

Let's Pray. *Father, thank you for these men and women. You are at work in them. I've witnessed your work among the people of Union Church and I thank you, Lord. Holy Spirit, as we open up the scriptures please give us wisdom. Enlighten the eyes of our hearts to see the beauty of Jesus, to know the hope of the gospel, to experience the blessings of the gospel. Help us, Lord. You are the vine, we are the branches. Without you we can do nothing. We depend on you and we are expectant for you to meet us. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.*

## I. Introduction

Well, good morning. If you're joining us for the first time or if I haven't met you yet, my name is Ethan. I'm one of the pastors here at Union. If you haven't yet turned to the book of Ephesians I'd love for you to find a way to get your eyes on the text - whether on your device, or one of the bibles we provide, or in these scripture journals. If you didn't get one last week, this is our gift to you! Please take one.

At Union Church one of the things we want to be is a community saturated in the bible, which is why most Sunday's you'll find us simply working through books of the Bible. This is something called expositional preaching, where my job as a preacher is to expose for us the things the bible means to teach instead of deciding what I want to say and sprinkling in some verses to support it. So that's why we're spending the next few weeks in the book of Ephesians. We'll actually be in Ephesians until Thanksgiving! And honestly that doesn't feel long enough. So buckle up!

Last week Pastor Kyle began our study in Ephesians and we looked at the first part of chapter 1, where Paul is just gushing with praise to God and expounding on the purpose that God has for salvation - that from beginning to end, God saves sinners for the praise of his glorious grace. And that since salvation is from God, and through God, and to the glory of God, that "we can't merely look for life advice when we come to God's word. [He said] We can't merely look for how we can act like better Christians. We can't merely ask how this makes the world a better place. We have to ultimately ask the question: How does this show me that God is great, and how do I respond and reflect that ultimate reality to the world around me?"<sup>1</sup> God, God, God! Paul has got his eye fixed on the glory of God in those first fourteen verses. And that makes it striking to see that in verse fifteen, he transitions from vertical praise to God, to horizontal love for the church. Or maybe its better to say his vertical praise overflows into horizontal love for the church. That's one of the side effects of loving God: it leads to love for people. And this is a theme we're going to see come up again and again in Ephesians, that when we build our foundation on the doctrine of God (on theology), there will be necessary implications for how we interact with one another. Doesn't that just make knowing God so immediately relevant? Because a lot of our problems these days have to do with how people interact, whether it be on the level of neighbor to neighbors or nation to nation. And Ephesians is going to show us that the gospel of the greatness of God bears weight on the way we relate to the world around us.

That is what we're going to see on display here in Ephesians 1:15-23. For us today it teaches us that our praise of God's glory must spill over into care for one another through prayer. Ephesians is going to show us other ways that our theology of God overflows into care for one another, but the first way Paul puts this on display is by modeling for us a prayer for his brothers and sisters. In a sermon a

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<sup>1</sup> Kyle Rodriguez, "Gospel Purpose" Sermon

couple of weeks ago I said that our worship propels us out on mission to the world- to bring God to people - and here today, we're going to see that worship also leads us to bring people to God in prayer. **Our praise of God's glory must spill over into care for one another through prayer.**

And Paul's prayer for the church here in Ephesians 1 teaches us that, as we care for one another through prayer, we should (1) thank God for his work in people and (2) ask for greater illumination (3) so that the church might know the blessing of the gospel.

## **II. Thank God for His Work in People**

So let's look at the passage together, starting at verse 15: Paul says, **"<sup>15</sup> For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, <sup>16</sup> I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers...."**

I don't know about you, but for a significant portion of my life coming to God prayer was reserved for either the ritualistic moments in life (in a worship service or before a meal) or for the times in life when the alarm bells are ringing and I need help. But Paul is modeling for us a prayer life that is marked by habitual gratitude. He says **"I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers"** which doesn't mean he is thanking God for them in every single moment of every day, but that every time he comes to God in prayer (which seems to be often) he is filled with gratitude for the Ephesian church. How often is your prayer life marked by gratitude for the believers God has put in your life?

