

We are taking a break from our series in the book of Mark and transitioning into looking at how we can become the people of God and live the way that God called us to live. We don't become experts at anything by merely stumbling into doing the right thing. We become experts by changing our life and adopting the lifestyle we desire to become. You put in the time and effort to make your life that way. When we, as Christians, are aiming to be like Christ, we change how we live and how we think to align with Christ, and that's what we're going to be aiming at. This message will set this up even though next week Kevin's really going to kick it off. I just want to lay some groundwork for us as we begin this transition. Let's pray as we get started.

God, thank you for your Word, and thank you for your faithfulness to us. Thank you for your goodness and mercy. I pray that you would speak and that we would hear your Word. I pray that the meditation of my heart and the words of my mouth are acceptable to you. You are my strength and my Redeemer, be glorified today. Amen.

When I was in college, I was helping out in the junior high ministry here. I was at a really weird place in my life because I was struggling with a tension. And this tension, for me, was ultimately the disjointed nature of my actions. What was happening is that even though I was here every Sunday; I was serving; I was involved. I was a part of all of it, but a lot of times, I would stay out late on Saturday night until like five o'clock in the morning and show up here, basically asleep. I was really wrestling with the disjointed nature of what I said I believed and followed and how I was actually living it.

It was a struggle for me because I knew that what I was doing wasn't what God was calling me to do. And this came to a head at a point when I was in college. I remember one day. I left my classes and drove across the street because I knew a local pastor, and I knew he wouldn't kick me out of his parking lot.

So I just pulled into his parking lot and sat for hours. I prayed and listened to worship music and said, "God, please reveal yourself to me, show yourself to me. I don't feel right living the way that I am. Something's not right within me." Soon God offered me mentors and had people speaking into my life.

One of the books that I was reading during this time was *The Cost of Discipleship* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. It really affected me when I read it. For those of you who don't know Dietrich, Bonhoeffer was a pastor in Germany in the 1930s and is very famous for being killed a few months before the end of World War II because of his proximity to the plot to kill Hitler.

In his book, he laments the state of the German church. He's saying things aren't right. I want to read a passage from his book that really stood out to me. I think he communicates some very important things that really affected me.

We justified the world and condemned as heretic those who tried to follow Christ. The result was that a nation became Christian and Lutheran, but at the cost of true discipleship. [Church religion in Germany at the time. But this came at the cost of true discipleship.] The price it was called upon to pay was all too cheap. Cheap grace had won the day. But do we realize that this cheap grace has turned back upon us like a boomerang? The price we are having to pay today in the shape of the collapse of the organized church is only the inevitable consequence of our policy of making grace available at all too low a cost...We poured forth unending streams of grace. But the call to follow Jesus in the narrow way was hardly ever heard... What happened to all those warnings of Luther's against preaching the gospel in such a manner as to let men rest secure in their ungodly living? Was there ever a more terrible or disastrous instance of the Christianizing of the world than this? Dietrich Bonhoeffer

"Was there ever a more terrible or disastrous instance of the Christianizing of the world than this?" This phrase just stuck with me and haunted me because what do you mean that this is a bad thing? Aren't we supposed to be Christianizing the world? Isn't that the point, Dietrich? Like, what are you saying? I don't understand?

I had to wrestle with this because it was the Christians speaking into my life, who were saying that this is a great book to read. And I'm like, are you reading the same book as me? He's saying this isn't how it's supposed to be done. And so I didn't know where to go. I didn't know how to think through this. I didn't know how to process this. And I think in those times, it's important that we get in the habit of going to the scriptures and seeing what the scriptures say about it and test what these books and people say compared to the scriptures.

With this tension that Bonhoeffer is wrestling through in the back of our minds, let's look at Ephesians 2:1-10.

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 flesh and following its desires and thoughts.

Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. Ephesians 2:1-3

This is a precarious situation. Ephesians 2 starts by giving us a problem. The problem is that we are all dead. There is a sense in which we have all contributed to, because of our own sins and transgression, the evil that's in this world. The problem is dead people can't make other dead people alive. And if we're all dead, this is a problem. The question is, how do we get out of this? We are all participating in this, which is the story of the Old Testament scriptures from Genesis all the way through Malachi.

