

Coming to Grips with Being Dead

Ephesians 2:1-7

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ June 21, 2015 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

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¹You were dead through the trespasses and sins ²in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. ³All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. ⁴But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us ⁵even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— ⁶and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. (Ephesians 2:1-7, NRSV)

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Many years ago I was driving east across the Bay Bridge when the engine on my normally dependable Honda Civic basically blew up. Thankfully I was on the downhill side of the eastern span of the bridge with enough momentum so that I was able to coast a half-mile or so off the bridge to a place where I could pull safely to the side of the road. The thing is, if you'd been driving alongside me on the bridge that night and seen me coming down into Oakland that last half-mile you might not have known anything was wrong. Because I was headed downhill with good momentum I was still cruising along at a pretty good speed. From all appearances you would never have guessed that the car speeding along on the highway next to you was, in fact, on its last legs.

Sometimes appearances can be deceiving.

As we just read, Paul begins this passage with a sobering claim, **“You were dead...”** And if you were paying attention you said, “What? I was dead? No I wasn’t. I *will be* dead. I’ll give you that. But I’ve never *been* dead. Nor has anybody I know.” And Paul would respond to you, “Sometimes appearances can be deceiving.”

You see, Paul is not speaking here of physical death because, of course, none of us have yet been physically dead. No, Paul is speaking here of spiritual death, telling us that there was a time before we placed our faith in Christ that we were spiritually dead because Christ, after all, is the source of all life. Therefore, before we received Christ into our lives, there was no life in us. We may have appeared alive from the outside as we cruised along in life, but like my car that night on the Bay Bridge, there was a deadness inside which meant that unless something changed it would only be a matter of time before even our physical life ebbed away. For you see, if the spirit within the body is dead, it’s only a matter of time before the body dies as well. Don’t be deceived, just because you see people cruising along in life does not necessarily mean that there is life within.

But why? What makes people dead in their spirits? Paul is very clear. **“You were dead,”** he declares, **“through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient.”** Sin brings death, first to the spirit and then eventually to the body as well.

But what is sin? Think about it this way. Out of love God created human beings to experience abundant and eternal life with him. But from the beginning God made clear that this life is only possible as we remain connected *to him* because He alone is the source of this life.¹ What this means is that our identity, our security, our purpose are all rooted in God. God alone is the source of these things.

We sin, therefore, when we refuse to root ourselves in God, to seek from Him *alone* our identity, security and purpose. Sin is when we seek cosmic significance in something other than God. You see, sin is not just doing bad things. Sin is making good things into ultimate things. For example, though God tells me it is a sin when I selfishly hoard money

¹ See Jesus’ brilliant teaching on this in John 15:1-17.

and material things, it's not material things in and of itself that is the main problem. The sin beneath the sin is that I have convinced myself that my identity, security and purpose are ultimately defined by the good material things I possess. In other words, I've made money my god and, in doing so, cut myself off from the only true God, the one who is the only source of the life I was made for. This is why sin always leads to deadness, first of the spirit and then eventually of the body. And since God loves his people, God hates sin because sin brings death to his people.

Let me pause here and acknowledge that I am fully aware that it is not popular these days, even in the church, to talk about sin. As somebody recently pointed out, about the only time we see the word "sin" these days is on dessert menus. We don't mind labeling a white chocolate raspberry truffle cheesecake sinful; we just don't like put that label on people. And I think the reason for this is that in our culture, where tolerance and acceptance reign supreme, we're deathly afraid of coming across judgmental. Who am I to tell you that you are a sinner?

Well, as we used to say when we were kids, it takes one to know one. And actually that's Paul's point here in Ephesians. In verse 3 he writes, "**All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else.**" When it comes to sin, every single one of us is in the same boat. In one way or another, we all have sought to root our deepest identity, security and purpose in something other than our relationship and service to God.

For this reason, there is no room for judgment, especially least self-righteous judgment, the sort of judgment where I compare my life to your life and come to the smug conclusion that I've lived a better life in the eyes of God than you have. If that's where our discussion of sin has led us then I completely understand why people don't want to talk about sin. That is never, however, where the discussion *ought* to lead.

Imagine two men standing at the rim of the Grand Canyon. Even though it is fully 18 miles wide, both men have deceived themselves into believing that they can jump across the canyon to the other side. So on the count of three, both men jump. The first man gets a decent jump and makes it 10 feet across. The second man, however, a man of far superior strength and skill, jumps an impressive 18 feet across. Then, as they both fall towards their death on the canyon floor the second man turns mid-air towards the first and spends his final moments boasting about how much farther he jumped.

I want you to understand that whenever self-righteous judgment enters into our discussions of sin the solution isn't to stop talking about sin. The solution is to realize that we've made the wrong comparison. In fact, whenever I compare my righteousness to your righteousness, or lack thereof, that leads to the sort of judgment that we all ought to hate because God hates it as well.

