

Robert Toney, The Ellen and James Taylor Award in Preaching

Sermon notes: July 19. 2024

Ephesians 1:3-14

Spiritual Blessings in Christ

*3 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,[a] 4 just as he chose us in Christ[b] before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. 5 He destined us[c] for **adoption** as his children[d] through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, 6 to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. 7 In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace 8 that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight 9 he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, 10 as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. 11 In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance,[e] having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, 12 so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. 13 In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; 14 this[f] is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.*

Who are you? What does it Matter?

Situation:

How many of us look in the mirror?

Really look in the mirror...? I was told once when I was in high school that I looked troubled. It was my mother's cousin, we affectionately call "Lil bit". She was a small framed older woman that I somewhat knew through my mother, but I had never really interacted with... she scared me. When I got home after her statement, I instantly ran to the bathroom, shut the door, and stared intently into my own eyes. What secrets were my eyes betraying that I was not aware of? I was in high school... of course I had troubling secrets I didn't want mom to know about... were my eyes snitching!?

When you look in the mirror, literally or just in thought, Who are you?

Think now, can you pull together a sentence in your head now to define who you are? Just a sentence that identifies you completely.

Go ahead... take a second, I'll wait.

Ok, how'd you do? No need to read out loud or share with your neighbor, just how did you do? Are you satisfied with your answer? Does it feel complete?

Not to worry, my hope is that like me in high school staring in the bathroom mirror, you will check and recheck and recheck again periodically your own eyes and see what they are telling you. It may be... in fact I'd challenge that all of us have an identity crisis. We know not who we are... and that is a troublesome situation for us all... Let's pray.

Father I ask at this time to remove the flesh of me from this pulpit and let your Spirit be all that is seen, heard and experienced.

Remind me with every breath I take that I live for Your glory and not my own. Let Your name be praised, and your word be understood.

In your Holy son Jesus' name, I thank You for this honor Amen!

So, the book of Ephesians was written by Paul as a circular letter to the church in Ephesus. Many scholars refer to this book as one of

the “prison epistles” Paul wrote while in Rome. Ephesians is believed to be a letter written to the church for the purpose of circulation throughout the Asia-minor region. It was not addressed to any specific individual, but the goal is said that it would circulate to speak to any reader, much like a flyer, newsletter or today, a public FB post or tweet.

In other words, Paul had no idea to whom he was writing. But he knew the message would apply... or at least the Holy Spirit knew.

He starts our scripture this evening in verse 3, “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...”

Notice, he did not say some, or most spiritual blessings, but he says every! There are no conditions, addendum, or asterisk , he says every! So right from the start of his letter, it is all laid on the line. We are blessed in Christ with every spiritual blessing! Remember, he is not talking to anyone specifically, but all who are hearing this letter.

So, a minute ago when you were thinking about your personal definition... your sentence defining who you are, did you mention Christian in there somewhere? No need to publicly confess or testify, I'm not trying to shame anyone here or enforce peer pressure. But just want to make sure if you included "Christian" in your self-definition. Do you know what "Christian" means? I've had one mentor of mine define it as "little Christs" We as Christians are little Christs.

Ok, if that's the case, lets re-read that first line of tonight's scripture again, "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" Paul is talking to us y'all... the little Christs. We are the receivers of every spiritual blessing! Eureka! Who we are!

But wait... still need more evidence... let's continue. Verse 5, "He (God) destined us for adoption as His children through Jesus Christ according to the good pleasure of His will..." Stop... What!?

Wait, did Paul just write me and you a letter telling us we are adopted into God's Holy family!? He don't even know me! He doesn't know what I look like, how I act, what schools I have been to, what I do for fun, my diet and exercise routine(or lack thereof...) He does not know my position at the church, my titles, how many boards I chair, budgets I've written.... Or (shhhh) How much I tithe....

Yet, I am in God's holy family!? Really?

Why?

Let's check scripture again, verse 11: "In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, so that we who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of HIS glory."

Oh snap! HIS glory? I am who I am for HIS glory!? I'm in the family... you're in the family... we are all in the family for HIS glory???

Why am I spending money in seminary then? Just kidding!

See... Paul is writing this letter to the people of Ephesus then, as he is speaking to us now... because we are not that different. Ephesus was an ancient Greek city and port on the western coast of Asia Minor, in what is now Turkey. It was one of the largest and most important cities in the ancient Mediterranean world, and was a major trading center. Its name translates as Abundant City. So, the people there, not unlike ourselves here, had an identity crisis. They, as us, can tend to believe our identities are based on our external measurement of success. And even as they, and we struggle as “little Christs” to hold on to our faith and our scriptural teachings, We are living in the environment of this world that emphasizes everything else EXCEPT who we truly are as God’s adopted fulfillment of His fullness to receive EVERY BLESSING!

Example: tonight’s theme is Social Justice. My sermon title asks you 2 questions I really hope you carry with you out these doors, on

your drive home, and into your next mornings. Who are you? And Does it really Matter?

