

James 1:18 “You are the Firstfruit.”

Happy new year! Here we are January 4th, 2015. No better way to spend the first Sunday of the year than gathered together with family, the family of God!

At the beginning of the year us optimists get all excited at the possibilities! Even pessimists recognize a changing of times and perhaps the chance of a change for the better. As we set out on the course of this new year, I think it is fitting to reaffirm who we are in Christ. That is the foundation on which everything else you do or are in this year, is built.

This morning I want to base the message on just one verse.

But that one verse says a lot. It is **James 1:18**.

**“Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures”**

I remember having a conversation with my daughter, Katie, after church one day. She had heard about firstfruit in her Sunday School lesson. But she wasn't sure what it meant to be a firstfruit. So I mentioned the command of God to the Jewish people to dedicate the first of everything to him. First fruit, first grain, first born animal and first born child.

The first fruit is the part that belonged to God. In the case of produce it was sacrificed. In the case of children they were to be redeemed. They belonged to God, but instead of sacrificing them, God told the people to offer a lamb or if the family was not very prosperous a pair of doves. That is what Mary and Joseph offered for Jesus in the temple on the eighth day.

This verse says that we all are firstfruits. This is the new covenant with God. Anyone who is in Christ is his first fruit. We belong to him.

It also tells us two other things that are very important. Let's consider these three points today.

- 1) We are firstfruits of Gods creation. In other words we are special.
- 2) God brought us forth of his own will. In other words He brought us to His family by His will and because of this we know He loves us very much.
- 3) This came about through the “word of truth”. Truth frees us and empowers us. Knowing and believing what is true is important!

First we are God's firstfruits. We are special to Him. Does this sound like I am being arrogant? Perhaps, if I were saying I am so great that even God thinks I'm special. That would be arrogant and completely false!

Remember how we became God's firstfruits. It was by Him giving us birth through the word of truth. It is God's doing, not ours.

We must realize that we don't deserve God's grace. We don't deserve to be a part of His family. We don't deserve to enter heaven, ever. But, we do receive God's grace. We are a part of His family. We will enter heaven someday, because of Him.

To get a better idea of what a firstfruit is let's look at where it is mentioned in the Old Testament. It is actually mentioned quite a lot. But there is a passage in the book of Nehemiah that sums it up well.

This was written at a time after the people of Israel and Judah had been taken into captivity. They had disobeyed God's commands. They had worshiped idols and done terrible things as part of their worship, including sacrificing their own children by burning them in fire.

As a consequence, God rejected them and sent them to captivity. Many of the Israelites had been taken to Babylon as slaves, or to be resettled there. After 70 years, God sent some of them back to their homeland. Now they had returned to Jerusalem and rebuilt the walls of the city. Their leader called them together to have a ceremony of dedicating themselves to God. Here is part of what they pledge, found in **Nehemiah 10:35-37** “**And we made ordinances to bring the firstfruits of our ground and the firstfruits of all fruit of all trees, year by year, to the house of the LORD; to bring the firstborn of our sons and our cattle, as it is written in the Law,**

**and the firstborn of our herds and our flocks, to the house of our God, to the priests who minister in the house of our God; to bring the firstfruits of our dough, our offerings, the fruit from all kinds of trees, the new wine and oil, to the priests, to the storerooms of the house of our God; and to bring the tithes of our land to the Levites, for the Levites should receive the tithes in all our farming communities.”**

So the firstfruits were the first part of everything they received. We follow this today when we talk about tithing our firstfruits. That is the first 10 percent of the money we earn. Many Christians take it as a matter of conscience to give 10 percent of their income to the church or to other Christian ministries. While this is important, it's not the point I want to make today. The point here is, if you are a Christian, a believer in Jesus Christ you are the firstfruit. That means you are set apart for God. That makes you special.

The Bible says that when you believed in Jesus and received his forgiveness you became someone new. You also became set apart for God. You belong to God. It is as if you personally were offered to Him. Not just your money, or your time on Sunday morning, but you yourself.