You see, when it comes to sin our standard of comparison is never one another. So what if I jumped 8 feet further into the canyon? In the end *both* our lives fell infinitely short. No, our standard of comparison is not one another but Christ. When I compare my righteousness to the righteousness of other people, especially if I'm selective in which people I choose to compare myself to, it's possible for me to come away feeling pretty good about myself. When I compare myself to Christ, however, to his righteousness, the only conclusion I can ever come to is that I have fallen terribly short. So what if I jumped 18 feet into the canyon. Big deal. Christ jumped the full 18 miles all the way across because he lived an absolutely perfect life.

You see, we know that in the person of Jesus we have divine revelation, that when Christ came to this earth as one of us we were given the clearest picture of God we have ever been given. Do you want to know what God is truly like? Look at Jesus. He is the image of the invisible God.² The problem is that we forget that in Jesus we also have *human* revelation. In other words, in the incarnated Christ we are given the clearest picture we have ever been given of what a *human life* is supposed to be like. When he was here with us Jesus became the only human being in the history of the world who lived a completely self-sacrificial life which was entirely devoted to God in every way. There was not a single moment in his life when Jesus failed to be absolutely generous, compassionate, kind, selfless, patient, faithful, joyful, self-controlled, and loving. Not one single moment. When we judge the goodness of our lives, *His* is the life to which we must compare ourselves. That means that unless you can say that your righteousness resembles, in every aspect, Christ's righteousness, then you are forced to confess along with me that our lives are full of sin and that, unless something changes, spiritual and physical deadness is our destiny.

² Colossians 1:15 reads, "The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation."

Left to ourselves, we are dead in our sin. On the outside it may appear that a person is cruising along just fine in life, but appearances can be deceiving. If that person has chosen to disconnect themselves from the source of life, deep within there is only deadness. And unless something or someone from the outside does something to remedy the situation it will only be a matter of time before the momentum of life runs out.

You see, when you're dead you're stuck. You can't help yourself. If I'm sprawled out on the couch day after day hypnotized by mindless television programs, the remote control hanging limply in my hand, drool running down my cheek, BBQ potato chip crumbs littered across my wrinkled t-shirt, you have every right to yell at me and tell me to get my butt up off the couch and make something of my life. If, however, I am lying in the same position in a casket at the funeral home, save your breath. Yell at me all you want to get up and make something of my life; it's never going to happen. I'm dead. And when you're dead, you're stuck. There is nothing you can do for yourself.

Paul chooses his words carefully when he says sin leads to death. In fact, he's merely joining a refrain we hear over and over in scripture. Romans 6:23 declares, "**The wages of sin is death.**" Ezekiel 18:4 says, "**The soul who sins is the one who will die.**" At the very beginning, when Adam and Eve first chose to trust in themselves rather than in God, what was the result? God warned them beforehand, saying, "**You must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it, you will surely die.**"³

We must understand this because our first inclination, even if we agree that our lives are infected by sin, is to double our efforts to make ourselves good. You see, the world has deceived us into thinking that at our core we are good people. That means that even if we admit the problem of sin in our lives we believe the solution is simply to try harder because in the end our goodness will outweigh our sin. As I'll show you in a minute, this is a horribly destructive lie from hell but is repeated so often and so convincingly in our world that many even in the church have come to believe it. But it is a lie. Nowhere in the Bible are we told that we are, by nature, good. *Nowhere!* Yes, we are told we are valuable, of great worth to God, bearers of his image. But not good in the moral sense. At the deepest part of who we are we are sinful. That is not our created nature but it is the nature into which we have fallen. In other words, left to itself the default position of every human heart will always be to seek our identity and security and purpose in something other than God. That is who we are.

I know myself better than anybody else knows me. Agreed? Without going into detail, I will confess to you this morning that what I have just declared to you about us all is definitely true of me. Left to myself, I will nearly always think first of myself. I am powerless over my own ego. I waste countless opportunities every day to be generous and kind. I regularly neglect even the most important relationships in my life. I make idols out of my success and my reputation. I dishonor the gift of sexuality. I use words to manipulate and deceive far more often than I'd like to admit. Greed rules my wallet. Resentment can fill my heart in an instant. Pride governs my decisions. All this is true of me. Sin is my nature. And if any of this surprises you it's because I do a better-than-average job of polishing up the outside so you can't see the mess on the inside.⁴

Funny thing is, I've noticed that whenever I talk like this people in the church who really ought to know better protest. Some of you are doing it silently right now. You want to tell me, "Come on, Jeff. You're not all that bad. Don't be so hard on yourself. You're not perfect...clearly...but you're a good person." And if that's your reaction then I must ask if you really think you know my heart better than I know my heart. Or is the reason you want to talk me out of it because secretly, maybe even subconsciously, you're afraid that if that's the way I am then maybe that's the way you are as well. Or maybe the reason is that you have confused worth with morality. Again, I'm not saying that God does not love me and that I am not exquisitely valuable in God's eyes. For reasons I'll never understand, I believe that I am, as are you. That does not mean, however, that I am good. As we're about to see, the wonder of God's love is that he loves us in spite of the fact that we are not good.

