

Introduction

The few times I was ever in a “nice” jewelry store was when I was picking out Katie’s wedding ring. And there is an interesting trick I began to notice that goes on in those higher end stores. If you go into just any jewelry store or kiosk in the mall and point at something you want to look at, they will hand it to you so you can look at it. You can try it on or examine it closely. And as always, every jewelry store has great lights, so of course anything with a diamond in a necklace or on a ring will sparkle quite nicely.

But if you ask to see a diamond ring in a higher-end store, they will usually (at least 20 years ago) pull out a black felt board and set the item on it first. Interestingly, the diamond shines brighter against that black backdrop. Something about the contrast of the light hitting the jewel and the black showing through the facets creates a stunning view of a diamond. Your eye catches it differently—it seems like a much nicer object when presented that way. What I am praying is that we see something very similar to this example with the black felt and diamond this morning in our passage. If we walk away with one main message this morning, I pray it is that we realize it is necessary to look at our sins, and in doing so see God more brightly!

From the beginning of Ephesians Paul has been praying for the Ephesians that they, and that me and you, might see the beauties and the glories of what God has done for us in Christ Jesus. How God chose us in Christ before the

foundations of the world (Eph 1:3–4). How he predestined us as sons and daughters in Jesus for his own glory (Eph 1:5–6). How he gave us redemption, grace, wisdom, and insight through Jesus (Eph 1:7–8). How God is uniting all things together in Christ Jesus (Eph 1:9). That we would see the amazing extent of the reign of Christ and his all-encompassing glory and dominion (Eph 1:15-23) and be moved to prayer!

What God has done for us in Christ REALLY is a multifaceted, brilliant, precious thing. Every way we might turn and examine the beauty of Jesus Christ, we can see another facet, another aspect of what God has done and is doing for us in Jesus Christ. His is the story that unfolds across Scripture from the Old to the New Testament, on through Revelation, and into our future in the new heavens and new earth. It is really an amazing thing to behold Jesus and never find ourselves lacking for awe at his very person and the multitude of ways he has loved us.

I also find there can sometimes be a fear or even worry when we then turn from looking at Jesus and look at our sins. I think we feel like it may be turning out the lights on our faith to consider our sin. As though there is nothing for us to see when we look at the darkness of the sin in our life. Yet Scripture doesn't hold back at all when it talks about our sins, and neither will Paul. Paul is turning here in Ephesians 2:1 from this grand, beautiful, high-soaring, thirty-thousand-

foot view of God's work in Jesus, to making it very personal for each and every one of us, and he is starting with our sin.

I want to encourage us to think about this section about our sin and situation this morning as the black felt board in those jewelry shops. Yes, it is dark and it doesn't reflect much light itself. That is a great analogy of our life in sin, and especially what we are apart from Jesus. But by being willing to look at our sin and put that black felt board out there, we find the diamond of the gospel of Jesus Christ doesn't sparkle less. We aren't turning out the lights, we aren't choosing to put our heads in the sand. In fact, God is seen more beautifully when we are willing to talk about our sin and his glorious grace through Jesus in the same sentence. To be willing to put our lack next to his abundance. To put our situation—with no caveats as dire and hopeless as it is—next to his plan for unity, mercy, grace and hope in Jesus. We don't find in that moment that Jesus lacks! As though Jesus can't deal with any and every situation that we might see or come up against in our life. We find that he is, in many ways, more beautiful and amazing when we see him in contrast to our sin!

Ephesians 2

We are going to start in this next section of Ephesians 2 today where Paul compares our relationship with Jesus to what it was like outside of him when we were under wrath and judgement. And we are going to look at just the side of

what we had without Jesus, where we were outside of Jesus in Ephesians 2:1–3:

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins 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—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. (Ephesians 2:1–3, ESV)

With this phrase “and you,” is Paul pivoting from a more generic, large picture of who God is and what he has done for us in Christ in Ephesians 1, and he is making that idea very personal. He wants us to know that this problem is about each one of us.

And something else interesting is going on here. Paul is using mostly participles—‘ing’ words—instead of verbs in this first section. The translators try to keep most of those to give you the feeling of what is going on here, but they have to switch to verbs every now and then to have it make sense. Paul is doing this on purpose. Think about this statement:

“My kid was being a brat.”

