

Parish of Central Saanich - St. Stephen's & St. Mary's

LENT 2018 - BIBLE STUDY SERIES

"What the Church Is All About"

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Ephesians Study #3: "The Blessings and Worship of the Church" ***(Chapters 1, 2, 5)***

Opening Prayer:

Heavenly Father, in Jesus, you have showered your Church with every spiritual blessing; help us now, by your Holy Spirit, to grasp the immensity of your generosity and respond with grateful and intimate worship as the beloved Bride of Christ. Amen.

Introduction

Do you find it easy to be thankful, to worship? Some of us do and some don't. There are many reasons for this which I won't go into here but simply say that one of the great impetuses to worship and thanksgiving is to be reminded of and grasp more fully the great blessings God has given us. This is what was behind what Jesus said in response to the Pharisees' complaint that the forgiven woman was being too effusive in her treatment of Jesus: "Whoever has been forgiven little loves little" (Luke 7:47). So, in this study, we are going back to the beginning of the letter that we passed over in the first two sessions to catch a fuller vision of all the blessings God has given us as a Church and as individuals and then revisit the concept of the Church as the Bride of Christ to see how we are to respond with grateful and heart-felt worship.

Blessings

The introductory verses of the letter (1:1-2) contain a succinct summary of the blessings we have received: "Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (verse 2). Grace indicates God's gifts to us and peace the nature of one of those gifts which we have seen is "reconciliation" – reconciliation with God and one another. Paul is then so excited about these gifts that he exclaims to his Ephesian readers, "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ" (verse 3) and continues on to list the gifts in a total of twelve verses in one single sentence in the original! It is something for us to be excited about, too. So, let us look at this marvelous list and unwrap all these gifts God has given us. We will look at our past, present, and future blessings and finally the centrality of grace which undergirds them all. I am very grateful to John Stott for his most helpful outline which has informed much of what follows.¹

¹ John Stott, *God's New Society*. (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 1979), pgs. 36-45.

1. The Past Blessings of Election

First, we have the gifts of past blessings of election. Election is a technical term meaning God's predestining, or choosing us. "For he chose us in Christ before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his children" (1:4-5). The basic concept behind it all is God's grace - he has taken the initiative; he has come seeking us. This is the most profound gift of all - not that humans have reached God through their great moral or intellectual or religious efforts, but that he himself has come to earth as a human being to draw us to himself: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).

The problem is, as soon as we acknowledge God's choosing us, we try to speculate as to how God's grace works. How does he decide who to give what to? Isn't this unfair? What about free will? Am I not a Christian because I chose God, I invited him to come into my life? This is like trying to analyse why someone gave you a Christmas gift instead of enjoying it. Yes, there is a choice on our part, we have to receive the gift, as Paul says in verse 13, "And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit." We believe the message, we receive in trust, but it is God's initiative, not ours. I think it works something like this: God can see how we would react if we were given the choice - whether we would accept or reject him - and so, when he sees we would accept him, he gives us the choice. Someone else has said, that when we enter the gates of heaven, the sign above reads, "Whosoever will, may come" (Rev. 22:17) and when you go through and glance back, you see on the other side of the sign it reads, "Chosen before the creation of the world" (Eph. 1:4).

The most important thing, though, is not to speculate but to rejoice that God has chosen us; as Jesus said, "You did not choose me, but I chose you" (John 15:16). This contains the following great truths:

- a. Election is ***not mechanical fatalism***, it is the expression of God's love for us: "In love he predestined us to be adopted as his children" (verses 4, 5). Election assures me of God's love for me.
- b. It is ***not meant to scare or exclude*** us - "Am I chosen? How can I know?" - but to affirm us, to remove doubt and fear; to take away any uncertainty of where I stand with God, whether I belong and whether I will be with the Lord after death. The answer is, finding ourselves in Christ as believers, we realize we *do* belong to him and are assured by passages like this that we have been chosen by him from before time and belong to him for ever.
- c. But it is also ***a stimulus to humility***. There is no ground for boasting here, no moral superiority or over-confidence in our own ability. Self-sufficiency is cut from under our feet. We have been chosen "to the praise of his glorious grace...that...we might be for the praise of his glory" (verses 6, 12).
- d. Finally, it is ***an incentive to holiness***. People react against election, because they think this gives license to behave however you want to - "If I am chosen, then it doesn't matter what I do." Paul affirms that we have been chosen in Christ "to be holy and blameless in his sight" (verse 4). A holy life is evidence that God has chosen us. Election leads to right living and praise of God.

