

God's Most Precious Possession

Ephesians 1:1-14

Big Idea: There is nothing outside the Trinity more precious to God than the church for which He died.

Introduction:

If I were to ask you what you believe is the most precious thing to the heart of God outside of the Trinity, what would you say? Some might say it's the Bible, since that indeed is the very word of God in written form. After all, no one would have the ability to know God if it were not for His revelation of Himself in the Book. Others might say the most precious thing to the heart of God is humanity. Because every human being is created in the image of God and therefore holds a unique standing as the crowning achievement of all God's creative work. Others, however, might say that what God loves most is heaven. After all, that is the holy place in which He dwells, in one sense. It is the place where the angels of God redound His praises day and night without interruption. And it is the place where no sin resides and where the three Persons of the Trinity enjoy eternal and unspoiled fellowship. Surely if there is anything God loves best it must be heaven.

Well, of course God does love His word infinitely more than the writings of man. And surely He loves humanity in a way that is higher than any other part of His creation. And indeed He must love heaven as the beautiful and eternal residence of everything holy. But as marvelous as these things may be to the heart of God, there is still one object of His affections that stands higher than the Bible, higher than humanity, higher than Heaven, and higher than anything else in all His creation. In fact, it is the single most precious Jewell of all the treasures of the universe. It is so precious, in fact, He would be willing to let go of everything else He loves and sacrifice His own life if that is what it would take to secure this one thing to Himself forever.

What could possibly be that valuable? In a word... the church.

There is nothing the Father, Son and Holy Spirit love more outside the very God-head Himself than the church of Jesus Christ. It is the crown jewel of the cosmos specially cut to reflect and radiate the majestic light of the glory of God like nothing else can. Yes, the heavens *declare* the glory of God, but not as loudly as the church. The mountains and the seas *display* the glory of God, but not as majestically as the church. Without a doubt every living thing on earth *magnifies* the glory of God, but nothing presents it with such clarity as the church of Jesus Christ. That is why the church stands alone as the most precious thing to the heart of God.

Ironically, however, it seems that while the church is the most precious thing in the universe to the heart of God, many of those who make up this church do not hold it in such high esteem. In our day it seems the church is increasingly being treated by many of those who profess to be its members as little more than a religious club or as week-end diversion. In our day, very few people hold the church in the high esteem it deserves.

Perhaps this is owing in part to the fact that many pastors have shifted their focus from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ through Preaching the God's Word, leading in prayer, dealing with sin and reaching the lost, in favor of a model of ministry designed to appeal to the world in order to increase attendance. Such ministries speak to the "felt needs" of people, offering therapy for the wounded, entertainment for the uninterested, and fun for the whole family. And while this may indeed work to draw larger crowds, it robs the church of her glory. The glory of the church is not in her size or her income or her ability to offer a program to meet every need. The glory of the church is the glory of Christ. And the glory of Christ is magnified most in the collective praises of His obedient, faithful, and joyful people.

In America we have been taught that the church exists for the individual's personal happiness. We tell people to "*accept Jesus as your personal Savior.*" We tell them "*God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.*" The message of the church is increasingly a message about people coming to God for personal blessing. And while it is certainly true that God loves every believer in a personal way, the glory of the church is the glory of a people whose affections and ambitions are set not on themselves but on Christ.

Is it any wonder then that people so frequently and casually move from church to church? If you believe the church exists primarily to meet your needs, you won't stay very long in any church. Churches only function as they should when the truth of God's word inspires the heart toward joyful worship made complete by willful acts of personal sacrifice. We are not called to be "seekers" but servants.

And that's what we see in the early church. The truth of God transformed selfish sinners into joyful worshippers, and their worship led them to sacrifice to meet the needs of others. So Luke tells us in Acts 2,

Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; and they *began* selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved (43-47).

These were people who intuitively valued the church the way God does. It was precious to them beyond measure. It became the epicenter of their lives as their focus was turned away from themselves as individuals and onto this new body of people who all shared in common the living Christ. To them the church did not exist primarily to meet their personal needs and contribute to their individual comfort. It existed as a body of people who were mutually committed to worshipping Jesus together whether by life or by death.

And this is how the Bible has always presented the church. Jesus told us to pray, not "*My Father,*" but "*Our Father.*" Not "*give me*" but "*give us this day our daily bread.*" It wasn't "*lead me not into temptation*" but "*lead us not into temptation, and deliver us from evil.*"

It has become foreign to us to think of ourselves a family made up of many imperfect

members who overlook one another faults and forgive each others offenses in order to collectively reflect the glory of Christ. And because such thinking is foreign to us, we don't value the church as we should. We don't value it like God values it.

