

Aaron Twitchell  
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Ephesians 2:1-10

Abington Presbyterian Church

## TRUTH AND CONSEQUENCES

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.

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.

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.

There are many powerful forces of nature. Some are scientific like gravity or the electromagnetic force. Some are natural, things like the erosion of a powerful river that carves its way into a valley or canyon. Still other forces are mechanical like a hydraulic press. Have you ever seen those YouTube videos where people use a hydraulic press to crush things like baseballs or fully cooked hams?

Neither have I. Okay, I watch it a lot.

I want to consider a certain force that is so powerful that no human being can escape its clutches. It's invisible like gravity and also like gravity this force can keep us weighed down and trapped, spinning around and around, orbiting objects and ideas that deep down we would rather have nothing to do with: the force is called **denial**

Oh how powerful denial can be. Its consequences range from the grave to the mundane. When I did hospital chaplaincy, one of the most difficult challenges was walking with patients to uncover their denial of the truth. Treatments were rejected, diagnoses were dismissed, doctors' orders were ignored, and family members were alienated. Or, consider when my friend warned his brother in law that the ghost pepper is not your average hot pepper before he took a Texas-sized bite and almost had to go to the hospital.

Isn't it true that one of the worst things you can hear from someone is: I told you so? And isn't it also true that a lot of the times when we deserve that, we really also knew the truth but for some reason we still chose to ignore it, as if some... force... were compelling us to behave in a way totally contrary to our values and beliefs.

In another letter, Paul describes it painfully but truthfully. It's five verses and I really need to read all of them. Just soak this up:

I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. Now if I

do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.

Doing something terrible, seeking forgiveness, and making a change is one thing. Paul doesn't seem to be talking about that here. He's describing something else and he seems to describe it again in our passage from Ephesians. Being "children of wrath" and having a "spirit of disobedience".

Denial is bad enough for ourselves but it gets worse the more people we involve in our web of tricks and mind games. In fact, I think that's why Paul uses such strong language in our passage. He knows that the ugliest thing about a sinful way of life is that it harms others while feeling like we ourselves are benefiting.

Paul loved the Ephesians. He spends half of chapter 1 lavishing praise on them, giving thanks for their great faith in God, and their love for all of God's people. Then we get to chapter 2 and the first line is: **You were dead in your sins and children of wrath, among other things.**

Again, he does this because he knows that the deeper we are entrenched in "the courses of the world" the harder it will be for us to snap out of it. All the while, our actions and way of life can lead to untold suffering down the line that we never even see or stop to consider. Why would we change if we don't see the reason to?

Paul rejects this and calls us to see those reasons, to open our hearts and minds to the "way of life" God has called us to.

So what, then, is Paul really talking about here? What are the "passions and desires of the flesh" or the "courses of the world" that Paul says we follow?

These questions have been up for debate and discussion for a long time. Is it sexual immorality, which Paul gets to later in Ephesians and seems

to want to talk about in every letter he writes? Are the passions of the flesh things like murder, greed, or leaving the nearly empty milk container in the fridge?

Look, for too long we've used these uncertainties as an excuse to keep doing what we're doing:

“Well, let me just get some more information! I can't just stop everything I'm doing without knowing *exactly* what Paul is talking about here. And what if it doesn't even apply to us today? What about historical context?”

Meanwhile, we continue in the status quo because, well, we can.

I took my daughter shopping last week and before I left my wife and I were discussing which stores to go to. She made a suggestion and I in my enlightened millennial wisdom scoffed and said, “I would never shop there. Do you know how they obtain their textiles?” When we got back from our trip my wife took one look at the shopping bags and said, “So you wouldn't go to the store I suggested but you're willing to shop **THERE?!**”

This was a day or two after a heated conversation I had with someone discussing the pros and cons of ordering from Amazon. And **THAT** conversation was a few days after a friend and I argued about the finer details of factory farming versus purchasing local meat versus environmental vegetarianism.

At some point, don't I need to actually make a choice?

We may not think of these issues as “passions of the flesh”. They may not make the top of our list of the things Paul is preaching about when he says we were “children of wrath”.

We may not *want to* admit that ignoring the perils of the earth or slave labor in far away places are exactly what the psalmist saying we were “sick in our sinful ways and loathing at the gates of death”.

We may be waiting for the bigger sins like murder or adultery when we read in the gospel passage for today’s lectionary from John chapter 3 where Jesus describes us as “loving darkness rather than light *because our deeds were evil*”

Friends, to say that since we aren’t committing murder or adultery this language probably doesn’t apply to us is just classic denial.