That “being” gives us the sense that it was not a one-time, momentary issue, but that it was going on for a while. That is

often why we switch to participles in English—to imply something that was ongoing for a long time or something that has started and is still going on. That is the same feeling we are meant to feel when we read through this section of Ephesians. This ongoing, continual nature of what Paul is saying. I would outline our section like this:

“And you,
being dead in your trespasses and sins
in which you once walked
following to the course of this world
following the prince of the power of the air
the spirit now working in the sons of disobedience
among whom we all once lived
in the passions of our flesh
carrying out the desires of our body and mind
and we were by nature children of wrath
even as the rest of mankind.”

(Ephesians 2:1–3, Ryan’s Version)

You can sense the rhythm, almost the repetition both in the words themselves and in the meter of the passage when you break it into its parts that implies the ongoing, continual nature of our state prior to and outside of Christ.

If you are here this morning and you don’t yet put your faith in Christ, this first section is descriptive of you. This is how the Bible would describe your life and situation today. And it was descriptive of all of us here today as well at one point. And before anyone might cry, “Hypocrite!” because you see us doing this still, let me affirm that this is who we all were AND who we struggle to no longer be as we walk in the power and

the life we have now in the Holy Spirit. That is why this passage still matters to us today. This may have been our state outside of Christ, but it is where we are tempted to run back to all the time.

Being dead

Paul starts by saying “being dead.” We touched on this already in Ephesians 1:4–6 when we talked about God choosing us. God had to choose US because we couldn’t choose HIM because we were DEAD. As Ezekiel says:

The hand of the LORD was upon me, and he brought me out in the Spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of the valley; it was full of bones. And he led me around among them, and behold, there were very many on the surface of the valley, and behold, they were very dry. And he said to me, “Son of man, can these bones live?” And I answered, “O Lord GOD, you know.” Then he said to me, “Prophecy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. **Thus says** the Lord GOD to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. And I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the LORD.” (Ezekiel 37:1–6, ESV)

This was us. We were **“being dead,”** as Paul says here. As God said to Ezekiel **“I will cause breath to enter you...I will**

lay sinews...I will cause flesh to come on you...and you shall live, and you shall know that I am God.” God did the work! If we have been following Paul’s logic in Ephesians so far we, should not be surprised that Paul says we were “being dead.” That was our state—our hearts and souls were dead to God, undesirous to seek and know him, to even care about him, until he breathes life in us!

In your trespasses and sins

And we see that Paul further describes the state of our heart and our “being dead” through this phrase, “in your trespasses and sins.” Paul uses two similar words, which we really can’t make a huge distinction between, to speak to the totality of what was happening to us and the sphere of how we were dead. In the variety of ways we acted, we were totally and completely in our sins. And being in sins is the same as being dead. We are not in relationship with God and might as well be dead, outside of real life. And this wasn’t just a momentary problem (which the idea of being dead would also assume). We were ALWAYS in trespasses and sins. Even in our best intentions we were not doing them to honor God.

In which you once walked

Paul continues to expand this idea with this phrase “in which you once walked.” This idea of walking is often used in Scripture for how we live—our entire life. Sin wasn’t something we randomly came across as though it was sporadic. It also wasn’t something that we were fighting

against and in that sense not normal or desired for us. Sin and trespasses was our constant, desired state—to live in our sins.

Outside of Christ THIS is our normal state. Living life dead to the ways of God, completely embracing and living in our sins and trespasses against him. But this word “once” is trying to point to the past. This is something that WAS our normal but should be less and less normal for us in Christ Jesus now. Our life is different now in Jesus as we talked about in Ephesians 1, but we will still struggle with living in sin today. As Paul says in Romans 7 says:

For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. (Romans 7:15–17, ESV)

Three Ways to Live

What comes after this introductory statement “And you, being dead in your trespasses and sins in which you once walked” is an explanation, or description, or the different ways in which we were walking. That is what the middle section of this statement is meant to show, and what is one of the main goals of this passage—to see clearly what living in our sins and trespasses, being dead, looks like. And Paul shows us three examples of what it looked like to live in our trespasses and sin. We walked in our sins and trespasses:

1. Following the course of the world
2. Following the devil
3. In [following] our sinful flesh, body, and mind

These three spheres describe the expanse of this black backdrop that is our life outside of Christ. These are some of the main ways in which we lived in and sought out sin.

