

## “Know our problems!” Ephesians 2:1-10

“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. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in 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 coming ages 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 a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

I wonder, what do you think, do we have any problems in our Lutheran Church of Australia? I think we could agree that we, indeed, have been abundantly blessed with many and many different problems.

Just reflect to yourself, which would be the first three that come to your mind? It would be interesting to compare our top 3 lists, but... today we will use the reading from Paul's letter to Ephesians to reflect on three such problems. I wonder whether any of you would have thought about these, but they are very, very serious.

What are they? First, we **struggle to understand the depth and seriousness of our sinful condition**. Second, we **don't really appreciate God's grace** that we have received. And, third, we **don't know what to do** when we have received it.

Let's begin with **our struggle to understand our sinful condition**. Listen once again, what Paul the apostle writes: **“You were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked... following the prince of the power of the air... carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath.”**

This is an alarming diagnosis to say the least. Our society has to great extent lost the meaning of the word sin. But even we, Christians, struggle to come to grips with how serious our condition is. Because we can't understand the depth and seriousness of our condition from our experience, neither analysing ourselves, nor observing others.

Surely, we may be shocked by some particularly atrocious acts, like the ones we get reported from war in Ukraine. When the innocent civilians are tortured, raped, murdered. When soldiers are taken captives, tied and castrated by criminals conscripted in the Russian army, while recording this savagery on video and posting on social media.

Who could do something like that?! Let me tell you a story. There was this pastor in Latvia. A true saint. He was invited to address prisoners in a highest-level security prison. Just imagine who were there, what terrible crimes they had committed.

Pastor Feldmanis began his address by saying: “There is nothing that you have done that I would not be capable of in certain circumstances.” He meant this. Let this sink it. He wasn't original, or radical. He simply shared Biblical teaching on sin.

We need to get this, that the roots of our sin go down to the deepest abysses of hell. For we are under the spiritual rule of the prince of the power of the air as Paul calls him, the archenemy, the devil.

This is all human beings before God speaks to us, before His creative Word shatters our dead hearts and breathes new life in us, before He creates in us new hearts, living hearts. Before that we are dead in our sins.

Fully capable of all evils, while totally incapable of even seeking for true God. He saw us in that state. He saw you. He came and rescued us. Paying the most painful price. Yes, He did it. For me, for you. If only we understood this.

How much would it change our lives? How grateful we would be that we were rescued from that situation, how careful would we be with our choices and actions, not to endanger our faith and salvation?

How much would we appreciate the gifts of God's Word and Sacraments, the very means our gracious Father has given to us to battle against evil, to cleanse ourselves from every sin, and to keep us in true faith. If only we understood...

How different our mission efforts would look! We would realize that it is only by the power of God's Spirit that someone can be raised from the dead. How much more zealous would we be in our prayers? How much more relying on God, not on our own skills, or reason, or abilities and efforts. For if we don't understand our hopeless condition, we can't really appreciate how incredible God's grace is.

This was our second problem. **We don't really appreciate God's grace.** Do we? Do we understand what the Triune God has done for us? Do we understand how undeserved, how disproportional, how unbelievable what God has done is?

Let's listen to Paul once again: **"But God, being rich in mercy... made us alive together with Christ... and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages 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 a result of works, so that no one may boast."** Do we appreciate this? Consider what Paul is saying. We all were dead in our sins. We all were enemies of God. We all were heading towards eternal separation from God, that was our preference. God in His rich mercy, because He loved us, despite our rejection, He chose to make us alive.

Listen carefully, for we often miss the grandeur of this!

What did God do? Was it just a forgiveness of a few things that we have done wrong and a few more which we have failed to do? Just a little grace, almost deserved? No, what He does is utterly disproportional!

He unites us with Himself, with the most intimate bond of His Spirit, He unites us to Himself so closely, that what happens with Jesus, happens with us. We die to sin, we are crucified with Jesus, we are raised with Jesus, and we are seated with Him in the heavenly places. So that in the age to come God could reveal fully the immeasurable riches of His grace and kindness towards us.

See what He has done? He has made us alive with Jesus. He has raised us with Jesus. He has seated us with Jesus in the heavenly realms. This is what He has done for you. In His rich grace. How could anything like that be earned?

How could anything like that be deserved? Even if we were sinless and perfect and lived perfect lives, how would we deserve to be made heirs of God, His sons and daughters, co-heirs of God's Kingdom to rule with Him forever?! How?!

This is so much larger... infinitely larger! This is where we see the riches of God's grace and kindness. All of this isn't seen yet, but for now you have the Spirit of God dwelling with you as a guarantee, that all of this is true and will be done.

