

ON BEING A MASTERPIECE

8th in a Series on Ephesians called, "Messages to the Misfits"
Ephesians 2:10 – Topic: Good Works

Louisville, Kentucky television station WDRB had an interesting report on its news 2 years ago about something that happened on Father's Day that year. At a McDonald's in southern Indiana a driver at the drive through window noticed a dad in the car behind her. He had 4 kids, apparently a bunch of Happy Meals, a Quarter Pounder, a Big Mac and assorted other items. She told the worker at the window that she wanted to pay for the food of the man behind her and asked that the worker say "Happy Father's Day" to the dad. That dad was touched by her kindness and wanted to do the same for someone. So he paid for the food for the people in the car behind him. The person behind him had the same reaction, and did the same thing. Every person who received that kind gift chose in turn to pass it on to the next car. It continued until midnight on Father's Day when the store closed, ending at 167 cars.

I find it interesting that the story made it on the TV news. People love to hear things like that. It's the way we wish the world was. I know personally it is a powerful thing. I've mentioned before that last year we had a little taste of it. Laurie and I were on vacation and one evening went to an ice cream store. When I tried to hand my credit card to the girl at the cash register she said, "It's already paid for." I was caught off guard because that doesn't usually happen. She could see my confusion and explained, "The man in the group just before you said he was having such a happy time on his family vacation that he wanted to make others happy as well, so he gave them \$60 to pay for the ice cream of the people who came along behind him." Receiving a kind act like that is a powerful and memorable thing. God doesn't ask us to go around paying for other people's food necessarily, but he does want us to be powerful, memorable people. We can see that in Ephesians 2:10

GOD MADE US MASTERPIECES

I recently had one of those down moments that I have occasionally. They are not frequent, but every now and then it happens. I don't know if others have these times. I don't even know what caused this time of discouragement. For whatever reason that day I started reflecting on how much I wanted to be an athlete in my earlier years. What I realized looking back on it was that was a forlorn and misguided desire from the start. I should have realized that, but I didn't. I was never big enough or strong enough to be a good athlete. I was really a scrawny little guy. I was never very really good at any sport, and that has always been disappointing and frustrating for me, even this far into my life. But my discouragement got worse because I then began thinking about other aspects of my life. I wanted to write novels, too. And I did so. And I was no better at writing

books than I was at being an athlete. I was an athlete and author wannabe, not the real thing. Then I began reflecting on how useless I am with anything practical, like home maintenance. The peak of my skill is changing light bulbs and taking out the trash. I can't do anything. I then reflected on my inabilities in several other areas of life. Finally I came to what proved to be my life's work, being a pastor. When I summed that all up that looked like a pretty weak effort as well.

I shared with Laurie some of my thoughts. She disagreed with my analysis of my weaknesses, but I still was left with a sense of discouragement. Shortly after that episode I was confronted with the verse that we are considering today. I realized that whatever I may feel about what I've done well or what I haven't, I needed to rethink how I see my life, because this verse says something quite different.

Verse 10 says, "We are God's handiwork." That's an acceptable translation of that phrase, but to me it is a bit vanilla. The words actually are more vibrant. The Greek word "handiwork" might sound familiar to you. The word is *poiema*, and it is the origin of our word "poem." Paul literally wrote, "For we are God's poem." I'm not a big poetry person. But I do get the power of poems. Emma Lazarus' poem "The New Colossus" is about the Statue of Liberty and is now inscribed on it. The poem says, "From her beacon hand glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command the air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame. Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp! Cries she with silent lips. Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest tossed, to me." That is a beautiful and powerful poetic statement of the power of this country. It stirs something in our hearts.

If it were me writing a poem this would not be a very impressive thing. Any poems I've ever written would be in the class of those that begin, "Roses are red, violets are blue." But this is God writing a poem. And as we can see from the examples I cited, poems are works of art. They are beautiful and powerful. The Greek word *poiema* was often translated "craftsmanship." Craftsmanship implies something done with care and skill. And that's what this verse says you and I are.

