

“I’m God, and I Approve This Message”

Ephesians 2:1-10

7 in our series on Paul’s letter to the Ephesians

November 4, 2012

Peter Hiett

Sermon

In the first chapter of Ephesians, Paul spoke an amazing blessing. He ended his prayer with this line:

Ephesians 1:22-23:

And [God] put all things under [Christ’s] feet and made him head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

Anakephalaio means united under one wounded head, forgiveness of trespasses, and redemption through His blood. We are or are to be included in His body, circulating His blood. And He is life.

Ephesians 2:1:

And you were dead...

Dead! If that surprises you, maybe you’re still dead...or just barely alive. A Christian is someone “begotten from above,” begotten of eternal seed. But seed starts small. Life starts small and grows within us, like seed in dirty soil, a baby in a womb: life in a “body of death.”

In Romans 7, Paul writes, “Oh wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death?” So if he was alive, he still had a body of death.

Gosh! What if you’re dead? Or mostly dead and barely alive? That would change things, wouldn’t it? Hebrews 2:15: “It’s through the fear of death that Satan holds us in lifelong bondage.” But what if we’re already dead?

[Movie Clip from *The Others*. A group is gathered around a table for a séance. An old lady with clouded eyes speaks into the spirit world and writes what she hears on paper.]

Medium: *Why are you afraid, children? Why don’t you want to tell your friends? Come on, speak to us. Speak. Tell me what happened.*

Boy: *Don’t tell her! Don’t tell her!*

Girl: *If I tell her, they’ll leave us in peace.*

Boy: *Mommy!*

Man, reading medium’s writing: *Mommy.*

Medium: *Why are you crying, children? What happened in this room? What did your mother do to you?*

[Girl whispers in medium's ear while medium writes.]
 Man, looking at the paper: *Something about a pillow.*
 Medium: *Is that how she killed you? With a pillow?*
 Girl: *She didn't kill us!*
 Medium: *Children, if you're dead, why do you remain in this house?*
 Children: *We're not dead!*
 Medium, still writing: *Why do you remain in this house?*
 Children: *We're not dead! We're not dead! We're not dead! We're not dead!*
 Medium: *Why do you remain in this house?*
 Man, reading: *They are not dead. They are not dead.*
 Children: *We're not dead! We're not dead! We're not dead!*
 [Mother has been watching and now runs into the room screaming, tearing the pieces of paper.]
 Mother: *They're not dead! They're not dead!*

That's the movie *The Others*. Nicole Kidman plays this woman who lives on the island of Jersey during World War II. Because of a "medical condition," her children can't be exposed to light. She's very religious and keeps the children safe in the dark through fear—fear of Hell, and fear of "the others." She's concerned that there are ghosts in the house, but it turns out that they themselves are the ghosts in the house. "The others" are living people in the house. She and her children are dead. But because of her pride, she won't admit to being dead.

And Paul writes, "And you were dead in your trespasses and sins."

In a desperate effort to maintain control as the Nazis advanced, this mother had smothered her children with a pillow and then put a raffle to her head and pulled the trigger. But she wouldn't admit to what she'd done.

"And you were dead," writes Paul.

Maybe you *are* dead. If you take that seriously, it's terribly offensive. You're dead, but you're the walking dead, a zombie. Zombies are dead and crave the flesh of the living. Or you're a vampire. Vampires drink blood, don't "walk in the light," and can't die because they're already dead. The walking dead crave body broken and blood shed. Maybe you're dead, like a zombie, vampire, or ghost.

And now let me say: What those people in the movie were doing is called "necromancy," contacting the dead for information. It's strictly forbidden in the Old Testament. Yet Jesus contacted the dead when He said, "Lazarus, come forth." Séances are forbidden, not because there are no such things as ghosts, but because there are such things as ghosts, but they are a bad source of information. They are people trapped in this world whose biological bodies have died. Yet Paul seems to say that even though our biological bodies are alive, we can still be dead.

Do you remember when Jesus rose from the dead? He had a spiritual body that walked through walls. That body had to have been *more solid* than the walls and *more solid* than the disciples. I mean, maybe even as we walk on the surface of this earth, we appear like ghosts to those who have entered into glory.

In Scripture, Hell (that's Hades) begins on the surface of the earth and continues under the earth. Yet the kingdom of Heaven is at hand. Maybe we're dead or mostly dead, and that changes things. If we're dead or barely alive, then:

1. Things aren't right but wrong. And strangely, that gives me hope. The American dream is not Heaven. What this world is selling is not Heaven but Hell.
2. Trying to save my life is simply preserving my death.

