

## The Father's Christmas Gift – Grace “in the Beloved”

2<sup>nd</sup> Sun. after Christmas – 01/03/21 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: Ephesians 1:3-14 Pastor Keith Besel

vv. 5-6 “[The Father] predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of His will, to the praise of His glorious grace, with which He has blessed us in the Beloved.”

### Introduction

- ✘ Now that Christmas is over, what’s happened to all of those presents you so carefully picked out, wrapped and distributed to your friends and family? Are they still working?
  - ➔ Typically, we say that a good present is one that the person is going to be able to use over and over again. So, for example, you buy a toy for a young family member. Has it been forgotten already, or is the gift played with quite a bit? Does it still do what it’s supposed to do or is it already broken?
  - ➔ By looking at what the recipient of the gift does with the present, we see whether the gift was worth the trouble to give, right?
- ✘ Christmas is the time for us to see what you and I have done with the gifts given to us...by God.
  - ➔ We have received some very unique presents from our loving Lord, and the question is, “Have we broken them or outright failed to use them?” To answer that question, let’s spend a bit of dedicated time in our Epistle Reading today, and let’s first see just what kind of gifts God has given to us.
  - ➔ Many people understand this beginning portion of Paul’s letter to the Christians in Ephesus to be an explanation of the doctrine of Predestination. But Dr. Thomas Winger, the author of the Concordia Commentary on Ephesians, believes that while these verses do talk about predestination, they are much more about God’s gift of grace given to us “in Christ” through the waters of our baptism and how that gift is applied into our everyday lives as His adopted children of faith.
- ✘ As verse three tells us, God, the “Father of our Lord Jesus Christ...has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.” You see, He held back nothing in this Christmas gift to end all gifts.
  - ➔ Every spiritual blessing is already ours! Every good gift is given freely, with no cost or effort from us. These gifts are not only guaranteed for eternity; they are valued beyond any amount of earthly worth that any of us can ever imagine.

### I. Holy and Blameless

- ✘ So, beginning with verse four, let’s look at each of these gifts we have received in the coming of the Christ child at Christmas. The first is that God makes us “holy and blameless” in His sight.
  - ➔ Later in Ephesians, Paul describes how God gives us this cleansing present. In chapter 5:25-27 he says that “Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her, that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the Word, so that He might present the church to Himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.”
  - ➔ In Christ alone you and I receive the forgiveness we so desperately need for all of our unholiness and guilt. And because Jesus took the guilt and punishment we deserve, now the Father looks at us, and we are completely clean!

## II. Adoption as sons

- ⊗ Another present in verse five is that God adopts us as His children. We are no longer excluded from His family because of our disobedience to our Father's commands.
  - In Christ, we are welcomed into His household with open arms. You and I are made to be brothers and sisters to one another here in His Church. Jesus teaches in John 8:44, that apart from Him our father is Satan and our natural will is to follow the devil's desires.
  - But now, by God's grace, all of that has changed. Now with the Holy Spirit living and active inside of us, we desire the will of our true heavenly Father. We seek to bring glory to Him in all that we think and say and do.

## III. Grace and blessing in the Beloved

- ⊗ Verse six describes another gift; the wonder that God showers us with His undeserved love – that is His “glorious grace” – and thereby “has blessed us in the Beloved” with the gift of faith.
  - Look, faith always has an object – a person or thing in whom we believe. Of course the object of our saving faith is Jesus – the “Beloved”; the One who is one with the Father and the Holy Spirit in the Holy Triune God.
  - John 3:16 says that He is the “only begotten Son” of God and that the greatest expression of God's love for the entire world is that He “gave” His only Son to us for salvation. “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.”
- ⊗ In today's text Paul uses the expression “In Christ” or “in the Beloved” or “in Him” ten times, with the 11<sup>th</sup> time in verse 13 describing how we who “believe in Him” have been “sealed with the promised Holy Spirit”.
  - All of this is 100% gift – including the gift of faith. We believe in Jesus only because God first “chose us in Him before the foundation of the world” (v.4).
- ⊗ This is where the important and proper understanding of God's predestination is taught by Paul. We can't spend the needed time right now explaining all of the different ways that predestination is incorrectly taught so that, in many cases, it actually leads souls away from Jesus and salvation.
  - But let me tell you this much. Every false understanding of predestination makes God's choosing of souls dependent upon the value or works of the person to earn or deserve his/her choosing rather than what Paul teaches here – that “God chose us in Christ”, that is because of Christ and His saving work and divine value in our place. And Paul says it all happened “before the foundation of the world” (v.4).
- ⊗ This confusion even infected our church body in its earlier years, back in the 1880s. My own ancestor, my great-great grandfather, who first came to faith as a Calvinist in Prussia, and then was converted to Lutheranism as a missionary here in the United States, struggled with this teaching when the Missouri and Ohio Synods split over what came to be called the “Predestinarian Controversy”.
  - Those of the Ohio Synod, with Reformed or Calvinist leanings like my ancestor, believed that God chose us because He knew that we “would believe” in Christ. In other words, it was the believer who actually got the credit for believing; for making the decision to believe in Jesus that motivated God to choose them for adoption. Well, that's nothing but salvation by works, right?

