

Sermon Title: All of Us, of Every Ability, Created for Good Works

Sermon Text: Ephesians 2:8-10 - 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. (ESV)

Prayer:

Father, please help us now to see and understand you and your sovereignty more clearly from your word, to embrace whatever your hand and your plan have predestined to take place, and to treasure Jesus even more in his glory and wisdom and strength in all circumstances of our lives. Please, Lord, let your word be a comfort and an encouragement to these friends. For your glory and for their joy, in Jesus name, Amen.

As I had anticipated as I look about this group, there is little need for disability awareness in this crowd. You are already quite aware! But there is another kind of awareness related to remembering; remembering promises, remembering the goodness of God, remembering what he has done for us. As Paul wrote to the Thessalonian church: Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing. (ESV) So, friends, as I prayed, I hope this is an encouragement to you.

Actually, me just being here should be an encouragement because of what God has done. You see, 22 years ago, shortly after my son was born and we knew he was at least blind, I was standing under an awning outside of a hospital while the rain poured down in buckets and thought to myself, who am I? All the preparation towards moving to this new class of manhood called being a father, all the gentle teasing about how it would change my life, had not included this. Maybe you've felt it as well, making a category shift from the expected to the unexpected in one moment. Maybe it happened in your family like that, or your chose it through adopting a child with disabilities, or it happened in your own body through accident or illness.

This was not part of the deal I had with God; I had behaved myself - far better than most people in fact. The fact that it was behavior based in pride and self-righteousness hadn't occurred to me - God still owed me and hadn't delivered. And I was a member of a good, Bible-believing, God-centered church! So after about 3 months a lifetime of religious momentum ran out and I left the church, openly denied God as good and merciful, and settled in for a miserable lifetime of just hanging on until I died. I had every intention of raising my son with my wife, but wallowed in bitterness, fear and envy because of the life I had been given which was different than the one I thought I deserved. And living in this culture I understood how the culture thought about people with disabilities. At this point, all I knew was that he was blind - the cognitive disabilities, the autism, the eating and sleeping issues, the epilepsy all would come later.

Maybe you've experienced that as well - the loneliness, the fear, the pain. The fact that tens of millions of people in the US and more than a billion people in the world live with one or more disabilities doesn't change the fact that disability is different in this and every other culture in the world, and is treated as different, strange, pitiful, frightening, abnormal, offensive, troubling everywhere. My children can tell you stories of people staring, asking questions, and generally noticing that we are a different family. The fishbowl of being noticed constantly but truly known seldomly can be wearying. And then add in the complications with doctors and therapists and healthcare and paying for it all, schooling, legal issues, social workers and IFSPs and IEPs and transition plans and government bureaucracies - running from

one thing to the next, with the guilt-inducing drumbeat of needing to do that one additional thing, one additional hour of therapy, one additional drug treatment. Today my wife lives with the consequences of Stage IV breast cancer and currently has painful stress fractures in both her legs which require surgery this week - the brokenness and pain of this world are not just in my past or theoretical; it is right now. I need, you need, to have a proper perspective.

Let's turn to our text, starting in Ephesians 2:1:

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins -[2] 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—[3] 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.

When I abandoned church back in 1995, my son's disabilities had not changed me; they had simply revealed who I really was. That is, dead.

I never doubted the existence of God, I simply denied he was good, I found him to be cruel, capricious, doling out pain simply because it brought him some sadistic pleasure. All evidence that I was dead.

Now for the good news:

[4] But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, [5] even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— [6] and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, [7] so that in the coming ages **he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.** [8] For by grace you have been saved through faith. **And this is not your own doing;** it is the gift of God, [9] **not a result of works, so that no one may boast.**

Let's be clear - it is grace you have been saved - not by intellect, service to others, philanthropy, good deeds or any decision - by GRACE! Can't be bought, can't be earned, can't be reasoned, can't be decided - by GRACE you have been saved!

Let's pause and go back to that rainy evening in July 1995. I had categories of people, mostly without thinking - better than and less than, admirable and pitiful, normal and disabled. Those categories exist all around us right now. I was afraid of living in that new category of disability.

And people aren't even afraid of the right things, are they? They imagine the life we lead and miss the reality. Are we sad about the pain and suffering in ourselves or our child? Of course. But how can they understand how angry we are at how we're treated? As a man, I noticed when meeting with doctors, social workers and educators that my observations about my child with disabilities needed to be confirmed by our child's mother! Mothers are heroic angels rather than real women. We have all heard this, "God only gives special children to special people" - good grief. Or "God only gives us what we can handle" - then what do any of us need God for if we can handle it? These and the hundreds of other things we have heard build up walls - I'm glad you're special and I'm not. We all have these stories of being discounted or stereotyped because of our association with disability. We live in a world of categories, and disability is at the bottom.

