

Before and After Ephesians 2:1-10

Few things manage to pull off being brutally honest and powerfully motivational at the same time, the way before and after pictures can. Which is something the advertising industry has recognized for a long time. Nothing sells gym memberships faster than pictures of love handles spilling over the waistband of a bikini, split screened to a shot of the same person with tight abs and slender hips frolicking on a beach before an audience of admiring and envious onlookers. Before and After ads capitalize on confronting us with our undeniable imperfections as we are and then planting the hope of becoming the person we wish we could be, before promoting a product that promises to get us from one image to the other, where all else has failed for us before.

The Letter to the Ephesians, particularly the passage we just read, follows a “Before and After” pattern of its own. The first few verses, written in past tense, compose a “Before” picture of the people to whom it was written. Like modern ads, the “Before” picture is not pretty. “You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived following the course of this world.” It’s talking about being spiritually dead or alienated from God.

Mind you, this letter was written to be read in churches.

To Christians.

These words weren’t written for people sitting in jail cells, barrooms or brothels.

They were written to people sitting in church pews.

It was written to you and me.

You and I are included in this “Before” picture. And just as physical love handles are embarrassing evidence of a lack of self-control where our excessive diet and insufficient exercise are concerned; it is our “spiritual love handles”; our trespasses and sins, which result from our “following the course of this world” that Paul puts on such unflattering display. At least there is some relief to knowing that this is all written in the past tense. That it describes who we *once were*.

The “After” picture is a totally different picture of who we are now. And it is written in the present tense. It tells us that we are raised up and seated with Christ in heavenly places. That is quite a transformation. I’d say, even more impressive than going from bulging waistlines to washboard abs! It is a leap from being spiritually lifeless and drifting along on the winds of this world that lead us astray from following God, to being so alive to God that it is as if we are seated with Christ in heaven right now.

Sounds like the kind of dramatic change that only comes through a lot of sweat and determination, doesn’t it? Or, a lot of dieting and self-sacrifice. But read the fine print on this

offer. “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the GIFT of God – NOT the result of works, so that no one may boast.”

Wait. What?

It is the gift of God? No payment plan? No operators waiting by phones to get your credit card number? No expensive gym memberships or diet schemes? None of what we assume to be the pre-requisites of a Before and After transformation?

It is free.

It is grace.

The standard definition of grace is the unmerited favor of God. It is God’s love shown to us when we least deserved it. And verse four says, “God who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which God loved us EVEN WHEN WE WERE DEAD THROUGH OUR TRESPASSES, made us ALIVE together with Christ.”

God doesn’t wait until we reach a certain waist measurement or muscle tone or standard of righteousness to give us this new life. God’s love is not contingent on our goodness or on our fitness. God only waits for us to say yes to the “no strings attached” offer of grace. God gives us new life, not because of who we are but because of who God is. Not because of what we’ve done or haven’t done, but because of what Jesus did for us. “By grace you have been saved through faith.”

Jesus has made the sacrifice for us. It was by his pain that we gain. The most strenuous thing we are required to do, is to believe it. To accept it. To allow it to transform us from who we were before, into someone new. That’s the only work required of us. The work of faith. The work of trusting in God’s love for us; the love that was seeking to bless us even when we were too preoccupied with following the course of this world for our blessings to even know that it was a free offer. We don’t earn God’s grace, but we must respond to it and receive it in faith. Faith is saying yes to God’s offer to be reconciled to a living relationship with God and to have a privileged place in God’s plan.

Although, our salvation is a free gift, it does not mean that it came cheaply, or didn’t cost God anything. We are forgiven and reconciled to God through Jesus. Specifically, through Jesus’ death and resurrection. The cross, sign of the *worst* that the world could do to God, through God’s amazing grace becomes a sign of the *best* that God has done for the world. And as Jesus was resurrected from death’s bonds, we are raised up to new life in him.

But wait! There’s more! More to the after picture of who we are in our relationship with God through Jesus. It says that, “For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.” God had a particular life in mind for us when we were created. It was a life of doing good works. A life of reflecting the love we experience from God by loving our neighbor. Not the kind of doing good works we once

thought were necessary to get ourselves in shape Before we could earn God's approval. But the good works that come on the "After" side of receiving God's grace, which provides us with the strength and stamina to live the life we were created to live. A life of doing good works, because we have been saved FROM what we are WITHOUT Jesus, to be saved FOR all it is possible for us to be WITH Jesus, as a result of being saved by the grace of God IN Jesus.

The passage ends with the claim that God saves us, "So that in ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus." Grace is designed to be the gift that keeps on giving. And, the chief method by which it is passed on to others is through the Before and After images that advertise the difference grace has made in reshaping us. Which then become living testimonials for what grace can do for anyone.

If there is something like a regimen of spiritual exercise that can work with grace to move us from Before to After, it might look and sound somewhat like this prayer by Quaker writer Richard Foster:

"Today, O Lord, I yield myself to You.
May Your will be my delight today.
May You have perfect sway in me.
May Your love be the pattern of my living.
I surrender to You my hopes, my dreams, my ambitions.
Do with them what You will, when You will, as You will.
I place into Your loving care my family, my friends, my future.
Care for them with a care that I can never give.
I release into Your hands my need to control, my craving for status, my fear of obscurity.
Eradicate the evil, purify the good, and establish Your kingdom on earth.
For Jesus' sake."