

Ephesians: *The Deep, Deep Love of Jesus*  
Ephesians 3:14-21

Here at Colonial we have been slowly making our way through the book of Ephesians; in fact, we have spent the last two weeks looking at Paul's prayer for the early church as found in Ephesians 3:14-21--and I will confess that we are only half way through! This morning we will return once again to a prayer that will change EVERYTHING in your life should you pray it with a contrite and sincere heart as it pertains to your own soul. This is a prayer revealing what God wants FOR you. So, let us again rise together and speak aloud the Word of the Lord in Ephesians 3:14-21:

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.

You may recall that Paul's prayer spirals upward with glory, intensity, and power much like a staircase consisting of four steps that are interrelated, connected, and dependent upon one another. Paul prays for STRENGTH, LOVE, KNOWLEDGE, and FULLNESS (Show staircase). We have looked deeply into the first two steps: the prayer for strength in the inner being through the power of the Holy Spirit; and the prayer that Christ might dwell permanently in our hearts through faith, thereby creating a new condition of the heart whereby we are "rooted and grounded in love." If you are tuning in for the first time or have been away for a couple of weeks, please, please, please take some time this week to read or listen to the previous messages to better understand how these first two steps prepare us for what comes next: the step of knowledge. As we look to this third petition of Paul, I have organized my message based upon three subheadings: 1) Strength to Comprehend; 2) Love to Know; and 3) The Deep, Deep Love of Jesus.

### **I. Strength to Comprehend**

I began my illustrious career as a student in the year of our Lord, 1975--five years prior to the formal discovery of "attention deficit disorder." Now, I'm pretty sure that if you do your research, you will find that an entire field of study suddenly burst into existence in 1975 due to a particularly rowdy child who lived in my hometown and attended my elementary school...in fact, he sat in my desk! That's right, I created so much chaos as an elementary student that a new diagnosis was born in 1980. The condition was initially called TWKP... "That West Kid is a PROBLEM!" They changed the name to ADD (attention deficit disorder) so they wouldn't have to pay our family any royalties. As a result of my condition, mom and dad began spending copious amounts of time praying Ephesians 3:18: "Give that boy STRENGTH to COMPREHEND!!!" I'm pretty sure I'm right about all that history, although I didn't pay much attention in history because...well, you know.

I tell you that *mostly* made-up story to introduce the question: why does Paul pray that the Church would be given “strength to comprehend...?” What does “strength” have to do with comprehension?

I think the answer is found at the very beginning of Paul’s prayer. Remember that Paul begins praying “that according to the riches of His glory, [the Father] may grant you to be *strengthened* with power through His Spirit in your inner being...”

Strength in the inner man is the product of the Holy Spirit’s work. And so Paul prays here in vs. 18 that the Church, through the work of the Holy Spirit in the inner being, might have “the strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth, and length, and height, and depth”...of what? Well, if we set aside the prepositional phrase and put the two infinitive clauses together in sequence it reads: “may have strength *to comprehend*...and *to know* the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge”. I think this is the proper rendering of the text, which leaves us to assume that the dimensions (breadth, length, height, and depth) are referring to the love of Christ as well. We’ll return to the dimensions of Christ’s love in just a minute.

Now, remember that this third step in Paul’s prayer (show steps), this prayer for strength to comprehend and know Christ’s love, comes immediately after Paul’s prayer that Christ would dwell in our hearts and so change the composition of our character that we would be “rooted and grounded in love.”

We must recognize that Christ in our hearts leads to us being rooted in grounded in love, which creates the environment by which we are strengthened to 1) comprehend and the 2) to know the love of Jesus. That’s lofty for a Superbowl Sunday morning, so let’s bring this down to earth for a minute.

I want you to imagine somebody who is far from Christ and proud of it...perhaps it’s a family member or a neighbor or a co-worker. It’s the last person in this world that you would expect to become a Jesus-follower. You’ve tried everything to reach this person, but you have come to your wit’s end, so you call in the Big Gun...Pastor Bob! Pastor Bob has led hundreds of people to the Lord, so you call Bob and watch him go to work.

The very first thing Pastor Bob is going to do is pray...just like the Apostle Paul is praying right now. He is going to pray for the Holy Spirit to strengthen this person’s inner being so that they might comprehend the love of Christ. Remember that the initial work of the Holy Spirit is to bring conviction about Truth-- the Truth of the Gospel—the truth regarding sin, righteousness, and judgment...and most importantly, truth about the love of Christ for undeserving sinners. Bob will surely explain the Gospel to your unbelieving friend, but if the Holy Spirit does not strengthen their inner being so that they can comprehend the love of Jesus, they will never call upon His name to be saved. Such is why PRAYING for people FIRST is so important—apart from the strengthening work of the Holy Spirit, no one is able to comprehend

the love of Christ. The Gospel sounds like foolishness to them...they simply cannot comprehend the love of Christ, nor do they care to try.

