

STRENGTH TO KNOW CHRIST'S LOVE

Ephesians 3:17-19 (No. 19)

Treasuring Christ Church – Pastor Boyd Johnson

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INTRODUCTION

Eph 3:14-19

¹⁴For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, ¹⁵from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, ¹⁶that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

As we'll see today, only Christians can truly know Christ's love. We have a unique privilege of knowing and experiencing Christ's love. And a mark of maturity in the Lord is a growing understanding and a deeper sense of God's love for you. Grasping Christ's love for us—as we'll see in today's passage—is urgently important to your life.

Unfortunately, so many times when we hear others explain Christ's love, it tends to be mere sentimentality. A kind of shallow emotionalism rather than a robust experiential knowledge that we find in the Bible. Let me give you an example of this shallow emotionalism from a best-selling Christian book a few years ago from an author many of you would recognize.

I was going to call this book Jesus of a Thousand Hearts, because of the way he continually breaks into my life. He “speaks” to me through hearts. I'll find stones in the shape of hearts in rivers where I'm fishing. I've seen them almost step-by-step up a mountainside when on a grueling climb. Praying in the morning I'll look out the window and passing by will be a heart-shaped cloud. Dinner rolls, seashells, stains on my jeans. I've won the lottery when it comes to hearts from Jesus. But I am ashamed to admit that last summer, I grew a little impatient with them. I was going through a trying time and seeking God for the answer to many questions. Often, he would simply give me a heart in reply. I'd be walking down the sidewalk, and there in the cement see a heart-shaped hole, made by a bubble when they poured the sidewalk.

I actually grew a little dismissive of them. I didn't want hearts—I wanted answers.

So, Jesus stopped giving these treasures of our friendship.

Last fall, while walking through an alpine meadow bow hunting, I was asking him, How come you don't give me hearts anymore? I asked it in a pouting kind of way. At that moment something gray caught my eye. I looked down midstride, and there in the grass, about as big as a dinner plate, was a dried piece of cow manure—in the perfect shape of a heart.

If I didn't know Jesus adores me, if I didn't know he is playful, and if our relationship didn't allow me to receive a playful tease, I might have misinterpreted the icon. But I

loved it. It was both, Oh, so now you want a heart? and, I adore you still. A cow-pie heart. That is so Jesus. Wish I'd taken a photo of it—we could have put it on the cover of this book.

There are a lot of problems with that quote. I can't imagine the Apostle Paul would ever write something so juvenile. Even if I believed the author—which I don't—but even if I believed the author that Jesus was dropping heart-shaped everything in his path—we can be assured of this: heart-shaped cow pies aren't going to get you through life's troubles or help you become more Christlike. As one commentator said, if Jesus really did give him a heart-shaped cow pie, this is truly the worst gift ever.

I use this quote to illustrate the kind of sentimentality about God's love that exists in Christianity and yet the Bible knows no such thing. Biblically, the love of God for you is rooted in a man half-naked, with spikes driven through his hands and feet, and blood dripping like rain off a cross. Biblically, the love of God for you is rooted in a kind of courage and manliness this world has never known, where the God-man braved the torment of his enemies and suffered the wrath of his Father in order to rescue the ones he came to save, even though they were born his enemies. Christ's love for you isn't so much a "love-letter-in-the-sand" kind of love as it is a "storming-the-beaches-of-Normandy" kind of love.

We need to know the true love of Christ for us. Not some cheap substitute. Not some shallow emotionalism. We need the heavy ballast of the truth of Christ's love at the bottom of our boat when life's seas rage. Verses 17-19 are such truth. They reveal the true nature of Christ's love for us.

Connection to Last Week

These verses are part of a lengthy prayer from Paul that begins in v.14 and extends through v. 21. I said last week that this prayer builds on itself. Each phrase builds on the phrase before it. There is logical progression to the prayer. And there is an emotional progression to the prayer. The prayer builds in intensity. The stair steps in this prayer, as Paul leads up to God, are marked by the word "that"—found in v.16, 17b, 19b. The first step is a prayer for strength in your inner being.

v.16-17a: [Paul prays] that according to the riches of [God's] glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith

So Paul wants this church to know that he prays for God to strengthen them in their spirit so that Christ might dwell in their hearts. In other words, that they would be strengthened by God with the result that Christ becomes the controlling influence over all their affections. That Christ so controls their hearts—that it's apparent he is their Lord.

