

Blessed to Be Blameless

[Ephesians 1:3-14](#)

Dr. Gareth W. Icenogle
Sunday, September 3, 2006
Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

I want to particularly thank Carolann Haley and the Choir this morning, for there is rather a spontaneous change. Mike Denham had to leave and go to Oklahoma City to be with his father. Carolann stepped in at the last minute. Thank you, Carolann. Thank you, Choir.

In going, Mike left me a message; part of that message relates to the text before us this morning. He said, "I want you to know that the opening text of Ephesians may have been my Dad's favorite passage from the Bible. We lingered over it at Saturday morning breakfast. It is comforting and strengthening to know that Dad believes it with all his heart, and that good theology is good for living and dying. I'll be praying that God will give you strength and clarity as you proclaim it tomorrow. I know that, if my Dad is gathered into the Savior's arms today, he will arrive blameless and blessed in Christ forever. Whenever that happens for me, I know my experience will be the same, largely owing to my Dad's own loving witness—for he is my hero."

Mike's father died early this morning. Let us take a moment to pray for the ministry of the Word and for the great witness of those who leave us with a wonderful sense of God's blessedness and blamelessness.

Lord Jesus Christ, be with us now as we read and preach your Word. May we be like Mike's father and live into it with our whole life; and may we hear and act on the basis of who you are—in your belovedness, your blessedness and your blamelessness. Through Jesus Christ and the power of the Spirit, Amen.

As Doug Learned said last week in a wonderful sermon, Jesus invites us to step outside of our comfort zones and to cross over into other places—to cross boundaries, walls, and other divisions and separations. To not let divorce stand in our midst. To heal broken relationships. To build bridges and to make peace with enemies and nations. To reverse the pattern of prejudice in the world. To embrace difference and to bring unity. To become completely mature in Jesus Christ. That is the overall message in the letter to the Ephesian church.

As we read and note today, listen to this special emphasis in this reading; it is one long un-ending sentence of 202 words. In it are hints of the baptism of Jesus in Matthew 3, and it is a doxology of the Trinity: the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Listen for the words that Jesus heard when he was baptized, from the Father: "This is my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well-pleased." Listen to the Word of God:

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, just as he chose us in Christ, before the foundation of the world, to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his council and will, so that we, who were first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. 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.

Amen. It is the most magnificent, extended, extravagant sentence of praise in the entire Bible. It is as if the writer, whom most people think was the apostle Paul, literally let himself go in a flow of extravagant praise. It is a torrential flow of excitement—breathless because it is an affirmation of the core character of God that impacts you and me.

On one hand, it shows that we are people who are blessed by a powerful God; and on the other hand, it shows that we are people who live in poverty without God to bless us. It is a statement that has the beginning and ending of all things, the height of the heavens and the depths of the Earth, and the complete Trinity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is a complete statement of praise for the Living God.

But at the heart of this statement at the beginning is this wonderful word, "blessed." We are able to bless God because God has blessed us; that word has to do with "speaking well of." God speaks well of us in heaven. God does not have negative things to say about us. God has only positive affirmation to proclaim about his children—sons and daughters. God blesses us in the heavens. God speaks well of us. God has a good word for us, and this is true from the beginning of time, to the end of time. This is to counter the theological belief that God is 'out to get us.' Hear it once-and-for-all, over and over again: God does not have anything against us. God is for us. God wants us to succeed, prosper, and benefit.

All of this happens through Jesus Christ, for Jesus is the one human being who lived in a way that all of his life was without blame. And the gospel according to the letter of Ephesus says: you are brought into the presence of God because of Christ's perfection and blamelessness. You are able to live blameless in a crooked and perverse generation. You are able to live life without being a person who blames others and lives under the blame and oppression of accusation. So, in the blessing of God, we are able to be beloved and

blameless before him in love. How does this happen except in Jesus Christ? Jesus lived in relationship with the Father in such a way that the Father poured out love upon him and only saw in him that which is well-pleasing. And so, when God sees us in Jesus Christ, he only sees in us that which is well-pleasing. The life of Jesus has covered all of those things that are to be blamed and blame-worthy. If your life is hidden in Christ, then you are walking—from God's perspective—in blamelessness.