Can you see that the only way we ever end up feeling good about our own moral standing or accomplishments is when we compare ourselves to somebody else on the way down to the canyon floor? Nobody who compares their goodness to Christ's goodness ever comes to that conclusion. We are dead to our sin and when you are dead you are stuck and that

³ Genesis 2:17

⁴ I'm borrowing language here from a most excellent sermon preached recently by John Ortberg entitled, "Me Too" (Menlo Park Presbyterian Church, February 15, 2015). Find the sermon online at <http://mppc.org/sermons/unstuck-me-too>

means the first step, really, is simply to confess this reality and admit that there is nothing you can do to get yourself unstuck. If, by the grace of God, you can get to this place in life than you truly are in a wonderful place because now you are ready to see what God can do and, in fact, what God has already done!

Anybody who has ever been to an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting knows that the first step of the twelve steps in AA is similar to the first step in all recovery programs: “I admit that I am powerless over my addiction and that my life has become unmanageable.” And when you introduce yourself at an AA meeting what do you say? “Hi. My name is Jeff and I’m an alcoholic.” You don’t stand up and say that you have a problem with alcohol. No. It’s much deeper than that. You are an alcoholic. This isn’t only about a few poor choices you’ve made; this is about the identity of who you have become. That’s why even after years of going to AA meetings, even after people stopped drinking, they still introduce themselves in the same way as a reminder that, left to themselves, this is their nature.

If there is to be any hope for our lives, any chance of salvation, the starting point for us in the church must be the same. It’s essentially what we’re doing every Sunday during our prayer of confession. Whether you’ve paid attention to it or not, when you join others in confessing our sins at the beginning of every worship service you are essentially making this public acknowledgement, “Hi. My name is Jeff, and I’m a sinner who, left to myself, is dead in my sin.” Is that a confession you are prepared to make?

This is where we reach a critical step. It’s critical because I fear not all of us will take it. As Paul pointed out at the beginning of this passage, there is among us a **“ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient.”** There is an evil at work in this world, an evil which is relentless in its efforts to deface God’s beautiful creation, especially his image-bearing people, a force so powerful that much of our world has been deceived and conformed. Even in the church, we too can easily be swept along in the prevailing current. If, however, God can help us to see clearly at this point, we stand ready to receive good news which saves and brings life in ways we could never imagine.

This, then, is the critical step. We must come to see that if left to ourselves we are, in fact, dead in our sins and since we are dead the solution is not to try to bring ourselves to life again but rather to trust another, the only other, who has already demonstrated he does, in fact, have the power to bring life from the grave.

In his book, *The Reason for God*, Tim Keller makes this point with an illustration from Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. As you may remember, in the book Dr. Jekyll comes to realize that he is a strange combination of good and evil and that his bad nature is holding his good nature back. He wants to be good; he just can’t. So he comes up with a potion that will separate his two natures. His hope is that his good nature, which comes out in the daytime, will then be free from the influence of evil. However, when he takes the potion and his bad side, which he calls Mr. Hyde, comes out at night he soon realizes the evil within him is far greater than he ever imagined. He describes himself this way:

I knew myself, at the first breath of this new life, to be more wicked, tenfold more wicked, sold a slave to my original evil; and the thought in that moment, braced and delighted me like wine...my every act and thought centered on self.

By cleverly naming Dr. Jekyll’s evil nature “Mr. Hyde”, Stevenson is suggesting that even the best people among us *hide* from themselves that which is within – specifically an enormous capacity for egotism and self-absorption. Once Dr. Jekyll realizes this about himself, however, he reacts by deciding to clamp down heavily on this evil nature within himself. He solemnly swears never to take the potion again and, instead, devotes himself to charity and good works, partially as atonement for what Mr. Hyde has done in the darkness, but also partially as an effort to simply smother his selfish nature with acts of unselfishness. He believes that the goodness within can and will outweigh the evil alongside it.

