

St. Augustine's Sermons

Calgary, Alberta

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The Constancy of God's Holy Love

The Text: Ephesians 2:1-10

1 And you were dead in the trespasses and sins 2 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— 3 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. 4 But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, 5 even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ— by grace you have been saved— 6 and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, 7 so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. 8 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, 9 not a result of works, so that no one may boast. 10 For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

Introduction

This morning we are dealing with a text that is one of the clearest statements regarding the character of God found in the whole Bible. This is a text that also has some very sobering things to say about humanity when it is cut off from God, influenced instead by Satan. But if what is said about human life lived in the sphere of the evil one's influence weighs us down like a dense fog, what Paul says about the

life of the person who is in Christ is like the sun breaking through and absorbing the water droplets, thus giving way to a clear blue sky.

I have entitled this sermon: "The Constancy of God's Holy Love" because the witness of both testaments is unequivocal in its declaration of God's constancy. We read, for instance in 1 Samuel 15.29:

"He who is the Glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind; for he is not a man, that he should change his mind."

Then some six hundred years later, the last book of the Old Testament, Malachi 3.6 echoes Samuel with these words:

"I the LORD do not change. So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed.

As we turn to the New Testament Epistles the same thought is expressed in James 1.17:

Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.

And then in Hebrews 13.8 is this resounding affirmation that hits us like a trumpet reveille.

"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever."

The Apostle Paul, whom I have not yet quoted, also affirms this doctrine of the changelessness of God. Ephesians implicitly states this theme throughout. The constancy of God's character is assumed by Paul in chapter two verses 1-10. Because of God's constancy He relates to us as the Holy Lover. Because God is the Holy One, He longs for and intentionally works for us to be whole. His heart breaks to see how bound we are in Satanic deception, as verses 1-3 so clearly announce. Because He is also the Absolute Lover He longs to court us and woo us away from the deceiver of our souls.¹ And yet for us to respond to the Lover's call is so hard because the one Paul refers to as the "prince of the power of the air" has such a hold on both our imaginations and our hearts. Satanic influence in the world is like that thick dense fog that is not easily burned off.

¹ See sermon from January 20 where I discuss the meaning of the middle voice verb "He chose us".

As we delve into these verses I want to suggest that they are like a symphony in three movements. The theme that runs through the movements is The Constancy of God's Holy Love. Within each movement there is another key theme. In Movement 1, verses 1-3, the theme is "Our Position Apart from Christ". In verses 4-7 the theme is "Our Position in Christ". Then in verses 8-10 the theme is "The Wonder of Saving Grace."

Let's now take them movement by movement.

1. Our position apart from Christ.

1 And you were dead in the trespasses and sins **2** 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— **3** 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.

Paul has a two spheres theology. People live in one of two environments, either in Christ or in Sin. Transgressions and sins determine what can be described as our natural state. In that natural state we have an accomplice who is referred to here as the prince of the power of the air.

St. John Chrysostom, known as the "Golden Tongued Preacher" in his 4th homily on Ephesians, written in the late fourth century asks the question: Now why does Paul call the Devil "the prince" of the world?'

Here is Chrysostom's answer:

Because nearly the whole human race has surrendered itself to him and are his slaves. And to Christ, though He promises unnumbered blessings, not any one so much as gives any heed; whilst to the Devil, though promising nothing of the sort, but sending them on to hell, all yield themselves. His kingdom then is in this world, and he has, with few exceptions, more subjects and more obedient subjects than God.

Yes, be it Ephesus in the apostolic period, Constantinople at the time of Chrysostom or the Calgary of today, Paul's words do apply. The course of this world is one that is debase and operates in ways contrary to the course of Christ. We have no greater authority than Jesus himself who in Matthew 7 says:

Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many.

This world is evil. So says the Bible and yet we affirm that even in this movement, the strains can be heard of God's holy love. How do we hear the strain of Holy Love? By remembering that Jesus chose to come into this debase world so that those who respond to his saving grace can be saved. And saved we all need to be.

Why do you ask? Paul says we need to be saved because our position apart from Christ sees us in the grip of one who wills our death. When we choose to follow the course of this world we are dead in our trespasses and sins. People, often unknowingly, are being ruled by one who is a tyrant rather than the God who created them. When people are controlled by this prince of wickedness, death controls life. It is non relational and corrupting. As a consequence of sin, people have no relation to God and distorted relations with each other. They are powerless to change and are being pulled down to destruction.

Such destruction results from people being obedient to the passions of our flesh. In Paul "passions of the flesh" usually refers to that which leaves God out of the picture, that which is merely human and left to its own devices. Implicit is the thought that without God, desires are the lord in control. They must be gratified and followed. To live according to the passions of our flesh means we live by our sinful desires, doing whatever they tell us. The NIV translates verse three like this:

"All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts."

