

Christ is Wisdom

Fall Quarter: God's Exceptional Choice

Unit 3: We are God's Artwork

Lesson 11

Sunday School Lesson for the week of November 13, 2022

By Craig Rikard

Lesson Scripture: Acts 19; Ephesians 1-15-23; Revelation 2:1-7

Key Text: *I pray that the eyes of your hearts may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people.*
Ephesians 1:18

Lesson Aims

1. To understand how God's gifts of wisdom and revelation help us to know God better.
2. To understand the meaning of Christian hope as it relates to God's Kingdom.
3. To explore the power that resides within every Christian through the Holy Spirit.
4. To grasp what it means to be the "body of Christ" at home and in the world.

Author's Note: Traditional pronouns are used for reading flow and ease. However, God is neither male or female. God transcends all labels and language. The lesson is intended to be a supplement to the well-done lessons in the Teacher's Manual.

Introduction: Geography, Paul, and Background/Context

Geography

Ephesus was a major city in the Roman Empire in Asia Minor (modern day Turkey). It was an ancient Greek city on the Aegean Sea. It was a large city of approximately 200,000 people. A large Jewish Population lived in the city. The city consisted of many Synagogues. However, most of the language and imagery used by Paul addresses the Greek population. Whereas many Jews shunned the "new faith," large numbers of Greeks were drawn to it. Though a large number of Jews lived in Ephesus, the city contained a large temple to the goddess Diana. Much like Corinth, the city is a site of great commerce. Many goods and ideas move in and out of Ephesus. It was a great city from which to launch Christianity into the world. The church was planted by Paul, along with Priscilla and Aquila. Later, Paul's son in the faith, Timothy, will become the leader of the church at Ephesus. Timothy will later be assigned a greater responsibility when he is made bishop of Ephesus and will lose his life attempting to stop a parade in honor of the goddess Diana.

Paul

Most of us are acquainted with Paul. The stoning of Stephen unnerved Paul. Consequently, Paul meets Jesus soon thereafter on the Damascus Road. Paul was both a deeply spiritual and analytical man. You can't establish churches, organize them, raise leaders, and address Roman officials without a keen mind. It is Paul who took the story of Jesus along with his personal

experience and framed it in doctrinal and theological language. The book of Romans is Paul's great theological masterpiece.

Paul's understanding of the faith grew as he answered God's call upon his life. Steeped in Judaism as a Pharisee, he was also acquainted with the Greek worldview. Paul experienced God's truth in both cultures. His initial letters addressed specific problems within a local church. As the years passed, Paul begins to include his deeper understanding of the faith. Thus, some of his letters were known as circular letters. That is, they were not just intended for the community he addressed. The content was of great value to all congregations and therefore the letters were circulated. The letter to the Ephesians was such a letter.

Background and Context

As stated in last week's lesson, Paul was almost certainly in jail when he wrote this beautiful letter. Great persecutions were beginning, and under the emperor Nero the persecutions became vicious and widespread. The hope and joy that soar from this letter take on great meaning against the backdrop of imprisonment and persecution.

As shared in last week's lesson, Paul is overwhelmed with the joy and comfort he finds in Christ. His inspired words teem with hope. Have you ever talked with someone so overwhelmed with joy they can't stop talking? Paul's joy and faith roll off his tongue with passion. Last week's text contained one of the longest sentences of over 200 words. That is, 200 words in one sentence! Perhaps Paul is becoming aware that his life may be in jeopardy. He has so much to share and maybe feels there is so little time to say it. Whatever the underlying reason for Paul's wordy expressions, they reveal a genuine, inspired, meaningful hope and joy.

Today's text picks up where last week's study ended. It is still a part of the salutation. Again, most salutations consist of a greeting, an expression of prayer that the reader is healthy and well, followed by a lead-in to the body. However, the salutation in Ephesians contains far more theological underpinning. Again, it is almost as if Paul can't wait to get the message he seeks to impart.

A Faithful Church

As Paul stated in verses 1-14, the people have been faithful and have earned a great reputation among the churches Paul founded in Christ. After Paul reminds them that the promise of hope and a new day were guaranteed through the gift of the Holy Spirit, he writes, "For this reason, I have given thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers." What was the reason for his gratitude and prayers? Paul had heard of "their faith in the Lord Jesus, and their love for all of God's people."