For us, those here this morning who put our faith in Jesus, these are helpful categories. These spheres are also the main areas that work against us and tempt us to run back into sin today. These arenas were problems BEFORE, and they are still problems TODAY.

And there is not just one influence on our life that keeps us in sin or draws us back into it, but rather, these three spheres that Paul gives us (and there are probably more), remind us that there are a myriad of forces working against us to draw us away from the love and joy we have in knowing and walking with God. For most of us this morning, this passage can serve as a reminder of the ways we need to be vigilant and the ways we need to fight the various ways sin comes into our life. If you are here this morning and don't yet trust in Jesus, I pray you seriously consider these categories as arenas that are working against you and enticing you to sin rather than moving towards the love that God has for you in Jesus Christ. Do you see them as areas that are moving us away, not towards, God.

Following the course (ways) of this world

The first sphere Paul talks about is the world. He says we were living in our sins and trespasses:

Following the course [ways] of this world

Do you remember this childhood song?

Row, row, row your boat,
gently down the stream,
merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily,
Life is but a dream

Now, don't take this wrong. I am not trying not make you feel guilty if you sing this song in fun with your kids or if they read it in a children's book—it is a fun and easy tune to memorize. But this is tragic song! The philosophy behind this is nihilism, meaning that we all will amount to nothing someday. We will cease to exist. Or as this song says “life is but a dream.” So, what does the song suggest we do in this life if we will all just cease to exist? Go with the flow. No need to make up rules to follow. Row downstream, not upstream. Enjoy the ride and make it as easy as possible.

This is the world's desire! This is what we are being encouraged to do at every turn by the world. Why are you so weird, Christian? Why would you do things different, Christian? Why not just join us? There are patterns,

engrained in our society, that make it hard for us to choose Christ. Culture forces us to go upstream to love God, not downstream. The world makes it hard for us to choose Christ in many ways.

Jack and the youth recently did an experiment—an idea from Courtney Doss—and looked at the worldview in many of their favorite songs. There is often a message that the world is sending us—whether it is in a song or movie or other force—a way they are encouraging us, and it is usually quite different than the message of Jesus Christ. Remember, Jesus said:

Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world.” (John 18:36, ESV)

That is the juxtaposition Paul is also wanting us to see here. The world that we are in is not the same as the world to come. We are to see the contrast of our world and what it offers and encourages versus what Paul has said about our promised inheritance of the world to come in Ephesians 1:11–14. And we should not be surprised that the world is pulling us away from God, and as a result, when we don’t go the direction the world wants us to that it isn’t a pleasant experience.

If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. (John 15:18–19, ESV)

Application

We must critically assess what the world is offering us. What the world says is normal and compare that to God's standards and his ways. We must have an eye to be critical of the world and the viewpoint it offers and normalizes. And that takes work! We must assess TV shows, movies, clothing, books, lifestyles, how we spend and utilize our money, what it looks like to do our jobs well, and so much more. Before, as Paul says, we were just "following" what the world was doing and where it was going. It shouldn't be that way now.

This will require me and you to study Scripture well. To have many conversations, as we discussed last week, on important issues with much grace for one another as we seek to find wisdom in the complicated issues that are all around us. To encourage one another and hold one another accountable.

Following the prince of the power of the air

The second category or sphere Paul presents is one we often don't think of, especially in a post-modern culture and in a world that has quite effectively hidden the spiritual realm

from us. This sphere is the reality that there are evil forces that are working against us!

following the prince of the power of the air
the spirit now working in the sons of disobedience
among whom we all once lived

We as Christians believe there is very real spiritual being called Lucifer. He is also called the devil, which means “slanderer.” He is the deceiver of the whole world (Revelation 12:9), and the ruler of this world (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11; and here in Ephesians 2). He is a god of this age (2 Cor 4:4), the prince of demons (Matt 12:24). He is not omniscient (all knowing), and he is not omnipresent (everywhere at the same time), but he is ruling, and does influence both other spiritual beings to do as he would do, and he does seek to influence people.

