

What You Need To Know For The New Year (Ephesians 2:1-10)
Faith Evangelical Free Church
December 29, 2019

- Introduction -

Good morning, everyone, and welcome our last Sunday gathering of 2019. It's hard to believe that another year has come and gone, that another Christmas has been celebrated and is now in the past, and that in just a few short days we'll be ringing in the New Year.

Many people, myself included, use this time of year to reflect a bit on the last 12 months and make plans, set goals, or create resolutions for the year ahead. You might ask yourself questions like sort of person do you want to be in 2020? What sort of challenges are you ready to face, changes are you ready to make, and how do you hope to grow from January to February, February to March, and so on?

We often ask these sorts of questions in relation to our physical or material circumstances. How can I improve my health or my image? What goal could I set to advance my education or move up in my job? What are the things around me that could change, and in changing could have a positive impact on my overall happiness and well being?

And while resolutions of this sort can be very good and very healthy to commit to and pursue, this morning I want us to consider what sort of plans we are making for our spiritual well being in the New Year. How do you hope to grow as a follower of Jesus Christ in 2020? Or, if you are with us this morning but are not sure you do believe in Jesus, what steps could you take to move closer to a decision? How can we all learn more about God's love for us as we move forward into next year?

As I thought about these questions for myself, my heart became heavy with the challenges that being a follower of Christ comes with in the context of our everyday lives. There's an awful lot of pressure to think certain ways, eat at certain places, vote for certain people, purchase what we need from certain stores, watch certain shows while avoiding others...and this sort of list seems to go on, and on, and on. (A lot of extra heaped on to being a Christian)

On top of all that there seems to be a growing cultural conflict or discomfort with certain practices and beliefs within our faith. It feels like each day there is a new accusation of Christians being narrow minded, intolerant, or worse. It breaks my heart to think that a way of life founded on the two great commandments of "Love God" and Love Others" is somehow becoming known for a bunch of things that don't matter near as much as the love we're supposed to share as we share Savior's Gospel.

With all this in mind, what I'd like to do this morning is reset our feet on the solid ground of that Gospel and make clear what we all really need to know, and remember, and cherish in our hearts for the New Year: that we are all people who *were lost in sin*, but in Christ have been *saved by the loving grace of God*, and now *we've got good work to do to help others* in His name and for His glory.

That's the core, the essential truth of who we are. If we can all hold tightly to that in 2020 and commit to sharing it with others, we'll all have a resolution truly worthy of pursuing and changing our lives for.

To do this, we're going to take a look at **Ephesians 2:1-10**.

In Chapter 1 of Ephesians Paul declares the absolute and sovereign rule of Christ over all creation. Verses 3-23 are filled with some of the most beautiful exaltations of our Savior you can find in the New Testament.

Then, in Chapter 2, Paul's focus changes suddenly and dramatically to us, to humanity, and he reminds us of our tragic and fallen reality: all people are lost to the power of sin and evil.

- We are all people who were lost in sin...(vv.1-3) -

Starting in Ephesians 2:1, we read:

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.

Ephesians 2 (NIV)

When I was in middle school, and beginning to explore the freedoms that come with being a teenager who thinks he's basically an adult, my parents laid down two rules, two sovereign commandments that I was to follow with uncompromising obedience. The first was curfew -- it could be negotiated depending on what my plans were for the night, but I needed to be through the door of our home by the previously agreed upon time. The second for my cell phone -- if my mother called me on my 1st generation Nokia Brick with the flip down guard over the keypad, I had BETTER answer, or at least follow up quickly if I happened to miss a call. Be home on time, answer when mom calls. This was the law.

One night, I had plans to watch a movie at a friend's house. With my curfew set at 10pm and my cell phone in my jacket pocket, I walked down the street and arrived at my friend's home excited for the fun of the evening ahead. We got the movie started a little late, and as the hours rolled on I began to realize that the movie wasn't going to end before 10pm. Instead of doing something sensible, like calling my mom and asking if I could stay a little later, I reasoned with all the teenage self-righteousness I could muster that I was only a few minutes from home so it didn't matter if I stayed out a little later than normal. So I ignored the time, decided not to call home, and lived life to the fullest that a middle schooler can.

And then...it was time to leave. I pulled my jacket on and slipped my phone out of the pocket to check the time. It was after 10:30...but that's not what I noticed first. The time display on my phone had been pushed to a small corner by the alert that I missed on one...not two...but FOUR calls from my mom.

The memory of my slow, doomed steps back home is what often comes to mind when I read the phrase, “*you were dead in your transgressions and sins*”. It’s not a physical death, but a sense of hopelessness and inevitable punishment. A realization that rebellion has a cost, and that you cannot save yourself from the judgement to come.

This -- but on a far more consequential and terrible scale -- is what the Apostle Paul is describing in these three verses.

