

EPHESIANS

EVERY SPIRITUAL BLESSING IN CHRIST

by

Jeremiah Bass

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PREFACE

THE EPISTLE OF PAUL TO THE EPHESIANS is a small letter of slightly more than 2400 words written in the first century in Koine Greek to a church in what is now western Turkey. And yet, small though it is, it is packed full of Divine and holy wisdom and instruction. It tells us about God's plan for his people, a plan that stretches from eternity past into eternal future. It orients God's people to unchangeable truth. It fills our hearts with hope and directs our feet to the path of holiness. It is unparalleled in its praise of God's sovereign grace in the salvation of dead and depraved sinners. It is doctrinal and it is practical, and shows us a balance in the way we should think and act that is often missing in our lives. We should therefore praise the Lord for such an epistle as this!

What follows is a series of sermons I preached on Ephesians when I was the pastor of a small country church in Texas. Yet the truths of this epistle are for everyone in every place and in every time. These are timeless, precious truths. I commend it to you, with the prayer that under the grace of the Spirit of Christ you might be led, with the apostle to praise and live out his grace more fully in your life.

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Ephesians

Part I:
A Trinitarian Hymn
and Apostolic Prayer
(Ephesians I)

CHAPTER I

SAINTS AND FAITHFUL

(EPH. 1:1-2)

WHEN OUR LORD PROPHESED of the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles, he did not dwell upon the remarkable or the miraculous; rather, he told them that “when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will show you things to come” (Jn. 16:13). According to our Lord, one of the primary goals of the work of the Holy Spirit post resurrection and ascension was to communicate truth to the apostles, and to unpack the theology that was in many ways hidden from them during the earthly ministry of our Lord. Later, the apostle Paul, in his letter to the Corinthians, would argue that the truth he was communicating to the believers there was the direct result of the illumination of the Holy Spirit: “But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, even the hidden wisdom, which God ordained before the world unto our glory. . . . God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit: for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God” (1 Cor. 2:7, 10).

There is, of course, a sense in which all believers are illumined by the Holy Spirit. But the illumination that the apostle Paul is speaking about,

and the illumination that our Lord prophesied, is the process of inspiration whereby God's truth is infallibly communicated to the church. It was necessary because the work of our Lord which culminated in his death, burial, resurrection and ascension into heaven, needed to be correctly interpreted. The only one who can truly interpret what happened is God himself. Our Lord predicted that it would happen and the Holy Scriptures are the product of God's infallible interpretation of the meaning and theological implications of our Lord's earthly ministry.

The epistle to the Ephesians is a product of this Spirit-inspired process of inspiration. It is something that has had a tremendous impact upon the church throughout its 2000 year history. The fourth century church father Chrysostom said that this book contains some of Paul's "profoundest conceptions; and the Epistle itself is full of sublime thoughts and doctrines."¹ J. Armitage Robinson considered Ephesians to be "the crown of St Paul's writings."² On his deathbed, the Scottish theologian John Knox had Calvin's sermons on Ephesians read to him often.³ Paul's imagery on Christian warfare has inspired hundreds of books, including John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. Some claim that, apart from Romans, no book in the New Testament has had a greater impact upon the life of the church than this little epistle.⁴ Certainly, this is a book worth studying.

Most of all, I want us to study this book because I believe it can and will have a significant impact on our own walk with the Lord. I don't know about you, but often I have found myself looking at the waves and the wind instead of Christ. Do you ever feel like a spiritual Pig-Pen, with a cloud of ingratitude following you everywhere you go? There should be no reason why a Christian should go around like this. We get this way because we forget about the blessings that are ours in Christ. We forget about what God has done for us, is doing for us, and will do

¹"Homily on Ephesians," see <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/230100.htm>

²Quoted in Harold Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Baker, 2002), p.1.

³W. Curtis Vaughn, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (Convention Press, 1963), p.1.

⁴Hoehner, p. 2.

for us in eternity. Or we may know it on an intellectual level, but we haven't really appropriated it for ourselves. So we become focused on ourselves rather than on Christ, and we become gloomy and morose.

There is a story that came out several years ago about a homeless man in Utah whose brother bequeathed to him a considerable amount of money. However, for several months he continued to be homeless, pushing around his shopping cart with all his belongings, and sitting on park benches with nothing to do. Fortunately, a private investigator was hired who was finally able to track him down and give him the good news.⁵ In the same way, I think a lot of Christians live like that homeless man; we have been given riches untold through the death of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and yet we continue to go on as if we have nothing. Sometimes it's because we just don't know what we've been given because we have not truly absorbed what is promised to us in the word of God. Hopefully, the book of Ephesians can be for us what the private investigator was to this homeless man in Utah.

Hopefully, we are going to begin to do this as we look at Paul's introduction for his letter to the Ephesians in verses 1 and 2. It's important that we linger over these verses because even here the apostle is packing a lot of theology in these words. I want to look at these verses through the lens of three questions. First, why should we study this book? We've already answered this to some extent, but it merits more consideration. Second, how should we apply the teachings of Ephesians? And finally, what does this introduction indicate about the message of this epistle?

Why should we study this epistle?

Paul begins this letter in much the same way as any first century letter-writer would. Today, we usually begin a letter denoting to whom we are writing and end the letter denoting who it is from. I've always thought

⁵See <http://www.deathandtaxesmag.com/106572/homeless-man-was-actually-rich-and-didnt-even-know-it/>

that a little strange, and personally I think the first-century format had a little more common sense to it. At that time, a person would begin a letter indicating who the author was followed by an announcement of the recipient of the letter followed by a greeting. As you see, Paul is following protocol here. However, he Christianizes it, and there is marvelous significance in the way he Christianizes his introduction.

Thus Ephesians begins with a statement of its author: “Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God.” Here we have the reason we should study this epistle. It’s important because it is written by an apostle of Jesus Christ. To see why this is important we need to consider the implications of the title which Paul is giving himself here. In the ancient world, “apostle” was a word that could be used of a naval squadron sent out on a mission, or of an ambassador sent out by a King. Literally, the word means “one who is sent, a messenger,” and it denoted someone who was officially appointed to carry a message or carry out a mission.⁶

There are several uses of the word apostle in the NT. Jesus is called the “apostle and high priest of our profession” (Heb. 3:1). It is used of messengers of the churches in 2 Cor. 8:23 and Phil. 2:25. However, most of the uses of “apostle” in the NT refer to a select group of men who were personally chosen by our Lord to represent him to the world, and to provide special leadership for the world-wide church of followers of Jesus. These men were endued with power and authority from our Lord that no spiritual leader since can properly lay claim to. Thus, when Paul says that he is an apostle of Jesus Christ, he is telling us that his words are authoritative and worth listening to. As an apostle, what he has to say is important. The apostle John made the same point in his epistle, when he was contrasting the message he was carrying with that of false-teachers: “We are of God: he that knoweth God heareth us; he that is not of God heareth not us. Hereby know we the spirit of truth and the spirit of error” (1 Jn. 4:6). In other words, those who refuse to accept the teaching of the apostles are not of God. In fact, following the

⁶Vaughn, p. 5.

teaching of the apostles over the false-teachers that sometimes infiltrate the church is a mark of true faith.

We are living in a day when this principle is especially important to grasp. People in the church today will often complain if you call out another professing Christian for teaching false doctrine. They will tell you that you should not attack another professing Christian but rather that we should just all embrace Jesus. The problem with this attitude is that you cannot embrace Jesus without embracing the teaching of his apostles. If someone who claims to be a Christian teaches something that is in direct contradiction to the teaching of the NT, they need to be called out. They are not following Christ if they are not following his apostles. Now that does not mean that we should be savage about it. It seems to me that people often conflate confronting false teaching with being hateful. You can oppose false teaching without being mean and ugly about it, and we ought to do that if we want to be faithful to our Lord. We are to speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15).

Now Paul underlines his authority with the words, “by the will of God.” He is saying that apostleship is not something he applied for. He did not choose this line of work; rather, God chose it for him. He was not a self-made apostle as so many others were (then and today); he was a God-made apostle. In his letter to the Galatians, where he was having to deal with false-apostles, he makes this point with unusual directness: “Paul, an apostle, (not of men, neither by man, but by Jesus Christ, and God the Father, who raised him from the dead” (Gal. 1:1). Later, he writes, “For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by men is not man’s gospel. For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ” (Gal. 1:11-12, ESV). To hear the apostles is to hear God. Not that the apostles are divine; it is just that they carry a divine commission in what they speak and teach. To reject their message is to reject God’s word.

The epistle to the Ephesians is, therefore, not just the word of Paul. It is the word of God, and worth your attention and mine.

How should we apply the teaching of this epistle?

Another way to ask this question is, how should we listen to the teaching of this epistle? This is an important question, because if this is the word of God, then, as our Lord put it, we should “take heed how we hear” (Lk. 8:18).

The answer to this question lies at least partly in the way the recipients of the letter are described: “to the saints which are at Ephesus and to the faithful in Christ Jesus.” If you open a letter that is not addressed to you, then the contents of the letter are probably not going to be applicable to you. Now this letter is addressed to saints and faithful. That is to whom Paul is writing. He is assuming that his readers share these characteristics when he writes what he does in the following words. So the first thing we need to ask ourselves as we approach this letter is, are we saints and faithful in Christ Jesus? Because if you are not, then it would be wrong for you to appropriate the message of this epistle to yourself. On the other hand, if you are, then it would be wrong for you not to appropriate the truths in the following chapters. Who then are these “saints and faithful in Christ Jesus”?

First of all, Paul describes his readers as “saints.” Unfortunately, the word “saint” has become a way to describe someone who is a bit closer to heaven than earth, someone who is on a spiritual level that none of us could imagine joining. However, the NT uses this word, not to describe a very small group among the multitude of believers; rather, it assumes that everyone who follows Christ is a saint. In NT parlance, “saint” is just another word for a follower of Jesus.

The word “saint” is a form of the word “sanctified.” To be sanctified means to be made holy. So a saint is a holy one. To understand the implications of this for us, we have to go back to the OT. In the OT, something or someone was sanctified or made holy, when it or they were

set apart for God. Thus, the tabernacle was holy, all the instruments of the priesthood were holy, and the priests themselves were holy. Why? Because they were set apart for the service of God. In the same way, every believer in Christ has been set apart for God and his service. This is what the apostle Peter was getting at when he wrote, “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy” (1 Pet. 2:9-10, ESV). Once we belonged to the world; now we belong to God, and that’s what makes us a saint.

We need to realize is that everyone who belongs to Christ is a saint. They have been set apart for the service of Christ. They belong to him. The first thing, therefore, that we need to understand about the implications of the meaning of sainthood for you and me is what an incredible privilege this is. To belong to Christ! What does it matter what the world thinks or says of you or me if we belong to the King of kings and Lord of lords? You and I may go through life without ever being noticed. We may never be appreciated. In the end, if you are a saint, that doesn’t matter. Why should we crave the approval of man when Christ has personally claimed us? Why should we care if people pass over us when God himself has chosen us for himself?

The second thing we need to understand about this is that being a saint does imply certain things about our habits and lifestyle. It implies that we are devoted to God and Christ, and that this is a reality, and not just a claim that we make. It implies that though we are not perfect (nor ever will be this side of heaven), we want to be more like Christ and that there has been some measure of growth in godliness since we became a Christian. This is why the apostle Peter also urged the saints to whom he was writing, “Wherefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and hope to the end for the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ; as obedient children, not fashioning yourselves according to the former lusts in your ignorance: but as he

which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of [conduct]; because it is written, Be ye holy; for I am holy” (1 Pet. 1:13-16).

In particular, it implies that we are not trying to be like the world. It implies that the lusts and desires and goals and priorities of this world are not ours. As Paul put it in his letter to the Romans, it implies that we are not being conformed to this world but that we are being transformed by the renewing of our minds, that we may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God (Rom. 12:2).

Let me point out that the difference is primarily internal, not external. There have been a lot of people throughout history that have tried to make holiness of thing mainly of external differences. You can wear this but not that, eat this but not that, and so on. I’m not saying that there are no external differences; of course there will be. But being a saint does not mean being different for the sake of being different. Nor does it mean being weird. I like how the apostle Paul inserted “to the saints which are at Ephesus.” They are saints, yes, but they are still citizens and inhabitants of Ephesus. They didn’t pack up their belongings and go join a commune. They didn’t wall themselves from the world. Rather, they learned how to shine the light of Christ in the darkness. That is what we must do as saints.

This is what saints have always done. Consider the situation of the Ephesian Christians. We may grieve the fact that our culture is post-Christian, but Ephesus was thoroughly pagan, and life in this town was greatly influenced by the worship of the god Artemis whose magnificent marble temple was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.⁷ Paganism has never set well with Christianity, and the idol-makers tried to expunge the influence of Paul in Ephesus, creating a riot in the process (cf. Acts 19). It was probably very difficult to live there as a Christian. In addition to idolatry of the worship of Artemis, there was the problem of what you might call black magic. Recall that in Acts 19:19, we read that “a number of those who practiced magic arts brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all. And they counted the

⁷Hoechner, p. 83.

value of them and found it came to fifty thousand pieces silver” (ESV). To put that in perspective, that’s fifty thousand days’ wages! It must have been pervasive. Evil was all around the believers, every day and in every part of the life of the city. And yet the believers there learned how to be in this world without being of this world. They learned how to love their neighbor as themselves, while retaining ultimate allegiance to Christ. They learned how to be holy in an unholy world. That is what you and I must do as well. It is to this kind of person to whom this letter is addressed.

Paul doesn’t stop there. He goes on to describe his readers as “faithful.” Those who belong to Jesus don’t give up. They can be relied upon. Recall that our Lord in the parable of the sower differentiates those who give up after persecution or the cares of this world dry up their appetite for spiritual things from those who bring forth fruit (Mt. 13:3-23). The person who is a saint is going to persevere. That doesn’t mean that they never sin. It doesn’t mean that, like Peter, there can’t be lapses of faith. But it does mean that faith wins out in the end. Not because we are strong but because the God who gave us faith is strong. Remember that we are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed at the last day (1 Pet. 1:5). The saint is dependable; he or she can be relied upon; they are faithful.

There is another meaning to this word. It could be translated “believers”; in fact, this seems to be the translation that most commentators prefer. This word is translated this way in Jn. 20:27 when Jesus says to Thomas, “Be not faithless, but believing.” This points to the fact that one of the essential characteristics of the Christian is their faith in Christ – note the following words “in Christ Jesus.” What makes a Christian a Christian is not how nice they are or what charitable causes they have championed. There are plenty of pagans who can do all those things and more.

What makes a Christian is their faith in Jesus. It means that, if we want to be able to claim any of the blessings and promises of this book, we need to make sure that we trust in Jesus Christ. All of the saving

blessings from God to man comes only through Jesus Christ and they are appropriated only by faith.

However, we must be careful by what we mean by “faith.” Our culture has redefined this word to mean “believing something is true when there is no evidence for it.” That is self-evidently not the meaning of the word in the Scripture. To have faith in Christ means that you trust in him, and you trust in him because you have reason to do so. Perhaps he has spoken to you in your heart as you have been in his word. Perhaps you have looked at the evidence for his resurrection and been convinced. However a Christian comes to faith, they do so because they are convinced, because they have reason to believe. It is no “leap in the dark,” no closing my eyes to evidence. It means that I trust in Christ because I have every reason to believe that he is Lord and Savior and that there is no other name under heaven given among men whereby I must be saved (Acts 4:12). Do you trust in him? If so, then this letter is for you: keep reading! If not, then stop immediately, and get on your knees before God and seek his face. Ask him to reveal his Son to you, and put your trust in Jesus.

This brings us to our final question:

What is the message of Ephesians?

The message of this letter is summed up in Paul’s greeting: “Grace to you and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ.” Now there were standard greetings in Paul’s day. A Greek might greet someone with the word, “Chairein! [Rejoice!]” A typical Jewish greeting would be, “Shalom” – “peace.” Paul changes “chairein” to “charis” [grace], and adds “peace.”

I think Paul has chosen his words carefully and they are worthy of our studied consideration. Grace and peace sum up the message of this epistle, and indeed of the Christian message. Grace is God’s free and unmerited favor, given to us because Jesus Christ has merited every saving blessing for God’s chosen people through his costly sacrifice for them.

Grace therefore describes how God brings the blessings described in this book to us.

On the other hand, peace describes what we receive by grace. What has grace brought us? Grace brings peace: peace with God through the forgiveness of sins and adoption into his family. You could say that most of the first chapter is an unfolding of this aspect of our salvation. Furthermore, grace causes us to be at peace with other people. Men are at each other's throats because they are first of all enemies of God. Most of the efforts at peace in this world by men who know nothing of Christ and his salvation are useless. They do not deal with the main issue, which is enmity and hostility towards God and his Son. Therefore, Paul goes on to say in chapter 2 that Christ not only reconciles us to God but also to each other. Jew and Gentile, once at irreconcilable odds, are now part of one family in Christ. He heals relationships, so that husbands and wives sacrificially love each other instead of jockey for their own preferences. Children obey their parents and parents bring up their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. Employers and employees work together instead of against each other. All of this is a product of the peace that grace brings us through Christ.

Both grace and peace come from God the Father and Jesus Christ our Lord. Once again, we see that no blessing comes to us apart from the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. You cannot come to God apart from Christ, for all blessings come from God the Father and Jesus Christ. Moreover, they cause us to relate to God as our Father and to Jesus as our Lord.

Probably the central theme in this epistle is the union that believers have with Christ. The phrase "in Christ" or its parallels, occurs 36 times in this epistle alone. You see it repeatedly in verses 3-14, Paul's extended praise to God for his spiritual blessings in heavenly. It occurs again and again throughout the epistle. Perhaps the best single verse that summarizes the message of Ephesians in this respect is 1:9-10, where Paul writes that God is "making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of

time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (ESV). What is God’s saving purpose? It is to “gather together in one all things in Christ.”

Thus, if we would sum up the message of Ephesians, we could say that it is about the union that believers have with Christ and all its implications for us. In Christ, we are given new blessings (chapter 1), made a part of a new society (chapter 2-3), enabled to live a new life (chapter 4), and put in new relationships (chapters 5-6).⁸

These are breathtaking realities and, if we truly believe that these are ours in Christ, there is no reason why we should not be able to “rejoice without ceasing” and to “in everything give thanks.” There would be no reason why we could not be the happiest, most content, most secure and fearless people in the world. With the early saints, we would experience “joy unspeakable and full of glory.” Paul’s prayer for the saints and faithful at Ephesus was that they would “be filled with all the fullness of God” (3:19). As we study this book, my prayer is that this would become a reality for myself and for everyone who hears these messages. May God our Father grant grace and peace, through our Lord Jesus Christ.

⁸The inspiration for this division is John Stott’s similar division for Ephesians.

CHAPTER II

EVERY SPIRITUAL BLESSING

IN AFRICA, THE OKAVANGO DELTA in the Kalahari Desert remains a wasteland for most of the year. However, there is a period of time each year when this wasteland becomes a paradise. During this season, grasses and flowers grow where once there was nothing but cracked and hardened dirt, and water flowing in abundance where not long before there was none. What makes this even more amazing is that the rain that turns this desert into a veritable Garden of Eden does not actually fall in the desert. Rather, the life-giving waters originally descended in rains upon mountains a thousand miles away in the highlands of Angola.

I think this is an apt image for what the apostle is describing for us in our text. Paul begins here in verse three by praising the Triune God for blessings – blessings that originated not in our sin-cursed desert but in heavenly places. The origin of the blessings over which Paul exults in doxology come from a time before time, and from a place beyond our earthly places. Just like the waters that flow to make deserts blossom again, the spiritual blessings that come from God turn our own barren and desolate hearts into fountains of living water.

There is an ocean of spiritual wealth in just this verse alone, that, if appropriated by faith, would truly cause believers to radiate with glory and joy. Lloyd-Jones preached three sermons just on verse three in his series of sermons on Ephesians. And yet this is just the start. Verse three is the beginning of one long sentence in the Greek, a sentence that does not end until verse 14. It's as if Paul cannot stop praising God for the fullness and richness of his blessings toward his people. The majesty and the glory of this passage is unmistakable. It's been likened to "a magnificent gateway," and to "a kaleidoscope of dazzling lights and shifting colours."¹ Perhaps one of the best descriptions was given by John Mackay, who proposed a musical simile for this doxology. He writes, "This rhapsodic adoration is comparable to the overture of an opera which contains the successive melodies that are to follow."²

And yet this is not just a random and thoughtless avalanche of words. There is an obvious structure to these verses. Paul organizes his song of praise around what we might call three stanzas directed at each person of the Trinity. In verses 4-6, he praises the Father who has chosen us to be holy and predestined us to become his sons and daughters. In verses 7-12, he praises the Son by whom we are redeemed, enlightened, and made heirs of an inheritance that is far beyond what anything on this earth could afford. Then in verses 13-14, he praises the Spirit of God who seals us and gives us the earnest of our inheritance in Christ. At the end of each stanza (6, 12, 14), Paul pauses to point out that the display of the glory of God's grace is the ultimate purpose behind the unfolding drama of the redemption planned by the Father, executed by the Son, and applied by the Holy Spirit.

The Trinitarian structure of these verses is anticipated in verse 3, for here the apostle in summarizing the blessings in one verse, does so by pointing to the Trinity as the one through whom all blessings flow. The Father is the one who blesses us – he is the fountain of our blessings. But these blessings come in Christ, and Paul calls him the Father of our Lord

¹See John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Ephesians* (BST), p. 32.

²Quoted in Stott, p. 32.

Jesus Christ because it is through Christ that we receive anything that brings us to heaven and makes us accepted before God. Finally, Paul describes the blessings that we receive as “spiritual blessings.” This is a reference to the Holy Spirit (not our spirit), who applies the blessings to us.

To see this, it is instructive to note how this word “spiritual” is used elsewhere in the NT, especially by Paul. In 1 Cor. 2, for example, Paul talks about how “the natural man” does not receive “the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him” (14). Then he says, “But he that is spiritual judges all things, yet he himself is judged by no man” (15). In these verses, the spiritual man is contrasted with the natural man, and the distinction is very clearly that the natural man lacks the insight given by the Spirit of God. So the spiritual man is someone who is enlightened by the Holy Spirit to see the truth and beauty of the gospel. Then in 1 Cor. 12, Paul teaches them about spiritual gifts. What makes them spiritual? They are spiritual because they are given by the Holy Spirit (12:1, 4, 7). Finally, in 1 Cor. 15, Paul contrasts the spiritual body with the natural body (42-46). The natural body dies but the spiritual body is what is given to believers at the resurrection of the dead. Just as our Lord was raised from the dead by the Spirit (Rom. 1:4), even so believers will be raised from the dead by the power of the Holy Spirit at the Last Day.

The point of this is that we shouldn’t interpret “spiritual blessings” as referring simply to things that benefit our spirit rather than our bodies. Rather, spiritual blessings are blessings which are conferred upon us by the power of the Holy Spirit, just as our spiritual enlightenment, our spiritual gifts, and spiritual bodies are all given to us according to the working of the Spirit of God. In fact, we should point out that the spiritual body that Paul is talking about in 1 Cor. 15 is not an incorporeal body because it is a body like Christ’s, and his body is a real, fleshly, physical body – but without corruption and empowered by the Spirit.

So this verse really does anticipate and summarizes all that follows in the next 11 verses, especially the Trinitarian origin of our blessings.

However, what I want to focus on this morning is what this verse tells us about how we are to respond to these blessings. In particular, this verse shows us that we should be people whose lives are characterized by praise. I'm not talking about the dutiful or habitual "praise God!" that falls off of many people's lips, because they know they should say it but their heart really isn't in it. That's not what Paul is doing here. I'm talking about having a heart that explodes in praise to God because it is hit with the glory of what has been given to me in Christ.

The question then is, How do we become people like that? The verse before us helps here. It tells us that we need to become people who are focused on the source of our blessings – God. It tells us that we need to become people who are confident in the security of our blessings – God has blessed us: "The past tense . . . is used because the apostle contemplates his readers as actually redeemed, and in present possession of the unspeakable blessings which Christ has procured."³ We need to be people who have laid hold of eternal life. It tells us that we need to become people who embrace the superabundance of our blessings: "with all [or, every] spiritual blessing." We need to be people who understand the splendor of our blessings: they are "spiritual blessings in heavenly places.

The Source of our Blessings

So first of all, we need to become people who are focused on the source of our blessings; we need to be focused on God himself. The problem that we get into is that we tend to focus on the blessings (or lack thereof, as we might see it) instead of on God. The problem with this is that focusing on our blessings means that we are looking at ourselves all the time. This leads to becoming a person who is self-centered, self-focused, and self-oriented. And that is idolatry. It follows that focusing on the blessings instead of on God is the surest way to short-circuit our ability to live a life that is characterized by joy and praise. If you and I

³Charles Hodge, *Ephesians*.

seek the blessing instead of the one who gives the blessing, we will miss the blessing.

Notice how Paul begins: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” To say that God is blessed does not mean that we are adding to the glory and worth of God. You and I can add nothing to God. He is not served by human hands as though he needed anything (Act 17:25). It means instead that we recognize with our minds and affections that God is worthy to be praised. It means that we see that God is blessed and see (to some extent) his glory. It means that we can say with the angelic hosts: “Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created” (Rev. 4:11). It means that we praise God for who he is and not just because we have received gifts from him that we like.

How then do we become people who persistently look to God instead of to themselves? First of all, we must be surrendered to God. If we are holding anything back from God’s control over our life, that thing is obviously more important than God. And that thing is going to blind us from seeing the surpassing worth of God. The reason people don’t see God’s majesty has nothing to do with God himself – it is not because God wants to be appreciated for something he is not. The reason lies in our falsely valuing things above God – things that are not really valuable at all when compared to God. Am I truly surrendered to God? Is there anything in my heart that has preeminence over my affections? If so, I will not be able to see the glory of God as I should, and even if my lips utter praise to God they only do so disconnected from a heart that treasures other things.

This is one of the reasons why holiness is so often associated with joy in the Bible. People tend to associate holiness with gloom and censoriousness and a general lack of happiness. This is because people have mistaken self-righteousness for God-centeredness. It is otherwise in the Scripture. There, we are told, “Blessed [happy] are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Mt. 5:8). We are told that “light is sown for the

righteous, and gladness for the upright in heart” (Ps. 97:11). We are told that it is the “holy city,” the New Jerusalem, that is the place where there will be “no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain” (Rev. 21:2, 4). You will never be able to say, “Blessed be God,” until you can also say with Paul of God: “whose I am, and whom I serve” (Acts 27:23).

Obedience isn’t the only way we surrender to God. We also surrender to him by trusting in him, by relying upon him, and by depending on him. So often the reason why the first word out of our mouths isn’t praise to God is because we are still trying to live life depending on our own resources and strength and cleverness. Paul lived by faith in the Son of God (Gal. 2:20). On another occasion Paul said that “we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God which raiseth the dead” (2 Cor. 1:9). If you are truly at the end of yourself and you recognize that you are wholly dependent upon God, then it will be easy to praise God. You will not be deluded to think that the successes of your life are your successes. You will recognize that every blessing you receive ultimately comes from the gracious hand of God. Of course you will say with Paul, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!” We must learn to look to God.

The Security of our Blessings

Then we must become people who are confident and secure in their relationship with God. I don’t mean presumption. I’m not talking about people living in sin who nevertheless claim to be eternally secure. God’s word holds out no hope for people who are living in rebellion against him. Rather, I’m talking about people whose lives are characterized by faith and repentance. You can be seeking to live a life in submission to Christ, and yet fail to rejoice in the hope that is yours because of Christ; they are not confident in their participation in the blessings that belong to all who belong to the Lord.

What I mean is that it is possible for believers to develop a mentality that God is somehow against them. If you get that way, you are always going to be questioning whether or not God has the best in mind for you. You might read that those who trust in the Lord are blessed, but there will always be a question mark in the back of your mind: am I really blessed? You might interpret things that have happened in your life as God getting back at you, or as divine retribution, rather than as God's loving discipline to increase your joy in him.

To such people Paul reminds us that "God . . . hath blessed us." We are blessed; it is past tense. Those who belong to Christ are not waiting to be blessed, they are blessed, right now. In fact, every spiritual blessing in heavenly places belongs to them. The blessings of salvation are not dependent somehow on how good you have been or will be. You don't have to merit them. You don't have to earn them. You don't have to rack up a certain number of points to be blessed. You are already blessed in Christ. As the apostle John put it in his first epistle, "Beloved, now are we the children of God" (1 Jn. 3:2).

If you belong to Christ, then the way you respond to these blessings is to lay hold of them, to own them. Do you deserve them? Of course not. We don't receive these blessings because we deserve them. They come to us through Christ, in Christ. He is the one who bought these blessings with his blood and now, according to the Father's purpose and plan, gives them to us freely by his grace. There is nothing wrong with accepting what God has already given. This is what I think the apostle Paul meant when he urged Timothy to "lay hold of eternal life" (1 Tim. 6:12). What does Paul mean? He means that Timothy is to live his life in light of the reality that eternal life is his right now, not something he has to wait for. To be sure, the fullness of eternal life, and the fullness of our experience of the spiritual blessings awaits the future. But they belong to us now in Christ, and we are even now receiving through the Spirit the down-payment of those blessings.

If we truly believed what God has promised to us, then we would certainly bless God. Our lives would be characterized by praise instead

of doubt and unhappiness. Let's not doubt God, but embrace what he has given to us by grace in Christ. With Paul, we ought to live "in hope of eternal life, which God, who cannot lie, promised before the world began" (Tit. 1:2).

The Superabundance of our Blessings

Then we need to be people who embrace the superabundance of what God has given to us in Christ. We are blessed "with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ." God has not just blessed us. He has blessed us with every spiritual blessing. In other words, there is no blessing that will give you grace and glory that God has held back. As the psalmist put it, "For the LORD God is a sun and shield: the LORD will give grace and glory: no good thing will he withhold from them that walk uprightly. O LORD of hosts, blessed is the man that trusteth in thee" (Ps. 86:11-12).

Adam and Eve thought that God had held a blessing back from them. Eating the forbidden fruit did not lead to blessing but to a curse and to death. In the same way, we may think that God is holding back from us. We can be sure that such is not the case. God is generous in ways that we cannot even imagine.

Now it is true that we do not always feel blessed. We do not always experience the blessing in the present, but that is not because the blessings are not ours. We are in the position of the Israelites on the borders of Canaan. God had promised to give them the land. It would have been presumptuous for them to ask God to give them something that he had already promised. At the same time, disobedience (as in the matter of Achan and Ai) led to temporary setbacks. But the land was theirs; God has already given it to them. In the same way, the Christian has been given every spiritual blessing in Christ. If you are in Christ, there is no blessing that Christ has purchased that is not already yours. This is why, I think, the apostle describes those who are predestined to be conformed to the image of Christ as being already glorified (Rom.

8:29-30). They are not in fact actually glorified, but they will be because Christ has purchased it for them. When through sin or unbelief we lose our present experience of these blessings, this does not remove the fact that they are ours, and even the repentance and faith that brings us back into the fellowship of the Holy One has been purchased for us on the cross.

The Splendor of our Blessings

Finally, we need to understand the splendor of our blessings in Christ. Paul describes them with one word and one phrase: “spiritual” and “in heavenly places.” We’ve already defined the meaning of spiritual: spiritual blessings are those which are “derived from the Spirit, whose presence and influence are the great blessing purchased by Christ.”⁴

What then are the spiritual blessings? What does the Holy Spirit bring us? He effectually calls us to embrace Christ by faith; he brings us into the fellowship of God. “For through him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father” (2:18). He holds us up and strengthens us for the life of faith and obedience (3:16). He brings us into the unity enjoyed in the fellowship of the people of God (4:3-4). He opens our eyes to see the truth of God’s word and applies it to our hearts so that we can wield it like a sword against the wiles of the devil (6:17). He enables us to pray effectively for the advance of the kingdom of God in our lives and in the world (6:18). In other words, everything we need to live a life of obedience and faith, to live the abundant life, to get us to heaven – all this is included in “spiritual blessings.”

The other phrase that describes our blessings, points to the sphere in which they are enjoyed: “In the heavenly places.” This phrase is used five times in this epistle (1:3, 20; 2:6; 3:10; 6:12). It refers to “the unseen world of spiritual reality.”⁵ It is the place inhabited by the principalities and powers (3:10; 6:12), which seems to be a reference to angelic

⁴Hodge.

⁵Stott, p. 35.

beings, the latter reference to fallen angels. So it is not synonymous with heaven. However, 1:20 and 2:6 make it clear that “heavenly places” can refer to heaven, for the right hand of God is surely a reference to the blessed abode of God where he manifests his glory most fully. Thus, when Paul denotes the place where our spiritual blessings reside as “heavenly places,” he is noting that salvation belongs to the age to come and that this is what Christ has purchased for us. He has not purchased citizenship in this world, but citizenship in the world to come. We are in the world, but we are not of it.

This points to the fact that the blessings with which we have been blessed are infinitely far superior to those after which most of the world grasp. Most people are like the muck-raker in *Pilgrim’s Progress*, who have their eyes glued to the muck of this world when there is a celestial crown being offered to them, if they would just look up. It is true that we are not promised this world. Everything here is temporary and passing away. What God has given us in Christ is eternal. As Paul would remind the Colossian believers, “If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God [in the heavenly places!]. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth. For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory” (Col. 3:1-4).

We may think from time to time that we are not blessed because we are not experiencing more of this world. Let us once and for all get rid of this notion. The blessings of this age are no measure of our blessings that belong to the age to come. I would rather be a Lazarus whose only friends in this world were the dogs who came to lick his sores than be the rich man who had everything in this world but only torment on the other side of death. What God has given us in Christ are the true riches – everything in this world (including gold-plated aircraft) are fake in comparison. We would be crazy to give up the spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ for advancement and comfort and security in this world.

So may the Lord open our eyes to see how truly rich we are in Christ.
To have such blessings freely and liberally given to us is truly amazing.
“O taste and see that the Lord is good” (Ps. 32:8)!

CHAPTER III

CHOSEN IN CHRIST (EPH.

I: 4-6)

WE HAVE BEGUN TO LOOK at Paul's extended doxology over the blessings that God has given to us in Christ. In verse 3, he summarizes these blessings as "spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ." That's the summary. Now, he begins to spell out in verses 4-14 what these blessings are. We've noted that this passage divides naturally into three subsections in which Paul praises the Father for electing (4-6), the Son for redeeming (7-12) and the Spirit for sealing (13-14).

In verses 4-6, the apostle Paul praises God the Father for electing the saints and predestinating them to the adoption of children. In doing so, he is not only beginning to explain what the spiritual blessings are, he is also giving us their basis and foundation. Notice the words, "according as." Paul is answering the question: How do these blessings come to us? How is it that men who are fallen and in rebellion against God, who are hostile towards God and his word, can come to love God? Paul explains: "According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world." The basis for our salvation is God's choosing us. In other words, we are saved because God the Father has elected us.

There is, therefore, no doubt that this text teaches the doctrine of election. The question is not if the Scriptures teach this doctrine; the question is what the Scriptures have to say about it. This doctrine, however, has been a source of unending controversy in the Christian church. This is unfortunate because the reason God has revealed this to us is so that we would join the apostle in praising God for his incredible grace. It is not meant to provoke controversy but to inspire exultation in God. For that reason, I think that, before we even approach the teaching of this text, we need to put the teaching of this text in some perspective.

The first thing that needs to be pointed out is where the doctrine of election lies in order of importance relative to other doctrines. On one level, it should be obvious to every believer that it is important, because otherwise the Holy Spirit would not have inspired the apostle to write it down. "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable..." (2 Tim. 3:16). Nevertheless, we all recognize that there are different levels of importance when it comes to the Biblical doctrines. There are what might be called three tiers, or levels, of doctrines. The first level of doctrines, or primary truths, are those truths in Scripture which enable us to distinguish between Christian and non-Christian. Though this is not a very popular concept among even Christians of our day, the fact of the matter is that there are things you must believe in order to be rightfully called a Christian. For example, if you deny the Trinity, the deity of Christ, or the necessity of the atonement in order to be saved, you cannot be a Christian. This is the first level.

The second level of doctrines are those truths which enable us to distinguish among denominational commitments. There are certain truths that are important enough that it is worth putting some denominational distance between you and other Christians over them. For example, the baptism of believers by immersion is something that Baptists believe is important enough to make an identifying mark of their churches. Thus, to become a member of a Baptist church, you must be willing to identify yourself with the belief that the proper objects of baptism are believers and the proper mode of baptism is immersion.

In doing so, they are not denying that people in other denominations are not Christian. They are just saying that this doctrine is important enough that even though they will not deny others who differ with them on this issue the title of Christian, they are willing to deny them affiliation in their denomination.

There is a need for such denominational commitments and distinctions. Let us stick with the example of baptism to illustrate. The point is that denominational distinctives are necessary to defend and perpetuate certain Biblical truths that are not agreed upon by all Christians. Once you stop affirming a truth to be a distinctive of your church, you have essentially given up that doctrine as an identifying mark of your church.

Then there is a third tier. At this level are differences of opinion over issues that are often the result of nothing more than different levels of maturity among believers. However, such differences of opinion need not necessitate separating into different denominations or churches. In fact, every healthy church will have a variety of opinions on certain topics that are neither first or second level truths. The apostle gives an example of this in his letter to the Romans in the fourteenth chapter. There were those who had fully grasped the implications of the gospel and no longer celebrated the Jewish holy days or observed the food laws of the Mosaic Law. On the other hand, there were other believers who still felt it necessary to practice these rites. However, Paul does not tell them to separate into different churches; he tells them to forbear with one another and not to put a stumbling-block in the way of other believers over these matters.

Now the point of all this is just to say the following: the doctrine of election is not a first-tier truth. Whether it should be second or third I will leave aside for the time; however, it is important to note that good Christians have disagreed over this doctrine for centuries. A great example of this is found in the lives of John Wesley and George Whitefield, who were contemporaries. Whitefield was a Calvinist and Wesley an Arminian, and in fact there was for a time a rupture in their friendship

over this very doctrine. Nevertheless, they were reconciled and Wesley even preached Whitefield's funeral. Both were good men; both were greatly used by God to bring many into the fold of faith during the Great Awakening. Nevertheless, they never came to an agreement over the doctrine of election. It is therefore repugnant to me to hear some argue that, if you don't believe in the doctrine of election from a certain point of view, you are not a Christian.

It is not Biblical to think and feel this way. When Paul wrote to the Romans, it appears that there were some in that church who disagreed with him on this very doctrine. And yet he never tells them to jump ship; he never tells them that they were not Christians. In the same way, as we approach this doctrine, I want to make it very clear that, though I believe very strongly that the Calvinistic approach to the doctrine is the correct one, nevertheless, we ought to affirm gladly that there is room for disagreement (hopefully loving) here among Christians.

I mentioned Calvinism, which brings me to a second preliminary point. Unfortunately, names get associated with ideas and people begin to think that such an idea originated with the name. People talk about Western or Aristotelian logic as if Aristotle dreamed up the laws of logic. He didn't – logic is logic, whether you live in the East or the West. The laws of logic didn't originate with Aristotle, although he did such a good job clearly delineating them that his name has been associated with logic ever since. In the same way, what are called the doctrines of grace are often associated with Calvin's name. It is true that the way I understand the doctrine of election lines up with how John Calvin taught the doctrine. However, it is simply a mistake to infer that Calvin dreamed up this particular approach to the doctrine of election. The fact of the matter is that almost all the Reformers both before and after Calvin embraced the sovereignty of God in salvation. This is why Calvinism and Reformed theology are more or less synonymous.

However, it would also be a mistake to infer from this that Reformed theology originated with Martin Luther or Martin Bucer or Ulrich Zwingli or any of the other first generation reformers. It didn't. The fact

of the matter is that Reformed theology predates the Reformation by a lot. I would argue that it predates it all the way back to the apostle Paul. The fact of the matter is, in the history of the church, there are many examples of theologians who embraced what is now called Calvinism long before Calvin was even born. For example, John Wycliffe, who is often called the Morning Star of the Reformation, embraced the sovereignty of God in salvation and a Reformed understanding of the doctrine of election about a hundred and fifty years before Luther nailed his 95 Theses on the Church door at Wittenberg.

Actually, it goes back even further. The greatest theologian between the apostles and the Reformers was Augustine, the fourth/fifth century bishop. Although I would disagree with a lot of what he had to say about the doctrine of the church, I would agree with almost everything he had to say about the doctrine of salvation. He was “Reformed” a thousand years before the Reformation.

The point I’m trying to make is that we do the doctrine of God’s sovereignty in salvation a disservice when we associate it with the name of John Calvin. Now the exposition I’m going to give may be in line with Calvin’s understanding, but it didn’t originate with him. With all this being said, I’m going to drop Calvin’s name from this point on. The question I want to pursue with you this morning is not, “What did Calvin say?” but, “What does the Bible say?” My goal this morning is to do an inductive study with you of the Biblical doctrine of election, and for us to see what the Bible has to say about it.

We begin of course with our text: “According as he hath chosen us before the foundation of the world that we should be holy and without blame before him in love; having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ unto himself according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved.” What does the apostle say about the doctrine of election here? He says at least five things. First, he says that the one who chooses is God the Father, the subject in verse three being the subject of verse four. Second, the objects of God’s

election are “us,” which points back to verse 1 and to the saints and faithful in Christ Jesus. Third, the way God chose the saints was “in him,” in Christ. Fourth, the timing of God’s election was “before the foundation of the world.” Finally, the purpose for which they were chosen was that they should be “holy and without blame before him in love.”

Is Election unto Salvation Conditional or Unconditional?

Now there are basically two ways that this text has been interpreted. One viewpoint says that God’s choice of particular people was based on their foreseen faith. God chose one person over another because he foresaw that they would believe in Christ and turn from their sins. Another variation of this is that God did not choose particular people but chose to save a certain type of person, i.e. those who would put their faith in Christ. The other viewpoint is that God’s election is completely unconditional, and that faith or any other spiritual good thing in us is the result and not the basis of God’s choice. So, the question is, Is God’s choice of one person over another conditioned on foreseen faith or is it not; is it conditional or unconditional?

Evidence from the connection with verse 3.

There are several reasons to think that the election that Paul is describing here is unconditional. The first reason lies in the way verse 4 connects with verse 3. As we noted before, Paul is not only describing our spiritual blessings in verses 4 but by opening with “according as,” he is denoting that the foundation of these blessings lie in the action of God described in verse 4. That action is election. Election is therefore the basis for every spiritual blessing. Certainly, faith and its fruits would seem to be included in “spiritual blessings.” If that’s the case, then faith is the fruit of election and not the cause of it.

Evidence from the phrase “that we should be holy and blameless . . . in love.”

This phrase is not the only evidence for unconditional election in the text. Here I think the phrase “that we should be holy and without blame before him in love” is decisive. Note that God did not choose anyone because he foresaw that they would be holy – he chose them in order that they might be holy. Holiness is the purpose, not the cause, of God’s election. Since the purpose of election is to create holy and blameless people, this also indicates that holiness is the result of election. Now, some might reply that they do not claim that holiness is the ground but that faith is the ground of election. However, faith is the fountain of holiness. What is the victory that overcomes the world? It is our faith (1 Jn. 5:4-5). The faith that saves is holy faith, and so if faith is the ground of our election, then election is unnecessary for our holiness.

Note further that Paul explains that the holiness and blamelessness to which we are chosen is holiness which is defined by love: “holy and blameless before him in love.” Some think that “in love” defines the way God predestined us, but I think the KJV has it right when it puts it at the end of verse 4 because in this doxology this type of phrase usually follows the main verb rather than precedes it. “In love” therefore explains how holiness and blamelessness are exercised. This makes sense because love is the fulfillment of the law, and all of holiness is summed up in the commandment to love. Of course, it is not just love to other people, but love to God that is the preeminent quality of Biblical love. Again, you cannot separate faith in Christ from love to God. They go together. You are never going to put your faith and trust in Christ as long as you are hostile to him. So how can love be the purpose for which we are chosen when it is produced by the faith which is supposed to be the basis of election? That would be to get the cart before the horse.

Now, I suppose that someone could make the argument that, even though holiness is produced by faith, it doesn’t mean faith is the same thing as holiness. After all, we are justified by faith and not by good

works (holiness). So it could be argued that God could have chosen us on the basis of foreseen faith and for the purpose of future holiness (so that faith logically precedes God's election and good works logically follow it). However, this argument doesn't work. To foresee faith is to foresee holiness since one produces another. They both relate to God's foresight in the same way. If one is the basis of God's choice, why is the other not? Again, if holiness is the effect of election, then it stands to reason that faith must be as well.

There is another reason why we shouldn't see faith as the basis of God's election of his people. In the next chapter, Paul explicitly says that faith is the gift of God: "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God" (2:8). What is the gift of God? It is salvation through faith. All of salvation, including the faith that apprehends the gift of Christ, is the gift of God. If faith is the gift of God, how then can it be the basis of election?

Now if faith were in fact the basis for God's choice of his people, Paul could have made this explicit. He could have said that God chose us because of our faith and love. But he doesn't. He doesn't even mention our faith until verses 12 and 13. It seems that he doesn't because he wants us to see that salvation is all of God, from first to last. He wants you to see that the foundation beneath your hope does not lie in yourself but in the everlasting and faithful God. And he wants you to exult in that.

Evidence from predestination unto adoption.

Paul goes on to say that those whom God chose he also "predestinated . . . unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ unto himself, according to the good pleasure of his will" (5). Election and predestination are very closely tied together. God chose people, whom he predestines to belong to his family. This is the crowning blessing in all of salvation. To become the children of God through Christ is to come into the closest possible relationship to God. It is what caused the apostle

John to exclaim, “Behold what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us that we should be called the children of God!” (1 Jn. 3:1). Paul expands upon this in his letter to the Romans when he writes that “the Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: and if children, then heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ” (Rom. 8:16-17). Thus, verse five explains verses 11 and 14.

Notice that the apostle goes on to tell us how God did this: “according to the good pleasure of his will.” Again, when the apostle wants us to know what moved God to do this, he doesn’t point to anything that you or I have done. He doesn’t point to foreseen faith and any good work as the reason for which God put us in his family. Rather, he points to the good purpose and pleasure of God’s sovereign will. What is the reason you are in the family of God and another person isn’t? Paul answers that question by pointing, not to us, but to God. It is God’s choice and God’s purpose and pleasure that lies at the bottom of your salvation. He is, therefore, the rightful object of your worship and praise and thanksgiving. You owe your salvation, not to your own cleverness or goodness, but to the sovereign initiative and grace of God.

God has done this “to the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein hath made us accepted in the beloved” (6). The display of the glory of God is the ultimate reason why God does what he does. As believers, we all recognize that God is the one who gets the praise for our salvation. We instinctively recognize that God is the one who makes us accepted. The emphasis of this entire passage is on the sovereignty of God in our salvation. God chose us to be holy, not because we were holy. God predestined us to become his children according to the good pleasure of his will, not because of the good pleasure of our will. God made us accepted in the beloved [in Christ]; his acceptance of us is the basis of our acceptance of him and not vice versa. In other words, God’s election of his people is entirely gracious and unconditional. Your eternal destiny does not ultimately depend upon your fickle will but upon God’s unchanging purpose.

So it certainly looks like Ephesians 1:4-6 is consistent with the teaching that election is unconditional. But is this corroborated by the rest of the NT? Or are we reading into this text ideas which are foreign to the words of our Lord and the other apostles and the other writings of Paul? Let's consider other passages in the NT where this idea occurs.

Evidence from the rest of the New Testament.

First of all, consider the words of our Lord in John 6:37-45. Twice in this passage, our Lord refers to those whom the Father has given to him (37, 39). God the Father gave a people to his Son to save. These are the people for whom our Lord prays in his high priestly prayer (17:9): there they are distinguished from the world. In other words, those whom the Father gave to Christ to save are not coextensive with the world. This corresponds with Paul's words in Eph. 1:4. Now we can see what Paul means by God choosing us in Christ; he means that in eternity past, God the Father in the covenant of redemption gave God the Son a people to save.

Now our Lord says, "All that the Father hath given me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out" (37). Those whom the Father chose in Christ will come to Christ. A few verses before, our Lord defines coming to him in terms of faith in Christ (35). Thus those whom the Father chose will believe in Christ. Now the question is, do they believe because they were chosen, or are they chosen because they believe?

The answer comes in verses 44-45: "No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day. It is written in the prophets, And they shall be all taught of God. Every man therefore that hath heard, and hath learned of the Father, cometh unto me." How is it that men come to Christ and believe in him? Our Lord says that they do so because they are drawn by the Father (44). Moreover this drawing is effectual: "every man . . . that had heard, and hath learned of the Father" believes in Christ. Thus our

Lord is not describing what some have called prevenient grace that can be rejected. This drawing is successful. And the one who draws men to faith in Christ is God.

Putting this together, we see that faith cannot be the basis of God's election because faith is the product of God's effectual drawing men to faith in Christ. In other words, just as we saw in Ephesians 2:8, faith is the gift of God. If it is the gift of God, then God's purpose stands behind our faith rather than being based upon it. God gave a people to the Son to save, not because he foresaw their faith, but because he purposed to give them faith so that they would come to Christ and receive the atonement purchased for them on the cross. God draws us to faith in Christ, and he does this on purpose, not by accident. This purpose is rooted in God's eternal election.

Consider next the report of the effects of Paul's preaching in Pisidian Antioch in Acts 13. We are told that the Gentiles "heard this [the gospel]" and "they were glad, and glorified the word of the Lord: and as many as were ordained to eternal life believed" (13:48). Clearly, being ordained to eternal life is synonymous with election to salvation. This text is especially important because we have both faith and election mentioned in the same verse, and we are told how they relate to each other. The Gentiles who believed did so because they were ordained to eternal life. That is the natural meaning of the text. If I said, "As many as went to school got an education," you would immediately recognize that what I meant was that those who got an education did so because they went to school. No one would think that I was saying that they went to school because they got an education. That doesn't even make any sense. Even so, we shouldn't think that Acts 13:48 is saying that people were ordained to eternal life because they believed. It is the other way around. Faith is the result of election, not the cause of it. If you have faith, you have God to thank. It is his grace and unconditional favor that has drawn you to his Son and opened your eyes to the beauty of the gospel. Salvation is of the Lord.

Then look at the way the apostle describes the Thessalonian believers, as he contrasts them to those who believed not the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness (2 Thess. 2:12): “But we are bound to give thanks alway to God for you, brethren beloved of the Lord, because God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth: whereunto he called you by our gospel to the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2:13-14). Here Paul says that God chose us to salvation “through sanctification and belief of the truth.” God’s choice is “through faith” in the same way it is “through sanctification.” Now if faith were the basis of God’s election, wouldn’t that mean that sanctification is also the basis of God’s election? Then that would contradict what the apostle writes in Eph. 1:4. We are not chosen because we are holy but to be holy. Rather, we are chosen through faith because God purposed to give the gift of faith (and holiness) to all whom he chose in Christ. God not only chooses the end, he also chooses the means. (Incidentally, this means that if you do not have faith in Christ, you have no reason to claim that you are elect. Only those who have faith and are living a sanctified life can claim to be chosen by the Father.)

This is corroborated by what Paul goes on to say in verse 14: “whereunto he called you by our gospel.” Whereunto what? Unto faith and sanctification. God effectually calls those whom he has chosen to believe the truth of the gospel. As many as are ordained to eternal life believe.

There are many, many other passages we could look at. In a future message, I would like to look at Paul’s exposition of these matters in Romans 8 and 9. There is one more passage I want to consider with you this morning. It is that wonderful passage found in 2 Tim. 1:8-9. There Paul writes, “Be not thou therefore ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but be thou partaker of the afflictions of the gospel according to the power of God; who hath saved us and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the

world began.” How did God save us? Once again, according to Paul, at the very bottom of our salvation stands God’s purpose and grace. This purpose and grace is not conditioned on anything that we have done but was given to us in Christ Jesus. The very calling which brings us to faith is the fruit of which God’s electing purpose and grace is the root.

I also want to point out in these two verses that an understanding of God’s sovereign and gracious purpose in salvation, far from making us slothful and aimless in the life of faith, is especially suited to put iron in the blood of those who believe it. What could possibly be more steadying than to know that God’s unchanging purpose and love is the foundation of my hope of salvation? Especially in the face of persecution, when the temptation to capitulate to fears and abandon Christ is very real and poignant, the only thing that’s going to keep you going forward and to not be ashamed is to know that God is unchangeably for us in the midst of trials and sufferings. The doctrine of election only undergirds such a conviction.

Now I recognize that this doctrine provokes a lot of questions. Many of these questions are worthy of our consideration, and sometimes I don’t think those who are Reformed take these objections seriously enough. What makes them even more urgent is that there are a lot of people who have read the wrong implications into this doctrine and become Biblically imbalanced. I think the main question is what this means for evangelism. Another question has to do with the question of the freedom of the human will. I don’t have time to deal with these questions now, but I plan to in the next message. For now, however, I want to make the following points.

How to hold the doctrine of election.

First, this doctrine, like the doctrine of the Trinity, is full of mystery, and therefore behooves us to approach it with humility and reverence. We are talking about the eternal councils of God here, and it should not surprise us that we are coming face to face with something we cannot

fully understand. We should be careful that we do not confuse our inability to completely understand this doctrine (which is all of us) with the truth value of the doctrine. We should also be careful that we do not mistake mystery for irrationality. Just because we cannot fully understand something does not mean that it must therefore be irrational. Again, think of the doctrine of the Trinity.

Second, the gold standard for theological truth is not a manmade system but the Bible. Before you think you are exempt from the danger of manmade systems, think again. Everyone in this room has a theological system to which they adhere, and as it is the product of your personal understanding of Scripture, it is to that extent manmade. We all filter God's word through our fallible minds and in the process, end up distorting some of it. That is why it is important to keep coming back to the Bible again and again and to test our understanding against the whole of God's word.

This means that we must submit all of our thinking to God's word. We need to continually bring "into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ" (2 Cor. 10:5). We should believe everything the Bible says, whether we can at present see how it fits together or not. I believe in unconditional election because I believe the Bible teaches it. For the same reason, I not only believe in unconditional election but also in the necessity of evangelism. This is because I believe the Bible teaches the responsibility of believers to evangelize. I also believe that my choices are significant and that I am responsible for my choices and actions. I believe it because I believe the Bible teaches it. Now I may not be able to see how it all fits together. We certainly should try to do so. In the meantime, our job is to simply believe what we understand the Bible to teach.

In closing, let us return to Paul's purpose. He is praising God for choosing him and the saints at Ephesus and faithful in Christ Jesus. He is thanking him for predestinating him to the adoption of children. For God to set his choice upon you is just another way of saying that he has loved you, and loved you from the foundation of the world. There has

never been a time when his heart was not toward you. This is not just a generic love but a personal, never-ending, saving love. What God declared to the prophet Jeremiah is true of every believer: “I have loved thee with an everlasting love: therefore with lovingkindness have I drawn thee” (Jer. 31:3). There is no greater reason to rejoice than this. There is no greater blessing that can be conferred upon anyone than this. May we more fully see that, since our salvation is of the Lord, we should seek him for everything and to see and feel that he should be at the center of our affections and lives.

What if you do not know the Lord? How should you respond to this doctrine? Well, you should respond by confessing your sins, repenting of them, and embracing Christ. The evidence for election is faith in Christ. The apostle Paul told the Thessalonian saints that he knew that they were elect. How? “For our gospel came not in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance” (1 Thess. 1:4-5). Has the gospel come to you in power? Have you seen the blackness of your sins and felt the need that you have for the salvation and freedom that comes only in Christ? Then come to Christ and receive him as your Lord and Savior. “Let not conscience make you linger, nor of fitness fondly dream; all the fitness he requireth is to feel your need of him.” Come to Christ and be saved.

CHAPTER IV

ANSWERING OBJECTIONS TO THE DOCTRINE OF UNCONDITIONAL ELECTION (EPH. 1:4-6)

LAST WEEK, WE CONSIDERED Paul's words in Ephesians 1:4-6. There, we noted that Paul not only begins to unpack the spiritual blessings given to the saints and faithful in Christ Jesus, but gives the very basis of these blessings: the divine initiative and purpose of God in choosing to save sinful men and women through Christ. This is the doctrine of election. Before the foundation of the world, God the Father gave God the Son a people to save. Paul wants us to see that ultimately salvation is the work of God. Or, as the Scripture repeatedly puts it, "Salvation is of the Lord." God saved us, and he did it on purpose not on accident, and this purpose was formed in the covenant of redemption even before the world began. Because salvation ultimately must be ascribed to the work and grace of God, he gets the glory, not us (cf. ver. 6).

We also tried to show that the purpose of election was not based on foreseen faith or good works of any kind. We are not saved because we are holy, we are saved “that we should be holy and without blame before him in love.” We also tried to demonstrate that this is the uniform testimony of Scripture, and we looked at our Lord’s words in John 6, Luke’s testimony of the effects of Paul’s preaching in Acts 13:48, as well as some of Paul’s other writings in 2 Thessalonians 2 and 2 Timothy 1. These texts join the apostle in affirming that the election which is spoken of in Ephesians 1:4-5 is unconditional.

Now last time, we didn’t have time to consider objections to the doctrine of unconditional election, so I want to do this now. However, again I want to remind all of us that there is a right way and a wrong way to approach even objections to this doctrine. First, this is not a primary truth and we need to remember that. Primary truths are truths you must believe to be saved. The doctrine of election is not one of these truths. Therefore, just because someone doesn’t see eye to eye with you on the doctrine of election does not mean that they are not walking with the Lord in faith. It doesn’t mean that we cannot have fellowship with them or learn from them. Second, we need to remember that we should always speak of these things with great humility. To argue about the doctrine of unconditional election with a prideful and antagonistic spirit is fundamentally incongruous to the doctrine itself. To speak and act as if the knowledge of this truth somehow makes you “better” than those who don’t is to contradict what the doctrine of election says: that God in pure grace and without consideration of merit chose to rescue you from the pit of hell. You and I have therefore absolutely no right to look down on anyone. We are what we are by the grace of God and by the grace of God alone. Third, meditating on the doctrine ought to lead us to worship. This is what Paul is doing here in Ephesians 1: he is worshipping the God who chose to save him from before the foundation of the world. Did you notice that this is what he is doing also in 2 Thess. 2:13-14 and 2 Tim. 1:9? If doctrines are no more to us than fodder for debating those who disagree with us, then something is

wrong with our hearts. Doctrines that do not lead our hearts to worship will eventually harden them.

Now some might say that doctrines are divisive and therefore we should avoid them. However, that is impossible. You cannot learn about God without learning doctrine and theology. Just because some doctrines are more divisive than others does not give us a warrant to ignore them. If they are revealed in Holy Writ, then we ought to try to understand them and believe them, no matter what the consequences are. Certainly, the doctrine of unconditional election is not only in the Bible, it is all over the Bible and we must, therefore, pay attention to it and to the objections which are leveled against it.

What, then, are the objections? There are, in my opinion, four main objections which are the reasons why some do not believe that election is unconditional. They have to do with the meaning of foreknowledge in the Bible, with the justice of God, with the role of the human will in salvation, and with the urgency of evangelism. All of these objections are important because they have their roots in Biblical concerns. Understanding God's foreknowledge in Scripture is an obvious concern. Certainly, evangelism is a Biblical concern. Moreover, the Bible does not allow us to think of ourselves as if we were robots. We are accountable for our actions and choices. God is just. Thus, any teaching which seems to contradict these concerns deserves scrutiny.

Now, I want to work through these objections by looking at the way Scripture deals with them. All four objections find their answer in Paul's epistle to the Romans, in the eighth and ninth chapters.

The Objection from the Foreknowledge of God.

OBJECTION 1: "There are Scriptures which tie predestination and election to God's foreknowledge. These verses therefore indicate that election is based on foreseen faith." There are five places in the NT that refer to God's foreknowledge (Acts 2:23; Rom. 8:29; 11:2; 1 Pet. 1:2, 20). Of these, Rom. 8:29 and 1 Pet. 1:2 put God's foreknowledge as the basis

of his choosing a people to save. However, there are very good reasons why we should not think that these verses teach that faith is the ground of election.

To begin with, I just want to make the simple observation that faith is never explicitly said to be the object of God's foreknowledge in any of these texts. Note that neither Paul nor Peter say that what is foreseen are events such as, "Jeremiah placed his faith in Jesus on such and such a day." Rather, in both places it is not what is foreknown, but who is foreknown. People are foreknown. This is very important for the following reason.

In the OT, the word "know" has connotations which include not only knowing about someone or something, but also knowing in the sense of being in a relationship which is based on covenantal commitments. For example, in Amos 3:2, God says through the prophet to the nation of Israel, "You only have I known of all the families of the earth: therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities." Clearly, God didn't only know of Israel in the sense of knowing about them – God is omniscient. He knows all the nations in that sense. Rather, he is saying that because of the unique covenantal relationship that existed between him and Israel, he was going to punish them for their breaking of the covenant. Knowing here refers to a close relationship, not to mere knowing facts about them.

When we come to the NT, we find this sense of the word "know" in the mouth of our Lord and his apostles. For example, when Jesus says on the Day of Judgment, "And then I will profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity" (Mt. 7:23). Jesus is not saying that he didn't know about the wicked. In fact, it is his knowledge about them (their refusal to do God's will) that is the basis for his rejection of them. Rather, he is saying that he is not committed by covenant to their eternal good. He is not related to them in a saving way.

In fact, this is the very way Paul uses the word "foreknow" in Rom. 11:2. There, the apostle writes, "God hath not cast away his people which

he foreknew.” Paul is arguing in this chapter that God is not finished with Israel. The basis of his argument is that Israel is the “people which he [God] foreknew.” Again, this is clearly not a reference to mere pre-science. Knowing about Israel in that sense is not a distinguishing mark. Rather, what distinguishes Israel from other nations is the fact that God entered into a covenant with that nation through promises made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This relationship is based upon a covenant that God purposed to make from eternity. It is in this sense that Israel is foreknown. Again, what comes to the forefront is this close relationship between God and Israel which is based upon covenantal commitments. (Also, this is not “foreknowing” in the sense of knowing things about Israel which would make them worthy of a special relationship with God. See Deut. 7:6-8).

Therefore, when we come to passages like Rom. 8:29, we ought to read this in light of the OT meaning of the word. When Paul writes, “For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren,” he is saying that God has foreknown them in the sense that from eternity he has purposed to enter into a covenant relationship with them. There is absolutely nothing in this verse about foreseen faith. This is not about what we have done that is the basis of God’s predestination; it is about God’s purpose from eternity to enter into a saving relationship with us that is the basis for their being predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.

This is confirmed by the usage of the word in 1 Peter. When we look at 1 Pet. 1:20 we are told that our Lord “was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times or you.” The Greek verb “foreordained” is the same word found in Romans 8:29 and 11:2, there translated “foreknow.” This is not a bad translation; it can carry the sense of foreordain. In any case, there is nothing significant in saying that God foreknew Jesus in the sense of knowing things about him. Of course he does. Rather, Peter is saying that our Lord was foreordained in the covenant of redemption to accomplish redemption for

the sake of his people. The Father and Son entered into a covenant commitment to save the elect. Again, we see how this is completely fitting with our interpretation of the usage of the word in Romans.

The noun is used in 1 Pet. 1:2. There Peter says that the believers are elect exiles “according to the foreknowledge of God the Father.” Again, nothing is said about faith; rather, they are foreknown and elect “unto obedience and sprinkling of blood of Jesus Christ.” This is the purpose for which they are elect and foreknown; not the reason why they are elect and foreknown.

Thus, we see that the way the apostles use the word “foreknow” and “foreknowledge” is consistent with the doctrine of unconditional election. God foreknew us in the sense that he entered into a special relationship with the elect in the covenant of redemption from the beginning of time. This covenant relationship is not based on foreseen works or faith; it is completely gracious and unconditioned on merit in us.

Before we look at the next three reasons, we need to stop and consider the context and meaning of the first 23 verses of Romans 9, for we will be looking for the answers to the remaining three objections there. To understand Romans 9, we have to understand what the problem was that Paul is seeking to solve. The problem is that somehow, it appeared as if God was not keeping his word. The apostle defines the problem in verse 6a: “Not as though the word of God hath taken none effect.” In other words, something in what the apostle taught had elicited the objection that, if what Paul said was true, then God had failed to keep his word; it had taken “none effect.” Paul of course rejects that.

Now what had brought this on? The answer lies in the first five verses, in which Paul describes the sadness of his heart, a sadness that was brought on by the lostness of his fellow Jews. What made his heart ache with unceasing pain was amplified by the fact that they had so many privileges. When you look at these privileges which Paul lists in verses 4-5, the unifying element to all of them is that they were all meant to point to Christ. Of all the people in the world who should have wel-

comed the Messiah, it should have been his “kinsmen according to the flesh.” Nevertheless, many of them persisted in rejecting the Lord.

Hopefully it is clear to all that Paul is not here agonizing over the historical destiny of Israel. He says that “I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh” (3). The problem is that Paul’s relations were accursed, lost, unsaved.

Now what does this have to do with the objection of verse 6? It is this: Paul’s kinsmen assumed that they inherited the blessings of the promises made to the fathers just by being related to Abraham by blood (cf. Mt. 3:9). But Paul was telling them that, if they rejected Jesus, they were lost. To them, this meant that God was not keeping his word. To them the lostness of the Jews meant that the promises had fallen to the ground. Thus verse 6.

What is Paul’s answer? It comes in 6b: “For they are not all Israel which are of Israel.” What does this mean? Paul explains in verses 7-13, the gist of which is that just because you are physically related to Abraham does not mean that you inherit the blessings of the promises of God. He illustrates with Isaac and Ishmael (7-9), both of whom had Abraham as their father, and yet Isaac was the one who inherited the promise. There is an even stronger point to be made with Jacob and Esau, both of whom were born of the same mother and had Isaac as their father and Abraham as their grandfather (10-13). And yet Esau was rejected and Isaac accepted.

Some people object that the point of the OT verses quoted here have to do with historical destinies and not salvation. However, this doesn’t hold up. For one thing, the context is not historical destiny of nations, but the lostness of individual Israelites. Second, Paul elsewhere uses the example of Isaac and Ishmael to illustrate the difference between those who are saved and those who are not (Gal. 4:21-31). This passage is important for another reason. Here when Paul uses the phrase “children of promise,” he uses it to denote those who are saved (Gal. 4:28) in contrast to those who are lost. Even so here, Paul is saying that, just

because you are physically related to Abraham, it does not mean you are saved; it does not automatically make you a child of promise.

When then does make one a child of promise? What distinguishes between Jews that are saved and Jews that are not saved? The answer is in verse 11: “For the children being not yet born, neither having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works but of him that calleth.” If there is any verse in the Bible that teaches unconditional election, this is it. Jacob was chosen, not Esau, not on the basis of foreseen works, but solely on the basis of the gracious purpose of God. Even so, Paul is saying, what makes the difference between saved Israel and lost Israel is election. At the bottom of one’s salvation is God, not man, his work and not ours. Of course, what is true of Jews is also true of Gentiles. The ultimate reason you are saved does not lie in your will or cleverness or privileges or whatever. The ultimate reason lies in the unconditional grace of God. He is the one who deserves all the praise for our salvation.

In other words, the context of Romans 9 is unconditional election as the reason behind “they are not all Israel which are of Israel.” This then sets up the following objections which Paul answers in verses 14-23. These two objections are also the next two objections which we will look at.

The Objection from the Justice of God.

OBJECTION 2: “If unconditional election is true, then God is not just. How could God not give everyone the same chance? This seems so unfair.”

This is the objection that Paul deals with in verse 14: “What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God?” Paul’s answer is of course, “God forbid.” He denies that election makes God unfair. It is interesting to note how he deals with this objection. The answer comes in verse 15: “For he saith to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.”

Paul does not give a philosophical answer to the objection. Rather, he argues that the same Scriptures which reveal to us the righteousness and justice of God also reveal his sovereignty in dispensing grace and mercy. If we believe that God is just on the basis of Scripture, then we also have to believe that he is sovereign on the basis of Scripture.

We need to hear this, because we need to be willing to accept whatever Scripture says, even if at the time we cannot understand it. We also need to be careful that we do not pit Scripture against Scripture, or try to undermine the Bible with the Bible. If we believe that the Bible is God's word, then we need to believe all that it says about God, even if we cannot see how it all fits together.

Note Paul's conclusion: "So then [since Scripture settles the matter] it is not of him that willeth nor of him that runneth, but of God that showeth mercy" (16). "It" refers to salvation of which election is the fountain. Salvation is not ultimately a product of human will or human work, but "of God that showeth mercy."

Here there is another point to be made. Inherent in the apostle's reasoning is the fact that salvation is a matter of compassion and mercy. In other words, in the background of Paul's argument is human suffering and misery. And yet what is the cause of this suffering and misery? Is not sin? Paul's argument throughout assumes the sinfulness of man. Therefore, when it is argued that election makes God unfair, this fails to consider the fact that God is under no obligation to save anyone. We are all by nature "vessels of wrath" (22). The doctrine of election does not mean that God refuses people who want to be saved. Rather, the picture here is of rebellious humanity that would have rejected God to the bitter end had not God stepped in to save some. If God had not chosen to save some sinful men and women, no one would have been saved. Hell would have been full and heaven empty if not for the sovereign grace and mercy of God.

Therefore, God is not unjust in electing some of sinful humanity to save, while leaving others to perish in the sin that they freely choose. The testimony of Scripture and the sinfulness of mankind together tell

us that the unconditional election of individuals unto salvation is not only necessary but just.

The Objection from the Freedom of the Will.

OBJECTION 3: “The doctrine of unconditional election undermines human freedom. In particular, if the number of the elect is fixed from eternity, then no one can freely choose Christ in time. But the Scriptures teach that we must freely choose Christ to be saved.”

To answer this objection, we return to the text of Romans 9, and pick up at verse 17. Here, the apostle cites another Scripture to back up his case (Exo. 9:16). It is found in God’s word to Pharaoh: “Even for this same purpose have I raised thee up, that I might show my power in thee, and that my name might be declared throughout all the earth” (17). The reason the apostle brings up this text is found in verse 18: “Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy and whom he will he hardeneth.” Recall that in Exodus, Pharaoh is said to harden his heart and God is said to harden his heart. Of course, Pharaoh was responsible for his rebellion, and yet Paul reminds us that God hardened his heart in order that his name might be declared in all the earth. In other words, in the same act of rebellion, God was at work and Pharaoh was at work.

Now we know that God is not the author of sin (cf. Jam. 1:13-16). So when Paul reminds us that God hardened Pharaoh’s heart, he does not intend us to take from this that God forced Pharaoh to sin. Otherwise, Pharaoh wouldn’t have been responsible for his sin and the justice and power of God would have been undermined in his overthrow. And yet, Paul does not flinch from saying that God hardened his heart. What then does this mean? I think the key lies in verse 18. Here Paul contrasts hardening with showing mercy. I think to say that God hardened Pharaoh’s heart is the same as to say that he withheld his mercy from Pharaoh, thus allowing him to continue on in his sin and rebellion and to become hardened. Pharaoh hardened his heart freely. God didn’t force him to do it. In fact, he gave him all the rope he needed to hang

himself. We see that Pharaoh acted freely in refusing the mercy of God, and God acted freely in allowing him to go on in his sin. Despite all of Pharaoh's power and privilege, he could not save his soul.

This indicates that the flip side is true as well. If, unlike Pharaoh, I freely choose the offer of God's mercy in Christ, the reason must ultimately be because God has acted freely to intervene and keep me from going on in my sin. He does not harden my heart. Rather, he does heart surgery upon me so that my heart, which was once set against God and rejected his word, now loves God and keeps his word. This is what the prophet promised would happen: "A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments and do them" (Ezek. 36:26-27). My heart would never freely choose Christ if left to itself. It would rebel against God for eternity. In order to make it possible for me to freely choose Christ, my heart must be changed, but this is not something which I can do of myself. It is something that God must do. Suppose a world-renowned heart surgeon has a heart condition that requires open heart surgery. No one would think that he could do heart surgery on himself to fix his condition. He needs someone outside of himself to do it. Even so, if our wicked and evil hearts are to be fixed, we need the ultimate heart surgeon to perform the operation. We need God. In other words, my freedom to choose Christ would never be possible if God was not willing to come in and give me a heart that loves him and his law. If God had done this to me, it is because he has purposed to do so from all eternity. That is to say, the doctrine of election, far from undermining my freedom to choose Christ, actually makes it possible.

Nevertheless, Paul expects still another objection: "Thou wilt say then unto me, Why doth he yet find fault? For who hath resisted his will?" (19). In other words, the fact that God's will and not human will is ultimately determinative means that men are not to blame for their sins. Here we have the problem of the mystery of human responsibility and

divine sovereignty set squarely before us. How can God be sovereign and men responsible?

Paul's answer: "Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, why hast thou made me thus? Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honor and another unto dishonor? What if God, willing to shew his wrath and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction: and that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had afore prepared unto glory?" (20-23).

The apostle makes at least three points here. The first point is that if Scripture says so, then that ought to be the end of discussion. Otherwise, we are arguing with God, and it is not befitting for a creature to do so. Job found this out the hard way. Let God be true and every man a liar (20). The second point is that God has the right to do with his own what he will. If God chooses to allow some to perish, then he has that right. If he chooses to save some and leave others in their sin, then he is just to do so. He has no less power over us than a potter has over his clay (20-21). The third point is that God's sovereign action is one of both justice (22) and mercy (23). If God chooses to "make his power known" in the destruction of the wicked, then he is just to do so. If God chooses to show mercy on those whom he "afore prepared unto glory," this is not something we can demand of God for it is a matter of mercy and grace.

Of course Paul does not really answer the thorny question completely. But he does remind us that we ought to humble ourselves when we begin to question the ways of God. We ought to be careful lest we become like Job and darken counsel by words without knowledge (Job 38:2). We come then to the last objection.

The Objection from the Urgency of Evangelism.

OBJECTION 4: “The doctrine of unconditional election undermines the urgency of evangelism. For if the number of the elect is fixed and they are certain to be saved, then why put forth the effort to do the work of missions?”

Like the other reasons put forward to reject the doctrine of unconditional election, the answer is found here in Romans. For here we have the doctrine of unconditional election taught very clearly by the apostle. And yet note that Romans 9 is bookended by 9:1-3 and 10:1, and followed by 10:13-17. Paul evidently saw no reason not to weep over the lost, nor did it keep him from arguing for the necessity of evangelism.

However, perhaps more pressing is the question as to how this doctrine can help us in the area of missions and evangelism. I believe that it can. History has proven it, as some of the greatest missionaries like William Carey and Adoniram Judson were Calvinists. Let me give a couple of Biblical illustrations to show how this doctrine is not only compatible but helpful when it comes to missions.

The first is found in Acts 18. Paul was in Corinth, and evidently there were reasons to be afraid, for the Lord came to him in a vision to strengthen and encourage him to stay. Note the reason that is given: “Be not afraid, but speak, and hold not thy peace: for I am with thee, and no man shall set on thee to hurt thee: for I have much people in this city” (9-10). The reason Paul was encouraged to stay was that God had many people in the city of Corinth. I think that God was encouraging him to persevere and not quit because he could have confidence that the elect in that city would hear the gospel and be saved.

You see the same attitude in Paul’s last letter to Timothy: “Remember that Jesus Christ of the seed of David was raised from the dead according to my gospel, wherein I suffer trouble, as an evildoer, even unto bonds, but the word of God is not bound. Therefore I endure all things for the elect’s sakes, that they may also obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus unto eternal glory” (2 Tim. 2:9-10). Election didn’t keep Paul from persevering; it put iron in his blood to keep on even in the

face of persecution. He knew that his labor was not in vain, for God's purpose cannot be overturned.

God does not only ordain the end, he also ordains the means. The end will not happen without the means. The means that God has ordained for the salvation of the elect is hearing the gospel and receiving it by faith. People must believe if they would be saved. The doctrine of election means that we can have confidence that our labors are not ultimately dependent upon ourselves. We go in the confidence that God's purpose and promise will take effect. God will not let his word fall to the ground.

I believe that we have every reason to rejoice in the doctrine of unconditional election. It means that underneath my feeble purpose is the unchanging will and gracious purpose of God. I have every reason to believe that God will not let go of me and that my salvation is secure. It also means that our labors are not in vain in the Lord, and that the success of the gospel is not dependent upon my weak efforts but upon God's powerful grace that can take a few loaves and fishes and multiply them for others. Praise God for his amazing grace.

CHAPTER V

REDEMPTION IN CHRIST (EPH. 1:7)

EARLY IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, theologian H. Reinhold Niebuhr accused so-called Christian liberals of preaching that a “God without wrath brought men without sin into a Kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a Cross.” Though evangelicals today have not yet abandoned the cross, it seems to me that it has become commonplace to us and the work of Christ as a result is not really appreciated as it ought to be with us. If this seems a bit overblown, ask yourself the following questions. Do we really rejoice as the apostle Paul does in Ephesians 1:7 over the redemption that we have through the blood of Christ? Does it thrill our hearts and does it affect our outlook on life and the way we process the difficulties of life? More to the point: what is more pressing, the problems of this life or your relationship with God?

Your answer to the last question is the real test of whether you truly value the cross of Christ. Even though there is a lot of emphasis among evangelicals upon being “gospel-centered,” I wonder if we really understand what that means. The focus on being gospel-centered today seems to be how we should use the gospel to solve everyday problems

like marriage difficulties or traversing decision-making or how to face trials and stay happy. Although I don't deny that the gospel does speak to every aspect of our life, the main problem that the gospel solves has little to do with this life.

Another way to put it is that we tend to focus upon the victory that Christ brings us: victory over addiction, victory over lust, victory over anger, victory over depression, and so on. Again, I'm not saying that Christ does not give us victory over these problems. He can and he does. But if the main reason we stand before the cross of Christ is to get deliverance from the misery that sin has brought upon us through addiction or lust or whatever, then we have not come for the right reason.

The main problem that the cross of Christ solves is our alienation from God. The fact that God has hidden his face from us is the real reason we need the cross. Above all else, we need to be forgiven of our sins and received back into his fellowship. It is precisely this that the apostle Paul addresses and rejoices in here in the text: "In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace" (7).

Why does this not thrill us? I suspect it is because our view of God is too low. Modernity has killed our ability to truly grasp the reality of a God with wrath or a Kingdom with judgment as well as mercy. But this is not the God of the Bible. The God of the Bible is not weak. He is not beholden to man. His hands are not tied. He is holy and unwilling to have fellowship with the unholy. In contrast, to modern man God is just love and mercy and the last thing he wants to do is to punish rebels. This low view of God inevitably results in a corresponding low view of sin. Forgiveness then turns out to be no problem. The horror of sin that is the backdrop of the cross is totally lost on us.

Compare this with Luther's saner and more Biblical view of God: "Do you not know that God dwells in light inaccessible? We weak and ignorant creatures want to probe and understand the incomprehensible majesty of the unfathomable light of the wonder of God. We approach; we prepare ourselves to approach. What wonder then that his majesty

overpowers us and shatters!”¹ This attitude toward God is so foreign to our modern categories of thinking that we are apt, as Bainton appears to do of Luther, to strike such comments down to a more primitive mindset. However, could it be that our modern mindset is wrong and Luther’s is right? I believe it is. At least if you believe that the Bible is God’s word, there is no way to avoid the reality that our view of God and sin and forgiveness often comes far short of the Biblical view of these things. Even if our minds are right on this issue, sadly our hearts beat to the tune of the culture more easily than to the realities of God’s word.

To appreciate this text, then, we need to have a Biblical view of the majesty and holiness of God. This is why it is important to pay attention to Paul’s order here. He does not begin with the work of our Lord upon the cross. Rather, he begins with the will of God the Father. The picture of God that we saw in verses 4-6 is not of a God that needs man or must forgive him. Rather, we see the picture of a God who saves “according to the good pleasure of his will” (5). God does not have to save you and me; indeed, he did not have to save anybody. Salvation is not something that God must do, it is something that he has chosen to do because it pleases him to do so. The redemption and rescue of any person is not ultimately due to God having to accept their good deeds; rather, salvation is ultimately due to the sovereign choice of God who before the foundation of the world chose unconditionally to save sinful men and women. God does not need us; we need God.

God is not beholden to us. We have no reason to expect that God will forgive us. Instead, we have every reason to believe that he will not. The Bible teaches, and experience confirms, that all men are sinners. This does not mean that we are all as bad as we can be but it does mean that we have within our hearts a disposition that is fundamentally opposed to God. We are not thankful for what he has given us; we complain when bad things happen and when good things happen we chalk them

¹Quoted in *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther*, by Roland Bainton (Mentor, 1950), p. 43.

up to our own cleverness and skill. We ignore God's commandments and, when we sin, we don't think it's a big deal. As a result, we essentially ignore God in this life, though we may give lip service to him every now and then. We may not even do that. Despite all this, we think we are big stuff. We think that we deserve the best out of this life, and if there is a next, of it too. We definitely don't think that we deserve hell and that if God judges people, well, we don't like that kind of God anyway. So, why would God forgive us? Why would he want to have fellowship with us? God, who is the ultimate reality, we ignore for video games and Facebook and Pinterest. Why would he want to save us?

We have exalted ourselves, ignored God, and expect God to forget all that and forgive us? Here is what God has to say to people who ignore him, to those who "regard not the work of the LORD, neither consider the operation of his hands" (Isa. 5:12): "Therefore hath enlarged herself, and opened her mouth without measure: and their glory, and their multitude, and their pomp, and he that rejoiceth, shall descend into it. . . But the LORD of hosts shall be exalted in judgment, and God that is holy shall be sanctified in righteousness" (Isa. 5:14, 16). Or, as the Psalmist put it, "Now consider this, ye that forget God, lest I tear you in pieces, and there be none to deliver" (Ps. 50:22). Or as the apostle puts it in this very epistle: "For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience" (Eph. 5:5-6, ESV). In other words, in the revelation of God's word, we are told that God's wrath is upon those who ignore and forget him as well as upon those who despise him; it comes down upon those who refuse to repent of respectable sins as well as upon those whom society condemns.

If we think this is unjust, it is because we have too high a view of ourselves, when the reality is that we are nothing. God is everything. He alone dwells in light inaccessible whereas we are creatures of a moment. Yes, we are God's creation. But we have willingly sinned against him,

and, having done that, we have forfeited any right to receive good from him. The view we have of ourselves is not just; it is distorted and warped. We shrug off the fact that we have replaced God, the fountain of all good, with the broken cisterns of this world; whereas God and heaven are appalled: “Be astonished, O ye heavens, at this, and be horribly afraid, be ye very desolate, saith the LORD” (Jer. 2:12). We may be respectable in the eyes of the world, but the angels in heaven with clearer eyes shudder in horror at our idolatry. No, we should not expect God to save us.

The church desperately needs to reclaim a sense of God’s holiness and man’s sinfulness. The gospel will never be meaningful to us until we are amazed by God’s transcendence as well as convicted by our own sinfulness. In fact, no one can ever really take the gospel seriously or appreciate the seriousness of its claims until they are convicted of sin and convinced of their own helplessness to remedy their situation. And no one will ever get there until they have first come face to face with the awesome majesty of God. All the apologetics in the world will never make the gospel desirable unless it is accompanied by these convictions. When we get to this place, we will recognize that we do not deserve to be saved. We will say with the hymn-writer, “And if my soul were sent to hell, thy righteous law approves it well.” Can you say that?

The fact that God is holy and we are not means that it is not an easy thing for God to forgive treason, which is what sin is. It’s interesting that we should think that forgiveness is so easy for God when we have such a difficult time forgiving those who sin against us. Consider why forgiveness is so hard for us. I think that one of the problems is that we think we are such a big deal. What makes forgiveness almost impossible is that we put ourselves in the place of God. We think of ourselves in ways that would be appropriate only if we were God. But God is God! If someone sins against me, it may be a truly terrible and tragic thing, but sin against me is trivial in comparison to my sin against God. So, the difficulty that I have extending forgiveness to others actually speaks against the idea that forgiveness is cheap and easy for God.

The fact that it is not easy is demonstrated by the cross. Lloyd-Jones observed in a sermon on this text that God created the universe simply by speaking it into existence, but he could not just speak forgiveness into existence. His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, had to become incarnate, had to become a man and take our place before the throne of his justice and to bear our sins on the cross. The awful punishment upon the cross was necessary for forgiveness to become a reality for sinful men and women.

Now we can see why the apostle would marvel at the cross. Salvation is not something that we have a right to expect, and yet this is the very thing that God has done. In Christ, God has accomplished redemption. In Christ, now forgiveness becomes possible. In Christ, God extends to us the riches of his grace.

At what was the apostle marveling? It is important to see what is given to us at such expense: “the forgiveness of sins.” Now I think this is very important. Here the apostle underlines the main problem which is solved by the cross. It is the forgiveness of sin. What problem does this solve? I don’t think we should read into this that Jesus came to solve some psychological need that we have for a guilt-free life. Our Lord didn’t die on the cross so we could feel good about ourselves. The problem here is that sin separates us from God: “Behold, the LORD’s hand is not shortened that it cannot save; neither his ear heavy, that it cannot hear: but your iniquities have separated between you and your God and our sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear” (Isa. 59:1-2).

Here again we see why modern man sees little need for the gospel. The gospel is not mainly about this world. It is about restoring man’s fellowship with God. Most people see very little need for that. To most people, the concerns of this life are paramount. Education or social and economic mobility or social justice are the concerns. Or perhaps something more prosaic like how to pay off a mortgage or fix the leak under the bathroom sink. Fellowship and acceptance with God are not seen to be that important, if they are seen to be real at all.

The fact of the matter is, if this present world is all there is to it, then they are right. If this life isn't all there is, then this is not only wrong, it is a fatal delusion. The Bible teaches us that this life is only a preparation for the next. We are to live in the present by laying hold on eternal life (1 Tim. 6:12). This is because, according to our Lord and his apostles, past the door of death there are only two possibilities: eternal punishment or eternal life in the presence of God (Mt. 25:48). On the one hand, all the possibilities and pleasures of this world will not make up for the future judgment of God. On the other hand, one moment in heaven is only the beginning of an eternal journey of increasing, never-ending fulness of joy. "Earth has no sorrow that heaven cannot heal."

In order to enter eternal life in the presence of God – and it is God's presence which makes heaven what it is – we must be first reconciled to God. We must have our sins forgiven. The breach that sin has opened up must be mended. This is what the apostle says happened at the cross: "the forgiveness of sins." This is why the ministry of the gospel is called "the ministry of reconciliation." Paul writes that "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5:18-19).

Of course, reconciliation with God brings with it innumerable blessings both in this life and in the life to come. Joy, peace, not only in the world to come but in this life as well, all flow from the cross. Fellowship with God is not merely a future blessing, it is a present reality. This is why Paul says: "in whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins." We have it now, we are not simply waiting for it to come, although redemption in its fullest manifestation is yet to come. However, we must start here, for without reconciliation to God, without the forgiveness of sins, we cannot be saved.

Thus, as important as all the benefits of redemption are, we can see why the apostle starts with forgiveness. It is our main need. We cannot have any lasting blessing from God apart from this. All the blessings of victory over sin spring from the forgiveness of sins. All the joy and

peace that comes from a relationship with God have their beginnings in being reconciled with God through the blood of Christ.

On the other hand, the forgiveness of sins secures an infinite ocean of everlasting blessing from God. Or, as the apostle puts it, “the riches of his grace.” Thank God that he does not practice “trickle-down economics” in the economy of salvation. Rather, he lavishes us with the wealth of his grace. This reality ought to change the way we look at the world and the things that happen to us. Because our sins have been forgiven, we have been granted the riches of his grace. We have been reconciled to God; whereas before we were under the wrath of God, now God is everlastingly for us. Can you imagine anything better than that? As the apostle reasons, “If God be for us, who can be against us?” Not that people are not against us. The world in rebellion against God, Satan and his legions, are against the Christian. There are plenty of foes against the believer. The question is not whether anyone is against us; the question is whether they can be successfully against us. The answer is no: “Nay, in all these things [persecutions, among other things] we are more than conquerors through him that loved us.”

Either this is true, or it isn't. There isn't a middle ground. God is either for you or against you. He is not somewhere in between. If you are in Christ, he is for you. There is therefore nothing that can happen to you that can even remotely threaten or imperil your eternal joy. Regardless of who is against you, God is for you. Regardless of what men may do to you, God is for you. There is never a moment when the forgiven saint is not loved and cared for by God. There is not a path that the forgiven saint walks down but that it leads to holiness and heaven and the Father's eternal embrace. Because we are forgiven, God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear (Ps. 46).

How does this happen? It happens solely through Christ, and the redemption that he accomplished on the cross: “in whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins.” Redemption is a word which means deliverance through the payment of a ransom. The

deliverance that is obtained is deliverance from the guilt of sin and its eternal consequences. The price is the blood of Christ, shed on the cross.

Now the fact that the apostle mentions the blood of Christ is important, because by this he is not only pointing to the cross, but he is pointing to the OT ritual that provides the language by which we are to meant to understand what transpired on Calvary. In the OT, blood sacrifices were offered for the forgiveness of sins, and this transaction was always understood to be substitutionary. In other words, it was understood that the animal took the place of the worshipper, and died in his or her place. This was often signified by the worshipper or the priest placing their hands upon the sacrifice, symbolizing the transfer of the worshipper's guilt to the sacrifice.

A great illustration of this principle is given to us in the sacrifice that God called Abraham to give in Genesis 22. There God tells Abraham to sacrifice his only son, Isaac. We all know the story: he dutifully goes, binds Isaac upon the altar and just as he is about to plunge the knife into his son, God stays the execution. Then Abraham looks over and sees a ram whose horns are caught in a thicket, and the ram takes the place of Isaac. In the same way, Paul is indicating to us that, on the cross, Jesus became our substitute. He died, not merely as an example, but as the only one who can take away our sin. "He became sin for us, who knew no sin, that we might become the righteousness of God in him" (2 Cor. 5:21).

The redemption that Christ accomplishes is complete. There is nothing that we can do to add to what he has already done. No amount of fasting, or crying, or punishing yourself can add to the infinite value of our Lord's saving work. If we think that we must do something to make us worthy of Christ, then we have misunderstood what he came to do. He did not come so that you could make yourself worthy for him. He came to take your unworthiness upon himself so that you could have his worthiness. For us to offer Christ our efforts toward repairing our fallen image is to mock what he has done. It is to question his finished work. Paul does not say that we have a partial redemption through his

blood or that we have the forgiveness of most of our sins through Christ and that we have to make up for the rest. No, we have full redemption through his blood and the forgiveness of all our sins. It is because of this that the apostle can confidently say to the Romans, “There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ” (Rom. 8:1).

Moreover, Christ is the only one in whom we have redemption. The only way we can be saved, the only way we can obtain the forgiveness of our sins, is by being connected to the death that Jesus died upon the cross. There is no other way of salvation. If your sins are not forgiven on the basis of what Jesus did on the cross, then they are not forgiven. It is only as we are in him that we can be saved.

How then do we become connected to Christ? How is it that we come to be in him? Our Lord himself tells us in John 6:35, in response to those who asked him to give them the bread that comes down from heaven (see Jn. 6:32-34): “And Jesus said unto them, I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst.” The way to be connected to our Lord the bread of life is to believe in him. Or, as the apostle Paul puts it so thoroughly in his epistle to the Romans, we are justified by faith. This, of course, means more than mere intellectual assent that he is Lord and Savior. The demons believe that. True faith involves not only mental assent but also the trust of the will and the affection of the heart. It means that we understand our need of him, that we are sinners and that we cannot save ourselves. It means that we understand the depth of our need and that Christ is the only one who can save us. It means that we willingly place ourselves under his command, recognizing him as Lord as well as Savior. It means that we trust in him and follow him. Those who do so are given eternal life; they are saved. It is not about bringing anything to the table. It is about receiving what Christ has accomplished already on the Christ. It is about resting in him and in his work, not in our own. According to the Scripture, those who do so are saved, once and for all, finally and completely. Praise God for the riches of his grace in Christ!

CHAPTER VI

GOD'S PLAN FOR THE FULLNESS OF TIMES (EPH. 1:8-10)

AS WE COME TO THIS POINT in Paul's doxology here in chapter 1, we need to stop and take stock of where we are. The apostle began expounding the spiritual blessings in verse 4 by beginning with God's eternal purpose "before the foundation of the world." Now we come in verse 10 to "the dispensation of the fullness of times," which, as we shall see, points to God's purpose for the end of history as we know it in the establishment of Christ's kingdom over all.

John Stott reminds us in his exposition of these verses that we all need to share Paul's vision. Though he was chained to a Roman soldier under house arrest in Rome as he penned these verses, yet "though his wrist was chained and his body was confined, his heart and mind inhabited eternity. He peered back 'before the foundation of the world' (verse 4) and on to 'the fullness of time' (verse 10), and grasped hold of what 'we have' now (verse 7) and ought to 'be' now (verse 4) in the light of those two eternities. As for us, how blinkered is our vision in comparison with his, how small is our mind, how narrow are our horizons! Easily and

naturally we slip into a preoccupation with our own petty little affairs. We need to see time in light of eternity, and our present privileges and obligations in the light of our past election and future perfection. Then, if we shared the apostle's perspective, we should also share his praise."¹

We often focus on our problems in the here and now. As we have noted before, one of the oft-repeated objections to Christianity is that it is so focused on the next world, to the neglect of the present. Sadly, there have been Christians who have almost completely neglected the present for the future. I think that we are plagued with the opposite problem today. This is true even in the religious world. It seems to me that a lot of people are only interested in religion for the benefits it brings to them now. Like the people who came to Jesus in John 6, they are laboring for the food that perishes (Jn. 6:27), even if they are seeking it from Jesus. Of course, food is necessary. These people were probably really hungry. It was a legitimate need. However, if you seek Jesus for material needs, even if they are legitimate, merely for the purpose of using Christ to serve yourself, then you should not be surprised if you end up walking away from Christ in the end (Jn. 6:66). You will be disappointed because Christ did not come to subsidize our idolatrous love of this world, but rather to give us everlasting life in him.

If we do not share the perspective of the apostle Paul, we are just going to use Jesus to make our lives more tolerable and comfortable in this world. We will be serving him from mercenary motives, not from real love and devotion. This does not mean that, to be a genuine follower of Christ, you must forget about this world altogether. It does not mean that you abandon the responsibilities you have in your family, job, or church. There is a way to be a "worldly Christian," not in the sense of being worldly in being like the world, but being worldly in being in the world and not of it.

How do we do this? How do we live to the fullest in this world while remaining faithful to Christ? (By "living to the fullest" I don't mean having your best life now. After all, the apostle is handcuffed to a

¹John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Ephesians* (BST), p. 44-45.

Roman soldier as he writes these verses, hardly an enviable position! Rather, I mean living a life that is even now characterized by the joy and peace and satisfaction and fruitfulness that can only come through fellowship with God through Christ.) I think the answer lies at least partly in sharing the apostle's viewpoint that he lays before us in these verses. With him, we need to focus on God's plan for the fullness of time. To share the apostle's perspective, however, we need to tap into the "wisdom and prudence" (8) that enables us to see the "mystery" (9) of God's plan. Only then will we be able to see what God is doing "in the dispensation of the fulness of times" (10) and live our lives accordingly. In other words, we not only need to see what God has revealed to us but also how he has revealed these things to us. In our message, we will start with the "what" (verse 10) and then go back to the "how" (verses 8-9).

What the Lord has revealed

To understand what Lord Jesus has revealed to us, there are a couple of words we need to carefully define. The first is the word "dispensation." The Greek word behind this can either refer to the office of an administrator or to the work of an administrator. Because a steward or administrator is meant to carry out the plans of the one whose property they administer, the word came also to refer to a plan or a strategy.² Here it refers to the carrying out or administering God's plan or purpose for the fullness of times.

The next important word that needs to be clarified is the one that stands behind the phrase "gather together in one." Paul uses the same word in Romans 13:10, when he says that the whole law is summed up in the command to love one another. The idea here is to unite various things under one head.³

²Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Baker, 2002), p. 217.

³*Ibid.*, p. 221.

Thus, we could paraphrase Paul's meaning in verse 10: *God purposed that in carrying out his plan for the fullness of times, he would unite all things in heaven and earth under the headship of Christ.* This is the content of God's purpose in verse 9, and unpacks the what is meant by "the mystery of his will" (9). Since the Fall, this world has been infected by sin and rebellion. According to the apostle in Romans 8, this rebellion does not only affect humankind, it also affects the physical creation. Thus, because of sin, the universe is discordant and at cross-purposes with God's original intention for his creation as a place that reflects his glory in being "very good." Sinful men and women have especially walked away from God's purpose for them. Far from being united to God in friendship, we are separated from God in hostility. We could liken this fallen world is an orchestra whose members refuse to follow the leadership of the Grand Composer. We are out of tune with God's good purpose for us, out of harmony with God's word and each other.

What the apostle is saying, then, is that God has purposed to remedy this situation in Christ. It is through Christ that the discordant elements of this universe will be once again united in perfect harmony under the headship of Christ. Paul was saying something very similar to the Romans when he wrote, "For to this end Christ both died, and rose, and revived, that he might be Lord both of the dead and the living" (Rom. 14:9). Except here, the breadth of Paul's vision has widened. Here, he not only included humanity as that which will be united under Christ's headship, but also "all things in heaven, and which are on earth." This is Paul's way of saying that his sovereignty includes everything. There is nothing in the universe that will not one day acknowledge his Lordship. God's broken creation will one day be fully restored in Christ.

Now some have wrongly concluded from this that Paul was a universalist. Their argument is, if everyone and everything in heaven and earth will be united under the headship of Christ, then doesn't that mean everyone will be saved? Isn't that implied in being united under our Lord's headship? The answer is no. After all, the apostle will later

argue that God's wrath is coming upon the children of disobedience (5:6). The apostles argue that one day everyone will bow the knees to Jesus as Lord and will acknowledge his rule over them. Like rebels that have been vanquished, they will be made to submit. However, this is not the same thing as being saved. Active rebellion will one day be completely vanquished. That does not mean that they will start loving God or that they will enjoy eternal life in the presence of God.

Nevertheless, we should not miss the scope of our Lord's sovereignty. He is Lord over all, and as such, he is going to unite everything in perfect harmony under his rule. This is why the Scriptures don't teach that the heavens and earth are going to be replaced, but redeemed (Rom. 8:19-26). You don't redeem that which is destroyed. This earth is not going to be destroyed but purged and cleansed. New heavens and new earth don't mean new in the sense of completely different. There will be continuity. They are new in the sense of being renewed.

This is important for the following reason. God is not done with this world in which we live. The idea that this creation is something inherently evil and that the way to become holy is to put as much space between you and the world as possible is not an idea inherited from Scripture but rather one that has found its way into our thinking from the pagans. Unfortunately, this idea began to create problems for the church from the very beginning. Paul had to address it in the church at Ephesus during his lifetime. He wrote to Timothy, that there were those who were "forbidding to marry, and to abstain from meats, which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth. For every creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving: for it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer" (1 Tim. 4:3-5). What is a "creature of God"? Everything. There is nothing that falls outside this category. As such, they are good and not to be refused.

Those who give the impression that to be holy you must have as little to do with this world as possible are falling into the theological error about which Paul was writing. This world is not to be refused. Why?

Because it belongs to God. Because in Christ he is going to redeem it. In Christ, he is going to make it good again.

When God created man, he gave him dominion over the creation (Gen. 1:28). He made us stewards over the physical world that he had created. This mandate was not removed at the Fall; that did not change. What changed is that the world that mankind administered for God became cursed (Gen. 3:17-19). Sin did not make the world evil, it made it hard. This hardness we see all around us: we see it in natural disasters; we see it in the cruelty of men against men. It is hard to live in this world. It is hard to live in a world that is groaning under sin and it is hard to live in a world inhabited by sinful and selfish men and women.

Here again, the perspective of Paul can help. Knowing that Christ is Lord over creation and that he is going to redeem it will keep us from over-spiritualizing the mission of the church. Even if we recognize the mandate to be good stewards over God's creation, the hardness of this fallen world can still make us want to withdraw from it and give up on it. I read a story not too long ago of a pastor who labored for many years in a very poor neighborhood with all its endemic problems. Over the years, many young men who aspired to the pastorate came and went in this neighborhood. But this man persisted. When he was asked why he persevered and these other guys didn't, he responded that he kept reminding himself that our Lord told us that the poor will always be with us (Mt. 26:11). This helped him remain realistic whereas the others had simply been idealistic. We need to recognize that, no matter how faithful we are, we should not be surprised that the world around us remains hard. It will, because God has not promised to unite all things under Christ until "the fullness of times." This is obviously a reference to the end of history as we know it. It is a reference to the Coming of our Lord in his glory when he will establish his kingdom in its fullness. Until then, we are laboring in a fallen world.

We should not give up on the world. It is still the Lord's. Moreover, the fact that Christ is Lord over all means that he is very interested in the way we are exercising our stewardship over his world in the here and

now. The implication is that we don't just glorify God when we sing his praises in church; we don't just honor him when we share the gospel with others. We can also glorify him in our jobs and in our hobbies; we can praise him in the arts and in the sciences, in the mundane as well as in the exciting aspects of our lives. "Whether therefore ye eat or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31).

However, it means that the Christian ought to sanctify everything into which he or she comes into contact because of this perspective. We do not seek to excel as stewards of God's good earth as an end in itself; still less in order to get glory and recognition from men. Rather, we ought to do so in order to advance the kingdom of God in this world and to bring others to see how everything in this world points to the glory of Christ. This world is still broken, and for us to pursue life in this world apart from joining Christ in his redemptive mission is ultimately to contribute to the world's brokenness instead of to its healing. Rather, our prayer ought to be the prayer of the psalmist: "God be merciful unto us, and bless us; and cause his face to shine upon us; that thy way may be known upon earth, thy saving health among all nations" (Ps. 67:1-2).

This also means that God will bless us and strengthen us as we use this world for his glory and the advance of his kingdom. The promise of grace is not just future; it is present. As we noted last time, the apostle says that we now have redemption in Christ (7). He doesn't just wait to bestow grace upon his child; he lavishes it upon us now (8).

How the Lord reveals this to us

We've looked at the what; this brings us to the how. How do we come to possess this perspective? For most people do not share it; even those who are aware of it through the Bible. What makes the difference?

To answer this question, we need to go back to verses 8-9. Verse 8 begins with the words, "Wherein he hath abounded toward us in all wisdom and prudence". The word "wherein" points back to "grace" in verse 7. What God has abounded toward us, or lavished upon us, is grace.

This grace is manifested in the fact that God has given to us “all wisdom and prudence.” Though some evidently argue that the wisdom and insight here refer to God’s wisdom and insight, it seems clear to me that they are meant to refer to wisdom and insight that God gives to us. After all, in the very next verse, the apostle continues by saying that God has made known to us the mystery of his will. How has he made this known to us? By giving us wisdom and prudence. This argument is strengthened by comparing this verse with the parallel passage in Colossians, where Paul says that his desire for them is that “ye might be filled with the knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding” (1:9). There, it is clear that the “wisdom and spiritual understanding” are given to the Colossians to help them understand the will of God for them. In the same way, Paul is telling the Ephesian believers that they have been graciously given wisdom and prudence so that they might know and understand the mystery of God’s will.

As Lloyd-Jones has pointed out, the best exposition of this verse is 1 Corinthians 1 and 2. There Paul argues that the wisdom of this world is not sufficient to give insight into the reality and relevance of the gospel. It takes more than a grand intellect to perceive the glory of God in the gospel; it takes the grace of God opening our eyes to see it. Paul says that he and the other apostles do not speak the wisdom of the world (1 Cor. 2:6), but the “wisdom of God in a mystery” (7). He goes on to say that the only way to see this wisdom is to have God reveal it to you: “But God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit” (10); “the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him neither can he know them because they are spiritually discerned” (14). The gospel is a great leveler. It is not intelligence that is required to be able to see the glory of Christ; what is needed is the work of God in the heart and mind, granting wisdom and insight. This is why we can preach the gospel with as much confidence in a third world country as we can among the most sophisticated and urbane. The problem to be overcome in each case is the same: it is spiritual blindness, not a low IQ.

It is the same God who bestows it in each case, who is ever present to open the blind eyes and soften the hard hearts.

This does not mean, of course, that the gospel is irrational. It just means that what prevents men and women from universally receiving the gospel is not a lack of reason but a heart that is opposed to God. The wisdom and insight that the apostle is talking about is not, therefore, merely the bestowing an intellectual perception into the truth of the gospel, but that wisdom that sees the beauty of the gospel, that tastes and sees that the Lord is good. Unless this is given, we would all remain in darkness. Or, as the apostle puts it in 2 Cor. 4:3-6, “if our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost: in whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them. For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus’ sake. For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” This is why the ability to see and understand the gospel is a gift of grace. It is grace lavished upon us that gives us wisdom and insight. If you are a Christian, it is not because you are cleverer than the next person; it is because God in his grace has given you the eyes to see and the heart to believe.

This brings us to the meaning of “mystery” in verse 9. The wisdom and prudence that are given in verse 8 are given specifically to help us to know “the mystery of his [God’s] will.” We have already noticed that this mystery refers to God’s plan to unite all things in heaven and earth under the redemptive Lordship of Christ. Why does Paul it a mystery?

First of all, “mystery” does not refer to something that is unintelligible. This word is no cover for those who want to evacuate Christianity of all its doctrinal content, who want to reduce the intellectual content of Christian doctrine to a bare minimum.

Second, this is not a reference to the mystery religions that were common in Paul’s day. These religions claimed to have “secret knowledge” that only its inner circle was privy to. Even when you obtained access to

this knowledge, you were not allowed to share it with others. Unfortunately, there are still religions and secret societies that operate like this. The Christian religion is nothing like this. This is not a mystery that is kept secret, but one which is made known, not just to a few but to every follower of Christ.