Thanks be to God, many souls, upon hearing the Gospel, are quickened by the Spirit just enough to repent and respond with faith in order that they might be saved. God's grace is so amazing, and our salvation is a very low bar due to God's unmerited mercy towards sinful souls.

However, simply comprehending the love of Jesus...that is, agreeing with the facts, the history, and the finished work of the cross, is not the same as KNOWING the love of Jesus. Comprehending is mostly intellectual work, and it is important work that is only made possible by the strengthening of the Holy Spirit. Even so, a heart that agrees is not the same as a heart that believes, loves Jesus, and then KNOWS the love of Jesus. Again, here in vs. 18, we see the tension between intellectual consent (comprehension) and a changed heart (knowing the love Christ). Paul prays for both...that the Church would have the strength to comprehend AND to know. Let us consider now my second subheading:

## **II. Love to Know**

My favorite old guy, the Scottish preacher Alexander Maclaren, devoted an entire sermon to distinguishing between the comprehension of Christ's love and knowing Christ's love. I am no Maclaren, but I will attempt to unpack this subject in hopes that you will become curious enough to read Maclaren's *Exposition of Ephesians* for yourselves! I know you have nothing going on this evening around 5:30, so that would be a perfect time to dig into this theological treasure chest!

Now, when we read the Bible, we find two primary ways that the word "knowing" is used. The first is what we might call intellectual perception (comprehension)...sometimes we refer to this kind of knowing as head knowledge such as one might have about any subject. The other kind of "knowing" in scripture is a deep and living experience which is possession before it is knowledge, and knowledge because it is possession<sup>1</sup>.

The first kind of intellectual comprehension is independent of love. Maclaren writes: A man may know all about Christ and His love without one spark of love in his heart. And there are thousands of people who, as far as the mere intellectual understanding is concerned, know as much about Jesus Christ and His love as the saint who is closest to the Throne, and yet have not one trace of love to Christ in them. That is the kind of people that a widely diffused Christianity and a habit of hearing sermons produce. There are plenty of them, and some of us among them, who, as far as their heads are concerned, know quite as much of Jesus Christ and His love as any of us do, and could talk about it and argue about it, and draw inferences from it, and have the whole system of evangelical Christianity at their fingers' ends. Ay! It is at their fingers' ends; it never gets any nearer them than that.<sup>2</sup>

Church, if Maclaren didn't make you flinch there, I suspect you got distracted thinking about football. Listen: so many of us are like train conductors. We have called out the destination so often that we actually feel like we've been there, even though we never stepped off the train. We

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<sup>1</sup> Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture: Epistle to the Ephesians*, 152.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 153.

all know people who are very doctrinally sound—they LOVE to argue and debate about the finer points of Reformed Theology...and yet there is not an ounce of love for Christ in them. They are proud; they are accurate; but we avoid them at all costs! In 1 Corinthians 8:1 Paul writes, “Knowledge puffs up; but love builds up.”

Again, intellectual comprehension IS important...in fact, true intellectual comprehension is a gift from God made possible by the work of the Holy Spirit, so I do not mean to disparage the work or contributions of the intellectuals, to whom we owe a great debt of gratitude. But intellectual consent alone is less than what God wants FOR us!

Paul is praying that upon comprehending, we would be drawn into experiencing a deeper kind of knowing. Maclaren writes:

There is another kind of knowledge which goes deep down into the heart and is the only knowledge worth calling by the name; and that knowledge is the child of love. Love, says Paul, is the parent of all knowledge<sup>3</sup>.

“Love is the parent of all knowledge.” Now, that’s going to hurt your brain, but it’s true. Think about it.

Christy and I were married for five years before getting pregnant with our first child. So, at the age of 29, I thought I “knew” marriage, but I was scared to death about what I did not know regarding babies! So, we read books. We talked to our church members about how to take care of a baby. We gathered as much information as we could find. And of course, everybody kept telling us... “You’ll figure it out once he gets here! Your life will never be the same! You have never experienced anything like the love you will feel when you hold your child for the first time.” I would ask them to describe that experience and they would quickly run out of words. They would smile and say something to the effect of, “Well, you’ll see.”

Knowledge regarding parental love comes only when we possess a child and start loving! There are no words, formulas, illustrations, or YouTube videos that will teach you what parental love is...or how the arrival of a child will change your marriage...these things can only be learned through experience. As we loved our child, we learned about love. As we loved each other in marriage, we learned what marital love is. So much of our deepest “knowing” comes about this way.

Maclaren writes: Experience is our only teacher in matters of feeling and emotion, as in the lower regions of taste and appetite. A man must be hungry to know what hunger is and in like manner he cannot know sorrow but by feeling its ache, and must love if he would know love. Experience is our only teacher, and her school-fees are heavy<sup>4</sup>.

