PEOPLE THE GOSPEL CREATES · WEEK 1

Grace Creates a Holy People

September 27, 2026 · Ephesians 2:1–10 · Pastor Bart Denny

THE BIG IDEA

Holiness begins with grace: God makes us alive with Christ and keeps working until His life shows in the way we walk.

This guide works two ways. On your own, take one section a day through the week, or use the daily readings near the end. In a group, plan on about an hour: read the passage aloud, talk through the background, then choose the questions that fit your group. Nobody has to answer every one.

Read **Ephesians 2:1–10** at least twice, once quietly and once aloud. If you have time, read all of Ephesians 1 and 2. Last week closed our Within Reach series with Zacchaeus, a man Jesus came looking for. This week begins a new series, People the Gospel Creates, about holiness: what happens after grace finds us, as the life of Christ starts showing in our relationships, habits, speech and desires. Paul starts where holiness has to start, with what God has done.

Where this passage sits

Paul wrote Ephesians from prison (3:1; 4:1; 6:20), probably to be read in several churches around Ephesus, a large city in what is now western Turkey. The letter falls into two halves. Chapters 1–3 tell what God has done for us in Christ. Chapters 4–6 tell how to live in light of it. Paul's word for that is *walk*: "live a life worthy of the calling you have received" (4:1).

Chapter 1 is one long burst of praise for God's plan to bring everything together under Christ, and Paul prays that the believers would know "his incomparably great power for us who believe," the same power that raised Christ from the dead (1:19–20). Chapter 2 shows that power at work in us. Verses 1–3 describe what we were. Verse 4 turns on two words, "But . . . God." Verses 4–10 describe what God has done and why.

A few words worth a closer look

"Dead" (2:1)

Not physically dead, since these people are walking, following and desiring. Cut off from the life of God, living under a sentence of death (Romans 6:23). Jesus' father in Luke 15 says the same of his returning son: "this son of mine was dead and is alive again."

"Lived" (2:2)

Literally *walked*. Paul uses the same word in 2:10 for walking in good works. The passage moves from one way of walking to another.

"The ruler of the kingdom of the air" (2:2)

The devil. Paul takes spiritual evil seriously without blaming every bad decision on it.

"Flesh" (2:3)

Not the body, which God made good. Human desire bent out of shape by sin, so we want good things in the wrong way.

"Wrath" (2:3)

God's settled opposition to evil, not a temper tantrum. A holy, loving God can't treat cruelty, deceit and rebellion as small things.

"Grace" (2:5, 8)

God's undeserved favor and His active power at work in us. Grace gives what we could never earn.

"Handiwork" (2:10)

The Greek word is *poiēma*, something made, a work of art. We are what God is making.

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1 Sin has left us living under death

READ Ephesians 2:1–3, Romans 6:23 and Luke 15:11–24

Pastor Bart began with something most of us know: knowing what needs to change in my life isn't the same as changing it. A quick temper, bitterness we thought we'd moved past, pride, envy or the way we talk when we're frustrated. We know it should be different, so we try harder. Scripture does call us to obey and resist sin. But Paul takes us deeper than behavior.

"You were dead in your transgressions and sins." There's an old expression for a condemned prisoner: a *dead man walking*. He can still talk, think and decide, but a sentence hangs over him. Paul's "dead" people are very active. They walk, follow and gratify desires. But their lives are under the dominion of sin and death. In Jesus' parable, the younger son was very much alive while he wasted his inheritance. His father still says he "was dead." He had wandered far from his father and from the life he was meant to live.

Paul describes sin pressing on us from three directions. First, *the world*. We "followed the ways of this world." Every culture teaches what to admire and chase and what counts as normal. Without anyone teaching us outright, we start assuming more money will make us secure, getting our way will make us happy, and whatever we most strongly want must be right. Second, *the devil*, "the ruler of the kingdom of the air." We don't need to blame a demon for every bad choice, but Scripture won't let us explain evil away entirely as psychology or environment. Third, *the flesh*: our own desires, twisted by sin. Comfort becomes selfishness. The desire for approval leads to compromise. Anger becomes something we nurse because we enjoy feeling justified. Paul won't let us blame it all on the culture or on the devil. Sin has found willing cooperation in the human heart.