"Cravings" and "desires" refer to legitimate human needs that are distorted, subverted, and heightened to produce an irrational self-centeredness. Once again Paul focuses on the mind. The former life is marked by a misaligned reasoning process that causes people to do what the sinful nature says. Sin causes a distortion in the mind and we choose to reject God and His will for us. This is why Paul says that the Prince of the Ruler of the Air is at work in the sons and daughters of disobedience.

And disobedience in a world apart from Christ is all the rage. This is because the idea of obedience to God is one that rubs the prince of the ruler of the air the wrong way. And come to think of it is rubs many people the wrong way too.

Think about the culture in which we live. There is a prevailing message that is repeatedly articulated that states we do not want to be obedient and accountable to anyone but ourselves. This is a culture that is self absorbed and it is not surprising given what we have experienced in the last two hundred years; I want to give you two dates: 1789 and 1989.

Does anyone remember the significance of this first date? This marked the Year of the French Revolution. How about 1989? This was the year that the Berlin Wall came down and the collapse of the Communist illusion. This two hundred year period has been termed the Age of Rationalism and Modernism. Within the intellectual thought of western culture four values came to be deified during these two centuries. And we are now living with all four as the engine driving popular culture. The first is hedonic narcissism, the second autonomous individualism, the third reductive naturalism and the fourth absolute moral relativism.

I know that is quite a mouthful so let me explain each of these in turn. Hedonism is a philosophy that is concerned with placing primary emphasis in life on the pursuit of pleasure. Narcissism is the practice of self absorption. Hedonic Narcissism is therefore concerned with the individual's pursuit of pleasure as an ultimate good. Autonomous individualism is self explanatory. But let me say that at its essence is the belief that no one, and especially God, will tell me what to do. I am my own master and in control of my own destiny. Reductive Naturalism is the belief that all we can know about life is what can be discerned by the senses and by reason. Therefore any categories that take us outside of reductive naturalism, like the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection are rationally impossible categories and must therefore be rejected. Absolute moral relativism is a mindset particularly in vogue today. This is the belief that there is no objective law or Being, ie. God, who governs morality. What is right or wrong, true or false is in the eye of the beholder.

As I was thinking of these idolatries, I would suggest that one of the goddesses of this self absorbed, God-forsaking, demonic controlled philosophy is Britney Spears. It was mentioned on the CBC afternoon show "The Home Run" that tabloids pay her ex husband Kevin Federline \$1,000,000 for his name and connection to Britney Spears. This report also mentioned he gets \$35,000 when ever he makes a night club appearance. And by appearance I mean just that, all he has to do is show up. Tabloid sales increase by 50 - 70% when Ms Spears adorns their covers.

Such are the values of the course of the world under the influence of the ruler of the air. Paul says that to live this way results in being people who are by nature children of wrath. Notice that he says we are all in the same boat, under the tyranny of the evil one, separated from God and deserving of his wrath and judgment.

And just when the fog is its densest the Sun breaks through and with the theme of the constancy of God's holy love.

4 But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, 5 even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ— by grace you have been saved— 6 and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, 7 so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

What a different tone from the opening three verses. Our position in Christ is announced with those two words "But God". These are the most important and weighty words in the whole passage. Yes, the influence of the prince of the ruler of the air weighs us down heavily but God..... And what it is we learn about God's constant holy love in these verses? He is rich in mercy because of the great love with which he loved us.

Here is the thing about the love of God. His love is visible and active even when we are dead in our trespasses and sins. I had never seen it so clearly before this week. In the passage from John 13 Jesus embodies His constant holy love by washing the feet of one who would deny him Peter, ten others who would forsake him, and Judas who would betray Him. Here were twelve men who at this time were in the grip of the Prince of the Power of the Air and what does Jesus do? He washes their feet as he shows humble service. Oh the wealth of God's mercy and grace.

When you know you have been raised with Christ and are alive to God this is the biggest thing you will ever know about yourself. You are alive to God, in tune with the Eternal, and have been awakened to something infinite and absolute. What a different way of life this is from that marked by hedonic narcissism, autonomous individualism, reductive naturalism and absolute moral relativism.