But then one day, as he’s sitting on a bench in Regents Park, thinking about all the good he has been doing, and, in spite of Mr. Hyde, how much better a man he has become than the great majority of people, this thought comes into his mind,

I resolved in my future conduct to redeem the past; and I can say with honesty that my resolve was fruitful of some good. You know how earnestly, in the last months of the last year, I labored to relieve suffering; you know that much was done for others...But as I smiled, comparing myself with other men, comparing my active goodwill with

the lazy cruelty of their neglect...at the very moment of that vain-glorious thought, a qualm came over me, a horrid nausea and the most dreadful shuddering...I looked down...I was once more Mr. Hyde.⁵

Remember, sin which leads to death is defined as the choice in life to seek our identity, security and purpose in something other than God. Perhaps the most deadly sin there is, and the one to which religious people are highly susceptible, is the sin of rooting your identity, security and purpose *in your own goodness*. Then, instead of humbly throwing yourself on God's mercy you re-double your efforts to earn God's favor through your own efforts at goodness and, tragically, you make yourself your own savior. In a way, your greatest sin then becomes your denial of your great sin. But like Dr. Jekyll, all you're doing is deceive yourself by comparing yourself to the other person who didn't jump as far as you into the canyon as you both fall to your death. Haven't you ever wondered why in his day Jesus was far harder on religious-types who had convinced themselves that they were good enough than he ever was on thieves, prostitutes and traitors who lived under no such illusion?⁶ This is, in fact, the critical step at which everything hangs in the balance.

I know it may not have seemed like it so far, but this really is a sermon full of the good news of God's extraordinary love. However, if we insist on clinging to the lie that by our own efforts we are good and deserving people, then the news that God loves us isn't really good news. It's expected news, but not necessary good news. It's like me going home and saying to my wife, "Good news, honey! You'll never believe it. I went to work today and worked hard all day and at the end of the day my boss paid me for my work." Is that good news? It's expected news, but it's not really good news. How about, instead, "Guess what, honey! I had a horrible day at work today. I made a ton of mistakes. In fact, the decisions I made may have cost the company millions of dollars. But guess what? You'll never believe it. At the end of the day, my boss decided to pay me for my time anyway and on top of it gave me a promotion and a raise!" Now that's good news. Good *and* unexpected news!

If God loves us because we are lovable, big deal. Truth is, God does not love us because we are lovable. God does not give us good things because we are deserving. God does not accept us because we are acceptable. Listen again to how Paul puts it, **"But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through 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 ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus."**

The life God has for us, and has always had for us, is a full, harmonious, joyful, flourishing, abundant, and everlasting life. Through Christ, he has made it possible, as he did for Christ himself on Easter, for those who are dead in their sins to be raised to this life. This is not the result of our own goodness in any way but is simply the result of God's rich mercy, his great love, and the immeasurable riches of his grace towards us. Let's stop praising our own goodness and instead reserve all our praise for the goodness of God alone.

Beginning next Sunday we will begin to see how the rest of Paul's letter to the Ephesians fleshes out this extraordinary good news. We are going to hear good news all summer long! And so even though I've talked a lot about the bad news of our sin today, I can't end without at least hinting at this good news which is to come.

Paul's right, we were all dead in our sins. But that's not the end of the story. Far from it! There is good news, the best news, to come. But we cannot or will not be able to receive this good news, in fact we won't even be looking for this good news, until we come to grips with the reality that what Paul says here is true - left to yourself, you are dead in your sins. Left to themselves, every person on the planet is dead to their sins. On the outside all of us may appear to be cruising along just fine. Appearances can be deceiving. Left to ourselves spiritual death will always lead to physical death, death that is total and eternal. Once we come to come to accept and confess this reality, however, refusing the temptation to simply redouble our efforts towards goodness in favor of throwing ourselves at the mercy of Christ, we will then be ready to receive some extraordinary and unexpected good news which will, in time, change everything.

Amen.



⁵ Cited by Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God* (New York: Dutton, 2008), 175-176.

⁶ See Jesus' comments in Luke 5:27-32.

The Next Step
A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read Ephesians 2:1-7. What do you notice here? If there a word, a phrase, an idea that stands out to you?
2. When Paul says we were “dead in our sin” what do you think he means? What part of us was/is dead?
3. What is sin and why do you think Paul says it leads to deadness?
4. Why do some people, even in the church, so dislike talking about sin? Should we talk about it more or less than we do?
5. When we evaluate our own goodness why do we usually compare ourselves to other people rather than comparing ourselves to Christ?
6. After the sermon we were asked to publicly declare a portion of the “Confession of 1967” from our *Book of Confessions* which includes these words: **“Wise and virtuous men and women through the ages have sought the highest good in devotion to freedom, justice, peace, truth, and beauty. Yet all human virtue, when seen in the light of God’s love in Jesus Christ, is found to be infected by self-interest and hostility. All people, good and bad alike, are in the wrong before God and helpless without God’s forgiveness.”** Do you find it hard or easy to declare these words? Why?
7. Was this a sermon full of good news or not?
8. These days do you feel more spiritually alive or spiritually dead? Why?