

Sermon 4, A Doxological Account of Election, Ephesians 1:4-6

Sing “A Debtor to Mercy Alone”

Proposition: Because God the Father has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in Christ, especially the blessing of election, we must bless Him!

- I. Our Father Chose Us in Christ, v. 4
 - A. The Objects of Election: Us, v. 4a
 - B. The Medium of Election: Christ, v. 4a
 - C. The Time of Election: Eternity Past, v. 4a
 - D. The Purpose of Election: Our Holiness before Him, v. 4b
- II. Our Father Pre-Decided to Adopt Us in Christ, vv. 5-6a
 - A. His Goal in Pre-Deciding: Adoption to Himself, v. 5a
 - B. His Agent in Pre-Deciding to Adopt Us: Jesus Christ, v. 5b
 - C. His Standard for Pre-Deciding to Adopt Us: His Good Pleasure, v. 5c
 - D. His Reason for Pre-Deciding to Adopt Us: The Praise of the Glory of His Grace, v. 6a
- III. Our Father Highly Favored Us in Christ, v. 6b

Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we saw last week how to appropriate the spiritual blessings our Father has lavished on us in the heavenly places in Christ. Our passage this morning focuses on one of those blessings in particular — the blessing of election. Indeed, this passage focuses on two themes which have historically occupied the attention, time, and effort of the Church of Jesus Christ. They are the themes of praise and predestination. Paul begins this letter to the church at Ephesus with an overwhelming outburst of praise directed to the Triune God. If your theology is like Paul’s theology, then, you will be literally and figuratively singing God’s praise as much as you possibly can. Paul’s theology of election resulted in his practice of praising God. His theology was doxological. His heavy-duty intellectual and spiritual *content* resulted in equally profound *exultation* and *exaltation* as he exulted in exalting God.

Different camps and parties within the church have fought fierce battles over the doctrine of election. What does it mean? How does it work? What about the non-elect? These battles have consumed a lot of paper and a lot of thought (and even more of what passes for thought). But in the Apostle’s mind, the doctrine of predestination/election is first and foremost a matter for praise — and at its best, of course, praise and worship is what the church has always engaged in and will, in Heaven, always continue to engage in. Indeed, this theme of praising God for His glorious work of choosing for Himself a people in Christ is so important to Paul that I am tempted to cancel this sermon and simply add 6 or 8 additional hymns to the service. But Paul

didn't sing this; he wrote it. And he wrote it in such a way as to require explanation, expansion, and elucidation. Here's how you and I will know whether I've explained the passage correctly. We will know by whether we want to praise God when this sermon is over. If we have caught Paul's meaning and Paul's spirit, then we will want to praise God with the same fervor and volume that Paul demonstrated in his praise. What I hope to show you this morning is that we need to praise God the Father for blessing us with all spiritual blessings, and preeminently with the spiritual blessings of election, predestination, and gracious favor.

I. Our Father Chose Us in Christ, v. 4

Paul continues his opening doxology by lauding the way that our Father (who is also Christ's Father — see vv. 2 & 3) bestowed on us the specific spiritual blessing of *election*. We have every spiritual blessing, and it is our call to appropriate those blessings, as we saw last Sunday. But the blessing that is highlighted in our passage this morning is specifically the blessing of being chosen by God for holiness and blamelessness as His adopted sons. That is a spiritual blessing, for it is applied to us by the Holy Spirit. He is, after all, the guarantee of our inheritance, the inheritance that we will receive as the sons and daughters of God Almighty! It is a blessing related to our life with God. How is it related to our life with God? It is the logical prerequisite for every other spiritual blessing. You won't receive any spiritual blessings at all unless God has chosen you to receive them. That's what election means. It means being picked, being selected. Our first question is "What about those not chosen?" Paul does not address that question here. Elsewhere he answers it by asking who we are to criticize God. Ultimately, with Thomas Aquinas we must affirm that God wills good to the non-elect as well as to the elect. Yet to the non-elect He does not will the particular good of salvation. He chose *us* to be saved, Paul says, and leaves the matter there. Why? Because he is in the process of explaining to us why we should bless our Heavenly Father.