Rather, in the NT, “mystery” is a reference to a truth or reality that is unattainable through human inquiry and must be revealed by God. This is the way our Lord used the word in the parables in Matthew 13: “it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given” (11). It is the way the apostle uses it in 3:3, 5: “by revelation [God] made known unto me the mystery . . . which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit.” So here, the mystery of God’s purpose is something that he has to reveal to us in order for us to know it. This is the same thing as saying that the gospel is special revelation. You don’t look up into the heavens to discern God’s eternal purpose in Christ. He has to reveal it to us.

What is the bottom line here? It means that we are utterly and completely dependent upon God for the knowledge of the gospel and plan of God. We are utterly and completely dependent upon God for the eyes and heart to receive the gospel and see the truth and importance of it to our lives. That means that we ought to join with the apostle in praising God for the wisdom and understanding given to us by his grace. It means that, as we share the gospel with others, we need to be praying that God would accompany the truth we share with his Spirit to soften hearts and open eyes.

We ought to be living every day in the knowledge that every part of this world belongs to Christ. He is Lord over all. As Abraham Kuyper famously said, “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is sovereign over all, does not cry, ‘Mine!’” We can thank and praise God that there is coming a day when all who belong to Christ will participate with him in his victory over all.

CHAPTER VII

THE COUNSEL OF GOD'S WILL (EPH. 1:11)

IN VERSE 5, THE APOSTLE SAYS that God the Father “predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will.” Now, in verse 11, the apostle says almost the same thing. Here, he says that in Christ “we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the council of his own will.” These verses are linked by the twin ideas of God’s family and God’s purpose. In verse 5, the apostle praises God that he has predestined us to become sons and daughters of God. Now that we are in his family, we have a glorious inheritance from our Father. Thus verse 11. Underneath our acceptance into the family of God and our inheritance in the family of God is God’s good purpose in predestining us to these wonderful gifts.

However, Paul is not being redundant here. Verse 5 answers the question, “How did I get to become a child of God?” The ultimate answer lies in God. We are in his family because he predestined us to be there. All the glory belongs to God, not to us. Now that we are in the family of God, another question arises. How can I be sure that I will remain in the family of God and inherit eternal life in the age to come? Will I

persevere to the end? Or will I lose my faith and my salvation? Having begun well, will I finish well? Will I, as the apostle Peter put it, have an abundant entrance “into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 1:11)?

The answer to that question lies in the verse before us. God’s purpose doesn’t just get us into the family of God, it also ensures that all who become sons and daughters of God will inevitably enter into their glorious inheritance in the age to come. God has predestined not only that we believe and obtain the power to become the sons and daughters of God (Jn. 1:12), but also that we inherit the blessing that he has reserved for his children. All whom God predestinates to this blessing will obtain it. For when God speaks a promise, he brings it to pass; when he purposes to do something, he will do it (cf. Isa. 46:11).

In other words, the apostle’s words here imply the doctrine of the preservation of the saints; or, as some like to put it, the eternal security of the believer. I say “the preservation of the saints” because at the bottom of our security is not our fickle faith but the firm and unshakable purpose of God that preserves us in faith. That is not to say that faith is not important. It is not only important but it is necessary. Only those who endure to the end will be saved, as our Lord put it in the Olivet Discourse (Mt. 24:13). However, what keeps the embers of the saint’s faith from dying out is the power and grace of God. Peter put it this way: he says that God has “begotten us . . . to an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time” (1 Pet. 1:3-5). Note what Peter says: it is God’s power that keeps us through faith. We are not kept without faith, but we are kept by God’s power. The salvation of the believer is secure.

Our Lord put it this way: “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me [there is faith and obedience]: and I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand. My Father, which gave them [to] me, is greater than all [there is the power of God]; and no man is able to pluck them out of

my Father's hand" (Jn. 10:27-29). Yes, the saints will persevere in faith and holiness. What keeps the believer in faith and holiness is the grace and undefeatable power of God for him or her.

However, Paul is so solicitous that we should be confident in the fact that all the elect of God will inherit eternal life, he adds, "being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the council of his own will." In other words, it is not just heaven and eternal life that God has predestined the saint to enjoy. In addition, he works all things after the council of his own will. Paul's argument is that the believer can have unshakable confidence that he or she will reach heaven and enter into the joy of the Lord with eternal life because there is nothing in heaven or on earth that can possibly jeopardize their inheritance. The reason nothing can jeopardize their security is because God works all things after the council of his own will. "All things" here really means "all things." There is nothing that can happen to the saint that falls outside the purpose and plan of God.

We need to be careful that we don't soften the apostle's words here. Paul does not allow the possibility that there are some things that take God by surprise. He is saying that all that happens in this universe happens according to the plan of God. God is never taken by surprise. He doesn't have to improvise. He is not playing chess with the world. He works all things after the council of his will. God's purpose is all-encompassing. Listen to the way the prophet Isaiah puts it: "Remember the former things of old: for I am God, and there is none else; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure:'" (Isa. 46:9-10). What does God do? He declares the end from the beginning. He knows the future perfectly. Why? Because he is a good guesser? No! God's omniscience is grounded in God's sovereignty: he knows the future perfectly because his counsel will stand and he will do all his pleasure. God's knowing of the future is not based on my counsel or your counsel or the counsel of any other human being. It is solely determined by his counsel. Contrast

this with ourselves. You and I can't know the future because we can neither understand nor control all the variables involved in just our own lives. But God both understands and controls all the variables. As one theologian has put it, there is not a maverick molecule in the universe.

We are thus faced with the Biblical principle that God's eternal plan and providence are both sovereign and all encompassing. It is this that afforded the apostle such comfort and became for him the foundation of his praise. Now what about you and me? How is this principle supposed to work out in our lives? What conclusions are we allowed to take from God's over-arching sovereignty and how are we to apply it to our lives? What are we to know about this so that it, too, becomes a matter of blessing and praise in our own lives?

The Example of Joseph

I think the best thing to do here is to work this out through Biblical examples. The first example I want to consider with you is that of Joseph, whose history is recorded for us in Genesis 37-50. A brief sketch of Joseph's history is as follows. Joseph was the oldest son of Rachel, Jacob's favorite wife. Jacob unfortunately showed favoritism towards Joseph and this invited the jealousy of his other brothers. What added to the volatility of the situation was the fact that Joseph had several dreams which he unwisely related to his brothers and father. These dreams indicated that one day Joseph would be in a position of power over his brethren, and they further resented him for this. Over time, their jealousy turned to hate and their hate to rage until, when they had the opportunity, they sold him into slavery. To cover up for their foul deed, they lied to Jacob and made it appear that Joseph had been attacked and killed by an animal.

Joseph was then sold to Potiphar, "an officer of Pharaoh's, and captain of the guard" (Gen. 37:36). However, we are told that God blessed Joseph even in this low position, to the point that Potiphar entrusted all that he had to Joseph, making him the chief steward of his house-

hold (Gen. 39:2-6). It seemed that Joseph's luck was turning, when his master's wife "cast her eyes upon Joseph" (Gen. 39:7), seeking to tempt him to sin with her. Joseph steadfastly refused; but instead of being rewarded for his godliness (cf. 39:9), he was framed by Potiphar's wife and, in a sad irony, accused of raping her. This enraged Potiphar who had Joseph thrown into prison (39:20).

So Joseph had gone from being hated by his brothers to being sold into slavery, and now thrown into prison. Now Joseph had done nothing wrong. In fact, in comparison with his brothers (cf. 35:22; 38:1-26), Joseph was the only honorable man among them. At this point, he could have become angry with God. Why did he deserve any of this? Why was God doing this to him? Or perhaps he could have reasoned that God didn't want him to endure this but didn't have the power to stop it. Either God wasn't good or God wasn't powerful enough. We know Joseph didn't think this way. We know that he continued to trust in God. Why did he do this?

What happened next is that Pharaoh threw a couple of his servants into the prison with Joseph, where they both had dreams (40:1-23). In those days, before the Bible was completed, God often spoke to people in dreams (I believe he still does this today, but we should be careful that we do not value dreams over the written word of God. See Acts 10.) Joseph was able to accurately interpret their dreams. This was significant because after several more years, Pharaoh himself had a dream which obviously had some importance but which he was not able to discern (Gen. 41). At this point, one of Pharaoh's servants remembered Joseph, at which point Pharaoh had Joseph taken out of prison, and he was given the opportunity to interpret Pharaoh's dream, which he did. In fact, the king was so impressed by the young Hebrew's ability and wisdom that he elevated him to second in command over all Egypt.

The dreams had been about seven years of plenty followed by seven years of drought. This foresight allowed the Egyptians, under Joseph's leadership, to prepare for the drought by storing up food. It also brought Joseph into contact with his brothers once again, who came to

Egypt to buy grain for food. Eventually, Joseph's entire family traveled into Egypt and settled there, and would remain there for four hundred years until the Exodus.

Now when their father Jacob died, Joseph's brothers, now in Egypt and under Joseph's rule, figured that Joseph would get his revenge. So they sent a messenger to beg his forgiveness. Here is how Joseph responded to them and it is the key to how he endured all the misery that led up to his prosperity: "Fear not: for am I in the place of God? But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive" (Gen. 50:19-20). Do you hear what Joseph is saying? He is not saying that God made a good situation out of a bad one. He is actually saying that God intended for Joseph to be sold into slavery. "God meant it unto good." They meant it for evil, but God meant it for good. Moreover, we do not do justice to Joseph's meaning here if we say that God simply foresaw what Joseph's brothers would do. That is not the same as meaning or intending for something to happen. God planned it and it happened.

That, of course, does not take away the culpability of his brothers. Because they meant it for evil, they were certainly guilty of a foul sin. Here we have the mystery of providence: God freely planned this event for good, while Joseph's brothers freely planned the same event for evil.

However, we can now see why Joseph didn't get angry with his brothers and didn't let bitterness fester in his heart against God or his family. Joseph recognized that God was moving and acting according to his good plan in all that happened. God planned his slavery and his imprisonment because it was through this route that God would set Joseph over all Egypt. Joseph recognized that God's plan is good even when we do not or cannot understand what God is doing.

In the same way, there are a lot of things that can happen to us to make us doubt or question God's love and care of us. We may not be sold into slavery or thrown into prison, but things can happen to all of us that can be crushing and bring us to the point of despair. In those moments, we need to remember what Joseph believed: that God means

it for our good, whatever men may intend or events may threaten. God works all things after the counsel of his own will, and God's plan for his children is good. It is one which will bring them into an eternal inheritance of never-ending joy.

The Example of Job

Another example of this principle we find in the life of Job. Like Joseph, Job was a godly man, and is introduced to us in the very first verse of the book that bears his name as “a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job: and that man was perfect and upright, and one that feared God and eschewed evil.” This man was fantastically wealthy, with 7000 sheep, 3000 camels, 500 yoke of oxen, and 500 donkeys. He also had what is often lacking among the rich: a wonderful and loving family, which included 10 children. Job had everything going for him.

Everything was going for him, that is, until the day “when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan came also among them” (Job 1:6). He came as he always does, as the accuser of the brethren. And there he accused Job of having an empty and hypocritical faith. Satan dared God to take away Job's wealth, saying that if Job lost his wealth, his godliness would disappear along with it. Sadly, this has proved all too true in far too many cases. Satan bet that this was true of Job as well.

In order to show Satan that he was wrong about Job, God allowed Satan to take away Job's wealth and his children. In a few short moments, Job was hit with news of tragedy after tragedy, and the hurt was infinitely multiplied when he learned that all his children were killed in a freak accident. I cannot imagine the pain that Job must have been feeling at that moment.

What did Job do? What would you have done? I dare say that many of us would be tempted to shake our fist at heaven and berate God. Or to do what Job's wife would later counsel him to do: to curse God and die (Job 2:9). Instead, we are told that “Job arose, and rent his mantle, and

shaved his head, and fell down upon the ground, and worshipped, and said, ‘Naked came I out of my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return thither: the LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD. In all this Job sinned not, nor charged God foolishly” (Job 1:20-22).

Now the first thing I want to note here is that the theology of Job is correct: “In all this Job sinned not, nor charged God foolishly.” Which is exactly the opposite of what most theologians today would say. When tragedy strikes, we are often told that God had nothing to do with it. That is not what Job claimed. “The LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away.” He’s referring to the loss of all his children and all his wealth. God gave these things to him and God took them away. Yes, we know that Satan was immediately responsible for these tragic acts, and his malice was evil and wicked. He will pay for his crimes in the lake of fire forever. Nevertheless, Job was not saying a lie when he ascribed his losses to God. Job knew that God works all things after the counsel of his own will, the good and the bad. Job knew that Satan could not move a muscle without God’s permission. He is on a leash and God is holding the leash.

That does not mean that God willed Job’s tragedy in the sense of delighting in it. In fact, we are told in the next chapter that God complains to Satan that “thou movedst me against him, to destroy him without cause” (2:3). (Note here that God is ascribing Job’s tragedy to God!) God hated what was happening to Job. Nevertheless it is right to say that God willed it in the sense that he allowed it for his wise and ultimately good reasons. And Job obviously knew that.

Unfortunately, Satan was not finished with Job. He was still not convinced that Job’s piety was real: “And Satan answered the LORD, and said, ‘Skin for skin, yea, all that a man hath will he give for his life. But put forth thine hand now, and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse thee to thy face”” (Job 2:4-5). In other words, Satan is saying that if Job loses his health, he will also lose his religion. (Again, what about us? If you lost your health tomorrow, would you lose your faith?)

Job didn't. Amazingly. When Satan "smote Job with sore boils from the sole of his foot unto his crown" (2:7), we are told that Job still retained his integrity. And when his wife pushed him to shake his fist at God and commit suicide (ver. 9), we are told that Job responded, "Thou speakest as one of the foolish women speaketh. What? Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?" (ver. 10). Once again, we are told that "in all this Job did not sin with his lips" (10).

Job's theology was essentially correct. In fact, at the very end of the narrative, we are told by God himself that Job was right. In contrast with Job's three "friends," God says, "ye have not spoken of me the thing which is right, like my servant Job" (42:8). It is clear that Job's theology of God's sovereignty over all things is the one thing that kept him from apostasy. It kept him hoping when all hope seemed lost. It is what stands behind verses like 13:15: "Though he slay me, yet will I trust him." And, "Behold, I go forward, but he is not there; and backward, but I cannot perceive him: one the left hand, where he doth work, but I cannot behold him: he hideth himself on the right hand, that I cannot see him: but he knoweth the way that I take: when he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold" (23:8-10). Job knew and understood that this trial was ultimately from God and, because of that, he could be sure God was going to use it for his good.

In the same way, we ought to join Job in knowing that our lives, from beginning to end, lie in the hands of a wise and kind God, even when we are going through periods of massive difficulty and hardship. As one preacher put it long ago, God is too wise to err, and too good to be unkind. He will work all things, the good and the bad, for the good of those who love him and are called according to his purpose (Rom. 8:28). He will take "our light affliction, which is but for a moment" and work "for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory" (2 Cor. 4:17).

The Example of King David

Let us next consider what King David says about himself in Psalm 139. How encompassing is God's plan and providence? David answers this question in this psalm when he talks about the omniscience (ver. 1-6) and omnipresence of God (ver. 7-12). Such is God's knowledge of us that he knows what we are going to think before we even think it (2). Such is his presence that "if I ascend into heaven, thou are there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou are there" (8). The upshot of this is that we cannot hide from God, not even in our thoughts!

David goes further. He next contemplates the providence of God over his life, beginning at his birth: "13. For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. 14. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well. 15. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. 16. Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them" (ESV).

Hear what David is saying. All the days of our lives are written in God's book before we are even born. The fact that they are written in God's book indicates that every aspect of our lives are comprehended in the plan of God. There is not a day nor a detail that God is not working out according to his plan. He is working all things according to the counsel of his own will.

What makes this knowledge a blessing lies in the fact that the one who so thoroughly knows us is God, who loves his people with an undying, never-ending love. So David goes on to say: "How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! If I would count them, they are more than the sand. I awake, and I am still with you" (17-18, ESV). David stands amazed that God not only thinks of him but that he never stops thinking of him. God's thoughts are precious thoughts when they involve his children. He is always solicitous for their good and well-being.

At this point, I do want to add a word of caution. We have to be careful that we keep the balance of Scripture when discussing this principle. A lot of confusion has happened because of a lack of faithful care when handling such doctrines. Yes, God works all things after the counsel of his own will. Yes, God's plan encompasses all things. Yes, God's purposes have never been, and never will be, defeated. We should not reason from this, however, that it follows that it doesn't matter how we live or what we do. Fatalism is never taught in Scripture. This is a mystery, and you can ruin it by inserting unbiblical propositions to fill in the holes of what we cannot understand. This is why I think the framers of the London Confession were wise when expounding the decrees of God. Their statement is Biblically balanced: "God hath decreed in himself, from all eternity, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeably, all things, whatsoever comes to pass; yet so as thereby is God neither the author of sin nor hath any fellowship with any therein; nor is violence offered to the will of the creature, nor yet is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established; in which appears his wisdom in disposing all things, and power and faithfulness in accomplishing his decree."¹ If you say that you cannot see how both the statement and its caveats can be simultaneously true; well, that is because we are talking about God here. Though we don't want to violate reason, neither do we want to arrogate our reason above the revelation of God in the Bible. We have to learn to be humble when we think and talk about the ways and works of the infinite God.

The Example of our Lord

In concluding, I want to end by pointing out that of course the greatest example of this principle in all of Scripture is found in the death of our Lord upon the cross. I have dealt with this recently, so I will only remind you of it. The cross was no accident. It happened according

¹The 1689 London Baptist Confession of Faith, Chapter 3, para. 1.

to the plan of God. The fact that it happened according to God's eternal purpose did not lessen the crime of those who nailed him to the cross. Neither did the freely chosen actions of wicked men lessen the fact that Christ was the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world. The apostle Peter put it best: "Ye men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs, which God did by him in the midst of you, as ye yourselves also know: him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain" (Acts 2:22-23).

Thank God for the cross. Those who put him to death meant it for evil. But God meant it for eternal good. Though the wicked men who nailed Jesus to the cross thought they were proving that Jesus was a sinner, what they didn't realize is that in a very real sense upon the cross our Lord became a sinner – not from sins of his own, but because in God's plan he bore the guilt of our sins upon himself. This was the great exchange: he took our sin so that we might have his righteousness. All who believe on him are forgiven of all their sins, are given the right to become sons and daughters of God, and are given a place in God's eternal inheritance.

And being forgiven, we can live life here with fearless faith, knowing that our loving Father hold the future for our good and his glory. If we truly believe this, our lives will be characterized by courage, not cowardice; by faith, not fear; by joyful contentment, instead of envious contention. May God make it so in us. Amen.

CHAPTER VIII

THE PRAISE OF GOD'S GLORY (EPH. 1:12)

IN PROVERBS 17:6 WE ARE TOLD, “Children’s children are the crown of old men; and the glory of children are their fathers.” There is a reciprocal glory when fathers bless their children and children bless their fathers. This is, of course, a proverb, which means that it does not depict a universal reality, but is meant to portray the way things ought to be and the way God designed them to be. God made fathers and children so that they would bless each other. It is not always the case, but when you have a godly father who brings up his children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, and you have children who respect and honor their father, both the father and the child reap the benefits. A crown is placed on the head of the father and glory is given to the children.

I want to emphasize that it must go both ways. Today on Father’s Day¹, there are many homes where the children’s hearts are sad because their father never really demonstrated to them that he loved them. Perhaps work was more important to him than his family. Perhaps he was enslaved to terrible habits. Whether through absence or negligence or

¹This message was preached on Father’s Day, 2017.

whatever, they are not the glory of their children. On the other hand, today there are many homes where the hearts of the fathers are sad because one of their children decided that they knew what was best and, like the prodigal son, take their journey into a far country and waste their lives on riotous living. Such children are not the crown of their fathers, unless it be a crown of thorns. When the love of a wise and godly father finds receptive and listening hearts in his sons and daughters, then the father is praised by his children and the children are praised by their father.

I begin this way today, not only because it is Father's Day, but also because it is pertinent to our text. Here, we read, "That we should be to the praise of his glory, who first trusted in Christ" (12). The apostle has been exulting in the fact that God has predestined those whom he has chosen in Christ to the adoption of children (5), and that, as children, they are predestined to an inheritance in Christ (11). For Paul, it was a most amazing thing to find himself belonging to God as a son belongs to his father. You see, he didn't embrace some vague notion of the "universal fatherhood of God." Though God may be spoken of as the father of all in the sense that he is the creator of all, that is not what has taken the apostle by surprise. Paul knew that, because of sin, we are all alienated from God, separated from his fellowship and from his saving blessing and life. Because of our rebellion, God does not look upon us as children but as enemies. And you know what? By nature, we consider God to be our enemy as well. There is, therefore, no reason for us to expect God to bless us at all. By grace we find ourselves seeing our sin, repenting of our sin, turning in faith to Christ and understanding that not only are all our sins forgiven, but also that we have been received into the very family of God as his sons and daughters. And then to hear that we have an inheritance undefiled, incorruptible, and that fades not away – that is truly amazing.

If you belong to Christ, if you are "in him" as the apostle speaks in this epistle, then you are a son or a daughter of God Almighty. You have been given the greatest privilege and honor that could ever be given in

this world or the next. All the gold and silver and power and comforts and popularity of this world are nothing and less than nothing compared with your exalted status as a child of God. Your father is your glory. He is the best Father, and any good earthly father is going to look to your heavenly Father as his model.

As the proverb puts it, it is not just that the father is the glory of his children. It is also that children are the crown of their fathers. A good son or daughter puts, as it were, a crown upon the head of their worthy parent. They do this in many ways. They do it by verbal praise. They do it by living lives that reflect upon their upbringing. In the same way, the text before us is telling us that as God's sons and daughters, we are to put a crown upon the head of God our infinitely worthy Father. He has bestowed upon us such glory, and now it is incumbent upon us that we give glory to him: "that we should be to the praise of his glory."

There are three questions I want to ask of our text this morning. First, what does this mean for us? What does it mean to be to the praise of God's glory? Second, why should we exult in this, as the apostle does? Why is this good news? For a lot of people, the requirement to glorify God is a distraction from something much more important: seeking glory for themselves and advancing the goals of personal ambition. I want to argue that seeking personal fulfillment and not putting God's kingdom first is actually counterproductive and ultimately suicidal. Finally, and I want to consider how we put this into practice. It's one thing to know that this means; it is another to put it into daily practice.

What does it mean that we should be to the praise of God's glory?

First of all, what does it mean that we should be to the praise of his glory? There are at least two ways by which we praise God. We praise God by being trophies of his grace and by being proclaimers of his grace.

We praise God by being trophies of his grace. A trophy is a mute symbol to the victories of its owner. In the same way, just the fact that we are saved and the way in which God saved us glorifies God. Before we

even open our lips to praise God, God is praised by his work for us and in us. A parent doesn't have to wait until their children can talk or until they graduate and go off to conquer the world before their children praise them. An infant in his mother's arms gives the most eloquent praise to his or her parents. Even so, God's work for us in redeeming us and changing us and making us like his Son is a testimony to the glory of his grace. No matter what you think you have accomplished for God, it is what God has done for you that brings him the most praise.

To see that this is what Paul means, note the connection between this verse and the previous ones. "That we should be . . ." implies purpose. The reason God did something was so that the elect would be to the praise of his glory. But what did God do for this purpose? The answer: everything that he has done in saving us is done to the praise of his glory.

Remember that this is not actually the first time Paul uses this phrase. He said it first in verse 6, now in verse 12, and finally in verse 14. As we noted before, this phrase "to the praise of his glory" (or something similar) is Paul's refrain that also points to the subdivision of this doxology into praise for the Father (4-6), praise for the Son (7-12), and praise for the Holy Spirit (13-14). This phrase therefore points back to the glory of the Triune God in accomplishing salvation for his people. God the Father chose a people before the foundation of the world purely on the basis of grace and predestined them to become his children. This points to the glory of God the Father in planning salvation for us. God the Son then came to accomplish the redemption planned in the covenant of redemption, and gives to us the forgiveness of sin according to the riches of his grace. In him we are enlightened and in him we have obtained an inheritance. All this points to the glory of God the Son in accomplishing salvation for us. Then God the Holy Spirit seals the work of the Father and Son in the hearts of believers by giving them an earnest of the inheritance. All this points to the glory of God the Spirit in applying salvation to us.

One of the things that ought to stand out to us, especially in our day when the image of the Self is so important, is that verses 3-14 are not

about what we have done to save ourselves. There is not one word of that in all these verses. Rather, these verses are all about what God has done to save us. The Actor throughout this hymn of praise is God and God alone. We are the objects of his saving work. Therefore, when it is all said and done, just the very fact of our salvation is a testament to the grace and power and love and mercy of God. Even if I were mute and paralyzed for eternity, if I am saved, then I am praising God. We will stand forever as trophies of God's amazing grace.

I think it is important for us to realize this truth. It bothers me the way some people talk about their salvation. It's almost as if God couldn't quite pull it through and they helped him across the finish line. May such sentiments be far from us! As J. I. Packer so eloquently put it, "salvation, first and last, whole and entire, past, present, and future, is of the Lord, to whom be glory for ever; amen."

This quote ties into the second way in which we are to the praise of his glory. We not only praise God by being trophies of his grace but also by being proclaimers of his grace. The connection between this point and the previous one is that we will never properly proclaim the glories of God's grace until we understand that God alone is at the bottom of our salvation. However, God is not only glorified in giving grace, he is also glorified when he is seen to be glorious. Anyone who truly tastes and sees that God is good will not want to remain quiet about it. They will want to give glory to the God who saved them. They will do this with their words and they will do it with their works. They will not only want to sing of God's amazing grace, but also they will want to demonstrate it with their lives. They will want to live lives that point away from themselves and point toward the God of grace.

Why is this good news?

We now come to our second question: Why is this good news? Why should we be thrilled at the prospect of being to the glory of God's grace? It is very important that we see why, because we can never truly

consciously live for God's glory when we don't think it's worth it, or if the pursuit of our own glory is closer to our hearts. I want to give two reasons why we should pursue God's glory and not our own: one from human nature and one from Scripture.

First of all, experience proves that the human spirit is only properly fulfilled when it is a part of something bigger than itself. For example, people naturally want to be part of a cause that's bigger than themselves, and the bigger the better. People who are patriots are so because they believe that their country is a cause worth living for and dying for. Love of country is a cause that is bigger than the individual citizen and it can often spark incredible devotion in the patriot. Or people are attracted to various social justice issues. Whether you are religious or not, it doesn't matter; people want to be a part of something that matters, something that is bigger than themselves. You even see this phenomenon displayed in sports. It's ironic that the irreligious will deride Christians for singing praise to God and then they will go to a football stadium and yell like crazy people for their team until their lungs give out.

However, neither one's country, nor one's favorite social justice issue, nor one's favorite sport's team is big enough to fill our hearts. One of the reasons is that, no matter what issue or cause we devote ourselves to, no cause is truly universal. Every country has boundaries. No social justice issue benefits everyone. No sports team is universally loved and admired. The kingdom of God is the only truly universal cause. Only the kingdom of God will one day cover the earth as the waters covers the seas. Only the kingdom of God will one day encompass heaven and earth. Therefore, only the cause of God and truth can truly bring fulfillment to our hearts.

In the same way, we want to experience greatness. We want to be in the presence of greatness. Why do we want to stand before mountains? What draws us to look through telescopes and behold the magnitude of the universe? Because, again, we are looking at something bigger than ourselves. It's why we want to be in the presence of our human idols.

Again, God is the only one who is truly great. Everything else is finite; only God is infinite. Therefore, God is the only one who can truly satisfy our desire for greatness. Greatness is not found in ourselves; it is found in God. If you are looking for glory, you won't be satisfied by seeking it in yourself or in your accomplishments.

I think this is what the Preacher in Ecclesiastes is getting at, when he wrote that God has put eternity into man's heart (Eccl. 3:11). We want to get beyond the limits of the here-and-now. We want to experience greatness beyond what we are or have experienced. There are faint echoes of this in the greatness of our world and the universe and even in our own nature. But only God can give what our spirits long for. Therefore, we should seek the glory of God, not our own.

If nature testifies to this fact, Scripture does so even more clearly. The Bible teaches that God made man for his glory, not our own. When we pursue our private glory instead of God's glory, we are committing spiritual suicide; we are killing lasting and satisfying joy for a cheap imitation. God has told us what to do: we are to seek him. We are idiots if we do otherwise.

This reality is, in fact, all over the Bible. For example, in Isaiah 43:6-7, we read: "I will say to the north, Give up; and to the south, Keep not back: bring my sons from afar, and my daughters from the ends of the earth; even everyone that is called by my name: for I have created him for my glory, I have formed him; yea, I have made him." Here, God denotes the Israelites as his children. He makes it clear that he will never forsake them. Even if they are scattered to the ends of the earth, he will gather them home. What was true of God's old covenant people is even more true of the new covenant people of God. Every believer in Christ is called by God's name, and as such are created for his glory. As God's new creation, we have been formed for his glory, not our own.

A few chapters later, God speaking through the prophet says, "For mine own sake, even for mine own sake, will I do it: for how should my name be polluted: and I will not give my glory unto another" (48:11). Therefore, if we are seeking our glory in this world instead of the glory

of God, if we are trying to make ourselves instead of God the object of praise, then we are pitting ourselves against God. He has made us for his glory. If we are trying to capture that glory for ourselves, we are at cross-purposes with God: he will not give his glory to another. You cannot steal the glory of God and get away with it. It is a futile exercise.

In fact, God's glory is not only the purpose behind the salvation of his elect, it is the purpose behind all that he has done. The apostle Paul writes in Rom. 11:36, "For of him, and through him, and to him are all things: to whom be glory forever. Amen." To God are all things. God is the origin and creator of everything in the universe and he is the one who holds it together. He does it all that he might receive the glory. Proverbs 16:4 concurs: "The LORD hath made all things for himself: yea, even the wicked for the day of evil." God has made all things for himself in the sense that they are meant to give him glory. "The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament sheweth his handiwork" (Ps. 19:1). "Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created" (Rev. 4:11).

This is the purpose behind all true religion. The Scripture teaches that what differentiates between true and false religion is this principle: those who seek the honor of God in sincerity have true religion; those who seek their own glory deceive themselves (cf. Jn. 5:44; Mt 5:16; Rom. 4:20; 1 Cor. 6:20). It is why the Lord's Prayer begins the way it does: "Our Father which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name."

Now it may seem strange to us that God is out to magnify himself. We may think, as C. S. Lewis once did, that the commands in Scripture calling us to praise God sound like a vain woman seeking compliments. It would not only be strange but wrong if we were the ones calling others to worship us. But what is wrong and selfish and evil in us is right and loving and holy in God. In fact, if God did not do this he would be wicked. As John Piper puts it, God is not an idolater: he has no other gods before him. It is wrong in us because no human being can be the

foundation of your joy. Only God can be that. Therefore, only he can be the proper and ultimate object of your praise.

It is not selfish for God to do this. When God points us to himself as the supreme object worthy of our love and affection and praise and delight, he is acting not only for his glory but for our joy. When we learn to live unto the praise of his glory, we are investing in the God who is an infinite treasure of grace and love and joy. Those who honor him he will honor; not by making them into little gods but by granting them access to the fellowship of the Triune God.

The ultimate reason this is good news lies in the infinite greatness of God and the discontinuity between God and men. God is awesomely transcendent. The reason why so many people don't see the need to seek the glory of God is that the god they believe in is not really that great. He is not much different from themselves. If you get bored with God, you are not going to be to the praise of his glory. But if you have seen the glory of God, you are not going to be able to do anything else. You praise what you love and admire. God is infinitely worthy of our love and admiration and therefore infinitely worthy of our worship and our praise.

How do we live to the praise of God's glory?

Now that brings us to our final question. How do we in fact live to the praise of his glory? Suppose we know in some sense what this means and why we should do it. How do we make this practical? To see the answer to this question, let's look at the text again. The key is in the last part of the verse.

Note that Paul says that those who live to the praise of God's glory are those "who first trusted in Christ." The word "first trusted" means "to hope before." It's the word for "hope" with a prefix that is translated here as "first" and in other translations as "before," or something similar. However, you cannot really separate hope and faith. "Faith is the substance of things hoped for" (Heb. 11:1). Those who trust in Christ

as precisely those who hope in him. Thus, those who live for the praise of God's glory are those who hope in Christ.

Some commentators think that Paul is referring to believing Jews in verse 12 (we who first hoped in Christ) and to the believing Gentiles at Ephesus in verse 13 (in whom ye also trusted). This seems to best explain the meaning of hoping or trusting "before" others. The Jewish believers preceded their Gentile brethren in matter of time in terms of believing on Jesus. However, since Paul applies to his Gentile readers in verse 13 what he has just said in verse 12, it is clear that this is a universal truth that applies to all believers everywhere. All who trust in Christ will live for his praise.

Two things are worth pointing out here. First, we are taught in these words that no one can truly live to the praise of God's glory on their own. We need Christ, we need to be connected to him and his grace and power and the way we do this is by trusting in him, by placing our faith in him.

Second, it is only when we hope in Christ and not in ourselves that we will be able to live in a way that points others to him and to the glory of his grace. We are living contradictions when we point others to Christ and yet are living for ourselves. This is what is behind Peter's famous instruction: "But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear" (1 Pet. 3:15). We will never be pointing away from ourselves to God until we have placed our hopes in him.

As those who hope in him, we live aware of the riches that we have in Christ so that we don't become distracted by the cheap pleasures of a world in rebellion against God. This is, in the end, the evidence that you are living a life that echoes the glory of God and not your own. What are you hoping in? Whatever we see as glorious, in that we will hope. Paul writes to the Colossians that it is Christ in us that is the hope of glory (Col. 1:27). In Christ, we have one in whom we can hope and not

be ashamed (cf. Rom. 5). May all our eyes be opened to see his glory so that our hope will be in him, and him alone.

CHAPTER IX

THE MINISTRY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT (EPH. 1:13-14)

WE LIVE IN A DAY when a person's identity has come to be defined completely in terms of one's own desires. This has become so important that we are told it is reprehensible to object to whatever a person identifies him/herself to be. In its current manifestation, this appears in the gender confusion that has washed over our culture here in the West. This is, of course, the logical endpoint of the new definition of freedom that our culture has adopted: to be free is to be whatever one wants to be. Inevitably, however, this freedom comes at a terrible cost. By uncoupling the ties that bind personal identity to objective reality, we have erased identity of any real meaning. To say that I can identify as anything that I want to be is just to say that I have no real identity at all. My identity is as formless and shapeless as the sea of desires in which it supposedly rests.

Of course, one of the reasons we find ourselves awash in this confusion lies in our culture's rejection of external authority. We want to be free in the sense that we don't want to be accountable to anyone but ourselves. This is incompatible with living under the authority of God and his word. So we have rejected it. The irony is, however, that in

our attempt to abolish God's sovereignty over us, we have in the process sped along the abolition of man. Rejecting the identity that God has given us, we have ended up with an illusion in the place of any real identity.

Now what has this to do with our text? Christians find their identity as sons and daughters of the Most High. They identify as his children, and as citizens of heaven. They are heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ. That is who they are. This is what the apostle has been saying all along in Ephesians 1:3-14. However, could it be that this identity is just something that we have given to ourselves? If that were the case, then we would be no different from our non-Christian counterparts. Our text says differently. The identity of the Christian is not based upon his or her own desires but upon God's identification of them as his children mediated to them through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. In the text before us, the apostle calls this the sealing ministry of the Holy Spirit, which he further describes as "the earnest of our inheritance."

So this morning, we want to look at the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers. Surely this is very important. Christianity is a Trinitarian religion; if you do not believe in the Trinity you are not a Christian whatever you may say about Jesus. That means that we not only worship God the Father and God the Son, but also God the Holy Spirit. We should not neglect the Holy Spirit, and here in Paul's hymn of praise to God, the Holy Spirit is rightly praised for his role in the salvation of the elect. We, too, need to be aware of the work of the Holy Spirit and to worship him as he is revealed to us in the Holy Scriptures. As we consider what God is doing in the lives of his people, it can greatly encourage us, which is what I want to happen this morning.

First of all, however, we need to consider some technical details relating to the text. In the KJV, it reads, "In whom ye also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that Holy Spirit of promise" (13). Now the word "trusted" is supplied by the translators; it is not in the Greek text. The text literally reads, "In whom you also, having heard

the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, in whom also having believed you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise.” Now it is the word “also” that gives translators the problem here. What was Paul comparing the Ephesian believers to? Clearly the KJV translators supplied the word “trusted” from the previous verse (12) and understood Paul to mean that the Ephesian Christians trusted in Christ just as their Jewish brethren had previously done. That is one way to deal with the problem.

Others believe that what needs to be supplied in verse 13 is not “trusted” from verse 12 but “obtained an inheritance” from verse 11. Thus Paul is saying, “we have obtained an inheritance . . . you also have obtained an inheritance.” This is certainly possible, and may very well be how Paul intended his audience to read this. However, verse 11 is relatively far away from verse 13 and one wonders why Paul didn’t actually include the words if that is how he intended this to be read.

This is why still others believe that nothing need to be supplied, and that everything in verse 13 is related to the verb “were sealed.” This is the way the ESV translates the verse: “In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit.” This seems to me to be the best way to translate the text, and many modern commentators and translators agree with the ESV in its translation. The main point here is that the believers were sealed by the Spirit, and that this took place when they heard the gospel and believed it.

At the end of the day, however, it matters little which translational route you choose to take. It is certain that the Ephesians trusted in Christ just as their Jewish brethren had done. It is also certain that they had obtained an inheritance along with their Jewish brethren. In each case, the work of the Holy Spirit that is highlighted is his ministry in sealing the saints and giving them an earnest of their inheritance. Which is what we want to consider now.

How the ministry of the Holy Spirit is described

The first thing we want to do is to consider how the ministry of the Holy Spirit is described in these two verses. In verse 13, he is said to seal the saints; in verse 14, he is said to give them an earnest of their inheritance. Let's consider these twin aspects of the Spirit's work in the people of God.

Sealed with the Spirit of promise

What does Paul mean when he says that “ye were sealed with that Holy Spirit of promise”? There are at least 3 ways people used seals in the ancient world. They were used to identify something as authentic, to identify ownership, or to render something secure.¹ The work of the Holy Spirit in the believer encompasses each of these purposes. For the believer, all three uses of a seal – to authenticate something as genuine and to identify ownership and to render secure – go together. For when the saint is authenticated as a genuine child of God, this is the same thing as identifying them as belonging to him. And being the child of God is to be secure, forever.

The Holy Spirit authenticates a believer as genuinely belonging to God. The believer has the witness in himself (1 Jn. 5:10). How? Paul explains in his letter to the Romans: “The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God” (Rom. 8:16). This is not just the believer talking to himself or herself. This is God communicating to the believer that they belong to him by giving them the assurance of their salvation. This is not something they are doing to themselves; it is something God does to them and for them. So he seals them in this way; he gives them the assurance of their salvation.

Now a lot of people have thought that the assurance of salvation undermines the urgency of holiness. If you know you are saved no matter what, what is going to keep you from living however you want? Well,

¹See Hodge, p. 34; see also Hoehner, p. 238.

short answer? Nothing. But the thing is that when God really gives the saint assurance of salvation, they are not going to want to live in an ungodly way. For assurance of salvation brings with it the overwhelming conviction that we belong to God and a corresponding detestation of sin. We must not forget that this is the ministry of the Holy Spirit. The assurance of salvation that the Spirit brings must be in accordance with his nature as holy; it would therefore be incongruous for him to communicate an assurance that became the foundation for an unholy life. True assurance is therefore inconsistent with sin; and in the same way, true assurance is the best motivator for a holy life. Saints are not pressed to be holy because they are constantly in fear of losing heaven; they are pressed to be holy because they want more of the heaven that they have already experienced through the ministry of the Holy Spirit in sealing them. This is certainly how the apostle John understood it: “Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is. And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure” (1 Jn. 3:2-3). In verse 2 we have the heights of assurance. John knew he was a child of God. He knew that one day he would see Jesus as he is. He didn’t, therefore, think this gave him the license to live in sin; on the contrary, “every man that hath this hope in him purifies himself, even as he is pure.”

Perhaps the reason people think that assurance gives a license to sin is because they think of assurance only in terms of going to heaven when they die, but that is not Biblical assurance. The object of the saint’s hope is not heaven itself; it is Christ. As Paul said in another place: “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. . . . For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ; which is far better” (Phil. 1:21, 23). This was certainly John’s hope, to see Christ as he is. That kind of hope and assurance is altogether incompatible with living in sin that alienates you from Christ.

The earnest of the inheritance

Now Paul goes on to say that the Holy Spirit “is the earnest of our inheritance” (14). The word “earnest” means “initial installment.” The word that Paul uses here was a Hebrew word that passed into the Greek language. In modern Greek the word refers to an engagement ring. It’s not far off from Paul’s meaning here. What the apostle is saying is that the Spirit’s work in the hearts of believers is not just a promise of heaven; it is a part of heaven. The believer’s experience of God now is “the same in kind, though immeasurably less in degree,”² with his experience of God in heaven. Charles Wesley expressed exactly what Paul was saying here when he wrote in the hymn, “When He shall more of heaven bestow.” Paul said the same thing in a different way in Romans 8:23, where he wrote, “And not only they [the creation], but ourselves also, which have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body.” The first fruits were not just an anticipation of the full harvest, it was a part of the harvest itself. Even so, the work of the Spirit in the heart of believers is not just a pledge of heaven, it is a part of heaven. It is a foretaste of the future blessedness.

We have to be careful to recognize that such an earnest does not remove us from present grief and sorrow. We taste of heaven, but we are not in heaven yet. As Paul puts it in the passage above, we are still groaning, even as we have the first fruits. Or, as he put it in his letter to the Corinthians, “For we that are in this tabernacle do groan, being burdened: not for that we would be unclothed, but clothed upon, that mortality might be swallowed up of life. Now he that hath wrought us for the selfsame thing is God, who also hath given unto us the earnest of the Spirit” (2 Cor. 5:4-5). Groaning for the blessedness of heaven is a fruit of the earnest of the Spirit. We groan for it precisely because we have tasted its happiness and that causes us to want it even more. It is artificial and superficial to paint a picture of the saint’s journey to heaven

²Hodge, p. 35.

as if he or she were just passing through fields of dandelions and roses. I agree with John Stott who once remarked that some Christians grin too much and groan too little. Their grinning is not a mark of spirituality but of superficiality. It shows that they really know very little of what the apostle is talking about here. We are on a battlefield as we journey to heaven. We know we have the victory, but that does not mean that there are not a lot of battles to fight before we get there. So we groan even as we have the earnest of our inheritance.

Yet the groaning is not the groaning of despair but of hope. The hope of the Christian is not simply wishful desire, but one of confident expectation. What God has begun in us he will perform until the day of Jesus Christ (Phil. 1:6). Thus, Paul ends verse 14 by saying that this ministry of the Holy Spirit lasts “until the redemption of the purchased possession, unto the praise of his glory.” Paul is referring to the final act of redemption when death itself will be defeated and this present world will give way to a new heavens and new earth. This will take place at the final advent of our Lord when he comes a second time without sin unto salvation. This is what the Spirit is the earnest of. This is that for which we wait and hope and long.

How the ministry of the Holy Spirit is applied

How is this ministry of the Holy Spirit begun in us? And how is it continued? Paul makes it very clear: it happens when we hear the word of truth, the gospel of our salvation, and believe it (13). In other words, it comes to us through faith. Paul put it this way to the Galatians: “Christ hath redeemed us . . . that the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ; that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith” (Gal. 3:13-14). Now I recognize that there has to be a work of the Holy Spirit in us that is prior to faith: those who believe are those who have been born of God (Jn. 1:12-13). Faith itself is the gift of God (Eph. 2:8), not simply a product of our own will. God begets faith in us. However, neither does the work of the Spirit in us proceed

without faith. The work of God in the believer through the Spirit grows as we learn to live by faith in Christ.

However, it is not just any faith that sanctifies. It is faith in Christ. Note how Paul links faith with the gospel. The gospel is the good news that Jesus Christ the Son of God has come into the world and died for our sins; it is believing that we are saved and sealed with the Holy Spirit. It is only those who come to Christ recognizing their helplessness to save themselves from the guilt of their sins and from the power of sin over them – it is only these who will be saved and sanctified. You are not saved and sealed by having confidence in yourself. You do not make progress in the life of godliness by self-actualization. You do it by clinging to Christ, by looking to him as he is revealed to us in the gospel.

That is important: it is not just any Christ who will save. You can't say that you have faith in Christ but then feel free to redefine him to be what you want him to be. You will not find him in your heart. You will find him in the pages of Scripture, in the "word of truth." It is there that we must seek him. A life of faith is inseparable from a commitment to applying the truths of the Bible to our lives. That is why, later in this epistle, Paul will call the word of God the sword of the Spirit (Eph. 6:17).

That is why I want to encourage all of you to be consistently reading your Bibles and seeking to apply it to your lives. You cannot expect to flourish as a Christian and live apart from your Bible. And that goes for all of us. If you are a Christian, you need to be hearing God's voice in his word on a regular basis. If you are young or old, if you are a man or a woman, a boy or a girl, if you are an officer in the church or not, you need to be reading and seeking to understand and put into practice the truths of Scripture in your life. The Christian who prospers is the Christian who knows and believes and practices the truths of God's word: "His delight is in the law of the LORD; and in his law doth he meditate day and night. And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper" (Ps. 1:2-3).

I was at a conference a week or so ago, where David Kinnaman, the president of Barna Group, was commenting on how our culture is changing and how the people of God need to respond to it. One of the things he said was that our screens (think iPhone, computer, tablet, TV, etc.) are colonizing our minds. How true that is, but how unsettling, because in our day people always seem to be looking at a screen of some sort. How is your mind being colonized? What sorts of things are you looking at? What sorts of seeds are you planting in the garden of your heart and mind? What truths have a hold on your affections? Do the truths of Scripture have the upper hand or have the values of our godless culture planted its flag upon your soul? We desperately need to read, to believe, to love, and to apply the word of truth, the gospel of our salvation, to our souls.

With Paul, we should thank God for the ministry of the Holy Spirit. We should be encouraged from his ministry in us and for us. It means that we are not alone and we are not on our own; God is not only for us, he is really with us. When Jesus promised that he would be with his church to the end of the age (Mt. 28:20), and when he promised the disciples that he would not leave them orphans (Jn. 14:18), he was referring to the ministry of the Holy Spirit who mediates the presence of the risen Christ. It is in this sense that he was promised. Christ promised to send him once he was risen from the dead and seated on the right hand of God. In his absence, the Holy Spirit testifies of Christ and advances his kingdom in this world.

Let me give an illustration. In 1587, an Englishman, John White, tried to start a colony with about 100 people in what is now North Carolina. He had to go back to England for more supplies, but because of a war between England and Spain he was delayed for almost 3 years. When he came back, there was no sign of the colony, just some letters on a post that spelled “Croatoan” (the name of a nearby island). They never found the settlers. To this day, no one knows what happened, and they are known today as the “Lost Colony.” Some think that they just assim-

ilated into the nearby Indian tribes. Others think they were killed by either the Indians or the Spanish. No one really knows.

You see, the problem was that they had no enduring connection between them and civilization. When their leader sailed back across the ocean to bring back more supplies, they were really on their own. As a result of this lack of connection, the colony was lost whether through assimilation or death. In the same way, if we were really on our own, we too would be lost. We would either end up assimilating with a godless culture and give in to the pressures of temptation, or we would end up spiritually dead.

Our text tells us that we are not on our own. We have a real and permanent connection to our risen Lord. He is physically absent, that is true; but he is spiritually present. According to our Lord, it is to the advantage, not the disadvantage, of the church, that this happened: “I tell you the truth; It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you” (Jn. 16:7). The risen Christ really is present with his people though the ministry of the Holy Spirit. They will never be lost because all the power of heaven is on their side. Yes, we have enemies. But “ye are of God, little children, and have overcome them: because greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world” (1 Jn. 4:4).

Do you ever feel alone? My friend, if you are in Christ, you are not alone and will never be alone. Though our circumstances may look very dark, and though at times we may be groaning very loudly, that does not take away the reality that we are sealed by the Holy Spirit and guaranteed an entrance into the eternal kingdom. So let us, therefore, live lives that are to the praise of his glory. God’s glory and grace have come to us through Jesus Christ and nothing can change that. Praise God!

CHAPTER X

A PRAYER FOR THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD (EPH. 1:15-17)

I LOVE TO HEAR CHILDREN PRAY. The prayers of my own children have on some occasions brought tears to my eyes, on other occasions have necessitated a stifled laugh, and on still other occasions left me wondering what they were even thinking about when they said that. One of the best things about the prayers of children is their transparency. They haven't yet learned to mimic the standard religious phrases of the day and they just say what they are thinking. You can often tell what is really important to them by listening to their prayers.

Of course, listening to children is not always the best guide for praying ourselves! Unfortunately, listening to other adults pray is not always helpful either. At some point, we learn (perhaps too early) what the accepted religious expressions are and tend to parrot those without thinking what we are saying. Even worse, we pray for the ears of men and try to impress them with our spirituality or theological knowledge. Such prayers are not necessarily instructive. Where then do we go for instruction in prayer?

For that, we need to turn to the Scriptures. There is no better place to start than to study the prayers of the apostle Paul in his epistles. If you want to know what the Biblical priorities for prayer are, then listen to the apostle as he prays. I'm not saying, of course, that these few prayers found scattered in his epistles are meant to be an exhaustive resource for prayer. The prayers of the saints throughout Scripture, and especially the Lord's Prayer, fill out the Biblical teaching on prayer. But Paul's prayers are a good starting point for our own prayer times.

The thing that immediately strikes me as I study the apostle's prayers is their spiritual focus. Sometimes our prayer time can just end up being a laundry list of things we need to make life here more comfortable. Paul's prayers are entirely focused on the spiritual well-being of believers. He was intensely concerned about growth in grace. Now we do have to be careful here because Paul is addressing believers from a distance and it's possible that this letter was meant to be shared with other churches. So his prayers would have had to be a bit general. Given the way information traveled in those days, he probably didn't know the present material circumstances of most of his readers so he couldn't have prayed for those things anyway. Nevertheless, the apostle knew and understood that, no matter where they stood on a material level, they all needed to grow in grace and in the knowledge of their Lord. And so he prays for that . . . in every single recorded prayer. I think that says something about how we ought to pray. No matter where we are on a material level, we are always in need of spiritual growth and maturity.

Of course, at the same time, we shouldn't take from this that God doesn't care about our material needs. We should always remember that the Lord's Prayer contains the petition, "Give us this day our daily bread." As we've noted, the reason Paul didn't pray for material needs had nothing to do with the non-acceptability of praying for such things. Rather, the point I'm trying to make is that praying for our spiritual needs is a priority no matter what our material needs are. The Lord's

Prayer begins and ends with a focus on spiritual needs, and our prayers should mimic the same priority.

You may not be what you used to be, but it is equally certain that you are not what you ought to be. We all need to be praying for spiritual growth, for God's sanctifying work in our lives and hearts. The very worst place to be is to have the attitude of the Laodiceans, who said that they were rich and increased with goods and had need of nothing (Rev. 3:17). I think it's pretty clear that one of the reasons they felt so spiritually adequate was because they were materially well-off. In other words, they might have interpreted their material prosperity as a sign of spiritual success. If that's so, it's all the more reason for us who live in a very prosperous country to be on our guard against such an attitude. How much money we have is never a good barometer to gauge our spiritual condition. We could be dangling on the edge of steep cliff spiritually when we are lounging in a hammock materially. We may be rich, but the real question is, are we rich toward God?

Prerequisites for spiritual growth

The question then is, since spiritual growth is so important, how do we get there? How do we keep ourselves from being lulled to sleep like the Laodiceans? Here I think our text can help us. The first thing it tells us is what the prerequisites to spiritual growth are, which you must have to grow at all. If your yard contains only rocks, you can water it all you want to, but you are never going to get grass to grow there. You need good soil. Not just soil, but good soil. The ground in much of the Middle East used to be very fertile thousands of years ago. Places that are now desert used to be farmed. What happened is that the water farmers used to make their crops grow contained small amounts of salt in it, and over the years this very slow process of salinization sterilized the ground. Thus, we need to have hearts that are prepared to grow spiritually and that aren't so contaminated by the spiritual salinization process at work in the world that we can't receive God's word into our

hearts.

Are you born again?

What needs to happen? First of all, we have to be born again. God has to prepare our hearts and make the soil good before the seed of God's word will do anything there. That's why, before Paul even prays for the Ephesians, he takes notice of the spiritual realities that were already there: "Wherefore I also, after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus, and love unto all the saints, cease not to give thanks for you making mention of you in my prayers" (15-16). Paul points to their faith in Christ and their love to the brethren as the reason why he went on to pray for them. If these things hadn't been realities in them, it would have been pointless for him to pray as he did.

Paul mentions faith and love because these are the two graces that every person who has been born again has to have in some measure. Every Christian is a person who has faith in Christ and who loves other believers. Both of these things are pointed to in 1 John as evidences of the new birth. Consider, for example 1 John 5:1: "Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is [has been] born of God: and every one that loveth him that begat loveth him also that is begotten of him." Here John is saying that both faith and love are products of the new birth. The new birth produces faith in Christ and love to the saints. Note the universality of the apostle's language. His language rules out the idea that you can be born again and yet not believe in Jesus or that you can be born again and be an unloving person.

It's significant that they both go together. John points to that in the text mentioned above. Faith in Christ produces love to people. Paul says that the believers at Ephesus were known for their love to "all the saints," not just some of the saints. John explains why: those who are born again recognize the family likeness. If you love God, it stands to reason that you will love those who are being recreated in his image (cf. Eph. 4:24).

So before we even ask how to grow in grace, we need to find the evidences of the new birth in our lives. Have we been born again? Do we have faith in Christ? Have we seen that even one sin justly keeps us from heaven and eternal life? Have we renounced our sins and turned to place ourselves entirely in the gracious hands of our Lord to save us from our sins? Do we love the brethren? Are our favorite people to be around those who share our faith in Christ?

Do you pray?

The next prerequisite for spiritual growth is prayer itself. Paul prays for the saints at Ephesus that they might know and grow (16). Now I know that this is Paul's prayer for them, but it stands to reason that if he is praying this for them, they should be doing the same thing as well. In any case, the point is that supplication is indispensable to sanctification. If God just did this without us seeking him for it, why would Paul pray that God do it? Paul clearly saw a correlation between prayer and spiritual growth. In the same way, we need to recognize the place of prayer in our spiritual lives. We cannot expect to grow to spiritual maturity if we do not consistently pray.

However, if we're honest, many of us (including myself) have to admit that our prayer life is not all that it should be. Many of us don't give it the time it deserves. The hymn puts it this way:

*Take time to be holy, the world rushes on;
Spend much time in secret, with Jesus alone.
By looking to Jesus, like Him thou shalt be;
Thy friends in thy conduct his likeness shall see.*

I don't think the problem is that we lack the time, however busy we are. The problem is that we don't often enough feel the urgency of our desperate dependence upon God. Sometimes we do. The problem is, while our felt need for Christ fades, our real need of him never fades and never lessens. Self-sufficiency is deadly in the battle for holiness.

God will not bless those who rely upon themselves. If he were to do so, he would be robbing us of the joy of knowing more deeply the triumph of his grace in our lives. God does not want us to live in self-deception. He does not want us to live the idolatrous lie thinking that we are pulling it off when all along it is God doing it. Thus the call to prayer is a call to know more fully the reality that God and God alone is the one who gives us spiritual success. Those who, like Paul, cease not to give thanks and pray are precisely those who are living in holy dependence upon God. As such they are the ones who grow spiritually.

Do you have the Holy Spirit?

This brings us to the final prerequisite mentioned in the text. It is intimately linked with the previous one, prayer. We need the Holy Spirit not only for new life but also at every stage in our journey toward heaven. In verse 17, where Paul begins to pray, he asks “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory,” to “give unto you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him.” I think it is very likely that Paul is not speaking of the human spirit in verse 17, but of the Holy Spirit (in many translations, the word for spirit is capitalized). The word “spirit” could refer to either. But the primary reason I think this is a reference to the Holy Spirit, is the fact that Paul asks for the “spirit of wisdom and revelation.” Revelation does not originate in believers but in the Holy Spirit. In 3:5, Paul says that the mystery which we preached “was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit.” Even if we interpret “spirit” in verse 17 as the human spirit, we still must understand the gift of revelation as something revealed to us by the Holy Spirit. Either way, it comes down to the same thing. Wisdom and insight and revelation originate in the Spirit of God, who gives it to those who belong to Christ.

This does not mean, of course, that a believer can completely lose the influence of the Holy Spirit upon his/her life. We can grieve him but not lose him. The point is that we can only grow in grace through the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives. It is only through the power of God through the Spirit that we can make any real progress in the Christian life. So Paul prays that God would give it to the believers at Ephesus. Two thousand years later, you and I are as in much need of the Divine influence as they were.

The Essence of spiritual growth

Now what is all this for? What does Paul see as the essence of spiritual growth? It is the knowledge of God (17). Do you want to grow in grace? Then you must grow in your knowledge of God. That is the key to sanctification and spiritual growth. Adolphe Monod famously said, “Philosophy taking man for its centre says know thyself; only the inspired word which proceeds from God has been able to say know God.”¹

You want to know the spiritual secret of the giants of the faith? Their secret was that they knew God. In the book of Daniel, we are told that in the midst of apostasy some would hold firm. Why? “But the people that do know their God shall be strong and do exploits” (11:32). At the end of the day, the very essence of spiritual and eternal life is summed up in the knowledge of God. Our Lord put it this way, “And this is eternal life, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent” (Jn. 17:3). We can see now why this is what Paul would pray for the believers at Ephesus.

It is true, of course, that every believer in some sense knows God. After all, according to our Lord you can’t even have eternal life without a saving knowledge of God. One of the New Covenant blessings, which belong to all who are in Christ, is that “they shall not teach every man his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord: for

¹Quoted in John Stott, *The Message of Ephesians* (BST), p. 54.

all shall know me, from the least to the greatest” (Heb. 8:11). But even saving knowledge of God is incomplete. No one can know God fully because he is infinite and we are finite. It will take eternity for us to fully appreciate and know God. We will never stop learning more about him.

What kind of knowledge is this? Since our Lord defines salvation in terms of knowing God, it can’t just mean knowing information about God. Even the devils believe and tremble (Jam. 2:19). The commentaries tell us that the word Paul uses in verse 17 for “knowledge” in fact denotes something more than just knowing about God. It involves experiencing God; it is an intimate knowledge of God. Thus, Paul wants the saints to experience more of God.

However, it is more than just “experiencing God.” I suppose you could experience God and still be lost. Aaron’s sons saw God on Mount Sinai and then offered an unauthorized and unholy sacrifice before God and were killed. Rather, to know and experience God in a saving way means that he is real to me, more real than the things I can touch or taste or see. It means further that God has become infinitely relevant to me. He is not just a Being that I’m supposed to believe in. He is not just “the Man upstairs.” He is the one with whom we have to do (Heb. 4:13). Whereas before I cared less about God, now he is near and surpassingly important. The things of God are weighty and significant whereas before they were distractions. It means, above all, that I have come to taste and see that God is good (Ps. 34:8). I have come to see that God is a God of glory and I have come to love the glory of God.

Let me illustrate the difference. It’s the difference between reading about a tornado and being in a tornado. It’s the difference between seeing pictures of the Rocky Mountains and standing on a peak of one of them. You can read all you want about God; that will never in itself give you the kind of knowledge for which Paul is praying.

Perhaps the best commentary on what Paul is praying for here are his own words in Philippians 3, where he says he aim and desire in life is “that I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his suffering, being made conformable to his death” (3:10).

Knowing the power of Christ's resurrection is more than just knowing about the resurrection and believing it occurred. Paul has felt its power in his life and he wants to know more of it. Knowing the fellowship of his suffering is to experience the reality of his sufferings in one's life. That is obviously not merely grasping the intellectual content of the sufferings of Christ – it is to experience them in one's own body (cf. Col. 1:24). And for Paul, this was not something you attained and then moved on. It was his life's goal, something he kept striving after: "Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:12-14, ESV). Knowing God more fully is the journey of a lifetime. In fact, it does not even end in heaven; we will go on knowing more and more of God forever.

Thus we see why this is necessary for spiritual growth, for this is the purpose for which God has saved us. Everything God has done for us and in us and to us, he has done so that we would know him more fully. The reason he elected us and redeemed us and adopted us into his family and sealed us was so that we would see and experience the wonder of his grace, the fullness of his love, the richness of his generosity, the awesome glory of his power and sovereignty. God does what he does in us by the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit so that we will love him more earnestly and behold him more clearly. In fact, the perfection of heaven is described in Scripture as knowing God with a clearness that we will never attain this side of heaven: "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known" (1 Cor. 13:12). When John wants to describe the perfection of the new heavens and earth, he puts it like this: "and they shall see his [God's] face" (Rev. 22:4). So when Paul prays that his readers know God more fully, he is just praying that the salvation Christ purchased for them be applied to them more completely.

Knowing God has a sanctifying effect: “But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord” (2 Cor. 3:18). To know Christ in this way is to become more like him.

None of this means that there is no doctrinal content to such knowledge. It is no vague spiritual experience that Paul is advocating here. The God whose knowledge Paul desires his readers to have is described as “the God of our Lord Jesus Christ” and “the Father of glory” (17). You cannot know God unless you know him as the God of our Lord Jesus Christ. In other words, you can only know God through Christ. There is no other way. Our Lord himself said, “No man knoweth the Son, but the Father; neither knoweth any man the Father, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal him” (Mt. 11:27).

You cannot know God apart from the gospel. Yes, it takes the work of the Spirit of God to open our eyes and to enlighten us (cf. Eph. 1:18). But the Spirit speaks to us in the pages of Scripture. The sword of the Spirit – the instrument he uses to pierce our souls – is the word of God (6:17).

And yet, the miracle is that, in Christ, we can know God. We can know him in this personal, saving, life-giving way. Those who know him can know him more and know him better. God does not stiff-arm his children. He welcomes them into his presence to enjoy his fellowship and experience his love and grace and power. It is possible, increasingly so, this side of heaven. Then the vision of God becomes infinitely clearer and wonderful. May the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, give unto you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him. Amen.

CHAPTER XI

THREE THINGS EVERY CHRISTIAN NEEDS TO KNOW (EPH. 1:18-23)

FOR WHOM WAS THE APOSTLE PRAYING? He was praying mostly for people that had recently converted to Christianity from paganism. These people had grown up in an environment that had little to no knowledge or concern for Biblical principles. Instead, they were raised in a milieu that assumed a polytheistic worldview, had little regard for the value of human life, and a disturbing appetite for sexual immorality. Paul was not exaggerating when in the next chapter he would describe his readers as “Gentiles in the flesh, who are called Uncircumcision by that which is called the Circumcision in the flesh made by hands; that at that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world” (Eph. 2:11-12). In chapter 4, he describes the culture in which these Christians had formerly lived: “This I say therefore, and testify in the Lord, that ye henceforth walk not as other Gentiles walk, in the vanity of their mind, having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through

the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart: who being past feeling have given themselves over unto lasciviousness, to work all uncleanness with greediness” (4:17-19). Note the word *henceforth* in 4:17. They had one time lived that way. In other words, these were people who undoubtedly had a lot of baggage, as we sometimes put it. These were not people with minor issues.

What did Paul do about it? How did he pray for these people? How did he exhort them to live? I think what Paul did not do is almost as instructive as what he did. The apostle did not spend an inordinate amount of time telling them how bad were the sins in which they once wallowed. That’s not to say he didn’t (as in the verses in chapter 4 quoted above). But most of his time is spent on inculcating positive virtues. The apostle evidently understood that, if you love the good enough, you will lose your appetite for the bad.

This is what the apostle is doing in this prayer. He is praying that God would so give them a taste of the glory of God and an experience of his goodness and greatness that they would find the sins of the flesh to be disgusting. He wants them to be so convinced of the truth about the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ that they will not fall prey to the lies that so many of their friends believe. It’s the converse of C. S. Lewis’s famous analogy: the ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in the slum because he cannot understand what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. If you’ve been at the sea on holiday, why would you want to trade that for mud pies in the slums?

That’s not to say that they are still in the dark. “But ye have not so learned Christ” (4:20). We noted last time that the fundamental prerequisite for spiritual growth of any kind is spiritual life; you have to be born again and that the new birth inevitably produces faith in Christ and love to the saints. Paul returns to that theme at the beginning of verse 18, when he reminds them that “the eyes of your understanding [heart]” have been “enlightened.” This again is what makes the prayer meaningful, and what makes these things possible for the Ephesian believers. If you’ve been born again, your eyes have been opened to see the

glory of God and the urgent relevance of the gospel to your life. That in itself is going to create some changes. If you are a new creation in Christ, then the old has passed and the new has come (2 Cor. 5:17). Those who say a person can be born again and yet exhibit no change of life is like saying a blind man can receive his sight and yet still go one bumping into things that he's looking at. Imagine our Lord during his earthly ministry healing a lame man; is it possible to imagine that such a man would go on limping? The power of our Lord is greater than that. The triumph of the new birth really does produce new life and new sight and new desires after godliness. The grace that brings salvation teaches us that we should say no to ungodliness and worldly lusts and to say yes to self-control, righteousness, and godliness in this present world (Tit. 2:11-12).

I think this is one reason why the apostle didn't try to micromanage their lives. He understood that God's grace and power were at work in the lives of true believers. They were enlightened. However, that doesn't mean that they didn't need to grow in the knowledge that they had. As we noted last time, every believer has to some extent true knowledge of God, because the essence of eternal life is to know God. But we all need to grow in that knowledge, as Paul's prayer here demonstrates.

Another thing that is important is in what direction we grow. I have a peach tree in the back yard that is desperately trying to grow out of a taller tree's shade. It's amazing how plants reach for the light and do so in a way that maximizes their exposure to the sunlight. In the same way, you and I need to grow spiritually so that we maximize our exposure to gospel influences. We don't want to end up with the world blocking the light of God's grace from our lives.

In what direction then do we grow? The text we are looking at this morning, Paul's prayer in verses 18-23, helps us here. For in these verses, the apostle prays that the knowledge of God for which he prayed in verse 17 will exhibit itself in three directions. Note the progression in Paul's prayer. In verse 17, he prays that God would give them the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of God, so that (verses 18-19)

they would know three things: the hope of God's calling, the wealth of God's inheritance in the saints, and the greatness of God's power. We can see immediately why knowing God is foundational to knowing these things. For the calling is God's calling, the inheritance is God's inheritance, and the power is God's power. If you don't know God, you can't know any of these things either.

We need to know these things. This is not just a prayer for former pagans. It's a prayer for you and me as well. We may not have been raised in a pagan environment (though our culture is tending more and more that way), but there is paganism in all our hearts. The new birth gives us new eyes and a new heart and new desires but it does not take away the sinful tendencies that remain in our hearts. We are still vulnerable this side of heaven. Let the one who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall (1 Cor. 10:12).

The fact that it is an apostle praying for these things makes it even more important that we follow his footsteps and pray the same things for ourselves. These are the directions in which we need to grow. Let's consider each one in its turn.

The hope of God's calling

First of all, the apostle prays that they "may know what is the hope of his [God's] calling" (18). It is often said that the three things Paul prays for in verses 18 and 19 point to the past (God's calling), to the future (God's inheritance), and to the present (God's power). Although it is true that God's call is something that happened in the past for the Christian, the emphasis in Paul's request is on hope, which clearly points to the future. It would seem at first glance that there is little difference between the prayer that they would know hope and the prayer that they would know the riches of God's inheritance. However, it is not so much the object of hope that Paul wants them to know (that's the next petition), but the grace of hope that he wants them to experience fully. Hope is a subjective experience that links the one who hopes with the

object hoped for. There are three things (at least) that are implied in the prayer for hope.

First, Paul wants us to have confident expectation in the promises of God. He wants us to have a rock-solid confidence that God's word is trustworthy. Abraham "against hope believed in hope that he might become the father of many nations; according to that which was spoken, So shall thy seed be. . . . and being fully persuaded that, what he [God] had promised, he was able also to perform" (Rom. 4:18, 21). Thus, hope is an extension of faith. We believe that what God has said will never be unsaid through a failure from God to follow through.

Second, to have hope implies that we have applied God's promises to ourselves, that we have laid hold of the promises of God. There are some who think that this is presumption. It is not. The Scriptures everywhere encourage the Christian not only to believe the promises of God are true for others but to believe that they are true for them as well. Although there is such a thing as a false hope, the hope of a hypocrite, that does not mean that all hope is bad. We do need to be careful that we are not deceiving ourselves, but it is not wrong to apply God's truth to ourselves when God's word warrants it. The problem is that we either don't pay attention to the warrants of Scripture or we add conditions to the promises of God that were never there.

What is the warrant of Scripture? What gives anyone the right to hope for heaven? It is simply faith in Jesus Christ, and its concomitant, repentance of sin. Our warrant to the promises of God does not come through being "good enough" but by relying upon the goodness and grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. God's word teaches us that all who believe in Christ will be saved. Paul has been teaching in this very chapter that if we are "in Christ" by faith then we are elected, predestined, adopted, redeemed, given an inheritance, and sealed. For us to refuse to accept these blessings which have been freely given to us in Christ is not a mark of humility but of unbelief and does not honor God but dishonors him.

Third, to have Biblical hope implies that we long for that in which we hope. As we noted before, hope is confident expectation, a real desire to have that which God has promised. Of course, a lot of people might say that they want to go to heaven when they die and so have hope. However, this hope is not just a hope to escape the wrath of God but a hope to enjoy the presence of God forever. Paul put it this way in his letter to the Romans: we “rejoice,” he says, “in hope of the glory of God” (Rom. 5:2). Paul would later exhort his readers to join him “rejoicing in hope” (Rom. 12:12).

When you put these three things together – confidence that God’s promises are true, appropriating them by faith and longing for them – we can see why hope is so important to the Christian. Someone who has this kind of hope is impregnable to the assaults of Satan. It is why Paul calls on the Thessalonian believers to put on “for a helmet, the hope of salvation” (1 Thess. 5:8). It is a helmet. It’s the reason Paul says that we are saved by hope (Rom. 8:24). The reason is that “if we hope for that we see not, then do we with patience [endurance] wait for it” (Rom. 8:25). Hope is that which keeps us persevering when the going gets rough. It’s what keeps us from giving up.

Of course, it is not just any hope that Paul is calling for. You can have hope in the wrong things. When you do that, instead of building up your faith, you will destroy it. The hope for which the apostle prays is “the hope of his calling.” Paul is referring here to what theologians denote the effectual call. It is God’s call to salvation (Rom. 8:30). God has called us to be saints (Rom. 1:7), to be holy (1 Thess. 4:7). He has called us to the fellowship of his Son (1 Cor. 1:9). He has called us to glory and virtue (2 Pet. 1:3). This calling is why our hope will not make us ashamed in the end (Rom. 5:5); God is on the other end of our call. This hope is not something that we give to ourselves but something God has given to us when he called us to salvation in Christ. God is able to complete that which he has begun (Phil. 1:6). We can, therefore, have every confidence in the God in whom our hope resides.

The Riches of the God's inheritance in the saints

The next thing that Paul prays for is that the saints would know “what [is] the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints” (18). Now some believe that Paul is talking about the saints as being God's inheritance. However, Paul has just said that the Holy Spirit is “the earnest of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession” (14), and I think it is likely that Paul is referring to the same inheritance in verse 18. It is God's inheritance in the sense that the inheritance the saints enjoy is both from him and centers around him. We are heirs of God (Rom. 8:17). When Paul says that this inheritance is “in the saints” he doesn't mean that the saints are the inheritance but that the inheritance is not something we enjoy to ourselves but among the saints; it is something we enjoy in common with other believers.

In the previous petition, Paul is praying that believers will have a strong and confident expectation of the glory to come. However, you cannot have that unless you see and believe in the glory of that inheritance. I once read an interesting story of a swimmer who was determined to swim the English Channel. On the day she attempted it, however, it was very foggy and she couldn't see the coast she was aiming at. She began to swim, full of determination and hope, but eventually she got to the point where she just couldn't go on and gave up. She was then pulled into the boat that had been following her across. If I remember the story right, the fog lifted suddenly and there was the coast. She had almost made it. If she had been able to see the coast she might have had the determination to continue. The fact that the coast had been shrouded in fog kept her from being motivated by the goal. In the same way, we do not only need hope but we need that hope to be fed and strengthened by a clear vision of the glory to come.

Notice how Paul puts this. “The riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints.” He could have just said, “I want you to know the inheritance that will be enjoyed by all the saints.” Instead of this, he heaps together these descriptive words to help us see just how wonderful and

surprising this inheritance really is. Riches, glory, inheritance. This inheritance makes those who possess it incalculably wealthy. The riches of the richest people on earth are nothing compared to what the saints in heaven will inherit. It is breathtakingly glorious. By using words like “riches” and “glory” to describe the inheritance, Paul is not only praying that we will know about the inheritance but also that we would see it as a place that is infinitely desirable above earthly joys; in other words, something on which we can place our hopes.

We have all heard about people who are so heavenly minded that they are no earthly good. The Bible does not support this notion. Here, the apostle is saying that, if you really want to grow spiritually and have victory over sin, you will have to be heavenly minded. You will have to see that the inheritance to come is something that is worth putting your hopes in. You will have to be the kind of person whose ultimate focus is on the prize to come. Like Moses, who chose “rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season; esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt: for he had respect unto the recompense of the reward” (Heb. 11:25-26).

The Greatness of God’s power

The final thing Paul prays for here is that the saints would know “what is the exceeding greatness of his power to usward who believe, according to the working of his mighty power” (19). Here again, the apostle piles on these descriptive words, this time for power. There are four different words for power in this verse (*dynamis*, *energeia*, *kratos*, *ischus*). Paul wants us to understand that the fulness of God’s power is available to all who believe. It’s not just that God’s power is toward those who believe. No, it’s the greatness of his power – no, it’s the exceeding greatness of his power! Just in case we didn’t get the picture, he goes on in the next verse, “which he wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead, and set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places”

(20). The very power that raised Christ from the dead is operative in the saints.

Now why would Paul pray for this? What relationship does this have to the two preceding requests? Let's start with the relationship to the prayer for hope and knowledge of the inheritance. The connection is this: those who have placed their hope in the inheritance that will be theirs at the end of the age need to know that they will get there. Though in the big scheme of things our lives are like a vapor, they still seem long to us while we are in the journey. The question is, will we make it? Or will we die along the way (like my van's transmission did when our family was on the way to New Mexico)? Will we commit spiritual suicide? Paul's answer is no: we are not going to heaven on our own. God is not only working for us, he is working in us both to will and to do of his good pleasure (Phil. 2:13).

I do not tire of saying this because it is true and because it is necessary for us to hear it again and again: you cannot persevere in holiness on your own. It is true that we are to labor and strive and work and will and mortify and deny ourselves. But we do this in the strength God provides: "For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live" (Rom. 8:13). You and I have to mortify (put to death) the deeds of the body. That is something we have to do. We can only do it through the Spirit. There is simply no other way. The flesh is simply too strong for us to try to manhandle it on our own. We do not need to worry: greater is he that is in us than he that is in the world. God is for us and God is working in us. Not only is he working in us, but he is extending to us the very power that raised his Son from the dead. God is not stingy with his grace, wealth, or power. He freely gives it to us. The Spirit who raised Christ from the dead works in us to put sin to death.

Thus, we see why Paul prays for this. It would be very easy for us to become discouraged were we at this alone, but we are not. Moreover, this means that there is no task to which God has called us that we cannot do. It may seem sometimes that the task to which God has called

us is impossible. On one level that may very well be true. Paul talks about being “pressed out of measure, above strength, inasmuch that we despaired even of life” (2 Cor. 1:8). “Above strength” means impossible in human terms. So how did Paul make it through this trial? He answers: “But we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God which raiseth the dead [like he did when he raised Christ from the dead]: who delivered us from so great a death, and doth deliver: in whom we trust that he will yet deliver us” (2 Cor. 1:9-10). It is only when we die to trusting ourselves and look to God who raises the dead that we will discover the power that enables us to remain faithful in hard times.

In fact, Christ’s resurrection is not just a demonstration of the power available to the church; he represents the church in his exalted state. His ascension to glory guarantees the complete salvation of the church. This is the apostle’s point in verses 20-23. He is exalted at God’s right hand and from there he dispenses the Spirit and every blessing and grace (20). Moreover, he is exalted above every power that might pose a threat to the Christian (21). There is nothing, either in this world or the world to come, that can successfully be against the believer. All things have been put under the feet of Christ (22), and he is the head of the church which is his body, “the fullness of him that filleth all in all” (23). Christ losing the church would be like a body losing its head. That will never happen to Christ. The church is Christ’s fullness; he would be incomplete without his elect. Not because he needs the church, for he fills all in all, but because he has committed himself by covenant and promise to see that the blood he shed for his people will not be in vain.

These are the things that you and I need to know. They are indispensable to spiritual growth. Thankfully, they are already ours in Christ. We just need to pray for them and grow in them. May the Lord make it happen for each and every one of us.

Ephesians

Part 2:
New Life in Christ
(Ephesians 2)

CHAPTER XII

HUMANITY'S DESPERATE CONDITION (EPH. 2:1-3)

WE ARE LIVING IN AN AGE in which each advance in technology overtakes the last in breathtaking rapidity. It's amazing what we can do now that just a few years ago would have seemed impossible. It doesn't look that there is any end in sight. Human progress is seemingly limitless. And yet, with all the improvements in lifestyle, humanity remains inhumane on so many levels. The nightly news hasn't gotten any better. It seems that what we gain in one area, we lose in another.

Now I'm not saying that I would rather live in the 1950's. There was inhumanity there, too. It was not the Golden Age so many people think it was, especially if you were an African-American living in the South. In the first half of the twentieth century, history recorded the advance of Nazism and Communism and two World Wars that cost millions of lives. In the second half, we saw the Cold War and a world living under the specter of a nuclear holocaust (which hasn't gone away to this day). In the twenty-first century, it's not much better. We have spent most of it fighting a long war against terrorists. There are still wars and rumors of wars. There are still people dying from hunger. There are still people suffering injustice. There are still people living under brutal regimes. In

our own country we are watching freedoms we cherished slip away as our culture changes its values. There is the horror of abortion, which hasn't gone away and doesn't look like it will any time soon.

What makes it even worse for followers of Jesus is that in the West we are seeing the decline of Christianity as the culture increasingly embraces its post-Christian identity. As I've noted before, we are standing on the other side of Christendom. St. Augustine saw it going up as the Roman Empire went down. We are seeing it go down as a new paganism rises out of the ashes. There are a lot of reasons for Christians to be depressed.

And yet, this is where the realism of the Bible is so helpful. It tells us that the basic reason technology doesn't change the inhumanity of man is that technology doesn't even touch the basic issue. It tells us that, no matter when you live, there will always be injustice, inequality, and inhumanity. It reminds us that the past was not a golden age because man essentially was the same then as he is now. It also reminds us that, unless our Lord returns, the future isn't going to erase the fundamental problem with the human race: human depravity and sin.

Inside the realism of Scripture, however, there is also optimism. For the Bible tells us that the fundamental problem with men and women will never essentially get worse. It is not worse now than it was in the past and it will not be worse in the future than it is now. Certainly, its manifestations can be worse at some times and in some places than others. But that does not change the fact that, underneath the changing landscape of human tragedy in history, the corruption of the human heart has been constant. The reason for this is, according to the apostle Paul, that mankind is "dead in trespasses and sins" (Eph. 2:1). You can't get any worse than dead.

This is good news because it means that the prescription the Bible gives for human sinfulness is just as good now as it was in the first century. According to Paul, God has extended his power in raising up people who are dead in sin from a spiritual grave to give them new life and new hope. He has just reminded us of the power of God that raised

Christ from the dead (1:20), a power that is now at work in believers (1:19). Now, in chapter 2, the apostle is going to remind us that God was at work in us even before we became believers. For being dead in sin, we also needed to be raised from death, and it took the power of God to do it: “But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ” (2:4-5). Technology can’t add to the power of God. Human ingenuity can’t add to the power of God. Human advancements of any kind can’t add to the power of God. God doesn’t need our help in giving new life to those who are spiritually dead. He is just as powerful today as he was thousands of years ago. “For I am the LORD, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed” (Mal. 3:6). In other words, history neither changes our basic need nor the potency of the cure. People need to be saved, and they are saved today exactly as they were 2000 years ago: by God.

However, we need to understand just how desperate our condition is because, unless we do, we are never going to see our equally desperate need for God. The words “but God” at the beginning of verse 4 are prefaced by verses 1-3 for good reason. If you are not a believer in Christ, it is important for you to see this because, unless you do, you will never truly see the need to throw yourself on the mercy and grace of Christ for salvation and life. It is important for those of us who share the gospel with the lost to know this because, unless we do, we will falsely think that evangelism is just applying the right amount of arm-twisting and emotional manipulation to get the lost on board. People who are lost don’t need to have their arms twisted; they need life, and only God can give that. In other words, we need to see that God is the only one who can truly change and save us, and these verses help us to see that.

To see this then, we need to carefully consider the words of the apostle in the first three verses of this second chapter. There are three basic things that the apostle points to as the condition of men and women in sin. We are dead in sin, we are in bondage to sin, and we are

condemned because of sin.¹

Dead in Sin

First of all, the apostle describes the human condition as being dead in sin: “And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins” (1). This is, in my opinion, one of the most important descriptions of human nature in the Bible. It underlines just how desperate our condition is. We are not just sick. We are not just unhealthy. We are not just weak. We are not just ignorant. We are not just temporarily unresponsive to God. No, by nature, we are dead in sin. This is a very real state. Paul is not using the language of death and life here in a figurative way, as in the parable of the Prodigal Son, who was said to be dead and then alive again. Rather, this is a very real condition that every one of us is in apart from the grace of God.

The apostle is clearly not describing a physical death here. The next few verses show that these people are very much alive. The death is rather a death in sin; it is a spiritual death. Perhaps the best commentary on this phrase is the apostle’s own words in chapter 4, where he described the lost as “being alienated from the life of God” (18). To be dead in sin is to be separated, or alienated, from the life of God.

It is important to see just how we are separated from God. We are not just separated from his fellowship, though that is true. We are not just separated from his favor and blessing, though that is also true. Fundamentally, we are separated from his life. The death that the apostle describes in verse 1 is contrasted with the life that God gives to those he raises from the dead in verse 5. To “quicken” is to give life. We are dead because we are not alive spiritually.

This condition or state is the opposite of what the apostle is talking about in Romans 6. When we become alive in Christ by the grace of God, we move from a state of death in sin into a state of death to sin

¹See Charles Hodge, *A Commentary on Ephesians*, p. 58; also John Stott, *The Message of Ephesians*, p. 71-78.

(Rom. 6:1-6). Paul argues in his letter to the Romans that God's saving power moves us out of the sphere of sin into the sphere of grace. His argument is, if you have made this transition, it is simply unthinkable for you to go on living in sin: "How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?" (Rom. 6:2). In contrast, those who are dead in sin cannot but live in sin. It is impossible for them to do anything else. By nature, we breathe in rebellion to God like we breathe in air. It is the sphere in which we live. In a state of spiritual death, we are no more responsive to God than a corpse is to a medical doctor.

An implication of this description of humanity as dead in sin is that we are unable to take one step toward God apart from his gracious intervention. This is what our Lord meant when he said, "No man can [is able] to come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him" (Jn. 6:44). Now that doesn't mean that we are off the hook for our sin. Our inability to come to Christ is as real as our death in sin, but it is not an inability that takes away our responsibility. Our inability does not lie in a lack of mental or physical furniture. Rather, it lies in a heart that is settled in opposition against God. When our Lord said, "Ye will not come to me that ye might have life" (Jn. 5:40), that word "will" means "desire." They did not come because they did not want to come. So when Jesus says that no one can come to him, the reason they cannot is because they will not. So settled is that "will not", they will not until God intervenes to give them life and a new heart that desires to come.

Paul uses the same kind of language in Romans 8: "For they that are after the flesh do mind the things of the flesh; but they that are after the Spirit the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God" (5-8). The apostle clearly believed that men in sin are unable to please God or keep his law. The reason for this is found in their hostility toward God.

Now some think that a person in this condition can just pick themselves up by their bootstraps. However, the only way a person will turn toward God and his law and his Son is if their heart and will are inclined toward God, his law, and his Son. The apostle is saying that our heart and will are not inclined toward God but against God. Therefore, unless God intervenes, we will remain in a state of death in sin. This is why in Eph. 2:4, the difference between death in sin and life in Christ lies entirely in those two words “but God.” “Even when we were dead in sins” – even when we were in this state of hostility towards God, he moved to give us new life (5).

However, I want to point out again that this is an inability that increases rather than erases our responsibility. It’s not as if people want to come to Christ but are unable. That is not the sort of inability that Paul is talking about. The reality is that people don’t come to Christ because they love darkness rather than light (cf. Jn. 3:19). So it would be an incorrect response to this doctrine to say, “Well, I’m dead in sin, so I’ll just go on living in sin until God picks me up by the scruff of the neck.” Rather, what this ought to do to you is to show you just how desperately you need God and to send you pleading with him for mercy and life. He is the only one who can change you and you need to find him if you are going to find life.

If you are saved, the effect this ought to have on you is to praise him for the life that you have in Christ. You did not give it to yourself; it was given to you entirely of grace by God. You were in the position spiritually that Lazarus was in physically. He was in the grave, a stinking corpse. Christ comes to the tomb and people are wondering what in the world he could do. He calls out his name: “Lazarus, come forth!” and he comes (Jn. 11:43-44). In the same way, if you are a believer, it is because Christ came to your grave and called your name. He gave you life and he deserves your gratitude and love and praise and worship.

Slaves to Sin

The second thing Paul points to in these verses to describe our spiritual state apart from grace is our bondage to sin (2-3). There are three areas in which this slavery is manifested. We are enslaved to the world, to the devil, and to the flesh.

Enslaved to the world

First of all, by nature we are slaves to the world: “Wherein in times past ye walked according to the course of this world.” The word “course” literally means “age.” We are generally not bound by previous generations or future ones. What binds and enslaves us is the “present evil world” (Gal. 1:4). The current age or course of this world is what the apostle is speaking to.

We see that happening all around us. People say they are free to think whatever they want, and they celebrate this. But when you inspect what they are thinking, they are really no different from everybody else. They are slaves to the course of this world. It enslaves them through television and YouTube and Facebook and Pinterest and Instagram and Twitter and cable and through a million other inlets into their hearts. It’s even happening to the church in the West. It’s disheartening to see just how fast so many churches and denominations are capitulating to the new morality of our time, ignoring 2000 years of the church’s faithful witness to the Biblical teaching. It shows you just how powerful the enslaving influence of the world can be.

There would be no escaping it if it were not for the power of God in Christ. However, I love how the apostle prefaces his description of their former condition: “wherein in times past ye walked.” No longer. God had made them free. That is just the point. It is God who did it. It is God who set them free.

Enslaved to the devil

The second enslaving influence was that of the devil: “ye walked . . . according to the prince of the power of the air, [of] the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience” (2). There is no doubt that the apostle is referring to Satan in these words. Though some in the church today are embarrassed by the Biblical insistence that there are demons and a prince of demons, we cannot ignore the clear Biblical teaching that such beings exist and that they are powerful influences in the hearts and minds of those who are lost. In fact, the apostle John states that “the whole world lies in the power of the evil one” (1 Jn. 5:19, ESV).

This explains why the “course of this world” is so bad. It is bad because the power and glory of all the kingdoms of this world have been given to Satan for a time (cf. Lk. 4:5-6). He rules in the hearts of those who do not know God. Thus, the apostle goes on to describe the devil as not only the prince of the power of the air but also as the prince of the spirit that now works in the children of disobedience. There is a spirit of the age, sinful attitudes which are common to all who do not know the saving grace of Christ. Behind these attitudes is the sinister influence of the devil.

Paul is not saying that the Ephesians had been demon-possessed. No, what he is saying is probably worse: he is saying that they had been blinded by the devil to the glory of God before their conversion (cf. 2 Cor. 4:3-4). This is the state of every man, woman, and child yet outside of Christ. To be outside of Christ is not to be in some neutral state. You are either under the Lordship of Christ or you are under the dominion of Satan. You are either serving God or the devil, whether you realize it or not. There is no third course.

Enslaved to sinful desire

The last way in which our slavery manifests itself is through bondage to sinful desires: “among whom also we all had our conversation [conduct] in times past in the lust of the flesh, fulfilling the desires of the

flesh and of the mind” (3). Solomon wrote that a three-fold cord is not quickly broken (Eccl. 4:12). Humanity is enrapt in a three-fold cord of sin: the world, the devil, and the flesh. It is not easily broken.

Some people are enslaved to the lusts of the flesh. For instance, like pornography. Young people, do not mess around with this. The world will make light of it and make fun of you if you don’t. But don’t be deceived. It is enslaving. It will ruin your soul and shrivel up your appetite for the life-giving word of God. The apostle Peter was right when he warned: “while they promise them liberty, they themselves are the servants of corruption: for of whom a man is overcome, of the same is he brought in bondage” (2 Pet. 2:19). Of course, it doesn’t just have to be porn. The devil is looking for anything to put in your path that will take over your heart and lead you away from God. Beware the lusts of the flesh. Giving into them is like putting a noose around your neck.

Others, however, are enslaved to the lusts of the mind. For them it may not be sex but pride perhaps to which they are in bondage. They are so puffed up with their accomplishments and achievements that life just becomes all about how to do more and to achieve more. Such people are in bondage. They are in bondage to the praise of men. They are in bondage to self-worship; it drives everything they do. Everything becomes about themselves, even as their families slip away and everything truly meaningful in their lives wither and die.

These are just a couple of examples, but they demonstrate just how entangled we become with our sinful desires. They turn us inward and away from God and the gospel. They create destructive habits and patterns of thinking that blind us to that which is truly glorious and good.

This is where we are apart from the grace of God. It is the condition of all men, not just some: “even as others” (3). Really, that should be translated, “even as the rest [of humankind].” Depravity is universal: “all have sinned and come short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). There is no one that has escaped this terrible condition. Unless we are raised from this spiritual death, this is where we will remain: in bondage to the world, the flesh, and the devil.

Unfortunately, this is not all the apostle has to say about the human condition. He ends his description by saying that we “were by nature the children of wrath, even as others” (3). Now some have argued that “children of wrath” here means that they were angry people before their conversion. Most commentators agree that Paul is referring here not to the wrath of men but to the wrath of God. What makes this even more likely is that Paul appends “of God” to a similar phrase in chapter 5: “Let no man deceive you with vain words: for because of these things cometh the wrath of God upon the children of disobedience” (5:6). In this chapter, Paul also describes them as the “children of disobedience” (2:2) who are under the wrath of God (2:3).

This then is the terrible consequence of sin. It is bad enough to be dead and enslaved, but to be under the wrath of God is unspeakably awful. The author of Hebrews wrote that “it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Heb. 10:31).

We were this way “by nature.” As Charles Hodge points out, this phrase “always expresses what is natural or innate, as opposed to what is made, taught, superinduced, or in any way incidental or acquired.”² In other words, he is saying that we were born this way. We are not born with a blank slate. We were born in a state of sin, and as such we were under condemnation.

This really is an explanation for the state of mankind. Why are all men sinful? Why is depravity so universal? It is because we are by nature the children of wrath. If you want an explanation of this, go to Romans 5. There Paul explains that just as Adam’s sin has brought death to all who are his descendants (which is everybody), in the same way, Christ’s righteousness has brought life to all who belong to him. In other words, Adam’s sin is imputed to those who belong to his family in the same way that Christ’s righteousness is imputed to those who belong to him. We fell in Adam and are made alive in Christ. What we are in Adam, we are by nature, and thus by nature we are children of wrath. What we

²Hodge, p. 68.

are in Christ, we are by new nature, and thus we become the children of righteousness and life.

If this were all the apostle had to say, it would be bad news indeed. Thank God therefore for the next two words: “but God.” There is the gospel, and there is our hope. Let all who see the desperateness of their condition come to Christ for healing and forgiveness. God’s wrath is not the whole story, for in the very next verse the apostle announces the love of God that has come to rescue the perishing. Let us all, therefore, look to him. In him there is fullness of grace to break the power of every enslaving lust, to give us life where we had none, and to free us from condemnation and give us instead righteousness and life.

CHAPTER XIII

SALVATION BY GRACE

(EPH. 2:4-10)

CHRISTIANITY IS DIFFERENT from every other world religion in one very important sense. It is the only world religion that is a religion of grace. Every other religion tells you what you have to do to earn eternal life. Christianity, on the other hand, puts a cross where every other religion puts a rule and says that Jesus Christ the Son of God has done for us what we could not do for ourselves. Salvation is not a work, it is a gift. Nowhere is the gracious nature of salvation exhibited more clearly than in Ephesians 2:4-10.

It is imperative however, as we look at the apostle's words here in verses 4-10, that we keep the reality of verses 1-3 before our minds. We will never truly appreciate what God has done for us until we really appreciate where we were before God moved in to save us. Paul helps us here because, at the beginning of verse 5, he himself reminds us that God saved us "even when we were dead in sins." To be dead in sin is not the state of a small minority of mankind. It is not a description of the very worst of sinners. No, it is a description of the world, of everyone who is yet outside of Christ. You and I are by nature heirs of the wrath of God, even as the rest of mankind (3). As such, we are slaves, slaves to

the course of this world, slaves to the Prince of darkness, and slaves to the lusts of the mind and flesh (2-3). The problem with mankind is not a lack of knowledge or a lack of resources or a lack of better opportunities. The problem with mankind is that we are dead in sin, with hearts that are opposed to God, his law, and his gospel.

The state we are in doesn't mean that men and women are as bad as they can get. It does mean that by nature we are unable, because we are unwilling, to move one inch toward God. We can no more move toward God than a corpse can move toward a physician. We are spiritually dead.

Until we get that, until we really believe that, we are not going to be able to grasp the significance of what the apostle is saying in these verses. What we need in order to be regenerated and converted is life, spiritual life, and life is not something that you and I can create. George Washington Carver, the famous botanist, after dissecting a leaf, is said to have remarked: "There, I have taken it apart, but only God Almighty can put it back together." Or as the king of Israel responded to the message from the king of Syria demanding that Naaman be cured of his leprosy: "Am I God, to kill and to make alive?" (2 Kings 5:7). Only God can give life to the dead.

This truth is why, when you look at how the apostle describes how we are saved, the focus is entirely upon God, not us. We need to hear this because our great need is to be looking toward God. Do you remember Paul's prayer in the previous chapter? It was that they might grow in the knowledge of God, and that they might know and experience God's calling, God's inheritance, and God's power (1:15-19). The Scriptures continually remind us that we are in constant need of God. They tell us that, apart from Christ, we are nothing and can do nothing pleasing to God. They remind us of our desperate need of him.

Of course, the purpose of such emphases is not to turn us into spiritual sloths who wait for God to do something for us. We are to work out our own salvation with fear and trembling (Phil. 2:12). We are to strive with all our might against sin. We cannot expect to make progress in holiness by just sitting around. This is not a call to fatalism. Rather, it is

a reminder that as we work out our own salvation, we do so because it is God who works in us both to will and to do of his good pleasure (Phil. 2:13). I cannot expect to take one step apart from the grace of God. And yet I am commanded to take that step in and through and because of the grace of God. If I am making progress in holiness, it is not because I am better than the next person. It is because God has given me life and sustains me in that life that I can make any progress in the life of obedience and faith.

We don't just need God at the beginning of the Christian life. We need him for every step that we take afterwards. When Paul writes in verse 8, "for by grace are ye saved," the Greek verb behind "you are saved" denotes action in the past with results continuing into the present. We are saved by grace at the beginning in regeneration and conversion, but God's grace doesn't stop there. Like ripples in the water, it continues to radiate outward and operates in the life of the child of God from that point on, so that what God has begun in us he will also complete (Phil. 1:6). The point is that the Christian life is lived with our faces constantly turned toward our gracious Father in heaven, trusting in his Son who saved us by his sacrificial death and resurrection from the dead. That is why we need to remind ourselves constantly of the truths of these verses.

The Source of our Salvation

What does the apostle say, exactly, in these verses? First of all, he points us to the source of our salvation, which is the mercy and love of God: "But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us" (4). Mercy is kindness extended toward those who are in a miserable state. Surely there is no worse or miserable condition than to be dead in sins. Remember that Paul had just in the previous verse said that we were by nature children of wrath – that is, subject to the wrath of God on account of our sins. God is rightly angry with us because of our rebellion against him. And yet, wrath and anger are not the only things that characterize God. He is also merciful and loving. To have

a correct view of God, you have to hold both these things together – God’s holy wrath and his loving mercy. God cannot but be angry with us over sin. He would not be holy if he were not. And yet, the Bible tells us that God averts his own wrath by extending mercy to us through his Son, Jesus Christ.

The apostle is actually saying that God extends mercy and love toward those who are spiritual corpses. Now, there are some who think they are too far gone. They look at their life and think there is nothing God could do for them. They think that God would never have mercy upon them for what they have done. And yet that is exactly what Paul is saying here. Again, you cannot get any worse than dead. Your specific sins may be worse in some sense than the sins of someone else, but that doesn’t really matter. What you have to remember is that it’s not specific sins that are the problem; it’s the spiritual deadness behind those sins that is the problem. It doesn’t matter whether or not you were raised in a Christian home. It doesn’t matter if you burned up your youth doing depraved things. What does matter is that your past can stay in the past forever because God raises dead people to life through his Son Jesus Christ. He is rich in mercy and great in love towards us. The implication of this verse is that, if you are saved, you didn’t make yourself good enough for God. You are not saved because you got your ducks in a row. You are not saved because you cleaned yourself up first. Rather, you are saved because God is rich in mercy and great in love. That is true of everyone in this room who is saved. We should be very careful looking down on others. None of us has the right to do so, because all of us, no matter what was our background, were dead in sins before God gave us life. It’s God’s mercy and love that made the difference, not us.

Another implication of this verse is that, if you are saved, you don’t have to live in continual fear that God is somehow going to regret what he has done and take back what he has given. You were dead once; now you are alive – and you are going to stay that way! You may mess up really badly. But that doesn’t take away the life God has given. Just as putting

make-up on a dead person doesn't give them life, even so throwing mud on a living person doesn't make them dead. Spiritually dead people can do good things, but that doesn't mean they are saved. At the same time, those who are alive in Christ can do bad things, but that doesn't mean they are now dead. The reason is that God is not just merciful; he is rich in mercy. He is not just loving; his love is great toward his elect.

This love and mercy that Paul is describing here is God's saving love and mercy. God does have a general love for all mankind. God does not desire the death of the wicked but rather that they should live (Ezek. 18:31-32). The love that the apostle is describing in these verses, however, is a love that moves God, not merely to make salvation possible, but to make it a reality in the lives of those whom he chose before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4). This is a love that does not merely desire life, but moves God to "quicken us together with Christ" (2:5). God the Father, before the foundation of the world, chose a people in Christ. Now, in time, he moves in his great love and mercy for them to quicken them and give them life in Christ.

Raised to Newness of Life

We are brought to the next thing the apostle does in these verses: he gives us a description of our salvation: "Even when we were dead in sins, [God] hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved;) and hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (5-6). The difference between being lost and being saved, between being under the wrath of God and embraced in his love, between being unforgiven and forgiven, is the difference between life and death. Simply put, Paul's description of salvation is of a person being raised from the dead.

This description means that there is a real difference between being lost and being saved. A person cannot say they are saved and yet go on in bondage to the world, the flesh, and the devil. That was a description of lostness and deadness. If you are lost, if you are unsaved, then you are a

slave to the general direction that the world is going, a slave to the devil, and a slave to the lusts of the flesh. If that still describes you, then you are still dead. Those who are alive in Christ are in a different state altogether. They have gone from being dead in sin to being dead to sin. I love the way the apostle put it to the Corinthians: “Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, not revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God” (1 Cor. 6:9-11). Before a person is saved, they might have been all those things and more. But now things are different. They have been washed, sanctified, and justified. There is new life and a corresponding new way of living. The old has past and the new has come.

Being saved doesn’t just mean that you have identified as a Christian. Anyone can do that. Fundamentally, it means that you have new life and with this new life comes new desires after God, after Christ, for prayer and fellowship with God, and for the word of God. There is a new desire for holiness; whereas once keeping God’s commandments was a burden to you, now it is a delight. Nor is it some effervescent experience that wears off after a few days or months or years. The life that God gives has staying power.

This is why Paul not only says that God gives to his people new life and resurrection, but also that they are seated with Christ in the heavenly places, “the unseen world of spiritual reality.” That description would not be true of any believer unless their final salvation was guaranteed. How could I said to be seated in heavenly places if I eventually end up in hell? In that case, the apostle’s words would just be a sick joke. Rather, Paul is saying here what he said, in different words, in Romans 8:29-30. Those who are called are justified and glorified, past tense. Why? Because what God has begun in us he will complete. Christ is even now glorified at the Father’s right hand. In Christ, every believer

even now shares his glorification; he or she is seated with him at the Father's right hand.

All of this is "in Christ," or in union with Christ. We are given new life with him, raised with him, and seated with him. Many commentators believe that Paul is thinking about Christ's resurrection, ascension, and session at the Father's right hand. What Paul is saying is that, when Christ rose from the dead, ascended into heaven and sat down in victory, he did not do this as a private individual. He did this for those he came to save. It is in virtue of what Christ has done for me that I can have new life. Another way to put this is that union with Christ is the basis for salvation by grace.

Allow me to illustrate. One of my favorite Dickens' stories is *Little Dorritt*. One of the main characters is Arthur Clennam, who, in the course of the story, becomes a business partner with another character named Daniel Doyce. While Doyce travels to Russia to pursue their business interests over there, Arthur decides to invest in a speculative banking scheme and ends up losing all his money, thereby unable to pay off the business' creditors. As a result, he ends up in the debtor's prison, the Marshalsea. However, while Arthur languished in prison, his partner Daniel Doyce had become rich. When he comes back from Russia, he uses his wealth to free Arthur from prison. Of course we understand why. Clennam and Doyce were partners: what one lost for the business the other made up, and even more. All the creditors were paid off and Arthur was free. Of course we are not strictly partners with Christ. However, just as there was a sort of union between Clennam and Doyce, there is an even better and more wonderful union between Christ and the believer. Through our sin, we have lost everything and languish in the prison of our slavery to sin. We would stay there if it had been left to us; however, Christ has acted for his people, so that all who belong to him by faith can look, not to their own gain but to the riches of Christ who has paid all our debts for us and set us free.

Why would God do this? Why would he act for disgraceful sinners as we are? The apostle answers in verse 7 by giving us the goal of our

salvation: “that in the ages to come he might shew the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus.” The goal of our salvation is not to make a spectacle out of us; it is to direct our attention forever to the glory of the exceeding riches of the grace of God in his kindness in Christ. I think a good way to check ourselves to see whether we are in the faith is to ask yourself: does this excite you? Does this not thrill your heart? For the believer, the display of the glory of God forever is the essence of heaven and of the delight that will fill our cups brim full for eternity.

Verses like this are also the reason I don’t think heaven is some stagnant experience. “In the ages to come” is an age without an end. Through these endless ages, God will be showing us the exceeding riches of his grace. This is not like looking at a single display forever, like sitting in front of a painting at a museum. That would get boring. Rather, the glory of God’s grace is so infinitely vast, that it will take eternity for us to enjoy it. There will be fresh displays of God’s glory and grace forever and ever. The focus will not be on us, it will be on God! And the saints will enjoy it, forever.

I think what the apostle does at this point in verses 8-10 is to show us the implications of our salvation, which he has written about in the previous verses.

The overall implication, of course, is that we are saved by grace. He has said this already in verse 5, and reminded us of God’s grace in verse 7. Now, in verses 8-9, he sums up it all up: “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast.” Salvation is the gift of God, not the work of man. It is something that God gives us, which we receive by faith. It is not something that we work for. It is not something that we merit. It is not something we deserve. It is of grace, pure and simple.

You can see how this follows from all Paul has said in the previous 7 verses. How could it be otherwise? We were dead in sin; how could we save ourselves? It was God who gave us life – we did not give it to ourselves. It was God who raised us up and God who seated us with his

Son at his right hand. It was all accomplished in Christ, in virtue of his righteousness and his sacrificial death, burial, and resurrection. Thus it is that the entirety of salvation is “not of yourselves: it is the gift of God.”

The next implication follows directly from the previous one: “lest any man should boast.” If salvation is by grace, there is not a place of boasting for any of the saved. John Stott recounts that, when he was a divinity student, one of his teachers was honored by having his portrait painted and put on display on campus. His teacher responded that he liked the painting very much because no one would be asking who was the man in the portrait, but rather who was the painter? In the same way, no one in heaven will be looking at any saint and wondering how great a Christian they must have been. Rather, they will look at them and see only a prize of the grace of God. If we are tempted at any time to think that we are great stuff, we need immediately to check such a spirit. Any spirit of imagined superiority is a false and sinful spirit and needs to be squelched.

In any case, it is impossible to glory in God and glory in ourselves. It has to be one or the other. One is right and the other is wrong. “He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord” (2 Cor. 10:17).

Finally, we cannot be saved by works because we are God’s “workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them” (10). It’s always good to get your prepositions right! We are not saved by good works, we are saved unto good works. The final implication here is that works are not the basis of our salvation, they are the fruit of our salvation. So although it is right to look for good works as the evidence of salvation, it is not right to require good works in order for salvation.

Some people will get upset with you if you doubt their profession of faith because they are living in sin. “Hey, I put my faith in Jesus, so I am saved; I am eternally secure!” they say. The problem is that they have misunderstood the theology of salvation by grace. It is not an excuse for sin. For if you have been truly saved, your life will be different. If

you have been given life, you are not going to keep acting like a dead man. Don't condemn someone for burying you if you aren't breathing and stink. Don't condemn someone for questioning the reality of your faith when you continue to act like a spiritually dead man. There is such a thing as false faith. False faith is as different from saving faith as death is from life. Our Lord said this: "Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down and cast into the fire. Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them" (Mt. 7:17-20). Or as James put it: "Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe and tremble. But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead?" (Jam. 2:19-20). As it has been often put: we are saved by faith alone, but not by a faith that is alone.