How true is that? Experience can be a wonderful teacher when it comes to love, tastes, music, and sunsets...but experience can be a ruthless teacher when it comes to divorce, losing a child, or battling depression. Be that as it may, when it comes to *knowing* the deep, deep love of Jesus,

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 153.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 154.

we must possess Him to know His love. Love is our Teacher. Love, given and received, is how we come to know love.

Church, do you KNOW the love of Jesus? I'm not asking if you know about His love...I'm asking you if you KNOW the love of Jesus...have you experienced His love? Knowing about the love of Jesus is imperative for our minds to rest in Him; but experiencing the love of Jesus is what changes our character and empowers us to love others as Christ first loved us.

So how do we come to KNOW the love of Christ in a powerful, experiential way? Maclaren writes:

We must be rooted and grounded in love ere we can know love, and must have Christ dwelling in our hearts, in order to [have] that deep and living possession which, when it is conscious of itself, is knowledge, and is forever alien to the loveless heart.<sup>5</sup>

This has been Paul's prayer for the church: 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 through faith—that being rooted and grounded in love, we might have the 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, how do we get started? The catalyst for truly knowing the love of Jesus and truly loving Jesus in a way that makes it to the heart rather than just head knowledge comes down to one word: faith. Faith is the act of trusting Jesus with every part of our being every day for the rest of our lives. Faith opens the door of our hearts.

We must learn the difference between agreeing and trusting. I can agree that my wife is a good cook, but our relationship will suffer when I never try a bite of what she offers me. In the same way, we can intellectually agree with the data about Jesus and never TRUST ourselves to Him relationally. Simply put, we will never know the love of Christ until we take Him in, and that requires faith. Now, before we can take Christ in, we absolutely need true and accurate information regarding what Christ accomplished on the cross on our behalf. Maclaren writes: Before the love which is thus the parent of deep, true knowledge, there must be the knowledge by study and credence of the record concerning Christ, which supplies the facts on which alone love can be nourished.<sup>6</sup>

There can be no deep love that is based on falsehood. If you are here today and you are trying to figure out if you can trust this whole Christianity thing, ask your questions! The former atheist Josh McDowell famously writes, My heart cannot rejoice in what my mind rejects. The Christian faith is an intelligent faith, so never be afraid to ask questions you can't answer, because there are answers.<sup>7</sup>

Thinking people should study and think hard, ask questions, and investigate the claims of the Gospel before making a confession of faith in Christ, and there are many here this morning who can help address your questions. But listen: in the end, our faith is not in a doctrine. Our faith is

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 155.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 155.

<sup>7</sup> Josh McDowell, *More Than a Carpenter* (from memory). The fuller quote came from <https://theaquilareport.com/josh-mcdowell-discusses-misconceptions-about-the-christian-faith/>

in a Person...our faith is in Jesus, the Son of God and the King of Kings. Jesus does not come to you this morning asking you only to agree about what He did in history. He comes asking you to trust Him with your whole heart...with your relationships, your career, your health, your identity...everything. When you trust Him, He will take residence in your heart, you will know Him and be known by Him...and you will come to know through personal experience just how deeply He loves you. Church, it is this radical, infinite, indescribable love of the living Christ that changes a human heart, and so Paul prays that, through the work of the Holy Spirit and the indwelling of the living Christ, the first century believers (and 21<sup>st</sup> century believers) would move from agreeing to trusting with their whole hearts...hearts rooted and grounded in love...that they would come to both comprehend and to *know*...through personal, intimate experience...the deep, deep love of Jesus.

Maclaren concludes:

Poor, simple uneducated people as well as philosophers and geniuses have to learn love by their hearts and not by their heads, and by a sense of need and a humble trust and a daily experience have to appropriate and suck out the blessing that lies in the love of Jesus Christ. The end of all aristocracies of culture and [haughtiness] of intellect lies in that great truth that we possess the deepest knowledge and highest wisdom when we love and by our love.<sup>8</sup>

Love is the parent of knowledge...and His name is Jesus.

### **III. The Deep, Deep Love of Jesus**

I have three observations before we close. First, Paul prays that we would “comprehend *with all the saints...*” John Wesley once wrote, “There is no such thing as a solitary Christian.”<sup>9</sup> As we touched on last week, when we profess our faith in Jesus, we are grafted into the Body of Christ...we are part of His community, and it is in Christian community that we begin to comprehend the vast love of Christ as we see His love, experience His love, and demonstrate His love in the fellowship of believers. NT scholar John Stott writes:

It needs the whole people of God to understand the whole love of God, all saints together, Jews and Gentiles, men and women, young and old, black and white, with all their varied backgrounds and experiences<sup>10</sup>. It is in loving and being loved by the diverse, multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, boundary-breaking Body of Christ that we come to know the deep love of Jesus. Jesus said (John 13:35) that the world would know His followers by the way they love one another! Our witness depends on the deep love of Jesus that is given and received in the Christian community...it is the signature quality that sets us apart as those who belong to Christ. Remember that point when somebody sits in your usual spot next Sunday! The world is watching the Church to see if the love of Jesus is for real...so let your light shine Colonial, amen?

