

# Photos of the Faith – A Plumb Line

## Ephesians 1:3-14

### Introduction

Once upon a time there was a very powerful king. As kings are sometimes inclined, this king liked to have things his own way. So ...

- If he saw something he wanted, he took it.
- If he felt like doing something, he did it.

He paid little heed to the opinions of other people or to what society generally considered to be right and proper.

The woman who became his wife is a perfect example. She was already a married woman when the king decided he wanted her for himself. What the king wants, the king gets. So he intentionally seduced this woman and ultimately convinced her to leave her husband for him.

Now ... it just so happened that the queen's former husband was a brother to the king that seduced her. That means the woman seduced by the king was actually his sister-in-law. Not only that, this king's family tree was so messed up, his now wife who was once his sister-in-law was also at the same time his half-sister and his niece. Wouldn't reunions in that family be a hoot!

This might make you shake your head, but remember ... the king is the king! Kings can do whatever they want.

Or can they?

John the Baptist didn't think so. This king I have been describing is the same king you met in today's gospel reading. His name was Herod Philip, son of Herod the Great. Herod the Great was king when Jesus was born – the one the wise men visited and the one who killed all the baby boys in Jerusalem. He is also the king responsible for the building of the magnificent Temple that was the site of so many gospel stories.

The wife/sister-in-law/niece/half-sister was Herodias. Historians generally describe her as very beautiful but not very nice. You see that side of her in the gospel, don't you?

Anyway, John thought this whole affair was rather sordid. It most certainly violated Jewish Law. So John the Baptist, never one to withhold his opinion about the sinful behaviors he observed, publically rebuked the king and his new bride the queen.

For John had been saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." (Mark 6:18)

There is a standard, John told the king, a standard to which even powerful kings are subject: "What you have done is not lawful." And apparently he said it many times.

John didn't use word pictures to convey his message. He was far more direct than that. But if he had opted for some kind of visual aid, he might well have used a plumb line. That's the picture painted by the prophet Amos:

This is what he showed me: The Lord was standing by a wall that had been built true to plumb, with a plumb line in his hand. And the Lord asked me, "What do you see, Amos?" "A plumb line," I replied. Then the Lord said, "Look, I am setting a plumb line among my people Israel... (Amos 7:7-8)

Today I begin a seven week sermon series that I have titled "Portraits of the Faith." We will follow the assigned lectionary texts, placing our emphasis on the Scriptural teachings found in the readings from the book of Ephesians. Each week we will use those texts to find a picture – a portrait – that captures the central teaching of the day.

Over the course of these seven weeks we will build an art gallery, with each picture contributing a new image for our understanding of the faith. The portrait for today is found in the Amos text: a plumb line.

Many people today suffer from the same spiritual malady that plagued King Herod. In fact, it is a malady that has plagued humanity since the Garden of Eden. The ending line of the book of Judges captured the sentiment well:

People did whatever they felt like doing. (Judges 21:25, The Message)

There was no moral compass, no standard of right or wrong to which people adhered. People did whatever they felt like doing. Today you will hear that life philosophy expressed in many ways:

- Who are you to tell me what is right or what is wrong?
- If it is right for me, that's all that matters.

A life philosophy like that ignores or outright denies that God has established a plumb line – a divine standard by which every person will ultimately be judged. When you come to the end of your days, you will be measured to see if you are true to plumb.

John the Baptist attempted to call King Herod back into alignment. In response the king had John beheaded. In so doing, the king eliminated a major nuisance, but he didn't eliminate the plumb line. What was wrong when John was living was still wrong after John was dead. "It's not lawful for you to have your brother's wife."

You and I can talk for hours about the standard of God. There may well be points where we differ. In fact, whole denominations have split over discussions like that. But I think our reading from Ephesians today gives us a clear picture of what God expects from each person who claims to follow Him. This text establishes a plumb line for us to follow.