When God works on a man or woman, boy or girl, the craftsmanship is obvious. God creates beautiful things. He brings life out of death, he gives "beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they might be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that he might be glorified" (Isa. 61:3). The amazing thing is that he does it out of his sheer mercy and grace. Thank God for his grace through Christ! It ought to cause all of us to love the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ more, to depend upon him, to cling to him, to trust in him, to admire him, to look to him, and to obey him.

CHAPTER XIV

SUPERNATURAL RELIGION

(EPH. 2:1-10)

IN ITS 2000-YEAR HISTORY, Christianity has almost destroyed itself numerous times. It really is amazing the church is around at all. Jesus must have been telling the truth when he promised, “The gates of hell will not prevail [against the church].” Its problems have not only been caused by enemies from without, but also by enemies from within (as Paul himself predicted would happen to the Ephesian church in Acts 20). One of the things that has plagued the church from the very beginning is the attempt to redefine the church in ways that end up evacuating the church of its power and real influence. Often the way this comes about is through people who argue to convince Christians that the only way they can stay relevant is by changing who they are in ways that conform to society and culture. We’re seeing that today, with the effect that the church is losing relevance instead of becoming relevant.

Christianity has been redefined in multiple ways. Some try to redefine it as a political movement. I’ve been reading a lot of church history lately, and one of the things that has stood out to me is how unfortunate it was that the church became allied to the state in ways that made the

church inherently political. Think about the terrible things that happened as a result. We wouldn't have had the Crusades or the Inquisition or a million other evils if the church had stayed away from politics. Of course, that doesn't mean that individual Christians shouldn't be involved in politics. But it does mean that the church, as such, should never identify itself with a particular political party, and we need to hear this as much today as ever. The church should certainly never, ever use political power to advance its mission. This may gain short term advantages, but it is a terrible long-term strategy.

Others have tried to redefine the church as a cultural movement. If the former is a temptation for the religious right, this is a temptation for the religious left in our day. In this scenario, the church is seen to be a cheerleader for the current cultural trends. I remember what a former famous baseball player said when he was asked if he was a Christian: "Of course I'm a Christian – I'm American!" As if these were one and the same. The church was never meant to be a shadow for the national ethos. It was never meant to be an echo-chamber for the values of the times. Instead, the church is supposed to be radically counter-cultural in ways that make the Sermon on the Mount incarnational in a society that is ultimately under the power of the Prince of Darkness. What its advocates don't realize is that this is fundamentally lethal for the church. When the church in Europe during the first world war (on both sides) acted as God's voice for their governments advocating for war, this led to wide-spread disillusionment in the wake of the war and to the waning of the church's influence in Europe. In any case, God will not bless the church that advocates the values of fallen and sinful society – the purpose of the church is to call society to repentance, not to cheer it on. The role of the church is not that of a cheerleader; it is that of a prophet.

Still others have tried to redefine Christianity as a moral movement. In this way, the Christian religion is redefined and reduced to law. Though the religion of Christ is not lawless, and though the apostle Paul speaks of being under the law of Christ (1 Cor. 9:21), it is not law but gospel that defines what is unique and central to Christianity. More

importantly, the danger here is defining Christianity so that it is primarily about “being good” and about what you can do for God so that you can somehow earn your way into heaven. The focus is off God and onto man. Although many who advocate for this view would hate to be in the same room as an atheist, their view of salvation is not so different from that espoused in the Secular Humanist Manifesto: “No god can save us; we must save ourselves.”

It is this latter redefinition of Christianity that I primarily want to take aim at as we step back and look again at the first ten verses of Ephesians 2. We must beware of any view of salvation that assigns the ultimate and decisive factor to man that brings a person from being under the wrath of God to being accepted by him. This can be very subtle. You can talk about grace and yet think that something you did made the decisive difference when it came to being saved. There is little, if any, difference between that and advocating for salvation by works.

The problem with this view, from a Biblical standpoint, is that the Bible never speaks of salvation in this sense. It doesn’t say that man has nothing to do with salvation (we are to believe and repent), but it never, ever ascribes the decisive step in the order of salvation to man. Rather, it ascribes it to God and to God alone. Salvation is of the Lord. In fact, Paul would say this to the Corinthian believers: “For who maketh thee to differ from another? And what hast thou that thou didst not receive? Now if thou didst receive it, why dost thou glory, as if thou hadst not received it?” (1 Cor. 4:7). Ask yourself the same question: What makes you different from an unbeliever? The fact that you are saved and someone else is not is not explained by something you did as it is by something you received. We are saved by grace through faith.

Now it is true that we are justified and forgiven by faith. If you would be saved, you must repent of your sins and trust in Christ as your Lord and Savior. We must not think that our faith is something that we can take credit for. Faith does not come out of thin air. More to the point, faith in Christ is created in the heart of rebels. It is created in the heart of a person who was dead in sin. Being dead in sin means that your

heart was turned against God, his law, and his Son. Faith in Christ is unthinkable in someone who is in this state, who is hostile to God. It is, therefore, out of spiritual life that faith comes, so that even faith itself is a gift from God (Eph. 2:8). There is nothing that we can take credit for, not even our faith, so that there is absolutely no ground for boasting (Eph. 2:9).

Look again at Ephesians 2. In verse 1-3, we are told the state that we are in by nature. We are dead in sins, alienated from the life of God. As such, we will never take one step toward God because we are enslaved to the course of this world, in lock-step with the devil, the world, and our own lusts. How is this condition to be reversed? How are we to be saved?

The answer to this question comes in verses 4-10, but it is summed up with the first two words of verse 4: “But God.” The bridge between depravity and sainthood is not to be found in the warped will of man. Rather it is found in the sovereign grace of God. Paul does not see the answer to man’s predicament in something that we do, but in something that God does.

The thing that God has done corresponds to our condition: we were dead in sins and so God raises us from a spiritual death (4-6). This happened “even when we were dead in sins” (5) so that we cannot take credit for being quickened (made alive), for being raised up, or for being seated with Christ in the heavenly place. The subject of each of these actions is God, not man, who is being acted upon.

Paul makes it clear here that this is the decisive action that brings us from being “children of wrath” to being saved. The decisive action is God giving us spiritual life. This is what makes the difference. It is out of this spiritual life that faith comes by which we receive justification and acceptance before God (cf. Rom. 5:1). We would never make the journey from death to life had not God intervened in Christ by grace to save us from sin.

Throughout eternity we will not be praising ourselves for the good decision that we made. We will be praising God for the “exceeding riches

of his grace in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus” (7). There will be no room for self-worship. God will be the only one who will be praised for endless ages.

Thus, when Paul says that we are saved by grace through faith, and that not of ourselves, it is the gift of God (8), we should not exclude the “faith” as that to which “it” is pointing as part of the gift of God.¹ Faith is part of the gift of God, something which has its origin in the life that God gives his elect. This is supported by the observation that if faith was not part of God’s gift to us but something entirely of ourselves, then we would have something to boast in, namely, our faith. Paul says that we are not saved by works, “lest any man should boast” (9). It does not do to say that faith is different from work. That is true. Nevertheless, the observation still holds: a faith which originates in our hearts apart from God’s prior and effectual work in our hearts would still be a ground of boasting in us. There would be some part of our salvation that we could take credit for, and this would undermine the reality of salvation by grace.

When Paul finishes this section by saying that “we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works” (10), he is again underlining the fact we are not self-created spiritually. We do not give ourselves life. God did that. We do not raise ourselves from the dead. God did that. We do not seat ourselves in the heavenly places in Christ. God did that. We are his workmanship, not our own. Therefore, to God alone the glory.

Now I don’t want to deny that at the same time our faith is our faith. Our repentance is our repentance. We believe. We repent. If we don’t believe and don’t repent, we will not be saved. I’m not arguing, and the apostle was not arguing, that we are robots or puppets. Rather, what I believe the apostle is saying is that everything good in us spiritually is a gift of God, including our faith (cf. Eph. 1:3). We exercise what he

¹In the Greek, the word “it” is neuter, whereas “faith” is feminine. So “it is the gift of God” does not refer only to faith. Rather, it must refer to the entirety of our salvation which is by grace and of which faith is a part.

gives us. As Saint Augustine prayed: “God, give what you command, and command what you will.” The apostle James put it this way, “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variableness, neither shadow of turning. Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures” (Jam. 1:17-18). Or, as Paul would say to the Corinthians, our faith does not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God (1 Cor. 2:5).

In other words, Ephesians 2:1-10 emphasizes the reality that the Christian religion is supernatural. It is not a political, or a cultural, or even a moral phenomenon. It is fundamentally a supernatural reality. I think that is one of the major takeaways from this passage. I believe this is something that we need to constantly remind ourselves of because, in our day, Christianity has been in many ways reduced to a formula, to an algorithm. Books come out with the promise, “Here is the secret for (fill in the blank)!” The underlying message is that if you follow these steps, you will achieve the hoped-for end. The danger in many of these books is that sanctification becomes a matter entirely of what you do. The supernatural element has been removed from our walk with God.

I’m not saying that there are no steps to sanctification or salvation. “Believe, and you shall be saved” is a fundamental step we must all take. There are things we must do, without which we will never grow in grace. What we have to be careful about is that salvation and sanctification become primarily about what you do. At that point, we need to remind ourselves that salvation in all its aspects is not something that we are doing on our own. Salvation is first of all something God has done in us and for us. Then as we work out our salvation with fear and trembling, we do so knowing that it is God who is working in us both to will and to do of his good pleasure (Phi. 2:12-13). Salvation and sanctification are supernatural processes in our lives.

Yes, the point of Ephesians 2 is that salvation is by grace. But whose grace? God’s grace! Salvation is therefore supernatural in its origin (in the giving of spiritual life, verses 4-6), in its continuance (in the

sustaining of spiritual life, verses 8-10), and throughout eternity (in the celebration of God's grace in giving and supporting us in spiritual life, verse 7).

What are some of the implications of this fact? What should our lives look like in light of this reality? It means primarily that our lives ought to be oriented toward God. It means that we ought to live out our sanctification in dependence upon God in Christ. God is doing a thousand things in your life to make you more like his Son. Every one of us is different. No one of our stories is going to be exactly the same. There is no cookie-cutter Christianity. The things and truths and events and circumstances that God uses to sanctify us may be different for each of us. But there is one unifying reality: we are all sanctified by the work of God because of what Christ has done for us and because of what the Holy Spirit is doing in us. This reality means that, no matter what our path to holiness looks like, it must be characterized by a life of dependence upon the Triune God.

What I want to drill down on is what this dependence looks like in light of the truths of Ephesians 2:1-10. There are at least six features that our dependence upon God ought to be characterized by.

First of all, *our dependence upon God ought to be Christ-focused*. If Ephesians 2 reminds us that we owe our spiritual life to God the Father, it also reminds us that the Father gives us this life in his Son. We are "quickened together with Christ" (5), and when Paul uses the word "together" with "raised up together" and "seated together" the implication is that we are raised and seated together with Christ (5-6). The riches of God's grace in his kindness comes to us "through Christ Jesus" (7). We are God's "workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works" (10). This is Paul filling out what he meant in 1:3 when he said that God "hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ."

The dependence that characterizes a Christian is not, therefore, some general and vague notion of a merciful and kind Creator who occasionally intervenes in the lives of his creatures. It is not the belief that God

helps those who help themselves. Rather, it is trust in the redemptive work of Christ upon the cross. It is depending on the fact that Christ by his death purchased for us “all things” necessary for life and godliness (Rom. 8:32). It is relying on the reality that Christ was my substitute, taking my sin upon himself so that I could have his righteousness (2 Cor. 5:21). It is understanding that the basis of my relationship with God is not dependent upon my being good for God but upon Christ being righteous for me. It means relating to God through Christ as my Mediator, knowing that in him I can do all things that God expects me to do, but without him I can do nothing (Jn. 15:5; Phil. 4:13).

Second, *our dependence upon God ought to be active and obedient*. We are not saved by works (9) but we are saved unto good works (10). The dependence we are talking about is not that of a spiritual sloth or of the fatalist. It is not drawing the implication that since God’s works for me, I don’t have to do anything. Rather, the knowledge that God is working in us and for us ought to energize us to work for God. God gives us life and raises us from the dead, not so that we can go on doing nothing for God but so that we will walk in newness of life (Rom. 6:4).

It is absolutely necessary for us to understand this if we are going to be truly productive in God’s kingdom. If you think you can obey God in your own strength, it is because you don’t really understand the depth and breadth of God’s commands. There is a lot of superficiality in religion, especially among those who define Christianity purely in terms of law. God asks of us things that we cannot do in ourselves. We are like the apostles who were commanded to take five loaves and two small fishes and use them to feed 5000+ people. It was impossible! And yet they did it, not in their own power, but through the power of Christ. In the same way, we are to live out our lives in active and obedient service because we are not dependent upon our own resources, but upon the power and grace of God which is freely given to those who trust in him. It follows that true obedience, the obedience that takes in all that God commands, is dependent upon the grace and power of God.

Third, *our dependence upon God ought to be confident and courageous*. Do you hear the note of confidence in Eph. 2:1-10? This may seem like a contradiction to dependence, but we are not talking about self-confidence here. We are talking about confidence that God can and will do what he says he will do. In fact, one of the major obstacles to obedience is a lack of confidence in God. Why do we sin? Why do we fail to do what we ought to do? Is it not often because we simply do not believe that God will follow through with his promises?

If we recognize that God has been at work in us from the very beginning, that he is the one who has made the decisive difference in our lives, and that he is continuing this work in us to the present day, then that ought to give us confidence and great courage. If, moreover, we recognize that God's work in us is not dependent upon our goodness but upon his grace, then we have no reason to rest fully upon his promises that he will continue the work he has begun in us.

Yes, there are a lot of reasons in us to cause us to be frightened and to step back from obedience. We are weak. We often feel ill-equipped to the task. However, these are not reasons for the Christian to step back from obedience. For we know our weakness is not obstacle to God. In fact, God loves to work through our weaknesses. Remember the apostle Paul? "And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong" (2 Cor. 12:9-10). We are to know "the exceeding greatness of his power to us-ward who believe, according to the working of his mighty power" (Eph. 1:19).

Fourth, *our dependence upon God ought to be a humble dependence*. There is no room for boasting (Eph. 2:9). Our victories are not accomplished in our own strength. "Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us" (Rom. 8:37). When Peter healed the lame man at the temple gates, and the people began to praise him for

this miracle, he responded, “Ye men of Israel, why marvel ye at this? Or why look ye so earnestly on us, as though by our own power or holiness we had made this man to walk?” (Acts 3:12). Peter then pointed them to Jesus (13, ff). In the same way, none of us have any ground for praise. All the good that we have done, we have done through Christ. It is his life that animates us. It is his grace that empowers us. Therefore, it is his glory that ought to be praised.

Fifth, *our dependence upon God ought to be a prayerful dependence*. To say that we depend upon God and yet do not pray to him is a contradiction. Those who depend upon God must pray and will pray. Prayer is not something they have to do; it is something they feel that they must do. I read recently someone who likened prayer to eating food. You don’t force yourself to eat food. Nor do you beat yourself up if you sometimes miss a meal. You eat because you need to. In the same way, the Christians who understand just how dependent they are upon God don’t have to be forced to pray. Nor do they beat themselves up if they haven’t prayed as much as they should have because they know that God is gracious. One thing they will not do: they cannot not pray. We need God more than we need the air that we breathe. In him we live, and move, and have our being. He gave us life, we are his workmanship, and we need him for every step that we take. Show me a dependent Christian, and I will show you a praying one.

Finally, *our dependence upon God ought to be a worshipful dependence*. In Ephesians 2, Paul is worshiping God as much as he is teaching about him. How can you not worship God who has given you life, raised you from a death in sins, and seated you in the heavenly places in Christ? God has not only been good to us, he has been eternally gracious to us, delivering us from what we deserved to give us what we do not. Worship and prayer flavor the lives of those who are conscious of what God has done, is doing, and will do for them.

My friends, the world wants to tell you how to feel empowered. What they mean by this is that you can look inside yourself and find the strength and power and confidence to make something of yourself in

this life. This is not what Paul or the gospel or our Lord promises his followers. Instead, it calls us to look outside of ourselves to Christ and find his strength and power and grace that makes dead men into living men not only in this life but for all eternity. Don't believe the fake and cheap lie that the world is peddling. Believe the gospel. Believe the word of God. Look, not to yourself, but to Christ and in him find life and grace and power and joy forever.

CHAPTER XV

FROM FOREIGNERS TO FELLOWCITIZENS (EPH. 2:11-12)

WE ARE LIVING IN AN INCREASINGLY fragmented society, a nation in which people of differing political views eye each other with growing suspicion and hostility. We don't just argue with each other, we attack each other. We put up roadblocks instead of building bridges. The tragedy of Charlottesville and the alt-right and the thuggery of the alt-left and the so-called "Antifa" are just symptoms of a wider problem here in our country and the West in general. You see it in safe-spaces on the left and you see it in the retreat of conservatives and the religious into their own little enclaves. Many are no longer interested in understanding the other side; they just want their own views to receive validation and they are ready to attack anyone who questions them. We allow differences to become barriers.

I don't know all the reasons for the growing alienation in our culture. Part of it is no doubt due to the fact that our society has become more diverse but there is no cultural glue to hold everyone together. The idea of belonging to a common culture is shattering before our eyes as people

join groups, each competing for political power over the others. I have no doubt that the ultimate reasons lie in our sinfulness and the pride and selfishness and lack of love that sin spawns in our individual hearts which then spreads out to society as a whole.

The question is, how do we respond to this? And what can the church do to shine the light of Christ in an increasingly alienated society? There may be some who don't think there is a solution to the problem. It has been said that a problem without a solution is not a problem but a fact. Is that what we are faced with – a fact? Is this not something that can be fixed?

The text we are considering this morning actually has a lot to say to such a problem. It tells us how Jews and Gentiles, very different both racially and religiously and culturally, were reconciled and learned to embrace each other as brothers and sisters in Christ. However, the solution it presents is a gospel solution and it tells us that there really is no way that such a thing can happen apart from the embrace of Christ and his word by faith.

How and why the gospel is so important to this process of reconciliation.

In the first 10 verses of this chapter, the apostle has recounted a seismic shift in the lives of the Ephesian Christians, namely, that they had been relocated from the realm of spiritual death to life in Christ. Now, in the second half of the chapter, he reminds them of another equally seismic shift in their relationship to the people of God. Simply put, once they were not part of the people of God and now they are part of the people of God.

The change they experienced is actually far more significant than it sounds at first. For almost two thousand years, the locus of the people of God centered in the Jewish people. They were privileged in ways that no other nation was privileged. They had the advantage in that “unto them were committed the oracles of God” (Rom. 3:1-2). God revealed

“his word unto Jacob, his statutes and his judgments unto Israel. He hath not dealt so with any nation: and as for his judgments, they have not known them” (Ps. 147:19-20). In this way, as our Lord reminded the woman at the well in Samaria, “salvation is of the Jews” (Jn. 4:22).

It is not that the Gentiles had no access to the precious treasure of the word of God, but they had to go to Israel to hear it. In fact, the people of Israel were meant to be a light to the nations, so that they would come to seek the God of Israel. Solomon, in his dedication prayer for the temple, expected strangers to come from far countries for the sake of God’s great name (1 Kings 8:41-42).

However, that’s not to say that participation with the people of God was easy for the Gentiles. There were two great barriers against them. One was the law of Moses itself, which Paul calls “the law of commandments contained in ordinances” in verse 15, which describes the “middle wall of partition” in verse 14. The Law was a middle wall that separated the Gentiles and the Jews. It accomplished this primarily by the rite of circumcision. There were a lot of Gentiles in Paul’s day (called God-fearers) that would go to the synagogue but would never take the step of becoming a full-blown proselyte to Judaism because they didn’t want to be circumcised. No doubt the burden of many of the other ceremonial aspects of the Mosaic Law prohibited many from uniting themselves with the people of God.

The other barrier was the unfortunate attitudes that developed between Jew and Gentile. No doubt the apostle was thinking about this when he wrote of the “enmity” that existed between them (15). William Barkley describes the situation that existed in Paul’s day:

The Jew had an immense contempt for the Gentile. The Gentiles, said the Jews, were created by God to be fuel for the fires of hell. God, they said, loves only Israel of all the nations that he had made . . . It was not even lawful to render help to a Gentile mother in her hour of sorest need, for that would simply be to bring another Gentile into the world. Until Christ came, the Gentiles were an object of contempt to the Jews. The barrier between them was absolute. If a Jewish boy mar-

ried a Gentile girl, or if a Jewish girl married a Gentile boy, the funeral of the Jewish boy or girl was carried out. Such contact with a Gentile was the equivalent of death.¹

Nowhere was this double barrier illustrated with greater force than by the Jewish temple then standing in Jerusalem. A one-and-a-half-meter wall separated the temple precincts proper from the Court of the Gentiles. You might remember how much trouble Paul got into when some Jews imagined that he had brought some Gentiles past the wall into the temple. There were actually signs mounted on this wall at periodic points which warned not, as Stott puts it, “Trespassers will be prosecuted,” but “Trespassers will be executed.”² Gentiles could behold the temple from afar, but they could not enter it, and they certainly could not participate in its rituals. They were decisively separated from the people of Israel and their religion.

What the apostle does in this part of the epistle is to remind the Ephesians how this double chasm was bridged. He does this by first reminding them where they were before they were part of the people of God (11-12), how they were incorporated into the people of God (13-18), and where they are now as a result (19-22). This morning, I want to focus on their previous position when they were estranged from the people of God. I do so because the negatives Paul mentions here tell us something very important about the great defining characteristic of God’s people.

How does the apostle describe them? He begins by describing them as they were called by the Jews: “the Uncircumcision” (11). This was an umbrella term for the descriptions in the following verse (12). They were: (1) without Christ, (2) aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, (3) strangers from the covenants of promise, (4) having no hope, and (5) without God in the world.

It’s interesting to consider these characteristics in light of the solution that Paul gives in the following verses. Christ died in order to bring them out of the state outlined in verses 11-12 and into the state outlined

¹Quoted in Stott, p. 91.

²See Stott, p. 91-92 and Hoehner, p. 369.

in verses 19-22. The bridge verse is 13: “But now [as opposed to “at that time” in verse 12] in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ.” It is the redemptive death of Jesus that healed the rift described above. The result is that they are now the members of God’s people and family. So the condition described in verses 11-12 was something that required the death of Jesus Christ and which issued in participation in the family of God.

Why then does Paul place “aliens from the commonwealth of Israel” in this description? In particular, why would Paul list non-citizenship in the nation of Israel as something that necessitated the death of Christ so that the Gentiles might be saved and included in the people of God? It’s not as if citizenship in Israel was ever necessary to be saved or even part of the people of God. What did this have to do with being without Christ, God, and hope?

I think the key is the very next phrase: “strangers from the covenants of promise.” This is not a reference to the Mosaic covenant, but to the Abrahamic covenant, which Paul consistently calls the covenant of promise in contrast to the Law of Moses. For example, in Galatians 4, Paul talks about two covenants, one of promise represented by Isaac, and the other of law represented by Ishmael (4:21-31). Some question whether it could only be the Abrahamic covenant, since Paul uses the plural covenants. But we must recall that God repeated this covenant multiple times to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and I think it is in this sense that Paul speaks of covenants plural.

What exactly was this covenant? The apostle Paul focused on the promise that in the seed of Abraham all the world would be blessed and saw this promise as the gospel in miniature: “Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness. Know ye therefore that they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through faith, preached before the gospel unto Abraham, saying, In thee shall all the nations of the earth be blessed” (Gal. 3:6-8). The apostle’s argument was

that Abraham was justified exactly as Gentiles are today: by trusting in the God of the gospel.

This covenant was given to Abraham, and through him to the nation of Israel. This is why belonging to the nation of Israel was so important. To be an alien to the nation of Israel was to be a stranger from the covenants of promise, and, therefore, to be ignorant of the gospel, even if it was only in its infant form during the OT era. This explains why Paul says they were “without Christ.” Unlike their Jewish counterparts, they were not looking forward to the coming of the Messiah who would save his people. They had no such expectation because they had no such gospel.

Without the gospel they were without Christ, and being without Christ they were without hope and without God in the world. That doesn’t mean they didn’t have hope at all; it means that the hope they had was unfounded and ill-placed. Over and over the Bible reminds us that hope in Christ is unique because it alone is that which will not make those ashamed who place their hopes in Christ: “Hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us. For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly” (Rom. 5:5-6). “For the Scripture saith, Whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed” (Rom. 10:11). To be without Christ is to be without hope.

You don’t have Christ apart from the gospel: “How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach except they be sent? As it is written, How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, that bring glad tidings of good things! . . . So then faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the word of God” (Rom. 10:14-15, 17).

The unifying element to all these negatives, then, is the lack of the gospel. They were without Christ because they were ignorant of the gospel, and they were ignorant of the gospel because they were not part of Israel, the place in which God uniquely revealed the gospel through

the promises made to Abraham and his seed. Therefore, they were without hope and without God.

A very important implication of Paul's teaching in this text is the fact that the word of God creates the people of God; in particular, the gospel does this. To be without the gospel is to be without Christ and without hope and without God. It is to be lost. There are a number of important truths that follow from this.

First of all, *there is no salvation apart from Christ and the embrace of the good news about him in the gospel*. "Neither is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). The idea that there are multitudes of people living without any knowledge of the gospel who will then be saved is simply a foreign idea to Scripture. It is the reason it is imperative for this church to support missionaries who are bringing the gospel to the unreached in the world. For the awful reality is that without the gospel they are in exactly the position that the apostle Paul is describing for us in verses 11-12. They are without hope and without God in this world. Moreover, it is not enough simply to bring water and food to the unreached. That is not missions in the Biblical sense. Though we ought to do such things, we ought to see such outreach as a means of opportunity for the gospel. Jesus not only healed people's physical bodies, he also preached the gospel of the kingdom. Neither is being nice to lost people evangelism. We must give them the gospel.

We must avoid the lie that you can be saved and not know Christ. What Paul is saying here is that being religious is no guarantee that you know God. In fact, the word Paul uses for "without God" is the Greek word *atheos*, from which we get the word "atheist." Of course, the apostle is not saying that they literally didn't believe in God; in fact, they had almost certainly been polytheistic before their conversion – they believed in many gods! Rather, the apostle is saying what he said to the Athenian philosophers on Mars Hill: they were very religious but the true God was yet unknown to them (Acts 17:22-23). Christ did not come to make men religious. He came and died so that we might

know the true God (Jn. 17:3). We know the true God through Christ and Christ alone.

Second, the word of God in the gospel not only saves us, *it also becomes the very thing that brings us into participation with the people of God*. This was true in the OT era and it is true today as well. Before, the Gentiles had been “strangers and foreigners” but now in Christ we are “fellowcitizens with the saints and of the household of God” (Eph. 2:19). Before, they had been separated from the people of God because they were separated from the nation of Israel and its rich store of God’s word and promises and covenants. Now they “are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone” (20). The church, which is the visible expression of the people of God upon the earth, is founded upon the word of God. This is not just any religious word: it is the word of the apostles and prophets. In other words, the Scriptures.

I cannot stress enough the importance of God’s word for the formation and sanctification of the church. The apostolic church understood this. When Luke gives us a progress report on the state of the church in its early years, he does so in these words: “And they continued steadfastly in the apostle’s doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers” (Acts 2:42; see also 6:4).

Recently, in reading early church history, I came across a description of church worship in the 2nd century by Irenaeus, bishop in Lyon. According to him, the worship of the typical second century church consisted of four things: Scripture reading, preaching, corporate prayer, and the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. This is interesting because this list is almost identical to the one given in Acts 2. The church was still putting emphasis upon God’s word. Unfortunately, over the years this emphasis waned until it became non-existent. The Bible was taken from the masses and even when it was read it was in Latin, in a language the common people did not understand. We should thank God, especially in this year the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, that the reformers like Luther and Calvin were so insistent upon

putting God's word front and center again for the benefit of the church and the glory of God.

Of course, that doesn't mean that the health of the church is solely dependent upon right doctrine and a right understanding of the gospel. There are a lot of other things that figure into the health of both the individual Christian and the church as a whole. However, we should beware of ever leaving aside the central place that God's word ought to play in our lives and in the life of the church. It would be like saying, "I don't like the way you emphasize eating because there are other things just as important to good health." Yes, but if you don't eat you will most certainly die. And the church without the word is like a body without food. In fact, as our Lord put it, we do not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God. "More to be desired are they than gold, yea, than much fine gold, sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb" (Ps. 19:10). "Thy words were found, and I did eat them; and thy word was unto me the joy and the rejoicing of mine heart" (Jer. 15:16).

Just as the word of God formed the nation of Israel, even so the word of God forms the church. Any church which is not rooted in and upholding the word of God is not faithful to God's purpose for the church. As the apostle Paul reminded Timothy, the church is "the house of God, which is the church of the living God, pillar and ground of the truth" (1 Tim. 3:15). The church relates to the truth as a pillar to a building: it holds it up for all to see. It relates to the truth as a foundation to a building: it establishes the truth and holds it with unshakable confidence.

God's word also gives us hope. "For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope" (Rom. 15:4). The purpose of God's word is not only to fill our heads with the knowledge of the truth, but to brace our hearts with the joy and peace that come through hope (cf. Rom. 15:13). The Gentiles were without true hope because they were without the word that supplies that hope.

Again, I think the connection to the covenants of promise is important here. The chief way the Scriptures operate to give us hope is through the promises of God in his word to us. The promises do not operate alone; they are inextricably tied to God's acting in history. The future that is promised to us is not grounded in mere words but in past salvation history. This is why being part of the commonwealth of Israel was so important. Israelites could look back on their history; it interpreted the promises and gave confidence that God would fulfill his future gracious promises to them. God, through the prophets, promised them that he would deliver them from captivity; they looked back on the Exodus and this made sense to them. God promised that he would send them a Messiah who would take the throne of David forever; King David himself became a paradigm for such a promise.

The ultimate Divine intervention into history was not the Exodus or exaltation of David to the throne of Israel; it was the coming of Jesus the Son of God into the world to rescue his people by taking the guilt of their sins upon himself and suffering the punishment they deserved upon the cross so that they might be forgiven and freely accepted before God. He not only died but rose from the dead and ascended into heaven. This is not some fairy tale but history that radically changed the lives of the apostles and the first-generation Christians. So, when we are faced with trials that threaten the foundation of our faith and hope, we need to look back to what God has already done for us. When we wonder if God could love us because of some loss, let us remember what God had to lose that we might gain eternal life. As Michael Card puts it in one of his songs, "What more could God have given, tell me, what more did God have to give?" "For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich" (2 Cor. 8:9). Though we have not yet reached the Promised Land, we can look back to that to which the Exodus pointed and have confidence that that deliverance will issue in the other.

You could summarize verses 1-3 of this chapter by saying that the Gentiles before Christ were without life. Verses 11-12 could in turn be summarized by saying that the Gentiles before Christ were without the truth. As a result, they were separated from God and the people of God. We must not miss the significance that God gave them life and light. He quickened them and gave them the gospel: "And came and preached peace to you which were afar off, and to them that were nigh" (17). These pagans who were once without Christ and God and hope, who were strangers to the culture and conduct of God's people, were by grace brought into the bonds of peace.

God did this through the truth of the gospel. He took these pagans who had long been at odds with the church of God and hostile to the God of the church were reconciled to both God and his people. They heard the gospel and they were saved. Through the truth of the Scriptures they grew in grace and lived out the unity to which God had called them. This was monumental.

In our day, as we see our culture fragmenting into safe spaces and identity politics where people – both secular and religious – are hunkering down into their own little enclaves, we need to remember what God did in the first century between Jew and Gentile and what he continues to do to the present day. God is bringing very different people into the church through the truth. The unity that we are called to seek in the church is not to be found in our race, or in our cultural heritage, or life experiences. It is found in Christ and in the good news that he brings. As Paul reminds us, "For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:26-28). It is a unity that desires for as many as possible to participate. It is expressed in the prayer of the apostle: "Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer for Israel is, that they might be saved" (Rom. 10:1).

The gospel can do this because the gospel empties us of both personal and cultural pride. It teaches us that we are bankrupt sinners whose salvation does not come from belonging to a certain race or culture but to Jesus who died for the sins of people from every people and tribe and nation and language (Rev. 5:9). There is no room for pride in people who are redeemed and saved by grace. There is a reason why Eph. 2:1-10 comes before 2:11-22. Jew and Gentile could never have been reconciled on any other basis than grace.

The gospel brings about reconciliation because the gospel tells us to find our identity in Christ, not in the color of our skin or in the flag that we salute. That's not to say that we should not be thankful for our heritage. The gospel transcends all such distinctions and we learn to receive each other as Christ received us to the glory of God (Rom. 15:7).

The gospel brings about reconciliation because the gospel causes us to find hope in a Savior who is not dependent upon or loyal to our own particular culture. He is the one redeeming our culture, a culture which is sinful since it is the product of human designs and desires. He is the one who will bring a New Heaven and New Earth which is infinitely more desirable and valuable than the one we now inhabit. Our hopes are therefore not pinned upon one particular expression of human achievement which is inherently bound by time to expire, but on the living Christ who will usher in an everlasting kingdom.

The Lord is thus using his word to bring together his people from every people and tongue and nation and tribe. Let us therefore be faithful to his word and to his desire to bring about true unity – the unity that is found by belonging to the people of God through Christ. If you are yet a stranger to Christ and the gospel promises, the invitation is open to you: Come, put your trust in Christ as your Lord and Savior, and you will light and life in him.

CHAPTER XVI

THE MIDDLE WALL OF PARTITION ABOLISHED (EPH. 2:13-15)

ONE OF THE MORE VEXING QUESTIONS that has plagued the church throughout history has been the question of the relationship of the Christian to the Law of Moses. The problem showed up almost at the beginning of the church. Acts 15 is about the debate that took place in Jerusalem among the leaders of the church as to the relationship Gentiles to the Law; in particular, whether or not they were required to be circumcised and to observe the whole apparatus of the ceremonial law. It was decided that the Gentiles didn't have to observe the law. This conflict also lies behind the tensions implied in Romans 14, where Paul argued that those who observed the feast days and food laws of the Mosaic law should not judge those who didn't. He further argued that they should all receive each other, as Christ received us to the glory of God (Rom. 15:7). Above all, the question lies behind Paul's epistle to the Galatians.

When we survey the Biblical evidence, it seems that there were two problems that the early church had to deal with when it came to the

relationship of the law to the Christian. The first was a matter of obedience. The question was whether God still requires obedience to all aspects of the Mosaic ordinances. For many Jews, it was simply unthinkable to say that God no longer required the observance of the Passover, Day of Atonement, observance of the Sabbath, food laws, and so on. It had been part of the obedience of the faithful for 1500 years. Though many of us think of the law as partitioned into ceremonial, judicial, and moral, such distinctions would have been foreign to the Jew. For them, all the law was moral because all the law was part of their obedience to God. To imagine that these were suddenly no longer part of a life of faithfulness to God was simply anathema to many. So you can see why this would have been such a big issue in the early church. I think it was this problem that was at the heart of the conflict recorded in Acts 15 and Romans 14-15.

The other problem was more serious. It was a matter of justification. It seems that there were those who not only taught that obedience to the law was necessary for obedience, but that it was necessary for justification. They taught that a person was made righteous through keeping the law; that a person's acceptance before God depended on their keeping the law of Moses. It was this view, which Paul calls "another gospel" (Gal. 1:1:7-8), that he addresses in Gal. 2:16: "knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified."

These two problems illustrate the different ways that legalism has tried to invade the life of the church. It is legalistic to add to God's commands and to require what he has not required. The more dangerous type of legalism is that which seeks to place obedience to God's commands as the basis of our acceptance with God. Of course, it doesn't have to be the law of Moses that we place as the basis of our relationship to God; it can be any kind of work.

In a real way, these two types of legalism were what motivated the Protestant Reformation. On one level, the medieval church had piled on all sorts of extrabiblical requirements for the Christian. For example, if you really wanted to be holy, you had to embrace the ascetic life of the monastery. More seriously, the whole sacramental system left many with the impression that you had to make yourself good enough in order to get to heaven. This was certainly the way Martin Luther felt as he tried to assuage the intense guilt of sin that oppressed his soul. It was why he became a monk, why he tormented his flesh, why he spent sometimes six hours in the confessional trying to rid himself of the stain of sin upon his heart. It wasn't until he understood that the righteousness that justifies is not something we give to God but something we receive from God that he felt as if he had entered open doors into paradise itself.

These two problems are perennial. Five hundred years after the Reformation, we are still tempted to add to what God has required. We are also tempted to believe that by doing something we can achieve God's acceptance.

Our text deals with both these problems. It lays an axe to the root of legalism in both forms. It tells us that the Mosaic Covenant as a whole is no longer necessary for our sanctification and it tells us that the law of Moses has never been necessary for our justification. In verse 13, the apostle tells us that the Gentiles who were once far off are now made near by the blood of Christ. We saw last time that the Gentiles were far off in two ways. They were far off from God, without God and without Christ and without hope. They were also separated from the people of God. This double alienation was bridged by the death of Christ for us. By his death, our Lord broke down the middle wall of partition by abolishing the law of commandments – the law of Moses. The law of Moses is no longer a barrier between Jew and Gentile because it no longer expresses God's will for the people of God. Thus our Lord reconciled Jew and Gentile (14-15). He also reconciled both Jew and Gentile to God (16). He ended the hostility that existed between Jew and Gentile (14) and the hostility that existed between both Jew and

Gentile and God (16). On account of his life and death, we no longer look to Moses but to Christ as our law-giver. Also, we no longer look to our righteousness to bring us peace with God but to the peace with God that our Lord purchased on the cross for us (17-18).

This morning, I want to deal with that aspect of our Lord's redeeming work that frees us from obligation to the Mosaic law. Verses 14-15 very clearly teach that the law of Moses is no longer operative for the Christian. It's pretty clear that the apostle is referring to the law of Moses by the words "the law of commandments contained in ordinances" (15). The law consisted of many commandments that expressed God's will for the nation of Israel. Paul says that our Lord, by his death, abolished this law. In a parallel passage in Colossians, Paul writes that, by his death, our Lord blotted out "the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to the cross" (Col. 2:14). In another passage, the apostle tells us that we have died to the law (Rom. 7:6). If our Lord abolished the law, nailed it to the cross, and if we have died to the law, then it must be that we are no longer obligated to the demands of the Mosaic covenant.

We need to approach this matter both negatively and positively. First of all, I want to make very clear what the apostle was not teaching by saying that our Lord abolished the law. There are many who draw inferences from the NT emphasis on freedom from the law that are not warranted by the overall teaching of the NT. Then we need to approach these things positively, and establish exactly what it was the apostle was teaching.

What Paul was *not* teaching

First, negatively. Now I want to be clear here. The apostle was not arguing that freedom from the Mosaic law means freedom from all law. As he tells the Corinthians, he was "not outside the law of God, but under the law of Christ" (1 Cor. 9:21, ESV). Freedom from the law of Moses does not mean that we can live any way that we please. This is

why I think the distinction between the moral, ceremonial, and judicial aspects of the law are helpful. The Mosaic law ultimately did not come from Moses but from God. As such, it reflected God's holiness and his desire for his people to live holy lives. Since God never changes, we should expect that there are aspects of the Mosaic law that were true before it was formally given on Mount Sinai and remained true after the abolition of the Mosaic covenant. These aspects of the Mosaic covenant are what theologians have referred to as the "moral law." The moral law consists of those matters of obedience to God which are timeless. It was wrong to steal, kill, and commit adultery before God gave Moses the Ten Commandments and it will always be wrong.

You see this in the Sermon on the Mount. Recall that, in the fifth chapter of Matthew, our Lord is correcting some Pharisaic misinterpretations of the Law of Moses. He does not abolish the Law of Moses; if anything, he strengthens it. He reminds his audience that the commandments that forbid murder and adultery don't just refer to what we do to other people but what we think and feel in our hearts. He tells us that except our righteousness exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees we will never enter into the kingdom of heaven (Mt. 5:20).

How do we distinguish between those aspects of the Mosaic law which are timeless and those which are not? It is common to say that we are only required to keep those commandments which are reiterated in the NT.¹ Though I would agree with this as far as it goes, this statement needs some qualifications. So blandly stated, it makes it sound like we don't even need to read the OT.

First of all, the underlying principle we need to keep in mind is that Christ has fulfilled the law. This is what he said in the Sermon on the Mount: "Think not that I am come to destroy the law or the prophets: I am not come to destroy but to fulfill. For verily I say unto you, till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled. Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least

¹Hoehner, p. 376.

in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (Mt. 5:17-19). Christ did not destroy the law, he fulfilled it. Clearly our Lord assumes that the commandments of the law have enduring validity for the kingdom that he came to usher in.² Does this mean that we are still required to keep the ordinances associated with the OT ritual? The answer given in the NT is clearly, no. The reason is that the early church read the law in light of our Lord’s fulfillment of it. They understood that the ritual aspects of the law were no longer necessary after our Lord fulfilled them. However, in fulfilling the moral law, our Lord not only did not abrogate the moral law, he strengthened it (cf. Mt. 5:21-48). Again, we have to read the law in light of our Lord’s fulfillment of it.

Although I realize the distinguishing between moral and ceremonial in the law of Moses is out of fashion, I don’t see how you can make sense of our Lord’s words in Mt. 5:19 unless you assume that he is referring to those enduring aspects of the moral code in the Mosaic law, when he says that whoever breaks one of these least commandments will be the least in the kingdom of heaven. The moral law is not abrogated in the death of Christ, but the ceremonial and judicial aspects are.

So when the apostle says that our Lord broke down the middle wall of partition by abolishing the law of commandments contained in ordinances, he is not referring to those commandments which still remain the rule of conduct for the Christian, God’s moral law. Freedom from the Law of Moses means that we are free from that law as a covenant, but we are not free from our obligation to obey God. It’s simply impossible to read the NT and not see the emphasis on holy living. The standard of conduct is not less than the standard of conduct in the OT;

²Some try to get around the implications of this text by saying that God temporarily abandoned the kingdom project for the interim project of the church, so that this text does not apply to the church. This, however, has absolutely no support in the Biblical text. When Paul preached the gospel, he preached “the kingdom of God” (Acts 28:23), the same kingdom about which our Lord preached and which was ushered in by our Lord’s life, death, and resurrection.

if anything, it is elevated by the teaching of our Lord and his apostles and by the example of our Lord and his apostles.

Second, not only must we read the OT in light of our Lord's fulfillment of the law and the prophets, but we must also read the NT in light of the OT. We must never forget that the Bible of the first-century church was the OT. If we somehow think that because we are NT Christians, we no longer need the OT, then we are completely out of sync with the church founded by our Lord. The fact of the matter is that the NT simply does not make sense apart from the OT. If you want to understand what it meant for our Lord to give himself as an atoning sacrifice for sinners, then you have to go back and understand what was happening when the OT priests offered sacrifices. For our Lord's death was a fulfillment of all those ritual sacrifices. He was the "Lamb slain before the foundation of the world."

This also applies to the moral code of the NT. It has been pointed out that the NT never explicitly forbids bestiality. Does that mean it is okay for Christians? Of course not! Again, we need to read the NT prohibitions against sexual immorality in light of the OT proscriptions against immorality. Read in this light, the NT condemns every type of immoral behavior also forbidden by the OT, including bestiality. Whoever breaks these least commandments will be called the least in the kingdom of heaven. The standard of holiness in the NT is not less than that of the OT.

We must beware of falling into the trap of those ancient heresies that taught that the God of the OT was different from the God of the NT. One of the more serious heresies to afflict the church as early as the second century was the Gnostic gospel preached by the followers of Marcion. Marcion taught that the Old and New Testaments were absolutely opposed to each other, and that the God of the OT was the Demiurge, "a cruel and unloving Being, and Judaism was an evil religion, a religion of law and works and self-righteousness." The NT, on the other hand, was a religion of the supreme God and his Son Jesus

and was a religion of grace, faith, and freedom.³ Accordingly, Marcion banned the OT and much of the NT with the exception of most of the epistles of Paul. Though Christians today would not go to the same extremes of the ancient Marcionites, the fact of the matter is that many Christians are all but Marcionite in their outlook upon the OT. We must recognize it for the heresy that it is. The God of the OT is the God of the NT.

What the apostle *was* teaching

Positively, what was the apostle teaching? He was teaching that the Law of Moses is no longer a barrier between Jew and Gentile. The people of God are no longer identified by the keeping of the Law of Moses. Circumcision is no longer the sign of the covenant between God and his people, baptism is. God's people are no longer primarily identified by a racial connection to Abraham, but by exercising the faith of Abraham. The door to belonging to the church is not participation in an elaborate ritual consisting of a multitude of holy days and sacrifices, but faith: "For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:27).

There are some Christians today who still believe that the Law of Moses in all its aspects is still applicable to the Christian. This is precisely the type of legalism that the apostle in our text is forbidding. In other places, we are explicitly told that we are not required to keep the food laws. In fact, Paul described those Christians as "weak" who believed they still needed to keep the food laws, and said that those who kept the food laws should not judge those who did not (Rom. 14:2-4). He also went on to say that the religious calendar of the Law was not necessary for sanctification: "He that regardeth the day, regardeth it unto the Lord; and he that regardeth not the day, to the Lord he doth not regard it. He that eateth, eateth to the Lord, for he giveth God thanks; and he that eateth not, to the Lord he eateth not, and giveth God thanks"

³Nick Needham, 2000 Years of Christ's Power, Vol. 1, p. 104.

(Rom. 14:6). To the Colossians, he wrote, “Let no man therefore judge you in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days: which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ” (Col. 2:16-17).

The apostle is saying that we are no longer under the Old Covenant. We no longer approach God through the priests ordained under the Law of Moses, but through the High Priest to whom the entire Aaronic priesthood pointed. And “the priesthood being changed, there is made of necessity a change also of the law” (Heb. 7:12). Rather, if we belong to Christ, we relate to him through the terms of the New Covenant. Our obligations to God under this covenant are spelled out in the New Testament, in the writings of the NT apostles and prophets (Eph. 2:20).

When we celebrate the Lord’s Supper, we are not celebrating the Passover, an OT ordinance, but something which points to the New Covenant that our Lord established by his death: “this is the new covenant in my blood” (1 Cor. 11:25). Every time we share Communion, we are reminding ourselves that we are participants, not in the Old Covenant which Moses instituted, but in the New Covenant purchased by our Lord’s redeeming death.

Note that this change of covenants required the death of Jesus Christ. The apostle writes that this wall, the law, came down by Christ, “in his flesh” (15). This phrase, “in his flesh” is almost certainly a reference to his death. You see this by the parallel between verses 15 and 16.⁴ In verse 15, Christ abolished the enmity between Jew and Gentile “in his flesh.” In verse 16, our Lord slays the enmity between man and God “by the cross.” It thus appears that “in his flesh” is parallel to “by the cross.” It follows that the obligation to obey the Law of Moses passed away because of the death of Jesus.

Why did it require the death of Jesus? It required the death of Jesus because the purpose of the Law of Moses was above all to point to the

⁴The Greek is somewhat ambiguous here. I am following the translation of the KJV here; the ESV also puts “in his flesh” with “enmity” or “hostility,” but does so in verse 14.

death of Jesus. "The law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian" (Gal. 3:24-25, ESV). The whole sacrificial system had to remain until it was fulfilled. And it was, in Jesus' death. He is the Paschal lamb. He is the Prophet, Priest, and King to whom all the OT prophets, priests, and kings pointed.

That is why it is ridiculous to insist upon keeping the ceremonial aspects of the Mosaic law. To do so would be to say that Jesus had not yet come and fulfilled the law. Why sacrifice a goat which will never take away sins, when we can look to Jesus who fully and completely took away the guilt of sin for those who believe in him, by bearing the punishment of their sins in his own body on the cross?

So the apostle is saying in verses 13-15 that, by his death, Christ has taken down the cause of hostility between Jew and Gentile by abolishing the law which was like a wall of partition between them. We are no longer under the Law of Moses as a covenant. We no longer have to keep the ceremonial law, but that does not mean that we are free to do whatever we want. We should beware of leaving legalism only to stray into antinomianism. As members of the New Covenant, we are under the law of Christ. Neither do we abandon the OT. We read the OT in light of our Lord's fulfillment of it. And we read the NT in light of the OT teaching. The Bible of the Christian is both the OT and the NT, because God is the God of both the old as well as the new covenant.

Christ is the one who ties both together. He is the Christ of the covenants. The Old Covenant pointed to him and the New Covenant was inaugurated by him. This is why we preach Christ and him crucified. He is the only redeemer of mankind. He is the only one in whom we can find eternal salvation, the forgiveness of sins, and wonderful fellowship in the presence of God forever. It is both the privilege and the responsibility of the church to share that all who believe in him will be saved.

CHAPTER XVII

PEACE WITH GOD, ACCESS TO GOD (EPH. 2:16-18)

IN THESE VERSES, we are promised something more wonderful than we could ever really imagine in our wildest dreams. It is summed up in the two words peace in verse 17 and access in verse 18. The peace that is promised is peace with God and the access that is promised is access to the Father. This is not something that is merely potential; it was truly and fully purchased upon the cross for all God's chosen people, for all who embrace Christ by faith with renewed hearts. It is not merely that we might have this peace someday or that we might have this access in the future, perhaps in heaven. No, the reality is, if we belong to Christ, we have peace with God right now and we have ongoing access to the Father through Christ in the Holy Spirit.

And yet, if we are honest with ourselves, too often these realities don't land on us the way they ought. I wonder why? Could it be that the promise of peace with God and access to him seems far away and unlikely because of the difficulties we are going through at the moment? Perhaps we question God's love for us when we seem to be at the end of our tether and there doesn't seem to be any hope of deliverance from our predicament. When we look around us and see the wind and the

waves raging, or when we look ahead and see the storm that is coming, God's love for us doesn't seem very real and therefore the promise of peace doesn't seem very believable.

Or perhaps peace with God just doesn't seem to be very practical. No, it's not so much peace with God that we want as peace in our current circumstances. We want peace from the hectic pace of life, from people who we feel are trying to pull the rug out from under us, from physical pain and weakness that dogs every moment of every day, from our own inadequacies that hamper every attempt to move forward with our lives. Worry and anxiety haunt us at every turn. Yes, we want peace, but we don't think it is peace with God that we need. We want peace with life!

Perhaps we don't think it's peace with God that we need because, when we look at the saints in the Bible and the saints in history, a strong relationship with God doesn't seem to correspond to peace in this life. David was doing just fine until he killed Goliath. He then had to spend the next decade or so of his life dodging King Saul's jealous rage. The apostle Paul was really doing great until he became a Christian. His life wasn't so great after that – beatings, stoning, ship-wreck, and so on. Of course, the greatest example is our Lord himself. His single purpose in coming into this world was to die an awful death upon a Roman instrument of torture. Who had a greater relationship with the Father than the Son?

It's not that we don't want peace that these truths don't land on us the way they ought. The fact of the matter is that we are all peace-seekers. Everyone wants peace. I don't think there is a human being who has ever lived or will ever live who has not spent or will not spend their entire lives seeking peace. On some level, everything we do is an attempt to get peace. Some people go for it by immersing themselves in work. Some people go for it by immersing themselves in entertainment. Some people seek it by pursuing wealth and comfort. Some people pursue it in thrilling exploits and a dare-devil lifestyle. Some people seek it by living in denial of reality.

This morning, I want us to see that the greatest thing we need and the greatest thing we actually want is promised us in Christ: peace with God. It is not gained by denying reality. It is not gained by pursuing the things of this world. Nor is it gained by denying oneself of every aspect of this world. Rather, it is gained by finding a relationship with God the Father through the sacrificial ministry of God the Son and the inner ministry of God the Holy Spirit.

If then we want to see that peace with God is our greatest need and most precious treasure, then the first thing we must do is to do exactly what the apostle exhorted the Ephesians to do: to remember (11). What were they to remember? They were to remember “that at that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world” (12). This is where everyone is who is yet outside of Christ, who is not connected to the saving benefits of his atoning death through faith.

In other words, it doesn't matter how good you have it right now, if you are without Christ. For to be without Christ is to be without any real hope. Honest atheists have recognized this. I think it was Bertram Russell who said that we have to live life in the face of despair. He understood that, apart from God and the promise of life after death, there is nothing really to hope in. We are left with despair, and so you live life in the face of despair. All the riches in the world don't give hope. All the comforts in the world don't give hope, and, therefore, they don't give peace. How can you have peace, even if you define it merely as inner tranquility, if you are living life in the face of despair? That is the very opposite of peace. No wonder that we read in the prophesy of Isaiah (and which Paul was obviously thinking of when he wrote Ephesians 2:11-22): “I [God] create the fruit of the lips: Peace, peace to him that is far off, and to him that is near, saith the LORD; and I will heal him. But the wicked are like the troubled sea, when it cannot rest, whose waters cast up mire and dirt. There is no peace, saith my God, to the wicked” (Isa. 59:19-21).

Hopelessness and, therefore, absence of true and lasting peace cannot be escaped with money or possessions or earthly comforts or worldly security. Everyone who is outside of Christ is also hopeless and without peace, no matter how rich or affluent or well-liked or famous they are in this world. Thus, when we begin to think to ourselves that we will have peace and inner tranquility if we could just get that better job or if we could just be liked by such and such a person, then we have bought into the lie that the things of this world can give us peace. More to the point, if we think that the gospel is not practical because it does not address our current worries, then it is because we have believed the falsehood that this world can buy us peace.

The thing is, we know this on some level. We see evidence of it all around us. Why is it that every time you turn around, you hear a story about one of the famous and wealthy who are just destroying their lives through really bad choices: drugs, alcohol, or some other type of recklessness? If the things of this world really could bring you peace, then the rich and famous should be some of the most contented people in the world. And yet we know that is not the case; in fact, in many cases, they are some of the most miserable people in the world. And yet such is our madness that we believe that if we just had what they have, we would find the peace that has eluded us.

In fact, the gospel is practical. Having a relationship with God is the only really practical way to live. To live any other way is really to be living in denial. To live as if this life were all there was to it, that is denial. Do you remember the parable that our Lord told of the rich fool? It was in response to a man who was upset with his brother who had wronged him financially by not sharing his father's inheritance with him. To this our Lord responded: "Take heed, and beware of covetousness: for a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth" (Lk. 12:15). If we believe that, then we will go after peace in the things of this world. To enforce the danger of such thinking, our Lord went on with this parable: "The ground of a certain rich man brought forth plentifully: and he thought within himself, saying, What

shall I do, because I have no room were to bestow my fruits? And he said, This will I do: I will pull down my barns, and build greater; and there will I bestow all my fruits and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry. But God said unto him, Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided? So is he that layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God" (Lk. 12:16-21). How practical is it to spend all your life laying up wealth to the neglect of your soul? It's not practical, it's stupid. This parable reminds me of the story of the man who jumped off of a tall building. Half-way down, someone asked him, "How's it going?" To which he responded, "So far so good." Everyone who is not rich toward God is like that man that jumped off that building. They are flying through this life downward and downward toward the judgment seat of God. "So far so good," is what they tell us. But as they say, it's not the fall that kills a man, it's the sudden stop.

Every one of us will come to that sudden stop. It's called death. The Bible teaches that on the other side of that sudden stop is the judgment seat of God: "It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment" (Heb. 9:27). Therefore, the most practical thing you can do, no matter how bad your present circumstances are, no matter how un-peaceful your life is in this world, is to make sure that you have a relationship with the living God. The fact of the matter is that the things of this world only last a little while, in comparison with eternity. To spend all your effort toward securing a little peace in this world, to the neglect of the next, is nothing short of insanity.

That brings us to the other problem. Perhaps we can see that having a relationship with God is practical. The other problem is, how can I be sure that he loves me when all around me is turmoil and trouble? This thinking is rooted in the wrong belief that the evidence for God's love of us is to be found in worldly success and earthly prosperity. This is simply not the case. There are a multitude of reasons why God lets us go through stressful times. One reason is that God is rooting out the evil

that is inside of us. We need affliction in our lives; it purifies us. As the psalmist wrote, “It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn thy statutes” (Ps. 119:71). Sanctification just doesn’t happen apart from the furnace of trial: “ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations: that the trial of your faith, being much more precious than [that] of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 1:6-7).

Another reason we need to be tried is that we can never really go deep in our experience of the love and power of God apart from the trials we experience in our lives. Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians begins and ends with this truth. In chapter 1, he writes: “Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God. For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also aboundeth by Christ” (2 Cor. 1:3-6). By the way, this text also gives another reason for suffering in our lives: we can never really empathize with others in suffering and minister to them until we have suffered a little ourselves. The other big truth here is that God is the one who comforts us in all our tribulation; not just some but all. We experience God in it.

Close to the end of the epistle, Paul reminds us of his own experience: “And he [the Lord] said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ’s sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong” (2 Cor. 12:9-10). Paul was so convinced of this truth, that he not only did not complain and doubt God’s love in his suffering, but gloried in his infirmities. We need to remember that these are not the words of some philosopher in some ivory tower, but a real man who suffered a lot in this life and who, nevertheless, could testify to God’s

power and love and grace and mercy even in the midst of weakness and suffering.

There is another reason. Again, in 2 Corinthians, Paul writes this: “For which cause we faint not; but though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal” (2 Cor. 4:16-18). I don’t understand all the implications of these verses. But one thing at least seems clear: Paul is saying that our afflictions that we experience in this world and in this time are producing for us a richer experience of God in the world to come. The trials of this life are not just bumps along the road to heaven; they are integral to preparing us to experience more of God in eternity.

We should not think that our troubles are signs of God’s thoughtlessness or carelessness. No, they bear every sign of our Father’s care for us. He does not abandon us in trouble. He comforts us in all of them. When we go through the fire and flood, God is with us. He is our refuge and strength in time of trouble. He sanctifies us through trials and makes us more like his Son and therefore more blessed. And in our trials he is preparing us for unspeakable glory.

So we have no reason for doubting that peace with God is really offered to us through his Son. Of course this is the greatest reason to believe that what God offers us is true. The death of Christ upon the cross not only purchased reconciliation with God, it also proved once and forever that God is infinitely serious when he comes to us and gives us a message of peace.

What is the peace that God offers us? It is clearly not a stress-free life in this world. That is, it is not the promise of a life of ease and comfort this side of heaven. In fact, the apostles told believers that “we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). It is something much more than that. As we have already observed, that

doesn't give you peace anyway. What is offered to us in the message of the gospel? When the apostle says that he "came and preached peace to you which were afar off, and to them that were nigh" (17), what is being preached?

To answer this question, we must go back to verse 16: "And that he [Christ] might reconcile both [Jew and Gentile] unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby." Now as we have already noted in an earlier message, the apostle is arguing that in Christ peace has been achieved between Jew and Gentile (verses 13-15) and between both Jew and Gentile and God (verses 16-18). There is a horizontal dimension to this peace and there is a vertical dimension to this peace. The most fundamental aspect to the peace that Christ purchased on the cross is peace with God. That is what Paul is talking about in verse 16. In fact, the peace between Jew and Gentile is predicated upon their common reconciliation with God.

Note how Paul describes it: "having slain the enmity thereby." That word "enmity" means "hostility" or "hatred." Some think this is still a reference to the hostility that existed between Jew and Gentile. I don't think so; Paul has already dealt with that in the previous verses. No, this is hostility between man and God in verse 16. On the cross, Jesus Christ dealt with the most fundamental problem between God and man: the just wrath of God against us on account of our God-denying, God-ignoring, and God-despising choices in which we chose our own sovereignty over God's rightful sovereignty over us. We are traitors against the God of heaven. Sin is not just the problem with the human race; sin is man's fist raised against a holy and just and good God.

The hostility begins with us; we are hostile toward God. Paul writes in Romans, "the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be" (8:7). We must not think that, because we are not outright atheists, we are exempt from this description. Every sinful act and affection and thought is a usurpation of God's

rightful claim upon your life; it is an act of treason. We are not merely victims of circumstance. By nature we do not love God, we hate him.

There is no reason to expect that God must do anything good for us. And yet, God has done the greatest thing for us. He did not wait for us to mend our ways. He does not wait until we are better. The fact of the matter is, we can never do enough to undo all the ugliness that we have introduced into God's good world through our sin. We can never wash away the stains. So God did it for us. He killed the hostility by nailing it to the cross. Paul put it like this to the Romans, "For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. . . God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:6, 8).

Let us remind ourselves what Christ our Lord did upon the cross. The guilt of our sins, which should in justice have brought God's wrath down upon our own heads, Christ took upon himself. He bore God's wrath upon the cross. Not God's wrath against the sins of Christ, for he had none; but God's wrath against the sins of his people. This is what Paul means when he says that Christ reconciled us to God by the cross. Having borne God's wrath and satisfied his justice against our sins, he has killed God's hostility against us.

Do you understand what this means? It means that all for whom Christ died are no longer the enemies of God. God is no longer against them; he is for them in every sense of the word. He is their Father, he is their friend, and he is their refuge and protector. He loves them and gives them eternal life. He gives them peace. This is the peace that is preached in the gospel. This is what is offered to those far and near. Our Lord told his disciples on the eve of his death: "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid" (Jn. 14:27). Thank God that he does not give us the peace of the world! He has given us something infinitely better.

The result is that we have access to God: "For through him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father" (18). This means that we

have a way of approach unto God as our Father, and this way is never barred, is never shut up. The door is always open. The access is continual. The OT worshipper approached God as it were from a distance; we approach him directly by Christ in the Spirit.

What should we do, then? We should do exactly what the author of Hebrews exhorts us to: “Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh; and having an high priest over the house of God; let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water” (Heb. 10:19-22).

This access is only for those who are in Christ. Are you in Christ? Have you entrusted your soul to him? You may feel that you are not worthy; of course you are not, but he has been worthy for us. All who believe in him are washed in his blood and clothed with his righteousness and are granted access to God.

CHAPTER XVIII

WHAT IS THE CHURCH?

(EPH. 2:19-22)

IN THE WEST, WHERE INDIVIDUALISM reigns supreme, we have privatized almost everything, including the Christian faith. But it's interesting, isn't it, as we look at Paul's words here in Ephesians 2, that one of the overriding concerns of the cross is to bring people together. The reconciliation that was accomplished on the cross, doesn't just reconcile people to God – though that is the main thing – it also reconciles man to man. And it doesn't stop there; it brings men and women into the community of the church. We are not meant to live out the Christian life in solitude, cut off from other believers. We are to live together in the fellowship of those who have also been called out of darkness and into the marvelous light of Christ.

And yet, despite the clear importance of the church, there is a lot of confusion as to what the church is. Too often, I think, church is equated with the meeting that happens on Sunday morning. Though this event is certainly necessary and very important to the life of the church (we are not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together, Heb. 10:25), this is not the church. If what we do on Sunday morning is the sum total of what defines us as a church, then we need to think a little more carefully

as to what we are about. Not too long ago, I heard a prominent voice in the Christian community say that he didn't think the church was up to the task of confronting the rising secularism of our culture. His statement frankly alarmed me. How can you have so little confidence in God's institution? If change doesn't come from the church, where would it come from? Then I realized that he was thinking of the church as a group of people who do no more than meet together to watch something once a week, if that often. Yes, I agree, that will not change society. Because that is not the church!

On the other hand, some people think that church is just getting together with other believers, in any context. This is closer to the truth, but it is still far from the Biblical reality. They emphasize fellowship, which is important, but they stop far short of what the Bible describes as Christian fellowship. They balk at the notion of a "service," and will ascribe such things to legalism and formalism. For such people, a church service is no good; they would rather go to the park and talk theology over hot dogs. Fellowship among Christians is truly in short supply, and ironically our technological society has begun replacing Biblical fellowship with media. And yet, the NT church is much bigger than talking theology over hot dogs.

Others think of the church purely in terms of programs. Again, I want to say right off the bat that I'm not against programs, but secular organizations run programs. Doing stuff together is not what really defines a group of people as the church, no matter how impactful such efforts might be.

What then, is the church? Well, we can give a functional definition. When one looks into the NT, one sees that the church is the community of God's called-out people (*ekklesia*) who worship together (Eph. 5:19,20), pray together (1 Tim. 2), disciple one another (Rom. 15:14), submit to spiritual leaders together (Heb. 13:7, 17), hear and respond together in faith to Spirit-filled preaching (2 Tim. 4:1-5), who hold one another accountable (Gal. 6:1-5), and who share with each other (1 Tim. 6:17). All these things can be illustrated by definite examples in the book

of Acts. This is not a complete list. All the “one-anothers” of the NT go here as well. It thus becomes immediately clear that limiting the church to an event, to a program, or to theology over hot dogs, is far, far from all that God has for us in the church.

However, the problem with purely functional definitions is that they beg the question, why? Why do we do all these things together? Why these particular things and not others? And so on. That is why it is also very important to get down to a more ontological definition of the church. What I mean by that is, what is the church before it does anything? What is the essence of the church? Because if we understand that, then we will have a better grasp on what we are to do. I think this is especially relevant for our church in this season. As we consider what God would have us to do, we need to always go back and measure such goals against what we are.

Here in our text, the apostle Paul helps us. Though the word “church” itself is never used, we know that is what the apostle is talking about here. For the imagery he uses, he applies elsewhere to the church. Paul describes his readers as belonging to the household of God; in 1 Tim. 3:15 he says that the house of God is the church of God. In 1 Cor. 3, Paul describes the church as a temple, just as he does here. In Eph. 2:19-22, we have a description of the NT church.

In describing the church, the apostle uses three metaphors: kingdom, family, and temple. The first two are found in verse 19, and the third is expounded in verses 20-22. So as we ask the apostle Paul what he thinks the church is, he would say that the church is the community of those who belong to the kingdom and family of God, and who are being incorporated into the temple of God. This morning, I want to try to unpack what is implied in these metaphors. Hopefully, as we go forward in our vision-casting, we will look back to what we are in Christ in order to determine how to look forward in our service to him and his kingdom.

The church is the community of those who belong to the kingdom of God.

Now I recognize that the church and the kingdom of God are not strictly synonymous. God's kingdom rules over all (Ps. 103:19), and the church is not a universal community. It has always been, and will always be a minority community in the world. Nevertheless, the church consists of those who have bowed the knee to Jesus as their King and who find their identity as citizens of the kingdom of heaven. This is what the apostle is saying when he writes, "Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints."

This is in contrast with the description of their former state in verse 12. "At that time" they were "aliens from the commonwealth of Israel." Remember that before Christ came, God's rule among men was most closely connected with the nation of Israel. Israel, in its most glorious state under the rule of Kings David and Solomon had been a theocracy; the true God was the acknowledged ruler. The Gentiles were for the most part alienated from this visible expression of God's rule upon the earth. But now, this is no longer the case. In Christ, God is forming a new community upon the earth, the church, and this community is now the visible expression of God's rule upon the earth.

Of course, the citizenship celebrated here is more than just belonging to the church here on earth. It means that we are citizens of heaven, as Paul reminds the Philippian believers: "For our citizenship is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ: who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself" (Phil. 3:20, 21). The kingdom of which we are now a part has no borders and it has no end. It is a kingdom which will find its ultimate fulfillment in the new heavens and new earth.

As such, the church is connected to the saints in every age. "Fellow citizens with the saints." The saints are those who in every age, from Adam until now, who have embraced with faith the rule of God over

their lives, who have bent their knees to the sovereignty of God over their plans and choices and desires. It is a truly global and timeless community.

There are at least three implications for the church that arise from this metaphor. First of all, we need to be constantly reminded that it is vain that we claim to belong to the kingdom of God if we are not willing to submit our entire lives to the lordship of Christ. Though it is true that our works can never inherit eternal life, and though it is gloriously true that we are justified by faith alone in Christ alone, that does not mean that works have no place in the life of the Christian. Faith is necessary, but faith without works is dead, as James put it. We are saved by grace unto good works (Eph. 2:9-10). The fact of the matter is that you cannot truly have put your trust in Christ without repenting of your sins. Christ does not present himself to you merely as a Savior, but as Savior and Lord. You must have the whole Christ; he does not come to you in pieces for you to pick and choose as you like.

That reality is why any healthy church is going to be a place that promotes holiness and discipleship. Healthy churches are going to be places where church discipline is practiced. They are going to be places where sin is lovingly confronted, not conveniently ignored. Of course that does not mean that we are to be harsh or unkind. It does not mean that we are to be inflexible or self-righteous. It does mean that we follow Christ. We embrace the sinners with love and with the same love call them to repentance.

There is also another implication from this description of the church that we need to hear: since the church is borderless and timeless, we need to be careful that we don't just define our mission purely in terms of our own locality. From Paul's epistles, we know that in the first century, churches in Greece sent money to help churches in Judea. Christians had a global mindset even then, and we need to have the same. To the extent that we can, we should be willing to help churches in other parts of the world. This is an often overlooked responsibility of the church.

We are sometimes so focused on helping those who don't know Christ in other parts of the world, that we forget about those who do.

The third implication is that we are to be concerned about world missions. We cannot belong to the kingdom of God and pray, "Thy kingdom come," without wanting to see the saving rule of Christ embraced by more and more people in every part of the world. This is why Paul was in prison; he was in prison because he had made it his mission "to make all men see what is the fellowship of the mystery" (Eph. 3:9). May God bless our church to be a part of God's world-wide mission.

The church is the community of those who belong to the family of God.

In Christ, we belong to the family of God. It is why, when we pray, we call God, "Father." Christians are people who embrace God as their Father through Christ and who receive one another as brothers and sisters. We belong to "the household of God." One commentary notes that the world the apostle uses here "implies a close intimate family."¹ God does not welcome us to his family like David welcomed Absalom back from exile; rather, God embraces us with open arms into the intimacy of the fellowship of his family.

This is one of the reasons, by the way, why we have to be careful that we don't define church so narrowly as to exclude members of God's family from it. Unfortunately, the need for denominational commitments has led to a very unbiblical view of the church. For some, the church is defined primarily in terms of externals like baptism and ordination. But here, in our text, the apostle describes the church as the household of God, as he does in 1 Tim. 3:15. That does not mean that we give up certain denominational commitments, but it does mean that we are willing to recognize that the church is bigger than our own local fellowship or denomination. We all know how dreadful it is when

¹Hoechner, p. 384.

siblings exclude each other; how much more horrible must it be when sons and daughters of God exclude each other from mutual fellowship!

Just as the metaphor of kingdom speaks to the need of holiness in the church, so the metaphor of family speaks to the need of love in the church. “Home is where the heart is” is a message we see displayed in many homes, and it should certainly be true of the church. The community of the people of God should be a place where we feel at home. It should be a place where we can let down our guard, so to speak, where we can feel vulnerable. It should be a place where we can be honest with each other without getting our heads bitten off. The church should be a community of people who want to serve each other. It should be a place where washing the disciples’ feet is lived out in many practical ways. Remember what our Lord said: “By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another” (Jn. 13:35). “Bear ye one anothers burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2).

By the way, kingdom and family are not mutually exclusive categories. Paul put both the need for holiness and the need for love together in Eph. 4:15, when he wrote, “But speaking the truth in love, [we] may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ.” We grow in holiness through the embrace of truth in our hearts. But truth is most convincingly embraced when it is received in love. It is very unfortunate that some people don’t know how to be zealous for holiness without being ugly about it. How unlike our Lord that is! There was no one on earth more zealous for holiness and the glory of God than Jesus Christ. And yet there was no one on the earth more gentle and loving than he. I love how the prophet describes him: “A bruised reed shall he not break, and smoking flax shall he not quench” (Mt. 12:20, quoting Isa. 42:1-3). It was he who said, “My yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Mt. 11:29).

The church is the community of those who are being incorporated into the temple of God.

The third metaphor Paul uses, and which he spends the most time developing, is that of the temple. He writes: “And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone; in whom all the building fitly framed together growing unto an holy temple in the Lord: in whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit” (20-22).

There are two words for temple that are used in the NT. One word is used to refer to the totality of the temple precincts in Jerusalem: the court of the Gentiles, the court of the women, and the court of Israel and the priests. The other word is used to refer to the inner sanctum, the temple proper, where the priests would offer sacrifice and burn incense to God. It is this word that the apostle uses to describe the church. The church is the place where God meets with his people in grace and salvation. The church is the “habitation of God through the Spirit.”

It is true that the individual Christian is the dwelling place of God through the Spirit. Paul teaches that in 1 Cor. 6. But in 1 Cor. 3, when Paul refers to the temple of God, he is not talking about the individual believer, but as here he is talking about the church of God as a corporate reality. We must not miss the significance of that! In a day when people are adopting drive-thru churches or resorting to the Hour of Power as their weekly encounter with the church, we need to be reminded that God reserves a special blessing for the church as the gathered community of his people. We are meant to be together, and God blesses his church when they meet together.

You see that in the imagery that Paul uses here. He says that in Christ the building is “fitly framed together.” Today, it really doesn’t matter as much how the bricks are shaped because we use mortar to put them together. In Paul’s day, they didn’t use mortar and so there was “an elaborate process of cutting and smoothing the stones so that they fit exactly next to each other.”² The idea is that God is shaping us and smoothing us so that we will fit perfectly into the temple that he is building. That means fitting exactly next to other believers! This is a

²Hoechner, p. 409.

beautiful picture of the harmony and unity enjoyed by believers who, before their conversion, were at each other's throats. We need each other for the temple that God is building.

A wonderful illustration of this comes from the ministry of the Welsh preacher, Martyn Lloyd-Jones. There was a witch in the town where he was preaching who was on her way to take her own life, when she passed by the church building and heard the service in progress. For some reason, she went in – and as she entered, she said that she felt a power, not a dirty power which she had known through witchcraft, but a clean, holy, wonderful power. And it changed her! God was working in the gathering of his people! We need to make sure that we don't miss the great blessing of the church. God didn't ordain the internet, he ordained the church. He didn't ordain parachurch ministries, he ordained the church. God is building his church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. If you really want to experience his blessing, you will get in on what God is doing; and what he is doing is building his church. To abandon the church is to forsake your own blessing.

In describing the church, Paul talks about its foundation. This is very important. One of the sad things about the church is that through history it has often been mistaken about its foundation. Paul says that the foundation of the church is “the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone.” The apostles and (New Testament) prophets are foundational in the sense that the church's beliefs and doctrines are grounded in their teaching. God communicated his truth to the church through the apostles and prophets. This was done once: “are built upon the foundation...” God is not still laying the foundation. That has been done. As Jude put it, we are to contend earnestly “for the faith once delivered unto the saints” (Jude 3). We are not to add to that foundation.

The contents of this foundation are to be found in the NT. It is not found in the tradition of the church fathers, nor in the traditions of our grandfathers! It may be illuminated by them, but it is not defined by them. This is why I am so thankful for the Reformation emphasis

on sola Scriptura, “Scripture alone.” With Martin Luther, we ought to boldly proclaim, “Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason, I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have often contradicted themselves; my conscience is captive to the word of God. I cannot and will not recant, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand, I can do no other. God help me. Amen.”

Jesus is the “chief cornerstone.” Ancient builders laid the cornerstone first. It was the most important stone in the foundation because it determined how the other foundational stones would be laid. “It is that stone by which every other stone in the foundation and the superstructure must be measured.”³ Christ is the measure of the church. The message of the church is Christ and him crucified. The life of the church is the abundant life purchased by him on the cross. Everything about the church is to point to Christ as our Savior and Lord and Brother and Friend. We witness to the fact that those who rest their lives upon him will never be disappointed.

³Ibid, p. 407.

Part 3:
Paul's Apostolic Calling
& Prayer
(Ephesians 3)

CHAPTER XIX

DO NOT LOSE HEART (EPH. 3:1-13)

WE NEED TO REMEMBER that the apostle Paul was in prison when he wrote this. Indeed, the apostle himself reminds us in the opening words of chapter 3: “For this cause I Paul, the prisoner of Jesus Christ for you Gentiles. . .” (1). In 4:1 he again describes himself as “the prisoner of the Lord,” and in 5:20 as “an ambassador in bonds.” Technically, he was the prisoner of the Romans, awaiting trial before Caesar. But Paul never describes himself in those terms; it is always, “the prisoner of the Lord.”

This personal description was significant because, for one thing, it was a reminder that ultimately it is Christ who is sovereign. He is the prisoner of the Lord because, on one level, it was the Lord who put him there. Paul knew from experience that, if he was in prison, it was because it was the Lord who put him there. Why did he get thrown into prison in Philippi? Because a jailor needed to hear the gospel and be saved. Why was he then in prison? Because the Roman emperor Nero needed to be confronted with the truth of the gospel. Yes, he was a prisoner of the Romans. What they didn’t realize is that the Emperor of the Universe had him there for a reason. God is sovereign, and we must never forget

that. They put Paul in chains, but they could not bind the power of the gospel: "I suffer trouble, as an evil doer, even unto bonds; but the word of God is not bound" (2 Tim. 2:9).

It was also a reminder that he was not in prison because he had committed some egregious wrong against Roman (or Jewish) society. No, it was because he was a minister of Jesus Christ. In particular, it was because of the message that the Gentiles are "fellow heirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel" (6) that his fellow Jews had risen against him and accused him to the authorities. They had tried to kill him multiple times for the proclamation of the gospel. It is a very sad reality that, though this message is the very thing we need to embrace in order to be reconciled to God, yet because of human sinfulness and unbelief it is also the very thing that unregenerate men and women want least to hear.

In Paul's context, the most problematic aspect of the gospel to his Jewish audience was this insistence that God is creating a new society composed of Jew and Gentile, and that the door into this new society is not the observance of the law but faith in Christ. Paul tells the Galatians, "And I, brethren, if I yet preach circumcision, why do I yet suffer persecution? Then is the offense of the cross ceased" (Gal. 5:11). He reminds them that the reason his legalist opponents in Galatia insisted on their converts keeping the law was "lest they should suffer persecution for the cross of Christ" (Gal. 6:12). Paul refused to compromise the gospel, and so he got persecuted. He bore in the body the marks of the Lord Jesus (Gal. 6:17).

The reality is that following Christ does not always lead to people liking you. Sometimes, perhaps more often than we would like, it means that people will not only not like us, they will despise us. Faithfulness to Christ can be a lonely road in this world. It is not a popular way. Didn't our Lord remind us of that when he described his way as a narrow and hard way, one that few traverse (cf. Mt. 7:13-14)? If we follow Christ, we need to remember that we are following him whom the prophet described as "despised and rejected of men" (Isa. 53:3). I think this is

important to remember in our day because the perception is that, if you are a faithful follower of Jesus, everyone will see you are a nice person and appreciate all the things you do. On the other hand, if you stir up the malice of unbelievers against you, it must be because you said or did something inappropriate. But this is just not so. Jesus was the best person who ever lived on this earth, and his own neighbors tried to throw him off a cliff (cf. Lk. 4). In fact, our Lord says the opposite of the conventional wisdom: “Woe unto you, when all men shall speak well of you! For so did their fathers to the false prophets” (Lk. 6:26). Beware when you are popular. You might just be a false prophet. Paul was not a false prophet; he was a faithful minister of Jesus Christ and it landed him in prison.

At the end of chapter 2, Paul had just finished describing the double reconciliation of Jew and Gentile to God and to each other that our Lord accomplished through his death on the cross, and he was apparently then going to pray for the Ephesians. Verses 2-13 are a sort of parenthesis. In verse 1, Paul says, “For this cause I Paul . . .” and then doesn’t come back to what he was going to say until verse 14, where he repeats in identical language, “For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,” and then he prays. So in verse 2, Paul breaks off from this intention to pray, and instead gives them this lengthy description of the mystery and ministry that he has received from Christ. The question is, obviously, why would Paul do that?

I think the reason is that, as Paul is describing himself as a prisoner of Jesus Christ, he remembers something else. He remembers that many of the saints in Ephesus are discouraged because of his imprisonment. We know this because of what Paul writes in verse 13, at the very end of his parenthetical excursion: “Wherefore I desire that ye faint not at my tribulations for you, which is your glory.” They were fainting, losing heart, becoming discouraged precisely because he was a prisoner of Jesus Christ. Despite the fact that our Lord himself has warned us that following him is not a participation in a happy parade down Main Street, somehow we get the impression that, if we follow him, all should

go well. When it doesn't, we begin to lose heart. Perhaps something like that had happened to the Ephesians. They didn't understand why someone like Paul, a man personally commissioned by Christ himself, would suffer as he did at the hands of wicked men. And so Paul writes verses 2-13 to keep them from losing heart.

It is, therefore, very important for us to get the big picture here and to see what Paul is doing. Fundamentally, in verses 2-13, he is giving the Ephesians who are discouraged reasons to overcome their discouragement. If you are struggling this morning with discouragement, if you feel that you are on the verge of losing heart, if you feel faint, then you need to hear what the apostle has to say. You need to take the pastoral medicine that he is about to administer to these weary believers.

The key to overcoming discouragement is found in verse 13, where Paul says that his sufferings for them are their "glory." This was very important for them (and us) to see. You see, there are two approaches you can take when you are confronted with suffering, whether yours or someone else's. One approach is to try to understand why the suffering is taking place, to understand the reason behind it. I think this approach is fundamentally flawed, because there is no way this side of heaven that we will ever be able to understand all the reasons why we or others suffer as we do. The big lesson from the Book of Job is that God never explained to Job why he suffered. God never let Job in on his meeting with Satan. Rather, God tells Job that he was not in the position to understand or even to ask why. No human being has the right to shake their fist at God and demand answers. God is not the one who needs to be justified; we are the ones who need to be justified.

The other approach is the one that the apostle takes. It is to place our sufferings and trials in the light of God's redemptive purposes for us. It is to see our tribulations against the backdrop of the glory that God has reserved for his elect. Paul had seen glory, the glory of Christ and the glory that he gives. He knew that no amount of suffering in this world would be able to diminish, not in the very least, the glory that belongs by grace to the children of God: "For I reckon that the sufferings of this

present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us” (Rom. 8:18).

Our problem is that we often do compare our sufferings with the glory to come. We so fixate on them that we diminish the immensity of the reward that is ours in Christ. When we do that, we begin to lose heart.

I do not want to give the impression that we are to pretend that our sufferings are not real or tragic or even at times unbearable. We are not commanded to bear up like a Stoic and act like we do not feel the pain. Our Lord wept at Lazarus’ tomb and in the Garden of Gethsemane he was under so much duress that he sweat as it were great drops of blood. Some of us will bear mental and emotional scars to the day of our death, and that is just reality. There is nothing sinful about being human. So I am not saying that the key to dealing with suffering so that we do not lose heart is to pretend that we don’t feel the hurt and pain. We are not supposed to live in denial that our suffering is real and hard and painful and sometimes lifelong.

We don’t live in denial of present suffering. But neither do we live in denial of future glory. Paul reminds the Ephesians that his sufferings for them have secured for them the glory to come. He is in prison for preaching the gospel, yes. This preaching led to their receiving the gospel, by which they became fellow heirs, members of the body of Christ, and partakers of his promise in Christ (6). Note that Paul is not the least bit sorry that he has done this. The ministry, which led to his imprisonment, was not a matter of regret for Paul, it was an occasion of incredible and intense gratitude: “unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ” (8). Regardless of what Paul was suffering or would suffer, this reality could never be taken away from him: “in whom [Christ] we have boldness and access [to God the Father] with confidence by the faith of him” (12).

In other words, the key to not losing heart is to remind ourselves that we are heirs to unspeakable and incomparable glory in Christ. You see

this emphasis all over the NT. For example, to the Romans, Paul writes, “Rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation” (12:12). I don’t think it was an accident that Paul put those two things together. They who persevere in trials are precisely those who rejoice in hope.

You see this in the apostle Peter’s epistles. He writes that they have been born again to a living hope “to an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed at the last time. Wherein ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness though manifold temptations: that the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried by fire, might be found unto praise and honor and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 1:3-7). I think it is very significant that Peter’s reflections on their sufferings are bracketed before and after by his reminders of the glory to come. I also want to notice the dual reality of rejoicing and heaviness that described the experience of these Christians. Faith in Christ does not make the heaviness disappear. It is balanced by rejoicing in hope, and in that hope we can find the strength to persevere in the midst of trials.

Again, in chapter 4 of 1 Peter, we read, “Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you: but rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ’s sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad with exceeding joy” (12-13). We should not think it strange that those who follow Jesus Christ should suffer. He suffered. His whole life was marked by suffering. When he was born, his parents had to spirit him away to Egypt because Herod wanted to kill him. When he began his ministry, his neighbors wanted to throw him off a cliff. Finally, he was arrested and crucified. He was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. So when we respond to his call, “Follow me,” it should not surprise us if we find fiery trials along the way. We are simply following our Savior. But this is not the whole story; our sufferings are his sufferings, and as his suffering gave way to immeasurable glory, so our trials will

someday give way to indescribable glory. We may be in heaviness now, but there is coming a day when all will give way to “exceeding joy.”

Of course our Lord himself taught this at the end of the Beatitudes. “Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness’ sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted the prophets which were before you” (Mt. 5:10-12). Why should you rejoice in the midst of persecution? Surely there is no reason to rejoice! And yet, our Savior tells us that it is precisely at that moment that we should rejoice: “for great is your reward in heaven.” It is only as we keep our eyes upon the reward that we will be able to be patient in tribulation.

The apostles lived this out. This was not merely theological discourse to them. When Peter and John were arrested and then beaten for preaching in the name of Jesus Christ, we are told that “they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name” (Acts 5:41). We see the same for believers throughout history, men and women who were willing to undergo the most brutal sufferings for the name of Christ because they kept their eyes on the hope of glory. There are millions of God’s people in heaven today who can testify to the reality that faith in Christ will never disappoint.

Many of the passages that we’ve referenced refer to believers suffering for their faith. The NT authors focus on this because the church faced violent persecution from the very start and believers had to be prepared for that. The fact of the matter is, even in the West, we will inevitably face some form of persecution if we are faithful to Christ. “All who will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution” (2 Tim. 3:12). We should not think that only those sufferings which are the direct result of persecution for the sake of Christ are addressed by our hope in Christ. When Paul writes that “the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory,” there is no indication

that he is thinking just of sufferings due to persecution. Rather, we should take his meaning in the broadest possible sense. When we lose someone very dear to us, that is suffering. We are not immune to it. The pain can be indescribable. And yet, we know that all our suffering is Christ's suffering. Because it is his suffering, we can be sure that behind our suffering will come the grace and comfort of our Savior that bears us up and keeps us going until the day we are face to face with him in incomparable glory.

Now there are many people, especially in our day, who, if they heard me say this, would simply respond by saying that I am just dishing up pie in the sky. They would say that all this nonsense about hope is simply wish-fulfillment for people who want to escape reality. The first thing I would say to that would be to ask, could it be possible that the desire for there to be no heaven and no hope beyond this world be nothing more than wish-fulfillment for those who have no desire to meet the God of heaven?

The second thing I would say, and the more important thing, is that we have every reason to believe that this hope is not simply pie in the sky. This is because our hope is built on the fact of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Peter describes the hope of the Christian as a living hope "by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (1 Pet. 1:3). Our hope is anchored in an event of history that took place in Judea 2000 years ago. It was an event that was witnessed by every one of the apostles, who turned from fearful and trembling recluses to courageous and lion-like witnesses for Christ. It was witnessed, according to the apostle Paul in 1 Cor. 15:6, by more than 500 eye witnesses. Then we have the testimony of Paul himself, who met Christ on the road to Damascus and turned the persecutor into an ambassador for Christ. There simply is no good explanation for the meteoric rise of the Christian church in Palestine if Christ did not rise from the dead. Of course, in some sense every believer in Christ has met the living and risen Christ. He has raised us from a death in sin and given us life in Christ. Jesus our Lord arose. He did not rise simply as an individual but as the first fruits

of all who belong to him: “But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the first fruits of them that slept” (1 Cor. 15:20).

For that reason, we have hope. We don’t have hope because we are good enough to deserve the glory to come. No, we have hope because Jesus Christ was good for us, because on the cross he paid the penalty for sin and invites all who know their sinfulness to embrace the forgiveness that he offers to those who believe. It is because of that we can have hope. It is because of our Lord’s triumph over the grave that we can have confidence that one day we too will triumph over the grave. “But thanks be unto God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmovable, always abounding the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord” (1 Cor. 15:58).

CHAPTER XX

GIVEN BY REVELATION

(EPH. 3:1-6)

IN A COUPLE OF DAYS we come to Halloween, which is another way of saying All Hallows Eve, the day before All Hallows Day, which among certain denominations is the day the church remembers and celebrates the memory of the saints and martyrs of the church. It is unfortunate, in my mind, that we have replaced the memory of saints and martyrs with goblins, ghosts, and devils. Be that as it may, and whatever one thinks of the current celebration of Halloween, something very wonderful did happen on this day exactly 500 years ago – the beginnings of the Protestant Reformation. It is generally agreed by historians that the Reformation began when Martin Luther nailed 95 theses for debate on the subject of indulgences to the Castle Church door in Wittenberg, Germany, on October 31, 1517.

In itself, the nailing of the 95 theses was not a very dramatic event, however. Luther himself never expected the commotion that resulted from it. It has been said that Luther was like a blind man in a bell tower who lost his footing and reached out for something to steady himself. When he caught hold of the bell rope, he was as startled as anyone else when the bell started tolling. After all, just a few months earlier he had

nailed a previous set of theses for debate to the church door on weighty theological issues and yet nothing came of it. You must remember that Wittenberg was a university town and scholars posted theses for debate to church doors all the time. In those days, the church door functioned just as much as a community bulletin board as it did an entrance into the church. So what Luther did that October 31 was not a big deal, really.

What made it a big deal was the fact that they dealt with indulgences and indulgences were very unpopular in Germany at that time, which were seen by many Germans to be the Roman curia's way of lining their pockets with German money. Thanks to the printing press and the fact that someone translated Luther's Latin theses into German, these particular theses soon set the entire nation on fire and he became an instant hero in the fight for German independence from Roman overreach.

However, the real dramatic event in Luther's life was not nailing the theses on the church door. The real dramatic event happened about three and a half years later when he was summoned to appear before the imperial diet at Worms in April, 1521. By this time, everyone understood where Luther was headed, and it upset the Roman church and the civil authorities. Luther also knew that although he was given a safe conduct to and from the diet, so had John Huss and they had burnt him at the stake. Many of his friends begged him not to go. Luther went anyway, and when told that he must recant the teachings of his books, he finally replied, "Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason, I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have often contradicted themselves; my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will recant, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me, Amen." Luther's nailing the theses to the church door did not make the Reformation inevitable. His continued stand, despite being outlawed by the Roman church and the civil authorities, did.

What we hear in Luther's famous declaration before the emperor in Worms is that the authority of Scripture was at stake. The Roman

church did indeed give lip service to the authority of God's word, but in effect it had gutted the influence of Scripture upon the church by replacing it with the authority of the pope and church tradition. By Luther's time, the church had become thoroughly corrupt. Reformation was needed. But not just any reformation; what was needed was a reformation that proceeded upon paths determined by Holy Scripture, and that is what Luther and the other Reformers determined to do. This is why I believe God blessed the Reformation, for all its faults. Because God blesses his Word and he blesses those who honor his Word. At the end of the day, the Reformers were men who were determined to follow and honor God's holy Word. Their consciences were captive to the Word of God.

Every generation needs men and women who are like Martin Luther, who are determined to follow and obey God's Word, no matter what others say or threaten. Today, the church needs men and women of Luther's caliber more than ever. For we are living in a day in which the church seems to be embarrassed by the Word of God. There is a great ignorance of the teachings of God's Word even in the so-called evangelical church. There is little true preaching of the true gospel, even by those who claim to believe it. I was told that, here in our own community, at a recent Christian youth event, the speaker never mentioned the gospel, and yet at the end gave an invitation. An invitation to what? It reminds me of what Spurgeon said of some of his contemporaries, who would shout at men and women to believe, and yet never tell them what they were to believe. We have replaced true gospel-centered preaching with emotionalism and sentimentalism.

This replacement is why we need to hear what the apostle is saying in the text we are considering this morning, Ephesians 3:1-6. You cannot become a Martin Luther if your conscience is not captive to God's Word. You will never submit your conscience to the authority of the Bible if you are not absolutely convinced that it is the Word of God. You will not follow the teachings of the Scripture to a point where you become an outlaw like Luther if you think the Bible is just a nice collection of

sayings by nice people who ultimately just wanted you to be nice. You will never be like one of the saints and martyrs commemorated on All Saints Day if you think your 21st century intellect is too sophisticated for the Bible.

Hear what the apostle is saying in these verses. He says that he has been given a stewardship of God's grace – "the dispensation of the grace of God" (2). The object of this stewardship was to bring the message of the grace of God to the Gentiles, so that they could be "fellowheirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel" (6). At the heart of the message he had been given was the "mystery" (3). The mystery was the fact that God was now creating a new people composed of Jew and Gentile, and that door into this new people of God was faith alone in Christ alone. Before our Lord's first advent, if you wanted to be a part of the OT church, you had to submit to all the regulations of the Mosaic Law. Now, faith in Christ is the only prerequisite for admittance into the NT church.

However, notice that at the heart of Paul's ministry was the fact that he had received revelation from God. The content of his message was determined by revelation. The mystery which he preached was given to him by revelation. He says this in verse 3: "How that by revelation he made known unto me the mystery." Then again in verse 5: "Which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit." Paul is claiming that he didn't discover his message; it was given to him, it was made known to him, by revelation. In fact, the very word he uses to describe his message – mystery – implies this idea of revelation. In our day, if something is a mystery, it means that you cannot understand it. We talk about the mystery of the human mind, by which we mean there are aspects to the human mind we cannot fathom. Something may be a mystery until you understand it; then it is no longer a mystery to you. However, in the NT, a mystery is something which cannot be known unless it is revealed. For example, in Romans 16, Paul also writes about "the revelation of the mystery, which was kept secret since the world

began. But now is made manifest, and by the scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the everlasting God, made known to all nations for the obedience of faith” (Rom. 16:25-26). The gospel is a mystery, not because we cannot understand it but because it could only be known by revelation. Even after it is known, it does not cease to be a mystery, because the gospel never loses the property of being Divine revelation.

The apostle is thus reminding his readers that he is not preaching his own message. The gospel he preaches and writes about is not his own. It has been given to him by God. It has been communicated to his “holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit.” He is delivering the words of God. He is an ambassador, not declaring his own message but that of his king. He is an apostle, one sent by Christ himself to preach good news to both Jew and Gentile.

Now that phrase “by the Spirit” is also very important here. Because there are some who might say that yes, God has revealed the gospel to the apostles, but then they communicate it to us with their own words which are not always without error. There are those who believe that the Bible is God’s word in the sense that it contains God’s word, but it also contains error, and it is up to the church to discern between the truth and the error. Those who argue this way will often point to what they think are historical inaccuracies in the Biblical narratives.

However, when Paul says that the gospel was revealed to him “by the Spirit,” he is essentially saying that not only was the content of the mystery determined by revelation, but the communication itself was safeguarded by the Holy Spirit so that the revelation is not intermixed with errors. Remember what the apostle Peter said: “Knowing this first, that no prophesy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. For the prophesy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pet. 1:20-21). Peter is saying that God didn’t just give the prophets a general idea of what they were to speak and then they were on their own. No, he guided them in the very words they used to communicate God’s truth: “holy

men of God spake as they were moved [carried along, ESV] by the Holy Spirit.” The very words of the Bible have been safeguarded from error by the inspiration of the Spirit of God.

Again, the apostle Paul tells Timothy, “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God” (2 Tim. 3:16). The word “Scripture” literally means “writing.” So when Paul says that Scripture is given by inspiration of God, he is not just saying that the ideas are inspired, or that the doctrines behind the Scriptures are inspired. No, he is saying that the writing down of the doctrines and ideas in words onto the pages of Holy Writ is inspired. Not just some Scriptures, but all Scripture, every last word.

The uniform testimony of the authors of the Bible is that their words are not their own; they were given to them by God. When we read Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, we are not just reading Paul, we are reading God’s Word to them and to us. Thus, when Paul writes to the Thessalonians, he gives thanks because “when ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe” (1 Thess. 2:13). The difference between the Bible and the Koran, or between the Bible and the Book of Mormon, or between the Bible and the Vedas, is not one of degree but a complete and utter difference of kind. The Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments is uniquely God’s Word to man. Nothing else even comes close.

Now there are all sorts of objections to this. Some will argue that it is arrogant to claim that Christians have the word of God and other religions don’t. However, think about this a bit. Why do they say this? They say it because they believe it is a matter of humility to believe that you don’t have all the truth and pride to believe that you do. Relativism is hard-wired into the way our culture looks at and thinks about things. People will often give the analogy of the blind men and the elephant. One blind man touches one of the elephant’s legs and says that an elephant is like a tree. Another blind man touches his trunk, and says that an elephant is like a snake. And so on. People who use this analogy will

apply it to religion: we are all talking about the same God although we describe him in different ways. No one has the whole perspective; we are all describing God from our limited point of view. Both blind men are right; in the same way, all religions are right even though they describe God in different ways.

However, this analogy fails. Do you see why? It fails because in order for the analogy to work, the person telling the story has to have the whole perspective, has to see the entire elephant. The only way to come to the conclusion that both blind men are telling the truth is that someone has to have seen the elephant trunk to tail, head to foot. In the same way, people who say that all religions are telling the truth although from different perspectives are essentially saying that they have the whole perspective. How else could they say that? Those who confidently affirm that the Bible is just part of the truth are just as guilty of the arrogance that they claim the Christian to be guilty of. For they cannot make their claim unless they have assumed a position of absolute knowledge about the truth of God.

Another objection to the claim that the Bible is the inspired, inerrant Word of God is that science has made the Bible irrelevant. Many today just don't feel a need for the Bible because they look to science instead. Unfortunately, a lot of modern people think that, as science expands, belief in God will shrink. Not too long ago, a famous author claimed that belief in God would disappear in the next few decades. In other words, it is thought that the reason for God lies in the places that science cannot explain, a "God of the gaps." So as our need for God as an explanation goes away, our need for Scripture disappears, too.

This idea is folly. One problem with this is that it confuses different types of explanation. Science is powerful as an explanation for the mechanisms behind the material processes in the universe. But to say that because we understand the science behind certain aspects of physical phenomenon, therefore we don't need God as an explanation for the universe, is like saying that, because we understand the physics behind

the internal combustion engine, therefore we don't need Henry Ford as an explanation for the automobile.¹

This kind of thinking is also problematic because it overestimates the power of scientific explanation. Science cannot explain everything. In fact, science cannot even explain itself. The affirmation that we can only arrive at true knowledge through science is a statement that is not testable by the scientific method and so is self-defeating. In fact, science does not explain the really big questions. It cannot tell you why you are here, where you came from, or where you are going. It cannot give you a reason for your existence. More importantly, science cannot give you access to the mind of God concerning salvation. It cannot tell you how sinful men and women can be reconciled to a holy God. In order to know that, we must hear God speak to us. That does not come from science; that comes from Scripture.

Another objection comes from the apparent discrepancies and historical inaccuracies of the Bible. It would take me too far afield to address these all. However, let me say this. When you hear someone say that the Bible cannot be true because of this or that apparent discrepancy, be very careful that you don't just swallow the claim hook-line-and-sinker. Neither should we be afraid of facing up to them. Caution is the order of the day when it comes to such claims. For years, it was thought that the Bible contained errors because in Daniel it says that Belshazzar was the ruler in Babylon when it fell, when there was no evidence outside the Bible that such a man even existed. In fact, everyone knew that it was Nabonidus who was ruler when Babylon was conquered. For many years, believers in the inerrancy of Scripture had no proof that the Bible was telling the truth. Eventually archeology turned up independent evidence for Belshazzar. This has happened over and over again. So be careful. The Bible is an anvil that has worn out many hammers. Even when evidence is lacking, history tells us that over and over again the

¹I got this analogy from John Lennox. See his book *God's Undertaker: Has Science Buried God?*

Bible is eventually vindicated. We have every reason to believe that it will emerge victorious over all who dispute its truthfulness.

The ultimate proof in the trustworthiness and authority of Scripture comes from our Lord Jesus Christ. What did Jesus say about the Bible? He affirmed the authority of Scripture and its truthfulness, down to the very words. For example, in John 10:35, he defends the position he was taking in a controversy with his opponents by appealing to Scripture, and then by saying, “And the Scripture cannot be broken.” What is so significant about this is that Jesus’ argument hinged on a single word in Psalm 82:6. He was saying that Scripture down to its most minute details cannot be broken, annulled, or denied. What’s interesting about this is that the word “Scripture” had a very definite meaning in his day. It meant the entire OT as we have it today. So when our Lord said that Scripture cannot be broken, he was appealing to the fact that all of the OT from Genesis to Malachi is authoritative and true.

In Matthew 19:4-5, our Lord quotes Gen. 2:24, and says, “Have ye not read, that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female, and said, For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh?” What is interesting about this is that when you read Genesis 2:24, it is not explicitly said that God said these words. In fact, it appears to be the words of Adam, or Moses’ commentary on the events of woman’s creation. When our Lord quotes these words, he ascribes them to God. Why? Because what Moses wrote were the words of God. Genesis is not just Moses’ version of early history; it is the word of God to man.

Our Lord did not only affirm the authority of the OT, he also affirmed the authority of the NT. Because he commissioned the apostles to go speak his words to men. He promised them the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to the apostles when he said, “When he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak, and he will shew you things to come” (Jn. 16:13). This is why the early church rejected all documents as canonical that were not either written by apostles or by

those directly connected with the apostles (like Mark and Luke). The reason is because it is the apostles to whom God revealed the mystery, as Paul puts it to the Ephesians.

The resurrection is not just proof that God the Father accepted the sacrifice of God the Son. It is that, primarily and gloriously. But it is also proof that the claims of Jesus during his earthly ministry were true. The resurrection is God's imprimatur upon the claims of Christ. One of those claims is that the Bible, OT and NT, is the Word of God. We can believe in the truthfulness of the Bible and the authority of the Bible because our Lord rose from the grave.

What effect should this have on us? Do we truly believe that the Bible is the Word of God? Then my friends, let us hold fast to it with all our might. Let us not neglect it or despise it. Let us not turn from it for the chaff that passes as wisdom in our culture. As God told the prophet Jeremiah long ago, "The prophet that hath a dream, let him tell a dream; and he that hath my word, let him speak my word faithfully. What is the chaff to the wheat? saith the LORD. Is not my word like as a fire? saith the LORD; and like a hammer that breaketh in pieces?" (Jer. 23:28-29). This word is not something to be ashamed of; it is our glory (cf. Eph. 3:13). It is that which changes us from glory to glory (cf. 2 Cor. 3:18).

CHAPTER XXI

THE GRACE OF GOD FOR MINISTRY (EPH. 3:7-8)

IT IS STRANGE BUT A FACT that often people become bitter at God, not through the sufferings that they are going through, but because of the sufferings they see others going through. The irony is that those who are undergoing the actual suffering many times come through it resilient when it comes to their faith and hope in God. I have found this true in my own life. As I watch others endure tragedy and trials, sometimes it makes me complain to God and doubt his goodness. And yet, those who are enduring the tragedy and trials are being drawn nearer to Christ through it all. This is not universally true, of course. There are those who lose their faith in a loving and good God because of the suffering they undergo. I also know that there are people who have endured much more and yet come through it stronger in the faith. I think of Corrie Ten Boom who watched her sister die in a Nazi concentration camp, and who was herself brutally treated by the prison guards. And yet, even though she did struggle with her own doubts for a time, at the end of it all she realized, as she put it, that there is no pit so deep but God's love is not deeper still. She didn't say that the way

Hallmark cards sentimentalize things. She meant it. She experienced it. There is no pit so deep but God's love is not deeper still.

Still, we struggle with the concept of a loving and good God allowing his people to suffer. I say this to remind you of the context of the verses we are considering. Paul is writing to encourage the Ephesian Christians who have become downcast on account of his imprisonment. It made them "faint" (13). Perhaps they reasoned, how can we trust in the provision and love of God when he allows his foremost apostle to be treated this way? Even though the Ephesians themselves do not seem to have been going through trials of their own, yet they were really troubled with Paul's suffering. It caused some of them to lose hope.

The funny thing is that Paul himself did not share their gloomy perspective, even though he was the one in prison, not they. He is not at all ashamed or disappointed in the path that obedience to Christ has led him. Instead, he exults in the ministry that eventually landed him in prison. He never second-guesses the Lord. He doesn't wish that things somehow would have turned out better. There are no regrets on his part.

Instead, Paul revels in the amazing privilege it was for him to represent Christ to the world. How could he do this, as he sat in prison year after year? How could he do this, after all that he had gone through? Think about it: everything Paul said had happened to him in 2 Cor. 11:23-28 had already happened and then some, with "far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked [by this time it would have been four times]; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the

churches” (ESV). How could Paul go through all this and not end up jaded?

Well, we saw a couple of weeks ago one of the answers: Paul’s hope was not in this world, but in the glory of the world to come. It is to that glory that Paul points the believers in verse 13. I think another answer lies in the fact that Paul did not have any false expectations from Christ. He did not sign up expecting to be on top of the mountain all the time, feeling great, with no worries and a perpetual smile on his face. He knew, from the very beginning, that following Christ in this world was not going to be easy. He didn’t think, unlike a lot of Western evangelicals, that if you just have enough faith you won’t have to deal with the pressures of life. Do you remember what our Lord told Ananias about Paul, right after the Damascus Road experience? “Go thy way: for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel: for I will show him how great things he must suffer for my name’s sake” (Acts 9:15-16). Paul knew from the beginning that suffering would mark the way of obedience for him. So when it happened, he didn’t lose heart.

For a lot of us, we just do not expect suffering. We somehow think that worldly prosperity and blessing is a sign of God’s love. Therefore, when we lose the prosperity we lose confidence that God really loves us, and we become bitter and disappointed. So let’s be very clear. Jesus doesn’t promise any of those who follow him immunity from the disappointments that often meet us in this world. He promises no immunity from pain, or depression, or sickness, or poverty, or loneliness, or persecution. If that is why you are following Christ, then you are following him for the wrong reasons. No wonder we give up when the going gets hard. We think, “I didn’t sign up for this!” No, we didn’t, and if that’s our point of view, then we never truly signed up to follow Christ.

