

The Last Word

Christ the King Sunday

November 26, 2023

Ephesians 1:15-23

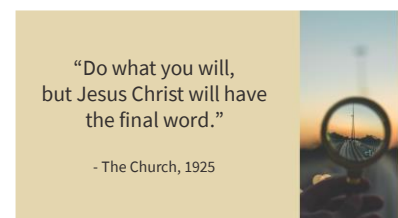
¹⁵ I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason ¹⁶ I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers.

¹⁷ I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, ¹⁸ so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, ¹⁹ and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. ²⁰ God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, ²¹ far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. ²² And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, ²³ which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.



As we come to the last Sunday in the Christian calendar, we celebrate what is known as “Christ the King” Sunday. Back in 1925, this Sunday was created as the last word in the

Christian year. In Europe the forces of secularization were doing all they could to limit and weaken the influence of religion in their nations. Christianity was a favorite target of dictators laying the groundwork for World War II. In response, the church sent a message to these new world forces, boldly stating, “Do what you will, but Jesus Christ will have the final word.”

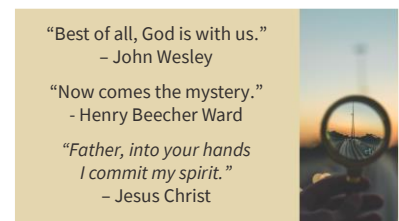


These church leaders were clinging to their belief that “one day every knee will bow.” As we consider last words today, let us begin with a word of prayer...

Last words can be fascinating. In many ways, our first words spoken as a child and our last words spoken before death can be some of the most important words we speak.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, spent his final breath saying these words:

“Best of all, God is with us.” The great evangelist Henry Beecher Ward used his last breath to say, “Now comes the mystery.” And, perhaps most famously, in the gospel of Luke, from the cross Jesus said, “*Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.*” These were Jesus’ last words.



We have a lifetime of words to speak. Often, we do not pay much attention to these words. We send emails and texts; we have little conversations here and there. The things we say and the things that are said to us – they too often go in one ear and out the other. At times we hear but don’t really listen. We will only have one chance to say our last words. We will only have one breath to utter a final reflection on life and what it was all about.



Turn with me to Ephesians 1 as we hear Paul proclaim the reign of Christ in all things. As we do so, let’s use the first few verses of this book to lead into today’s Epistle passage. In verse 4 Paul reminds all believers – and that includes you and me – that God chose us in Christ to be God’s people, “*holy and blameless before him in love.*”

Moving down a little, to verse 7, Paul reminds the Ephesians and us that we have *“redemption through the blood... forgiveness of our trespasses... and the riches of his grace.”* What wonderful blessings we receive from our Lord and Savior! Redemption, forgiveness, and grace. And, drawing closer to today’s passage, in verse 13 Paul reminds all believers that we are *“marked with the seal of Holy Spirit.”* It is from this place of understanding and promise that Paul begins the prayer for the Ephesians.

Paul prays that the church would have the spiritual understanding to grasp the full significance of God’s gifts. In the opening verses of today’s passage, Paul gives thanks in his prayers for the Ephesian church’s *“faith in the Lord Jesus”* and for their *“love toward all the saints.”* Paul rejoices that this church is living out its faith in the world dominated by pagan governments and by the secular culture fostered by these governments. In a way, it sounds a lot like what was happening in 1925. This continues to be a battle for the church today.

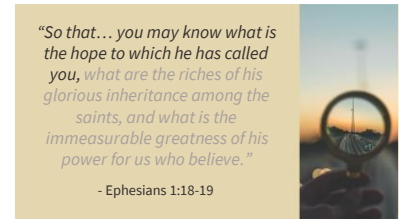
Continuing in verse 17, Paul prays for the church to receive *“a spirit of wisdom and revelation”* as they come to grow more and more into Christ. In the Bible that I use at home it reads, *“so that you may know him better”*!! But Paul wants the church to not just know about God intellectually. He wants the church to know God personally and experientially. That is the ‘what’ of Paul’s prayer for the church. Look at verses 18 and 19. Here Paul identifies what receiving this spirit will lead to: *“So that... you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe.”* There is a lot to unpack here.

“So that... you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe.”

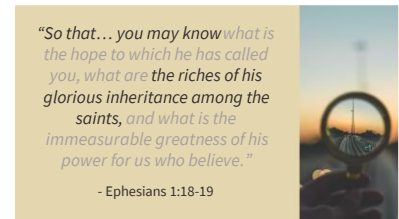
- Ephesians 1:18-19



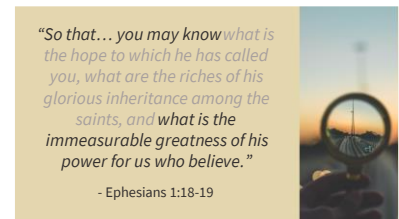
First, *“So that... you may know what is the hope to which he has called you.”* Paul wants the Ephesians and all who will read these words to know a sure hope. This confident hope is in the anticipation of Jesus’ return and in the future blessings



that all believers will share in. Joined to Christ, all believers will become co-heirs with the Lord, joining him one day in *“the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints.”* Over the course of this series we have covered these riches – a great banquet table, a joyful choir of saints and angels singing praises to the Lord our God, a place where the tears, pain, and hardships of this life are no more. It will be glorious indeed.



