

How are we? If you have your Bibles, let's go to Ephesians, chapter 1. Let me chat with two separate groups here. Kids, I'm glad you are in here. Our first through fifth graders are joining us this weekend for what we just call family worship weekend. My name is Pastor Matt. I teach your mom and dad while you're being taught in Kids' Village. I'm glad you're here. If you got those notes on your way in and you're able to write and all that, my name is Matt, or Pastor Matt, however you want to write it. I'm really, really glad you're here. You have an energy and a vitality that I respect and, at times, am very jealous of, so I'm glad you're here.

Now, let me chat with you parents. I am well aware there are a lot of kids in the room, so here's what we can all expect. There are going to be some noises that aren't normally in here, and there's going to be a lot of movement that's not normally in here. Let me tell you how I'm going to handle that. If I hear noise, I'm going to assume they are agreeing with my sermon. If I see movement, I'm just going to guess the Holy Ghost got them, all right?

What I'm going to encourage you to do as parents is just breathe a little bit. Just loosen up the reins. Don't *drop* the reins; just loosen them up. I'm fully aware there's going to be movement and there are going to be little voices and you shushing. I'm well aware that all of that is going to happen. I just want you to breathe and know that I'm expecting it, that everyone in the room is expecting it, and that it will not be a surprise to any of us that we hear and see these things. I'm glad you're here. Let's breathe out and just get after the Lord. We wanted your child to come in. We wanted these kids to come in and just see what we do and how similar it is to what *they* do.

In regard to contextualization, my plan is to go a lot shorter than I normally go for everyone's sake...for your sake, for our sakes, and, bless your kids' hearts sake, for their sake. My plan is to go about 25 minutes, and then that will be that. Your kids should know how, if you are a regular attender here and they come, to navigate the Bible at some level, so we're going to be in Ephesians, chapter 1.

Now, I love watching my kids open up presents. Something occurred to me this year for the first time. When you're a kid, Christmas is really magical, and I figured out why this year. When you're a kid, you ask for everything. There is not a commercial on television that one of my kids doesn't say, "Add it to the list." I have 9, 7, and 3, and regardless of male or female, if it's a commercial, put it on the list. Since you ask for

everything, you have no idea what you're getting. Because when you ask for 7,000 things, the mystery in what you're going to get is large.

Then as you get older, what you want kind of shrinks as the expense of the things you want increases. As you get older, as you get well into the later teenage years, you kind of know what you're going to get. You at least know one or two of the things you're going to get, because it went from 7,000 to 60. Then if you're sharp (and I'm not saying you were a sharp teenager), you could kind of price those things out and kind of navigate this. "I'll probably get this. I'm maybe going to get this." You know you're going to open up that package of underwear and/or socks. You know it's in there. Maybe that's somewhere else, but you know it's coming.

Some of the magic wears off at that point, and then you get into college and you just know what you're going to get. Then from there, once you have your first kid... I remember when Audrey was born, that first Christmas. We were giddy. We just couldn't wait for it. We had all these cute little toys for her. We were geared up to go. I believe she opened up one present then fell asleep and then just played with the boxes and the paper. If you have your firstborn and this is their first Christmas, just wrap some boxes. That's cheap for you. They'll love it.

What has happened now is as I've gotten older and as my kids have gotten older, we're kind of back in magic zone. Here's what I've found. *I'm* really excited about it. I'm excited about my kids opening up their presents. I get this honestly. My dad was the same way. My dad likes to pretend he's real gruff, but he's really just a softhearted, kind man. He would get... I don't even think he knew what we got for Christmas. I think my mom did that. That might have been why he got so excited.

There was one time in particular where we came home after a Christmas Eve service, and my dad was like, "You can open one present." We got to open one, and then we were so giddy about it, he freaked out and was like, "Open them all!" We just opened all of our presents on Christmas Eve. As a parent, there is an anticipation. Even now in my house, we've started to wrap presents and put them under the tree. There's this growing anticipation. There's this curiosity.

I don't know what your rules are, but they've started to try to pick up the boxes. Our rule is if you touch it, it goes back. I don't know if you've employed that rule. That's what we do. "Touch it, it goes back." I mean, you know if it's Legos. So we have to say, "Don't touch anything. Stay away. This is a no-touch zone." So we set all of that up. You can watch; there's a level of excitement building in them and, God help me, in me. Especially now when the commercial comes on and one of my kids is like, "Oh, I really, really want that," and I know we got it. I know it's already under there. I know, as he says that, it's six feet from him. That's exciting.

Here's what I know is coming in just about 16 days. We'll wake up... I don't know how you do it. Here's how we do it. We'll make our kids eat breakfast first, which I always chuckle at because we never force them to eat breakfast, but on this morning they're eating breakfast. We make breakfast, we eat breakfast, and then I read the Christmas story...slowly...out of the book of Luke. I'm not doing the short version. You're getting the full-on version here. We're going to maybe even flip over to the genealogy a bit, just so you can see where he came from. Literally, Audrey will start to sweat. Like, "Come on!"