3. By fearing my death, I'm fearing the death of death. And what's the death of death? Wouldn't that be life? In I Cor. 15, Paul says that the last enemy to be destroyed is death. And Christ destroys death. Christ is the death of death, and He is Life.
4. Maybe I don't know life. I'm one of the walking dead, my own worst nightmare. And frankly, I find that profoundly insulting. I mean, we know what life is. Modern philosophers and scientists have told us.

In 1850 Charles Darwin published *On The Origin of Species*. It really didn't explain life but described changes in life—"speciation"—through natural selection, what we call "survival of the fittest." It really doesn't explain life, yet that's the story we tell ourselves. And as psychologists (like Carl Jung) and sociologists (like Peter Berger) teach us: It's the stories we tell ourselves that shape our persons and societies, our stories, or our archetypes. So this is an archetype:



Modern man has come to believe that life is the result of violent competition: one organism protecting itself from the others and exalting itself over the others. In the words of the Prussian philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, it's the meaning of the earth, "the will to power." "Lo, I preach to you the Superman," wrote Nietzsche. "The Superman is the meaning of the earth. What is good? All that heightens in man the feeling of power, the desire for power, power itself. What is bad? All that comes from weakness."

Friedrich Nietzsche hated Christianity and our Messiah. Nietzsche believed that the Superman was the next evolutionary step, what man was destined to become. Nietzsche and Darwin had a profound effect on men like Adolf Hitler, who had his soldiers carry Nietzsche's books in their knapsacks, believing that the Arian race was the next evolutionary step. They had a profound effect on men like Karl Marx and Joseph Stalin, who believed the communist state was the next evolutionary step. And maybe they had a profound effect on men like...us Americans. We certainly value competition. "It's what makes us strong," we say.

When I was a kid, the teacher always graded on a curve. So my success was dependent on another's failure. And my failure was their success. We all learned that lesson well. Not spelling, but competition. So even if you failed the Spelling Bee, you didn't fail at competition. You just beat the crap out of the good spellers after school. So we all learned the lesson: "That's life." And that's my life. That's what I learned in school.

I am the product of violent competition. I am, because one particular night in December of 1960, one billion competitors strained at the starting gate. And then at the right moment, the one billion sprang into the vase deferens, raced past the seminal vesicles, into the urethra, from whence they were launched into the vaginal cavity, where a furious battle ensued. Hundreds of millions would be lost. However, a few million would reach the cervix. Perhaps only a million would make it through the mucosal barrier. Of those, hundreds of thousands would race up the wrong fallopian tube. And so out of one billion, just a few—the few, the proud, the fittest—survived the journey to the ripened ovum. And *only one*, only one would

enter. Out of one billion, only one made it, only one became a somebody. And I am that somebody.

I am the sperm that made it.

Whenever you're down and feeling insignificant, that's what you can tell yourself:

I am the sperm that made it!

And in some form, that's the story we tell ourselves. I'm valuable, I'm a winner, I matter, I'm good, because I graduated from high school and I got the job and I was chosen for the promotion and I'm smarter, richer, more loving, more Christ-like than the others. I'm more humble than the others.

I'm the sperm that made it.

Well, unfortunately, we live in a world with seven billion other sperm that made it...to this life. But what about the next life?

Hey, did you know that Jesus is the sperm that made it? In places like Galatians 3:16, Paul makes it clear that Jesus is the promised seed, the seed of the woman, seed of Abraham, seed of David, the only sinless man, the Superman, the *Eschatos* Adam. "Seed" is *sperma* in Greek.

He's the sperma that made it.

But not because He strove to be first; actually because He chose to be last. Not because He glorified Himself, but because He humbled Himself. Not because He made himself something but, Philippians 2:7, "He made himself nothing."

In John 12:46, Jesus said, "Truly I say to you, unless a grain of wheat [a seed] falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." That's more seed, not alone.

And, you see, that's a different story, a different archetype. Perhaps I'm making too much of this, but the sperm that reaches the egg is actually the first one to die, the first one to sacrifice itself. It dies in the ovum, and that's life—the very creation of my life. John 1:3-4: "In him was life," or "In him was made life, and the life was the light of men."

Well, maybe life isn't violent competition but loving sacrifice.

One cell sacrificing for another cell.

One member serving another member.

One body part sacrificing for another.