A. The Objects of Election: Us, v. 4a

Why should we bless our Father? Because He chose us, that is, every saved person. It doesn't say that God chose Christ first and that whoever is united to Christ came along for the ride. We know that in one sense, that's perfectly true. See the Servant Songs of Isaiah, where Christ is referred to repeatedly as God's Chosen Servant. But it's not the whole truth. Paul says specifically, in no uncertain terms, that God chose us. That means each individual Christian, every single believer in particular, was hand-selected by God with personal knowledge, care, and love. All the options were known, and God picked *you*. He didn't pick us in general; He picked us in particular, you and me in particular. That is the teaching of the Apostle Paul, which he repeats in several of his letters.

Notice that the verse also doesn't say that God chose qualities, or characteristics. It doesn't say that he chose believing people, or that He chose those whom He could foresee to be decent, faithful folks. It doesn't say that He chose based on race or gender or socio-economic status. He chose *people*. So be cautious of anyone who tries to tell you that He actually chose a certain kind of person, or people who _____ (fill in the blank however you like). If you're

qualifying the people whom God chose and saying that He chose people who would believe, or people who would deserve it, or people who would do what He wanted, or you name it, then you are adding to the word of God. Never will you find in Scripture that God chose people who did or were x, y, or z in themselves. You will only find that He chose people whom He foreknew and foreloved. The only distinguishing characteristic of the people who are chosen is that God knew and loved them from the beginning. Don't add to God's word. Don't teach, preach, believe or think that the electing grace of God is only for people *who*. God's choice is limited and directed only by Almighty God Himself.

B. The Medium of Election: Christ, v. 4a

Yet none of this election happens or could happen outside Christ. There is no salvation without Him and His atoning work! Paul can't get this off his mind. Here he is, mentioning it again when he just mentioned it about 5 words previously. When you think of salvation, is your heart immediately carried out toward Jesus Christ? When you think of election — the truth that God chose us — do you immediately recognize that this choice was not and could not have been apart from Jesus Christ? The New Testament knows nothing of Christless Christianity. The Christian faith could not exist without Jesus and His historical work.

Notice again that Paul doesn't say that God chose Christ. He says that God chose us in Christ. If you believe this doctrine of election, it should result in praise to your Lord and Savior.

C. The Time of Election: Eternity Past, v. 4a

When did God choose us? Such a question would seem irrelevant. What's important is that He chose us, not when He did it, especially since it appears in some sense that God is outside of time and certainly not subject to time in the way that we are. Not only are all times soon to Him, but many theologians even believe that all times are *present* to Him. Yet despite these philosophical conundrums, Paul plunges in boldly and gives us a timestamp on God's decision to choose some for salvation in Christ. This decision was made before the foundation of the world. That is, prior to the creation of any created thing, God made the decision to save you in Christ.

Why does Paul tell us this? What good does it do us to know when God made this decision? Well, for one thing, it comforts us. God's choice to save me is a well-thought-out choice. It is something He has been planning to do for millennia. Longer than Earth has existed, God has planned to save. Literally, His decision is older than the oldest hills. That means that He's not going to change His mind now! As Matt Chandler puts it, God does not regret saving you!

Not only does God's choice before the foundation of the world comfort us; it should also remind us that God's choice is not predicated on what kind of people we might be. Paul didn't need to mention the time when God made this choice — but the fact that he did mention it tells us something about the nature of this choice. God didn't say "I'll watch them for a few years and then save the good ones." You know, my great-grandfather grew 5 acres of strawberries up in Michigan. He hoed all five acres by himself. But when harvest time came, he hired some local girls to pick. He watched them work and he married the best picker! He didn't decide which

berry picker he would marry even before they started picking; he made that decision after he had a chance to watch and see what they were like. In our minds, that's the only rational way to make a choice. But both here and in Romans 9 Paul highlights for us the idea that God chose us before He had seen us in action, before He had even created the world, much less created us! God's choice, then, was not dependent on factors outside Himself. That, I believe, is what Paul intends us to take away from this timestamp on the decision to elect. Because God's choice is based entirely on factors internal to Himself, nothing we are or do can make Him change His mind or decide not to elect us after all.

