

Ephesians 3:1-13

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[0:00] Heavenly Father, would you send your Holy Spirit now to open our ears and soften our hearts. That we may receive your word so that we may more fully know who we are in Christ.

And that we may trust your purposes for us. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Please be seated.

Friends, if I haven't had a chance to meet you, my name is Jacob.

I'm one of the ministers here at the evening service. And we're going to be looking at Ephesians chapter 3. So turn there if you've closed it already. It's 977 in the Pew Bible.

Ephesians 3, 1 to 13. We're in a sermon series in the book of Ephesians. But if you're new with us here tonight or if you've just forgotten, which is fair enough, let me catch you up.

The Apostle Paul is writing to the Christians in Ephesus. And Ephesus was a major city in the ancient Roman Empire. It was a very wealthy, beautiful, cultured, and very religious city.

[1:03] But the people of Ephesus lived in fear of the gods. The gods they worshipped were totally unpredictable. And so there was this culture of magic and wizardry meant to help people appease the gods or gain their favor.

And there was this whole economy around it too. People would buy magical bracelets or necklaces that they would use to either whip up the favor of the gods or to call down curses on their enemies. It was a spiritually volatile place, Ephesus. And when the gospel of Jesus Christ came to Ephesus, this is the place where the big transformation happened.

Maybe you remember. The Ephesians who believed in Jesus came and they burned all their magical accoutrement. They didn't need it anymore because they were secure in Jesus.

Nevertheless, Paul recognizes in this letter, in his letter to the Ephesians, that those spiritual powers, those false gods that they worshipped, they're invisible, but they're very real.

[2:18] And they're very present. Listen to what Paul says toward the end of his letter to the Ephesians from chapter 6. He says, Finally, Ephesian Christians, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might.

Put on the whole armor of God that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. The devil and spiritual forces of darkness are real. They were cloaked in the Greek gods of Ephesus, and they are hidden in the idols of our culture today.

Paul says that they're crafty, they're powerful, they hate Jesus, but because they can't get to Him, they've set their sights on us, on the church.

They want to destroy us. And how do they want to destroy us? Well, their main weapon that they have against us is division.

[3:40] Division. And so they try to divide us. This is why in the second half of the letter to the Ephesians, which we're going to get to in the next few weeks, Paul's main concern is that we maintain unity.

Be unified, he says. Member to member. Husband to wife. Children to parents. Servants and masters. Be unified under the lordship of Jesus.

Because there are powers. And they will try to divide you. Because they want to destroy you. And so, in chapter 3, our text tonight, Paul is writing to encourage the church at Ephesus to this end. And he's encouraging them by showing them that their identity and their purpose as the church are established by God.

And because our identity and our purpose are from God, we can be confident. We can be confident against all the powers that are trying to divide us as the church.

[4:50] And so, Paul has two encouragements here. So, that'll be the two points of the sermon. The first is the church's identity. And the second is the church's purpose.

And it really nicely divides right at the paragraph break, verses 1 to 6 and 7 to 13. Okay? You with me? All right. Let's get into the first point, which is the church's identity.

Now, Paul is giving us these encouragements in an interesting way. He does it by telling the Ephesians about two gracious gifts that were given to him by God.

Right? And the first one is here in verses 1 to 6. Look at verse 2 with me. He says, Assuming that you Ephesians have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you, how the mystery was made known to me by revelation.

Paul says that God made him a steward and revealed the mystery to him. So, a steward is somebody who's given authority over a property.

[6:01] So, Marion is the steward of this building while we're here on Sundays. She doesn't own it, but she's in charge of it. And don't we know it? Thank you, Marion. Paul's a steward.

A steward of what? He's a steward of the mystery. The word mystery comes up three times here. So, this word mystery, we often use this word to mean something that's like way beyond us, something that's too complicated for us to understand, you know, so it's a mystery.