Few things make a pastor happier than to know a church they served is doing well, and even better since their departure. I have always prayed the churches I served would become even better in Christ under the leadership of the pastors that followed me. I pastored a church in my early years that was struggling. I was told by my District Superintendent, "If you can't get them moving, they will probably fold." That was a lot of pressure for a young preacher! Still, I found a congregation of great people, and together we grew and became Church of the Year in our area.

Years later I returned for a special service. The church was far better and stronger than I left it. Like Paul, I bowed and gave thanks.

Pastors are not always responsible for a church's struggle or growth. There are always some great, loving, gifted people present. Through prayer and a covenant to grow in strength and love, a church can move forward. We often hear, "Don't care about what other people think." In many cases that is true. However, there are some moments when reputation is great gift. In 2 Thessalonians 4, Paul wrote that the people of the church should "earn the respect of those outside." Paul understood the value of a good reputation as it relates to being the body of Christ. It isn't the reputation itself for which we strive. When we engage in loving, redemptive ministry the reputation is a natural byproduct of effective ministry.

What do you think is your church's reputation in the community? If it doesn't have one, why not? What can be done to help a church develop a reputation as a loving, redemptive community in Christ? How can the laity and clergy work together to generate a reputation that is inviting? How do you think a good reputation helps a church's witness?

Paul implies he is overjoyed with gratitude. For me, gratitude has a deeper meaning than "being thankful." Being thankful is something I feel in a given moment in time. Gratitude for me implies living in a *state* of thanksgiving. Gratitude resides in the heart and spirit and effects our countenance, interactions, and outlook. Almost all people have been thankful at some time or another. However, not all are grateful. If Paul were only thankful, he might have struggled to express being thankful in prison. However, Paul is filled with gratitude. Gratitude defies our circumstances and can live in and through us regardless of those circumstances.

What do you think is the difference between being thankful and being filled with gratitude? How can we, through the grace of God, develop a grateful heart, a grateful state of being? What do you believe is the great fruit and witness of a grateful heart? Can you recall a time when you were grateful in the midst of adversity?

Getting to Know God Better

As Paul moves into verse 17, he exudes a deep reverence for God. Again, it almost seems at times like Paul just doesn't have enough words to properly address our great Lord. It is for this reason that I love the amazing hymn "O, For A Thousand Tongues to Sing." When I read the text, I get a sense that Paul would love to have possessed a thousand tongues.

From this point, Paul reveals that for which he is praying. He desires that God endow the Church with a spirit of wisdom and revelation. When Paul employs the word "spirit" he is actually referring to our human spirit. He is praying that the Holy Spirit will enliven the mind to gain wisdom and the heart and spirit to receive God's revelation. Again, use of the word "spirit" implies far more than just an experience. We can have experiences that enlighten us and allow us to see what God desires we learn in a given moment. However, praying that we might receive from God a spirit of wisdom and revelation implies a sense of "permeance." Paul desires that we live with the gift of wisdom that enlightens and illumines us in every experience of life. The same is true for the gift of receiving revelation. Wisdom and revelation actually are bound

together. The wisdom we gain is from the revelation we see. As Christians, we believe Christ is present in every moment of life. There is always light to see, regardless of the circumstances. When Paul records his moments of adversity and suffering, we almost always read of what he saw and learned in those moments. In Philippians 1:12-13 Paul writes, "I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel."

Remember, our faith is based on revelation. We would know little of God apart from God revealing the divine nature and presence to us. Our faith is best described as "progressive revelation." God reveals Himself and eternal truth to us in a way we can understand at the time. As we embrace that expression of truth, we then are ready for the next. This is the progression of the Old Testament. It is also true of our spiritual walk with Jesus. In the beginning we know so little, but as we walk with Christ we see more and learn more. We learn to see God in our circumstances and the moments in our day.

It is important to differentiate "knowledge" from "wisdom." Knowledge is learned truth retained but not necessarily accompanied by experience. Knowledge describes what we know. Wisdom implies we know how to use what we know. Knowledge without experience can lead to destructive decisions. Personally, my understanding of the "other tree" in Eden, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, is that it leads to destructive behavior. When people have knowledge without experience, they jump ahead of God. I often wonder if those who split the atom seriously consider all the ways this knowledge could be used. We can destroy everything through splitting the atom. The second tree is not a statement against knowledge. It is a warning that knowledge without prayerful experience can be dangerous.

