

# The Message

Note: No sermon is quite the same when you read it. You miss the inflections, the understanding that you gain in the hearing. Nevertheless, the words are shared with you here.

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Scripture: Ephesians 1:3-10

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## THE BENEDICTION

A couple of weeks ago, one of Mark Rothko's paintings sold for \$31 million. The painting was four feet by six feet. If you had purchased it, it would be small enough to go on your wall, but it was large enough to be the only piece of art on your wall.

[Pastor Mike refers to slides of other paintings.] I really like this painting because of the title—"White in the Middle." It's about the same size as the previous one. You could have purchased this one for your home for a cool \$77 million back in 2007. The funny thing about Mark Rothko, and the reason I bring him up, is that he was a Russian immigrant. Born in the early 1900's, he was an Orthodox Jew. However, Rothko did not find the heritage or tradition of his religion fulfilling. So, he traded his heritage that he got from his parents for the meaning of art. He vested himself in art. By 1950's he had become "discovered." He was popular, critically acclaimed, and wealthy. Anything he painted was worth its weight in gold. And yet, once he became famous, the more he came to despise his fame. The more famous he became, the more isolated he felt. This malaise got so bad that in 1970 he ended his own life in complete isolation and desolation. His story is very sad.

Whenever I hear a story such as Rothko's, I often wonder why is there such a disparity between external reality and the internal world we live in. He had it all. What didn't he have according to the standards of the world? He had power, influence, wealth, and acclaim. And yet, when the critics told him, "Your paintings are wonderful." Rothko would respond, "You don't know what you're talking about. Anyone who uses words 'doesn't get me.'" Rothko just wasn't understood. Sad, isn't it?

Why is it when Paul tells us that we have every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms that we don't feel that way? To me, it's the same question.

Now, let me give you a different story—the story of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. I've just read Eric Metaxas's biography about him. Bonhoeffer, like Rothko, was born in the early 1900's; he came from an aristocratic family—very wealthy, very

influential. Bonhoeffer decides to study theology; he gets his PhD by age twenty-one. While he is preparing for church service, the Nazi party is gaining momentum in Germany. In fact, the Nazi government took over the church. To which, Bonhoeffer cried "foul." The rest of the church declared the Nazi party good because it was making Germany rich. Hitler fooled everyone by making Germany successful.

He made some curious decisions. For instance, he kicked all the Jews out of the church. Hitler said, "If you were born as a Jew, then you can't be a Christian." Bonhoeffer's response is "wait a minute. You don't get to do that." Finally, Bonhoeffer makes the decision that he would rather be guilty of doing everything he could to end the Nazi regime than to do nothing at all. So, he enters into a conspiracy to assassinate Hitler. Because he took part in the plot, Bonhoeffer's life ends in a Nazi prison camp. By personal order of Hitler, Bonhoeffer is executed. As he goes to the gallows, he tells one of his friends, "Praise God that I've been able to live a faithful life. God has tested me and I have decided to side with those who have suffered and been counted as dead. I would rather be counted as one of them than to be deceived by success, convenience, and a life of comfort."

Why, according to the world, did Bonhoeffer fail? In the eyes of the world, he was a failure. He didn't succeed at what he set out to do. All the plots against Hitler failed. He died in a war camp. Nevertheless, he had complete confidence and peace that he had done what God had called him to do. He gave up his prestige to follow God, and he felt the reality of it.

So, what's the difference? One guy has it all, but feels that he has nothing. The other gave up everything and he feels that he has everything.

Paul says, "Praise be to the God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has given us every spiritual blessing in heavenly realms" (Eph. 1:3). Is that your reality on the inside? It's true on the outside. From God's perspective, this is true. That's what I call objective truth.

There is a question today whether there are any objective truths. My response is as follows: Whatever God believes is true is objectively true. This is God's truth: We have it all. We have everything we need.

But it doesn't mean that we feel that way on the inside. Why the difference?

