

The Divine Referee and the Ultimate Goal

Ephesians 1:3, 8b-10, 17-23
Berkey Avenue Mennonite Fellowship
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Ephesians 1:3, 8b-10, 17-23 (NRSV)

³ *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.... **With all wisdom and insight** ⁹ **he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, ¹⁰ as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.***

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.***

- I. Growing up in Indiana back in the 50's and '60's, it was almost assumed that boys learned to play basketball.
 - A. So my Dad taught my brother and me how to play basketball--not only how to shoot the basketball but how to play defense as well.
 1. I was told that when defending against your opponent, you could only touch the ball, never the other person.
 2. If you touched the other person, it was a foul.
 3. So when my brother would try to steal the ball from me and caught the tip of my finger, I would call a foul.
 - B. I've often thought about that foul rule when in later years I watched an occasional hard-fought basketball game on TV.
 1. By the standard I was taught, every player would foul out in the first 2 minutes of the game.
 2. Referees don't call a foul every time an opposing player touches another player.
 - a. There came to be the concept of "No harm; no foul."
 - b. Sometimes it's hard to judge when there has been harm.
 3. But referees study increasingly complex rules which are different at every level from grade school to the pros.
 - a. And even then, they have different styles which can vary from game to game.

- b. TV commentators note whether the referees are not only calling the game fairly, but whether they are calling it closely (with many fouls) or “letting them play.”
 - C. Referees, umpires, officials, or judges are an important part of any sport.
 1. They are the ones who enforce the agreed-upon rules of the game.
 2. Referees are like judges in everyday life.
 3. Referees and judges decide whether a rule or law has been broken and, if so, what the penalty will be.
 4. Referees and judges are the great separators of the world’s reality.
 - a. They separate the good from the bad...
 - b. The fair from the foul...
 - c. The legal from the illegal.
 - D. Right now, the sports world’s attention is focused on soccer and the World Cup.
 1. The actions of a referee in a simple game of soccer are controversial enough.
 2. Soccer games have been known to end in life and death stampedes resulting from the referees’ judgments.
 3. How much more difficult it is for the judges in our court system to sort out the good and the bad.
 - a. After all, in life, there are more than just two teams involved.
 - b. There are many powerful interests that influence the situation.
 - c. And there are even more than one set of laws and questions raised about whose laws to enforce when.
 4. There are many powers at work in our world and a true mixture of good and evil all around us.
- II. Yet, many people approach life and Christian faith like a game of soccer or basketball.
 - A. We want clear-cut enforceable rules to know what is right and wrong, legal or illegal, fair and foul, Biblical or unbiblical.
 1. We want our leaders to be the judges or referees and “tell us what the Bible says.”
 2. Yet, when we don’t agree with them, we criticize and judge and separate.
 3. We use the Bible as our rule book, but we interpret it differently from each other.
 - B. The result is separation and division in society and even among Christians.
 1. We have become our own judges, the great separators, constantly distinguishing and separating ourselves from those who disagree with us.
 2. Fellow Christians become opponents instead of teammates.
 3. We are so busy playing referee and crying “foul” that we have lost sight of the goal.
 4. We look at the Bible like our instant replay, studying it and dissecting it and analyzing it and even then we come to different conclusions.
 5. Why, we lament, won’t God come down and be the “Divine Referee” that we need in our situation?
 6. Why won’t the all-powerful judge simply come and make things right?

- C. It is in such a perplexing situation that the writer of Ephesians in the name of the apostle Paul speaks powerfully about the meaning of Christ's coming into the world.
1. New Christians have been given a spark of hope that justice and righteousness will prevail, but yet the powerful and evil interests in society still seem dominant.
 2. So the question comes: In Jesus, the Messiah, do we find the Divine Referee we have been seeking?
 - a. Is Jesus the great Separator who finally sorts out good and evil in the world?
 - b. Is he the judge who has come to make all things right and good?
 3. And what does it mean that Jesus calls us to be a part of the winning team?
 - a. Does that also make us judges?
 - b. Do we make the referee calls against anyone who isn't on our team?
 - c. How does Jesus' coming help the church to sort out the issues it faces both in the world and in its own midst?
 4. The answer may surprise us.
- III. In the first chapter of Ephesians, we find a key to the question of the Divine Referee.
- A. Starting in the middle of 1:8, the writer declares that *With all wisdom and insight he [God] has made known to us [the church] the mystery of [God's] will...*
1. The will of God and thus the judgments of God are made known to the church!
 2. But there is more: Going on, it says that *the mystery of [God's] will* is made known...
 - a. First, *...according to [God's] good pleasure that [God] set forth in Christ*, and
 - b. Secondly...*as a plan for the fullness of time*, and then...
 - c. Thirdly, the plan in a nutshell *...to gather up all things in him [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth. (1:8b-10)*
 3. By sending Christ into the world, God makes known a plan by which good and evil are revealed--and most importantly, by which God's good comes out victorious.
 - a. In other words, God has a plan for carrying out the work of the Divine Referee.
 - b. God has a means by which every player in the world is judged.
 - c. Let's note, then, several points about this plan.
- B. First, *the mystery of [God's] will* is made known *...according to [God's] good pleasure that [God] set forth in Christ...*
1. This means that God's will is revealed according to God's timing, when God wants.
 2. This is elaborated in the next phrase *as a plan for the fullness of time*.
 3. In other words, the referee's decision is not instantaneous.
 4. God is more like the referee who says, "Let them play the game!"
 5. Whatever judgment comes does not necessarily come when we want it.
 6. Instead, it comes according to God's timing.
- C. Secondly, the plan to reveal God's will is *set forth in Christ...*

