Opening Words

Some may be listening who are trusting in their own righteousness before God. My prayer is that you would come to see yourself in an accurate way, as a failure before God. This is not meant to depress but to deliver you from a false security and to drive you to the one who is rich in mercy.

125 Eph We Lived According to the Flesh

Paul describes the world. Paul describes the devil. Now he describes the flesh – thus completing the triumvirate of the tyranny of sin and the living death that people experience without Christ. Let's listen to him again in Ephesians 2:1-3.

> And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, [2] in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. [3] Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.

Paul is a man of humility. He does not speak of "those wicked pagans out there." Instead, he includes himself. He said, "among these sons of disobedience **we too** all formerly lived." Paul is a Jewish man who grew up in Israel and sat under the feet of Gamaliel. He was in a covenant relationship with God, and he knew God's word and sought to obey it. Yet, he had to admit that he, as well as all other Jews, was a moral failure.

Paul wrote the book of Romans this way. In that great letter, he began by explaining how the Gentile nations rebelled and turned away from God. He described the wickedness of the nations and how it led to hardness of heart. But then, Paul spoke of his own people, and really himself. He explained how the Jewish people were just as guilty before God although they had the Law of God. Paul concluded by saying that all are guilty before God which then prepared him to explain about the work of the Messiah for Israel and for the nations.

Paul is doing the same thing in Ephesians, in abbreviated form. He began by talking about the world and the wicked spiritual powers behind the world system but when he concluded this description of the deadness of our spiritual death, he said, "we too lived this way. We too indulged the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and we too were by nature children of wrath, just like the rest of the world."

This was an eye opener for Paul. He thought he was righteous. He boasted in his credentials. He was "circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless."

But then he met Jesus in his glory and saw what he really was and what his achievements really were. He went on to say. "But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss

for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from *the* Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which *comes* from God on the basis of faith,"

It occurs to me that some may be listening who are in Paul's shoes. By this, I do not mean that you are Jewish, you may be, but my point is that some may be trusting in your own righteousness before God. My prayer is that you would come to see yourself in an accurate way, in the way Paul came to see himself – that he really was a failure before God. This is not meant to depress but to deliver you from a false security and to drive you to the one who is rich in mercy.

And so, in this passage Paul completes the description of the great triumvirate of tyranny that opposes itself against God – the world, the devil, and the flesh – and his mention of the flesh is a painful reminder that we must take responsibility for our actions and faults before God and others.

Yes, it is true that the world system makes it difficult to pursue God. Yes, it is true that the evil one adds his wicked, energizing power to it all, but ultimately, we must face the reality that without Christ the typical human is content and happy to indulge fleshly thoughts and activities.

In Galatians 5, Paul gives a sample list of what he calls there, the works of the flesh.

> Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, [20] idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, [21] envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Look at the first five – immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, and sorcery. These are awful works of the flesh – we think of carousing, adulteries, fornications, and often these types of sexual sins were aligned with the idolatry of the times. Imagine, going to a temple for worship and part of the worship being a sexual rite! That's the way many of these pagan religions were. And then he talks about sorcery. We are talking about active involvement in embracing the dark powers and using their power to influence the world. It is not just that people are influenced by Satan and the world, they actively align themselves with the evil by using his power to manipulate others.

But before we shake our heads in disgust and point our finger at others, we must continue reading the list for Paul then speaks about enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, and factions. Let me ask you – have you experienced any of these? Have you participated in any of these sins? I know the sad truth about you, and the reason I do is that I know the sad truth about me. I have participated in some of these more "acceptable" sins. Immorality – no way! Idolatry – unthinkable! Sorcery – you must be kidding! But Paul throws other sins into the mix with these "big sins" and if we are honest and humble we will say with Paul, "we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest."

Let's be honest, even though we have met Christ, sometimes these old habits hang on. Yes, the Spirit of God continues to work his character within us, but sometimes we can still be full of enmity, jealousy, strife, and anger.

I don't share these things to depress you or to depress me, but with Paul, I share them as a reminder of the frailty of our lives and that we need a Savior. When we live with the awareness of failure and of Christ's great mercy toward us it has a profound effect upon our relationships. I have discovered that I am much more patient and forgiving. When I hear of stories of the failures of others, I do not delight in these stories, but I mourn knowing my failures. I also think of how Christ can restore others just as he has poured restoring grace upon me. And this even goes when people sin against me, when people offend me. I'm not talking about generic sin that people commit every day, but I am talking about situations when people sin *against me*. It's hard. But then I remember that I too "formerly lived in this way" and that the only reason my life has changed as much as it has is that Christ has been abundant in his mercy and grace toward me and continues to pour it out.

Let's define the flesh as we bring our message to a close today. I have discovered the flesh refers to three things.

First it refers to our physical body. Paul said in Philippians 1:21-24 – "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. But if I am to live on in the flesh, this will mean fruitful labor for me. And I do not know which to choose … yet to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake." So here, as in many other passages, the flesh is not an evil thing but just another way of talking about our body.

Second, the flesh refers to our status as sinners under the judgment of God. Paul said in Romans 7:5 "For while we were in the flesh, the sinful passions, which were aroused by the Law, were at work in the members of our body to bear fruit for death." Notice that Paul says we *were* in the flesh, with the implication being that we no longer *are* in the flesh. Paul explicitly says this at the beginning of Romans 8:9, "you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit…." Thus, the flesh, in 7:5 and 8:9 refer to *the status of the sinner in solidarity with Adam* and not to something internal to us.

Third, the flesh refers to our sinful behavior and habits in which our one human fallen nature engages. The passage in Galatians and our text in Ephesians uses the word this way. Paul is simply referring to our behavior that is contrary to God's holy and loving character.

And Paul tells us that all of us formerly were this way. We were men and women who indulged the desires of the body or of the mind, at least in some ways. Paul's list in Galatians 5 is not exhaustive – who could list all the varieties of sin in the world? Who would want to?

There may be some things we have done that are not on the list, but we were a fleshly person anyway. And Paul does not mean that we were guilty of all of them. But we were guilty of some of them and Paul ends this section by saying that we were by nature children of wrath. Warren Wiersbe said, "The only difference between one sinner and another is the state of decay. The drunk living on skid row may have more decay in his life, but the superior, rich athlete who is separated from God is just as dead. A body that has just died is dead but is not as decayed as a body that has been dead for years."

And this is the way we were – by nature, children of wrath. We were born this way, connected to the sin of Adam and connected to the generations of sin before us including the sins of our parents that were passed down to us, living in a world that reinforced the sin, and energized by a powerful spirit-prince whose goal has been to keep us enslaved.

Thankfully, that is not the end of the story for Paul begins the very next sentence with these two words, "But God …" and that is the good news we share on this program. Yes, our situation was desperate and hopeless, but God did something about it. I hope you'll join us for this good news on our next broadcast.