

## Feeling Unworthy? God of Mercy – Ephesians 2:4

### Scripture Reading: Ephesians 2:1-7

#### Introduction

Back in 1999, the director M. Night Shyamalan put out a movie that dealt with the story of a child psychologist treating a troubled young patient who claimed to be able to interact with people who had died

The movie was called The Sixth Sense and it contained an iconic line that is still quoted today – “I see dead people”

Fast forward to 2010 when a new television series came out called The Walking Dead

That series is set in a fictional world that is overrun by zombies who just sort of lumber around wreaking havoc on the living

Of course, the characters on the show are trapped in this nightmarish scenario from which there appears to be no escape leading to speculation as to which group really is the “walking dead” when it comes right down to it

Now, we know that the dead don’t come back to haunt the living and there is no communication with the dead – God’s Word is clear on that subject

But, as our Scripture reading makes equally clear, the earth is filled with the walking dead and when we come to understand what Paul says in the verses before us we too will see the living dead all around us

This is our tenth sermon in the series I have titled “But God...” where we have been looking at various places in the Bible where those two words appear together

And what we have seen is that, when God enters the picture, everything changes

Within each of the instances of “But God...” is a stark contrast between the way things are on their own and the way they are when God is taken into account

Each of the instances we have looked at in the previous nine sermons have dealt with issues that some people may have experienced while others may not have

Such as when we feel confused God shows he is the God of enlightenment or when we feel oppressed by evil God reveals himself as the God of justice or when we may be feeling superior we see God as the God of equality and so forth

Not all of us have wrestled with all of those issues so we probably haven’t experienced God in all the ways we have looked at up until now

But the issue we are considering today is true of everyone who has ever lived making it the most crucial of the instances

One of the problems in modern society and even in many churches today is that we have the tendency to downplay the problem of sin

We prefer to give sin pet names so it doesn’t seem quite so bad and we really would prefer to think that God doesn’t really mind our sin so much

So we shy away from talking about sin at all and focus instead on the more pleasant and positive aspects of God’s Word

But the reality is, if people don’t understand how much their sin matters, how much it offends God, and precisely what their spiritual condition is apart from God, they are unlikely to understand their need for the Savior

And if we, as followers of Jesus Christ, minimize our own sins and don’t take seriously the depths from which God rescued us, we are unlikely to properly value his great love for us

We must recognize and always remember where we have come from in order to appreciate fully where we are today and what our future holds all because of God and be encouraged to reach others with the gospel message

If you are taking notes, in Roman numeral one, we are going to take a look at our default state

Then in Roman numeral two we are going to see how God changes everything

And then in Roman numeral three we will consider the difference it makes now and forever

So, let's dig in and look at how Paul describes our default state – and it's enough to make anyone feel unworthy

## **I. Our default state**

While we celebrate the coming of new babies and cheer the start of a new life when little ones are born, it's more than a little bit ironic that Paul says here that everyone who is born is actually dead

Of course there are all kinds of ways to define "life"

There are bacterial life, vegetable life, animal life, and the life of the intellect to name a few

Then there is the life that Paul is specifically speaking of here – spiritual life

And Paul says in the first two verses of Ephesians 2 that, in the sense of spiritual life, all people default to being the walking dead – in other words, it's possible to be alive in one or more senses while being dead in another

A little while ago we sang the hymn Amazing Grace to begin our service and, if you were singing along, you sang the words "Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me..."

A "wretch" is a person worthy of both pity and contempt, a degenerate; a completely despicable person

And many of us sing the opening words of Amazing Grace as if they contained a bit of poetic license or hyperbole – we sing of our wretchedness while thinking all the while that we really aren't all that bad

But the author of the hymn understood quite well his state before Jesus

That hymn was written by a man named John Newton who was an 18<sup>th</sup> century slave trader before he was saved

Actually, to back up a bit, Newton was a life-long rebel who floundered in employment as a youth before being pressed into service in the Royal Navy from which he deserted

When he was caught he was put in irons and flogged but eventually he convinced his superiors to discharge him to be a hand on a slave ship where he continued his rebellious and insubordinate ways

Later in life he wrote of those days: "I sinned with a high hand and I made it my study to tempt and seduce others"

Like Jonah, God used a powerful storm to get through to Newton and he was saved but still continued as a slaver hoping, he said, to use his Christianity to restrain the worst excesses of the slave trade

God continued to work in his life and he eventually left the slave trade behind and even worked for its abolition but the point is, Newton understood what it meant to be a wretch and he knew the title befit him in his unredeemed state

