

William Shakespeare used the phrase “a piece of work” in *Hamlet* (1604), Act 2, where the prince says to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: “What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty! In form and moving how express and admirable! In action how like an Angel! In apprehension how like a god! The beauty of the world!” In many ways Shakespeare echoes the sentiment of the much earlier biblical masterpiece of Psalm 8, where the writer refers to God making human beings “a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honor” (v. 5).

But this good association didn’t last long: by the late 16th century “a piece of work” took on a more negative connotation. In 1553, the OED added “difficult undertaking or task” to the definition of “piece of work.” The first derogatory use of the term, as applied to a human being, emerged in 1713 in a manuscript by the Duke of Portland, who wrote of a contemporary: “I believe your Lordship will have nothing to do with him, he being a whilding [sic], dangerous piece of work and not to be trusted.” And there we have it: humankind is a real piece of work.

In our text for today, the apostle Paul calls the followers of Jesus a piece of work, or pieces of work. In Ephesians 2, Paul seems to put this whole idiomatic discussion into perspective by comparing the relative value of the product to the One who is doing the making. It's a "before and after" look at human beings. *Before* putting our faith in Christ, we are the "piece work" of "the ruler of the power of the air." *After* Jesus begins working in our lives we are God's "workmanship," masterpieces made to show God's glory.

A piece of work - before: Paul begins by plainly telling the Ephesians that before coming to Christ, they were "dead through the trespasses and sins" in which they once lived, "following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit at work in those who are disobedient" (vv. 1-2).

Some commentators suggest that Paul's use of both "trespasses" and "sins" was a way of delineating between Jews and Gentiles. Jews "trespassed" against the law of God while Gentiles "sinned" apart from God (the former knowing that they were trespassing and the latter unaware that their pagan lifestyle was an offense to God). Both, however, were subject to the "ruler of the power of the air" who was at "work" manufacturing them into "children of wrath" (vv. 3-4).

Before faith in Christ, human beings are real "pieces of work" who are driven by "the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses" (v. 3). We aren't what we were created to be, says Paul, and it's all because we allowed ourselves to be shaped and manufactured by "the course of this world" (v. 2).

The implication here, too, is that the character and quality of a piece of work depends on the artist who is doing the workmanship. In this case, it's the devil and our own sinful nature, and the results are not pretty. But if the Artist is God, then this becomes a different story.

A piece of work -- after: In the coming of Christ, God took over the manufacturing process and restored human beings to "pieces of work" that are not only God's masterful handiwork, but also useful for God's purposes. Two of the most powerful words in the Scriptures are found in verse 4: "But God..." Despite our being useless, dead pieces of devil's work, God didn't give up on humankind, created in the image of God. The God who is "rich in mercy, out of the great love with which [God] loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ" (vv. 4-5). In the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, God entered our broken condition and repurposed us for God's work by defeating death and sin along with it.

This is the "grace" by which we have been "saved": not just saved *from* the work of sin and death but saved *for* the work God intended us to undertake from the beginning (v. 5). Here's that "before and after" component again. From sin and for God.

From: Salvation is not just reserved for some later heavenly glory; we are already "raised" with Christ and "seated with him" in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (v. 6). In other words, the work of Christ makes it possible for us to take control over the powers that once bugged us and controlled us. At this point, our lives take on new meaning, new purpose, revealing "the immeasurable riches of [God's] grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus" (v. 7). To borrow a phrase from the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, our "chief end" or purpose as human beings is to "glorify God and enjoy [God] forever." All of this is the result of God's work in us through Christ.

That work is all God's, through God's grace. It's not the result of our own "works" but rather through the "gift" of God's grace working in us that we are saved (v. 8). God must take over the manufacturing process or we remain broken and useless. Our résumés before

receiving the grace of God in Christ are nothing to boast about (v. 9), but when we put our faith in Christ and his work on our behalf, we are saved from the dead-end way of sin and death.

For: But we are also saved *for* the work God has prepared for us to do from the beginning. "For we are what [God] has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand for us to do" (v. 10). The purpose of God's work of salvation is to renew us and enable us to join in God's work. God created humankind to be God's regents, God's representatives, to reign over the Earth and reflect God's glory in God's good creation (Genesis 1:26-27). God created us as the crowning masterpiece of creation, created in God's image to do God's work in the world.

Sin marred that image when our work turned from reflecting God's glory to attempting to be like gods ourselves. But now, in Christ, God gives us the grace and the way to reclaim our original mission: to be re-created in Christ "for good works which God prepared beforehand for us to do" (v. 10).

Because of God's grace, we can look at everyone around us, even those "pieces of work" who seem to be hopeless cases, recognizing that God's grace is changing them into a masterpiece. Transformed by God's grace ourselves, we can and should testify to that fact and help others to know and experience what God is doing for them in Christ. Helping others to experience God's grace is a big part of the work God prepared for us to do. We are God's "pieces of work," made so that we can work for God and the glory of God. You are a piece of work, God's work, and that's a pretty good thing.

Prayer: Even when we were dead, Paul writes. Even when we turned away from the One who had created us. Even when we lived in the grip of what drew our gaze from God. Even when we were oblivious. Even when we followed a path fashioned of nothing but our own desires. Even when we wandered far and willfully away. Even when we forgot to look past our own feet and to see the wonders not of our making. Even when we failed to stand in awe, to breathe thanks, to lean into the love that had waited long for us. Even when, Paul writes. Even when, even then: grace. God, may your grace continue to surprise us and dwell in us that we might show your good works through our lives. In Jesus' name. Amen

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A Piece of Work

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Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Ephesians 2:1-10

American English is filled with all sorts of idioms that can leave learners of the language more than a little confused. An idiom is a phrase or expression of which the actual meaning is different from the meanings of each word separately. For example: If we say that someone is "under the weather," most Americans understand that phrase to mean that the person isn't feeling well. A non-American, on the other hand, might wonder why a person would be standing outside "under the weather" and what that has to do with him or her missing work today - unless, of course, it's "raining cats and dogs" which must be a very unusual meteorological storm of airborne house pets that would certainly explain the reason for one's absence. Then again, if one does make it to work, one must "pitch in" and be "on the ball" or "face the music." You get the idea.

Some idioms are downright confusing, especially when they refer to another person. Take the expression "a piece of work." When you refer to someone as a piece of work, it is never a compliment. It's an idiom reserved for a person whose pattern of speech and behavior is worthy of contempt. If your co-worker is always late, if he often makes inappropriate comments in meetings, if he cheats on his time card and if he is known to be stepping out on his wife, you might say that he is "a piece of work."

Or *she* is a piece of work. The late comedian Joan Rivers freely admitted that she was a "piece of work," and the highly acclaimed documentary about her is called *Joan Rivers: A Piece of Work*. This documentary tries to "[peel] away the mask" and expose the "struggles, sacrifices and joy of living life as a groundbreaking female performer." The documentary calls Rivers "superbly skilled"...not only at being funny, but at being mean, opinionated, harsh (almost abusive), critical...and so on. She truly was..."a piece of work."

But this expression wasn't always a negative thing. The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) cites the first use of the phrase "piece of work" in the year 1473 to refer to a product or something manufactured. The original meaning was all about making something useful. Related to this is the word "masterpiece" which refers to an outstanding "piece" of art. Whether it was utilitarian or aesthetically pleasing, a "piece of work" used to mean something good.