

Ephesians: *Union with Christ*
Ephesians 3:14-21

Today is February 5th, and as such we are entering into a season when our country recognizes and honors Black History. I want you to know that we will also be honoring Black History Month here at Colonial in a creative way over the next few weeks. You will be hearing some testimonies from several of our black members beginning next Sunday, and as we approach the end of the month Pastor Greg and his family have a very special offering prepared for us! Now, I know that this congregation loves and affirms black people, and we celebrate the unity that we enjoy in Christ...that has been true of this congregation for several generations.

I also know that there are people here in our midst who have real issues with us “going along with cultural/secular holidays” as though we are somehow required to talk about Black History because it’s the month of February! In fact, some of you will inevitably jump to the conclusion that because we are honoring Black History Month, we must be “woke” or ignorantly falling into to Marxist philosophies or critical race theory. So, let me take a minute to put those fears to rest and provide a few simple reasons why I think it is both God-honoring and wise for us to devote some time to honoring Black History this February.

First of all, given that we have recently been steeped in Ephesians 2 and 3 where Paul has redundantly emphasized the unifying work of Christ that breaks down the wall of hostility between people groups, I think it’s a great opportunity to hear from a group of people who may have in times past felt uninvited or uninvited at a church like Colonial. In other words, it’s one thing to talk about the unifying work of Christ on the cross...it’s another thing to present the unifying work of Christ in real stories of real people who have found community and oneness in a congregation whose majority population is of a different ethnicity. In short, I see this month as an opportunity to celebrate what Christ has done, amen?

Secondly, I have learned over the years that Black History Month is an important and special occasion for the vast majority of my black brothers and sisters here at Colonial. So, as is always the case in my house...*if it’s important to my family, it’s important to me.* As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 12: “For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of the one Spirit. God has so composed the body...that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.” I rejoice when my black brothers and sisters are honored, just as I would rejoice when my white brothers or sisters are honored. That’s how it works in the Body of Christ, and that’s why we will rejoice in honoring Black History Month, particularly as it concerns the profound and important role black men and women have played in the Body of Christ and the Kingdom of God, amen?

So, in honor of Black History Month, I will begin with a quote from Dr. Martin Luther King in his letter written from a jail cell in Birmingham, AL in August of 1963: In deep disappointment I have wept over the laxity of the church. But be assured that my tears have been tears of love. There can be no deep disappointment where there is not deep love. Yes, I love the church. How could I do otherwise? Yes, I see the church

as the body of Christ. But, oh! How we have blemished and scarred that body through social neglect and through fear of being nonconformists. If today's church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century. Every day I meet young people whose disappointment with the church has turned into outright disgust.

King is lamenting what we shall refer to as “the gap.” “The gap” is that dark recess between what we say we believe as Christians and the life we actually experience in our “real world.” Remember that King was writing to pastors in Alabama who firmly believed in the finished work of Christ that breaks down the walls of hostility between blacks and whites; however, when put to the test, these pastors and their churches were unwilling to live into the unity they claimed to believe in. Their faith in the unifying ONENESS of Christ didn't make it past the doors of the church, and so King laments “the gap”. King rightly observes that if the church continues to live in a way that is inconsistent with the Truth we confess, the church will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as meaningless by future generations.

Many Christians would have to agree that the powerful claims of the Gospel that they believe with their minds are often not consistent with their experiences in day to day living. Whereas the Gospel tells us we have freedom from condemnation, we still struggle with feelings of condemnation. Whereas the Gospel tells us we have the power of the Holy Spirit within us, we feel generally powerless in our day to day living. Whereas the Gospel tells us that Christ has destroyed the wall of hostility between the races, our experience tells us that the wall is still standing and is as hostile as ever.

Because of this “gap” between our core beliefs and our lived-out experiences, we are often discouraged in our faith and likely think of ourselves as “frauds.” I won't ask for a show of hands, but how many of you have recently wondered if you are a fraud, or at least a right out hypocrite because of “the gap” in your life? Listen: the problem of the gap is very common. All Christians wrestle with how to actually experience the joy, freedom, and unity that we believe to be true as presented in the Gospel.

This problem with “the gap” is precisely why Paul hits his knees in prayer for the church in Ephesus. Paul knows that unless the believers are empowered by the indwelling of Christ in their hearts, this gap will continue to rob the Christians of all that God wants for them, and their witness will be consistently compromised. So, with nor further ado, let us once again read aloud Paul's famous prayer 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.

