

March 1, 2009

THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

To the Praise of His Glorious Grace

Ephesians 1:1 – 6

Last week as we dove into this letter to the Ephesians, I trust that our hearts were staggered by the revelation that ***the gospel is intensely God-centered and exclusively God-glorifying.*** We should understand that ***God always acts for the sake of His name – which is another way of saying He acts for His own glory.*** That is everything God has done, is doing and will do is to the praise of His glorious name, and that includes especially the proclamation of the gospel, calling sinners to repentance and glad worship of God's glory in Christ. And lest you should think that that is somehow unloving or unworthy of God to exalt Himself consider that the glory of God is what we were made to see and savor and enjoy for all eternity and nothing less will satisfy our souls. So if God does not exalt Himself for us to admire and worship and enjoy He is most unloving and unworthy because He would be withholding the very thing we need most.

I trust we were also staggered by the thought that God has chosen, before the foundation of the world, those whom He would seek and save, or to give it some theological terminology ***the sovereignty of God in election.*** That is the thought that our transition from death to life, from objects of wrath to objects of mercy was exclusively and entirely an act of sovereign grace. God chose us, as verse four tells us. He didn't wait to see if we would choose Him. He didn't look down the corridors of time and see that at some point you would choose Him, and then on that basis choose you. He didn't choose you because you were cute and cuddly, or because you were tall and handsome, or because you were talented, smart, good-looking or any other criteria. He chose you because He chose you.

And I know we wrestle with the obvious conclusion that if God chose some – that means He didn't choose others. And if we do not wrestle with this then we really don't understand the situation. I believe hard texts in the Bible are there for us to wrestle with – not explain away, or explain around, or to somehow settle for interpretations that seem fair to us. The issue of God's sovereignty must be settled in our hearts first.

Listen to what the Lord says to Israel about His choosing under the old covenant: *"For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for His treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set His love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that He swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.* Deuteronomy 7:6-8 His choosing is directly related only to Himself – because He loved Israel and set His love on them, and swore an oath to them – not because of any intrinsic worth they had, ***but because of a special love that chooses, saves, and glorifies His own.***

And this is echoed in the New Testament covenant: *'For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.'* 1 Corinthians 1:26-29 This is all about God's choice first, and not ours, so that God would get all the glory and the praise and honor. ***So that grace might really be grace.***

This is why Paul breaks out in praise at the end of this first bit: *'to the praise of His glorious grace, with which He has blessed us in the Beloved.* Ephesians 1:6 Do we really understand that grace cannot be grace without acknowledging God's sovereignty in election? If there is any room at all for us to claim even an iota of credit for coming to Christ – grace is no longer grace. Grace is the undeserved power of God to save a wretch like me – dead in sin, hostile to God, in full-blown rebellion against the King of the Universe. I deserve death – He gives me life. I deserve eternal punishment – He gives me eternal joy. I deserve a cross – He gives me a crown. ***To the praise of His glorious grace indeed!*** This is exactly why, when calling sinners to repent, it is so necessary to let them face and taste the bitterness of sin and the awful penalty it requires. Because if someone has never contemplated the awfulness of their sin, they can never savor the sweetness of the grace that saved them. Cornelius Plantinga, President of Calvin Theological Seminary said: ***'The sober truth is that without full disclosure on sin, the gospel of grace becomes impertinent, unnecessary and finally uninteresting.'***

And this morning I want to focus on this gospel of grace. Paul begins this letter by saying: *Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.* Ephesians 1:2 Paul's understanding was that this Christian life is all about the grace of God. **It begins by grace, it is sustained by grace, and it is grace all the way to the end,** as he signs off with verse 24 of chapter 6: *Grace be with all those who love our Lord Jesus Christ with a love incorruptible.* And the sum of all our lives ultimately resounds *to the praise of His glorious grace, with which He has blessed [graced] us in the Beloved.* Ephesians 1:6

Paul intentionally uses a form of the word for grace – **charis** when he says God has blessed us, or graced us, in the beloved. Here he uses **charitoo**, [*khar-ee-to'-o*] which means to make graceful, to honor with blessing. It means that we have been showered with unmerited blessings from God. And Paul is trying to paint a picture of the incredible mercy of God's sovereign will on his chosen ones. And he begins to list the elements of that mercy and the outlines of grace on us in these first few verses. He really begins to paint that scene in verse 3 and so that is where we begin: *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places,* Ephesians 1:3

First of all Paul says that we have been blessed in Christ with every spiritual blessing – that means that **nothing is lacking that is necessary first of all to save us, and then to keep us, and finally to bring us to glory.** Peter says almost the same thing in his second letter: *His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness,* 2 Peter 1:3a. One way to put this is that we are not saved by grace and then expected to do the rest on our own. The most often quoted verse that is **not** in the Bible is '**God helps those who help themselves.**' I believe that is found in the first chapter of Me, Myself and I. God is not into helping those who help themselves – if they can help themselves they don't need grace. God is into helping those who have no possibility of helping themselves. **That is the nature of grace.**