Second, we cannot escape the irony of Paul’s prayer, that we would “know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge...” I think you get this. We will never fully know anything that is “infinite” on this side of the grave. Think about the universe for a minute. We don’t know if the universe is infinite, but it might as well be when it comes to our limited knowledge of it, right? It is too vast for us to even contemplate its vastness. But we can know the universe...we

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<sup>8</sup> Maclaren, 159.

<sup>9</sup> Found in William Barclay’s, *Ephesians*, 133.

<sup>10</sup> John Stott, *Ephesians*, 137.

can grab a handful of the dirt on planet earth and know a bit about the universe. We can look through the telescope and know a bit more about the universe...but ultimately the universe surpasses our knowledge...it is far too grand. But listen: the universe is pre-school compared to the love of Jesus! The love of God through Christ our Lord is INFINITE, and although we can know His love through experience, we will never fully know the love of Christ until we see Him face to face. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 13:12, "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known." Until that day, we are left with these poetic dimensions that Paul lists in vs. 18 when he writes, "...that you may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth, and length, and height, and depth...to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge..."

There have been many words written about what these dimensions might imply regarding the love of Jesus. I think Paul simply wanted us to know that the love of Jesus is infinite, all encompassing, beyond measure, and inexhaustible. That said, we cannot help but think about each dimension specifically.

The *breadth* of Christ's love encompasses all people, everywhere, in every age...Jew and Gentile, black and white, Chiefs and Eagles, republicans and democrats, believers and unbelievers alike. Our human love is often limited to those we feel safe with, to those we agree with, to those who do not threaten our people or our preferred lifestyle. The love of Jesus has no such restrictions...the breadth of His love encompasses all, even me.

The *length* of our Lord's love is from everlasting to everlasting. Before the foundation of the earth, Christ was loving us as His own. And five hundred billion years from now, His love will be just as strong as it was on that day He spoke softly to his friend saying, "Mary..."

The *depth* of our Lord's love haunts me. He set aside His glory and condescended from an indescribable glory to enter our story. He set aside immortality to become one of us. He took on flesh and was bruised and bloodied. He walked and worked and wept and wondered at the evil that even now leads beautiful people to do horrible things. And He went to the cross where He suffered a depth of agony that we will never know as the Father turned His face away. Even now, is there any depth of corruption that is too far for His grace? Can we cross a line that He will not cross in order to save us? No. There, in the darkest stench of abject evil we will find His everlasting arms ready to catch a lost soul with His infinite love and mercy, if only that soul will call upon His name. Evangelist Sam P. Jones once said, "The Lord fishes on the bottom."<sup>11</sup> Our creed agrees and states that "He descended into Hell"...<sup>12</sup> I'm pretty sure that's where he found my rotten soul...and if Christ can save a wretch like me, there is no limit to the depth of His love, amen?

The height of our Lord's love shines all the more brilliantly because of the depth of His grace. Like a Pacific Island that soars above the waves represents only a small portion of the whole which lies mostly hidden under the sea, so the height of our Lord's love is inestimable and inconceivable...and yet His love is accessible. How can that be? Maclaren writes:

In the natural world the place where heaven touches the earth is always the furthest point of distance from us; but in the spiritual world the place where heaven stoops to me is always right over my head, and the nearest possible point

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<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Sherwood Wirt's *Jesus Man of Joy*, 203.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted from *The Apostles' Creed* (you can read it here <https://www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/creeds/apostles-creed>).

to me. He has come to lift us to Himself, and this is the height of His love, that it bears us, if we will, up and up to sit upon that throne where He Himself is enthroned<sup>13</sup>.

The love of Jesus is like the ocean...it is of an expanse and depth and volume that far exceeds our comprehension. Sadly, we can lower a jar into the ocean to the deepest, unrecorded depths, and the contents of the jar remain as dry as a bone. A jar left unopened knows nothing of the water surrounding it.

Church, it is possible for you to live and move and have your being in the great sea of Christ's love, and yet not one drop of His living water will quench the thirst of your soul. You must take Him in. Open your hearts...that door is locked on the inside, and only you have the key. Open your hearts to Him. Agree with Paul's prayer and humbly ask the Father to strengthen your inner being with power through His Spirit, that Christ might dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may comprehend along with the all the Church and come to experientially know the deep, deep, love of Jesus. Pray this prayer every day. Wait on the Lord, and He will come. Will you pray with me?

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<sup>13</sup> Maclaren, 170