

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Friends, today we have ourselves an apples to oranges comparison. A difference that is as clear and noticeable as black and white, as night and day, as summer and winter up here in Fairbanks.

Do you know what I'm talking about? Look through these verses from Ephesians again. We have a huge contrast here, a contrast of extremes which isn't that uncommon here in the Bible. There's lost vs. found. Or, an enemy of God vs. his own dear child. Hating God vs. loving him with everything we are. Friends, It's all about our condition, from where we once were to where you and I are today. Our verses this morning give us another, wonderful contrast, the contrast which shows how God's Gift of Grace Gives Us New Life!

New life in Christ. Now, that is one of Paul's reoccurring themes of Ephesians. Right? This isn't the first time you've heard about new life. Maybe this rings a bell. A couple of weeks ago, we talked about what our sad condition used to be...dead in transgressions and sins, like spiritual zombies. Physically alive and spiritually dead.

But you remember what God, in his grace, did, don't you? I believe that passage goes like this, "But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved."

When you and I were dead in our sins, on our own unable to escape an eternal death in hell, God saved us, made us alive in Jesus, whose life, death, and resurrection took away those sins which had been keeping us dead. All that, only because of his grace, his gift of underserved and amazing love to us.

And God's grace extends way beyond that one time event, of Jesus death on the cross, for forgiveness of our sins, past, present, and future. That grace of God has worked in you and me a change. God's gift of grace has given way to a new life in every single one of us. A complete day and night difference to who we used to be.

Paul talks about our old life in these verses. It's the same life the Gentiles, that so many people today, unbelievers, that they live, "in the futility of their thinking...darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more."

So what's wrong with these Gentiles, with unbelievers, with this old way of life? Well, really, there's no proper set of values. Their thinking is all messed up. Since they don't know God, they frankly don't care about what God wants from them in their lives. You could say they are darkened in their understanding. The light of what God wants them to do and not to do has not been shed on them.

So, inevitably, their thinking is futile. It isn't about God, it's all about them. And you know what happens when someone starts thinking only about him/herself. They start acting only for themselves, and that kind of thinking, that kind of acting could only lead to them being guilty of wrong actions, of sin.

Because of that, there is a clear separation between the Gentiles and God. Paul says the Gentiles' hearts are hardened. Do you know what that means?

There is an example of a hardened heart in the Bible. It belonged to Pharaoh, the Egyptian ruler Moses dealt with in Egypt. As much as God told Pharaoh through Moses to let his people go, the book of Exodus continually says Pharaoh hardened his heart and would not let the people go. He would not budge, would not give way to God's wishes, a heart of unbelief and blatant disobedience.

And then came the change. After a while, it was no longer Pharaoh who was hardening his heart. It was God who hardened his heart. God shutting the door on Pharaoh, no longer giving Pharaoh the opportunity to repent of his sins and find forgiveness in God's mercy. He was gone for good.

Hardened hearts. An unwillingness to give in to God's will, his commands and demands for a holy life. That is the separation from God the Gentiles, unbelievers, experience, a separation which clearly evidences itself by their sinful lifestyles. A loss of sensitivity, a conscience no longer pricked and guilted by their sinful acts, replaced by indulging in sensuality, sins of the flesh, and in every kind of impurity.

So Paul doesn't stop at sexual sins, having improper sexual relationships, whether that's having sex outside of marriage, pornography, homosexuality, and the like. But every kind of impurity, like hatred, giving way to senseless murders, like what happened the shooting at the Sikh temple in Milwaukee this past week, the results of hatred for others who are different.

Or gang violence, corruption in politics, business scandals, money, jobs, possessions, identities, stolen. Just some of the moral filth in our world today. And not just those sinful acts once. No, a continual lust for more. Never being fully satisfied with disobeying God, but wanting it more and more and more.

That is the old life. Not how you are, right? Well, before you get too comfortable in your seats because you know you're not like that...don't. Because, at one time, that is how each of us were. Why do you think Paul had to insist at the beginning of our verses that we no longer live as Gentiles do? It's because at one time, we were just like them. We were no better than unbelievers.