That's why holiness reaches deeper than appearances. Better habits are good, but sin touches our loves, our loyalties and the things we've learned to excuse. And Paul includes himself: "All of us also lived among them at one time." We

can't fix this by becoming slightly better versions of ourselves. We need God to act.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. What's something you've tried to change in yourself more than once? Why do you think trying harder didn't settle it?
2. How can a person be "dead" and still very busy and active? What does the prodigal son add to that picture?
3. What does our culture teach us to admire or chase without anyone saying it out loud?
4. Why is it unhelpful to blame every sin on the devil? Why is it also unwise to ignore spiritual evil?
5. Paul says sin twists good desires. Which good desire in your life most easily gets bent out of shape?
6. Paul says "all of us," himself included. Why does that matter for how we see other people?

2 God gives us life by grace

READ Ephesians 2:4–9, Romans 5:6–8, Titus 3:3–7 and John 14:19

"But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ." God acts because of who He is, His love and mercy. Nothing in verses 1–3 suggests He looked down and saw people finally getting themselves together. "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). "He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy" (Titus 3:5).

Much of life trains us to think in terms of earning, and often that's right. If you work forty hours, you expect a paycheck, and you don't call it generosity when it comes. Grace is different. God gives what we could never earn or make Him owe us. Church attendance, moral behavior, generosity, Bible knowledge and service all have a place in a faithful life. None of them puts God in our debt. That's especially hard for religious people to remember. It's possible to spend years at church and quietly start thinking our record gives us special standing: the sins we avoided, the years we served, the money we gave. Then we look at someone whose failures are easier to see and think, *Good thing I'm not like them.* Paul won't let us do that.

Notice what grace does. God "made us alive with Christ," "raised us up with Christ," and "seated us with him" (2:5–6). Salvation is more than a fresh chance to behave. God brings us into the risen life of Jesus. "Because I live, you also will live" (John 14:19).

"It is by grace you have been saved, through faith." Faith is trust. It receives what grace gives; it isn't one last good work that finally convinces God. And our response is real. God doesn't believe or repent for us. Wesleyans speak of *prevenient grace*: grace that goes before us, awakens us to our need and makes our response possible. We can resist that grace, or we can trust the One who has come near. Either way, nobody can boast.

That should change the atmosphere of a church. Someone who has followed Jesus for fifty years doesn't stand above someone who just started seeking Him. If a person comes in rough around the edges, with complicated relationships or habits that make longtime Christians uneasy, grace doesn't let us act as if we arrived by a better route. It makes us patient with people still learning to follow Jesus and slow to decide anyone is beyond God's reach. Paul says God saved us "in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace" (2:7). Our salvation puts His kindness on display.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. Think of a time you received something you didn't earn. How did it feel different from being paid what you were owed?

2. Why is it easy for longtime church people to start feeling they've earned something with God?

3. What's the difference between faith as "receiving what grace gives" and faith as one more work?

4. What does it mean to you that you are raised and seated *with Christ*, and not just given a second chance?

5. How should grace shape the way we treat someone new to church whose life is messy?

6. Is there anyone you've quietly decided is beyond God's reach? What does this passage say to that?

3 Grace changes the way we walk

READ Ephesians 2:10, Titus 2:11–14, Philippians 2:12–13 and Ephesians 2:19–22

Verse 10 keeps us from stopping too soon: "For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." We can't earn salvation, and the people God saves are His work in progress. He's still at work in us.

New life doesn't mean everything changes overnight. We bring habits, fears, desires and ways of reacting that took years to form. Some things God changes quickly. Others take time, and sometimes He starts working again in an area we thought we'd finished. Pastor Bart said he can look back and see where God changed him without his noticing it at the time, and he can also see where God still has work to do. That's holiness: the God who makes us alive keeps working until the life of Christ shows more and more in how we live. Wesleyans call it sanctification.