I left seminary with a wealth of knowledge. However, using that knowledge in the local church without previous experience often led me to engage in decisions that were not helpful at all. Clergy often talk about a young minister going into a church like a "bull in a china shop." We mean they went into a situation with a lot of knowledge, without experience, and attempted to change everything right away. Wisdom is that beautiful, powerful gift that merges knowledge and experience.

Have you ever made a decision based on knowledge without experience? What was the result? Have there been moments when you wish you would have waited until you had greater understanding? Have you ever had the experience of being a bull in a china shop? How do you seek God and God's light in your day? How does prayer help you in your seeking? Can you attest that the longer you have walked with Christ, the greater wisdom you possess?

Why does Paul desire that we possess the spirit of wisdom and revelation? The answer is clear in this salutation: to better know God. It is biblical - and clear in Scripture - that our relationship with God through Christ involves a journey. It should be a walk in which we grow in vision, in enlightenment, in understanding, and in confidence. As stated in previous lessons, God transcends all that is related to our human experience. We begin with a simple yet profound profession of faith. From that moment forward, the new Christian needs to engage in the disciplines of the faith: worship, prayer, Bible study, and service. The more we engage in these disciplines the greater our understanding of God and God's redemption through Christ. These

disciplines empower our spiritual eyes and ears. We learn to see God in human experience, in worship, in passages of Scripture that come alive to us, and in scenes of creation. Prayer is very important, especially prayer to begin our day.

In teaching a new group of Christians I often ask, “Without looking around, what did you see that is maroon in the room?” Some will mention an obvious item or two. I then would instruct them, “Ok, now look around.” They begin to see maroon all about them. What was the difference? When I planted the color maroon in their minds, they began to see it. Prayer brings God into our consciousness. The person that prays continually in their day will begin to see God’s presence in places they never considered.

We also hear God through the cries of people. We also hear God far more keenly in our conscience. The hymns and Christian music take on a new life. As we learn the beauty of spiritual solitude, we can actually begin to hear God’s glory in the winds and flowing waters.

In your Christian journey, what helps you most to see God in life? How have the Christian disciplines helped you to know the Lord better?

In my person journey, I have gotten to know the Lord much better. God, for me, is much kinder and eager to forgive. The love of Christ knows no bounds and omits no one. One of the major things I’ve learned in my walk is to differentiate between what is trivial and what is vital. I cannot omit the change in my relationships. Through prayer, in each encounter I have with a person I learned that I have one task: to love them more than they love me. I want to out-love them in Christ. Each person’s journey occurs at a different pace. However, the journey ends in the same place for all of us: we know God better. John records in chapter 10 Jesus saying, “I know my sheep; and my sheep hear my voice.” God has already moved close to us. God is with us and in us. Now, our disciplined walk of faith helps us draw near to God.

In your walk of faith, how has your faith and prayers improved your relationships with others? Where do you most often hear the voice of God? Can you note the difference between your knowing God in the beginning and in later years? What are some of things you now understand about Christ that you did not understand earlier? How have they enriched your life?

The Great Power at Work Within Us

The power of the Holy Spirit is at work within each Christian. The Spirit empowers us to become wiser and more confident in the faith. The Spirit awakens us to the great hope God has given us. As cited previously, hope is not simply wishing things will turn out okay. Hope is the belief that Christ is with us in every moment, wasting none of them. Therefore, everything will always, in the end, be well. The gift of hope leads us toward that glorious inheritance. The inheritance is, of course, eternal life. However, we taste that life and experience the wonder of that coming life in our everyday existence. When we know Christ is with us, regardless of the circumstances, we live in confidence. We face fear with confidence in Christ. We taste our inheritance through knowing “all things are working for the good” as Paul stated in Romans 8. If all things work for the good then God has to be present in all things. We are already members of the Kingdom of

God. That kingdom is present now in the world, breaking through the clouds of suffering and doubt with the message of hope. The message of the Kingdom of God is: there is always coming a new day!