But here in the New Testament, this Greek word for mystery, it simply means something that is hidden from view, something that is not understood yet, something that hasn't been revealed yet. My wife and I, we love to watch the old show Murder, She Wrote. Any Murder, She Wrote fans in the house? Thank you. I've got one, two.

Very good. So, in Murder, She Wrote, Jessica Fletcher, who is this writer of murder mysteries, every episode, she gets herself tangled up in a murder mystery.

[7:09] And we, as the audience, spin the whole episode in tension because we don't know who killed the farmer's wife or who killed the football star until, what?

In the last 10 minutes, Jessica Fletcher unfolds the mystery and all is revealed, right? The mystery is only mysterious until Jessica Fletcher explains it to us.

And that's what's happening here. God revealed the mystery to Paul so that he could bring us in, so that he could let us know God's mind.

So, what's the mystery? He tells us, look with me, verse 6, this mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

The mystery that's been revealed to Paul so that we could understand it is that Jews and Gentiles together make up the body of Christ.

[8:21] And brothers and sisters, this is all about our identity as a church. What this means is that the church, by its very nature, is unified in Christ.

Now, I bet this stuff about Jews and Gentiles probably doesn't immediately resonate for us like it did for the people who would have heard this. So, we need to dig into it a little bit. Jews were God's chosen people.

They were in covenant with God, which means they had a relationship with Him. And so, they looked with, at best, suspicion, and at worst, disgust to Gentiles, to all the people, the nations of the world who were not Jewish.

But here, the mystery that's been revealed is that Gentiles are included. Gentiles are part of the promises of God.

Jew and Gentile together, literally in the Greek, it says they're co-heirs. They're a joint body. They're co-partakers of the promises. So, it's this image of two parties, not just sort of getting along with each other, but of being brought together into one.

[9:40] It's this image from Jeremiah of the potter, and the pot is broken. And God says, I can actually make a whole new pot out of you, Israel.

It's like those two pieces are broken down and formed into something new. Jew and Gentile together, make up the church. And Paul says in verse 5, that this is a mystery which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations.

He's talking about the Old Testament saints. But hang on a second. Anybody, I can hear my Old Testament friends saying, anybody who just does a cursory reading of the Old Testament, would say this isn't new.

This isn't something new. Just read Isaiah. Just read Jeremiah. God's saying this all the time. He's going to include the Gentiles. Go back to Genesis. The promise to Abram.

I'm going to bless you. Why? It's for the blessing of the nations. It's all throughout the Old Testament. And Paul knew his Old Testament. Right?

[10:49] So what's the mystery? What's new here? Well, here it is. The mystery is the radically new and unified identity of the church.

You see, Jews, they expected, if they expected, they expected Gentiles to be saved. How?

By becoming Jewish. By becoming part of the covenant that they were part of. You see, for Jews, there were two ways of being human. Jew and Gentile.

If you stop being Gentile and start being Jew, bada bing, bada boom. But the mystery revealed to Paul is that God has done something totally different.

God has created a new humanity. God has created a third way of being human. Just look up at the page at chapter 2.

[11:51] Look at verse 14. For Jesus himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances that he might create in himself one new man, one new humanity in place of the two.

So making peace. God has created a new humanity in place of Jew and Gentile.

As Jew and Gentile are reconciled to God through the body of Christ on the cross as he makes atonement for sin and he makes relationship with God possible for humanity, Jew and Gentile are also reconciled to each other.

And as they're reconciled to each other in the body of Christ, a new creation is born. A whole new way of being human called Christian.

This is what the church is. And so look back at the mystery in chapter 6. Paul uses these three images here to make that point.

[13:11] He says that in the church we are co-heirs. This is hearkening back to chapter 1. We've been adopted together into God's family and we're entitled to all that belongs to the Father.

Two totally disparate parties now together in family. This would be like if me and Ryan were both adopted by the same millionaire, right? Which would be weird at our age to be adopted.

See, we've had no common financial security, I don't think. But now we do.