In his book *Gettin' There*, Steve Farrar wrote, "You are a piece of work...You do not exist by the sheer coincidence of chance and time that caused you to evolve from the stagnant slime of some ancient accidental, and inexplicable drop of water... You exist by the will and skill of the most accomplished craftsman in all the universe. He formed you, shaped you, molded you, and birthed you. And he did it for a reason."

A craftsman doesn't patiently, carefully create a piece of his craftsmanship for no reason. A poet doesn't write a poem for no reason. The craftsman has a purpose in creating, as does the poet. The poet has something to say. The same is true of God. We begin to see the power of these words. Our world tells us that we are mere accidents. There is no art to our existence and certainly no point to it. But this verse says that is not the truth. The truth is that we are not the product of chance. We are created by God who made us for a purpose. There is both purpose and beauty to our existence. Our lives have a message and meaning. That's true of every one of us.

Psalm 139 says much the same. In verses 13-14 David wrote, "You created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well." David says that God's works are wonderful. If we are God's works, what does that mean about us? It means that we are wonderful as well.

I have a tendency occasionally to say to God, "You created my inmost being. I am fearfully and poorly made. Your works are not very good." I don't tell God this, but I find at times I think, "If I had God's power and I was making me, I think I would have done a better job. I can think of a number of improvements to the current design that could have really helped."

But in Psalm 139:16 David wrote, "Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be." In other words, God had a plan for my life, and he built me in such a way that I am perfectly suited to carry out the role he designed for me. And so are you designed for the role he has for you to play.

When I reflect on this fact and my arrogant thought that I could have done a better job than God, I realize the heart of the problem is right there at that matter of God having a purpose for his craftsmanship. When I think about the design improvements I would have made, they typically are about things that could bring me more approval, success and acclaim in this world. In other words, the things I take issue with God about really come down to making life about me and about this world right now. But God is playing the long game and he is not creating with a view to enabling us to make life all about self. He has a cosmic plan, and he has designed a role in that plan. If you ever watch movie credits eventually you will see the names of all the cast and the roles they played, even down to the guy whose role is listed as "Bystander #2." It may not seem big, but Bystander #2 was needed for the movie to be complete. Maybe you feel like your role is Bystander #10, but that role is needed.

We have a tendency to be all about, as I said, approval, acclaim and success in this world. But let me give you a couple of examples to think about. Do you know who Edd Roush was? He had success that I thought I wanted. He was a Major League Baseball player from 1913 to 1931. He had a lifetime batting average of .323, which put him in the top 50 of all time. He led the National League twice in hitting, and was elected to the Hall of Fame. And my guess is the majority of you have never heard of him. We can go for those selfish this-world purposes and find out that only a few years later no one cares. You are forgotten all too soon.

Then think about a woman named Rahab. She lived in Jericho. She was not a part of God's people. One would think because of this she had no role in God's plan. To make matters worse, she was a prostitute. I have no doubt that she must have had times when she would have laughed cynically at anyone who suggested that she was fearfully and wonderfully made. Yet she played a role in helping Israel take over Canaan, and would eventually end up as an ancestor of Messiah, the centerpiece of history. She is still remembered and honored today, more than 3000 years after she lived.

When I sum up my life to date I might easily conclude that it is not very impressive. But Rahab never knew how crucial her role in God's plan was. We likely will never know our part either. The things that we usually think are big and important are almost always fleeting and in the end not especially crucial. But perhaps being a faithful husband and dad will mean future generations of Myatts might produce someone who will play a crucial role in God's plan. Perhaps some person who has been in my ministry will have a descendant who will be the next Billy Graham. I will never know about any of that, so I need to trust God's plan for the days of my life.

GOD CREATED US TO DO GOOD THINGS

This verse goes on to say that God created us in Christ Jesus for a particular reason. By saying he created us in Christ Jesus Paul was making the point that actually God acted in two ways to create us. First is the obvious, that as the Creator of all he created us to begin with. Second, in Christ he gave us new life. So in a sense he created us again.

So God both created us and saved us, giving us new life in Christ. He had a purpose in doing so. It is that we do good works. His purpose is not that we would do something the world considers great. It is not that we would be comfortable. It is not that we could be successful. It is not that we could become powerful or rich. He created us so we could do good works. This is a common theme in the Bible.