→ But the Missouri Synod officials insisted that Scripture here in Ephesians and other places teach that our faith is not an act of our own doing, but instead a gift from God, and therefore it had no part in God's choosing of us and all people for salvation "in Christ".

→ Romans 5:8,10 says, "but God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. ... For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by His life".

#### IV. Redemption in Christ

✘ That leads us to the fourth gift we have received "in Christ" and His coming. Verse seven says, "In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace."

→ I don't know how it can be any more clear that God's choice to adopt and save us is 0% our doing and 100% because of Christ. Paul says we are redeemed, that is bought back from sin and death through "His blood", not ours. And the forgiveness of our sins or debts is possible only because of the "riches of His grace". So, apart from Jesus folks, we are nothing! Our value is zero! And our ability to change that status is nonexistent.

→ But "in Jesus" our sins are removed, our value is flipped completely around and our status is now "beloved child of God" – so loved in fact that He sacrificed His only Son on the cross to get us back together with Him for eternity.

#### V. Wisdom and Insight

✘ And gift number five is explained in verses 8-10. The Father has granted us "wisdom and insight" into the mystery of His will, meaning that those who do not believe and have rejected Jesus as their Savior cannot understand God's purpose and plan – it remains a mystery to them.

→ But for those of us gifted with Jesus, we now understand the Gospel truth in faith, that in Christ all things – that is the souls of all believing people in heaven and earth will be united together by God's salvation plan.

→ Without Jesus there is chaos, conflict, war, sin and hatred with each other and with God. But at just the right time, or as Paul says in verse 10, in the "fullness of time" God set His plan into completion by sending His Son to be born of Mary and to be laid in a humble manger.

✘ These things are mysterious – even foolish to those who do not believe. But to us they are the greatest and most glorious gift of all time and for eternity!

#### VI. Inheritance

✘ Finally, the sixth gift that Paul wants us to see and open up during our Christmas celebration here is that in Christ, we have received an eternal inheritance as a member of our Father's family.

→ Paul is talking about, how in our baptism, God not only chose us, but He "sealed (us) with the promised Holy Spirit" to receive the best inheritance possible – a room in the Father's heavenly home; a place before His holy throne; the right and privilege of walking the golden streets of Paradise into eternity!

✘ Paul says that the Holy Spirit is the guarantee of this for you and me right now today. He's the one who keeps us in Christ in faith. He guides us by the Word of God and He strengthens and

sustains us until the day that we leave this earthly life through death and enter into Paradise with Jesus. This happened on Thursday for our beloved sister here at Mt. Calvary, Hertha Benson.

→ But if Jesus returns before we die, the Holy Spirit keeps us in Christ so that at His return He will take us that day to be with Him and all believers who are raised from death to physically enter the heavenly glory of eternal life.

## **Conclusion**

⌘ You see, the gift of Jesus gives us so much more than any other gift could ever give. And it keeps on giving forevermore!

→ Now, the question remains. What have we done with these gifts? Do we use them or do we all too often forget about them as soon as we leave church and go back to our everyday lives? Do we keep them as precious gifts; close to our hearts or do we break them in disobedience and rebellion?

→ Certainly, every one of us has failed to use them as God intends. Our lives do not always demonstrate to others that we've received such wonderful gifts. Many times we hide who we are and what we have received from God so that we don't appear too different from the people around us who do not believe. Too often we do and say and think what is wrong, and thereby wreck God's precious gifts we have received.

⌘ However, Christmas is the season to remember that Jesus is the one gift who keeps on giving; giving us forgiveness, adoption, faith, love, eternal life and more. In the infant in the manger who grew up and died for us, every other heavenly gift comes to us in abundance and in grace.

→ Yes, Jesus is the gift who gave Himself to be born of human flesh. He gave of Himself as He lived among us sinful human beings. And He gave Himself on the cross.

→ Jesus gave His all for us, to give us every spiritual blessing from the heavenly realms. That's what God decided to do for you and for me from the foundation of the earth. That's what happened to us and for us because of Jesus, and what we continue to enjoy as Jesus remains forever the gift of grace that keeps on giving. Amen.