Then (we adopted this from the Walkers, my in-laws) the presents are handed out. Everybody gets a pile, and then you get to open them one at a time, and after you open them you have to give kisses and hugs to whoever you owe kisses and hugs to. Gratitude must flow from your heart to whoever gave you that gift. That's how we do Christmas. Then, as the dad, I have to then take everything out of the adult-proof boxes. Quit stealing stuff. If people wouldn't steal stuff, they wouldn't put a bear trap in the box to keep you from taking it out of the box. Then about 3:00 we're all exhausted and can start to cook dinner.

So this is kind of what Christmas is like at the Chandler home. I'm guessing for you that as this season gets closer, as the day draws near, there's actually a little bit of excitement in all of us...the kids to receive, the parents to give, and even maybe as parents to receive. The thing about being Daddy (and again, I don't know how your home works) is if I don't get what I asked for, I'm just going to go buy it. That kind of bothers Lauren. "Here's what I'd really like," and then if I don't get it I'm just going to go get it. I'm hoping *she'll* get it so I don't have to go get it. Either way I'm getting it.

When all is said and done, I get excited about this season, and part of it is this idea of the gifts that are going to be opened and the gifts I get to give. I said last week at the end of the message that there will be no family experience, there will be no gift you open, there will be nothing significant that happens this season that carries more weight, more opportunity for gladness, and more opportunity for fullness of life like the reality that God came in the flesh and dwelt among us, Immanuel, God With Us.

I've been haunted since I became a daddy out of a passage in Luke, chapter 11. In Luke, chapter 11, verse 11, Jesus says, "Which one of you fathers, if your son asks you for a fish, would give him a snake?" Then verse 12 says, "Which one of you fathers, if your son asks you for an egg, would give him a scorpion?" Then Jesus goes on to say, "If you who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more then is your heavenly Father, who is not evil, able to give good gifts to those who love him."

Jesus is playing on my sensibilities as a father and saying, "You, selfish you, broken you, stumbling about you, if you know how to give good gifts, if you know how to figure out what your son needs..." Listen, there are some things I'm going to give my children because they're going to love it, and there are some things

I'm *not* going to give to my children that they want because I'll love it. It'll be good for them and good for me that they don't get it.

The Bible says, "If you, then, who are evil, broken..." If you think back to last week. "If you, then, who are born in iniquity and walk in transgression, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more then is your Father in heaven, who does not have iniquity and has never transgressed, able to give good gifts to those who love him." With that said, I just want to look at the gift of Jesus Christ and what has been promised to us in his coming out of Ephesians, chapter 1. Let's look at this.

Ephesians 1, starting 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..."** If you write in your Bible, draw in your Bible, circle things in your Bible, draw a line out to the margin and write in your Bible, anytime you see the two words *in Christ* put next to one another, you need to make a note of it. The idea of union with Christ, really throughout the Bible but especially in the New Testament, carries with it the power to skyrocket our joy and our understanding of how God sees us, how he views us, and what our position before God is.

What this just said, **"Blessed be the God..."** We need to stop real quickly, because when you bless something, you normally are giving something more value than it currently possesses. If you bless someone, you're increasing their value. But you cannot bless God in that way. You have nothing by which you can increase the value of God. There's nothing you have or could give to him that's not already rightly his. You have nothing to give him that would increase his value. He is wholly, "otherly" different, and you can give him nothing he could not sovereignly say, "That was mine anyway."

The reason this idea of *blessed...* He's actually referencing most of the Old Testament that cries us to bless the name of God, to praise him, to sing and celebrate, to submit and to surrender, to make much of. Bless the name of God. *Bless God* means to ascribe worth and value to. Not to *add* value, but to *proclaim* his value. Why? Look back at the text. **"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..."**

All of God's gracious transactions between himself and man are through Christ. It is through Christ we are loved by God. It is through Christ our prayers are heard. It is through Christ we are loved. It is through Christ we are justified, through Christ we are sanctified, through Christ we are forgiven of sins, through Christ we are matured in the fullness of Christ. All of God's gracious transactions between himself and man are through Christ and in Christ.

So the apostle Paul in the letter of Ephesians says, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus. Praise his name." Why? Because he has given us Christ, and when we are in Christ, we have all things God has promised to us in Christ. You and I cannot fly unless we are put in an airplane. Christ is the airplane. Christ gives us the wings to fly. So he's going to begin to unpack some of this, why we should bless the name of God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us in every... So look at verse 4. We're going to start to look at what some of these spiritual blessings in the heavenly places are.