Why then would anyone ever follow him? Well, false expectations have to give way to true expectations. No, Christ has not promised us riches and wealth and ease and prosperity in this world. What he has promised us, though, is “the unsearchable riches of Christ” (8). What

are those? Go back and read Ephesians 1-2; those are the riches Christ has given his people. He has promised us “every spiritual blessing” (1:3), including victory over death, the forgiveness of all our sins, and endless fellowship with God forever in never-ending, ever-increasing joy. All this is given to us not because we earned it or because we deserved it, but because God the Father freely elected us before the foundation of the world that we should become his sons and daughters, because Christ lovingly died for us and purchased every blessing on the cross, and because the Holy Spirit has come effectually to apply the merits of Christ to us personally. If we really believe these things, I mean really believe them, then there is no reason why we would not willingly follow Christ through suffering if that’s the way we get to glory.

However, that does not mean that there are no blessings along the way to heaven. The path to glory is not one long wilderness road bereft of any beauty. Paul reminds us over and over again in his letter to the Philippians that the Christian above any other person should be rejoicing: “Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say, Rejoice” (Phil. 4:4). There is manna in the desert. There is water from the rock. Every step between Egypt and Canaan is watched over by the Lord. And that is one of the things that stands out to me in the text we are considering this morning. You cannot read Paul’s description of his ministry and not come away with a sense that here was a man who truly appreciated his work. He wasn’t in it for the fame. He wasn’t in it for the money. He was in it because he loved Christ and the grace he received in serving him was a foretaste of the future grace of the glory to come. Paul found joy in the journey as he labored in the ministry to which Christ had called him.

Yes, there may be hardship. And yet, along the way God gives grace and more grace. We rejoice in hope and we rejoice in knowing and serving Christ in the here and now. I think this is true not only for Paul but also for you and me. No matter where God has placed you, if you are a Christian, your purpose in that place is to serve Christ. As you

serve him faithfully, you will find grace upon grace, even in the trials that God is bringing you through.

In other words, if you want to persevere as a Christian in this world, you have to have your eyes fixed on the glory to come, you have to throw away these false expectations of health, wealth, and prosperity in this world, and then you must not live for yourself but live out your life serving the Lord wherever he has placed you. I want to focus the remainder of our time this morning on this last point: serving the Lord in the ministry to which he has called you. To see how we can do this, I think we can learn some lessons from the way the apostle describes the ministry to which he was called.

I know that the age of the apostles is over. None of us is called to be an apostle. That is not the way God wants you to serve him! Clearly, there are applications of this description of ministry that are wider than apostleship. Clearly, every pastor can say with Paul that the privilege to preach and teach the gospel is a gift of the grace of God. The fact of the matter is that, as we've been suggesting, every Christian is called to some form of ministry. It is as we serve Christ using the gifts and resources that he has given to us that we will find the "effectual working of his power" in our lives, and there is surely nothing more invigorating and joy-filling than that.

If you are a Christian, you are meant to serve the kingdom of God in some form. In chapter 4, the apostle will say that the reason our Lord gave the church apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor/teachers is "for the perfecting [equipping] of the saints for the work of the ministry" (4:11-12). Thus, the pastor isn't the only one doing ministry. In fact, one of the main jobs of a pastor is to equip the church so that they will go out and do ministry. If the pastor is the only one in the church doing ministry, something is wrong. The apostle had already written to the Corinthians on this point. In his first letter to the Corinthians, he wrote, "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (1 Cor. 12:7, ESV). Did you hear that? To each, to every person who belongs to the church, is given "the manifestation of the Spirit,"

a spiritual gift, in order to serve the common good of the church. Not every gift is the same. Thank God for diversity! In fact, some of the gifts Paul mentions in Romans 12 might seem to some rather prosaic, and yet they are just as much the ministry of the Spirit to the church as any other gift. Consider the list of gifts he gives there: prophesy, serving, teaching, exhorting, giving, ruling, showing mercy (Rom. 12:6-8). Nor is this list meant to be exhaustive. Any gift whereby the church is encouraged and built up is a Spiritual gift.

However, there is a difference between Christian ministry and charitable activities. There is and ought to be a difference between what happens in the church and what happens in the Kiwanis club. As we consider and celebrate what it means to engage in Christian ministry, how Paul describes his ministry is very helpful. There are three adjectives that defined Paul's ministry and these three adjectives ought to always define the kind of ministry we do for our Lord. Thus, Christian ministry is a gospel ministry; Christian ministry is a gifted ministry; and Christian ministry is a gracious ministry. We will now consider each of these statements in turn.

First of all, Christian ministry is a gospel ministry. Paul begins verse 7 by saying, "Whereof I was made a minister." Whereof what? The word "whereof" is a reference to the word "gospel" at the end of verse 6. In fact, some translations go ahead and put the word "gospel" in verse 7 as a way to clarify what Paul was saying. Paul was a minister, a servant, of the gospel. Everything he did was to proclaim the gospel to Jew and Gentile. The gospel is the good news that Christ has come into the world to do what we could not do, to save us from our sins. The gospel is not the story of mankind's attempt to save himself. It is the true story that the Word of God was made flesh and dwelt among us. It is the record that the Son of God bore the righteous wrath of God that ought to have fallen upon sinful men and women, and nailed it to the cross. It is the news that the grave is empty, that Jesus rose victorious from the dead, and that the Father accepted the sacrifice so that all who put their trust in him need no longer to anguish over their sins.

Perhaps when you think of gospel ministry, you think of a preacher on a street corner sharing the gospel to passersby. That is an instance of gospel ministry, but that is not all gospel ministry is. That is a very small fraction of it. In fact, if you are a mom or dad raising your children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, that is gospel ministry. In fact, everything we do, from eating and drinking to what we do at the job ought to testify to the gospel. Our whole lives ought to testify to the gospel; our whole life ought to be gospel ministry. All of us ought to be living and preaching the gospel with our lips and lives. As the apostle put it, “And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus” (Col. 3:17).

The gospel ought to be a fragrance that blows through every room of our lives. It ought to flavor all our words and affect all that we do. We all do gospel ministry by living out the realities of the gospel in our lives. You don’t have to be behind a pulpit to do that. You just have to be a person who trusts in and loves Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior.

More specifically, it means that we ought to be looking for ways to put the gospel on display for others to see and savor. It means that we look at our jobs, not just as a way to make money and pay the bills, but as a way to introduce others to the realities of the grace of God in Christ. If we are truly gospel-centered, it means that we have realized that God has put us where he has put us in order to shine the light in that particular dark spot in this world. It means that we look at our homes as places where we want Jesus to be cherished above all things. It means that we watch our attitudes and affections so that we do not become people whose lives tell others that Jesus is not the most important person in the world to us.

If we are just living for this world, if we are just serving time, then no matter how great our accomplishments, at the end of the day they are only temporary. If we are living with a gospel mentality, then everything is done in light of eternity. No longer are our lives being wasted, no matter what others may think of our achievements.

As we consider as a church where we want to go in the future, let us always keep the gospel first and foremost. Above everything else, God is calling us to be a gospel church, a church in which the gospel is proclaimed, taught, lived out, and shared. The banner over our church ought to be what Paul said to the Corinthians: “For I determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2).

Second, Christian ministry is a gifted ministry. The apostle continues: “. . . according to the gift of the grace of God given unto me by the effectual working of his power.” Here Paul is saying that his ability to do the ministry that God had called him to do did not stem from himself. The ability to do the ministry came from God. It was the gift of the grace of God.

Here is the lesson. If God is calling you to a particular ministry, he is also going to give you the ability to fulfill that ministry. God does not call us to something for which he will not empower us. At the end of the day, no matter how gifted we are, whether by nature or educationally, we cannot do real gospel ministry unless we do so in God’s power. Consider the apostle Paul. He was probably far and away the most educated of the apostles. Some have said that Paul had the equivalent of a Ph.D. by the age of 21. And yet, Paul never once gives even the slightest hint that any success in his ministry had come from his own attainments. No, rather he says things like this: “But by the grace of God I am what I am: and his grace which was bestowed upon me what not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all: yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me” (1 Cor. 15:10). Or, “we preach [Christ], warning every man, and teaching every man in all wisdom; that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus: whereunto I also labor, striving according to his working, which worketh in me mightily” (Col. 1:28-29). Or, “But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us” (2 Cor. 4:7). If Paul realized that he couldn’t truly serve Christ apart from his grace, how much more do we need his help?

There is no room for pride in the service of Christ. We can't change hearts, only he can. "So then neither is he that planteth anything, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase" (1 Cor. 3:7). There is no room for boasting about what we have done. In fact, if we have done anything apart from the help of the grace of God, then it will only come to ruin. Only God can build his church and only God can impart the grace to ministry that makes it truly effective, and therefore only he gets the praise.

There is another side to this coin. The reality that ministry is a gift of grace not only means that there is no room for pride, it also means that there is no room for despair. If God has called us to do something, he will give us the grace to see it through, no matter what the devil and the world will throw at us. Note that Paul describes the help that comes through grace in terms of the power of God: "the effectual working of his power." The resource at the believer's disposal is nothing less than the power of God. If God be for us, who can be against us? So let us not despair or grow weary in well-doing. If God has gifted us, he will support us and bless us. He will never fail us, even when all our earthly supports come crashing down.

Finally, Christian ministry is a gracious ministry. In the first part of verse 8, the apostle writes, "Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given." It is not just lack of resources that causes us to shrink back from ministry for the Lord, is it? Isn't it also the fact that so many of us feel unworthy? We look back over our past lives and the darkness of past deeds comes creeping around us and makes us feel that we should not engage in gospel work because we are just not worthy.

Listen to the apostle Paul. "Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given." Paul actually bends grammar to make this statement. He takes a superlative ("least") and turns it into a comparative ("leaster"). Less than the least of all the saints: that was how Paul saw himself. This was no false modesty. Paul really felt this way. To his dying day, he never forgot the shame from the role he played in persecuting the church, and in participating in the murder of Stephen. Toward the

end of his life, he still described himself as “before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious.” He doesn’t stop there: “but I obtained mercy” (1 Tim. 1:13). In fact, he goes on, “And the grace of our Lord was exceeding abundant with faith and love which is in Christ Jesus. This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief” (1 Tim. 1:14-15). This is not just for Paul: “Howbeit for this cause I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show forth all longsuffering, for a pattern to them which should hereafter believe on him to life everlasting” (1 Tim. 1:16).

Our past does not need to determine our future, not because we can make our past go away, but because Jesus Christ died for our filthy, shameful past. He can make it go away. The blood of Jesus Christ cleanses from all sin. Whatever ministry we do, it is not to put us on display. It is to put Christ on display. So let us not be discouraged from serving Christ. If you have repented and are trusting in the sacrifice of Christ on your behalf, then grace is given to you. It came to the least of the apostles, to the least of all the saints, and to the chief of sinners.

This is not only true of serving Christ; it is also true of coming to Christ in the first place. Do you think that you are not worthy? Of course you are not; no one is. Do you feel that your sins are keeping you from God? Well, there is only one way to breach the gap between you and God. You will never do it by trying to please God on your own, for you will never be good enough. You will never do it by trying to punish yourself, for you will never erase the guilt of sins against an infinitely holy God. The only way you can come to God is by grace, by the free gift of God in Christ. We are “justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 3:24). So come to him this morning, embrace his cross and his righteousness and his forgiveness, and you will be saved.

CHAPTER XXII

PERFECT FREEDOM (EPH. 3:9-13)

WHAT IS YOUR VIEW OF HISTORY? Do you see it as merely a jumble of names, dates, and events? Is history for you a boring tale of irrelevant people and places? To quote Henry Ford, is history “bunk”? Well, for me history is anything but boring. I was a history major before I was a math major. To this day, I still love history. In fact, history well-written is far more interesting than any novel, in my opinion.

I am absolutely certain that a knowledge of history is very important for any educated person. In fact, one of the things that really worries me about our current society here in America is the reality that so many people have almost no knowledge of history. As is often quoted, “Those who forget history are doomed to repeat it.” Unfortunately, we forget history over and over again. When we do, there are always dire consequences. Think of that fateful verse at the beginning of the book of Exodus: “Now there arose up a new king over Egypt, which knew not Joseph” (Exod. 1:8). The result was the enslavement of an entire race of people. I think we are seeing that very thing happening in our own country today. There is a whole generation of young people today who

have no real knowledge of our country's past and principles. It is very troubling to think about where we are headed.

However, this is not all there is to history. History is not just a warning from the past. Nor is history just the story of all the stupid things people have done. Nor is it just the story about the rich and the powerful and the famous. For the Christian, history is much, much more than that. For us, history is His-story, God's story. It is not organized around this or that civilization but around redemptive history. For us, history begins in the Garden of Eden and moves through Egypt and Canaan towards the birth of the Son of God, who took on flesh and died for our sins, so that one day a new heavens and new earth will replace the sin-cursed heavens and earth in which we now dwell, and then redemption will be complete.

What Paul is describing in the text we are considering this morning takes into account the Biblical view of history. According to the apostle Paul, God has a plan. In verse 9, he calls it "the plan of the mystery" and in verse 11 he calls it "the eternal purpose which he purposed [accomplished] in Christ Jesus our Lord." This is very important. If you believe in a sovereign God, you cannot believe that the saga of the human race is just a random series of events. According to the Bible, God is over history. This is one of the hard lessons that King Nebuchadnezzar had to learn. After being struck down on account of his pride, he realized that God is the ultimate king, not he: "And all the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing: and he doeth according to his will in the army of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth: and none can stay his hand, or say unto him, What doest thou?" (Dan. 4:35). Therefore things happen for a purpose, even if we don't see what that purpose is. God's ways are higher than our ways and his thoughts than our thoughts.

According to the apostle Paul, God's plan for history involves the church. In fact, the church is the key player in what God is doing on the earth today. In verse 9, the apostle tells us that "from the beginning of the world" God hid this mystery. In other words, up until that point in history, the mystery was not revealed (cf. ver. 5). Now God has re-

vealed it. The mystery is the fact that God is now creating the church, a multi-national, multi-ethnic community of followers of Christ. Those who make up the church are “fellow-heirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel” (6).

Then in verse 10, Paul tells us one of the reasons why God is doing this: “to the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God” (10). The “principalities and powers in heavenly places” are not societal or political structures to which the church is supposed to bear witness. By comparing Paul’s words here with 1:21 and 6:12, we see that he is referring to angelic beings, both good and bad. As God gathers his redeemed people into the church, both angels and demons are made to see the wisdom of God at work. The apostle Peter says something very similar in his first epistle: “Unto whom [the OT prophets] it was revealed, that not unto themselves, but unto us they did minister the things, which are now reported unto you by them that have preached the gospel unto you with the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven; which things the angels desire to look into” (1 Pet. 1:12). I think John Stott sums it up well: “It is as if a great drama is being enacted. History is the theatre, the world is the stage, and church members in every land are the actors. God himself has written the play, and he directs and produces it. Act by act, scene by scene, the story continues to unfold. But who are the audience? They are the cosmic intelligences, the principalities and powers in the heavenly places. We are to think of them as spectators of the drama of salvation.”¹

Again, all of this is “according to the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord” (11). Now the verb “purposed” is literally the word “made” or “accomplished” or “realized.” God’s purpose is made in Christ. It is a redemptive purpose and it is accomplished and carried out in Christ. This tells us that the big thing that God is doing in history has little to do with the acquisition of land or wealth or the advance of technologies. That doesn’t mean that God has nothing

¹John. R. W. Stott, *The Message of Ephesians (BST)*, p. 123-124.

to do with these things, of course. What it does mean is that the most important thing that is happening in the world right now is not the development of the next iPhone but the gathering into the church of people from every corner of the world through the gospel. Whatever the world thinks about the church, the church is the key to history because the church is the key to God's eternal purpose in Christ Jesus. The Israelites may have been slaves in Egypt, but it was through Israel that God brought his Son into the world. Although Christians today may be the least of the least in the eyes of modern man, it is through the church that the life-giving message of the gospel is brought forth into all the world.

The great thing that God is doing through the church is to bring people the gospel so that they will "have boldness and access with confidence by the faith of him" (12). What is God doing in history? He is opening people's eyes to see the truth of the gospel so that they will be able to have full and free access to the Triune God. That is the "glory" that the apostle is referring to in verse 13. It is this reality that I want to focus on this morning: the Christian is a person who has perfect freedom to speak to God and perfect freedom to approach God. God is creating the church, which means he is about creating people who fit this description. So let us consider what this means and what implications it has for our lives.

First of all, I think it's important to nail down exactly what Paul means when he says that we have "boldness" and "access," both with "confidence." Take the word "boldness." This word was used to describe the freedom of speech exercised by the citizens of the Greek democratic city-states (in particular, Athens).² More than that, it expressed the fact that citizens not only had a right to speak freely but with a frankness that could sometimes be unhelpful (as is often the case in political discourse). In the NT, it means the ability to speak plainly, openly, and with confidence. It describes a person who is not afraid to speak and to give their opinion. We all know what it is like to be around people and

²Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary*, 465.

be afraid to speak. We are intimidated. What the apostle is saying here is that those who are in Christ have no need to be intimidated in the presence of God, who is infinitely exalted above the most powerful king or ruler on earth. They have boldness: they have freedom of speech in the presence of God. In Christ, we have no reason to shrink back from pouring out our hearts to God.

Then there is the word “access.” We have already seen this word in 2:18, “For through him [Christ] we both have access by one Spirit to the Father.” This word has reference to freedom as well. It refers to freedom of approach. The door is open and you can walk on in. There is no one barring your way. As the hymn-writer put it: “Bold I approach the eternal throne, and claim the crown, through Christ my own.”

Paul says that the Christian has both freedom of speech with God and freedom of approach to God with “confidence.” These are incredible gifts to have and it is often held by the fearful Christian rather tenuously. The apostle says that there is no reason we should not take our freedoms in Christ and exercise them with confidence. It is not presumption to approach the throne of grace boldly since God has freely given us these freedoms in Christ. As Hebrews puts it, “Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb. 4:16).

Of course, confidence does not mean arrogance. It does not mean that we come before the throne of God with a proud heart. We all know what God thinks of pride: “though the LORD be high, yet hath he respect unto the lowly: but the proud knoweth he afar off” (Ps. 138:6). This access and boldness and confidence is “by the faith of him [Christ,” and that implies a person who sees their utter and complete dependence upon Christ. Such a person does not come waltzing into the presence of God. On the other hand, neither does our knowledge of our sins keep us from entering in if we are in Christ. For in Christ our sins are purged and God sees us clothed in the righteousness of his Son.

Let’s think about the implications of these freedoms for the Christian. First of all, this says something wonderful about God’s attitude

towards his children. If freedom of speech and freedom of approach are blessings given to us in Christ, then it means that these blessings are not things we give to ourselves but things that are given to us from God himself. Our heavenly Father wants us to come to him and he wants us to pour out our hearts before him. He doesn't want you to keep your burdens to yourself. He wants you to unburden yourself before him. Psalm 62:8 reads, "Trust in him at all times; ye people, pour out your heart before him: God is a refuge for us."

It means, as incredible as it might sound, that the God of heaven wants to hear from those who trust in his Son as their Lord and Savior. It means that the God of the universe wants to have fellowship with you. He desires this fellowship right now. These freedoms are not something merely to be enjoyed in heaven, in the age to come. Sure, we will experience these freedoms to their fullest in the age to come, but these blessings belong to us now. "We have" right now, present tense, boldness and access with confidence by the faith of him.

It also indicates that God desires to bless his children. We all know that fathers who love their children and want to be around them are also the best providers for their children, as far as they are able. In the same way, the fact that God is so solicitous for his children is strong evidence that he will guide them and bless them. And he is able. Though, of course, this doesn't mean that the saint will have no problems in this world, it does mean that God does not allow anything to happen to his children that is not for their ultimate good. So this not only says something about the privileges we have as believers, it also says a lot about the love that God the Father has for those who belong to the body of Christ.

Another implication for the Christian is what this means about the life of prayer. For one thing, it means that prayer is not dependent upon the right phraseology to be accepted by God. I wonder how many of us have a hard time praying because we just don't think God will think very highly of the sentences we use in our prayers? We have this idea that the effectiveness of prayer is somehow linked to the language we

use in them. However, the freedom that we have in Christ means that we have the freedom to approach God freely with our words. You don't have to use some exalted ecclesiastical prayer to engage the God of the universe. No, you simply need to come by faith in Christ. Faith is the language of prayer and is what makes it effective, not the style in which we pray.

It also means that we have freedom to come to God in prayer whatever we find the state of our soul to be in. You don't have to have some halo glowing above your head to pray. You don't have to be completely peaceful in your soul to pray. You can feel down and depressed and guilty and dirty and still pray. Our freedom to approach God does not depend upon the state of mind in which we find ourselves. It depends upon Christ, our advocate, who is always for us and never changes.

Are you feeling overwhelmed? Do you feel like you are sinking in a pit? Then pray! If you belong to Christ, if you are covered by his blood, then you have boldness and access with confidence to the Father. I love the way the psalmist opens Psalm 130: "Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O LORD. Lord, hear my voice: let thine ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications" (1-2). There are all sorts of promises for those who feel like they are in over their heads, like the one in Isaiah 43, "When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee. For I am the LORD thy God, the Holy One of Israel, thy Savior" (Isa. 43:2-3). It is right for you to come before the throne of God and plead for grace and deliverance. It is a right that has been given to us at the great cost of the life of the Son of God. So avail yourself of this great privilege.

Are you feeling the weight of the guilt of your sin? Perhaps there is nothing that tends to silence our mouths in prayer more than this. Even then, the one who belongs to Christ still has the freedom to speak to God and the freedom to approach his presence. Jesus Christ did not just die for some of your sins. He died for all of your sins. He fully and

completely paid the price. He fully and completely satisfied the wrath of God against you on account of your sins. I'm not saying that we don't have to worry about repenting of our sins. Those who belong to Christ live lives of repentance. Faith in Christ is unthinkable apart from repentance towards God (cf. Acts 20:21). It is possible to be repenting of your sins and yet think that somehow your sin has barred you from further fellowship with God.

That is not true. Hear what the apostle John tells us: "My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: and he is the propitiation for our sins: and nor for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 Jn. 2:1-2). Our sinfulness is not dealt with by our becoming righteous, but by Christ being righteous for us and by becoming the propitiation for our sins. So don't let the feeling of guilt keep you from praying. Later on in Psalm 130, the psalmist goes on to say this: "If thou, LORD, shouldst mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand? But there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared." And therefore, "I wait for the LORD, my soul doth wait, and in his word do I hope. My soul waiteth for the Lord more than they that watch for the morning: I say, more than they that watch for the morning. Let Israel hope in the LORD: for with the LORD there is mercy, and with him is plenteous redemption. And he shall redeem Israel from all his iniquities" (Ps. 130:3-8).

Are you feeling confused and not knowing which way to go? Then pray! One of the Scriptures that I've been praying a lot in the past year or so is Proverbs 3:5-6, "Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths." Claim that promise. Those who acknowledge God in prayer, who commit their way to him, will be directed by him. I want God to direct my paths. I don't want to strike out in any direction which would take me away from the blessing of my Lord. And so I pray this prayer.

I love the way Psalm 107 puts this all together. In this Psalm, we are presented with four scenarios. Each case is different, but in each case, people find themselves in a state that requires help outside of themselves. That is to say, they have reached the bottom. They are at the end of themselves. Or, as the psalmist puts it in verse 27, they “are at their wits’ end.” In each case, we are told “then they cried unto the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them out of their distresses” (ver. 6, 13, 19, 28). No matter what situation the believer finds himself or herself in, we ought always to follow this example. We have no reason not to.

Now these two freedoms, freedom of speech before God and freedom of approach to God, these are the very things that, apart from Christ, we don’t have. There is no access to God apart from Christ. We have no right to speak or pray to him and we have no right to approach his throne. “The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination unto the LORD: but the prayer of the upright is his delight” (Prov. 15:8). No one has the right to claim either one of these privileges apart from the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. None of us can approach the throne of God on our own and expect to receive his blessing. We are sinful. We are unholy and we are unthankful. You and I need Christ. And yet, though none of us deserves the least of God’s mercies, he sent his Son into this world to pay the penalty for sin. The gospel announces that he has finished the work and that all who believe on him will be saved. If you believe in Christ with all your heart, you will be saved. As the saved, you not only are delivered from the wrath to come, but are welcomed with open arms into the presence of the God of the universe, with boldness and access with confidence by the faith of Christ.

CHAPTER XXIII

A THANKFUL HEART (EPHESIANS 1-3)

WE SOMETIMES DON'T REALLY APPRECIATE our blessings until they are taken from us, if even for a moment. It takes bad health to make us appreciate good health. You get the air knocked out of you and you suddenly realize how precious oxygen is. You might complain about your job until you lose it.

It works the other way as well. When our curses are removed, we sometimes fail to remember just how bad they were when they plagued us, and therefore forget how great is the blessing our deliverance. The Israelites were not long in their exodus from Egypt when they began to pine for their slavery again. They remembered the leeks and the cucumbers but forgot the humiliation, the servitude, the pain, and the disgrace. They were not thankful for the blessing because they forgot the curse.

We all suffer from the same malady. Because of this, we are constantly in danger of failing to recognize the incredible blessings we enjoy from our salvation in Christ. The best thing about our salvation is the very thing that makes thanksgiving for it so easily forgotten. The great thing about salvation in Christ is that it can never be taken from us. We

“stand” in grace; we don’t move in and out of it (Rom. 5:2). “For I am persuaded,” said the apostle, “that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:38-39). A grace which we could lose would not be very good. Because the people of God cannot lose their salvation, they are in constant danger of failing to appreciate the never-dying wonder of their deliverance and to forget the pit from which we were delivered.

And yet, thanksgiving is necessary, from a spiritual perspective. For one thing, it’s a matter of obedience. The apostle Paul wrote, “In everything give thanks, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you” (1 Thess. 5:18). In chapter 5 of Ephesians, Paul will say that giving thanks is an expression of being filled with the Spirit (Eph. 5:20).

God does not just command thanksgiving because we owe it to him. We do, of course. More than that, he does so because at the bottom of mankind’s rebellion against God is a heart that is void of thanksgiving: “Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened” (Rom. 1:21). A thankless heart is one step removed from idolatry. Those who are not thankful to God for who he is and what he has done for them will give the allegiance of their hearts to someone or something else.

It is also easier to become bitter against God when we lack thankful hearts. If our hearts are not full of gratitude to God for all that he has done for us, we will easily fall to disappointment and disillusionment when things don’t go our way. This is exactly what happened to the Israelites in the wilderness. Despite their miraculous deliverance and God’s continued provision for them, these things faded into the background of their minds and the problems with which they were faced became paramount. They failed to trust in God and turned to idols. At the bottom of their problem was the absence of a thankful heart: “they soon forgot his works” (Ps. 106:13, 21; 78:7, 11).

To become idolaters is to sabotage our true and ultimate happiness. This is what ancient Israel did when they abandoned the true God for false idols: “Hath a nation changed their gods, which are yet no gods? But my people have changed their glory for that which doth not profit. Be astonished, O ye heavens, at this, and be horribly afraid, be ye very desolate, saith the LORD. For my people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water” (Jer. 2:11-13). This is what we do when we abandon God for the false idols of materialism, prosperity, sex, and fame. They promise us happiness, but they will eventually leave us empty, cold, and dead. Ultimately, idols are helpless: “They have mouths, but they speak not: eyes have they, but they see not: they have ears, but they hear not: noses have they, but they smell not: they have hands, but they handle not: feet have they, but they walk not: neither speak they through their throat. They that make them are like unto them; so is every one that trusteth in them” (Ps. 115:5-8).

The battle for a thankful heart is therefore a battle against idolatry. It is, therefore, also a battle for our spiritual well-being and our true joy. The Biblical command to be thankful is not a call to nostalgia. Nor is it an attempt to create in your heart the warm fuzzies. It is essential for the survival of your soul.

This morning I want to give you ammunition in this critical battle against ingratitude. The way I want to do this is to review with you the spiritual blessings that the apostle has chronicled for us in the first three chapters of the epistle to the Ephesians. These blessings are described for us as “spiritual blessings” (1:3); that is, blessings which come to us through none other than the Holy Spirit in his ministry to us as he imparts to us the riches of Christ. They are called “the unsearchable riches of Christ” (3:8) since the blessings we receive through Christ are infinitely valuable. They demonstrate “the manifold wisdom of God” in the salvation of his people (3:10). What are these blessings?

Before I proceed, I want to remind you that these blessings are “in Christ” (1:3). Not everyone is in Christ. We are all “in Adam.” We share

Adam and Eve's fallenness. We are broken, selfish, godless sinners and rebels who are worthy of the judgment of God. Look around you. The world in which we live is man's world. It is our world. It is the world man has created. All the injustice and hate and war and moral confusion that makes our world so ugly and depressing and dark is mankind's signature upon human history. Sin is not a harmless or inconsequential pleasure. It is not just a "failing." Its consequences are all around us, and it is sickening. What we need to understand is that the darkness that is all around us is also within all of us. All of us. None is exempt. "There is none righteous, no, not one" (Rom. 3:10). Therefore, none of us deserve even the least blessing from God. When we ask why do bad things happen to good people, we forget that there aren't any good people: "There is none good but one, that is, God" (Mk. 10:18). The only really perfect man who ever walked this earth was crucified 2000 years ago. We cannot expect a single blessing from God if we are expecting him to bless us because of who we are or what we have done. We can only expect to be blessed by God if he chooses to do so out of grace. God is not only gracious; he is also holy. The only way God can be both gracious and holy is if our sin is punished in Christ. All the blessings of salvation come through Christ, and through Christ alone. We receive them through faith in Christ, by looking away from ourselves and resting completely upon the sufficiency and merit of the Lord Jesus Christ. "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God" (Eph. 2:8).

If you are in Christ, if you belong to him by faith, if you enjoy saving union with the benefits of Christ's sacrifice on your behalf, then the blessings which the apostle records for us in Ephesians belong to you. You should not only own them, you should reflect upon them until you feel your heart filling with thanksgiving to God. What are some of the things Paul calls to our attention?

First of all, he reminds us that in Christ we have been made accepted. This is one of the things that every human being craves. So many people go through the holiday season with deep sadness in their hearts because

they feel alienated and alone. We all want to belong somewhere. We want to have relationships where we are not judged; where we are accepted. Paul reminds us that the believer has acceptance on a level that no earthly family or club or team can give. For the believer has first of all been accepted by God himself. He or she has been chosen by God (1:4) and predestined for adoption into the very family of God (1:5). God the Father has not just grudgingly accepted you. We all know what it is like to be included because people feel they have to include us in their group, even though they don't want to. It is not a very enjoyable association. Instead, God has taken the initiative before you were born and chosen you to salvation. He chose you in love, and it is in this sense that "he that made us accepted in the beloved" (1:6). We need to remember that God's choice of us is entirely of grace. It preceded our choice of him not only in time but also in terms of cause and effect. We chose him because he first chose us. His acceptance of us is therefore not dependent upon the vacillations of our souls but entirely upon the unchangeable love of God for his people. We ought to marvel at and be thankful for the goodness of God in whom we find perfect acceptance!

Not only this, but God has put his children in a family. He has created the church, where believers of every stamp can find acceptance. He has not only reconciled men and women to himself, he is also reconciling men and women to each other in the church. This is Paul's point in 2:11-22. We love each other here because we all share in God's love for us in Christ. God has created an institution in which we can grow spiritually and be encouraged and held accountable. The devil tries to mimic the church, but the church is the only place in which you can truly grow spiritually. God your Father provided it for you, for your joy and blessing and good.

Second, the apostle reminds us that in Christ we have the forgiveness of all our sins: "in whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace" (1:7). No one can completely escape the reality of guilt. We all have to deal with it. There are basically two ways to deal with guilt. One way is to ignore

it, harden your heart, and sear your conscience. Unfortunately, this is the advice that many mental health professionals give to people dealing with genuine guilt (though I am not denying that there is such a thing as a false sense of guilt). Guilt is not a bad thing, when it is the response of our soul to sin in our hearts and lives. It is a warning that something is wrong and needs to be dealt with. Ignoring that is like covering up cancer with a Band-Aid. You can bury it for a while, but it will eventually rise up against you in the day of judgment.

The other way is to acknowledge your sin and to try to make things right. However, we cannot make things right if we only try to work on the horizontal level. The most important dimension to sin is the vertical. We have sinned against God. There is no way we can adequately right our wrongs against God. This is, of course, because since God is infinitely exalted above us, our sin is infinitely heinous and therefore deserving of infinite punishment. We have spent what we cannot pay back. We can never purge our sins. We are enslaved to the just claims of God's judgment.

This is why the gospel is really good news. We should shed our blood from now until eternity and never pay the debt we owe to God. The God-man, Jesus Christ, has come and shed his blood for us. In him we are delivered from our liability to God's holy wrath against sin. Our mites can never pay the debt we owe. In Christ, the riches of God's grace came and paid the debt for us. There is truly no greater blessing than this. Everything else is in comparison but shadows and smoke. If we can claim this reality, then it does not matter what else happens to us, does it? For if your sin is paid for, if your debt is paid, then God is for us. And if God is for you, who can be against you?

Third, Paul reminds us that in Christ we have been given hope (1:8-14, 18). A lot of people have no idea what their place is in this world. Or they just have no hope at all. They believe that when they die, that's the end. So there is no future for them beyond the grave. The apostle's description of those who are outside of Christ is that they have "no hope, and [are] without God in the world" (2:11). In Christ we have

been enlightened as to our future with him. We are told that in the fulness of times God will unite all things in Christ. He will take the discordant elements of the universe and finally bring harmony to our broken world. We will have a part in this, because he has given us an inheritance in the age to come. We know that our hope is sure because the one in whom we hope is the one “who works all things according to the counsel of his will” (1:11, ESV). Thus, we who “hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory” (1:12, ESV).

I cannot imagine what it would be like to live without hope. I don’t think you can live without hope. So it’s not that only Christians have hope. The difference is that the hope of the Christian is rock-solid and eternally meaningful. We have a hope that is like “an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which entereth into that within the veil” (Heb. 6:19). Thank God for this hope. It is the light that shines upon our path, the lightness in our steps, the kindling for joy in the heart.

God your Father desires that you have this hope. It is for this reason that he has sent the Holy Spirit into our hearts as “the earnest of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, unto the praise of his glory” (1:14). The word from without and the Spirit from within testify to us of the hope that we have in Christ.

Fourth, the apostle reminds us that in Christ we have been raised from a death in sins (2:1-10). If you are tempted to wonder why God is not doing something in your life, why he isn’t fixing a problem that you have, and if you are tempted to wonder if God is even interested in your life at all, remember this. There was a time when you were dead in trespasses and in sins. You were spiritually in no better shape than a corpse is physically. You were dead to the things of God. You were separated from the life of God. You were going your own way, away from God and away from eternal life. You loved the things you should have hated. You despised the things you should have loved. You were enslaved to the world, to the flesh, and to the devil. There is no reason why you should ever have considered the state of your soul and turned in faith to Christ. Why then, did you?

The answer is that God invaded your life. God came to the grave which was your heart and spoke life into it. He took away your blindness to the beauty and sufficiency of Christ. He took away your hardness of heart. He did it. You did not raise yourself from your death in sin. “But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together in Christ (by grace ye are saved)” (2:4-5). You did not make yourself into what you are. No, you are God’s workmanship (2:10). Don’t forget God’s goodness to you in giving you the new birth and bringing you to faith and repentance. Thank him for the life that you have in Christ.

Fifth, Paul reminds us that in Christ we have been given the gospel of God through the apostles and prophets (3:3-11). It has come to us “by revelation.” God has “revealed [it] unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit” (5). The fact of the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, is a remarkable testimony to the goodness of God towards his people. The Bible is our burning bush. In it we hear the words of God. There is no learning more precious than this. You may go to hell with a head full of knowledge about math and physics and literature and history and languages. But you cannot go to heaven without the knowledge of the God of heaven, and you cannot know God apart from his word.

To have the Bible in our own language is another remarkable blessing. We should never forget that men and women have given their lives for this privilege. More than that, we have amazing access to this word. Most of us have multiple copies of the Bible in our homes. If someone does not have a copy, they can easily get one.

These are some of the blessings which the apostle invites us to remember. God – Father, Son, and Spirit – has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in heavenly places. He has blessed us with blessings that are infinitely superior to any merely earthly gift. Not only that, but he is infinitely generous with his gifts. Over and over again the apostle speaks of God’s riches. “The riches of his grace” (1:7); “the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints” (1:18); “God, who is rich in mercy” (2:4); “the riches of his grace in his kindness toward us in Christ Jesus” (2:7);

“the unsearchable riches of Christ” (3:8); “the riches of his glory” (3:16). No believer is a beggar in Christ. God has lavished his gifts upon us with unbounded kindness.

Our earthly fortunes may wax and wane. Our riches may come and go. Our health will eventually give way. There is no time in the believer’s life when any one of these spiritual blessings are not true. The one who is in Christ is always accepted and loved, and forgiven. We always have a reason to hope. The life that God has given to us can never be taken away. The word of God is always true and reliable. We, of all people, have a reason to be thankful. Remember God’s goodness toward you and do not forget. Let our thankfulness be appropriate to the blessings we have received.

CHAPTER XXIV

STRENGTHENED WITH MIGHT (EPH. 3:14-16)

THE CHRISTIAN IS THE POSSESSOR of incredible privileges, for we are, through the merit of Christ, entitled to the riches of the glory of God. In chapters 1-3, the apostle has reviewed many of these riches with us. It is important that we know what we have in Christ. It is important not only for the comfort and peace that such knowledge brings, but also because such knowledge is essential for living out our Christian identity. Our life of obedience to Christ ought to be rooted in the gospel and related truths. All sorts of problems that Christians struggle with can often be traced to the fact that they are not really embracing who they are in Christ. Those who are constantly struggling to gain God's favor instead of embracing the grace of God in Christ have simply failed to understand the Biblical theology of grace. Or, those who deny that obedience has any place in the Christian life also have misunderstood the theological implications of the gospel. In other words, theology is fundamental to the Christian life.

You see this in the overall structure of Ephesians. Paul has just spent almost three chapters, not in exhortation, but in theology. Paul has touched on the doctrine of salvation, the doctrine of man, the doctrine

of the church, the doctrine of last things, among other things. He does this first, in order to establish the ground of and to give motivation to the life of obedience that he will move into in the second half of this epistle. When Paul begins chapter 4 with the words, “I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called,” he is grounding everything he is about to say in what he has already said. You cannot properly move into the application of the gospel unless you have first mastered the theology of the gospel.

This is perhaps most pronounced in the book of Romans. The first eleven chapters are theology. The last five are application. The bridge between theology and application is Romans 12:1, “I beseech you therefore brethren by the mercies of God. . .” The meaning of the “mercies of God” are to be filled up by the teaching and theology of the first eleven chapters.

Paul sometimes does this in reverse order, as in Titus. There application comes first, but he inevitably ties it back to the theology of the gospel (see Tit. 2:12-15). We are to “speak the things which become sound doctrine” (Tit. 2:1), not just to be theologically correct but also because the Christian life cannot be lived out in a vacuum. There must be context and motivation for the life we are called to live, and theology does that.

So beware when people tell you that theology is unimportant. I realize that there are people out there who master theology on an intellectual level but who don’t show love and grace to others, who can tell you all about the nature of Christ as the God-man but who won’t live like Christ before others. That is truly repugnant, but the answer to this kind of hypocrisy is not to rule theological knowledge out of bounds. The answer is to live a life that loves theology and lives theology. After all, what is theology anyway? It is not so much an academic discipline as it is the study of God, which means that everyone in the end is a theologian. The question is not whether you will be a theologian; the question is what kind of theologian will you be? Will your theology be based upon

a thorough knowledge of the word of God or will it be based on whim and cultural influence? Unfortunately, a lot of Christians who decry the study of theology don't realize that they have a theology that has been filled up with unbiblical thinking.

We need to be people who live out our Lord's words in John 4:23-24: "But the hour cometh and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. God is a spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth." Worship, which is the chief thing that we are called to do in this world and the next must be done in spirit and in truth. This means that it is not only important to be sincere, but that our worship be true. Worship cannot be true if it is not motivated and informed by the knowledge of the true God, which is to say that you can't truly worship God unless you are a theologian.

The fact of the matter is that eventually you are going to be faced with the question, "Why am I doing this?" For the Christian life is not easy. Our Lord himself described it as taking up the cross. The apostle Paul described it as enduring hardness. It is a warfare, not a vacation. When the world, the devil, and the flesh are pressuring you to give in and take the easy way, it will be very easy to give in unless you have a powerful motivation to do the hard thing. That motivation is not going to be found in, "This is just the right thing to do." Or, "The Lord commanded it, therefore I must do it." You are going to have to persuade yourself to do the right thing, not just know that it is the right thing. I would argue that the way to persuade yourself to make the difficult choice, to deny yourself, is to preach the truths of the gospel of grace to yourself. You will need to sing to yourself the beauty and glory and majesty of God in Christ. In other words, you will need to draw from the rich theological implications of the gospel if you are going to withstand in the evil day.

As we have seen from our Lord's words in John 4, you not only need "truth," you need "spirit." You not only need light, you need heat. It is not enough to simply know truth. We must apply it to our lives. How-

ever, again, this involves more than just knowing that we need to apply it. Living the Christian life is much more than knowing what we must do and why we must do it. We need to be empowered to do it. Remember that we are in a warfare. You don't only need to know how to fight and be motivated to win, you have to have the ability and strength to fight. An army can be very motivated to win, but if it doesn't have superior resources than the enemy, it will almost certainly lose. Witness the Confederacy in the American Civil War or the Carthaginians in the Punic Wars.

We are up against a very motivated and powerful and smart enemy. The apostle will describe them in the sixth chapter: "For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places" (6:12). Our enemy has resources. He is very powerful. He is not a poodle snapping at your heels, but "a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour" (1 Pet. 5:8). He is not out to make your life miserable; he is out to destroy your faith, and he will if he can.

So how do we persevere? How do we fight and live out the Christian life? How do we live out the realities that the apostle has described for us in the preceding verses? The answer is found in the prayer of the apostle in Eph. 3:14-21. It is very important to see how the apostle begins this prayer. It is a prayer for strength: "That he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man."

Paul would not be praying this prayer if his readers didn't need strength. You and I need strength as well. You need strength that comes from outside yourself. In yourself, you do not have the resources to defeat the world, the flesh, and the devil. You need God's strength to live out the life that Christ is calling you to live. The first thing this text teaches us is that we need the help of the triune God – God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who gives us this help through the Spirit.

I think it is important to note that Paul is not praying for unbelievers here. He is praying for believers. He is praying for people who have

already been given spiritual life. And yet he prays for strength for them. Why?

One reason is that God never intended you and me to live our lives apart from his constant help and grace. In the Christian life, we don't grow up to a point where we don't need God to hold our hands anymore. We are always in some sense to be like "newborn babes" (1 Pet. 2:2). God did not create us to be independent of him. Our identity as creatures of the living God means that we never outgrow our constant need of God. Maturity in the faith does not mean that we can do more and more on our own; it is actually the reverse. As we grow in our faith we become more and more dependent upon God; we grow to realize more the reality of just how much we need him. Self-sufficiency is not a sign of spiritual growth; if anything, it is a sign of spiritual decay.

The church of Laodicea is an unfortunate example of this. Their thought was, "I am rich and increased with goods, and have need of nothing." But God's verdict was the very opposite: "...and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked" (Rev. 3:17). They thought they were strong, but they were weak.

The opposite attitude, and the one we ought to have, is exemplified in the apostle: "For when I am weak, then am I strong" (1 Cor. 12:10). In fact, the apostle constantly gloried in his dependence upon Christ. To the Philippians he would say, "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me" (Phil. 4:13). Our Lord reminds us, "Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine, no more can ye, except ye abide in me. I am the vine, ye are the branches: he that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing" (Jn. 15:4-5).

All of us need to realize that we can do nothing apart from the help and grace and strength that Christ provides. Left to yourself, no matter how far you have come in the Christian life, you will shrivel up and die, like a branch that is severed from the vine. You have no grace in yourself. It comes from Christ, and Christ alone. You have no strength

in yourself and you will never have strength in yourself. For that, you must look to the grace of God, every minute of every hour of every day.

There are some great pictures of this in the OT. Have you ever wondered why the Philistines didn't know where Samson got his strength? You know, if the pictures of Samson are right, I don't think the Philistines would have been confused. There is no doubt where Arnold Schwarzenegger gets his strength – he got it from body-building! Personally, I think the reason the Philistines were confused is because Samson looked just like any other man. Just looking at him you would never have guessed he had this incredible strength. The reason is that the strength was not in himself – it was a gift given to him by God. It was grace that gave Samson his power! When he became cocky and self-sufficient and lazy and careless, he lost it. So will we, unless we remain dependent upon God for all the tasks set before us.

Another example of this is found in the confrontation between David and Goliath. Goliath had spent his entire life in the study and practice of warfare. On top of this, he was an obvious giant of a man. He was armed to the gills. His appearance was so fearful that the entire Israelite army refused to face him. Then there was David, a little shepherd boy armed only with a stone and a sling, who hadn't had a day's military training in his life, and yet who took down this monster with a single stone from his sling-shot. Why? David himself gives us the answer, as he put it to Goliath: "Thou comest to me with a sword, and a spear, and with a shield: but I come to thee in the name of the LORD of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom thou hast defied. This day will the LORD deliver thee into mine hand . . . that all the world may know that there is a God in Israel" (1 Kings 17:45-46). David had it right; the difference was not in David, but in the God who empowered David to smite the enemy of Israel.

Let us beware of self-sufficiency. It is rooted in pride and there is nothing that will kill our spiritual walk with God faster than pride. We are told to "be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace unto the humble. Humble yourselves therefore under the

mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time: casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you” [then follows the caution about the devil who goes about like a roaring lion] (1 Pet. 5: 5-7). Instead, let us pray that God would strengthen us with might by his Spirit in the inner man.

Another thing this prayer teaches us is that we not only need to realize our utter need and dependence upon God, we also need to pray out of a sense of that need. And we need to pray for power. It is not enough to know we need God. We must bring to him our every need. If we cannot take one step apart from the grace of God, then we need to be praying over every step that we take.

This truth deals with another problem that Christians face. There is the problem of self-sufficiency and pride. There is also the problem of a sense of helplessness and defeatism. The feeling that we can just go no further. The feeling that God has abandoned us in the wilderness and left us to die. The feeling that we are on our own and that we are therefore defeated. The feeling that we will be overcome and overwhelmed by our enemies.

These feelings are lies. Because if they are true, why would Paul pray for God’s strength and might? He prays thus because there are infinite resources available to the Christian. He prays because there is “the exceeding greatness of his power to usward who believe, according to the working of his mighty power” (Eph. 1:19). Paul, in fact, begins and ends this prayer with a contemplation on the power of God. He prays for God’s power on behalf of believers in verse 16, and then in verse 20 he exults in it: “Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us.”

Yes, we have a powerful enemy. Yes we are in ourselves very weak. But “ye are of God, little children, and have overcome them: because greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world” (1 Jn. 4:4). Like Elisha’s servant we need to see that surrounding all our enemies are the horses and chariots of fire (2 Kings 6:15-17).

The Christian who leans upon the grace of God has no reason to fear being defeated, for he or she has all the resources of heaven at hand. We are strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man. It is the Spirit of God himself who comes down to help us. In other words, God does not just send help; he himself is our help. It is his power that works in us.

That is why Paul begins this prayer the way he does: “For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named” (14-15). In opening this way, the apostle again reminds us of the special and close connection that each believer has with God. In Christ, God the Father is our Father. We bear his name. We are his children. Because we are his children, we can be sure that he will look after and take care of us. He will not leave us as orphans. He will come to us. He will send the Spirit of his Son to us to strengthen us in our time of need. “If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children: how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?” (Lk. 11:13).

And so, if we are in want, it is not because we lack the resources, or because our Father doesn’t care. Rather, “ye have not, because ye ask not” (Jam. 4:2). God waits for us to ask him because it is only in this way that we will be constantly reminded not only of our need for him but also of his care for us. The call to prayer is a call to remember again that God our Father loves us and cares for us and will strengthen us for the road ahead.

Now, before we end our consideration of this part of Paul’s prayer, I think it is important to see where this helps goes. It is aimed at “the inner man.” That is so say, it is aimed at the heart and soul and mind. That is not to say that our bodies will not be redeemed. And that is not to say that God does not sometimes slow down the process of death which grips every one of our bodies by healing us of our diseases. The reality is, unless our Lord returns, this temple will crumble. Nevertheless, the promise of our text is that, whatever happens to our bodies this side of the resurrection, God will never allow the saint to lose continual

access to God's power and strength for the inner man. Paul put it this way to the Corinthians: "For which cause we faint not; but though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day" (2 Cor. 4:16). We may even lose the ability to use our ability to think insofar as it is connected to the function of our brain, but we will never lose the help that God gives the inner man.

We must never forget that every gift, including spiritual strength, is not based upon our goodness but upon God's free favor and grace that comes to us through the righteousness of Jesus Christ on our behalf. All the riches of the glory of God are rooted in the riches of his grace. His grace comes to us solely through Jesus Christ. Let us look afresh to him, approach the throne of our Father, which in Christ is a throne of grace, and find strength and grace and help in our time of need – which is right now.

CHAPTER XXV

IS CHRIST AT HOME IN MY HEART? (EPH. 3:17)

WHAT DOES IT MEAN for Christ to dwell in our hearts by faith? This epistle is to a church, and so the apostle is praying for believers. Thus, in a real sense, these believers already have Christ dwelling in them. Remember what the apostle has already written to the Romans: “But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his. And if Christ be in you, the body is dead because of sin; but the Spirit is life because of righteousness” (Rom. 8:9-10). According to Paul, there are only two states a person can be in: you are either “in the flesh” or “in the Spirit.” To be “in the Spirit” is to have the Spirit dwelling in you and to have the Spirit dwelling in you is for Christ to be in you, since the Spirit is the Spirit of Christ. So if you are a saved person, you already have Christ dwelling in you through the Spirit (note the connection in Eph. 3:16-17 between the Spirit strengthening us and Christ indwelling us).

If Christ dwelling in us is inseparable from salvation, why then is Paul praying for it? The answer is that he is praying for it because the indwelling of Christ is a thing of degrees. Now there are some things

in our salvation that are not things of degrees. Justification is not a thing of degrees. Those who are justified in Christ are no longer under condemnation (cf. Rom. 8:1). Regeneration (the new birth) is not a thing of degrees. You are either born again or not. You are either in the Spirit or in the flesh; there is no halfway point between these two poles.

However, there are other things in our salvation that are things of degrees. Sanctification is a thing of degrees. It is a progressive experience, begun in the initial giving of spiritual life in the new birth and continued throughout our life until Christ finishes his work in us at the last day (cf. Phil. 1:6). What the apostle is praying for here is also a progressive experience. There is a sense in which Christ already dwells in us through the Spirit, but there is a laying hold of this reality through faith that is also very important for the Christian walk, and it is this that the apostle is praying for here.

There are two texts which can enlighten us as to the apostle's meaning. The first is found in Rev. 3:20 in our Lord's expostulations with the Laodiceans. We noted last time that they had this fundamentally wrong attitude of self-sufficiency and spiritual pride. They thought they were strong when in reality they were weak. They needed to be praying for God to strengthen them with might by the Spirit, but they were not in a position to pray this because they were blind to their need. As a result, they were also lacking the very thing the apostle prays for next: for Christ to dwell in them by faith. Thus, our Lord approaches the Laodiceans and says, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me."

This may be one of the most misapplied verses in all the Bible. It is often used in an evangelistic context, where Christ is portrayed standing outside the hearts of unbelievers and begging entrance. However, this verse was not written to unbelievers. It was written to believers. Therefore it was written to people who on one level were indwelt by Christ already. However, because of their sin they were strangers to any real personal fellowship with Christ. In a real sense, he was a stranger

to them and so there he is on the outside of the door of their hearts, knocking, desiring entrance and fellowship.

That is what I think the apostle is praying for here in Ephesians 3:17. He is praying that they would know the reality of fellowship with Christ on a deeper level than they already had experienced before. Commentators have noted the significance of the word that the apostle chose to use here. The word for “dwell” means to “settle down, to be at home with.” He is praying that Christ would be able to be at home in their hearts. He does not want their experience of Christ to be that of welcoming a stranger into their homes from time to time. Rather, he wants their experience of fellowship with the Lord to one of continued, growing, never-ending communion.

Another passage that can enlighten the apostle’s words is found in John 14:16-21. There he promises the apostles that he is leaving, but in leaving them he will not leave them “comfortless” (or “orphans,” ver. 18). He will “come to them.” They will see him (19). “At that day ye shall know that I am in my Father, and ye in me, and I in you. He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me; and he that loveth me shall be loved of my Father, and I will love him, and will manifest myself to him” (20-21). Note the connection between Christ dwelling in his people (20) and his manifesting himself to them (21). This suggests that the indwelling that our Lord promises here has to do with the experience of Christ’s fellowship with his people.

Just as we see in our text, there is a connection between this indwelling and the ministry of the Holy Spirit. In John 14, our Lord indicates to his apostles that it is through the Spirit that he will return to them: “And I will pray to the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you forever; even the Spirit of truth: whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him: but ye know him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you” (16-17).

This text is also misunderstood, as it is often pointed to as proof that the Spirit never indwelt anyone until after Pentecost. But that cannot

be. The apostles were clearly born again, and the new birth is a work of the Spirit (cf. Jn. 3:5-8). Instead, what our Lord is referring to here is the ministry of the Spirit of God mediating the presence and power of the risen Christ to his church. They didn't need this particular ministry of the Spirit as long as Christ was present with them, but they would need it in his absence. The Spirit has come to bring the presence of the living Christ to his people. He is through his Spirit with us always, even to the end of the age (Mt. 28:20).

However, it is one thing to know what a text means, and it is another thing to desire it and to pray for it with intentionality and sincerity. Because the indwelling of Christ is a thing of degrees, and none of us are perfect, we all have room to grow in this area. At one extreme, you can be like the Laodiceans and have a heart that is in such a desperate condition that you know little of the reality of fellowship and communion with our Lord. On the other hand, you can be like the apostle John, who wrote of his experience and invited others to experience it as well: "That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ. And these things write we unto you, that your joy may be full" (1 Jn. 3:3-4). We ought to want to distance ourselves from the experience of the Laodiceans and to approach the experience of the apostle John.

Of course we need to be convinced that this is an experience that we can enjoy. We need to remember that Paul is not praying for super-saints. He is praying for ordinary Christians like you and me. This is a prayer for us to pray and an experience for us to reach for. It is not unattainable, and in fact it is something that ought to characterize our walk with the Lord. If it doesn't, it's not because our Lord is not willing to commune with you. The problem is entirely on our end. Remember the imagery of Rev. 3:20. Our Lord stands at the door and knocks, desiring to come in and fellowship with us. He desires our fellowship; why would we not desire his?

However, this does not mean that there are not obstacles, even if many of them are obstacles of our own making. This is indicated by Paul's previous request in this prayer, that they would be "strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man." The fact that this prayer for strengthening precedes the prayer for Christ to dwell in their hearts by faith indicates that it is no easy thing for this to happen. It is something that requires the power of the Spirit of God working in us that makes it possible for us to experience the fellowship of Christ for which the apostle is praying.

What are some of these obstacles? Well, sin in general is a huge obstacle. I don't think it was for no reason that the apostle John, right after he had issued this invitation for fellowship with God, immediately goes on to write: "This then is the message which we have heard of him, and declare unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth: But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin" (1 Jn. 1:5-7). God does not fellowship with people who do not live repentant lives. Recall that in John 14 Jesus connects keeping his commandments with his manifesting himself to us. You simply cannot walk with God if you are living in sin, if you your lusts are enjoying an open season in your heart.

This week, my family and I are experiencing a house that through flooding has become temporarily unlivable. There are boxes of things stacked everywhere, furniture in places where they aren't supposed to be, floors torn up. It's hard to get around in the house. It's inconvenient. We would never think about asking someone over in this condition; we can't even stay very long in our own house right now. Things are going to have to be fixed and put back together before our house is livable again. How many of our hearts are just like that? How many of us have allowed our hearts to be flooded with sinful attitudes and desires and purposes and plans? The debris of sin is all over the place. And yet we have the audacity to think that Jesus would be just fine with our hearts.

He can't settle down in a place like that! We can't even do it, if we are honest with ourselves. The selfishness that plagues so many of our hearts makes us miserable in ourselves, as well as being difficult to live with when it comes to others. Why would we think that our Lord would be okay with staying on when our heart is in that condition? No, he is on the outside, looking in, knocking at our door, and he will stay there until we are ready to get the junk out of our hearts.

Here is the simple truth: there is no fellowship with Christ when we are comfortable with the sin that is in our lives. There is no faith without repentance. I will go a step further: if you have no desire to rid yourself of the sin that is in your heart, if you are okay with Jesus standing outside and looking in, then it could very well be evidence that you are not in fact born again at all. Our Lord told the Laodiceans that if they didn't repent, he would vomit them out of his mouth (Rev. 3:16). It is only to those who overcome by fleeing from sin and clinging to Christ that he promises a throne in the age to come (21). There simply are no promises for those who refuse to repent of their sins. If you are happier in the darkness than you are in the light, it is very possible that you belong to the darkness and not the light.

We have to be careful especially about the sin that is in our hearts. The apostle James writes, "Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you." But how do we do this? James goes on to explain: "Cleanse your hand, ye sinners; and purify your hearts, ye double minded. Be afflicted, and mourn, and weep: let your laughter be turned to mourning, and your joy to heaviness. Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up" (Jam. 4:8-10). It is not enough to deal with external problems. We must deal with the heart. We must repent of the sin that no one else can see. It stands to reason that if we want Christ to dwell in our hearts, then our hearts have to be clean.

Now I want to be clear here. I realize that all of this must be done in the context of the gospel. I'm not talking about cleaning yourself up so that you can make yourself worthy for Christ. The only way we can walk in the light is if the blood of Jesus Christ the Son of God is constantly

cleansing us from our sin (1 Jn. 1:7). Nor can we cleanse ourselves from our sins in our own power and strength. That is the point of the prayer for the strengthening of the Spirit of God. We need the power of God to give us the strength to say no to sin and yes to righteousness. It is the grace of God that teaches us to deny ungodliness and worldly lusts and to live with self-control and godliness in this present world (Tit. 2:11-12). We are utterly and completely reliant upon the grace of God that comes to us through the merit and worthiness of Christ for us. And yet we need to reckon with the reality that grace does teach us to say no to sin and yes to godliness. Those who never raise a finger to the sin that is in their hearts just show that they know nothing at all of the reality of grace. Beware of those who turn the grace of our God into lasciviousness (Jude 4)!

Another reason sin needs to be rooted out of the heart is because we will clearly not pray this prayer unless we from the heart desire to have the fellowship with the Lord that is held out for us here. So it's not just that Christ will not have fellowship with us when we harbor sin in the heart and life. It's that we will not want to have fellowship with him as long as we harbor sin in the heart and life. Sin blinds us to the beauty and power and sufficiency and desirability of the gospel. Therefore we need to rid the things in our hearts that compete with Christ for supremacy. Anything that vies with him for the supremacy of our hearts is an idol and therefore must be vanquished before we can have communion with him.

To try to have fellowship with Christ and hold on to our idols is like the Philistines with the ark of God. They tried to put it in front of their god Dagon. During the night, Dagon fell over. They didn't get the message so they set him back up. The next night, not only did Dagon come tumbling down, but he shattered into a million pieces before the ark of God (cf. 1 Sam. 5:1-5). God will not compete with your idols. You will either have to give them up or give God up.

There are a million things tugging at your heart seeking to turn you away from the fellowship of Christ. In those times, we need to pray that

the Holy Spirit would strengthen us against those desires. We need to remind ourselves that there is nothing that can take the place of Christ. No one else can give you eternal life and reverse the process of death that is already at work in your bodies. No one else can give you joy that will only grow and will never bring regret. If you have tasted that the Lord is gracious (1 Pet. 2:3), don't turn from that to the plastic fruit that this world offers.

We do not only make way for fellowship with the Lord by saying no to sin. Positively, we must lay hold of the truths of the gospel by faith. It is in this way that Christ comes to dwell in our hearts by faith. We must not only look away from sin, but we must look toward Christ. I'm not talking about a magical formula or incantation or mantra here. We make way for communion with the Savior by beholding him in the mirror of his word, in the Holy Scriptures. We need to meditate on the person and work of Jesus Christ as he shows up in the gospels and in the epistles. We need to consider how he was promised in the OT and how those promises were fulfilled in the NT.

Then we need to lay hold of God's word by faith. This does not mean to take a leap of faith into some spiritual unknown. It means that we need to have absolute confidence that God's word is true. There are all sorts of reasons to have this kind of confidence. The testimony of the apostles is both credible and believable. Historical research is not the only way we gain this confidence. The fact of the matter is that the word of God is unique because, to those whose eyes have been opened, the word of God is its own witness. We hear God speaking to us in the Scriptures. Not an audible voice, but there is an inner certainty that the saints of God know as they hear or read the Bible. As our Lord himself said, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. And I give unto them eternal life, and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand" (Jn. 10:27-28). It is perhaps what John was referring to when he wrote, "He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in himself" (1 Jn. 5:10). We need that witness, that certainty, if we are going to open up our hearts to Christ as

we ought. You are not going to be seeking the kind of fellowship that Paul is praying for in Ephesians 3:17 if your attitude toward Jesus is to try him for a while and see if it works out. No, you will not seek this indwelling unless you are absolutely convinced that he is the only one who can fill your heart. That is the attitude of faith, of confidence in the reliability and trustworthiness of God's word.

Jesus Christ is worthy of your confidence. We are all aware of his competitors. But to put your trust in his competitors is like putting your trust in an idol. Why would you put your trust in something that ultimately owes its existence to Christ anyway? Why live for power when all power ultimately belongs to Christ? Any power we grasp from him and take unlawfully or as a way to gratify our desire for self-worship will have to be eventually surrendered under judgement anyway. So it is with all his other competitors. Why live for pleasure apart from Christ when true pleasure is found only in Christ? Why live for fame when all fame justly and ultimately belongs to Jesus? Why live for philosophy when all truth is found in the Word of God, the Word made flesh?

The fellowship of Jesus Christ is far more to be desired than the possession of any earthly, temporary pleasure or accomplishment. Moreover, it is the testimony of millions of believers over the past 2,000 years in every part of the world that this is no shadow of a dream. It is spiritual reality. It is not a self-induced spiritual experience, but a real experience of fellowship with the risen Son of God, our Lord and Savior. If you belong to him, the fact of the matter is that he desires your fellowship. He stands at the door and knocks; those who open and invite him in will enjoy the company of our living Savior.

How does it stand with you? Does Christ dwell in your heart by faith?

CHAPTER XXVI

ROOTED AND GROUNDED IN LOVE (EPH. 3:17)

HOW CAN YOU UNDERSTAND the love of God if you yourself are an unloving person? It would seem that only a loving heart could receive the offers of God's love. It is reasonable to suppose that a heart that channels all the affections back toward the self would have a difficult time comprehending how the heart of someone else would want to channel affection outwards. The ruts created in the heart through constant self-centeredness are sometimes too deep to jump out of and into paths of selflessness.

It is for this reason that the apostle now prays that his readers would be "rooted and grounded in love." This prayer precedes Paul's desire that they would be able to comprehend the dimensions of the love of Christ (18-19). This indicates that the request in verse 17 is not that they would be rooted and grounded in God's love to them (which is expressed in the following verse) but that they would be rooted in grounded in their love to God and their fellow man. But they must be rooted and grounded in their love to others (and, above all, to God) in order to have the kind of heart that would be able to comprehend the

breadth and length and depth and height of the knowledge of the love of Christ to them. Verse 17 makes verse 18 possible.

The apostle is expressing the fact that love is fundamental to living out the Christian life. He does so by using two metaphors, one from agriculture and one from architecture: “rooted and grounded.” The thing that roots and foundations have in common is that they both provide stability and durability to the structures they support, so it seems likely that the apostle has this in mind when praying that they would be rooted and grounded in love. A tree with shallow roots will be easily uprooted, but a tree with roots that go down deep into the ground will not be knocked over even by a strong wind. In the same way, a building that is anchored upon a strong foundation will not collapse, whereas one without a foundation or a flimsy foundation is always in danger of collapse. I am told that one of the reasons there are so many skyscrapers in Manhattan is because Manhattan is basically solid rock. It is perfectly suited for the many tall buildings it supports. Each building is rooted and grounded, stable and durable.

Our Lord himself used this analogy in the Sermon on the Mount. He talks about those who build their house upon a rock, “and the rain descended and the floods came and the winds blew, and beat upon that house, and it fell not, for it was founded upon a rock” (Mt. 7:25). Whereas those who built their houses upon the sand, without a strong foundation, fell, “and great was the fall of it” (27). Thus, to be rooted and grounded in love means that love keeps us from being blown over by every blast of hate and meanness and bitterness that pummel us as we go through this world. In other words, love gives the saint staying power in this world. This is, in fact, one of the things that Paul says about love in 1 Cor. 13: “Love is patient . . . Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends” (1 Cor. 13:4, 7-8, ESV).

Now I think it is appropriate at this point to observe that if love has this quality, then love is very different from the kind of sappy sentimentalism that is so often smuggled in as if it were love. The kind of love

that is portrayed on TV and in movies and books is not the kind of love that Paul is praying for here. That kind of love is easily toppled the first time the winds of lust start blowing in another direction. Lust is not love. Lust is the chaff of which love is the wheat. Although I wouldn't want to divorce desire from love, yet we must be careful that we don't mistake every strong desire for what the apostle is praying for here. Biblical love is something much deeper and longer-lasting than mere whim and desire. It is something that defines you and propels you and keeps you going when everything else is against you. Paul described his love to Christ is this way: "the love of Christ constraineth us" (2 Cor. 5:14). Or, as the ESV puts it, "the love of Christ controls us." It did so in the face of immeasurable difficulties and opposition. It kept Paul going. Mere desire won't do that. Desire on its own doesn't have roots. Love, real love, sends its roots down into the heart and will and affections and will keep you grounded in the face of hostility and failure and opposition. It won't be moved when everything around it is.

I think the clearest expression of this is the mission of the Son of God into the world. What propelled the Son of God into the world to save a world of sinners in rebellion against him? It could not have been some wonderful feeling that did this. Nice feelings alone don't withstand the brunt of Gethsemane and Golgotha. What was it then? Was it not love? And is that not the gospel? "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life" (Jn. 3:16). The meaning of Christmas can only be understood against the backdrop of the love of God: "For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich" (2 Cor. 8:9). Our Lord, Jesus Christ, willingly chose to forfeit the privileges of deity for a time in order to come into a very hostile world in order to save a thankless, rebellious people. It was love that did that. "And walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us, and hath given himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling savor" (Eph. 5:2).

As Paul's words in Ephesians 5:2 indicate, it is this kind of love that we are to emulate and imitate, and it is this kind of love for which he is praying in Ephesians 3:17. Love is something that causes us to sacrifice ourselves for the good of someone else. Love is something that causes us to keep doing good to others when there is no immediate return for our love.

So we see that this is important, because not only does being rooted and grounded in love enable us to receive further revelations of God's love to us, but also because it enables us to persevere in the faith. It enables us to "not be weary in well-doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not" (Gal. 6:9). Perseverance is important. We are warned again and again against apostasy, and apostasy is necessarily linked to a failure to maintain a loving heart: "And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold. But [in contrast to those whose love has grown cold] he that shall endure to the end, the same shall be saved" (Mt. 24:12-13). I don't think it is for no reason that our Lord later rebukes this very church of Ephesus, "because thou hast left thy first love" (Rev. 2:4). Then, a few verses later, he exhorts them to perseverance: "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit sayeth unto the churches; To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God" (7). Those who leave their first love will later leave the faith.

Of course, it's not that we stop loving altogether when we stop persevering in the faith. We are creatures of love. We will love something. But if God is not at the top of that list, and if we do not love our fellow man as we love ourselves, then our love will be warped and aimed in the wrong direction. In fact, this is precisely why Demas failed to make it to the end (as far as we know): "For Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world, and is departed unto Thessalonica" (2 Tim. 4:10). So Paul is not praying that they will just love anything. That's a given. Paul is not praying that they will end up like Demas. He wants them to persevere. He wants them to have the kind of love that roots and grounds them against apostasy.

So let's remind ourselves what this love looks like.

First, this love is rooted in love to Christ. In other words, the primary object of love is God. That is why the first part of verse 17 comes before the second part of verse 17: "That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love." It is as we treasure Christ in our heart through faith that love to Christ sends its roots down deep into our hearts and steadies us as we grow in grace. Of course, love to Christ is inseparable from love to the Father and the Spirit. To love the Son is to love the Father. And so, the love that Paul is praying for here is love to the Holy Trinity, Father, Son, and Spirit. Note that all three Persons show up in this prayer. Paul is praying to the Father (14) to send his Spirit (16) to strengthen the saints in order that the Son (17) might be at home in their hearts. This is a Trinitarian prayer and it shows us that all true religion is Trinitarian at heart. If we want to be rooted and grounded in love, we must be rooted and grounded first of all in love to God.

This is the center of all true religion. Recall that in answering the question, "Which is the great commandment in the law?" our Lord answered, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment" (Mt. 22:36-38). You cannot please God, you cannot follow Christ, and you cannot walk in the power of the Holy Spirit if you do not first and foremost love the God of the Bible.

Of all the things or people we could place our love upon, God is most worthy of your love. The very existence of love depends upon the nature of God as love (cf. 1 Jn. 4:7). Every good thing we have ever experienced or will experience in this age and in the age to come is a gift from the mercy and goodness of God. The loveliness and beauty of any good thing, or the attribute of any good thing that calls out love from the heart, is owing ultimately to God who is the source of all beauty and loveliness. Of course, we do owe love to God. He is the creator and we are his creatures. It is a fundamental right that we owe to him. It is not only right that we do it; it is also fitting that we do it. It is for our eternal

good and joy that we give God our ultimate allegiance and the love of our hearts. To withhold love from God is to commit spiritual suicide. To love him brings everlasting healing and joy to the soul and heart.

Especially for those of us who claim to be redeemed by the blood of Christ, how can we not love him? How can we not love the One who shed his blood for us, who left his riches to be impoverished in our nature and to suffer for us who were once his enemies? How can we not love him who has enriched us with every spiritual blessing and has given us good hope through grace? How can we know the fellowship of Jesus Christ and not give him the love of our hearts? There is nothing and no one to be loved compared to Jesus Christ. Even heaven, with all its wonders and joys and blessings, is nothing compared to Christ. Heaven is heaven because of Christ. He is the light that enriches and gives beauty to the New Jerusalem. He is worthy of the most earnest love of our hearts.

This love is therefore born out of fellowship with Christ. You cannot love someone you do not know. That is why having Christ at home in your heart comes before being rooted and grounded in love. It is important to realize that we are not talking about a merely theoretical association with Christ. We are talking about a relationship with him that draws out the love of your heart to him.

Second, we are not only to be rooted and grounded in love to God, but also in love to our neighbor (Mt. 22:39-40). You cannot love God without loving your neighbor. For the Christian, this especially applies to loving the brothers and sisters in Christ. As the apostle John puts it, "Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God, for God is love" (1 Jn. 4:7-8). "If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?" (1 Jn. 4:20).

It is the easiest thing in the world to talk about loving God, but the proof is how you treat others. How you treat your spouse. How you treat your children. How you treat your neighbor. How you treat your

brothers and sisters in Christ. Do you love them? More to the point: would they say that you love them? We can croon about our love to others all we want, but if they don't feel it and see it, then it's very likely that we aren't really loving them.

Third, this love demonstrates itself in selfless and sacrificial acts on the behalf of those it loves. "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (Jn. 15:13). Love is giving. Love looks outward and away from the self. More importantly, when we love someone we identify with them in such a way that we seek for them exactly what we would want for ourselves, and are willing to deny ourselves of that good in order to secure it for them. This is exactly what Christ did for us on the cross. It was not good for him to die. He died so that death would not have the final say over us. He died to give us abundant, eternal life. This is the kind of love for which the apostle is praying.

Going back to 1 Cor. 13, we see in every description of love how selfless it is. "Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (4-7, ESV). Every one of these descriptions can be illustrated in the life of our Savior. As we imitate him, we too become more loving.

The reason we can do this is because love is rooted in love to God and in who Christ is and what he has done for us. I don't think you can demonstrate the kind of love the apostle is praying for here apart from a relationship with Christ. The reason I can give myself for others is because Christ has already given me all that I need and I will lose nothing of the riches in Christ through sacrificing for others. I can give up a little temporary pleasure and comfort and security for someone else because what Christ has given me can never be taken away. If my hope is in the age to come then I ought to be able to deny myself in this age out of love for someone else. My treasure is never threatened

by anything that is lost in this world, and therefore there is no need for me to fear losing anything out of love for others.

This is so important, it is the essential mark of the Christian. “By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another” (Jn. 13:35). We talk about the need for evangelism, but evangelism will never make a dent in our community if it is not accompanied by love. That is why I really believe that if we are to really make a difference in our community, it will only be done as we minister to people and show love to them in tangible ways. It is only then that their ears will be tuned to hear the notes of the gospel. Just shouting at people to repent and believe is not going to be very effective. Jesus not only preached the gospel, he healed their diseases. He fed them. He ministered to their bodies so that they would be able to receive the medicine for their souls. Love your neighbor; it is essential for the witness of the church.

It is also essential for the unity and community of the church. You simply cannot have harmony in the fellowship of believers if we don’t work hard at practicing love to each other. Don’t just love your brother or sister when it is easy. Do it when it is hard. Put in practice what the apostle Peter said: “And above all things have fervent charity among yourselves [keep loving one another earnestly, ESV]: for charity shall cover the multitude of sins” (1 Pet. 4:8). Be earnest in your love to the brethren.

Listen to what the apostle tells the Philippian church: “If there be therefore any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any bowels and mercies, fulfill ye my joy, that ye be likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others. Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2:1-5). In other words, if we want to experience all the things he mentions in verse 1, we have to have the mind of Christ, we have to put others before ourselves. In other words, we have to be loving people.

Moreover, love is essential for the work and fruit of faith. Love is the environment in which the Christian life grows and prospers. It is why the apostle wrote, “Let all your things be done in charity” (1 Cor. 16:14). It is why he wrote, “And above all these things put on charity, which is the bond of perfectness” (Col. 3:14). Faith works by love (Gal. 5:6). It is the glue that ties everything together. It is that which sums up the law and fulfills it (Rom. 13:10).

Of course knowledge is important too. Some people go so overboard on love that they become unbalanced by untying love to the knowledge of God. In doing so they undermine what the apostle is praying for here. He is not praying for some generic feeling of love for God. This love is itself rooted in an understanding of who God is. We must remember that the people Paul is praying for have a pretty good grasp of Biblical knowledge. They have just heard or read Ephesians 1-3, and these were probably not unfamiliar truths to them. The fact is that knowledge and love must go together. In fact, Paul would explicitly pray for this for the Philippians: “And this I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and in all judgment; that ye may approve things that are excellent” (Phil. 1:9-10).

Love with little knowledge will end up being shallow. We must also beware of knowledge without love. It may be worse. As Lloyd-Jones argues in one of his sermons, one of the reasons Paul wrote 1 Corinthians was because they had exalted knowledge over love, and it had created all sorts of problems. Thus, in the preamble to his chapter on love, he writes, “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing” (1 Cor. 13:1-3). All the religious knowledge and zeal in the world apart from love is nothing!

Let us love one another. Above all, let us love God. May we be so rooted and grounded in that love, that it prepares us for greater knowl-

edge of God and his love for us and make us more effective for the gospel of the kingdom.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE LOVE OF CHRIST, THE FULLNESS OF GOD (EPH. 3:18-19)

IN THESE VERSES, we reach the pinnacle of Paul's prayer for the saints in Ephesus, and, indeed, the pinnacle and climax of all Christian experience. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, in one of his sermons on this text, rightly said, "There is no more staggering statement in the whole range of Scripture than this." It is something we could not dare to pray for were it not in Scripture itself. It is this: "that ye might be filled with all the fullness of God." That is what Paul is ultimately praying for. The reason they needed to be strengthened with might by the Spirit in the inner man was so that Christ would dwell in their hearts by faith, so that, being rooted and grounded in love, they might be able to comprehend the love of Christ so that they would be filled with God's fullness. It all leads to that.

Now it is important to see that the culmination of this prayer really explains what it means to be filled with all the fullness of God. The structure of Paul's thought here requires that it be explained by know-

¹D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *The Unsearchable Riches of Christ*, p. 278.

ing the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge. That is how we are filled with all the fullness of God. Recall that to the Colossians, Paul would write of Christ, "For in him dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily. And ye are complete in him" (Col. 2:9-10). The only way for us to be filled with all the fullness of God is to know most fully the love of Christ in whom dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily. The climax of spiritual experience is to know and experience as much as humanly possible the love Christ for us, which goes to show that many of us have very little knowledge of the love of Christ.

One way to put this is to say that the apostle is praying that the believers to whom he is writing would discover and experience God in ways that they had not up to that point. Surely there is no greater goal for which we should strive. God made us to do this. He put us on this planet so that we should seek him and find him, as the apostle put it to the philosophers in Athens (cf. Acts 17). It is the reason for which Christ died. He died to bring us to God (1 Pet. 3:18). The forgiveness of sins is an important accomplishment of the death of Christ, but it is subservient to this greatest of all ends, to bring us into the fellowship and presence of the living God. It is this, in all its fullness, for which the apostle is ultimately praying for here.

And yet, so many, even in the church, are left uninterested in the prospect of being filled with all the fullness of God. Why? I think one reason is to be found in the fact that we live in an age where technological discovery is proceeding at a lightening pace. Our world is opening up to wondrous technological marvels that just a generation ago would have seemed like science fiction. It is easy to get sucked into the vortex of excitement generated by such discovery. There are many who would look at what they are doing and experiencing due to such scientific advancements, and look on this passage and wonder what is the relevance of it all. They are not interested in discovering God. They would rather discover the next step towards quantum computing.

In fact, a lot of people would go further. They would say that there is nothing interesting about finding God. God is just for the weak-

minded, they would say. They look at themselves and think they are too sophisticated for God. God is boring, uninteresting, and a fable to boot.

Now I grant that if God is a fable, then there is nothing in fact to discover. If we proceed upon the assumption that he is real (an assumption which can be backed by many solid arguments and evidences), then it is manifest folly to think that pursuing the next technological marvel is more interesting or more important than pursuing the knowledge of God. Every scientific discovery is but a discovery of something in a universe that God created. So, if we consider it from that point of view, then what they are doing is at least several levels down from the discovery of the God of the universe itself. I'm not saying what they are doing is not important. I'm just saying that it's not anywhere nearly as important or exciting as the discovery of the God who gave the human mind the propensity for discovery and innovation and who gave us a universe which can be harnessed to the service of human advancement through scientific endeavor.

To pursue human advancement apart from the knowledge and service of God is to build a Tower of Babel. It may be impressive, but it is doomed to failure in the end.

But this is not the only reason people put off seeking the presence of God. Another reason why people think that the discovery of God is uninteresting is because they think they know all there is to know about God. There is this notion that the knowledge of God is elementary, something which is limited to a few doctrines. You read your Bible a few times, a couple of systematic theologies, and you're done. Moving on!

The apostle's prayer here shows us that this view of the knowledge of God is clearly insufficient. It is stupid to assume that we know all there is to know about the fullness of God! He is infinite, and I am finite. There is simply no way a finite human being could know or experience all there is about God in a finite amount of time. The apostle himself interrupts such a line of thinking in these verses. In verse 19, he talks

about knowing the love of Christ, “which passeth knowledge.” He is not saying that the love of Christ is unknowable since he is praying that they might “know the love of Christ.” Rather, he is saying that we can never exhaust the riches of the love of Christ for us (cf. 3:8). No matter how much we know about the love of Christ, there are still dimensions to his love which we still have yet to discover. The love of Christ is infinite, and it surpasses our ability to comprehend it completely. The saints will spend the rest of their lives and eternity exploring the vastness of Christ’s love for them.

I think people also make this mistake because they fail to realize that there are two levels upon which we proceed in our knowledge of God. One is intellectual, and the other is experiential. It is agreed by the commentators upon these verses that the word Paul uses for knowledge here encompasses both the intellectual and the experiential components. Now those who think they have exhausted the knowledge of the fullness of God and the love of Christ, only approach this on an intellectual level. Of course they are wrong even here; there is no way we can exhaust the knowledge of the love of Christ even on this level. Again, we are dealing with the fullness of God here; a finite mind cannot completely grasp the infinite. Those who think God is boring simply fail to come to terms with the reality of the infinity of God.

There is also this experiential aspect to the love of Christ and the fullness of God. You can know a lot of doctrine about God and the love of Christ and yet know nothing of experiencing the richness of fellowship with the living God. Here is the test for those who think God is boring. If they think that, it is because they have never really experienced God. It is because they know nothing of the love of Christ. Knowing the love of Christ turned the persecutor Saul into the apostle Paul. It takes ordinary people and motivates them to love others even when they are being persecuted by the people to whom they are showing love. The love of Christ constrains them, it controls them. It causes them to rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory (1 Pet. 1:8). The saints will spend all eternity exploring the vastness of the dimensions

of Christ's love for his people. We cannot say that we know all there is to know about the love of Christ and the fullness of God. The fact of the matter is that we know little of what we ought to know, even here.

Another reason people find discovering the fullness of God to be uninteresting is because they think it is impractical. There is this idea that to be a top-of-the-line Christian, you must be an activist. You must be doing something, achieving something. On the other hand, they think that those who spend their lives pursuing an experience of the love of Christ are selfish and impractical and unhelpful. Their focus is not upon a doctrinal knowledge of Christ's love to them, or an experience of Christ's love for them, but upon doing something for Christ.

Now there is something true in this perspective. We don't want to become Christians who just sit on their hands. We are in danger when we think that developing a real, experiential knowledge of the love of Christ for us is impractical. Both Scripture and church history tell us exactly the opposite. If you really want to be useful in the kingdom of God, you must first revel in the love of Christ to you. For the chief mission of the church is to share the love of Christ. How can we do this if we ourselves don't know it very well? To use an expression that Lloyd-Jones used, the danger is that we become advocates for the gospel and not witnesses to the gospel.

Moreover, it is going to be hard to do real ministry in an unloving world if you are not empowered by a love that is not tied to this world. Only the love of Christ can keep us going when everything else is against us. It is what kept Paul going. He was not only persecuted by the unbelievers in his day, he was also persecuted by other church leaders! You see this in his letters to the Corinthians and Galatians, and you also see it in the first chapter of his letter to the Philippians. How could he keep going when he had so much negative feedback? It was because the love of Christ constrained him (2 Co. 5:14). If you want to know the secret of Paul's ministry, it was that he knew and experienced what he here prays for the Ephesians.

I do want to push back on this idea that doing, doing, doing is the key to a successful Christian life and ministry. I don't think I'm wrong to say that we live in a time where churches are doing a lot of things. There are a multitude of ministries out there. And yet, look at our society. It is getting worse, not better. Why? Could it not be because so much of what the church does today is not empowered from the knowledge of the love of Christ but rather out of a desire to produce statistics? It seems unarguable that the church today is more interested in statistics than it is in really knowing Christ. Therein lies a great part of our problem.

There are many illustrations from church history to back up the fact that experiencing the fullness of God is essential to true usefulness in the kingdom of God. As just one example, consider D. L. Moody. There he was, preaching the gospel, but doing it, as he put it, as "a great hustler," in the energy and power of the flesh. Then one day in 1871 as he was walking down Wall Street in New York, the power of God fell upon him in such a powerful way, that he had to go into a nearby house where he experienced such joy that "at last he had to ask God to withhold his hand, lest he die on the spot from very joy." He pointed to that experience as a watershed event in his life, and although the sermons that he preached afterward weren't any different from those before, they were accompanied by a power that led to the conversions of hundreds.² The power of God, the fullness of God! Note that he didn't do anything different in terms of external activity after as before. But there was a power that was present, a power that could only be explained in terms of his experience of God. We are so confident in our methods, that we forget about the God apart from whose power and enabling we can do nothing.

Now where are you and I at in terms of knowing this love of Christ and experiencing this fullness of God? Of course, if you are a Christian, you do know something of the love of Christ. There is so much more that we could experience and, the more we experience it, the more we will realize how little we actually know. One of the reasons I pursued

²See <http://holyspiritempowers.com/2013/02/d-l-moody/>

graduate school in mathematics is because, when I finished my undergraduate degree, I looked at all my books and they almost all had the words, “Elementary” or “Introduction to...” in their titles. I realized that, even though I had obtained a bachelor’s degree, I still had only been introduced to mathematics! So I realized that, if I really wanted to know what mathematics was all about, I had to go on. The problem is that by the time I finished graduate school, I realized that I still was only scratching the surface. In fact, I have a book in my office with the title, *Advanced Linear Algebra*, but which opens with the words, “This book is a thorough introduction to linear algebra.” So even advanced books in mathematics can only claim to be thorough introductions! If this is true in mathematics, it is even truer in theology and the knowledge of God. None of us can really claim to have gotten beyond an introduction to the knowledge of God. And yet, for those who go on, there are riches that make the journey more than worth it.

Edward Payson puts all this in a way that I think is very helpful and instructive. He describes classes of believers who are ranged in concentric circles about Christ:

Suppose professors of religion to be ranged in different concentric circles around Christ as their common centre. Some value the presence of their Saviour so highly that they cannot bear to be at any remove from Him. Even their work they will bring up and do it in the light of His countenance, and while engaged in it will be seen constantly raising their eyes to Him as if fearful of losing one beam of His light.

Others, who, to be sure, would not be content to live out of His presence, are yet less wholly absorbed by it than these, and may be a little further off, engaged here and there in their various callings, their eyes generally upon their work, but often looking up for the light which they love.

A third class, beyond these but yet within the life-giving rays, includes a doubtful multitude, many of whom are so much engaged in their worldly schemes that they may be seen standing sideways to Christ, looking mostly the other way, and only now and then turning their faces towards the light. And yet further out, among the last scattered rays, so distant that it is often doubtful whether they come at all within their influence, is a mixed assemblage of busy ones, some with their backs wholly turned upon the sun, and most of them so careful and troubled about their many things as to spend but little time for their Saviour.³

I think this is a very accurate way of putting it. The point is that we are on one of these concentric circles, closer or further away from the center who is Christ. The goal for every Christian is to move toward to the center. That is what Paul is essentially praying for here. He wants them to be so close to Christ that everything in their life and work and play is flavored by their relationship to him, and they don't want to do anything that would endanger their nearness to Christ.

I like the way Payson describes those who are removed from the center. The further out you go, the more interested in and engulfed you are by the things of this world to the exclusion of Christ. The less the rays of Christ's love enflame you, the less you are interested in your relationship to him. The closer you get, the more you want of his presence and nearness, the more you want to know of his love.

In evaluating ourselves, we need to pause and ask ourselves, "How attracted am I to the love of Christ? How constant is my affection for him?" As with gravity, distance affects the attraction we feel towards our Lord. The closer we are to him, the more we want to move towards him, the more we want to know of him and his love toward us, the more we want to experience the fullness of God. Whereas, the further out we are, the less we will tend to be attracted by the gospel and its glories.

³Quoted in Lloyd-Jones, p. 242-243.

Another way to put this is that we are on a continuum between two poles. At one end is Christ and at the other end is an idol of some form. For different people the idol may be different. But the battle that is being fought in this prayer is the battle against idolatry. It is the fight to move away from the idol and towards Christ. The more you know of the love of Christ, the less you are going to be interested in the idol. The more you are filled with the fullness of God, the less room there is going to be in your heart for that idol.

The closer we move toward Christ, the more we will realize that every idol is but a shadow of Christ and therefore less desirable than Christ himself. Most idols are gifts that God gives that we then put in the place of God. Pleasure, power, fame, money: these can all be legitimate gifts that can enrich our lives. The problem is that we begin to look to pleasure or power or fame or money to give us what only God can give. We also tend to give to the gifts what only God deserves: worship and affection and devotion and love. They cannot give us what only God can give and we should not give to them what only God deserves.

It's like exalting a sun beam over the sun itself. The sun beam is great. It is what makes flowers grow. It's what gives us warmth. But the sun beam would not exist without a sun. To praise the sun beam while ignoring the sun is stupid. Even so, when we put God's gifts in God's place, we are praising the sun beam and forgetting about the sun. Clearly, the sun is greater and more important the beam of light it emits. In the same way, God is infinitely exalted and above his gifts. It is folly when we idolize the sun beam. The Giver is greater than any of his gifts.

How do we get there? How do we move towards the Center? To be completely honest, I do feel like I am preaching more as an advocate here than as a witness. I don't feel like I've experienced the fullness of God anywhere nearly as I should. But I want to get there. We should be encouraged in our journey, if we are related to Christ. Because the apostle prays that they "may be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth and length and depth and height, and to know the love of Christ." This is not something that is out of reach except only for

a few super-saints. It is for all the saints, for every believer, for anyone who knows Christ.

We ought to be intensely thankful that our Lord has not put this on a level that only few can reach. This is one of the glories of the Christian religion. It is not reserved only for the intellectuals. It is not reserved only for the wealthy. It is open to all who know Christ, no matter their IQ or their status in society. Our Lord himself said, "I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes" (Mt. 11:25). It is not only there for you, but our Lord himself wants you to experience the fullness of God in his love. He stands at the door and knocks (Rev. 3:20). There is no reason, beyond those of our own making, why we cannot attain to what the apostle prays for here.

However, it is not automatic. When my wife and I were in Colorado several years ago, we stopped by this mountain and near the top of it you could see little people ascending to the peak. I decided that I wanted to do this, and so I set off. However, I was not exactly in shape, nor were my lungs conditioned for the rarified air at that elevation. At some point I had to give up and turn back. In the same way, many of us are spiritually out of shape. That doesn't mean we can't ascend to the peak and behold the majesty of Christ's love for us; it just means that there has to be some conditioning for us to be able to ascend to the top.

What are some of the things we must do? Well, first, we have to want it. If we want our idol more than Christ, we are going to stay away from the Center. God does not reward those who do not seek him diligently, with the whole heart. The prophet put it, "And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart" (Jer. 29:13). Our Lord compares seeking him with a man who sells all that he has to have a field for the treasure buried within it, or to a merchant who sells everything to obtain that one pearl of great price. Do we want the Lord that much? It is the only way we will find him.

Unfortunately, even if we are aware of our need, we are often also simultaneously aware of a lack of desire. We feel the pull of the idol

even as we reach for the Center. It is here that prayer is so important. We must pray. We must pray for it when we feel like we want it and we must pray for it when we don't feel like we want it. God hears prayer, and it is not for no reason that Paul puts this in a prayer for the Ephesians.

And then, we must repent of our idols. If we are aware that we are putting something in the place of Christ, we must do what it takes to repent of this. John's first epistle begins with an invitation to the fellowship of God, which is what the apostle Paul is essentially praying for in this prayer. It is, therefore, instructive that John ends with this exhortation: "Little children, keep yourselves from idols" (1 Jn. 5:21). If we want this fellowship with God, if we want to experience the fullness of God and the love of Christ, then we must keep ourselves from idols.

Further, since this is all centered on Christ, we must constantly remind ourselves of the gospel and what Christ has done for us. This is not something we do just on Christmas or during certain seasons of the year, but every day of every year. It is only when Christ dwells in our hearts by faith that we will be able to comprehend the dimensions of his love for us and be filled with all the fullness of God.

So as we come to the end of this year and look forward to a new year, let us resolve with the apostle in this prayer, to go on through Christ our Lord and Savior, to know more of his love for us and to be filled with all the fullness of God. Surely there is no greater resolution for a Christian to have. In some sense, any New Year's resolution should be subservient to this one. May the Lord make it so for us in the year to come.

CHAPTER XXVIII

SOLI DEO GLORIA (EPH.

3:20, 21)

WHAT CAUSES YOU TO WORSHIP GOD? What sorts of things move your heart to overflow in praise to God? I'm not just talking about Sunday morning when you are singing hymns that you didn't write. I'm asking: what are the kinds of hymns that regularly emerge from your heart during the week? What are the wells of joy that your soul draws from that causes you to break forth into singing? Are they things that make your life easier during the week? Is it that promotion you have longed for all those years? Is it deliverance from some temporary setbacks?

Now, don't get me wrong: we are to thank God for everything, and therefore everything, the good and the bad, the surprising and the mundane, ought to all provide subject matter for the believer's worship: "In everything give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you" (1 Thess. 5:18). When we look to the NT and see what sorts of things caused the apostles to start singing, we come face to face with the first doxologies of the church. They go like this:

"Now to him that is of power to stablish you according to my gospel, and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according the revelation of the mys-

tery, which was kept secret since the world began. But now is made manifest, and by the scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the everlasting God, made known to all nations for the obedience of faith: to God only wise, be glory through Jesus Christ forever. Amen” (Rom. 16:25-27)

“Now the God of peace, that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is well-pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen” (Heb. 13:20-21)

“But the God of all grace, who hath called us unto his eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after that ye have suffered a while, make you perfect, stablish, strengthen, settle you. To him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen” (1 Pet. 5:10-11)

“Now unto him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy, to the only wise God our Saviour, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and forever. Amen” (Jude 24-25).

And then there is our text:

“Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we can ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen” (Eph. 3:20-21)

The word doxology literally means “to speak (or ascribe) glory” from the Greek words *doxa* and *logos*. In each of the doxologies above, there is an ascription of glory to God, as in our text, “unto him [that is, God] be glory.” To glorify God is to give him the highest adoration of our heart. It is to ascribe worship and praise to him above all else. To give God glory is to be transfixed by a sight of his majesty and dominion and holiness and grace. It is to recognize that God is supremely worthy of our affection and admiration, our reverence and esteem.

Above all, it means that we have come to see that God is transcendent, that there is no way that we can compare God to anyone or anything

else. Everything else in comparison is nothing. The way the apostles used the word “glory” comes from a Hebrew word, *kavod*, whose basic meaning portrayed something as being “weighty.” From this it came to signify things with significance or importance. In the OT, it is almost never used with reference to man, but it is often used with reference to God. We are light and feathery things in comparison to God. Our lives are like a vapor, but his has no beginning and no end. He only has immortality, dwelling in unapproachable light (cf. 1 Tim. 6:16). All of reality depends upon God for its existence. There is nothing or no one else in all of creation that can say, “I AM THAT I AM.” Only God can do that. Therefore, to God alone belongs the glory.

I think Paul breaks forth into doxology because he has experienced the things for which he prays for the Ephesians. He knew what it was like to be strengthened with might by the Spirit of God. He knew from personal experience what it was like to have Christ at home in his heart, to be rooted and grounded in love, and to know the limitless love of Christ, and finally to be filled with all the fullness of God. These were not abstract concepts to him: they were realities. Paul had experienced fellowship with the living God. He knew how precious and sweet and courage-building and faith-strengthening and sin-killing these realities were to him, and therefore he couldn’t help but exult in these gifts of grace that had come to him and all the saints. Hence doxology for the apostle was inevitable. He is not writing this because he is supposed to. He is writing it because he must: he must in the sense that having tasted and seen that the Lord is good, he could not but sing this praise to God. As C. S. Lewis famously put it, worship is the culmination of delight that one has for another. Those who truly love God cannot help but worship him.

So this morning I want to look at this doxology with you and to so hear it that we will join Paul in it. These verses are full of reasons to be encouraged in the Lord. You cannot hear or read one of these NT doxologies without sensing the note of triumph in them. Doxology and defeat don’t go together. We praise God because in him we are

overcomers. We praise God because, despite our weakness and sin and helplessness, we have a God who is sovereign over all and who loves his children with a never-ending love. Doxologies remind us that we are saved. Yes, we are not glorified yet, but the glorification of the saint is sure. Romans 8 begins with no condemnation and ends with no separation. God has saved us, he is saving us, and he will save us. And so we sing to God and love him and rejoice in him and give all the glory to him.

There are four things in this doxology that I want to focus on. First, we will look at the object of worship: “unto him be glory”. Second, we will note the sphere of worship: “in the church.” Third, the possibility of worship: “by Christ Jesus.” And finally, the duration of worship: “throughout all ages, etc.”

First of all, let us consider the object of our worship: “unto him be glory” (20, 21). The referent to “him” in verses 20 and 21 is “God” in verse 19, from whose fullness we are filled. As we have already been saying, God alone is worthy of our praise and worship. There is no other being or thing in the realm of the universe that can take his place. It is why idolatry is so repugnant. Idolatry is ascribing to a created thing what only properly belongs to God. The calf may be golden, but it is still a calf.

Paul doesn’t just say, “Praise God!” and go on. “Unto him” is filled with meaning in verse 20. Paul’s praise is rooted in very Biblical ideas about God. This is important. It is important that we are continually reminding ourselves of who God is. It is important that, as we do this, we are doing so in terms of the parameters of Scripture.

This is, of course, where doctrine comes in. Those who eschew doctrine usually end up with very shallow views of God. Worse still, their view of God is hopelessly tainted by the godless culture in which we live. The reality is that, if you are not grounded in the Biblical teaching of who God is, your worship is going to be superficial at best. True worship, our Lord tells us, is performed in spirit and in truth. Both the mind and the affections must be engaged. Fire without fuel will burn out,

and worship without doctrine won't last long. Worship has an object, and that object is God. So far, so good. The question is, what kind of God are you looking at? Is he the God of the Bible, or he a god of your imagination? A god of our own making will not sustain worship. Only the God of the Bible can do that.

So what is the portrait of God that Paul paints for us? He tells us in verse 20: "Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us." Paul does two things here. First, he piles on word after word that tells us something about God's power. The verb "that is able" literally means, "to be powerful." This is the verbal form of the noun "power" he also uses in this verse. The phrase "that worketh in us" again points to God's power. It is the word from which we get the term "energy." Paul uses all these words to give us the unmistakable portrait of a God who is powerful.

He goes further. He also says that God is "able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think." The apostle is straining language here to convey to us the idea that there is nothing impossible with God. The words Paul uses here are described as "the highest form of comparison imaginable."¹ There are no limits to the power of God. That is what the apostle wants us to realize.

We are full of limitations, especially in terms of our physical selves. We can only be in one place at one time. We only have so much strength and endurance. We only have so many talents. We are circumscribed on all sides by the limits of our abilities. God is not. As the Bible reminds us over and over again, what is impossible with man is possible with God.

The mind can sometimes free itself of such shackles and roam in the imagination where we could not physically go. We can close our eyes and imagine ourselves doing things that we could never actually do in person. We are not nearly as limited in the mind and imagination as we

¹BAGD, p. 840; quoted in Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary*, p. 493.

are in the body. Like Han Solo said to Luke Skywalker, “I can imagine a lot, kid.” Here is the amazing thing. The apostle tells us that God is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think. We may be able to imagine a lot, but we cannot even think our way past the power of God. It is truly infinite, unimaginable, and unfathomable.

The sad thing is that we do think that we can imagine the boundaries of the power of God. We think that God cannot do this thing or that. So we don’t ask. We don’t expect. We don’t believe. Like the Israelites of old, we turn back and tempt God and limit the Holy One of Israel (Ps. 78:41).

Now we don’t want to interpret this passage in a way that would sabotage the rest of the NT message. Paul is not saying that, if you have enough faith, God will grant you whatever you want. God is not a vending machine. He is saying that there is no power on earth or hell that can prevent God from doing for you what is for your ultimate good and his glory. As Paul put it to the Romans, “What shall we then say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us? He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him freely give us all things?” (Rom. 8:31-32). God is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think for us anything, no matter how far-fetched we might think it is, that is for our joy in him and the advance of his kingdom in this world.

Power is not the only attribute of God, of course. This power that the apostle is talking about is incomprehensible apart from all his other attributes. God’s glory is the publicity or manifestation of all his attributes. Therefore, since this power is operative for the sake of his glory (21), it is a holy power, a loving power, a gracious power, a wise power on the behalf of those who belong to his Son.

Worship is hamstrung when we limit God. Delighting in the power of God for us and in us is essential for true worship. The God that we worship is powerful, infinitely so, and he is powerful for us, not against us. That is surely something for which we ought to rejoice.

Second, we notice the sphere of worship: “in the church” (21). Now there is a sense in which all the creation glorifies God. Even the wicked will glorify the justice of God in their punishment at the Final Judgment. But that is not what Paul is talking about here. The praise here is unique to the church. This is because the church is the body of believers in the world. The church is the institution consisting of those who have tasted and seen the goodness of God and so the church consists of those who worship God in spirit and in truth.

We have every reason to glorify God. For we do not only behold God’s power from afar. We experience God’s power for us and in us and through us. In particular, Paul focuses on God’s power in us: “according to the power that worketh in us” (20). We would not even be Christian if it were not for the power of God. We were dead in trespasses and in sins. It was God who raised us up, exerting in us the very power that raised his Son from the dead. He prays that we would know “what is the exceeding greatness of his power to us-ward who believe, according to the working of his mighty power, which he wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead, and set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places” (1:19-20).

God not only raised us from the dead and gave us life (2:1-9), he also continues to work in us. We are God’s “workmanship” (2:10) past, present, and future. We still pray that we would “be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man” (3:16). There is never a time in the life of the believer when God’s power is not ready to be extended for their sake.

This power is not just given so that we will not remain dead in sins. It is given so that we will serve him in this world. God has not only saved us, he gives us the privilege of working with him in the advance of the kingdom. It is his power that gives us the ability to do this. With Christ, we can do all things; without him, we can do nothing. It is his power that works effectually in us that enables us to serve our Lord.

This is a truly amazing privilege. Sometimes you get the impression from some that God needs the church, and that without believers he

could do nothing. That is not the picture the NT gives. God does not enlist us because he needs us. He enlists us because we need him. It is not because God could not advance his kingdom without us that he brings us alongside for ministry. Rather, it is because God wants to bless us by giving us the privilege of serving with him in kingdom work. There is nothing more meaningful than engaging in that which has eternal significance.

God is so committed to this that what he does in this world to advance his kingdom agenda, he usually does through the church. We should never allow our belief in the power and sovereignty of God for his people to cause us to think that, therefore, we don't need to contribute to the cause of God and truth in this world. God is powerful, yes; but he exerts his power in and through his people. If there is something to be done in this world for the sake of the gospel, it will be done in and through the church. God gathers his elect into the church through missions, and missions are driven by people who are giving their lives for the sake of Christ. God moves to save the lost through his people who share the gospel which is the power of God unto salvation. God disciplines and grows his children through other mature believers who teach them the word. God breaks the power of Satan through the prayers of believers. Where God is doing something in the world for the sake of the gospel, he is almost certainly doing it through believers, through the church.

There is this amazing scene in the book of Revelation. We are brought into the throne room of God where seven angels prepare to blow seven trumpets. Before they do this, we read: "And another angel came and stood at the altar, having a golden censer; and there was given unto him much incense, that he should offer it with the prayers of all saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne. And the smoke of the incense, which came with the prayers of the saints, ascended up before God out of the angel's hand. And the angel took the censer, and filled it with fire of the altar, and cast it into the earth: and there were voices, and thunderings, and lightnings, and an earthquake" (Rev. 8:3-5). These

verses seems to indicate that the prayers of the saints are very much a part of God's plan to bring about the final salvation of his people and the culmination of his plan of redemption. This is especially remarkable because the overwhelming focus in the book of Revelation is on God's unfettered sovereignty over all his enemies and his power to bring about the salvation of his people. The focus is not on believers and what they do, and yet here we have this scene where the prayers of the saints play an important role in the unfolding of God's plan.

Is there something that needs to be done for the cause of the gospel? Pray about it, but don't pray about it without asking God what he would have you to do about it. Because if there is something to be done, it will be done through the power of God working through believers like you and me.

One of the reasons I am stressing this is because there is no better way to prepare our hearts for worship than in serving our Saviour in this world. If the primary purpose of your life is to pad your life with comforts, then don't expect God to be working in you and through you. When you surrender your life to the cause of the gospel – whatever that may look like for you, and it will be very different depending on where God has placed you – then expect to experience God's power. When we experience the power of God in us and through us, doxology is inevitable.

This brings us to the third thing I wish to notice in the text: the possibility of worship. I find this in the words, "by Christ Jesus."

There is no way that worship can exist apart from Jesus Christ. Apart from Christ, we remain hostile toward God and alienated from God. Apart from Christ, we will die in our sins. Apart from Christ, we have no righteousness and no forgiveness. It is only in him that we can be reconciled to God. It is only because on the cross he took our sins so that we might have the righteousness of God that we can approach God's throne as a throne of grace. Apart from Christ, the power of God is terrifying. Apart from Christ, God's power is against us. When we trust in Christ, when we belong to him, God's power is no longer against us,

it is for us. It is no longer the power of God to condemn and destroy; it is the power of God so save and to rescue.

I think it was John Piper who said that missions exist where worship doesn't. Missions and worship go hand in hand. This duality is why missionaries carry the gospel with them. It is why the preeminent message of the church to those on the outside is to preach Christ and him crucified. There is no hope for worship to exist where the gospel is yet unknown.

Not only does the work of Christ make worship possible by breaking down the barriers to worship, it also makes worship possible by giving us a window into the character and love of God. How is it that we can be filled with all the fullness of God? It is only as we come to see the multifaceted love of Christ which is supremely magnified by the work of redemption that he accomplished through his life of obedience and sacrificial death. The more we come to know God through Christ, the more we will be able to worship him in ways that are appropriate to his glorious nature. So it is that the church gives glory to God "by Christ Jesus."

