



# SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

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"But God" (WORTHY Sermon Series)

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**W**orthy and God's Great Love. Those have been the titles and focus of the first two weeks in Ephesians. Both Tim and Dan have challenged our hearts to soar with the powerful truths of what God has done in Jesus Christ and what He has given to us in the Holy Spirit. It is easy to see why some commentators have said that the Book of Ephesians is the pinnacle of the Apostle Paul's writings.

*(Rollercoaster video starts playing behind)* As I begin this morning I need to make a confession. Summer is coming up and that means vacations. Many of you might decide to visit an amusement park as part of your vacation and that means rollercoasters. Okay, here's the deal. I hate rollercoasters. Okay, hate is such a strong word. Let me just say, I don't appreciate rollercoasters and feel no need to go on them. I've done some research and let me just say, I'm not alone in my feelings. Wait let's ask right now, "Who likes rollercoasters?" What's wrong with you people? Who doesn't like rollercoasters? Just as I thought, things are pretty much split down the middle. There doesn't seem to be a whole lot of middle ground on this one.

I have two reasons for not liking them. One, I don't have great faith in man's mechanical genius. My apologies to any engineers and architects out there of whom I have offended. But the second reason is the primary reason and it keeps me from testing

reason number one. I get sick from the sudden drops. I don't like the feeling of my stomach leaving my body, along with potential other stuff. It's interesting. I'm okay with the spins, tight turns, even the corkscrews, but those straight drops and undulations and that stomach "leaving the body" experience overrides any joy that might possibly come from the ride. I might be in the minority, but I know what my body and mind don't like.

Well, welcome to chapter two of Ephesians. I don't think they had rollercoasters in first century Palestine, but the Apostle Paul is going to take us on the ride of our lives, and for some of us, the drop is going to be pretty scary. It might even leave some of us holding our stomachs.

Some of the best characters on television have come from Saturday Night Live. Yes, I know some are a little irreverent, but many of them have entertained and, at times, illuminated. Who can forget Chris Farley's "Matt Foley" a motivational speaker, or Dana Carvey's "the Church Lady." One of the lesser-known characters on SNL was created by Rachel Dratch. Her character's name was "Debbie Downer." Debbie was the one who, in any situation, could point out the bad news. Most of time Debbie spoke the truth that most would prefer not to think about. And with each pronouncement came her signature sound, "Wah, wah!" (*Debbie*

*Downer "wah, wah" sound bite was played.)*

Her character's very first line was spoken in a skit on May 1, 2014. When asked what she would like for breakfast, she responded, "Ever since they found Mad Cow disease in the U.S., I'm not taking any chances. It can live in your body for years before it ravages your brain." (*"Wah, wah" sound bite*)

This was a truth that those there at the meal would just prefer not to dwell on. And the problem with Debbie Downer is that she only pronounced the bad news, there was never any hope.

The tendency today, especially in pop culture, and maybe because people don't know where hope is found, is to never talk about or address the truth of the utter despair of a situation, our situation.

Well, the Apostle Paul approaches our situation from the other direction. For Paul we can't really understand and appreciate how great the hope is we have in Christ if we haven't been honest with how dire our situation is. And since Paul is so confident in the hope of God, he is willing to lay the bad news out there so we can fully understand how great God's love and mercy, God's grace, truly is.

Paul has laid out the hope in Chapter 1 with powerful truths. We have been:

- Blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places
- We have been lavished with the riches of His grace
- God has given us the immeasurable greatness of His power in the Holy Spirit

How much higher could we get. Go back to the rollercoaster. Remember that first hill on the rides. The coaster always climbs to the top where the view is amazing. You can see the whole park from there. And Paul has given us an incredible glimpse of what God has done in Christ.

Here's the problem. As Tim shared in week # one in our series, we slip into thinking we somehow deserve these blessings, they are something we have earned. We think we are worthy of what God has done. Paul wants us to know very clearly it has nothing to do with any credit to ourselves; it is totally about God's grace. He is the one who makes us worthy.

And so, in verse one of chapter two, the roller coaster hurdles to the ground, leaving at light speed the glorious view from up above, and the reality of our situation comes up on us, so to speak, instantly. "You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived." (*"Wah, wah" sound bite*)

Thank you, Paul, for being so subtle, so pastoral. Paul minces no words. We were dead.