Let's talk about question 2 real quick... Does it really Matter who you say you are? Scripture shows us, here in Ephesians, in Roman 5:8, and various places in the Bible, There is nothing you can do to make God love you more" Nothing! This is the pledge; the gift God has given us through the Holy Spirit. The same Holy Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead... is with us too!" always... fused to us, there is no separation. These bodies we are in are merely flesh. Vessels God designed to carry His Spirit in... miraculous vessels, but vessels all the same. What you see in front of you in this pulpit, next to you in the pew, at home, at work, at the grocery store and on the news... are flesh vessels carrying the Spirit of God.

But... every vessel within the sound of my voice has been raised and over-exposed to the awareness of "Whiteness"

“Whiteness”, for those in the back, because mom says I have a tendency to mumble.

“Whiteness”.

Not white people – no I am not condoning any type of racism. But ... and I have just recently (shamefully) learned this distinction,

“Whiteness” is the dominance of culture, systems and preconceived notions that labels and taints our measurement of personhood on a scale weighted with White Supremacy and privilege. “Whiteness” is love and consideration based on skin tone, with White skin at the top and Black skin at the bottom. The full spectrum falls in the middle somewhere. The closer to the color White is good, pure, clean, intelligent, controlled, moral. The closer to Black is dark, dirty, dangerous, dumb, lazy, hypersexualized.

These are historical teachings, some of which have been scripturally supported, that have been part and are still part of our education,

politics, corporate policies, and sadly religions since way before anyone sitting in this room's time.

Wooo... took a left turn there didn't I? Built you up with "Who you are... then reminded you Who you are not..." Sorry... not Sorry. This comes from a sermon I slapped myself with over the last few years, so I know it's a lot.

When the hashtag "Black Lives Matter" first appeared in 2013 after the murder of Treyvon Martin and the mass shooting at Pulse nightclub in Orlando, then blew-up in 2020 after the tortured murder of George Floyd, many people, including myself proclaimed "All Lives Matter" and that may still be true for some of you today.

But I challenge that "All Lives Matter" is not big enough for Black Lives! "All Lives Matter" dilutes and cannot contain Black Lives Matter for two specific reasons:

- 1) Black Lives in this country (arguably and historically worldwide) disproportionately SUFFER more than any other

lives. We see this everywhere, just research the police accountability statics for stops, arrests, bodily violence against Black Lives as compared to overall population of your areas. Look at the prison statistics. Look at the access to healthcare, life sustainable jobs, and healthy foods in our community. Look at the street sanitation, the lighting, the road and building conditions outside our doors. Look at the infrastructure we live in... do you still get nervous with every big storm that your basement might flood? How are your sidewalks, the empty lots in your neighborhood, foliage in the alleys? How many luxury car dealers are in our community compared to how many luxury vehicles we drive? How many gun shops are in our community compared to how many guns there are on our blocks? We suffer by design... don't be mistaken, don't get it twisted! We can't even keep a Target or Walmart in the neighborhood for our own convenience, yet their commercials are full of people who look like us, grinning and dancing and

loving the opportunity to spend money in their stores to bring us closer to the joy of “Whiteness”.

2) Black Lives CONTRIBUTE disproportionately to others in this country and abroad. The US was built on the backs of our ancestors. The economy would perish without our buying power. Every politician on both sides of the aisle publicly panders for our voting power then privately ignores or dismisses our needs. And I don't want to knock our Black leaders... it can't be easy. Even Pre. Obama had to wrestle with how much he would have to dance with the "Whiteness" in order to maintain his power in the White House. The resources from our mother-land were pillaged for this country. Our culture, our music, our ingenuity, our athleticism, our perseverance to survive... have all formed what we call the Greatest Country on Earth.

We have been taught since birth to fight for our inclusion in the “All”.

Don’t try to include us in your rebuttal to our demand... “Black Lives Matter!”

Do we think we are special? Well in fact yes, we are!

But, not because of the color or racial identity of this flesh vessel...

No – rewind – We are special because we recognize who we are as Children of God! Made in HIS image... not picture, but SPIRIT! Do not identify us based on our lack of “Whiteness”!

Ephesians 1:13: “In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were MARKED with the seal of the promised HOLY SPIRIT!”

This is the PLEDGE of our inheritance toward redemption as GOD’s own people, to the praise of HIS GLORY!”

This family is Who We Are! Nothing else matters... how we decorate these bodies, how we earn these dollars... this is how we have been

taught to measure ourselves as we fight against a weighted scale of “Whiteness”.

Instead, let's measure ourselves on what is real... the fruits of the Spirit... Galatians 5:22-23 “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. And if I can be so bold to add one more... FIGHT! Let's practice these... weigh ourselves with these. When we look in the mirror, let's see our reflection of these fruits ... and if we fall short... Choose Again.

You are the Glory of God! You are the reflection of the Spirit!

Black Lives Matter not because of who you are but because of who God is!

Repeat!

Repeat!

Amen!