

# "Epiphany vs. Entitlement"

Text: Ephesians 3:1b-11

Grace, mercy, and peace be multiplied to you in the revelation that Jesus Christ is not just the Savior of the world, he is *your* personal Savior - from sin, death, and eternal torment. Amen.

Dear Fellow Servants of the One True God:

Do you have blind spots? Interesting question, isn't it? By definition, how could you know? How you answer probably depends on how you are wired, what kind of person you are. An overly confident person might boldly assert he has none whatsoever. Someone who lacks confidence might suppose he has more blind spots than factual insights. Most would probably answer either "Maybe" or "Probably."

So how do you figure it out? Obviously the only infallible source is the mirror of God's Word. Carefully study the image that God draws in his Word of what we *should* look like – how we should think and act – and then compare that to the reality you see in the mirror.

But what if we have a problem honestly acknowledging what we see in ourselves? Then you actually gather evidence against yourself – by asking questions of yourself. Here's what that might look like if you wanted to figure out if you, like the unbelieving world around you, have developed, for example, an unhealthy sense of entitlement. You would ask yourself questions like the following:

Do I feel that I should get more money from my employer just because my boss's salary is greater than my own, or because my company is presently making more money than they did last year? On the other hand, do I feel that my salary should be *cut* dramatically if my company loses money in any given quarter? Do I believe that I am automatically entitled to a raise at work just because another year has passed, even though my workload has not increased and the cost of living has not gone up? Do I believe that working roughly one third of my life should entitle me to a life of ease for the last third of my life? Do I think that it is fair and just to give my accumulated wealth to my children so that others (taxpayers) have to pay for my nursing home costs and medical expenses at the end of my life? Do I think I ought to be able to watch television shows for free and that they ought to be commercial free? Do I think it is acceptable to download pirated software or music from the internet at least in part because the companies and artists who produce such things already make plenty of money? When I leave my parents' house, should my standard of living

start where their's left off – even though they worked for decades to get where they are and I have done essentially nothing but live off of others.

Interesting questions. Often disturbing answers. Go a bit deeper. We expect our religion to provide us with answers to such critical, pivotal questions as the meaning of life, death, heaven, hell, disease, even God himself. How hard am I willing to work to achieve or gain such insights, or do I essentially expect someone else to figure it out and just provide me with an executive summary once each week? How much time and effort am I willing to expend or invest to safeguard the spiritual gifts I have been given? Do I expect others to pay the bills so that my church doors can stay open and that I should be able to gain all of the benefits of my church without personal cost or effort?

To a certain extent, every single one of us has been infected with both a "something for nothing" mentality, and with its diabolical twin sister, entitlement. While the something for nothing and entitlement mentality is crippling to any society, social problems actually pale in comparison to the spiritual havoc it is creating in the Church. That is the subject – the problem - we examine this morning, in large part because it will help to shed light on the two events we commemorate on this Sunday: the baptism of Jesus and Pentecost. In fact entitlement and Pentecost are so diametrically opposed to each other, our sermon theme is simply: Epiphany vs. Entitlement. The text that will form the basis of our study is found in the Third Chapter of Paul's Letter to the Ephesians:

**ESV Ephesians 3:1b-11 "I, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles--<sup>2</sup> assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you,<sup>3</sup> how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly.<sup>4</sup> When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ,<sup>5</sup> which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> ¶ Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me by the working of his power.<sup>8</sup> To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ,<sup>9</sup> and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things,<sup>10</sup> so that through**

***the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. <sup>11</sup> This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord.***"

So far the very words of our God. Confident that God will keep his promise to visit us with power and great blessing whenever we study his Word, so we pray, "***Sanctify us by your truth, O Lord. Your word is truth.***" Amen.

Thomas Jefferson once wrote, "*The worst day in a man's life is when he sits down and begins thinking about how he can get something for nothing.*" Pride and greed are, once again, the obvious root problems. It is *pride* that tells me that I am worth more than I am being paid and *greed* that refuses to be satisfied with receiving only what I have actually earned by the labor of my own hands.

Again, while all of this absolutely destroys lives economically and socially, the spiritual implications are truly terrifying. The consequences there are truly *eternal*.

We are indeed in strange territory here, for we have come to a strange place where our sense of entitlement meets our desire for something for nothing. The result is that the gospel itself is in peril, as are such key Christian doctrines as grace and justification. In fact if we really are *deserving* of all that we imagine, then grace really is dead.

We define grace, of course, as "*God's undeserved love for sinners.*" He demonstrated that love nowhere more obviously and dramatically than when he sacrificed his Son Jesus to pay for our sins. Yet this sacrifice of the Lamb of God is robbed of its majesty whenever and wherever mankind imagines that God was in any way *obligated* to do anything at all to secure our rescue, or that we were worthy or deserving in any way. In fact the key word in our definition of *grace* is that word "undeserved" – God's *undeserved* love for sinners.