Now this is an amazing truth, because we do not feel that way in everyday life. How much of your life do you spend in self-blame? How much of your day do you spend in the blame of ancient voices to you—from grandparents, or parents, or bosses? How much of your life do you spend in blame because of the people around you who accuse and blame you?

God is not a part of that. It is clear that from the beginning of the book of Ephesians that, in Jesus Christ, we are seen by God as blameless. Now how does that happen? Well, this is a mystery. Even the greatest theologians in history cannot explain totally how it is that God sees us without blame. But it must become very deep in our hearts and our minds that we are people who do not live in blame; we are supposed to live blamelessly. It is tough to bless and not blame another person in our lives... a family member... a member of the church... someone important to us... a partner in the practice... someone in corporate life... someone in our entertainment in environment. We tend to be a people of blame.

Tim Russert, in his book, *The Wisdom of our Father's: Lessons and Letters from Sons and Daughters*, lists the letters from a daughter about her father. The young woman is telling a story about an incident in her past. On her 25th birthday, she was with her husband and her father at Disney World. They were having a wonderful time on their way to one of the shows, and her father turns to her and says "You are no longer a part of my family. I want you out of the car. I want you out of the hotel. I want you out of my life." And he literally dropped them off on the street where they had no place to go. It was on Christmas Day and it is hard to find a car rental on Christmas Day.

This was a father who was so wrapped up in blaming his daughter for the things that were going wrong in their life together. Later in the week, to re-affirm his position, he sent her a letter and said to her: "Please take your husband's last name. You don't deserve to carry mine." After that she had violent dreams about him. She dreamed of paying him back every cent that he had invested in her—to 'un-make' him as her father—and even taking a hammer to his knee. She wanted to blame him. How deeply this spins in families, and at the core of our being; it is profoundly impactful for how we live life.

But that is not how God wants us to live. According to the apostle Paul in the letter to the Ephesians, God does not blame us. God sees us as beloved in Christ. We are embraced as sons and daughters. God is not ready to dump us and reject us. God is constantly inviting us into intimate presence, so that we will sit, stand, and kneel before him in love. God wants us to be there with him. God, in no way, wants to get rid of us or abandon us. God is abundant in grace, rich in mercy, and has adopted us to be his sons and daughters in eternal family; and we inherit everything that Jesus inherits. God blesses us, his sons and daughters, in the way that he blessed Jesus, his only begotten Son. Heaven has come to Earth, and we are a people who are built in belovedness, blessedness and blamelessness.

But there is a problem. Paul points out that there are two theological patterns that are extended in the culture in which the Ephesians lived. The culture of narcissism, which had a view that the gods in heaven are not interested in the lives of people on Earth. They had basically written them off and rejected them; the gods of the heavens blamed the people on Earth for the mess that the Earth was in. What Paul is saying to the Christians is: do not believe that narcissism. Do not believe, for a moment, that that is the nature of God in heaven. God is not out to reject you. God embraces you in the love of Jesus Christ.

The second theological problem had to do with the practical theology of the people of God—the Jewish people who had become Christians, and the Jewish people who struggled with what it meant to be a Christian. That theology of Pharisaism was still hugely bound up in Judaism—a theology that says "I have a right to blame you for your life gone wrong. And I have a right to blame you for my life gone wrong." Bad theology. Bad view of God. We practice our true theology. If we are a people who tend towards blame, guess what? That is what we really believe about God. If we are a people who are hesitant to bless, then that is what we believe about God: that God is stingy and has a scarcity of grace.

There is an awful lot of blame in this world today. You saw how, recently, Mel Gibson, when he was full of alcohol, began to blame other people—and the devastation of that blame. And that, in a sense, reverberated in the words of his own father, whom he has never fully come to grips with: his father, who hates Jewish people; his father, who believes there never was a Holocaust; his father, who names the name of Christ, with this view of blame—blaming Jews for all wars.

People who know Mel Gibson say, "This is not really Mel; this is Mel under the influence." My sense is that, when we become disoriented, our subconscious takes over and those things that are deeply rooted in our souls from our families of origin—our parents, those who have spoken to us at young ages—begin to reverberate in our theology and we begin to blame as our parents blamed.