1. The *mystery of [God's] will* is not made known in instant decisions which reward the good and penalize the evil.
 - a. God is not an objective, disinterested referee standing off to the side calling fouls.
 - b. Instead, God gets into the game, enters human history!
 2. The *mystery of [God's] will* is made known in a person—Jesus Christ!
 - a. God's perfect will for humanity is made known in the example of how Jesus lived, worked, served, and died, in our world.
 - b. But most importantly, as we will soon see, God's perfect will for humanity is made known in the resurrection power which overcomes death!
- D. The heart of this *mystery of [God's] will*, this plan that is being revealed, is to *gather up all things in [Christ]*.
1. Here is where our image of the Divine Referee really begins to unravel.
 2. Referees and judges are supposed to separate foul and fair on the spot, in the moment.
 3. Instead of a snap separation of judgment, we are told that God is gathering up all things.
 4. And he is taking his own sweet time to do it!
 5. To make the point even more emphatic, the *all things* includes *things in heaven and things on earth*.
- E. What is going on here?
1. Instead of the referee calling a foul on our opponents, the game is allowed to continue.
 2. And not only does it continue but as the ruling on the field is delayed, God himself enters the game.
 3. In Jesus Christ, God gathers us together--calls us together into the same huddle, calls us to be on the same team!
 4. How is this going to help bring about righteousness and justice?
 5. How is this going to assure that the right side is the winner if Jesus keeps muddling up who is on what team?
- IV. Further insight comes in the next paragraph of Ephesians 1.
- A. If God is the Divine Referee, it is a very different type of judging the game than we typically expect.
1. How does this refereeing work? How are the game calls being made?
 2. In other words, how does judgment take place in the world through Christ?
- B. Let's see if we can follow Paul's line of thought.
1. Since *the mystery of [God's] will* is being made known to the Church according to God's timing, it is not something automatic.
 2. To understand God's will and God's judgments is not to be given some instant power as in Superman or Batman, or any of the superheroes of our culture.
 3. Rather, it comes as the church opens itself up to the Holy Spirit in prayer.
- C. So the apostle himself initiates that prayer. In v. 17, he then prays that the believers would be given *a spirit of wisdom and revelation*.
1. Paul is asking God to give us as believers the powers of discernment.

2. Is it possible that the believers themselves have the ability to whistle a foul?
 3. Are we in the church to be the judges despite Jesus' words that we "Judge not"?
 4. What is this wisdom and revelation all about? What is it we are supposed to know?
- D. V. 17 says that we are given *a spirit of wisdom and revelation as [we] come to know him*, that is, Jesus Christ himself!
1. Again, we see the emphasis is not on a string of verbal pronouncements such as the text of a Supreme Court decision.
 2. The *wisdom and revelation* that makes judgment even possible comes as we learn to know the person and character of Jesus.
- E. Knowing Jesus Christ gives us knowledge of three things, according to vv. 18-19:
1. (V. 18) ...*the **hope** to which [God] has called you.*
 2. (V. 18) ...*the **riches** of [God's] glorious inheritance among the saints*
 3. (V. 19) ...*the immeasurable greatness of [God's] **power**.*
- F. Hope, riches (or resources), and power are the keys to living as Christ's church, according to God's plan for revealing *the mystery of [God's] will*.
1. Knowing **hope**, having **hope** enables us to endure when the game seems to get completely out of hand and totally unfair.
 2. Knowing ourselves as the children of the Divine Referee means that we have the **resources** to endure when evil seems to be prevailing.
 - a. Believers are provided with God's own kind of **riches**.
 - b. We are being given what we need to live out our witness to Christ in this world.
 3. But the real focus comes as we look at *the immeasurable greatness of [God's] **power**.*
- V. God's power is indeed the key to understanding God's judgment.
- A. Normally, we think of the power of a referee or judge as the power to force everyone to play fair.
1. It is the power of separation that penalizes and sidelines those that commit a foul or infraction and rewards those who are fouled against with a free throw or penalty kick.
 2. Thus, when everyone plays fair, supposedly the best team wins.
 3. The good guys prevail and the bad guys get sidelined, penalized, or put in jail.
- B. At its most extreme expression, the power of the judge, is the power of life and death; it is the power to kill in the name of freedom and justice and righteousness.
1. Clearly, that's what the religious and civil authorities thought they were doing when they sentenced Jesus to die on a cross.
 - a. Jesus was seen as a threat to an established order in society.
 - b. The judges of this world, whether religious or secular, took it upon themselves to judge Jesus, to exercise the power of death over Jesus.
 2. So when Ephesians talks about *the immeasurable greatness of [God's] power*, this is not the power of the Divine Referee that we commonly envision.
- C. Instead, as v. 20 puts it, *God put this power to work in Christ when [God] raised him from the dead.*

