

VII. Lesson 7 The Identifying Factors of a Mature Christian – Ephesians 3:14-21

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Stuart chapter 7

Aim: To appreciate the exceedingly wonderful greatness of our God.

In chapter 1, Paul assured the new believers at Ephesus that he was praying for them. He told them that he was praying that they might understand where they were going, and what had happened to them. But that was not the sum total of his intercession. Here in 3:14-121, he discloses what else he was praying for on behalf of the Christians to which he was writing.

From verse 14 through to verse 21, there is an interlude of prayer. It is a prayer of thanksgiving, it is a prayer of adoration, and it is a prayer of apostolic intercession for the saints that they may grow in their capacity to be filled with the love of Christ. This prayer prepares us for the grand theme that Paul is going to expound in chapter 4, which has to do with the unity of the body of Christ, the church.

A. Paul's Prayer (Eph. 3:14-15)

'For this reason...'

Paul is taking up what he was originally going to write in 3:1, where the same words occur. To find out, therefore, what the 'reason' (*charin*) for his prayer is, we must go back to the teaching immediately preceding 3:1. There he was telling us that there are no longer Jews and Gentiles in God's sight. Jews who believe, together with Gentiles who believe, all form just one nation; they make up a single spiritual temple. As Paul thinks about this, it moves him to pray for the Ephesian believers. 'The mystery' was taking visible form on Ephesian soil. Paul sees it, and goes to his knees to ask God to grant further favors to these people.

Not only is Paul led to prayer by the thought of the greatness of the grace of Christ raising to life those who were dead in sin, and by the realization of the unity into which Jew and Gentile have been brought in the one household, but also by the contemplation of the whole wonderful purpose of God which he has been led now to express more deeply and personally.

Paul's confidence is that God has already determined to do all the things he has been writing about for and in the believers for whom he prays. God is establishing His church, in which the manifold wisdom of God is being displayed before the watching angels. God is doing this. God is showing forth His glory in us. Therefore—that is, for this very reason—Paul prays for those in whom He is doing it.

1. To the King (3:14a)

'...I bow my knees...'

This passage is a prayer like that of 1:15-23, but it has even greater intensity, because of his posture. How does he approach God? He kneels in prayer. This posture is unusual, since the way in which Jewish people prayed at that time was by standing and looking up into heaven (*cp.* Mt. 6:5; Lk. 18:11, 13). Kneeling for prayer, though it has become a regular Christian attitude, was formerly an expression of deep emotion or earnestness.

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By kneeling, Paul refers to his sense of wanting to be on his face in a posture of homage and obeisance before the Kingship of God. He approaches God as King. Prostrate and in utter abasement, he must come as a suppliant before the throne. Likewise, we must approach God humbly with our petitions and supplications. By humbling ourselves, we will be more in tune to pray in accordance with God's will and motivation, and not our own.

2. To the Father (3:14b-15)

‘...to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named...’

God has one eternally begotten Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. He also has an immense number of adopted sons. Each one has been named with His name. Some of these adopted children are now with the Father in heaven, while others are at this moment living on the earth. But whether they are in heaven or on earth, they form a single family, and there is only one Father.

The phrase ‘whole family’ is *pasa patria* in Greek. Since the word for ‘Father’ in the immediately preceding phrase is *pater*, there is an obvious play on these words which is impossible to capture in English. Our spiritual ‘family’ (*patria*) derives its being and even its very name from its *pater*. One way to describe it would be to say that *patria* refers to all of the descendants of a particular *patriarch*. In one sense, the whole Jewish nation could be traced back to Abraham and be called the *patria* of Abraham. It does not just refer to the single family unit as in our own culture.

The other interesting word is *pasa*. *Pasa* can mean (and usually does mean) ‘every,’ in which case the phrase *pasa patria* would mean ‘every family,’ meaning perhaps ‘every nation’ of the world or ‘every family within’ the one larger family of God's people. However, it is not a variety of families that Paul is thinking of here, but one family, the family that derives its very name from God. So *pasa* should correctly be translated ‘whole.’ It is the whole family for whom Paul prays—Jew and Gentile, rich and poor, male and female, young and old, educated and uneducated—everyone, for it is in the family as a whole that God's great purpose of making known His manifold wisdom is fulfilled.