My message will fall under three subheadings: 1) The Indwelling of Christ; 2) Through Faith; and 3) Rooted and Grounded.

I. The Indwelling of Christ

OK, if you recall from last week, Paul's prayer for the early church is like four stairs that rise higher and higher in aspiration. The four stairs are power, love, knowledge, and fullness (show stairs from last Sunday). Last week we looked at Paul's prayer for strength and power through the Holy Spirit in the inner man. We learned that the Holy Spirit brings light and transformation to the very nature of the believer, including power to suffer well, strength for engaging in the conflict, and freedom from selfishness so that we can serve with gladness. These were just a few examples of what happens when the Holy Spirit strengthens our inner being with supernatural, straight-from-heaven POWER that Jesus promised all those who believe in and follow Him.

Now, as we return to Paul's prayer, let's move up to the second step, the LOVE step, which is very dependent upon and related to the first step of power. Let us once again listen to Paul's prayer, but this time I will have you read it with the word order that is in the Greek NT when we come to vs. 17-18: 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 Christ to dwell through faith in your hearts, in love being rooted and grounded, 18 in order that you may be able to comprehend with all the saint what is the breadth and length and height and depth..."

As you can see, that last part of vs. 17 "in love being rooted and grounded," actually goes with the indwelling of Christ in your hearts through faith. I know that seems unimportant, but it's VERY important, and I'll show you why in just a minute.

First of all, let us look at the connection between the strengthening with power of the Holy Spirit in the inner being and the indwelling of Christ.

The picture here is that Jesus intends to reside permanently in your heart.¹ Let us remember that Jesus is a King, so wherever Jesus resides, He reigns, amen? Jesus will never be content living in the spare room over the garage. Jesus will never be content to be an infrequent guest who drops in for a visit at Christmas and Easter!

God sent His Son to die in our place so that we might be forgiven, reconciled to the Father, and so that we would never again walk ALONE in this world! This is what God wants FOR us: He wants Jesus to take up permanent residence within every believing heart...but there are some

¹ There are two words in the Greek that indicate "dwelling." *Paroikeo* suggests temporary residence, like a foreigner who is dwelling in country as a visitor, or even a temporary lodging situation like a hotel. *Katoikeo*, which is the verb used here by Paul, means to settle down somewhere...it suggests a permanent dwelling as opposed to a temporary abode. See John Stott, *Ephesians*, p 135.

conditions to His residence. First of all, Jesus will not co-exist with evil. If Jesus is going to live in our hearts, evil has to go. Secondly, if Jesus is going to take up residence in our hearts, He gets the Master Bedroom--our hearts no longer belong to us, they belong to Him. And finally, if Jesus is going to live permanently in our hearts, He gets to renovate each and every room in whatever way He pleases.

C.S. Lewis captures this picture perfectly in *Mere Christianity*:

Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on; you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently He starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make any sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of - throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were being made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself.

So how does the Holy Spirit prepare our hearts to host Jesus as a permanent resident? First of all, the Holy Spirit brings conviction about our sinful thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors so that we will turn away from our sin and turn towards God. We should not expect Christ to dwell in our hearts alongside our lust, our hatred, our unforgiveness, our pride, or our idolatry; but clearly we do not have the power to rid ourselves of those parasites, so that is exactly what the Holy Spirit's power comes to accomplish. If you hope to enjoy Christ's indwelling, ask for the strengthening of God's Holy Spirit in your inner being, and be prepared to repent early and often! Martin Luther once wrote, When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said "Repent," he intended that the entire life of believers should be repentance.

Listen: I love to repent! I try never to argue with God about my sin, nor do I try to justify my sin. I want to keep short accounts with the Love of my life, so if I have offended my King, I want to know immediately so that I can repent and restore the relationship. By the way, I feel the same way about my wife...and every person that I love. Repentance is a gift that you give to a person that you value above your pride and your need to always be right. There can be no restoration of a relationship damaged by sin without humility and a contrite heart. The Holy Spirit empowers us with conviction and the strength to repent.