This is the tragedy of human existence. Our sins, our rebellion, our wrongdoings both premeditated and spur of the moment all contribute to our spiritual death and our alienation from God. The prophet Isaiah captured this condition perfectly in his lament,

“But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear”

Isa 59:2

If you’re going to understand Christianity -- if you’re going to understand what it means to follow Christ, to recognize him as your Savior, you have to begin from this place of realizing and admitting your rebellion and need for salvation. It’s uncomfortable to dwell on the topic of our transgressions and sins, but we can’t appreciate all that God has done for us if we don’t first come to terms with the disaster of life we’ve created for ourselves. Something is terribly wrong between us and God, and we need to be able to see that so we can also see the ways He has worked to make it right again.

So, in these few verses Paul briefly outlines three areas in which our struggle against sin and evil take place.

First, he says we were dead in our transgressions and sins when we followed the *ways of this world* (v2). Scripture is full of warnings that what worldliness can lead us to believe about getting ahead and begin successful is often incompatible with the will, values, and commands of God. The world beckons us to indulge the influences of greed, corruption, oppression, immortality, materialism, and the neglect of our neighbors in need. Another author in the New Testament echoed Paul’s warning of worldliness:

15 Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them. 16 For everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—comes not from the Father but from the world. 17 The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever.

1 John 2

Worldliness is in conflict with a godly, righteous life because it encourages us to believe that we can make it on our own, that we can be powerful, that we should be in control, that God works for us, and that we can act without consequence or concern. We slip into following the ways of this world when we fool ourselves into thinking that we can get away with it -- with sin, with lies, with evil -- because no one is watching, or even if they are watching, they can’t do anything to stop us.

But friends, God knows our hearts. He knows who we really are, what we've really done, and knows whether or not we really love Him...or if our love has fallen short and settled for small and selfish things that will one day turn to dust.

A second struggle we face is against "*the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient*" -- in other words, our struggle against the enemy, against Satan, against the devil and the demonic forces of evil that stand with him is very real and very much a threat to our spiritual and eternal well-being.

I don't know what everyone here this morning thinks about the existence of "the devil", and I don't have much time to spend on this topic. Suffice it to say that the Bible regards Satan as a very real and very dangerous threat to humanity. He delights corrupting our connection to God and his work flourishes in the lives of those who embrace disobedience.

And before we excuse ourselves from this struggle against evil, notice in v.3 that Paul clearly declares these sinful afflictions as affecting *all of us*. We have all suffered from embracing the ways of the world, from the influence of evil in conjunction with our disobedience, and, as it says in v.3, from "*gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts*".

Selfishness. Self-centeredness. Unchecked cravings, addictions, and the insatiable desire to consume. We sin in our flesh when we objectify something or someone good so that we can use it to satisfy our burning desire for selfish gain. We become gluttonous, lustful, and give ourselves over to feelings like anger, hatred, and greed.

When you lay it all out like this, it becomes frightfully easy to see just how dire our sinful situation really is. We are attacked from without by the world, from beyond and above by evil, and even from within ourselves by our own corruption. Sin has caused us to possess a deeply broken and flawed nature, which Paul bluntly describes as "*deserving of wrath*". We have all done things that place us in the path of God's righteous judgment.

And this is perhaps where the truth we find in Scripture clashes the most with what the world wants us to believe about ourselves: you and I are not just fine the way we are, on our own. We don't get to define what is right and good about ourselves. The creation does not dictate to the creator the way things are going to work.

Yes, all people are made in the image of God, and because of that truth all people inherently have a reason to love and be loved. But the terrible tension unapologetically found in Scripture is this: despite our glorious origins as special creations of God...we are not perfect. We are not flawless. We are not free to be whatever we want to be. We are slaves in bondage to our sin. We are dead in our transgressions that we choose to continue committing over and over again. And no matter what we do, no matter how good we try to be, we're stuck -- disobedient and doomed.

This is what it means -- or, for some, what it meant -- to be people who were lost to sin.

- In Christ we have been saved by the loving grace of God...(vv.4-9) -

BUT then, in v4, like a deep gasp of fresh air or light bursting forth in the darkness, God changes everything.

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.

Ephesians 2 (NIV)

Yes, we all need to remember and never forget that we were totally lost and dead in our sin -- but God did not leave us alone to suffer our dark, self-made fate. He proved Himself to be who he has always been, as he proclaimed long ago,

6 “[I am] “The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, 7 maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.”

Exodus 34

In Christ we have been saved by the loving grace of God.

Everyday we are given dozens of opportunities and options with which to define ourselves. Some are simple: the clothes we wear, the food we eat, whether we choose to drink coffee or tea in the morning. Some are more complicated, like how we go about our work or the people we meet and the relationships we create.

But this is what I want you to consider today, and think about as we move forward into the New Year: what would it mean if everyday you defined yourself -- first and foremost -- as someone who has been saved by the loving grace of God? What might change about your life if your motivations, decisions, and actions all began with a recognition and appreciation that your entire life is a gift from God?