Of all of Paul’s letters, Ephesians deals the most with the spiritual dynamic that lies behind much of what we see in this world. We will see that again and again throughout this letter. In fact, when talking about many of the problems around us, one commentator says that the world is a:

“satanically organized system that hates and opposes all that is godly (cf. John 15:18, 23; 18:36; 1 Cor 3:19)”
Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 310

In that sense the first and the second spheres work together. Satan is attempting to influence the world that it might be a system that works in his favor. That is going along with his program. This is why Paul says Satan is:

the spirit now working in the sons of disobedience
among whom we all once lived

Satan is working in the world. The title Paul gives him ‘the prince of the air’ reminds us that all we see that is surrounded by air, our entire world, is his arena. And he is actively seeking to influence all of us. In case we forget and become tempted to act like we have a better situation, Paul reminds us that we all once lived like this. This was our heart and our ways outside of Christ. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4:4 that Satan has “blinded the minds of the unbelievers.”

We cannot act like evil is just some sort of nebulous force, an attitude to be avoided. Evil comes in the very real choices and lives of spiritual beings who try to encourage us to follow them in their rebellion against the Lord and to make those same evil choices in our lives. Satan and his legions are trying to influence us. As Jesus said to Peter:

Satan demands to have you, that he might sift you like wheat... (Luke 22:31, ESV)

And, Peter would later say that Satan prowls around like a lion looking for those whom he can devour (1 Peter 5:8).

But we don't have to fear! God rules all the kingdoms of men (Daniel 4:17). We see that Jesus:

He commands even the unclean spirits and they obey him (Mark 1:27, ESV)

Friends, this life and the Christian life in particular is a battle ground, not a vacation! There is a very real war and very real actors in this war that we don't often see. As Paul will say later in Ephesians 6:12:

For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.
(Ephesians 6:12, ESV)

Application

It is one of Paul's great concerns in Ephesians that we know how to combat the temptation of sin in general and how to resist Satan and other demonic forces as one of the spheres where we are drawn and tempted into sin. We will spend much more time here when we get to Ephesians 6, but Paul sees Satan and his goals as very real threats, and he wants us to be prepared. His answer Ephesians 6 is to put on the armor of God! This idea—using all the tools God has given us to defend ourselves in this battle—is pertinent not only in this sphere but also in our battle against this world and our

own passions and desires. God has given us his truth, his righteousness, the gospel of peace, faith in Jesus, our salvation in Jesus, his very Word in Scripture, and his Spirit that we might fight well.

Instead of focusing primarily on the answer of how to fight Satan this morning (that is something we will talk about later in Ephesians), I want to remind us that Satan's influence may not always look spectacular. When we think about Satan and spiritual beings we often think about spectacular shows of power and encounters that are meant to frighten us through a show of force. That can happen, but more often it is through more subtle means. I want to ask you this morning if you ever view your (and my) subtle "small" sins as potentially being part of Satan's tactics in his fight against you?

If you haven't read C.S. Lewis's *Screwtape Letters* I would recommend it. It is an imaginary dialog between a senior demon, Wormwood, and a junior demon, Screwtape. Screwtape is asking and seeking advice on how to best influence the person he has been assigned to. I don't recommend this book because it is THE truth on what is happening to me and you in this sphere, but because Lewis stretches us to imagine the variety of ways Satan may be coming after us. And how often it isn't in the large ways you would expect. Take this imaginary exchange for instance:

“You will say that these are very small sins; and doubtless, like all young tempters, you are anxious to be able to report spectacular wickedness. But do remember, the only thing that matters is the extent to which you separate the man from the Enemy. It does not matter how small the sins are provided that their cumulative effect is to edge the man away from the Light and out into the Nothing. Murder is no better than cards if cards can do the trick. Indeed, the safest road to Hell is the gradual one—the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts...”

Screwtape Letters, CS Lewis

Friends, we are not necessarily rightly defending ourselves from Satan simply because we don't see something atrocious or stunningly bad in our lives. He is working to separate you and I from God by any means he can. And sometimes this happens in small ways that seem very normal. We need to use the armor of God, the means he has given us, for all these spheres to fight sin.

In [Following] the passions of our flesh

Last, but not least, we find that we are often fighting against our own nature:

In the passions of our flesh
carrying out the desires of our body and mind

That was true then, and sadly it continues to be a difficult arena for us today. This is the continuation of what we read Paul saying in Romans 7 earlier. If we continue on in Romans 7:17, we see Paul says this;

So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. (Romans 7:17–20, ESV)

Sin dwelled in us in a way that made us slaves to it before Christ. Yet it still lives in us to fight against us and our pursuit of Christ today. We are often quite familiar with this sphere because as Christians we talk about it often. Our flesh, our body, even our mind is still wrecked with sin and bent in ways towards it that we may not see full relief from this side of the new heavens and the new earth. Again, we need every tool God may give us to fight even our own sinful desires that we might pursue God rightly.