Remember at Easter as Pastor Dan was talking of about Jesus death on the cross and some claiming that Jesus was really only partly dead, the same way that Billy Crystal, as Miracle Max in Princess Bride, said when they brought Westley to him:

*(Image of Miracle Max was shown)*

- Miracle Max: He probably owes you money huh? I'll ask him.
- Inigo Montoya: He's dead. He can't talk.

- Miracle Max: Whoo-hoo-hoo, look who knows so much. It just so happens that your friend here is only MOSTLY dead. There's a big difference between mostly dead and all dead. Mostly dead is slightly alive. With all dead, well, with all dead there's usually only one thing you can do.
- Inigo Montoya: What's that?
- Miracle Max: Go through his clothes and look for loose change.

Paul wants there to be no mistake in our thinking. We were dead! Not mostly dead, but really dead. All dead.

Before we go on, let me clarify something. In Genesis, when we were created, God looked upon humankind and said, "It is good." He has created us in His image. We have such value to God that He has sacrificed all. HE LOVES US AS WE ARE. But, when it comes to thinking we could save ourselves or offering anything to our salvation Paul lets us know there was no escaping our condition. He uses two words to make it clear, trespasses and sins. Neither of these words deals with "almost" or "sort of close."

One of the words Paul uses for sin is "harmatia" or "missing the mark." This word is really helpful for me in regards to sin because it keeps me from saying the very thing I want to say which is, "I'm not as bad as that person." Here is how to understand the intent of the word "harmatia"

*(Photo of kids at archery range was shown.)* Think of yourself on the archery range. Before you is a target on a hay bale. *(Photo of target was shown.)* The target has a series of rings on it leading to a bull's eye in the middle. When you launch your arrow toward the target, if you don't hit the bull's eye, you have *harmatia*, missed the mark.

It doesn't matter if you hit the second ring, struck the side of the hay bale, or missed the hay bale all together. If you

missed the bull's eye, you have missed the mark. And the mark God has set for us is sinlessness.

It's not that God is a perfectionist. God knows that we don't need more perfectionists telling us what to do. It's just that God is telling us the reality—that every area of our life is tainted by sin by our pride, our selfishness. I think you and I know that. And when we read the news headlines, we know that is true whether it is ISIS, FIFA, Lance Armstrong, Lindsay Lohan, A-Rod, or common folk like you and me. Any sin, big or small, has missed the mark of God's righteousness, whether by inches or by miles. We can never say, "Well, at least I'm not like those other people."

Comparing ourselves is a place where I have really struggled and it happens for me when my eyes are on myself and not on Christ. That is when the Pharisee in me can creep out.

I had been driving for 27 years, and I had never had a speeding ticket. Not that it was a source of pride or anything, ha! But let me tell you, if it ever came up in a conversation I was glad to share the information.

Well, the day came. We were driving to see our daughter at Whitworth University in Spokane, WA, driving through the high Oregon desert, doing 85 mph on I-84, (with traffic, of course) when I decided to take a shortcut and take a highway that cut off a couple of miles.

Unfortunately, in my mind it was all still desert, so I kept the same speed. That is until I saw the patrol car coming towards me. I immediately slowed down, my heart racing as he drove past me, and then my heart sank as I watched him in my rearview mirror turn on his lights and make a U-turn and pull me over.

**T**he first thing I did, start trying to make excuses as to why the speed limit should never be 55 mph in the desert, and there was no way I could have been going 79 mph. Rather than admitting I was speeding I was trying to convince him I was only doing 65 mph. Now, what was wrong with that picture? By the way, that letter I sent to the judge didn't do me any good either. By the law, I was guilty, no matter what anyone else was doing. And in my heart I knew the truth. This wasn't the first time I had sped; it was just the first time I had been "caught" speeding. Trying to compare my one speeding ticket to the multiples of others did not make me any less guilty. Comparison never moves us forward. I was guilty.