And second, *“So that... you may know the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe.”* To know this power, one must first know Christ. Once we are joined to the



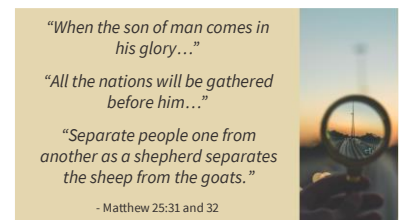
resurrected Christ, we experience the power of the Holy Spirit at work in and through our lives. The greatness of God’s power is revealed to us through Christ in so many ways. We experience this great power throughout our lives – in the midst of chaos, fear, illness, death, and so much more. God’s power is the peace in the chaos, the assurance in the fear, the healing in the illness, the resurrection in death. In each of these trials and hardships, because Christ is enthroned above all, Jesus has the last word. Now, at the time, it might not be the word that we want to hear. But over time we almost always come to believe or to understand that Christ’s last word in that situation was absolutely the right word.



The last few verses of our text remind us that Jesus was *"raised from the dead... is seated at right hand"* of God. This is understood as the judgment seat. More on that in a minute as we turn to the gospel text for this week. In the last verse Paul reminds the believers that God *"put all things under his feet."* Not some, not most, all things. The kingship of Jesus transforms every allegiance, every relationship, and even our understanding of life and death. Christ's place in the heavenly realms and the role that he will play there demands our attention in the here and now. The work of faith on a daily basis, my friends, is to live in confidence and with an assurance of the final word that we will each receive from the risen Christ.

Turn with me now to Matthew 25, verse 31. Our gospel text clarifies for us what Jesus' expectations are for those who follow him. It speaks of the judgment that will come to all people one day – to believers and non-believers alike. This passage is, at the same time, one of my favorite and one of my least favorite teachings of Jesus.

Our gospel text begins, *"When the son of man comes in his glory"* and continues, *"All the nations will be gathered before him."* This scene takes place in the final days, just before the creation of a new heaven and earth. Jesus will then proceed to *"separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats."* This imagery would be very familiar to Jesus' audience. It was a part of everyday life for many people in that agrarian society. This is the reality that will one day take place. I am not sure about you, but I am good with all of this. I understand that one day we will be judged. As we continue, it is the "how" we are judged that can make me a little uncomfortable.



Jesus begins by addressing those on his right, the sheep of his pasture, saying, *“Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundations of the world.”* How sweet it would be one day hear those words.

*“Come, you that are
blessed by my Father,
inherit the kingdom
prepared for you from the
foundations of the world.”*

- Matthew 25:34



Come and enter the glory and wonder of heaven. Come and be blessed. Beautiful words that we hope to one day all hear. But then it gets real as Jesus unpacks the criteria.

Hear these words from verses 35 and 36 with fear and trembling: *“I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.”* Here is where I struggle with this passage. I don’t struggle because I don’t want to do these things or because I don’t ever do them. Doing these things brings me joy. I like doing these things. So that is not it.

*“I was hungry and you gave me food,
I was thirsty and you gave me
something to drink,
I was a stranger and you welcomed me,
I was naked and you gave me clothing,
I was sick and you took care of me,
I was in prison and you visited me.”*

- Matthew 25:35-36



When those on his right question when they fed or gave drink to or clothed or welcomed or cared for or visited Jesus, he replies, *“Just as you did it to one of the least of these members of my family, you did it to me.”* I can see Jesus looking towards and gesturing towards a group of people as he says these words. Those on Jesus’ left are *“accursed”* and they are ushered off into the *“eternal fire.”* This is the goats’ fate because they did not feed or gave drink to or cloth or welcome or care for or visit *“the least of these.”* And right there is where conviction hits me. There are times when the opportunity is there to feed or visit or whatever and I choose to pass it by. There are times when the Holy Spirit nudges me towards action and I say, ‘No thank you God.’

Maybe you can relate to my struggles. And although it is uncomfortable for me at times to read and ponder this teaching, I do sincerely believe that it is necessary and good to wrestle with the scriptures at times. If we do not reflect on the state of our faith and of our souls, we tend to stagnate or even backslide. Introspection and reflection are needed for our faith to grow and mature. All that being said, I do not believe that Jesus expects perfection of us. Nor do I believe there is some cosmic balance scale that Jesus will lay the scope of my life out upon.



When asked by youth as they wrestle with their faith or by non-believers who are curious or by those new to the faith about what it will be like when we meet Jesus, my standard

response is this: I think Jesus will ask us, 'Did you know me?' By this I think Jesus will be wanting to know if our heart was his heart, if our hands were his hands, if our words were his words. If our heart, hands, and words are Jesus' heart, hands, and words, then we will have made the time to care for the least of these. If our heart, hands, and words are Jesus' heart, hands, and words, then we will have made the time to grow day by day in our faith in Jesus Christ, the king of kings and lord of lords. In the moments after we take our last breath Jesus will speak a last word. Will it be a word of welcome?

Today, on Christ the King Sunday, we proclaim to one another and to the world that Jesus is the firstborn of all creation. By acknowledging that we bow and give Christ the last word, we declare in the here and now that he is our king. Jesus is our king as we sit in the waiting room, hoping for good news from the tests. Jesus is our king as we weep over the grave and as we watch the war-torn world come closer to falling apart.

Jesus is our king when all hope seems lost, when the promises have been shattered, and when we cannot imagine that anything can fill the hole inside of us.

As we claim Christ the King, we faithfully live into the now-and-not-yet of the Christian life. We celebrate a victory that the world cannot see or comprehend as we stand upon a hope that defies the logic and thinking of this world, as we rejoice in a king who was once enthroned on a cross for us. Friends, we need not be afraid of any power of this world, because Christ gets the last word. Alleluia and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. In the big scope of your faith journey, are you more of a sheep or a goat?
How might the power of God be at work in you this week and in the future?
- 2) *Pray*. As you think about the last words that Jesus and others might say about or to you, what are your hopes? Turn this into a prayer of commitment to God.
- 3) *Study*. Read Mark 13:14-23. How do these words connect into this week's theme and your understandings of the end times?