

Mark D. Reichert

Lent 4 – Ephesians 2:4-10 – A New Way to Walk

3/14/21 – Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Beaver Dam, WI

About a month and a half ago, I got up in front of you and asked you, what makes your Bible any different or any better than any other holy book in the world? Along with its unique message and history, we talked that day about its divine power and authority to speak to hearts, to change lives, and to save souls for eternity. Well today I'm going to ask you something similar: what is it that makes your Christianity any different or any better than any other religion in the world? Do you have an answer for that one?

If you're struggling with what exactly to say, again, you're not alone. A few weeks ago, our public school confirmation class had what we called our Evangelism Day. That's something I do every year with my confirmation class to help them learn how to share their faith in a short and simple, clear and concise way. But year after year, I've noticed that they have the hardest time saying that Christianity is truly different from any other religion in the world. I hear things like, "Most religions believe that..." or "Lots of people think this way..." or "This is what you usually hear..." Now I know that some of that just comes with practice and study and comfort level, but I think also that (not just for 8<sup>th</sup> graders, but for people in general) some of that is rooted in the pressure our society puts on us to say that every different way of life and belief system is equally good and valid, and if you don't believe that, it's *you* who are wrong and *you* who are the problem. That sort of attitude can give us a definite reluctance to say, "What I believe and what Christianity teaches is totally special and unique and there's nothing else like it."

But I'm here to tell you that Christianity *is* totally special and unique and there *isn't* anything else like it, so what are those differences? Well according to what the Apostle Paul says in our second lesson for today, it all has to do with the way you walk. See, this chapter of Ephesians begins with a pretty ugly picture of what our lives apart from Christ look like. Here's what it says: "As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you [once walked] 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" (2:1-3). Left to ourselves, Paul says, the only walking we can do is away from God. Spiritually speaking, we are dead because of our sins and there is nothing we can do to help ourselves or improve our situation. In fact, all we can do is make it worse – because when we follow the ways of this world, we aren't following Christ. When we gratify the cravings of our sinful nature and its desires and thoughts, we aren't gratifying our Lord and what he says is good and right. So that means left

to ourselves, we are *objects of wrath* – just like we confessed earlier, we deserve God's punishment both now and in eternity.

And every religion in the world recognizes that problem. There is something that stands between us and God, something that broke our relationship that needs to be fixed – it's what we call *sin* – and every *other* religion in the world says that in one way or another, it's on you to fix it. Keep the commandments. Follow the five pillars. Get your karma in line. Get in touch with nature or your inner self. Try, then try again, then try harder the next time, and maybe eventually you'll get there. But here's the first thing that makes Christianity unique: we can't. I mean, could the passage be any clearer that sin is impossible for us to fix? There is no way for us to make ourselves right with God, any more than there is for a dead man to bring himself back to life again. Now that's a message that might seem more hopeless than any other religion in the world... but truly, that actually leads to a message that is surely more *hopeful* than any other religion in the world.

See, if your relationship with God is on you to fix, based on what you do, imperfect humans that we are, how can you know you've ever done enough or been good enough? How can you ever know if you've given enough or if your love has been pure enough or if your obedience has been strict enough? You can't – in fact, you pretty well *can* know that you've fallen short – and the weight of that doubt and that guilt can be crushing. So then you might ask: how is it any better for us to honestly admit our sin and our helplessness and what we deserve from God because of it? It's because of one all-important word at the beginning of our text for today: *But!* Yes, it is true that we were dead in our transgressions and sins. Yes, it is true that we followed the ways of the devil and this world. Yes, it is true that we were objects of wrath, *but* God loved us too much to let it stay that way.

And that means whereas every other religion in the world makes its people walk in the fear of uncertainty, Christianity calls us to walk in the grace of God. "*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.*"

You know, I remember hearing a presentation once when I was in school by a Christian man who grew up Muslim in the Middle East. He told a story about some American Christian soldiers sitting around a fire with some Iraqi Muslim soldiers. They were talking about religion, exchanging arguments, the Bible says this, the Quran says that. They were going back-and-forth in their debate, but the Muslims went silent when the Christians talked about

their God of love and forgiveness, because Muslims don't know God like that. They know their God only as a judge who requires submission to his demands. God be praised if this section of God's Word seems like old hat to you because you know it so well, because there are so many out there who yearn to know God this way: he is a God whose love for you is great, a God who is rich in mercy toward you, who saves you by grace, who expressed his kindness to you in the greatest of ways – who saw a desperate need in you and then he himself jumped immediately into action to meet that need perfectly by sending Christ Jesus.