But I sincerely doubt any of you have quite such a disreputable past and suspect you likely didn't come to Christ because you clearly saw yourself as a wretch in desperate need of salvation

I think it's far more likely you acknowledged your sin in a general, intellectual way while rationalizing that you actually do need the Savior – but just barely

I accepted Christ when I was a child and even though I didn't grow up in a church-going family we were a moral family that believed in God and so it was only as I have grown that I have come to understand the true nature of sin and my wretchedness before God

And had it not been for the fact that I grew up in a home where general biblical principles were practiced even in the absence of regular church attendance, only God knows what behaviors I might have found myself involved in

By nature I was as spiritually dead and prone to absolute corruption as the next person because that is the default state of every human being

This idea of spiritual death may well be the most difficult truth we find in the Bible for people to accept

In Genesis 2 we read how God told Adam if he ate of the one forbidden tree he would surely die

And then in Genesis 3 we read how Adam and Eve ate of the forbidden fruit but because they were still walking and talking and going about their business they didn't recognize the most fundamental thing about themselves

We all understand that when a person is declared dead they have no more power or ability to do anything at all

They are on a path of steady decline into corruption with no power of their own to arrest it

And yet we seem surprised that the world around us, the world of the walking dead, is falling apart and moving ever further from God

It's futile for those of us who are spiritually alive to rail against the decline of those who are dead as if they could help themselves arrest their downward slide

But, in reality, those who are spiritually dead wouldn't change even if they could

Look with me again at verses 1-3 [**Ephesians 2:1-3**]

*And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.*

I want you to notice that those who are spiritually dead are first "*following the prince of the power of the air*" who is the devil and they are "*carrying out the desires of the body and the mind*"

Truth be told our default nature is to be controlled and to conform

Unregenerated people do what unregenerate people do and, typically for the same reasons because the structures of this world are set up to reward them for doing so

So that the walking dead don't really want to be different and they are in bondage by the spirit of evil that causes them to live to fulfill their lusts which means disobeying God

Our natural tendency is to want to satisfy the desires of our sin nature and those impulses it creates and to rationalize our behavior which is actually very easy because of the way the world rewards those behaviors

And, because we are dead, there isn't a single thing we could do about it even if we wanted to – we are completely unworthy in every sense of the word and powerless to change it – but that's okay

Because that's where the "but God..." comes in and in verse 4 we see God come into the picture and that changes everything

## **II. How God changes everything**

[**Ephesians 2:4-7**]

*But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.*

I want to look at three very important words from those verses – mercy, grace, and love

We are going to consider the love of God in depth next week so today I only want to point out that the Greek word for love that Paul uses here is *agape* which is the ultimate expression of love – sacrificial love

*Agape* love is active love and it's God's love that is the driving force behind the other two words we are going to look at as we see how God focuses his love on us

Mercy is compassion and God's mercy is an active form of compassion that looks at those who are pitiful, hopeless, and helpless and acts on their behalf so that mercy is the outward manifestation of compassion

But mercy is also the refraining from inflicting harm on someone who deserves it which, in this case, means that God doesn't give us what we deserve

Remember, we were once dead in our sins, following the course of this world, following Satan, and satisfying our own passions and lusts which made us children of wrath deserving of hell

But God, being rich in mercy – that word “being” indicating that this is God's continual state; God is compassionate and merciful and quick to extend his kindness and goodwill to all by not immediately falling upon us with the wrath and judgment we so rightly deserve

Instead, God looks at us in our miserable state and has pity and seeks to relieve us of our misery – that's mercy

Grace is similar to mercy but also very different

Whereas mercy means to withhold some punishment that is deserved; grace means to give someone some good thing they don't deserve

In fact, the Greek word that is used here and typically translated as “grace” is *charis* which reminds us of our English “charity”

One source I read says that God's grace is “undeserved, unsought, and unbought” – at least by us for we know that the price of it was the blood of God's only begotten Son

By way of illustration, let's say you get a speeding ticket and are told you have to go to court and stand before the judge. You go and the case is made against you and you have no defense because you drive like a maniac so the judge declares you guilty and levies a \$100 fine against you.

But then the judge says he is releasing you from paying the fine – that's mercy.

Then he does something completely unexpected and he reaches under his robe, pulls out his wallet, and pulls out a \$100 bill to pay your fine and gives you a good driving certificate – that's grace.