2. The Present Blessings of Adoption

Being chosen in the past leads us to work out the following blessings we have in the present:

- a. ***We have been adopted;*** we have a place in the universe, we belong to God. "He predestined us to be adopted as his children through Jesus Christ...and you also were included in Christ" (verses 5, 13). Virtually every one of these twelve verses has the phrase, "in Christ." This brings to mind the vine and branches imagery used by Jesus in John 15. By God's grace through faith we, as branches, have been grafted into Christ, the vine, and because of that, we have everything he has. This also means we are part of God's family, the church. Our adoption means we belong to him and to one another - what great news this is for our age alienation and aloneness!
- b. ***We have redemption, forgiveness, reconciliation to God.*** "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins" (verse 7). The nearer we draw to God, the more conscious we become of our own shortcomings and failures. The nearer we draw to God, the more conscious we become of the forgiveness we have through the death of Jesus on the cross in our place. This forgiveness is not merely a cancelling of our offences against God and removing our guilt, it is a deliverance. Using the picture of the slave-market, Paul sees our gift in Christ as redemption, a freeing from all that has bound us and kept us in slavery. Our slate has been wiped clean, we have a new start.
- c. ***We also have responsibility.*** As children of our Heavenly Father we are called to reflect his likeness, his glory. Again, we look at the statement, "For he chose us in Christ...to be holy and blameless in his sight" (verse 4). Holy means different, set apart. Blameless means without flaw, the best one has to offer. We are to make a difference in the world; when we live for God, we don't just satisfy the expectations or rules and regulations of the situation - we go beyond the minimum to give our all. We make a difference because we give our best because God has given his best for us.
- d. ***We live by God's power:*** However, we do not live this way in our own strength. We also have the power and presence of God within us. "Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession" (verses 13, 14). The word, "seal" is the same as that used for seals on a crate or package to mark its ownership and destination. The Holy Spirit both affirms within us who we belong to and empowered us to live out the new life we have been redeemed to live.

3. The Future Blessings of Unification

All this is ours, now, in the present. But there is a future that the Holy Spirit's seal points us to and that is the future blessings of unification. "And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ...to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ" (verses 9, 10). What we experience in the present is merely a foretaste of what lies ahead. The barriers between us as humans - racial, linguistic, social, or whatever - which we begin to see broken down in our new family, will be fully overcome when the Kingdom of God is fully restored at Christ's second coming. This inheritance of unity which we will then experience will also include the reunion of the whole church - both the dead and the living in Christ.

What is more, though, it will include a cosmic regeneration – “all things in heaven and earth” - the liberation of creation from the bondage and decay brought in by sin. Both church and universe will be unified under Christ and all will be put right and will work as it is meant to. What a glorious day that will be! This is the reconciliation we spoke of in the first study of which we are the agents and demonstration as a Church.

4. The Centrality of Grace

These themes are also taken up in the first ten verses of chapter 2 which we don't have time to examine closely now but will mention just briefly, mainly because they highlight the heart of the Christian faith – grace – which lies behind all our blessings!

- Before we came to know Christ, we were spiritually dead, cut off from God: “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins...Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath” (2:1, 3). We needed an action of grace to rescue us.
- God's grace has reversed our situation, bringing us life in Christ: “But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved” (verses 4, 5). “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast” (verses 8, 9). God did for us what we could not do for ourselves.
- We have been “saved to serve” – a holy life is a natural working out of what God has worked in: “For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (verse 10). That grace does not come “cheap” – it cost God his all to rescue us and he demands our all in response to what we have received.

In summary, all the blessings we have that are listed in chapters 1 and 2 are because of what God has given us through Christ by his grace. Out of his own love, he has taken the initiative, and it is none of our own deserving. We are assured of membership in his family; we are overjoyed by the forgiveness and new life we have in Christ; we look forward to that time of great celebration when all will be reunited and put right. As a believer today, these are the blessings God has given you.

Worship

Paul's response to all this in the second half of chapter 1 is to burst into thanksgiving and praise – worship: “For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all God's people, “I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers” (verses 15, 16) and goes on for a total of another 9 verses, again all one sentence in the original! We will touch on some of these verses in our final session when we look at the struggle of the Church and the victory of Christ. Giving thanks in worship is a most natural response after hearing about our blessings and it is possible that verses 3-14 reflect or were actually taken from a liturgical/worship service setting. The evidence is two-fold: first, the phrases in the original Greek are rhythmical and poetic and second, the passage can be divided into three stanzas, (verses 3-6, 7-12, and 13-14) where

each contains the refrain, "to the praise of his glory" at its end.² Was Paul borrowing from or inspired by the worship of God's people?

