

Holiness is a gift. All is a gift.

As you will know, over the past few months much of the teaching & preaching from up the front here has been working through the vision & the ministry principles that we believe are the direction God has invited us to go in as a church, built on where he has already bought us over these last several years of growth & blessing.

This is that vision (power point). A little bit earlier this year, we did a whole series on '*our identity*' - as God's sons & daughters, as those made in God's image, and as disciples of Jesus. Those are still available.

Today, I want us to start exploring this part of the vision over here on the left: that: *Each person would find their place in God's world (their Mission & Vocation)*. And over the next few weeks we are going to be having a number of messages on mission, & God's mission in the world & each of our places in that.

Now of course, when we start talking about our mission & vocation, it is very easy for us to jump immediately to the question of 'what are we to do?' 'what does God want us to do?' And because most of us are wired as 'doers', we do tend to be very quick to make that jump. And these are crucial questions, so we do need to ask them seriously & prayerfully, & persistently until we find our answer.

But if there is one thing I have become convinced of over these last 20 years of immersion in mission & in ministry, it is this: that doing flows out of being. That is, what we do flows out of who we are, & out of what we have received. And until we know - really know - and appreciate to the point of being truly at peace with & grateful for who we are & what we have received - our doing, no matter how active or even frenetic, can be ineffective, or even quite destructive. To quote Richard Rohr - "*we can only give away who we are. We can only offer to others what God has done in us*"

Let's look at that passage we read in Ephesians 2:1-10 one more time, and actually if we start at verse one, to give us the full context,

1 As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, 2 in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the

kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. 3 All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh[a] and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. 4 But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, 5 made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved. 6 And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, 7 in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. 8 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – 9 not by works, so that no one can boast. 10 For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Paul starts by reminding us that once upon a time, we were as good as dead in our sin - now sometimes I think that word ‘sin’ is a bit confusing, because in the world today it’s come to be thought of as gross moral violation, which actually for most people is confusing - & I know when I came to faith, even though I was an atheist, I had been leading a fairly good, fairly moral life, so the word ‘sin’ initially really confused me. But if we realise that this word ‘sin’ in essence means that we are missing the mark, & we are missing the most important things in life that God wants us to be & to do, for me it then starts to make more sense.

*The principal word in Hebrew translated as sin is the word **chatta’ah**, meaning ‘to miss the way’. The most common Greek word for sin used in the New Testament is **hamartia**, derived from archery. It literally means to ‘miss the mark’.*

*There are two other Hebrew words for sin: **pesha** - commonly translated as transgression or trespass, & it has the connotation of breaking a rule or law; the third word is **avon** most commonly translated as iniquity, & it can carry the connotation of depravity.*

[www/evidenceforchristianity.org/what-are-the-origins-of-the-word-sin/](http://www.evidenceforchristianity.org/what-are-the-origins-of-the-word-sin/)

These 2nd two are used much less frequently in the OT, & so I want to focus on this one that is used the most in Scripture, where we are given the idea,

principally, that we are missing something, that we are just not reaching or attaining the things that God has for us to be & to do. The idea of sin strongly carries this idea of 'separation from', & 'alienation from'. And so we were once lost in sin, missing the things that are most crucial & feeling separate from God & from each other & from the person that we were meant to be - separate from our own souls. Paul goes on to say, in those first four verses, that at that time were we separated from God, and were held hostage by dark forces - powers and habits, and addictions that we did not have the strength to break free from.

That's where we were at, BUT - & verse four starts with a magnificent BUT - look at all we have now received & been given: read this & look at all we have been given & all we have received - let the power of these words flow over you....*great love, rich mercy, made alive, given grace, been saved/rescued, raised up, seated with Christ, incomparable riches, grace, kindness, grace, a gift from God.*

We have received this now, & we are going to receive even more in the age to come. We have been given these things as a deposit, a first payment of even greater gifts to follow, & in a sense, we are already seated in heavenly places with the risen & ascended Christ, & that speaks of the spiritual authority & confidence that we have now, and yet also of all we have to look forward to in the future through Christ's victory & resurrection, and know that one day this will be complete when we are invited to that incredible wedding feast with Jesus, face to face. For now we still live in this broken world, & we still do experience trouble and trial and sadness - but one day we will be completely free, & able to say along with Martin Luther King Jr "*free at last, thank God almighty, we are free at last*"

But Paul is straining with his pen, with his quill, to get us to understand that this is all a gift - lavish, gratuitous, unearned. Life is a gift. All is a gift.