‘His whole family in heaven (*ouranos*) and on earth (*gēs*)’ thus refers to the elect family of God, namely the church universal. This family of God incorporates those who are in heaven, as well as those who are on earth. The Church of Jesus Christ includes in its membership believers from all tribes, all nations, and all times. We have a mystical fellowship not only with those brothers and sisters in the Lord who are alive and within the scope of our acquaintanceship, but with those who are living right now all over the world, and not only with those who are alive now, but with those who have gone to heaven.

Every Christian is in a mystical union with Jesus. When we die and go to heaven, that mystical union is not broken. Nothing can separate us from the union that we have with Jesus. If presently I am alive and have a saving relationship with Jesus, I am in mystical union with him. Insofar as I am united to Him, I am also in mystical union with everybody else who is likewise united to Him. Our unity with all saints living and dead is through our Savior Himself.

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B. Paul's Petitions (Eph. 3:16-19)

Generally speaking, Christians tend to fall into one of two extremes when they pray. There are those who see only the greatness and majesty of God and who speak to Him as if He were distant and almost unknowable. Then there are others who seem only to remember that He is our Father and who often address Him with sickening intimacy. Paul avoids both these dangers. Paul believes that God is able to grant the requests he makes because of 'the riches (*ploutos*) of His glory (*doxēs*).' Paul sees Him as a majestic King of obvious wealth. Why should God listen to Paul's prayer at all? Simply because He is the Father of His people. God can be confidently addressed as King. He can be boldly addressed as Father. That is why Paul comes to Him with his requests.

Paul's prayer concerns his readers' wills, their hearts, their minds, and their whole person. Each of his four petitions starts out with the word 'that.' In his prayer he speaks about the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. He is praying that the whole of the Godhead will do something for the whole man. His prayer does not mention externals, for the gospel is not concerned with them. He is praying for something to happen inside the lives of the Ephesians.

1. The Will (3:16)

'...*that* He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man...'

The first gift for which prayer is made here is strength (*cp.* 1:19). The verb *krataiōthēnai* speaks of being made strong or capable. A person can be made strong in love, or knowledge, or some other quality; at this point the prayer is that Paul's readers may be equipped with the power or might (*dynamis*) that makes them able to stand firm in Christ, and to live and work for Him. Whatever spiritual power they have, Paul is praying that it will increase so that it will permeate the very depth of their being. The strength for the Christian life comes by the personal indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

Paul has been talking about suffering, and this is probably why he begins his prayer with a request that the believers at Ephesus might be strengthened by God's Spirit. None of us show much of the manifold wisdom of God in easy days. It is in suffering that the grace of God is manifested. But who has the strength for suffering? Still, it is not only in times of suffering that we need to be strengthened. We need strength every day of our lives and in every circumstance. A Christian needs to be fortified with the assurance of God's power, not his own. When a believer attempts to minister in his own strength, he fails to let God maximize the opportunity.

2. The Heart (3:17a)

'... *that* Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith...'

The indwelling of Christ in the heart, and the strengthening by the Spirit coming into the inner being, are not two different experiences. Paul is not always precise in distinguishing the work of Christ and of the Spirit in human lives. It is true that all who are truly Christians are indwelt by Jesus Christ, but it is also true that this is something they grow into as Christ takes stronger and fuller possession of every corner of their lives.

This is the only place in the whole Bible that specifically mentions Christ dwelling in our hearts, although the concept permeates the Scriptures. When a person becomes a Christian and has authentic faith, he has a real mystical union with Christ, so that Christ really comes to indwell

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the believer. When we exercise faith in Jesus Christ, His righteousness is counted towards us and we are justified. At that same moment, Christ, by virtue of the Holy Spirit, comes to dwell inside of us. Does this phrase contradict Paul's earlier writing that says the Spirit of Christ already dwells within the hearts of believers (1 Cor. 6:19)? No! The indwelling of Christ is a matter of degrees. It progressively reinforces divine security whereby one's faith is strengthened in proportion to the energy he expends in the performance of his salvation (Phil. 2:12).

