

SERMON TITLE: "Saved By Grace: Our Way to Life"
SERMON TEXT: Ephesians 2:1-10
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: October 8, 2017, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

For the past several weeks, we've been celebrating the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. With people all over the world, we've been commemorating the fall day in 1517 when Martin Luther posted his *95 Theses* on the door of the Roman Catholic church in Wittenberg, Germany. Luther had been a Catholic monk. He was very religious, and yet, he had struggled to gain a sense of his own salvation. He was plagued by a sense of guilt, and no matter how much he confessed his sins or acted in penance, he couldn't seem to find a sense of peace.

The teaching and practice of the Catholic Church compounded the problem. Catholic leaders emphasized humanity's sin and guilt as a way to make the people more dependent on the church's means of grace—which, at that time, included the sale of indulgences. Supposedly a sinner could make payments to the church to purchase the excess good merits of the saints, and that act of purchase would then free the sinner from guilt. Eternal damnation would be kept at bay for a time, until the church needed further income, the sinner needed further absolution, or both.

Today, we could look upon that whole ecclesiastical business as corruption and abuse. But, of course, the church did provide many good benefits to the people. Even with a list of 95 complaints, Martin Luther wasn't decrying *everything* that the church did. The reason he took all this so seriously was that he continued to hold the church and Christianity dear to his heart. It was just that, through his closer reading of the scriptures, Luther came to believe that our salvation doesn't come through our own works of penance or righteousness or through the purchase of the extra merits of the saints. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus, all that was necessary had already been accomplished. Our salvation was already freely offered as a gift of God's mercy and grace.

Over the past weeks, we've come at this Protestant Reformation topic from a number of different directions. Today, I'd like us to look at Ephesians 2:1-10, which is one of the most important scripture texts for reformation theology. There, we see that, when we are saved by grace, we find our way to life.

1—DEAD IN SIN

You may have noticed that the section heading in our pew Bibles says "From Death to Life." That's a pretty good description of these verses in Ephesians 2. About half of this passage describes what it's like to be dead in sin, and the other half describes what it's like to be alive in Christ. You could make a chart that would show the indicators of death on one side, and the characteristics of life on the other. When we're saved by grace, we move from the death column to the life column.

Let's start by looking at the death column. As we scan these verses, we see a description of death that comes through trespasses and sins that have to do with following the ways of the world, following the rulers and powers of the culture around us, and following the spirit of disobedience to what we know is right. The death described in Ephesians 2 is a result of living according to passions of the flesh and desires of the senses, which then stirs wrath within and against us.

Today, we might use a little different imagery or language to describe how sin arises and impacts our lives, but I think we can all understand and relate to what Ephesians is saying. There's a lot that's good in our world and our culture, but there's a lot that can lead us astray too. If we blindly follow the "power of the air", the stuff that just floats around us on our airwaves, in our social media, and in our daily interactions, we can easily go the wrong direction. If we don't carefully think about what we're doing, we can easily be led onto a path of death and destruction.

Culture is made up of the ideas and traditional values that are just taken for granted. Culture is that way of life that is so basic that we rarely even question it. Many aspects of culture are beautiful and wonderful and help us to thrive. But culture and tradition are not always benign. They often serve

a purpose of empowering some people at the expense of others. If we don't question the cultural air that we breathe, we may not realize how polluted and deadly it is. We may not realize what damage it's doing to our spiritual lungs and those of other people. We may not realize how dead and destructive we've become.

