

Ephesians: *Filled unto the Fullness of God*
Ephesians 3:14-21

We are on our fourth week of looking at Paul's prayer for the Church in Ephesians 3:14-21. It is a prayer that reveals the heart of the Father for His Church, both as individuals and as the Body of Christ. The prayer reveals what God wants FOR you; not what God wants FROM you. It is a prayer that I've asked you to pray daily for yourselves and for the church. And should we pray this prayer with a sincere and open heart, we will be changed. We will be changed as individuals, we will be changed as families, our marriages will be changed, our children will be changed, our church will be changed, our city will be changed, and the world will be changed! But make no mistake...this prayer is higher than the prayers we typically bring before the Lord. It is a prayer that stretches our imaginations of what is even possible in the Christian life; and so, with no further ado, please stand and let us read the prayer of Paul, and let us pray this prayer in our spirits as we read aloud together:

14 For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, 15 from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, 16 that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, 17 so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, 18 may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, 19 and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. 20 Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, 21 to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

Remember that this prayer of Paul spirals upward in intensity and glory, each petition building upon and supporting the next. We have envisioned each petition as a step upward (show step graphic): Paul prays for *strength* and power through the Spirit working in our inner being; that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith so that we are rooted and grounded in *love*; that we would have the strength to both comprehend intellectually and *know* experientially the deep, deep love of Jesus; and finally, this morning, we shall look at the final step: that we may be filled with all the *fullness* of God.

My message shall fall under three subheadings: 1) Filled Unto All the Fullness of God; 2) Possible or Impossible?; and 3) What is Needed.

I. Filled Unto All the Fullness of God

Imagine if you will that I am a fisherman...I know, it's a stretch...but work with me here. So, imagine that I am a professional commercial fisherman. I own my own company; I am very successful (naturally!)—my company is worth millions; and, I have an 8-year-old son. Naturally, my dream for my boy is that he will one day take over my company, so I can't wait for him to start fishing with me. The first time or two he goes out on the water he enjoys himself, he catches a few fish, and of course, all he wants to do is drive the boat and go fast!

Six years go by...my son is now 14, and by now he can drive the boat; he can drive my truck and back in the trailer; and he's a decent fisherman. I've noticed, however, that all he really wants to do is play video games. In fact, the more often I ask him to go fishing, the more irritated he gets...video games have become his primary joy...and no matter how hard I try, I

simply cannot convince him that there is a world of opportunity that awaits him if he will come with me. Of course, my desire is to not only teach him to fish, but to teach him how to read a lake, how to adapt for various weather conditions, how to fish a wide variety of species; how to appreciate and care for God's beautiful creation; how to run the business, how to manage the company's staff, how to invest money...and beneath all of these desires is my deepest desire: to spend time with my son and impart all that I have and all that I've learned to him as my father and my grandfather had done for me.

Sadly, whenever I invite him to go fishing, all that comes into his mind is that the weather is too cold or too hot; he imagines having to beat off the bugs; he assumes he can catch fish anytime he likes since his Dad is a pro; and then there's all that "wasted time" having to drive back and forth to the lake. As a 14-year-old kid, my son's vision is small, and he is distracted by the flashing lights of an imaginary world that doesn't really exist. Saddest of all, he makes it clear that he doesn't really care to spend time with his Dad if it means that he has to go fishing. He will spend time with Dad on his terms...the terms of a 14-year-old adolescent who truly believes that life revolves around his buddies and video games...a lifestyle that leaves little opportunity for meaningful conversations with Dad or growing up into manhood.

Church, when it comes to our relationship with our Heavenly Father, so many of us are like the 14-year-old boy in this story. We have been "fishing" with the Father a few times, so we think we know what that's all about. Truth be told, we actually believe that our Father should be thankful that we even agreed to go out with Him...as though somehow we have *done Him a favor* by attending church a few times a month and slipping a \$20 in the plate. Whenever we think about spending time with the Father, all we can think about is the time we won't be able to do the things we really WANT to do.

So, so many of us are stuck in spiritual adolescence, but instead of growing out of our small view of the Christian life...instead of outgrowing our addiction to entertainment and self-indulgence...our lives look more like the movie *Groundhog Day*...and we keep playing out the same behaviors and attitudes over and over again in a never-ending loop.

Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 13:11, "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways."

The prayer that Paul prays here in Ephesians 3 reveals a man who has given up "childish ways." Paul prays a prayer for the Church that is so high, so lofty, so powerful...it is, in fact, a prayer that very few of us would ever think to pray for ourselves, our families, or our church.