There are two Greek words meaning 'to dwell.' The first word, *paroikeō*, means to dwell in a place as a stranger. It is used of a foreigner dwelling in a land not actually his own. Paul does not use this word; instead, he uses *katoikeō*, which means to dwell in the sense of settling down in a place and making a permanent residence there. The prayer is that Christ might settle down in our hearts and control them as the rightful owner.

When a person puts God's Word into practice, he has a sense of Christ's presence in his life. But why should anyone obey God's Word? Because he *believes* it. Christ's being 'at home' in our hearts is linked to faith. And since the heart is used in the New Testament to describe the innermost center of human life, Christ should live, not at the periphery, but at the very center of the Christian's life.

3. The Mind (3:17b-3:19a)

'... *that* you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height—to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge...'

Paul's third request is to do with the mind. He is praying that his readers, inwardly strengthened by God's Spirit and filled with love for Christ, will be able to comprehend something which is beyond comprehension, to know something which is unknowable!

a) *Rooted and Grounded in Love (3:17b)*

'... that you, being rooted and grounded in love...'

The form of these verbs, 'rooted' (*errizōnemoi*) and 'grounded' (*tethemeliōmenoi*) indicates past action that has taken place and is continuing. The apostle is mixing his metaphors, drawing one from agriculture (rooted) and the other from masonry or the building industry (established, founded, or grounded). The first picture compares a believer to a plant rooted in the love of God. Love is here pictured as something that nourishes us and causes us to grow. The second image compares believers to a building established on love as a foundation. In this case, love is pictured as a solid foundation that supports us against and forces against us. Both roots and foundations are unseen. Love often works behind the scenes; it does not boast or see its own (1 Cor. 13:4-5). A mature Christian exudes love in serving others.

b) *May Be Able to Comprehend With All the Saints (3:18a)*

'...may be able to comprehend with all the saints...'

Paul is praying that our understanding will be able to penetrate one of the great mysteries. It is not enough that we understand God to be loving, nor that we understand there to be a love that belongs to Christ. We need divine power to have a deeper understanding of the dimensions of the love of Christ. The word translated 'may be able' or 'may have strength' (*exischysēte*) and also the verb 'comprehend' (*katalabesthai*), meaning 'an earnest grasping,' suggest the difficulty

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of the task envisaged, simply because it is no mere intellectual feat, but a matter of practical experience, a living together in love which is inevitably costly.

Paul was aware of a danger, especially in the churches of the Greek world, of a faith that depended simply on intellectual knowledge (*cp.* 1 Cor. 1:22; Col. 2:18, 23; 1 Tim. 1:4; 6:4). This was the supreme weakness of Gnosticism. So here he teaches that the true knowledge of God is unattainable without love. If there is no love, the Spirit of Christ is not present, and there can be no understanding.

This petition gives two reasons why understanding proceeds of necessity from love. In the first place, the truth is not apprehended by an individual in isolation, but ‘with all the saints’ (*hagios*). His love unifies all believers. Christians who isolate themselves will have a limited knowledge of God’s love. Isolation leads to hermitage, and hermits only serve themselves. Christians are called to be united in Christ to experience the fullness of God. A mature believer will be actively involved in the community of faith.

Secondly, the content of the knowledge and wisdom of God is love. Although we cannot exhaust the love of Christ by our knowledge, we can nevertheless know this love truly. It is the same with the knowledge of God, generally. We cannot know exhaustively, but we can know truly. The love of Christ that we know at the beginning of our Christian life is the same love that we will know (though more fully) at the end. How do we grow in awareness of that love? Through experience, and particularly in the routine hardships, sufferings, and persecutions of life.

c) The Dimensions of Christ’s Love (3:18b-19a)

‘...what is the width and length and depth and height—to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge...’