Finally, we note the duration of worship: "throughout all ages, world without end." There is nothing on this earth that deserves eternal praise. The fact of the matter is that we couldn't even if we tried. No created thing can give us eternal satisfaction. No created and finite thing can delight us forever. We would eventually tire of it. At that point our praise would run out.

The fact that Paul says that doxology will be given to God for ever and ever tells us something about God. It tells us not only that he is worthy of eternal praise, but also that he is such a fountain of blessing and delight that the saint will never tire praising God. In heaven, our experience of God will be undiluted and pure, and so the expression of our hearts will be forever overflowing in praise to God.

Thank God, we can begin even now. Through Christ, we can come into a relationship with God our Father and begin to experience all the fullness of God. May we do so more and more. As we do so, may

Ephesians

our lives become a chorus of praise and doxology to our powerful and gracious and loving and glorious God. Amen.

Part 4:
Walking Worthy
of God's Calling
(Ephesians 4)

CHAPTER XXIX

KEEP THE UNITY OF THE SPIRIT (EPH. 4:1-6)

PAUL'S LETTER TO THE EPHESIANS is very clearly divided into two parts. Chapters 1-3 give us doctrine and chapters 4-6 give us duty. So with the word, therefore," the apostle is moving from exposition to application, from the credenda to the agenda. In the first three chapters, Paul uses the imperative only once (2:11); he uses it forty times in chapters 4-6. It is important that we know certain things; that is the point of chapters 1-3. But we must put what we know to practice, and this is the point of chapters 4-6.

We must have both doctrine and duty. I know some Christians prefer doctrine over duty and they decry as legalistic all who preach sermons directed to the life. Such people are mistaken. Those who hold doctrine without duty only possess a useless knowledge and a barren intellectualism that spread division and death in the church. On the other hand, there are those who prefer duty over doctrine and think that too much time spent on doctrine is time wasted. Get out there and do stuff! Such people have shallow roots and end up petering out over time. Because their roots don't go down deep into the truths of God's word, they don't have the motivation and resources to keep going when the going

gets tough. Moreover, often what they do isn't grounded in Biblical truths and ends up undermining the very cause they claim to live for. We need doctrine and we need duty.

Paul spends about the same time on both doctrine and duty here in Ephesians. That says a lot. He wants to make sure that we are rooted and grounded in the truths of the gospel. He wants you to know what you have been given in Christ. He wants you to know that to which you have been called. Note how he begins: "I therefore the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called" (4:1). As we shall see, the emphasis in the first six verses is on unity. But the overarching exhortation is not one to unity; it is to walk worthy of your calling, God's calling. Before you do anything, you need to understand your calling.

What is this calling? Paul has mentioned it just once before in this epistle, in 1:18: "that ye may know what is the hope of his calling." The calling that Paul is talking about is not something that we do to ourselves; it is something God does to us. It is God's calling. Here in 4:1, it is a calling of which we are the recipients, "wherewith ye are called." God does the calling.

What has he called us to? Well, in Romans 8:29-30, we read, "For whom he [God] did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover, whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified." God's calling is a calling unto salvation. God calls those whom he predestinates, he justifies those he calls, and glorifies those whom he justifies. God's calling is part of an unbreakable chain of salvation.

In Romans 8:30, it is linked to God's predestination. Paul has talked about that in Ephesians 1:5. There, he writes that God the Father has "predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will." This indicates that God calls men and women to become part of his family, to enjoy the adop-

tion of children by Jesus Christ. Being called into the family of God means that now it is imperative that we act as members of this family. That is Paul's point here at the beginning of Ephesians 4: you are now a son or daughter of the Most High. Through Jesus Christ our Savior, you have been given the incomparable privilege of relating to God as your Father. Now walk like it!

Leonard Ravenhill, a British-born evangelist, pastor, and author, once recalled seeing the royal family, and the thing that struck him most was the way in which the children of the royal family acted. He said they bore themselves in such a way that it was obvious these were children of the King of England. Now Paul is reminding us of our calling, and in doing so he is implicitly reminding us that we are children, not of an earthy king or queen, but of the King of heaven and earth. Bearing his name, it is imperative upon us that we live in such a way that we reflect the glory of our glorious Father in heaven: "walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye have been called."

I love the way Paul exhorts us to this. "I . . . beseech you." The word that the apostle uses here is almost impossible to translate into English in a single word. It has such a wide variety of meanings that translators and commentators really struggle exactly how to put it. Personally, I think those who land on a single word do injustice to the meaning. There is no single word that adequately renders Paul's meaning here. "Beseech" is good, but the word also carries the meaning, to exhort, to appeal, to encourage, to comfort, and to beg. Paul is doing all those things here. He is not just exhorting them; he is also encouraging them, appealing to them. In doing so, he is not hitting the Ephesians over the head with the stick of authority, though he certainly does carry authority as an apostle and prisoner of Jesus Christ. He is appealing to them, not to show them who's boss, but to encourage them to do what is ultimately for their good and God's glory.

This appeal also alerts us to the gravity of that to which they are called. Walking worthy of your calling is not something to be shrugged off. It

is far more important than most of the other concerns competing for our attention. The glory of God is at stake.

It's important to see this because everyone wants to be part of something bigger than themselves. If you are a Christian, you need look no further. You are already part of something infinitely bigger than yourself: namely, the display of the glory of God in this world. You don't necessarily do that by doing something "big" as the world defines big. You do it by walking worthy of the calling to which you have been called by God.

What does this look like? Paul begins to answer that question in verses 2-6. Really, all of chapters 4-6 show us how to walk worthy of our vocation. The first part of the answer to what this looks like begins in 4:2-6, and that's what we will consider together this morning.

The heart of Paul's exhortation in these verses is found in verse 3: "Endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." The emphasis on unity in these verses is unmistakable. In verses 4-6, the word "one" is used seven times, referring to the unity of the body of Christ. So what we are to do is given in verse 3: keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. How we do this is found in verse 2, and why we do this is found in verses 4-6.

What we are to keep

We begin with the what in verse 3. There Paul exhorts us to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Notice that Paul does not exhort them to create the unity of the Spirit. There is a reason for this. The unity that Paul is speaking about here is not something you can create. It is something that has already been created. Jesus Christ did this on the cross: he reconciled both Jew and Gentile "unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby" (2:16). In verses 4-6, the unity described is assumed and provides the basis for the appeal in the previous verses. This unity is a unity that is cemented into the salvation that Christ came to accomplish. All who are redeemed by him

enjoy the unity resulting from belonging to Christ. Our Lord prayed shortly before his death, “Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word; that they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us; that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. And the glory which thou gavest me I have given them; that they may be one, even as we are one: I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one; and that the world may know that thou hast sent me, and hast loved them, as thou hast loved me” (Jn. 17:20-23). Being “one” in the sense in which our Lord speaks here encompasses all the blessings of redemption.

I think this is important because often we focus our attention too much upon external forms of unity. I’m not saying, of course, that we should totally ignore such things, but we should not put too high a premium upon them. The unity that our Lord came to accomplish and the unity that we are called to keep is the unity that springs directly from our Lord’s redemptive work for his people. All who share in his redemption share in this unity. It is the unity shared among all who embrace the Lord Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord that we are to keep. How awful it is when we will have no fellowship with brothers and sisters in Christ because they don’t dot every “I” and cross every “t” the way we do.

It is the unity of the Spirit. It is “of the Spirit” because the blessings of redemption are applied to us by the Holy Spirit. It is why Paul begins his epistle by thanking God “who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ” (1:3). When we considered that verse, we noted that “spiritual” doesn’t refer to our spirits but to the Holy Spirit. The blessings are applied to us by the Holy Spirit. All who are born again are born again by the Spirit of God (Jn. 3:8). Those who share in Christ’s salvation are thus partakers of the work of the Holy Spirit upon their hearts.

It is this unity that we are to endeavor to keep. We are to be eager to keep it. We are to make every effort to keep it. Those who have no desire

to pursue the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace show that they know nothing of the salvation which is ours in Christ, because they show that they are strangers to the family of God. The apostle John teaches that if we are, in fact, born again and bear the imprint of the Father's character upon our hearts and lives, then we are going to be attracted to our brothers and sisters in Christ. If we love the Father, we will love his children. Our hearts will go out to them, not in word only but in deed and in truth.

Given the nature of this unity, it should not surprise us that this is where Paul begins in the application section of his epistle. When God saves us, he does not save us onto an island. Our lives as children of the Most High are not to be lived out through rugged individualism. They are to be lived out in the context of the family of God. You cannot be a follower of Christ and ignore his family. You are saved and called into a family and it is in the context of this family that you grow in grace. As Paul will show in the following verses, our growth in grace and maturity depends in large measure upon our interaction with other believers. God has not given you all the gifts. You depend on other believers and their gifts to grow up into the measure of the stature of Christ. We obviously need to be unified in order to fully benefit from the giftedness of one another.

We all need each other to display God's glory to the world. Think of the church as a puzzle. Each believer is like an individual piece. By themselves, they don't show much of the picture. But when put side by side in their proper places, they create a beautiful picture of the glorious grace of God in the salvation of his people.

How we are to keep it

However, we all know that the reality is that often this unity is not kept. It is broken by a thousand petty differences. It is broken over misunderstandings. It is broken by selfish choices and sinful habits. So the next obvious question is, "How do we keep the unity of the Spirit

in the bond of peace?” Paul tells us in verse 2: “with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love.” We now move from the what to the how. Let’s consider each of the words in their turn.

First, lowliness. What is lowliness? In Phil. 2:3 it is contrasted with strife and vainglory; those who are lowly esteem others better than themselves. In 1 Pet. 5:5 it is contrasted with pride. In Romans 12:16 the lowly are contrasted with those who “mind high things.” In other words, to be lowly is to be humble. Charles Hodge says that it “includes a low estimate of one’s self, founded on the consciousness of guilt and weakness, and a consequent disposition to be low, unnoticed and unpraised.”

It should not surprise us then that being lowly is not something that you are going to learn from the world. The world wants nothing to do with sin and guilt. It doesn’t want to admit guilt and weakness; it wants to ignore it and cover it up. So there is no ground for lowliness. In fact, the Roman philosopher Epictetus put the quality of lowliness as first on his list of character traits to be avoided. The world does not commend lowly people. It commends those who push themselves into the limelight. It commends those who are self-assertive and bold and brash. I would bet that, if you read a lot of self-improvement books today, they are going to agree with Epictetus.

If unity is to be kept through lowliness and humility of mind, it is no wonder why the world is so rent with divisions. The very thing that disgusts them is the very thing that is the only cure to the hatreds and suspicions that tear our world apart. It gives the church a unique opportunity to show the world what true peace and unity looks like.

If you are a follower of Christ, you must be lowly. After all, isn’t this the way he described himself? “Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek, and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls” (Mt. 11:28-29).

Everything in this world is crying at you to exalt yourself. If you listen to these siren calls, you will torpedo the manifestation of the unity of

the church. We desperately need people who are willing to be lowly. These are the only people who will be able to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. They are the only people who will be able to help the broken and the hurting. Proud people don't minister grace and peace. They minister hurt and divide. We need lowly people, people whose lives are characterized with all lowliness.

Next, Paul exhorts us to meekness. Meekness is strength under control. It is gentleness. Aristotle described the meek as those who lived between the extremes of being angry all the time and never being angry at all. Meekness, in other words, is not weakness. It is the ability to control oneself and to endure the faults of others, knowing that God will make all things right in the end. A meek person applies the truth of Romans 12:19, "Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord." It is supremely illustrated in the life of our Lord, who was meek and lowly in heart, but who was by no means a weak person.

The only way unity can be maintained is by people who are not always wanting to insist upon their rights. Our whole society is filled with groups of people who are insisting upon their rights, and it's tearing our nation apart. The church, if it is to be any kind of witness to the world, is going to have to go a different direction – the direction of meekness. We need to be gentle with others. After all, God has been gentle with us. It is his gentleness that has made us great (cf. Ps. 18:35). Stop insisting upon your rights. Give way to others. Be like Christ.

Then Paul urges longsuffering, which he further describes as forbearing one another in love. These exhortations tell us something very important about the church. They tell us that the church is not perfect. They tell us that, if you belong to the body of Christ, there are going to be people who rub you the wrong way. You don't forbear with people who treat you the way you want to be treated. Or you don't forbear with people who are just the way you want them to be. You have to forbear with people who get on your nerves, who are inconsiderate, who treat you badly. It is no sign that you need to leave a church because someone

there bothers you. No, it is a sign that you need to be longsuffering. You need to be patient. You need to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

The key of all this is love. To love someone in a Biblical sense is to seek their highest good, even if seeking that good comes at great expense to you. The great exemplar of this, of course, is the love of God sending his Son to die for our sins. Our highest good is eternal fellowship with God, and God sought that for us at great cost to himself – the sacrifice of his Son. We are to imitate this: “Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love. In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another” (1 Jn. 4:7-11). We are to love the brethren in the same way God loved us!

Why we are to keep it

That brings us, finally, to the why. That is given to us in verses 4-6. We are to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace because the identity of the church is inseparable from the unity of the church. Paul focuses on seven realities upon which the unity of the church is based. In doing so, the apostle also draws our attention to the fact that the unity of the church is a Trinitarian unity: it is based upon the persons of the Trinity, Father, Son, and Spirit.

He begins with the realities connected to the Spirit of God: one body and one hope (4), for it is the Spirit of God who brings us into the one body of Christ (“For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit,” 1 Cor. 12:13) and who fills our hearts with hope (“And hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of

God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us,” Rom. 5:5).

He then focuses on the realities connected to the Son of God: one faith and one baptism (5). In the NT, “Lord” is almost universally a reference to Jesus Christ the Son of God. Our faith is centered on Christ and on what he has done for us; the embrace of the gospel is what makes us Christian. The one baptism is our outward affirmation that we have been buried with Christ and risen with him from the dead into newness of life (cf. Rom. 6). (I cannot help but observe that according to this text, baptism is not about our connection to a denomination but about our connection to Christ.)

Finally, Paul focuses on the reality connected to the Father: the one family (6). The “you all” of verse 6 is not a reference to all of humanity but to the church, the body of Christ. God the Father is the Father of all who belong to Christ and he is above, through, and in them all. He is not the absent Father, he is ever present to bless his children. He loves them and they love him back.

It is in this way we are to walk worthy of our calling. Paul’s plea 2000 years ago is just as relevant today as it was then. Do you want to grow in your gifts? Then begin by keeping the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Do you want to grow in grace and holiness? Then keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Do you want to flourish in your relationships? Keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Do you want to stand firm against the evil one? Keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. This is where it all begins. Walk worthy of the vocation to which you were called!

CHAPTER XXX

THE SOURCE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF SPIRITUAL GIFTS (EPH 4:7-10)

WHAT DOES CHRIST EXPECT OF ME as a Christian? The answer is that he expects you to walk worthy of his calling. This is what Paul beseeches his readers to do in the first verse of the application section of his letter to the Ephesians. It is the banner that waves over the entirety of chapters 4-6. In some sense, everything that Paul will say from this point on is just an exposition of what it means to walk worthy of the vocation wherewith we have been called.

He begins with a call to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (4:3). For Paul, unity was essential because we live out the Christian life in the context of the Christian community, the church. Paul clearly believed that spiritual development and maturity happens as we rub shoulders with other believers (cf. 4:16). That is not going to happen if you can't get along with other believers. This is not always easy, which is why Paul exhorts us to be lowly and meek and longsuffering

and forbearing, all in a spirit of love (4:2). If we are not endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, it's not going to be kept.

So verses 2-6 warn us against trying to live out our Christian life in isolation. It warns us against the rampant individualism that has divided and paralyzed the culture of the church.

There is another danger that threatens to undermine our ability to walk worthy of our calling. It is the danger of wanting everyone to be the same. In some sense, it is opposite to the problem of individualism. We naturally are attracted to people that are just like us, with similar personalities and giftings. We like people who see things the way we see them.

This is a problem in the wider culture, especially in the political realm. Commentators warn us of the fact that too many people live in echo chambers. Conservatives only want to listen to other conservatives and liberals only want to listen to other liberals. Some people only listen to Fox News and others only listen to CNN. We are drawn to Facebook groups of people who are just like us. We follow people who validate our own personal choices. This problem carries over easily into the context of the church.

The irony is, when we want everyone to be like us, we probably think that we are pursuing unity. What is really happening is that we are extending the call to unity into areas where there ought to be diversity. So we are really undermining the very unity to which Christ calls us.

The unity to which our Lord calls us is a unity in diversity. Yes, there is "one body and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all" (4-6). However, there is not only a "you all" aspect to the church, there is also the "every one of us" aspect of the church (7). At verse 7, Paul switches from "all" to "each one," from unity to diversity.

The diversity that Paul highlights here is the diversity of giftedness. It is the diversity of gifts that enriches the church and makes it a place

where people can grow in grace and learn better to walk worthy of God's calling. It is important to know where the diversity lies. It does not lie in diversity of doctrine, for there is "one faith, one Lord, one baptism." It does not lie in diversity of religion, for there is "one body and one Spirit, and one hope." The Christian church is a society with bounds, and these bounds are determined by the Word of God in the Bible. There is such a thing as heresy. Just because you name the name of Christ does not mean that you should be in the church. The apostle John reminds us, "Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son. If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him Godspeed" (2 Jn. 9-10). It is a serious thing to abide not in the doctrine of Christ.

Unity is not achieved by removing the boundaries between the church and the world. Unity is achieved by holding fast to Christ as he is revealed to us in the Word of God, the faith of God's people. Within this unity, however, there is a lot of room for different ways to fit into the church. In particular, there is a lot of room for diversity of gifts. It is only as we support this diversity and benefit from the gifts of others that we will truly grow in the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

What does the apostle teach us about this diversity of giftedness? I think he does two things in these verses. First, he shows us who the source of our gifts in verse 7 is: "But unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ." Jesus Christ is the source of every believer's gift or gifts. Second, in verses 8-10, he shows us what the significance of our gifts is. They are the fruit of our Lord's victory over Satan, sin, and death. In verse 7, we see Christ sovereignly presiding over the distribution of the gifts and in verses 8-10, we see Christ supremely preeminent in the exercise of the gifts.

Let's see how this works out in the text.

The Source of our Gifts

First, in verse 7, we see Christ sovereignly presiding over the distribution of the gifts. Now, I think it is significant that the word that Paul uses here in verse 7 is not “gift” per se, but “grace.” In 1 Corinthians 12, for example, he uses the word *charisma*, “spiritual gift” (1 Cor. 12:4). However, in this place Paul doesn’t say *charisma* but *charis* (although it is clear that both words are related). However, given what Paul goes on to say in the following verses, it’s obvious that *charis* here refers to spiritual abilities for service in the kingdom of God. So there is salvation grace (cf. Eph. 2:8-9) and there is service grace, and it is the latter that the apostle is talking about here. It is, of course, completely fitting that “grace” is the word used to describe our spiritual gifts, because our gifts are not something that we create for ourselves. They are given to us, freely, and apart from any merit on our part. Every spiritual gift is a grace in that sense. You didn’t earn them and you don’t deserve them. They are gifts freely given to you by Christ.

He gives them to every believer: “unto every one of us is given grace” (7). Every believer has a spiritual gift. In other words, we are all given the ability to serve in the kingdom of God. You are not meant to be a spectator. You were not meant to take up ground. Even if we are given one talent, we are expected to use that. We each have a unique role to play in the advance of God’s cause upon the earth.

This idea is implicit in all the “one another” texts in the NT. We are told to “be kindly affectioned one to another, in honor preferring one another,” to “be of the same mind one toward another” (Rom. 12:10, 16). We are to “by love serve one another” and to “bear ye one another’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal. 5:13; 6:2). We are to “let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord” (Col. 3:16). We are to “comfort yourselves together, and edify one another” (1 Thess. 5:11). We are to “exhort one another daily, while it is called today; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin” (Heb. 3:13). The apostle Peter sums it up when he writes, “As every man hath received the gift,

even so minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the grace of God” (1 Pet. 4:10). Peter thus shows that all the “one another” texts are calls for each of us individually to serve the church with the gift or gifts given to us.

The point here is that, when the Scriptures speak about the spiritual gifts, they are not talking about some special ability that only some believers have. They are not necessarily a reference to the gifts of healing and prophesy. They are a reference to the way Christ has equipped you and every other believer to help the church grow in Christlikeness. In other words, these verses are speaking about you and to you. You have a role to play in the advance of God’s kingdom.

That is not the only thing Paul has to say about the dispensing of the gifts. He also tells us that our Lord not only gives the gifts, but he determines what the gift is that you have. We are given grace “according to the measure of the gift of Christ” (7). In 1 Cor. 12:11, Paul writes that “all these [the different gifts] are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.” The Spirit, of course, is the Spirit of Christ (cf. Rom. 8:9) so what is said about the Spirit is also true of Christ. He apportions, through the Spirit, to each person the gift that he decides for them to have.

Not only that, but our Lord also decides the measure of our giftedness: “according to the measure of the gift of Christ.” He not only determines what our particular gift is, he also determines the amount of the gift that we receive. Some people are more gifted than others. Some will be more gifted than you and others may be less gifted than you. The point here is that you are not the one who determines the level of your giftedness; Christ is. As John the Baptist put it, “A man can receive nothing, except it be given to him from heaven” (Jn. 3:27).

So Christ is the one who sovereignly presides over the distribution of the gifts. Now in the following verses, the apostle grounds this reality in an OT text, namely, Psalm 68:18. In doing so, he opens a window into the significance of the gifts that our Lord gives to his church.

He writes, “Wherefore he saith, When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive and gave gifts unto men” (8). Now a lot of ink has been spilled in commentaries over this verse, because Paul doesn’t quote the passage verbatim. In fact, it appears that the apostle has changed the meaning of the verse. The main point of difference between Paul’s quotation and the actual verse is that Paul says that “he . . . gave gifts unto men,” whereas the psalmist writes that God “received gifts for men.” So there is the difference between giving gifts and receiving gifts. How do we deal with this apparent discrepancy?

Psalms 68 is a celebration of God’s victory over his enemies and the enemies of the people of God. Thus, the psalmist rejoices in God’s righteous protection of his people and especially of the defenseless (the widows and orphans, ver. 1-6); he celebrates the exodus and the conquest of Canaan (ver. 7-10), and he goes on to exult in God’s victory over the Gentile kings who opposed Israel throughout their history (ver. 11-18). It is in this context that verse 18 comes in: “Thou [God] hast ascended on high, thou hast led captivity captive: thou hast received gifts for men; yea, for the rebellious also, that the LORD God might dwell among them.” The idea in verse 18 is of a conquering king taking spoils from his conquered enemy.

Paul takes this verse and turns the taking of spoils from enemies to giving gifts to friends. We can see that the idea of one implies the other, so that though Paul’s quotation is not exact, neither does it violate the meaning of the Psalm. For kings took the spoils from their foes and lavished them on their friends. King David himself did this as recorded in 1 Sam. 30:26.

Christ did this on the cross. He blotted “out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to the cross; and having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a shew of them openly, triumphing over them in it” (Col. 2:14-15). He spoiled the principalities and powers by his redemptive work. Then he lavished the grace of his victory over them upon the church.

The apostle goes on in verses 9-10 to expand upon the ideas implicit in verse 8. In particular, he focuses on the phrase “he ascended on high,” and he applies this to the resurrection of Christ: “he . . . ascended up far above all heavens, that he might fill all things” (10); compare Eph. 1:20-23. As he says, ascending implies descending “first into the lower parts of the earth” (9).

Again, a lot of ink has been spilled over this verse and what it means. Many of the early church fathers took this to mean that Christ descended into hell between his death and resurrection. Others have taken it to refer to the incarnation. Christ descended from heaven to earth when he was born. However, I think this descent is a reference to the grave. His ascension followed his descent into the grave. There are two reasons why this interpretation is compelling to me. First, because if this were just a reference to the incarnation, it seems that Paul would have simply written that Christ descended to the earth, not to the lower parts of the earth. Second, and more importantly, this same sequence of death followed by resurrection and glorification appears in Eph. 1:19-23, including Christ filling all things: “Which [power] he wrought in Christ when he raised him from the dead, and set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come: and hath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him that filleth all in all.”

The Significance of our Gifts

Now the significance of the gifts is in full view. The gifts are the spoils of Christ’s victory over Satan, sin, and death. They are the part of the fruit of the death and resurrection and ascension of Christ. They are an extension of Christ filling all things. So we should not take the gifts lightly. To despise the gifts is to despise the redemptive work of our Lord. It would be to despise his victory over his enemies and ours.

What are we to do with this phrase, “that he might fill all things”? Not too long ago I heard R. C. Sproul say that when he was expositing through this passage, when he came to this phrase, he didn’t know what to do with it. So I’m not sure I can handle it either! However, my modest proposal is that this is just a very picturesque way of saying that Christ’s dominion extends to the farthest reaches of the universe. As he put it to his disciples in the Great Commission, “All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth” (Mt. 28:18). When our Lord ascended, he ascended to take the throne of the universe. As Daniel predicted, “I saw in the night visions, and, behold, one like the Son of man came with the clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of days, and they brought him near before him. And there was given unto him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages, should serve him: his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed” (Dan. 7:13-14). In other words, our Lord’s dispensing gifts is part and parcel of his sovereign dominion over all the universe, which is an extension of the victory which he accomplished by the cross.

Now that we’ve seen what Paul is saying in these verses, let’s go back to the question we raised at the beginning of our message: how can we walk worthy of our calling? The answer in these verses (7-10) is that we do so by using our gifts and by benefiting from the gifts of others. Now what is necessary for us to do that? Three things.

First of all, you need to understand the source of your gifts. Jesus Christ is the source of your gifts. Knowing this will do at least two things. It will keep you from pride. The very last thing you want to do is to take your gift and use it as a platform to draw attention to yourself. We need to remember that we would not have any ability to serve Christ and his people if he had not given us the grace to do so. Remember what the apostle said to the Corinthians: “For who maketh thee to differ from another? And what hast thou that thou didst not receive? Now if thou didst receive it, why dost thou glory, as if thou hadst not received it?” (1 Cor. 4:7). Pride will poison your gifts. It’s like a putting a drop of

arsenic in a healing balm. Being able to serve others with our gifts is an amazing thing, but if we start to become puffed up in our use of the gift, don't be surprised when God takes it away from you.

I think this is one reason God often sends brokenness into our lives. He made Jacob limp to remind him of his frailty and the fact that he was constantly dependent upon God. He gave the apostle Paul a thorn in the flesh to keep him from being puffed up with pride. If God has sent pain into your life, know that pain is better than pride, because pain reminds us that we depend every moment upon God's grace, whereas pride hardens our heart against dependence upon the grace of Christ.

Knowing that our Lord, not us, is the source of our giftedness will not only keep us from pride, it will also keep us from despair. If you are looking at your life and wondering if it has any meaning because your achievements don't compare with others; if you are burdened because you look at the victories of others and you seem to have only defeat; if you feel guilty because your gifts don't stack up against the gifts of others, then you need to remember this. You need to remember that you don't have the ministry of someone else because you don't have the gifts of someone else. And that is not your fault. In fact, it's nobody's fault. You have the gifts that Christ wanted you to have. So you don't have to feel guilty because you're not doing what someone else is doing. You just need to do the things to which Christ has called you to do. If that means doing things that no one will know about, that's okay, if that's what Christ has called you to do. At the end of the day, the value of our gifts doesn't come from the praise of men but from the call of Christ upon our lives. Better to be a doorkeeper in the house of God than to dwell in the tents of wickedness.

The second thing we need to do is to understand the reason for your gifts. Our gifts are given to us to serve and advance the kingdom of Christ. This is only implicit in our text, but Paul makes it explicit just a few verses later. However, it's already in the word for gifts: "grace." God's grace is his favor bestowed freely and without consideration of merit in order to bring men and women into fellowship with himself.

Grace extends to every part of our salvation. It is not just given in order to give men and women the forgiveness of sins, it is also given to make us more like Christ. And that is where our gifts come in. The fact that they are called “grace” points us to their place in the application of Christ’s redemptive work to his people.

If you are a Christian, you need to understand that it is not just the preacher’s job to make sure that believers grow in grace. It’s your job, too. You have a role to play. There is no believer without a gift, and there is no gift that does not have some function in the spiritual growth of the church. So don’t isolate yourself. Don’t seal yourself off from others. Open your heart and your home to others, and especially the people of God. This reality does not depend upon age. If you are a believer, it doesn’t matter whether you are 8 years old or 80 years old: you have a gift and you are meant to use that gift for the cause of God and truth.

Finally, you need to understand the significance of your gifts. Don’t undervalue them: they are the spoils of Christ’s victory over his enemies and yours. It doesn’t matter how small they might appear in the eyes of men. If Christ has given them to you, they are more valuable than the greatest scientific achievement or the greatest military victory, or the greatest political accomplishment, or the greatest business deal. No Nobel Prize can compete with the gift you have been given. For before it was given to you, it was purchased by the blood of the Son of God. You aren’t going to use your gift if you think it is useless or worthless, but neither is true. It is most useful and most valuable.

So thank God for your gifts. In the name of Christ and by the power of the Spirit of Christ, go out and use them.

CHAPTER XXXI

WHY WE NEED SPIRITUAL GIFTS (EPH. 4:11-16)

LAST TIME, WE SAW that our Lord is the source of spiritual gifts and that the significance of the spiritual gifts lies in the fact that they are the fruit of our Lord's redemptive work. However, this does not fully unpack the reasons for which the spiritual gifts have been given. Paul does that in the verses before us. In verse 12, we are given the purpose of spiritual gifts: "for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ." The main idea in that sentence is "perfecting" which can mean to equip, to complete, to train, or to mend. The idea that is common to all these meanings is taking something which is lacking in some sense and completing it so that it no longer lacks that thing. The church presently is imperfect and incomplete, and so the Lord has given gifts to the church to make up for that imperfection. You see it also in the word "edifying," which means to build up. Again, you have this idea of taking a building which is incomplete and adding to it so that it is a complete structure.

This immediately begs the questions: in what sense is the church incomplete? The answer comes in verse 13: "till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect

man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.” The apostle seems to be saying one thing in different ways, namely, that the goal for which we are being perfected is conformity to Christ (cf. Rom. 8:29; Phil. 3:20-21; 1 Jn. 3:2). We are incomplete in that we are not yet like Christ. This does not take place in this time, for it will happen when we shall see him as he is. However, it is the goal that we are all to be striving after in this present time. It is the main task of the church, to become more like Christ.

In verse 13, the apostle has introduced another idea to fill out the need for the church to be perfected or completed. It is the idea of growth. We are to grow until we reach the “measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.” This idea is then reinforced in each of the following verses. In verse 14, we are not to remain as little children, but to grow so that we do not become the victims of spiritual deception. In verse 15, we are told to speak the truth in love and so grow up into Christ, and then in verse 16, Paul explains how this growth takes place: as each member functions properly in the body of Christ.

Thus, Paul is talking about spiritual growth in these verses. The reason the spiritual gifts were given was so that we might grow spiritually so that we might become more like Christ.

How does this happen, exactly? How do the gifts function so that spiritual growth happens? Verse 16 shows that this does not happen apart from every believer functioning properly in the body. In other words, in some sense, my spiritual growth depends upon your spiritual growth. We grow together. We need each other. You see this in that phrase which is found in between “perfecting” and “edifying” in verse 12: “for the work of the ministry.” The question has often been asked whether this phrase is parallel to the other two or whether it is dependent upon the first. The structure of the Greek text seems to favor the view that it depends upon the first phrase. In other words, the spiritual gifts are given so that the church will be equipped for the work of ministry, with the result that the church will be built up in edification.

Ministry, or “service,” is not just done by a small group of people in the church. It ought to be done by the entire church. The apostle is saying that the spiritual gifts are given so that the church as a whole would be equipped to do the work of ministry. It is only in this way that the church grows.

Well, we have just given a quick tour of the text. What I want to do now is to go back through the text and highlight a feature of Paul’s treatment of spiritual gifts in this text. It has to do with the role of God’s word in the growth of the church. I think it is important to highlight this feature for a couple of reasons. One is that there is often confusion over the relationship between the spiritual gifts and the Scriptures. Some, in order to make room in the church for the spiritual gifts often seem to downplay the importance of the Word of God in the church. Others, in order to maximize the influence of the Bible in the community of God’s people seem to want to downplay any role for spiritual gifts apart from those recognized in the offices of elder and deacon. What we see in this text, however, is a dynamic that weds the spiritual gifts with the Word of God in way that brings about the spiritual growth of God’s people.

So how does this happen? How does the intersection of spiritual gifts and the Bible bring about the spiritual growth of the church? The text shows us four ways in which this happens.

We grow through the written Word

First, we grow through the written word. Paul begins in verse 11 by enumerating some of the gifts. Now, we need to remind ourselves that in the four lists in the NT that mention specific spiritual gifts (Rom. 12:6-8; 1 Cor. 12:28; Eph. 4:11; 1 Pet. 4:10-11), none of them are the same. So, we should not think that the list the apostle gives here is meant to be exhaustive. However, there is a reason the apostle mentions these instead of others. I think the reason lies in the connection between the role of God’s word and the growth of the church. You see, every one

of the gifts mentioned here are in some way connected to the teaching and proclamation of God's word.

The first two, however, are more intimately connected to the written word which we have in the Scriptures. These are the apostles and prophets. It has often been noted that there are at least two different ways that the word "apostle" is used in the NT. It can refer generically to anyone who is "sent," and so we read about those who were denoted as the messengers or apostles of the churches (2 Cor. 8:23 and perhaps Rom. 16:7). However, the word "apostle" is mainly used to denote a very limited and distinct group of men who were specially chosen by Christ to bear his authority and to give his word to the church. The apostle gives the preeminent qualification of an apostle in this sense in Gal. 1:1 – "Paul, an apostle (not of men, neither by man, but by Jesus Christ, and God the Father, who raised him from the dead)." Apostles were not appointed by men but directly by Christ himself. In addition, they were required to have seen the risen Christ in order to be eyewitnesses to the resurrection (cf. Acts 1:22; 1 Cor. 15:5-10). So, we see that in the nature of the case, there can be no apostles in the church today.

However, that does not mean that the apostles are lost to the church so that we cannot benefit from their gift. For they remain with us through their writings in the NT. It is not for no reason that the early church discriminated between those writings which were directly associated with an apostle (either written by an apostle or someone who wrote under the authority of an apostle like Mark and Luke) and those that were not. Those which were not were discounted as Scripture. And for good reason, for the apostles are the ones who were directly commissioned by our Lord to give his authoritative word to the church. We have already seen how the apostle described the process by which he received God's word for the church as "revelation" (Eph. 3:3).

Next, we come to the prophets. The prophets in Ephesians are always put together with the apostles. Thus, in Eph. 2:20, we are told that the church is "built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone." And in Eph. 3:5, we

read that the mystery of the gospel “in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit.” Then we have Eph. 4:11, “And he gave some, apostles, and some, prophets.” The fact that they are always mentioned together has led some to believe that they are the same group. However, our text precludes that. Paul doesn’t say, “And he gave some apostles and prophets,” but rather “some apostle, and some prophets.” So, they are a distinct group from the prophets.

Nevertheless, it is difficult to determine exactly where the difference between them lies. With the apostles, they spoke by inspiration from God. Again, they are intimately connected with the transmission of the Scriptures. The apostle Peter in fact denotes the process by which Scripture is given to us as prophesy: “We have also a more sure word of prophesy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn and the day star arise in your hearts: knowing this first, that no prophesy of the scriptures is of any private interpretation. For the prophesy came not in old time by the will of man: by holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pet. 1:19-21). The 19th century Princeton theologian Charles Hodge believed that the difference between NT prophets and apostles lay in the fact that the inspiration of the apostles was permanent whereas for the prophets it was occasional, and therefore the authority of the prophet was subservient to that of the apostle.¹ I find this distinction persuasive and it seems to fit well with the nature of the ministry of the prophet laid out in 1 Cor. 14.

One more question: are there prophets today? I tend to think not, at least not as the apostle Paul thinks of them in this epistle, for with the apostles they are foundational to the church. You only lay the foundation once. So I don’t think this is necessarily an ongoing gift. I certainly am very uneasy with people who today claim to speak the very words of God and begin by saying something like, “The Holy Ghost says . . .”

¹Charles Hodge, *Ephesians*, (Banner of Truth, reprint; 1991), p. 159.

This can be a dangerous (and I think unscriptural) practice that often tends to undermine confidence in the sufficiency of Scripture.

The fact that the apostle mentions these two gifts first both in Ephesians 4:11 and 1 Corinthians 12:28 indicates that he considered these gifts of primary importance for the church. The fact that they are so intimately connected to the giving of Scripture tells us why the word of God is so important for the growth of the church. The starting point for any kind of spiritual growth is by taking seriously the book that the Holy Spirit has given to us through the apostles and prophets.

The importance of Scripture is implied throughout this passage. The “faith” that we are to grow toward in unity is the faith of the word of God (13). The “knowledge of the Son of God” does not come through our own musings but through the Bible (13). We grow as we speak, not our own words, but the truth in love (15), truth whose boundaries are demarcated by the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. As Paul would later exhort Timothy: “All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works” (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Do you want to grow? Then get familiar with your Bible.

We grow through the preached Word

However, we not only grow through the written word; we also grow through the preached word. The next two gifts Paul mentions are “evangelists” and “pastors and teachers.” Neither an evangelist nor a pastor is concerned with creating new revelation. Rather, their task lies in disseminating (proclaiming and teaching) already existing revelation.

There are only three texts in the NT that directly refer to evangelists, one of which is our text. The first of the other two is Acts 21:8 where Philip is called an evangelist, and the last is 2 Tim. 4:5 where Paul exhorts Timothy to do the work of an evangelist. These texts seem to indicate that an evangelist was simply a person who preached the gospel to oth-

ers, especially to those who had never heard (as in the case of Philip). On the other hand, a pastor-teacher is someone who disciples and teaches those who have already received and believed the gospel. “Pastor” literally means “shepherd” and the way pastors shepherd their flocks is by giving them the word of God, not their own word. Some have commented that not every teacher is a pastor, but every pastor must be a teacher. They must be “apt to teach,” and the reason is because pastors are to lead by the preached word.

I think this is significant because it shows that having your Bible is not enough. At least, this is not God’s normal way of helping his people grow in grace. We need to hear the preached word (this goes for the pastor as much as for those who are shepherded). We need to have others speak the truth into our lives, and one of the main ways God has ordained for this to happen is through the preached word, especially as it regularly comes to us in the weekly rhythm of the gathering of the local church.

You see the urgency of this in Paul’s letter to the Titus. There, he writes, “For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee” (Tit. 1:5). Paul did not want there to be a single church without elders. The church was “wanting” as long as this condition subsisted. You can see how important their function as teachers was as the following verses unfold, especially verse 9. The elder/bishop is to hold fast “the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers.”

Some might question whether “pastor” is a reference to the “bishop/elder.” I believe it is. Elders are shepherds (1 Pet. 5:1-4). Like shepherds on the watch for potential predators, elders “watch for you souls” (Heb. 13:17). Paul exhorted the Ephesians elders himself with these words: “Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood. For I

know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. . . Therefore watch” (Acts 20:28-29, 31).

You see the reason for this function of the pastor-elder-bishop in verse 14: “that we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive.” The word “sleight” in verse 14 literally means “dice-playing” and refers to the cheating and trickery that often accompany games of chance. False teachers don’t just come out and announce that they are teaching something different from the apostles. Rather they will come in with teaching that sounds good, even orthodox. Thus the apostle anticipates those who would take advantage of immature believers. The only way to prevent their deception is for the believers to be well grounded in the faith, and the knowledge of the Son of God, and thus to have attained “the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (13). This happens as they take advantage of the gifts of verse 11, which for us means taking advantage of the written word and the preached word.

We grow through the applied Word

However, we all know that having your Bible and regularly attending the sermon is not enough to guarantee spiritual growth. Unfortunately, there are multitudes who pass by the pulpit as they go on their way to spiritual destruction. So, that brings us to our third point, which is that we grow through the applied word. You don’t just read God’s word; you don’t just hear it. You must also apply it. In verse 13, Paul writes, “till we all come in the unity of the faith.” The word “come” means “to attain to,” or “to reach a goal.” The goal is the unity of the faith, the perfect conformity to the character of our Lord. We will not reach it until we are glorified in the age to come, but Paul does not envision the Christian just sitting down waiting for that to happen. Rather, we are on a journey, working toward that goal. We are applying God’s word to our own attitudes and situations. We are right now being perfected

and edified (12). We are right now growing up into Christ (15). All this points to present growth in grace and that doesn't happen unless we are believing and obeying God's word ourselves.

The apostle James warns us against being content with a bare knowledge of God's word. "But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves. For if any be a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass: for he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was. But whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed" (Jam. 1:22-25). In the next chapter, he remarks, "Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble" (Jam. 2:19). Saying that we believe the doctrines of the Bible when we refuse to apply them to ourselves is useless and dangerous.

Remember that the people who bore the overwhelming brunt of our Lord's denunciations were the Pharisees. The Pharisees knew their Bibles. They could quote them back to you forwards and backwards. Their whole lives were defined by their religion. And yet they became the steadfast opponents of Christ. They persisted in their opposition to the point that they connived in his crucifixion. Then they bitterly persecuted his church after the resurrection. Of course, our response to this should not be to chunk religion altogether. But it should warn us against the danger of thinking that having religion and a general knowledge of the word of God is sufficient evidence that we are saved.

Indeed, the knowledge that Paul speaks of in verse 13 is not the useless knowledge that the apostle James is inveighing against. Hodge remarks that the word Paul uses here denotes not just cognition, but recognition. This is knowledge to which the heart responds. He goes on to comment, "Faith and knowledge . . . express or comprehend all the elements of that state of mind of which the Son of God, God manifested in the flesh, who loved us and gave himself for us, who died on Calvary, and is now enthroned in heaven, is the object – a state of

mind which includes the apprehension of his glory, the appropriation of his love, as well as confidence and devotion. This state of mind is in itself eternal life. It includes excellence, blessedness, and the highest form of activity.”² We not only know the word of God, we live it out daily in our lives.

We grow through the shared Word

Finally, the church grows through the shared word. We not only apply it to our own lives. We share it with each other. We speak into each other’s lives. This is what the apostle is referring to in verses 15-16: “But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ: from whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love.” The main idea of verse 16 is that the body grows as each member does its part. Verse 15 shows that the main way this translates to the church is that each member is speaking the truth in love. As the apostle would tell the Colossians, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and spiritual songs” (Col. 3:16). In Hebrews, we read, “Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God. But exhort one another daily, what it is called today; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin” (Heb. 3:12-13).

I think I need to emphasize that the life that is being held forth in this passage is not that of a community of people whose heads are full of religious knowledge and who are trying to see how miserable they can make each other. No, this is truth that is held with the heart, that brings the love of Christ into the heart and overflows in love to others (15-16). It is truth that causes the heart to sing. Did you hear what Paul said to the Colossians? He goes from letting God’s word dwell in you richly

²Ibid., p. 166.

to singing to each other. This is not dry theology. This is not lifeless doctrine. It is truth that sings.

It is this truth to which that the apostle is calling us. Grow through the written word, the preached word, the applied word, and the shared word. It is a wonderful word because it centers upon Christ and his redemptive work on our behalf. He came for us, he died for us so that our sins might be forgiven, so that its power might be broken. He rose again so that we might join him in everlasting glory and life. His word is living and powerful because he lives and is sovereign over all things. His word is infinitely valuable because he is infinitely valuable. So may we treasure his word in all these ways.

CHAPTER XXXII

“BUT YOU HAVE NOT SO LEARNED CHRIST” (EPH. 4:17-24)

IN THE TALE, *THE EMPEROR’S NEW CLOTHES* by Hans Christian Andersen, we are told how a couple of swindlers were able to dupe a king and his counselors and indeed an entire city into believing that they had made the emperor a suit of clothes which in fact really didn’t exist. The key behind their fraud was that they were able to convince the people of the city that the fabric had magical properties. The magical property was that the clothes they made with this wonderful fabric became invisible to anyone who was unusually stupid or unfit for office. Since no one wanted to admit they couldn’t see the clothes because they had believed the tale of the fabric’s supposed magical properties, everyone agreed with the swindlers that the clothes for the emperor were magnificent. And so the emperor went on parade with absolutely nothing on. (This is almost like some of the parades in our cities, but that’s another story.) It took a child to admit what was obvious to everyone, and though at first people tried to ignore the child, eventually it got around and people began to be convinced. Even the

emperor, we are told, suspected the child was right, but the procession had to go on, and so they continued on with the illusion and the fraud.

In the West, we have been similarly deceived with the blithe promises of the post-modern, post-Christian swindlers of our day. The politicians, the academics, the pop-stars, and even the preachers of our churches have told us that we need to get rid of the rags of Biblical Christianity and to replace them with the magical fabric of post-modern morality. They've convinced us that if we don't see the value of their worldview, it just means we are stupid. People, of course, don't want to be stupid and so we've gone along with things that are clearly absurd: Like the idea that a man can be a woman or vice versa. Or the idea that a child in the womb is not a person. Or the idea that purposeless causes can mimic intelligent beings. These should be obvious untruths, but since so many others go along with them, we don't want to be the odd man out. The emperor has no clothes, and even though a child can see the obvious, the intellectuals and the elite continue to tell us that it isn't so and we continue to cheer the patently ridiculous.

In our text, Paul is being honest and telling us that the emperor has no clothes. He describes what a culture is like apart from faith in Christ: the word he uses to describe a godless culture is "vanity" (17). It's the word the Preacher uses over and over again in Ecclesiastes to describe the purposelessness of existence apart from the knowledge of God. There is no reason that, as Christians, we should want to go back to join the vain parade. In fact, there is every reason for us to move in a direction opposite from the flow of a culture which is becoming more and more detached from its Christian moorings. As it does so, we are seeing more clearly the effects of secularism upon the death of a culture. It is not an accident that our culture is becoming more toxic, more violent, more tribal, and more enslaved to physical appetites. The scary thing is not that this is the first time these things have popped up. They've always been around to some degree or another. The scary thing is that, for the first time in a long time, these things are being celebrated.

What our text does for us is to remind us why we shouldn't join our culture in celebrating godlessness. That's what unbelievers do. They know deep down they are wrong, but they don't want to live with the conviction of sin and so they silence their consciences by celebrating wickedness with one another. Paul described it this way in Romans: "who knowing the judgment of God, that they which commit such things are worthy of death, not only do the same, but have pleasure in them that do them" (Rom. 1:32). As followers of Christ, we have already made a break with our neighbors who don't know Christ, but there will always be the temptation to go back. So we need to be reminded again and again why. Again, our text does that.

What the apostle does in these verses is two-fold. First of all, he describes the situation apart from Christ (17-19). It is a scary and an ugly accounting of life in a culture devoid of the knowledge of the true God. But it is honest, and we need to be reminded of it because the world will try its best to cover up this reality. Second, the apostle urges us to be faithful to the truth centered on the person and life and work of Jesus Christ (20-24). To be faithful we need to live out the reality that we have not only put off the old man (22) but have also put on the new man and are being renewed in the spirit of our minds (23-24).

You could say that the banner over verses 1-16 is "walk in unity." The apostle begins this chapter with the words, "I therefore the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called . . . endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (1, 3). In the same way, the apostle begins again with another "therefore . . . walk" (17). This time, the emphasis is not so much on unity as it is on purity, or holiness. So we might say that, whereas the common theme to the first sixteen verses is "walk in unity," the emphasis in verses 17-32 is "walk in purity."

This does not mean, of course, that there is no emphasis on purity in the previous verses. In fact, the apostle's words in verses 17-32 flow naturally out of verses 1-16. We saw in those verses that the unity we have is a unity in diversity, and this diversity is a diversity in spiritual

giftedness. The reason the gifts are given are so that we become more like Christ. This idea, therefore, ties naturally to the apostle's observation in verse 20: "But ye have not so learned Christ," and the exhortation to put off the old man which is not like Christ and to put on the new man which is.

The apostle's flow of thought goes as follows: there are two reasons why you should not walk like the Gentiles. Reason 1: because their life is a life devoid of light and life (17-19). Reason 2: because you have not so learned Christ (20-21). This is then followed by the twin reminders that they have put off the old man (22) and put on the new man (23-24). Let's now walk through this text with the apostle and really try to hear and understand his reasons and his exhortations.

Two Reasons to Reinforce

Reason One: Because their life is a life devoid of light and life. Remember that "to walk" in this context is not a reference to locomotion but to lifestyle. We are not to adopt the lifestyle of those who do not believe the gospel. Why? Because, the apostle tells us, they "walk in the vanity of their mind" (17). It is pointed out in the various commentaries that "mind" to the Biblical writers is more extensive than what we think of when we use the term. For them it comprehended not just an intellectual component, but a moral component as well. Paul in Romans writes, "And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not convenient [fitting]" (Rom. 1:28). So when Paul says that the Gentiles walk in the vanity of their mind, he is referring to the moral purposelessness that characterized the unbelievers. This was the state of affairs in Paul's day and it is the state of affairs in ours, as well. We are becoming less and less able as a culture to give reasons why we should reject any kind of wickedness. We are adrift in moral relativism and it isn't pretty. Paul is essentially asking, "Why would you want to go back to that, to vanity, to a life which is morally adrift?"

This is only at the head of things, the final result at the end of a sad and scary sequence of events. It really begins with “the blindness of their heart” at the bottom of verse 18, which is the fundamental reason given for the entire sequence. This word probably should be translated “hardness” instead of “blindness.” This is the way the word is translated, for example, in Mark 3:5. The verbal form of this word always means “to harden” (see Mk. 6:52; 8:17; Jn. 12:40; Rom. 11:7; 2 Cor. 3:14)¹. In any case, spiritual blindness and hardness go together, as John 12:40 shows, which reads (quoting Isaiah 6:10), “He [God] hath blinded their eyes, and hardened their hearts; that they should not see with their eyes, nor understand with their heart, and be converted, and I should heal them.” Spiritual blindness and hardness describe those who will not see the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ (cf. 2 Cor. 4:3-4). They cannot see (blindness) because they will not see (hardness). The fundamental problem with humanity is not a lack of education. The fundamental problem is a heart which is unresponsive and blind to life-giving truth. This problem, of course, is not a hardness which leaves us unaccountable, but one which increases our culpability and guilt before God.

As a result of this hardness, such individuals are ignorant and know nothing of “the life of God” (18). In fact, they are alienated, estranged, from the life of God. This is the same word Paul uses in Ephesians 2:12 when he says that, before they were saved, they were “aliens [alienated, estranged] from the commonwealth of Israel.” One of the reasons the ungodly mock the Christian is because they really do not know what they are missing. They are spiritually dead and they think this is normal. However, there is no reason for the Christian to want to go back to this because we do know what it was like. We know what it was like to be alienated and estranged from the life of God. We remember the bondage; why would we want to go back to that?

This is not all. Paul tells us that, in this condition of alienation from the life of God, we were darkened in our understanding: “having the understanding darkened” (18). When your heart is wrong, when the will

¹Although the KJV renders the verb “to blind” in the last two references.

and the affections are bent against the will and ways of God, your mind will follow suit. It's the reason why brilliant men can completely miss the evidence for God and the gospel. It's not a matter of the intellect, it's a matter of the heart. Again, if your heart is wrong, your mind will go with it. Paul explained it this way to the Romans: "For the invisible things of him [God] from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse: because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools" (Rom. 1:20-22). The word "sophomore" literally means "wise fool" and our universities are full of them. Unfortunately, I don't think this category belongs merely to second-year students!

Finally, the end result is that such people walk in the vanity of their mind. So spiritual hardness of heart leads to spiritual ignorance which leads to alienation from the life of God which leads to a darkened understanding which leads to walking in the vanity of the mind. Unfortunately, this is not the end of the description, either. Paul goes on to say, "Who being past feeling have given themselves over unto lasciviousness [sensuality], to work all uncleanness with greediness" (19).

God created every person with a conscience. It's what Paul refers to in Romans 2:15 as the law of God written in the heart. You can get to a point where that law is not talking to you anymore. You've become "past feeling." To Titus, the apostle describes it as the condition where one's conscience becomes defiled (Tit. 1:15). To Timothy, he describes those who speak lies in hypocrisy, "having their conscience seared with a hot iron" (1 Tim. 4:2). It is a scary condition. The result is that such people give themselves over to sensuality and uncleanness. They not only want it, they want it insatiably. What was at one time perhaps gross and despicable to them, they now embrace with both hands. Sin is like leprosy; it numbs our spiritual senses so that we play with fire and end up losing toes and fingers and don't even realize it. This is not

something you want to be. This is a spiritual condition every bit as horrifying as a physical leprosy.

It takes the work of God to awaken a sinner from such a condition. Like the Prodigal Son, we have to come to ourselves, to our senses (Lk. 15:17). Our blindness and hardness of heart prevents that unless Christ comes in his power to open our eyes and awaken us from a spiritual death. This is why Paul goes on to talk about learning Christ and being taught by him. The Ephesians didn't actually hear Christ himself. But when the gospel comes to us in the power of the Spirit of Christ, it is not any different than if he were there teaching us himself. Our eyes are opened because of the power of Christ to open our eyes; and this is his second reason.

Reason Two: Don't walk like the unbelievers because you have not so learned Christ. This is a remarkable saying. Generally, you don't learn a person, but that is just what the apostle says in verse 20. What does he mean? He means that we don't just learn about Christ; we don't just subscribe to his doctrines and teaching. Rather, we embrace Christ himself in all that he is for us. We embrace him as our Savior to deliver us from the guilt and defilement of our sins. We embrace him as our Lord and King to rule over us and to conquer our enemies. We also embrace him as our Prophet to teach us and to deliver us from our sinful ignorance and spiritual darkness. Hodge writes that "to learn Christ' does not mean merely, to learn his doctrines, but to attain the knowledge of Christ as the Son of God, God in our nature, the Holy one of God, the Saviour from sin, whom to know is holiness and life. Any one who has thus learned Christ cannot live in darkness and sin."²

This point is important to emphasize, because there has been a lot of teaching, especially in the West, that teaches that saving faith just involves affirming doctrines in the mind, whether or not it changes the heart and the life. Sometimes this is called "easy-believism," sometimes "antinomianism." Whatever name it goes under, it is unbiblical and

²Charles Hodge, *Commentary on Ephesians*, p. 256.

contrary to the teaching of our text. You don't learn Christ and then live like the devil. Such a person has not learned Christ at all.

Again, the reason this could never be is because, in conversion, we don't just come to Christ, Christ also comes to us: "If so be [assuming this has happened] that ye have heard him, and have been taught by him, as the truth is in Jesus" (21). Again, Jesus didn't physically come to the Ephesians and preach the gospel to them. They had heard the truth from the apostle Paul, and perhaps others. But when the gospel came to them, it "was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power: that your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men but in the power of God" (1 Cor. 2:4-5). It "came not . . . in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance" (1 Thess. 1:5). The gospel is the power of God unto salvation (Rom. 1:16) because, in the conversion of sinners, more is at work than merely speaking words of truth. The Holy Spirit is opening eyes and hearts. We are told that the reason Lydia received Paul's gospel was because the Lord had opened her heart (Acts 16:14). So it must be with us. If we are saved, it is not because we were smarter than the next person. It is because God has done a work in your heart. Conversion is a supernatural work of God. That being so, it is ridiculous to think that such a person could go on living as if nothing had happened. When God speaks life into the soul, it will be so. Grace does not leave a person unchanged.

Two Realities to Recall

From this reality follows an exhortation based upon two realities of which the apostle reminds them. They are tied to verse 21, "you . . . have been taught by him." What were they taught? They were taught to put off the old man (22) and to put on the new man (23-24). This is an obvious reference to changing one's clothing and the point is, as there is an obvious difference in our appearance when we have changed our

clothes, even so there is a clear difference between what we were and what we are now in Christ.

There is difference of opinion over whether these verses refer to something that happens only once or whether it refers to something that happens over and over again. It is difficult to decide, but I am of the opinion that verses 22 and 24 refer to their conversion whereas verse 23 refers to an ongoing action. There are several reasons I take this position.

First, it is true that every believer has definitively put off the old man and put on the new man. Paul assumes this in the parallel text in Colossians: “Lie not one to another, seeing that ye have put off the old man with his deeds; and have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him” (Col. 3:9-10). We have already argued that those who live lives that are no different from unbelievers show that they were never saved to begin with. This is also assumed in passages like Romans 6, where Paul’s whole argument assumes that the believer’s death to sin is something definitive that happened in the past and that it is in light of this reality they are to live. It is in this context that he mentions the “old man” in verse 6: “Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin.” Again, in Galatians 3:27, the apostle writes, “For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ [a one-time event] have put on Christ.” These verses indicate that putting off the old man and putting on the new man is a definitive, one-time event that happens at the very beginning of the Christian life. As Paul puts it in 2 Cor. 5:17, “Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creation; old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.” The old man, or old self, is what characterizes us before the new birth. The new man, or new self, is how we are described after the new birth; it is what the new birth makes us.

Second, the tense of the verbs is different in verses 22 and 24 than in verse 23. In verse 23, Paul uses a present middle infinitive, whereas in verses 22 and 24 he uses aorist middle infinitives, which would be the

verbal form we would expect Paul to use if he had meant to refer to a once-for-all action.

Finally, this fits the apostle's pattern of exhortation. He often lays down a general principle and then applies that principle to specific details. For example, in Romans 6, he tells his readers that they have died to sin, that the old man is crucified. This is the reality they are to grasp. On the basis of this reality, they are to go on to "let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof" (12).

To say that putting off the old man is something that happens once in conversion, however, does not mean that we are not tempted to act out in ways that characterized our life before conversion. The NT everywhere exhorts the believer to continue to put off or put away sinful attitudes and behaviors and to put on godly behaviors and attitudes. Though we are genuinely new people in Christ, that doesn't mean that there are not remnants of the flesh still hanging around. We don't lose this all at once at conversion. Sanctification is a continual process, right up to our death. So there are always going to be aspects of the old nature, the old humanity that we have inherited (cf. 2:3 and Rom. 5:12-21), that we are going to have to continually fight against. Thus, as Hodge points out³, we are called to put off the works of darkness (Rom. 13:12), to put away lying (Eph. 4:25), and to put off anger, wrath, and malice (Col. 3:8). We are told to "lay apart" or put aside "all filthiness" (Jam. 1:21). On the other hand, we are told to put on the Lord Jesus Christ (Rom. 13:14; Gal. 3:27), we are to cast off the works of darkness and to put on the armor of light (Rom. 13:12). We are to put on compassionate hearts, etc. (Col. 3:12,ff). However, there is a difference between saying that we have put off the old man, which once it's done is done, and saying that we are to continue to put off attitudes and actions which are reminiscent of the old man and life. The former is done once, whereas the latter is something that we do every day.

³See p. 259.

To sum up, in verses 22 and 24, Paul is describing what happened at our conversion both negatively and positively. In verse 23, he is describing the ongoing process of sanctification. However, we need to be reminded of who we are in Christ and what he has saved us from. For it is on the basis of these realities that the apostle will go on to give very specific exhortations to holiness of life in verses 25-32.

Thus, when Paul reminds them that they were taught to “put off concerning the former conversation [conduct, lifestyle] the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts” (22), he is essentially saying, “Don’t go back to what you were.” As the apostle Peter would put it, “the time past of our life may suffice us to have wrought the will of the Gentiles, when we walked in lasciviousness, lusts, excess of wine, revellings, banquetings, and abominable idolatries” (1 Pet. 4:3). Notice that the apostle assumes that the life he is warning them away from is something they have parted ways with. It is the “former manner of life.” Again, there is always the danger of going back. To warn us against that, he reminds us that the former lusts in which we indulged were “deceitful lusts.” We were lured into desiring those things because they appeared to be something they were not. These lusts were Greeks bearing gifts. They come to us promising pleasure when in reality they are warring against our souls (cf. 1 Pet. 2:11). Like the swindlers in Andersen’s tale, lusts offer you lavish clothes that don’t exist. The apostle is essentially saying, “Why would you want to go back to that? Why would you want to go back to being deceived and living a lie?”

Then, the apostle reminds us that we were taught to “be renewed in the spirit of your mind; and that ye put on the new man, which after God is being renewed in righteousness and true holiness” (23-24). Whereas the old life was one of deception, the new life is characterized by truth. One commentator translates verse 24 as “righteousness and holiness that comes from truth.”⁴ We are sanctified by truth (Jn. 17:17) and it is the truth that sets us free (Jn. 8:32).

⁴Hoehner, p. 609.

This new life, this new man, means becoming more and more like Christ. For the apostle tells us that the new man is being renewed “after God.” When you compare this with the parallel verse in Col. 3:10, it is clear that the apostle is referring to the restoration of the image of God in the soul of man. Now, every man still has the image of God to some extent (cf. Jam. 3:9), but it has been marred almost beyond recognition. Christ has come to restore it, and the way he is doing that is by making us like him (cf. Rom. 8:29; 1 Jn. 3:2). For he is the image of God par excellence (Col. 1:15).

Of course, this does not mean that we are being deified. Paul limits the extent to which we are being transformed into the image of Christ in the words “in righteousness and true holiness.” Whereas our lives were once characterized by the moral purposelessness of the Gentiles, now it is characterized by the moral excellence of righteousness and holiness. We are being conformed into the image of God’s Son by being like him in his character.

Jesus Christ is perfection itself. All the moral excellences of God are in perfect display in Christ. He is strong and loving, he is wise and kind, he is utterly holy and forgiving. To be like him is to know what perfect contentment is like. It is to know joy that is pure and never-ending. Why would we not want to be like Christ? Why go back to the condition of verses 17-19 when we have learned Christ? If you are a believer, to ask the question is to answer it.

Of course, to get there is going to take work on our part. We have to put off and put on, but we are to continue to be renewed in the spirit of our mind. Perhaps the best commentary on verse 23 is Romans 12:1-2: “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present yourselves a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world, but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God.” How do we do that? By paying close attention to the teaching of our Lord in his word. In that way we will be renewed in the spirit of our mind; not just when

we absorb its truths on an intellectual level only, but when we wed that knowledge to our affections and will so that our lives and outlook are changed.

The wonderful thing is that all this is possible to us through Jesus Christ. May we know him by faith and trust in him, who is our Savior to take our sins and purge them, who is our King to take our enemies and crush them, who is our Prophet to take our ignorance and enlighten us. He is offered to us in the gospel; all who thirst for the life he offers may come; those who drink will be filled.

CHAPTER XXXIII

TELL THE TRUTH (EPH. 4:25)

IN VERSE 25 THE APOSTLE PAUL begins to go into detail into the kind of life that we are called to live. Recall that in verses 17 through 19 the apostle talked about the world of the Gentiles, that is, the unsaved, and how they are living in darkness. Then he says in verse 20, “But you have not so learned Christ,” you have not learned this from the gospel, and that you have been changed from the old man into the new man and given this reality you are to live out. So the apostle is going to begin going into detail into how that works out. The exhortations, beginning in verse 25, are based upon the reality described in the previous verses, namely, that they have put off the old man and have put on the new man.

Notice the word at the very beginning here in verse 25, *Wherefore*. That is to say, because these things are true, because you have put off the old man, because you’ve put on the new man, because you are being created in righteousness and true holiness, *wherefore* these following things ought to flow naturally from that.

There are some implications that come from that. First of all, you cannot follow God and his son Jesus without being committed to holi-

ness. In verse 20, the apostle had written, “But you have not so learned Christ,” meaning, you cannot love God’s son and not love what he loves and not hate what he hates. In the same way, the apostle tells us in Romans 12 to abhor that which is evil and to cleave to that which is good. You just can’t follow God without being committed to holiness.

Another implication here is that you can’t believe the gospel without being committed to universal holiness. In verse 21, he says, “If so be that you have heard him and been taught by him as the truth is in Jesus.” The gospel teaches us to live a certain way, and the apostle Paul is saying here that because you’ve been taught to live this way in the gospel, you are now to go out and do it. Remember, as we’ve been saying, in the gospels Jesus is not just presented as a Savior to forgive us of our sins; he is also presented as our Lord to rule over us. You cannot receive a partial Christ; you must receive the whole Christ.

A lot of people talk about faith in such a way as to imply that you can believe in Jesus and go on living an impure life. But in the Bible, we see that faith and obedience always go together. Not that our obedience forms the basis for our justification. We receive justification by faith alone through Christ alone on the basis of grace alone. True faith results in obedience; we are not saved by works but we are not saved without them. Hence, at the beginning of Romans and at the end of Romans, in Romans 1:5 and then in Romans 15:26, the apostle uses this phrase, “the obedience of faith.” If you believe, if you have faith in Christ, you’re going to obey him.

So *wherefore*, because this is true, do these things. Another implication that follows is that you can’t experience grace without being committed to holiness. Grace is what explains verses 22 to 24 where the apostle Paul says you have put off the old man which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts; you are being renewed in the spirit of your mind, and you have put on the new man in the image of God, which after God, is being created in righteousness and true holiness. It’s grace which recreates us in God’s image. Eph. 2:10, which reads, “For we are his workmanship,” follows Eph. 2:8, “For by grace are ye saved.” Then

in Eph. 4:24, you have put on the new man which is created by God in righteous and true holiness. We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God has before ordained that we should walk in them.

We see then that God, the gospel, and grace all unite as reasons the Christian should live a life of holiness. God, the gospel, and grace unite to draw us along in paths of holiness. Therefore, this ought to determine a particular outlook on how we live the Christian life.

I think this is very important because these realities not only frame the kind of life we are to live, but they also frame the way we look at the way we think about how holiness is produced in the Christian life. For example, one thing that flows out of this is that a Christian who has experienced and believes these things is not going to live out the Christian life out of pride. He or she is not going to live out the Christian life out of self-sufficiency. The new man is a new creation, and it's not our creation. It is God's creation, which is what God is doing inside of us. We need to understand and we need to remind ourselves that all of life is lived out in the power of God's grace.

This truth, by the way, is why the lost need the gospel, not the law. The lost don't need to be told a bunch of things to do, because it will not save them. They need Christ; and once they have Christ, and they receive this grace, now their lives can transform. The Sermon on the Mount is useless for people who are outside of Christ, except perhaps to condemn and convict. This sermon is the kind of life that's lived out in the power of God's grace.

Recall what the apostle Paul wrote in Phil. 2:12-13, that we are to work out our own salvation with fear and trembling. Why? Because it's God who works in you to will and to do of his good pleasure. Some people have the wrong conception and they think that if I'm doing something, God's not doing it. If God's doing something, I'm not doing it. But the Bible says you are doing it and God is doing it at the same time!

I read recently in 1 Thess. 5, where the apostle Paul says, "Pray without ceasing." We are always to pray because we are always dependent upon

God's grace for every step that we take. So it's right for us to pray for God's blessing and and for God to bless us with empowering grace.

You see something similar in Psalm 119:34-36. The psalmist is doing this very thing. He begins in verse 34, "Give me understanding" - this is a prayer - "Give me understanding, and I shall keep thy law; yea, I shall observe it with my whole heart." You see the sequence of events here, right? I will keep your law when you give me understanding, "Make me," - here's a prayer, again - God "make me to go in the path of thy commandments; for therein do I delight. Incline my heart unto thy testimonies, and not to covetousness." What great prayers for us to be praying constantly. "God, make me go in the path of your law; God incline my heart to your commandments." You know we sing that song,

*Prone to wonder, Lord, I feel it,
Prone to leave the God I love!
Take my heart, Lord, take and seal it,
Seal it for thy courts above.*

That's exactly what the psalmist is doing here. We are like plants; in fact, our Lord likens us to a plant in John chapter 15, to branches on a vine. As long as the branch is connected to the vine, it grows. As long as we are connected to God's grace, we grow and flourish. As long as we have our roots down deep in God's word and we are drawing from the well of God's truth, we grow. When our leaves are open to the sunshine of God's grace we grow. As soon as we cut ourselves off from God's influences, we wither and die. The Lord said, "Without me, you can do nothing." So we need to be aware of trying to work out our obedience in self-sufficiency.

Really, this comes down to unbelief. It comes down to a failure to believe what God's word has to say about our need, our desperate need for God's grace. If we believe what God's word says about us, we're going to be constantly saying with the psalmist and with the apostle, "Incline our heart, make me go in the path of obedience."

Then secondly, if we believe these things we are not going to live our lives out of fear that we will not be able to obey. We have to be aware of that: living the Christian life out of fear that we won't be able to obey, that God has not given me the resources to obey. Because this also is unbelief in what God's word says about the resources that we have in Christ. You need to remind yourself every morning, "I am a new creation Jesus Christ," because the devil is going to come to you and he's going to give you all these arguments why you won't be able to obey him today. There's some task that is before you and you will rationalize that perhaps you can't do it; we have all these reasons why we just can't do it. God's word tells us that we are a new creation in Christ and that we do have all the resources. There's nothing that God has commanded us that he has not already provided for us so that we can fully obey.

If we don't obey, it's not because there's a failure on God's part; it's totally because of failure on our part. We need to remind ourselves that, if we're in Christ, we already have access to grace. You know, this attitude of fear leads to spiritual laziness. I have noticed in my own experience that when I get really afraid of something, a kind of a physical lethargy comes over me, and that's the way it is in the spiritual life as well. There's a spiritual laziness that grips us when we give in to fear.

Sometimes we can even do this in a very religious way. Above, we said that we need to be people who are constantly praying that God will empower us for his grace. And yes, that's right, because we need to be constantly reminded that we cannot take one step apart from God's empowering grace in our lives. But sometimes we use prayer as a cover up for disobedience. Lloyd-Jones has a very provocative sermon in his exposition through Ephesians; the title of this sermon is, *When not to pray!* That's an interesting title because the Bible tells us always to pray and not to faint. Lloyd-Jones was making this very point, that sometimes we use prayer as an excuse for remaining in sin. In other words, I'm not going to obey until I feel just right. God is calling you

to obey right now. This is not a time to pray you just ought to obey because God has already empowered you for obedience.

I like the attitude the Psalmist in Psalm 119:59-60, when he says, “I thought on my ways and turned my feet unto thy testimonies. I made haste and delayed not to keep thy commandments.” If God has told us to do something, it will not do for us to mull over whether or not we should do it. We should just obey and, if we try to cover up our disobedience by prayer, this is not the kind of prayer that God appreciates. It’s just spiritual laziness.

If we believe what Paul is saying in the previous verses, we’re not going to give in to an attitude of pride. We’re not going to give in to fear. We’re going to obey in the power of grace.

As a way to illustrate all this, think of Lincoln and his generals. Lincoln in the Civil War had problems with his generals, and a lot of times it was just this kind of problem between attitudes of fear and attitudes of pride and self-sufficiency each of which ended in disaster. For example, Lincoln had a general by the name of George McClellan. McClellan was a great organizer, he could build a great army, but he didn’t know how to fight. He let fear paralyze him. In two different instances, McClellan turned what should have been victories into defeats - the Seven Days Battles and Antietam. On the other hand, you had a guy like General Fighting Joe Hooker. He was the opposite of McClellan. He was super confident; after all, Fighting Joe was his name! He was so confident that he foolishly split his forces in front of Lee at Chancellorsville and ended up getting decimated completely. It was the worst defeat the North suffered in the entire war. His pride led to his defeat.

We have to be aware of these kinds of attitudes in our spiritual life: being too afraid to do battle for the Lord or too self confident. Because these wrong attitudes, which really come down to unbelief in what God’s word said about us and what God’s word said about his grace and the resources we have in Christ, this will always turn our victories into defeats.

There's something else that follows from these verses. Not only will we not live our lives out of pride, not only will we not live our lives out of fear, but we will be willing to apply God's word to all of our life. We will want to labor for universal holiness. You've heard the phrase "the devil's in the details." Well, you know God is in the details too. God cares about the details of your life.

You see this in the verses that follow. These are very detailed instructions as to how we are to live our lives. We are not to lie; we are to be angry and sin not; we are not to steal but to work with our hands to give to those who need; we're not to let any corrupt communication come out of our mouths but that which is to the use of edifying; we're not to grieve the Holy Spirit, and we are to let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and evil speaking be put away from us with all malice and be kind one to another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another even as God for Christ sake has forgiven us. Paul goes on in the next chapter to give very detailed instructions, and in all of life he gives instructions to wives and husbands and children and masters and servants. All of life is to be lived under the domain and reign of God's grace. Clearly, what we're to take from this is that God demands universal holiness.

It is intrusive when people try to control our lives. The reason this is wrong is because people don't always know what is best for us. But this does not apply to God; in fact, it's the other way round. God knows what is best for us even when we don't know what is best for us, and so it's not intrusive for God to do this; in fact, it is for our benefit.

Therefore holiness, living a life of holiness, is a result of having a proper theology. Holiness is not just knowing right and wrong, but it's putting these things into practice into our lives. I wanted to say these things the beginning here to put all this in perspective.

Let's come now to the details of the text. The apostle Paul says, in verse 25, "Wherefore putting away lying, speak every man truth with his neighbor: for we are members one of another." First of all, it's very interesting that in verses 25 to 32, the apostle Paul follows a very consistent structure. He always starts with the prohibition, followed by a positive

command, and then he gives a reason. So you see that here: we are to put away lying - that's the prohibition - and then the positive command is to speak truth with your neighbor. The reason is that we are members one of another. As you go through these verses, you see this is basically the structure of the following verses. What the apostle is doing here is telling us to stop doing what's wrong, to start doing what's right, and then to understand why.

Truthfulness is where the apostle Paul begins. Of course, we could ask the question as to why does the apostle Paul begin here? What is so important about truthfulness and putting away lying? Let me give you several reasons why the apostle might begin here.

First of all, he starts here because the fundamental characteristic of a life of sin, which we are to put off, is deception, is lying. Listen what the apostle Paul says in verse 22: he says that you were to put off the old man which is corrupt. How? According to the *deceitful* lusts. Why do we sin? We sin because in some sense we are tripped, we have been deceived. On the other hand, the apostle Paul says you have put on, you are to put on, the new man which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness. Or another way that can be translated is *holiness of truth*.

So you have desires of deceit and holiness of truth. The old man is characterized by deceit and the new man is characterized by truth. You see this also in verse 14, where the apostle says that one of the reasons God has given the gifts to the church is so that we would no more be children tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine by the slight of men and cunning craftiness whereby they lie in wait to deceive (Eph. 4:14). Our Lord describes the devil in this way in John 8:44; he says to the Pharisees, "Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar, and the father of it." That is to say, he speaks lies out of his own nature because he is a liar by nature.

If we claim to have left this old life behind, this life over which the devil reigns, that means we must leave deceitfulness behind. Remember what the apostle Paul says in Eph. 2, that you were dead in trespasses and sins wherein in times past you walked according to the course of this world, according to the Prince of the power of the air? Everyone in the old life is living under the dominion of Satan, and he's a liar.

You know what? Once you become a believer, he's not content to leave you alone. He wants to deceive you, he wants to draw you into error, he wants to make you to believe lies. In some sense, I think every time we sin it's because we believe the lie. Every time I sin it's because I believe the lie that it's going to be better for me if I do this, when God's word says, no, it's wrong, and I believe the devil over the Lord. I believe the lie.

That's why the apostle Paul says this to the Corinthians in 11:1-3, "Would to God ye could bear with me a little in my folly: and indeed bear with me. For I am jealous over you with godly jealousy: for I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ. But I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtilty, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ." There's always this danger. Then in verses 13 to 15, he says this: "For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ. And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also be transformed as the ministers of righteousness; whose end shall be according to their works."

This is the way the old life operates. It operates according to the deceits of Satan, and it's ruled over by the devil who is the father of lies. So Paul begins here: don't live lives that are characterized by the very thing that characterizes the life of sin.

Secondly, I think Paul begins here because our Lord, in contrast to the devil, is truth itself. Remember how Jesus described himself to his apostles in John 14:6, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." Jesus Christ is the source of all truth. He tells Pilate in John 18:36 that he came to bear

witness to the truth and that everyone who is of the truth hears his voice. The apostle Paul says this in 2 Corinthians 1:20, “For all the promises of God in him are yea, and in him Amen, unto the glory of God by us.” God has made all these promises all throughout the Old Testament. What has Jesus done? Jesus came and fulfilled all the promises of God. He showed that God is true, that God is trustworthy, that God is worthy of our trust. He is truth itself.

Thirdly, Paul begins here because we claim to preach a gospel that is truth. One of the main functions of the church is to be a witness and a light in this world, isn’t it? We claim to have a gospel that’s truth in contrast to the false gospel that the world presents. We claim to know the truth and that no lies are of the truth. But here’s the question: how can how our message be believable when we cannot be believable? How can our message be believed when we tell lies? It absolutely undermines our gospel witness when people can’t trust the things we say.

Finally, Paul begins here because grace and truth go together. This is how the apostle John describes the coming of Jesus in John 1:14, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.” We’ve already seen that God, the gospel, and grace all unite to draw us along in paths of holiness. Those three things, God, the gospel, and grace, are all there to convince us that the life of deception is totally contrary to the life that God is calling us to walk. So why then do we lie?

Unfortunately, we all are still prone to this danger. I think of Ananias and Sapphira. To show you just how serious God thinks of this, remember what happened to them. You know there was a movement in the early church to provide for those who didn’t have enough, and so the wealthy went and sold their possessions. Many of them went and sold their possessions and used that money for a fund that the church used to provide for those who were less fortunate. You have to remember that, in first century Palestine, there was no safety net; the church was completely responsible for the destitute, especially for widows and orphans. Evidently there had been a famine to make things worse. Ananias and

Sapphira were members of the early church, and they got caught up in this. They were evidently fairly wealthy. They went and sold a piece of land and they came and they did bring money to the apostles; they were participating in this. But here's the deal: they lied about how much they sold the land for and they kept back some of it for themselves. Ananias lies about it.

You remember what happened to him; he drops dead. Peter says, "You lied to me, you lied to God," and he drops dead. A few hours later, his wife comes in, not knowing what had happened. Peter asked her the same question - they had colluded - she says yes, we sold the land for that much. Peter then says, "Why have you agreed to tempt the Holy Spirit? The men who took your husband are going to carry you out." Speaking the truth is a serious thing.

Why do we lie? I think there are several reasons we lie. Some of us lie to cover our hides and to avoid consequences, but this is never finally successful. The apostle Paul says in 1 Timothy 5:24, "Some men's sins are open beforehand, going before to judgment; and some men they follow after." The apostle is saying that all sin is going to be exposed at some point, either now or later. Lying is never going to be successful because ultimately God is going to expose your sin.

That's not the only reason we sin in this way. We lie in order to make ourselves look better, either to God or to others. Of course, if God is the one we're trying to deceive, we cannot; and if man is the one, we should not. The underlying thing here, I think, is the fear of man. Often we lie because we fear man, and we lie because we fear the attitudes of man; we lie because we fear what other people are going to think of us. The Bible teaches us that we are not to fear man; we are to fear God, and if we fear God, we have no reason to fear man. Therefore we have no reason to lie.

If God has accepted you in Christ, what reason have we to present ourselves to be something that we are not? To try to mortgage our acceptance with God for acceptance with a human being is a completely unreasonable and stupid thing to do.

Underneath all of this is self-love, self-love as opposed to the love of God, loving God and loving my neighbor. Listen to what the apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13, where he describes love. He says love does not rejoice in iniquity, but what does it do? It rejoices in the truth. It's interesting that here the apostle Paul is quoting from an Old Testament prophet. He's quoting Zechariah chapter 8 and Zechariah is giving the people of Israel some instructions and he starts exactly at the place the apostle Paul begins. Zechariah 8:16, "These are the things that ye shall do; Speak ye every man the truth to his neighbour; execute the judgment of truth and peace in your gates."

He goes on to say: "And let none of you imagine evil in your hearts against his neighbour; and love no false oath: for all these are things that I hate, saith the Lord" (17). All those things have something to do with truth, with being truthful. But the thing I want to underline here is this phrase in verse 17: "let none of you imagine evil in your hearts against his neighbor." Not telling the truth to your neighbor is to hate your neighbor. It is not to love your neighbor. Oftentimes, people give this as a reason to lie: "Well, I just don't want to be truthful because that seems cruel if I were to tell that to my friends." But telling a lie, hiding something from someone, is not being loving.

Ultimately, that brings us finally to Paul's reason for not lying but telling the truth. He says, "for we are members one of another." It's like the apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12, that if one member suffers, every member suffers. The apostle Paul is saying that you shouldn't want to lie to one another, you should want to tell the truth and be truthful to one another, because you were all members of one another. In other words, this goes back to what we were saying: lying hates your neighbor. The one who lies hates his brother and sister in the Lord, not telling the truth, trying to hide things from them. It's not loving and, since we are all members one of another, we are to be truthful. Chrysostom said this: "If the eye sees the serpent, does it deceive the foot? If the tongue tastes what is bitter, does it deceive the stomach?"

Of course not! If we are members one of another, we ought all to be willing to be truthful to one another.

Furthermore, who is it that brought us into being members of one another in the first place? In Christ are we not united through Christ in one body through what he did on the cross? In other words, we are together because Christ loved us and put us in the church. So if Christ loves those to whom we are joined, we should love them too. We can only do this by being truthful.

There's really no reason in the church for us to hide behind lies because in Christ we are washed, our sins are completely taken away. If we believe that, we don't need to pretend. Maybe the world needs to pretend but none of us needs to pretend because of what we are in Christ. We are completely pure and white and clean in Jesus Christ. So put away lies and speak every man truth with the neighbor, for we are members one of another.

CHAPTER XXXIV

BE ANGRY AND SIN NOT (EPH. 4:26-27)

OUR WORLD IS FULL OF ANGRY PEOPLE. They are out there on the roads, in the office, and at home. You will find them on Twitter, Facebook, and the nightly news. Like the frogs, gnats, and flies in the Egyptian plagues, angry people are everywhere.

Anger is generally ugly. It was probably anger that lay behind the apostles' desire to call down fire on a village that wouldn't receive Christ. To these apostles our Lord replied, "Ye know not what spirit ye are of" (Lk. 9:55) and he rebuked them. It was anger that caused Moses to "speak unadvisedly with his lips" and to strike the rock when he should only have spoken to it (Ps. 106:32-33). It lost him the opportunity to enter the Promised Land.

Anger is so serious that our Lord likened it to murder: "Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment: but I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment" (Mt. 5:21-22). A problem might arise between two people that is initially solvable; but once you interject anger into the matter, you have almost guaranteed disaster. We are told that it was hatred that

caused Cain to kill his brother Abel (1 Jn. 3:12-13). In fact, the apostle John goes on to say, “Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer: and ye know that no murderer hath eternal life abiding in him” (1 Jn. 3:15). Although anger and hatred may not lead to murder every time, yet it has killed many marriages, alienated friends, and shut the doors on many a church. According to Jay Adams, sinful anger is behind about 90 percent of the problems that counselors deal with.

And yet . . . anger is not always bad and sinful and wicked or even ugly. We know this because the apostle says, “Be ye angry.” That is a command, not a concession. Though some commentaries try to soften the apostle’s meaning here by translating it, “If you are angry, don’t sin,” that is not what the apostle said. It is best to simply take the apostle’s meaning at face value. This is a command to be angry. In other words, there are times in which it would be wrong not to be angry.

Our purpose this morning as we look at this text is to consider how to balance this command with others like that in verse 31: “Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger [this is the noun form of the verb Paul uses in verse 26], and clamour, and evil-speaking, be put away from you, with all malice.” Obviously, there is such a thing as sinful anger. We are to put that away. It is part of putting off the old man. We also see this by the words that immediately follow the command to be angry: “and sin not.” The dividing line between righteous anger and sinful anger has been likened to a razor’s edge. It is indeed very thin, and it behooves us to know where that line is, because the phrase “and sin not” is also a command. You don’t get to choose which one to obey. We must be angry and we must not sin when we are angry. The question then is, how do we do that?

As we consider this, we must be careful that we approach this as Christians, and that means that we approach this from the perspective of the gospel. With this in mind, the first thing I want to point out is that we must never approach lists of do’s and don’ts (as we find here in Ephesians 4 and many other places in the NT) as a way to become superior to others. If you can master your anger and turn it to holy and good

uses, that is wonderful. But be careful that you don't then suddenly think you are superior to those who still lose their tempers and struggle with anger issues.

That is not appropriate and the first three chapters of Ephesians tell us why. If we as Christians are in the position where we are now working on issues like truth-telling and anger and so on, it is because we have been made new (ver. 24). Who was it that made you new? It wasn't yourself. The reason you are different is because God made you different. He chose you before the foundation of the world and predestined you to become a son or daughter of God. And that meant sending his Son to die for your sins and his Spirit to regenerate you and to give you spiritual life and to raise you from your death in sin. You didn't do any of that; God did. As the apostle would say to another church, "Who maketh thee to differ from another? And what hast thou that thou didst not receive? Now if thou didst receive it, why dost thou glory, as if thou hadst not received it?" (1 Cor. 4:7).

The point of these commandments is not to put you in a place where you can look down your nose at someone else. Grace precludes that. Grace reminds me that the good in me is a product of God's good work in my heart and soul. If I am different, he gets the glory, not me. We don't shine the light by pointing people to ourselves. We shine the light by pointing people to God. Humble people who know they are saved by grace can do that; proud people can't. In fact, if anything, a proud person is more likely to turn people off the gospel than they are to turn people towards the gospel.

So the gospel helps us to get our attitude right. It helps us to see how we can even begin to approach applying these truths to our lives. It delivers us from Pharisaism and makes us humble light-bearers in the midst of our dark world.

On the other hand, I don't see how you could do this without the gospel. Someone told me once that they had rejected the Christian faith in which he had been brought up and that this freed him from judging others. I reminded him that grace should keep every Christian from

a harsh and judgmental spirit. But I also don't see how people who reject the gospel can really be free from a judgmental spirit and remain consistent with their beliefs. For if you don't believe the gospel, then if you have changed (especially when someone else hasn't), you must believe that the reason for the change lies entirely in yourself. If that isn't grounds for a spirit of superiority and prideful disdain of others, I don't know what is.

What, then, about the command to be angry? Again, the gospel helps us out here. Those who say there is no room for righteous anger run immediately into problems with the gospel, because the gospel makes no sense at all apart from God's righteous anger towards and hatred of, sin. This is exactly what the apostle says at the beginning of Romans: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith" (Rom. 1:16-17). Now why was the apostle so excited about the gospel? When there were a thousand reasons to be ashamed of the gospel, why was he not ashamed? Why, in fact, did he boast in the gospel? The answer comes in the following verse: "For the wrath [Greek is *orge*] of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold [down] the truth in unrighteousness" (ver. 18). The reason there was a cross and an atonement was because God hates sin. He is angry with sinners. His wrath is against those who have broken his law. He is holy and just and right to do so. In fact, God would not be holy if he were not angry with those who break his law. The gospel assumes that fact, and without it the gospel becomes unintelligible. If God is not angry with sinful men and women, why the cross?

The worst sort of person is the sort of person who yawns at wickedness. It's the type of person who sees a Hitler and then says, "Well, that's none of my business." The problem with our generation is not that people are not angry. It is that we are angry at all the wrong things. We get all bent out of shape over trivialities, over the way a person says something

or over issues that are at best secondary in importance. The problem is that we don't get angry over wickedness. We ought to be angry at wickedness. It ought to grieve us; it ought to make us weep. The reason we don't do this is not because we are somehow more mature but because we really don't understand the holiness of God and the ugliness of sin.

Listen to how the psalmist prayed: "Rivers of waters run down mine eyes, because they keep not thy law" (Ps. 119:136). Or, "I beheld the transgressors and was grieved; because they kept not thy word" (ver. 158). Are we like that? Too often we are not, myself included.

I think we are more like the people that the prophet Jeremiah addressed in his day. He wrote about the false prophets, "For they have healed the hurt of the daughter of my people slightly, saying, Peace, peace; when there is no peace. Were they ashamed when they had committed abomination? Nay, they were not at all ashamed, neither could they blush: therefore shall they fall among them that fall: in the time of their visitation they shall be cast down, saith the LORD" (Jer. 8:11-12). They saw abominations and they could not even blush. I think as a culture that is where we are.

The problem is that even the church can absorb the culture in this respect. We have to be careful the kinds of things we let ourselves watch and read and see, because we can become hardened through continual exposure. We may be telling ourselves the whole time we are watching people on the screen do wicked things that we don't approve, but as we let our eyes see it, our heart is taking notice too. So we get to where we don't even blush anymore.

This had happened to the church at Corinth. Paul had to write to them to excommunicate a man who was involved in some unthinkable wicked behavior. The apostle wrote, "And ye are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he that hath done this deed might be taken away from among you" (1 Cor. 5:2). Not only were they not grieving and angry over this deed, they were proud about how they were tolerating him in the church! So the apostle had to tell them to put him out of the

church and to deliver him over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh (1 Cor. 5:5). He then goes on to say, “Your glorying is not good” (ver. 6). No, it is not, even in our day when we make such a big deal about being tolerant. More often than not, what this means is tolerating sin when we should hate it and grieve over it.

When our Lord was confronted with willful sin, he didn’t just yawn. On one occasion he made a whip and overthrew tables and ran the charlatans out of his Father’s house. On another occasion, we are told that “when he had looked round about on them with anger, being grieved for the hardness of their hearts” (Mk. 3:5). This is said of him “who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth” (1 Pet. 2:22).

All this to say that the church needs to recover righteous anger. We need to tremble at God’s law, grieve over the wickedness we see all around us, and to be angry at the havoc that the devil is inflicting in our world. We will never make any real progress in holiness until we do.

We are all aware of danger that anger brings. We may be strangers to righteous anger, but every one of us is very familiar with sinful anger and the danger is to mistake the latter for the former. So the apostle now goes on to qualify this command to be angry with several important and necessary qualifications. First, with the words, “and sin not,” which he then expands upon in the words, “let not the sun go down upon your wrath,” and then finally in the words, “neither give place to the devil.”

Here again the gospel is our template and frame of reference. Yes, the righteous wrath of God is real. But the gospel doesn’t stop at the wrath of God. It doesn’t just tell us to flee from the wrath to come. If that is all the gospel had to say, it would not be good news at all. The gospel is centered around what God the Son came to do: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (Jn. 3:16). That is the most amazing news imaginable. We deserve to perish because we have sinned against God. But God the Father sent his Son into the world to pay the price we should have paid for our sin.

In other words, God's wrath against sin did not preclude his love for those who sinned against him. At one time, you and I were "by nature children of wrath, even as others" (Eph. 2:3). That means that you and I were the objects of God's wrath. And we were worthy of his wrath. We deserved it. We were dead in sin and slaves to the world, the flesh, and the devil. God could have let our stinking corpses rot for all eternity, but he did not. He sent his Son into the world to die for our sins and to give us life. He loved those against whom he was angry. That's the gospel.

So how does that apply to you and me? It means that, like God, we are merciful and slow to anger, just as he was to us. We learn to "let not the sun go down upon your wrath." This is clearly a proverb that is not meant to be taken with excessive literalism. If you live in Greenland and the sun doesn't go down for several months, this doesn't give you the right to nurse a grudge for that long! Rather, this just means that we are not to allow ourselves to go on being angry. Whether or not we can resolve the issue isn't the point; the point is that we have such self-control that we do not allow ourselves to be controlled by anger. It doesn't dominate us, it doesn't fester and build up into rage and revenge.

The Christian is a man or woman or boy or girl who has self-control. Paul tells Timothy that "God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind [self-control]" (2 Tim. 1:7). The initial cause of your anger may have been just; but if you go on allowing the anger to build, whatever else this may be, this is at least a lack of self-control and it now becomes sinful. It is self-control that allows us to be longsuffering and lowly and meek; it allows us to forbear with one another in love (Eph. 4:2). It is what produces the man the apostle James describes in his epistle: "But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy" (Jam. 3:17). Does this describe us? Are we easy to be entreated? Or are we like a human porcupine that people are afraid to approach? Are we "kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for

Christ's sake hath forgiven you"? (Eph. 4:32). I sometimes think that, if people would just be more tenderhearted, a lot of problems in the home and at church and at the workplace would just disappear.

The book of Proverbs has a lot to say on this matter. It tells us that "a man of quick temper acts foolishly, and a man of evil devices is hated" (Prov. 14:17).¹ It tells us that "whoever is slow to anger has great understanding, but he who has a hasty temper exalts folly" (14:29), and that "a soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger" (15:1). It tells us that "a hot tempered man stirs up strife, but he who is slow to anger quiets contention" (15:18). It tells us that "good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense" (19:11). Above all, we learn that "a man without self-control is like a city broken into and left without walls" (25:28). Someone who can't let go of their anger lacks self-control and walks in foolishness.

Now the reason the apostle gives for this is found in verse 27: "Neither give place to the devil." The problem with anger run amok is that it makes us spiritually vulnerable. Remember what the proverb said: "A man without self-control is like a city broken into and left without walls." The devil is out there waiting for an opening. For us to give into anger is to give him that opening. He knows that once anger begins to control us; we aren't thinking straight anymore. Satan can start feeding us his lies and we will believe them.

Beware of ever making any decisions based on anger. The probability is that your decisions are being more informed by the devil's lies than logic and Scripture and good sense. Put away the sinful anger first and then come back to the issue at hand.

We are then to be angry at the sin around us (and in us) but we are not to allow anger so to control us that we give place to the devil and place ourselves at his command. Instead, we are to be angry and sin not, and not to let the sun go down upon our wrath.

I want to end our consideration of this passage with three final observations.

¹The quotations from Proverbs in this paragraph are from the ESV.

First, there are those who really struggle with anger. The reality is that probably all of us do. I thought I didn't until I got married and had kids and had to live in an environment where my preferences had to constantly give way to the preferences of others. Then I discovered that I too had a problem with anger! Well, the danger is to say that we can't help it. That it is just too engrained in our nature to put it away. What I want to say to that is just this: it is a false and total lie. If you are a believer, you have put off the old man and put on the new man. You are a new creation. Sin no longer has dominion over you. To say that you can't obey the apostle's command is to admit that you are not a Christian, that you are not born again, that you are not being recreated in God's image. No, my friends, if you are a believer, you are able to obey this command: Be angry and sin not! Put away your anger! Don't give the devil and opportunity to make hay out of your situation.

Second, we need to remind ourselves of the context. Go back to the beginning of chapter 4. Go back further to chapter 2 and recall that the apostle is very concerned about the fellowship and unity of the Christian church. The reason he is dealing with these issues of truth-telling and anger is that he knows that lies and unbridled anger will inevitably undermine the unity of any body of believers. So this is not just about becoming a better person. This is about becoming a person who can live better in community with others. Christian sanctification is not an exercise in navel-gazing; it is all about building up the community of the church.

Finally, this issue of anger is utterly important for the witness of the church to the world. Beware of becoming like Talkative in Pilgrim's Progress. Though he could grapple with any theological issue, no matter how abstract, yet he did not have an ounce of true godliness in him. We are told that it came out in his relationships with others. Here is how Bunyan describes him: "His house is as empty of religion as the white of an egg is of savour. . . . He is the very stain, reproach, and shame of religion, to all that know him, A saint abroad, and a devil at home. His poor family finds it so; he is such a churl, such a railer at and so

unreasonable with his servant, that they neither know how to do for or speak to him.” May it not be said so of us.

CHAPTER XXXV

FROM ROBBERS TO RIGHTEOUS (EPH. 4:28)

THERE ARE A COUPLE OF THINGS that immediately strike me as I consider this passage. The first is that the gospel is powerful enough to take those who once were thieves and to make them members of the church. Think about the kind of person you associate with robbers. These are members of the criminal classes, people who have very little, if any, respect for their fellow man. And yet, the apostle is addressing people in the church at Ephesus who once participated in that kind of life. As John Stott so aptly put it, “none but Christ can transform a burglar into a benefactor!”¹ They went from being robbers to becoming righteous. Christ does this. He takes people from the darkest parts of society and remakes them into new men and women. He takes people who took from others and recreates them into people who now give to the very people from whom they once stole. I’ve seen elephants and lions, constrained by thirst, drink from the same pool of water. There is an uneasy truce, as they eye each other while they sip up the water. Some things can bring even enemies together in this world. The gospel does more than this: it takes wolves and lambs and causes

¹John Stott, *The Message of Ephesians*, p. 188

them to lie down with each other in mutual friendship. It takes enemies and turns them into brothers and sisters in Christ.

We need to remind ourselves of the power of the gospel. It is so easy to look at people and to think they it would just be impossible for them to be converted. We lose heart and fail to bear witness to the gospel because we don't believe that the gospel is the power of God unto salvation. We need to remember that our own conversion is just as impossible as that of anybody else. Do you remember what our Lord said to the apostles after the rich young ruler walked away from Jesus' call to come follow him? "Verily I say unto you, that a rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven. And again I say unto you, It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God" (Mt. 19:23-24). The apostles, we are told, were astonished at our Lord's indictment. To them, this man was the paragon of virtue. How could he be lost? They asked, "Who then can be saved?" (ver. 25), to which our Lord responded: "With men it is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (ver. 26). Salvation is an impossible thing, humanly speaking. We cannot save ourselves. But God can save anyone. That includes the person you think would never listen to or receive the gospel.

Now suppose someone was once a criminal and then came to Christ and wanted to join your church. Would you be okay with their being a part of the church? Would you mind sharing the same pew with them? It's one thing to subscribe to the power of the gospel on a theoretical level; it's another thing to put it into practice. I'm not saying we just accept a profession of faith without evidence of genuine conversion (we shouldn't), but neither should we always be looking out the corner of our eyes at other Christians who have a different set of life experiences.

There is another thing that strikes me as I consider this verse. It is that sanctification is a process. Yes, the gospel is powerful, but that does not mean that conversion does away with every vestige of sin this side of heaven. Paul, writing to a church, puts in this exhortation, "Let him that stole steal no more." Now, I don't think this means there were a

bunch of people in that church who were shoplifting every time they went to the marketplace. I do think it means there were people in that church for whom stealing had been a lifestyle before their conversion. Their conversion had been real, but it didn't erase their previous lifestyle from their memories. Some might be tempted from time to time to go back to that lifestyle, and so Paul writes this verse in the fourth chapter of Ephesians.

Now there are some things that you just can't do as a matter of lifestyle and be saved. Theft is one of these. In another place, the apostle writes, "Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioner, shall inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Cor. 6:9-10). You see that "thieves" is a part of this list. If that describes who you are, you are not saved, and if you continue in this lifestyle, you will not inherit the kingdom of God. But this does not mean that once you are saved out of these lifestyles, you will never be tempted to go back. It may happen that way for some; it is certainly not that way for most of us. We will struggle with sin until our dying day.

That means we need to be careful about avoiding these two extremes. One extreme is to say that, as long as you've made a profession of faith, well then you are saved no matter what you do afterwards. The Bible doesn't teach that because the Bible recognizes the reality of a false faith, which the apostle James calls a "dead faith." Dead faith doesn't save. It's not that these people were saved and then lost their salvation; the reality is that they were never saved to begin with. "They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us: but they went out, that they might be made manifest that they were not all us" (1 Jn. 2:19). Someone who tells you they are saved because they have made a profession of faith and been baptized and yet go on stealing from others is simply not saved. Their faith is fake.

On the other hand, we need to beware of thinking that, if you are saved, then all your problems with sin are over. That is not taught by the Bible either. “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1 Jn. 1:8). Sanctification is a process. When you are saved, you are put on a trajectory of spiritual growth. But that does not mean there will not be times when we go backward. Like a river, our general direction is consistent, but there are tracks of our life where, like bends in a river, we are for a time going in the opposite direction. Someone may be saved out of a terrible lifestyle, and if they are saved, then the general tenor and direction of their life is going to be going in a direction away from that sin and towards God. However, temptations may for a time bring them back to that sin. If they are truly saved, they will eventually repent. True saints persevere. The point is, just because they are for a time drawn back to this sin for a time does not mean their salvation is not real.

So, though we want to see evidence of a lifestyle of godliness for those who claim the name of Christ, neither should we be so harsh that every misstep is a reason for us to reject them as brothers and sisters in Christ. The church has often been likened to a hospital. A hospital is a place where sick people are (hopefully) getting better. We are all sick people getting better through the work of the Holy Spirit in us, not healthy people coming to be admired. No church is going to be in a position to disciple immature believers into mature believers if they are not willing to be patient with one another.

Those are some general principles that I see in this text, but we must come down to the specifics. I want to point out immediately that these words are not just for thieves but for all of us. It may be true that you are not a thief. Very well, but what the apostle goes on to say is for all of us. In these words, the apostle affirms not only the value of work, but also one of the chief reasons we are to work. He continues in the pattern he has established back in verse 25. He begins with a negative prohibition (“Let him that stole steal no more”), followed by a positive exhortation (“but rather let him labor, working with his hands the thing

that is good”), followed by a reason for the exhortation (“that he may have to give to him that needeth”).

Before we look at the specifics, I want to make the observation that true Christianity does in fact deal with the nitty gritty of our lives. In other words, if we are following Christ, we are not going to be content to simply make a profession of faith and then get on with our lives. Christianity is not Jesus tacked onto your life. It is Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior transforming our lives so that we are being conformed into his image. And that means that every aspect of your life is coming under the lordship of Christ. In every aspect of our lives, we need to be asking the question, “How does this part of my life honor Christ as Lord and Savior?”

This, of course, applies to our work. It is simply inconceivable that our Lord would have nothing to say about our work, especially considering the fact that it takes up so much of our lives. He does, and this text will help us to see how we ought to think about it.

God values work

First of all, we see in this passage that God values work: “let him labor, working with his hands the thing which is good.” Now, I think it’s important at the very beginning here to note what Paul does not say about work. He does not limit the value of work to distinctly Christian ministry. Throughout history there have always been those who make it sound like, if you are not in the ministry, then you are somehow a second-class citizen of heaven. In fact, in Paul’s day some took this even further and went to the extreme that they quit working altogether to wait for the kingdom of God! Such people did not get a commendation from the apostle but rather a rebuke: “For yourselves know how ye ought to follow us: for we behaved not ourselves disorderly among you; neither did we eat any man’s bread for nought; but wrought with labour and travail night and day, that we might not be chargeable to any of you: not because we have not power, but to make ourselves an ensample unto

you to follow us. For even when we were with you, this we commanded you, that if any would not work, neither should he eat. For we hear that there are some which walk among you disorderly, working not at all, but are busybodies. Now them that are such we command and exhort by our Lord Jesus Christ, that with quietness they work, and eat their own bread" (2 Thess. 3:7-12).

"Seek ye first the kingdom of heaven" does not mean to abandon your earthly responsibilities. Nor does it mean that you have to be a preacher or a missionary in order to do something that honors the Lord. It means that, as the apostle would say to the Colossians (addressing the slaves): "and whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not to men" (Col. 3:23). We sanctify our work when we do it unto the Lord. You may have an unbeliever as your boss, but as a Christian, you are to recognize that you ultimately serve Christ, no matter where you work. If you work with that mindset, you are seeking first the kingdom of heaven, whether you are an accountant or a school teacher or an entrepreneur or whatever.

Of course, there is also the opposite danger, although this is not likely to come from believers, though even they can adopt this attitude. It is the attitude that Christian work is not really work, and that those who go into the ministry are somehow avoiding working a real job (especially when this involves raising support). This is equally wrong. We need pastors and missionaries and the Bible says that "if a man desires the office of a bishop, he desires a good work" (1 Tim. 3:1). Believe me, it is work. Those who do Christian ministry right know it is not a sinecure. We need pastors and missionaries, so we need to encourage young people who are considering a life in Christian ministry. As our Lord himself said, "The harvest truly is plenteous, but the laborers are few; pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he will send forth laborers into his harvest" (Mt. 9:37-38).

God values work. It is something that even man in his innocence, before the fall, was tasked to do. "The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it" (Gen. 2:15, ESV).

Before sin, before the fall, man was supposed to work. It is part of what God made us to be: he made us to work and keep things. God did not make you to sit in front of a computer and play video games in your parent's basement. He made you to take something like a garden and work and keep it. Work is not bad, it is not sinful. Work is something that God made us for. Work is good. Work is sanctified by God's plan for mankind.

It's important to understand that sin did not take work and make it bad. It's not like work was good before the Fall but now it's bad. No, sin did not take work and make it bad; sin took work and made it hard: "By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread" (Gen. 3:19, ESV). Work is hard, that is why it is called "labor," but that does not mean it is bad, or that its hardness gives us a reason not to work.

In fact, when Paul describes work, he describes it in terms of labor. The word Paul uses in Eph. 4:28 is connected to the idea of tiring out, or growing weary, through work. One commentator writes, "The point is that the labor exerted is exhausting. In this context the stealer used to obtain things with little effort, but with the acquisition of the new person all things are acquired with labor that requires much effort."² Christianity is not a life of ease, and this is true in our work as in all of life. Conversion does not release us from weariness and labor; conversion sanctifies that weariness and labor so that it is not longer done in vain. It is worth something because it is done for the Lord, and "whatsoever good thing any man doeth, the same shall he receive of the Lord, whether he be bond or free" (Eph. 6:8).

If you are a Christian, then you are to put in labor and effort into your work. That means that, if you are a student, you don't take shortcuts in your studies. You master the subject you are being taught. It means that, if you are employed by someone, you don't steal your employer's time by doing things that are not connected with your work. It means that you do the very best job you can do within your abilities. If you are

²Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary*, p. 625.

self-employed, it means that you do the very best job for your customers. Whatever you do, as Scripture tells us, we are to do with all our might.

We shouldn't read too much into the phrase "working with his hands the thing which is good," as if to say that only manual labor honors the Lord. The point is that God expects us to work hard at our jobs, whether it involves mainly our minds or mainly our hands.

The only caveat Paul places here in his exhortation to work is that we are to work at "the thing which is good." In other words, not all work is good and therefore not all work is something a Christian can do. We cannot as believers do anything that compromises our integrity or is at odds with the gospel. If my boss asks me to lie or to steal or to cheat, as a Christian I simply cannot do that, even if it costs me my job.