"The grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives" (Titus 2:11–12). Grace *teaches us*. The same grace that brought us to Christ keeps working on how we respond when we're angry, what we do with temptation, whether we nurse resentment and how willing we are to forgive. And we have a real part: "work out your salvation . . . for it is God

who works in you" (Philippians 2:12–13). When He brings something to our attention, we don't have to pretend it isn't there. We can confess it, surrender it and walk a different way.

Pastor Bart compared it to restoring an old house. Fresh paint helps for a while, but real restoration gets beneath the surface: rotten wood, bad wiring, plumbing. You open a wall expecting a small repair and find the damage goes farther. God may start dealing with anger and show us how much it has shaped the way we talk to the people closest to us. He may expose pride, and suddenly we understand why apologizing has always been so hard.

Paul is writing to a church, and much of what God wants to change becomes visible only in relationships. We learn patience when someone makes it hard, forgiveness when someone has really hurt us, and humility when someone else gets the credit we wanted. God is building us together into "a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit" (2:22). Verse 2 described a life that *walked* in sin. Verse 10 describes another way to walk, in the good works God prepared. Grace changes the direction of a life.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. Can you look back and see a way God has changed you that you didn't notice at the time?
2. What does it mean that grace "teaches" us? How have you experienced that?
3. How do "work out your salvation" and "it is God who works in you" fit together?
4. In the old-house picture, what's the difference between fresh paint and real restoration in a person's life?
5. Which relationships in your life are teaching you patience, forgiveness or humility right now?
6. Paul says God prepared good works for us to walk in. What might one of those look like for you this week?

Where is grace trying to change the way you walk?

READ Ephesians 2:8–10

Some of us may still be trying to make ourselves acceptable to God, thinking that if we clean things up enough, maybe we'll be ready for Him. Ephesians 2 takes that burden off our shoulders. God has already acted in love and mercy. If you know you need Christ, trust Him and receive the life He gives.

For those who already follow Jesus, the sermon closed with one question: **Where is grace trying to change the way you walk?** There may be something you've learned to excuse because it's been part of you a long time: anger, bitterness, pride, something you keep feeding in private, the way you talk to someone close to you, or resentment carried for years. You probably already know some of those places. Knowing isn't the same as changing. Bring one of them honestly before God and ask what obedience looks like there. Maybe there's something to admit, an apology to

make, someone to forgive or a habit to stop making room for. Then take one concrete step. And don't turn holiness into another attempt to prove yourself to God. It's a response to His grace.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. Without having to share details, is there one area where you sense God is at work in you right now?

2. What's the difference between pursuing holiness as a response to grace and pursuing it to prove yourself?

3. What's one concrete step of obedience you could take this week?

Through the week

☐	**Monday**	Ephesians 1:15–23. Ask God to help you understand His great power for those who believe.
☐	**Tuesday**	Ephesians 2:1–3 and Romans 6:20–23. Thank God honestly for what He has rescued you from.
☐	**Wednesday**	Ephesians 2:4–9 and Titus 3:3–7. Name one thing you might be tempted to count as earning God's favor, and give it back to Him.
☐	**Thursday**	Ephesians 2:10 and Titus 2:11–14. Ask God to show you a good work He has prepared for you today.
☐	**Friday**	Philippians 2:12–13 and Ephesians 2:19–22. Pray for your church family, that God would shape the life we share.

Try this

Write down one area of your life where you sense grace trying to change the way you walk. Ask God what obedience looks like there, and take one concrete step this week: admit something, make an apology, forgive someone or stop making room for a habit. Then thank Him that He hasn't left you where He found you.

Close in prayer

Father, thank You that You did not wait for us to become worthy of Your love. You came to us in mercy and made us alive with Christ. You saved us by grace, and You haven't left us where You found us. Search us, and show us where the way we live doesn't fit the life You've given us. Give us courage to be honest, humility to confess what is wrong and strength to obey where You lead. Keep us from turning holiness into another way of proving ourselves. Make us more like Jesus in how we think, speak, love and live with one another. In Jesus' name, amen.

Notes

Watch the sermon online

Scan the code or visit **pathwaywes.com/sermons/grace-creates-a-holy-people** for the video, this guide and Pastor Bart's blog post on this week's message.

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