The definite goal to which the Christian life must move is ‘to know the love (*agapē*) of Christ,’ to know how He loved and loves, and to experience His love in loving Him and loving others for His sake. Yet, the love of Christ is infinitely greater than anyone can fully know or imagine, and it is also much more than any object of knowledge. The chief idea is experience. Paul wanted them to experience the love of Christ, which in its fullest extent surpasses human knowledge (*hyperballousan tēs gnōseōs*).

We normally talk in terms of three dimensions. Paul gives us four, but why he chooses to do it this way, he doesn’t tell us. He wants believers to be able to understand the love of Christ completely. 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 Him to heaven.

Paul knows full well that no one can ever discover the full dimensions of Christ’s love. He wants us to explore its width. There is a marvelous breadth (*platos*) about it. It embraces not only the Jew, but the Gentile as well. There is a wide invitation to come to Christ. Not even all the church put together has yet realized how wide the love of Christ really is. And what is the length (*mēnkos*) of Christ’s love? It is from eternity to eternity. Who knows how deep (*bathos*) Christ’s love is? It was His love which brought Him to descend from heaven. It was love which moved Him to sit with sinners, even with those who had sunk to the very depths. Can anyone explain how high Christ’s love is? Think of the height (*hupsos*) to which He has already lifted us. We are the adopted children of God, already seated in heavenly places.

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Paul's petition alludes to heavenly perfection. Although our sinful natures keep us from this perfection, we must not forsake the challenge of emulating Christ and becoming like Him. A mature Christian will continue to educate himself in Christ and the Word of God; for our heavenly Father expects us to grow daily toward the fullness that awaits us in Him.

We all know more about Christ's love than we used to. However, if all believers of all times were to tell what they knew, we should still not discover the whole. No Christian has gone as far as it is possible to go. No believer has yet understood all that there is to understand. There are limitless panoramas just waiting to be seen and enjoyed. There are endless dimensions of spiritual experience to be entered into. No number can be put on the discoveries that have yet to be made. Who would be foolish enough to be content with his present level of spiritual understanding and enjoyment? Shall we not give all our energy to making spiritual progress?

Could we with ink the oceans 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 oceans dry;
Nor could the scroll contain the whole
Though stretched from sky to sky.

4. The Whole Person (3:19b)

'...*that* you may be filled with all the fullness of God.'

Paul ultimately prays in the climax of his prayer that we may receive not any attribute of God, or any gift of His, not love, not knowledge, not strength, alone or in combination – but no less than the very highest he can pray for, the full indwelling of God – 'that you may be filled (*plērōthēte*) with all the fullness (*plērōma*) of God.'

Overwhelming as the petition may be, Paul seems to be praying that we (and all other Christians) may be filled up to or unto all the fullness that is in God Himself. We are to be filled with all God's fullness, an infinite thing. But then, we have all eternity (an infinite time) to be so filled. Paul is praying that we will be filled and filled and filled and filled and filled—and so on forever, as God out of His infinite resources increasingly pours Himself out into those sinful but now redeemed creatures He has rescued through the work of Christ.

There is no limit to God's giving because He, by definition, is limitless. So Paul asks that we might be filled and filled up to the limit of God's ability to give. But there is no limit! So he prays that we might be filled unto all the fullness of God.

Do you want everything that God has for you, the full measure of His grace? If you are going to achieve full stature in the Christian life, you need to be filled with the love of Christ, a love that surpasses understanding and knowledge.

C. Paul's Praise (Eph. 3:20-21)

Paul then gives a benediction in the middle of the epistle. It is as though he says, 'I am finished with this theme, I am going to turn my attention now to the practical applications of this depth and riches of the mystery of Christ's love in the family of God.'

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1. His Ability (3:20)

‘Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us...’

Paul reflects on the fact that there is no limit to what God can do for us. No limit! Only human thoughts and words about it are limited. He is able to do what we ask; all that we ask; above all that we ask; abundantly above all that we ask; exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask; exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think!