In Matthew 5:16 Jesus said, "Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven." In Colossians 1:9 Paul prayed that God

will fill his readers with knowledge of his will, according to verse 10, “so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way; bearing fruit in every good work.” So doing good works is worthy of the Lord and pleases him in every way. 1 Timothy 6:18 challenges us to be rich in good works. Hebrews 10:24 says Christians should always gather together and “spur one another on toward love and good deeds.” Titus 2:14 says Jesus “gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.” That last phrase literally says he wants to create people “eager to do good works.”

The word translated “eager” is the Greek word *zelotes*. We get the word “zealot” from it. The dictionary defines a zealot as “a fanatical adherent.” So Paul said God wanted to create and save you so that you would become a fanatic for doing good works. Have you ever known anyone who is a fanatic about something? Lately our granddaughter, Ella, has been a fanatic about Rapunzel. Her current favorite movie is Disney’s *Tangled*, which is their animated version of the story of Rapunzel. She has watched the movie repeatedly. She has a Rapunzel shirt that she wants to wear continually. When Anna was on her business trip she would Face Time with the kids. At one point she was concerned with the fact that Ella had that shirt on yet again and Laurie had to assure her that she had washed it the night before while Ella was sleeping. When she went to Disneyland with her daddy, guess what she wanted to do. She wanted to see Rapunzel.

Fanatics tend to end up talking about whatever their obsession is in every conversation. They dream about it and they are passionate about it. That verse in Titus says that Jesus wanted to make us people that are fanatical about doing good works. God wants us to be passionate about it. But what good works does God want us to do? In John 4:34 when the disciples of Jesus were hung up on food Jesus said, “My food is to do the will of my Father.” So one of the works that God wants us to do is just doing his will, whatever that may be. Jesus was doing good deeds when he talked to that Samaritan woman at the well and when he told Nicodemus that he needed to be born again. He was doing good works when he walked on water and when he told the Pharisees they were like white washed tombs, because these were things the Father wanted him to do. You are doing good work when you are in church, fellowshiping with believers and worshiping God, because God commanded that we do that. It is his will, so it is a good work. When you discover that leak in your house that is going to mean ripping out your floors and parts of your walls and weeks of disruption, not to mention unplanned expense, and you still give thanks to God, you are doing a good work, because giving thanks in all things is God’s will for you.

Titus 3:14 says “Let our people learn to devote themselves to good works, so as to help cases of urgent need, and not be unfruitful.” Another translation of that is that we must

devote ourselves to “doing good works in order that they may provide for daily necessities and not live unproductive lives.” In other words, when we take responsibility for our own lives, when we work and earn money to support ourselves we are doing a good work.

In John 6:29 when he was asked what good work God requires of us Jesus said, “The work of God is this, to believe in the one he has sent.” When you trust in Jesus for forgiveness and eternal life, you are doing a good work. When you trust in his provision for you no matter what comes in the future, you are doing a good work.

Acts 9:36 describes a woman named Tabitha as “always doing good and helping the poor.” She made clothes for people and did the kinds of things we think of as good deeds. My mother has a sister-in-law who lives in an adult living facility in Chula Vista. She wanted to go visit her, but doesn’t feel confident driving that far. Mark and Karen Kamps offered to take her there so she could visit. They were doing a good work. I’ve heard many in our church going out of their way to help others in so many ways. These are some of the good works God wants us to do.

In all these ways God has created and then given us new life specifically so that we could do those good works. He wants us not just to do some occasionally, but to be fanatics for doing them. I recall a time when I was driving and I saw this woman driving fast coming from behind me. She weaved through traffic then rudely cut off a driver up ahead of me. I found her bumper sticker rather ironic. It said, “Practice random acts of kindness.”

Perhaps that’s an illustration that you can live a basically selfish life and interrupt it with an occasional act of kindness. That is not what God created us for. He created us to be fanatics for doing good works.

It is crucial that we remember the place of good works. They are not the cause of our salvation; they are the result of it. Remember that the whole point of verses 8-10 is that we are God’s work, that we have been saved by what he has done for us by grace. Our good works are not the way we gain approval from God. They are the outflow of the grace that God has poured into us.

