

A Sermon on the Connection between “Ought” and “Is”

Eph. 1.15-23



The Scottish philosopher David Hume introduced a famous ethical distinction between “is” and “ought.” Hume claimed that you cannot get from “is” (the way things are) to “ought” (how things should be or the kinds of moral behavior we should practice). This is-ought distinction is a common modern assumption, and is also reflected in what is called the difference between “facts” and “values.” Facts are about things of which we can be certain, like the physical sciences. “Values” are merely matters of opinion: ethics, politics, religion. We can argue about whether something is a fact these days, but arguments about “values” won’t get us very far. There’s a popular slogan: “You’re entitled to your own opinions, but not your own facts.”

This distinction between “is” and “ought” or “fact” and “value” would not have made any sense to pre-modern people. Pre-modern people believed that there was a correlation between what we believe about reality and the kinds of things we ought to do. And a moment’s thought will show that the pre-modern understanding is self-evidently correct. An illustration: You might be surprised to hear that there are

123 McDonald's restaurants in India. However, it should not be surprising to find out that McDonald's in India does not serve hamburgers, but only vegetarian burgers. If you're a Hindu and you believe that cows are sacred animals, you do not eat hamburgers. In the USA, we literally do not believe in "sacred cows," and McDonald's serves hamburgers here.

In the epistle reading this morning, we find in Paul's prayer for the Ephesians a perfect illustration of how this works. In Paul's prayer, he lists a number of activities – things that he is doing or that he expects his listeners to do. For example, Paul "gives thanks"; he prays that his hearers will "have the eyes of their hearts enlightened." However, Paul does not do the things he is doing – "give thanks" – or instruct his hearers to do certain kinds of things, for no specific reason. Rather, Paul draws a connection between the specific activity and some reality for which it is the "fitting" response. So Paul begins by saying that "he gives thanks for his hearers," and he "remembers them in his prayers" because of something he has heard – that they have "faith in the Lord Jesus" and "love toward all the saints" (Eph. 1:15-16).

The same pattern appeals in the way that Paul mentions four basic activities, which we could also call virtues or patterns of moral behavior: they are the three traditional "theological virtues" of faith, love, and hope, with the additional virtue of "knowledge" or "wisdom." In each case, Paul correlates a specific activity or virtue – an "ought" or a "value" – to something that is true about reality – an "is" or a "fact."

It is also interesting that Paul's prayer has a trinitarian structure. Each one of the virtues of faith, hope, love, and wisdom is associated with a specific member of the Trinity – the Father, the Son, or the Holy Spirit – and something that divine person has done to bring about our salvation. The basic structure of Paul's prayer is that because God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit have done certain things, Paul prays

that his hearers will be filled with these specific virtues. In what follows, I am going to reflect a bit on each one of these virtues to see how Paul correlates it with some activity of the Triune God – the Father, the Son, or the Holy Spirit.

So, first, what is faith? Some wag once remarked that faith is believing things that we know are not true. In Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, Alice says that "one can't believe impossible things," to which the White Queen replies, "I daresay you haven't had much practice . . . Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast." But faith does not mean believing "impossible things." In the apostle Paul's theology (and this was one of the important realizations of the Protestant Reformers), "faith" is not simply "belief." A better English translation might be "trust" or "reliance." Trust is inherently relational. Faith looks away from myself and what I can do to what someone else has done for me. Justification by faith means that I trust in Christ alone for my salvation because Christ is trustworthy even if I am not. So justification by faith is another way of saying justification through the redeeming work of Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ alone.

In Paul's prayer for the Ephesians, faith is directly related to the redeeming work of the second person of the Trinity, to what Jesus Christ has done for us. First, Paul refers to the Ephesians' "faith in the Lord Jesus," and later to the "immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who have faith." This power is the power by which God the Father raised Jesus Christ from the dead and "seated him at the right hand in the heavenly places." This risen Jesus Christ is now the head of the church, but he also has the "fullness of whom who fills all in all" (vs. 15, 19, 23).

The same God who created the entire universe (and according to Paul in the letter to the Colossians, God created the universe through Jesus Christ [Col. 1:16]), this God has redeemed us in Jesus Christ. God the Father has raised Jesus Christ from the

dead, and the risen Christ now not only shares his resurrection life with the Church which is his body, of which he is the head, but he rules over the entire universe God created while we wait for Christ to return. We can therefore trust in God – that is, have faith – because of what God the Father has done – raise Jesus Christ from the dead.