This is the story that, time and time again, when left on our own, we tend toward chaos. We tend towards going our own way. We tend toward abandoning and disobeying God. That's where we all are. And that's where we all were. And that's where I was at that time. I thought I could say I followed God but could do what I wanted on Saturday night.

Because of his great love for us, God is rich and merciful.

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 is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. Eph. 2:4-10

This is a beautiful passage because we were dead. There was no way out, but God, because of his great love, didn't leave us there. What a beautiful message of grace. This is it. It wasn't up to you to get out of your own situation. God spoke and he worked and he brought life out of death. Praise the Lord. This reminds us that even now when we mess up when we fail, it wasn't our work that got us here in the first place. It was God that got us here. So that takes the pressure off of us from having to save ourselves. We can realize that we can just sit and rest in the mercy that God has given us. How beautiful is that truth. Praise the Lord.

But I also want to point out here, and in verse 10, he continues on his thought. You'll notice in many of your Bibles that there is no paragraph break or anything in between. This isn't the end. It's not just by grace you have been saved. We are told why he saved us by grace. It says, "*For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do*" (v. 10).

See, the text isn't just saying you were saved by grace. That's true. It is a free gift of God that saved you. Absolutely. But he said God saved you with a purpose. He saved you on purpose for a purpose in order that you would go and do the work that he created us to do. And what Bonhoeffer was talking about was the church was saying that they were

Christians and Lutherans, but they weren't living like Christians and Lutherans. They weren't living the way Christ called them to live. His point was that there is a cost and that cost isn't to earned our salvation. The cost is you can't live the way that you were living before. The cost is our old way of life.

And how disastrous it is when Christians take on the name of Christ and then don't live like Christians. How much destruction and chaos does that cause in the world? We think of all throughout history, multiple examples, and even now, there are many times where pastors have fallen because they didn't change how they were living and continued on in their sin. How many times have we seen sexual abuse allegations coming up time and time again against the church, perpetuated by people who took on the name of Christ? How many times have we failed as the people of God to live up to that? This grace that we've been given costs us how we want to live.

But the question is, where do we go? What are the good works we're supposed to do? We could say that it's wrong to do those things, but what are the things we're actually supposed to do? We can't just leave it with, don't do bad. In Ephesians 2, it doesn't say he called you just to not do bad things. He called you to do good things.

What are the good works that God called us to do? If we reflect and think, we can see this all throughout the Bible. In Genesis 1 and 2, for example, we see that human beings were created before the fall. God put us in the garden. He gave us work to do. He said we are to work and to keep it. And he gave us a blessing. He told us to be fruitful and multiply and to fill the earth and subdue it. That is just about having children, this idea of being fruitful and multiplying. I think there's so much more to it. Because they were there in the garden, and they were supposed to care for God's creation.

Many times what trips some people up, and it tripped me up for many years is that word subdue. Because it seems to have a sort of negative connotation, right? Subdue, I'm going to oppress or put other people down. And that's not what the text is saying because if you think about the nature of God, I don't think God would be like, "Hey, do all these good things and then oppress the ground." That doesn't sound right.

If we look in context in Genesis 1, we can see what he's saying is that subduing the earth is part of the good order of God's creation. Let me give an analogy here. A fruit tree, if left alone, will eventually just drop fruit; maybe an animal will come and eat it, and then eventually, a new tree will grow. The seeds would fall into the ground, and another tree would appear.

But if humans get involved, we can plant the seeds in an organized way. We can tend to the trees; we can cut off the bad branches. We can trim. We can maintain the tree to help it grow and to flourish the way it was designed to flourish. If you drive down Hwy 5, you'll see thousands of flourishing fruit trees because of what humans have done. And I would say that's what it means to subdue the earth. It is to bring life, order, and flourishing to God's creation.