Concluding Application: Holding it all in tension

It is here at the end, when we have seen all three of these spheres, and when we stop and think about all three of these arenas together, that we can begin to see how important it is to consider all of these in tension with one another. Because we can find ourselves, at times, so focused on one arena that we miss the others.

For instance, something I see often in our culture is people who may be trying to fight the good fight of not being conformed to the world, yet they decide that HOW they discuss that problem or attack it doesn't matter. They frankly act like jerks to other people who don't agree with them and their concern over the world's message. They state their position in the most offensive way possible, as though they can run after sin in the way this third category describe (being in sin and trespass in the fleshly desires of our body and mind), and that doesn't matter as long as they are not following the world! They/we also don't even consider that this may actually be a tactic of Satan. Here is another pertinent quote from Screwtape that I think speaks well to our present age:

“All extremes except extreme devotion to the Enemy are to be encouraged. Not always, of course, but at this period. Some ages are lukewarm and complacent, and then it is our business to soothe them yet faster asleep. Other ages, of which the present is one, are unbalanced and prone to faction, and it is our business to inflame them.”

Screwtape Letters, C.S. Lewis

Another way we can often weigh these spheres wrongly is when people find demons under and in every problem and in every issue that we face. It may be true that we are more influenced by Satan and his forces than we realize, but we also have to take responsibility for the sin that is in us that he (Satan) is fanning into a flame and cooperate with the Spirit to kill our sin. We also need to realize where we are often following a culture that is encouraging us to either ignore Satan (what most of the world does), or to see him even where he isn't (what some churches do).

And again, when we focus on just our indwelling sin, do we realize there is something bigger happening all around us than just our own sin? That a world is pushing us along, sometimes carrying us along, without us noticing it? Or that spiritual forces are battling us?

Holding all of this in tension is hard at times. But what it does is cause us to be honest about our sin, look at it, and assess it against the many realities of how we are STILL being drawn into sin again and again.

Conclusion – And we were by nature

We need not be afraid to look at the darkness of our sins! To not look at our sins means we don't acknowledge that there is something that needs to be fought, and our weapons sit in

disarray in the corner, gathering rust. And importantly, we don't see the beauty and glory of Jesus who saves us from our sins!

When we acknowledge that we are still struggling to not sin and to walk rightly with God, it can make us feel like maybe not much has changed for us. Like we are still stuck back in the state before we knew Christ. But even if we still are struggling to not pursue and give-in to sin, one of the main things that has changed in our lives is what Paul ends this section saying:

“and we were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest of mankind.”

That WAS our status but is no longer who we are. Our status has changed now in Jesus, as we saw Paul say in Ephesians 1:4

In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. (Ephesians 1:4–6, ESV)

We are adopted children now, no longer children of wrath. We may at times (or often) be disobedient children, but we are God's beloved sons and daughters in Jesus Christ. We are no longer objects of wrath but objects of love in Jesus Christ! Anything he does in discipline for us, any of his ways

of caring for us, are done as a loving father trying to seek the best for us that we might know him, love him, and find joy in our life with him.

Seeing the darkness of our sin reminds us of the beauty of God and the glory of Jesus. In fact, God chose broken sinful people exactly so he might be glorified!

But we have this treasure [salvation in Jesus Christ and his Holy Spirit] in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So, death is at work in us, but life in you." (2 Corinthians 4:7–12, ESV)

God uses our constant dying to sin to manifest his glory in us. He uses it as the black backdrop that he might shine brightly. Friends, have we considered that one of the reasons you and I might not evangelize as well as we would like is because we hide our sin. We hide our problems. What if God's plan was to use our sin that he might look marvelous—both to others but also to us. Knowing that, in spite of our sin, God still loves us might actually draw us

closer to him AND help us fight sin. That is part of the deep joy of God, and where we will go next week—God's love amidst our sin.

This morning, friends, don't be afraid to look at your sin. To ponder them in the light of Jesus. To see these different spheres and acknowledge each of them, to hold the spheres in tension when fighting your sin, to look to God's word to fight sin in all its temptations and ways, and to see in this God's beauty shining brighter in our lives.

PRAY

COMMUNION

BENEDICTION

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. (Rev 1:5–6)