



Westminster Presbyterian Church  
Knoxville, TN  
March 10, 2024  
The Rev. Dr. Richard Coble  
Sermon: "Multitasking with Eternity"

**Ephesians 2:1-10 (NRSV)**

2:1 You were dead through the trespasses and sins

2:2 in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient.

2:3 All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else.

2:4 But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us

2:5 even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ--by grace you have been saved--

2:6 and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus,

2:7 so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

2:8 For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God--

2:9 not the result of works, so that no one may boast.

2:10 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.

## Sermon Text

Can you be in two places at once?  
Of course you can - we do it all the time.  
We call it multitasking.

An example: Want to where I came up with this introduction? I didn't mean to do it. It's not like the program wasn't interesting, or didn't deserve my attention. But I couldn't help myself. I kept chewing on this sermon introduction Wednesday night, while I was *also* listening to Marjorie Thigpen-Carter give a presentation about Justice Knox for this church's Wednesday night series.

Right before her presentation, I had been studying Ephesians, and I was chewing on its message about how we are simultaneously in Christ and in the world, and I couldn't get this question out of my head: 'How are we ever in two places in the same time?'

Sitting in the Lisa Kaufman Hall, listening to this brilliant presentation. I wasn't fully there. I was also, *here*. Thinking about this sermon, thinking about this very moment. I realized, I was in two places at the same time.

Honestly, it was distracting me so much, I eventually whipped out my phone, and wrote up some notes, simply so I could stop thinking about it. So, I could put the sermon down in my mind, so I could be present in *one place*, for that presentation. Do you ever find yourself in two places at once?

After that experience, the next day I read an article on multitasking in the *New York Times* entitled:

“Stop Multitasking. No Really – Just Stop It.”<sup>1</sup>  
-Which is a great title.

It's also great advice to *you*, if you happen to find your mind wondering in the next ten minutes – “Just Stop It.” The author argues that you have to do one thing at a time, if you ever really want to accomplish anything.

But that's harder than it sounds. For example, I was reading the article at my desk, at my computer. And then I noticed, I stopped.

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<sup>1</sup> Oliver Burkeman, “Stop Multitasking. No Really – Just Stop It.” *The New York Times*. July 29, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/29/opinion/do-one-thing-at-a-time-management.html>

I opened a tab; I checked my email.

Realizing I was multitasking, I stopped myself and started reading the article again about why we should quit multitasking.

And then, I stopped.

I got out my pen. I started taking notes, for my sermon. As I was taking those notes, I realized, well that I was doing it again.

I quit and started reading the story again. It wasn't too long until I stopped, I checked my phone, because I had a text.

I started reading it again, with the realization that I'm terrible at this. Why can't I focus?

As I was castigating myself, a 40-year-old, who somehow still cannot sit still, I noticed, about a minute later, I checked my watch.

Can you be in two places at once? Of, course, we do it all the time. Where are you, right now? But of course, that's a silly question. No one ever stops paying attention in church. (pause)

According to the author of Ephesians, we are always already in two places in Spirit:

*You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world...But God, who is rich in mercy...made us alive together with Christ...and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places.*

We are already there, in Christ.

I mean, we are here, certainly, in this world, in that pew.

But we are also there, in Christ, in fact, seated right beside him in the heavenly places. The epistle is saying, that if we are members of Christ's body, then our soul's home, where your soul rests, the most real part of you, your heart, your Spirit, your soul, is already in Christ, is already with Christ.

Think about those Spirit-filled moments of your life. In church, when a hymn or a song lifts you up. Or you stare out, into the vastness of the ocean and hear the

crashing of the waves. Or, you are read a novel, or a poem, or hear a sermon that seems to reach out, and touch your heart. Or you remember the smile of someone, you've loved with all your heart. In those moments you catch a glimpse of transcendence – and you realize, where you really belong. It's in those moments when we realize that in our core, in our most central selves, we are part of something so much bigger, so much more real and eternal than the normal day to day; we catch a glimpse of who we really are.

And what we really are, according to Ephesians, is “raised up with Christ and seated with him in the heavenly places.”

We can contrast those transcendent moments, with the worlds of work, of school, of economy, that bring us down, that reduce us and measure our worth by our productivity, by our bank account, by our social situation:

We can contrast those transcendent moments with:

- A test in school that makes you feel like you don't measure up
- Or a community that makes you feel like you don't really belong
- Or a failure that makes you feel like a failure
- Or even a life doesn't measure up to the picture of life that you were given or promised

When the world tells you are one thing, when it measures you and tells you that you don't measure up, the Epistle of Ephesians speaks back, and says ‘No, you are more than that. You are in Christ, “And this...is the gift of God.” That is what you truly are.

Ephesians, Ch 3: *I pray that you may have the power to comprehend...what is the breath and length and height and depth...[of] the fullness of God.*

But, that's the problem with being two places at once. After all, we can be terrible at multitasking. And being simultaneously in Christ and in the world, well it's hard to be in both those places at once.