Listen Church: there is so much more that the Father wants FOR you...so much more than our typical, small and pathetic view of God and the Christian life. Alexander Maclaren writes: Paul's prayers are God's promises; and we are justified in taking these rapturous petitions as being distinct declarations of God's desire and purpose for each of us; as being the end which He had in view in the unspeakable gift of His Son; and as being the certain outcome of His gracious working on all believing hearts. It also serves as a rebuke to our low lives and feeble expectations.

Paul prays that the Father would grant us to be *strengthened* with power through His Spirit in our inner being, so that Christ may dwell in our hearts permanently through faith; that His presence within us, causing us to be *rooted and grounded in love*, would empower us to comprehend and *experientially know* the deep, boundless love of Christ; so that, in the end, as the end, we would be *filled unto all the fullness* of God. This is your destiny as a Christian...this beautiful prayer is God's dream and intention for your life.

So...what might that look like? What would it mean for us to be “filled unto all the fullness of God?” (show pic of Jesus)

If you think about it, we know what that looks like when we look at Jesus in the four Gospel accounts. In John 14:7 Jesus said to His disciples: If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know Him and have seen Him.

Paul writes in Colossians 1:19-20: For in Him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through Him to reconcile to Himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of His cross.

Again, in Colossians 2:9-10: For in Him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in Him who is the head of all rule and authority.

Jesus was filled with all the fullness of the Father, that is why we look to Jesus as the greatest, most specific, most perfect picture of God's nature and character...Jesus was filled unto the fullness of the Father. And Jesus said, “Follow me.” The whole point of the Christian life is to follow Jesus, and as we follow Jesus, as we abide in Him and He abides in us, we are transformed more and more into His likeness...we too, are filled unto all the fullness of God.

But how does that translate into our puny little lives? Surely Paul is not suggesting that we could contain *all* the fullness of God?

New Testament scholar Dr. Kent Hughes provides a helpful illustration:

If I were to take a pint jar and allow the ocean to run into it, in an instant my little jar would be filled with the fullness of the Pacific. But of course, I could never put the fullness of the Pacific in my little jar! Because Christ is infinite, He can hold all the fullness of Deity. But whenever one of us finite creatures dips the tiny vessel of our lives into Him, we instantly become full of His fullness. We can always open to hold more and more of His fullness. And the more we receive of His fullness, the more we can yet receive! This will be our experience in eternity—the ultimate elevation of our souls. We will be loaded with the fullness of God, integrated more and more into His fullness.¹

Church, we will never own every quality of God as finite creatures, but the promise is that we will more and more carry within us His power and His nature. This “being filled unto the all the fullness of God” is not presented in scripture as an optional elective for those who take their discipleship seriously...this “filling up” is presented as God's intention and plan for the life of every believer.

¹ Dr. Kent Hughes, *Ephesians*, p 116.

Maclaren writes:

Paul's prayer and God's purpose and desire concerning us is that our whole being may be so saturated and charged with the indwelling divinity as that there shall be no more room in our present stature and capacity for more, and no sense of want or aching emptiness.²

Do you remember what Paul wrote in Philippians 4:11: I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. Church, when we are being filled unto the fullness of God, our sense of want is satisfied. Our hearts will no longer ache and that void in our spirits will be filled...we will learn contentedness. Our hearts will be like those empty jars at the Cana wedding, of whom Christ commands, "Fill them to the brim." And then, by His touch, by His own dwelling within us, the ordinary substance of our ordinary lives shall be transformed into the *new wine* of His Kingdom! We shall be filled and satisfied unto the fullness of God. This is what God wants FOR YOU!

By the way, you'll notice I keep saying "unto the fullness of God" rather than "with" the fullness of God. The Greek preposition here is *eis*, which usually means "unto" rather than "with." That's important because being "filled *unto* the fullness of God" is a process rather than a transaction. The picture here is that as we are filled, our capacity to receive more of God expands. The "vessels" of our hearts can grow...and we know this is true because of the GRINCH who stole Christmas, right? (show picture of the Grinch with the big heart!) His tiny heart grew when he let himself feel love! Well, that is the sense that we get here in Paul's prayer. Remember that as Christ dwells within our hearts through faith, we are rooted and grounded in love...both of the metaphors suggest growth and expansion. The more of God's fullness we contain, the greater our capacity to contain His fullness.