But perhaps if we stopped to consider how much God loves, not just the individual, but the church as a body, we would take a significant step back toward seeing the church as God sees it; loving it as God loves it.

So how much does God love the church? Let's consider...

I. God's Love for the Church in Eternity Past (3-6)

1. This text is an amazing passage of Scripture. It is all about the church and how God Almighty designed it in the timeless recesses of eternity. In verses 9-10 of this chapter Paul explains that the NT church had - since the beginning - been a "sacred secret," a mystery that God chose not to reveal until the appointed time. In Chapter 3:3, 5 he says "that by revelation there was made known to me the mystery... ⁵ which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit."

2. You see, there has always been a people of God. Even in the days of apostate Israel God had His remnant of faithful saints who would not bow to Baal and Loved God's word. But they knew nothing of God's plan in the future to create a new kind of body of people. It is one that would be made up of both Jews and Gentiles together as one loving and forgiven group. (3:6) Paul says "*to be specific, that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.*"

3. This was unheard of in Paul's day. In fact, it was scandalous! You can't imagine the kind of prejudice and racial conflict that existed between the Jews and the Gentiles. Before Paul, no one was really able to comprehend the full meaning of God's promise to Abraham, that "in you, all the families of the earth will be blessed" (Gen. 12:3). It was inconceivable to the Jewish people that some day all the redeemed would come together as one body in which there would be absolutely no racial distinctions.

4. Even men like Peter and Barnabas stumbled on this point in Galatians 2. Paul writes:

"But when Cephas [Peter] came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. ¹² For prior to the coming of certain men from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he began to withdraw and hold himself aloof, fearing the party of the circumcision. ¹³ The rest of the Jews joined him in hypocrisy, with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy."

5. The truth was, however, that by God's incomparable grace (v. 5), "*the Gentiles [people like you and me] are now fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus.*" This is the great mystery of the church.

6. In fact, not only did God plan to bring together these two racially segregated groups of the world into one body, but He also chose every individual from those groups who would be included. Now that's an amazing thought. That God planned from eternity past that you and I in particular would be included in this amazing body of people called the church.

7. In fact, as Paul pondered and savored the beauty of these truths, its as if he broke out in song over the wonder of what God had done. Verses 3-14 are actually only one sentence in the Greek. It is the longest sentences in the Bible containing some 200 words. As he thinks about what God has done in the creation of the church, his mind goes from glory to glory, from wonder to wonder, from delight to delight. In one “song” he includes all the cardinal doctrines of the church, including election, sanctification, redemption, glorification and on and on he goes. And all the way through Paul seems intoxicated with a desire to magnify the glory of God, saying things such as *“To the praise of the glory of His grace”* (v. 6); *“that we... should be to the praise of His glory”* (v. 12); *“To the praise of His glory”* (v. 14)

8. You get the distinct impression as you read this that Paul knows something that we don’t. He knows how much God values the church. And it all starts in eternity past.

9. Read 3-6

10. Where did the church begin? It wasn’t some afterthought. It wasn’t some kind of contingency plan that God came up with after man really started to blow it with their sin. No! *“He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world”* (4).

11. In other words, before there was an earth, before there was a sea or a mountain or a single plant or tree; before the first man was formed from the dust of the ground or had any opportunity to rebel against his Creator, God personally chose (lit. “called out” “elected”) us for Himself.

A. Now, don’t let your self get bogged down in all the issues of sovereign grace vrs. free will; God’s sovereignty vrs. Man’s responsibility. For just this moment, let yourself savor the fact that if you know Jesus Christ today it is because God personally chose you to belong to Him.

B. He picked you out of a group of billions of people and adopted you into His family before even a one of us was created!

C. In fact, God went so far as to write you name in the book of life before the world began. Rev. 17:8 speaks of those whose names had not been written in the book of life *“from the foundation of the world.”*

D. Jesus said to His disciples, *“You did not choose Me but I chose you, and appointed you...”* (John 15:16).

E. To Timothy Paul spoke of the electing God *“who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity.”*

12. Oh beloved! Let this truth sink into your soul! Let your heart be refreshed by this revelation! God loved us before we were born! The end of verse 4 says, *“In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, ⁶ to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.”*

13. How do we know that the church is the most precious thing in all creation to the heart of God? Because he was already pouring out His love upon His people before a one of us was made. He secured every single individual whom He would adopt to such a degree that Jesus was

able to say, (Jn. 6:39) *"This is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day."* And again (10:29) *"My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; ²⁸ and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. ²⁹ My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand."*

14. And how much does God love these people who are His church? He loves them as much as He loves His only begotten Son. Jesus prayed to the Father, *"that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me."*

15. Now that would be enough to sing about, but Paul goes on. He moves from God's love for the church in eternity past, to His love for the church in the present.