GOD HAS PREPARED WORKS FOR US

There is a really cool note at the end of this verse. It is that God has prepared good works for us to do before we ever have any clue about them. For a period of time a few years ago our daughter in law, Anna, had a kind of strange job. Her position in the company she worked for was more than a bit vague. For months she would have to go

to the office because the job required that she be there, but she had nothing to do. She had to make up things to do to occupy her time. It was actually a very trying time for her.

This verse claims that this is never the case for us. Every day of our lives God has something for us to do. It will involve doing his will in some way, trusting Jesus, taking responsibility for ourselves or doing a good work for some other person, but there will always be things to do. God doesn't want to waste our lives. He doesn't want to waste a single day of our lives.

This means when we wake up we can know that our day will be full of meaning in some way. We can go through our day knowing that God has good deeds lined up for us to do. All we need to do is be passionate about doing good deeds, keep our eyes open, and act when we see the opportunity.

As I reflect on my life I can see how God has prepared things for me to do beforehand. I remember when I was a sophomore in high school we had an assignment to do a 4 minute speech in my English class. That meant I was going to have to stand up in front of my classmates and talk for an eternal 4 minutes. It didn't occur to me that they would be as bored and inattentive when I talked as I was when they talked. I just remember being petrified of having to speak in front of people and to do it for that long! A little later in high school as I was going into my senior year several of my friends urged me to run for office in our student body association. I briefly considered it but ruled it out for one reason, candidates had to make a speech before the student body, and I wanted no part of that. Fast forward to my last year of seminary. People asked me what I was going to do when I graduated. My standard answer was that I didn't know, but that I wasn't going to be a pastor. I never wanted to be a pastor. Isn't it ironic that I've spent the past 40 years being a pastor? I assure you that it wasn't a role I imagined for myself, designed for myself or even wanted for myself. But I can also assure you that it feels like what I was supposed to do, almost like God had that role prepared for me to do before I ever came on the scene. Though not in the same way, God is doing the same kind of thing in your life.

CONCLUSION

KNOW THAT YOU ARE A MASTERPIECE

Being God's masterpiece is crucial to us being able to fulfill the role God has designed for us. We will not consistently and seriously pursue God's plan for us if we do not understand and live by this truth. This is true in two ways. First we have to remember that we are God's masterpiece. We are not our own idea, and we are not alive first and

foremost to live for our own goals and desires. We are here to fulfill the purposes designed for us by the one who made us.

Second, it is only as we are confident and at rest in the fact that we are exactly as God wants us to be that we can truly accept ourselves and not be obsessed with what others think. It is only when we are convinced of that fact that we can let go of the crusade to create an image of ourselves that might impress others or gain their approval. When we are on that crusade we will not be fanatical about good deeds, unless we think that doing them will create the image we want. Even if that's the case we are not actually loving others, we are merely serving ourselves.

So remind yourself that you are not a mistake or an accident. With all your quirks and eccentricities, you are God's craftsmanship, made purposely to reveal the beauty, wisdom and grace of God in your own unique way.

KNOW WHY YOU LIVE

There is a truth that our culture especially does not believe, much to the detriment of people in it. That truth is that we were all designed and created for some real purposes. The principle that we need to never forget is that when we operate contrary to our design and our purpose inevitably it creates harm and frustration.

My daughter's favorite Disney movie when she was little was *The Little Mermaid*. In it, of course, Ariel, a mermaid, longs to be "part of your world." She wishes she had legs, which are required for jumping, dancing, strolling along down a (what's that word again?) street. She wanted to be something other than what she was, something contrary to her nature.

I'd like you to imagine a scenario that's kind of the reverse of that. Imagine an eagle that decides what it really longs for is to swim in the ocean like a dolphin. What is going to happen if that eagle insists on pursuing it's intended purpose? First, it's going to be frustrated, because wings are designed for flying, soaring in the air. It can't swim like a fish. Second there's a solid chance the eagle is going to injure or even kill itself in its attempts to imitate Flipper.