Now, if the prayer stopped there it would be a powerful prayer. This is the kind of prayer we should all pray for our own lives and the lives of those we care about. "O God, change our hearts, sweep our hearts clean, give us your desires, crucify our loves that do not honor you!" But Paul doesn't end there. He goes another step further. And we come to the second petition in his prayer. But it isn't a petition for something altogether different. The prayer builds.

The second petition is related to the first. We need to be strengthened by God so that we would have the strength for something. What is it?

Introduction of the Text

v. 17-19 [that you] 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,

So, see the link between verse 16 and verse 18. . .

v. 16: “he may grant you to be strengthened with power”

v. 18: “you may have strength to comprehend. . .”

Strengthened with power (v. 16) in order to have strength to comprehend (v. 18). Strength to comprehend what? He says [look at this carefully with me], “strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth. . .” Of what Paul? At first glance, he appears not to complete the thought. Right when we think Paul’s going to tell us “the breadth and length and height and depth of. . .” The line goes dead. Same in the Greek as in the English. The next word is “and.” Well, he didn’t forget to complete his thought. Rather, he’s building intensity. So that when you get to this point in the sentence you’re asking the very question we’re now asking—Of what Paul? What do I need strength to comprehend the breadth and length and height and depth of. . .”? What is it, Paul?

So he’s pulling you along—like a master of the pen, he’s compelling you to read the rest of the sentence—heightening your anticipation, intensifying your emotions. And then he says, “and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge.” Ah! So now we know what he means—we need strength to comprehend the breadth and length and height and depth of Christ’s love for us, so that we would know his love that surpasses knowledge. We need strength to know the vastness of Christ’s love. Now, I want you to observe five things here about the love of Christ—5 observations about this love.

First. . .

I. CHRIST’S LOVE IS A LOVE BEYOND MEASURE

The human mind can invent no system of measurement to measure the love of Christ. All the ways that we could think of to calculate Christ’ love, estimate his love, gauge his love prove inadequate. Look at the “breadth and length and height and depth” of Christ’s love and you cannot survey it.

Paul says that the love of Christ “surpasses knowledge.” The word “surpasses” = lit. “to throw beyond.” It can be translated surpassing, extraordinary, exceeding. So to fully comprehend the love of Christ is beyond the capability of any human being. That Christ died on behalf of sinners is beyond our full comprehension. No matter how much you know and understand of Christ and his love, his love surpasses that knowledge. There is always more. The more we know of his love, the more there is to know. The more we know of his love, the more we are amazed. Who can explore all the depths of the sea? Who can map the universe?

And who can say they know all the greatness of Christ's love for you? We try to understand his love. And we do know it. But just a little.

One writer says that "the love of Christ is broad enough to encompass all mankind, long enough to last for eternity, deep enough to reach the most degraded sinner, and high enough to exalt the sinner to heaven" (Stott). But because the vastness of Christ's love for you, you need the strength of God to know the love of God. That doesn't sound like it goes together, does it? Strength to know love? But when you consider the bigness of Christ's love for you, then you realize you need the strength of God to comprehend it. You need an act of God, you need the mighty power of God in order to know this love. Christ's love is a love beyond measure. Second. . .

II. CHRIST'S LOVE IS A LOVE WE GROW TO KNOW

We know that growing in our comprehension and knowledge of Christ's love is possible for two reasons:

- 1) Paul is praying that it would happen
- 2) and we have the strength of God to make it happen.

One of our aims in Christian maturity is to grow in our knowledge of the love of Christ. When we are first saved, we know something of the love of Christ. Christ's love may have been so compelling to us that we felt instantly drawn to him as he saved us. Over time, our apprehension and joy in Christ's love should grow. Charles Spurgeon likens this to a child at school:

"We must learn our alphabet at the elementary school of repentance and faith, and study the syntax of Christian holiness at the grammar school of experience before we can enter the university of full assurance, and obtain a fellowship among those who comprehend the science of Christ crucified in its highest degree."

"The apostle does not propose that the new convert should at once be able to measure the breadth and length and depth and height of the love of Christ; he knows that this is not within the range of the infant mind; for the new-born spirit has a time of growth to go through before it can enter into the deep things of God."