Now Paul goes on to list those blessings: **the Father's work of love in election; the Son's work of grace in Redemption; and the Holy Spirit's work of power in sanctification.** So let's look at these a little closer. We'll start with the last part of verse 4 because we covered the first part last week: *even as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him.* Ephesians 1:4 **The Father's choosing has two main themes – that His chosen ones would be holy and blameless.** When we think about holy – we tend to go right to the behavioral aspect. Holy people don't do bad things. And while that is true – this is not the first bit about holiness we ought to understand. To be holy is to be set apart for sacred use. Common objects, set apart for uncommon use. Just as all the elements in the tabernacle in the wilderness and the Temple in Jerusalem were common objects made holy – set apart for sacred use – so we who are chosen before the foundation of the world are to be set apart for the purpose of God. We have not been destined for lesser things. And I think Paul had this in mind here.

We are also chosen to be blameless before God. And the first thing I want to ask is 'How is that possible? I will be the first to say that I cannot look at my life and declare that in an of myself that I am blameless. And yet the Father chose us to be blameless or faultless. The word is used of a sacrifice that is without spot or blemish. But the good news is that He does not expect us to produce this blamelessness. We need to refer back to verse 3 where we have been blessed **in Christ, who is the spotless Lamb of God.** That means that because He is without blame before the Father – we are without blame in Him. If when we came face to face with the Father and there were still blame attached to us, we would be immediately consumed. But because we are in Him, no blame attaches to us. This is the idea in what Paul wrote to the Corinthians: *And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption,* 1 Corinthians 1:30

If holiness and blamelessness are the major themes of our being chosen, then **predestination is the goal.** *In love He predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of His will,* Ephesians 1:5 Election is God's choosing whom He will, and predestination is **God's determination that those whom He has chosen will become His sons.** But first of all I want you to notice that little propositional phrase - **In love.** Now commentators are split over which sentence this phrase modifies – whether it should read: *that we should be holy and blameless before Him in love;* or *In love He predestined us to sonship.* In the Greek it is possible to read it either way. And there is a sense in which love **is** the road to holiness and blamelessness. But this morning I want you to see what I think Paul wanted the Ephesians to see – that is that **the very foundation of our choosing springs from the unmerited, undeserved, unlooked-for love of the Father for His children.**

This is a love that is rooted in the very goodness of God. One of the reasons people struggle with this idea of election, is that either it doesn't seem to line up with the biblical revelation that our God is a good God, or they have a sneaking suspicion that He really doesn't have our good at heart. They say things like, 'If God is good and God is love then why does He allow pain and suffering and tragedy'?

I want to assure your hearts this morning that we have a good God, a loving God. He is good through and through. And He plans nothing but good for His people. Every thought, every move, every decision God makes is shot through with goodness. **Goodness is the intrinsic disposition of God by which He looks to show kindness and seeks the well-being of those whom He has chosen.** God *is* good – it is His nature. Another way to express that is that here is no goodness apart from God – all that is good in the world is good by virtue of some derivation from God's goodness. We have derivative goodness – God has intrinsic goodness. The psalmists knew this: *You are good and do good*; Psalm 119:68a. *O taste and see that the Lord is good.* Psalm 38:4. And Peter says the same thing in the New Testament: *if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.* 1 Peter 2:3 If you do not truly believe that God is good you will never trust Him to do good for you. It is only those who have never tasted the goodness of God that are the first to blame God and doubt His goodness when planes go down and tsunamis wreak havoc and tornadoes devastate.

And this good God is actively seeking the well-being of those whom He has chosen. We often look at our situation and circumstances and conclude that God doesn't seem to be doing us good. There are sicknesses we face, tragedies we endure, catastrophes that happen, persecutions and deaths that decimate Christians and we can wonder where is the goodness of God toward us. Yet because God never lies and His word is truth, we can read passages like Romans 8:28: *and we know that God causes all things work together for good to those who love God and are called according to His purpose*; and conclude that in spite of what we see, what we know is that in the middle of all of these things we have a good God who is ultimately causing all our joy and all our heartache to work good things for us. When I am tempted to doubt the goodness of God and His love for me, I am reminded of a man named Allen Gardiner – alone, sick and dying on a desolate island – his mission in ruins and with no good outcomes in view – writing his last words in his journal in weak and shaky hand: ***'I am overwhelmed with a sense of the goodness of God.'***

God demonstrates His goodness toward us through His particular love for those whom He has chosen. I say particular simply because the Bible makes that distinction. It is a distinction between God's universal love for all that He has made [John 3:16] and His specific love [Romans 9:16] for those whom He has chosen. It is a little bit like saying, 'I love all of you – but if there is a fire in the house, y'all are on your own – I'm getting my wife and daughters out first!' When we talk about love, especially the love of God, we need to understand what we are talking about. ***In love He predestined us to sonship.*** What is that love? What does it look like? If we are not clear about the love of God for those whom He has chosen, then when bad things happen – or things go wrong – we will be tempted to conclude that God is not loving and He is not good.