Paul is thankful for specific things. He is thankful for (1) their faith in Jesus and (2) their love for one another. Here again we see that a vertical relationship with God, leads to horizontal love for one another. And here's one thing that sticks out to me when I see Paul praying like this: last week we came across the word "predestined" in the text, which is an uncomfortable word for some. Some of you are resistant to the doctrine of predestination, that salvation comes to those who God chose before the foundations of the world, but here again is a little support for this doctrine, because who is Paul thanking for their faith in Jesus? God! Now, if you and I were invited into the home of a great chef and she served us a delicious meal, wouldn't it be weird for me to turn to you after the meal and say "thank you" to you? Of course it would because the meal didn't come from you. The person to thank is the chef who did the work and provided the meal! And in the same way, Paul has heard of the faith of the Ephesian Christians and instead of giving them a gold star for their faithfulness, he turns to the one who gives them faith and says "thank you!" Faith in the Lord Jesus comes from God. He alone can give us the gift of faith, therefore we should thank him for it.

Now that was just a little theological aside, but whatever you want to believe about predestination, the main thing on display here in verses 15-16 is Paul's thankfulness to God for his work in these people. Union Church, I want to call you up into this kind of gratitude to God for one another. One of the things that will distinguish us from the world as disciples of Jesus is the degree to which we are on the lookout for evidences of God's grace in one another. Let us be a people who thank God without ceasing for what we see him doing in the lives of our brothers and sisters! "God, thank you for my brother who so joyfully teaches children inside and outside the church. God, you put that skill and that passion in him. Thank you!" "God thank you for my sister in Christ, who studies the world with diligence and speaks the truth with such clarity. Your Spirit is at work in her! Thank you!" And then,

friends, let us take Paul's example to heart and let one another know the things that we see in their lives that we thank God for! That's what Paul is doing here in Ephesians. He's telling them the ways he is thanking God for them.

If we are to be a church where the gospel truly marks us - I mean marks us in such a way that the culture of our community stands out from the world - we cannot look at one another with insecure comparisons, or negative scrutiny. The gospel compels us to joyfully "Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor." (Rom 12:10). A pastor named Ray Ortlund, who is one of the sages I want to be like when I grow older, wrote:

Our churches tend to live on a starvation diet of personal affirmation. Let's risk a more generous tone of delight in one another. The honor of Romans 12:10 is not flattery. It is the practical outworking of the doctrine of glorification. It is gospel obedience to honor another Christian with, "Here is how I see Christ in you. Here is how I see his glory appearing in you. Last Tuesday when I had a need and I called you..." That discourse among the people of God is highly conducive to a joyous gospel culture. I have never met anyone too encouraged in the Lord!<sup>2</sup>

Let's be that kind of people! Let's care for one another in that way!

So as we care for one another through prayer we should (1) thank God for his work in people and then Paul continues in prayer by (2) asking for greater illumination...

### III. Ask for Greater Illumination

Let's look again at the text. We'll start at verse 16: <sup>16</sup> I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, <sup>17</sup> that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, <sup>18</sup> having the eyes of your hearts enlightened... So Paul moves from thanksgiving to intercession. He is now asking God for things on the behalf of others. He asks God for two things for the Church, which I'm summarizing with this word, "illumination." He asks for the Spirit of wisdom and the Spirit of revelation. And the result he's asking for is that the Spirit of wisdom and revelation would enlighten the eyes of their hearts.

You might remember from last week that Ephesians 1:13 says disciples of Christ have already been given the Holy Spirit. It says, "...when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, you were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit..." So even though Christians have been given the promised Spirit, Paul's prayer just four verses later tells us that there is still a need for believers to experience the power of the Spirit, for the Spirit to open our eyes and soften our hearts to know the Lord and see his beauty and joyfully obey. This opening of our eyes is called illumination. If you think back, you might notice that we pray prayers of illumination every time we gather, sometimes more than once and it's because we want to be a people who are hyper-aware of our dependence upon God to know him and understand his truth.