And here's the thing – since those who are unredeemed are dead they cannot help themselves in any way and they are totally dependent on having others act for them.

So God takes the initiative and offers mercy and grace because of his great love for mankind.

We naturally accept that because we tend to think that there is something within us that causes God to love us but look again at verse 3 [**Ephesians 2:3**] which tells us we were not only dead but “*children of wrath*”

Write this down – There is absolutely no reason for God to love us and offer us his mercy and grace except for the fact that it is God's nature to do so.

There is nothing commendable about us so we need to stop trying to make ourselves lovable to God and just receive his love, mercy, and grace in spite of our unworthiness.

And once we do that we will discover the wonderful difference God's act of reconciliation makes for us.

### **III. The difference it makes**

What we are going to see is that God's act of reconciliation toward us has effects on our past, present, and future.

Look again at verse 5 [**Ephesians 2:5**] which tells us clearly that God didn't wait for us to become more lovable but he loved us while we were still dead in our trespasses.

Paul states this truth again in **Romans 5:8** which tells us that

*God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us*

That's the same idea, right?

In fact, being dead is a requirement to be saved.

One must recognize and accept the fact that they are dead and give up on all attempts to earn God's love and mercy for themselves – God's salvation is by grace alone; it cannot be earned or deserved

And then, continuing on in verse 5 [**Ephesians 2:5**] we see that God has made us "*alive together with Christ*"

When Jesus joined with us in our death he made it possible for us to join together with him in his life everlasting

And again, Paul makes clear that this is all a function of God's grace toward us

If you are a true child of God this has already happened, you are no longer dead but alive with Christ – that's the past

But God's mercy and grace have a present effect as well as we see in verse 6 [**Ephesians 2:6**]

God has raised us up to sit together with Christ in heaven

Now, we need to recognize that this is one of those "already but not yet" realities we find so often in the Bible

It should be obvious as we look around this morning that we are not presently actually sitting in heaven with Jesus

But since Jesus is seated at the Father's right hand at this very moment and since we are in Christ as we read in Romans 8:1, Philippians 1:1; Colossians 3:3, 1Peter 5:14, and other places

Since our identity is now inextricably intertwined with Jesus'; and since he is sitting in the heavenly places, we are also

We read in **Philippians 3:20** that our citizenship is in heaven and we sing the words "this world is not my home; I'm just a passing through" because, as God's children, we have a right to God's kingdom and our future there is so secure we can say that it is our present reality

Then in verse 7 [**Ephesians 2:7**] Paul looks to the future as he says God will continue to *show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus*

I believe Paul means that God will continue this pattern of mercy and grace throughout the duration of this age until the return of his Son – that much seems pretty clear

The gospel will continue to be preached and people will continue to be saved and then blessed while on this earth

But I also believe he is talking about after all of God's children are gathered together in heaven to dwell with him forever

I believe God's mercy and grace will be ours for all eternity as God continues to reveal the immeasurable depths of his love for us

So we see that God's work of reconciliation has blessing for us in our past, present, and future – it really makes *all* the difference

We were dead but God acting in love, mercy, and grace made us alive, we are citizens of heaven, and will continue to be the recipients of God's blessings

## Conclusion

I trust that you now see why I said at the beginning of our study that this instance of “but God...” is arguably the most crucial of them all

Since the default state of existence for everyone who has ever been born is to be one of the walking dead this “but God...” touches everyone

Recognizing this truth has profound implications for us today as we look around at the seemingly ever-increasing moral decay of the world around us

Really, none of it should surprise or confound us because it is simply the nature of dead being to decay

But we know the cure and it's contained for us in these verses from Ephesians 2

Think about it; if we extend down to verse 8 the entire gospel message is right here

As Pastor Ray Pritchard so aptly puts it, we can sum up the message in just six words:

You were, but God, through faith

You were dead in your sins just like all the unredeemed around us still are

You were a slave to sin and following the prince of the air, helpless, and hopeless just as they are

Then comes the “but God...” as God reached down and sent his Son to give us the gift of salvation because of his love, mercy, and grace and not because of any redeeming quality we might fancy we have

And then the final two words found in verse 8 tell us that we appropriate God's grace only through faith – through letting go of everything else and forgoing any effort on our part and trust fully in the sacrificial death of Christ

Do you want the world to be different?

The cure isn't in political or social solutions it's in these verses – people must be brought from death to life

Without that, our world is going to continue to be filled with the walking dead doing what the walking dead do

But God...

Let's pray