If you have ever planted a sapling (show pic of sapling), you will understand this principle of growing capacity. When a sapling takes root, it draws nourishment from the soil and the young tree is filled unto all the fullness it can absorb. But as that fullness courses through the branches, the tree is growing, expanding, always stretching toward maturity which leads the tree to bear fruit in its proper season (show pic of a mature tree with fruit). The longer the tree is filled with all the fullness it can absorb, the more the tree will be able to be filled as the years go by. However, should the tree be cut off from the life-sustaining nourishment due to drought or disease, the tree will not only cease to grow and bear fruit...it will most surely die.

Maclaren captures this so beautifully:

We cannot die until we have exhausted God. Till we comprehend all His nature in our thoughts and reflect all His beauty in our character; till we have attained all the bliss that we can think, and received all the good that we can ask till Hope has nothing before her to reach towards, and God is left behind; thus 'we shall not die, but live, and declare the works of the Lord!'

Church, the goodness of God is from everlasting to everlasting, and our capacity to be filled unto all the fullness of God begins now and extends into eternity. This is what God wants FOR you. There's only one question...

² Alexander MacLaren: Expositions of Holy Scripture: Ephesians, p 174.

II. Possible or Impossible?

One of the greatest enemies of our faith is our very own pessimism. We hear Jesus say, “You must be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” and we immediately fire back and say, “Well, nobody’s perfect.” We hear Paul praying that we might be “filled unto all the fullness of God” and we think, “. . . I would be happy to have just a little bit of the fullness of God. . . I’m sure I will never be FILLED with His fullness. . . after all, I’m still a sinner.”

When we think this way, our shrunken expectations sabotage any motivation or desire to be “filled unto the all the fullness of God.” We carry within our hearts a “victim mentality” of hopelessness for some wrong that we suffer that is not of our own doing. . . we think of ourselves as “victims” of a sinful predisposition that “cannot be helped.”

The truth is that we have more *faith* in the power of sin than we do the power of God. . . and naturally so since we have more experience with the power of sin than our limited experience with the power of God. Our confidence is that we will cave to sin no matter how hard we try to “do better,” so we have resigned ourselves to the power of sin and have very little faith that God can or would even want to fill a corrupted heart like ours. How many of you know what I’m talking about?

Maclaren writes:

Oh! If we believed less in the power of our sin it would have less power over us. If we believed more in the power of an indwelling Christ, He would have more power within us.³

Church, the indwelling of Christ in our hearts through faith is NOT impossible, for Christ promised in John 15 saying, “Abide in me, and I will abide in you. . . whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that will bear much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.”

In John 14:23 Jesus promised, “If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.”

It is absolutely possible for us to be filled unto all the fullness of God. . . were it not so, Paul would not have lifted up this prayer to the Father on behalf of the Church, nor would we find story after story of the apostles being filled with the Holy Spirit as demonstrated by acts of power, courage, boldness, and generosity!

Kingdom Oneness is possible, were it not so, Jesus would not have prayed so often for our Oneness in John 17, nor would we see the historical description of the early church in Antioch with all its racial and ethnic diversity.

We must resist faithless expectations; instead, we must allow our expectations to rise to the level of God’s promises as we find them right here in Ephesians 3 and throughout the scriptures. If

³ MacLaren, 177.

Christ said, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father in heaven is perfect,” should we not anticipate and expect that God fully intends to perfect us and thus measure our efforts and our attainments by these lofty expectations?

If our Lord prayed for Oneness, even as He and the Father were one, should we not set our expectations on Kingdom Oneness and measure our efforts towards that end?

We do not have because we do not ask...and even worse, we do not even think to ask due to the very low expectations we have for our Christian lives.

I want you to hear the lament of Alexander Maclaren written over 100 years ago:

I believe that one great cause of the worldliness and the sinfulness and mechanical formalities that are eating the life out of the Christianity of this generation is the fact of the Church having largely lost any real belief in the possibility that Christian men may possess the fullness of God as their present experience. And so, when they do not find it in themselves they say: ‘Oh! It is all right; it is the necessary result of our imperfect fleshly condition.’ No! It is all wrong; and His purpose is that we should possess Him in the fullness of His gladdening and hallowing power, at every moment in our lives.⁴

The scriptures are clear: You have been saved by God’s unmerited favor to be filled unto all the fullness of God! Possible? Or Impossible? Where is your faith? Have you greater confidence in the power of sin, or the power of the indwelling Christ? What would you be willing to do differently in your life if you truly believed that you could be filled unto all the fullness of God?