D. The Purpose of Election: Our Holiness before Him, v. 4b

We've seen the who, the in whom, and the when of election. But now Paul reveals to us the purpose of election. What are we chosen *for*? The answer is that we are chosen for holiness and blamelessness in love. This is why we aren't allowed to get all snooty over our status as "chosen ones." God didn't choose us so that we could brag to our neighbors. He didn't choose us so that we could vaunt ourselves as special chosen ones. He chose us to be holy, set apart exclusively to His use. We talked a few weeks ago in Sunday School about how our primary identity should be as slaves of God. That is another way of saying that we should be holy. We need to recognize that we don't exist for ourselves or for our own glory. If you have been chosen for holiness, then you exist for the sake of glorifying God. Paul puts it in a different way, then, by saying that we ought to be blameless. We need to be like the OT sacrificial animals, which were without spot or blemish. We should be without defects, without character flaws, without flaws and spots and known areas of sin. In fact, that's what God chose us for.

When you think about it like that, it kind of kills boasting, right? If you're a kid picked to be on the varsity basketball team, you might be tempted to brag a little bit. But if you're a kid picked to be a blameless basketball player, one who can sink the ball from the 3-point line every single time, and you actually miss the hoop entirely about $\frac{3}{4}$ of the time, then you are not going to be very braggadocious. "I was chosen to sink the ball every time from the 3-point line!"

"Well, let's see you do it."

"Um, I'm not sure that right now's a good time. I threw my elbow out in yesterday's game."

Christian, you were chosen to be blameless! So the instant you start feeling uppity, or looking down on those who you're pretty sure aren't chosen, just remember that you are supposed to be blameless.

But not only does this choice of us to be holy and blameless kill all boasting. It should also massively encourage you. Christian, God chose to you to be holy and blameless, and His choice cannot be frustrated or overridden! You will be holy and blameless someday soon. Can you strive to be holy and blameless now, knowing that you will be perfectly so in God's good time?

Think of it as going on a very annoying, socially difficult diet. You aren't able to eat much of anything, but you're doing it because you want to be healthy and slender. Right now, it's

no fun to try to be thin. But you put up with the annoyance now because of that promise of being the weight you want to be in the future. Well, right now you and I are not particularly holy and blameless — not like we ought to be. But we put up with the annoyance of trying to be holy and blameless when we're not because we're looking toward that goal, that day when we will actually be everything we should be.

What is the particular virtue in which holiness and blamelessness will be manifested? Love. At that great day, our holiness and blamelessness will be primarily manifested in our love for one another and for God Almighty. Paul will spend much of the rest of this letter telling us about how we need to love one another and walk in the unity, purity, harmony, and victory that love brings. The consummation of the Christian life will be when we are holy and blameless in love. All this will take place “before Him,” that is in the presence of God. When we stand before Him, seeing Him, we will become like Him. Even now, that is our motive and reward. Just as spiritual blessings can only be appropriated by communion with the Holy Spirit, so holiness and blamelessness can only be sought and sustained by communion with the Father in Christ.

Do you want to be holy? Then stand “before Him.” Come into His presence through worship. That means private worship, family worship, and corporate worship.

Do you want to be blameless? Then stand “before Him.” Come into His presence through worship. That means private worship, family worship, and corporate worship.

Do you want to be loving? Then stand “before Him.” Come into His presence through worship. That means private worship, family worship, and corporate worship.

This is your destiny. This is what you were chosen for. Can you start pursuing it right now?

Remember looking at the Bible's Big Picture together? What did we see? We saw that the theme of the entire Bible is God's people coming to dwell with Him in His house for eternity. We saw further that you need to get a head start on that right here and now. If you are a believer, then you should want to dwell with God, and that means standing before Him in worship. You were chosen for this. You were elected for this. And that means that you need to get after it!

II. Our Father Pre-Decided to Adopt Us, vv. 5-6a

Well, Paul just won't let this idea drop. First he had to go bring up election. Didn't he know that this idea would be such a stumbling block to the church in future centuries? But he then doubles down and to the discussion of election he adds a discussion of predestination!