Our strengthening comes also from people who are led by the Holy Spirit to be our friends, our teachers, our pastors, and our mentors. In other words, part of the strengthening that ministers to our inner being comes from being connected in the Body of Christ through the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. Listen: we must resist thinking that it's all about ME, and that if I'm going to experience Christ living in me, it's all about my effort, my devotion time, my morality, my habits, my, me, me, me. You were never meant to go it alone. The moment you called upon the name of Jesus to be saved, you were grafted into His Body...the Church! The Church is your family; but even more than your family, the Church is the rest of the Body that you desperately need to function and thrive. Think about it: a hand does not function well apart from the wrist, the arm, the shoulder, and every other part of the body. When Jesus comes to live in our hearts, He does so with the intent of working through us IN COMMUNITY...in the CHURCH...which

is His Body. To be in Christ is to be part of His Body...the Church. To be apart from the Body is to be apart from Christ.

So, how do we get started? How do we begin to experience the real presence of Christ dwelling in our hearts? How do we close the gap between what we believe and what we experience out there in the real world? Paul's prayer is that we will exercise our faith....

II. Through Faith

Just as we are "saved by grace through faith," Paul once again appeals to faith as the means or the condition by which the indwelling of Christ takes place. Faith, to some degree, is the act of opening the door of your heart. Remember the words of the Resurrected King in Revelation 3:30: Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. We don't have to clean up the house or even prepare dinner when it comes to Christ: our role is to simply open the door.

Maclaren writes: Trust, which is faith, is self-distrust. Self-distrust brings the Christ. Faith is desire. Never, never in the history of the world has it been or can it be that a longing towards Him shall be a longing thrown back unsatisfied upon itself. You have but to trust, and you possess. We open the door for the entrance of Christ by the simple act of faith and blessed be His name! He can squeeze Himself through a very little chink; and He does not require that the gates should be flung wide open in order that, with some of His blessings, He may come in. You cannot cleanse your hearts so as to bring Christ into them, you must let Him come and cleanse them by the process of His coming, and fit them thereby for His own dwelling. And assuredly, He will so come, purging us from our evil and abiding in our hearts.²

Faith is the means by which Christ comes into our hearts, but we have a role to play in keeping Christ in our hearts. Again, Maclaren says it best: A Christian man can drive away his Master by evil works. You bring Christ into your heart by faith without any work at all; you keep Him there by a faith which produces holiness.³

Herein lies a lot of the problem with our modern, Western Christianity, and this problem accounts for the gap that we spoke of earlier between our doctrine and our experience of Christ. Many of us know what it was first like to receive Christ with faith. It was exhilarating...everything was new and there was a sweetness to our lives that we had never tasted before. Then what? Over time, we fail to practice our faith in our "real lives", right? Oh, we love to come to church, and we hope to feel the presence of Christ in worship or at the candlelight service on Christmas Eve, but our faith is all but absent when it comes to our finances, our work, our marriages, our parenting, our hobbies, and our private habits that we would rather no one know about. We have attempted to lock Christ into a spare bedroom that we rarely visit...we like to think that He is there if we should need Him under some extreme circumstance...but for the most part we go through our lives as self-reliant, self-trusting, self-centered people with little to no thought of the KING who has declared Himself our SOVEREIGN LORD upon OUR INVITATION!

² Maclaren, Ephesians, 148-149.

³ Ibid, 149

Church, listen to me: union with Christ is what God wants FOR you⁴! The empowered, supernatural, intimate, real experience of Jesus that you long for is exactly what God wants for you as well. But can we agree that a faithless, self-reliant lifestyle leads to a corrupted heart full of evil and selfishness...and such a heart should not expect to entertain a King. It is exactly this scenario that leads to the gap: we believe in our heads that Jesus is Lord, but we have driven him out of our hearts due to our faithlessness and our chronic self-reliance.

The secret to receiving everything that God wants FOR you...including the permanent residence of Christ IN US, is a life lived by faith. It is a life marked by self-distrust. It is posture that kneels daily before the King of Glory, yielding and waiting upon His pleasure instead of our own. This is the faith that leads to holiness...it is a faith through which Christ will move in and renovate your shabby little heart into a palace fit for a King!

If you are hungry for a deeper experience of Christ in your heart and your life, I encourage you to pick up a copy of Andrew Murray's *Waiting On God*. It's a 31 day journey of learning to wait on the Lord. You would be absolutely amazed how taking even five minutes to be still and wait for the Lord to speak to you will change your life.

OK, let us now look to what Christ brings when He indwells in our hearts.

III. Rooted and Grounded

Paul leverages two metaphors in his prayer that reveal the powerful, transformative work of Christ within a human heart.

