

To See Our Privilege

Reign of Christ Sunday - November 22, 2020
St. Luke's United Church of Christ, Lititz, Pennsylvania
Pastor James Haun

Ephesians 1:15-23

I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

When I was a child, I would occasionally find myself in a disgruntled mood and would lament the unfairness of life, as children are prone to do. More than once my parents would respond with a mild rebuke which contained wisdom: "Kid, you don't know how good you have it!" At the time I did not understand, but they were quite right about my lack of appreciation of all the blessings and privileges which I had. I suppose that my folks also thought back to their own childhoods which were during the Great Depression and followed by a world war! Their families had employment through all those years, although my mother once told me of a neighbor who hanged himself in despair over losing his savings and falling into debt. My father went off to war and witnessed a whole continent left in ruins with tens of millions killed and even more impoverished and displaced. Truly I had no idea just how good I had it! Now I am an adult, but I still need to revisit this lesson on a regular basis, for I frequently forget just how blessed I am. In our Epistle lesson we hear Paul communicating much the same lesson to the Ephesian believers. The main thrust of this passage is a desire that the Ephesians come to see and realize all the blessings and privileges that are theirs because of Jesus Christ. We are all given to ingratitude and not realizing our

blessedness and high privilege, so Paul's lesson, like mom and dad's, is most worthy of our attention.

A word is in order as we look into this challenging letter. The Ephesian letter is a difficult read as Paul loads every sentence with a sermon full of meaning and information. One can easily be intimidated by Ephesians. The best advice I know in studying such passages is to concentrate upon what you can see and understand, and not becoming discouraged by what you cannot interpret. Paul says a great deal in this first chapter, but let us concentrate upon his central theme. He wants the believers to come to a much deeper understanding of just how blessed they are. *I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened....* Paul's language is rich and descriptive, so much so that we can lose track of the central message. He uses three descriptive terms to say much the same thing. First, he prays that God will give them *a spirit of wisdom*, that is, that God will make them wise. To be wise means to have a full and practical understanding of life. He prays also that they would receive *revelation*, which sounds very mystical and wild, but it is really not so complicated. All this means is that something be revealed to us so that we can see and understand. Finally, he prays that *the eyes of your heart* would be *enlightened*. Again, the fancy language actually presents a simple request. He wants our eyes to be opened so that we can truly see and understand. Paul wants very badly for us to see more clearly.

So, what does he want us to see? Again, Paul's language is so full and descriptive that it can become a challenge to sort through it all. Paul wants us to know how blessed and privileged we are, and all these wonderful assets are tied up in our relationship with Jesus Christ. *As you come to know him*, is a key phrase at the heart of the message. To be a Christian is not merely to pledge an allegiance to Jesus, good as that may be, but it is to come to know Jesus in a personal way. It is a living relationship and bond of love, and to be in such a loving relationship with God has many wonderful implications that Paul wants us to know. Paul's desire is that *you may know what is the **hope** to which he has called you, what are the **riches** of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his **power** for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.* I will elaborate on these blessings in just a moment, but first let me speak to some potential confusion in reading this passage. Paul quickly moves on to the wonder, power and glory of Christ and how God has resurrected Him and raised Him to a place of sovereignty over the whole of creation!

The reader may be left wondering just where Paul is trying to direct them. Are we to rejoice upon our benefits in knowing Jesus Christ, or are we to be delighting in Christ's victory and His being raised to the place of ultimate power? It seems as though Paul is changing the focus of the passage. Actually, the two items belong together. Paul wants us to know and to delight in our countless blessings received through Christ,

and when he proceeds to celebrate Christ's ultimate triumph over all other powers, he is still telling us of our reasons for delight. When we read of Jesus being elevated to Lord over all, we too often register this teaching in our minds as a Sunday school lesson or a doctrinal point to remember for our confirmation exam. What we should be doing is celebrating! "Our guy is now the boss!" Think of your mother or father being promoted to the presidency of their company. You would cheer and delight as this has everything to do with you, for you will be sharing in the blessings and joys! Our dear Friend, the One who once humbly walked in our shoes and suffered all of life's trials and harms is now in charge! We have a "friend in high places," and that is a very good feeling.

Let us back up for a moment and consider the blessings which Paul tells us are ours. Because of Jesus we have *hope*. Hope means a wonderful future, and that the days ahead which we can so easily fear, will lead us to blessing and victory. Hope has to do with the future, but knowing that the future is ours and that we win in the end also makes life much more joyous and purposeful right now! In these recent weeks we have heard reports of a vaccine being developed. This wonderful victory will still be months ahead, but how it gives us hope! We see the end of this miserable virus and we find fresh joy, now! This is hope.

Next Paul tells of *the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints*. There is much debate among scholars regarding the precise nature of these riches, but I will gladly receive any riches! The New Testament speaks of our inheritance from Christ which we receive at his death, but unlike an earthly inheritance, the One who left us this wealth is again alive. In Christ's death and resurrection, we gained the assurance of salvation as our sins were nailed to the Cross and we are promised life beyond death through Jesus' conquest of death. Jesus has gone ahead to prepare us a place in the Father's House, and in the meantime sends us His Spirit and power. And in a world where alienation seems to be the last word, God has placed us in a beautiful family, the Church. How rich we are!

Finally, he tells of our receiving *power*. This promise is hard to fully accept when we hear it on a sleepy Sunday morning, but oh what power we have! The gladness we know as believers and the power to live for Jesus is all a part of these riches. I look back on the blessings and victories of my life and I ask myself, "How did I do that?" "How did I find the strength?" We know the answer. God gives us power for living, and God shall continue to empower us in the times to come.