This past Thursday my family and I spent the evening at my parents house and when we left it was dark outside and I had to back our minivan down my parents driveway in the dark. And I wanted to get to a certain point in my parents driveway where I could back up into the grass and turn the van

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<sup>2</sup> Taken from "How to Build a Gospel Culture In Your Church" by Ray Ortlund

around so I could pull out onto the street front-first. And since I've grown up on this property, I'm super confident. I got to the place I wanted to back up and I whipped the van into the grass and BANG! I hit a tree that I had forgotten was there. Thankfully my minivan has great bumpers and all is well. Not a scratch. But that's a pretty accurate depiction of the bent of our hearts. We so easily fall into the trap of believing that we are self-sufficient, that we know the way, and so we charge forward when really we are backing up in the dark without mirrors like a fool!

But the good news is that we have a glorious God and the mighty, awesome, Creator-of-all-things God, "who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor 4:6). This is what the Spirit does for us when we are first saved. That's why we sing, "I once was lost, but now am found. Was blind but now I see." And this is what the Spirit continually does for us, He is continually revealing more and more of who God is and giving us the wisdom to see more clearly the glory of what God has done for us."

And since Paul is so floored by the glory and mercy of God it only makes sense that he would ask for the Spirit to illuminate hearts of these people who he loves so that they might get more of God.

This is a specific thing that you can pray for the people God has placed in your life. Every day at 1:00PM an alarm goes off on my phone to remind me to pray for a friend who doesn't know Christ and one of my most consistent prayers for him is that the Holy Spirit would open the eyes of his heart to truly see Christ in all of his compelling beauty. You can pray that prayer for the people in your life who don't know Jesus. And on top of that, who are the brothers and sisters in Christ that God has placed around you? What if, after you thanked God for the work you see him doing in their lives, you then asked the Holy Spirit to give them wisdom and revelation, so that they might grow in their wonder at the glory of God!

Friends, please don't be satisfied with the kind of church community that comes and goes week to week and puts on nice smiles, and exchanges pleasantries, and sits, and serves a little and then repeats that again next week. Please, let us be a family of faith that is so arrested by the glory of God and so filled with love for one another that we are ambitious and zealous for one another to be radically transformed by the Holy Spirit teaching us wisdom as the glory of Jesus Christ is revealed to us more and more and more. Let us be hungry for that kind of maturing in Christ not only for yourself, but for the people sitting next to you! Imagine your joy in bible studies, in worship services, in baptisms, in prayer meetings, in serving together, if your motivation for taking part was not only your own growth, but your ambition to see your brothers and sisters growing in their faith because you have prayed earnestly, consistently for the Spirit to enlighten their hearts. There is so much more opportunity to see God at work and worship him when we care about the Lord's work in others and not just ourselves!

#### **IV. So That the Church Might Know the Blessing of the Gospel**

This is how Paul prays for the Ephesians! And Paul prays this way with a purpose in mind. Look again at the passage, starting in 17: <sup>17</sup> that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may

give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, <sup>18</sup> having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, **that** you may know what is the hope to which he has called you...

There is a “so that” implied there. He asks the Spirit for greater illumination *so that* the church might know something. Let’s read all the way to the end: that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, <sup>19</sup> and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might <sup>20</sup> that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, <sup>21</sup> 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 one to come. <sup>22</sup> And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, <sup>23</sup> which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

As we care for one another through prayer; as we thank Him for his work in people and ask him to illuminate their hearts, we pray these things so that the ones we pray for might be re-rooted in the blessings of the gospel. Jesus Christ, in his life, death, resurrection, and ascension has purchased good things for his people. This is why Paul, at the beginning of Ephesians 1, says the Father has “blessed us in Christ Jesus with every spiritual blessing.” Because in Jesus we receive good things from God. And Paul’s prayer for the church is that God would enlighten their hearts to recognize and understand those good things.

So what are the blessings of the gospel that Paul prays for his readers to understand? He writes about three particular blessings: (1) the hope of his calling, (2) the riches of his inheritance, and (3) the greatness of his power.