Were you aware that union contracts force many companies to continue paying workers for not working when automation or improvements in efficiency make their jobs obsolete? Even though their companies no longer needed their services, the incredibly twisted thought is that these unnecessary workers are somehow still entitled not to a job but to the *pay for that job*. (Jefferson would turn over in his grave.)

Yet when we shift the conversation from the physical to the spiritual, consider that you and I are ongoing beneficiaries of a much sweeter deal. The law commanded every human being to carry out the tireless work of keeping God's will perfectly. We opted not to. God's rescue plan was to have his Son carry out that work in our place, and to have you and me reap the benefit of forgiveness and eternal life that were earned by another. We didn't do even one thing to earn such benefits. Jesus did. Far from deserving, we were the ultimate in undeserving, lazy, spiritual slobs.

And yet God the Father, in light of what Jesus has done, has declared that our sin debt has been paid.

Were any of us deserving of such a gift? Obviously not – which is why grace (and the gospel itself) is such a remarkable example of an undeserved gift. Yet understand well that just as someone has to earn the money that pays for all the "free stuff" being given away in our society, so also the payment for our sins was not "something for nothing." It was and is a gift as far as you and I are concerned, but that gift was earned at great cost by another, in our place.

This morning the two events that we celebrate provide insight into God's love and our own undeservedness: the baptism of Jesus and the Epiphany. Both lose nearly all meaning and significance in the heart steeped in the "something for nothing" and entitlement myths.

God knew that even with the birth, life, and death of his Son, human beings could not even bring themselves to believe in that Savior on their own. So he gave us the gift of baptism. With the Word of God applied to simple water, God the Holy Spirit promised to work saving faith in human beings young and old. The part that man carries out could not be any simpler: God's Word plus water applied to a human being. The part that God the Holy Spirit carries out could not be more amazing: a dead soul is brought to spiritual life. Simply amazing, *and never earned*. It is a pure and holy gift from a merciful, loving God.

Jesus, of course, had no sins to wash away. His baptism was, first of all, an anointing by the Holy Spirit for the work that lay ahead of him. It marked the beginning of his public ministry at age 30. Secondly, by his participation in baptism Jesus gave us an example that we certainly should be eager to follow. Note well – baptism was not a law that had to be obeyed out of fear but a loving invitation to participate in the means of grace – an offer of spiritual life from our merciful God.

This Sunday is also the first Sunday in the season of Epiphany. Our typical reaction is a yawn. In other words, while the paraments on the altar and pulpit change color, we notice and appreciate little else. It's not that big of a deal to us. Why? Mostly because we take the good things of God for granted, and consider ourselves worthy.

Epiphany is when we celebrate the fact that God not only sent his Son to be our Savior, he also revealed that Son *to the world* as the Savior of *all mankind*. This is the great mystery Paul mentioned in our text: ***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.*** Our sense of entitlement works against us here in two different ways. First, because we imagine that *of course* God will *reveal* his Son to us as our Savior. Why would he send him but keep his advent a secret? Yet it is prideful and arrogant for us to take *anything at all for granted* from our God. God owes mankind nothing, and yet he has given us everything.

Second, Epiphany generally flies under our appreciation radar because it is about God revealing his Son as the Savior *of all mankind* – *not just the Jews*. *"Well of course God sent his Son to save more than just those troublesome Jews. In fact isn't it true that Americans are actually much more deserving of such generosity than the Jews?"* God preserve us from such nonsense. Every bit of this sense of privilege and deservedness is sin that irreparably damages the gospel and God's grace.

It is, on the other hand, the very essence of humility to affirm that God owed me nothing. Nothing at all. In fact what I deserved was a life of misery and an eternity of torment. Paul understood this full well, didn't he? He gives evidence in our text when he says, ***"Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me by the working of his power. <sup>8</sup> To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ."***

Paul was arguably the greatest Christian missionary. Through his mission efforts, untold millions (directly and indirectly) came to hear the gospel. Yet Paul still referred to himself as unworthy – as ***"less than the least of all the saints."*** Perhaps this is part of the reason Paul thrilled and rejoiced so at the good news of sins forgiven through faith in Jesus Christ – because he had no sense of entitlement, privilege, or deservedness. Paul recognized it as a pure, undeserved gift from his God – the *undeserved* part brought into sharp, clear focus in his heart by the fact that Paul had once persecuted his Lord and his Lord's Church. Paul's confidence and

boldness came not from himself and his own accomplishments or worth but from the underserved love and promises of his Savior.

This is the very spirit that you and I want for our own – a sense of continual awe and thanksgiving at the great things that our God has done for us, for which we were and are *utterly unworthy*. To this end, we pray that our God would purge from our hearts every last shred of prideful entitlement and deservedness, even while we stand in awe at the gift that we in no way earned. We also pray that he would fill us instead with humble gratitude for every one of his countless blessings. Only then can God's *grace* be appreciated by us as the amazing gift it truly is. Amen.