Love, grace, mercy, kindness, salvation - these are all pure, gratuitous, unearned gifts. As Paul says elsewhere in *1 Corinthians 4:7* "*What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, how can you boast ?*"
What do we have in our lives that we did not receive as a gift from the hand

of God - nothing! Not a single thing that really counts - according to Paul - is earned.

Now we come to the climax of this passage - verse 10. Not only has God given us the gift of all these beautiful, beautiful gifts, indeed life itself - God says that we are his beautiful handiwork, his work of art, his masterpiece. The NIV translates this word as 'workmanship', but I don't think that anywhere near captures the power or beauty of what Paul is trying to say here.

The Greek word Paul uses here is *poiēma*. Does that sound familiar? It should. It's where we get our word "poem" from. Reading Ephesians 2:10 in this light, *we are God's poem, his poetry*. Do you hear that? - we are God's poem; we are God's love-letter, we are God trying to express the inexpressible and enfold it in the world. Do you know what the prime function of poetry is? It is to express beauty & truth. And when God looks at you & me, who are made in God's image - yes he sees our scars and our wounds and he sees our sin, of course, but more than that he sees what we so often struggle to see in our selves and in each other - he sees our beauty and what we are capable of being & doing when we get free from sin, and separateness, and allow our selves to be redeemed by what Christ is & what Christ has done.

I just told you that when I became a Christian, coming from a totally non-churched background I found a lot of the Christian words confusing. Holiness or 'being holy' also confused me for a long time. We were told to be holy, but what did that mean? Did it mean living an incredibly moral life? Did it mean trying to purge every possible sin and wicked thought out of my head? And some of the Christian books I read seemed to suggest that - but actually that just left me feeling more & more like a failure & further away from God & like I needed to strive to be perfect. But then one day in a book shop, in the Philippines actually, I picked up this wonderful book called 'A Concise Dictionary of Theology' - by two Catholic theologians no less. And I opened it up to the page that defined holiness & read this definition & it set me free. Here's how that book defined it:

"HOLINESS - from the Old German word for "whole". The attribute of a being that entirely fulfils the purpose of its existence and is thus at one with itself.

Strictly speaking, therefore, only God can be holy...." Isn't that beautiful?

You can meditate on that for a long time. I sure have. And I love that holiness

is related to wholeness, and that God wants to share His holiness and his wholeness with us as a gift. This is not something we can attain by striving.

One of our spiritual forbears, John Calvin, & those who followed him, I think spent far too much time dwelling on our fallen-ness & of course they came up with that phrase 'the utter depravity of man'. And yes we are capable of great depravity, individually & collectively. Look at the holocaust, look at what is happening in Syria right now - indeed that is the utter depravity of man. Simultaneously - We are all fallen, we are all broken, we are all sinners in need of redemption - AND we are all made in God's image, we all bear his likeness, and are all God's works or art.

But Paul is saying here, that because each of us are God's work of art, God's poem to the world - we have been created to do beautiful things in the world. Good works, prepared in advance for us to do. Specific works, that only you can do; and only I can do. Works that if you & I aren't obedient and don't do, may well never get done & the world & God's Kingdom & the church become poorer places for it.

I have a quote here from Marie Curie, the Polish-French scientist who discovered the properties of radio-activity in the late 19th & early 20th Century: She said

"Life is not easy for any of us. But what of that? We must have perseverance and above all confidence in ourselves. We must believe that we are gifted for something and that this thing must be attained". Marie Curie.

I love this quote, & actually it was one that kept me going two years ago when I was really, really sick - or rather, as started lifting my eyes off how sick I was & started to put them on the things that God had called me to be & to do. And Nigel really helped me with that too, when he challenged me to look beyond my illness & get a vision of what God wanted me to do next once I was well again, & then really focus on that. When we are in really low times, dark times, we need to be able to look back to when we were 'in the light', & things were clear; and we need to look forward, to when we will be in the light again, & how God will use the hard time we are going through now to shape us for that future.

