

“Free Gift, or No?”  
 Sermon for 9 July 2017  
 Text: Ephesians 1:18-19a; Romans 5:14-17

**. . .having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, so that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, 19. and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power towards us who believe . . . (ESV)**

Two things came to mind as I meditated on this verse and the first of those is Paul's petition that the saints have hopes **worthy other calling**. What might Paul mean by that? And the second is **the riches of his glorious inheritance**. I put that up against the great and free salvation which we have by faith in Jesus Christ. Having already deal with the glorious inheritance that God has **in the saints**, as contrasted with for the saints which puts the emphasis on what's reserved for us in heaven. The result of this latter thought is to provoke a sense of wonder at the incalculable value which which God values us—we who are both undeserving and who carry about a great sense of unworthiness. If our inheritance is seen as God himself we are vastly rich indeed! Psalm 73: 24-26 exults:

**...24 With Your counsel You will guide me, And afterward receive me to glory. 25 Whom have I in heaven but You? And besides You, I desire nothing on earth. 26 My flesh and my heart may fail, But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever....**

In other words I was drawn to the sheer magnitude and wonder of this **glorious inheritance!** (v. 18) **The riches.**

With regard to the **hopes worthy of the calling** I conclude that these hopes must be high and nobles ones. They should be high enough to secure, or to induce in us the best and most excellent pursuits imaginable. Christ-likeness would be at the head of the list. Our hope is that when he comes, we will indeed be like him—what a glorious high hope.

However, when I returned to the freeness and immeasurable richness theme—such as in how great a salvation, how full and free—I had to deal with some ghosts from my past. In particular, I had a flashback to my days of studying social anthropology—when I wrestled with the implications of Marcel Mauss' The Gift: a 225 page monograph (in translation) first published in 1899). Mauss' book is a masterpiece of secular humanist writing. It is very well-conceived and written. Mauss questions if there even is such a thing as “a free gift.” You do not need to have read The Gift to grasp that if there is not such thing as “a free gift” both our understanding of salvation and of grace would need to be reconstructed. Of course, that would be one of the objectives of the humanist project. Questioning the idea of a “free gift” would undercut some of Christianity's foundation truth—and the good part of the good news of the gospel would be seriously diminished, reduced, or undercut. Mauss is a French social scientist and The Gift, although it alludes to God and talks about gods is covertly subversive. Mauss' book is right up there with James Frazer's massive (encyclopedic!) work, The Golden Bough. Frazer sought to dethrone the

exclusive truth claims of Christianity by promoting the plurality of religion(s)—they are all the same, all mythological, all unscientific. There is a lot of good comparative ethnology buried underneath the ideology of “enlightened” tolerance—it is kind a backdoor approach to the delegitimization of Christian truth.

Mauss and Frazer were both in quest of some “unified field theory of everything” in the social sciences so as to qualify as “scientific”—that is, right up there with the hard sciences like physics, cosmology, astronomy, chemistry and life sciences. They were looking to be “credentialed,” or taken seriously in age of technology whether structural, or genetic in nature. So, Mauss presents “gift exchange” as a “total social fact.” *Total social facts* include such things as “the divine of labor,” the suicide rates of specific populations, certain statistical and social norms—indeed religion is a social fact whether or not one affirms its truth claims or not! The social reality of “gift exchange” brings the collaboration of many social institutions (religious, judicial, moral, familial and kinship based institutions); they are economic events which both transact and celebrate the production, distribution and consumption of goods, value, wealth and prestige. When the minister asks, “Who gives this woman to be married to this man?,” he is invoking the language of “gift exchange” to assist in solemnization of the marriage covenant. That is very interesting, an intriguing form of social discourse and discussion.

So, is salvation the **free gift** of God, or not? (Roman 6:23) Or are we trapped in the atmosphere of mutual obligation, held down by the gravitational force of “gift-exchange?” Or, is this exactly the point that Paul is praying about in Ephesians 1? Is he petitioning the God of this universe to **open the eyes of our heart, to enlighten us** so that we can achieve orbit and escape the earth-bound-ness of things to which the Maussian analysis confines us?! And the short answer is “yes.” God sent his Son from heaven to earth to effect just such a liberation of mind and soul!

That is why it is written, **If Christ has set you free, you are free indeed.** (John 8:36) And, accordingly, Romans 5 reads:

Romans 5:14 **Nevertheless, death reigned from Adam until Moses, even over those who did not sin in the way that Adam transgressed. He is a pattern of the One to come. 15 But the gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God’s grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abound to the many! 16 Again, the gift is not like the result of the one man’s sin: The judgment that followed one sin brought condemnation, but the gift that followed many trespasses brought justification.**

If we are *free indeed*, in **Christ**, through His ministry to and for us, we are *free indeed* to self-surrender. ***The gift is a theological fact, prior to and beyond all its lesser implications!*** And by that self-surrender, rooted in God’s great gift to us in sending Christ, we come into a partial possession of God, a possession that starts small and grows greater and greater, aimed at fullness, and completion—which is heaven and knowledge of God simultaneously! The Christian life is, in the here and

now, an extrapolation of the life to some. Some heaven now, more heaven later! In ever-increasing measure of glory and wonder and splendor. Many social scientists are actually very, very restrictive—only certain outcomes can flow from their humanistic premises! It's as if they are attempting to compete in the high jump with concrete shoes on! They can hardly run up to the pit, let alone loft themselves over the bar!

I close with some thoughts on abundance and supply. I go here because it is most evident that the closed system say of gift exchange, or of the humanist project falter on this point of **the riches of his glorious inheritance**. What Paul has in mind here is both infinite in supply, and inexhaustible. It has its source in God and not in the world of limited resources and the restrictions of materiality. God is not lacking in riches, wealth or treasure in fact they are **glorious**—they defy quantification. Of course, quantifiability is the chief tenet of scientific endeavor! God can be described but God cannot be quantified . . . or analyzed . . . or reduced to the limits of human propositions. Another mind-boggling piece is the interminable nature of this **inheritance!** It does not dissipate, or deplete. We tend to assume both about this created space in which we live—*but we must not make that mistake about the God Who created us? Who sustains and governs us . . . God is the ultimate Giver. He cannot be out-given, and is not bound by his generosity or His actions as if he were a man.*

So, the gift is free . . . because God is free. There need be no other reason.

**Amen**