On my wrist, I have on a yellow silly band. It's shaped like a cupcake. Children love these silly bands. Now, does anyone have a cell phone? I believe that the cell phone represents everything wrong with America, specifically the I-phone. How many of you want the I-phone? I'm raising my hand because I'm one of those. I plan on getting one as soon as I possibly can.

But this represents the problem we have. We live in a culture where we are barraged with the message that we are always supposed to be looking. So, you do your research and find the thing that you need. As soon as you find it, a new thing comes out that is better than the one you just got. So you need the new one, right? This is the American way. You always need something else. Our culture tells us that we should always be looking for the next, great thing. And as soon as I get it, I need something else. Therefore, meaning is found in the search. It's the definition of a consumerism society, and it's the one in which we live.

No one cares when considering cell phones and silly bands. The problem that we have is that culture filters its ways into the church. And it filters its way into our relationship with God. We begin to question, "Is this all there is? Am I missing something?" We ask because our spiritual life doesn't feel good right now. We think, "My relationship with God is proving to be a little tougher than I thought. I must be missing something because surely God wants my life to be easy."

This thinking isn't new. I can bemoan our culture, but it has always been this way. It was this way during Paul's day, too. In our scripture lesson, the people were asking, "Is this it? Is there something more? Jesus gets us into heaven, but what about everything else? Are there more heavens? Are there different levels of heaven?" I don't know if you have ever asked those questions, but Paul's readers were. And they were asking Paul specifically, "Do we need to be praying to someone other than Jesus? Are there special beings, angels? Should we be praying to our ancestors? Do we need to pray to Abraham?"

Paul answers, "No. Stop it. Once you've been found by Christ there's nothing else to find. He is the only way, the whole way, the every way. There is nothing more." If we don't feel it, it's not because it isn't true. Paul tells us that we're blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavens.

So I ask you: Do you feel like that's true? More importantly, are you living your life in accordance with that truth? It's one thing to seek more of Jesus. But it's another to seek more of something else. God tells us to seek only Jesus.

Paul continues. "For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight" (Eph. 1:4). Let's do a little survey. You may or may not know the person next to you, but you still know the answer to this question. Is the person next to you blameless and holy? To the left, to the right? If my wife was sitting next to me, she would answer, "No, he's not holy and blameless. Let me count the ways!"

Hence, my question is this: Does God not see our sin? He knows that you're not holy and blameless! He knows all the foibles and details; and yet, he chose us to be holy and blameless in his sight. It's not because you're holy and blameless.

It's because he chose not to see your sin. He chooses not to see those things which keep you from being holy and blameless.

He doesn't accidentally use the phrase "before the creation of the world." God on purpose made the decision to make you holy and blameless in his sight. It was his plan. Let the weight of that point seep in. God did this on purpose. This morning you are not here by happenstance. You would not have a relationship with God just because! He meant you to have a relationship with him. He wants to have a relationship with you. And he has chased after you on purpose. He has intended that you would be holy and blameless in his sight.

Then, the scripture says, "...he predestined us to be his sons and daughters in Jesus Christ" (Eph. 1:4). None of us choose to be the children of our parents. And parents don't choose the children that we have. We may choose to have children. But if I were to bring my children, ages five and seven, up here, you would look at them and say, "Aren't they precious and sweet?" And indeed they are—in public.

None of us choose the children that we have, and none of us choose the parents that we have. So, Paul tells us that God actually chose you to be his children. Sons and daughters have an inheritance. They have the riches of their father at their disposal. The same thing is true of us. We have these riches, we have this wealth, and we have this inheritance. This inheritance is "redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sin" (Eph. 1:7).

We're introduced to two concepts—forgiveness and redemption. Let me illustrate. Think of a hole in the ground. Forgiveness is putting the dirt back into the hole as if there were never a hole. God forgives; he forgets about the hole. Redemption is slightly different. He takes what was once a hole and makes it into a platform, a platform on which you can stand and bless others. He takes something that was once ugly and painful and turns it into a blessing.

This idea is seen in the founding of Alcoholics Anonymous. There was once a man who was an alcoholic. He created Alcoholics Anonymous for the glory of God. Because he was willing to stand up and say, "I am an alcoholic and I take responsibility for my life one day at a time through the power of Christ." He has helped thousands of people to stop drinking. That's redemption!