The reason for work

Then we see the reason for work: "that he may have to give to him that needeth." There are all sorts of wrong reasons why people work. Some people find their identity in their work, so that if you took it away from them they would simply go to pieces. God did not make you to find your identity in your work. Adam and Eve found their identity in being created in the image of God. Their work in the garden was simply an expression of that identity. As believers in Jesus Christ we are being re-made in the image of God. Therefore, we are to find our identity in Christ, not in our jobs. Your job was never meant to fill up your life with meaning or to give you ultimate satisfaction, and if you seek that in your work, you will end up sorely disappointed. Only Christ can fill up our hearts. Therefore don't measure yourself by your employment. Don't compare yourself to others you make more than you or do something which has a greater cultural appreciation. If you are in Christ, you can push a broom for the kingdom of God. The richest person in the world has nothing on you if they have not Christ.

Beware, therefore, of being a workaholic. There is a balance between working hard at our jobs and being consumed by them. Those who are

consumed by their jobs so that they neglect other equally important areas of their lives (like family, their personal devotional life, etc.) have probably fallen into the trap of seeking their identity in their work. The reality is that, if I am a Christian, I do not have to outperform others; I don't have to work to get the attention of others, and I don't have to work so that people recognize my work and give me rewards. I don't have to do this because I don't need the acceptance of men: I am fully accepted already by the God of the universe through Christ. My job doesn't need to fill out the meaning of my life because Christ has already given that to me.

Why then are we to work? To give to those who need. Of course, the first place to which we give is our own family: "But if any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel" (1 Tim. 5:8). But I don't think that is primarily what Paul is talking about here. He is talking about people who work hard at their jobs so that they not only have plenty for themselves and their family, but also for others who are in need.

Here is what the apostle is saying. He is saying that the gospel completely changes the outlook of the Christian. Before they were saved, they thought only of themselves. They stole, they took from others in order to benefit themselves. They didn't respect others, their persons or their property. The gospel introduces a tremendous change in the outlook of the believer. They no longer think of themselves and their needs and their wants and their comforts; now they think of others and how to help and minister to others. Now they want to weary themselves with work – not so they can build a big retirement account and retire early and buy vacation homes and go on cruises – but so they can give to others who have less than they. Their thought is of others.

What induces this change of mindset? The gospel. For the essence of the gospel is this: "For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich" (2 Cor. 8:9). Our Lord was infinitely rich and glorious in heaven with the Father. He gave all that up for a time;

he became indescribably poor. We will probably never understand, at least on this side of heaven, what Christ forsook when he was born in Bethlehem. The step from heaven to earth was an infinite drop. Why did Jesus do this? “That ye through his poverty might be rich.” As the Shorter Catechism puts it, his poverty was being born in a low condition, undergoing the miseries of this life, the wrath of God, and the cursed death on the cross, in being buried and continuing under the power of death for a time. He did that for his people. He took their sins upon himself so that they might have his righteousness and eternal life in the presence of God forever. He took the worst thing in the universe upon himself (the wrath of God upon sin) so that we might have the very best thing in the universe (perfect fellowship with God forever).

If we believe this, then, how could we not image this to others, however faintly we can? “Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man on the things of others. Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: but made himself of no reputation, and took upon himself the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross” (Phil. 2:3-8). A person who does not want to give to others knows nothing of the redemption that Christ accomplished on the cross.

Ultimately, all that we do as Christians is meant to be a picture of the gospel, because God’s heart is to see his people gathered through the gospel into the church. The amazing thing is, no matter how much we have taken in sin, God is still willing to give salvation to those who believe in his Son. He takes thieves, and the despicable and outcasts of society, and brings them into his family and gives them eternal life and joy in his presence. May we know the Giver of salvation and may we know how to imitate him to others.

CHAPTER XXXVI

WORDS THAT EDIFY (EPH. 4:29)

OUR WORLD IS A WASH IN WORDS. About one million books are published each year, about 2700 books per day. Even more breathtaking is the fact that, with the advent of the internet, this torrent of verbal effusion has increased with blogs: we are told that about two million blog posts are published every day! Add to this the fact that each one of the approximately seven billion people on earth speaks on average about 370,000,000 words during their lifetime, and it is easy to see just how important words are to the human race.

It is this ability to speak that is one of the preeminent ways that humans are separated from the animals. Language is tool that we take for granted, and yet it is something so profound that it is simply cannot adequately be described with a “bottom-up” explanation in terms of chemistry and physics. Oxford mathematician John Lennox tells a story of a conversation he had with another scientist at the university. This man was a chemist who subscribed to the idea that everything can be explained entirely in terms of scientific data. Lennox pointed to the words on the menu at their table and asked him if he could explain the meaning (semiotics) of the words in terms of chemistry and physics.

The chemist immediately saw that he couldn't – and not because of an inability on his part to explain it in those terms but because he saw that there is an intrinsic impossibility to explaining the meaning of language in terms merely of physics and chemistry. Words and language and speech point to our wise and communicating Maker.

In other words, language is one of the ways we reflect the image of God. It is therefore a wonderful gift that we have been given and it behooves us to reflect this aspect of God's image in ways that are appropriate and befitting. It makes total sense, therefore, that having spoken of "the new man, which after God [in God's image] is created in righteousness and true holiness" (ver. 24), he should then go on to remind us to "let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace to the hearers" (ver. 29). In fact, if we look through this section of the epistle, we see that this emphasis on proper language is interspersed throughout these verses. Verse 25, a proscription against lying and an exhortation to truth-telling, is a verse that deals with speech. Then, in verse 31, Paul writes, "Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, but put away from you, with all malice." In 5:3-4, Paul goes on to say, "But fornication, and all uncleanness, or covetousness, let it not be once named among you, as becometh saints; neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor jesting, which are not convenient: but rather giving of thanks." Again, you see this emphasis upon proper speech. It is clearly important.

Our Lord himself taught the importance of words, when he said, "But I say unto you, That every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment. For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy word thou shalt be condemned" (Mt. 12:36-37). This is a strong warning. We tend to minimize the impact of our words, but our Lord warns us that we will have to give an account for the words we have spoken to God himself. That is no light thing. The reason he gives for this is that our words reveal who we really are: "A good man out the good treasure of the heart bringeth forth good things: and an evil

man out the evil treasure bringeth forth evil things” (Mt. 12:35). You’ve heard the adage, “You are what you eat.” Well, our Lord might have said, “You are what you speak.” If you are bad, your words will reveal it and if you are good, your words will reveal that, too. The point here is that we need to watch our words because we will stand before God in judgment over the words we speak. Let us, therefore, make the prayer of the psalmist our own: “Set a watch, O LORD, before my mouth; keep the door of my lips” (Ps. 141:3).

However, not only are our words important in terms of our own accountability, but also because of what our words can do to others. I think this is clearly one of the reasons the apostle introduces this injunction at this point. Remember that chapter 4 begins with this emphasis upon the unity of the church. Then the apostle goes on to say how our Lord has ordained the gifts in order that the church might grow in this unity. As the apostle goes on to develop the idea of the purity of the church in the verses we are considering, he has not forgotten the reality of the unity of the church. Holiness is meant to serve the unity of the church, not fight against it. Unity is best served by people who tell the truth, who aren’t ruled by their anger, who don’t take from others but who labor to give to those who need. And unity is helped by those who watch what they say; who communicate in ways that are helpful, not hurtful. They don’t speak corrupt words, but words that minister grace to the hearers.

The apostle James also reminds us how important words are in this connection, especially in terms of the harm they can do to others. He tells us that our words are like little matches that can burn down whole forests of trees (Jam. 3:5-6). He tells us that the tongue is like poison; in fact, that they are full of poison (ver. 8). Our tongues may be little and seemingly insignificant, but like a small rudder on a big ship, they can steer our lives in good or bad directions (ver. 4). The great German battleship Bismarck was sunk because its rudder got stuck. And we can absolutely destroy the lives of others when our tongues get stuck in the hateful and ugly and sarcastic position.

In fact, our Lord in the Sermon on the Mount warns us against murdering people with our words: “Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment: but I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment: and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire” (Mt. 5:21-22). You can see this worked out in terrible ways in schools when kids bully other kids and those who are bullied end up isolated and alone and hurt, or worse. Our Lord would have no problem calling this verbal murder. It is wicked. It happens not only on the playground; it happens every time any of us strike out in hateful anger with our words at someone else. Note again, we see how our Lord reminds us not only of the terrible effect our words can have on others; he also reminds us of the judgment that is coming on us if we do not repent.

However, our words are not just important because of the damage they can do. Thank God, our words can also be good words, helping words, healing words. The word Paul uses here is the word, “edifying,” which, as we know, means to build up. We can tear down with our words, but we can also build up. Remember what the apostle said back in verse 15: “But speaking the truth in love, [we] may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ.” The letter to the Hebrews encourages us to “exhort one another daily, while it is called today, lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin” (Heb. 3:13). Exhorting, of course, happens as we speak to one another.

The danger we face when we realize just how dangerous our words can be is to talk as little as possible, or not at all. There is a whole order of monks who take a vow of silence. You will note that the apostle does not follow up the prohibition to speak corrupt words with an exhortation to silence. No, the solution to evil speaking is not refusing to speak; the solution is to speak, but to speak “that which is good to the use of edifying.” Silence may be golden at times but silence all the time is not

only not good, but also it can be just as harmful as saying the wrong thing.

This then leads to the question: how are we to order our speech? Let us follow the apostle's order here and consider first the negative prohibition and then the positive exhortation.

The negative prohibition

First of all, the apostle writes, "Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouths." The word for "corrupt" means rotten, harmful, unhealthy, diseased. It refers to the kind of speech that characterizes those who are yet in the flesh, who are still walking in the vanity of their mind, whose understand is still darkened, who are alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them because of the blindness of their hearts (Eph. 4:17-18).

What characterizes such speech? Well, I would say the first thing that characterizes it is that it is centered on the self. The thing that Christ redeems us from is ourselves. We are by nature consumed with ourselves; we are selfish creatures, and nowhere does this manifest itself more clearly than in our speech. You hear it in those who always want to talk about themselves or want to direct the conversation to their own interests or towards themselves. When others talk, they are always wanting to butt in and grab the attention of everyone. They can't wait until someone else has stopped talking so they can dominate the conversation. It is perfectly ugly. We all recognize how awful it is. There is a comedian, Brian Regan, who has made a whole skit around this. Look it up on YouTube under "the ME monster." "Me monsters" are everywhere and, if we have been redeemed by Christ, one of the ways this should manifest itself is in selfless speech. We should recognize that we are not what people need. Christ is what people need, and our words and speech need to be such that people are not pointed to ourselves but away from ourselves to Christ.

Another thing that corrupts our speech is making light of sin. The apostle will go on to say that “it is a shame even to speak of those things which are done of them in secret” (Eph. 5:12), by which he is referring to “the unfruitful works of darkness” which we are to reprove, not repeat (ver. 11). Joking about wickedness is not harmless. To celebrate sin is to indoctrinate our hearts into thinking that sin is not really that big of a deal and to deceive ourselves into thinking that God doesn’t think anything of it, either. It is to make ourselves think that sin is not really that bad. It inevitably leads people, whether ourselves or others, to indulge in behaviors that God hates. More than that, it will cause us to belittle the cross. You cannot value the gospel and snicker over sin. It’s why the hymn says, “Ye who think of sin but lightly, nor suppose the evil great, here may view its nature rightly, here its guilt may estimate. Mark the Sacrifice appointed! See who bears the awful load! ‘Tis the Word, the Lord’s anointed, Son of man and Son of God.” How can we look at Jesus upon the cross, bearing our sin, and then joke about it? It just shows that we do not really appreciate what he has done for us.

Another characteristic of corrupt speech is thoughtless speech. Talking without thinking about what we are saying. It’s like pointing a gun in someone’s face without any appreciation that it could go off. Though total silence is not the appropriate solution to sinful speech, yet we ought always to weigh our words before we speak. Contrast this to what the apostle exhorts us to do: “But that which is good to the use of edifying.” Now the Greek literally says here, “but if there be any good [word] for the building up of the need.”¹ In other words, in contrast to thoughtless speech, we are to think of the need that exists in front of us and speak so as to meet that need. Or, as the ESV puts it, we are speak “as fits the occasion.” Again, when we are speaking in appropriate ways, we are thinking of others. We are not just talking to hear ourselves speak.

I know that when most people think of filthy or corrupt speech, they think of certain words. Certainly, we don’t want to use words that our

¹Harold Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary*, p. 629.

culture views as “foul.” That is corrupt speech. As believers, we should avoid using these words. I know some Christians have no problem using foul language, but in light of what the apostle says here and in 5:4, I don’t see why they don’t see a problem with this. Hopefully you can see that this is a greater problem than what usually falls under the category of cursing. Corrupt language is any way of talking that is inappropriate for image bearers of God.

The positive exhortation

How then are we to speak? Paul writes, “But that which is good to the use of edifying.” As we have already noted, Paul is saying that, when we speak, we are to think of the needs of others. So the first thing is that we are not to use our speech as a way to put ourselves on display. We are to be thinking of others.

This means that often before we speak we need to listen. The proverb tells us that, “If one gives answer before he hears, it is his folly and shame” (Prov. 18:13, ESV). Too often we do just that. We jump to conclusions, and often the wrong ones, because we didn’t hear the other person out. It is again a manifestation of our selfishness. We are not interested in hearing someone out; we want to do all the talking. As a result, we end up making things worse instead of better. We don’t consider the need and so we aren’t in a position to meet the need.

It also means that we are to apply wisdom to the situation to which we speak. Again, to quote the Proverbs, “The tongue of the wise useth knowledge aright: but the mouth of fools poureth out foolishness” (Prov. 15:2). In other words, it is not only that we need to use the right words and say the right things, but that we need to say the right things at the right time and to the right people. “A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver” (Prov. 25:11).

Our Lord is the great example here. We are told in the prophesy of Isaiah, in speaking of the Messiah: “The Lord GOD hath given me the tongue of the learned, that I should know how to speak a word in season

to him that is weary” (Isa. 50:4). He not only spoke the truth, he spoke the truth in such a way that it would minister grace to the hearers. To Nicodemus, he speaks of new birth and argues from Old Testament metaphors of being born of water and Spirit. To the woman at the well, he speaks of living water. He knew exactly how to speak to them so that the truth would find a lodging place in their hearts. Some people have the idea that as long as they speak the truth, they are in the right. Such people often end up doing enormous damage. It’s not that we should lie (see verse 25!), but that we should apply wisdom to the truth we share.

We don’t want to be insensitive to the people to whom we speak. For example, the first thing to do when someone is suffering from the loss of a loved one may not be to remind them that all things work together for good for those who love God. It is of course true; but they may not be in an emotional frame to receive it. The best thing to do in cases like that is just to love on that person. Sometimes weeping with those who weep is far more eloquent and edifying than the most profound theology. Then later, when they are able to receive it, rejoice with them in the amazing truth of Romans 8:28.

You also see this in the way the apostle Paul himself dealt with people. To the Corinthians, he writes, “And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ” (1 Cor. 3:1). He spoke to them as was appropriate for believers at their level of maturity. To do otherwise would have been counterproductive.

Don’t use truth as a bulldozer. Be like Jesus and speak as fits the need and the occasion. As the Scriptures prophesied of him, “A bruised reed shall he not break, and smoking flax shall he not quench” (Mt. 12:20).

One more point: if we are to edify others, that means that we need to speak truth, and that means that our words need to be informed by Biblical doctrine and theology. Let me draw an analogy between theology and history. Why does history repeat itself? Why do people keep doing the same stupid things over and over again? Because they do not know their history. Pharaoh wanted to kill the Hebrew children

because he knew not Joseph. People say all sorts of dumb things about war and economics and many other things because they aren't aware of even recent history. In the same way, people say all sorts of stupid things and give all sorts of dumb advice because they don't have a Biblical framework for applying truth to people. This is because they've never appreciated the importance of sound doctrine.

Sound doctrine! Do you appreciate the meaning of that phrase? The apostle talked about those things which are contrary to "sound doctrine" (1 Tim. 1:10) and commanded Timothy: "Hold fast the form of sound words, which thou hast heard of me, in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 1:13). "Sound" is the Greek word from which we get the word "hygiene." It means "healthy." Sound doctrine, sound words, are healthy words as opposed to rotten and corrupt words. They are rooted in correct and Biblical doctrine and theology. You want to be healthy? Then you need to live your life in accordance with sound doctrine. It's why the apostle would also tell Timothy about the false teachers, "Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. But shun profane and vain babblings: for they will increase unto more ungodliness. And their word will eat as doth a canker" (2 Tim. 2:14-17).

It's why the apostle John wrote: "Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son. If there come any unto you, and bring not the doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him Godspeed: for he that biddeth him Godspeed is partaker of his evil deeds" (2 Jn. 9-11). There are a lot of people, even in the church today, who think that where you come down on doctrine is unimportant. These verses tell a different story. That doesn't mean, of course, that we have to fight about every difference of opinion. Paul and John were opposing false teachers whose teaching was overthrowing the faith of some in the churches.

Even with these allowances, we need to understand that the reality is that all Biblical doctrine is important, and your spiritual health is to

a large extent dependent upon how you are living in accordance with sound doctrine. You are not going to edify yourself or others if you are not speaking in accordance with sound doctrine.

Now, why are we to do this? “That it may minister grace to the hearers.” To link this up with the previous point we were just making, I want to point out that the grace that is being ministered here is God’s grace, and God will not send his grace down channels of false doctrine.

This underlines the reason why our words are so important. If you are a believer, your words can become conduits of grace, God’s grace. God works through his people; we are his instruments. One of the primary ways he ministers through us to others is through our words. This is a wonderful motivation. Think of it: to be a co-worker with God. To help him advance his kingdom and cause. It doesn’t take a lot of education to do this. It doesn’t take a lot of time or money. All it takes is a willingness to speak truth wisely, discerningly, lovingly, carefully, evangelistically.

As believers, we should want to do this, since it was probably someone’s word that opened our eyes and hearts to the life-giving gospel. The man God used to bring truth to me was Arthur Pink, through his book *The Sovereignty of God*. Pink’s own story is instructive. Raised in a Christian home in Victorian England, Pink abandoned the faith of his parents for a cult. But his father never gave up speaking truth to him. One evening, as Pink came home to prepare for a speech he was to give at a meeting of spiritists, his father was waiting for him. Pink rushed by him as quickly as possible, but his dad was able to get in the words, “There is a way that seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof is the way of death.” Pink was not able to get these words out of his mind, no matter how hard he tried. For three days he wrestled with them, but in the end, he was converted to Christ. One verse from a father’s lips led to the conversion of his son, who in turn has influenced untold thousands of others, including myself.

Of course the greatest reason we have for speaking truth is that God has himself spoken truth to us; preeminently in his Son, who is the

Word of God, and these words are saving and life-giving. He has spoken to us the gospel, the news that God sent his Son into the world to do for us what we could not do for ourselves: to take our sins and atone for them, every single one of them, to give us righteousness, and ultimately to bring us to God in the closest friendship forever. May the Lord bless us to speak to others in such a way, that we show ourselves to be recipients of the gospel, and then to invite others to join with us in our journey to eternal joy and glory.

CHAPTER XXXVII

GRIEVE NOT THE HOLY SPIRIT (EPH. 4:30)

IT HAS SOMETIMES BEEN ARGUED that the Holy Spirit is an influence or a power, but not a person. Our text should put such thoughts to rest once and forever. You can't grieve an influence, whereas you can grieve a person. The Holy Spirit is not just a reference to the outworking of the power of God in the world, the Holy Spirit refers to the third person in the Trinity. This is, of course, a mystery, but we believe it because the Scriptures teach it. The Holy Spirit is God, as is taught in Acts 5:3-4, where the apostle Peter equates lying to the Holy Spirit with lying to God. The Holy Spirit is distinct from the Father and the Son, as can be seen in the baptism of our Lord, but also in his relationship to the Son and the Father in John 14:26 and 15:7: proceeding from the Father and being sent by the Son. When you put these things together, that the Holy Spirit is given personal, Divine, and distinct properties, the doctrine of the Trinity emerges with respect to the Holy Spirit.

You don't take statements like the one in our text and pull them from the context in which they were found. I don't just mean that we should look at the verses right before and right behind in order to establish

the context. You have to look at the entire book or letter in order to do this properly. In Paul's letter to the Ephesians, the Holy Spirit of God figures prominently. In fact, we meet him for the first time in the third verse of the first chapter: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ." As we noted when we looked at that verse, the "spiritual blessings" are spiritual because they come from the Holy Spirit. We become partakers of the blessings that come to us in Christ when we become connected to Christ through the Holy Spirit. Thus, the apostle writes in 2:18 that "through him [Jesus Christ] we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father." The Spirit is the link between the righteousness of the Son that brings us into the presence of the Father.

There are some who think that the difference between the OT and NT is that in the OT the Spirit operated upon people, but in the NT the Spirit operates within people. Some take this from our Lord's saying in John 14:17, "the Spirit of truth . . . dwelleth with you, and shall be in you." Certainly, our Lord was pointing to the Day of Pentecost and all that would follow. There is a difference between the ministry of the Spirit in the OT and the ministry of the Spirit in NT. But the difference was not that the Spirit did not change people from within in the OT whereas he does that now. People needed to be born again in the OT era just as much as they need new birth now (cf. John 3:3-8). The difference is that, before Pentecost, the Spirit was not yet given as the One who mediates the presence of the risen Christ.

This is the point of our Lord's promises throughout John 14-16, when he prepared his disciples for his departure. Knowing their apprehension and fears, he comforts them with the promise that he is not really leaving them: he will return through the Spirit. "And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter [Paraclete], that he may abide with you for ever; even the Spirit of truth. . . . I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you" (14:16-18). "But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said

unto you" (14:26). "But when the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father, he shall testify of me" (15:26). "Nevertheless, I tell you the truth; It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you" (16:7). "When he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will shew you things to come. He shall glorify me: for he shall receive of mine, and shall shew it unto you. All things that the Father hath are mine: therefore I said, that he shall take of mine, and shall shew it unto you" (16:13-15). The profound implication of these promises is that the ministry of the Holy Spirit consists primarily in representing Christ in his physical absence and in continuing his ministry on earth. We thus can have no connection to Christ apart from the work of the Holy Spirit in us.

It is thus that Paul prays in Ephesians 3:16-17, "That he [the Father] would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man; that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith." There is a definite connection here between being strengthened by the Spirit in the inner man and having Christ dwell in our hearts by faith. In fact, some commentators on these verses see these as complimentary aspects of the same reality.

We also see this in the unity that the apostle speaks of in Ephesians 4. In verse 3, he describes the unity of the church as "the unity of the Spirit" and goes on to say that "there is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling" (4:4). The body that is given unity through the Spirit is the "body of Christ" (4:12). The apostle explains why this is true in 1 Cor. 12:12-13, when he writes, "For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ. For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit." We come to be partakers of the body of Christ and, therefore, of the salvation that

comes through him when we are baptized into this body by the Spirit. The work of the Spirit is the point of entry into the salvation enjoyed by all who belong to Christ.

This being baptized into Christ is another way of talking about the new birth that our Lord spoke of to Nicodemus. It is a sovereign work of the Holy Spirit and it is a necessary work of the Holy Spirit. You cannot experience or enter the kingdom of God apart from it. It is by him that we are washed and regenerated: we are saved “not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Ghost, which he shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior; that being justified by his grace we should be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life” (Tit. 3:5-7).

This language of washing is not a reference to baptism per se, although in baptism it is symbolized. Rather, it is a reference to the promise in Ezekiel 36: “Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you. A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments and do them” (36:25-27). All these verses imply that we are absolutely in no condition to save ourselves. We are dirty and filthy because of our sin, our rebellion against God. We cannot enter his kingdom or come into his presence. There is nothing you can do to yourself or for yourself that will fit you to come into God’s presence. Indeed, such is our wickedness that we will never even want to enter God’s kingdom or submit to his rule. We do not desire to come to Christ that we might have life (Jn. 5:40). We need God to change us. In particular, we need the Spirit of Christ to come and give us spiritual life and to cleanse us from our sin and to write God’s law upon our hearts.

However, we should not think that the ministry of the Holy Spirit is complete when we are born again. There is an ongoing ministry of

the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers. This is indicated in our text, and also in Ephesians 1:13-14, where the apostle describes the work of the Spirit in terms of a “seal” and an “earnest.” The first word points to assurance of our salvation that the Holy Spirit gives to us (cf. Rom. 8:14-16), and the second points to the present experience of our future salvation, the foretaste of the hope of glory. We are not only dependent upon the Holy Spirit for the initial reception of salvation; we are also dependent upon the Holy Spirit for working out our salvation day by day. We need the Spirit to produce in us the daily fruit of love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, and temperance (Gal. 5:22-23).

You see this illustrated most clearly in the book of Acts. On the day of Pentecost, we read that the apostles “were filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance” (Acts 2:4). It was the Holy Spirit who enabled the apostles to speak in the languages of their hearers of “the wonderful works of God” (Acts 2:11). Later, when the church faced persecution, after praying for help to preach without fear, we are told that God answered their prayer: “And when they had prayed, the place was shaken where they were assembled together; and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and they spake the word of God with boldness” (Acts 4:31). We are told that Stephen was filled with the Holy Spirit, which is clearly meant to help us understand the unusual power that he was given in speaking the word with power and in working miracles (Acts 6:5,8). This should not surprise us, because this was also true of our Lord during his earthly ministry: “And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit into Galilee: and there went out a fame of him through all the region round about. And he taught in their synagogues, being glorified of all” (Luke 4:14-15).

One thing you notice about these passages is the connection between being filled with the Spirit and speaking God’s truth with authority and power. It is no wonder that Paul will go on to exhort believers to “be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit; speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing

and making melody in your hearts to the Lord; giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Eph. 5:18-20). Speaking in song and thanksgiving is a fruit of the Holy Spirit.

That brings us directly to our text. Most commentators on this verse connect it with the previous one. Thus, the apostle is saying that a principal way we grieve the Holy Spirit is when we use corrupt and unedifying language. The Holy Spirit influences us to speak what is right, and healthy, and edifying. So when we intentionally speak that which is wicked and unhelpful, we grieve the Spirit. Note the word “and” connecting verses 29 and 30.

We are now in a position to understand the seriousness of this exhortation. “Grieve not the Holy Spirit of God.” We are totally dependent upon the Holy Spirit for every blessing of our salvation. We are dependent upon him for entrance into the kingdom of God and we are dependent upon him for living a kingdom life in this world. To grieve him, therefore, is to cut ourselves off from his blessed influence and power.

I am not saying that a genuine believer can lose his or her salvation. Paul is addressing true believers here who are “sealed unto the day of redemption.” Whatever else that might mean, being sealed certainly seems to convey the idea that the salvation of the believer is sure. Nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 8:38-39). Our Lord himself said that “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: and I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my Father’s hand. My Father, which gave them to me, is greater than all: no man is able to pluck them out of my Father’s hand” (Jn. 10:27-29).

This does not negate the reality that unsaved people can be influenced by the Spirit to some extent and yet remain unregenerate. This is the kind of person described in Hebrews 6:4-6. Such people can reject and resist the Spirit of God (cf. Acts 7:51). And it is a very fearful thing to do despite to the Spirit of grace (Heb. 10:29).

However, the apostle is not addressing the unsaved in Eph. 4:30. The assumption here is that they are saved, sealed unto the day of redemption. If we cannot fatally lose the influence of the Spirit, what is meant here?

It means, first of all, that we are in danger of losing the sense of the assurance of our salvation. I am talking about that inward sense and awareness of the love of God toward us as his children. It is what the apostle is talking about in Romans 8:14-18. He writes, "For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God. For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear: but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father. The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: and if children, then heirs; heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be glorified together."

Note the connection in this passage between obedience (ver. 14) and the experiential enjoyment of belonging to the family of God (ver. 16). The Spirit bears witness to [better, "with"] our spirit that we are God's children when we are being led by the Spirit to put to death the deeds of the body (cf. ver. 13). This is an amazing blessing. Being able to come before God and cry out to him, "Abba, Father!" with assurance that he hears us as a father hears his child is the crowning privilege of our salvation.

Commenting on these verses, theologian Sinclair Ferguson explains, "The fact is that the Christian's own spirit does display an awareness of sonship . . . amazing though this is. The problem is that this awareness is often weakened, and God's children may even find themselves doubting their gracious status and privileges. What Paul is saying, however, is that even in the darkest hour there is a co-operative and affirmative testimony given by the Spirit. It is found in the very fact that, although he may be broken and bruised, tossed about with fears and doubts, the child of God nevertheless cries out, 'Father!' as instinctively as a child who has fallen and been hurt calls out in similar language, 'Daddy, help me!' Assurance of sonship is not reserved for the highly sanctified Chris-

tian; it is the birthright of even the weakest and most oppressed believer. This is its glory.”¹ We should rejoice with Ferguson that this assurance can never be totally taken away, but we need also to be aware, as he admits, that this assurance can be weakened. One of the ways this is often weakened is through sin.

I think this is why, after saying, “And grieve not the Holy Spirit of God,” the apostle goes on to say, “whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption.” Can we be unsealed? No. But our inward sense of this sealing can be strong or weak. When we sin, when we refuse to walk in the path of obedience, we lose this sense of closeness to God as Father. We sense instead his displeasure. It is an awful place to be, but thank God it is this way, for this is often precisely the way we are brought back to obedience and joy. The true child of God cannot do without the sense of her father’s smile. We would rather give up our sins than lose the sense of his pleasure.

The apostle is saying, “Don’t go there in the first place. Don’t grieve the Spirit through sin. Don’t grieve him by wicked and worthless speech. Be holy. Speak holy and helpful words. In doing so, you will not lose that sense of belonging to the family of God and will continue to be able to rejoice in your salvation.”

This has been the testimony of the people of God in every age. If you belong to God, if you are truly one of his, then you cannot sin with impunity. You cannot live in sin and be happy about it. It is a mark of the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart. King David describes his own experience in this way: “When I kept silence, my bones waxed old through my roaring all the day long. For day and night thy hand was heavy upon me: my moisture is turned into the drought of summer. I acknowledged my sin unto thee, and mine iniquity have I not hid. I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the LORD: and thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin” (Ps. 32:3-5). As long as David had unconfessed and unrepented sin in his life, he was miserable; he could not get comfortable. Have you been like that? Then when he got honest with God,

¹Sinclair Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit*, (IVP, 1996), p. 184-185.

things changed. He then experienced the blessedness of forgiveness and justification (32:1-2). Even so it is with every child of God.

There is another reason implied in this verse for why we should not grieve the Holy Spirit. I take it from the connection between verse 29 and 30. As we have seen, the ministry of the Holy Spirit is especially connected to the ministry of the word in the NT. If you use wicked words, you are undermining this aspect of the ministry of the Spirit in your life.

This is important because we not only have this great privilege of knowing Christ but also of making him known. However, the gospel is only powerful in a saving way when it is accompanied by the witness and power of the Holy Spirit. Our witness is not effective because we are eloquent or brilliant in our gospel presentation. It can only be effective when we are presenting in the power of the Spirit, when he takes our broken words and takes them like arrows shot at a venture and causes them to pierce the heart. This is how Paul himself explained the effectiveness of his ministry among the Corinthians: "And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power: that your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men but in the power of God" (1 Cor. 2:4-5). In fact, Paul studiously avoided the rhetorical flourishes of popular speakers, afraid lest people would be attracted to a preacher rather than to the Lord.

I sometimes think we do not adequately appreciate just how helpless we are in terms of our witness. There is so much emphasis in our day upon techniques in evangelism that it gives the impression that, if we just do it "right", we will win souls. This is not the impression you get when reading the NT. Yes, we need to speak the word faithfully and humbly and meekly, but in the end we are absolutely dependent upon the Holy Spirit to make our words convincing and powerful to those we speak to. The power resides not in us as the speaker but in God, the author of the gospel.

This is true in every other aspect of our lives as followers of Christ. We are completely dependent upon the power of the Spirit to strengthen us in the paths of obedience. To grieve him is to undermine our ability to grow in grace. It is to undermine the path to joy and peace and assurance and fruitfulness in the kingdom. We are like a man shooting at his own kneecaps. It is spiritual idiocy. Why would you do that?

Finally, this verse confronts us with the reality that the most important thing to a true Christian is to please God. “Grieve not the Holy Spirit of God.” That ought to be the greatest motivation to obedience right there. Don’t sin. Why? Because it grieves God. It grieves the Holy Spirit. Why would you grieve One who has done so much for you and in you? Why would you grieve him who unites you to Jesus Christ and makes you a partaker of all saving blessings? The godly man or woman is one who lives before God, and who lives for Him before anyone else. When faced with pleasing human authority or God, Peter responded, “We ought to obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). The Christian man is the man who lives before an audience of One. He studies to show himself approved unto God (2 Tim. 2:15); he cares little for the approval of men.

Does this describe you? Are you a man or woman who lives before God? Is your religion something you are doing because of what other people think of you, or can it only be explained because of who God is to you and what he has done in you? Are you a person to whom this exhortation means something? Does it move you to obedience and holiness when you hear the apostle say, “And grieve not the Holy Spirit of God”? If not, then you need to examine yourself. Above all things, we need to be men and women who can stand before God, for we shall all do this in the end. You cannot escape it, either.

Therefore, we need Jesus Christ because it is only through him that we have access to the Father, through the Spirit. It is only through the blood of Christ that we will ever be able to stand before God without fear and shame. You cannot live before God and for God as long as you are condemned by him. We need the guilt of our sins to be removed. We

need to be released from the grip of sins. We need the redemption from sins that comes through the death of Christ upon the cross. Thank God that the promise is ours that all who come to him and believe on him, trust in him and turn from their sins will be forgiven and receive eternal life in the presence of the Father forever.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

LIVING OUT THE GRACE OF CHRIST (EPH. 4:31-32)

IF YOU ARE A NEW TESTAMENT CHRISTIAN, you believe that you are saved by grace and not by works (Eph. 2:8-9). You believe that you are justified before God not on the basis of merit but solely on the basis of what Christ has done for you (Rom. 4:5). We must believe this, for Scripture teaches us that we have no ground of boasting before God. There is nothing that we can point to in ourselves or that we have done that made us worthy of God's good and saving favor. Moreover, if we are honest with ourselves, we have to confess that this is true. We know that we are sinners and worthy of God's eternal judgment. We know that left to ourselves we would have never come to God. The only way we can have any assurance that we are saved is if the ground of our salvation lies outside of ourselves. If salvation were based on what we are or do, we could never be sure that we were pure enough or had done enough. We would forever be suspended in painful doubt, wondering if death would bring us before God's blessing or God's judgment. The grace of God is the foundation of all the joy we have in our religion.

The grace of God is certainly central to Paul's epistle to the Ephesians. In this letter, we are told that the praise of the glory of God's grace is the very reason we are saved (1:6). He tells us that redemption from sin flows from the riches of God's grace to us (1:7). Twice he tells us that we are saved by grace (2:5, 8) and that in eternity God looks forward to lavishing upon his people the boundless riches of his grace (2:7). The apostle owes his ministry to the grace of God (3:7-8). God's grace furthermore equips all the saints with spiritual gifts for the building up of the body of Christ (4:7). God's grace saves us and equips us for ministry.

Grace is unmerited favor. It is glory bestowed upon the shameful, riches given to helpless debtors, strength and power given to spiritual corpses.

Now when Paul exhorts us to behave in the manner depicted in verse 32, the reason he gives is: "even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you." Now this verb "hath forgiven" is the verb *charizomai*, which is clearly related to the word *charis*, the NT word for "grace." The same word is used in Rom. 8:32, where it is translated freely give: "He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?" The basic meaning of the verb is to be gracious to, to show grace to someone. Certainly, this idea includes showing forgiveness, but this is an idea that is included in the larger concept of showing grace. So yes, Paul is telling us to forgive others as God has forgiven us, but this is an implication of the exhortation to show grace to others as God has shown grace to us. Being gracious is set in verse 32 in contrast to all the ugly and wicked attitudes and actions of verse 31. We are to be gracious people because God has been gracious to us. It is the obvious application in a book which is so centered around the grace of God.

The implication of the apostle's teaching here is that those who have experienced the grace of God and who have embraced the gospel of the grace of God ought to be gracious people. By nature, we are all like people with the attitudes depicted in verse 31, bitter and wrathful and angry and loud and abusive. Then the grace of God comes and

changes us. We become or start becoming people who are kind and tenderhearted and gracious and forgiving.

And yet, we are not yet perfect, and we need to be reminded of these things. It is so easy to slide back into these things. We also need to be reminded of how clear a break with such sins we need to make. It is not only easy to slide back into sins, it is also easy to give ourselves excuses with respect to such attitudes and dispositions and behaviors. We need to be told again to “put away” such things. We are not to trifle with our sins. We should radically separate ourselves from them. How radical does such a break need to be? I think this can be illustrated by the word the apostle uses. It is the same word used in Mt. 24:39, where our Lord is describing the extent of the destruction of Noah’s flood: “And [they] knew not until the flood came, and took them all away; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be.” The verb “took . . . away” is the same verb Paul uses, “put away.” As one commentator on Eph. 4:31 put it, “As a flood swept away the inhabitants of the earth . . . so should all these negative characteristics be swept away ‘from you’.”¹ The destruction of the flood was complete; even so, let our warfare against the sins and wicked dispositions of our hearts be total. Let there be no quarter taken and none given. Put away your sins!

You see this also in the word “all” at the beginning and at the end of verse 31. We are to put away everything associated with these sinful dispositions and acts. We are not to fight against these some of the time, but all of the time. We are not to fight with some of these things, but with all of them. We are not to attack these sins when it is convenient, but when it is not convenient. Put them all away.

Well then, what are we told to put away here? The controlling word in verse 31 is “malice.” The thing is, as we have seen, anger is not necessarily sinful. We are to be angry and sin not. Moreover, God’s wrath against sin is a holy wrath. The word “clamour” doesn’t necessarily always involve something sinful. It sometimes, in fact, describes a cry of joy, such as Elizabeth’s shout of joy when Mary the mother of our Lord came to

¹H. W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Baker, 2002), p. 637.

see her (Lk. 1:42). This is where the word “malice” comes in. This word is just a general word for wickedness and badness. By it the apostle is letting us know that all the things he is describing in verse 31 are bad things. Yes, there are occasions when it is right to be angry. But there is also such a thing as sinful anger and wrath. There is a time when loudness is a megaphone for our frustrations and impatience and at that moment it is wicked and sinful. We are to put all such things away.

First of all, the apostle tells us to put away “all bitterness.” In its most basic sense, this word conveyed the idea of something sharp, like arrows. It came to be applied to smells which were pungent, pains which were penetrating, and sounds which were piercing. With reference to a person’s temperament, it came to mean bitter and resentful.² John Stott, quoting Armitage Robinson, describes it as “an embittered and resentful spirit which refuses to be reconciled.”³

Sharpness is an apt description of a bitter person, because their words tend to be arrows which sink painfully into those against whom they are bitter. Paul, in his letter to the Romans, in describing man in sin, says that his “mouth is full of cursing and bitterness” (Rom. 3:14). We come across the phrase “the gall of bitterness” in Acts 8:23, which seems to refer to the fact that bitterness not only makes a person unpleasant but also bitterness becomes poison in their very heart and soul. In Hebrews 12:15 we are told to beware “lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled.”

There are people in and out of the church who have settled into an attitude of bitterness. They are sour and they make life sour for everyone who is around them.

Does this describe you? Are you resentful and bitter, for any reason? Do you refuse to be reconciled? Have you become one of these unpleasant people who, because they feel wronged, want to take it out on everyone around them? If so, you need to beware of justifying this and

²Ibid, p. 634.

³John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Ephesians* (IVP, 1979), p. 190. Robinson, in turn, was quoting Aristotle!

attitudes like it by saying, “Well, but that’s just who I am.” Very well, it may be so, but then it needs to stop immediately! Christ changes who you are. That’s what grace does. So put it away, all of it! You cannot be bitter and obedient at the same time. You must choose one or the other. Of course, if we are serious about our walk with Christ, the choice is obvious. We will put bitterness away.

I think I hear someone saying at this moment, “Well, this may be good advice for some people, but I can’t forgive and forget; I can’t help but be resentful, because of all the very bad things I have had to go through.” If that is your excuse, fine; but it means then that you are not a Christian. Christians are not bitter people; they are people who are able to put all things into the hands of their sovereign Lord, knowing he has forgiven all their sins and is committed to justice for all who have been sinned against.

The next terms we come across are “wrath and anger.” As we have already considered the problem of sinful anger in 4:26-27, we will only comment on this in passing. Let us remember that, though there is such a thing as righteous anger and wrath, it is much more likely that, when we are angry, we are doing so from a selfish point of view. In that instance, we have sinned. Remember that “charity suffereth long” (1 Cor. 13:4) and when we become prickly with anger and wrath, it is often because we are not longsuffering and, therefore, not loving.

Next, Paul mentions “clamour.” This word refers to those who, in anger, cry and scream and shout and in other ways loudly vent their frustrations upon all who are their unfortunate victims. In contrast, our Lord is described from an OT prophesy as one who “shall not strive, nor cry [the verb here is *kraugazo*; the noun Paul uses is *krauge*]; neither shall any man hear his voice in the streets” (Mt. 12:19). What is interesting is that right after this description, the prophesy goes on say, “A bruised reed shall he not break, and smoking flax shall he not quench, till he send forth judgment unto victory” (Mt. 12:20). In these two verses, there seems to be a connection between our Lord’s gentleness with hurting people (expressed in verse 20) and our Lord’s quietness (expressed

in verse 19). You see this also in Paul's exhortation to Timothy, in dealing with difficult people: "And the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient, in meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth" (2 Tim. 2:24-25). If you truly want to help people and if you truly care about them, you are not going to try to foist your will and way upon them by being louder than they are. We all know that you don't convince people by shouting them down; you may cause them to cower, but you will not change their hearts. If anything, you may cause them to double down and harden in their opposition.

Again, this clamoring is just an expression of a selfish and sinful attitude. It is an example of the malice which the apostle forbids. It is an expression of a lack of self-control and of a desire to play God with the people around me. We must repent of it.

Finally, Paul says that we should put away "evil speaking." The word here is the same word that is elsewhere rendered "blasphemy" (cf. Mt. 12:31). Other translations put this as "slander" (cf. ESV). Hoehner defines it as "profane or abusive speech."⁴ What began as bitterness becomes anger and wrath and is expressed through shouting and slander. It is part of the "corrupt communication" that the apostle forbids in verse 29, and which grieves the Holy Spirit (ver. 30). There are many ways to do this today, unfortunately. In our day, social media has become a hotbed for this kind of "evil speaking." It is easier to type abuses on a computer screen as an anonymous person than it is to confront someone to their face. Facebook and Twitter and a thousand other places on the internet have bred this kind of sinful speech. As Christians we must repent of it. Nor must we justify abusive language by arguing that we are just "speaking against sin." Yes, we must do that, but we must do so in a way that expresses a concern for the souls of men, and not just to score a victory for our side of the argument.

⁴p. 636

That is what we must put away. As we have seen, sanctification is not just putting away (4:22) but also putting on (4:24). We don't just die to sin but live to righteousness. We don't just empty the house but fill it with good things. So the apostle goes on to address the situation positively in verse 32: "And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you." As we have already noted, the verb translated "to forgive" is probably better rendered as "to be gracious to" which of course includes the idea of forgiveness. We are to be gracious to others as God has been gracious to us for Christ's sake.

How are we to show grace? The apostle begins by saying that we are to "be . . . kind." Stott notes that the "word is *chrestos*, and because of the obvious assonance with the name of Christ (*Christos*), Christians from the beginning saw its peculiar appropriateness."⁵ To be kind is to be like Christ, who like his Father, is kind even to unthankful and unholy (cf. Lk. 6:35). The basic meaning of the word is to be good and to do good to others. The Christian is not a great person but a good person.

Someone who is bitter and angry and loud and abusive is a person who is turned in upon themselves. As a result, their words and attitudes are poisonous and hurtful to others. In contrast, a Christian looks outside of themselves to others. They overflow in grace to show kindness to others. They are aware of the needs of those around them and they move to meet those needs as they are able.

The next word is one I think we ought all to think about with the aim of becoming more like this: we are to be "tenderhearted." I think this is a marvelous word. This describes people who are sensitive to the needs of others. That is the "tender" part of the word. They are not only sensitive to the needs of others, but also their heart is moved toward the need rather than away from the need. That is the "hearted" part of the word. Of course, we are talking about compassion here.

⁵Stott, p. 190.

We need Christians who are tenderhearted, compassionate people. They are like our Lord, who when he saw the people around him “scattered abroad, as sheep having no shepherd” was “moved with compassion on them, because they fainted” (Mt. 9:36). There are some people who are only aware of their own need. Their world extends no further than their own frustrations. As we become more and more like Christ, we become less and less concerned about our own needs and more and more concerned with the needs of others. Not just because it’s the right thing to do, but because we can’t not help those who are in need. We are moved by the hurt of others.

This is, of course, in contrast to those who are hardhearted. They are not moved by the pain others are experiencing. As long as they are comfortable, that is the most important thing to them.

This is an essential component to any healthy relationship. Do we want to have unity in the church? We need to be tenderhearted toward one another. Do we want to have healthy marriages? Then we need to have husbands and wives who are tenderhearted toward each other. I have seen marriages on the rocks precisely because either the husband or the wife was hardhearted instead of tenderhearted toward the needs of their spouse. So many problems would disappear if we would stop obsessing over our own “concerns” and start being moved by the needs and hurts of others. We need tenderhearted Christians.

Such people are gracious, forgiving people. They forgive, as Christ has forgiven them. How has Christ forgiven you? He has forgiven you graciously and completely and forever. There is no condemnation to those who are in Christ (Rom. 8:1). We did not earn his favor, but moved with love he conquered our rebellious and hateful hearts (cf. Tit. 3:3-9). Though I agree that we are to hold people accountable for their sins in order to help them repent, that does not mean that we are allowed to have a bitter, unforgiving spirit toward them. We are immediately and graciously to forgive all who have sinned against us. We are to forgive completely and forever. There is no way you can justify holding a grudge against someone if you take verse 32 seriously and apply it honestly. We

are to show grace as Christ has shown grace to us, and grace is by its very nature unconditional.

How can a Christian do this? We can do this for two reasons. First of all, we have received the grace of God and God's grace changes a person. Yes, by nature we are foolish and disobedient and deceived, serving lusts and sinful pleasure and living in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another (Tit. 3:3), but God does not leave us in that condition. Grace doesn't just change our status, it changes our nature, makes us new creatures in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17). Grace severs the root of sin in our hearts and lives.

If you feel still in the grip of these sins, it could be for several reasons. One reason could be that you are not claiming the truth that in Christ you are dead to sin. The apostle exhorts you then to "reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord. Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof, neither yield ye your members as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin; but yield yourselves unto God, as those that are alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness unto God. For sins shall not have dominion over you, for ye are not under the law, but under grace" (Rom. 6:11-14). Note the fact that being under grace is not an argument that it's okay to continue in sin but an argument to kill sin.

On other hand, it could be that you are actually in the grip of sins. If this is the case, you need to be saved. You need the grace of God to change your heart and save you from your spiritual deadness. You need to cry out to God to show mercy upon you through Christ.

How can a Christian do this? Not only because God's grace makes it possible, but because God's grace also makes it plausible and desirable. We can be kind because Christ has been kind and good to us. God's goodness so fills up the heart of the Christian that it cannot help but overflow in kindness to others. Moreover, the Christian can be tender-hearted to others because he or she sees how God was moved with compassion towards him/her in their spiritual need. They look at the humili-

ation of Christ for them, the incarnation and the cross, and then at their own unworthiness and wonder how God would have ever been moved to save them. There was never anything in us. And yet, Christ gave up his glory in order to enter in upon our miserable existence to save us. How can we believe that and not have compassion for the lost? How can we believe the gospel and not show grace and extend forgiveness to others?

Grace causes us to die to ourselves and to live for others, as Christ died for us so that we might live in him. As the hymn puts it:

*What grace is mine that he who dwells in endless light
Called through the night to find my distant soul
And from his scars poured mercy that would plead for me
That I might live and in his name be known.*

*So I will go wherever he is calling me
I lose my life to find my life in him
I give my all to gain the hope that never dies
I bow my heart, take up my cross, and follow him.⁶*

⁶By Kristyn Getty

Part 5:
Walking in the Spirit
(Ephesians 5)

CHAPTER XXXIX

WALKING AS CHILDREN OF GOD (EPH. 5:1-7)

THERE IS NO GREATER PRIVILEGE than to be called a son or daughter of God. I do not think we truly appreciate the magnitude of this blessing because we don't really grasp the reality of it. It is what caused John the apostle to exclaim, "Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God!" (1 Jn. 3:1). It is what caused Charles Wesley, upon his conversion, to write:

*Where shall my wondering soul begin?
How shall I all to heaven aspire?
A slave redeemed from death and sin,
a brand plucked from eternal fire,
How shall I equal triumphs raise,
Or sing my great Deliverer's praise?
O how shall I the goodness tell,
Father, which thou to me hast showed?
That I, a child of wrath and hell,
I should be called a child of God,
Should know, should feel my sins forgiven,*

Blest with this antepast of heaven!

This is how the apostle opens this chapter. He reminds his readers that they are children of God. He has not explicitly called them children of God up to this point, but he has repeatedly implied it with his references to their inheritance (Eph. 1:11, 14, 18) and to the fact that they are members of the household of God (Eph. 2:19). He is very clear here, not only that they are children, but also that their status as children of God is something that they should highly value. They are indescribably blessed. You see this in the phrase “as dear children.” There are a couple of words Paul could have used here to describe their position as sons and daughters of God. The word he uses points to their closeness to the Father as well as to the fact that they are completely dependent upon him. Furthermore, he says that they are “beloved” or “dear” to the Father. This is the same word that God the Father used to describe the Son of God: “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased!” (Mt. 3:17). It was often used to describe an only child, upon whom the parents bestowed all their affection and care. Though we are in a family innumerable, what this word points to is that God’s love for us as his children is special, particular, abundant, and faithful. You are loved by God as if you were an only child. It is the same love that the Father has for the Son.

If that sounds blasphemous to you, then you need to know that this is something that our Lord himself affirmed in his high priestly prayer in John 17: “And the glory which thou gavest me I have given them; that they may be one, even as we are one: I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one; and that the world may know that thou hast sent me, and hast loved them, as thou hast loved me” (ver. 22-23). I cannot imagine anything better than that. There is no honor, no blessing, no pleasure, no comfort, no status, no achievement, no anything that is anywhere close to comparable to being embraced in the love of the Holy Trinity. To be loved with the love that God the Father has for God the Son is unimaginably great and wonderful.

This is the context in which the exhortations of the following verses follow. The apostle continues his description of the Christian walk. We are to walk in unity (4:1), in holiness (4:17), and now he reminds us that we are to walk in love (5:2). But this love is circumscribed by the Father's love for us (5:1) and the Son's love for us (5:2). We are in the family of God. As such, we are to show and walk in the love of God's family (5:1-2). This precludes certain behaviors that are inconsistent with belonging to the family of God, which the apostle mentions in verses 3-4. They are "not convenient" or not fitting or proper. There is the family name and the family honor to uphold. There is our Father's reputation to honor. Of course, there is the fact that these types of behaviors are just shameful. We are not to participate in them for these reasons.

The apostle does not stop there, however. We are not only to be motivated to holiness by God's love and God's honor, but also by God's judgment. This is the apostle's point in verses 5-6. I've often heard it said that the children of God are not to be moved to obedience by the fear of God's judgment. Those who say such things simply can't or won't come to grips with verses like Ephesians 5:5-6. Note verse 7: "Be not ye therefore partakers with them." The "therefore" points back to verses 5-6 as the reason the believer is not to participate in wickedness.

You will note that the apostle follows the same basic pattern in arguing for holy living as he did in the previous verses (4:25-32). There is the negative (what we are not to do), the positive (what we are to do), and the reason (why we are to do it). Generally the negative is followed by the positive; here in 5:1-6, he inverts the pattern: the positive (1-2) followed by the negative (3-4) followed by the reason (5-6). However, as we have already indicated, there is another way to look at this. In these verses, we see that the believer is to be motivated to holiness by the love of God (5:1-2), by the honor of God (5:3-4), and by the inheritance of God (5:5-6). We will follow this division in our argument in what follows.

Motivated by the Love of God (5:1-2)

We are to walk in love (2) because we are loved (1). We are to live out what we have received. As the psalmist put it, “I love the LORD, because he hath heard my voice and my supplication” (Ps. 116:1). The psalmist received the love of God, and in response he loves God back. Paul begins in verse 1 by saying, “Be ye, therefore, followers of God, as dear children.” The “therefore” probably points back to the previous verse (4:32), where the point is that we are to be gracious as God as been gracious to us. We are to be “followers of God.” The word “followers” can be translated “imitators” (cf. ESV). We are to mimic God in his grace and love.

The way that God’s love is most clearly demonstrated to us is in the cross of Christ. This event forms both the motivation to live lives of love as well as the example of it. We are to “walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us, and hath given himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling savor” (2). In a particular instance of this, the apostle will exhort husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself for it (5:25).

Now we need to be careful here. Some may argue from verses like this that Christ’s death on the cross was merely exemplary and not substitutive, because we cannot love others in that way. In other words, since I cannot substitute myself for someone else’s punishment and legally stand in their place, some may argue that it therefore follows that Christ did not do that for us since his death for us is held up for us to mimic as a pattern of love.

This is faulty reasoning. It does not logically follow that, because I cannot imitate Christ in every aspect of his sacrifice, therefore I cannot imitate him at all. For example, we are told in the Sermon on the Mount to love our enemies as God loves his enemies. To illustrate, our Lord tells us that God sends rain on the just and on the unjust. Now you and I cannot send rain at all, but that does not mean that we cannot follow that pattern that God sets in sending rain. I follow his pattern

by showing mercy and kindness upon even those who hate me. In the same way, none of us can be a sacrifice for sin as Christ was. He was a propitiation for sins. He took our sins that we might have righteousness (2 Cor. 5:21). God's righteousness is imputed to us on the basis of what Christ has done for us (Rom. 4). I cannot do that for anyone. I cannot pay your debt for sin; in fact, I cannot even pay my own! So none of us can mimic that aspect of Christ's death. And yet, that does not mean we cannot imitate him at all. His atonement for sin involved incredible sacrifice. What the apostle is saying, therefore, is that we should be willing to sacrifice for others as Christ has sacrificed for us.

Although the sacrifice of our Lord provides the example for us, it also provides the motivation for us as well, and this is where it is important to understand the full ramifications of our Lord's death. He did not just die as an example. In fact, if you think about it, that doesn't make much sense. If Christ's death on the cross is not a death for our sins, then it's hard to see how it is an example of love for others. In other words, seeing the sacrifice of Christ as an example of love, and as a motivator of love, only makes sense when we understand it in terms of a substitutionary sacrifice for sins. It is in this sense that we are to understand the words "hath given himself for us."

We are all sinners. What does that mean? It means that we have willingly and knowingly violated what we know God wants us to do. We have transgressed his laws. We are rebels and traitors. Of course we are good at justifying and making excuses for our sins. If we do that enough, we may even convince ourselves that we are okay and that all this talk about sin is just a way to manipulate us toward a certain response. That is a terrifying place to be, because unless God wakes you up the next time you are convinced of your sinfulness, you will be standing in front of your Judge and it will be too late. On the other hand, if you know you are a sinner, that is an incredible blessing, because now you understand that something needs to be done about your guilt.

What is to be done? If we truly understand our sinfulness, we will have come to grips with the fact that we cannot atone for our sins. My

righteousness now doesn't undo the wickedness of my past (or future). Moreover, God's majesty is infinite; my sins against him are worthy of an infinite punishment. Furthermore, since God is the God of our inward person, it follows that God doesn't just require external obedience but the obedience and affection of the heart. If we are honest with ourselves, we will have to admit that we have never loved God with all our hearts and souls and minds and that wickedness has had plenty of places to hide in the recesses of our hearts. For these reasons, it follows that we cannot fix the fundamental problem that sin has created: namely, that it has separated me from a holy God and has made me justly subject to his holy wrath and judgment. Unless this is taken care of, I will perish forever in hell and justly so.

If we realize this, then we will also realize that the only way I can be saved is if someone else takes my sin upon himself and bears its punishment. This is what happened on the cross. It is our only hope. We can be saved in no other way.

How can we receive the forgiveness of sins and the love of God instead of judgement upon our sins and the wrath of God? How can what was done on the cross be applied to me? Paul tells us that it comes by faith in Christ: "Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us . . . that the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ; that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith" (Gal. 3:13-14). Receiving this gift, we are also adopted into God's family: "But as many as received him [Jesus Christ], to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God" (Jn. 1:12-13).

Understanding this, knowing the magnitude of what Christ has done for us and the depths to which he had to go to obtain it, how can we not show love to others as Christ has shown such love to us? This is John's argument: "In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved

us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another” (1 Jn. 4:9-11).

Moreover, it shows us that love reveals itself by sacrifice. I cannot say that I love someone if I am not willing to sacrifice my very life for them. I just finished reading *The Band of Brothers* by Stephen Ambrose, and one of the things that impressed me while reading about Easy Company was the bond that was created among these men in combat; a bond that was created because these men were literally willing to die for each other and endure any hardship for their fellow soldiers. However, what Christ did for us was infinitely harder and the results infinitely greater than what was ever done on a battlefield. We should be willing to show this kind of love for each other. It is this kind of sacrificial love that pleases God: it is “a sweet-smelling savor” to him.

Motivated by the Honor of God (5:3-4)

In verses 3 and 4, Paul motivates us against the kinds of behaviors mentioned by arguing that it is not fitting and appropriate for saints: “let it not be once named among you, as becometh saints . . . which are not convenient [fitting].” These things are “out of place” for the believer (cf. ESV). The child of God is different from the world. We have not so learned Christ (4:20). We have put on the new man which is being recreated after the image of God in righteousness and true holiness (4:24). We are to be different, not just for the sake of being different, but because we are saints (ver. 3). Remember that a saint, or holy one, is someone who is devoted to God. Their lives now are no longer lived for themselves but for God. They, therefore, represent God to this world. Their lives are a reflection upon God. Thus, when we embrace wicked behaviors, it is not just that we are doing shameful things that ought not to be done, but that we are doing things that are not proper for people who are devoted to God. God’s honor is at stake here. We are children of God; what we do reflects upon our heavenly Father.

What behaviors does the apostle say we should avoid? He begins by saying, “But fornication, and all uncleanness, or covetousness, let it not be once named among you, as becometh saints” (ver. 3). All of these things have to do with extramarital sexual acts. “Fornication” is any sexual activity that is forbidden by God’s word, including sex before and outside marriage between one man and one woman. Sinning in this way leads to “uncleanness” and impurity. “Covetousness” probably refers to the greediness with which people who do not know Christ pursue fornication and impurity; it is a mark of the lost that they “being past feeling have given themselves over unto lasciviousness, to work all uncleanness with greediness” (4:19).

As a church, faithful to God’s word, we will be under intense pressure to relax the standards that the apostle upholds here. But if we cave into the world, we cannot be faithful to the Lord. We cannot be saints, set apart for God in this world. We may end up being congratulated by the world, but we will lose our witness and the approval of God which in the end is all that matters. Young people, you will be tempted in every conceivable way to give in to the pressure to conform to the sexual standards of the culture. You will be told that sex outside of marriage is good for you and if you don’t experiment with it you will never know what you are missing. You will be tempted to think that Biblical morality is a stifling straitjacket.

How do you combat these things? Well, remember God’s love to you in Christ. He is not withholding any good thing from you. How could he? He has given his Son for your eternal life and joy! It is a lie of the devil that sin will lead to your happiness. Then remember that God’s honor is at stake here. Every act of yours reflects upon God. You don’t belong to yourself; you belong to God. Your body is not your own; it has been bought by Christ; you are a temple of the Holy Spirit; you are a saint. As the apostle pleads with the Corinthian believers, do not take the temple of God and join it to a prostitute! (cf. 1 Cor. 6:15-20).

The apostle does not stop there. He goes on to say, “Neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor jesting, which are not convenient: but rather

giving of thanks” (ver. 4). All these words have to do with speaking and joking and making light of sin, especially (though not necessarily only) sexual sin. “Filthiness” is a general word for anything shameful and obscene. “Foolish talking” refers to empty and useless and senseless and idle talk. “Jesting” (“crude joking,” ESV) refers to wit in the service of sin. Together, these words present a picture of people whose talk reflects a heart uncentered on God and centered instead on themselves and upon indulging their sinful appetites. Paul warns the believers to avoid this kind of talk; it is not proper for members of God’s household.

Rather, our speech should be characterized by “giving of thanks.” Of course, we should understand the object of our thanks to be God: “giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Eph. 5:20). The juxtaposition of thanksgiving to idle and wicked talk almost seems out of place. But it makes sense: just as filthiness, foolish talking, and jesting point to a mind filled with itself, even so thanksgiving points to someone whose mind is centered on God. John Stott believes that the thanksgiving the apostle commends here, in light of the contrast with verses 3 and 4, is thanksgiving for God’s good gift of the romantic love (and its expression in sex) between a husband and wife. The believer sees it as it is, a gift from God and to be enjoyed in the place that God has ordained for it. He or she does not turn it into a matter for obscenity or course jokes, but a matter of thanksgiving to God. We do have to be careful that we don’t give the impression that sex itself is sinful; its misuse in immorality does not make it bad. As Christians, we celebrate it in its rightful place.

Motivated by the Inheritance of God (5:5-6)

The apostle does not stop there. He goes on to warn against a lackadaisical attitude toward sin. There have always been those who so emphasize the love of God that there is no place for the wrath of God. The church has always had to defend the doctrine of hell against those who

teach that all will be saved in the end. Such are “vain words” and to believe them is to be deceived (ver. 6). There have also been those who teach that a person can be saved and yet continue in sin. So universalism and antinomianism have been perennial dangers against which the church has had to fight. Paul warns against both in these verses.

He writes: “For this ye know, that no whoremonger, nor unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, hath any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God” (5:5). These are serious and terrifying words. They don’t mean that if you have an unclean thought you are condemned. They don’t mean if you mess up and have fallen into sexual sin you are certainly damned. What they do mean is if you live in these things, unrepentant, you will never inherit the kingdom of Christ and God. If these things characterize your patterns of behavior, if these are the things that make you happy, then you are lost. There are no exceptions. You are not an exception!

Now there are some who say that as long as you make a profession of faith in Christ, or have been baptized, then you will be saved no matter how you live. They will further say that to say different is to undermine the doctrine of grace. What they fail to understand is that, though good works do not contribute to our salvation in the sense of merit, yet they are the evidences of it, and that without good works there is no evidence that one has been saved. Grace in the heart produces good works. Yes, we are saved by faith apart from works (Eph. 2:8-9), but works always follow faith (Eph. 2:10). Beware of those who give the impression that holiness does not matter: “Let no man deceive you with vain words: for because of these things cometh the wrath upon the children of disobedience” (5:6). Universalism and Antinomianism (or Easy-Believism) are dangerous, deceptive words and are refuted right here by the apostle.

If you live in sins, if your life is running in a way that is contrary to the path laid out for you in the word of God, the Bible, you are under the wrath of God. If you do not repent you will perish. You may claim to be a child of God, but you cannot be a child of God and a child

of disobedience at the same time. This verse precludes that. It is just impossible. So don't deceive yourself or allow yourself to be deceived.

This should motivate us, not only because we don't want to be exposed to God's powerful and holy wrath, but also because we do not want to miss eternal participation in the kingdom of Christ and God. This is an inheritance that was purchased by the blood of Christ (1:14), so infinitely valuable. Paul talks about the "riches of the glory of the inheritance in the saints" (1:18); the apostle is stacking word on word in that verse as he struggles to convey the immensity of the blessing that is ours in the inheritance to which we are predestined (1:11). It is "an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you" (1 Pet. 1:4).

We are reminded in these verses of two realities which we would do well to have always before our minds. First, that though the wicked may prosper here in this life, there is an eternal end to their prosperity. Whereas the inheritance of the saints is incorruptible and undefiled and unfading, the riches of the wicked are corrupted, moth-eaten, cankered; their treasure is heaped for the last days (Jam. 5:1-5). Their good things not only have an end; they will be replaced by "miseries that shall come upon you" (Jam. 5:1). Second, that though the righteous may have it rotten in this life, there is an eternal beginning to their joy and prosperity. The joys of the righteous are mainly future: "blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted" (Mt. 5:4).

The pressures of this life upon our faith are fierce and powerful. They will try to get you to focus only on the present and forget about the future. Our text reorients us toward the future. Remember the inheritance of the saints. Remember the wrath of God.

So here is how we are to be motivated to obedience. Remember the love of God in Christ. Remember that you have been sanctified and that the honor of God is at stake. Remember the inheritance that will be given to the saints and the wrath of God that will come upon the wicked.

Believe God's word, both the promises and the warnings. Rest in his Son by faith. Follow him wherever he goes. Lay hold on eternal life.

CHAPTER XL

WALKING AS CHILDREN OF LIGHT (EPH. 5:8-14)

IN VERSE 8, WE COME ACROSS this little word “walk” again. The implications of the gospel upon one’s daily life are powerful and pervasive. We are to walk in unity (4:1-16), in holiness (4:16-32), in love (5:1-7), and now in light (5:8-14). Of course, there are overlaps between these categories, for you cannot walk in holiness without walking in love. Light is a Biblical metaphor for both holiness and joy. We are told that “God is light, and in him is no darkness at all” and that “if we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth: but if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin” (1 Jn. 1:5-7). We are also reminded that “light is sown for the righteous, and gladness for the upright in heart” (Ps. 97:11). So walking in light is walking in holiness and in the joy that springs from a life of godliness. They do go together: “For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost” (Rom. 14:17). If, as Christians, we are not happy, it could be that it is because we are not holy as we ought to be. True holiness ought not to produce gloomy and morose people, but people

who rejoice in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh (cf. Phil. 3:3).

The emphasis in the Ephesian passage, however, is more upon the aspect of holiness than it is upon the joy. Paul's emphasis in the second half of this epistle is that believers should live in accordance with the truths they profess in the gospel, and this means living a life separate from the world. After all, the purpose of God's electing purpose was that "we should be holy and without blame before him in love" (Eph. 1:4). In chapter 4, we have learned that we have been given a new nature for a new life, and are now growing up into conformity to Christ.

In some sense, the apostle is only repeating what he has already said. This is just a different way of saying it. Again, we are exhorted to live in holiness. You will notice that he has used different ideas to emphasize the necessity of holy living. He has used the imagery of the body of Christ (4:12-16), the metaphor of creation (4:24), and the picture of family (5:1). Now he uses the metaphor of light. The point is always the same, as he exhorts the saints to turn from sin and to walk in ways that are consistent with following Christ the King. It just goes to show that we need to hear these things over and over again, even as believers. We should beware of thinking that we have somehow "arrived." In my experience as a teacher, I have come to the conclusion that the worst student is that student who has familiarity with the topic being taught, but who never really mastered it in the past. The problem is that this familiarity breeds an attitude of indifference and a consequent lack of intentionality in trying to understand the concepts being taught. The result is almost always the same: failure. In the same way, we have to guard against an attitude of familiarity with respect to the need for holiness. We need to be reminded of it again and again.

It's interesting, though, how the apostle develops this idea through the imagery of light. He shows that there are essentially three movements in the life of the Christian, and he maps them out for us in these verses. The first movement is the passage from darkness to light, and the apostle deals with that in verses 8-10. The second movement

is when the believer begins to shine this light upon others, and the apostle deals with that in verses 11-13a. The third movement is when the light which the believer shines penetrates into the conscience and heart of the lost or wayward, and brings others into the light as well, and the apostle deals with that in verses 13b-14.¹ This, of course, leads to a cycle, so that those who are now enlightened go on to shine their light on others so that the circle of gospel influence grows wider and wider. So let us look together at these three movements, remembering all along that if we are believers this ought to be describing us.

First Movement: From Darkness to Light.

One of the mottos of the Protestant Reformation was the Latin phrase *Post Tenebras Lux* ("After darkness, light"). It underscored how the spiritual darkness that had enveloped the Middle Ages was giving way to the light of the gospel as it was being preached again in churches all over Europe. This could also be the motto of every Christian, for there was a time when we were in darkness. Then the Lord came and his light penetrated our hearts and we came into the light of the gospel: "For ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord: walk as children of light" (ver. 8).

I think it is interesting that the apostle does not say, "You were at one time in darkness." No, he says that "You were darkness"! Then he says that we changed from darkness into light. It was not that our environment changed. We changed. The problem is not that we are surrounded by darkness, though that is true. The problem is that the darkness was inside us; in fact, it defined us. We were the problem. People who talk about the inner light that dwells in each of us haven't really come to grips with the desperateness of our situation outside of Christ. If we are darkness, we cannot generate light. In fact, apart from the work of the Spirit upon our hearts, we are all like black holes that suck in light but never release it.

¹In the ESV, ver. 13b is actually the beginning of verse 14.

To the Colossians, the apostle reminds them that they ought to give thanks “unto the Father, which hath made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light: who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son” (Col. 1:12-13). We were darkness, and we were held in the grip of the power of darkness. Later in Ephesians, the apostle will talk about how we “wrestle not with flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places” (Eph. 6:12). This is consistent with the way Paul describes our condition as dead in sin: when we walked “according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience” (Eph. 2:2). In other words, our state of darkness was one of spiritual death, one in which we were under the power of the Devil. It is the state of many, many people all around us, and it was the state we were in prior to our conversion.

In that state, we walked “according to the course of this world.” Our walk, our habits, and the pattern of our daily behavior, was determined by the world in rebellion against God. We joined them in it, and willingly so.

The point I want to make with all this is that it is a mistake for us to blame our environment for our own transgressions, as is fashionable in these days. That doesn’t mean we aren’t influenced by our surroundings; the verses above settle that matter – we are influenced: by the world, the flesh, and the devil. But the reason why the surrounding darkness affects us so is because by nature we are already darkness. The darkness without finds a ready alliance with the darkness within.

Another point that needs to be made is that we need something outside of ourselves to save us. Darkness does not produce light. We are darkness, and if we want to become light, we have to be changed by a source of light outside ourselves. That source is the power and grace of God. This is why the apostle says, “but now are ye light in the Lord.” Not just that we shine our light for the Lord, but that he is the source

of the light in the first place. As our Lord himself put it, “I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life” (Jn. 8:12).

If Christ has changed us from darkness to light, if the Son of God has done a transformational work in your heart, then it is simply ridiculous to think that there will be no change. What? Shall the one who spoke the world into existence, who said, “Let there be light!” and there was light – shall he speak light into our souls only to leave us in darkness? Therefore, it is totally reasonable that the apostle should go on to say, “Walk as children of light.” Don’t walk as children of disobedience, but walk as children of light.

What does this mean? Paul elucidates in the next two verses. First, in verse 9, which though it is parenthetical, yet helps us to understand what it means to walk in light by giving some of its characteristics. Though the KJV reads, “the fruit of Spirit,” it is fairly universally agreed that it should read “the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true” (ESV). There is no material difference because the light here is itself a fruit of the work of the Spirit of God. Talking about the fruit of something is a way of describing its effects; the fruit of the light are the things it produces in the life of the believer. The apostle says that light produces goodness, and righteousness, and truth. The fruit of light is to make us good people, and righteous people, and people who speak the truth. If we don’t exhibit this fruit in our lives, then we need to re-examine ourselves.

Since verse 9 is parenthetical, verse 10 attaches grammatically directly to verse 8. In other words, the way we are to walk as children of light is by “proving what is acceptable to the Lord.” The point here is that the overriding concern for the followers of Christ is that they please him. Those who walk according to the course of this world lick their fingers to see which way the wind is blowing. They are more concerned about what most people think and what is popular – that is what guides their decisions and choices. Not so the Christian. For the Christian, the smile of Christ is more important than all the applause of the world.

The believer says of God, what Paul said, “Whose I am, and whom I serve” (Acts 27:23).

How do we do this? Verse 10 is very like what Paul says to the Romans: “And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God” (Rom. 12:2). That is, we do it by being transformed by the renewing of our mind, which means that our thinking becomes more and more Biblically informed and that our hearts and affections are more and more influenced and affected by its truth. We certainly don’t do it by checking in at the library of worldly thought.

This is necessary, for if as Christians we are going to influence our world, we have to be different from it. Salt only serves as a preserving and savoring influence in meat if it is chemically different from the meat it is in. Christian culture can only have transformative power as long as its culture is counter-culture, when we shine our lights amidst the surrounding darkness. “Be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world; holding forth the word of life” (Phil. 2:15-16). And that brings us to the second movement.

Second Movement: Shining the Light

The apostle goes on write, “And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them. For it is a shame even to speak of those things which are done of them in secret” (ver. 11-12). The Christian who is now light in the Lord cannot help but shine that light, and this is done negatively and positively. Negatively, in that Christ calls us to have no fellowship with the world. We are to live separate lives. To not have fellowship with the works of darkness means that we are not to participate in the kinds of talking and doing that characterizes those who are still in darkness. This doesn’t mean that we have to put walls around us and to have as little to do with the world as possible. That

would be to hide our lights. No, we are to be in the world but not of it. Note that the apostle does not say that a believer cannot befriend an unbeliever (our Lord did that all the time!). Rather, what he says is that we should have no fellowship with their works. Don't do what they do.

On the other hand, the believer is to rebuke the works of darkness. The word "rebuke" means to bring something to light or to expose it for what it is. That is what people who are light do; they expose the deeds of others for what they are. The deeds are shameful, but the world does all it can to turn shameful things into things which are celebrated. You see this in particular in our day with the various people in the abortion industry who call on women to celebrate their abortions. To kill a human being and then celebrate it! That is what sin does to people. "Woe unto them that call evil good, and good, evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!" (Isa. 5:20). We shine our light so that evil is shown up for what it is.

However, we should not see in this word "rebuke" a merely negative, censorious spirit. The purpose of this rebuke is to convince those who are involved in the shameful behavior that it is, in fact, shameful and wrong. To do that, we also need to make a positive case. That is, we not only seek to show wrong behavior for what it is, but also to offer a better alternative. That is what the Christian is supposed to do. It is what Paul exhorted Titus to do: "Holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able both to exhort and to convince [the same word as in Eph. 5:11] the gainsayers [those who oppose the gospel]" (Tit. 1:9).

Recently, Timothy Keller spoke at the British Parliamentary Prayer Breakfast. If you have not listened to his presentation, I would highly recommend it. In it, he quotes a historian of early Christianity who asks why so many people became Christians in the first few centuries when there was no cultural benefit to do so. He dismisses the offer of community inherent in the Christian church, for the simple reason that most people then already had community. He also dismisses the offer of miraculous healing – also for the reason that other religions offered

the same thing. What then made Christianity different? Simply put, it was the gospel. Every other religion proclaimed a works-based path to bliss in the afterlife. The appeal of Christianity was that it said that you don't gain the favor of God by things you do but you gain God's favor by what he has done for you on the cross, by dying for sins in our place as our substitute. That was the appeal of the gospel, and it is still the appeal of the gospel. In the end, it is really the only thing we have to offer: "But we preach Christ crucified . . . For I determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor. 1:23; 2:2). This is the truth that we need to convince people of.

One thing we need to remember is, though the world may turn shameful things into things to be celebrated, they still know in the end that what they are doing is wrong. In other words, we have their own conscience on our sides. What they do, they often do in "secret." Why? Why else, than because they know it is wrong?

Because of this, people will always want to cover up their sin. As our Lord put it, "And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved" (Jn. 3:19-20). They don't want to come to the light, so it is the necessary job of the church to shine the light everywhere it can. When we "reprove" others, whether in the church or outside it, we are shining this light. Thus the apostle goes on to say, "But all things that are reproved are made manifest by the light" (Eph. 5:13). Light makes things visible and discovers what the world wants to hide. That is what we do when by our lips and lives, our words and works, we shine the light of truth and the gospel in this world.

Again, the point of this is so that the light will chase away the darkness, that lost people and backslidden believers will come to the light. And that brings us to our final point.

Third Movement: The Light Penetrating the Darkness

Before we begin considering this final movement, there is a matter of translation that we need to deal with. In the KJV, the last part of verse 13 (first part of ver. 14 in ESV) goes, “for whatsoever doth make manifest is light.” Most modern translations have the verb “manifest” as passive rather than active. Thus, it could be translated “for whatsoever becomes manifest is light,” or, as the ESV puts it, “for anything that becomes visible is light.” Which is correct?

The problem is not that some manuscripts have a passive verb and others have an active. It turns out that there are some verbal forms in Greek which can be interpreted either as an active or a passive, and it turns out the particular form for the Greek verb behind “manifest” is one of those. Because of this, it is theoretically possible to translate this as an active verb, as in the KJV. However, when you look at the grammatical evidence in the NT overall, this is not very plausible or likely. Thus, I think the translation of the ESV is preferable: “anything that becomes visible is light.” But this being so, what is the apostle saying?

Remember that the apostle had previously said that in their conversion, the believers turned from being darkness to being light. Now, what he is saying is that when the light that shines out from the witness of believers under God penetrates the darkness of the lost, they too become light. As Charles Hodge puts it, Paul “does not say, ‘Reprove evil, for you are light;’ but, ‘Reprove evil; for evil, when reprov’d by light, is manifest, and, when manifest, it is light,’ that is, it is changed into light, or corrected.”² In other words, the apostle is encouraging the believers to shine their lights because it is in this way that God brings others to embrace the truth of the gospel and to be transformed by it truth.

This interpretation is confirmed by the following verse: “Wherefore he saith, Awake thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light.” Here the lost are described as being asleep in spiritual death. Then the light of Christ comes upon them and they are

²Charles Hodge, *Ephesians* (Banner of Truth; reprint, 1856), p. 215.

awakened from the sleep of death. As Charles Wesley wrote: “Long my imprisoned spirit lay, fast bound in sin and nature’s night/ Thine eye diffused a quickening ray/ I woke, the dungeon flamed with light/ My chains fell off, my heart set free/ I rose, went forth, and followed Thee!”

This is either a quotation from the OT,³ or a quotation from an ancient hymn. It doesn’t really matter which it is; however, I am of the opinion that this is a loose paraphrase of Isa. 60:1, which reads, “Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the LORD is risen upon thee.” In both verses, you have a call that goes out to those dead or asleep to rise and to receive the light, and a promise the Lord will shine his light upon them.

This should remind us that it is not in virtue of our own light that people are rescued from the darkness of sin and wickedness. This is because our light is a borrowed light; it is not our own. We are like the moon which receives its light from the sun; we, too, receive ours from the Son of God. His light must shine upon us if we would be saved. The light which we reflect will only penetrate the darkness when the Lord makes it powerful to that end. The power of the gospel does not come through our ability to convince people but to the Lord’s faithfulness to draw out his people through the word by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Have you been saved by the grace of Christ out of sin and into the favor and blessing of God? Have you been translated from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light? Then thank God, and walk as children of light! Walk in the truth, speak and share the truth in convincing, winning ways. And know that if you are a Christian, you are light. You are a beacon of hope in the midst of a dark world, no matter where you are, no matter how great or small your talents or opportunities. Can there be any greater calling?

On the other hand, if you feel the darkness closing around you and in you, there is hope for you. I do not offer you some program of self-improvement because neither you nor I can turn darkness into light. Only God has the power to speak light into the darkness. So I point

³In Eph. 4:8, the exact wording precedes a quotation from Psalm 68:18.

you to him. Do not look to or into yourself; look away from yourself to Christ who has the power to save. He has the power to save because he is the Son of God; because he became a man who could represent us before God; because he is the perfect sacrifice who gave up himself to death for us, not because he deserved death but because he chose to die the death we in fact deserved; because God has promised that all who believe in his Son will have the benefits of Christ atoning death for them.

What does it mean to believe on Christ so that we might live through him? It means that we trust in him and rest on him entirely for the hope of our acceptance with God. It means that we receive him completely as he is presented to us in the Bible, as the Son of God and Savior of the world, as our prophet to teach us, as our priest to atone for our sins, and as our king to rule over us for our good and his glory. It means to look to him, as God through the prophet put it, "Look unto me, and be ye saved: for I am God, and there is none else" (Isa. 45:22).

CHAPTER XLI

WALKING IN WISDOM, PART I (EPH. 5:15-18)

THE CHRISTIAN LIFE IS A “WALK.” In the beginning, the path of faith was known simply as “The Way” (Acts 9:2). You don’t just think about a Way – you walk it. Faith in Christ is not merely believing certain things like you might believe certain facts of history (though it is not less than that), but it is believing them in such a way that it affects the way you live, the choices you make, how you feel about things, and how you judge the value of things. We have noticed how the apostle has repeatedly exhorted the saints to walk in certain ways and we have used this as a sort of roadmap as we have explored the application part of this epistle (chapters 4-6). We are to walk in unity, holiness, love, and light. And now, the apostle exhorts us to “See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise” (5:15). Followers of Christ are to be characterized by wisdom in what they choose, in what they love, and in how they live from day to day.

We should be careful that we do not mistake the wisdom of which the apostle speaks for the “wisdom of the world” (cf. 1 Cor. 2:6). The world in rebellion against God will try to imitate every one of these things: unity, love, light, wisdom, and even holiness. It will offer you

an alternative version of these things and tell you that its version is the real thing. It looks at faith in Christ, not as wisdom, but as foolishness. As the apostle put it, “But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness” (1 Cor. 1:23).

I remember years ago reading *Masters of Deceit*, a book by J. Edgar Hoover, who was the head of the FBI. The book is about the Communist Party in the US in the 1950s. One of the things I remember to this day was the way he described the way the local party cells operated. According to Hoover’s description, it sounded a lot like a local church, and it occurred to me how even atheistic movements like Communism try so desperately to mimic the real thing. As people made in the image of God, we need community, whether we believe in him or not, and so the devil creates artificial substitutes. He does this with wisdom as well.

The world in which we live will tell you that wisdom means making the most of your finances and living in such a way that you can retire comfortably when you’re relatively young. Or it will tell you that wisdom means eating right and exercising so that you don’t die when you’re relatively young. Or it will tell you that wisdom is mastering some aspect of human experience, and to become a scientist and a scholar. Our culture worships wealth, physical fitness, and intelligence, and it equates wisdom with people who achieve some measure of success in these areas.

That’s not to say that wealth or physical fitness or intelligence are bad things. It’s not even wrong to pursue and improve upon these things at some level. But this is not how the Bible, which is God’s book, describes wisdom. As you were reminded last Lord’s Day, true wisdom is rooted in the fear of God. It’s interesting that this paragraph in Ephesians begins with an exhortation to walk in wisdom and ends with an exhortation to mutual submission “in the fear of God” (or, “in the fear of Christ,” which is perhaps the better reading). Knowing and fearing God is the first and most basic step to Biblical wisdom. The point of God’s word is that you can have all the wealth in the world, the fittest body, and the highest IQ, but if you do not have eternal life, if your sins

are not forgiven, if you are alienated from God, then at the end of the day none of those things are going to do you any ultimate or eternal good. On the other hand, the world, which doesn't give two cents for the age to come, thinks that it is totally absurd to spend all your time pursuing the things of God when you should be building your financial portfolio or building your body or building your CV.

The point is that you are going to have to decide which is most important. Either the Bible is right or it is wrong on what is of ultimate importance. If it is right, then it is absurd to seek first the kingdom of this world and its wealth, power, and prosperity. If it is right, then it is also absurd not to seek first the kingdom of God, and that means learning to walk in the way of Biblical wisdom. On the other hand, if you really think the Bible is untrue, then you are a fool to pursue Biblical wisdom. If you are convinced that it is true, then you are fool not to pursue Biblical wisdom.

How are we to figure out who is right and who is wrong? In our day, it is popular to appeal to the smart people and to scientific studies to back up one's claims. Clearly you cannot settle this matter by simply pointing to smart people who hold to a certain view; the problem with this is that there are plenty of really smart people who are on both sides of this issue. There are plenty of really smart agnostics and atheists, and there are plenty of really smart theists and Christian thinkers. Nor is it enough to get out the scales and weigh which side has a larger percentage of smart people on its side, for truth has never been decided by majority opinion.

How then can we decide for ourselves, or must we remain forever halting between two opinions? Though I am not against apologetics, and in fact very much for thinking through these things, yet the fact of the matter is that very few of us will ever be able to navigate all the arguments for and against. And yet, that doesn't mean we must remain forever in suspense. For if the Bible is in fact God's word, then it is its own witness. Theologians refer to this reality by saying that Scripture is self-authenticating. In other words, if God has spoken, then what

further proof would you need? Scripture claims to be God's word; the key to wrestling doubt down to the ground must, therefore, be found by seeking God in his word, which is given to us in the pages of Scripture.

What do I mean by this? I mean that you should seek God by reading the Bible. And if you truly are seeking him, you will find him there. Isn't that the point of Proverbs 2:1-6? Note that I am not talking about what Mormons encourage you to do, when they tell you to listen to that "still small voice." That is looking inside yourself; worse, it exposes you to mistaking God's voice with your own feelings, which may or may not be as influenced by undigested pizza as by anything else. Rather, the advice I am giving is to look out of yourself by looking in God's word given to us in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.

Let me illustrate what I am trying to say by looking at the way John Newton, the author of "Amazing Grace," was converted. Before his conversion to Christ, Newton was a confirmed infidel in the truest sense of the word. How did he move from unbelief to belief? He tells us: "One of the first helps I received (in consequence of a determination to examine the New Testament more carefully) was from Luke 11:13.¹ I had been sensible, that to profess faith in Jesus Christ, when, in reality, I did not believe his history, was no better than a mockery of the heart-searching God; but here I found a Spirit spoken of, which was to be communicated to those who ask it. Upon this I reasoned thus: If this book be true, the promise in this passage must be true likewise: I have need of that very Spirit by which the whole was written, in order to understand it aright. He has engaged here to give that Spirit to those who ask: I must therefore pray for it, and if it be of God, he will make good his own word."² In other words, Newton found a promise in God's word and tested it and found it to be true. He sincerely sought God in his word and he heard his voice. He found that the truths of the

¹"If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children; how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?"

²The Works of John Newton, Vol. 1 (Banner of Truth, 2015, reprint), p. xlvii-xlviii.

Bible were exactly fitted to the needs of his soul and was led more and more to rest in its truths.

That doesn't mean that reading the Bible mechanically imparts light to all who read it. A blind man can look at the sun all day long and never see anything. A spiritually blind man can look at the Scriptures and even write a commentary on it and yet see nothing impressive in it. The problem with fallen men and women is not a want of information as much as it is a want of a heart to seek and love God. If your heart remains in opposition to God, reading the Bible will probably not change that. You will remain blind to its truths and deaf to its Author. But if you truly seek God, if you are at the end of yourself and if you understand your need of him and feel the burden of the weight of your sins, then don't be surprised to find God speaking to you in his word. As our Lord put it, "If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether it be of myself" (Jn. 7:17). In other words, there is a moral dimension to wisdom; if your heart and will are strangers to the ethical demands of Scripture, you will never hear God's voice in its pages. This is what our Lord was referring to when he told Nicodemus that he must be born again before he could see the kingdom of God (Jn. 3:3); so it is with us.

It may seem to some that I am advocating blind faith here. But I am not. I am not saying that you should believe God's word before you have reason to do so. What I am saying is that, if your heart is not hardened in rebellion against God, then you will find the reason to believe God's word in itself. This reason is better than all the arguments for or against Divine truth, for this reason is rooted in the personal confrontation of the soul with God in his word and thus transcends, in a sense, all the debates about the trustworthiness of the Bible.

The reason I've insisted upon the self-authentication of God's word is that we have to be convinced that Biblical wisdom is in fact wisdom or else we will wilt when confronted by its substitutes. You simply cannot pursue the path of Biblical wisdom without finding some opposition from the world. You are not going to keep rowing against the current

unless you are convinced that you have to. I want you to be convinced of the reality that the path of wisdom laid out in the Bible is infinitely superior to what the culture offers you. It may be a narrow and hard path but it is much, much better than the wide road that leads to destruction.

I am going to proceed on the supposition that the Biblical path of wisdom is as far superior to the world's wisdom as light is to darkness or as silver is to sludge. It is so superior that the apostle calls the wisdom of the world folly. To adhere to it over God's word is to be a fool. That being the case, we come to the apostle's exhortation in verse 15: "See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise." The word "circumspectly" is an old word that means "carefully," and the apostle is saying that we should take care and pains how we live in this world. Or, as Charles Hodge puts it, it means that we are "to walk strictly by rule, so as not to deviate by a hair's breadth."³ The fact that we are to do this with such care points to the value of wisdom over folly. It also points to the fact that wisdom doesn't just happen; you have to search for it like you search for gold and silver and hidden treasure. A wise man doesn't just wake up with wisdom. Wisdom is accumulated through many pains that are taken to get it.

So what does walking in wisdom look like? What must we do to grow in wisdom? In the passage that we are looking at, we see that there are three things that people must do to get wisdom, and three things that people do who have wisdom. Or, to put it another way, we have three prerequisites for wisdom and three effects of wisdom. The three prerequisites for wisdom are redeeming the time, understanding the will of the Lord, and being filled with the Spirit. And the three effects of wisdom (or, being filled with the Spirit) are singing, giving thanks, and submitting to one another. We will deal with the first three today and save the second three for another Sunday.

³Charles Hodge, *Ephesians* (Banner of Truth, 1991, reprint of 1856 ed.), p. 218.

Three prerequisites for wisdom (ver. 16-18)

Redeem the time

If you do not want to be a fool (and, remember, from a Biblical point of view, a fool is not just someone who does stupid things, but someone who does the most stupid of all things – that is, one who does not fear God or listen to his word), then there are some things that you must do. The first things the apostle mentions in verse 16, “Redeeming the time, because the days are evil.” We walk circumspectly as wise men and women when we redeem the time.

What does this mean? This is a literal translation, which essentially refers to taking full advantage of every opportunity⁴ (“making the best use of your time,” ESV). In other words, we are to use our time wisely by not letting it slip by without improving ourselves in godliness and faith. This goes back to what the apostle said about walking carefully. It is the opposite of someone who just thinks they can float through life without putting forth any effort. This is especially true when it comes to the life that God calls us to live. It is likened to a race (2 Tim. 4) and a warfare (2 Tim. 2) and a wrestling match (1 Cor. 9), and therefore calls for a life of constant self-discipline and perseverance and watchfulness. You simply will not make strides in godliness and wisdom if you are not constantly striving for it. Jonathan Edwards knew the importance of this principle when he wrote, “Resolved: Never to lose one moment of time, but to improve it in the most profitable way I possibly can.”⁵

The reason the apostle gives for this is in the phrase, “because the days are evil.” It is like sailors on a storm-stricken ship which has sprung many leaks so that the pumps have to be constantly manned to keep the ship afloat. Leave the pump and the ship sinks. Even so it is in this

⁴Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Baker, 2002), p. 692-693.

⁵The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Vol. 1 (Hendrickson, 1998, reprint of 1834 ed.), p. xviii.

life. We live in evil days, days which are often like storms against an old sailing ship that puts holes in the sails and sides, and sends wave after wave into the ship. Unless you man the pumps, the ship will sink. Unless you redeem every possible moment, you will be like a sailor that leaves the pump unattended because he is just too tired. Your life depends upon it! We need to see that. King David fell into grievous sin because he stayed home when he should have been in battle. Peter denied Christ because he let himself go to sleep instead of staying awake to pray. You and I will not grow in godliness and wisdom unless we redeem the time and use every moment as a way to strengthen our spiritual health.

How do we know how to use the best use of our time? We get some insight into this in verse 17: “Wherefore be ye not unwise, but understanding what the will of the Lord is.” This is the second thing we must do to get wisdom.

Understand what God’s will is

Wisdom comes from understanding what God’s will is. This is acquired, first and foremost, by understanding the overarching Biblical principles that God has given to govern our lives and then by applying those general principles to specific situations. To get there, it is important that we study the Bible so that it informs every part of our life. It is true that there are details in your life that are not specifically addressed in Scripture, but if you understand its general principles, you will have fewer problems understanding what the will of the Lord is in that situation. It’s important to understand that a cursory knowledge of God’s word will not do this for you. We have to be intimate with its teachings, so that, like Bunyan, our blood is “Bibline,” and when people poke us, we bleed Bible. It needs to permeate the way we think and feel about everything. There is simply no wisdom apart from the insight that we get from God’s word.

Just as there is an intimate association between understanding God’s will and the word of God, the same is true with the third thing that

must be true of us if we would get wisdom: being filled with the Holy Spirit. “And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess, but be filled with the Spirit.” There is a parallel passage to this in Paul’s epistle to the Colossians, where the apostle says, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord” (Col. 3:16). Here the effects which are attributed to being filled with the Spirit are attributed to letting the word of Christ dwell in us richly. You can’t dissociate the work of the Spirit from the word of the Spirit.

Be filled with the Spirit

What does being filled with the Spirit look like? Well, notice that in these verses, the apostle has been contrasting two types of people: don’t be fools but be wise (16); don’t be unwise but understand God’s will (17); here, don’t be drunk with wine, but be filled with the Spirit (18). What we shouldn’t take from this is that being Spirit-filled and being drunk are similar. They are as similar as wisdom and folly. They are very different, not only in their effects but also in their very nature. Lloyd-Jones, speaking both as a pastor and a physician, reminds us that “wine . . . pharmacologically speaking is not a stimulant; it is a depressant. Take up any book on pharmacology and look up ‘alcohol’, and you will find, always, that it is classified among the depressants. It is not a stimulus. . . . What alcohol does is this; it knocks out those higher centres, and so the more primitive elements in the brain come up and take control; and a man feels better temporarily. He has lost his sense of fear, and he has lost his discrimination, he has lost his power to assess.” He goes on to say, “That is exactly the opposite of being filled with the Spirit; for what the Spirit does is truly to stimulate. If it were possible to put the

Spirit into a text-book of Pharmacology I would put Him under the stimulants, for that is where He belongs.”⁶

What does the Spirit stimulate us towards? Well, notice the contrast the apostle has set up. Drunkenness leads to “excess.” Now the apostle is not here referring merely to the amount of wine in the body. “Excess” is derived from a word which meant “what cannot be saved” and came to refer to debauchery and dissipation.⁷ A similar and related word is used with reference to the Prodigal Son in Luke 15, where we read that he “wasted his substance with riotous living” (the word “riotous” is the word which is related to “excess” in Ephesians 5:18). You might say that drunkenness leads to the lifestyle of the Prodigal Son.

It is this to which being filled with the Spirit is contrasted. A Spirit-filled person does not lead a life of debauchery; instead, he or she lives a life of devotion to God. Thus, when the apostle speaks of those who are led by the Spirit, he speaks in terms of mortifying the deeds of the flesh (Rom. 8:13). To the Galatians, he writes, “This I say then, Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh” (Gal. 5:16). To be Spirit-filled, then, is not to be determined by an experience of supernatural ecstasy but rather by the measure to which a person has put to death the old lifestyle of sin. After all, “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance . . . And they that are Christ’s have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts. If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit” (Gal. 5:22-25). Biblical spirituality is not measured by gifts so much as by godliness. Here we see why being filled with the Spirit is connected to wisdom, for as we have already noted, there is a moral dimension to wisdom. Sin blinds our eyes to truth and to wisdom. It is only as we pursue holiness that we will grow in wisdom, but we can only grow in holiness as we are filled with the Holy Spirit.

⁶D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Life in the Spirit in Marriage, Home & Work: An Exposition of Ephesians 5:18-6:9* (Baker, 1973), p. 19-20.

⁷Hodge, p. 220.

Paul says that we are to be filled with the Spirit, rather than being filled by wine and therefore drunk. Hodge notes that we “are said to be filled with wine when completely under its influence; so they are said to be filled with the Spirit when he controls all their thoughts, feelings, words, and actions.”⁸ We should not mistake this with a lack of self-control; after all, the fruit of the Spirit is temperance, or self-control! The Spirit-filled person ought to be the most self-controlled person out there. Rather, being under the influence of the Spirit means that we share his aims and goals and desires, so that God’s glory becomes our aim and supreme desire. It is the exact opposite of the life of the Prodigal Son, who went and wasted his life on profligate and riotous living, who gave his flesh full reign and let his passions rule. The Christian ought never to be like that. That is part of the past; we have not so learned Christ.

We should not pass on this point without noting the element of mystery that is essential to the life of every Christian. What do I mean? Here the apostle has given a command: be filled with the Spirit. This is something we are to do. And yet it has to do with the sovereign Spirit. He is not talking about harnessing some impersonal force, but rather being filled by the blessed influence of that Divine Person who is the Holy Spirit. But he is not a dog to be put on a leash; he is God to be worshiped and feared and loved and obeyed. So then how is it appropriate to be told to go out and be filled with the Spirit?

It is appropriate because it is simply a consequence of walking by faith in Christ. Our Lord is the preeminent example of one who was filled with the Spirit (cf. Luke 4:1). The Spirit that we receive is the Spirit of Christ (Jn. 14-16), and as we live by faith we walk by the Spirit. Notice that in the Galatians passage the apostle passes without even pausing between walking in the Spirit to “they that are Christ’s” back to walking in the Spirit. Belonging to Christ manifests itself in walking in the Spirit. We, therefore, are filled by the Spirit as we most fully abide in Christ (cf. John 15:1-5).

⁸p. 220

Even though this is a command that we are to obey, we should not miss the important implication that we cannot take one step spiritually apart from the Holy Spirit. That is why we must be filled with the Spirit. It is as the Spirit fills us and rules us that we are empowered to live a life of obedience and fruitfulness. We must be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man (Eph. 3:16). This should remind us of two things: first, that we are helpless without the Spirit and therefore to recognize that there is no room for pride in the Christian life; and second, that we who belong to Christ are never powerless in the face of the remaining corruption that lies within because we can be filled with the Spirit who empowers us to conquer the sin that so easily besets us. The believer is not fighting sin in his or her own strength; they fight in the strength that God provides, and that ought to give us great encouragement. In other words, we believe a lie when we are led to think that sin can have dominion over those who are in Christ. As the apostle John put it, we have the victory: “For whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith. Who is he that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God” (1 Jn. 5:4-5).

This is why it is folly to equate Christianity with some ethical system or to think that we win the world by making them do the right things. No one can live the kind of life the apostle is setting before us apart from the work of the Holy Spirit in their hearts. We cannot have the Spirit apart from Christ. That is why, if your heart is drawn towards what the apostle is describing here, the first thing you need to do is not to clean yourself up, but to believe on Christ, to trust in him and to commit yourself to him fully as your Savior and your King.

We’ve been talking about wisdom and its prerequisites: redeeming the time, understanding God’s will, being filled with the Spirit. The aim in all these things is to gain wisdom, to be wise. So let me end with an exhortation from the ninth chapter in Proverbs. It is addressed to you and me: “Wisdom hath builded her house, she hath hewn out her seven pillars: she hath killed her beasts; she hath mingled her wine; she hath

also furnished her table. She hath sent forth her maidens: she crieth upon the highest places of the city. Whoso is simple, let him turn in hither: as for him that wanteth understanding, she saith to him, Come, eat of my bread, and drink of the wine which I have mingled. Forsake the foolish and live; and go in the way of understanding” (Prov. 9:1-6). It reminds one of something our Lord said: “Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Mt. 11:28). Indeed, come!

CHAPTER XLII

WALKING IN WISDOM, PART 2 (EPH. 5:19-21)

LAST TIME WE SAW that there are three things that the believer must do if he or she is to walk in wisdom (15). They must redeem the time (16), understand the will of the Lord (17), and be filled with the Spirit (18). However, the apostle goes on to talk about the effects of walking wisely, and there are three things that he lists in verses 19-21. These are singing to the Lord and to one another (19), giving thanks to the Lord (20), and submitting to one another in the fear of God (21).

One preliminary observation I think it is important to make is that these things are done in the context of community. We are to sing to one another (the KJV “speaking to yourselves,” although a possible translation, is not quite on the mark; it ought to be translated, as it is in most versions, “speaking to each other”), and we are to submit to one another. Even the practice of giving thanks is described in such a way as to point to community: we are to give thanks “in the name of our Lord Jesus,” so that as we give thanks we recognize that our allegiance to Jesus is an allegiance in community.

If the effects of being filled with the Spirit operate within the context of the gathered church, it stands to reason that we cannot in the

first place become wise in isolation. This, of course, fits in with what the apostle has already said: the church grows as each member does its part in the community of believers. We are being transformed into the image of our Lord as we rub elbows with other believers who have different and complementary gifts. A wise person does not seek to isolate themselves from others, especially those who belong to the church.

Another preliminary observation is that these three categories serve as a way to judge the authenticity of any movement that claims to be Spirit-filled, for all these things are the fruit of being filled with the Spirit. A true revival of religion will be characterized by people who sing with their hearts to the Lord and to each other, who are thankful, and who strive with all their might to put the concerns of others before themselves.

We begin with the first effect of being filled with the Spirit: “Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord” (19). It is interesting that when Benjamin Franklin described the effects of the preaching of George Whitefield, singing was an important part of his description: “It was wonderful to see the Change soon made in the Manners of our inhabitants; from being thoughtless or indifferent towards Religion, it seem’d as if all the World were growing Religious; so that one could not walk thro’ the Town in an evening without hearing Psalms sung in different Families of every Street.”¹ Singing, it seems, was a natural byproduct of the revival that came to be known as the Great Awakening, and it fits exactly with the way the apostle described the filling of the Spirit.

I think we can all testify to the power that music has had in our lives. Sometimes a song is all it takes to bring us out of a period of spiritual darkness and despair and into the sunlit fields of gospel light. As I put it to the brethren during our last Wednesday evening prayer meeting, I have found that singing hymns, especially at the end of the day, has the effect of melting my heart which has grown cold and hard during the day. This is not, therefore, something which is marginally important;

¹<http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/becomingamer/ideas/text2/franklinwhitefield.pdf>

it is the very first thing the apostle lists as the result of being filled with the Spirit.

What then does this verse teach us about corporate worship? First of all, it teaches us something about the content of the music the church sings. Everyone of these words that Paul uses – psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs – were used to describe the OT Psalms in the LXX, often in the titles of the psalms. Also, the word translated “making melody” in the KJV literally means “psalming,” and is an unmistakable reference to the OT practice of singing the psalms. Now, I don’t think, as some do, that this means the church should only sing the OT psalms. It does point to the Psalms as a model for the kind of songs the NT church is to sing. When we look to the Psalms, we see that they were filled with doctrinal content as to the character of God and his redemptive purposes. They were not light and airy compositions with little or no doctrinal substance. Some of the very best descriptions of the nature and attributes of God come from the Psalms (take, for example, Psalm 145). The hymns that we sing today, therefore, need to have words that teach us something about God, that point our hearts and minds to truths about him. We will never worship God in spirit unless we also worship him in truth. The important thing is not whether a particular melody moves the soul, but whether the words which are carried upon the melody move the soul and heart. That is why I appreciate hymns like, “Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise,” or, “Holy, Holy, Holy.” These kinds of hymns point us to the greatness of our God, just like the Psalms of old. Again, just because a song moves you, does not mean it is worthy of the corporate worship of the church. You need to look at the lyrics. Do they point you to the God of the Bible? Do they teach you something about him? Do they reorient your heart toward God: Father, Son, and Spirit? Bob Kauflin, one of the great modern hymn-writers, makes this wise observation: “When our songs and prayers are dominated by what we think and feel about God and focus less upon who he is and

what he thinks and feels about us, we run the risk of fueling our emotions with more emotion. We can end up worshipping our worship.”²

Another thing instructive about the Psalms is the different ways they do this. Many of the Psalms are prayers which are sung directly to the Lord. We ought, therefore, to sing songs just like that. At the same time, there are also many Psalms (like Psalm 78) which are instructional and are directed to the people of the Lord. As the apostle put it, we sing to the Lord, and we sing to each other. There ought to be a sense in which truth is being preached to us when we lift up our voices in song. In this connection, the parallel passage in Colossians is enlightening: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord” (Col. 3:16). Here “teaching and admonishing” has replaced “speaking” in Eph. 5:19. By the songs we sing, we need to be teaching each other Biblical truth.

This, by the way, is partly what informs my desire to continue the practice to allow for people in our congregation to select some of the hymns that we sing. If the preacher or the worship leader picks all the songs, it really takes away the ability of the believers to participate in teaching others through song. In other words, when you pick a song for all of us to sing together, you have become in some sense one who is teaching and admonishing the rest of us through that particular song. This also fits in with the way the apostle described the worship of the earliest church: “How is it then brethren? When ye come together, every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation. Let all things be done unto edifying” (1 Cor. 14:26). I think it is also important for someone who has had a song that has really ministered to them that week to have the opportunity to sing that with the rest of the church on the Lord’s Day.

Another thing that I think is instructive about the comparison with the Psalms, is that the Psalms encompass the full range of human emotion, and I think we ought to allow space in our singing together for

²<https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/how-not-to-worship-your-worship>

just that. In other words, if every song that the congregation sings together supposes that they are all on the mountain top with no worries, then something is wrong. There ought to be place for hymns like Psalm 42: “O why art thou cast down my soul/ and why so troubled shouldst thou be/ hope thou in God and him extol/ who gives his saving help to thee/ who gives his saving help to thee.” You may not be lamenting but someone else in the church may be, and it will not hurt you to sing a song that expresses the lament of their heart – after all, we are to weep with those who weep, and we can do this in song just as well as we can do it with tears. Psalm 88 sits right beside Psalm 89 in the canon, and I thank God for that.

One may ask in this connection whether these words describe also the mode of our singing. Does the Bible prescribe one particular way to do this? The Psalms were clearly sung with musical accompaniment, and had the Divine sanction for the practice (see 2 Chron. 29:25). If fact, the very word “psalm” originally had reference to the sound of a stringed instrument.³ So an argument could be made that the very language of the apostle supposes that our hymns should be sung with musical accompaniment. However, by the time of the apostle, it could also just refer to a hymn of praise, whether accompanied by musical instruments or not (cf. Jam. 5:13). So it may be impossible to be dogmatic either way from the language of this verse. Nevertheless, given the obvious connections of the language of the apostle to the OT Psalms, it seems dubious to me to absolutely forbid the use of musical instruments in the church.