We have a picture from our earliest years of marriage that reminds me of this principle. We were living in an apartment in Solana Beach and we were having guests over for dinner. I had a bunch of ice that we needed to chop up, but I didn't have an ice pick. What could I use? I found a large meat fork with two tines that I thought would work. It kind of worked, sort of. I did get some ice. But you should have seen that fork when I was done. The tines were no longer parallel, they were bent all of out shape, one of

them perpendicular to the other. It's life as a useful tool of any kind was over. When you use something for other than its intended purpose the results are harm and frustration.

Our culture is doing lots of damage on a number of fronts because they insist they can ignore God's design and purposes for us indiscriminately with no consequences. Let's not make the same mistake. Let's remember that God created us with the intent that we would be fanatics for good works.

We are created specifically to believe and trust God, and then to love, to serve, to do good to others. When we are serving we are fulfilling our purpose, living in accord with our divine design. When we serve ourselves we end up like that meat fork, bent all out of shape.

KEEP YOUR EYES OPEN

Have you ever been bowling? When our kids were little at one point we had a bowling game they could play at home. It had a ball and 10 plastic pins. Mom or Dad would have to set up the pins in that diamond formation, then the competitors would roll the ball and knock some of them down. Of course Mom and Dad had to set them all up again.

The cool thing about going to a bowling alley is that they have machines that set and reset the pins for you. All you have to do is roll the ball down the alley. So at least embarrassing yourself does not also require tedious work. So the question is, as a child of God, is your life more like the at home game or the bowling alley? I submit this verse claims it is like the bowling alley. God is setting up the pins for you, in this case, good deeds that he has prepared for you to do. All you need to do is keep your eyes open and roll the ball.

It is amazing how much impact those good deeds can have. In his book, *Chasing Daylight*, Erwin McManus told the story of a friend of his named Dave who was a UPS driver. His job is to keep moving, as quickly as possible. Slowing down is not encouraged by the company. On Dave's route in LA he often encountered a guy named Ron who worked at a gas station in Santa Monica. Ron was one of those guys who loved to talk and was quick to share his thoughts on anything and everything. Dave said if he made a delivery anywhere within half a block of Ron's gas station, Ron would somehow find him, wanting to talk. Usually he would still be talking as Dave started rolling away in his truck. One day Ron handed Dave an envelope. He insisted that Dave open it. It was an invitation to Ron's upcoming wedding to a woman named Joanne. Dave politely thanked him without giving him a response. For the next 3 weeks all Ron

wanted to talk about was whether Dave was going to come to the wedding. Dave wanted no part of the wedding, but he procrastinated about answering. Finally he checked his calendar and discovered that he had a conflict. He had a meeting at church he was supposed to go to. He had an excuse. The next day he saw Ron and of course the first thing he asked was, “Are you coming to the wedding?” Dave said, “I don’t know what happened. In every fiber of my being a ‘no’ was forming, but as I opened my mouth the words that came out were, “Yes, of course I’m coming.” Ron lit up like a Roman candle.

The day of the wedding at the small church he found people seated on the bride’s side, but none on the groom’s side. When Ron saw Dave after the wedding he said, “You’re coming to the reception aren’t you?” “Of course.” Dave didn’t want any part of the reception, hanging for 2 more hours with people he didn’t know and would never see again. But he somehow felt obligated. During the reception there were the usual toasts, but then Ron stood up. He spoke of his love for his beautiful bride, then he said he wanted to thank his best friend for being there that day. He said, “I’d like you to meet my best friend, Dave.” Ron told him that he sent more than 150 invitations to friends and family, and of all the people he personally invited, Dave was the only one to come. Dave saw Ron as someone who slowed down his day, Ron saw Dave as his best friend. Dave would continue to be a significant person in Ron and Joanne’s lives, and eventually would lead them to faith in Jesus Christ.

Dave is not an evangelist or a pastor. He’s a UPS driver. But he’s a child of God who responded to the Spirit of God when he prompted him, however reluctantly. And that simple act of kindness had eternal consequences. We have no idea what God is going to do with the kind, loving, godly things we do. He takes small things and makes them significant. So ask God to open your eyes and ears to opportunity, and when he does, act.