It's not a plumb line that consists of a list of do's or don'ts. It is not a listing of laws, like those found in Leviticus or Deuteronomy. Instead this plumb line is presented in a simple phrase - a phrase that is repeated three times in today's reading from Ephesians. The phrase is this:

... to the praise of his glorious grace (Ephesians 1:6)

In order that we ... might be for the praise of his glory. (Ephesians 1:12)

... to the praise of his glory. (Ephesians 1:14)

Succinctly put, the plumb line presented here can be summed in a single question:

Is your life being lived for the "praise of his glory?"

As you read the text, you see that this is the purpose for which all creation was created. One of the great catechisms of the Christian faith poses this question as its very first point:

Q: What is the chief end of man?

A: To glorify God and enjoy Him forever.  
(Westminster Catechism)

Look how Paul unpacks this in the text.

## **#1: WE ARE BLESSED**

Look at verse 3:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. (Ephesians 1:3)

After his standard opening to one of his epistles, the Apostle Paul calls people of faith to recognize how they have been blessed. The 12 verses of this text contain at least 15 blessings that God has given to people who choose to live their lives according to His plumb line. Here are the 15 blessings I found.

1. He chose us (v. 4, 11)
2. He adopted us (v. 5)
3. He poured out His grace on us (vv. 6)
4. He forgave us (v. 7)
5. He redeemed us (v. 7)
6. He lavished us with the riches of His grace (v. 8)
7. He revealed His mysteries to us (v. 9)
8. He gives us a future (v. 10)
9. He unites us (v. 10)
10. He includes us (v. 13)

11. He saves us (v. 13)
12. He seals us with the Holy Spirit (v. 13)
13. He guarantees our inheritance (v. 14)
14. He calls us His possession (v. 14)

There may well be more. That's a pretty nice list! I would be deliriously happy if God simply said, "Choose two." Like the menu at Cracker Barrel: What two sides would you like with your meal?

So you might ask "What's the catch?" What does God expect from me in order to receive all of that?

## **#2: WE ARE BLESSED ... FOR A PURPOSE**

When Paul wrote this letter, he was addressing a subset of all humanity. Look how the letter starts:

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, To God's holy people in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus ... (Ephesians 1:1)

All of this belongs to those who live by faith, who live according to the plumb line. The gospel of Jesus Christ is not a gospel of universalism. That is the belief that all God is far too nice to condemn anyone who chooses to live a life that is out of plumb.

Let me take you back to my list of blessings. Notice the purpose of the blessing.

1. He chose us *to be holy and blameless* (v. 4, 11)
2. He adopted us *for His pleasure* (v. 5)
3. He poured out His grace on us *for His praise* (vv. 6)
4. He forgave us *to demonstrate His grace* (v. 7)
5. He redeemed us *to demonstrate His grace* (v. 7)
6. He lavished us with the riches of His grace *so that we could be forgiven* (v. 8)
7. He revealed His mysteries to us *to show us Jesus* (v. 9)

And the list goes on and on ... even though this sermon can't.

We are blessed. But we are blessed for a purpose. And that purpose is so that our lives can result in praise to the glory of God.

When a person is baptized in this church, we present them with a candle and these words:

Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:16)

Live your life, little one, to the praise of His glory.

## APPLICATION

Many people want the blessings of God without yielding to the plumb line of faith. As one famous preacher put it "They want 'heaven without the hassle.'" So it is pretty common for people to believe in Christ and still try to live life by a standard of their own making.

In Andrew Lloyd Webbers "the Phantom of the Opera" the phantom becomes infatuated with a chorus girl named Christine. So, he poses as an angel of music and at one point sings these words to her:

Close your eyes, for your eyes can only show the truth. And the truth isn't what you want to see. In the dark it is easy to pretend that the truth is what you want to be.

King Herod, and all who think as he did, pretends that God's standard doesn't exist – or at least doesn't apply to them.

- That somehow they can know the blessings of God apart from obeying the will of God.

Paul reminds us that the blessed life is the life lived to the "praise of God's glory." How are you living your life?

Amen.