You know, if one cell in my body competes with another cell in my body, it's called cancer, not life. And maybe my life isn't the product of violent competition but a sacrifice of love 2,000 years ago...and maybe even 52 years ago. Not two people competing, but just the opposite: Two people humbling themselves, stripped of their fig leaves, in a covenant that formed a sanctuary and produced a communion. And that sacrificial communion of love was life and gave birth to my life. That's a different story.

Have you seen this bumper sticker?



The Jesus fish is eating the Darwin fish. Is that why Jesus is life? I mean, shouldn't the Jesus fish be dying for the Darwin fish, saying, "This is my body broken for you. Take and eat. This is my blood shed for you. Take and drink"? In my experience, most ardent Creationists are social Darwinists and, worse yet, spiritual Darwinists. So we who preach Jesus with our lips usually teach Darwin with our lives. Ironically, it was Nietzsche who said, "Beware when fighting the dragon lest you become the dragon."

Well, maybe we think we're alive, and we don't even know what life is.

Paul writes 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 [literally this acon, this age] following the prince of the power of the air [the dragon], the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived [that must be a living death] in the passions [literally epithumia, lusts] of our flesh, carrying out the desires [theleima, the will] of the body [the sarch, the flesh] and mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.

If we "were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind," then we each had or have "a vessel of wrath," like the rest of mankind, like Esau, like Pharaoh, like Judas, like Paul.

Romans 9:22: "Vessels of wrath prepared for destruction that God might exhibit the riches of his glory in vessels of mercy which he prepared beforehand...."

Well, what is the vessel of wrath prepared for destruction? It must be our body of death—our flesh which cannot inherit the kingdom. And what's wrong with our flesh? And what's the lust of the flesh? You know, on the night He was betrayed, Jesus literally said, "In lust [*epithumia*] I have lusted to eat this Passover with you." So the problem isn't simply lust, desire, or will. The problem is the desire and will of our flesh. And it's not the thing we desire, but how we desire it.

In I Timothy 4:5, Paul wrote, "Everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer."

So maybe you thought the lust of the flesh was stuff like sex, wine, or food.

But God has made food a sacrament that we're commanded to eat, and wine a sacrament we're commanded to drink. And sex is a sacrament in the covenant of marriage, Ephesians 5:32, exhibiting the faithful relationship between Christ the Groom and His Bride the Church. It's the first commandment in Scripture, spoken before the Fall: "Be fruitful and multiply." More life, more seed.

So what's the will of the flesh? Listen closely to I John 2:16:

All that is in the world, the lust [*epithumia*, desire] of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life [literally: the boast of *bios*]....

Bios is the Greek word from which we get “biology,” biological life as opposed to zoe life. The boast of bios...that’s one life exalting itself over the others. That’s the survival of the fittest. The lust of the flesh is the boast of bios.

For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and lust of the eyes, the boast of bios, is not of the Father but of this world. And the world passes away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever.

What’s the will of God?
Relentless, sacrificial love.
What’s the lust of the flesh?
Pride, exalting myself over others.

See, Jesus doesn’t have a problem with eating. It’s eating with disregard for the others. In the Gospels, Jesus is always eating with others...at banquets, never alone. And Jesus doesn’t seem to have a problem with wine. You know, people drink wine at parties to forget themselves and connect with the others. Jesus turns wine into a sacrament. That means it reveals something else.

In Ephesians 5:18, Paul writes, “Don’t be drunk with wine, for that’s debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit.” The Spirit will help you lose yourself and find the others. The Spirit will humble you, so you can enjoy the party. For nothing wrecks a party like pride.

And Jesus certainly isn’t against sex. He’s against bad sex: self-centered, unfaithful, arrogant sex. God created sex as a sign of faithful communion with Christ in the covenant of grace giving birth to life. In this world of space and time, I can only give myself fully to one other person. It’s called the covenant of marriage. But that communion is just a taste of a far greater communion. So if you don’t have it, you will have it. Don’t worry: God will use all your longing. And that gives us hope.

Last week I read an amazing article in *Scientific American*. Scientists were shocked to discover that at the climax of good sexual communion, much of a woman’s brain actually shuts off. Shuts off. The desires of the mind—the bride’s brain—actually shuts off. In particular, “The dorsomedial prefrontal cortex, which has an apparent role in moral reasoning and social judging.”

In biblical terms that would be “the knowledge of good and evil,” with which the bride judges herself, her groom, and everyone in this world.

It’s precisely when the bride loses that,
that she experiences communion,
and it feels like ecstasy.

It’s precisely then
that two become one flesh
in the image of God.