First of all, we need to talk about what “predestination” is. You need to get its etymology out of your brain. We hear the word “destine” in there and so we think that Biblically speaking, to “predestine” means to mark people based on their final destination. Biblically speaking, we know that there are only two destinations, Heaven and Hell. So we hear “predestination” and think “This means God selecting this one for Heaven and that one for Hell because it's all about the destination, which is decided in advance (that's what pre- means, right?).” But the Greek doesn't contain the word “destination.” The Greek root here is actually the word from which we derive our word “horizon,” so called because it encircles us. What the Latin version (followed by

almost all English renderings) called “predestination” is actually pre-encirclement. God surrounded us, circled us, decided on us, before we were ever born. That’s what the word here means. Ultimately, of course, to be decided on beforehand for adoption does say something about our final destination. But that’s not its primary referent. Paul doesn’t say that God chose *our destination* but that God chose us. He doesn’t say that God chose *our final outcome* but rather that God pre-decided to adopt us with the adoption of sons. Now, if you’re adopted your destination certainly is Heaven. But that Heavenly destination is not the word’s primary reference. It’s a secondary inference. Translating as “predestination,” then, is simply wrongheaded. It gives people the wrong idea.

How’s that for an answer to rejection? If you are an orphan or a foster child, you might have undergone the experience of parents coming to check you out and look you over with an eye toward adoption. This might have happened several times. You could have gotten up your hopes to be adopted, then had them dashed when you were not chosen. But here Paul tells us that before we were born, God decided to adopt us!

A. His Goal in Pre-Deciding: Adoption to Himself, v. 5a

God pre-decided to adopt us as sons. Before we ever existed and had done anything good or bad, God’s decision was already final. He would adopt particular individuals. Can you believe this amazing grace and condescension?

To adopt us is to make us legally his children and heirs. We can call Him Father, and He regards us as His children. What kind of love is this, that we should be called the sons of God? That we should enjoy all the privileges of sons and daughters of God Almighty?

Do you trust God as a Father? Do you claim these privileges? Do you look to His aid, comfort, and instruction? Most of you have met my earthly father, and you know, I think, what a privilege it is to be the son of such of man. I know that Dad always has my back, is always proud of me, is always ready to help me. I have to be careful what “greeds” I mention around him, because he is liable to buy me anything I mention wanting. Brothers and sisters, God didn’t have to adopt us. God could have saved us and kept us at a distance, and we would have lauded His philanthropy and graciousness. But He has gone way above and beyond that. He has invited us to live in His house forever, not as guests but as children who belong. Listen to little kids talk about their parents’ home. They call it “my house” or just “home.” They have absolute confidence in their belonging there. Do you have that same confidence in your Heavenly Father? Do you regard Heaven as your home? Do you call on God as your Father and trust Him as your Father?

Calvin brought out an interesting point on this text with regard to assurance of salvation. If you teach people that they can’t be sure they are saved, then you violate the *lex orandi* or law of prayer, which basically states that how the church prays is how the church believes. If you pray to God as Father, then you must believe that He is your Father. But if your official position is that you can’t know whether God has pre-decided to adopt you as His son, then you’re telling people that they are not allowed to pray “Our Father.” They might be wrong; they might be lying; they might be calling God “Daddy” when He is no such thing to them!

So every time you pray to God as Father, remember this blessing of adoption as sons. Remember that God pre-decided to adopt *you*. Praise and glorify and worship Him for it. Bless Him for it, as Paul does. This is one of the greatest of the spiritual blessings in the heavenly places, to have been pre-encircled by your Father's loving choice and care.

Finally, notice for whom this adoption particularly was. God did it for Himself. "God, why did you adopt me?"

"For myself. I adopted you to myself for myself."

Can you believe this? That your adoption as a son of God was officially carried out for the sake of God and because that's how God wanted it? Remember how Jesus promised that when He came again He would receive us to Himself? Well, God has adopted us to Himself. Our destination in adoption is, if I may be so bold, to snuggle right up against the Father's chest. You ought to love and rejoice in this Father and His generosity to you for Himself. And you can rejoice even more because this is for His sake. He adopted you not out of pity, not because you were what you were, but because He had set His heart on you in love. His motives were internal, and therefore not subject to change. He will never disown or disinherit you. You have been pre-encircled by His loving choice since the moment of conception and even before.