III. What is Needed

There are certain things in life that we simply cannot control. For example: my kids cannot help that they were born to a father who is 5’5”. You will notice that my three boys are not tall (show family pic)...that is to no fault of their own! My boys also inherited their mother’s genetics which means they are, by nature, quite skinny. Now, as a teenage boy, it is not fun to be short and skinny, particularly when your peers are growing quite tall and broad as young men often do. My youngest son, Caleb, decided several months ago that he was going to begin living differently in order to do something about his “skinniness.” He joined the gym and began working out a few days each week. Then he began drinking protein shakes, and before long, he was going to the gym every day of the week and eating like a horse. Now...if you see Caleb around here today, at first glance, you might think he is still rather short and skinny as compared to others his age. But I know, as his father, that Caleb has put on about 25-30 pounds of muscle over the past 6 months. Trust me...you do not want to challenge Caleb to a pull-up competition! I am very proud of Caleb because he refused to believe the lie that he was powerless. Instead, he began living differently, and after many months, the results are obvious, but not just physically. Because Caleb changed his habits, his hard work has inspired and informed his whole personality, his work ethic, and his hope for the future. We all know this is true: if we want to see different results in our lives, we must choose to live differently.

The first part of living differently is praying differently. We must commit to pray as Paul prayed. If you notice, Paul’s prayer in Ephesians 3 has been an appeal to God to do what only God can

⁴ MacLaren, 178-179.

do...and that should be our prayer as well. The transformation of a human heart always begins and ends with God's sovereign power and His unmerited grace, amen? Such is why any hope of being filled unto all the fullness of God first requires the indwelling of the Holy Spirit who strengthens us in our inner being.

When we pray in faith, we grant the Holy Spirit access to our hearts, and this particular prayer aligns our hearts with God's vision for our lives. Church: this is a prayer that pleases God, and He is both willing and ready to accomplish what He already intends...that we would be strengthened with His power; that Christ would dwell in our hearts in faith; that we would be rooted and grounded in love; that we would experientially come to know the deep love of Jesus; and that we would be filled unto all the fullness of God!

When we get to chapter four here in a few weeks, Paul will give us direction for how to "walk" as believers who have prayed this prayer because our participation and our choices matter, amen? The transformation of our character is no more a passive exercise than is putting muscle on our skinny frames. To see different results, we will have to live differently. We'll dive deeper into what that looks like in the weeks to come, but this morning I will lead you back to the starting place which is so beautifully articulated in John 15.

At the minimum, in order for our spiritual capacity to grow and for us to be filled unto all the fullness of God, we must abide in Christ and have Christ abiding in us. What is needed for Christ to abide in us?

Maclaren gives this prescription:

There must be the emptying of self if there is to be the filling with God. And the emptying of self is realized in that faith which forsakes self-confidence, self-righteousness, self-dependence, self-control, self-pleasing, and yields itself wholly to the dear Lord.⁵

I know this sounds daunting for many people here today. We are all busy, and our busy-ness—along with our default faith in the power of sin—regularly serve as our self-justification for a powerless, joyless, skinny life of Christianity that looks and feels nothing like the glorious prayer that we find here in Ephesians 3. Church, we must live differently if we are going to see different results. God is faithful...He will surely answer this prayer for power and love and knowledge and fullness. But we must make room for Christ to dwell...we must abide in Him daily. Remember the truth that He spoke and let it be your driving motivation: "Abide in me, and I will abide in you. Apart from me, you can do nothing."

The other condition of our fullness is right there in the text: it is experientially knowing the love of Jesus! We tend to make room for the ones we love and the ones who love us well. Nothing will change the condition of your heart and increase your appetite to abide quietly with the Lord as remembering, praising God for, and experiencing the love of Jesus! This is the practice of worship...it is the practice of gratitude.

⁵ MacLaren, 179.

The love of Jesus was the match that lit the flame of revival in Wilmore, KY over the past few weeks, and tens of thousands of lives were impacted. Take this truth to heart Church: What truly changes and transforms the human heart is experiencing the deep, deep love of Jesus ...and that happens in worship, both corporate worship and personal worship. When we wait on the Lord each morning...when we set time aside to abide in Christ...when we present our hearts to the One who loves us without condition and without limit...when we gather as the Body and sing praises to the Lamb...our hearts abide with Christ, and our hearts are filled unto all the fullness of God!

Church, will you pray this Ephesians 3 prayer with all earnestness? Will you surrender your hearts and empty yourselves to make room for the indwelling Christ? Will you humble yourselves and lift up your worship to the One who loves us and gave up His life for us? Then and only then will we be filled unto all the fullness of God. Let us pray.