**1 Corinthians 6:19-20 “Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s.”**

Other places in the Bible it says we are servants or slaves of God. Is this a good thing? Slavery as it existed and still exists in this world is not good. There is much suffering that comes from it. It does not respect the dignity of human beings.

But being a slave to God is quite different from that. I am so happy to be his slave! It means that he has taken me in. He has put his mark on me in the spiritual realm. He will take care of me. He owns me and He takes good care of what He owns.

It is one of those upside down kind of things. When we become a slave to God we are actually much better off than before. It is a special privilege to be his slave. In making us his He has taken us from being spiritually dead and given us life! Life now without fear, and eternal life when these days are over! We don't always fully appreciate what He has done for us.

I once read a story that illustrates this. This story is just made up, but it shows what I mean here. Jesus built a wonderful mansion. Then he went out and chose a homeless man to live in the house.

It was a beautiful place. It had wall to wall carpeting everywhere. Every bedroom had it's own private bath. The kitchen was outfitted with the best equipment and conveniences. In fact it even came with a cook who prepared the most delicious meals everyday.

Behind the house was a large swimming pool for the resident of the house. Next to the pool was a heated jacuzzi. This was a wonderful place. I want to live somewhere like this!

When Jesus came to visit the man to see how he was enjoying his new home Jesus had a hard time finding him. Jesus went to the living room, the family room, the dining room, the library, and so on calling for him. But there was no answer.

Finally he went to the door that led to the basement. The basement was a dark place with no windows. It was only for storage. He called down the stairs and finally he heard the man answer.

He said, “Why are you down in the basement when I've given you this beautiful mansion to live in?”

The man replied, “I don't deserve to live in this beautiful mansion. All I deserve is the basement. Thank you very much for giving me a place to stay off the street, but I can't live in the rest of the house. It is too nice for me.”

At this Jesus was a little impatient with the man. “I built this house for you to live in! I gave it to you. It cost me very much to do this, but I chose to because I love you. What right do you have to tell me you don't deserve it?

Yes it is a precious gift, but it is for you. Don't argue with my generosity.”

We are like that man. Spiritually speaking we were homeless before we believed in Jesus. He built the mansion for us, by sacrificing his own life. He doesn't mean for us merely to miss out on hell.

He means to have a loving relationship with each one of us. We should be happy and grateful! We are His. We are firstfruits.

The second point from this passage is that God chose to do this. Let's read **James 1:18** again, "**Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures**" Some other translations of this passage actually use the word "He chose" instead of the words, "of his own will."

He chose to give us birth. He chose us because he loves us.

As many of you know there is some debate among Christians about how this choosing by God works out. Some understand this and many other passages of the Bible to be saying that God only chooses some. And if He only chooses some, then the others are passed by, not chosen. Then it is all up to God who is a Christian and who is not.

Other people believe that this passage and others mean that God chose to make it possible for anyone to believe. By this thinking, then God offers salvation to all, yet only some will choose to accept it. In this case it is up to the individual whether he or she will be a Christian.

I think Pastor Dan handled this well when he was preaching from Ephesians a few years ago and he came to the place where it says He chose us before the foundation of the world and predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself.

He used the illustration of someone walking down a hallway. On the side of the hallway there is a door with a sign above it. "Whosoever will may enter."

The door is open to anyone who wants to enter. Many people, we could even say most people just walk on past that door. It is open to anyone who wants to enter, but many will just think it isn't for them.

However, once a person enters into the room she sees a beautiful banquet table. It is loaded with food for a feast. Around the table there are places set for the guests. At one of the places is a name plate with her name on it.

It was prepared for her, even before she entered the room. As she turns around she sees above the door on the inside this time, a sign that reads, "Chosen by God from before the foundation of the world."

Now, which way is it? Can anyone come in or just those who are chosen? We choose to enter by believing in Jesus Christ, and when we have done so we realize that it was God's plan for us all along.

I'm not going to come right out and tell you what I believe about this. Let's save that discussion for another day. But I just want to say, I am a Christian because I believed in Jesus Christ and came to him in faith, because He called me from before the foundation of the world, and I accepted. Knowing He loves me that much is just an amazing thing!

