

The crux of the evangelical message is that God has engineered a custom torture chamber in which the billions and billions of human beings who have not accepted a certain creed or said a certain prayer will suffer for eternity.

Wailing and gnashing of teeth in the eternal flames of hell.

Man, that becomes a strong motivation to keep coming to church and to keep the church coffers full.

But all on their own, humans have done a bang-up job of creating hell right here on earth.

As we speak, many hundreds of thousands of people are living in the squalor of refugee camps with cholera infested water and starvation rations reluctantly doled-out by American and European nations.

Nations, I may add, that discard as much of 40% of the food they produce, which just adds insult to the injury.

Many of those refugees have lost families, homes, livelihoods and limbs to wars underwritten by distant powers with unclear motives.

God does not need to build a future hell down there, because we've done it right here.

Generation after generation, we've made our own hells – and often in the name of God, who actually wants nothing more than to love and heal us.

Sometimes our hells are as tangible as mass graves – and often they are secreted in our souls, played-out as abuse, addiction and depression.

Bootsie just read a passage from Ephesians, a letter written either by Paul or one of his close followers to remind the churches around Asia Minor of how Christ's sacrifice and the birth of the living church have changed their lives.

In today's passage from chapter 2, the author begins by reciting what life was before they knew Christ:

*Ephesians 2:1-2 As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, 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*

By the way, at the time this was written, people believed that demons were especially active in the region between earth and the moon – giving rise to the English word lunatic, from lunar and demonic.

So, the ruler of the kingdom of the air is the ruler of all the demons on earth and around earth.

And the writer of Ephesians does not describe people as carriers of an “original sin”, people who inherently deserve eternal

punishment, but rather as people susceptible to sin of their own doing or through the influence of those demons.

There is guilt with consequences.

But the idea of original sin is different.

Original Sin would have us believe that we suffer with an inborn flaw that makes humans - God's prized creation - so despicable that He intends to sentence us to an eternity of suffering.

But then Paul contrasts our pasts with new life in Christ:

*Ephesians 2:4 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*

The word *eleos* is translated as “mercy”.

It is a reference to Psalm 145:8 *GOD is all mercy and grace— not quick to anger, is rich in love.*

Notice the verb tense – something was already done that has impact both now and in the future.

This is really important: Paul and his disciples did not limit Christ's grace and salvation to a future time.

*He made us alive now.*

*By grace.*

Grace is an unmerited, unearned, unearnable gift, but often we don't open it, so we remain in our hells.

It is like Christ took the initiative to adopt you into his family to free you from your living hell right now.

As a matter of fact, that is the metaphor that opens this letter:

*Ephesians 1:5 ... (we are) adopted as God's children through Christ ....*

Timothy Paul Jones and his wife adopted an eight-year-old girl – we'll call her Margaret – after her adoption was dissolved by another family.

In other words, this child had been an orphan, then was adopted, but then was rejected and un-adopted.

Do you think this child might have come with a little baggage?

Yeah, she was a difficult child.

Timothy says that her previous family had never quite integrated Margaret into their family.

For example, whenever they vacationed at Disney World, they took their biological children with them, but they left her with a family friend.

Quite naturally, Margaret concluded that she must have done something terribly wrong to be banned from the yearly vacation to the Magic Kingdom.

And so, by the time Margaret was adopted by the Jones family, she had seen dozens of pictures of Disney World with the smiling faces of her adopted siblings, and she had heard their stories about the parades and rides, but she had always been left on the outside of the Magic Kingdom.

Tim says that once he found out about this history, he made plans to take her to Disney World.

Just what any good parent would do – and they expected Margaret to be excited and to feel their acceptance and love as they planned their vacation.

However, it didn't work out that way.

No.

They were not prepared for Margaret's disruptive behavior in the weeks leading up to the trip.

She began to steal food instead of simply asking for a snack.

She lied when it would have been easier to tell the truth.

She whispered insults that were crafted to hurt her older sister as deeply as possible.

A week before the trip, her tantrums had gotten so out of control, that Tim took her aside to ask what was up.

“I know what you're going to do,” she stated flatly. “You're not going to take me to Disney World, are you?”

Suddenly her downward spiral started to make some sense.

She had concluded that she was not good enough for the Magic Kingdom, and she'd learned that she couldn't earn her way in — she had tried and failed that test several times before.

So, she was behaving in a way that would guarantee the results she expected, that would affirm what she believed she was worth.

I wonder if you've ever sabotaged your own happiness or success.

Maybe you thought you weren't good enough for this man or this woman, that once they saw the “real you” that they would walk away, so you torpedoed the relationship before you could be hurt.

Maybe you were just starting to make it in your career, but the old voices of “you're a failure, you'll never amount to anything”, and “who do you think you are, anyway?” brought you back to your old reality – so why bother?

Do you feel regret or guilt for things you've done?

Of course.

Every one of the 8-billion adults walking our planet feels guilt for their mistakes.

But we often confuse guilt with shame, and they are not the same.

The difference between guilt and shame is the difference between “I did something bad” and “I am bad”.

It’s the difference between “I made a mistake”, and “I am a mistake”.

Guilt allows me to apologize if I hurt you, or to evaluate my performance versus whom I am striving to be.