Now to Him
Who is able to do
All that we ask or think
Above all that we ask or think
Abundantly above all that we ask or think
Exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think

The first thing that the apostle says is that God is able to *do* something. The Greek word, *poieō*, means ‘to make, cause, effect, bring about, accomplish, perform, provide, or create.’ It points to God as a worker, who gets things done. Too many times, we, as believers, fall back into our worldly attitudes and give ourselves credit for accomplishing difficult or challenging tasks. But it is God who does it, not us. The second thing Paul says about God is that He is able to do what we *ask*. That is, the ability of God to work is not related merely to His own concerns and interests, but extends to the concerns and interests of His people. Do we pray with confidence, asking God for what we need?

The next thing Paul tells us is that God is able to do *all* we ask or think. It is His ability to *all* we can ask or imagine that encourages us to stretch forward spiritually and ask for more. It is His ability to give all we ask or imagine that encourages us to come with big petitions. It is even greater than this, for Paul has amplified his doxology to say that God is able to do even *more* than all we might ask or imagine. Life may have not gone exactly as you would have planned it for yourself; you may have had many disappointments. But if you are really trying to obey God and follow after Him, can you not say that God’s fulfillment of His promises toward you has been more than you asked?

God is not only able to do more than all we can think, but He also is able to do *immeasurably* more than we can contemplate. ‘Exceedingly abundantly’ is another of Paul’s coined words: *hyperekperissou*. It occurs only here and in 1 Thessalonians 3:10 in Greek literature. It can be rendered ‘immeasurably,’ ‘infinitely more,’ ‘far more abundantly,’ ‘exceeding abundantly beyond,’ etc.

Paul is not thinking of earthly blessings here. He is going beyond these to think of the blessings of God’s inexhaustible kindness toward us through Christ in eternity. Since eternity is immeasurable, so also are the works that God will do for us in the life to come. And this is all accomplished through the power (*dynamis*) of the Holy Spirit which is already at work in us.

2. His Glory (3:21)

‘...to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.’

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Paul wants God to be glorified. He wants Him to be worshiped, exalted, and adored. He wants Him to receive all credit, and for all creatures everywhere to think high thoughts about Him. Whoever else will or will not praise God, the church must do it. And what is the first and highest task of the church? It is not primarily to be a fellowship or to evangelize, though these responsibilities are truly important. It is to prostrate itself before its God and to glorify him! The church is the sphere of the outworking of God's purpose on earth, and even in heaven it will have the task of proclaiming the manifold wisdom of God.

The locus of God's glory is in His church, the Bride of Christ. Throughout history, but especially in our day and particularly in the evangelical church, people attempt to displace this glory elsewhere. Heed Paul's insistence: 'to Him be glory (*doxa*) in the church (*ekklēsia*).' God will share His glory with no man, no institution, no para-church ministry. The Bride of Christ, however, will be so fully adorned with grace, beauty, truth, love, mercy, and righteousness that her glory will be incomparable. To whom do you ascribe glory?

Throughout the benediction Paul employs a vocabulary and repetition that is artfully designed to cause wonder and amazement. It is a hyperbole that still falls short of truly expressing how immeasurable is the work of God. Paul desires that this omnipotent God should be glorified in the church forever and ever and ever. Infinite love deserves infinite praise. Such praise can only be given in an eternal world. But we can begin our doxologies before we get there.

D. Application Questions

- *I want to have a love relationship with Christ. What can I do this week to enhance this relationship?*
- *Paul prayed that believers would become more Christ-like by showing humility, by being identified with God's household, by ministering to others with vigor, by displaying love, by becoming more involved with the local congregation of believers, by seeking more teaching in the Word of God, by recognizing that the Holy Spirit works within and through them, and by perpetuating the faith through family instruction and training. I know I am deficient in one or more of these above areas. How can I work this week to become more mature in these areas?*

For next time: Read Ephesians 4:1-16 and Stuart chapter 8.