Then, speaking of the measure of Christ's love, he says, "In this measurement may you and I be skilled. If we know nothing of mathematics, may we be well-tutored scholars in this spiritual geometry, and be able to comprehend the breadths and lengths of Jesus' precious love."

So do you pray like Paul that you would know Christ's love more? If not, is your prayerlessness because you assume that there is not much more to learn about Christ's love in the depths of your heart? Or, is it apathy? Or is it ignorance of the vastness of Christ's love? So pray that the Holy Spirit would strengthen you to know Christ's love more.

Christ's love is a love we grow to know. The third observation about Christ's love from this passage is. . .

III. CHRIST'S LOVE IS A LOVE WE KNOW BECAUSE WE HAVE BEEN LOVED

This part of Paul's prayer begins with the words in v. 17b, "you, being rooted and grounded in love." So there is a condition to knowing this love. ~You, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend and know this love. So for a person to know God's love for them, there is a condition. Not everyone is able to know this love.

Though God loves the whole world (we know that from John 3:16), there is a particular kind of love—a special love—that God has for his own. Paul is writing to believers. Christians are those who have been "rooted and grounded in [God's] love." Paul uses two metaphors here. The first is that of a well-rooted tree. Our roots sink deep into God's love for us. The second is that of a well-built building. Our foundation rests on God's love for us.

And one of the effects of God's love for you is that it enables you to know God's love for you. You have been loved to know God's love. He loved you first, so that you could know his love for you. So the kind of knowledge of Christ's love that Paul is talking about is a knowledge that can only be experienced by one who God has loved savingly. So Christ's love is a love we know because we have been loved. The fourth observation tells where growth in knowing Christ's love happens.

IV. CHRIST'S LOVE IS A LOVE WE KNOW IN COMMUNITY

Did you notice the phrase "with all the saints" in verse 18?

"that you" may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth,

Grasping Christ's love is something shared with other believers. This isn't a kind of esoteric knowledge that happens apart from the church. Grasping Christ's love happens within the church—in shared life with each other—as we mutually seek to have Christ dwell in our hearts more and more. Growth happens together. Finally. . .

V. CHRIST'S LOVE IS A LOVE THAT LEADS TO FULLNESS

v. 19b: "that you may be filled with all the fullness of God."

Where are you going with all this Paul? Is there a point of us grasping more fully Christ's love for us? The answer from v. 19b is yes, our growth in grasping Christ's love is so "that you may be filled with all the fullness of God." What does it mean to "be filled with all the fullness of God?" Paul uses that terminology about us in reference to all the members of the Trinity in this letter. Here: we are to be filled with all the fullness of God.

4:13 we are to grow in the fullness of Christ

5:18: we are to be filled with the Spirit.

So here in 3:19, it's Paul's way of saying "that you may become as much like God as possible." In other words, "that you may be all God has for you in Christ." What Paul prays is that these believers would have power to grasp the love of Christ so that they would become spiritually

mature. To be filled with the fullness of God is to live with a deep knowledge of the love of God that causes you to live differently. Tears don't necessarily indicate you know this love. But actions do. What did Paul say, "For Christ compels us. . ." (2 Cor. 5:14). Christ's love stirred him to action. The mature Christian increasingly acts on the basis of Christ's love for him. The stunning implication is this verse is that the way we grow spiritually is by receiving power from God to enable us to grasp the limitless dimensions of Christ's love.

We often think we grow spiritually by reading theology or learning more facts. But have you prayed?! Have you prayed to know Christ's love more so that you would become more like God?

CONCLUSION

So, Church, let us commit once again to pray for ourselves and for each other that we would grow to grasp Christ's love for us.

Let's pray together even now:

Father:

- We feel so inadequate to know Christ's love.
- Who are we to know the unknowable?
- How can we grasp what cannot be fully grasped?
- So, we ask for your power. May the Holy Spirit strengthen us to know this great love.
- And it is a great love.
- Like the hymnist wrote: the love of God is greater far than tongue or pen can ever tell.
- Could we with ink the ocean fill and were the skies of parchment made / Were every stalk on earth a quill, and every man a scribe by trade / To write the love of God above would drain the ocean dry; Nor could the scroll contain the whole, though stretched from sky to sky.
- What a love you have saved us into!
- Grant us, we pray, to experience this love increasingly.