Have you seen that flower? There it is at night, closed and shut; the sun comes out and suddenly it begins to open and to take in its life

from that glorious sun. That is what happens to the Christian. He is 'alive unto God'. What does it mean? It means that we have an entirely new attitude towards God. We are no longer at enmity with God. The apostle goes on in the eighth chapter of the Epistle to the Romans to say that the natural mind, the natural man, is enmity against God. Indeed, in this very Epistle to the Ephesians which we are studying, we shall see that Paul says later that we were 'aliens and enemies in our minds through wicked works'. And how true it is! But it is no longer true of the Christian. The Christian is no longer at enmity against God. He or she desires God. He or she no longer has the feeling that God is some terrible monster set against us, waiting to crush us and to damn us and to destroy us. No, he or she has come to know God, and to know that God is love and that God is mercy and kindness and compassion. We no longer run away from God trying to hide behind the trees, as Adam once did, avoiding God at all costs. That is what the natural man or woman still does; the natural person does everything they can to avoid God.

But not so the Christian, what a change! It is a change from death to life. It is an absolute change. It is an essential change. Is there a bigger change than this, that one now desires the Being that one feared before with a craven and trembling fear? God becomes our holy lover and the greatest desire of the true Christian is to draw nearer to this lover.

Can you say, honestly, that the greatest thing you desire at this moment is to know God better, and to realize His presence? If you can you, are a Christian. If you cannot, you better examine the foundations again; for when a person is in Christ he has a new nature, and this new nature cries out for God. The character of the Christian is that he or she is alive to God.

He or she is like this microphone through which I am speaking. When it is switched off it is dead. But switch it on and it becomes alive. The microphone receives my voice. Why?—because it is alive to me. But if you switch off it is dead. That is how we are when living apart from Christ, we are not alive to God and this is why Paul calls such people, "sons of disobedience." But when we know we have been raised with Christ we are sensitive to God, desiring God, loving God, seeking God and we look at the rest of our earthly life as that opportunity to know him more as we live in Christ.

And when we are alive to God in the way I have just described we cannot but exclaim: Oh the wonder of saving grace, which is Paul's affirmation in verses 8-10:

8 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, **9** not a result of works, so that no one may boast. **10** For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

If you were here two weeks ago you will remember that I mentioned that in chapter one the seven-fold blessings which are bestowed upon the believer are Trinitarian. The first two pertain to God the Father, the last two to the Holy Spirit, and the three in the middle to Jesus. The first of the blessings that have Jesus as the subject is found in verse 7:

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding.

Here in chapter two verses 1-10, and especially in verses 8-10 we have the development of Paul's thought in chapter 1:7. To have been redeemed means that Jesus paid for our deliverance from the ruler of the air. Those who are in Satan's grip are his slaves. Jesus is the one who pays the price to deliver us from the evil one so that we can be in relationship now with the constant, holy lover. The blood of Jesus is the ransom price needed and when we see what this means we do declare: "The wonder of saving grace."

Let us be clear in our interpretation of verses 8-9. We can do nothing to save ourselves. Paul says this to us by saying in four different ways that salvation is of God the Father through the ransom price of Jesus the Son.

1. For by grace you have been saved through faith. (A)
2. And this is not your own doing; (B)
3. it is the gift of God, (A)
4. not a result of works, so that no one may boast (B)

Please notice the ABAB structure of these two verses. The A refers to the work of God as the subject of the salvation. The B refers to the human as the object of God's saving love.

Paul is so very clear that when we understand with our mind and receive in our hearts the truth of these verses what deepens within us is our faith. And it is not faith in some abstract sense, but faith in the constant, holy, lover of our souls. And when we have come into this relation with the Father through Jesus Christ our Lord what do we realize?

Let's listen to Paul's last words to us to get the answer:

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

We are the workmanship of God and he has created us for good works. Do you remember last week I spoke of how our salvation has a component to it that is progressive? Progressive salvation is what Paul has in mind here. As we come to a deeper knowledge of saving grace the Holy Spirit is at work within us shaping the character of Jesus more fully within our imaginations and souls. As we live ever more fully in the realm of grace we will become people whose presence in the lives of others will be more like "Sun shine". The works that flow from grace are the focus of what Paul will teach us in chapters four and five.

For now I want to end by reflecting on the Gospel passage. I said about fifteen minutes ago that Jesus shows his love for the disciples when they are about to deny, forsake and betray him. I would like to ask you to think of the John 13 text and Ephesians 2:10 is reference to your own life. If the good works we are to exercise are the works of grace and the one in whose image we are being transformed into is that of Jesus, what are the ways in which I am being called to be a minister of grace? Such ministration is costly and often without any reward reciprocated to me by the one who is the object of my expressions of grace.

For here is the thing. God is the only one who is constant and fully embodying holy love. Yet he desires us to become those men and women through whom this constant and holy love is made known to others. As we live in grace and become more grace-full in how we choose to live than we will be used by God as the sunshine to burn of the dense fog of Satanic self interest.