First Paul asks God to open their eyes to know the hope to which He has called them. If you are a follower of Jesus that means that in eternity past, before the foundations of the world God set you apart. He lovingly predestined you to be called out of darkness and into his kingdom of light. Then at a certain time in your life, the Holy Spirit acted to open up your blind eye to believe in Christ. And what Paul is saying here is that there is not only a past and present dimension to our salvation, but there is a future dimension. The promise of the gospel is that God will make all things new in Christ and we will live with him forever. There is incredible hope in the good news of the gospel.

Without the gospel, there is so much in this world that we have to be ok with leaving undone. Without the gospel we have to come to terms with some conflicts never being resolved, with some injustices going unpunished, with some wounds never being healed, with some symphonies never being finished... because without the gospel everything ends. But the hope of the gospel is that in Jesus Christ God has promised peace, and justice, and restoration, and resolution. This is why Romans 5 says we can rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. It is a hope that allows us to endure and persevere because no matter how dark the night is, we have a sure and steadfast hope that the dawn will come!

So Paul prays that the people of God would have the eyes of their hearts opened to know the hope we have in Jesus. And then he prays that we would know what are the riches of his inheritance.

Now, the grammar here in verse 18 is tricky. Paul could be praying about the inheritance that we receive in Jesus, but I think it's more likely that Paul is talking about the inheritance God receives in the saints. We - the people he has saved in Christ - are God's inheritance. Paul prays that God's people would understand the value that God places on us who are in Christ. The God who created all things, who could have created for himself anything that he desired for his good pleasure has chosen to enjoy eternity with people who sinned against him, and were unfaithful to him, and who warred against him, who he has redeemed and adopted and sealed as members of his family through Jesus Christ. So that means that no matter how unimpressive you are, no matter how marked with stumbling your journey with Christ is, there is no such thing as sneaking in the back door of Glory and sitting unnoticed in the shadowy corner of the wedding feast. You have been welcomed into the kingdom of heaven with rejoicing and God will delight in you forever because you are a trophy of his grace and a treasure to his heart. He has been preparing a place for you since before the foundation of the world because he has chosen you as his inheritance!

And all of this - the hope of the gospel, the way God cherishes you in Christ - all of it is unassailably secure because of God's incomparably great power. And this is the third thing that Paul asks God to illuminate for the church - that "the immeasurable greatness of his power" is being exercised "toward us who believe." All of God's power - the power that raised Jesus Christ from the dead, the power that Christ has as enthroned king over the heavens, over all kings and kingdoms, over every spiritual power of Satan and demons, his power over all things everywhere is being exercised to accomplish his plan to redeem and restore all things in Jesus. He has shown us his power in raising Christ from the dead and Christ's victory is an ever present reminder that our salvation, our hope is secure. And Christ is seated now in authority over all things. He knows his church, he leads his church, he is protecting his church, and he will see to it that his church endures into eternity with him.

This is how Paul prays for God's people: eyes fixed on the glory and might and wonder of God, spilling over into joyful care for his people - thanking God for his work in people and asking him to open our eyes so that we, God's people, might see and savor the blessings of the gospel.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

So I want to encourage you in this way, friends. Paul comes to verse 23 and says that the church... is [the body of Christ] the fullness of him who fills all in all. And that means that right now Jesus Christ whose power fills the whole universe is filling his church by his Spirit, giving the blessings of the Gospel. Our gospel hope has our eyes fixed on eternity, but even at this very moment Christ is leading his people, filling his body, which means that by his power you are equipped by Jesus to be ministers of Christ's presence in the world. And the scriptures call us to carry the love of Jesus to the world in many ways, to preach the gospel with our lips and our lives as we go. But specifically, here in Ephesians 1, we are given one example to observe and put into practice: to let our worship of God spill over into care for one another through prayer. So I want to ask you to pray this week like Paul, with thanksgiving and intercession and praise for your brothers and sisters, to be ambitious for their knowledge to grow, to rejoice in the blessing of the gospel, and to be dependent on his power to carry us.

[Spiritual Vitality]

Let's pray.