It’s at that point
where my bride’s pleasure is literally my pleasure,
where humiliation is literally exaltation,
where we surrender vain glory and taste real glory,
where I’m no longer alone, trapped in this body of death.

So do you see the problem with my flesh? Except for perhaps a few sacred moments:

- My flesh is cut off from life.
- My flesh only feels its own pain and its own pleasure.
- My flesh thinks that it is its own life.

Yet I'm destined to be part of a greater life, Christ's life, Christ's body.

A body only feels pain when it's divided, when one member boasts over another member, when one cell starts consuming other cells in disobedience to the head. That's cancer; that's death. But when all members submit to the head and serve each other, that's life, and it feels like ecstasy.

Perhaps one day I will feel everyone's pleasure. You'll eat a cheeseburger, and I'll taste it. You'll rejoice, and I'll rejoice. You'll win, and I'll win. I will feel everyone's pleasure, and there will be no pain, for God has united all things— *anakephalaio*—under one sacred head now wounded.

That's life!
But boasting is death.

Why does God hate our arrogant boasting? Is it because God is insecure? Is it because He's proud? Like Andrew said last week, "God is not proud." So maybe He wants us to stop boasting, because boasting is death, and humility is life. To be more precise, Christ Jesus is life.

Ephesians 2:3-10:

We 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 [literally: "are having been saved"] through faith. And this [this salvation and this faith] 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.

Wow! It's pretty clear that we have no grounds for boasting. Not in our works, not in our choices, not in our salvation, and not in our faith...*especially* not in our faith. Are you proud to call yourself a Christian? Then maybe you're not a Christian, for you don't believe that you were saved by grace through faith, and this not of yourself lest you boast.

Religious folks are often the best at boasting. And it was to them that Paul was usually referring when he talked about the flesh and the desires of the flesh. Religious folks use the knowledge of good and evil to exalt themselves over the others.

We use the law to judge others and exalt ourselves.
We use the knowledge of love to not love our neighbors.
We use the knowledge of the good to crucify the Good.

To exalt myself, I judge my neighbor and crucify Jesus, who dies for the last and least of these my neighbors. Wow! My pride must constantly blind me to the depths of my transgressions. I crucify Christ and think to myself, "Well, that's just the way of this world."

You see, Darwin wasn't an idiot. The survival of the fittest explains this world of ours. It describes our flesh and explains our death. But it doesn't explain life. It doesn't explain love: why one cell would sacrifice for another cell; why one member would serve another member. It doesn't explain life.

Jesus is life.

It doesn't explain life; it explains death. Natural selection: I think the Bible calls that sin. It's the way this world operates, the spirit of the age in bondage to the dragon—the prince of the power of the air. It's the very will of our flesh and desire of our minds.

Natural selection is death.
God's election is life.

Natural selection is sin.
God's election is grace.

We have thoroughly underestimated the extent of sin and the depths of our sin. And thus we've utterly missed the glory of grace and the scandal that is grace. It's like we're dead and don't even know we're dead!

Now, I'm sorry, but in an effort to help our budget, we're going to pause for a few commercial messages.

[Video Clips – Political TV Commercials:]

President Obama: There's just no quit in America. And you're seeing that right now. Over five million new jobs. Exports up 41%. Home values rising. Our auto industry back. And our heroes are coming home. We're not there yet, but we've made real progress. And the last thing we should do is turn back now. Here's my plan for the next four years. Making education and training a national priority. Building on our manufacturing goal. Boosting American-made energy. Reducing the deficits responsibly by cutting where we can and asking the wealthy to pay a little more. And ending the war in Afghanistan, so we can do some nation building here at home. That's the right path. So read my plan. Compare it to Governor Romney's. And decide which is better for you. It's an honor to be your president. And I'm asking for your vote, so together we can keep moving American forward. I'm Barack Obama, and I approve this message.

Mitt Romney: There are two very different paths the country can take. One is a path represented by the president, which at the end of four years would mean we'd have 20 trillion dollars in debt, heading towards Greece. I'll get us on track to a balanced budget. The president's path will mean continuing declining in take-home pay. I want to make sure our take-home pay turns around and starts to grow. The president's path means 20 million people out of work struggling for a good job. I'll get people back to work with 12 million new jobs. I'm going to make sure that we get people off of food stamps not by cutting the program but by getting them good jobs. American is going to come back, and for that to happen, we're going to have to have a president who can work across the aisle. I'll work with you. I'll lead you in an open and honest way. And I ask for your vote. I'd like to be the next president of the United States to support and help this great nation, and to make sure that we altogether maintain American as the hope of the earth. I'm Mitt Romney, and I approve this message.