Verse 4: **"...even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will..."** This idea right here, as controversial as it can be, really excites me, because here's what it means. Are you ready? You're going to have a hard time believing this. In fact, it has been my experience that the longer you've spent in church the harder it is for some of us to get this.

Here's what this just said. Before time began, when God was glad simply in his "Godness"...there was no universe, nothing but him existed...God in his heart was anticipating and excited about the day in which he would not only save you but sanctify you. As I, a fallen father, am anticipating and excited about my children opening up temporary things that are going to get thrown away in the next couple of months or next couple of years, God our Father, since before time began, has had an anticipation about the day your heart would be awakened to his glorious grace, and on top of that, struggling brother or sister, also excited about how he was going to grow you and mature you.

Our default position as strugglers is to believe God is disappointed and frustrated, that he simply is tolerating us. But the apostle Paul in Ephesians 1 says, "No, no, no. Before the foundation of the earth was laid, he was going to adopt you, make you holy and blameless in his sight." Whether difficult days or good days, God is at work. God has not abandoned you in this difficult season. He's chiseling. He's shaping. It is not unloving to break the hand that's holding on to something that's detrimental to the soul. Why does he work like this? Let's look at it in verse 6.

"...to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved." Again, this is another one of those ideas to me that fuels my zeal for the Lord. What he just said is he rescued me, not because I have the types of skills necessary to make much of his name, but rather he rescues all of us for the praise of his glorious grace. If you're a struggler, if you have issues you're fighting through, this should be a log on the fire of your heart that burns into an inferno, because what God just said is, "I don't need you to be lights out; I'm lights out. I bring glory to my name in rescuing you despite you. I don't bring glory to my name because you rep me well; I rep me well. I rep me well saving you. I win with guys nobody else would pick. That's what makes me glorious."

Have you ever heard anybody complain about church? "They're a bunch of hypocrites." Yes, they are! I am! How amazing does that make our God, that in our hypocrisy he's longsuffering with us, in our inability to live out all he would call us to he continues to lavish upon us his grace. It should be good news for you, for the praise of his glorious grace. He doesn't save you because you're deserving; he saves you because he can.

In fact, if you read your Bible, you'll find he saves all sorts of guys whom sinners think are sinners. Wicked people are like, "That dude is wicked." Those are the kinds of people God saves and calls to his service. When wicked people think you're so wicked they don't want to hang with you, when thieves are like, "Don't let him in our house; he'll steal something," when murderers are like, "That dude is crazy," that's who God saves, and that's who God uses, and that's a testimony to us that God's salvation is for the praise of his glorious grace, which means it doesn't matter how you came in here.

It means God can rescue, it means God can save, and it means for those of us who are in Christ, you do not disgust him. "Well, you don't know what I struggle with and how deplorable it is." I know Jesus would say he paid the bill in full, so what you're saying is nonsense. If there are barriers between you and God at this point now that you've heard the gospel, you've put them up; he hasn't put them up. If there are barriers between you and God, you have built them; he most certainly has not. In fact, he has provided the wrecking ball to knock it down.

I want to spend a little bit of time on this last one, so let's look at verse 7. **"In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight..."** I love this word *lavish*. Extravagant, plentiful, over the top. When the Bible is talking about forgiveness, it's saying his grace in forgiveness is lavished, like it's too much, like it's ridiculous. It's a ridiculous amount. It's over the top. It's like *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*. It's like two people living in a 72-bedroom house. It's out of control. That is the grace with which he lavished on us in his forgiveness.

Why is God's forgiveness and how is God's forgiveness plentiful, abundant, and extravagant? Well, in Little Village we teach it like this. The forgiveness of God, when it comes to how he lavishes upon his people... You and I, if we are in Christ, are *fully* forgiven, *freely* forgiven, and *forever* forgiven. If you are in Kids' Village and have gone to Kids' Village, this is how we teach forgiveness there. You are *fully* forgiven. That's Romans 8:1. Kids, we're going to try to help your folks know what you now know. Romans 8:1 says, **"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ..."**

There it is again. Fully forgiven. All your sins. You have no sin...past, present, and future...that has more power than the cross of Jesus Christ. None. You are fully forgiven. Here's what this means, church folk.

This means your salvation wasn't just a past event alone, but that Christ even now is continuing to save you. He didn't forgive your past sins and is now leaving it up to you to conquer present and future sins. He paid for it all. You are *fully* forgiven.

Next, you are *freely* forgiven. Here's what that means. You cannot earn the forgiveness of God. There is no room, for those who understand and know the Word of God, for the idea of penance. You cannot earn God's forgiveness. It is freely given. Ephesians 2:8-9 says, "**For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.**" There you have it again. You don't earn it; it's freely given to you.