B. His Agent in Pre-Deciding to Adopt Us: Jesus Christ, v. 5b

Again, all of this is only through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As Thomas Aquinas said, something only catches on fire by being exposed to fire. Something can only become God's son by being exposed to God's Son. This filial quality can only be had from the Son of God. Without Him, God would never have pre-decided to adopt us; indeed, I believe it is fully accurate to say that God *could not* have pre-decided to adopt us. Without His natural Son taking flesh and dying in our place, He could not have entered into that paternal relationship toward us. God would not and could not have brought us into His home and into His family as His sons and daughters without Christ. It could not have happened. Every spiritual blessing, including the blessing of adoption, is only in Christ! So when you're praising your Father for adopting you, don't forget to thank Jesus, your older brother. Clearly, Paul's goal is to exalt Jesus Christ and to remind the Ephesians that it is only in and through Him that every spiritual blessing is communicated.

C. His Standard for Pre-Deciding to Adopt Us: His Good Pleasure, v. 5c

How did God measure His activity of pre-deciding to adopt us? What standard did He use to make His pre-decision? Paul tells us that the standard was the delight in goodness that His will has. He loves His own goodness, and everything He wills is directed toward His own goodness as its ultimate goal. His pre-deciding was according to the overwhelming, overflowing goodness of His nature and His will.

What an amazing standard! Once again, we see what's not mentioned: the status, condition, or qualities of the people He pre-decided to adopt. Paul doesn't say "He pre-decided to adopt us according to our worthiness of it," or "according to our fitness for it," or "according to what He foresaw we would be like." He says that God's pre-decision to adopt us was according

to the overflowing goodness of His will, such that He really enjoyed choosing us to be adopted as sons. “This is what He wanted to do, and it gave Him great pleasure,” as the NLT has it. That’s exactly right. Can you praise this loving Father for the sheer pleasure that He takes in doing good by pre-deciding to adopt us as sons?

D. His Reason for Pre-Deciding to Adopt Us: The Praise of the Glory of His Grace, v. 6a

Finally, Paul explains what God’s ultimate reason was. His standard was the pleasure in doing good and seeking good that His will takes. That’s the measure according to which He pre-decided. But the reason He did it was for the praise of the glory of His grace. The whole cosmos, including us, is called to praise the weightiness and splendor of God’s overwhelming favor. If you aren’t praising, then you haven’t realized what God has done for us in Christ! If you don’t see the glory of everything this passage teaches, go down to verses 17-20 of this chapter. Pray that prayer, and then read and study this passage again. Ask God to open the eyes of your heart so that you might see the glory of His grace. And then sing praise to Him as Paul told us to do back in v. 3!

III. Our Father Highly Favored Us in Christ, v. 6b

Well, as if the summary of spiritual blessings wrapped up in election and pre-deciding to adopt us weren’t enough, Paul adds that it is God’s grace which has graced us in the Beloved. God loves His Son so much that He can simply be referred to as “the Beloved,” and we all know who it is. That kind of love for His Son is what fills the Father’s heart. It is His love that drives His glorious grace.

The word for “graced us” used here is the same word Gabriel used at the annunciation when he called Mary a “highly favored one.” In Christ, who is God’s beloved, we are highly favored ones! Mary is not some kind of super-Christian, though she is the mother of the Lord and one of two ordinary humans mentioned in the Nicene Creed. The same kind of high favor that God showed to her He also shows to every Christian in His Beloved One, the Lord Jesus Christ. (Obviously, He doesn’t favor the rest of us with the exact favor of being Jesus’ human mother!) God’s grace has graciously favored us in Christ.

That, brothers and sisters, is the summary of these three verses. That favor is expressed in God’s pre-cosmic choice to make us holy and pre-decision to adopt us. It is a tremendous favor, an overwhelming grace that He has lavished upon us. Again, it should lead us to praise, laud, worship, bless, and glorify Him. This is the glory of what you and I have in Jesus. What an enormous blessing it is! Amen.