And the difficult TRUTH of the matter is, there are parts of our WAY OF LIFE that absolutely fall into the categories of “sinful ways”, “passions of the flesh”, and darkness.

The Jesuits are known for their education and their vow of poverty. Pope Francis refuses many of the luxuries historically provided to popes, including fancy apartments, vehicles, and accommodations. In fact, Jesuit teaching actually discourages priests from seeking higher office, including the papacy, so when Francis became pope the process was a very difficult one for him personally and for the Order as a whole.

Students at Jesuit colleges and universities quickly learn about poverty in the world. Professors do not hold back in their desires to shake these young students from their slumbers of privilege, and my experience was no different.

During one particular course called Globalization and God I was in despair. I’ve always had a deep sense of empathy and when it grows unchecked I can find myself overwhelmed. I asked my professor what I the world we’re supposed to do. It seems nothing is good. Everything is the worst. How can I live with myself knowing what I know now about humanity and the earth?

Her response was to tell me that her husband is a Lutheran minister employed by a congregation. I didn't get the point. She said, my husband is paid by his parishioners and there's no telling where their money comes from. She said, we all have to make decisions. We have to make choices and do the best we can. But what we cannot do, is say, "I'm doing the best I can" when in reality we are living in denial of the consequences of our actions and not making thoughtful choices at all.

I confess that's what happened last week after my shopping trip with my daughter. When I got home and was confronted with my wife's rightful indictment of hypocrisy, do you know what I said? I said, "we have to make choices."

The truth is, I didn't think any of it through very well. I reacted to one option only to mindlessly go a second route that arguably wasn't any better. It's like when you're driving and suddenly you pass your exit because you were in that weird driving trance. I didn't think and yet I still tried the old, "We have to make choices" line.

All of us are like the Ephesians. We are God's beloved and we are a community of faith who recognizes the saving grace of God that we receive through Christ Jesus. And we recognize that we receive God's grace not because of anything we have done but because it is God's gift. Verse 8 is one of the most famous verses for our Protestant and Reformed traditions: *saved by grace through faith*. In light of everything we've heard today, that is REALLY good news.

We're also like the Ephesians in that there are things we cannot forget. We cannot forget that we lived in darkness and that we battle against the desires of our flesh. And you know what? Interpret that however you want for your own life. It's between you and God. What are the things

you say, do, love, demand, and greedily pursue with little regard for the consequences, in full denial of what your choices mean for others or for the earth? What are those things?

We're like the Ephesians in that we must acknowledge those things and make wise, informed, and graceful choices that reflect who we really are: people who live in the light, out from under the slavery of our fleshly desires.

Perhaps the last line of the Ephesians passage is the most helpful for us in describing what the psalm means when it describes us as “saved from our distress”, “healed”, and “delivered from darkness”: Paul concludes with:

... we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

That is what we are. I am not someone who stand in desperate need of overnight Prime delivery or overalls that cost \$5.99. That does not have to be my way of life.

Our way of life should be one of good works, not because we think it earns us anything but because it's how we mindfully respond to the truth that we have been rescued and redeemed.

So think about what good you can do and then do those things. Find good works and do lots of them for your community, for your neighbor, for the earth, and for yourself. Likewise, think about what you should stop doing and what you should change.

I think of my professor's advice often: just think about your life and the choices you make. We can't do *everything* but living in a comfortable denial is darkness and leads to the gates of death.

Finally, realize that we are in this together. All of Paul's pronouns in Ephesians are plural because he knows that living in denial is much easier when it's done in isolation. We are a community of faith.

It's just that in as much as we encourage one another and remind each other of God's love for us, we also must remind each other of the *good works* we are called to do. We must remind each other that our choices matter and our habits and conveniences are not worth more than the well-being of God's children or the health of our planet.

This is the push and the pull of being the church.

Imagine those conversations we have with each other, our congregation. Imagine those moments when someone offers you wisdom at just the right time and it causes you to stop and think and realize something you'd like to change. Imagine how a hymn puts something into perspective and inspires you to develop better habits for the beauty of the earth. Or a new idea that better elevates the poor among us. This is why Paul's instructions are in the plural. Living in the truth is best done in community.

What are you willing to think about this week? What habits are you willing to examine? Maybe call up a friend or email someone and chat about it. Let us help each other out of the darkness that we are so inclined to live in, and move toward the light God has in store for us.