We're part of the same family. We're both adopted into this millionaire's family. We're both co-heirs to the same fortune. It would totally change our relationship. We're both together now, talking about our inheritance, what we have coming to us.

Paul's second image here is that the church is, they're members of the same body. In Greek, it's one word. And I think this is the one that Paul made up.

[14:19] But it means joint body in Christ. And this is a metaphor, of course, that Paul loves to use for the church because it emphasizes the organic connectedness, connectedness, both between the church and Jesus and between members to each other.

We're part of a body. It's an organic whole. So when Paul says that we are part of a joint body, what it means is that Jesus doesn't have two bodies or three or a thousand.

He has one. Now, there certainly is distinction, right? We're all different. I was just talking to a sister from Nigeria. I'm from Tennessee.

There's distinction. And we don't lose ourselves when we become part of the church. But as we're redeemed into his body, we become more fully ourselves with all of our diversity and our backgrounds.

When my family and I moved to Vancouver about five and a half years ago, we really didn't know anyone. And it was right after COVID, so there wasn't a lot going on.

[15:30] And I'll never forget, on our first outing as a family after quarantine, do you remember having to do quarantine? It was two weeks by ourselves, and we finally got out into the world.

And the first people we met was a couple from South India. And they had a little boy the same age as Noah. And we immediately hit it off because, you know, the kids.

And we found out about a week later that they were Christians. And we're still friends today. There was a deeper, there was, the relationship was deeper than the sum of the parts.

We were connected. What is, what is a person from Tennessee and a person from South India have to do with each other? Well, if we're Christians, we're part of the same body.

There's a family resemblance, even with our vast differences. Our souls belong together because we're in Jesus. Paul's last image here is that together in the church, we're co-partakers of the promise.

[16:36] We're people that take of the promise as a community. And the promise here that he's talking about is the promises of the new covenant.

The new covenant. We were once people estranged from the covenant of God and now we're a people in covenant together. And this is the same word that Paul uses for Holy Communion when we partake of the cup together.

And it's an apt metaphor, isn't it? There's something really intimate about sharing a cup with somebody, right? You get the other person's germs. The only person I share a cup with usually in my life is my wife, you know?

And that's probably true for y'all too, if you're married. Because where there's covenant, there's intimacy and there's sharing together. And brothers and sisters, we are part of a new covenant together in Christ's blood.

And this is why we share the cup together in Holy Communion because it means that we're partaking of God's promises together. So Paul gives these three illustrations to illustrate the one point.

[17:53] There's one people, one new humanity created by God in Christ. That's the identity of the church. And it's established by God's eternal purpose.

It was his idea and he has done it. So here's the encouragement. For us as individuals, what this means is that if we're called into the church, if we're baptized into Christ's body, we're part of something that God has created.

We're each here because he has made us part of the body. It was nothing that we did. He had to do it. And it also means that each of us who is here, every one of us has a place.

No matter our background, no matter if you grew up Christian or if you just became a Christian yesterday, you have a place in the church. And all of us together are guaranteed all of God's promises through Christ.

There's also an encouragement here, I think, for the local church, us as St. John's. What this means is that our value doesn't depend on how stable our institution is or how big our budget is or how professional our staff and clergy are.

[19:16] We're valuable to God because he made us and we are his body. We belong to him. And of course, we should strive to manifest this unity but even when we're failing, our value doesn't come from our success.

It comes from our God-given identity. So be encouraged. Our identity comes from God and so it's eternally secure in him. So that's the first point.

Paul encourages the church. We have a God-given identity. We're unified in Christ. And the second is that we have a God-given purpose in the church as well.

A God-given purpose. And this is the second point and it's the second gift that God gave to Paul. It's in the second paragraph. So look at verse 7.

Paul says, Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace which was given to me by the working of his power.

[20:26] To me, though I am the very least of the saints, this grace was given. Paul knew who he was. Paul knew who he was. He was a sinner.

He was a persecutor of the church. But when God's power came to him, it transformed him from a persecutor to a preacher. And what's he supposed to preach?