Paul reminds the Church that the great power of God, present in us through the Holy Spirit, is the same power that raised Jesus from the dead! This one truth should leave us awestruck. What kind of power does it take to breathe new life into the dead? What kind of power makes a dead heart beat again? What kind of power awakens every cell and fiber of the body? Humanly speaking, we have no human power that even comes close to the resurrection power of God.

Paul reveals what that great power accomplished. It not only raised Christ from the dead, it empowered him to take his rightful place in the Kingdom. God has a purpose for every life. We can fulfill that purpose through our yielding to the Holy Spirit and the power with which we are filled. No, we are not Christ's equal. We cannot raise a dead body and give it life. However, we are empowered to call the spiritually dead to new life in Christ. We are called to make broken hearts beat with hope again. We are empowered to help those who are spiritually blind and deaf to see and hear anew. Each of us has only employed a portion of the power God has given to us. However, as we grow in confidence and hope in our walk, we become more and more agents of change and redemption.

What do you think it means when Paul writes the power in you is the power with which God raised Christ from the dead? What has God called to life within you through Christ that once was as though it was dead? In what areas of service have you grown in confidence? How do the Christian disciplines help you release the power God has given you?

The Church of Jesus Christ

Paul writes that Jesus is the head over everything for the Church. Though our Christian conversion is a personal experience, our membership in the Church is the instrument through which we discover our gifts and grace and the means to use them.

Paul's definition of the Church should awaken us all regarding who we are, why we are here, and what is the nature of our mission. First, we are his body. Indeed, we are to become the presence of Jesus in the world. Our gifts and graces were not intended for a solitary Christian life. They find their meaning and purpose in the Church. Our individual gifts and grace, working in love and grace with our church family, allow the Church to become the powerful, transformative presence of Jesus in the world. Paul writes, "We are the fulness of Him who fills everything in every way." Jesus Christ is present in every moment of life, in the world (especially the broken places in the world), and in all the places we rarely look. This is the mission of the Church. We are the presence of Jesus in each other's life. We are especially present in the broken places of others. We are to be present everywhere in the world. Where our bodies cannot be, our gifts and ministries reach out for those beyond our reach. Remember, the Church is not just our local congregation. Every Sunday our local church recites the Apostle's Creed and our belief in the holy, catholic church. Catholic is an adjective, a description of the Church. The Church exists

everywhere, and those who believe in Christ gather together to worship and serve. Thus, our connection with others through prayer and mission help us embody Christ everywhere possible. The incredible power within all of us can accomplish what to others seems impossible.

When asked to build a church building in a poverty-stricken area of Merida, Mexico on the Yucatan, one could initially say, "It's too difficult." There is so much work to be done, so much money needed, and we can only visit every few months at best. However, our local church helped build a septic tank and installed the plumbing pipes. Another church built the walls and roof. My church went back later and laid the tiled floor. The "difficult task" had been accomplished by the Church universal, the holy catholic Church.

There is a great power at work within each of us, and when that power is at work in the church, united, difficult, and even impossible things can be accomplished. All of us became the presence of Jesus for a dear people who needed help. There is no other purpose in life that thrills me any more than embodying Christ in every moment possible and to do so in the holy catholic Church.

What is your present understanding of the Church and her mission? Does your church utilize all the gifts and graces present in her members? If not, what can we do to accomplish that task? Has your church joined with other churches in mission? What was the experience like for you and others? Do you think it helped all involved to better understand that we are the holy, catholic Church? How do you think your church can better become the presence of Jesus in every moment, especially moments of suffering and adversity? How do you think a local church can utilize the power of the Holy Spirit to call that which is dead to life? By dead we mean spiritually separated from God, those with unused gifts, or those with hearts crushed by a feeling of hopelessness. Are there other things that represent death you can add? What can we do together to call them to life through the power of God within us for the glory of Jesus?

Prayer

Almighty God, we fall to our knees, overwhelmed over what you have done for us, in awe over what you given us, and humbled by the mission to which we have been called. Forgive us for our neglect in recognizing the gifts and graces you have given. Quicken them to new life, that we might become the powerful presence of Jesus Christ in the world. In Jesus name, Amen.

Dr. D. Craig Rikard is a South Georgia pastor. Email him at craigrikard169@yahoo.com.