1. Bridal imagery and worship

Whether this is what he did or not, Paul picks up the theme of worship later in the letter at the end of chapter 5. To do so, he uses the imagery of Church as Bride which we shall see has profound implications for us in the area of worship. What is interesting is that he speaks about worship in the context of how we are to live out the unity and diversity of the Church which arises from the images of Temple and Body we looked at in our first study. We will pick up the theme of how we are to live out the faith in session 5: the practical ways of demonstrating our unity in Christ by building one another up – especially through our speech (chapter 4) and how that unity, through mutual submission, is to work out in our more personal relationships – as husband and wife, parent and child, employer and employee (chapters 5 and 6). But in between talking about building one another up in chapter 4 and submitting to one another at the end of chapter 5 and beginning of 6, he offers directives about worship:

Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit. Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ (Ephesians 5:18-21).

Worship and unity: Now you might ask why Paul moves directly from speaking of unity in our relationships in chapter 4 to worship in chapter 5. In worship, we recall and celebrate all God is and what he has done for us in his great plan of reconciliation. Therefore, in worship, we must be reconciled not only to him but also to our brothers and sisters; in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says that "if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift" (Matthew 5:23-24). Sharing "the Peace" is a symbol of that. It is in worship where we most clearly demonstrate and celebrate the reconciling acts of God, especially in the Eucharist. So, worship and reconciled relationships go together.

Worship and submission: Why, then, immediately after talking about worship, does Paul go on to say that being filled with the Spirit opens up the possibility of submitting to one another? In worship, we become vulnerable before our brothers and sisters. What do I mean? When we praise God, we affirm his trustworthiness and dependability. We also offer up all we are to God, including our alienation and brokenness and our need for healing and forgiveness. This implies we admit our vulnerability and dependence upon God to and in front of one another. Therefore, praise "requires that we trust our brothers and sisters."³ This trust is an act of mutual submission. I think this is one reason why, up to this present generation, men have found it more difficult to worship than women. We have found it hard to admit our vulnerability before God and others and so have been more restrained in worship (or even absent!). We have also found it hard to submit to one another. But this is what Paul calls us to do, as a result of being filled with the Spirit.

So, in the Church, as we give ourselves willingly to Christ in worship, we give ourselves willingly

² Ralph Martin, *Worship in the Early Church. Rev. Ed.* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1974), pg. 33f.

³ Jim Wallis, *The Call to Conversion* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981), pg. 152.

one to the other. Thus, it is a small step for Paul to continue at the end of chapter 5 and into chapter 6 by outlining how our mutual submission takes place in various human interrelationships, beginning with husband and wife (verses 25 to 32) which we will look at in more detail in our fifth study. But, returning to worship, as we saw in our first study, the voluntary and joyful submission of man and woman to one another in the bond of marriage is a picture of the joyful union of the Church to Christ. The church in worship is the supreme demonstration of this submission to God which is the intimacy of bride and husband. Again, this is demonstrated most clearly in the Eucharist. The former bishop of Montreal, Reg Hollis, who was one of the shyest men alive but also a spiritual powerhouse, once surprisingly spoke of the Eucharist in terms of sexual intercourse. He said that the joyous intimacy he experienced making love to his wife was the same joy as when he received the bread and the wine.

So, in worship, as the Bride of Christ, we demonstrate both our unity and our submission to God and to one another.

2. Practical Implications

So how does this work out in practical terms? To do this we go back to verses 18-21:

Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit. Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ (Ephesians 5:18-21).

Here are some implications arising from this passage:

- i. ***Under the right influence?*** The first thing Paul says about worship is to be sure you are under the right kind of influence. “Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit” (verse 18). Drunkenness is one way of seeking escape from the pressures, pain or monotony of life. Today, we could add other addictions through which we try to cover the aching regrets and disappointments in our hearts (pornography, computer games, food, work, etc.); but the relief and excitement of all these are short-lived and we end up depressed. Paul says don’t be under the influence of alcohol but be under the influence of the Spirit. Does it surprise you that the gift of the Spirit is associated with intoxication? In Acts 2:13, when the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost some bystanders sneered and said “They have had too much wine.” It is the Spirit who is to lift us to new levels of euphoria and experience. This frightens some people who have had negative experiences of people becoming “over-emotional” or “going off the deep end” when it comes to spiritual experience. Anglicans in general are not too renowned for their “euphoria” so I think we could loosen up on frowning at what used to be called “enthusiasm.” It is interesting how excited we allow ourselves to get excited at a football game or hockey match but then quieten right down when it comes to church. A fan is not always a fanatic. When King David brought the Ark of God to Jerusalem (2 Samuel 6:12-19) he celebrated with his whole being, body, soul, and spirit: “Wearing a linen ephod, David was dancing before the Lord with all his might, while he and all Israel were bringing up the ark of the Lord with shouts and the sound of trumpets” (2 Samuel 6:14-15); this describes complete abandonment to God. I am in favor of following David’s model for worship!
- ii. ***The Results of Being Filled:*** What then follows are the results of being filled with the Spirit; the link isn’t as clear in English as it is in the original. Our translation has a series of imperatives:

“Speak to one another...,” “Sing and make music...,” “Submit to one another...” The original has a series of participles: “speaking to one another...”; “singing and making music to the Lord”; “giving thanks to God”; “submitting to one another.” When we are filled with the Holy Spirit, then these expressions of worship (and relationship) overflow from the hearts of believers. Paul has already told us “Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God” (4:30) through unwholesome communication one with the other and now he exhorts us to allow the Spirit full rein that we might rightly and joyfully communicate with Him and one another.

We are then told four things which characterize Spirit-filled worship:

- a. **Worship is corporate:** First, we note that this worship is a corporate experience – “speaking to one another.” When Paul says, “Be filled” he uses the plural – it is “y’all be filled.” Filling with the Spirit is true for individuals but is seen here seen in the setting of the congregation at worship. Speaking to one another also implies a somewhat freer from of worship – interacting with one another. When you come to worship, it is not just between you and God – you bless others by your participation and contribution. Of course, it is also “to the Lord” as it says in verse 19, but is important to realize there are both horizontal and vertical aspects to worship. Spirit-filled worship is a corporate experience.
 - b. **Worship is musical:** Secondly, we note that worship is by “singing and making music” - music is a part of worship. Throughout history, whenever there has been a renewal of spiritual life, there has been a renewal of the Church’s music with new hymns and tunes. This has taken place during the charismatic renewal of the past forty years. But some of this music is transitory and only the best survives. There is nothing wrong in this as we need to experiment and see which of it survives the test of time. Charles Wesley whose hymns many of us love, wrote more than 3000 hymns and we sing only 30 of them today! Spirit-led worship results in an overflow of praise.
 - c. **Worship is varied:** This is followed by the fact that worship is varied. Paul speaks of Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. These have been variously described – songs using Scripture, songs which talk *about* God, songs which speak *to* God, and so on. The point is that God is praised using many different forms of musical expression. In heaven, there will be a variety of music styles. Revelation (21:26) speaks about the “glory and honour of the nations” being brought into the heavenly city – which includes the best of their various musical expressions! Variety of musical styles is Biblical. It is because of this that it is good for a congregation to have different styles of music in its services. Spirit-filled worship is varied.
 - d. **Worship is thankful:** Finally, worship is full of gratitude: “always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (verse 20). Worship can easily become self-centred so Paul lifts our vision to God and his purposes for us in Christ. Giving thanks for *everything* is not that we thank God for evil and good alike but that we thank God in all situations – even when things might seem bleak – trusting that he is in charge. In this way we admit our vulnerability before him, trusting that he can bring good out of evil, blessing out of difficulty. Spirit-led worship is thankful.
- iii. **Tensions in Worship:** We have come around again to the theme of vulnerability and I want to end by touching on the reasons for tensions over worship. The marriage analogy is helpful here.

Marriage is the place where we can experience the greatest joys in human relationships – but also the place where we can experience the deepest pain; this is because in marriage, we are touched at our deepest level of intimacy. It is the same with worship. In worship, we deal with what is most significant in life – our relationship with God. We have seen that it is a place of deep intimacy and vulnerability. Therefore worship is more important to us than other areas of our lives and so we are likely to feel more passionately about changes and preferences. My appeal to all of us would be that we not denigrate the preferences of others. What is important, is that in any disagreements, we submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. This means treating one another with respect and living out his reconciliation in our life together in our worship.

Conclusion

The Church is the Bride of Christ. As such, we demonstrate and experience the deepest intimacy with him who reconciled us to himself. We experience this intimacy most chiefly in worship, under the direction of the Spirit, where we encounter and celebrate reconciliation with and submission to both God and others giving thanks for the great blessings he has bestowed upon us. Is this your experience? This is part of what the Church is all about.

Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, you have loved the church as your bride, giving yourself up for us; fill us with your Holy Spirit, that we might respond in love through worship, submitting to one another and making music in our hearts and giving thanks to God our Father for every blessing you have bestowed upon us. Amen.

(Adapted from Ephesians 5:25, 18-20)