Now, you may never have murdered anyone, but even an angry, hateful thought toward anyone is the same in God's eyes. So, have you been a murderer? Now you may have never cheated on your spouse or actually committed any kind of adultery, but if you've made lewd jokes or have let your eyes or mind wander after another attractive person, are you any better?

You may have never stolen any material good or valuable item from any person, but maybe you've been lazy, taking away from the time you could be doing something productive or even side-stepping a project you promised someone else you'd do for them. So, you really have stolen.

You and I may not be Gentiles, at least in the sense that Paul is talking about in our verses, equating that Gentile with an unbeliever. But a remnant of that old life, of that old self still resides in every single one of us. I'm talking about that sinful nature, which we were all born with, the sinful nature which opposes God, wants nothing to do with him, but is intent on getting you and me to do the opposite of what God wants.

That sinful nature, that old life, which, if left alone, would bring about our demise, leading us to hell, the place of eternal death.

But Paul insists that you don't live like that. In fact, he says you won't live like that any longer. You're different. You and I don't live that old life, and here's why we don't. We have come to know Christ. We have come to know the saving truth of the gospel, of Christ coming to us and rescuing us.

Christ, our Lord, our Savior, who when we were stuck in our old life, a life full of sin and rebellion against God, lived, died, and rose for us. Jesus was never corrupted by a sinful nature. He never gave in to temptation. He lived perfectly for us.

And then, in his love, Jesus died for us. You see, by his death on the cross, Jesus ripped us from the grip of Satan, from that old life which leads only to hell, and he brought us into a loving relationship with God, one where all of our sins, past, present, and future, are forgiven, paid in full.

And the completion to all of Jesus' work, his resurrection, coming back to life, guaranteeing our resurrection to eternal life in heaven after our earthly lives are done, all because, only because of Jesus.

And now, Christ, our Lord, our Savior, who when we still find ourselves giving in to the ways of our old self, our sinful nature, which we do, even many times each day, still continues to forgive us.

And even better, God, as a gift of grace, has given you and me new life. Do you know what this new life is? Paul here calls it a new self. Martin Luther calls it our new Man. You probably best know it as faith. God's grace has not only saved us from being dead in our sins; that same grace gives us new life in Christ, saving faith in Christ.

And what characterizes this new life? Thankfulness, love, obedience. Thankfulness to God for sacrificing his own Son to save us, the greatest price in the world. Love which shows itself in our every action, a love based on the ultimate and underserved love of God.

And finally, obedience. That's how we show our thanks to God. That's how we show our love to him and to others. Through our obedience. A new life of obedience to God and his commands because our new Man is in harmony with God. What God wants and what our new Man wants is always the same. That new Man, created to be like God. We, in our new life, serve God in righteousness and holiness, with acts of holiness and righteousness.

So the question which may be on your mind right about now. If God's given us that new Man, that new life, then why don't we always do as he would have us? It's because, no matter how hard we might try, even though we have new life, that old life still exists. Inside every one of us is an old self, striving to get out and to make us sin.

Even though we have a new self, our sinful nature is still with us, every step of the way. And, oh, does it try to deceive us into heading right back into our former way of life, putting all those vain worldly pleasures in front of us, trying to make us salivate and go back to our former way of life.

But the new self continues to remind us we are righteous and we are holy in God's eyes not because of ourselves, but because of what Jesus has done for us. And if that isn't enough motivation to say no to temptation and sin, God works through each of us to throw off our old self so we can live how he wants us to live.

Isn't that neat? God has this standard of how he wants us to live. He knows we can't meet it, so he saved us, and now he works in us to live according to his holy, righteous, and perfect standard.

Because of God, that's how we live. What a gift of his grace! He saved us. He's defeated our sinful nature. He gives us new life, a life which loves God, which is thankful for what he has done for us, a life which gladly obeys him. That's the life we live, and by God's grace, we won't go back to the old life. Never again. Amen.