God wants our eyes to be opened that we might see just how blessed and privileged we are as His children. To be honest, this is not generally a message which excites us. We have heard of these divine blessings on so many Sundays and in so many hymns that we come to take them for granted and give them little thought. But this lesson takes on a fuller meaning when we come to understand the pandemic of blindness which holds the people of our world in its grip. A friend of mine helped me appreciate

this horror of this pandemic as he shared a story from his place of employment. Kent supervises a construction crew for one of our area's major construction companies and he related to me the difficulty that his company is having in finding and employing good workers. He told me of the now typical experience of hiring a dozen young people at a time for work in construction. Do know that working for this company means a good living wage and a full package of benefits. As a worker stays with the company the wages increase, as do other opportunities. After a few years in construction one learns such things as electronics, masonry, plumbing and carpentry, and the company will gladly help a worker toward further training in these fields and eventual certification. After five or more years and the proper training a worker could move on to another company with ease, or even start their own business, and there is always the possibility of advancement in the company. This is the kind of job and company that could see one through to a comfortable retirement. But I am getting ahead of myself. Let me get back to Kent's story.

Kent's story is a sad one, for he tells of how half or even more of these new hires don't even make it through the first weeks of their employment. It is not a matter of the work being too difficult for them to handle. They just stop showing up. For some reason they cannot find the energy and motivation to consistently report for work. Perhaps they do not like getting their hands dirty, and new employees do get more than their share of dirty jobs. Perhaps they do not like being told what to do. Whatever the reasons may be, they stop showing up for work. I hesitate to share such stories, for they are very upsetting and they cause people like you and me to become angry. When I graduated from high school in the early seventies nobody was hiring for much of anything and I would have given my eye teeth to get in on an opportunity like that. Such stories cause us to make accusations of laziness, and we are appalled to see such a complete lack of motivation.

Yes, this story truly is appalling, but let us consider what it is telling us. A counselling professor once told me that there is no such thing as simple laziness. There is a great deal of lazy behavior out there in the world, but it is due to much more than a mere reticence to work. Why are people lazy? Why didn't my friend's new hires show up? We may think of poor work habits and a young person not being taught to keep to the disciplines of work. What of drugs or other addictions? Could there be some psychological problem? These may all be real and possible factors behind the laziness, but the greater and underlying problem is blindness. These people have not vision. They cannot see a future. They cannot see an opportunity, even when it seems to bite them on the leg! They cannot see beyond the stress of a hard day, or find meaning in any of the headaches which work will inevitably cause. Perhaps they are captivated by foolish dreams of a magical stress-free job that they may be able to find, or by distrust for their employer who seems to be set on making their life difficult. Before them is opportunity in abundance, but they cannot see. The problem is blindness.

This story is not uncommon, and if we are to be honest with ourselves, we must realize that we have all been harmed by such blindness. Consider the opportunities in your life to which you were blind. I can think of many! There were classes and vocational pursuits which I did not take, as I felt that they may be too hard. I feared I could not do the work, or did not feel that it was worth all the effort. There were pursuits which just seemed too risky and I wanted to find a safer path. There were too many fears that I allowed to have the last word. How sharp are our eyes of faith? Do we seek out opportunities for service, knowing that God will see us through to a rewarding future? Or when we hear of an opportunity for ministry, do we immediately shut it out of our minds as it all seems too unfamiliar and threatening? This week there is a call to do some baking for the community turkey supper at Hosanna Church's kitchen. Might we want to be a part of a new ministry and people being blessed by our efforts, or can we only think of the strange setting, the people we don't know and the flour that we might spill with its accompanying embarrassment? We also are finding ourselves living in an increasingly grievance-oriented society where eyes are being drawn to the many wrongs and injustices which may have touched us. How easily we can become focused upon grievance, and soon after become blind to our hope and opportunities.

Paul is praying for our visual health. He wants us to be able to see beyond our discouragement, to just how much God loves us. For too many people their relationship with God has a certain tentativeness to it. "I hope God loves me, and I will try harder," is their prayer. They are blind to the full extent of God's love for us. It is all stated clearly by the Gospel chorus: *O how He loves you and me. O how He loves you and me. He gave his life, what more could He give? O how he loves you. O how he loves me. O how He loves you and me.* Amen! May our eyes be opened to see how loved we really are, and then to walk in joyful confidence under God's loving care.

May we come to see our opportunities, in daily life and in service to those all around us. I tell people to take the bulletin board announcements and worship bulletin announcements seriously, for many of them are directing us to rich service to Christ. I met a man who has been serving in Lesotho in a mission school for many years, and he tells me it all began with an appeal posted on his Church's bulletin board.

We can also do a great deal to help the blind to see. That sounds a little too amazing to be true, doesn't it? But as we encourage those around us, and as we invite and nudge people into service to Christ, we are helping the visually impaired to see the possibilities! Young people have so much to learn as they find their way in life, and we can help them to see that the future is bright and that God has great plans for them. Early in ministry I became involved with a camp and youth ministry which we called *Kings' Kids* – a title which many other such ministries have used. The young people we served, like most young people they felt that they were awkward and unlovable, and wondered if they had much of a future. We told them that they were royalty and encouraged them to live like royalty, not in a snobbish or superior kind of way, but to

know that they were special people, deeply loved and bound for glory. And truth be told, ministry with adults isn't a whole lot different! Our eyes need to be opened that we might see what privileged royal children we are.

In recent Sunday school lessons, we have been discussing privilege. Some in this world are underprivileged while others have an abundance of earthly privileges. We also discussed how privilege is commonly heard as a dirty word, and none like to admit that they are privileged. Truth be told, the Christian, regardless of their circumstance, is the most privileged person in the world. Let us embrace that privilege, and use it for the advancement of the Kingdom. Let us pray as Paul prayed: *I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places.*