Faith is also closely connected to the second virtue of love. Paul mentions love only once in this prayer, the “love” that the Ephesians have “toward all the saints” (v. 15). But we know from what Paul writes later that as our faith is a direct correspondence to what God has done for us in Christ, so Christian love is also a direct correspondence to the divine love given to us in Jesus Christ. Later in Ephesians, Paul writes: “But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ.” (Eph. 2:4-5) In a second prayer for the Ephesians, Paul prays “that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God” (Eph. 3:17-19). According to Paul, the same crucified and risen Christ who now “fills all things,” also lives in our hearts through faith to fill us with the fullness of God so that we can know the love of Christ that is beyond anything we can know. There is certainly a paradox here, or a mystery, to say the least. What does it mean to know a love that surpasses knowledge, to know a love that is beyond knowing?

If Paul correlates faith and love with the redeeming work of the Father and the Son in this prayer, he associates the twin virtues of wisdom and hope with the Holy Spirit. Paul prays that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ will give to his readers the “Spirit of wisdom and of revelation” so that they can know the hope to which they are called. This hope is the “riches of

his glorious inheritance in the saints" (vs. Eph. 1: 17-18) One has to be careful about making too clear-cut distinctions, but if faith is oriented toward the past – faith is trust in the God who has created the world and redeemed us through Jesus Christ's death and resurrection – and love is oriented toward the present – we love God and our neighbor now because Christ first loved us – then hope looks toward the future. For the time being, we live in the period when God the Father has put all things "under Christ," but hope means that we look toward a future, a "glorious inheritance," when what is hidden now (Christ's heavenly reign) will finally be visible and gloriously out in the open.

Why is hope necessary? Hope is necessary because the faith and love in which we live in the present is a trust in a promise that is not yet fulfilled. We know that we can trust God's promises for our future because of what he has already done. Because we have faith in the God who raised Jesus Christ from the dead, and Christ now reigns in glory, because we love the Christ who loved us first, we can be certain that one day this same Jesus Christ will return and reign over a renewed creation. But that future is not here yet. And so we need hope, and God gives us hope through the Holy Spirit.

I said at the beginning of this sermon that throughout Paul's prayer, he draws a connection between "is" and "ought," between "facts" and "values." How Christians live is directly correlated to what is real, to the world that God has created and redeemed in Jesus Christ. And the corresponding human actions to God's triune activities of creation and redemption are the virtues or qualities of faith, love, and hope. But it would be misleading to assume that the relation between creation and redemption and the theological virtues is something like a mathematical equation. Because we know that God has done certain things; therefore, it is now our job to do certain things: to have faith, to love, to hope. I already mentioned that faith is not merely an intellectual conviction, but neither are love and hope. Faith, hope, and love are verbs

– to have faith, to have love, to have hope. And to engage in these verbs requires not simply a kind of knowing that certain things are true – what we might call “facts,” but a “knowing how,” knowing how and when to trust, how and when and whom to love, what to hope for and how to keep on hoping. What enables Christians to know how to believe, how to love, and how to hope is an additional virtue called “wisdom,” the ability to discern, to know how to do the right thing at the right time. And Paul says that “wisdom,” the last of the four virtues, is also the gift of the Holy Spirit – the “Spirit of wisdom and revelation” that enlightens the eyes of our hearts (vs. 17-18).

To talk about what Paul says about how we acquire this wisdom would take another sermon, but there is an important clue in Paul’s language of participation in Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection. As the crucified and risen Jesus Christ is the head of the church, so he gives nourishment to – he shares his resurrection life with – the church which is his body. As God raised Jesus Christ from the dead, so we the church are God’s handiwork, created in Christ to do good works (Eph. 2:10). As we are strengthened through the Holy Spirit, the risen Christ dwells in our hearts through faith (Eph. 3:17). As Jesus Christ loved us with a love beyond knowledge, so through the wisdom given by the Spirit, we learn to walk in the way of this love (Eph. 5:2).

Through the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, any gap between what is and what ought to be – between facts and values – has been closed. May the God who has raised Jesus Christ from the dead, and who has given us his Spirit to dwell in our hearts, so join the life of the church which is his body to the risen Jesus Christ who is our head, that his resurrection life and his love might fill us completely so that through the faith, love, hope and wisdom which are his gifts, our lives might completely correspond to the reality of who He is and what he has done for us. Amen.