The last piece is not only are we *fully* forgiven, not only are we *freely* forgiven, but we're *forever* forgiven. I want you to look right at me, because again, I think this is one of those things I just don't know if you'll believe. Are you ready? Man or woman of God, in Christ but struggling, God does not regret saving you. He doesn't regret it. You haven't surprised him. You *cannot* surprise him.

God is not watching where you are now, watching how you've struggled this week, watching how you stumble and fall, and regretting the decision to pay the price for you in full. He doesn't regret saving you. You have to get out of that little self-pity party of yours. It's a lame party. It's a baseless party. It's one that mocks the cross of Christ as being not enough for your particular sin set. You belittle the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ when you sit in that pity party. He does not regret saving you.

First Peter 3:18 and Hebrews 9:28 have this same idea in them. It's that Christ died once and for all for those who are perishing. The altar is closed. Are you tracking with me? You have nothing to lay on it, because it's closed. You bring a little sacrifice to the Lord that's not just your life in glad submission to him in faith, in this grace, you lay something on the altar, there's no fire, there's no need for blood, no need for an offering for your sin; it's paid for.

It's like writing a check or paying online, giving your credit card company money, when you haven't spent it. It'd be pretty dumb, right? The credit card bill comes in, it's \$150, and you pay them a grand. That's what you're trying to do. I think they'll gladly take it. The difference is our God will *not* gladly take it. It's an offense now at this point. You belittle the name of Christ when you say, "This sacrifice isn't enough; let me give you more." More than what? God in the flesh?

One of the great gifts in Christ is this gift of forgiveness, regardless of background, regardless of how we've walked in, and regardless of what our future holds, because we're going to blow it this year, right? Yeah. Maybe this afternoon. Guys, what time do the Cowboys kick off? Some of you are going to blow it pretty quickly, even this afternoon. But by the grace of God, by his lavish, extravagant grace, we are fully

forgiven, freely forgiven, and forever forgiven. I had our communications team build out a little video on this, and then I'll come up and close us out.

[Video]

Male: God is perfect. Why? Because he is God. He is wise, generous, loving, and good. He has no sin in him. Not one bit. We are not perfect. Why? Because our hearts are sick and dirty with sin. We have all sinned against God. This means we are separated from him, and we are born outside of his family. Sin creates a barrier between us and God. It also affects our relationships with others. Sin makes a mess of everything. Yes, everything. We can't do anything to fix this mess on our own, but because he is gracious and loving, God did something incredible. He sent his Son Jesus into the world.

Jesus lived a perfect life. Yes, totally and completely perfect. What else did Jesus do? In love, Jesus died on the cross for our sins. He took the punishment we deserve and made a way for us to know God. Because Jesus died for sin, those who love and trust him can be forgiven, and they can be brought into God's family. Jesus removed the barrier between us and God. So what does this all mean? It means that all of the sin that keeps us from relationship with God and others was taken care of by Jesus. God forgives fully, freely, and forever. Because Jesus forgave us, we forgive others fully, freely, and forever.

[End of video]

We're 16 days away from Christmas. There's a lot to do between now and then. I just saw panic in some of your faces. I want to just remind you once again where I started and where I ended last week. There will be a lot of really cool things coming in the next couple of weeks. We've already been to a couple of Christmas parties, and we have a few more to go to. We'll laugh a lot in these days, and some of us will cry a lot in these days.

When all is said and done, what I want to continually lay before you is, regardless of what you've asked for, regardless of what you get, even if you're a single woman and some dude throws a ring at you, or you get the car with the bow on it, regardless of what you get, regardless of what kind of experience occurs, it is all not even secondary to what we've been given in the coming of Christ who dwelt among us, who becomes our righteousness and absorbs from us our sins.

The invitation to all of us is to enter into the forgiveness of God made possible in Christ to be fully forgiven, freely forgiven, and forever forgiven. Regardless of how you've come in, that's the offer on the table for you. My hope going into this week would be that you'd be tired enough to maybe hear it for the first time, or maybe that the kids being in here today would create receptivity that wasn't there historically.

Just know I love you and so desperately want you to walk in the joy of the Lord and not be constrained by religiosity but really to get that God loves you and likes you, and yes, he's calling you to holiness, and yes, he's going to transform your life, and he *is* going to demand that some things change in your life (we're going to talk more about that next week), but for today, the invitation is to rest in the forgiveness of God that is utterly and completely complete. Let's pray.

Father, we want to now move to blessing your name. We want to sing and celebrate. We want to remember and rejoice. We want to make much of your name, because you are the Father of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and you have placed us in Christ and granted us the righteousness of Christ and have taken from us all of our shortcomings and failures. So we make much of you in song today. We make much of you in the elements today. We make much of you with our voices and lives. We love you. It's through your beautiful name, amen.

Love you, guys. Great job, kids.