II. God's Love for the Church in the Present (6-11):

1. Read 6-11

2. Why did God choose to adopt us before any of us had done anything right or wrong? In order to magnify the glory of His grace. Grace, "which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved."

3. Now, who is "the Beloved"? That's Jesus, the One that God loves more than any other person in the world. Through Him God poured out His grace upon us. And He did it by means of a purchase. That's what "redemption" means (7) (exogorodzo = "from the auction block").

A. You see, the adoption proceedings did not come without cost. If God would have us, the law said He would have to buy us. And our redemption would not be cheap.

B. How much would it cost to purchase us for Himself? It would cost the life of the very One whom the Father called "the Beloved." In order to purchase the most valuable thing in the universe outside of the Trinity, God would have to sacrifice One He loved within the Trinity. It was the highest price conceivable. The life of His only begotten Son.

4. And so, by the blood of Christ our trespasses are forgiven. This is no cheap grace! This is priceless grace lavished upon us the way Mary lavished her costly perfume upon Jesus though it was worth a year's wages.

A. The word "lavished" here (8) means "more than enough."

B. In other words, God did not scrimp on His grace. He didn't just give us enough to get by. And there should be no fear that our sin might ever be so great that God's provision for us in Christ is not enough. He poured it *all* out, sparing nothing because He loves us so much.

5. And not only did He give us the grace of redemption, He also has bestowed upon us wisdom and insight into His plan. He has revealed the mystery of the purpose for all of history, that is the summing up of all things in Christ.

A. Without such divine wisdom man is adrift upon the sea of His own foolish and Godless notions about the meaning of life.

B. One French philosopher said, "The universe is indifferent. Who created it? Why are we on

this puny mud-heap, spinning in infinite space? I have not the slightest idea, and I am convinced that no one has the least idea” (MacArthur, *Ephesians*; p. 25). What hopelessness!

C. Because God loves us, He has revealed the most profound mysteries to us in his word. You don’t have to be a great philosopher to know what life is all about if you have the Creator Himself explaining it to you.

6. But there’s more. Not only did God love the church in eternity past, and not only does He love the church in the present, His love extends into eternity future.

III. God’s Love for the Church in the Future (12-14):

1. Read 12-14

2. Not only has God chosen us before the foundation of the world and redeemed us through the precious blood of His Beloved Son, He also demonstrates His love for the church by promising us an inheritance in the future.

3. You see, after responding to the gospel in faith, God sealed us in Christ by giving us the Holy Spirit as the down payment on our inheritance.

A. A seal in Paul’s day was a mark of identification that was placed on a letter, or contract, or other important document. It identified the person to whom the document belonged.

B. That’s what the seal of the Holy Spirit is to us. It is God’s mark upon our lives indicating that we belong to Him and that everything that belongs to Him is ours.

C. Not only that, but the Spirit is given as a kind of earnest money indicating that more of the same is set aside for us to enjoy in the future. Our salvation is begun, but it is not complete. And if ever we are given to doubt that we belong to God, we simply need to look at the Holy Spirit’s work in our lives to remind us that some day the fullness of God and freedom from sin will be ours experientially and forever.

4. And all of this will be to the praise of His glory.

Conclusion:

1. All of these things, and more, God has lavished on the church because He loves the church more than anything else in the universe outside of Himself.

2. And what I want us to see over the next few weeks of looking at these things is that the church that God loves is not just a bunch of random, unorganized, maverick free-spirits running loose all over the place in their own private relationship with God. Rather the church God loves is a body of people whose great joy is to live together and serve together, helping each other deal with sin, encouraging each other in worship and obedience. It is a church that is organized under God-ordained shepherds who are entrusted with feeding and protect God’s flock. It’s a church where every person has a unique Spirit-empowered ability to minister to the other members of the body like no one else can. It’s a place where the Bible is the truth that guides us, where love is the glue

that binds us, where submission to one another is a joy, and where commitment to each other is unhindered by petty differences.

3. This is the church of the Bible. And it is the most precious thing to the heart of God outside of the very Trinity itself. And it should be very, very precious to us.

Big Idea: There is nothing outside the Trinity more precious to God than the church for which He died.