I met a woman once who blamed everybody in her life for her pain. She said "My Dad said "No" to me about going to college when I was 17 and I still blame him for the mess my life is in today. For the last 35 years, I blame my mother and my children for the pain I have." The kids complain about Mom, and the Mom blames the kids. The people around her have cut her off because she blames them for most of what goes on. She has never taken responsibility for what's going on in her theology of God. That god is a god of blame.

The apostle Paul understood this. He understood that he was tempted, as a Pharisee, to blame Christians for the mess that was going on in Jerusalem; and so he went after them. As a Pharisee—a leader—he was there at the stoning of Steven; he imprisoned, crucified, and killed Christians because he believed they were to blame for the mess in Jerusalem.

What causes this kind of intensive blame in a culture? There is a tendency for all of us to refuse to accept blame for our own patterns

of sin and loss. And when we refuse to accept responsibility, we tend to turn to one another and blame each other for the mess we are in, or the pain that we have. A refusal to confess our own sin. A refusal to see ourselves clearly. A refusal to take a step back and to look at what the sources of our own pain are really about. It is about US and our relationship with God. A refusal to forgive and accept grace. A desire to return evil for evil and to take vengeance on people who have hurt us—to blame.

Many people today have said that we are in one of the strongest cultures of narcissism in the history of humanity. It's all about how we feel about ourselves and how we can blame others. But this is not the way of a gracious God.

My context to blame is when I'm tired; when I'm overwhelmed; when I'm hurting; when I'm in grief; when I'm confused. When I forget the sight of the God I worship and the pattern of his Son, Jesus Christ, then I become a person who is tempted to blame.

I have a friend whose wife fell down the stairs at home and the first words out of his mouth were, "Why did you do that? Can't you see that those stairs were there? How would you possibly make the mistake of falling down the stairs?" I'm tempted to go there sometimes; I don't know about you. Later on that same friend said, "Well, you know, my wife later on fell down another set of stairs. And I was really tempted to go there again, but something caught me. I remembered that my first words should not be blame—but blessing, belovedness, help, and compassion."

It's hard, when we are in pain, to give that up. But that is the core of the theology for the Ephesians. When we are in pain, when life is tough, don't go to blame. Realize your belovedness and go to blessedness. For blame is a refusal to take responsibility for how God loves you and cares for you, and how YOU make a mess of your own life.

And so it is. What eliminates blame? The deeply-embedded passion of Jesus Christ, from the love of the Father, that permeates our being and changes our theology, and says to us: No! Do not go into blame! Instead of blame, give blessing. Each one of us, in our own ways... when things are not going well... when we are lost in grief... are tempted to blame. And the pattern that Paul is calling us to is the pattern that God sees in us already: to go to blessings. Growing in blamelessness is to accept that God accepts you! God does not blame you. In Jesus Christ, God has forgiven you; and God is no longer holding an axe over your head. God is affirming that you are part of a family—not just today, but forever. God is saying that you don't just have a small inheritance, but you have a magnificent, lavish wealth of inheritance in Jesus Christ.

It is important to listen to the Word of God. The heart of this has to do with learning to be self-aware: to know when you are tempted to blame, and when you are free to bless. It is interesting to note, in the second half of the letter that the woman wrote to Tim Russert, that she has taken some time over the years to reflect upon her relationship with her father. As she is a new parent and nursing her young child, she is feeling the anger and disappointment of her lost relationship with her father; and she begins to reflect on why that is: How could my Dad do so, and why would he feel this way about me? How hurt he must be. How damaged he must be in his soul from his own relationship with his father, and how his own father would not approve of him, and blamed him for his life. And he never resolved that before his Dad died.

So in nursing her son, she decided to reach out to her father through an old tradition that they had shared when she was young: they would eat a bag of pistachio nuts. From time-to-time, she sent a bag of pistachio nuts to her father; and often he would give the bag back with just the empty shells. He sent it back to her with just the shells—as if to say: while this pattern of blame is a tough nut to crack, we will work this through and stop the blaming.

In Jesus Christ, you are called to live blamelessly. You are called to live blessedly. You are called to live as Jesus lived, as beloved of the Father. May the power of the Holy Spirit help us as a church and as individuals to live without blame before God, and without blaming one another.

Let us pray. Lord Jesus Christ, may you be with us in our time of Communion so that blessing prevails, and that blame is released. We pray this in the name of the Father who loves us, the Son who lays down his life, and the Spirit who helps us to live the new life. Amen.