It is by grace -- *a free and undeserved gift to us from God* -- that we have been saved -- *more than just forgiven, but also delivered from death, slavery, and wrath* -- and that salvation is through faith -- *our humble trust and heartcry that we need God.*

My wife and I have gone to see a couple movies in the past few weeks (Star Wars, Jumanji, Knives Out) and during the previews there is always an ad from Coca-Cola. A voice fills the audio reminding you not to forget your favorite drink, followed by a sensory-awakening sound of soda being poured into a glass, cold ice cracking as the liquid fills the cup, all the way to the top where you can hear the carbonation popping and sizzling -- beckoning you to jump from your seat and run to the concession stand before your movie begins. All of a sudden your mouth seems a little drier and you can't help but think, "Oh wow, I need a drink!"

Ephesians 2:1-10, and especially vv4-9, should cause a similar thirst for grace deep within your heart and soul. As you ready yourself for 2020, you should long for your life and the year ahead to be filled to the top with the love, grace, mercy, and kindness this passage promises all who are in Christ. That you can't help but run to the Lord for these good things.

And before we move on to our last verse for this morning, I must make sure that no one misses the emphasis on all of this truly being a gift -- salvation is unmerited, unearned, and offered to you freely by the loving God of all Creation.

Look again at how Paul describes our chance to be saved from our sins. Who is taking all the action? Whose motivation gets the work done? It is not our own. We cannot boast about saving ourselves. All the initiative and all the work of salvation is carried out by God Himself through Christ alone.

It is because of HIS great love for us that we are saved (v4). It is because of HIS rich mercy that we are not made to suffer judgment that we deserve (v4). It is because of HIS amazing grace that we can be saved by faith in Him (v5) It is because of HIS kindness, and His desire for that kindness to be on display throughout all creation and in all the ages to come that Jesus was born into this world, died as a sacrifice for sin, and was raised to life again (v7).

We do not redeem ourselves. Dogma and doctrine and slavish devotion do not somehow add up to an obligatory salvation. It is by grace that all in Christ have been saved through faith, so that not one of us may boast. It's a gift. Your life is a gift. Celebrate, be thankful, and resolve to use that gift to its fullest in glorifying God in the coming year.

We may have been people lost in our sin...but in Christ we are now people saved by the loving grace of God.

And because of this amazing gift, this fundamentally life changing truth...we've got glorious, wonderful work to do.

- We've got good work to do to help others in His name and for His glory....(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.

Ephesians 2 (NIV)

Instead of being dead and worthy of wrath, we're alive, totally recreated in Christ and sent out into the world to God's work.

Lately I have been thinking a lot about my role as a follower of Jesus in this world, and about what we as Christians are called to do as people who represent God to those who are still lost and searching for salvation.

Friends, I am so very weary of my faith and my religion being associated with terrible things.

I am tired of the misrepresentation I see the world and the enemy working hard to create, and I am so frustrated by our own actions and words that reinforce that false image of what it means to be one who has been saved by grace, who follows Jesus, and who worships the living God.

We are God's handiwork -- we have been created and reborn in Christ to do good in this world. In the coming year one of my greatest desires to live my life in obedience to the marching orders Jesus left with his disciples just before he faced the cross:

34 "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. **35** By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

John 13

We have not been hand-crafted by God to perpetuate violence, or anger, or hate, or cruelty. We are a people who ought to be uncompromisingly known for our love.

This is our true resolution: we will honor our new-creation-purpose and leave no doubt in the minds and hearts of all we meet that we see them with the eyes of God. That we love them. That Christ loves them, and died for them just as he died for us.

We are God's handiwork -- we are clay, God is the potter, and we are the work of His hands (Isaiah 64:8), sent out into the world to love others and make our creator, our artist, famous and glorified.

We've got good work to do to help others in God's name and for His glory....(v.10)

As you prepare for the New Year, how will you go about getting ready to be the person God created you to be?

A first step might be to be honest with yourself and before the Lord about who you struggle to love, and ask Him not only to forgive you, but to help you see that person or people as He sees them.

Another step you could take is to ask God to reveal to you what good works He has prepared in advance for you to do.

- Should you reach out to your neighbor?
- Share the gospel with your children?
- Explore a ministry God has in store for you by trying new ways to serve others?
- Cut back on the things you do so you can focus on loving a few well, rather than spreading yourself and your love too thin?
- Recommit to your work in a way that honors the Lord?

I cannot tell you what God has in store for you to do...but I can promise that He has made and is making you the perfect person to do it. You are His handiwork. Go and see what He's created you do.

And remember, you don't love others in order to earn something. You love others because God first loved you.

11 For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. 12 It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, 13 while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, 14 who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.

Titus 2

May we all be known our love of God, our love of others, and our eagerness to do what is good in the coming year.