

This Sunday's texts:

Amos 7:7-15

Ephesians 1:3-14

Mark 6:14-29

God's Will
Pastor Jim Cords
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The holy gospel for this week comes to us from the Gospel according to Mark, the sixth chapter:

Herod Antipas, the king, soon heard about Jesus, because everyone was talking about him. Some were saying, "This must be John the Baptist raised from the dead. That is why he can do such miracles." Others said, "He is the prophet Elijah." Still others said, "He is a prophet like the other great prophets of the past." When Herod heard about Jesus, he said, "John, the man I beheaded, has come back from the dead." For Herod had sent soldiers to arrest and imprison John as a favor to Herodias. She had been his brother Phillip's wife, but Herod had married her. John had been telling Herod, "It is against God's law for you to marry your brother's wife." So Herodias bore a grudge against John and wanted to kill him. But without Herod's approval she was powerless, for Herod respected John; and knowing that he was a good and holy man, he protected him. Herod was greatly disturbed whenever he talked with John, but even so, he liked to listen to him. Herodias's chance finally came on Herod's birthday. He gave a party for his high government officials, army officers, and leading citizens of Galilee. Then his daughter, also named Herodias, came in and performed a dance that greatly pleased Herod and his guests. "Ask me for anything you like," the king said to the girl, "and I will give it to you." He even vowed, "I will give you whatever you ask, up to half my kingdom!" She went out and asked your mother, "What should I ask for?" Her mother told her, "Ask for the head of John the Baptist!" So the girl hurried back to the king and told him, "I want the head of John the Baptist, right now, on a tray!" Then the king deeply regretted what he had said; but because of the vows he had made in front of his guests, he couldn't refuse her. So he immediately sent an executioner to the prison to cut off John's head and bring it to him. The soldiers beheaded John in the prison, brought his head on a tray, and gave it to the girl, who took it to her mother. When John's disciples heard what had happened, they came to get his body and buried it in a tomb.

The Gospel of the Lord. Praise to you, O Christ. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we pray that by your Holy Spirit and through your word, you would give us more and more understanding of who you are and what's important to you. Help us to know and understand your will and to see the truth of who you are. In Jesus' name. Amen.

We're going to seek today to understand God's will. Now, I will readily say that it is highly unlikely that God will reveal his full, complete, and perfect will to you through me. Not likely to happen. But there is some amazing truth in God's word for today, especially in this Ephesians text that is the basis of the sermon today. I want us to hear it and I hope it will both inspire us and guide us into our lives with gratitude and praise to God for the grace that he gives.

I want to start by acknowledging the Old Testament lesson. Maybe mostly because I think that there's still some part of my own heart and mind that understands that I, in and of myself, don't measure up and that as I see others in my life, I see that they don't measure up either. So in Amos, when we hear these words, "I will test my people by this plumb line,"¹ we realize that our lives are not in plumb. Our lives are off a bit. If we are measured according to the standards of God, the holiness of who God is, we fall short. Our lives are not in alignment as God would want them to be. This word in Amos continues with this phrase that says, "I will no longer ignore all their sins."¹ Sometimes when we hear that what we hear and what we apply to our lives even today is 'if God doesn't ignore our sins, we're in trouble.'

What I want to say to you is it's clear from our text today, it's clear in this Ephesians story, that God does not, God *will* not ignore sin. Now that may sound scary and I will tell you this.

When our sins are pointed out, when our lives are measured against that plumb line, we're likely to respond in the same way that Amaziah does. That is to find a way to silence the teaching or the teacher. Try to move away from anybody who's going to point out where we fall short and how we fall short. That rarely works in our lives, but I think we do it all the time. It's our way of saying we don't want to hear it. It's our way of living in denial of the truth of our

¹ Amos 7:8

own shortcomings. Because, quite frankly, we don't know how to handle them and even when we've tried over and over again, we've failed.

So let's listen to how Paul speaks to us in his letter to the church in Ephesus. Ephesians has two primary themes. The first theme is that Christ has reconciled all creation to himself, to God. The second theme is that Christ has united people from every nation into one church, his Church together. So we need to understand how does that reconciliation happen. On what is this unity of the church based. Because I can be real clear with you. It is not based on our common understanding of the teachings of the Scripture. It is not based on our common doctrines or lifestyles or music preferences or worship styles. Those are greatly varied. So what I want to say to you is that it is not based on us. Neither our reconciliation to God nor our unity together or our reconciliation to one another, is based on us, on our behavior, on our merit.

It's accomplished through what God does and it's free. It's done by the one triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It's received by us by faith through grace. It is a free gift of God as it says other places in Ephesians. Therefore, out of that work of God, we are able to live with gratitude in our hearts and in our lives and in our relationship with God and with others.

Almighty, sovereign God has chosen by his will to forgive us, to bring us into his family, to make us his children, by adoption through Christ. He blesses us with this gift. So our text today begins with these words. "All praise to God."² God gets all the glory, all the credit and this is a recurring theme throughout this text and throughout scripture. All glory to God both because of who he is and because of what he does for you and for me. What I want us so deeply to understand from our text today is what God does for you and for me and to believe that, to embrace it in faith, to trust that God indeed gives the very thing that he promises us he gives us in Christ.

It's not that we deserve it. It's not what has been done that flows from us, but what God has done that flows to us. This text tells us that we are blessed with every spiritual blessing.

There's this incredible exchange that happens in Jesus. Jesus takes what is due to us and he gives us what is due to him. We receive this eternal blessing. How? By being united with

² Ephesians 1:3

Christ. Because we are united with Christ, that God unites us with him. That is, again, gives us the very thing that Jesus deserves and takes on himself those things we deserve.

Here's the thing about this that I think is such a powerful thing for us to think about. Even before he made the world, God loved us and chose us in Christ. This isn't simply a response of God to us. This is God's intention and design from the beginning. It goes on to say that he chose us in Christ, to be holy and without fault in his eyes.

Now I've often struggled with this text because what I hear is that God's choice, God's desire is for us to be holy and without fault. I look in the mirror and I see I'm not holy and I have plenty of faults. I'm thinking, well, that might be what God wants, but that's not my reality.

It's because we miss the first words "in Christ." God loved us and chose us in Christ, to be holy and faultless. It's because Jesus is holy and faultless. It's in him that we are granted that reality. We are given what is due to Jesus and Jesus takes what is due to us, so that in God's eyes we are as Christ, holy and faultless, by his work, by his design, by his gift.

We're called to believe that true gospel message. Instead, too often, we believe what we see in the mirror. We believe what we know to be what is due to us. We think that's what we're going to get. And Jesus says no. I've taken that for you. Now you get what's due to me.

God decided in advance, the text says, to adopt us into his own family. He looks at us. He knows our brokenness and he redeems us. He chooses us and brings us into his family. We take on his name, his blessing, his eternity because he's made us his own, through Christ. This is what he wanted to do. This is God's will for me and for you. I still have to remember that this is the truth of the Gospel. The truth of the Gospel isn't that God wants or expects me to live perfectly. God knows full well that isn't going to happen. It hasn't happened before. This is what God wanted to do, reconcile us through his son. Forgive us. Redeem us. Choose us. Love us. Receive us as his own, by his power, by his will, by his work, not by ours.

It is grace and it is God's pleasure to give that grace to you and to me and to share that grace with others in the world, so that we praise God for his glorious grace.

Sometimes we find other reasons to praise God. We see the beauty of creation and we sing God's praise. We see the beauty in the face of a child, the wonder of God's creation and we give God praise. But here in Ephesians, we're told that we praise God for his glorious grace,

given to you, given to me, offered to the entire world out of the abundance of God's love, through the death and resurrection of Jesus. The text says he purchased our freedom with the blood of his Son and forgave our sins.

I remember in one of my seminary classes. The professor, Gerhard Forde said one time to me and my class, "I want you to imagine that you've preached a sermon. You've proclaimed the gospel. You've administered the sacraments. You're standing at the door at the back of the church and people are filing out of the church and someone says to you, 'Pastor, I don't feel forgiven.' What should you say?" Now I want to warn you that Doctor Forde was a theologian. He was not a teacher of pastoral care. What he said was that the appropriate answer was "I don't care how you *feel*. Can you still taste the wine on your tongue?" That is, do you still recognize that even if you don't "feel" forgiven, that is exactly what God has done for you, that he gave his son so that he could buy your freedom and your forgiveness? And it is yours whether you "feel" it or not, so get your feelings in line, and maybe where should those feelings go as we recognize God's grace indeed frees us and forgives us. Then it turns into praise. Hallelujah! Thanks be to God! I'm forgiven. Hallelujah! Thanks be to God! That forgiveness is available to you and to everyone through the death and resurrection of Jesus. We get his merit. He makes us his. It's his pleasure. It's his will to bring us back into a relationship with him, forgiven and reconciled and experiencing the joy and goodness of being in the presence of the living God.

Paul continues to write to the Church of Ephesus. He says, "God has now revealed to us his mysterious will regarding Christ which is to fulfill his own good plan."³ Jesus is God's plan. His good pleasure, his mysterious will is to bring us all back into relationship with God to forgive us and to restore us, and to unite us in Christ. That is his plan. He brings everything together under the authority of Jesus.

There's an important note here. It's under the authority of Jesus. If we want to do it on our own, we will continue to fail. If we want to create our own gods, our own systems, our own measures, we will continue to fail. God was and is and will be at work in the world and in his

³ Ephesians 1:9

church bringing everything under the authority of Jesus, so that all could be reconciled by his grace through faith. If we insist on earning it, we will continue to fail.

The text continues. It was God's purpose to do this with the Jews who first believed in him, so that again they would bring praise and glory to God and as they bring praise and glory to God, then it would be extended now to us, who are Gentiles, so that we've also heard this truth, this good news.

So how do you feel today? What do you think about the plumb line? Do you measure up? Can you see? Can you hear in this gospel that you measure up because you're measured according to Jesus, our savior? Can you see that you measure up and that the world will measure up? Because the carpenter who gave his life will indeed bring us plumb, to the will and good intention of God, to his praise and to his glory. That's the promise. Enjoy the good news of God's forgiveness. Live in the gratitude of the love he's expressed to us through Jesus and that he brings to the world through us, so that it too can experience the hope and the goodness and the praise and glory of God, our Father. Amen.