It's verse 8. To preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ. This word unsearchable means unfathomable.

Well, unending. The depth of which is beyond our comprehension. It's unsearchable. And this is really interesting, friends.

For Paul, it's not the mystery that's mysterious. It's the riches that we have in Jesus that are beyond our comprehension. Isn't that amazing?

[21:26] Paul can't find the end of it. And it was given to him to preach. Also, he was given verse 9. To bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things.

The plan of the mystery is the building up and the growing of God's church. That's what he means by the plan of the mystery. And so Paul is supposed to make all this known to everybody, to Jew and Gentile alike, that this new humanity gathered under the lordship of Jesus is the final goal of all things.

That's shocking. And if you're not shocked by it, maybe you didn't hear me. It's shocking as I say it. The final goal of all things is being worked through the church.

God had the church in mind from eternity past and now this mysterious plan is being worked out in our days. Why is Paul commissioned to preach these things?

Well, he tells us, it's the purpose statement in verse 10, so that through the church, the manifold wisdom of God might be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

[22:52] The church God created declares God's wisdom. The church God created declares God's wisdom.

The church is a visible, tangible preview of what God is going to fully accomplish in the final day.

The church is like a preview period for a theater production.

Do you know what I mean? So theater productions have a preview period where they sort of do some showings before opening night.

And in a preview period, the stage is set. The performers are on deck. there's a script, the director's vision has been cast, there are props, everything's ready to go, and they perform.

But the preview period is a genuine season of discernment and discovery on the stage. It's a period of testing and of tweaking to get things just right for opening night.

[24:05] The performers may perform better or worse night to night because they're getting oriented to the stage. They're getting oriented to each other.

They're getting oriented to the audience. And yet, the preview performances really are a tangible and visible performance of the full production to come.

this is what the church is on earth. So when you look at the church, now, you can see what God's going to do in the final day.

Because in the final day, all things will be brought into unity under the lordship of Jesus. And that's what we perform now in the church in this world.

world. That's how the church displays and declares the wisdom of God, by being united under the lordship of Jesus and signaling that all things are coming under his lordship at the end of the days.

[25:17] And friends, Paul in chapters 4 to 6, which we're going to get to in the next few weeks, he's going to make this really concrete. He's going to tell us really exactly what this should look like in our life together.

And I don't mean to spoil you, but I'm afraid that we might think it's kind of boring. It's regular old stuff like be kind to one another.

Don't lie to each other. Don't gossip. Be faithful to your spouse. Forgive each other when you hurt each other. Remind each other of the gospel.

It's not super spiritual stuff. It's just living the ordinary Christian life. But as we live that ordinary Christian life, we're encouraging our unity.

And we're more and more a picture of what God is going to do in the last days. And who does Paul say is the main audience for our performance as the church?

[26:22] He says, the rulers leaders and authorities in the heavenly places. And these are the same words that he uses at the end of the letter to talk about Satan and his demons and all the powers of darkness of this world.

So the preview period for opening night is not a local theater production. It's Broadway. It's on display to the universe.

So every time we, brothers and sisters, you and me here at St. John's, every time we encourage unity in our fellowship, when we reach out in love to each other, when we offer forgiveness to each other, or whenever we remind each other of the gospel, the devil and his demons see it, and they shudder because they see God's wisdom.

at work. So this is our purpose, church. And just one last point. This means that our relationships in this church couldn't be more important.

They couldn't be more important. The person you're sitting next to, or that person that you're in Bible study with, or that person who you know needs a friend, or the person that you know needs encouragement, these relationships are the venue for God's purposes for the universe.

[27 : 58] So as we simply live the Christian life by the power of the Holy Spirit, we further God's eternal mission, and we live into our purpose.

So St. John's, we have an identity and a purpose that's been given by God. God. And as we believe who he says that we are, and we follow the Lord Jesus in obedience, God will work his purpose in us and through us.

May it be so for us here. Amen.