But shame colors everything.

Shame lives deep in our secret self, from where it is all-encompassing and always destructive.

Shame is a soul-eating emotion. (Carl Jung)

Little Margaret was being the person rejection and shame had taught her to be, and so was sabotaging her dream vacation.

Tim confesses that when he sat her down he was tempted by the natural response, “If you don’t start behaving better, you’re right, we won’t take you.”

That’s what she expected.

But, by God’s grace he caught himself and instead asked her, “Is this trip something we’re doing as a family?”

She nodded.

“Are you part of this family?”

She nodded again.

“Then you’re going with us. Sure, there may be some consequences to help you remember what’s right and what’s wrong — but you’re part of our family, and we’re not leaving you behind.”

Did everything magically change after that conversation?

No.

She pretty much spiraled out of control at every hotel and rest stop during their road trip to Orlando.

But, she still got the thrills of the rides and of posing for pictures with Cinderella and Mickey Mouse.

In their hotel room that first evening, a very different child emerged.

She was exhausted and a little weepy, but her month-long rebellion had faded.

After she dropped into bed, Tim said their bedtime prayer and asked, “So how was your first day at Disney World?”

She closed her eyes and snuggled down into her stuffed unicorn.

After a few moments, she said, “Daddy, I finally got to go to Disney World. But it wasn’t because I was good; it’s because I’m yours.”



“It wasn’t because I was good; it’s because I’m yours.”

That’s the message of unmerited outrageous grace.

*Ephesians 2:7-8 Now God has us where he wants us, with all the time in this world and the next (notice that: it’s not just in the sweet by and by, it is also now) to shower grace and kindness upon us in Christ Jesus. Saving is all his idea, and all his work. All we do is trust him enough to let him do it. It’s God’s gift from start to finish!*

I get it in the abstract ... but I’ve done some really lousy things in my time that I have trouble believing I’m off the hook for.

I was a good parent – a single parent – but I fell way short.

For example, there were many evenings when I left Ian alone because I was working unnecessarily late or dating late.

I was always working, always dating, which meant often short-changing my own son.

I had a colleague who also was a single parent, but she committed to not dating until her two sons were off to college.

Unlike me, for ten years she stayed home every night and took them on interesting weekend trips.

I still feel shame when I compare myself with her.

That is shame’s first tape: I’m not good enough, successful enough, thin enough, extraordinary enough.

And if we somehow get beyond that old tape and try accepting that we are enough, then shame chimes in with, “Who do you think you are?”

Who you are is a child of God.

You were created in love by God, who wants a relationship with you throughout your life.

It was God who determined your body weight, your talents, your gifts, your sexual orientation.

*1 John 4:19 We, though, are going to love—love and be loved. First we were loved, now we love. He loved us first.*

If God loves us, who are we to contradict God?

The source of shame may be different for men and women.

For women shame is rooted in the competing and conflicting expectations that you can do it all ... be the loving, patient and wise parent, the successful career woman – assertive but never bitchy – the skinny and seductive wife, the gourmet cook who smiles as she cleans up after dinner – all without breaking a sweat.

Not going to happen, but many women are left feeling shame for not being enough on many fronts.

For men, shame comes from being perceived as weak.

And most of the shame men face does not come from the locker room or corner office.

Men's shame does not come so much from other men as it does from women.

For the last couple of decades, men have been encouraged to be open and vulnerable, but that has backfired for many of them.

As a matter of fact – and hear this, women – men have often found that even when their women have invited them to be vulnerable, their vulnerability disgusted them.

Maybe you have things that you feel shame about.

A failed marriage, unfulfilled commitments, a secret habit or addiction.

Shame says you're not worthy, not lovable, not acceptable.

Shames says you're weak, a loser.

Shame says if people knew the “real you” they'd reject you.

But that's not what God intends for you.

In the bible there's a story about a man named Hosea whom God orders to marry an adulterous woman and to take her out-of-wedlock children into his own family.

He remains true to her, even after she continues her unfaithful behavior – what in his culture may have been the ultimate shame for a man.

God then uses his story as an illustration of God's unwavering love for His people even after they mess up and keep messing up.

Later, Jesus gave lesson after lesson to express the outrageous grace God wants to shower upon you.

He said, grace is a farmer paying a full day's wages to day laborers with only an hour punched on their time cards (Matthew 20:1 – 16).

Grace is the insanity of a shepherd who puts ninety-nine sheep at risk to rescue a single lamb that's too stupid to stay with the flock (Luke 15:1 – 7).

Jesus said that Grace is like the love of a father who hands over his finest rings and robes to a young man who has squandered his inheritance on drunken binges (Luke 15:11 – 32).

It's the love our Lord feels for you, no matter who you are or where you've been – no matter how many times or in what ways you've screwed up.

Let's take a moment to think of some shame that continues to nag at us, and how God wants to break through the shame barriers we've erected because He loves us and wants nothing more than for us to have full, abundant, healthy lives.

This sermon ends with view a short video about grace, singing the 1<sup>st</sup> verse and chorus of *Scandal of Grace*, and then a prayer.

➔ (video + music then one verse and chorus of *The Scandal of Grace*)