Of course, there are other times when we know full well that we're not doing what we should. That's what it means to follow the spirit of disobedience. We eat too much even though we know what calories do. We drive over the speed limit even though we know it can be dangerous. We stay up too late at night watching TV or playing on the computer even though we know we'll be tired and less effective the next day. We skip our exercises even though we know we need the therapy to get well and be healthy. We don't take time to read the Bible and talk to God because there are so many other things we have to get done. We cheat a little here, we take advantage of people a little there because we delude ourselves into thinking it's our turn; we deserve it. We wallow in negativity instead of rejoicing in our blessings. We lie to cover our misdeeds and maneuver to feed our greed. We blame others for what is our fault. We become addicted to substances and behaviors. We disregard the needs of other people, so that we can justify our own satisfactions. We get angry out of proportion to the offense and hurt others with our response. We know we need to spend quality time with our families, but we selfishly go off by ourselves anyway. Or vice versa: We really need to take time for ourselves, but instead we give ourselves away to the point of exhaustion and resentment. O my! There are so many ways to disobey! And all those acts of disobedience lead us on the path toward death.

2—ALIVE IN CHRIST

And that's why it's so important for us to know that God has provided an answer for us. In Ephesians 2, verses 4-10, we see God's solution to our problem of death. The Christian good news is that, even when we were dead through our trespasses, God who is rich in mercy and great love has made us alive together with Christ. Not by the goodness or success of our works, but by the

immeasurable riches of God's grace and kindness, God has saved us. All we have to do is believe. And even that required faith is not our own doing; it's a gift from God. God gives us the faith to believe in Christ's resurrection power, so that we turn away from death and begin doing instead the good works that characterize our Christian way of life.

To be saved by grace is a miraculous and amazing thing. As the Apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans, "God proves his love for us in that, even while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."^{5:8} If we were to think that salvation was something we deserved or earned, then we'd have little motivation to do anything more or differently than what we're already doing. But when we realize that our salvation isn't dependent on ourselves, that it's God's gift to us, then appreciation wells up inside us. And when appreciation wells up inside us, then that stirs us up from the grave of sin and onto the path of life with Christ.

Ephesians 2:6 tells us that when we have been saved by grace, God raises us up with Christ in the heavenly places. That doesn't just mean going to heaven after we die. It means that even now, while our feet still walk this earth, we can have our mind engaged in heavenly perspectives and eternal attitudes. In Philippians 2, the Apostle Paul wrote that having the mind of the exalted Christ involves things like encouragement, consolation from love, sharing in God's Spirit, compassion and sympathy, joy, unity, and humility. Those are the life-giving human passions that involve caring for other people, not just our own desires. And those are the gifts of saving grace that provide our way to life.

CONCLUSION

If what I'm saying seems too abstract, let's talk about something very concrete that just happened this past week. No one seems to know yet what motivated Stephen Paddock to kill 58 people and maim hundreds more last Sunday in Las Vegas. But I think we can all agree that what he did was a sign of someone who was engaged much more in death than in life. Reports are telling us that he must

have been planning and preparing for this act of barbarism for some time. Apparently, he had done some practice runs in other places.

Can you imagine how last Sunday would have gone differently had Stephen Paddock accepted and embraced God's life-giving grace in his heart? Even if he had already thought for years about doing such a terrible act. Even if he had already purchased his guns and ammunition. Even if he had already planned when and where and how. Even if he had already bought his girlfriend a plane ticket to the Philippines and sent her away. Even then, if only he would have stopped and recognized that God's mercy was so powerful and so amazing that he could be forgiven for all of that wretched, death-mongering stuff that was going on in his brain. If only he would have embraced God's love that is willing and eager to save us in grace. If only he would have let God's gift penetrate his heart and his mind, 59 people would still be alive today, hundreds more would be healthy, thousands would be able to sleep at night without flashbacks and terrors, and our entire nation and world would be so much better off.

God's grace is available to us, to save us from death and to give us a pathway to life. God did not create us to destroy ourselves and each other. No matter what we've been doing, no matter what our mind has been thinking or planning, God has a means to interrupt our death-focused ways. If it feels futile, like you can't do it, like you can't believe it, like you're in too deep--no worry. This isn't about your abilities, your works, or your perfection. This is a God-given gift to you. Just reach out your hands and accept what is being offered.

This Protestant-Reformation, Christian-good-news message is for all of us. Be saved by grace. This is what God has prepared to be our way to life.