[Video Clip from *The Passion of the Christ*:]

Jesus, bloody, hanging on a cross: *Father, forgive them. They know not what they do. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? It is accomplished.* [Peter Hiett adds: "I'm God, and I approve this message."]

Wow! One of those ads was not like the others. Two paths were the same, and one was totally different: the path, the way, the word, the message. And how do we know that God approved that last message, that Word? Well, although He was cursed, and although He was numbered with the transgressors, although He had become nothing, the very last and very least, God raised Him from the dead and made Him head over all things, and of His kingdom there will be no end.

And just let me say, I really agree with Obama on some things. And I really agree with Romney on some things. But neither is the Messiah, and America is not the hope of the earth. And to think we are is blatant idolatry and death. Boasting is death, and humility is life. Not just life to come, but life right now.

You know this: Exalting yourself is an immense amount of work. And more than work, it's a lie. And more than a lie, it's death. It cuts you off from the others and traps you in fear, utterly alone. But you have been saved by grace through faith, and that not of yourself, lest anyone should boast. Do you believe that? Then turn to the others, turn to your neighbor, and say, "I'm no better than you." And now agree, "You're no better than me." See? That's a relief. And you don't have to get drunk to do it.

Now, I don't mean that you may not do some things better than the others; it's just that all you do is good work God prepared beforehand that you could walk in it. So every good deed is a gift, and the will to do the deed is a gift.

Your good, free, choice is a gift.
Faith, hope, and love is a gift.
Salvation is a gift.
Your life is a gift.
Jesus is a gift.

And if we really believe that, we won't be a party about to happen, but a party that *is* happening.

We'll share our lives in common and our goods in common.
We'll all be good and we'll all be free.
We will need no laws, and we will need no worldly government.
We will be the presence of a better government, another kingdom,
the kingdom of God.

If we believe. And, you see, maybe we don't believe, at least not much. And we can't just make ourselves believe, because then we could boast in our belief. And then it wouldn't be grace or faith, and we wouldn't be alive or saved.

That movie *The Others* is a tragedy. The mother convinces the children to keep repeating, "This house belongs to us. This house belongs to us." So they drive away the others—the living. At the end of the movie, she sees her sin, but she doesn't see mercy. Ironically her name is Grace, but she doesn't see grace or understand mercy.

[Movie clip from *The Others*:]

Mother, holding her children: I killed my children. I got the rifle. I put it to my forehead. And I pulled the trigger. Then I heard your laughter in the bedroom. You were playing with the pillows as if nothing had happened. And I thought the Lord in His great mercy was giving me another chance.

Hell is believing that all you need is another chance. Heaven isn't another chance, one more try. Heaven is not another chance; Heaven is a new nature, a new will.

Communion

And that's the Gospel—the good news—I proclaim to you. That on the night He was betrayed by this world, He took break and broke it saying, "This is my body given to you. Take it and eat it." And in the same way after supper He took the cup, having given thanks, and said, "This is the new covenant in my blood shed for the forgiveness of sin."

You see, this is grace, and He is life.

This is the body and blood you crave.
This is the body and blood you need.
This is the body and blood God gives.
This is the eternal seed.

He's not just giving you another chance. He's giving you Himself. He's giving you His nature and His will. He is life.

If you come to this table in hope, the seed has already taken root in you. And if you believe that all you need is another chance...well, in Ephesians 4 we'll find that Jesus even descends into Hell. But why would you want to spend any time in Hell when you can begin to live right here, right now?

Prayer

Pray this with me: "Jesus, I surrender my life, which is death. And I ask for your life, which is eternal."

Benediction

If you prayed that prayer for the first time, you need to understand something: You are alive; you are not dead. The real you, the true you, the one seated in the heavenly places is alive. So you must consider yourself dead to sin and death, and alive in Christ Jesus. You are forgiven; you've been grafted into the body of Christ. And this is the good news: You may not boast. At first it hurts, but then it sets you free.

You can boast in Jesus. And if you boast in Jesus, then Jesus will boast in His Father. And then the Father boasts in the Son. And then the Holy Spirit is going to rise up in you, getting you to boast in the Father and the Son. And the Son will take His crown and put it on your head. Then you'll take the crown and put it at His feet. And then you're home in the land of love, the economy of grace, for which you have been predestined.

In Jesus' name, believe the gospel. In His name, amen.