## Scripture Readings

ESV **Isaiah 49:1-6** Listen to me, O coastlands, and give attention, you peoples from afar. The LORD called me from the womb, from the body of my mother he named my name. <sup>2</sup> He made my mouth like a sharp sword; in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me a polished arrow; in his quiver he hid me away. <sup>3</sup> And he said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified." <sup>4</sup> But I said, "I have labored in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my right is with the LORD, and my recompense with my God." <sup>5</sup> And now the LORD says, he who formed me from the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him; and that Israel might be gathered to him-- for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD, and my God has become my strength-- <sup>6</sup> he says: "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

ESV **Mark 1:4-11** John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup> And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. <sup>6</sup> Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup> And he preached, saying, "After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. <sup>8</sup> I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." <sup>9</sup> ¶ In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. <sup>10</sup> And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. <sup>11</sup> And a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

# ST. PAUL EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH

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**Epiphany Sunday / Baptism of Jesus – January 10, 2021**

## The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

## The Opening Hymn – 119 (Red Hymnal)

"Great God, We Sing That Mighty Hand"

## The Order of Service – Supplement page 12ff. (Brown Hymnal)

## The Scripture Lessons: (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

**The First Lesson:** (Isaiah 49:1-6) We combine two observances on this Sunday – the Epiphany of our Lord and His baptism. Our first reading deals with His Epiphany or manifestation. Jesus not only came to save us, He revealed Himself to us (which is what both "epiphany" and "manifestation" mean), and he revealed to us that He came as the Savior of *all* mankind – both Jews and Gentiles. We never want to take such blessings for granted. The fact that Jesus came to this earth to save every single human being, including you and me, is a testament to his grace – his *undeserved* love for sinners.

## Psalm 91 (Supplement page 33)

**The Second Lesson:** (Mark 1:4-11) Our New Testament reading is the account of Jesus' baptism. Though Jesus had no sin from which He needed to be cleansed, by His baptism He demonstrated His willingness to fulfill every aspect of his Father's will for you and me. In every way, Jesus did what you and I should have done. His perfect obedience is now ours, credited to us by God's grace through faith.

## The Confession of Faith -

The Nicene Creed – page 5. (Brown Hymnal)

## The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 129 (Red Hymnal)

"Hail Thou Source of Every Blessing"

## The Sermon – Text: Ephesians 3:1b-11 (Printed on the back page)

**"Epiphany vs. Entitlement"**

## The Offertory – (Supplement page 16 insert)

## The Prayers

## The Pre-Communion Hymn – 163 (Stanzas 1-4) (Red Hymnal)

"The Death of Jesus Christ, Our Lord"

## The Preparation for Holy Communion (Brown Hymnal page 17)

## The Distribution

## The Nunc Dimittis and Thanksgiving (Brown Hymnal page 20)

## The Benediction

## The Closing Hymn – 134 (Stanzas 1 & 5) (Red Hymnal)

"Songs of Thankfulness and Praise"

## Silent Prayer

**Welcome!** - We warmly welcome any visitors worshipping with us this morning and invite you to join us each Sunday at this time. We are glad you are here!  
**To our Visitors seeking Holy Communion** – In obedience to God's Word, we practice "Close Communion." This practice stresses both our concern for others, not wanting anyone to receive the sacrament to their harm (1 Cor. 11:27-30) and the importance of unity in confession and faith (1 Cor. 10:16-17). For this reason we ask that anyone who has not established this unity through membership in a CLC congregation please meet with the pastor to discuss this Scriptural doctrine before communing. This is a practice that we follow out of love and concern for you, and out of obedience to God's Word, not in judgment of anyone's Christian faith.

## Attendance – Sunday (28) Average (30)

### This Week at St. Paul:

<b>Today</b>	<b>-9:00 a.m.</b>	– Sunday school and Bible Class
	<b>-10:00 a.m.</b>	– Worship Service w/communion
	<b>-11:15 a.m.</b>	– Fellowship Hour
	<b>-11:30 a.m.</b>	– Church Council Meeting
<b>Monday</b>	<b>-10:00 a.m.</b>	– Study Conference in Pierre
<b>Wednesday</b>	<b>-6:00 p.m.</b>	– Confirmation Class
	<b>-7:00 p.m.</b>	– Midweek Bible Study
<b>Next Sunday</b>	<b>-9:00 a.m.</b>	– Sunday school and Bible Class
	<b>-10:00 a.m.</b>	– Worship Service
	<b>-11:00 a.m.</b>	– Fellowship Hour

**CLC News** – Pastor Michael Eichstadt is considering the call to Living Savior of Eden Prairie. Pastor David Ude is considering the call to Redeemer of Cheyenne. The CLC Call Committee for Educational Institutions has postponed their call meeting to fill the upcoming vacancy at Immanuel Lutheran College until January 18.

**Church Council Meeting** – The Church Council is scheduled to meet this morning during the fellowship hour.

**Monday Meeting in Pierre** – Pastor Roehl is scheduled to attend a study conference in Pierre tomorrow (Monday) morning.

**CLC Grade School Tournament** – The annual CLC Grade School basketball tournament, for now, is still on. The dates are March 12-14. Please see Pastor Roehl if your children want to participate.