclaim release to the captives and liberation to the oppressed. He came to offer life, and hope and salvation to those worn out by their own sin.

He has come to rescue those who have come to the end of themselves.

He has come to offer forgiveness, mercy, and grace, not an updated set of burdens for us to busy ourselves with in the doomed project of justifying ourselves.

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I want to end with two very important words. Two words, found at the beginning of Ephesians 2:4:

But God...

These two words must always be the last word, no matter how stark the human condition might remain, no matter how bleak or conflicted the state of the church might look at any given moment.

But God.

In the midst of the death and the darkness of the human condition, God showed up with mercy. With love. With kindness.

By *grace* we have been saved. Not by anything we have done or could ever do.

And so, we lay our burdens down at his feet. All our darkness, all the things that lead to death, we lay them at the feet of Christ, and we allow God to raise us up, to make us alive.

We trust that God has done for us what we could never do for ourselves. We invite God's spirit to work in us, to dispel the darkness, and to help us to live into the reality that we have been made alive in Christ!

Because, as the NIV translates Ephesians 2:10,

We are God's "handiwork." The Greek word is *poiema*, which is the root word for our word "poem." We are God's creative work!

But. God.

By nature, objects of wrath. But God said, "mercy."

Lovers of darkness. But God said, "Light, and grace."

Dead. But God said, "Life and love."

"By grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God" (Eph 2:8).

We are just over halfway through the season of Lent.

As we make our way toward Easter, my prayer is that we would be a church and a people who receive and proclaim this gift of God. This good news.

The wondrous truth of the mercy and kindness and forgiveness of God.

Amen.