That being said, it is interesting is that the early church – the church of the first four centuries – did not look with favor upon the idea of using musical instruments in the church. The church fathers virtually unanimously voted in favor of acapella singing in the church. They felt that using musical accompaniment during worship was Jewish and Pagan; in other words, they wanted to distinguish the practice of the Christian church from the practice of the Jewish synagogue and the

³H. W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Baker, 2002), p. 708.

Pagan temple, and so they banned musical instruments altogether. In fact, the Greek Orthodox Church to this day does not use musical instruments in worship (with a few exceptions, it seems), and it dates this practice all the way back to the practice of the early church. Now this is not a Biblical argument and the early church clearly got some things wrong. We don't follow them blindly. But it ought to give us pause that, in our day when musical instruments are thought to be absolutely essential to worship, the early church for the first three or four centuries wouldn't use them at all and it did just fine.

Personally, I think there are a lot of dangers with introducing musical instruments that we need to be aware of. One of the dangers is drowning out the voice of the people and turning the worship time into a concert. The dynamic of Christian worship ought to be congregational, and the use of musical instruments ought to support this, not replace it. The introduction of musical instruments often ends up eclipsing the singing of the congregation, and this is extremely unfortunate (even if the singing is bad!). The apostle is describing corporate, not private, worship, and our worship time ought to reflect that.

However, whether this verse describes a mode of worship that uses musical instruments or not, we do need to note that an essential element to true worship is singing with the heart: "singing and psalming in your heart to the Lord." Again, I have heard people use this to say that we should never use musical instruments because the apostle says that we are to sing with our hearts, and musical instruments don't have hearts. This, of course, is a stupid argument. Whether or not musical instruments accompany our voices, the fact of the matter is that we are to worship God in our singing, and the only way we can truly do this is if our hearts accompany the sound. We do not want to be counted among those who worship God with their lips but their hearts are far from him. It is impossible to be filled with the Holy Spirit and to remain unmoved when singing truth to God and about the God of our salvation.

Closely connected to worshipping God with singing is thanksgiving: “Giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (20). Though this is something that we all know we ought to be doing, few do it the way they ought. We are told to say, “Thank you,” as a matter of duty, but few feel gratitude for the things they receive. We have to constantly battle against a “you-owe-it-to-me” mentality, this entitlement mentality. This is especially true when it comes to our relationship with God.

Yet someone who is filled with the Spirit is a person who is giving thanks to God. You can’t be the kind of person who is singing to God and remain unthankful. And you can’t be filled with a heart of gratitude and not want to sing to God. These things go hand-in-hand.

Remember that we said what was the *sine qua non* of being filled with the Spirit: it is the natural consequence of walking by faith in Christ our Lord. Those who do so recognize that certain things are true and, as a result of this, they are filled not only with the Spirit but with thanksgiving as well. For one thing, they recognize that God is sovereign over all things. It would be hard to give thanks to God for all things if you did not trust that he is in control and that his control is universal. God the Father has made Christ king over all: “All power is given unto me in heaven and on earth” (Mt. 28:18). As sovereign over all, he oversees all things for the good of his people. “The LORD reigneth; let the earth rejoice; let the multitude of isles be glad thereof” (Ps. 97:1). “Rejoice in the LORD, ye righteous; and give thanks at the remembrance of his holiness” (Ps. 97:12).

Of course, giving thanks for all things does not mean that we give thanks for sin and evil. We cannot rejoice in iniquity but in the truth. But it does mean that we recognize that even the bad things that happen to us and others will be overruled for God’s glory and our good: “And we know that all things work together for good, for them that love God and are called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28). It will be hard to give thanks if you think God is not sovereign over even the small events of your life. Those who trust in the Lord do not give in to despair but

give thanks because they confidently rest upon the good purpose of him who is too wise to err and too good to be unkind.

Those who trust in Christ not only recognize God's greatness but also their own guiltiness. There is nothing that will kill that sense of entitlement that spoils every thanksgiving more quickly than a realization of our own need for God's grace and forgiveness. The reason why every giving of thanks must be made "in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" is because of our sin so that our only hope of approach unto the Father is through the redemptive work of his Son. We are not entitled to anything. God does not owe us anything, except perhaps judgment. The fact that through faith in Christ we are heirs of the glory to come ought to forever silence all grumblings and thankless murmurings. So we not only thank God because we recognize his sovereignty over all things, but also because we recognize his grace over his through Jesus Christ.

We also recognize his faithfulness, his covenant love. We give thanks "always" because God is always for us in Christ. There is never a time when God our Father stops loving and caring for us. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ. They are accepted in the Beloved always and forever. We stand in the grace of God; we don't move in and out of it. God's sovereignty and grace extend to his people through all their lives and into eternity.

Thus, we thank him always for all things because we trust in his Son who has all power in heaven and earth, and who is with us until the end of the ages, who has died for those who believe in him so that they might have eternal life. We are filled with the Spirit because we believe these things and live out these things. And believing, we give thanks.

Paul adds, "Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God" (21). Now this verse lays the foundation for everything that Paul will write in verses 22 through 6:9. In those verses he gives particular instances of submitting to God-ordained leadership. But before he does that, he lays down a general principle. There is a sense in which we mutually submit to one another. The apostle Peter wrote, "Yea, all of you

be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble. Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time” (1 Pet. 5:5-6). This is a matter, therefore, of humility and it is a mark of being filled with the Spirit. It is, therefore, a mark of walking in wisdom. Wisdom does not lead to putting yourself ahead of others but of putting the interests of others before your own. It is what the apostle James was getting at when he wrote, “But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy” (Jam. 3:17). More particularly, what does it look like?⁴

It means, first of all, that we recognize that we are not merely individuals acting alone, but are part of a larger community. We are like soldiers in the army. You have to act as a part of a larger unit, whether considered at the squad level, or platoon level, and so on. Thus, we should never think individualistically. The Spirit baptizes us into the body of Christ, so if you are filled with the Spirit, you will not think and make choices that do not take others and their interests and problems into consideration. There is nothing that tears at the unity of the church, and grieves the Spirit, more than this individualism that so often permeates our attitudes towards others. Or another way to put this, is that we must kill the spirit of selfishness and self-seeking and putting ourselves first and being self-assertive. We need to kill it if we are going to keep in step with the Spirit.

Another way to put this is that we are not thoughtless, and we don’t just jump into something without thinking it through. Before I was married, I could make decisions on the fly and whether those decision were good or bad, it didn’t always matter because they generally affected only myself. But when I got married and then when I started having children, my decisions took on a much greater weight. They not only affected me but my wife and my children as well. In a similar fashion,

⁴Many of the following thoughts were gleaned from Lloyd Jones, *Life in the Spirit*, p. 55-69.

as we are part of the family of God, we ought to think before we act, especially before we pull the pin on a verbal grenade. Another way to put this is that I must be thoughtful of others. You are not the center of the universe. Christ is. We are one part of a much larger body and we can only benefit the body of Christ when we consider those around us. This is little worse than having to work with people who take little thought of the people around them.

One of the particular ways this is manifested is being opinionated. The Christian must never be opinionated. That does not mean he or she cannot have opinions; it just means that we care as much about the opinions of others as we do our own. We listen before we speak. The opinionated man speaks before he listens; his one concern is for his opinion to be heard. As Lloyd-Jones put it, the “opinionated man is much more interested in the fact that he believes than in what he believes; he is always looking at himself; he parades his beliefs. . . . But he is not really interested in truth, he is interested in his relationship to it, his knowledge of it. Opinionated people always cause clashes.”⁵

Such people tend to be dictatorial; it’s their way or the highway. Moreover, they also tend to be harsh in their criticism of others. Worse, they can’t take criticism themselves. Point out a problem with their thinking or with their behavior and they immediately become defensive and abusive. They attack those who have lovingly confronted them. The irony is that these people think they are showing strength when they respond this way; but they are really weak. They are being foolish. “A scorner loveth not one that reproveth him: neither will he go unto the wise” (Prov. 15:12).

What is the solution to this kind of attitude? It is to submit to one another in the fear of God. Most modern versions read, “the fear of Christ,” and this is probably the better reading. Regardless, it comes out the same either way. We are to be motivated by the fear of God, the fear of Christ. It recalls what Peter said when he set before his readers the “mighty hand of God.” It is a hard thing to do, to submit to others. We

⁵Ibid., p. 59.

all want to be exalted now. It is the pride that is latent in every one of us. The only way to combat this problem is to place ourselves before God Almighty. That is what Paul is getting at when he says we are to submit in the fear of Christ. We will inevitably overestimate our importance and be overly convinced of our self-importance until, like Isaiah, we see ourselves in light of the holiness and majesty and glory of God.

What does it mean to walk in wisdom? It means that we turn every moment to our spiritual advantage so that we grow in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord. It means that we seek God's word in God's book so that we understand what is his will for our lives. It means that we live by faith in Christ so that we are filled more and more by his Spirit. As we are being filled, we sing unto the Lord with joy and glory in our hearts, giving thanks, and humbling ourselves before our Lord so that we put others before ourselves. May God make these realities evident in our lives more and more.

CHAPTER XLIII

WHAT MARRIAGE SAYS ABOUT THE GOSPEL (EPH. 5:22-24)

WHEN I BEGIN TO PREACH almost 25 years ago, I was still a teenager and single. I remember being afraid to touch texts like Ephesians 5:22-33 for the simple reason that I had no experience with marriage, except as an observer. I am grateful to have two parents who I believe have modeled this passage better than most, and yet I knew it would be hard for me to preach on the subject with any authority unless I came at it from a position within, as someone who had personal experience as a married man. And yet, even now I find myself apprehensive when it comes to teaching on the Biblical portrait of marriage. Probably more than ever before the Biblical view of marriage and the relationship that exists between husband and wife are under attack. However, not only is it under attack from without, it is also under attack from within. That is, we not only have to worry about the pressures from society against the Biblical witness to marriage but also the pressures that are essentially arguing against faithfulness to Scripture from within the community of the faithful.

I think one of the big reasons why the church has fallen in its witness with respect to marriage is due to the seeker-sensitive approach that many churches in our day have taken. Though I respect the motivation behind seeker-sensitive churches – the desire to see the lost come to Christ – one of the many problems with this is that it causes church leaders to become overly sensitive to movements in the culture and, therefore, susceptible to absorbing those movements into the church for the sake of gaining the ear of the culture. But, as someone has so aptly put it, often those in the church who go in for street cred end up getting street crud instead. The sad result is a church which no longer witnesses to the truth of all of Scripture and the further result that such churches are filled with stunted Christians, immature Christians, and non-Christians (who unfortunately get inoculated with just enough religion to keep them from getting the real thing). I don't think there is any real doubt that this is exactly what has happened to the evangelical church in our day, at least in the West.

Another problem with the seeker-sensitive approach is that it inevitably undermines the gospel and, therefore, the salvation of those the church is purportedly trying to reach. You cannot separate the Biblical witness to sin and salvation from its witness about everything else. I realize that there are strata of importance when it comes to the various doctrines, but they are intrinsically connected under the Lordship of Christ. The same Lord that teaches us about his salvation and sovereignty is the same Lord that teaches us about marriage and the mutual roles that husband and wife play in that relationship. It might be possible for a man to be saved and yet relate wrongly to his wife; but it is not possible to reject the Lordship of Christ and be saved. Those who self-consciously reject the Biblical teaching of marriage (or any other area) are rejecting the Lordship of Christ in that area.

Additionally, it also seems that there is today in many places in the church almost a gnostic approach to the gospel and its connection (or rather, its disconnect) to life. This is equally destructive, for how can you take the gospel seriously when you disconnect it from life? Is it

really possible to embrace Christ as the one who gives you eternal life and yet has nothing to say about life in the here and now, about marriage and child-rearing and work? We are not disembodied souls, and yet this is precisely the picture that many people present in the way they hold the gospel. This is not the Christ of the gospel that has been handed down to us by the apostles. He is Lord of our souls, yes, but also of our bodies. “You are bought with a price; therefore, glorify God in your body,” says the apostle (1 Cor. 6:20). He is Lord over every aspect of our life, not only in the age to come but also in the present age, as well. In the words of Abraham Kuyper’s oft-quoted words: “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, ‘Mine!’” This being so, it should not surprise us that our Lord has something to say to husbands and wives, to parent and child, and to employers and employees, as he does in the book of Ephesians.

At the same time, we have to be careful that we do not go in the opposite direction. The way the gospel has sometimes been presented is as if the gospel is all about the here and now with little to say about the age to come. In this way man’s broken relationship with God gets minimized, and economics and social justice issues (man’s broken relationship with man) get maximized. The gospel becomes eclipsed by issues of social and economic inequalities. Now, it’s not that the gospel is not concerned with matters of justice; the issue of justice is at the heart of the doctrine of the atonement. The church ought to do everything it can to alleviate the injustices of our time. The problem with some of the social justice warriors in the church is that they are confused about the solution and tie it to politics instead of the lifestyle changes that result from gospel influence. People who are truly changed by the gospel are not going to be racist; they are not going to cheat and hate their neighbor, and so on. At the same time, the church’s message should reflect that the primary issue at hand is the issue of our alienation from a holy God and the need for acceptance with God through his Son and a new birth by the Holy Spirit.

In fact, everything the church says and does ought to tell the story of the gospel in some way. The way we keep from selling out to the culture via the seeker-sensitive movement or from ignoring the universal sovereignty of Christ over every aspect of our lives or from temporalizing and politicizing the gospel is to understand what the gospel is and that every aspect of our lives and the life of the church is to tell the story of the gospel. The gospel is the good news that the Sovereign of the universe became incarnate as a man to deal with the ultimate matter of justice, and thus to make a way for traitors against the King of heaven and earth to be saved. He came to be our Savior and our Lord and he is both for all who embrace him as such by faith. He is our Savior because he did what we could not do – in our place he kept God's law perfectly by his holy life and absorbed God's wrath completely by his substitutionary death. He saves us from every aspect of sin: not just its guilt but also its power. He saves us so that we willingly and joyfully embrace his lordship over our lives and no longer give ourselves to the joy-sucking and life-killing sins of our past. Salvation like this is so complete that it embraces every aspect of our lives and every aspect of our lives increasingly reflects the power of the gospel (or at least ought to).

It should not surprise us that as we move through the outworking of the gospel in the second half of this epistle we should come to the gospel's impact upon the relationship of husband and wife. Here we see that the gospel not only says something about marriage, but that marriage says something about the gospel. According to the apostle, Christian marriage preaches the gospel. Thus marriage is a gospel issue. Those who trifle with the institution of marriage not only get marriage wrong, they inevitably warp the message of the gospel as well, which is why we have to be very careful that we hear what Scripture has to say about it and avoid being sucked into the culture's attempt to define it.

How Marriage Preaches the Gospel

This morning we are going to look at verses 22-24. These are very controversial because they instruct wives to submit to their husbands: “Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord.” Furthermore, we are told that the husband is the head of the wife: “For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the savior of the body.” These twin ideas of the headship of the husband and the submission of the wife are extremely volatile topics, even in the evangelical wing of the church. I read a news headline the other day which was obviously meant to be negative, but which simply said that a certain politician had advised wives to submit to their husbands. Just to say you agree with the apostle is no longer culturally tenable! Everything has been done to deny the obvious meaning of these verses in favor of a position more favorable to the feminism of our times. Clearly, the obvious meaning here is that Christian husbands ought to be leaders in their homes and that their wives ought to follow this God-ordained leadership.

Does verse 21 completely define verses 22-24?

As we have been saying, this is often denied. One way people have tried to get around this is by interpreting verses 22-24 in light of verse 21. There the apostle exhorts his readers to mutual submission: “Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of Christ.” This submission is universal, and so this means that husbands are to submit to their wives just as wives are to submit to their husbands. Of course, this is right on one level: there is an aspect of mutual submission that is advocated, not only for husband and wife, but also for everyone else in the church. Recall how the apostle Peter put it: “Yea, all of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility” (1 Pet. 5:5). This mutual submission is simply an outworking of the humility which is to characterize all believers in all relationships.

However, that does not mean that there are not particular ways we are to submit or that these particular ways are transferable to others.

There are lines of authority that God has established, and these lines only go one way. The way to look at this is to consider the other two ways Paul works out this principle of submission: children are to submit to their parents and servants are to submit to their masters (although in both cases Paul uses the stronger word “obey” instead of “submit”). Eph. 5:21 does not mean that parents are to submit to their children in the way children are to submit to their parents or that masters are to obey their employees in the same way that employees are to submit to their employers. Yes, we are to deal with everyone with humility. The obedience rendered in the cases of children to parents and servants to masters doesn’t go the other direction. The same is true with Paul’s words to wives and husbands. Husbands are to relate to their wives with the humility that is consistent with the gospel. They are also to take the lead in the marital relationship and this leadership is a one-way, God-ordained authority.

Does the word *head* really carry the connotation of “authority over”?

Another way that people try to avoid the clear implication of the text here is by saying that “head” here refers to the idea of “source” rather than to the idea of “authority.” However, this still does not lead to an egalitarian reading of the text. Moreover, it seems to me incontrovertible that the context here demands the idea of authority, even if in other contexts head can denote source. When you add the idea of headship to submission, which the apostle does here, what else can it mean? “As the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything” (24). Furthermore, it is hard for me to understand what it would mean for husbands to be the source of their wives. And yet, even if we grant this, the apostle argues in 1 Cor. 11 that, since the man is the source of the woman, therefore the woman is to have a symbol of authority upon her head; in this context, the symbol of authority is a symbol of the husband’s authority in the marriage (1 Cor. 11:7-10). So it seems to me that, either way, headship refers to the husband’s position

of leadership in the marriage relationship and the authority that goes along with it.

The fact of the matter is that in any relationship, someone is always going to take the lead. Even in so-called egalitarian marriages, the buck is going to have to stop somewhere. Unless husband and wife agree on everything (not probable in any relationship, no matter how sanctified they are!), someone is going to have to give way to the wishes of the other. Someone is going to lead; it is inevitable. All the Bible adds to this reality is that the husband is to take the lead, especially when there are differences, and the wife is to submit to the leadership of her husband.

One may ask what difference does this make? Why cannot the wife lead? Why must it be the husband? Answers have been given to this question from history, psychology, and sociology. The fact of the matter is that if we accept the Scriptures at face-value; there is no need to appeal elsewhere, for the text itself answers this question. God intended it this way, and as our Creator he knows what is best for us.

Is this tied to a particular culture?

Now some have claimed that, as the head-covering of 1 Cor. 11 was a culturally relative application, it is no longer applicable to the church today, even as Paul's instructions to women here are also culturally relative. It is argued that just as slavery, to which Paul addresses himself in chapter 6, is no longer a part of the dynamic of relationships in the church, even so the submission of wives is no longer applicable to Christians today. What do we say to this?

Let us take the 1 Corinthians 11 passage first. The important thing to note there is the distinction between the principle of male leadership in the home and the application of that principle in wearing of head coverings. The principle is stated in verse 3: "But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God" (ESV). That principle is clearly not rooted to a particular culture. Rather, Paul is talking about lines of

authority that flow from God to Christ, from Christ to the husband, and from husband to wife. These lines of authority are not created by man, but by God. The particular application of this unchanging principle may vary from culture to culture, but the principle itself remains the same, and the principle is that husbands are to lovingly lead in the home.

What about slavery? First of all, I want to note that the comparison between the submission of wives and the institution of slavery is not apt. The true comparison would be between the institution of slavery and the institution of marriage. If you want to argue that Paul's words in Eph. 5:22-24 aren't applicable by comparison to slavery, the logic being used in this case demands that marriage itself is no longer applicable to Christians. Few in the church would want to do that.

However, some might still press the issue by arguing that Paul got slavery wrong and so we don't need to heed his instructions on other issues, like marriage. Of course, if you make that argument, you have demonstrated that you have no faith in the authority of Scripture. That is simply not a place we want to go. What would you say to someone who brought up the issue of slavery in the epistles?

We will go into this in more detail when we look at Eph. 6:5-9, but at this point, the important thing to remember is that slavery in the NT was not the same thing as slavery that existed in the Antebellum South. That institution was fundamentally immoral, and I have no doubt the apostle himself would say that, since it was based on kidnapping people from their homes and selling them into slavery, a practice that was a capital offense by OT standards (cf. Exod. 21:16). This is what people think of when they think of slavery. It is not the same thing as the institution that existed in the NT Roman world and so to criticize it on the basis of comparison to something it was not, is not a legitimate argument.

Marriage is not only God-ordained, but so are the ways that men and women relate in marriage. Nowhere do Paul's words indicate that these commands are culturally relative. If you want to ignore them, fine; you just need to be honest and admit that you are self-consciously dis-

obeying a clear command of Scripture in favor of your own will and way.

God's intention in marriage

Why did God intend it this way? What is behind God's intention is the fact that marriage says something about the gospel, and both the husband and the wife have a role to play in this display of the gospel through marriage. For the wife, she puts the gospel on display when, in her willing submission to her husband, she exhibits the beautiful relationship the church has with Christ. In marriage, the woman represents the church and the husband the Lord: "For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church."

In particular, the woman exhibits the willing obedience that the church offers to her Lord: "Therefore, as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything." There is nothing demeaning in the church's submission to Christ. It is, in fact, the church's blessing and beauty. This is so important to put on display because we live in a world that is ordered toward radical individualism and toward the breakdown of authority structures. Of course, when this is allowed to progress to its logical endpoint, the result is chaos and chaos always brings with it destruction. Harmony, on the other hand, can only persist and flourish where order and authority are acknowledged. True freedom is never the freedom to do whatever you want, especially when our wants are so often defined by selfish and sinful impulses. True freedom is the freedom to do what we ought, and salvation is partly about restoring sinful humanity so that men and women can do what they ought.

Where does marriage come into this? Christian marriage provides a unique opportunity to show the world what the blessing and beauty of submission to Christ looks like. In any case, the wife's submission to her husband is ultimately submission to Christ. The husband's authority is derived from Christ, who stands over him. In an age when

the breakdown of the home is accelerating, it is all the more important for Christian homes to put this on display.

At this point I want to point out that this picture undercuts the claim that submission implies inferiority. Many people, especially in our day, have rejected the Biblical role assigned to the woman in marriage because they believe it humiliates and degrades them. If that were the case, then it would be humiliating and degrading for the church to submit to Christ. But it is not. The holiness and righteousness of the church, which comes through obedience and submission to Christ's commands, is the beauty of the Church: "And I heard as it were the voice of a great multitude, and as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of mighty thunderings, saying, Alleluia: for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth. Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honour to him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready. And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in white: for the fine linen is the righteousness [righteous deeds - ESV] of the saints" (Rev. 19:6-8).

We must make clear that difference in role does not mean difference in worth. As the apostle put it to the Galatians, in Christ "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). Before God, there is complete equality. Men, in virtue of their role of leadership in the home, do not exercise any kind of superiority over the women. They are to exercise their role of leadership under Christ – they are not the Lord in the relationship, Christ is. Neither should men think that their role as leaders in the home makes them more important in any sense than their wife. John Newton once said that if two angels were sent from heaven, one to rule an empire and the other to sweep the streets, neither of them would have preference for one job over the other. If we, men and women, were as we ought to be, we would all be like these angels. Men wouldn't prefer their role as leader because it makes them feel important, and women wouldn't chafe in their role as their husband's supporter because it makes them feel unimportant. We would all accept

our roles as given to us by Christ because in them we are really serving Christ and putting the gospel on display.

It is incredibly sad that so many Christian homes do not put the gospel on display. Either the husband neglects his loving leadership or abuses it, or the wife ignores her husband's leadership or rejects it altogether. I think one of the reasons this is such an epidemic in the Christian church is partly because many so-called Christians do not take seriously the call to holiness. In other words, one of the reasons why so many women who call themselves Christian don't submit to their husbands is because they don't take seriously the reality that the church submits to Christ in all things. You can't put on display in your marriage what is not already true in your life. Holiness and obedience to Christ is the fundamental prerequisite to all of this. These things go hand in hand. The same is true for the men.

So let me just remind you what the apostle mentions here in passing. The church is subject to Christ. The church is the community of the redeemed, those for whom Christ gave his life: "and he is the savior of the body" (23). If you are not subject to Christ, that is, if your life is not characterized by obedience to his commands, then you cannot legitimately call yourself a member of the body of Christ. Those who live in sin are simply not saved. In other words, the problem with this text going unheeded is just a part of the much larger problem of holiness going unpursued.

I understand that for this to work out as the apostle intended, the husband must approximate the character of Christ. Thus, verses 25-33. Furthermore, submission "in everything" (24) does not mean that the wife is to submit to her husband's wishes when, as John Stott put it, they command what God forbids or forbid what God commands. It does not mean that a wife must put up with or follow and support an abusive or an adulterous husband. Nevertheless, neither does the apostle expect the wife to follow her husband only if he is perfect, which is impossible. Men are imperfect and the best husbands are going to mess up, and say stupid things and do stupid things. That does not mean that the wife

is no longer required to submit. Though we don't want to abuse the phrase "in everything," neither do we want to so qualify it that it has no meaning. Clearly, it at least means that the wife is to lovingly follow and support her husband in all aspects of their life together, as long as the husband has not forfeited his right to lead through grievous sin, and that this paints a picture of the wonderful relationship the church has with Christ.

Paul will have much more to say to the husbands, which we will look at next time. Husbands lead their wives with love and by being to their wives what Christ is to the church. There is no jockeying for first place in the marriage if the apostle's words are obeyed, either by the husband or the wife. The wife will loving support her husband and the husband will lead, all the while denying his own desires in order to bless and protect and cherish his wife. In doing so, they preach the gospel to the world. May it be so in our homes.

CHAPTER XLIV

HOW CHRIST LOVES THE CHURCH (EPH. 5:25-27)

EVER SINCE THE ONSLAUGHT OF the modernist movement that really gained steam in the 19th century, there have always been those who profess to be Christian and yet who want to say that it doesn't matter whether or not you believe in the gospel. In particular, it is claimed that it doesn't matter whether or not you believe in the miracles of the NT, the resurrection, or substitutionary atonement. And don't get them started on the OT. What's even more discouraging is that, from time to time, you will have men and women, whom you thought were on the side of believing faithfulness to Scripture, who will come out and say things like, "You should untether your faith from the OT; you don't need it." Or, "You don't have to believe that the Scriptures are inspired and inerrant." Thus, more people in churches are led down the path of unbelief.

One of the arguments forwarded against belief in the gospel is not only that science and modernity make such belief implausible, but also that it doesn't matter in terms of practical day-to-day realities, like marriage. They will say that theology is for head-in-the-clouds theologians, not for people who live in the real world. However, this controverts

everything the apostle says in the text. He thoroughly grounds every directive he gives to the wives and the husbands in theological realities. If you don't understand the theology behind the directives, you are not going to understand what it means to be a Christian husband or wife. More importantly, you are not going to be properly motivated to act in the ways that Christ calls husbands and wives to act, for the motivation is found in gospel realities, in theology. Do you want to be a good husband and wife? Then you need to be a theologian. It's as simple and straightforward as that. You can't untether your thinking from the OT or the NT if you want to follow Christ in your home and at work, among your friends and your family. If you do, you are either going to lose the motivation to persevere in what Christ calls us to do or you are fundamentally going to misunderstand what Christ calls us to be and do.

What I want to do this morning is to stop and to consider at length what the apostle says about the gospel realities behind the directives to the husbands. A good reason to do this is because the apostle himself seems to pause for an extended reflection on these realities in verses 25-27. He keeps coming back to it even when he does pick back up with the duties of husbands towards their wives (see verses 29b, 30, 32). It was clearly very important to the mind of the apostle, and it should be to us as well, especially for husbands who want to know how they are to love their wives. How are they to do this? As Christ loves the church, and the text tells us how he does this.

What I want to do this morning is to note two things this text says about the love of Christ, and then to look at two implications these truths have for the believer.

The Love of Christ is Sacrificial Love

The first thing the apostle says about the love of Christ is that it is sacrificial love. It is said that husbands were called upon to love their wives in the pagan, first-century world, but the word that was used was

the weaker word *philia*, whereas Paul calls husbands to *agape* love. One commentator notes, “This exhortation to husbands to love their wives is unique [in the first century world]. It is not found in the OT, rabbinic literature, or in the household codes of the Greco-Roman era. Although the hierarchical model of the home is maintained, it is ameliorated by this revolutionary exhortation that husbands are to love their wives as Christ loved the church.”

The thing that distinguishes *agape* love from other types of love, however, is not just the dictionary definition of the word. It is the sacrifice of Christ that fills this word with meaning for the Christian. It is what the apostle John was pointing to when he refers to the new commandment of love (1 Jn. 2:8). It was an old commandment in one sense, because God’s standards do not change and we have always been called to love others as we love ourselves. It was new in the sense that our Lord’s sacrifice for his people brought new light upon this old commandment. How are we to love others? In particular, how are husbands to love their wives? As Christ loved the church, and he loved the church by dying for it. He sacrificed himself for it.

In John 3:16, we are told that, “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son.” This is a reference to the Father’s love. The Father in love gave his Son so that those who believe in him might have eternal life. Eph. 5:25 tells us that God the Son gave himself for the church that she might have eternal life. The Son did not come unwillingly. He was not forced to come. Yes, the Father sent him from love, and the Son willingly came out of love.

What does *agape* love look like? It looks like a cross. It looks like Isaiah 53:3-5, “He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.” It looks like 2 Cor. 8:9, “For

ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich.”

Think about what Christ gave up in order to love us. He gave up the riches and glory of heaven for 30 plus years. He gave up reputation and comfort. He embraced pain and poverty and suffering and grief and loneliness. We are kidding ourselves if we paint love in soft colors. In this world, love is hard. Sometimes love leads to the death of the lover for the sake of those loved. In this world, love is often not self-care; it is a life of self-sacrificing choices for the good of those we love. Love is not about indulging selfish desires; it is about finding one’s fulfillment in the joy and glory of those we love. Husband, love your wife this way.

The Love of Christ is Saving Love

The second thing that the apostle tells us about the love of Christ is that it secured the good and glory of the church. Christ didn’t go to the cross because he liked pain and suffering. He wasn’t like some twisted minds who inflict pain upon themselves in order to draw attention to themselves. No, our Lord despised the cross and the shame. He embraced it because it was the only door through which he could bring his bride, the church. It was the only way his elect could be presented before him in joy and glory. Our Lord prayed, “Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me.” It was not possible, and so he drank the cup. The sacrifice was temporary; the glory is eternal.

We must not miss the fact that the glory of the church is the joy of Christ. “Who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb. 12:2). Our Lord not only died because this secured the ultimate happiness of the elect but also because his own joy was invested in the joy of the church. This is implied in the imagery which the apostle employs in the text. The imagery here is that of a wedding. In both the Greek and Jewish contexts, the bride would undergo some type of

prenuptial cleansing (bridal bath) before being presented to her husband on the day of the wedding. Paul's readers would not have missed the implication that the church is pictured here as the bride of Christ along with all the associations of the joy that accompanies the wedding day for both bride and bridegroom. Christ loves the church and, therefore, delights in her beauty and glory.

As a result of our Lord's care and delight in his church, she is made more beautiful and glorious. Note the words of the apostle in verse 27: "That he might present it for himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing: but that it should be holy and without blemish." The church is not the worse for wear because she is united to Christ; it is because the church belongs to Christ that she is made glorious. In fact, what our Lord has done is ultimately to erase all the imperfections of the church. His headship over the church (ver. 23) doesn't lead to an oppressed church but to a vibrant church.

Husband, love your wife like that. It is heartbreaking to see some wives whose beauty has been taken away as a consequence of living with a selfish, abusive husband. That is not the way Christ loves the church. He makes her beautiful.

Now, this is not to say that everything about how Christ relates to the church translates to husbands and wives. That is not Paul's intention. That is because the marriage relationship between a man and a woman is not meant to replace the relationship between Christ and the church but to be a witness to it. The belonging that comes with marriage is a faint echo of the reality that is the union between Christ and the church. For example, no husband is his wife's redeemer. Nor is the husband the source of his wife's sanctification, although he can contribute to that, and ought to (and vice versa). Ultimately, it is Christ and his Spirit and word that sanctify both the husband and the wife.

One of the implications the text has for marriage is that earthly marriage was never meant to be a substitute for a relationship with Christ. Men and women should not find their ultimate sense of meaning and purpose and joy in their spouse; they are to seek that in Christ. Let not

our marriages become idols. Our marriages will suffer when we replace Christ with our spouse. Your spouse was never meant to be everything for you; that place belongs solely to Christ. On the other hand, if marriage is meant to put the gospel on display, they will flourish when both husband and wife find their ultimate relationship in a relationship with Christ as Lord and Savior.

To the unmarried young people in our congregation, you need to know that what you need more than a husband or a wife is a relationship with Christ. Yes, marriage is a blessing. It is a blessing from God. The Bible says unequivocally that he who finds a wife finds something good and obtains favor from the Lord (Prov. 18:22). But earthly blessings are meant to point us to the Lord, not to block our view of his grace (cf. Acts 14:17). You, along with every other human being on earth, are yearning for glory. You will never find it outside of belonging to the church, and you will never belong to the church unless you belong to Christ. There is no path to ultimate and lasting glory and joy apart from union with Christ, because there is no glory until the glory-killer sin is dealt with and Christ is the only one who has fully put away sin for those who trust in him. So before you seek a spouse, seek Christ. Before you find a husband or wife, find the Lord. His salvation is not far from you (Rom. 10:6-10).

Thus, this text not only teaches us about how to live in the relationship of marriage. It is not just a word to husbands. It is a word to everyone of us. It has implications for everyone in this room. So let me point out two of those implications.

Confidence in Christ's Love

First, if you are a believer, you have every reason to believe that God, Father and Son, loves you and is maximally committed to your good. "He who spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him freely give us all things?" (Rom. 8:32). Christ gave

the most precious thing he could for you: he gave himself. He died for you. If there is any proof that God loves you, it is this!

Moreover, the cross is not just the effort of hopeless and ineffectual love. The cross is the outworking of God's eternal purpose. God gave his Son, and the Son gave himself, in order that God's purpose for the elect would be accomplished. Note what the text says that Christ came to do: that it [the church] should be holy and without blemish" (ver. 27). Now compare this with 1:4, where the apostle writes that God "hath chosen us in him [Christ] before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love." The apostle uses the same words to show us that what happens at the end of history when Christ comes again and brings his bride home, was both secured by the cross and purposed in election. In other words, we shouldn't see our Lord's death upon the cross as disconnected from God's purpose of election. Christ had each of one of the elect upon his heart when he was hanging there upon the cross. This truth is another way of saying that Christ gave his life for the church.

Since God's purpose of election is sure, then Christ's death for each member of the church is something that brings sure salvation. It is one thing to say that God loves you. It is another thing to say that God loves you in such a way that you will certainly be saved. Yes, God has a general love for all the world (cf. Mt. 5:43-48), but he has a saving love for his elect, for those who belong to the church. This love is not just a general positive feeling for someone; it is a love that brings about the eternal salvation for all who are embraced by it. If you are a believer, then you are one of God's elect, and one for whom Christ died to bring to glory. You are embraced in God's eternal and unchanging and saving love.

It is easy to lose sight of this fact when we are engulfed by suffering, and to think that God does not love us. In our suffering we need to remind ourselves that our suffering cannot take away what Christ has already purchased for us on the cross. Our present condition may be the furthest from glory that you could imagine, but there is a day coming when you will be clothed in glory forever. Every blemish and wrinkle

and spot will be forever removed. There is no sorrow that heaven will not heal. Your eternal joy has been purchased by the blood of Christ and no one and nothing can undo that.

The greatest possible good for anyone is to be presented before Christ and to enjoy him forever and it is given to all who are in Christ (ver. 27). It is not the greatest possible good to become the richest person in the world. It is not the greatest possible good to become the most famous person in the world. It is not the greatest possible good to achieve the greatest possible worldly success. For one thing, none of these things are lasting. More importantly, none of these things require the blood of Christ. The glorification of believers, on the other hand, does.

It is not sign of a lack of care on God's part if he does not give us earthly wealth and comfort when he has already given us a sure eternal inheritance than is incomparably great. Nor must we think that, if we have achieved some measure of earthly success, this means somehow that we are doing a better job at pleasing God and he is blessing us in response to our good works. Rather, the inheritance for which Christ died is yet future, beyond the door of death. Ultimately, it will be received when our Lord returns and establishes the New Heaven and New Earth. As a result, we don't have to cling to earthly riches but can look forward to superior pleasures when we pass through the door of death.

Consecration for Christ's Light

The next implication of this text is the importance of holiness. The only path from redemption to glory comes through sanctification. There is no glory apart from holiness: "Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord" (Heb. 12:14). This is surely an implication of what the apostle saying in verse 26: "That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word." The ultimate reason for which Christ died is verse 27, the glorification of the church. But the proximate reason for which Christ died is verse

26, the sanctification of the church. He died so that the church might be sanctified so that it might be glorified.

This is not saying that our holiness in this life is what secures the blessedness of the next, but you cannot enjoy the presence of God and be unholy. Darkness is always driven out by Light. It follows that, if you are redeemed by Christ for the enjoyment of God's presence, you are also redeemed for holiness. Holiness and sanctification are not the grounds of our salvation, but they are the inevitable fruit of it in this life as well as the next.

I know that there is a sanctification that is positional and which belongs to every believer upon the first moment of faith. We are positionally sanctified and set apart for God in this sense in virtue of Christ's death as soon as we believe. This is what the apostle was referring to when he described the church at Corinth as "them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus" (1 Cor. 1:2). Note that it is not, "those who are being sanctified," but "those who are (or, have been) sanctified."

There is also an initial sanctification that is equivalent with the new birth and regeneration. It is what Paul is referring to in 1 Cor. 6:11, when he says of the Corinthians, "And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God." There is also a progressive sanctification that takes place throughout the believer's life and is the outgrowth of the initial sanctifying work of the Spirit. It is this aspect of it that Paul is referring to in 1 Thess. 4:3, "For this is the will of God, even your sanctification, that ye should abstain from fornication." Which is Paul referring to in verse 26?

I believe he is referring to progressive sanctification because of the phrase "with the washing of water by the word." For reasons I don't fully understand, a lot of commentators want to interpret this in terms of baptism. There is no reason to see in this a reference to baptism. Paul is specific here: it is not the washing of water by baptism, but the washing of water by the word. The word of God sanctifies and washes the believer. Our Lord put it this way to his disciples, "Now ye are clean

through the word which I have spoken unto you” (Jn. 15:3). Or, in his prayer in John 17, “Sanctify them through thy truth, thy word is truth” (Jn. 17:17). This word is the word of Christ, the word which is given to us in Scripture, especially in the NT. We move closer to glory as we pay attention to his word in Scripture and apply it to our lives: “But we all, with open face, beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord” (2 Cor. 3:18).

If our Lord died so that we might be holy, so that we might enjoy his presence forever, should we not value holiness? Is it not a contradiction to say we value the death of Christ and not value that for which he died? Let us be holy as God is holy. And to that end, let us hear and do what his word tells us to do.

My friend, are you a believer? Then you are one for whom Christ died. There is nothing more amazing and incredible than that. It is a sure token of God’s love to you, a promise of glory to come, and a call to take up your cross and follow him. May the Lord bless each one of us to do just that.

CHAPTER XLV

HOW A HUSBAND SHOULD LOVE HIS WIFE. (EPH. 5:28-33)

TO THIS DAY, I REMEMBER a story I read in a magazine that came out when I was a teenager. It was about a well-known pastor who was almost forced to step down from the pastorate (and probably should have) – after many years of public and prosperous ministry – because his wife divorced him. Now the interesting thing is that she didn’t divorce him because he was sexually unfaithful to her or any other kind of what we would normally consider flagrant, ministry-ending sins. The reason she gave was that he had chosen his ministry over her. Over the years she had been neglected and ignored and unloved. He had poured all his passion into the ministry and left his wife in the shadows. I do not condone the divorce, but the fact of the matter is that this pastor certainly hadn’t loved his wife as Christ loved the church. He had sinned greatly against his wife.

The thing that haunts me the most to this day about this tragedy is the way the magazine advertised the story on the front cover. On the cover page was a picture of this pastor preaching, along with quotes

from sermons he had given over the years on marriage. Every one of the quotes condemned the very way he had treated his wife. If he had just listened to his own words. If he had just practiced what he had preached.

This story haunts me because I know how it is much easier to preach than to practice what you preach. This is, of course, true of all of us. Hypocrisy is not something some people have to deal with; it is something we all have to deal with. At some level, we are all hypocrites. You've heard the adage, "Don't do what I do, but do what I say." It's the same thing. It is easy to preach on marriage, but it is also easy to sin against your wife.

And so, when I come to preach on words like this, I remember that pastor. I preach this sermon with fear and trembling. I acknowledge before you all that I am not perfect and that there are ways I can and should be a better husband. I also acknowledge that by the grace of God I will become a better husband, and, taking Christ to be my guide, will love my wife the way she ought to be loved.

My wife and I have agreed that, if ever my ministry begins to come between us, I will step down from the ministry immediately. There are a million ways for a husband to sin against his wife because there are a million ways for a husband to fail to love his wife the way he ought to love her. So we husbands need to be vigilant. There is no better place to begin being vigilant in loving our wives than to start by listening to how the apostle exhorts Christian husbands to love their wives.

There are two aspects of this text that I want to look at. There will be, of course, some overlap with what we have already touched on in the previous verses, but I think these things are worth repeating. The overriding exhortation here is found at the beginning of verse 28: "So ought men to love their wives." I want to unpack that statement in two stages. First of all, this text says something about the foundation of this love to which husbands are called. That foundation is marriage and the meaning of marriage as God instituted it among men. In other words, the meaning of marriage gives the why of marital love. Second, this text

says something about the example of this love, which is Christ. His love for the church gives the how of marital love.

First of all, let us consider the foundation of this love, which is marriage. Clearly, Paul is speaking to husbands as to married men. But that is not the only reason why I say that marriage is the foundation of this love. It is because Paul goes on to say, “So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies.” Why does Paul say that? Why does he say, “He that loveth his wife loveth himself”? He says this because there is a real union between husband and wife and that union is created in marriage. They are one; so that, in a very real sense, when a husband loves his wife, he is loving himself. The apostle refers to the Biblical support for this union in verse 31, when he quotes Genesis 2:24. This verse reads, “For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh.”

Our Lord also referred to this verse when answering a question from the Pharisees about divorce. Our Lord quotes this verse, and then says, “Wherefore they are no more two, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder” (Mt. 19:6). This is a very significant text, for a very important reason. This is because our Lord affirms here that the marriage union is a union created by God. Husband and wife are one because God makes them and declares them so: “what God hath joined together.” So when Paul talks about husband and wife being one flesh, he is referring to the reality that in marriage God makes two people, a man and a woman, one flesh.

Some people look at this and think Paul is just referring to sex. Their reason is that in 1 Cor. 6:16, the apostle quotes Gen. 2:24 there as well as a reason for Christian men not to consort with prostitutes. There is no marriage there, just a man joining himself unlawfully to a prostitute. However, that cannot be the sum total to this one flesh reality that Paul and Christ are talking about in Eph. 5 and Mt. 19. The context of Genesis 2:24 is marriage, not just sex. The reason Paul refers to this text in 1 Cor. 6 is because marriage was ordained to be the only place in which a man and a woman should have sex (cf. Heb. 13:4). One of

the many horrors of prostitution is that it allows a man to treat another woman who is not his wife as if she were his wife, but without any of the commitments of love and respect; she becomes merely an object. It is a degrading institution and it is one of the benefits that Christianity brings to society that, where true Christianity flourishes, prostitution does not.

So the one flesh union is a reference to marriage, and marriage is a union created and sanctioned by God himself. In marriage, a man and a woman become one. This is the basis of the apostle's reasoning in the text. It is the reason given why a husband should love his wife. He should love her because she is one with him; to love her is to love himself. Later, in verse 31, where the apostle quotes Genesis 2:24, the language is there of a husband cleaving to [being joined to, holding fast to] his wife. This word "being joined to" underlines again the nature of this union. That word literally means to glue together, to weld together.¹ It is a very strong word. The apostle uses it to cement this idea of the union between husband and wife. Interestingly, it does not contain the idea of alloy, of two things being mixed up into one thing, but the idea of two distinct things being united into one. In marriage, our personalities are not dissolved but are united in such a way that they complement each other and strengthen each other.

Notice how the apostle reasons in verse 29: "For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church." It is unnatural for a person to hate themselves. We care for ourselves. Paul says that, if you are married, self-care means spouse care. If you don't see that, it means that you do not appreciate the reality that marriage is. It means that you don't understand the meaning of marriage.

Paul's logic is this: you are a husband, married to your wife, and therefore one with her. You are her and she is you in a very real sense. (Again, this is not to say that marriage disintegrates our individuality; it unites

¹Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Baker: 2002), p. 773-775.

two people without destroying their identities as individuals.) Therefore it is as unnatural to fail to love your wife as it is to fail to love yourself. You ought to love your wife because she is one with you. In other words, the meaning of marriage is the foundation of love in marriage.

This is very important for the following reason. We live in a culture in which the basis for loving someone else is whatever it is at the moment that pleases you. If another person pleases you, you love them. If they do not please you anymore, you move on. It is the mindset that is behind so many of the broken families in our generation. With this mindset, there is very little room for patience, for forgiveness, for longsuffering, and for sacrificial love. On the other hand, if you look at your wife as you look at yourself, there is going to be a lot more room for all those things. I love the way Charles Hodge expresses this. He writes: “Conjugal love . . . is as much a dictate of nature as self-love; and it is just as unnatural for a man to hate his wife, as it would be for him to hate himself or his own body. A man may have a body which does not altogether suit him. He may wish it were handsomer, healthier, stronger, or more active. Still, it is his body, it is himself; and he nourisheth and cherishes it as tenderly as though it were the best and loveliest man ever had. So a man may have a wife whom he could wish to be better, or more beautiful, or more agreeable; still she is his wife, and, by the constitution of nature and ordinance of God, a part of himself. In neglecting or ill-using her, he violates the laws of nature as well as the law of God.”² Husband, you are to love your wife because you are one with her; you are, therefore, to love your wife as you love yourself. Marriage is the foundation of the love to which you are called.

Second, let us consider the example of this love. It is Christ. Note how verse 28 begins: “So ought men to love their wives.” What does the word “so” refer to [“in the same way” is how the ESV puts it]? Well, clearly, Paul is referring to verses 25-27. Remember, in those verses he reminds us how Christ loved the church: “Husbands, love you wives, even as Christ loved the church . . . so ought men to love their wives.”

²Charles Hodge, *Ephesians*, (Banner of Truth, 1856 [reprint, 1991]), p. 246-247.

The reason you should love your wife is that you are one flesh with her. The example you are to take in loving your wife is the way Christ loved the church. Paul refers to this again in verses 29, 30, and 32.

We noted last time that there are two elements to our Lord's love for the church that are highlighted here. The first is that his love is sacrificial, and the second is that his love secures the happiness of the church. These two elements ought to find their way into the love that as husbands we have for our wives.

Let's take this second aspect first: if we love our wives, we will delight in and work for their happiness. The point of being married is not to have someone around to always serve your wishes. A married man who honors Christ in his marriage is the man who finds his joy in the joy of his wife. He is the man who serves his wife and meets her needs even as he leads her. He finds his delight in her delight. He dwells with her "according to knowledge," as Peter puts it, as an heir together of the grace of life (1 Pet. 3:7), in order to help her and bless her. Christ makes the church beautiful (cf. Eph. 5:27). A good husband does not wear his wife down but builds her up. He follows his master who did not come to be ministered to, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many (Mt. 20:28).

How is this worked out in the marriage? I think the key word here is "cherish" in verse 29: "For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church." The interesting thing about these words is that they come right out of the nursery. In other words, this is the type of language a parent uses to express the tender affection and care they have for their children. In fact, this is the way these words are used elsewhere in the NT. For example, the word behind "nourish" is the word for "bring . . . up" in Ephesians 6:4 with reference to a father's care for his children. The word behind "cherish" is used in 1 Thess. 2:7 to express the apostle's care for the Thessalonian believers and likens that to the way a nurse or a mother takes care of her children: "But we were gentle among you, even as a nurse cherisheth her children."

Paul uses these words here to describe how a person takes care of their bodies: they nourish and cherish them. In other words, people normally devote much care and attention to their bodies. The apostle is saying that this ought to describe our love for our wives. We are always shocked when we see someone who isn't taking care of themselves because that is just not normal human behavior. We are also shocked when we see a parent who isn't devoted to the happiness of their children. The apostle is implying here that we ought to be just as shocked when a Christian husband doesn't love his wife in such a way that he is devoted to her care and happiness. He ought to cherish her.

What does this look like? First of all, it means he is devoted to her. The reason why a wife might chafe under the leadership of her husband is probably because he is more devoted to himself than he is to his wife. The Christian husband is constantly thinking of his wife and her needs and wishes even as he leads his family. He is her servant even as he is her head. Now I am not saying that Paul is encouraging any kind of foolishness here, or that a loving husband indulges his wife even when it would not be for her good. It doesn't mean that he moves to her every whim. That would be not be wise or loving, and that is not how Christ loves the church. It does mean that she comes before everyone else. The husband's first affection and first loyalty is to his wife, not to his buddies or his co-workers or his parents. His wife is the love of his life. As Martin Luther is supposed to have said, "The Christian is supposed to love his neighbor, and since his wife is his nearest neighbor, she should be his deepest love." Whether he said that or not, I think it's absolutely right.

Second, it means that he doesn't just love his wife with his hands, but also with his heart. We all know that we are called to love even when we don't feel like it. There are always going to be times in a marriage when you do the right thing, not because you want to do it, but because it is the right thing to do. You don't cherish your wife if your married life is just one long list of duties to perform. If your affections don't follow your will, then something is wrong. To use John Piper's famous illustration, you don't give your wife roses and then explain that it was

just your duty to do so. That is not cherishing and nourishing. If you are not in the place where you feel love to your wife, where you are moved by your wife, then you need to get there. To stay in that place is sin and you need to repent. Husband, cherish your wife!

You can fail to do this in at least one of two ways. One way you can fail to do this is by intentionally doing things that hurt your wife. If you know that doing something will hurt her, but you do it anyway, that is wrong. It is not loving your wife as Christ loved the church. There is another way to fail to do this. It is by ignoring your wife. Going about life as if your wife did not exist. Christ does not ignore his church, his people. He constantly reminds us that he is with us, even to the end of the age. In all our afflictions, he is afflicted. He will never leave us or forsake us. He is always present (even if we don't feel it) to help and to bless. Thus, to live as if your life was just your life and not something you share with your wife is to fail to love your wife as Christ loved the church.

In all honesty, I must confess to my shame that I have been guilty of both the sin of omission and the sin of commission in this respect. I need to do better, and to follow more fully Christ our Lord in this regard. Thank God that he gives grace to grow in our walk with him and with our wives.

The other aspect of our Lord's love is that it is sacrificial. Now, if you are not living for your own joy but finding your joy in the joy of your spouse, you are going to find it a lot easier to live sacrificially for her. It means that you will be able to lay some of your desires on the altar in order to fulfill the desires of your wife.

All this should be manifested in concrete ways. It is the easiest thing to do to tell your wife you love her (if it is not, then something is dreadfully wrong!). Our love should not just be communicated by our lips; it should show itself by our actions. It is not just a matter of feeling like you love your wife. Rather, do you love your wife in concrete, specific ways? I noticed something when I was reading verse 25 again. It says, "Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ loved the church and

gave himself for it.” Our Lord has always loved his church and he will continue to love his church into eternity. But when Paul talks about Christ’s love for the church, he puts it in past tense, “loved.” Why? Because the apostle is referring to a specific act of love, the supreme act of love, by which Christ showed the church he loved her. That specific act was the cross, giving up his life so that those who make up his church might have eternal life. When we think of Christ’s love two thousand years later, this is what we think of. Not that Christ does not continue to love us, but he manifested toward us in this very specific, concrete way. Husbands, can you do this? Can you point to specific, concrete ways that you have loved your wife, even sacrificially? That is loving her as Christ loved the church.

As Christians, we have the greatest example and motivation and pattern to have wonderful and fulfilled marriages. As believers, we go into marriage having already experienced the kind of love that should guide and preserve and grow our marriages: Christ’s love for the church. We are not called to live out something alien to our experience, but something which we have all experienced. Christ’s love is the example, and it is also the power behind our marriages. It is his love that motivates us. It is his love that gives us grace for every trial and hardship that we face in marriage. We don’t do this alone. Christ walks with us in our marriages, with both husband and wife. There is, therefore, no reason why believers who are married should not be able to work out their differences. There is no reason why believers who are married should not be able to have the very best relationship with their spouse. We are not only united to each other, we are also mutually united to Christ. What greater commonality is there? None! May God grant that, as husbands and wives united to each other but also united to Christ, we will be able to grow in our love to each other even as we grow in our love to Christ. These things go hand in hand. You will love your wife more if you Christ above all. And the wife will love and reverence her husband (ver. 33) if she loves and reverences Christ above all. May it be so in our church!

Ephesians

Part 6:
The Christian Warfare
(Ephesians 6)

CHAPTER XLVI

HARMONY IN THE CHRISTIAN HOME (EPH. 6:1-4)

I THINK IT WOULD BE SAFE TO SAY that all of us want to have harmony in our homes. We want our homes to be a safe place from all the hostility and bitterness that exists in the world. The last thing we desire is to come home to dissension and anger and hostility and fighting. Such an environment leaves no place for the soul to rest. It causes husbands and wives, parents and children, to draw up into themselves and to avoid the people to whom they ought to be the closest. If a child does not experience love and harmony in the home, we should not be surprised if they grow up to be cynical and suspicious of others. Then they will go on to reproduce the cycle of suspicion and cynicism, hostility and anger, in their own homes. That should be the last thing we want.

As Christians, we have a choice. We may or may not have been brought up in a broken home. We may or may not have grown up in a home where parents fought with each other and with their children. In the end, that shouldn't matter when it comes to our homes, because

we have the perfect guide, our Lord, and the perfect rule, the Scriptures. We also have the perfect enabler, the Holy Spirit. Our homes do not have to be a mirror image of the ones we grew up in, nor do they have to be an image of the homes so often found in Christless families.

On the other hand, if we have grown up in a godly home, though you should thank God for this, you shouldn't presume that you are just automatically going to reproduce this in your home. A righteous man can have a godless son. Godliness does not run in families; it is a gift of the grace of God. Sin does, however, come naturally to us, and if we are not careful – even if we were raised in a consciously Christian home – we will end up reproducing an environment in our homes that is more like our godless culture than it is like the home that is the fruit of gospel living.

Now, I have preached on this passage many times. This morning, therefore, I want to approach it from a particular point of view, from the point of view of how we can restore and secure harmony in the Christian home. I say Christian home on purpose, because all the apostle says here is predicated on the fact that he is speaking to people who have embraced the gospel and the Lordship of Jesus Christ over their lives. You see this in our text in the words “in the Lord” in verse 1 and “of the Lord” in verse 4. The Lord is a reference to Jesus Christ. He is our Lord, and his words and example are the pattern and motivation for the Christian home. If you don't embrace Christ as Lord, then it is hard to see how you could truly put these words into practice.

How then do we secure harmony in the home? I am talking about harmony here. I know that the word “harmony” is not specifically mentioned in these verses, but it is definitely implied. Remember that everything the apostle says from 5:22 to 6:9 is predicated upon his exhortation in 5:21 – “Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God.” That is harmony, putting others before yourself. It's like what the apostle is talking about in Romans 15 when he exhorts the believers in Rome to “be likeminded one toward another” and to “receive ye one another, as Christ also received us to the glory of God” (Rom. 15:5,

7). It's what Peter is getting at when he reminds husbands and wives that they are "heirs together of the grace of life" (1 Pet. 3:7). If we put Paul's instructions into practice, we are going to see the relationships in our homes – between husband and wife, parent and child – become increasingly harmonious and unified and loving and caring.

Here's something else. Sometimes people have been so long in a bad condition that they don't have any hope for change. Things are just the way they are and they think they are going to stay that way. As Christians, we don't have to accept that! Look, if your problems are so bad that you don't have hope for change, then the real problem is that you don't really believe what the Bible says about the power of God's grace. Our Lord said, "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (Jn. 8:32). A lot of people quote that verse and apply it to truth in general, but our Lord is not making a statement about truth in general; he is making a statement about the truth concerning himself. You have to read this verse with the previous one: "If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." In other words, if you embrace the truth about Christ and become his disciple, then you will experience true freedom. The freedom he is talking about here is freedom from sin, because in verses 34 and 36 he says, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin . . . if the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed." It could be that harmony is hard to come by in our homes. It could be that you are very discouraged and don't think it could ever be achieved. That is just to give into a lie that the Devil wants you to believe, but the Bible tells us that "greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world" (1 Jn. 4:4).

I realize that for true harmony to exist in our homes, everyone has to participate. However, you cannot change the other person; you can only change yourself. So stop looking at the other person; Consider the ways you can change. There is freedom in that, even if the other person never changes. The Bible never gives us the excuse that we get to wait on

the other person, or if the other person doesn't change, then we don't have to. That's baloney.

With that in mind, what does our passage say about how to achieve harmony in the home?

Well, the first thing I think we should point out is that Ephesians 5:22-33 comes before Ephesians 6:1-4. In other words, unless husbands and wives are relating to each other the way they are supposed to relate, it's going to be hard to have a home in which the children relate properly to the parents and the parents to the children and the children with each other. Of course, if you don't have children in the home, all the harmony in the home is going to come down to harmony between the husband and the wife. So this is fundamental.

How does this harmony look? Let me remind you what the apostle says. He says that wives are to submit to their husbands. I know that this is not a popular thing to say today, but it is the Biblical thing to say. If a wife is fundamentally unwilling to submit to her husband, and if the husband is fundamentally unwilling to lead the home, then there will be no basis for Biblical harmony in the home.

However, the husband ought never to be a tyrant or bully or center-of-the-universe in the Christian home. Christ is Lord, not the husband. The husband is to lead his family, and especially his wife, in a loving manner. He is to love his wife as himself. He is to recognize that marriage has brought him into this "one-flesh" relationship with his wife, and on this basis he is to serve her and lead her, as Christ serves and leads the church. If the husband truly loves his wife and is looking out for her interests and not just his own, then he will be in a position to lead her in such a way that she will willingly follow. It will be hard, and sometimes impossible, for a wife to submit to a selfish bully. That is not the marriage Paul is calling us to model.

The apostle's words to husbands and wives are absolutely foundational to 6:1-4. If the marriage is not right, it will be very difficult, if not impossible, to get the parenting right. It will create an environment in which children will find it easy to disobey and disrespect their parents.

That doesn't, of course, give the children an excuse for such behavior, or make it right. It does make it easy for sinful attitudes and behaviors to take root. As parents, we must remember that when we sin against our spouses, it will not only affect our relationship to our spouse, our sin will also affect the people next closest to us, namely, our children. The words of Hebrews are relevant here: "Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord: looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled" (Heb. 12:14-15). When bitterness between husband and wife springs up, the first people (outside the marriage) to be defiled by that are the children.

I think this is especially important with respect to the attitudes that the husband has toward his wife and the wife toward her husband. Note the thing that Paul says at the end of Ephesians 5: "Nevertheless, let every one of you in particular so love his wife even as himself; and the wife see that she reverence her husband" (33). There are these two attitudes: love and reverence. They are absolutely crucial to harmony in the home. The husband loves his wife and does so in a way that is obvious to everyone – the wife, of course, and especially the children. Husband, does your wife feel loved by you? It is not enough to convince yourself that you love your wife. You need to love her in ways that she feels loved. If you are not doing that, you are probably not loving your wife.

Wife, does your husband feel respected by you? It is not enough to convince yourself that you respect him; he must feel respected by you. By the way, the word in the KJV is better than the one used in most translations here. Most translations use the word "respect" in verse 33. But "reverence" is better. It is more accurate. The Greek word literally means "to fear." Of course, Paul is not saying that the wife should be afraid of her husband, but there ought to be genuine reverence for him. And the children ought to see that. Do they? Why do you think children don't love and respect their parents? It's often because they don't see the love and respect their parents ought to have for each other. It is the first step to securing harmony in the home.

So wife, submit to your husband. And husband, lead her in a way that is loving and fundamentally consistent with the way Christ loves and leads the church.

Next, Paul comes to the children in verse 1-3. If there is to be harmony in the home, children must learn to obey their parents while they are at home. Then, even when they leave home and start their own families, they still show respect for their moms and dads. That is the point of these verses.

Another way to put this is that the Christian home is not a child-centered home. It is not a home where the children think they are the most important thing around, and where their wishes are always to be granted. Rather, the Christian home is a Christ-centered home, in which his Lordship is respected and followed in every area of the home. Part of being Christ-centered means following the leadership structure which he has ordained, meaning that parents lovingly lead their children and children lovingly obey their parents.

You know that you have entered a child-centered home when children are constantly interrupting their parents, when they can use manipulation and rebellion to get their way, when they can dictate the family schedule, when their needs take precedence over the needs of the spouse, when they have an equal or overriding vote in family decisions, when they can escape responsibility for their actions, when they look at their parents as if they were their peers, when they are entertained and coddled (instead of disciplined) out of a bad mood.¹

In many cases, the problem with children not obeying their parents is a problem with the parents not obeying Christ – that is, not willing to put in the time and effort to structure their home in the way Christ has ordained. Yes, children are to obey their parents and this is addressed to them and they are accountable to obey their parents, but it is also the parents' responsibility to see that the children understand that this is

¹I got this list from *The Heart of Anger* by Lou Priolo (Grace and Truth Books, 2015), p. 24.

how they are expected to behave and to explain (as appropriate) why it is this way.

Speaking of reasons why, do you notice that the apostle spends most of his time in verses 1-3 giving such reasons? There are three of them. One reason is from nature: “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.” Charles Hodge, commenting on this phrase, writes, “It is not because of the personal character of the parent, nor because of his kindness, nor on the ground of expediency, but because it is ‘right;’ an obligation arising out of the nature of the relation between parents and children, and which must exist wherever the relation itself exists.”² Nature and just plain reason ought to tell us that parents are the natural choice for the direction of the life of their children. To replace the parent with a nameless bureaucracy, as seems to be occurring in the West, is unnatural and unwise. Therefore, it is right and natural for children to obey their parents and wrong and unnatural for them to rebel against their direction and authority.

Another reason the apostle gives is from Scripture, straight out of the Ten Commandments: “Honour thy father and mother; (which is the first commandment with promise;) that it may be well with thee, and thou mayest live long on the earth” (2-3). It bothers me the way some evangelicals speak about the OT. One prominent evangelical pastor says that we need to unhinge our faith from the OT. Paul never did that. If you unhinge your faith from OT, you will also have to unhinge your faith from the NT. They go together. Yes, there is discontinuity but there is also continuity. The discontinuity shows up here in the way Paul generalizes the promise. In the Ten Commandments, the promise was that obedient children would have long life in the land of Canaan. Paul generalizes this to long life on the earth, because the church is no longer tied to a specific geographic location. However, there is also the obvious continuity. The moral law still applies. Paul is basing NT ethical commands on OT ethical commands. The reason is obvious: the God of the OT is the God of the NT. To deny this is to fall into

²Charles Hodge, *Ephesians* (Banner of Truth, 1991 [reprint, 1856 ed.]), p. 262.

the second-century heresy of Marcionism and to undermine the moral basis of the NT ethic.

This ought to tell you children just how important it is to obey your parents. God thought it so important that he did two things: first, he put in the Ten Commandments, which was a summary of how the life of the godly man or woman is to live before God. It's right there next to, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me." It's right there next to, "Thou shalt not murder." This is clearly serious, and you see how serious it is when you look at how rebellious children were dealt with under the Law. In a word, they were stoned! Now, here is another point of discontinuity, in that the punishments of the Law no longer apply to the church. We should not think, however, that God has softened in his view towards children who rebel against their parents. The Law remains a reminder of just how God continues to think of it.

Then the next thing God did was to attach a promise to this commandment. This has given commentators a lot of indigestion because of the fact Paul says that this is "the first commandment with promise." The problem is that there is a promise attached to the second commandment. However, I think that the solution is that the promise attached to the second commandment is not specific to that commandment but is a promise (or a threat) of how God will act toward all who disobey any of his commandments. Thus, the promise attached to the Fifth Commandment is the first promise attached to a specific commandment. But there's another problem then. There are no other promises attached to any other commandments in the Ten Commandments! So why would Paul say it is the first commandment with a promise? The solution is surely that, when Paul says this is the first commandment with a promise, he is not thinking only of the Ten Commandments, but the whole Law which includes the Ten Commandments. This is a consistent and satisfactory solution.

The point is that God gave a promise to this commandment. It's that important to him. It's not only that you should obey your parents because it's the right thing to do, but also because God has created this

world so that obedience would be rewarded and disobedience would be punished. That is the point of the promise. It is not that there are not exceptions to the rule. But exceptions do not negate the rule, and the rule – the promise – is that if you obey your parents, you are putting yourself in a position to be blessed. On the other hand, children who do not obey their parents are setting themselves up for failure and disappointment in life. This is why it is so important for parents to shepherd their children rightly and to command their obedience and respect. Proverbs 29:15 says, “The rod and reproof give wisdom, but a child left to himself brings shame to his mother” (ESV).

The most important reason Paul gives for children to obey their parents is from the gospel: I get this from the phrase “in the Lord” (1). This is an unmistakable reference to the Lord Jesus Christ. In a Christian home, everything is to be flavored by the gospel, including the way children relate to their parents. Children need to understand that our homes stand under the Lordship of Christ and that this is a good thing, not a bad thing. Christ died for our sins that we might have eternal life. This is not the act of a tyrant. This is not the act of someone who is using you for selfish and unloving ends. This is the generous and loving act of a Savior who gave his life so that his people might have never-ending and ever-increasing joy. So if obedience to parents is something he commands, we can be sure that it is for our good.

At the same time, the gospel reminds us that obedience to any authority is not the basis of our salvation; the basis of our salvation is Christ. Thus, where the gospel flavors the home life, it will temper the parent’s upbringing of their children, so that it is not done in a legalistic, mechanical, lifeless, and loveless atmosphere. Yes, we expect obedience from our children, but we also give them grace, because that is just the way our Savior relates to us.

That brings us to verse 4: “And, ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.”

First of all, Paul addresses fathers in particular here because fathers are the leaders in the home. It was that way in the general culture as well, but this does not preclude mothers. It is the ultimate responsibility of the father to make sure his children are being educated and brought up in a way that is consistent with the “nurture and admonition of the Lord.” Of course the mother plays an important and crucial role here as well and she should hear these verses addressed to herself too.

In our day, though, I think it is good that Paul put “fathers” here, because in our culture, men are more likely than not to leave the child-rearing to the mother. This is true I think in Christian and non-Christian homes. This tendency is not Biblical. Fathers, God holds you just as responsible for the upbringing of your children. We need to invest in our children, our sons and our daughters, and this doesn’t begin and end in bringing home the bacon. It means that you are actively participating in their intellectual, emotional, and spiritual development.

Note what Paul says: “in the nurture (*paideia*) and admonition (*nouthesia*) of the Lord.” This word “nurture” includes the total development and training of the child. The Greeks used this word to refer to the development of culture in their citizens. In other words, this means all that goes into the training of a child and the outlook that they develop as a result of that. Of course, for different people this means different things. For the ancient Spartans, it meant developing a sense of total submission to the state; that was their culture. For the ancient Athenians, it meant educating their citizens so that they developed physical and spiritual maturity so that they became responsible individuals who could serve the state.³

For the Christian, it means something entirely different: it means training our children so that they develop a Biblical worldview centered on Christ. This is the meaning of the phrase “of the Lord” in verse 4. We are not interested merely that they can read and write. We want them to read and write and think and do art and science and everything else

³Colin Brown, ed., *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Vol. 3, (Zondervan, 1986), p. 775.

to the glory of God. We want them to live out the answer to the first question in the Shorter Catechism: “The chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.”

One of the ways we do this is by instruction and admonition. Parents, you must teach your children the right way. They will not absorb it by some process of osmosis. They must hear from you the truth of God’s word. If you share the gospel with anyone, share it with your children. Teach them the Bible. Teach them theology. Memorize the Bible with them. Sing it with them. Let them know why you believe what you believe. Don’t just expect them to embrace your worldview, because there are plenty of influences out there in the world who would love to draw your children away from the faith. Make it interesting. Show them that it is freeing. Adorn the gospel of God our Savior in all things, especially in front of your children. Back it up with your life.

If they truly embrace the gospel, along with their parents, that is the truest way to harmony in the home. There are ways to sabotage this nurture and admonition, and that is why the apostle put in those words, “fathers, provoke not your children to wrath.” In Colossians, Paul writes, “Fathers, provoke not your children to anger, lest they be discouraged” (Col. 3:21). Are your children angry, angry with you? It could be that they are angry because you have provoked them.

There are any number of ways this could happen. Let me list a few.⁴ It could happen because of marital disharmony, as we’ve already pointed out. It could happen because you are modeling sinful anger in front of them, blowing up at each other and at your children. It could happen because, when you do discipline them, even if they are wrong, you discipline them in anger. As Lloyd-Jones put it, “We are incapable of exercising true discipline unless we are first able to exercise self-control, and discipline our own tempers.”⁵ Another consequence of this is scolding our children, which happens when we are unable to talk to our chil-

⁴Again, this list comes from Lou Priolo’s book, *The Heart of Anger*, chapter 2, p. 29-51.

⁵D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Life in the Spirit*, (Baker, 1974), p. 278.

dren in a natural tone of voice. Along the same lines is a parent who disciplines their children in front of others, adding insult to injury. In some sense this is a lack of discipline, refusing to make a place and a time in which correction can be administered in a way consistent with both justice and the dignity of the child. We can provoke them to anger when we refuse to listen to the child's side of the story, when we rush to judgment before we have had the opportunity to hear from them what happened.

There are other ways. For example, when we live a double life in front of them, when we tell them to do one thing and then do another. We can do it when we refuse to admit we are wrong and don't ask their forgiveness when we have sinned against them. We can do it when we are constantly finding fault with them, when we refuse to praise them for their successes but always point out their failures. We can do it when we continually compare them to others, especially to their siblings or perhaps someone else's child.

It is always the easiest thing to do to blame someone else when our homes are not the way they ought to be. If our homes are disordered, the very first place we need to look is in the mirror. If you provoke your children to anger, and you don't repent, Paul says that this will lead to discouragement. If that is not relieved, it will inevitably lead to rebellion. In other words, the failure of parents to pay attention to verse 4 leads to children who don't pay attention to verses 1-3.

If we want harmony in the home, we need to take heed to all the apostle's instructions, including his words to wives, husbands, children, and parents. If there is not harmony in the home, on any level, it is because we have left off obeying God's word to us in these verses.

Harmony is what we should expect in the Christian home. It ought to be the outworking of God reconciling us to himself through Jesus Christ and bringing harmony between us and God. If we have experienced this, it ought to show in practical, daily ways in our homes. Remember that these instructions flow out of the exhortation to be filled with the Spirit in 5:18. The promise of the Spirit is the gift of Christ,

given to those who believe in the Son of God. If we live in the Spirit, we ought to walk in the Spirit, not provoking one another, but exhibiting the fruit of the Spirit in our lives (cf. Gal. 5:22-26).

CHAPTER XLVII

THE CHRISTIAN WORK ETHIC (EPH. 6:5-8)

BACK IN CHAPTER 4, we noted that the apostle commends and commands labor. In other words, he speaks to the morality of labor: “Let him that stole steal no more, but rather let him labor, working with his hands that thing which is good, that he may have to give to him that needeth” (4:28). In the verses before us this morning, Paul speaks to the manner of and the motivation for our labor.

Now it is true that he is speaking to bondservants in verses 5-8. However, there are principles here that apply to all of us who, like the bondservant, work for others. Even if you are self-employed, these principles still apply. On some level, all of us are working for someone else. If you are not self-employed, that someone else is your boss. If you are self-employed, that someone else is your customer.

These verses don’t just apply to you and me because we, like the bondservant, are working for someone else. The main reason they apply to us is because we belong to Christ and all our work is ultimately to be work for Christ. It is not just the slave who must be conscientious of this fact; it is something that all who embrace the Lordship of Christ over their lives must live out on a day-to-day basis. These verses are

a specific application of the general principles laid out in verses like 1 Corinthians 10:31, “Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God.” Or Romans 14:7-9, “For none of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself. For whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord: whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord’s. For to this end Christ both died, and rose, and revived, that he might be Lord both of the dead and living.” Thus the apostle commands the servants to do their work, “as unto Christ” (5), “as the servants of Christ” (6), and “as to the Lord” (7). In other words, the underlying principle here is that believers, as the slaves of Christ, are to do their work to and for him. It is that principle we want to explore this morning. In particular, we want to explore how this should affect how and why we do our work.

How does being the servant of Christ affect how we do our work? Well, first of all, it means we are to do our work by respecting the authorities that God has placed over us. I take this from the overarching exhortation of verses 5-8: “Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh” (5). You don’t have to be a slave for this verse to apply to you. If you have a boss to whom you are accountable, the same principle applies to you. He or she is over you and you are to respect that authority. You are to carry out their instructions; you are to obey their commands. Of course, this doesn’t mean you obey unlawful or wicked directives. It does mean that you are not at liberty to do whatever you please on the job. You are not at liberty to disregard your boss’s instructions just because you think they are ludicrous or because you think you know a better way to do something. You may, in fact, know a better way. In that case, you share (respectfully) your ideas with your boss; if he or she agrees with you, great. If not, you drop it and do what they want you to do. The bottom line is that you are obligated to obey your boss even if you don’t like what they are telling you to do. It is a terrible witness to your employer and your fellow employees to disregard the wishes and directives of those who are over you. Such an attitude does not spring from godly principles. More likely, it springs

from pride, and it poisons not only your relationship with your boss but also your witness to them.

Even if you are self-employed, there is a principle here that can apply to you. Every time you enter a contract with someone, you are effectively binding yourself to the person through certain promises and expectations. As a Christian, you are obligated to follow through on those expectations. You are not to back down from your obligations or to renege on your contractual promises. Again, it is a terrible witness when a Christian does something like this. We are to be men and women of our word.

We must always beware of interpreting our freedom in Christ to mean that we can or should do whatever we want. That is never what Christian liberty means. We are always to “be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution” (1 Pet. 2:13). Nor does freedom in Christ mean that we are free from responsibility. It does not mean that we are free to pursue our every whim and desire. It is no indication of spirituality that we are free to do whatever we please. Nor is it any indication of a lack of spirituality that we are bound by certain earthly responsibilities and obligations. Obedience to earthly masters is not a hindrance to spiritual flourishing; neither will being self-employed necessarily promote godliness. I say this because there is, in certain quarters of the church, an idea that to be tied down in any respect to external authorities is antithetical to spiritual advancement. Such an idea finds no place in the Scriptures. Obey your masters!

How does this work itself out in our respective areas of employment? This leads to the second point. We are to do our work, the apostle says, “with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ” (5). Whether or not you have an earthly master, whether or not you report to a boss or employer or board, the Christian ought to do his or her work “with fear and trembling.” What does this mean?

When you compare this to other verses where this phrase appears, it is clear that it refers to what Charles Hodge calls “conscientious solici-

itude.”¹ In other words, we are to care about the quality of our labor. The effort we put into our work is not something we are throwing away. We are not to look at it as something that does not matter. It matters: we are to do it “with fear and trembling.”

The apostle is not referring here to the servile fear that many slaves had of their masters. This again, is clear from a comparison to similar passages. For example, Paul uses this phrase when he exhorts the Philippian believers to “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil. 2:12). He is not saying that the Christian is to grow in grace because they are afraid God will squash them if they don’t dot every “i” or cross every “t” to God’s satisfaction. That would be servile fear. That is not what the apostle is commending there. Rather, he is saying that they ought to show a great deal of concern and care about their spiritual condition; they are not to take spiritual growth lightly – they are to work at it with fear and trembling.

It’s interesting, isn’t it, that the apostle should use this same phrase with respect to spiritual growth and service rendered to earthly masters! It shows just how abominable it is to think that it is mark of spirituality when we abandon our earthly responsibilities in order to pursue spirituality. God does not command us to go out of the world; he commands us to be in it though not of it, and part of being in it means doing our work well. We are not to do our work in a slipshod manner; we are to do it with fear and trembling.

Remember what the apostle said to the Thessalonians: “Neither did we eat any man’s bread for nought; but wrought with labor and travail night and day, that we might not be chargeable to any of you: not because we have not power, but to make ourselves an example unto you to follow us. For even when we were with you, this we commanded you, that if any would not work, neither should he eat” (2 Thess. 3:8-10). You see how the apostle worked: “with labor and travail” – that is the outcome of doing it with fear and trembling. Now the reason he had to say this to them was because “we hear that there are some

¹Charles Hodge, Ephesians.

which walk among you disorderly, working not at all, but are busybodies” (ver. 11). For whatever reason, some were simply not working. Far from being Christian, it is wicked: “Now them that are such we command and exhort by our Lord Jesus Christ, that with quietness they work, and eat their own bread” (12). Refusing to labor in this world is never commended to the Christian, even under the most spiritual of pretenses.

It doesn’t matter where you work, how long you plan to work there, or what your particular job is, as long as it is labor that is consistent with the Lordship of Christ over your life. You are to do it, whatever it is, with fear and trembling, with conscientious solicitude. You are to do your work well, to the best of your ability, whatever you or others may think of it. You are to care about what you do.

Third, the apostle says that we are to labor “in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ” (5). Have you ever known someone who couldn’t do their job because their mind was always someplace else? We are to be single-minded, not double-minded, in our work. I think the apostle is referring to people who are so discontent with their position and work that they are always dreaming about being somewhere else and doing something else; as a result, they are simply unable to do their work “with fear and trembling.” It would have been easy for a bondservant to fall into this mindset, but it is equally easy for you and me. If we will do our work well, we must give our full attention to our tasks; we are to be single-minded.

We must at this point ask: why do all this? Paul is not talking to missionaries on the mission field – he is talking to slaves, many of whom were laboring at menial tasks. What was the point? Why give your full attention to such things? Why do it with fear and trembling? Surely such earthly and menial tasks are not worthy of the Christian’s full attention! The reason is given at the end of verse 5: we are to give our obedience to our masters and attention and care to our work, because all our work is rendered ultimately for Christ. All work can and does have eternal significance when it is done as a servant of Christ and when

it is done for him. You don't have to preach a sermon or go on a mission trip to serve Christ. You can wash cars and serve Christ. You can collect garbage and serve Christ. You can serve on a city council and serve Christ. You can teach or mow lawns or do art and science and a million other things and serve Christ. This is why the care and concern we have for our work is not a function of its cultural value, whether that culture is defined by the church or by the wider secular society in which we live. It is a function of the one we serve: Jesus Christ. He doesn't just call preachers; he also calls electricians.

Of course, we need men and women who are willing to do explicitly Christian work, who are willing to go to the mission field and labor and die there. The church needs pastors and teachers. But the fact of the matter is that we may not be gifted for such work, and then it is no lack of spirituality when we go into a job that is not explicitly tied to Christian ministry. In fact, like the slaves to whom Paul was writing, there may be circumstances beyond our control that dictate the avenue we take in life, an avenue that was not one that we wanted. That circumstance does not mean that God, in his providence, has no purpose for you there, or that you have failed in life. I think of John G. Paton's father in this connection. He desperately wanted to be a missionary, but for whatever reason, was unable. Instead, he spent his life as a humble weaver, laboring at this work day in and day out in what must have seemed like menial labor compared to the mission field. However, it was his godliness at home that certainly played an enormous role in the spiritual formation of his son, who later went on to be a missionary in the New Hebrides, leading an entire island to the feet of Christ. Over and over again, Paton calls attention to the role his father played in his own spiritual development. His father wasn't called to go to the mission field – instead, God called him to so live his life as a weaver that his son would go to the mission field with God's great blessing and success.

It is also a poisonous and completely unchristian idea that, unless you get your dream job, you have failed in life. It is wrong to assert that unless you have achieved the “American Dream,” are making lots

of money, have a large retirement, you have wasted your life. That is completely false. You have only failed in life when you fail to serve Christ in whatever place he has put you. At the end of the day, it doesn't matter that much what you have done in this life, but rather how you have done it, and to whom you have done it. Are you living your life for Christ and to Christ? That is the mark of true success.

Thus the apostle goes on to that we are to work, "not with eyeservice, as menpleasers; but as the servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart" (6). This is a consequence of serving Christ; our aim is to please Christ in our work. The idea is more than that we are to do good work at all times, as if what the apostle is condemning are those who work just when the eye of the master is upon them. Of course this should never describe the way the Christian does his or her work. What the apostle is saying here is that we are to work in our job, knowing that ultimately our master is in heaven, not in the office down the hall. We are to seek to please Christ in our work, whether or not our boss acknowledges us.

There are some people who will only labor well and do excellent work as long as they are acknowledged by the people over them and around them. If they don't get that plaque on the wall, that trophy, or that raise, their productivity goes down. The apostle is saying that the disciple of Christ ought never to approach their work in that way. It's not about recognition from men; we are to work knowing that we owe our Lord excellence in all that we do. We don't do it to please men; we do it to please the Lord.

That perspective means that we don't just do our work because we have to; we do it because we want to, and the reason we want to is because we are doing it unto the Lord: "doing the will of God from the heart." As John Murray explains, "It is the same vice [that of men-pleasing] that explains the lack of pleasure in work; labour is boredom and about all that is in view is the pay-cheque. This evil that turns labour into drudgery is but the ultimate logic of eye-service and men-

pleasing.”² It might perhaps be surprising that a consequence of doing work to the glory of God is finding fulfillment in our work, but that is certainly an implication of what the apostle is saying. Unlike men, God looks at the heart. He cares about our motives. Therefore, if we are laboring for the Lord, we are not going to be content to merely perform well, but we are also going to consider the motives behind the performance. If we glorify God when we enjoy him, then we can only glorify God when we find pleasure in the tasks that we do for him. This again does not merely apply to explicitly spiritual exercises like Bible-reading and prayer, but also to our work.

How can working for God not bring with it its own reward? When we labor for Christ, we have elevated our work and given it “the character of a religious service, because the motive is regard to divine authority, and its object is a divine person. It thus ceases to be servile, and becomes consistent with the highest mental elevation and spiritual freedom.”³

This point is so important that the apostle essentially restates it in the following verse: “With good will doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men” (7). The word “goodwill” here also connotes the idea of zeal and enthusiasm. The point is that it is always possible to be enthusiastic in our work when it is done with an eye to the glory of God, and from a heart of thanksgiving for his loving lordship over our lives.

In doing this, we follow Christ, who himself came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many (Mt. 20:28). As Paul reminds us in his letter to the Philippians, he “made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross” (Phil. 2:7-8). It is “to this infinitely exalted and infinitely condescending Saviour, who came not be served, but to serve, that the obedience of every Christian, whether servant, child, wife, or subject, is really and

²John Murray, *Principles of Conduct* (Eerdmans, 1957), p. 88.

³Hodge, *Ephesians*

consciously rendered. Thus the most galling yoke is made easy, and the heaviest burden light.”⁴

The reward that the Christian eyes is not an earthly reward. We may or may not be rewarded or recognized for our work in this life. That is why the apostle goes on to say: “Knowing that whatsoever good thing any man doeth, the same shall he receive of the Lord, whether he be bond or free.” I know that some people argue that it militates against the grace of God in salvation to recognize the possibility of rewards in heaven. I simply don’t know how to interpret verses like this apart from some doctrine of future reward, and the reward is not just that we get to go to heaven when we die. The reward the apostle is speaking of in this verse is specifically tied to things they have done in this life: “whatsoever good thing any man doeth, the same shall he receive of the Lord.” The Lord will recognize all work done for him in the age to come. Our reward is future, not present.

That makes it all even better. Any reward given now can only be temporary and marred by effects of our fallen world. But the reward in the age to come is eternal and unmarred. It is sweetness without any bitterness. It is wealth without worry. It is undiminished good.

Does this mar the doctrine of grace? I don’t think so. Any reward in the age to come is not a reward based on merit; any reward will be a gift of God’s grace. It has pleased our Father to recognize the labors of his children in this world (which they accomplish in the strength of his grace) by lavishing gifts upon them in the next. “Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord” (1 Cor. 15:58). We do not receive them because we deserve them; we receive them because God has ordained them for us in his mercy and grace.

This reward does not depend upon your status in this world: “whether he be bond or free.” The reward does not depend on the amount of fame you acquired in this world, or riches, or achievements.

⁴Hodge

It is graciously given to those who faithfully served Christ, whether or not they were noticed by men.

Here is the bottom line: you will work most fruitfully and with more fulfillment, when your eye is not on men (your boss or the customer) but on Christ; when your reward is not the paycheck but the glory of God; when your example is Christ and your Lord is Jesus. He sweetens every task and enlarges every field of labor when we do it for him. For the Christian, there is no such thing as secular work, for all that we do is religious in the sense that it is done for Christ.

If you are a Christian, your labor is not in vain in the Lord. Because he died for us, and because we have eternal life in him, our entire life belongs to the Lord of the universe. Our calling is noble because we serve the King of heaven.

If you are not a Christian, the most you can hope for is to find some significance in your work. However, that turns your work into a cruel taskmaster, one to whom you must devote everything, without ever being sure that it will not turn on you in the end and cheat you of the meaning you were so desperately trying to find. As the hymn puts it: Nothing of this earth is sure; vain hope soon dies; things of the Lord endure – Christ satisfies. You work cannot give you the one thing you really need: peace with God. Only Christ can give that to you. The wonderful thing is, he freely offers his grace to all who come to him. So come to Christ, embrace him as your Savior and Lord, and in embracing him, find eternal life and new significance in every earthly task.

CHAPTER XLVIII

THE NEW TESTAMENT ATTITUDE TOWARD SLAVERY (EPH. 6:5-9)

BEFORE WE COME TO EXPOUND these verses, I think it is important to step back for a moment and to consider their overall import. In the KJV, it might be easy to miss the fact that Paul is addressing slaves and slave-owners in this text, where the terms are translated “servant” and “master.” However, the terms are the terms for “slave” and “lord,” and thus this brings us to the question of the NT attitude toward slavery, and the apostle’s in particular. The problem comes down to this: why didn’t the apostle command the slave-owners to free their slaves? The fact of the matter is that he doesn’t do this; instead, he tells them to treat their slaves with the same respect and dignity that they would want to be treated. To Philemon, he studiously keeps from pressuring him to free Onesimus, appealing to him instead. From these facts, it seems to me that it is an inescapable implication that the apostle clearly did not see the institution of slavery as it existed then as fundamentally immoral; otherwise, he would have demanded the masters to free their slaves. This is a problem, and an embarrassment, to the modern evan-

gelical sentiment, especially in the West. Even the famous evangelical pastor and commentator John Stott accuses the apostles with being “mealy-mouthed” in their treatment of the issue of slavery. What are we to say about this?

This is especially important because the issue of slavery in the NT is a reason that many people give for either (1) rejecting the authority of the Bible wholesale, or (2) refusing to admit its inerrancy in its totality. This is the primary reason I want to speak to this issue. I believe the Bible is the word of God and is worthy of your total confidence and trust. I want you to love it and to live it out in your lives. I don’t want you to be embarrassed about any of its contents. For that reason, I think it is important to speak to the issue of the apostle’s attitude towards slavery.

There is another reason, as well. Recently, there has been quite an uproar in the evangelical world over the issue of social justice and its relation to the gospel. I know there is some unease over the smuggling of unbiblical categories of thought into the church as it struggles with various social concerns. The larger issue is how to think about the relative importance of these issues in light of the gospel. In what sense are social justice issues a gospel issue? How does believing and holding to the gospel affect the way we seek to solve social justice concerns? I think this passage indicates how the apostle would speak to these issues as well.

Why doesn’t the apostle condemn slavery and command masters to free their slaves? As we try to understand this, the first thing we need to do is to recognize that our own country’s history affects the way we think about this problem. In other words, when we think of slavery, we automatically think of slavery as it existed in the antebellum South. It is hard to imagine anyone today wanting to condone that institution. I certainly would not. But here’s the thing: I believe the apostle Paul would have condemned that institution as well. If that is true, then we have to separate in our minds the institution of slavery as it existed in first century Christian households and the institution of slavery as it existed, say, on an 1850 Mississippi plantation.

Why do I say that? I say it because Paul, being steeped in the Mosaic Law, would have known about Exodus 21:16, which reads, “Whoever steals a man and sells him, and anyone found in possession of him, shall be put to death” (ESV). You can’t kidnap someone from their home and sell them into slavery; under OT law, that’s worthy of capital punishment. But the reality is that, whatever exceptions there might have been to this, the institution of slavery broadly speaking, as it existed in the Americas, was fundamentally based upon kidnapping people from their homes in Africa, putting them on slave-ships against their will, and selling them into slavery. Therefore, the institution was fundamentally immoral, and I think it is the responsibility of every Christian to condemn it as such.

Another reason I think the apostle would have condemned slavery, as it existed in our country before the Civil War, is that it was race-based. Slavery in the NT era was certainly not race-based; in fact, if you had walked down the streets of first century Ephesus or Rome, you would probably not have been able to tell the difference between a slave person and a free person. One of the reasons why race-based slavery is so insidious is that it inevitably ties the color of a person’s skin with their worth. Race-based slavery in the U.S. led to white people looking at black people as less human than themselves, simply because their skin was darker than their own. This, in turn, led to all the awful by-products of such an attitude in the Jim Crow South that held on even a hundred years later (and in some places, even to the present day).

Let me underline again why it is so important to clarify this. When we are addressing Paul’s attitude towards slavery, we have to realize that NT household slavery was not the same thing as American slavery. You simply can’t read Ephesians 6:9 and conclude that the race-based, kidnapped-from-their-homes-based slavery in the pre-Civil War U.S. was okay. Some Southern theologians tried to do just that, but they were not justified in their conclusions. This is simply because the apostle was not addressing the same thing they were trying to justify.

Be that as it may, it is still troubling to many that the apostle seems to justify slavery, even if it wasn't the same thing as that dreadful institution that used to exist in our country. Slavery, after all, in whatever form, is still one person owning another person. How could the apostle be indifferent to that? What is behind his exhortations to slaves and masters in the text? I want to try to answer this question as best I can, and I will do so in stages, in a series of observations.

Here is the first: The apostle does not commend the institution of slavery in these verses. It is very important to note that, just because the apostle does not overtly condemn slavery, neither does he indicate his approval of it. His instructions to masters are no endorsement of slavery as an institution; rather, it was his attempt to make an inherently dehumanizing institution as humane as possible by commanding the masters to treat their slaves just as they would want to be treated.

In fact, his attitude toward slavery comes out a little clearer in his first letter to the Corinthians, where he gives this advice to those believers who found themselves in servitude: "Art thou called being a servant [slave]? Care not for it: but if thou mayest be made free, use it rather. For he that is called in the Lord, being a servant, is the Lord's freeman: likewise also he that is called, being free, is Christ's servant. Ye are bought with a price; be not ye the servants [slaves] of men" (1 Cor. 7:21-23). The last sentence in that text could mean nothing more than those who are slaves should not think of themselves ultimately as the slaves of men, when they are the slaves of Christ. However, I think what the apostle is really saying is that the position of slavery to men is fundamentally incompatible with our identity as servants of the Lord, and therefore they should avoid slavery at all costs. You might think, "Duh," but the reality is that many people in the first century sold themselves into slavery to better their lives (another way that first century slavery was different from 19th century American slavery!). People would sometimes sell themselves to a wealthy family where they would be taken better care of, educated in some skill, and then emerge some years later as a free person in a better position. Sometimes slavery even led to a man gaining

Roman citizenship. So there were all sorts of reasons why a person in Paul's day might actually choose to become a slave. What Paul is saying to the Corinthians is, "Don't do it! You are Christ's servants, so don't become the servants of men."

This attitude is actually duplicated all over the Bible. Yes, it is true that in the OT there are all sorts of laws on slavery. These laws weren't implemented to encourage the practice of slavery, but rather to govern it and to curb its abuses. The same thing was true with respect to divorce. God tells us that he hates divorce, and our Lord tells the Pharisees that from the beginning it was not so, but then our Lord goes on to say that God gave Moses laws that governed the dissolution of marriage because of the hardness of men's hearts, not because God approved of divorce. The same thing could be said with respect to polygamy. So it's pretty clear that you can't just look up the OT legislation on slavery and then say, "Aha! God likes slavery." When you build a wall around a tiger so that he can't get out, you are acknowledging the reality that there are dangerous and evil things that will happen if that tiger gets out. When God built walls of legislation around the institution of slavery, he was telling everyone that there are inherently dangerous and dehumanizing things about that institution.

The fact of the matter is that in the OT, the ultimate evidence of God's blessing upon his people is that "they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree" (Micah 4:4; cf. 1 Kings 4:25). This is not the picture of a man who is another man's slave, but a freeman every one. Slavery is therefore something that is incompatible with the fullest expression of God's blessing upon a people and a nation.

Nowhere in the Bible is slavery seen as an ideal institution. Nowhere are we justified in painting slavery as anything less than an institution whose tendency is toward dehumanizing other human beings. Nowhere are we justified in wanting to hold on to such an institution. It was a good thing that slavery eventually went away in the Roman Empire (well, sort of...it was eventually replaced with medieval serfdom, which was not all that different). It was a good thing that it was out-

lawed in our country at the end of the Civil War. Neither the apostle nor the Bible in general approves of slavery as an institution; neither should we.

One other observation on this point before we move on: there is a significant difference between the way the apostle speaks to slavery and the way he had spoken to marriage and parenting. It is not because the relationship between masters and slaves isn't in the same category as 5:22-6:4. It does belong in this section because Paul is speaking to household slaves. There were other types of slaves in the Roman Empire, but the only type of slave to whom the apostle addresses himself is the household slave. It is, therefore, part of his instruction on the home; in the NT world, a house was often not only made up of moms and dads and kids, but also their slaves. So the apostle addresses himself to such.

There is a difference, though. When he speaks to husbands and wives, he grounds their relationship in the relationship that Christ has with the church. When he speaks to the parent-child relationship, he quotes the Fifth Commandment. He does no such thing here. He does not ground the institution of slavery in Scripture, nor in any other theological reality. Again, here is evidence that the apostle thought differently about slavery than he did about marriage and parenting. Clearly.

Here is the second observation: The apostle's exhortation to the masters contained the seeds of slavery's demise. So when people argue that the apostle should have exhorted slave-owners to free their slaves, they are missing the fact that ultimately that is what happened in the long run because of the principles set forward in these words, especially verse 9: "And, ye masters, do the same things unto them, forbearing threatening: knowing that your Master also is in heaven; neither is there respect of persons with him." Now I'm not aware of any law that was passed in Christian Rome that outlawed slavery; however, I don't think it's disputable that slavery did become more and more rare, and surely one reason for this is that Christianity teaches the equal dignity of every human being. In other words, the fact that the apostle speaks to slave and slave-owner on the same terms, as equally valuable in the sight of

God, as having the same rights to justice, must be one reason why Christians have found it so difficult to enslave others. That is not in spite of texts like Eph. 6:5-9, but because of texts like Eph. 6:5-9. Therefore, it should not surprise us that the main proponents of abolition even in modern times were not unbelievers, but Christians. The leader in Great Britain against the slave trade and slavery in the 19th century who almost single-handedly took it down was not just a Christian, but an evangelical Christian, William Wilberforce.

All this still doesn't quite answer the question: Why didn't Paul command the masters to free the slaves? That leads me to the third and fourth observations.

Paul almost certainly didn't command the masters to free the slaves because he cared for the slaves. This may seem counterintuitive to modern sensibilities, but we must realize certain things about slavery in the ancient world. The slaves in a Christian household would have been treated well; they would have enjoyed a certain amount of freedom even (in the first century world, it was even possible for slaves to own slaves!). In Roman society, slaves could aspire to professions such as law and medicine; whereas as freemen they would have remained uneducated and unskilled. In other words, you shouldn't think of the household slave as a field-hand who worked from sunup to sundown and then went to bed in a ramshackle hovel. Rather, the household slave would have worked side-by-side with his master, and would have enjoyed similar accommodations as the rest of the family. On the other hand, to tell a man to set his slaves free would be to enslave them in hopeless poverty. The modern man, from his comfortable couch, might loudly proclaim his preference for poverty to slavery; I doubt many first century household slaves would have echoed this sentiment.

Again, this doesn't mean that slavery is an inherently desirable institution, nor that we shouldn't be glad it doesn't exist (in the West, at least). Nor do I mean to paint slavery as less severe than it was. What I said about household slavery above does not describe what happened in general. Slaves were often abused, branded, mistreated, and robbed of

justice; that was the reality of their condition. However, it is also important to recognize what the apostle surely saw; that at the time, for many slaves, their condition was an economic necessity, and that to demand their freedom would have been a crushing blow to many people, to the slaves as well as to their masters.

My fourth observation is this: Paul wasn't as concerned with changing existing societal structures as he was with preparing people for heaven. I think this is ultimately the reason Paul didn't get on the abolitionist bandwagon. There were so many things wrong with the Roman Empire of Paul's day. At the very top sat the infamous and immoral Nero. When we look at how Paul was treated during his imprisonment, we see how inadequate the judicial system was in his day. Paul does not spend his time wringing his hands over how to correct the abuses of society at the political level. Rather, he spent his time seeking to make men and women disciples of Christ so that they would know God and go on to enjoy his fellowship forever in the New Heavens and New Earth. Of course, as people change and become salt and light, society will reflect their influence. But that was not Paul's immediate or primary aim; his aim was to introduce men and women to God through his Son.

There is a crucial distinction here that I think is often missed. It is not the job of the Church qua Church to restructure the political and economic life of societies. The job of the Church is to make disciples of all the nations. It is to bring men and women into a relationship with God and to encourage that relationship through discipleship. The Church is to remind men and women that we are on a journey, that we are just passing through this world and we are being ushered into the world to come. With the Lord, the Church reminds people that they are on a road. It is either the broad road or it is the narrow road. Right now, the broad road is easy and the narrow road is hard. Each road ends, but what they end in does not end. The life that is at the end of the narrow way is a never-ending life, and the destruction that is at the end of the broad way is "everlasting punishment" (Mt. 25:46). People need to hear that, and it is the job of the Church to say it clearly and consistently.

However, that does not mean that individual Christians should not apply their Christian consciousness in this world and seek to affect it in positive ways. John Newton was right to discourage Wilberforce from entering the ministry and instead to seek to use his influence in Parliament to end the slave trade. Of course we try to exert our influence in this world and to change the way things are if the way things are is wrong. Moreover, the Church must speak out against the wrongs of society and its injustices. In our day, this would include abortion and racism and homosexuality and all the unbiblical categories with which people want to redefine who we are as male and female.

Again, the reason behind this is not so that we will have a better world in the here and now. The reason is because people can't come to Christ unless they repent of their sin. It is the job of the Church to enunciate clearly what the Bible says about sin, in order that people repent, in order that they might get right with God. My concern with all the social justice rhetoric is that the Church is in danger of losing its focus upon the eternal, which is infinitely more important than all the temporal inequities.

The bottom line is this: the Church should preach the gospel so that the focus is upon the eternal, and upon man's broken relationship with God, and the need to be restored to that fellowship through the redemptive blood of Jesus Christ. That doesn't mean we retreat from society. It doesn't mean we don't try to be salt and light in our world. It doesn't mean we don't try to change things that are wrong. But it does mean that we remember that this world is not our home. It is far more important to be right with God than anything else. Nothing else must ever eclipse our greatest need.

It's really a question of emphasis. When we communicate the gospel to the world, what comes through most clearly? That abortion is wrong? That gay marriage is wrong? That racism is wrong? This is all very true, but if that's primarily or all the world hears, then we are sending the wrong message of what the gospel is. What the world primarily needs to hear from the Church is that men and women are sinners in the

sight of God and are in danger of justly suffering his wrath forever, but that God offers his mercy now through Jesus Christ to all who repent and turn to Christ in faith.

So when Paul looked at the institution of slavery, it's clear to me that he didn't like what he saw. But he wasn't going to spend the rest of his life trying to undo a less-than-perfect institution when the main thing to do was to build the church and preach the gospel. He only had so much time. His perspective was eternal not temporal. He knew that the gospel sweetens every heart and home to which it comes and would go very far in ameliorating the more painful aspects of servitude. That should also be our focus, both as individuals and as a church. Believe the gospel. Then live out the gospel in ways that are appropriate to every relationship in which you find yourself.

CHAPTER XLIX

BE STRONG IN THE LORD (EPH. 6:10-13)

THE APOSTLE'S FINAL EXHORTATION is both a stirring appeal and a solemn warning. Though it is found in verses 10-20 of the sixth chapter, at the very end of this epistle, it is probably the most well-known of all the verses in this short letter. John Bunyan almost certainly was strongly influenced by the imagery of the apostle here when he wrote his famous book, *Pilgrim's Progress*. William Gurnall, the Puritan, wrote over 1000 pages on these verses alone, in a book with an equally long title: *The Christian in Complete Armour; A Treatise of the Saints' War against the Devil: Wherein a Discovery is made of that grand Enemy of God and his People, in his Policies, Power, Seat of his Empire, Wickedness, and chief design he hath against the Saints. A Magazine Opened, From whence the Christian is furnished with Spiritual Arms for the Battle, helped on with his Armour, and taught the use of his Weapon: together with the happy issue of the whole War*. When D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones preached through the book of Ephesians, he preached 26 sermons (of the 232 total!) on these verses. So history has shown that even the most experienced believers have found the instructions in these verses a rich treasure of spiritual refreshment. Throughout the

ages, Christians have found spiritual encouragement and strength again and again in this inspired call to arms.

As we approach these verses, we must begin by asking some fundamental questions. First of all, what is the function of this appeal in the epistle? Where does it find its place in the overall argument of the epistle? Secondly, why the military metaphor? Up to this point, the apostle hasn't invoked war and combat as a way to illustrate the spiritual struggle. Why now? And thirdly, why frame this combat entirely in terms of a struggle with spiritual forces? We live in a brick and mortar world; why tell believers to fight against beings who inhabit the "heavenly places"? Finally, what does this imply about the Christian life and the struggles that we face and how we face them? These are the questions that we want to consider this morning.

First question: What is the function of this appeal in this epistle?

It clearly functions as a closing appeal. We see this in the opening word, "Finally, my brethren . . ." (10). But why put it here? There are exhortations all over the epistle; why end on this note?

I think the clue is in the opening exhortation: "be strong in the Lord and in the power of his might" (10). From the beginning of this letter, the apostle has several times pointed the believers at Ephesus to the power of God for them. Not just the power of God, mind you, but the power of God which is appropriated for the day-to-day life of faith. Think back to chapter 1; there the apostle encourages them to know "what is the exceeding greatness of his power to us-ward who believe, according to the working of his mighty power, which he wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead, and set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places" (1:19-20). In fact, the apostle uses the same words here and in chapter 6 to describe the power of God. And then you have the mention of heavenly places which also shows up in 6:12. So you might think of these two passages as sorts of bookends for the epistle.

Then, right in the middle of the epistle, there it is again: Paul prays that God “would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man” (3:16). Again, we have this prayer for spiritual strength, and the source of this strength is the power of God.

This is tied to the overall theme of the epistle, because I think if you could sum up the overall theme of this epistle, it would be in the two words, “in Christ.” The apostle is reminding us of the spiritual blessings that we have in him (cf. 1:3). Everything we have that will bring us to heaven in the end comes in and through the person and work of the Son of God. We do not have eternal life because of who we are or what we have done. We have eternal life because of who Christ is and what he has done. It is an astonishing reality: we have union with God through Christ. This means that the power of God is now available for every believer. It is not only available, we wouldn’t even be believers apart from the power of God raising us from spiritual death. The point is, that same power is available to every believer, no matter where they are on the sanctification ladder. We may (and rightly so) feel our weakness and inability, but in Christ we are no longer alone. Yes, without him we can do nothing (Jn. 15:5), but through him we can do all things (Phil. 4:13).

When the apostle ends this epistle, it should not surprise us that he comes once again to the issue of union with Christ and the result of this union in being empowered with the power of God for daily victory over sin. “Be strong in the Lord and in the power of his might.” Union with Christ is not just an abstract doctrine to be believed and defended and admired. It is to be appropriated in our daily life through faith in Christ. What the apostle is essentially saying is this, that if we really believe the truths of this epistle, if we really believe that we have union with Christ, we are not going to sit down in defeat and gloom and despair. No, rather we are going to stand against all our foes. This epistle has reminded them of what God is doing for them and in them and through them. They are not alone. The grace of God has gone before them in election, was there

at the beginning of their spiritual walk in regeneration, and is a constant aid in Christ. He is still able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we can ask or think.

In summary, the apostle ends with these words because, in doing so, he is showing them how to take the great theme of this epistle, the wonderful truth of union with Christ, and put shoe leather on it, how to put it into practice. We live out the reality of being “in Christ” when we are strong in the Lord and in the power of his might, when he face down our spiritual enemies without running or giving up. Show me a Christian who really believes the truths of Ephesians, and I will show you a courageous man or woman. Theology matters, because theology, properly appropriated by faith with humility, puts fire in the bones and courage in the step. So this exhortation is a fitting conclusion to this epistle.

That brings us to the next question: why the military metaphor?

Well, one answer to that question is that this is one of the Prison Epistles, and no doubt as the apostle was under house arrest, he had a lot of opportunity to converse with Roman military personnel. This probably led to a lot of thought on the apostle’s part about how the military and warfare illustrate key realities in the Christian life. Certainly, the apostle uses the metaphor of warfare a lot in his epistles. For example, in writing to Timothy, he says, “Thou therefore endure hardness as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. No man that warreth entangleth himself with the affairs of this life; that he may please him who hath chosen him to be a soldier” (2 Tim. 2:3-4). And then, referring to himself, he writes, “I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith” (2 Tim. 4:7).

I think next to theology, I enjoy reading military history most. I think one of the reasons it is so appealing to me is because of this connection between military life and the life of faith. There are so many.