In the bible we see several words used to express the concept of love – and out of those there are two, one in the Old Testament and one in the New Testament, that nearly always refer to the love of God. In the Old the word is ***chesed*** – and it communicates two thoughts together. It is a covenant commitment or faithfulness together with kindness or goodness. ***That is, God will not fail to do good to those whom He has chosen. God's love is that He pledges Himself to bring about good.*** It is referred to in the Bible as a steadfast love – as you read all through Psalm 136. In the New Testament the word most often used to express the love of God is ***agape***. Agape is an unconditional love – an in spite of love. And that means that God's love is a matter of His choice.

And when you put these two concepts together, you begin to see that the love of God is so much more than a fluttery feeling in your heart. God determined by His own will and counsel that He would set His love on us, unconditionally, with no regard to our status or ability or any other factor of influence – and in love chose us and set us on a course for adoption as His sons. ***In love He predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of His will,***

If we try to measure God's love by our own inconsistent, and imperfect and conditional love, then we can only conclude that God is not love. But if we understand that the love of God is expressed by His unflinching faithfulness to do good to those whom He has chosen, and all the things in our lives are working to bring us to our predestined goal as adopted sons in His family, then we cannot help but wonder and marvel and lift our voices ***to the praise of His glorious grace, with which He has graced us in the Beloved.***

Some of you this morning still do not really believe that God loves you and really has blessed you in the Beloved. You wrestle with this because secretly you feel that you are not good enough, pure enough, holy enough for God to love. You feel like you have not come up to the standard of God's love. You have made a confession of faith but over and over again you fall short of the holiness God requires and therefore you conclude that He cannot love you. Things happen in your life that do not appear to be the hand of God's blessing and so you conclude that God really doesn't love you – you are not one of His adopted sons. Ancient Israel wrestled with the same thoughts. Listen to the Lord through the prophet Malachi: *The oracle of the word of the LORD to Israel by Malachi. "I have loved you," says the LORD. But you say, "How have you loved us?" "Is not Esau Jacob's brother?" declares the LORD. "Yet I have loved Jacob but Esau I have hated.* Malachi 1:1-4 **The demonstration of God's love is in the fact that He chose Jacob and not Esau. This can only be seen as grace.**

In the New Testament, Paul uses this argument to show that the choosing of God has nothing to do with our behavior – but altogether to do with His choice. In speaking of Jacob and Esau he says: *though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad, in order that God's purpose of election might stand, not because of works but because of Him who callsjust as it is written, Jacob I loved but Esau I hated.* Romans 9:11,13 Love is a decision – not fuzzy feelings. And you need to know that in eternity past God set His love on you, and chose you, and in time called you to Himself. **In Paul's words, He graced us in the Beloved.**

I want to show you one last Scripture that I think reveals the extent of God's love. *But now thus says the LORD, He who created you, O Jacob, He who formed you, O Israel: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are Mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I give Egypt as your ransom, Cush and Seba in exchange for you. Because you are precious in My eyes, and honored, and I love you, I give men in return for you, peoples in exchange for your life.* Isaiah 43:1-4

If you are trusting in Christ this morning then you can be sure that the destiny of your life was born in the eternal will and love of God in eternity past, and that the direction of your life is growing into an absolutely sure and glorious end, and you have been graced in the Beloved with all the blessings of God necessary to take you to glory.

If you have no assurance this morning that God has set His love on you and called you and destined you for adoption as a son of God and heir of Christ, then I invite you to respond to the matchless grace of God in Christ and kneel at His cross in repentance and receive His forgiveness of sin and know the love of God that has secured your destiny in the Beloved.

Our gracious heavenly Father,

May we revel in Your love and mercy and great grace this morning. May our hearts be assured before You of Your great love with which You loved us as dead in sin and rebellious as we were. Awaken our hearts to Your saving grace that brought us to faith, sustains us in faith and will bring us finally face to face with You, and that not one link of its chain can ever break. From Calvary's cross, wave upon wave of grace reaches us, deals with our sin, washes us clean, renews our hearts, strengthens our will, inspires our affections, rules in our souls, and teaches us Your immeasurable love. May we never doubt the goodness of God that has graced us in the Beloved. Teach us the bitterness of sin so that we might savor the sweet taste of grace. May we be those who delight in God through Jesus Christ, and spread His joy through the gospel to all people we pray, in the gracious name of Jesus, Amen.

**May the Lord bless you and keep you
and make His face shine upon you.
May the Lord be gracious unto you;
May the Lord lift up His countenance on you
and give you peace.**