1. Instead of the power of death, God exercises the power of life, resurrection power.
 2. This is a power that forces us to examine all of our previous assumptions about how God blows the whistle of judgment.
 3. It is the power of life over death!
- D. The second part of v. 20 and on into the next verses makes an equally astounding claim. 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.*
1. The one whom the world judged worthy of death has been shown by the power of the resurrection to be the final authority, seated as the co-ruler at the right hand of the king of the universe!
 2. Jesus is far above every power in every place and every time.
 3. That certainly gives Jesus the authority to be the Divine Referee, the Supreme Judge of the Universe.
- VI. And then the real astonishment in v. 22-23: ²² *And he [God the Father] has put all things under his [Christ's] 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.*
- A. Once again, we see that the whole concept of the Divine Referee is turned upside down.
1. The power of judgment is not seen as the whistle blowing power of the Divine Referee who makes sure all of the so-called “bad guys” get kicked out and sent to hell.
 2. Judgment, in terms of separation is certainly necessary and is used by God.
 3. But separation not God's final intent; it is not God's ultimate goal.
 - a. Instead, separation is the natural by-product of human sin.
 - b. God does not separate us as much as we separate ourselves because of our own sin and rebellion against God.
 4. The judgment of separation happens on its own as through human sin we separate ourselves from Jesus Christ.
- B. However, the bigger picture, the true picture of the Divine Referee, is one of bringing people and things together: *all things under his [Christ's] feet*.
1. It is the power of reversing the separation into a process of gathering.
 2. It is no longer the feared power of death but rather the power of the resurrection, of life over death!
- C. Jesus Christ is revealed as *the head over all things for the church*.
1. This is the basis for the faith statement that **Jesus is Lord**!
 2. The power of the resurrection has trumped all of the powers of sin and death.
 3. All of those secondary powers are now lining up underneath the resurrection power of Jesus.
- D. To confess Jesus as *the head over all things* is to acknowledge him as supreme in at least two ways.
1. Head can mean the **origin**: where something comes from.

- a. The head of a river is where that river begins.
 - b. The head of the body contains the brain and it is the brain's signals from which all the activity of our physical bodies originates.
 - c. In the same way, all power in the universe originates from God in the first place.
 - d. To acknowledge Jesus as head is to acknowledge him as the Creator of all that is.
2. But head can also refer to **destination**, the place to which all things refer and where everything comes together.
 - a. Jesus Christ is the Ultimate Goal in the game of life.
 - b. Countering the image of the Divine Referee and great separator is an even more powerful image of Jesus Christ as the Ultimate Goal of life!
 3. That is the picture of redemption itself.
 - a. What was **separated from its origin** as a result of human sin...
 - b. ...is now being **gathered together and moving toward its final destination** through God's reconciling work in Jesus Christ!
- VII. Personally, I find these words powerful and compelling.
- A. But I am still struggling to understand all of the implications of the confession that Jesus Christ is *the head over all things for the church*.
 1. I struggle in light of the notion of some in our own conference and Mennonite Church USA that they need to separate in order to be faithful.
 2. It seems to me that in light of this passage, a separation among those who claim "Jesus is Lord" is in itself an evidence of sin.
 3. It is a denial of the very claim of Lordship that it seeks to make.
 - B. If we could focus on Jesus Christ himself instead of some lesser power called "purity" or "faithfulness" or "truth" or "justice" or "righteousness" or whatever other principle we emphasize, we could learn *the mystery of his will*.
 1. We could stop acting like the Divine Referee under our own human power.
 2. We could come in humility to the recognition that *the fullness of time* has not yet arrived in which God has revealed all of the answers to our picky little questions.
 3. We could learn from each other how God is bringing *all things* under the feet of Jesus, not just the things of our own particular faction.
 4. We could align ourselves more fully under [*Christ*] who has already been proclaimed *the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all*.
 - C. May we together find the ways to make it be so and thus proclaim more fully that Jesus is Lord!