First, Paul uses the language of "rooted in love." The picture here is that Christ provides the soil in which the seed of our faith sprouts, grows, and bears fruit...and that soil is DEEP...it is rich...and because the roots are so well fortified, the fruit bearing tree does not wither or fail.

Maclaren writes: Where Christ abides in a man's heart, love will be the very soil in which his life will be rooted and grow. That love will be the motive of all service, it will underlie, as its productive cause, all fruitfulness. All goodness and all beauty will be its fruit. The whole life will be as a tree planted in this rich soil. And so the life will grow not by effort only, but as by an inherent power drawing its nourishment from the soil. This is blessedness.⁵

Church, many people seek to do good works for a variety of motivations. I think we all know that some people strive to be noticed...some people need to be needed...some people serve as a resumé builder...but for those who are in Christ, service is one of the natural fruits that are born from the soil they are planted in...the soil of Christ's love.

⁴ I have recently begun reading *Union with Christ* by Rankin Wilbourne. It is the best I've read regarding our union with Christ and comes highly recommended by Dr. Timothy Keller and Dr. John Ortberg (two of my favorites Presbyterians!).

⁵ Maclaren, 150.

NT scholar and pastor Donald Barnhouse once observed that love is intrinsic to all the fruits of the Spirit listed in Galatians 5:22. He writes:

Love is the key. *Joy* is love singing. *Peace* is love resting. *Long-suffering* is love enduring. *Kindness* is love's touch. *Goodness* is love's character. *Faithfulness* is love's habit. *Gentleness* is love's self-forgetfulness. *Self-control* is love holding the reins.⁶

Those indwelt by Christ...those empowered and strengthened by the Holy Spirit, will be those who are rooted in love. And that love is precisely what is needed to demonstrate the God-honoring Oneness that Jesus died for us to enjoy, amen? Without Christ dwelling within us, we may have correct doctrine, but our witness will be a “noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.”

The second metaphor that Paul employs is the that of a foundation. He writes of those in whom Christ dwells as souls “rooted and *grounded* in love.” Paul is perhaps harkening back to Ephesians 2:22 where he wrote, “In Him you are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.”

For those hearts strengthened with power through the Holy Spirit...in those believing hearts where Christ resides...the dwelling place of God is being established with a deep and firm foundation. It is upon that foundation of love that Christ will build our lives.

In both the botanical and structural metaphors, we get the picture of depth and the potential for growth. In each instance, because Christ is present in the believers heart, the depth and the growth are established in love.

Next week we will look at the third stair of Paul's prayer for the Church...the knowledge of the love of Christ that even surpasses knowledge!

For now, as we prepare to step back into our “real world,” as we reflect upon the gap between our beliefs and our experience of Christ, we must take with us Paul's prayer for our union with Christ. In the end, our joy, our witness, and our character depend upon Christ dwelling in our hearts through the power and strengthening of the Holy Spirit. That is Paul's prayer for the church, and that should be our prayer for ourselves and all of our Lord's Church. The world will not be better served by those who simply agree with Christian doctrine; but the world will be transformed by those in whom Christ abides, amen?

Church, pray for Christ to abide in you. Invite Christ to abide in you. Practice self-distrust and place all of your trust in Jesus. Our faith opens the door for Christ to come in. And when Christ comes in, hand Him the keys with no intention of taking them back, ever. His renovations may cause you discomfort or concern at first, but before long you will discover NEW things coming out of your life...new attitudes, new energy, new perspectives, new motivations, new insights, new priorities, even new friends...these gifts will be the fruit that comes from a life rooted and grounded in Christ's love. Make no mistake...that takes some time.

⁶ Quoted from Kent Hughes, *Ephesians*, 114.

Jesus will lead us to acquire new habits and to set aside old habits, and that does not come easily for any of us. And we will most surely fail from time to time. In a fit of self-indulgence we will snatch the keys away and politely invite our Lord to hide in the back bedroom! When we fail (and we will!)...and then later come to our senses...we need only to repent with a contrite heart and invite the King to return to His rightful place of governing our lives. He will gladly come! He is a King, but He is full of grace and mercy to those who are honest and humble about their sins. As John writes in 1 John 8: If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Church, the gap between our beliefs and our daily lives is a world of distractions, hurry, and clutter. Let us confess, let us repent, and let us invite the King of Glory to take up permanent residence in our hearts. Set aside time each day to wait upon the Lord...that we might be rooted and grounded in love. Will you pray with me?