In verse one Paul uses the pronoun "you" which would seem to mean Paul was talking solely about the Gentiles, but that pronoun changes quickly in the next verses as Paul changes the "you" to "we" assuring us that everyone is in the same situation, including himself. In regards to sin, there is no comparing ourselves to others

Eph 2:1-3: You were dead through the trespasses and sins in 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. **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. (*"Wah, wah" sound bite was played.*)

The good news out of all of this bad news is that without Christ, we are all in the same boat. We were all guilty, unable to save ourselves. Yes, the rollercoaster has plunged to the bottom and our stomachs have turned upside-down. Well, thank you, Paul, for being such an encourager. So much for feeling good about

ourselves.

But now come the two greatest words in all of scripture: **BUT GOD**

Eph 2: 4-7: **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.

**BUT GOD** means it doesn't end there. We are imperfect and sinful, and it seems we are in deep kim chee. **BUT GOD** says the story doesn't end there. **BUT GOD** means no matter how badly we feel, God has a new ending. **BUT** God means no matter how low we feel, God will raise us up.

There is so much good news in this passage it is hard to know where to start.

Look again at how verse 4 begins. "But God... But God ..."

The word "but" is a conjunction, and Paul wants us to see how wrath and mercy are joined together in the nature and heart of God.

- God is merciful
- By Grace
- We have been saved

First, **God is merciful**. Mercy is love for the downtrodden and the helpless. Mercy involves a decision to not give what is deserved, and God is rich in mercy. We are so far off the mark, **BUT GOD** is merciful and doesn't blow us off the map if we choose to follow Him.

Second, **by Grace** – maybe the second two most important words in scripture. Grace is God's free and

undeserved mercy. In grace we see the real character of God. Grace is solely God's activity in the lives of the undeserving. We can be so proud and think we know it all, **BUT GOD** offers us his grace, and we can live by grace so that we experience an abundant life in spite of us and not because of us.

Lastly, the scripture tells us **we have been saved**. We can feel we are sinking **BUT GOD** rescues us. It wasn't a one time "get out of jail free card." No, the understanding of Paul's word is that we have been saved and always saved. His mercy and grace is sufficient.

This is amazing news. With the words "but God" Paul moves us from our total despair and helplessness and to revealing for us the greatness of God and His great love.

Okay, maybe I'm starting to like rollercoasters, at least spiritual ones. We may go really low to the valley floor, **BUT GOD** raises us up to new heights. And the good news is that the best is yet to come.

Eph 2:8-10: For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

When we understand God's grace in our lives, we are moved to do good works.

Grace is hard to define, but I think we know it when we see it. When we see grace given we understand what a gift it is.

(*Photo of Les Miserables logo was shown.*) In the story of Les Miserables, Jean Valjean had paid the penalty for his sin, the sin of stealing bread to feed his starving family.

**A**nd even though the penalty had been paid, he still saw himself in his brokenness and could only see his identity in that brokenness. Even when kindness and charity were extended to him, his human condition overwhelmed him and he fell back into sin. It was in the complete revealing of his condition that grace took hold of him. Listen to how love and grace changes the heart and identity of Jean Valjean from a sinner to a transformed responder to grace. *(The Bishop's Song and Jean Valjean's response were performed.)*

But God.

We may have sinned, BUT GOD offers us a second, a third, a fourth chance. And in the story of Jean Valjean, due to that act of grace, he is moved to live a life of responding to grace by helping the poor, the broken, the destitute.

Due to God's great mercy and grace, a new story began. It can begin in each one of us.

We are invited to do one thing, walk in His grace. This is what we were created for. Invited to live a life in response to the grace of God. This is the ultimate contrast in the entire passage. We began in verse one living in sin and death. We end living in grace for which we were created

But God, by grace makes the difference

That is great news.

For some sitting here today, like Jean Valjean, your identity might still be wrapped up in the sin and brokenness of your past. When the scripture says you were dead in your trespasses and sin you thought, "Yeah, thanks for telling me something I didn't already know."

Hear this message, a message for

every broken heart, God's grace and mercy are poured out for you. His invitation is extended to each of us, no matter where we have been. God offers us new life, He removes the weight of shame. He breathes the new life of His Spirit within us and offers us freedom to live. If you would like that freedom today, would you say yes to His gift of mercy and receive His grace and let your new life begin today?

I'm going to pray for us and then Cindy is going to sing. The prayer team and pastors will be here. If you would like for them to pray for you to receive God's grace and mercy, to experience God's freedom that comes in His grace, I invite you to come forward during the song. God wants to bless us and free us to live the life we were created for. Pray with me.