But God tells us in Ephesians 2:1-9, that he has only two categories - dead or alive. Not capable and incapable, not 'normal' vs. special needs. Dead in sin, or alive in Christ. And those who are alive in Christ

are alive because of Christ, not because of their ability. No dead person brings anything of value to that question!

And that is my story - in a hospital hallway in Indianapolis, without anyone talking to me about God and with me thinking murderous thoughts about the doctor in front of me, God revealed to me the depths of my own depravity and my desperate need for a savior. And I became alive. Because of God's grace. And I returned to that church I had left because the people of that church, though they had made many mistakes, remained firm in communicating that God is sovereign in all things, including disability. Pastors, teach your people who God is and people like me benefit.

Now, that story of God's rescue is much more complicated and the extraordinary things God did for me are too numerous to mention here, including all the ways I hurt the people at my church. You can hear more of my story at my blog, theworksofGod.com under the resource library tab on the right.

But I will add this - I was saved, but very angry and discouraged. I knew I had been taken from death to life, but as I looked around at my American middle-class culture I saw clearly how people with disabilities, and their parents, were treated. I sought to learn all I could about disability law and accessibility and rights and the language of disability. In fact, if you used the wrong words for disability around me I would correct you - and usually harshly. Which made church really painful - or, I should say, I made church painful for other people - because those good people had no clue about the language of disability, so I was correcting them all the time and hurting people all the time. My motivation wasn't entirely bad, but my understanding of what God was up to was very, very small and I was sharing none of the grace I had received.

I was looking everywhere but God's word. I was not considering what God had already told us about how purposeful he is in all things. I was believing my limited perception of reality rather than hanging on to the infinite surety of God's promises. My encouragement was here, not out there! Let's go back to Ephesians 2:

[10] For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (ESV)

Let's pause over that. The Lord of the universe, who created all things out of nothing just by speaking, who knows everything that ever was or ever will be, who needs no service from us on anything - this Lord calls you and me his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works. God himself says it! And my perspective changed - disability could be part of God's intentionality.

But, some argue, disability is its own category, separate from God's creative work, meaning you are God's workmanship, but the brokenness of this world is not, that disability is not really part of God's purposes. That sounds reasonable. But, let us dig a little deeper to see if the Bible has anything else to say about this, if there is really is a separate category for disability outside of God's workmanship.

In Exodus Moses is attempting to get out of the work God has for him by claiming that he is slow of speech. The Lord's reply in Exodus 4:11: Then the LORD said to him, "Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the LORD? (ESV)

The Lord, without embarrassment, says that he has made some blind and deaf and unable to speak. Its right there! But there's more. He also tells us that he does it for a great purpose in John 9:1-3:

John 9:1-3 [1] As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. [2] And his disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” [3] Jesus answered, “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him. (ESV)

God KNEW this man would grow up in a society that believed his disability was caused by either his parent’s sin or his sin. He KNEW this man would not receive an education, that he would be limited to begging in the street. Yet, in verse 3 God changes this from accident of birth to purpose with the simple phrase, that the works of God might be displayed in him.

Some have argued that this is actually a case against the goodness of God, placing that man in such a horrible position in that culture. And that just shows how little we take the reality of sin and the eternal consequences of sin and hell. John 9 ends with the man worshipping Jesus, fully under the promise that he would get to be with Jesus for eternity. What is 30 years of suffering compared to eternity of ever increasing measures of joy with Jesus? That man eventually died. Would it have been better for him to live 80 years with sight - and then hell?

Now, for years this passage from John 9 was a problem for me. As the father of a son who will be blind his entire life, I hated that Jesus healed this man when that healing is impossible for my boy. I could not fully embrace what this meant because it appeared that healing was the purpose of his having his disability, and my son had no such purpose.

And then my pastor pointed out that God doesn’t always remove suffering in this life. He took me to 2 Corinthians 12 where another Paul is seriously suffering. And here is the conclusion:

2 Corinthians 12:8-10

[8] Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. [9] But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. [10] For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (ESV)

The world looks at this and thinks, how stupid! Avoid suffering! Run from it, medicate it, if necessary, kill it. Be strong, or at least give the appearance of strength and independence. The people of God say, we say, I was dead but because of Jesus I am now alive and I will go where Jesus is - outside the camp - Hebrews 13:13. Actually, because of disability, we’re already outside the camp! The health, wealth and prosperity gospel says we can have it all if we have enough faith. Jesus says, I am the propitiation for your sins, I give you faith, and someday you will get to be with me forever, but in this age you will have troubles. What is 22 years so far of taking care of a very vulnerable young man when my eternity with Jesus is assured.

And it doesn’t end there - God is purposeful about his glory, but there is also benefit that accrues to us!

