

Animal House

1. Warm-up question: Jeff began Sunday's sermon with a story about his dog who ate 18 uncooked yeast rolls. Turkey's experience reminds us how powerful our animal instincts can be. Some of us remember the Pepto-Bismol commercial that said, "I can't believe I ate the whole thing." When was the last time you remember saying that? And what was it you ate?

2. Two weeks ago, we launched a new sermon series called "New Life in Christ." We began with the passage where Jesus says, "You must be born again." There Jesus draws a distinction between being born in the flesh and being born in the Spirit. His point was that we all need to be born twice. First, we're born in the flesh when our mother's water broke and we came into the world as material creatures. And what is a material creature? We call them animals. We were born with all kinds of natural fleshly instincts and, left to our own devices, we end up living by those instincts. Put simply, we have a tendency to live like animals, guided by our base instincts. There's nothing inherently wrong with fleshly instincts and desires, but if that's all we got going on inside us, we can end up doing all kinds of destructive things.
 - a. Here are examples of some of our primal animal impulses: Anger, greed, violence, words that wound, selfishness, gluttony, lust, too much to drink, lying, racism, and cheering for the Dallas Cowboys. ☺ Whether it's on this list or not, what's one of the animal impulses that you really have to watch out for?
 - b. When being transparently honest about his own struggles, the Apostle Paul says, "I do not understand my own actions. I do not do what I want, instead I do the very things I hate." Romans 7:15. What do you think he means? Give an example from your own life.
 - c. Has there ever been a time when you lived almost exclusively by animal instinct, with little awareness of spirit or spirituality? Or have you ever known someone who lived like that? What was/is it like when we live that way? How does it feel? How well does it work?
 - d. This week's scripture passage begins by reminding us what it's like to live by animal instinct without a higher spiritual awareness. So now let's read Ephesians 1:1-3, as printed on p. 3.
 - e. What do you think Paul means in verse 1 when he uses the word "dead." Dead in what sense?
 - f. In verse 3 Paul says that before a spiritual awakening, we were all "children of wrath." What do you think that means?

3. If our animal nature was all we had, life would be pretty dismal and one dimensional. But the Good News is: that's not all there is. God has placed in each of us an

immortal soul. We're not just physical beings; we're spirit beings. But as Jesus indicated in our scripture two weeks ago, the spirit God has placed within us lies dormant until it's activated. Jeff compared it to how his new vehicle came with the built-in capacity to pair with his cell phone, but that capacity was dormant until activated. So how does the spirit within us that pairs us with God get activated? Let's now read Ephesians 2:4-10.

- a. These verses identify two key elements that trigger our spiritual awakening: "By **grace** you have been saved through **faith**." Ephesians 2:8. Grace is what God brings to the table and offers us. Paul describes grace in verses 4-7. Based on those four verses, how would you define grace?
 - b. Most people assume that we're saved by doing enough "good works." Paul explicitly rejects that here, instead insisting that grace is the only thing that can truly awaken the dormant spirit within us. Why? What's so special about grace?
 - c. Tell us about a time in your life when someone showed you great grace. How did that feel? How did it affect you?
4. Although grace is amazing, standing alone it's not enough to pair our soul with God. Grace is what God offers us, but the gift has to be accepted. Jesus says, "I love you unconditionally in spite of everything and want to activate your spirit so it can be paired with mine and live in harmony and communion with me – your spirit with my Spirit – so that you can become your best self, so that there is a power in your life – my power – that can begin to counteract those animal instincts that so often drag us down." That's the offer. That's grace. But we have to have enough **faith** to accept it – to dare to believe Jesus can and will do that for me – to dare to believe that the way of Jesus is the path to life.
- a. So much of what Jesus teaches is contrary to our animal instincts. Our animal instinct says taking and keeping is the way to get ahead in life. Jesus says give and you will receive. Our animal instinct says to hate your enemies and do everything in your power to destroy them. Jesus says love your enemies. Our animal instinct says to always play it safe, self-preservation is the way to go. Jesus says risk losing your life and you'll find it. Given how counterintuitive Jesus' path is, why do you want to follow it? Why do you believe it's right?
 - b. It also takes a lot of faith to believe God loves each of us unconditionally no matter what with a never-ending infinite love, so much so that God would come to us in the form of Jesus and give everything for us. In your heart of hearts, are you able to believe God loves you that much? Why or why not?
 - c. Jeff closed with the story of how Sherri Russel struggled to believe that God could love her unconditionally. What would you say to a transgender person – or anyone else – who struggles to believe in God's unconditional love for them? What advice would you offer them?

Ephesians 2:1-3

You were dead through the trespasses and sins ²in 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. ³All 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.

Ephesians 2:4-10

⁴But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us ⁵even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— ⁶and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus. ⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— ⁹not the result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.