When we were dead in our transgressions, God the Father sent Jesus to die in our place and rise up again so that one day we could rise with him – to spiritual life right now and to eternal life when he comes again. When we were headed for hell because of our sins, Jesus turned our eyes to him and his cross and he promised us a place next to him in heaven. When we owed God a debt we could never pay because of all the wrong we had done, Jesus did everything right in our place and for our sake, and then he shed for us his holy, precious blood to forgive that debt and pay that price to provide us a pass into Paradise.

From beginning to end, our eternal salvation is guaranteed in Christ. Every other religion in the world would tell you to prove your own worthiness, but Christianity is different. We don't walk under the burden of constant proof; we walk by faith in 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.”* But nowadays we still have a hard time coming to grips with that, don't we? We still have that tendency to think that it must be at least a little bit about us, like the things we do are like the cherry on top of what Jesus did for us that makes us just a little more godly. The clothes we wear, the people we interact with, our family name, our church attendance record, all the different positions we've served in, how deeply we “feel the Spirit” or how into worship we get – those can be a wonderful way to honor the Lord if they're coming from a heart of humble thankfulness, but let's not ever think that those sorts of things are reasons to boast about ourselves or ways to get closer to God.

No, we are saved by grace – God's unconditional, undeserved love that never fails. We are saved through faith – which is our sure connection to Christ and all the blessings he won for us by his perfect life and death and resurrection. And this is not from yourselves – and thank God it isn't, because our confidence in Christ gives us assurance in salvation that we could never otherwise have on our own. No, this is the gift of God – and that takes away all our guilt and shame and despair, and gives us instead every certainty and peace. We are saved all because of God's goodness, God's generosity, and God's perfection, no strings attached, no doubt about it.

Paul says here that it is only by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ that we can be certain of our salvation. Our eternal salvation is not about us – it's not about us doing the work, not about us meeting Jesus halfway, not even about us making a decision to give our lives to Christ or inviting the Holy Spirit to come into our hearts or choosing to believe in him. No, every last bit of our hope for heaven comes from the Father's perfect love, the Son's perfect work, and the Spirit's perfect power, shared with us through God's Word and Sacraments. And after all, that's what a gift is, right? It's something that comes to us not because we have done anything to earn or deserve it, but it comes to us purely out of the goodness and love of the giver.

And since that is true, we don't have to worry about proving our worthiness to keep it and we don't ever have to worry about whether we're good enough. Jesus was good enough for us; that's all that matters! And so that also means we have a new way to walk now – not away from God in our transgressions and sins like the passage said earlier, but in step with Jesus and with his people through this life and toward eternity in heaven. Here's how our text ends: *“For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance [that we would walk in them].”* Let's get this straight, Paul says. We don't do good works for God. God does good works in us and through us. Our relationship with him is *his* handiwork, not the other way around. Our lives are *his* masterpiece, not the other way around. And so true is that, Paul says, that all those good works you're doing now, people of God – it was God who prepared them for you a long time ago, God who set your feet down that path and gave you the strength and guidance for every step you take. Our salvation, our life right now and in eternity, our entry into heaven – none of it has anything to do with our work; it has everything to do with God's, and that's how we can *know* it's perfect, we can *know* it's dependable, and we can *know* it's complete.

And you know, that really reminds me of that famous poem, Footprints in the Sand. People love it and yes, it is a little folksy, but isn't this an all-important lesson for us to remember: on our walk through this life, whether times are good or bad, easy or hard, it is our Savior who carries us, and that's how we know we'll make it home. There is no better way, and why would we want it to be any other way? When every other religion in this world makes it all about you, your goodness, your performance, your faithfulness, your worthiness – or lack thereof – that can never bring any real peace of mind and heart and soul. But God's great love, living faith in Jesus, and good works to His glory rather than ours – I'm not ashamed to say that that *is* different and that *is* better than any other religion in the world can offer. So friends, I'll tell you what I always tell those Confirmation kids. Don't be afraid to walk differently than others, because that means we've got a new way to walk in the footsteps of our Savior, and by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, that's the path that leads to Paradise. Amen.