Brothers & sisters, there is plenty for us to do in this world - Jesus has told us to share our food with the hungry, our water with the thirsty, to invite the stranger in, to clothe the naked & the cold, to look after the sick & visit the imprisoned; Jesus has told us to share good news with those who are lost, to help prisoners find freedom and the blind find sight and the oppressed find justice.

And that doesn't mean we all need to jump on a plane & fly to India or Africa or somewhere far away. Mother Teresa, when people would visit her in Kolkata, used to say to them "your need to find your own Kolkata".

But remember, doing flows out of being, & what we do flows out of who we are. Once we have experienced God's grace & mercy towards us, then we are able to show God's grace & mercy towards others - because now we know what it looks like & what it feels like. Once we have experienced the incredible love & acceptance of God, and know the radical and deep & wide & long & broad that is - two things happen.

1. Finally we become able to love & accept ourselves in a healthy & whole kind of way. You know, when we are babies & toddlers & children - we only gain an awareness that we are loved & loveable if we see that reflected back in the eyes of our parents, of our mum's & dad's as they cherish us. But if we never got that as children, there's always going to be a hole, a wound inside us. But here's the Good News - at whatever age we are, God is able to cradle us in his arms, look us in the eye & tell us how much he cherishes us & loves us. How much does God loves us? To the point that he would put on flesh & blood & live among us and die for us, stretching out his arms that we might be protected from the powers of darkness & death, because he stood in the gap & took all that violence & hate & wrath & anger on our behalf. We are so loved.
2. 2ndly, when that has happened, then we are set free to finally be able to love others in a whole & healthy way.

But until we fully experience this incredible grace & mercy & acceptance from God, our human nature tends to take us in the other direction - the direction of judgement. It is human nature for us to sit in judgment on our selves and on those around us; to be constantly critical of our selves and those around

us. Those two things are linked - the more self critical & self condemning we are, the more we tend to be critical & judgmental of those around us as well.

You know, as we go through life, here & there you just meet these beautiful people don't you? people who you just know have found grace and love, and you know it because they reflect grace & gratitude; gratitude always being our response to grace. These gracious people- it just seems to flow off them & touch everyone they come into contact with.

Now Jesus was one of those people - certainly towards those who the religious leaders designated as "the sinners". And as you read the gospels you see this pattern clearly - when he is with those the world judged & marginalised & labelled as 'sinners' Jesus is extraordinarily patient, kind, merciful & gracious. But with the religious leaders of his day - i.e. the one who were judgemental & pointing the finger & calling other sinners, he was very direct, sometimes confrontational, & sometime furious.

There are several stories in the gospels that capture this beautifully, and here's one that I'm going to read now from Luke 7:36-50. And in fact we are going to start a few verses before that, because they are telling little verses that set the scene for what happens next.

33 For John the Baptist came neither eating bread nor drinking wine, and you say, "He has a demon." **34** The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and you say, "Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners." **35** But wisdom is proved right by all her children.'

36 When one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume. As she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.

When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, 'If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is - that she is a sinner.'

Jesus answered him, 'Simon, I have something to tell you.'

‘Tell me, teacher,’ he said.

‘Two people owed money to a certain money-lender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?’

Simon replied, ‘I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven.’

‘You have judged correctly,’ Jesus said.

Then he turned towards the woman and said to Simon, ‘Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven – as her great love has demonstrated. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little.’

Then Jesus said to her, ‘Your sins are forgiven.’

The other guests began to say among themselves, ‘Who is this who even forgives sins?’

Jesus said to the woman, ‘Your faith has saved you; go in peace.’

People who know how much grace & love they have been shown are gracious, & they love much. But people who think that everything in life is earned & should be deserved - they struggle with grace. Just like the Pharisee Simon in this story, & just like the older brother in the story of the Prodigal son.

And just as that beautiful, wounded, on-her-way-to-redemption woman came uninvited to that dinner table & found wholeness & healing - now Jesus says to us, **come**. You are invited. Come to this table & eat & drink of Jesus’ gift of sacrifice, of Jesus’ body & blood given for us, to make us holy. Come to the table where Jesus’ grace and mercy and love are poured out for us, so that we might have grace and mercy and love for each other. Come to this food that when we eat it, it enables us to become one with Jesus, one with God, one with ourselves, and even one with each other. Come.