Paul puts it this way: 2 Corinthians 4:17

[17] For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us **an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison**, (ESV)

I know, brothers and sisters, it does not feel light or momentary. But I can testify that after 22 years, God is still providing daily help. I'm glad he didn't tell us on day one what some of those days would look like over 22 years. That would have crushed me, I think. But knowing today that he knows the next 22 years of days, has already written them down in a book (Psalm 139:16), has determined how they bring him glory and will ultimately bring me joy, that he will provide daily help for as many days as I have, that is enough.

And it doesn't end there!

2 Corinthians 1:3-5

[3] Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, [4] who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. [5] For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. (ESV)

God gets the glory, we are being prepared for an eternal weight of glory beyond compare, we receive comfort, and we get to comfort others!

Let's go back to Ephesians 2:10: For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (ESV)

It is a universal statement. Our most disabled members were created for good works. The fact we who are not disabled may have to work harder to see and welcome those gifts does not change that God has done it. My son is very disabled, but one of the gifts he demonstrates is what dependency looks like. He is unashamed of his dependency. He also trusts those in whom he is dependent. Just like you and I are to trust in our good father.

He also sings at the most unusual times. In school, at Walmart, at a restaurant. It is sweet, and people are encouraged by it - but I believe he is also, at times, called to war. Now, he functions intellectually at about an 18 month level:

Psalm 8:2 Out of the mouth of babies and infants, you have established strength because of your foes, to still the enemy and the avenger. (ESV)

Have demons fled at his songs, prompted by the Holy Spirit? I don't know; but I know it is possible and I believe it has happened. Is that not a good work?

And God has said the weaker member has unusual value:

1 Corinthians 12:21-22

[21] The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." [22] On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, (ESV)

Seem to be weaker - I love that! Seems to be weaker to us, but in God's economy - indispensable, along with a warning - don't say to any part of the body I created that you are not needed, which also implies you shouldn't behave that way, either.

Or this:

1 Corinthians 1:27-29

[27] But God chose what is foolish **in the world** to shame the wise; God chose what is weak **in the world** to shame the strong; [28] God chose what is low and despised **in the world**, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, [29] so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. (ESV)

This gives a great deal of form to Ephesians 2:10, doesn't it! The good works God has given our most disabled members are likely the very works our churches need the most. So called normal people don't think that way, usually, because of our own cultural biases. But we aren't normal, natural people - we're supernatural! As my pastor has taught me, God is always doing 10,000 more things than we can see; if we are fortunate, we might see one or two.

So, church, reject and discard the sin of low expectations that the world places on those living with disabilities and their families. Pray that the good works God has for all your members would be expressed in your churches. Trust that God is for you in this, because of God's extraordinary, infinite ability to do all that he has said he will do! His promises are secured in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ - not our pitiful perceptions of reality, our so-called limited resources, our lack of imagination. Tremble with anticipation when the Lord brings yet another person with disabilities into your congregation.

And if you are the one who has been discounted, dismissed, unrecognized even within the church, turn it all back to Jesus. He knows what it is to suffer, to be humiliated, to be forgotten. But Jesus never forgets us and is for us when we cling to him in faith. We don't need to live lives full of bitterness and anger. We can live free in him, praying for change, trusting his ways are right as we seek change. In Christ we can be both bold and broken, advocates known for our humility, tenacious without being cruel.

And when the suffering comes to our churches, we can face it with maturity, tenderness and care. When a child is born with disabilities, when a young person becomes disabled through accident or illness, when the impact of age takes physical, sensory and mental capacities away from an older saint - we live 'as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing.' Weep with those who are weeping, who are frightened, who are struggling with bitterness. I still experience seasons when all the pain and hurt of this age rushes up on me and could overwhelm me. And in those moments I have brothers in the faith who have regard for me, who pray for me, who encourage me with God's word. And then I do the same for them. Persist in love, and if you are the one who is crushed in spirit, let them love you.

Recognize the pain and suffering, but don't be limited by it - run to Jesus for help. He knows we are but dust. As we know from Romans 8: In all these things we are **more than** conquerors through him who loved us.

My Pastor for almost 30 years put it this way:

What I think "more than conquerors" means for your happiness is that a conqueror has his enemies lying subdued at his feet. You've got distress, famine, nakedness, peril, sword, persecution, and there they are, conquered at my feet. More than conquerors means they're not just at my feet. They are serving me. They're not just in chains in prison. They are serving me. My

persecution, my famine, my nakedness, my loss—as painful and as tearful as they are—are my servants. God works them all together for my good.

Now that good that he works in and through them is the foundation of my happiness. It isn't the circumstance. There's plenty of tears. Jesus was "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief." Paul says, "Sorrowful yet always rejoicing."

So yes, God wants you happy. But he doesn't do it with circumstance. He does it with himself. He does it with the gospel.

The one who makes dead people alive will help you do the good works he has prepared for you, for his glory and for your joy. No exceptions, no limitations, all the elect created in Christ for good works.

Let us pray: