

Sermon 10, Thank God for Harvest Church, Ephesians 1:15-16

“Now everyone whom we love with charity, we ought to love either because they are holy or in order that they may become holy.” — Thomas Aquinas *in loc.*

Proposition: Paul responded to news of a flourishing church with prayer and thanksgiving — and we should too!

- I. The Roots of Prayer and Thanksgiving, v. 15
 - A. God’s Saving Work in His Son and His Spirit
 - B. News About the Church
 - 1. Our Faith in the Lord Jesus
 - 2. Our Love for all the Saints
- II. The Acts of Prayer and Thanksgiving, v. 16
 - A. They Ought to Be Unceasing
 - B. They Ought to Be for Specific People

Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we have spent the last nine Sundays looking together at the glorious length and depth and breadth and height of God’s saving work. We have seen a brief but dense summary of every spiritual blessing — blessings that we possess in Christ. Some of you have loved this part of the letter, and some have found it tough going. Regardless, we come today to a truth which can’t fail to be practical in your life and mine. Put simply, we are going to see today that we at Harvest ought to be marked by four things. The four things Paul mentions in this verse are four non-negotiables of the Christian life. You may love theology, philosophy, and deep thinking. Or you may love working with your hands and shun any line of thought best described as “metaphysical” or “cosmic.” But regardless of who you are, if you are a child of God then these four things are absolutely necessary in your life as an individual and in our life as a body. They are faith in Christ, love for the saints, prayer, and thanksgiving. If you don’t have these four, then you are not a believer. If our church doesn’t have these four, then it is not even a church, but merely a social club. I am dead serious. The church has been riven by debates over predestination, over the meaning of the sealing of the Spirit and the meaning of redemption through the blood of Christ. I’m not saying that there’s no correct view of those topics. I have tried to argue for the correct view of each of those topics over the last 9 weeks. But regardless of where you come out on predestination, redemption, and sealing — regardless of your theological stripe, if you are a Christian in any way, shape, or form you will know that faith in Christ, love for the saints, prayer, and thanksgiving are absolutely necessary. This sermon is, I hope, one of the most straightforward messages I’ve ever delivered, and its message is this: Harvest Church, we need to demonstrate faith, love, prayer, and

thanksgiving. These should be obvious, tangible realities in this body. And though there is much to be encouraged about here, there is much room for growth as well. Do you think that we have as much love, faith, prayer, and thanksgiving as we need?

I. The Roots of Prayer and Thanksgiving, v. 15

The text before us recounts Paul's response to two things: the truths he just outlined and the news he'd heard about the church in Ephesus. He mentions the truths just outlined with a "therefore," and he mentions in slightly greater detail what he had heard about the church. Then in the next verse, he describes his response to that news. His response was to pray and give thanks for the Ephesian believers. So just as our text moves towards the activities of prayer and thanksgiving, so our message this morning moves towards them as well. We will see both the roots of prayer and thanksgiving and the acts of the prayer and thanksgiving — and we will close with an exhortation to all of us to be diligent about showing faith, love, prayer, and thanksgiving.

A. God's Saving Work in His Son and His Spirit

"When you see a therefore, look to see what the 'therefore' is there for." So runs an old dictum of biblical scholarship. This therefore is here to tell us how Paul responded to the truths he just outlined.

How did you respond to the truths of vv. 3-14? Did they warm your intellect with the crackling fires of philosophy? Did they warm your heart with love for the Triune God who did all these things for you and for His own glory? Did they leave you cold, wishing that the text would get on to chapter 4 and start discussing practical exhortations instead of all this divisive theology? Well, the apostle recounts his own response. His response was prayer and thanksgiving. When he heard what God had done, he wanted to talk to God about it and to thank God for it. As banal as it may sound, he had an attitude of gratitude. He was genuinely thankful for the truths of spiritual blessings, election, redemption, sealing, and God's cosmic plan.

So how about you? Did the last nine weeks of sermons make you increase your daily prayer time by even one minute? Did you feel any additional gratitude to God? Did you at least incorporate thanks to God for the blessings and benefits listed in vv. 3-14 into your existing times of personal and family worship? To tell you the truth, I'm not sure that I did. In my private prayer times, I certainly gave thanks for these benefits — but much of that was during my "work" prayer times when I deliberately and specifically pray about the sermons. Brothers and sisters, are you intentionally going to God with hearts of gratitude? Are you intentionally nourishing your own prayerfulness? Are you making space in your schedule to talk to God, and are you talking to Him about what you're learning in worship each Sunday? If not, then you have no one but yourself to blame if your heart is cold and if you haven't been as moved and changed by worship as you'd like to be. If you wonder why you lack apostolic fervor, one reason is that you are not engaging in apostolic practices!

Brothers and sisters, make it intentional. Commit to thanking and praising God in prayer at least once each day, Monday through Saturday, for the truth you learned on Sunday. We need to imitate Paul in this, and thereby learn to be the kind of Christ-follower that he was!

B. News About the Church

But in addition to the truths of theology, the other thing which moved Paul toward prayer and gratitude was news about the church in Ephesus. Two things in particular stood out to him.

1. Our Faith in the Lord Jesus

The first was the Ephesians' faith in Jesus. They trusted Him personally and entirely. They believed that He was who He claims to be, and they trusted Him to save them as He promised. Notice, too, that their faith was so intense that Paul had heard of it — hundreds of miles away in a Roman prison cell.

Have you heard of the faith of some other church in some other country? Are you aware of how devoted a particular congregation in Scotland, Ukraine, Japan, Turkey, Brazil, etc. is? I daresay that few of us have heard those sorts of reports. One reason, of course, is that bad news is always more interesting. But might another reason be that it is simply uncommon for a local body to demonstrate enough faith to make that kind of a splash.

So let's make it personal. Do we here at Harvest Reformed Presbyterian Church (a) have faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and (b) show that faith such that (c) other people in town could say that they have heard of our faith? That is, is our faith demonstrably real? Would someone coming in here say, "Wow. I can tell that they really believe"?

So what are some ways that we can tangibly demonstrate our faith in the Lord Jesus? Remember, we are seeing here in the text that Paul heard of the Ephesians' faith. From that, we take the principle that our faith, like that church's faith, needs to be something that can be reported on. How would an observer know that we have faith in the Lord Jesus? Well, one obvious way is that such an observer could see us going to church, participating in the worship of Jesus, formally joining a church which worships Jesus, and so on. He could see us teaching our families about Jesus at home. He could see us doing the things that Jesus wants His followers to do — things like obeying the Ten Commandments, forgiving those who hurt us, and walking in unity, purity, harmony, and victory. In terms of what we saw a few weeks ago, he could see us living like those who possess purchased freedom from bondage to sin, and who therefore do not submit to sin's dominion any more. Those are the characteristics of believers that this letter highlights.

So if we, like the Ephesian church, were to be reported on to the Apostle Paul, what would he hear? Would he hear that our faith in Jesus is obvious? Would he be told, "It's clear that those folks at Harvest really believe what they say they believe!"?

I think he would. I think that any observer could see that the people at this church are here not because they have to be, and not because their family comes, and not because church-going has a certain social cachet in this town, and not because they really need the community and resources that are offered here, but because they believe that Jesus Christ is Lord and that it is important to worship Him with His people. In short, as your pastor I want to encourage and praise you. You are showing this kind of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ! Your activities are exactly the kind of thing that should motivate all of us to prayer and thanksgiving.

You and I should go home today saying “Thank God for Harvest Church!” We should go home and pray that our faith would increase, certainly — but we should also go home and thank God that our church already demonstrates so much faith in Jesus!

How many of you thanked God for your church’s faith in Jesus this past week? How many of you regularly thank God for the faith you see here? Brothers and sisters, if it’s imperative that you be motivated to thank God by the rich truths of Biblical theology, it’s equally imperative that you pour out praise and thanks to God for the faith that you see demonstrated every week by your brothers and sisters right here in this room as we meet for worship. I think I might ask for a show of hands next Sunday during the announcements time: “Who thanked God for Harvest Church this past week?” Kidding! But in all seriousness, where is our gratitude to God for the faith that this body of believers demonstrates? How often and how regularly do we thank Him for the faith that lives here among us and in our hearts? I don’t think that anyone in the room would say that it’s regular enough.

But I would add that another way, indeed, the second most obvious way to demonstrate our faith in Jesus Christ is by the other component of the report Paul heard.

2. Our Love for all the Saints

This, of course, was the Ephesians’ love for *all* the saints. The people of this church had a profound love for each other — a love so intense and so *tangible*, so *noticeable*, that it was reported to Paul far away.

Now be honest with yourself. Do you think that if we went to some of our closest ecclesiastical neighbors — churches that we have networked with and spent time with here in town — that they could say this about us? If we were ask someone from Roadway or from Calvary Community, “Have you heard about how the people at Harvest Church love one another?” what do you think the answer would be?

Brothers and sisters, I have to think that the answer would be “No.” Now, that’s not an answer saying that we *don’t* love one another. It is simply an answer saying that nearby churches *haven’t heard* anything regarding our love for one another.

I’m not an old-timer in Gillette. Few members of this congregation are. But those who have been around for awhile have told me things like “First Pres has old money.” What would an old-timer say about Harvest?

But rather than answer that question directly, let’s focus again on the practical dimensions here. We need to love all the saints. What should that look like? First of all, I want to remind you that love is an *action*. Benevolence, or thinking nice thoughts about people, is a good start, but until that matures into specific loving deeds, it hardly deserves the name of love.

I read recently that in most churches, Sunday morning is not a time to love or be loved. It’s true! Think in terms of the five love languages, for instance. If you simply come in the door, worship, and then head out within 5 minutes after the benediction, how do you even have time to express any of the love languages to your fellow saints? You aren’t spending quality time with them. You aren’t performing acts of service. You aren’t giving gifts — certainly not to all of

them! You might have time for some hugs, so physical touch might be a way to express your love to at least some of the saints. And you might be able to say a few sentences' worth of encouraging words. But brothers and sisters, I think it is pretty obvious that unless you and I spend more substantial time with each other than 5 minutes after the service, we simply aren't going to be noticeably expressing love to one another.

So how can we practically and tangibly love one another? How can we be like the Ephesian church, overflowing with love to all the saints?

One grid to use is to think about the times in your life when you knew you were loved — the times when someone's love washed over you and filled you with an overwhelming sense that you were delighted in. One such time for me is the farewell meal that my hosts in California gave me on the final evening of my internship at First OPC Sunnyvale. Think about those times, and then think about how you might perform similar acts of love for your fellow saints in this body.

Another grid is the one we just talked about — the five love languages.

1. You can show your love to the saints by spending quality time with them — by staying after the service to really talk and get to know people and to listen to their hearts, or by meeting them during the week for conversation or to attend some event together. Having someone into your home to watch a movie or play a game is a form of quality time. When is the last time you spent quality time with the saints in your church family?
2. You can show your love to the saints by performing acts of service for them. Offer to babysit for a young family. Offer to help with moving, painting, canning, or other larger projects for any family. Offer assistance with yard work. If you really want to humiliate someone, you can even offer assistance with housework! (Kidding!)
3. The "acts of service" category bleeds over into the gifts category. You can donate meat from your hunting trip to those among us who are in need. You can sign up to bring the Sunday morning snack. You can offer your skills in car repair or some other field of expertise. Duce has recently given me a deer hunt — a gift I greatly enjoyed. What gifts might you give to your church family to make your love for them obvious, both to them and to you?
4. Physical touch has obvious limitations, but it is an effective communicator of love in the life of the church. All of us in this room are burdened, and some of us are particularly burdened! Young mothers, is there another young mother in this room who just needs a hug from you? Men, is there a man you can encourage by a firm handshake or a slap on the back? Husbands, are you showing enough love to your wives and children using this language? If your child can't remember the last time you gave him or her a hug, you are failing to be the loving father God has called you to be. Wives, if your husband hasn't spent time cuddling you today, he needs to repent and show you some love by touch.

5. Finally, you need to be sharing encouraging words with one another. Have you said “I love you” to a fellow believer recently? Have you encouraged someone else in this church in the last week? In the last month?

Brothers and sisters, I fear that few of us can say “In the last week, I have demonstrated tangible love to multiple people in the body of Christ by spending quality time, performing acts of service, giving gifts, engaging in physical touch, and uttering encouraging words.” Yet if we are to be like the Ephesian church, we need to be showing this kind of love routinely, weekly, daily!

Can I suggest something? This church needs more hospitality in its life. You can have people over to your home and show them tangible love. Think about a dinner invitation. In one fell swoop, you have spent quality time, done acts of service, and given gifts. If you are a halfway decent host, you will also have uttered encouraging words and given a loving hug or handshake to your guests. In one single action, you have said “I love you” in all five love languages. That’s powerful. That’s incredibly powerful. And that is what this church is called to be.

Brothers and sisters, I know that there are people in this congregation who have been worshipping together for years who have never been in each other’s homes. I know because I’ve heard the questions: “Where do you live?” I understand that we have people who belong among us who live in the gigantic triangle formed by Moorcroft, Sheridan, and Wright. You might get a dinner invitation that asks you to drive 130 miles one way for a meal. Let’s talk about two possible responses to that invitation.

1. Yes
2. No

Those are the only two responses. If you say “No,” then you’re saying “I don’t love you enough to travel that far for you.” But loving our neighbors is the most important thing we can do after loving God. I’m not trying to guilt you here or suggest that if you have never gone to Sheridan for dinner you’re a bad Christian. I’m simply asking you to think about what tangible love would look like in our context. How could you show that you love all the saints?

And keep in mind that it is *all* the saints. Paul doesn’t say that the Ephesians love the saints who look like them, or the saints who vote like them, or even the saints who are good folks. He says that they love all the saints, with the implication that they love them precisely because they are saints. Do you love the saints because they are saints? Do you love God’s holy people for the reason that they have been set apart to God’s service and belong to Him?

If not, what can you do about it? How do you learn to love all the saints? Love is one of the fruits of the Spirit. Love is the greatest of the spiritual blessings that we have in Christ, as Paul has just finished recounting. And so the way to learn to love your fellow saints is to remain in Christ and to stay close to the Holy Spirit through worship and the means of grace by which we worship. If none of the five love languages directed towards your fellow saints sounds appealing to you, then you are probably not a Christian. That is simply the brutally honest truth.

But if you wished that all of them would sound more appealing to you, then you are almost certainly a believer who wants to grow to be exactly what God has called believers to be — lovers of their fellow saints.

We need to be a church filled with people who believe in Jesus and love the saints. We need to not just talk about it, but to do it. No one should be able to come in here without experiencing the five love languages. Every visitor should walk out saying, “Wow! These people love each other and visitors too!”

So how do we grow in love for one another? By staying close to God. And we stay close to God through prayer and thanksgiving. Indeed, theology, faith, and love combine together to form the roots of prayer and thanksgiving — but prayer and thanksgiving in turn power our theology and our faith in Christ and our love for the saints. This is a positive feedback loop. The more you increase in any one of the four qualities Paul lists in these verses, the more you will increase in the other three as well. Prayer makes you more thankful, more faithful, and more loving. Love makes you more prayerful, more faithful, and more thankful. And so on.

II. The Acts of Prayer and Thanksgiving, v. 16

So what is prayer and thanksgiving? Well, to pray is simply to talk to God. Paul says that while he is talking to God he mentions the Ephesians.

How does that make sense? In earthly relationships, it doesn't take long to learn that making our relationships about mutual friends is a really bad idea. If you and Megan and Ashley are all friends, and you and Ashley get together one day and just talk about Megan the whole time, your relationship is effectively built on gossip. That relationship can't last, and it is certainly not honoring to God.

So if I know God and I know Billy, why should I pray for Billy — especially behind his back? The answer is that prayer, true private prayer, is the opposite of gossip. My dad always defined gossip as talking to someone who was not part of the problem or part of the solution. Ashley is not the solution to Megan's tough marriage. You aren't the solution to the problems and difficulties your fellow saints face. But God is. He is part of the solution for every single human problem, and that's why it's appropriate to talk to Him about anything that would be gossip if it were shared with a fellow human being. In your prayers, then, you should mention other people by name and pray specific things for them. You ought to specifically thank God for other people and for the good gifts He's given to them.

A. They Ought to Be Unceasing

So prayer and thanksgiving ought to be unceasing. This doesn't mean that you should be on your knees talking to God out loud 24/7. But it does mean that you should always be in the habit of prayer and always have the attitude of prayer. The attitude of prayer is simply the attitude of dependence and reliance on God. It's saying, “God, I don't have this under control; I need your help. Please be present in this situation; intervene for your glory and my good!” That should always be your attitude, and that is one form of unceasing prayer. If your attitude is always one

of self-sufficiency, if your spirit is always saying “I got this,” then you are failing to pray without ceasing. Indeed, you are doing quite the opposite.

But in addition to a prayerful attitude, to pray unceasingly requires also that you pray regularly. If you say “I talk to my wife all the time,” you mean that you talk to her many times every day. If you say “I pray without ceasing,” then that means that you pray every day, multiple times a day.

Does your prayer and thanksgiving look like this? Do you actually have regular times where you routinely talk to God? Would someone who watched your routine for a day believe you if you said, “I pray without ceasing”?

The better you know God, the more you’ll want to talk to Him. The more amazed you are at His goodness, the more you will respond with prayer and thanksgiving.

B. They Ought to Be for Specific People

Notice, too, that Paul says he made mention *of the Ephesians* in his prayers. He didn’t just say “Thank you and please help everyone. Amen.” He named names in his prayers. He got specific. And you and I need to do so too.

Brothers and sisters, when you realize the magnitude of the spiritual blessings you have received in Christ, then you will respond with love, faith, prayer, and thanksgiving. If these qualities are yours and are increasing, you can be sure that you really are a child of God. If you say “No, I don’t have those things in my life,” you should want them! Let’s live by faith. Let’s show tangible love to each other. Let’s be thankful and prayerful at all times. Amen.