The question is, exactly how does military metaphor tie in to the message of this epistle? I think it does so in the following way. In this epistle, the apostle Paul is telling us, in not so many words, that God is building an army. Think back to chapter 2. How are we described? We were dead in sin, unable to take one step toward God, prisoners of lust, of the world, and of the devil. “But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ (by grace ye are saved)” (2:4-5). And then, he not only gives us life, but he begins to equip us for battle. First of all, he gives us a new nature, makes us new men and women in Christ (4:20-24). Our allegiance has changed. Once we were the willing servants of Satan and of sin, but now we willingly follow our new Master, the Lord Jesus Christ. Then he equips us, gives us spiritual gifts and builds us up as part of the one body of Christ (4:1-16). Yes, Christ is building a new society, but he is also building an army.

I don’t know about you, but this reminds me of the vision of Ezekiel in the valley of dry bones (Ezek. 37). God takes these dry bones which were scattered all over the place, puts them together, brings sinews and skin upon them, and then breathes life into them. The result? “So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and the lived, and stood up upon their feet, an exceeding great army” (37:10). That is what the apostle says has happened to the Ephesians. They were once no different, spiritually speaking, from a collection of dry bones. But God has brought live to them and they are now part of “an exceeding great army.”

That is one reason, but there is another reason I think the apostle uses military language in addressing the believer. When we think about the glorious privileges that are ours as men and women who are united to Christ, it is easy sometimes to forget that we are not in heaven yet. It is easy to think that, once we are believers, our life should no longer be hard anymore. In particular, it was easy for them to faint at the tribulations the apostle had to experience for the sake of the Ephesians and other believers (cf. Eph. 3:13).

The reality is that union with Christ, though it is a reality right now, does not make the road to heaven any less hard or any less narrow. It is a road beset with enemies who are determined to bring you down, and that is why the apostle ends on this note. It is a reminder that our salvation does not take away the fact that “we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). We are opposed by an enemy who will fire upon you, fix your position, and begin maneuvering on you. If you are not prepared, you are going to be brought down. You are not going to stand if you are not ready.

It is hand-to-hand combat that the apostle is preparing them for. That idea is embedded in the word “wrestle” in verse 12. Some commentators have wondered why the apostle didn’t use the word “war” or “battle” instead of “wrestle” there. The reason is that, in the first century, you didn’t defeat your foe unless you engaged them in hand-to-hand combat. The apostle is talking about soldiers who are fully engaged here; they are not sitting back firing missiles from miles away. This is up close and personal. If you are not prepared, you are not going to come out of that unscathed. You need to be ready.

In verse 13, the apostle says that we need to “be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.” That expression, “the evil day,” is an interesting one. It refers to a specific event in the believer’s life when their faith is under siege and they are on the verge of breaking spiritually. We don’t experience this every day, but we have all experienced times in our life when it is far more difficult than others to keep following Christ, to say no to sin, to push back against the bitterness and unbelief. The apostle is saying that you need to be prepared for that. It will come, if it hasn’t already.

Evil days come even when we have successfully weathered previous evil days. Think about how the devil attacked the Lord. He didn’t come at him at all times. We are told that after the wilderness temptation, “when the devil had ended all the temptation, he departed from him for a season” (Luke 4:13). He attacks, and if he is not successful, he will try again. He may depart, but it will only be for a season. The evil day

will return. We shouldn't become complacent. You haven't "done all" (13) just by winning one battle. The devil isn't finished with you. You need to be constantly on your guard. You need to be like the builders on the wall of Jerusalem in Nehemiah's day, who worked with a tool in one hand and a sword in the other.

The military metaphor is here to remind us who we are (we are the army of the Lord, and he is our Captain) and what we are doing (we are fighting a war that can be brutal and difficult). The difficulty doesn't mean we should despair, because our Lord has already defeated the forces of evil on the cross. The final victory is sure. We can stand as long as we are strong in the Lord and in the power of his might. There is no reason for despair, for defeatism. But there is still every reason for caution and preparedness.

Who are we fighting? That brings us to the third question, which was:

Why frame this combat in terms of fighting spiritual forces?

In verse 11, Paul warns us against the "wiles [stratagems] of the devil," and in verse 12 he goes on to say, "For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places." These are just different ways of describing wicked spirits, demons, who operate under the command of the devil, Satan. Paul is saying that this spiritual warfare we are to prepare for is a warfare against this particular foe.

This is in contrast to "flesh and blood." In other words, the enemy of the Christian is not the atheist, not the persecutor, not progressive secularist. People are not our enemy. Non-Christians are not our enemy. People of other faiths, like Islam, are not our enemy. We are not to be fighting them, we are to love them, serve them, and preach the gospel to them. Rather, our enemy, our opponent, our antagonist on the battlefield, are not people but evil spirits.

What does the apostle mean by this? Well, he, of course, doesn't mean that people can't be the source of great evil. There are false prophets, for example, who lead people astray. What the NT teaches is that people are not the ultimate source of false teaching and false living. Behind every false prophet is a demon or demons, as in 1 Tim. 4:1 - "Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits and doctrines of devils." Or, I think of what Paul says to the Corinthians: "For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves in to the apostles of Christ. And no marvel: for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also be transformed as the ministers of righteousness; whose end shall be according to their works" (2 Cor. 11:13-15). If people hurt us, it is because they are being used by Satan to do so. He is the real enemy. No wonder, because before our conversion, we ourselves were also servants of the devil (Eph. 2:2). He works in the children of disobedience. That doesn't take away the responsibility of sinners, but it does point us to our ultimate foe. The reason the church suffers and is attacked is because there is a devil in this world. He is the accuser of the brethren. He is our enemy.

This reality ought to tell us that the goal of standing is to stand against the devil. He wants, above all things, to destroy your faith (cf. Luke 22:31-32). Yes, he can attack you on a physical level, like Job. The only reason he did that was to get at his faith and to cause him to blaspheme God. So to stand against the wiles of the devil, is to not give in to unbelief, to not give in to the sin that will separate you from God. Think about what the apostle says in 4:27 - "Neither give place to the devil." In other words, don't let anger dominate you, because then that becomes a means the devil can use to get a place in your heart and to start turning you against God. He did that with Judas: "the devil having now put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him" (Jn. 13:2).

In other words, since the warfare is against spiritual beings, the warfare has as its aim spiritual goals. The goal is to stand against the attacks of the devil so that your faith is intact no matter how often or how hard

he levels his assaults against you. The battle the church fights is not a political battle. It is not a battle to win elections. It is a battle to maintain the faith. It is a battle to maintain allegiance to Jesus Christ. It is a battle to win souls for Christ. It is a battle to be holy in an unholy world.

It is why James exhorted his readers this way: “Submit yourselves therefore unto God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you” (Jm. 4:7). The one who occupies the battlefield at the end of the day is the one who wins. The one who resists the devil is the one who will stand and occupy the battlefield. It is important to remember that the context of that passage is the battle against worldliness (ver. 1-6). That is one of the ways the devil tries to get at you; by alluring you to be a friend of the world. Resist him, says the apostle.

Or think of what Peter said: “Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour: whom resist steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same afflictions are accomplished in your brethren that are in the world” (1 Pet. 5:8-9). Here, the idea is that the devil is behind the persecutions God’s people often have to endure. Again, the purpose of this is to overthrow their faith, which is why the apostle exhorts them to resist the devil “steadfast in the faith,” because it was precisely at that point that the battle was engaged.

The apostle draws our attention to a spiritual foe, because that is ultimately the source of our greatest danger. The stakes in this battle are matters of the soul; it is a spiritual battle in which we are engaged and in which we must stand.

What does all this imply about how we live out our lives as Christians?

Here I want to come back to the first point we started with; namely, the fact that this appeal is grounded in the doctrine of the believer’s union with Christ. The overall command here is to “be strong in the Lord and in the power of his might” (10), but that is not all he says. We

are not only told to be strong in the Lord, we are also told to “put on the whole armor of God” (11), to “take unto you the whole armor of God” (12). It is only as we do this that we will be able to “stand” (11) and “withstand” (13).

Here you have two realities that are simultaneously true. One reality is that we can do nothing apart from the power of God. That is the basis of the exhortation to be strong in the Lord. All our power for defense or offense comes from the Lord. In ourselves, we have nothing, no power, and no strength. On the other hand, we are told to do something. We have to put on the armor of God. We are to stand. These are things that we have to do.

It is very important to keep these two things together. For there are some who teach that the essence of the Christian is to “let go and let God.” Now, I agree that we are desperately in need of God and that without him we can do nothing. You have gone beyond Scripture if you take that to mean that spiritual victory is only won when we simply do nothing and commit the whole battle to God. That is simply not what text teaches! God is not one fighting here; the believer is. It is the believer who is to take the armor and put it on. Why? Because they are going to have to fight! Hand-to-hand! There is no passivity here. If we are going to stand in the evil day, we are going to have to fight, to wrestle with demons!

On the other hand, there are those who give the impression that God is simply waiting for you to do something for him. In other words, it really is up to you. This mindset is also contradicted by the passage. The overall command here is to be strong in the Lord. Yes, you are to fight, not in your own strength, but in the strength that God gives.

The doctrine of union with Christ, does not mean that daily victory over sin is automatic in virtue of our connection with the Lord. What it does mean is that we have been given spiritual life and power, and that it is in virtue of our connection to Jesus Christ that we are now able to fight and stand. So, it is not that God does everything and we do nothing. Nor is it that we do everything and God does nothing. Nor is

it that we do some things and the Lord does other things. Rather, the Biblical teaching is that every act of faith is an act in which we act and God acts, simultaneously. We can't take credit at the end of the day for our victory over sin, because the power in which we fight and live out the life of faith is all from God, not from us. Neither can we sit back and be okay with doing nothing, for the power of God is operative in the acts of the believing Christian. This is confirmed in many, many texts (cf. Rom. 8:13; 1 Cor. 15:10; Phil. 2:12-13).

It ought to encourage us that this is the case, for it implies that when we step out on faith, in obedience to our Lord, no matter how hard the task may be to which he is calling us, we can yet be sure that God will empower us to obey. Again, it is not our own strength that will bring us through but the power of God. If the Lord calls you to step out onto the raging sea, you can do so because you serve the one who walks on the waves. We so often falter and are ready to fall down in the evil day because we are focused on our own inabilities and inadequacies. And they are many! We need to be more like Abraham, who "being not weak in faith, he considered not his own body now dead, when he was about an hundred years old, neither yet the deadness of Sarah's womb: he staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God; and being fully persuaded that, that he had promised, he was able to perform" (Rom. 4:19-21). This is the perfect picture of what the apostle is calling us to do. You see, Abraham could not do the first thing to bring about God's promises to him. Neither can we. And yet, God was calling him to live a life of faith and it was as he lived out that life of faith that God brought his promises to fruition.

This is all possible ultimately because of what Christ did on the cross. Are we called to fight principalities and powers? Very well, we can fight them because Christ has on one level already vanquished them: "blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to the cross; and having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a show of them openly, triumphing over them in it" (Col. 2:14-15). On the cross, he destroyed

“him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; and deliver[ed] them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage” (Heb. 2:14-15). Christ’s death and resurrection guaranteed the ultimate destruction of Satan. We are fighting him and his legions in the shadow of his defeat and in light of the final victory that we have in Christ. We have, therefore, every reason to be encouraged. We have every reason to be strong in the Lord and in the power of his might. There is no reason why we should not take up the whole armor of God, for the battle is the Lord’s and he never loses. Let us, therefore, fear not and follow Christ, for he has defeated death, hell, and the grave.

CHAPTER L

THE PRIMACY OF INTEGRITY (EPH. 6:14)

THE CHRISTIAN IS IN A BATTLE. The believer is engaged in spiritual hand-to-hand combat (Eph. 6:12), and our souls are at stake. The devil wants to destroy your faith – and though it is not possible for the faith of the elect to be finally destroyed (1 Pet. 1:5), yet he can do great harm to the saints if they are not careful. Peter denied Christ. Let the one who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall (1 Cor. 10:12). We need to “take heed.” Beware of presumption. Beware of the attitude that you can get through life unscathed without any preparation for the battle that is waging all around you.

You might say that, in verses 10-13, the apostle is reminding us of the battle, making us aware of the war we are waging, its intensity and its difficulty. He is calling us to stand, to defend our ground, and to repel the attacks of the wicked one. You are not going to stand if you aren’t even aware of the battle, and so he calls this to our attention.

Then you need to be prepared for the battle. You need to go through basic training, so to speak. You need to become familiar with the weapons with which you will fight the enemy, what they are and how to use them well. That is what the apostle is doing in the verses before

us; he is preparing us for the battle. He is laying out in front of us the armor that we are called to put on, describing it for us and showing us in some sense how to use it in the battle. In verses 14-17 we have Christian basic training.

As we begin to look at each piece of armor, we first of all need to remember that God is the one who has provided each piece of armor for us. We may infer a couple of very important truths from this fact. The first truth is that every piece of armor is important for that battle. God is not going to send you into battle with a weapon or piece of armor unless you are absolutely going to need it. I am told that some of our soldiers overseas are angry because it has been decreed that they wear certain pieces of body armor which they feel are not necessary; it only slows them down and in that sense makes them more vulnerable to the enemy. We should not ascribe such folly to God; he will not demand any piece of armor that is not absolutely necessary. Therefore, it is stupid for us to pick and choose what we want to go into battle with; if we want to be successful, we have to have on the “whole armor of God” (ver. 13), not just part of it. Every verse here is important, every weapon and piece of armor is necessary. We can’t just pick up the sword of the Spirit; we must also have the shield of faith. We must have everything if we are going to withstand in the evil day.

To that end, I want to consider each weapon and piece of armor separately, to give each its own consideration. I think that is important in order that we truly understand how all this works together to enable us to stand against the wiles of the devil.

There is another inference from the fact that God is the one who supplies the Christian’s arsenal. It is the fact that we can be sure that what God supplies us, if used properly, will inevitably lead us to victory over the evil one. It may be true that the devil is powerful and smart and cruel; but it is also true that God is sovereign even over the devil, and that he knows the devil better than the devil knows himself. God knows your enemy, and, therefore, he knows exactly what you need to

stand and overcome. We would be foolish not to take what our Lord gives us to defend ourselves and fight for him.

This morning let us consider the first part of verse 14: “Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth,” or, as the ESV puts it, “Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth.” This is one of the first things a Roman soldier would have done; it was done before any other piece of armor went on. He needed the belt to gather together his tunic beneath the armor. The breastplate fastened to the belt, and it was also the place from which the soldier would hang his sword. So the belt was not just something you put on for looks; it was foundational and essential for the entire panoply of armor the soldier wore into battle.

Paul uses the imagery of the belt for truth. We are to put on truth like the soldier put on his belt. What does the apostle mean by this?

Some say that the apostle is referring to the truth of the gospel. Charles Hodge says that it means “truth subjectively considered; that is, the knowledge and belief of the truth.” Although I agree with Hodge that the belief of the truth is absolutely essential to our warfare, yet I don’t think that is what the apostle is referring to here. I believe that Paul is referring to integrity, or truthfulness in the inward person.

There are a couple of reasons why I think this. First, because Paul does refer explicitly to God’s word in verse 17, as the sword of the Spirit. Certainly, this would involve the knowledge and belief of the truth as well as applying it to our lives in concrete and specific ways. So it would seem strange that the apostle would repeat himself and refer to the same thing more or less under the imagery of different parts of the soldier’s panoply.

The second reason I don’t think he is referring to the truth of God’s word is also the reason why I think he is referring to integrity and sincerity. The apostle, who was steeped in the OT, surely got many of his ideas straight from the prophets. For example, the prophet Isaiah used the same type of imagery for God as a warrior for his people: “And he saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no intercessor: therefore his arm brought salvation unto him; and his righteous-

ness, it sustained him. For he put on righteousness as a breastplate, and an helmet of salvation upon his head; and he put on the garments of vengeance for clothing, and was clad with zeal as a cloke” (Isa. 59:16-17). This is so close to the apostle’s words in Eph. 6 that it is impossible to imagine he was not thinking of Isaiah when he wrote them.

It is true that Isaiah 59 does not refer to a belt of truth, but listen to what Isaiah said much earlier in his book (speaking of the Christ, 11:2): “Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist, and faithfulness the belt of his loins” (11:5). It’s interesting that the Septuagint translates the word “faithfulness” with the same Greek word behind the word “truth” in Ephesians 6:14. Since it’s widely agreed among scholars that the apostles were familiar with the LXX, it’s not hard to believe that Paul was probably thinking of Isa. 11:5 when he wrote Eph. 6:14. In that case, he is not thinking of truth as something you believe but truth as something you are. God is true in Isa. 11:5 in the sense of faithfulness; that is, he is true to his word. He does not say one thing and then do another. It describes who he is. So in this verse in Ephesians 6, Paul is calling us to be men and women of integrity, who are what they say they are.

Of course, the basic definition of truth is that which corresponds to reality. In Phil. 1:18, Paul contrasts “truth” with “pretense.” To put on the belt of truth then means that you are for real, that you are not pretending, that your profession matches your intention, that you are not something other than what you profess to be. It means you are sincere. In this context, it means being true to Christ as our Captain and Lord. One of the complaints Hodge made against seeing this in terms of integrity is that this would make it “a natural virtue, and does not belong to the armour of God.” This argument loses its force when we recognize that it is not just integrity in general that is called for, but integrity in the sense of our commitment to Jesus Christ.

In other words, as we put on this armor and gird ourselves for war, we are claiming to belong to Jesus Christ. To put on the belt of truth

means that we are in truth what we say we are. We do not put on the armor of God and then fight for the devil.

One of the things I enjoy about our university commencements is being able to observe the commissioning of men and women into the army as newly minted second lieutenants. As part of the commissioning ceremony, they raise their right hands and repeat an oath. In that oath, they promise to support and defend the Constitution and that they “will bear true faith and allegiance to the same;” furthermore, that they “take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion.” In some sense, that is what the apostle is calling us to do here. By putting on the belt of truth, we are promising to wear the uniform of Christ “without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion” and that we “will bear true faith and allegiance” to Christ. Do you?

In order to answer the previous question, we need to ask and answer another question: how do we live out a life of integrity in the service of Christ? What is involved? Well, I think at least three things are involved.

First, it’s a matter of counting the cost. If we are going to wear truth like a belt, if we are going to be men and women of integrity, we are going to have to count the cost of following Christ. We are going to have to consider what’s involved in serving him in this world.

It’s the easiest thing in the world (at least, in the West) to call yourself a Christian. Anyone can do that, but that does not mean you are a Christian. Just putting on the uniform doesn’t make you a soldier; you have to be willing to follow your Lord into battle. Even so, there are lots of people who call themselves Christian but they don’t really understand what it means to be a Christian; they haven’t counted the cost. As a result, they are not what they claim to be; they are not true to Christ.

To put on the belt of truth, you need to understand everything that’s involved in following Christ. It’s not just a matter of saying a prayer and getting baptized and then everything’s fine. We need to understand that there is a cost to following Christ, and unless you are willing to endure the cost, you cannot be a Christian. Isn’t this what our Lord himself

said? “If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple. And whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple” (Lk. 14:26-27). In that same text, our Lord goes on to illustrate his meaning with two stories, one about a man who wants to build a tower, and another about a king who wants to make war with another king. The point of both stories is that you have to sit down and figure out whether or not you have the will and resources to complete the task. The reason so many people who start out as Christians, but who end up jettisoning their faith, is because they never really understood all that would be involved. They liked the heaven part and the forgiveness part, but they don’t like the self-denial part, and the humility part, and the repentance part, and the persecution part.

From time to time we are reminded how painful the cost can be. This weekend, seven Coptic Christians were killed when their buses were fired upon by Islamic militants. This is just one story out of many these Christians could tell. They live in a country where they are routinely discriminated against, where their children and wives are kidnapped and forced to convert to Islam, and this has been their reality for over a thousand years. Or I think of the husband and father who was serving Christ as a missionary in Cameroon who was shot in the head this week and killed. I think of his family, and am reminded that we live in a world where it is often not only not easy to be a Christian but also very painful to be a Christian. Are you willing to pay the price and bear the cross?

In the book of Deuteronomy, when Moses is giving instructions to the Israelites on how they are to go into battle, he gives the following interesting directive: “And the officers shall speak further unto the people, and they shall say, What man is there that is fearful and fainthearted? Let him go and return unto his house, lest his brethren’s heart faint as well as his heart” (Deut. 20:8). In other words, the Lord didn’t want men on the battle line who were afraid because fear and panic spread like a disease and can instantly cripple an army. Instead, he wanted men who

were fully aware of the danger they faced and were willing to face it. He wanted men who were true. It wasn't enough to be on the battle line. You had to be willing to embrace the battle and all the hardship that went along with it. That's putting on the belt of truth. You've counted the cost; you know what it means to follow Christ, and you willingly embrace it with all your heart. Do you?

Second, it's a matter of guarding the heart. To be true to Christ, we have to be the same inside as well as outside. It was the damning sin of the Pharisees that they were "like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness." Our Lord went on to say, "Even so, ye also outwardly appear righteous unto me, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity" (Mt. 23:28-28). King David contrasts with the Pharisees because, even though he sinned greatly, when he repented, he repented thoroughly. You can see it in his prayer of repentance to God in Psalm 51, when he prays, "Behold, thou desirest truth in the inward parts: and in the hidden part thou shalt make me to know wisdom" (Ps. 51:6). Therefore, he goes on to pray, "Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me" (ver. 10). Truth in the inward parts –that is what God desires.

If we fall and fail to stand, almost certainly the reason behind the fall is to be looked for in the heart. Someone who falls into open sin probably began to nourish that sin secretly in the heart a long time beforehand. That's why the Scripture tells us to "keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues [springs, ESV] of life" (Prov. 4:23). Your heart is the battleground and the battle will be won or lost there.

Therefore, to be a soldier of the Lord is more a matter of being than of doing. God commended the church of Ephesus for doing a lot of things, but then went on to rebuke them because they had lost their first love (Rev. 2:1-7). They evidently had forgotten to be Christian because they were so busy doing Christian things. People can do all sorts of things for God when their hearts are far from him. But such service is worse than useless. The warfare that we are waging, remember, is

mainly spiritual and, therefore, must be fought on a spiritual basis. As Paul puts it to the Corinthians, “For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war after the flesh: (For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds;) Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought captive to the obedience of Christ” (2 Cor. 10:3-5). It’s a matter primarily of taking our thoughts captive for Christ.

Another way to put this is to ask the question: where is our ultimate loyalty? When it comes down to it, who will you follow? If you desire something very strongly but know it is not God’s will, are you going to do it anyway? Or are you willing to crucify your sinful affections for the sake of Christ? Our whole culture teaches that you should be true to yourself, and that means you should follow your every desire and whim. Christ teaches us to be true to him. Who will win? Are you willing to order your affections so that Christ and his will and word are preeminent? That is what it means to put on the belt of truth.

Third, it’s a matter of keeping our word. What I mean by this is that we follow through with our commitments to Christ. King David put it this way in his fifteenth Psalm: he describes those who will abide in God’s tabernacle and dwell in his holy hill; in other words, he describes those who have fellowship with God. He designates the godly man as “he who walks blamelessly and does what is right and speaks truth in his heart . . . who swears to his own hurt and does not change” (Ps. 15:2, 4). Here is a man who has made a commitment to the Lord; it will cost him something, but he follows through. That man is true.

It’s not enough to make great professions of faith and commitment to Christ. The godly man or woman, the man or woman who is true, will do what they say they will do for the Lord. Their life is not one of unfulfilled wishes for the Lord, but one in which they put into practice what they know to be true and profess to be true. They know prayer is important, so they pray. They don’t merely say that prayer is important, they don’t just praise prayer, they pray! The same with the Scriptures.

They don't just acknowledge that the knowledge of the Bible is important, but they read and memorize and meditate upon the Word of God.

Do you follow through? Or is your life one of fits and starts? Look, God does not want sprinters; he want marathon runners. He wants men and women who are committed, who take the truth of God's word and make it a part of their life. He wants men and women who don't just say and not do, but who do what they say is true.

Now we must ask the final question: why should we do this? Why put on the belt of truth? After all, to some this might seem more trouble than it's worth! So let me end by giving you three reasons why it is worth your while to fight in God's army and to strap on this belt of truth.

Reason 1: God is God, and you are not. He ought to be and is worthy to be obeyed and worshipped and served. He deserves your total commitment.

Reason 2: God is true. He is faithful to his word to us. He can be trusted. He never lets them down who put their trust in him (Rom. 10:11). Those who trust in him will never be ashamed. How can we not be true to him when he is unswervingly faithful and true to us? In contrast, the devil is a liar and the father of lies. For us to hold back anything from God is to give it to the devil. How could that be worth it when the devil only wants to bring you harm? When Satan comes, then comes the evil day (Eph. 6:13).

Reason 3: God is good. He sent his Son to die for the sins of those who put their trust in him, and to give them an entrance into everlasting glory and joy. Whatever sufferings we are called upon to endure in this world, we can be sure that they are not worthy to be compared to the glory which shall be revealed in us (Rom. 8:18). When Christ rose from the dead, he broke the power of sin and death for his elect. When God is so good to us, how could we not give everything to him? We have every reason to be true, to be men and women of integrity, to be fully committed to him who is fully committed to us in Christ.

So let us strap on the belt of truth. Let us be faithful to Christ, let us be true to him. Let us go forth into battle without any reservation

of heart and soul; indeed, “let us go forth therefore unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach. For here we have no continuing city, but we seek one to come. By him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name” (Heb. 13:13-15).

CHAPTER LI

THE HEART OF THE MATTER: THE BREASTPLATE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS (EPH. 6:14)

THE IDEA OF RIGHTEOUSNESS has fallen on hard times in our culture and even in the church. These days, for many Christians the goal is not to be righteous but to be nice. Unless, of course, you are talking about imputed righteousness and justification. Then it's okay to insist on righteousness. But once you hint at the idea that Christians must be righteous in their daily behavior and thoughts and affections, then don't be surprised when people begin to think of you as a legalist and a moralist. In our day and culture, those are bad things indeed.

Being nice has become a substitute for being righteous. It's not the only substitute: more and more it seems that people (especially in the evangelical subculture in the West) are confusing righteousness with

spirituality. The problem is that what many people think of as spirituality is only skin-deep. You can do all sorts of “spiritual” things, like pray and meditate and read your Bible, but if that’s all your spirituality is, then you are really not that spiritual at all. In other words, even if your goal is doing these things on a regular basis in your life, then you are not really spiritual. Having as your goal feeling spiritual is even worse. Unless your acts of devotion and spirituality lead to personal righteousness, then the fact of the matter is that you have sold your Lord for thirty pieces of silver. In other words, many have mistaken something flashy for devotion to Christ and traded Christ in for the flashy thing (in this case, so-called spirituality).

What then is righteousness? I think R. C. Sproul was right when he defined it as “doing what is right in the sight of God.”¹ It is doing what is right. But that’s not all – it is doing what is right in the sight of God. That is crucial. John the Baptist’s parents are a good example of this: “And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless” (Lk. 1:6). Where you get the standard for right and wrong really matters. The world has its standard for what is right and wrong. There are a bunch of spiritual and religious organizations and groups that have their standards for what is right and wrong. Unless it is rooted in God’s word, unless that standard is set by God himself, then it is not really righteousness at all. That is why, when Paul commends the Scriptures to Timothy, he puts it like this: “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works” (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Where do we get the instructions for righteousness? In the word of God, the Scriptures. It is a complete instructional record; by reading and applying God’s word to our lives, we become complete and thoroughly furnished unto all (not just some) good works.

¹<https://www.ligonier.org/blog/dont-confuse-spirituality-righteousness/>

Is this what Paul is referring to by the breastplate of righteousness? Some think Paul is referring primarily to the righteousness of justification. For example, Hodge argues that, if this refers to our righteousness, it is a problem because “this is no protection. It cannot resist the accusation of conscience, the whispers of despondency, the power of temptation, much less the severity of the law, or the assaults of Satan.” Hodge considers the apostle to be referring solely to the righteousness of God which is imputed to us at the moment of faith. The question is, is Paul referring to our righteousness which we live out in our daily lives, or is Paul referring to God’s righteousness which he imputes to us through faith?

Personally, I don’t think we have to choose here, for the following reason: the righteousness of justification is the ground for the righteousness of sanctification, and when you have the former, it inevitably produces the latter. In other words, having a righteous standing before God is inseparable from living a righteous life before God. A righteous status before God produces a righteous life before God. It is true that we are not justified on account of our works – our personal righteousness is not what justifies us before God. But it is also true that the justified man or woman will pursue personal holiness and righteousness in their lives. As the Reformers put it: we are saved by faith alone, but not by a faith that is alone. Justifying faith is not a dead faith, but a faith which produces good works.

If you have a hard time believing this, then listen to the logic of the apostle: “Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin. For he that is dead is freed [justified] from sin” (Rom. 6:6-7). The logic is this: it is inevitable (knowing this) that the Christian will not serve sin because (for) the Christian (he that is dead) has been justified from sin. Justification leads to sanctification. Thank God it is not the other way round. If you are consistently not living a sanctified life, that’s pretty good evidence that you have never truly been saved and justified to begin with.

It is true that, if our justification – our acceptance before God – depended on our personal righteousness, we would all be doomed. There would indeed be no place for hope or assurance. However, if Paul is commending personal righteousness here in our text, this would not mean that he is implying that our righteousness is the basis of our justification. Moreover, as we’ve been arguing, justification does not make sanctification irrelevant or unnecessary. It is absolutely true that a Christian who is living an unholy life is exposed to the assaults of Satan in ways that a righteous man is not.

I think the apostle is almost certainly referring to our personal righteousness here. Yes, it does assume imputed righteousness. However, the exhortation here is to personal holiness and righteousness of life. The reason I take this point of view is that, when the apostle refers to the righteousness of justification, he generally refers to it as the righteousness of God (cf. Rom. 3:21-26; 2 Cor. 5:21; Phil. 3:9), to distinguish it from our own personal righteousness. However, there is no such distinction here in our text: it is just “the breastplate of righteousness,” not the “breastplate of the righteousness of God.” Clearly, Paul does not mean justification every time he uses the word righteousness, and so it cannot be assumed unless the context makes that clear. Earlier in this epistle, “righteousness” does refer to our conduct and manner life; recall that in Eph. 4:24, the apostle wrote that we are to “put on [same word as in Eph. 6:14] the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness” (then see the following verses which flesh out how this is to look in the daily life!). Then, in Eph. 5:8-9, we are reminded that we were at one time in darkness but now are to walk as children of the light, “for the fruit of the light is in all goodness and righteousness and truth.” Again, this refers to righteous behavior, not to a righteous status.

God not only wants you to be justified and forgiven, he wants you to be sanctified and holy in your life. That is what the apostle is calling us to in this verse, under the imagery of the breastplate.

The breastplate was very important for the soldier. The breastplate consisted of metal armor that covered everything from the neck to the thighs, both front and back. If you didn't wear this into battle, you were severely exposed to the enemy. It protected some of your most vital organs. It was absolutely essential; you would not be able "to stand" without it. For the Christian, righteousness is like that breastplate. When we live in righteousness, we are ready to withstand in the evil day; without righteousness of heart and life, we are exposed. Christian, God is calling you to be righteous. He is not calling you to be nice. He is not calling you to be "spiritual." He is calling you to put on the breastplate of righteousness. It means living a life that is pleasing to God, whatever the world thinks about it. It means following his word, even when the world tells you to do the very opposite. It means selling out completely to the lordship of Jesus Christ over your life. It means holiness in thought and word and deed. It means living by the Book.

All this brings us to the following question: why should you be concerned with becoming more and more holy? Some people have the idea that holiness is only for the super-spiritual, or super-saints. There is even the idea that you can have too much holiness. However, such attitudes are incompatible with the life to which we are called in Scripture. If you want to be counted as a disciple of Jesus Christ; if you want to rightfully consider yourself "an heir of salvation and purchased of God," then you must be holy.

Justification and the forgiveness of sin, as important as it is, is only a means to an end. We are justified and forgiven so that we might enjoy fellowship with God and be conformed to the image of his Son. What does it mean to be conformed to the image of God's Son? Surely it mostly means being righteous as he is righteous: "If ye know that he is righteous, ye know that every one that doeth righteousness is born of him" (1 Jn. 2:29). Justification makes sanctification possible, and sanctification is completed in glorification. So we shouldn't think that holiness and becoming righteous is only incidentally important for the people of God. It is part and parcel of our future salvation.

Wanting heaven is not really a good reason to be holy. All sorts of people drop out of the race for holiness who wanted heaven. They wanted heaven but not its holiness and so they give into the pressures of this world to conform. The real reason anyone perseveres in holiness is because they love God and his Son Jesus Christ. They want heaven because they want God. If we want God, we will be holy (cf. 1 Pet. 1:13-16). Dying is gain because to live is Christ (Phil. 1:21).

This message is for those who love God. I want to give the one who loves God reasons he or she should pursue holiness and righteousness of life. If you don't love God, this message is not for you, because if you don't love God, you will never be holy. After all, the first commandment is that we love the Lord our God with all our hearts and souls and minds. If you don't start there, you can't even begin to be righteous in the sight of God. Your heart needs to be changed first, so that you are no longer at enmity with God. You need to be born again; you need to be regenerated by the sovereign power of the Holy Spirit. You don't need to be holy; you need life!

If you are born again, if you do love God and his Son, then you should want to be holy. The reason is very simply that God wants you to be holy. Everything he has done and is doing is to make you holy. Do you love God? How could it be that God's great desire for you could be at odds with your desires? If we love God, we will love what he loves. We will want to have communion and fellowship with him. All this is impossible without holiness and righteousness of heart and life. Let me show you that God the Trinity wants to make you holy and righteous and that this is his great design for your life. If you really believe that, and if you love God, then you will want to join God in his radical pursuit for your holiness.

First of all, know that God the Father's purpose in election and predestination was to make you holy. Remember what Paul said in chapter 1: "According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love" (1:4). Note that holiness and love are not only not incompatible, they

are actually inseparable. If you love God, you will be holy. “If you love me,” our Lord said, “keep my commandments.” Here in Eph. 1:4, we have God’s great design and purpose in saving you. It was to make you holy. It was not merely to forgive your sins. It was not merely to save you from hell. It was not to take your problems in this life and make them go away. Rather, it was to make you holy before him in love. From all eternity he was planning this for you. To not appreciate this, as if we were some kid getting socks for Christmas, is to show that we have no true understanding of what God is all about in the first place.

Second, the reason Christ came to die and accomplish redemption was also so that you should be holy. Of course we should expect this, because God the Son came to do God the Father’s will: “I came not to do mine own will, but the will of him who sent me” (Jn. 6:38). Since God’s will was to make us holy, this must also be the purpose of Christ in dying for us: our Savior Jesus Christ “gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people [a people for his own possession, ESV], zealous of good works” (Tit. 2:14). Think about it: when Christ was hanging on the cross, bearing your sin and your punishment, he was doing that so that you might be purified, rescued from lawlessness and zealous for good works. It was, of course, the most loving thing to do, for sin ruins us – not only in the future in the wrath to come, but also in the present. The apostle writes to the Galatians, that our Lord “gave himself for your sins, that he might deliver us from the present evil world” (Gal. 1:4) – not just deliver us from a future evil world (like hell) but from this present evil world. One of the wonderful effects of the atonement is to rescue us from the clutches of sinful and God-denying choices and desires and to make us godly in this world.

Third, the design of the Holy Spirit in giving us spiritual life in the new birth is to make us righteous men and women. Today, we think of “being born again” as a simple decision someone makes. The Bible makes it very clear that much more than that is going on when a person is born again. It is not a simple act of the will, but a mighty working of

the Holy Spirit in the human heart, giving us spiritual life and turning us from haters of God to lovers of God. Jesus told Nicodemus, “Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit” (Jn. 3:7-8). Earlier, John had written that those who believe on Christ are “born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God” (Jn. 1:13). It is a work of God in the heart, giving us new life (Eph. 2:1-10).

Those who are born again are “in the Spirit” and not “in the flesh.” Paul explains the difference between these two states in Romans 8:5-9. Those who are not born again, who are still in the flesh, mind and desire the things of the flesh (think Gal. 5:19-21), they are carnally minded, they are hostile to God and not subject to his law, and cannot please God. On the other hand, those who are born again, who are in the Spirit, mind and desire the things of the Spirit (think Gal. 5:22-23), are spiritually minded, are subject to God’s law and want to live lives that are pleasing to him. This is not just incidental to the working of the Spirit in the heart: it was God’s design all along. For the prophet Ezekiel writes, “A new heart . . . and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh [not the same meaning as “flesh” in Romans 8, obviously]. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments and do them” (Ezek. 36:26-27).

Fourth, it is God’s design in his word. The Bible everywhere calls you to pursue holiness and righteousness of life. “Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14). “But thou, O man of God, flee these things, and follow after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness. Fight the good fight of faith” (1 Tim. 6:11-12). In his next epistle to Timothy, Paul writes, “Flee also youthful lusts: but follow righteousness, faith, charity, peace, with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart” (2 Tim. 2:22).

This is true of every part of God's word. The history of Scripture gives us examples of what happens when we are not righteous (cf. 1 Cor. 10:11), and how God blesses the godly man and woman (think of Noah, Abraham, David, Daniel, etc., and Heb. 12:1). The doctrine gives us the foundation and motivation for living godly lives. The doctrine of Ephesians 1-3 makes the application in Ephesians 4-6 plausible. Romans 1-11 precedes Roman 12-16. And on and on. The promises of God's word are there to motivate us to holiness and righteousness. "Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (2 Cor. 7:1). It is no wonder then that the psalmist reasons, "How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word" (Ps. 119:9). It is simply impossible to truly value God's word and then live by the devil's advice.

Finally, it is God's purpose in his providential leading in our lives. God is not in heaven merely watching your life unfold. No, he is working in you, with you, and all around you, so that "all things work together" for your good (Rom. 8:28). The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, and he is no stranger to it. He shepherds his sheep even now. Christ is the good shepherd. And so, when we stray, God is able to bring us back. Often, he does this by disciplining us – and although such discipline can take a multitude of forms, its goal is always the same: to make us more holy. This, for example, is the point of Heb. 12:5-11.

All that God is doing, from eternity past to eternity future, is to secure your holiness and righteousness. If God is that intent upon it, surely you should be intent upon it as well. If you love God, you will love holiness and hate evil (cf. Ps. 97:10). It is what he is: God is light and in him there is no darkness whatever (1 Jn. 1:5). We kid ourselves if we walk in darkness and yet claim to have fellowship with him. As the Puritan Gurnall put it, not everyone who hangs around the court speaks to the prince. Not everyone who claims to be a Christian has real fellowship with God. If you are for real, though, if you are wearing the belt of truth, then you will know something about walking in the light. You will not

make it something you tack onto your main purpose in life; you will make it your main purpose in life. Pursue righteousness – be holy as God is holy!

CHAPTER LII

WAR AND PEACE (EPH. 6:15)

IT AT FIRST MIGHT SEEM STRANGE that the apostle puts the gospel of peace as part of the Christian warrior's armament, but this is what he does. He exhorts the Ephesian believers to stand and wage war against our spiritual foes by the gospel of peace. The KJV translates the verse this way: "and your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace," which is a very literal translation. The ESV puts it this way: "and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace."

The reason why the mention of peace in this context might seem strange to us is because there are two different types of peace, one of which is, in fact, antithetical to waging war. This would be external peace, peace in our circumstances, a cessation of hostilities between warring parties. There is no peace for the Christian in that sense. There will never be a day when we will not have to fight our enemy, the Devil. There will never be a day when we will not have to resist the world and the flesh. As the hymn puts it:

*Ne'er think the victory won,
Nor lay thine armor down;*

*The work of faith will not be done,
Till thou obtain the crown.
Fight on my soul, till death
Shall bring thee to thy God;
He'll take thee, at thy parting breath,
To his divine abode.¹*

Nor does the gospel give that kind of peace. Our Lord himself cautioned us once and for all against falling into that frame of mind: “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword” (Mt. 10:34). Following Christ does not mean we will have peace in this world.

There is another type of peace that is completely consonant with the outward confusion and clamor that comes with the din of war. It is inner peace, and this is the peace that our Lord gives, that the gospel gives: “I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world” (Jn. 16:33). Here you have two promises: a promise of peace and a promise of tribulation. They don’t cancel each other out. However, the peace that our Lord gives is a peace that enables us to endure tribulation. A submarine at the depths of the ocean is being pressed upon by the force of the water bearing down upon it in all directions; but if it is made right, it will withstand the pressure. Even so, the Christian is a person who has been engineered by the grace of God to withstand the pressures of the world which call it to capitulate. The irony is that if we give in, if we stop fighting, we will achieve a sort of peace. But it would be a false peace, a peace with the world that does not last. It is the inner peace that Christ gives that enables us from giving up for a false and temporary external peace and that enables us to keep fighting.

I think this is what the apostle is referring to here in our text. Though some have taken it to mean that we are to be ready to share the gospel at all times, I don’t think that is what the apostle is referring to here,

¹Hymn by George Heath, 1781.

though I agree with the sentiment. We should always be ready to share the gospel, ready to give an answer to those who ask about the hope that is in us (cf. 1 Pet. 3:15). Here, the apostle doesn't say that we are to have a readiness to proclaim the gospel, but that we are to have a readiness which is given by the gospel. It's not a readiness for the gospel, but a readiness of the gospel. To put it another way, the gospel here is not the object of the readiness or preparedness of which the apostle speaks; rather, the gospel is the source of that readiness and preparedness. He is saying that holding to the gospel of peace makes us ready to stand and fight our spiritual foe.

The question is, what is the connection here between the boots the warrior puts on and the readiness given by the gospel of peace? It is thought that the apostle here is referring to the *caliga*, which was a sort of boot worn by the Roman soldier "with soles made of several layers of leather averaging 2 centimeters (3/4 inch) thick, studded with hollow-headed hobnails."² His footwear enabled the Roman soldier to march long distances as well as giving him sure-footedness in the battle. Of course what you wear on your feet depends on what you are doing. I remember once working cattle with the Shafer boys wearing sandals, and deciding very quickly that that was a mistake. The same thing applies here: you wear combat boots into battle, not flip-flops.

Good shoes on your feet give you two things: mobility and sure-footedness. They enable you to move and move quickly; they also enable you to move without falling down. I know the overarching command here is to stand (ver. 14), but we shouldn't take that to mean standing still. Rather, the apostle means something more along the lines of standing tall, or standing firm. It is the opposite of falling down and becoming an easier prey for your enemy. You are never going to be able to stand without good footwear.

To sum up, I think what the apostle is getting at is this: the readiness here, associated as it is with the combat boot the soldier wore, is a refer-

²Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Baker, 2002), p. 842.

ence to our readiness to stand firm and stand tall. No one is prepared to fight if they can't stay on their feet in the battle. So I think the readiness and preparedness here is specifically tied to one being prepared to stand on their feet. In fact, in the LXX, this word ("preparation" or "readiness") was used with the meaning of an "established place, foundation" (cf. Ezra 2:68; Ps. 89:14).³ Thus, the NEB translates this verse, "let the shoes on your feet be the gospel of peace, to give you firm footing," which I think gives the sense of this verse very well.

David, in Psalm 18, speaks about how God helped him in battle, and his words underline the importance of being sure-footed in battle. He writes, "God . . . equipped me with strength and made my way blameless. He made my feet like the feet of a deer and set me secure on the heights. He trains my hands for war, so that my arms can bend a bow of bronze. You have given me the shield of your salvation, and your right hand supported me, and your gentleness made me great. You gave a wide place for my steps under me, and my feet did not slip" (Ps. 18:32-36). I think that is similar to the idea in our text: when you put on the gospel of peace like boots on your feet, you will be ready to stand so that your feet will not slip.

How does the gospel of peace do that? Before we answer that question, we need to think about what is meant by the gospel of peace. The gospel, of course, is the good news that Jesus God's Son has come and made peace between God and man, and between man and man (Eph. 2:11-22). "For he himself is our peace, who has made both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near" (2:14-17). The peace here is both subjective and objective. It is subjective in the sense that hostility is removed and it is objective in the sense that the thing (sin) that separated

³Ibid.

us from God has been removed by the atoning sacrifice of our Lord. The gospel is the gospel of peace in the sense that it is about peace and it brings peace: peace with God and peace with our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, whatever their background or nationality.

The Bible makes it clear that this peace ought to result in the tranquility and quietness of heart that rests in our being at peace with God. Our Lord said to his disciples and he says to us today, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid” (Jn. 14:27). God is a God of hope who fills our hearts with joy and peace through believing the gospel so that we abound in hope through the power of the Spirit (Rom. 15:13). The peace that comes from the gospel is not a peace that we simply have like money in the bank; it ought to be a peace that permeates our souls and enriches our lives. It ought to be a peace that fills us with joy: “Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ: by whom also we have access by faith into the grace where we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God” (Rom. 5:1-2, KJV).

How does this play into the battle? Why is this important? The point is this: you will never stand strong and stand firm if you do not have that inner confidence that comes from being at peace with God, a peace which only the gospel can give. You don’t want soldiers on the battle line that go to pieces. A soldier can be fully equipped, but unless he is filled with confidence and courage, he will never last. Even so, the Christian needs that confidence which only comes through peace with God.

We don’t want to be fearful; we want to be courageous. We want to stand firmly, not fall easily. My point is that you fight fear and gain courage by being at peace – and for the Christian this is rooted in our being at peace with God before anything else. This is what the apostle implies when he tells us “do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all under-

standing, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:6-7). How do you fight fear and anxiety? You fight it by taking your burdens to the Lord, and he gives you peace. Fear is replaced and removed when peace from God fills its place.

What this tells me is, if I want to stand firm and not run away out of fear, I need to have that inner confidence and stability that is the fundamental characteristic of a man who is at peace. If I want to have this peace, the only way I am going to get it is by going to the gospel, the gospel of peace. Let the gospel fill you with peace.

How do we let the gospel fill us with peace? Well, by understanding what the gospel says and appropriating it by faith. Consider the following points: these apply to all who are in the battle, who are following Jesus as Lord and you wear his armor and bear his name. All who are in Christ can rightfully apply the truths of the gospel to themselves.

Primarily, we need to understand and believe that God is for us. This is what the gospel tells us: Christ came and made peace between us and God, so that God is no longer hostile toward us. He is no longer your enemy; he is your Father through the Son. The apostle writes, “If God be for us, who can be against us?” Then note how this expostulation is explicitly tied to the gospel: “He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?” (Rom. 8:31-32, KJV). God is for us freely and fully through his Son and this is the only way God will be for anyone.

It is easy to believe this in the abstract, but that is not what is called for on the battlefield of life. There are a million things that rise up in our lives and threaten us and our prosperity and earthly happiness and comforts, and we are often ready when they take place to think that God has abandoned us or that he hates us or at least doesn’t care about us. We tend to tie our inner peace to our material happiness. Like Job, we take our earthly successes as signs of God’s approval. When he takes it away, we think we are the subjects of his displeasure.

We need to hear the logic of the apostle. We tend to measure God’s love by his gifts. That is partly right, but the problem is that we measure

his love by the wrong gifts. God doesn't mean for you to measure his love by earthly trinkets, but by the supreme Gift of all – the gift of his Son. The logic of Rom. 8:32 is that, since God has already given you his greatest gift, he will, therefore, not withhold from you “all things.” The giving of the Son for you is the greatest proof that he will withhold nothing that is for your ultimate happiness and joy.

What I need to believe, above all, is that no matter what happens to me in this life, I cannot measure God's smile by my earthly successes and comforts. Indeed, Paul goes on to write of tribulation and distress and persecution and famine and nakedness and peril and sword (Rom. 8:35) – and he says that these cannot separate us from the love of Christ. They do not separate us from his love by their absence, but in spite of their presence: “nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us” (ver. 37). He is for us; no one and nothing can be successfully against us.

Think about what it means that God is for us. First of all, it means that God loves you and desires your company. The God of heaven and earth wants to be with you! He thinks about you! And not just every now and then, but all the time. Isn't that what David said in the Psalm? “How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! If I would count them, they are more than the sand. I awake, and I am still with you” (Ps. 139:17-18). The God of the Bible is not some distant deity who just bears with his creatures. God created us for fellowship with him. Surely there is nothing so elevating in the world as that. No matter what other people might think of you, if you belong to Jesus Christ, then God wants you to be with him. You may be hated by everyone on Facebook, but if God loves you, what does that matter?

Second, it means that God is for you in particular. We need to meditate on the particularity of God's love. Sometimes, people so emphasize God's general love for mankind that they end up watering down the special and particular love that he has for those who are his chosen people in Christ. Hear, for example, the way Paul puts it: “I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and

the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2:20, KJV). “Who loved me.” Can you say that? Do you believe that? Not that God loves everyone and so of course he loves me; but rather, God loves me with a love that is specific to me.

When you read about the men and women in church history who were the boldest in the faith, you will often hear that what made them bold, was an assurance of the love that God had for them through Christ. They did not need to fear anything, for they fully believed that God was for them, and that whatever happened, it would be for their good. They stood firm in the fight of faith because they were filled with the peace that comes from believing the gospel truth that, in Jesus Christ, God is for us.

Third, it means that God does not hold any of your sins against you. Now, if we don’t repent of our sins, God is certainly willing to get your attention through the megaphone of pain and suffering. In this life, our sins often do come with a price. Forgiveness of sins doesn’t mean that we escape all the consequences of our sins, at least in this life. This is not a call to treat sins lightly or indifferently. But it does mean that our sins can never dampen God’s love for us, not once, not ever. “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1).

We say we believe in salvation by grace. We sometimes treat God, however, as if salvation were in fact by our works, and think of God’s love to us waxing and waning depending on the measure of our sanctification. Although, like any good parent, God is not indifferent to our obedience (because our happiness is in large measure dependent on our holiness and he does want us to be holy), nevertheless, we must never think that our relationship with him depends on our works. We are not just justified by faith at the beginning of our walk with God, but throughout the entirety of our lives. God does not take into account your goodness or holiness when it comes to your relationship in his fam-

ily; instead, he accepts us fully and completely because of what Jesus Christ his Son did for us and in our place.

Again, this does not mean that good works do not have a place; they are certainly necessary evidences of God's work in the soul. If we lack the evidence for a relationship with God, we have no reason to claim the relationship. Neither should we confuse the evidence with the ground of our relationship with God. Good works are not the ground of our justification, and we need to be careful that we are not trying, over and over again, to win God's favor by being good enough. You can't do that, and you don't have to do that. Christ has already been good enough for you and he has already fully paid the debt you owe to God by shedding his blood for you on the cross.

Finally, it means that whatever happens in this life, you are the heir of immeasurable joy in the next: "the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (Rom. 8:18). We may suffer with Christ now, but we will be glorified in the age to come (Rom. 8:17). Isn't it interesting that this is the word that God chose to describe your future state? Glorified! Full of glory! Another way it is described is, "heirs of God and fellows heirs with Christ." Nothing in this world can even come close. Bunyan was right to describe those who neglect the joys to come for the pleasures of this world as "muckrakers."

So take the gospel of peace and find firm footing. If you do not find yourself as yet in the bonds of the gospel, hear what our Lord says: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Mt. 11:28-30).

CHAPTER LIII

THE SHIELD OF FAITH (EPH. 6:16)

IF YOU WERE A SOLDIER in the first century, you would be subject to flaming arrows raining down from above. Like the initial bombardment in modern warfare, arrows were used as a way to prepare the way for the following frontal assault by the infantry. As suggested in our text, often these arrows would be dosed in a flammable substance, set on fire, and then shot with the potential of not only piercing an enemy soldier but also setting him on fire. It was a ghastly business.

What then did a soldier need to defend himself against these flaming arrows? He needed a shield. And the bigger the better: the shield the apostle refers to here was almost as big as a door – four feet long and two and a half feet wide. It consisted of two pieces of wood glued together and covered in hide. The edges would be secured by a metal frame. Sometimes before battle, soldiers would dip their shields in water for the specific purpose of reducing the effectiveness of an incendiary missile. It was the perfect cover.

Just so, the apostle tells us that we, too, are exposed to our enemy's fiery darts. The enemy, remember, is Satan and his demonic hosts. They are the ones firing these arrows at you. The phrase “the wicked” in our

text (KJV) should be translated “the wicked one,” and is a reference, not to people and certainly not to wickedness in the abstract, but to an evil, personal agency that desires nothing less than the ruin of every follower of Christ. His assault is every bit as fearful and deadly as a flaming arrow would have been to an exposed soldier in first century combat.

However, God has provided us with a shield. I am so thankful that the Lord knows exactly what we need to withstand our spiritual enemy’s attacks in the evil day. This shield is exactly what we need. You are to take it up. It is not enough to have on the belt of truth, wear the breastplate of righteousness, and put on the shoes of gospel peace. We are to put on the “whole armor of God” (13); we cannot decide which pieces we want to put on. Unless we put on the whole armor of God, we will be exposed. This is why the apostle opens this verse with the words, “In addition to all these, take the shield of faith.” The KJV, which reads, “above all,” is probably misreading what the apostle intended to say here. It is, of course, true that faith is very important, perhaps even supremely important. But the idea the apostle is seeking to get across here is that you must not stop with the aforementioned combat gear. You must go on to take up the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit. You must have everything God has provided if you expect to stand in victory over your foe. God has not given you extraneous pieces of equipment; he has given you precisely what you need to withstand your enemy.

What are these flaming arrows? What form do they take in the experience of the Christian? Well, they can take many forms. First of all, they can come in the form of attacks directly upon the mind and soul of the Christian. Throughout history, believers have testified to the reality that the devil has suggested thoughts to their minds, blasphemous thoughts, evil thoughts, that cannot be explained only in terms of the mental processes of their minds. It has come from without, but it has come in the form of a thought. If you don’t think the devil can operate here, think again. One of the clearest examples of this comes to us in the betrayal of our Lord by Judas Iscariot, and in John 13 we read this:

“And supper being ended, the devil having now put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon’s son, to betray him” (2). Here you have the devil putting a thought into the mind of Judas so powerfully that he acted upon it. That does not leave Judas guiltless; he acted upon the thought. But it was the devil who put it there to begin with. Even so, the devil can suggest things directly to our minds; we don’t know where they came from, and suddenly we are dealing with fear or lust or shame or some blasphemous thought. Perhaps more often than not, it is the devil who put those thoughts or feelings there. It is an assault. He is launching his flaming arrows at you.

Some might think that Judas is an exception, since, after all, he was the son of perdition. Maybe this can’t happen to true believers? Think again! Do you remember what happened to the apostle Peter right after his wonderful confession in Matthew 16? Just a few short moments after he said, “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God” (16), Peter rebuked our Lord when he warned them of his upcoming death. To which our Lord responded: “But he [Jesus] turned, and said unto Peter, Get thee behind me, Satan: thou art an offense to me: for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men” (23). What’s amazing about this passage is that our Lord addresses Peter and Satan at the same time. Why? Well, it seems to me that he did so because Peter was acting upon an impulse that was put there by Satan. Again, this does not leave Peter unaccountable, but it does show that even true believers can act upon things suggested to them in their minds and hearts by the devil himself. We are not immune from his attacks upon the mind. This, after all, is spiritual warfare.

I think it is important to recognize our vulnerability in this area, because if we don’t, we are not likely to be as vigilant over our own hearts and minds. That doesn’t mean that evil thoughts don’t originate in our hearts, or that every time an evil suggestion arises in our minds it comes from Satan. It does mean that he operates here, in the mind, and can attack us in our thoughts. If we are aware of this, we are probably going to be more observant about what is going on in our hearts, guarding

our hearts not only from the wickedness that is within, but also from the wicked one who is without and wanting in. Christ knocks on the door, but so does Satan. We want to let our Lord in; we want to keep Satan out.

There are other ways. The devil can get at us through outward afflictions as well. He can attack us at the point of our health, at the point of our finances, or almost any other area where he thinks we might be vulnerable spiritually. The devil knows that the soul and the body go together and that if you attack the one, you affect the other. I think of the woman our Lord healed in Luke 13, “a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan hath bound, lo, these eighteen years” (16). Job is the clearest example of this. Satan wanted to get Job to curse God, and the way he tried to get him to do this was to take away first his possessions, then his children, and finally his health. Job never actually cursed God, but he came pretty close a few times! In our day, we often never think of ascribing the work of Satan to a catastrophe that has interrupted our lives. If you are a believer, you should recognize that this is precisely the thing Satan does to get you to curse God and leave the faith. All too often, we see tragically that this is exactly what happens.

If the devil can't get at the saints through these avenues, he is not below stooping to persecution. This is what the apostle Peter was getting at when he wrote, “Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour” (1 Pet. 5:8). Now, there is a broad application of this text to all the devil's works against the saints. In the context, Peter is talking about persecution: “Whom resist steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same afflictions are accomplished in your brethren in the world. But the God of all grace, who hath called us unto his eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after that ye have suffered awhile, make you perfect, stablish, strengthen, settle you” (9-10). The devil is behind every martyr's death that has ever taken place; he is behind the imprisonment of every Christian, and he is behind the belittling and mocking of every follower of Christ.

It is true that people can hurt us, and hurt us badly; but we must never forget that behind the people hurting us – often not knowing what they are doing – is the devil, who does understand what he is doing. It's the reason our Lord called the Pharisees sons of the devil (Jn. 8:44). It's why the apostle John calls Cain, who slew his righteous brother, the son "of that wicked one" (1 Jn. 3:12).

The goal in every case is the same: to drive you away from Christ and to undermine your faith. When Paul was writing his second letter to the Corinthians, he included his concern about the false teachers which had infiltrated into the church: "But I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtlety, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ" (2 Cor. 11:3). To Peter our Lord gave a warning and an encouragement, both of which point to the goal of Satan to topple your faith: "Simon, Simon, Satan hath desired to have you, that he might sift you as wheat: But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren" (Lk. 22:31-32).

I think it's important to have this perspective, because sometimes we look at the bad things in our lives and think of them almost as flaming arrows from God's bow, as if God himself were the one shooting these painful missiles into our lives. God certainly allows it, and God certainly has a good purpose for allowing these things to happen. Nothing happens to us that God has not already planned for. We need to remember that, but we must not think that God willingly afflicts us. The devil does, however. We must not think that God is malicious, that he enjoys inflicting pain upon his people. The devil does, however. The bottom line is we must remember the reality of the devil when painful things happen to us, and though the devil delights in bringing us harm, God does not, and permits it only because he is bringing something much better out of it that otherwise would not have happened. In other words, if you are going to get angry, get angry at the devil, not at God. The devil means it for evil, but God means it for good.

Why does God allow this? What is the purpose of this? We can't say exactly what his specific purpose is in every case, but we can say, in light of Romans 8:28, God allows us to be attacked by Satan in order to bring us ultimate and everlasting good. The sufferings of this present time are producing for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory (Rom. 8:17; 2 Cor. 4:17). It is the grace of God that the sufferings are only "for a moment," but the weight of glory is "eternal." It is also the grace of God that allows us to endure these sufferings so that we will experience the weight of glory. In other words, the Bible teaches that there are aspects of glory that we would never be able to experience in the age to come apart from the sufferings of this present age. It's why our Lord said about those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness: "Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven" (Mt. 5:12). That doesn't make any sense unless the reward is somehow tied to the suffering.

We don't want to fall to the assaults of Satan. The question then is, how do we wield the shield of faith? It's interesting that the purpose of the flaming darts of Satan is to destroy our faith – but our faith is the very thing that quenches the fiery darts of the wicked one! How does it do this?

Well, first of all, we need to see clearly what the object of faith is. As Martyn Lloyd-Jones points out in his sermon on this text, the cults will tell you to have faith in your faith, but this is not what Paul is exhorting us to do here. What this really means is that they want you to work up to a feeling that something good is going to happen for you, whether it is healing or a new job or a new relationship. It is blind faith in the ultimate sense, because there is no object for faith – it has been reduced to a psychological state of the mind. Again, that is not what the apostle is telling us to do here – he is not saying that you are to have some unfounded confidence that everything is going to turn out for your best.

Nor is he saying that you should have faith in yourself. That is the big lie our culture advocates these days. "Have faith in yourself," they

say. "You can do anything if you put your mind to it," another blatantly false idea. In any case, when confronted with a supernatural foe, the last thing you should be thinking is how ready you are to meet Satan on your own. The fact of the matter is that whoever you are or whatever you have experienced, you are no match for Satan. He is in a different league altogether. Putting you up against Satan is like putting a tee-ball kid in front of Nolan Ryan. He's going to smoke you every time.

The object of faith is not yourself nor a feeling; it is Jesus Christ. True, biblical faith looks away from itself to Christ; away from our weakness and inadequacy to his strength and faithfulness. It is only when we recognize our need of him that he comes to deliver us from our enemy. This is what our Lord was getting at when he told his disciples, "Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me. I am the vine, ye are the branches: he that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing" (Jn. 15:4-5).

This does not mean, of course, that we are to "let go and let God." It does mean that our every effort in the struggle for righteousness is to be effected in the conscious dependence upon our Lord and his grace. It is living out Philippians 2:12-13 and 1 Corinthians 15:10.

It is living upon the one who has already defeated the devil. When our Lord was confronted and tempted by the devil in the wilderness, our Lord stood fast and did not give in. He chased away the tempter. Ultimately, our Lord defeated Satan at the cross. It is because of what our Lord did on the cross, that he foresaw Satan falling as lightning from heaven (Lk. 10:18). What the seventy experienced, we can experience in measure: "Lord, even the devils are subject to us through thy name" (17). I think of the demoniac, who was known by the name Legion, because there were so many demons residing in him. It took only one word from our Lord and they left and he was made whole (cf. Mk. 5:1-20).

When we trust in God, in our Lord, it is not so much that faith is our shield as it is the God who is the object of our faith. This is a com-

mon theme in the OT. Do you remember what God said to Abraham? There he was, probably discouraged from the lack of a son and seeing no earthly way God's promise was ever going to be fulfilled. Then God comes to him and says, "Fear not, Abram: I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward" (Gen. 15:1). Ultimately, we do not have to worry about what the devil is trying to do to us, what arrows he lets fly at us, because we have the God of the universe as our shield. Nothing can get through him! Truly, as the Proverbs put it, "The name of the LORD is a strong tower: the righteous runneth into it, and is safe" (18:10). Or, as the Psalm expresses it, "For the LORD God is a sun and shield: the LORD will give grace and glory: no good thing will he withhold from them that walk uprightly. O LORD of hosts, blessed is the man that trusteth in thee" (Ps. 84:11-12).

The apostle John understood this well. In his epistle, we read: "For whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith. Who is he that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God?" (1 Jn. 5:4-5). The people who overcome the world and the ruler of the world, are not those who possess a lot of self-confidence. The ones who overcome are those whose confidence rests in the Son of God who never fails those who put their trust in him. The protection faith in Christ affords is complete. It quenches all the fiery darts of the wicked one. Not some of them, not most of them, but all of them.

Why does God tie the victory to faith? Certainly not because faith has any magical powers latent in itself. Faith is not some potion you throw at the devil. Nor is it because faith makes us worthy of God's intervention. No – rather, faith is the victory because by faith we consciously look away from ourselves and towards the grace and power and sufficiency of God. It is by faith that God is consciously glorified as the one who is our deliverer. He could do it without faith. He could save us without us ever knowing, but God wants us to experience the joy and delight of resting in him. He wants us to know him and to know him is eternal

life and joy; but the only way we can know him is by faith, by looking away from ourselves and our idols and to him and him alone.

I used to think that God made me to be somebody. The older I get, the more I realize that God didn't make me to be somebody but to know Somebody – himself, the God of the universe, through his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. And that's why he created you: to know him and to know him not only as your creator, but as your Savior, as your provider, as your deliverer, as your delight. Resting in him, we find him to be a perfect shield, and find complete protection from all the darts and missiles of the evil one.

CHAPTER LIV

THE HELMET OF SALVATION (EPH. 6:17)

SO FAR THE APOSTLE HAS EXHORTED his readers to put on and take up the following items: the belt of integrity, the breastplate of righteousness, the boots of gospel peace which make us firm-footed in battle, and the shield of faith. What else does a soldier need in combat? Well, any soldier would be incomplete without a helmet. So the apostle goes on to say that the soldier of Christ is to take the helmet of salvation.

Each of these items in the panoply of spiritual warfare stands for spiritual realities that are to characterize the believer in Christ. The belt stands for the integrity of the Christian, the breastplate for his righteousness, and so on. Here, in verse 17, the helmet stands for the salvation that we have in Christ.

There are a couple of questions we should ask of this text. First, what exactly is the apostle referring to by “salvation”? This might seem like an obvious question, but it does bear some reflection. In the Bible, salvation has past, present, and future aspects. The question then is, to which of these aspects is the apostle referring?

Thus, when the apostle tells us that we are not saved by “works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved

us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost” (Tit. 3:5), he is referring to that aspect of our salvation that is past. There is a sense in which every Christian can say he or she is already saved. We are saved in the sense that “there is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1). Forgiveness of sins is not something we have to wait for, but something which is granted immediately to everyone who believes in Christ as Lord and Savior. We are “now justified by his blood” (Rom. 5:9). Moreover, a new nature and new life is something which is already ours in Christ.

There is also a present, ongoing aspect to salvation. Salvation is not yet complete, and we have not only been saved, but we are also being saved. This is how we are to understand a number of passages, such as Phil. 2:12, where the apostle tells us to work out our own salvation with fear and trembling. In that verse, salvation is seen as a work in progress, something that is ongoing. It is connected to past salvation in the sense that the beginnings of this ongoing work of salvation started when we first came to faith in Christ. Paul also refers to this in Phil. 3, when, referring to himself, he says that he is not yet perfect, he has not yet attained to the resurrection of the dead (see verses 11-14). No one can say that he or she is yet perfect. We still sin while we are in these mortal bodies, and so we are always in need of sanctification.

Thank God, that is not all there is to it. There is yet a future aspect of salvation, something which we all await. In some sense, salvation will not be fully perfected until the Second Coming of our Lord, when he will raise the dead and judge all the nations. For example, the apostle Peter writes that we are “kept by the power of God unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time” (1 Pet. 1:5). This is what the apostle is referring to in Rom. 13:11 when he says that “now is our salvation nearer than when we believed.” When we look all around us, and we see the church divided and confused, sin abounding, and problems in every corner of our experience, we can be thankful that God has not finished the story of salvation. The end of all this misery we live in will coincide with the beginning of an eternal rest of righteousness and peace. It is

only then that we will be finally and fully saved. In the book of Revelation, it is when the enemy of God's people, represented by Babylon, is overthrown, and God's people finally delivered, that we read of a great multitude in heaven crying out, "Salvation, and glory, and honor, and power, unto the Lord our God" (Rev. 19:1).

Again, the question is: to which aspect of salvation is the apostle here referring? Well, since he doesn't specify, I think it is best to take salvation here as referring to all aspects of it, past, present, and future. A further reason for this is that you cannot take any of these in isolation. What I mean is that, if you have been truly saved by a work of the Spirit of God in your heart, then there will be an ongoing, present experience of that salvation in your life, and it will inevitably be consummated in the age to come. There is no such thing as a saved person living with impunity in sin. There is no such thing as a truly saved person living without the fruit of faith in their life. And there is no such thing as a truly saved person who dies and goes to hell in the end. All who belong to Christ will be fully and finally saved. If you have been regenerated, you are being sanctified, and if you are being sanctified, you will persevere in holiness and be finally glorified.

These are important distinctions because there are all sorts of heresies that emerge from seeking to separate some aspect of salvation from the rest. For example, those who want to separate past salvation from its present effects in the heart and life end up advocating for a form of easy-believism that discourages people from getting serious about the sin in their lives. There are still folks around who claim that you can have Christ as your personal Savior, and yet reject him as your Lord. There are others who claim you can be born again and yet bear no fruit in the life that might bear up such a claim. Do you know what the Bible calls this kind of faith? It calls it a dead faith, the faith of devils, a useless faith (see James 2). True faith in Christ is a faith that works. True faith overcomes the world; it doesn't give in to it or imitate it (1 Jn. 5:4).

It's absolutely true that a believer can fall into sin, serious sin, and sometimes for long periods of time. No one is immune. If that were true,

Paul would not have had to write what he is writing to the Ephesians here in chapter 6. Let the one who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall (1 Cor. 10:12). Sin can come into our lives with serious and devastating effects, damaging our witness, destroying our relationships, and ending our ministries.

However, I don't think a true believer, someone who has been truly born again, will live their whole life in sin, bereft of the fruit of faith and holiness. There are two reasons I believe this. First, I believe it because the author of Hebrews notes that God knows how to discipline his children when they sin so that they bear the "peaceable fruit of holiness" (Heb. 12:11). In other words, when a child of God sins, God disciplines them so that they will stop sinning and start obeying. That is the clear implication of Hebrews 12. The other reason I believe this is the fact that the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart is more powerful than the power of sin. This is why the apostle John writes: "No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him; and he cannot keep on sinning, because he has been born of God" (1 Jn. 3:9, ESV). Note the universality of that statement: "no one." Note the power of the new birth: "he cannot keep on sinning, because he has been born of God." It doesn't say he will not sin at all, but that he won't keep on sinning – the work of God's Spirit has more staying power than the power of sin, thank God!

Our Lord said it like this: "Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them" (Mt. 7:17-20).

Another false idea that has been bounced around in the church through the centuries is this idea that you can be truly born again and yet finally lost. I appreciate the fact that those who advocate this can point to many passages that warn Christians of falling under God's judgment in the age to come. One thinks of the passages in Hebrews, for

example. However, the problem with this view is that it again separates what God has joined together: salvation is a unity and should not be torn into the disparate pieces.

How then are the warnings of Scripture to be explained? Well, those who think a true Christian can lose their faith and end up lost forever don't distinguish between saving faith and false faith. We have to make that distinction. It is a Biblical one. It's what the apostle James is getting at when he talks about dead faith. He is obviously not talking about someone who doesn't "believe" anymore; rather, he is talking about a person whose faith doesn't do anything, doesn't produce fruits of holiness in the life. It's like the faith of devils: they certainly believe in God and Christ, have correct theology and so on, but they are damned. That's what we mean by false faith. Someone can have this and really think they are a Christian and going to heaven, but they are without the kind of faith that saves. It is to these that the Biblical warnings are aimed.

On the other hand, those who are truly saved, who have saving faith, are "kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time." Our Lord tells us, "And this is the Father's will which hath sent me, that of all which he hath given me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up again at the last day. And this is the will of him that sent me, that every one which seeth the Son, and believeth on him, may have everlasting life: and I will raise him up at the last day" (Jn. 6:39-40). He goes on to say, "No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day" (Jn. 6:44). Again, hear the note of certainty in these verses: "I will raise him up at the last day." It's not, "I hope to raise him up," but "I will raise him up." Those who have been drawn effectually by the Father to faith in the Son will be finally saved. That's what our Lord himself said. This is backed up by numerous other passages, such as Jn. 10:27-29 and Romans 8:37-39. The elect will be finally saved.

This is different from those who say, "Once saved, always saved," but who really mean, "Once made a profession of faith in Jesus, necessarily

saved in the end.” That is not what we are saying. Again, we cannot separate the work of Christ in the heart from the life of the Christian. This is why older theologians preferred to say, the perseverance of the saints. Yes, the saints must persevere in faith and holiness in order to be saved (cf. Mt. 24:13). The point here is that they will, and that this certainty does not ultimately depend upon our own fickle wills but upon the power and promises of God our Savior.

“But,” you might say, “what difference does this all make? These just seem like theological niceties, clever distinctions, and so on, but I don’t see how they can make me a better person or prepare me for spiritual battle.” Well, that’s really our second question that we need to ask of the text. The first was: What is this salvation of which the apostle speaks? The second is: How do we appropriate salvation for spiritual battle and put it on like a soldier wears his helmet for combat?

It means that above all, we need to understand what we have in Christ; we need to understand our riches in Christ. This is very important. You need to understand your resources. You need to know that you can meet the enemy and defeat him, and that’s where salvation comes in. Charles Hodge wrote in his commentary on this passage, “That which adorns and protects the Christian, which enables him to hold up his head with confidence and joy, is the fact that he is saved.” We put on salvation like a helmet by understanding what it means to be saved in the first place. It is because we are saved that we can meet the devil and his legions to begin with. It is our salvation that has armed us, so to speak. We need to know what weapons we have as saved people.

The problem is that we can get discouraged in the battle, and begin to think we have far fewer resources at our disposal than we really do. You can begin to get the Elijah syndrome. That is, you can become paralyzed by the feeling that you are all alone in the battle and that you are having to do this completely in the power of your own strength and in the light of your own understanding. When you have made a few mistakes and when you come up short a few times, it’s easy to descend into this mindset. You become weary in the battle and you begin to think about

giving up. It's a bad place to be: it's incapacitating, debilitating, and paralyzing spiritually.

How do we get out of there? First of all, you need to understand and really believe that, when God saved you, he equipped you with everything you need to defeat the enemy. That begins with his work in your heart. It's easy to look at our hearts and see them as the playgrounds of Satan and to forget that "greater is he that is in you than he that is in the world" (1 Jn. 4:4). You are never alone, nor are you ever out-gunned, because there is never a day that the Lord is not working in you and through you. It is true that you may be small and insignificant, that your talents may be small, and your reach limited. But know that if our Lord could take a few fish and loaves of bread from the hands of a boy and feed five thousand people with it, he can bless you no matter how small you are.

In this connection, the apostle Paul wrote, "There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way of escape, that ye may be able to bear it" (1 Cor. 10:13). God will not allow you to be tempted above what you are able, and the reason for this is that he is there empowering you and equipping you. How are we strengthened? We are strengthened by the power of God (Eph. 3:16). We are kept by the power of God (1 Pet. 1:5). It was the power of God that saved you in the first place (Rom. 1:16; 1 Cor. 2:5) and it is the power of God that keeps you there. The apostle himself confessed that though he and his fellow workers were "weak" yet they were able to "live with [Christ] by the power of God" (2 Cor. 13:4). Paul prayed for the Thessalonians that God "would count you worthy of this calling, and fulfill all the good pleasure of his goodness, and the work of faith with power" (2 Thess. 1:11). God does not give us the spirit of fear, but of power (1 Tim. 1:7).

Of course, God's power does not look like the power of the world. It is a power in smallness, strength in weakness, just like the Lord. Nev-

ertheless, it is the power of God, a power that will overcome all that opposes it in the end.

Then we need to remember that God never gives up on his children. We are surrounded every day by false promises and false people. Our world is full of false hopes. At the beginning of WW2, our troops in the Philippines really believed that their government would rescue them. Nevertheless, they were left at the mercy of the enemy – not because their government wanted to leave them there, but because at the time it just couldn't intervene. God never gives up on us; he never leaves us or forsakes us. This is why the apostle was able to write that he was "confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until [bring it to completion at, ESV] the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:6). God did not start a work of grace in your heart only to let it rot and go to waste. It took the blood of his Son to begin that work, and you can be sure that he will not despise the value of his blood.

In the same way, the psalmist was able to pray, "The LORD will perfect that which concerneth me: thy mercy, O LORD, endureth forever: forsake not the works of thine own hands" (Ps. 138:8). Note the confidence with which the verse begins: the Lord will perfect, or fulfill, his purpose for us (cf. ESV). The reason we can be sure of this is because his mercy and steadfast love endure forever, are never failing. Thus the prayer, which does not arise out of doubt, but out of hope: "Forsake not the works of thine own hands."

Fundamentally, I see in this verse a call to hope. This is a call to hope in the sure fulfillment and completion of that salvation which God has already begun in us. Heaven is in the heart of every believer. This becomes especially clear when we compare our text with a similar text in 1 Thess. 5:8, where the apostle writes, "But let us, who are of the day, be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love; and for an helmet, the hope of salvation." Here the apostle makes it explicit: that which is our helmet is the hope of salvation. Thus, the primary focus of the Christian is on what God has promised us in the future. Though we

are not to forget the realities that are already true in us, we are to be constantly looking forward to the fulfillment of salvation in the age to come.

We can focus on the blessings of the age to come because we can be sure of the blessings of the age to come. All the pain we endure in this age is temporary at best. The blessings of the age to come are eternal. We are not “saved” in this world in the ultimate sense of what it means to be saved. Our salvation is closer than when we first believed, but we have not embraced it yet. Our full salvation is yet future. So don’t put your hopes on this world and this age. God does not intend for you to. To do so is to sabotage your hope. That does not mean he will leave you alone in this age. It does not mean he will forsake you. It does not mean that there is one moment when his grace is withdrawn from you. It does mean that the fullness of the blessings of our salvation are yet to come. By God’s strength and power we can endure to the end because it is worth it.

This is the point of Hebrews 10. The audience of that letter was on the verge of quitting. So the author reminds them of the hope of salvation: “But call to remembrance the former days, in which, after ye were illuminated, ye endured a great fight of afflictions; partly, whilst ye were made a gazingstock both by reproaches and afflictions; and partly, whilst ye became companions of them that were so used. For ye had compassion of me in my bonds, and took joyfully the spoiling of your goods, knowing in yourselves that ye have in heaven a better and an enduring substance. Cast not away therefore your confidence, which hath great recompense of reward” (Heb. 10:32-35). How do you endure the hard things? How do you stay strong in battle? By not casting away your hope, the hope of our final salvation – that we have in heaven a better and an enduring substance. Put on the helmet of salvation!

CHAPTER LV

ALL-PRAYER (EPH. 6:18-20)

IN BUNYAN'S CLASSIC ALLEGORY, *The Pilgrims' Progress*, he describes a point at which Christian comes to the Valley of the Shadow of Death. He is warned away from it by two men fleeing from its horrors in these words: "We saw there the hobgoblins, satyrs, and dragons of the pit; we heard also in that Valley a continual howling and yelling, as of a people under unutterable misery, who there sat bound in affliction and irons; and over that Valley hangs discouraging clouds of confusion. Death also doth always spread his wings over it. In a word, it is every whit dreadful, being utterly without order." Christian's response is that this is the way to the Celestial City, and so he ventures forward cautiously, carefully, and, frankly, fearfully. When he begins to approach the Valley, we are told that in "the midst of this valley, I perceived the mouth of hell to be, and it stood hard by the wayside. Now, thought Christian, what shall I do? And ever and anon the flame and smoke would come out in such abundance, with sparks and hideous noises, (things that cared not for Christian's sword, as did Apollyon before), that he was forced to put up his sword, and betake himself to another weapon called All-prayer. [Eph. 6:18] So he cried out in my

hearing, ‘O Lord, I beseech thee, deliver my soul!’ [Ps. 116:4].” Bunyan’s character, Christian, is not saved by the sword but by the weapon of All-prayer. Bunyan, of course, took this from the words of Paul in our text: “Praying always with all prayer...” (Eph. 6:18).

I’m not sure that Paul actually intended prayer to be considered a weapon. In any case, he does not liken prayer to any part of the soldier’s armor and weaponry. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that prayer is to accompany the Christian soldier throughout our warfare. This does not describe so much a particular weapon as it does the attitude with which a Christian is to do war with the enemy. Prayer is to pervade every aspect of our combat. We are to stand with the armor and take our weapons as we pray to the Lord for help and depend upon him for strength and guidance.

I think perhaps the best Biblical illustration of this comes from the reign of good king Jehoshaphat. In 2 Chron. 20, we are told that the nations of Moab, Ammon, and their confederates united to attack the nation of Judah. Against their numbers, the army of Judah was no match. So what did Jehoshaphat do? He “set himself to seek the LORD, and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah. And Judah gathered themselves together, to ask help of the LORD: even out of all the cities of Judah they came to seek the LORD” (20:3-4). In the next few verses, you have this great prayer of the king to the Lord (ver. 5-12), which ends with these words: “O our God, wilt thou not judge them? For we have no might against this great company that cometh against us; neither know we what to do: but our eyes are upon thee.”

God responds to their request through the words of the prophet Jahaziel (ver. 14-17). The gist of it was this: you will not have to fight; God will fight for you, and that is exactly what happened. Judah believed the word of the Lord. Instead of going out to battle with swords flashing, they go into battle line with a line of priests singing praise to the Lord. We read, “And they rose early in the morning, and went forth into the wilderness of Tekoa: and as they went forth, Jehoshaphat stood and said, Hear me, O Judah, and ye inhabitants of Jerusalem; believe in the

LORD your God, so shall ye be established; believe his prophets, so shall ye prosper. And when he had consulted with the people, he appointed singers unto the LORD, and that should praise the beauty of holiness, as they went out before the army, and to say, Praise the LORD; for his mercy endureth forever” (ver. 20-21).

In the end, Judah didn’t even have to fight. Instead, God turned the enemies of Israel upon each other, and God’s people just watched as their enemies destroy themselves. The key to the victory here was not the power of the sword, but the power of prayer. Not that prayer is itself powerful, of course. Prayer is only as powerful as the God to whom it addresses is powerful. Since the God of Judah is the God of the universe, their enemies had no power over them. They stood in the evil day through prayer.

Here is a NT illustration of the principle of the text before us. In several of the gospels, we have this story of the father whose son is afflicted by demons. He had asked the disciples to cast out the demon but they were unable. At the time, Jesus and three of his apostles were gone (they were on the Mount of Transfiguration). They returned just as things were getting pretty embarrassing for the disciples that had been left. Our Lord then cast the demon out with no problem. Flummoxed, the apostles asked the Lord why they were not able to do this themselves. I want you to hear the Lord’s very interesting reply: he told them they were not able to cast this demon out “because of your unbelief: for verily I say unto you, if ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, ‘Remove hence to yonder place;’ and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you. Howbeit this kind goeth not out but by prayer” (Mt. 17:20-21).

Our Lord’s response points to two realities that we would do well to take heed to. First, that prayer is the response of faith and that the measure of our faith can be determined by our prayer life. The words, “this kind goeth not out but by prayer” indicate that the disciples had not sought the exorcism of the demon through prayer. In other words, they were relying on their own power and ability, as strange as that might

seem. I suppose that, after you've cast out a few demons, anyone could get cocky. Our Lord says that it was their unbelief that was their undoing on this particular occasion, and then points to their prayer life. Faith and prayer go together. Sinful self-confidence and self-righteousness and prayerlessness go together too. Whereas the Lord blesses the former, he will not bless the latter.

The second reality to which our Lord's words point is that some situations require more conscious seeking and dependence upon the Lord than others. They had cast out other demons, but this one wouldn't budge. Why? "This kind" was different from the others. I don't know particularly much about demons, but apparently some are worse than others. This points up to a general principle: there are some things in the spiritual realm you are not going to be able to accomplish apart from a life of faith and prayer. Talents and ability and personality won't do it. These things may count for a lot in this world and its priorities, but not before God. As the Psalm puts it, "He [God] delighteth not in the strength of the horse: he taketh not pleasure in the legs of a man." Rather, "the LORD taketh pleasure in them that fear him, in those that hope in his mercy" (Ps. 147:10-11). It's when we are weak (in terms of our own personal strength) that we are truly strong (in terms of God's grace and empowerment, 2 Cor. 12:9-10).

These two illustrations, one from the OT and one from NT, show us why the apostle would say what he does here. Prayer is immensely important. It is important, not as another box to check on our spiritual duties list, but as a way to express our dependence and faith in our Savior. These illustrations show us that true spiritual victory is accomplished not so much by what we do, but by what God does by his grace for us and through us. And the only way to truly live this reality out is through prayer. If we really believe that it is not by might nor by power but by the Spirit of God (cf. Zech. 4:6) that we conquer, then this conviction will express itself in regular, real, believing prayer.

The apostle does not focus so much on the why of prayer here. He assumes it, more or less. Rather, he focuses on the how of prayer. How

are we to pray? Here is how: “always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints: and for me, that utterance may be given unto me, that I may open my mouth boldly, to make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in bonds: that therein I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak” (Eph. 6:18-20). In particular, there are four universals that are to characterize our prayer life: we are to pray with all prayer, at all times, with all perseverance, and for all the saints.

All Prayer

There are different kinds of prayer. There are prayers of thanksgiving, prayers of deliverance, prayers of praise, prayers for direction, and so on. Our prayers ought to be as varied as our needs. In fact, the description of prayer by the term “supplication” points to prayer as that by which we address to God our needs. It is a word which points in the direction of neediness, of lack, of want, and of entreating God to meet us at our point of need. We come to him, not as one who is “rich and increased with goods and have need of nothing” but as those who are “wretched and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked” (Rev. 3:17). The Psalmist described himself as “poor and needy” (Ps. 40:17), a fit description for you and me as well! The great thing is that, despite our poverty and emptiness, “yet the Lord thinketh upon me” and therefore we pray, “thou art my help and my deliverer; make no tarrying, O my God.”

We are to commit to God all our needs, both small and great. We are not to think that there is anything too small for the notice of our God, who knows even the number of the hairs upon our heads. He who cares for the grass of the field and the birds of the air certainly cares for our littlest needs. There is nothing that escapes his notice, nothing beneath his dignity for which we cannot pray. Isn't this how the apostle exhorts us in his letter to the Philippians? “Be careful [anxious] for nothing; but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God” (Phil. 4:6).

In doing so, we will learn to bring all our life under the sovereignty of God, which is where it should be. This is what the apostle James is getting at, when he rebukes those who cavalierly make plans without consideration of God's will in the matter. "Go to now, ye that say, Today or tomorrow we will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain: whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor, that appeareth for a little time and then vanisheth away. For that ye ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this or that" (Jm. 4:13-15). Approaching every situation with the prayer, "If the Lord will," is the only way to submit our hearts to God's sovereign will over our lives.

Prayers of supplication are not the only category of prayer. Prayer is not just to be a litany of needs presented before God. Thanksgiving ought to be a great part of our prayer life. If we don't make room for thanksgiving, we will end up forgetting just how blessed we already are in Christ. Thanksgiving is a preventative to bitterness. It also keeps us from developing an entitlement attitude. Thanksgiving reminds us that God doesn't owe us anything, that everything comes to us as a gift of grace.

Then there should be confession. "If we confess our sins" is a necessary part of walking in the light as he is in the light (1 Jn. 1:9). May God prevent us from ever taking on the attitude of the Pharisee who could only see the sins of others and not his own. When we pray asking for God to cleanse us from all unrighteousness, we are acknowledging our dependence upon the redemptive work of Jesus Christ and our need of God's righteousness which comes to us through him by faith. It is also the first step to dealing with our sins. If you cannot even bring up your sins in secret confession to God, how in the world are you going to even begin to think of mortifying them in our life? So let confession be a part of your prayer life.

Then there ought to be the element of worship in our prayers. What I mean by this is that our prayers ought to be characterized by a sense of awe and reverence and humility and joy. It's why when our Lord

taught his disciples to pray, the very first words are, “Our Father which art in heaven, hallowed by thy name” (Mt. 6:9). We are so liable to pride that we need to constantly be humbling ourselves. We also need to be reminded just how small we are and how great God is. It is the first step in true religion. There is a book, written by Ed Welch, entitled, *When People are Big and God is Small*. It’s a book intended to deal with all the problems that come from magnifying people and minimizing God. Certainly, a lot of problems start here.

Ultimately, the reason for the element of worship in our prayers is that God is worthy of our worship. He is worthy in a way no one else is. He is the only source of eternal joy and gladness. At the end of the day, our greatest need is God himself, not the things he gives, but himself. When we worship him, we are acknowledging that reality. Let us pray with “all prayer and supplication.”

Before we address the next universal, notice that the apostle describes this praying as praying “in the Spirit.” This points to the reality that prayer is not just a matter of turning prayer wheels. It is real communion with the living God. You are not going to really pray if you don’t believe that. The point of the apostle is that this is exactly what prayer is for the Christian. Christ has provided a way into the very presence of God. “Through him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father” (Eph. 2:18). Prayer, therefore, is not something we do just to make ourselves feel better. It is not something we do to lower our blood pressure. No, it is talking to God in the most real and literal sense and knowing that God is listening to you.

In fact, Paul says in his letter to the Romans, that even in the situation where we find ourselves unable to know what to pray, the Spirit of God himself steps in and prays for us: “Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. And he that searcheth the hearts knoweth what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit maketh intercession for the saints according to the will of God” (Rom. 8:26-27). This being

the case, why is it that we do not avail ourselves of this privilege more than we do? Paul is saying that, apart from sin separating us from fellowship with God, there is literally no way you can go wrong in prayer. Even when you don't know how to pray, even then we can pray the most spiritual prayers!

All Times

In the KJV, the apostle opens by saying, "Praying always." The text literally says, "on every occasion," or, as some translate it, "at every opportunity."¹ As the apostle says in another place, we are to "pray without ceasing" (1Thess. 5:17). I take this to mean that the Christian is to maintain an attitude of prayer throughout the day and throughout one's life. There is never a moment when we do not need God, and, therefore, there is not a moment when we should not be able to pray. Theologian John Gill once described prayer as the breath of the regenerate man, and I think he is exactly right. Prayer is not just something we do at discrete points in time; it is an attitude that we ought to carry with us throughout the day.

Again, this points to the privilege that belongs to the Christian. The fact that we are to be continually engaged in prayer means that heaven's gates are always open to the Christian. If we do not avail ourselves of the privilege of prayer, it is not because God is not listening. It is because we have become self-satisfied, like the apostles who couldn't cast out the demon and didn't even think to avail themselves of the power of prayer.

All perseverance

Praying at every opportunity goes hand and hand with another part of Paul's description of the how of prayer: "watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication." This points to maintaining an earnest purpose for preserving prayer as a part of our lives. It means that we

¹Hoehtner, *Ephesians*, p. 855.

don't give up when we don't get what we pray for. It means that we don't stop praying because we feel neglected by God. It means that we keep praying even when we don't feel like it.

The fact of the matter is that prayer is hard. Anyone who tells you different must have a different experience from most of the saints throughout history. Prayer is hard because it is part of a spiritual battle, and battle is hard. The devil knows that God blesses prayer and it is to his advantage that he keep you from praying.

This is why our Lord spoke the parable of the unjust judge in Luke 18. Do you remember how this parable is introduced by Luke? He says, "And he spake a parable unto them to this end, that men ought always to pray, and not to faint" (Lk. 18:1). Our Lord spoke this parable to encourage us to pray because he knew that it is easy for us to become discouraged and to stop praying. Looking at the parable, it seems that our Lord's point is that, like the widow, we have to keep coming to God, even when it doesn't seem like God is listening to our requests. God does not always answer our prayers on our time schedule. God answered Isaac's prayer for Rebekah twenty years later, it seems. God answered Zachariah's prayer for Elizabeth long after he had stopped praying for it and had completely given up on it. But God had heard, he had listened, and he did answer their prayers.

Now this doesn't mean that if we badger God long enough, he is eventually going to give in to our every request. Thank God he doesn't! It does mean that every prayer is heard and received with love, and is answered according to the counsels of infinite wisdom, power, and grace.

We don't give up on prayer, because giving up on prayer means that we have given up on God. God is faithful, and he will never give up on us. Therefore, let us pray with all perseverance.

All saints

Finally, Paul says we are to pray for "all saints." It has been pointed out many times over that the Lord's Prayer is a communal prayer, not a

prayer of the rugged individualist. In the same way, Paul reminds us that, when we pray, we are to pray for all the saints. Of course this doesn't mean every Christian in the world. It does mean that we are to pray for those believers that are in the sphere of our influence and notice. Begin with your own home, and then work outward in increasing circles of people you are connected to. Of course this doesn't mean we don't pray for our own needs. But God doesn't have us on this earth for ourselves; we are here to serve others. Part of that service to others is to pray for them.

You see this illustrated in several delightful ways in the NT. I think of Epaphras, who is described to the Colossian believers as "a servant of Christ . . . always laboring fervently for you in prayers, that ye may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God" (Col. 4:12). It is what James exhorts us to when he writes, "Pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much" (Jm. 5:16).

Paul himself wants to get in on this, as he does in other places as well (cf. Rom. 15:30). In particular, he asks them to pray for him so that he will have boldness in proclaiming the gospel.

It is well that we hear this. Do we not often think, "Well, what's the point? Why pray when God is sovereign?" Whereas we ought to say, "Why pray at all if God is not sovereign?" If God's hands are tied, if he has already done everything he can and now it's up to us, then there really is no point in praying. But if God is sovereign, then we can have confidence that our prayers will be answered. We can have confidence because the Scriptures teach us that God has chosen to use prayer to further his purposes in the earth. Having chosen prayer, we can be sure that God will use it. God's sovereign control over all things is no reason to sit on our hands and do nothing. Prayer is God's sovereignly chosen means to advance his kingdom, his glory, and our eternal good in this world and the next.

This being the case, we cannot expect God's blessings apart from prayer. There is very real danger lurking around the corner for those

who do not pray. The apostles found this out when they slept instead of praying. We should hear our Lord's words to them and appropriate them for ourselves: "Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Mt. 26:41). They didn't and entered into temptation. Peter denied Christ, and the rest abandoned him.

So let us pray. With all prayer, at all times, with all perseverance, for all the saints. It's an incredible privilege given to us through the redeeming work of God's own Son. Therefore, let us take every advantage of this amazing blessing!

CHAPTER LVI

BRINGING THE GOSPEL HOME (EPH. 6:21-24)

THE BOOK OF EPHESIANS is one of the most important letters in the entire New Testament. It contains in relatively brief form the Apostle Paul's major theological ideas as well as his understanding of their application in the life of the first century church. Of course, we believe that, since this book is written by an apostle of Jesus Christ, it is not, therefore, just the apostle's own personal understanding of these things, but an authoritative message from our Lord himself. These are good words. They are true words. Some people have tried to separate Christianity from Paul's understanding of Christianity. The fact of the matter is that you simply cannot do that. You are not a Christian in any authentic sense of the word if you are not Pauline in your orthodoxy. That makes books like Ephesians simply foundational for the identity of the church today and the way it lives out the gospel.

As we come to a close in our series of expositions on this great book, let's remind ourselves of some of the major themes that the apostle has set before us in his letter. In fact, we have them right before us in the closing words of the apostle: "Peace be to the brethren, and love with

faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace be with all them that love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity. Amen.”

There are several words here that really summarize the message of this epistle. They are peace, grace, love, and faith. These words tell us what God has done for us in Christ, how this came to us in Christ, and why this came to us in Christ.

Peace. This is what God has done for us in Christ. It is a central element to the gospel. Essentially, the gospel is about reconciliation, above all between God and man. In 2 Cor. 5:18, Paul calls his ministry “the ministry of reconciliation.” According to God’s word, sin has created a chasm between God and man and the gospel tells us that this chasm is bridged by Christ. In the gospel, we have the announcement of peace from heaven: “For he [Christ] is our peace, who hath made both [Jew and Gentile] one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us; having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in himself of twain one new man, so making peace; and that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby: and came and preached peace to you which were afar off, and to them that were nigh” (Eph. 2:14-17). This idea is also present at the very beginning of the letter, when Paul tells us that the purpose of God’s predestination of his people is that we should be adopted into his family (Eph. 1:5). Those who were once enemies are now part of his family!

This is a two-fold peace. There is a horizontal and vertical dimension to it. Horizontally, we are reconciled to our brothers and sisters in the body of Christ. Though this is a very diverse group of people, with very different backgrounds – as illustrated in the bringing together of Jew and Gentile into one church – yet we have far more in common than we are different from one another. For we are members in a family, we are brothers and sisters in Christ. We share a family likeness as the result of the new birth and a family name as a result of adoption into the family of God. We share a family inheritance as well, one that is not dependent

upon the rising and falling fortunes of the stock market, but one which is kept for us, reserved in heaven.

This peace is primarily vertical, and it is this peace that makes the peace with our fellow Christians possible. Through Christ's atonement, we have been reconciled to God. Our sins have been purged and done away with. We have obtained forgiveness and justification. Moreover, our hearts have been changed. So we are no longer hostile toward God and God is no longer hostile toward us. If you are in Christ, God is on your side. He is with you, and no longer against you.

Again, this truth should lead to us being at peace with one another. Paul put it this way to the Romans: "Wherefore receive ye one another, as Christ also received us to the glory of God" (Rom. 15:7). Peace with God leads to peace with the brethren. It should lead to peace in the church. The Spirit of God, who unites us to Christ, is a Spirit of unity and therefore of peace: "Endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3). Peace is not some theological abstract that we are supposed to hold independently of our day-to-day lives. It ought to manifest itself in longsuffering toward one another, forgiving one another, submitting to one another.

Depending on how important this is to you will determine how you will read this book and respond to it. If you are more concerned with your financial portfolio than you are about your relationship with God, then this epistle isn't going to mean much to you. If politics is more important to you than whether or not you have a relationship with God and his people, then this epistle isn't going to mean much to you. If your personal comfort and security in this life is more important to you than the forgiveness of sins, then you might just yawn through this book. How in the world does it make sense to put politics, personal comfort, or money before a relationship with the God of the universe? How does it make sense to prioritize those things above the gospel? When we see things the way we ought to see them, this announcement of peace in the gospel is the most amazing thing in the world. Indeed,

“how beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things!” (Rom. 10:15).

Grace. In the final benediction, Paul prays for grace. It is a fitting thing, too, because this epistle has begun with grace and grace has weaved its magic throughout its pages. Grace tells us how God brings peace to us. The fact confronting every human being is that we are not what we are supposed to be. We are massive failures. We have failed at the most important thing: loving God with all our minds and hearts. Instead, we have alienated ourselves from God. We have ignored God. We have sinned against him over and over again. We deserve judgment. We deserve hell. We need to be saved.

How can we be saved? That is the question. The answer is grace. “By grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast” (Eph. 2:8-9). Grace is God’s unmerited favor. He does not save us because we were good enough; he saves us because it is his gracious will to do so. Our salvation does not originate in our goodness, for we have none, but in God’s generosity.

How can grace and justice coincide? For God is holy. God can have no fellowship with sin. He is “of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity” (Hab. 1:13). How can a just and holy God embrace sinful men? How can grace come to us? The answer is that grace comes to us through Jesus Christ. That is why you read this phrase “in Christ” or something like it over and over again throughout this epistle. It begins that way: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ” (Eph. 1:3). God can be just because Jesus Christ came as the perfect sacrifice to purge our guilt by taking the punishment of our sin upon himself. He became a propitiation for sin, to take it away, so that God “might be just and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus” (Rom. 3:25-26). Through Christ, grace comes to the guilty and justifies those who are ungodly (Rom. 4:5).

Grace runs deeper than most people think. Grace did not begin when I made a decision to follow Christ. Grace went before and gave me life when I was in a state of spiritual death (Eph. 2:1-10). I would never have made one step toward Christ, had not God opened my eyes to my need for the gospel, and that was a work of pure grace.

Grace goes back even further: it began in eternity past when God, apart from any consideration of works on our part, chose us in Christ (Eph. 1:4-5). My salvation did not originate in my will but in God's gracious and loving will. God did not choose me because he foresaw that I would choose his Son, but I chose his Son because God the Father chose me. Just like it has always been: "and as many as were ordained to eternal life believed" (Acts 13:48). In other words, I owe all my salvation, from beginning to end, to the grace of God in Christ Jesus. There is no ground of boasting. All crowns belong at the feet of Jesus in the age to come.

Love. The question then is, why did God do any of this? If there is no reason to be found in me? What motivated God to save me? The answer of the apostle, and of the entire Bible, is that God loved us before the foundation of the world. It was his "great love, wherewith he loved us" that caused him to give us life from the dead (Eph. 2:4). It was not a love that responded to loveliness in us. If you want a picture of what we were like before God saved us, look at Ezek. 16. No, we were not lovely, we were loathsome. God's love was not responding to anything in us; God's love originated in himself, from the fellowship of the Holy Trinity. We love him because he first loved us (1 Jn. 4:19).

We are confronted with a mystery here. No wonder the apostle talks about "the love of Christ which passeth knowledge" (Eph. 3:19). It is a glorious and wonderful mystery, because it means that God's love for me does not depend upon my fickle love for him. It means that God's faithfulness to his people is rock-solid and eternal. Our confidence and reliance upon God's commitment to us can never be misplaced. Thank God for the reality of Jer. 31:3, "I have loved thee with an everlasting love: therefore with lovingkindness have I drawn thee."

Of course, if we have really been embraced in God's love, we ought also to love one another. This is the practical dimension to this epistle. Knowing the love of Christ, we are to bear with one another in love (Eph. 4:2); we are to speak the truth in love (4:15) and grow up into Christ in love (4:16). We are to walk in love as Christ loved us (5:2). Husbands are to love their wives as Christ loved the church (5:25). What Paul said to the Colossians applies here: "And above all these things, put on charity, which is the bond of perfectness" (Col. 3:14). You cannot know the love of God expressed in the doctrines of the first three chapters of Ephesians and not go on to live them out in a life of love to others in ways expressed in the exhortations of the last three chapters of Ephesians.

In particular, we will love Christ (Eph. 6:24). In the KJV, the prayer is for those who love our Lord "in sincerity." Probably a better translation is that of the ESV, "with love incorruptible." (See 1 Cor. 13:42; Rom. 2:7 for example uses of the word). Those who truly know Christ will love him with an undying love. Those who abandon him for the things of the world, like Demas, never really knew him or his love. The love of Christ is not something you can ever recover from, thank God.

There is one more word here at the end. It is "faith" which Paul puts together with "love." Why is that? "Love with faith." Well, clearly the love here is a love centered on the gospel, and that is impossible apart from faith. You cannot exercise the love commanded and commended in the pages of the NT unless you believe the gospel. It also points us to the nature of saving faith. True faith is a faith which works by love (Gal. 5:6). If you have this faith, then you will love Christ with an undying love. This faith is a faith which sees the beauty of holiness and the ways in which Christ is uniquely and perfected fitted to be our perfect Lord and Savior. It will have no other rule over it. Its allegiance is to Christ above all.

Faith is also important because faith is the way by which, in God's perfect plan, we become personally connected to all the saving benefits of Christ's redemption. We are saved by grace through faith. Do you

feel your need for peace with God? Do you want to experience his saving grace? Do you want to know God's love for you? Then believe on Christ, and you shall be saved.

These are the great themes of Ephesians. However, before we end our time in this epistle, back up a couple of verses to verses 21-22. Here Paul mentions a man by the name of Tychicus. I think it's important for us to consider what Paul says here because it illustrates a very important point, one which we dare not forget when reading these epistles. The principle is this: we can never separate the truths of God from the people of God.

This is true for a number of reasons, not least of which is that it is usually people who bring us the word in the first place. We get the word of God from the people of God. As children, perhaps we got it from our parents or a close friend. As we grew up, we have been influenced by the godly people God put into our lives, whether it be at church or in the workplace or in our circle of friends. We ought to thank God for this. For the Ephesians, it was Paul who brought them the gospel in the first place. We don't just need to be converted, we need to grow in our faith, and so he writes them this epistle. Paul cannot go; he is in prison, and so he sends this man Tychicus in his place.

Who was Tychicus? Well, he is mentioned in four passages in the Bible, excluding this one: Acts 20:4; Col. 4:7-9; Tit. 3:12; 2 Tim. 4:12. When you put these verses together, what emerges is a picture of a man who was obviously a trustworthy servant of God. Paul probably sent him to relieve both Timothy at Ephesus and Titus in Crete. He was someone Paul could trust to carry on the work of guys like Timothy and Titus in their absence. Like them, he could act at times as an apostolic representative. It is also possible that he was a native of Ephesus, since he is said to be from the Roman province of Asia (where Ephesus was), and is linked to Trophimus who is explicitly called an Ephesian in Acts 21:29. Tychicus also probably served as Paul's postal service in carrying no fewer than five different epistles of Paul to various locations (Colossians, Philemon, Ephesians, 2 Timothy, and Titus).

If Tychicus was from Ephesus, then you could say he was bringing the gospel home. There, he would not only share the news of Paul's health and goings on, but also minister to them himself with words of encouragement (ver. 22). The point here is that all this happens through the ministry of people like Tychicus. Paul wrote the epistle, but it would have never made it to the Ephesians without the service of Tychicus.

There is another reason why we can never separate the truths of God from the people of God. It is because those who bring the word commend the word only so far as they are willing to live by the word. The word of God does not simply live on pages in a Bible. It lives in the lives of the followers of Christ. That is why the description of Tychicus is so important here. He is called "a beloved brother and faithful minister in the Lord" (21).

He is first of all "a beloved brother." Paul loved him, and it's obvious that he must have loved Paul. By describing him this way to the Ephesians, Paul is saying that this man is someone any Christian could love. He is not the kind of Christian that you want to avoid being around. He was not one of those difficult people who are always creating problems for others to fix. He was someone who invested in others, who thought about others, who served others.

These words lead to the second way Paul describes him: "a faithful minister." The word here is not a term designating a person who is in "the ministry" as we use the term today. It's the more general word for service – in fact, the word here is *diakonos*, though it doesn't refer to the office of a deacon either. A *diakonos* was a person who served others. And that is what Tychicus did. Sometimes he did it by carrying Paul's letters to various churches. Sometimes he did it by serving as a temporary pastor in a place. Sometimes he did it by simply encouraging others with the word of God. The point is that this was not a man who lived for himself – like his Lord, he did not come to be served, but to serve. It was the life of a man like this, one who characterized the truths of Ephesians, that made its message more plausible.

We, too, need to be like Tychicus. We need to be people who bring the word to others. Sometimes this means bringing the word to a non-believer by sharing the gospel. Sometimes this means bringing the word to fellow believers by teaching truth and reminding and exhorting and encouraging them to live out its truths. Above all, we need to be people who live out the word. Knowing the doctrines and exhortations of this letter will do us absolutely no good unless we put it into practice. Ephesians was not written to be merely understood and studied. It was written to help God's people live out the kind of life that is appropriate for those who are saved by grace through faith. Knowing the doctrines of this epistle and doing nothing with them is like a billionaire sitting on his wealth and doing nothing with it.

The book of Ephesians offers to us a perspective on life that the world will not and cannot give. It gives the perspective of God. It gives an eternal perspective, one that reaches back into the mists before time into God's eternal plan in Christ, and one that reaches forward into an unending future of glory for those who are embraced in the family of God. Its message of peace with God who loves us and gives us grace through faith is one that ought to inspire us to a living hope and deep joy. It remains for us to take that message, and, like Tychicus, bring it others by our word and works, by our lips and our lives.