God wants to redeem something in your life. He wants to redeem something in every one of our lives. There are times in our lives when God says, "Forgive and forget." But there are other times when he says, "This is something I can use. That little bit of pain or hurt or darkness is something that I can turn into a light bulb."

The question is as follows: Are we going to let him? Are we to partner with God on blessing others through the areas of pain that we have had in our lives? That's our inheritance. Redemption and forgiveness.

The issues of redemption and forgiveness have really challenged me when I read this biography of Bonhoeffer. I was unaware that Bonhoeffer had a friend that acted as his confessor. Although not Catholic, he believed that the Catholics were on to something. He felt that we should confess our sins to people that are trustworthy. Hence, Bonhoeffer had a friend to whom he would write letters and confess his sins. For instance, he would confess that the last couple of months he had really been struggling with depression. Although depression is not exactly a sin, it hurt the people around him. He would confess the things with which he struggled. His friend would write back, "Those who have confessed their sins in Christ are forgiven; thus, you are forgiven."

My question for you is thus: Do you have someone in your life that you can go to and say, "I'm missing the mark on this and I need a little more grace in my life"? We all need that! Sometimes, we think it's all about being perfect. But God really just wants us to try to practice the disciplines of grace and forgiveness and confession.

When was the last time you went to someone and said, "I've done something wrong"?

A while back, I went to an event and gave (partly) this message. Someone came up to me and said, "Thank you, Pastor." I responded, "You're welcome." And her response, "No, thank you! My husband apologized to me for the first time tonight in thirty years." My response: "Wow! Thirty years! He's even more stubborn than I am!"

The truth is that if we haven't apologized to someone in thirty years it's not because we have no need to apologize. I'm not saying you should go home and drudge something up. No, I'm saying that this should be a regular part of life where we recognize that we need to be proactive about making things right.

Paul continues: "In him you were chosen to receive this inheritance...you were marked in Christ with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance" (Eph. 1:13). In the beginning, Paul writes, "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing" (Eph. 1:3). These words praise and blessing are related words. In the Greek, they come from the word meaning "to speak."

This definition makes me think of this old story from the book of Genesis. Two brothers, twins, fight over their father's blessing. Esau is the "manly" man. His father comes to him and says, "I'm about to die and I want to give you the

blessing.” The blessing was an oral covenant, once spoken it could not be retracted. “I want to pass on all of my wealth to you; I want to pass on all of the inheritance that my father gave to me that he received from God.” He says these words to Esau. He continues: “Go make me some dinner and I will give you the blessing.”

While Esau is out, Jacob dresses up as his brother and tricks their father into giving him the blessing. One of the things I like about the Old Testament is that it doesn't cover over the unsavory aspects of our heritage. Jacob was a trickster, not exactly a good role model. He tricked his father and his father gave him the blessing. According to the ways of the world, that was not supposed to happen.

However, Paul tells us that God reverses the story. We're not Jacob seeking more things from God. Instead, Jesus is chasing after us saying, “I want to bless you. I want to give you heaven. I want to give you eternal life. I want you to be my sons and my daughters. I want you to live with me for eternity. I want to give you everything...if you will just believe in me.”

So, Jesus chases after us and gives us an inheritance. Part of the reason that we don't feel the weight of all these blessings is precisely because we haven't inherited them all yet. Some blessings we will not receive until we cross the great river (in other words, die). Some things we just have to wait for.

In the meantime, he has given us the Holy Spirit, the guidance that will answer every question we have. Now, he might not give us the answer we want, but he will give us the guidance that we need.

Do you need guidance? Is there anything in your life that you aren't able to figure out? Do you ever wonder where is God? The Holy Spirit is the one with the answers. If we just pause and listen, he has promised us the Holy Spirit. He has given us the Holy Spirit. If we lean upon him, if we trust him, and if we seek him alone, he will always give us what we need to be faithful in Christ. Because he is that deposit guaranteeing our inheritance.

Let us pray.