

Rethinking Religion: Scratching that Itch

Ephesians 2:1-10 (NIV)

¹ As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, ² 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. ³ All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. ⁴ But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵ made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. ⁶ And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, ⁷ in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. ⁸ For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast. ¹⁰ For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Mosquitoes are maybe the worst creatures ever in existence. And that's really just because of their bites. They not only take your blood but also leave behind their saliva which results in that itching sensation. But this is not like other itches like the one on your nose or on the back of your head, ones that you scratch and then move on. With a mosquito bite, you scratch it, the itch is temporarily relieved, only to itch more seconds later. You scratch it again, and the cycle repeats, itching more every time. You keep scratching that mosquito bite and soon your skin is red, irritated, raw, bleeding, and it still itches!

Here in his letter to the Ephesian Christians, Paul describes committing sin like scratching a mosquito bite. In talking about how we used to live as unbelievers, when we were dead in our transgressions and sins, he says that "all of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts." (verse 3a)

You've experienced the mosquito bite itch of sin. It starts out by taking a good thing like rest. Your body, your mind, you need rest. We take that where we can. You sleep in or take naps as your schedule allows. You sit on the couch and binge Netflix after you get home from work. You stay in if you don't have to go out. But then you keep scratching. You look to cut corners at work, to find places where you can get away with not working the whole time you're on the clock. You neglect your duties at home because you say that you need rest. You cancel plans to go out with friends to stay in. You skip church because you want to sleep in and stay in your pajamas on Sunday morning. Yet, scratch this itch for rest as many times as you want, but you never have enough. Instead, the more you scratch this itch for rest, the lazier you become, neglecting more of the good things that you should be doing.

How many other things work the same way, that as you scratch that itch, it never satisfies, and scratching ends up hurting you – like a mosquito bite? Is it with God's gift of work, that you keep scratching that itch for meaning in your life by what you do and so you neglect your family, your home, yourself to work? Is it with God's gift of food or drink, that you eat that one Reese's peanut butter cup, but two is better, and before you know it you've eaten your whole supply and go out and buy more, or that one beer which leads to a twelve pack of empty bottles and you needing to buy more to get through the day? Is it God's gift of relationships, that you found out that by talking about someone else, people paid attention to you, and you felt valued and appreciated, an itch scratched, and so you keep talking about others to others, regardless of what it does to their reputations? Is it taking God's gift of sex, these good desires from God, but you're not married. You have that itch, and you scratch it with willing partners, with pornography, but the itch gets worse. And the list of things we scratch in order to gratify the cravings of our flesh goes on and on.

No amount of indulging, no amount of scratching that itch, actually satisfies you. You keep itching, and this will very well leave you with scars, regrets later that you wish you wouldn't have scratched those itches. And the more we sin, the bigger the barrier that we put up before God. The guilt of the repeated scratching of that itch piles on as our conscience tells us that this is wrong and that we deserve judgement, as Paul rightly concludes: "Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath." (verse 3b)

What's the solution? Well, if we are talking mosquito bites, don't scratch the itch, right? We do that by putting a band-aid over it or wearing socks or snapping rubber bands to take our minds off of it. More than that, we need some medicine, some anti-itch cream.

What does this look like spiritually? There is no amount of scratching that we can do that makes us satisfied and right with God, no amount of promises that we make, no amount of works that we do, no amount of church services that we attend, no amount of prayers that we offer. If we try to make ourselves right with God, earn his favor, achieve through our efforts a reward from him, it's just like scratching a mosquito bite. So God provides the solution outside of our efforts, our scratching. "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." (verses 4-5)

Being motivated by himself, his great love, his great mercy, his desire to treat us better than we deserve, he took us from spiritual death and made us spiritually alive. He did this through the message of what he has done for us. Christ lived that perfect life for us in our place. He shed his perfect and innocent blood for our sins, for all the times we have scratched that itch to gratify the cravings of our flesh. He paid the price so that we are forgiven. This forgiveness was given us through the waters of holy baptism, that there he washed you clean, adopted you into his family, made you an heir of the riches of heaven, that you will live with God forever. “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.” (verses 8-9) All credit to God for making us new, treating the itches of sin that we want to scratch.

More than that, God doesn’t want us to just sit there and agonize over not scratching that itch, longing to gratify those cravings of our flesh. God has us do things to take our mind off of those itches. After having been saved by his grace through faith, he tells us what we now do: “For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” (verse 10)

When counseling a person who was struggling with a pornography addiction, it was like helping them not scratch an itch. They wanted those images, the fantasies, the physical pleasure thinking that this would fulfill them, that gratifying these cravings would bring them relief. Ultimately, though, the porn was tearing apart their marriage, causing them to leave things around the house neglected, and was distancing them from God.

So, we talked about the good works that they could do, good works that God had prepared in advance for them to do. They came up with a list of 10 good things that they could do immediately instead of looking at porn. The first one was something that hopefully every Christian would come up with: Read the Bible. Remember their Bible passage that would strengthen them when they wanted to scratch this itch. They called this their fighter verse. But the itch to scratch that sin didn’t simply go away by reading the Bible. When the itch came, they would walk the dog, which was good for the dog and good for them. They would look at the list of remodeling projects around the home, pick one, and get going on it. Good for taking care of the home God provided for them. They would go exercise. Good for their body, good to get around other people. They would go to entertainment like a tv show or a video game or play pool. Good gifts from God to enjoy entertainment, recreation. They would do a crossword or a puzzle. Good to engage the mind and keep it active. They would go for a drive and enjoy God’s gift of nature. They would pick up a musical instrument and play, enjoying the talents God had given them and making a joyful noise to the Lord, whatever they played.

This list may not scream good works to you, but that’s exactly what they all were. This was not the person just killing time to avoid scratching an itch, but it was using what God had given them to enjoy the new life of being saved, serving God and others by these actions. These were indeed good works that God had prepared in advance for them to do.

God has prepared good works in advance for you and me to do instead of scratching that itch. What are those good works, those deeds done out of faith knowing that God has saved you, bringing you from spiritual death to life? They may look like very little things. It’s getting up at 2:00 am and changing a diaper. It is smiling at the cashier as you get your groceries. It is doing your homework and getting your assignments done on time. It is picking up your room, taking out the trash. It is your work, that you are doing something useful not just for you and providing for your family but also providing a service for others. It is calling a friend, visiting them, making a connection, learning about them, loving on them, giving them the gift of company, of your time. It is studying God’s Word, not just for you, but to do this with other people, to learn from them, to give your insights to them, to share it with others. It is your volunteer service, not just in the church, but in your kids’ school or at a food pantry. It is enjoying the good gifts from God of nature, recreation, entertainment. These are all done out of faith recognizing that these are good gifts from God.

If you don’t find yourself in that list, then I know one good work that God has prepared in advance specifically for you to do: pray. This is never a little or inconsequential thing. This is actually the best thing any of us can ever do. You are calling upon God Almighty to act in this world, to change it, to do good. Because of this, you praying may very well be the greatest work God prepared for you.

Gratifying the cravings of our flesh is an itch that will remain with us this side of heaven. But God is the solution. He acted for us. Out of his great love, his sheer grace, his great mercy for us, he made us alive. He saved us, made us whole and complete by his work. We are alive in Christ, a new creation. God also prepared good works in advance for us to do, that we would redirect our energies to do these good works, serving God, serving others. We do these good works prepared for us instead of scratching our itches. Amen.