The important thing I want to say about this is that He chose us because He loves us. Our believing and becoming a part of His family was His idea, not ours. You didn't become a Christian because you were good enough. You became a Christian because God chose to give you birth. You didn't earn God's favor; He favored you even though you didn't deserve it.

There are none born in this world who have the ability to please God on their own. The Bible says that no one is righteous on their own. None of us can please God by trying to do good. It pleases God to love us anyway. There is nothing you can do to get God to love you more than He already does. There is nothing you can do to get God to be more pleased with you than He already is.

Isn't that wonderful! You can quit worrying about trying to win or keep His favor. You have it, period!

The third point is that truth is powerful. "He brought us forth by the word of truth." Don't pass over that part without thinking about it. Jesus is quoted in the Gospel of **John, chapter 8, verse 32** as saying, "**Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.**"

If you are in Christ you have been made into a new person. You are free from the old life and ways. But the devil will try to tempt you and tell you otherwise. He will tell you that you are really not any different. He will tell you that you aren't pleasing God, and that God doesn't really love you the way you are. Folks, these are lies! Don't believe them.

The way to fight against lies is with the truth. It is the same as when you enter a dark room. The way to dispel the darkness is by turning on a light. The way to not fall prey to the devil's lies is to shine the truth. Where does the truth come from? It comes from the Word of God. This book is His inspired word. If you read it regularly, study it, think about what it says and live your life based on it you will know the truth and you will be free!

What we believe does make a difference. This is more than just the power of positive thinking. Believing the truth or not is a choice that we make.

You can either believe the truth or perish in delusion. **2 Thessalonians 2:10b to 12** reads, **“They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness.”**

Yes, it said God sends the powerful delusion, but He only does it because they refused to believe the truth. Believing the truth or not is a choice that we make.

C.S. Lewis wrote a wonderful seven book series called the “Chronicles of Narnia.” If you haven’t read them yet, that’s great. You have a real treat waiting for you! Be sure to find them sometime and read them. They are simple, aimed at young readers, but full of eternal truth in allegorical form.

The last book of the series is titled, **“The Last Battle.”** This is the end of the land of Narnia. Aslan has come back to take his followers with him. But there is a great army fighting against them, trying to kill them all. Finally, it comes down to a doorway between worlds.

In the meadow in Narnia it is the door of a little old shed. On the outside that seems to be all that it is. But on the inside is another world. Those who followed Aslan go through the door and find Aslan waiting for them. He joyfully greets them and sends them on to the beautiful world He prepared for them.

There are also some dwarves who go through the door. The dwarves have fought against those following Aslan, and called them fools. They are absolutely convinced that there is nothing on the other side of the door, but the dark, smelly inside of the stable.

When the dwarves go through the door they are in the same beautiful world that the followers of Aslan entered. But they can't see it. Instead they think they are sitting on straw in the darkness.

When one of the children in the story tries to convince one of the dwarves that they are in a meadow by holding a bunch of wild violets to his nose he yells at her and accuses her of holding filthy stable litter in his face.

When Aslan creates a banquet of delicious food and puts a golden goblet of good wine in each one’s hand the dwarves begin eating and drinking. But instead of enjoying the delicious food and wine, they think they’re eating hay and old turnips and drinking water from a donkey’s trough.

Finally Aslan says, **“They have chosen cunning instead of belief. Their prison is only in their own minds, yet they are in that prison; and so afraid of being taken in (that means fooled) that they can not be taken out.”**

Find the truth and believe it. The truth is that God made you. God chose you. God loves you. God values you.

If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, God is going to bring you to his kingdom, and God is going to crown you.

Our response to all of this can only be one thing. Love and gratitude to God. In this God is glorified.

This is the foundation on which to live this year and the rest of the years of your life.

Extemporaneous prayer ---

Our response to all this love and grace of God should be one of love and gratitude back to him. This song we're going to sing says it well. Please think carefully about the meaning of the words as you sing, and sing it to Jesus. Thank you musicians.