If we did appreciate it, how could we not be grateful? How could we possibly consider ourselves better than others, or more deserving of God's grace than others? How could we not be gracious towards all people? How could we not burn with passion to share this incredible news with every living being?

For this is what our Father in heaven in His incredible grace has done for you, what He has bestowed upon you, what He has prepared for you in the age to come, what He has promised and confirmed by giving you of His Spirit.

But our problems don't end here. There was one more. **We don't know what to do when we have received this grace.** This is true. God has been so abundantly gracious to us, and how do we respond? There is this caricature.

"You Christians, you sin, then go to the Church for forgiveness, and then go and happily sin again, and so it goes in circles." Unfortunately, there is much truth in this caricature. How many there are who would say that they are Christians and that they know that they are saved by God's grace alone, not by what they do, and so, they don't need to do anything.

They can live their lives as it pleases them. Perhaps they worship, or perhaps they don't even need to do that much. For they know the right information. They are saved by grace. What an incredible foolishness!

God's relationship with us is not about us knowing the right answer to the question of "how are we saved?" It is about relationships! About being together with Him, where He invites us. About getting to know Him, about listening to Him and rejoicing together with those who also know Him. About inquiring how to please Him, about living for Him as He did for us.

Sure, we are saved by grace alone, sure, this is not our doing and we can't boast. But we are not only saved from our sinful condition and from eternal separation from God, we are also saved for. Yes, for! You are saved for a new life in Christ!

I knew well verses 8-9 that we are saved by grace alone and this is not our doing, but I was really surprised, perhaps, even a bit shocked when one of my professors asked us to read also verse 10.

**"For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them."** This was a new emphasis for me. We are created in Christ Jesus for... good works! More! Which He had prepared beforehand so that we should walk in them.

We are not saved to return to old lives, we are saved for new lives in Christ! This is why God has given us those gifts, the Divine Service, the Word of God, the Sacraments, the community of saints, to shape and strengthen us in new life.

To help us to walk in good works. And there are so many! In His wisdom God has instructed us how to cultivate godly character, how to flourish in relationships, how to serve in all our calling, how to bless many and many through our new lives.

I happen to know a pastor, who is even building an online school, where everyone can learn God's beautiful vision for our new life, it's called the Wiseberg Academy. Perhaps, you may have heard about it.

So, yes, we are created to walk in our good works. God's blessings don't stop with saving us. He gives us new lives. And we need to remember that we are eternal beings. You are eternal beings. And you serve other eternal beings. What you do in this life, it will have eternal consequences. Let me conclude with an illustration how we may live in our good works.

This is just one illustration, but each one of you has countless other options as well. So, remember, everything we do either individually or as a congregation, it has so much further-reaching consequences than we can possibly imagine. Just picture yourself, you getting up on Sunday morning. Perhaps, you didn't sleep too well.

Or perhaps, you don't really feel like attending the Divine Service. But then you remember that that is how you love your God, that is how you keep the first three commandments and also how you support your fellow saints. With your presence.

So, you do get up and join the worship. More, as you come you pray. You pray for the Divine Service; you pray that the Lord would bring many to His house today and that they all are nourished by the Gospel.

You pray for pastors, so that they can preach faithfully, that the Spirit open our ears and hearts, that we all learn and are strengthened in our faith. You pray that the Lord would use you to bring others into God's family.

Then you pick a sermon copy and, on your way home, you pray to the Lord to show to whom to give it. You end up giving it to your granddaughter, or a young woman who lives next to you. What happens? Of course, she doesn't care about the sermon. She drops it somewhere.

But then things go dark, she gets pregnant and finds that her boyfriend is cheating on her. It's a dark place. Dark time. Then somehow, by accident, she sees the sermon laying among other trash. She picks it up...

And the Holy Spirit really hits her hard. She is changed. She becomes Christian. She prays and the father of her child becomes Christian as well. They get married and he begins his seminary studies, and becomes a marvellous evangelist. Many are blessed by his witness and preaching, many come to faith.

You die. Jesus meets you, hugs you, welcomes you, takes you by hand and brings and shows you a group of fellow saints: "See, they are here, because you did try to walk in the good works that I had prepared for you. Thank you!" The end.

See, we have a lot of problems. But we have this incredible God, gracious and merciful, He has saved us when we were dead in our sins, He has sat us in heavenly places with Jesus, and He has created us in Christ for good works to walk in them. What a privilege it is!

May the Spirit help us as we try, and then... perhaps, the Lord willing, our church will have less problems, and there will be more joy in heavens.

Amen.