Realizing this, in Ch. 4, the author of Ephesians writes: *I...beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called...Put away your former way of life, your old self...and be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and clothe yourselves with the new self.*

Grow out of your old self, grow into your new self. Remember, as you are in the world, you are also truly in Christ. But that's harder than the letter makes it sound, isn't it? I mean, how do you know when you're operating out of your new self, in Christ?

I say it's difficult, because Ephesians itself gets the two mixed up. Because if you know anything Ephesians, you likely know its worst parts.

Because if being 'in Christ' means anything, it means we are in the one who proclaimed, "good news to the poor...release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free" (Luke 4:18)

But that's not where Ephesians goes. Instead, as one commentator I read this week puts it, instead, "the author's [theology] is used to justify and Christianize" the hierarchy and the patriarchy of his time:

*Ephesians Ch. 5: Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church.*

And for the next 2000 years those verses have been used, first and foremost by the church, to justify abuse, to silence women, and restrict their rights – along with those in LGBT communities, all in the name of God.

Ephesians doesn't take its own advice. It confuses the old self for the new, and as a result, has done so much harm.

*Ch. 6: Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ...Render service with enthusiasm, as to the Lord.*

As I mentioned in a sermon a couple of weeks ago, over the past month, our congregation has been studying Dr. William Yoo's book *What Kind of Christianity: A History of Slavery and Anti-Black Racism in the Presbyterian Church*.<sup>2</sup> Through that study, we have born witness to how this Scripture was employed to twist the Christian message into a pro-slavery ideology.

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<sup>2</sup> William Yoo, *What Kind of Christianity: A History of Slavery and Anti-Black Racism in the Presbyterian Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2022). The story appears and quote below appear on p. 147.

And yet, even in this devastating history, there are these dazzling moments, when the God of liberation breaks through. When faithful people, even in a time when slavery and racism was the air they breathed, remembered their true place, remembered they were in Christ.

In a sermon a couple weeks ago, I named one such rare instance with an abolitionist Presbyterian in Charleston. As we finish this book study in our congregation, I want to share the story of Laight Street Presbyterian Church in New York City. In 1834, a white member there, Arthur Tappan, grew weary of his Northern church's practice of segregation in worship. There were white pews in the front, and Black pews in the back and balcony. So, one Sunday Arthur Tappan invited the Rev. Samuel Eli Cornish, a Black man who was the pastor of a nearby Black congregation, to sit with him in his pew.

In Dr. William Yoo's words,

*The ferment over Tappan's decision to invite [the Rev. Cornish to sit with him] percolated over the next several days within the congregation. [So,] the [church's] pastor, [the Rev.] Samuel H. Cox, addressed the controversy by siding with Tappan and addressing the sin of racial prejudice. [Rev.] Cox noted to his white congregation that Jesus Christ was a man of color from Palestine, bearing a skin complexion that was likely closer to [Rev.] Cornish's than to that of anyone in their white congregation, and [he] wondered if they would similarly oppose the notion of Jesus sitting in one of their pews designated for white worshipers.*

And that was in 1834. I read that this week, and I was awestruck, that a preacher preached those words to a segregated congregation 200 years ago.

But I guess I shouldn't have been surprised. Because, as the author of Ephesians puts it, "[we have been] made alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved."

Is there any other word for that, than grace? Graced by a God of liberation, so that even in times when Scripture used to justify the deepest oppression, the God of liberation breaks through, even if just for a moment.

Just for a moment. I should tell the rest of the story, that after his message, both Tappan and the Rev. Cox's homes were burned down. Liberation often comes with a cost.

But can't you see, that this is liberation nonetheless? Freed from the hate of this world, even if just for a moment, they *saw* and they *were* their true selves. They acted in Christ, the one who proclaims, "release to the captives."

It's always a work in progress. We live in two places, in Christ and in the world. Even the author of Ephesians got the two mixed up. He failed to take his radical message of liberation to its rightful and faithful end. Proclaiming freedom in Christ, made free by a liberating God, he ended his letter instead entrenched in the hierarchies and oppressions of this world.

But Scripture doesn't end there.  
Our story does not end there.  
Our story ends in Christ, for by grace we have been saved.

Saved, so that every time we hear God's name used:  
not for love but for captivity,  
to take away rights,  
to scapegoat communities,  
to justify inequality and silence those on the margins...

Every time we hear God's name is used:  
for shame rather than love,  
for exclusion rather than community,  
for violence instead of peace...

Every time...Every time, we are freed, by grace, to say "No."  
"No, you are mistaking the ways of this world for the ways of God. And 'by grace we have been saved.' We have been set free, to join God, in the work of liberation."

God calls us out of the ways of this world,  
So that we can join God in this world,  
To bring light and love into this world.  
As Jesus, in the Gospel of John says,  
'For God so loved the world.'

So, the next time someone asks you, if you have ever been two places at once? You can say, "Of course. I am in Christ. We are in Christ. And we have work to do, in this world." Amen.