I would argue that this is what Genesis 1 is calling us to do. Not to just get whatever we want out of the earth. We're going to bring life, goodness, and order to the whole tree. That was our call, and then we fell. But throughout the entire Bible, there are consistent images of trees and rivers of life and temples all throughout the scriptures, which points us to this idea that it is still our work to bring life. Think about what Jesus says of us, disciples of Jesus, in John 7:38. Rivers of living water will flow through and bring life to all those around us. And I think this culminates when we get to Revelation 22. So let's take a second and look at verse 1, which talks about the new heaven and earth.

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Revelations 22:1-2

If we're tracking the biblical imagery from Genesis to Revelation, what we see here is John looking into the eternal state and seeing the people of God maintaining and keeping God's new Eden, his new creation. We, doing the good work that we were called to do, is his ultimate hope for humanity. That one day, we will do what we were told to do in Genesis 1. That's his hope for us.

As we track this, we should think to ourselves, "How can we begin to contribute to that?" And it might seem overwhelming because it's easy for us to think that we're never going to ultimately reach that endpoint. We're never going to get to the place where things are perfect in this life; that's Revelation 22. That's when Jesus comes back and makes all things new. And I'd say, yes, that's absolutely true. We are looking forward to that day. We aren't there yet, but that shouldn't stop us from working every day to begin this process, now, on earth.

I want to use an analogy here. When we became Christians, we were dead in our sins, as it says in the text. Then God made us alive, and it began this process in us where we started to adjust how we live. And we started to change us. Maybe we swore like a sailor when we first were Christians, and now it's not as much. Or maybe we lied to our spouses before, but now we confess and try to openly communicate with them. Maybe we tried to hide things, but now we're honest. There is a work where God is moving us toward the right way. And we know we're never going to be perfect. We look in the mirror, and we see, ultimately, that we are never going to get to that point where we are perfect. But God still calls us to move along that path in this life.

In the same way, when we're told in Ephesians 2 that we were designed and created to do good works. What he's saying is that God saved us, and we're going to begin this journey, begin this process of becoming more like Christ. And act in our world to do the good, to bring life and healing to the area around us. We're hoping to become transformed people who transform this local area. And so, what we do is find ways to get involved. We find ways to do good. I mean, think about, throughout history, the times when Christianity has been at its best.

Those are the times when Christians are building hospitals. When Christians are going into the places where the least of these are, and step in and bring healing and life there. Who's running the food banks in most of America? Well, the Christian Church. Who's doing good in their communities? Who's taking care of foster kids? Well, mostly the Christian Church. That's what we should be known for. And when we start to run into trouble is when we're becoming known for things other than that. We run into trouble when we think there's some other way to do this.

But God has called us to be people who bring healing, who bring life to our community. Yes, we will never get to that point in this life perfectly until Christ return, but we can definitely make changes in our local communities. We can definitely, as one New Testament scholar said, begin building for the kingdom. We can begin to prepare the way. We can begin to make a difference.

So the question, of course, then becomes, well, how do we do this? The first step is to look at the ways in our life where we may be failing, where we may be contributing to the evils of this world. Look for areas where we choose to go our own way instead of following God. We fudge the numbers a little bit. We do things a little differently than we should.

We realize this, and then confess and repent of it. Then we begin the process of building into our lifestyle habits and disciplines of doing the work of God. And so what I want to lead us in now is a prayer where we reflect on what God has called us to do. What he has called us to and the ways where we have not lived up to that call. So let's take a moment to reflect on our lives and our hearts. And then I will lead us in a prayer.

Most Holy Father, we confess to you and to one another that we have sinned against you by what we have done. And by what we have left undone. We have not loved, with all our hearts, with all our minds, and with all our strength. We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We have not always had in us the mind of Christ. You alone know how often we have grieved you by wasting your gifts by wandering from your ways. Forgive us. We pray. Oh merciful Father, and free us from our sins. Renew us in the grace and the strength of your Holy Spirit for the sake of Jesus Christ, your Son, our Savior. Amen.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail,
please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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