

Ephesians: *To Him Who is Able*

Ephesians 3:14-21

This morning we will return to Ephesians 3 where we have spent several weeks looking at this powerful, life-changing prayer written by the Apostle Paul in vss. 14-21. It is a prayer that I have asked you to pray for yourselves and for our church...it is a prayer that elevates our hopes and expectations for the Christian life. Today marks our final treatment of this text, and then we shall move on to Ephesians 4. So, let us for the last time stand and read together 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.

It's been a few weeks since I was last with you, so let me remind you of this beautiful, spiraling "staircase" of petitions that Paul has prayed for here in Ephesians 3 (show stairway). Paul first prays that the church might be strengthened with *power* through God's Spirit in our inner being; then he prays that Christ might dwell in our hearts through faith, and as such we would be rooted and grounded in *love*; that leads to the strength to comprehend and to experientially *know* the boundless love of Jesus; and finally, Paul prays that we might be *filled* unto all the fullness of God! Over the course of four weeks, we have looked at each one of these petitions, so as always, I encourage you to read, listen to, or watch those messages that are available on our website.

Now, remember, this prayer is so much higher than our prayers, right? We typically pray for relief, for healing, or provision for our earthly needs...but Paul is praying for so much more. Paul prays for power, love, knowledge and fullness in our inner being. Paul is praying for spiritual transformation both personally for each individual believer and as well as the whole Body of Christ. This is not a prayer we would even think to pray of our own accord, and yet Paul unapologetically prays this prayer for the new believers in Asia Minor. Paul has been given a glimpse of what God has in store for His own, and so he prays "according to the riches of God's glory."

Upon making his petitions, Paul closes with a doxology...a short hymn of praise to God in vss. 20-21, "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 focus primarily on this doxology this morning, and I have arranged my thoughts under three subheadings: 1) To Him Who is Able; 2) According To; and 3) *Soli Deo Gloria*.

I. To Him Who is Able

I have a friend named Scott. Scott is one of the most brilliant guys I know, particularly when it comes to taking an old house and transforming it into something new. Over the past several years Scott has purchased old, run-down homes and transformed them into homes that sold for nearly twice what he bought them for. Due to our friendship, I have had the privilege of touring the houses when they were first purchased, then again when they were stripped down to the studs, and then again when the houses were finished. The transformation is nothing short of miraculous in my opinion; but what really blows my mind is that Scott can see the finished house in his mind long before the plans are drawn. As we walk through the old house, Scott excitedly points to walls that will come down and additions that will be added. He already knows what bathroom fixtures will be used, what doors he wants, what lighting goes where; and he gets excited about those extra special touches that will surprise and delight even the most demanding buyers. Scott has a unique gift.

I do not have that gift...at all. In fact, I experience significant anxiety FOR Scott whenever we do those walk-throughs because Scott's vision for that house is beyond my imagination. When I think of how I would approach that old house, *arson* (show pic of housefire) is usually the first thing that comes to mind! I would be more inclined to burn that old house to the ground and start over. I am *unable* to imagine what can be done with that old house; I am unable to draw those plans or accomplish the work; I am unable to even desire that kind of a project. So, if you are looking for a guy to transform your old house into something beautiful, you don't want to come to me...you want to go to the one who is *able*...the guy who doesn't see your house for how it is, but who is able to see your house for what it can become, and the one who is able to make it so...right?

This is, to some degree, the picture that Paul paints for us in this prayer. Remember that Paul's prayer reveals God's promises for the Church...God's intention for all believers. That is to say, your destiny as a believer is to be strengthened with power through God's Spirit working in your inner being...so that Christ might dwell in your heart through faith...that you, being rooted and grounded in love, might have the strength to comprehend the breadth and length and depth and height, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you might be filled unto all the fullness of God Himself! No matter how deplorable the condition of your soul...no matter how battered or bruised you may feel...no matter how fierce the addiction or how stubborn the pride...when God looks upon your believing soul...a soul that has been forgiven in Christ...a soul that is inhabited by Christ...this is His ultimate plan for you: power, love, knowledge, and fullness. Do you believe that to be true? Have you given serious consideration to the way that God sees your soul and who you are becoming?

Listen Church: God does not get disillusioned by the condition of our souls when we turn to Him. He does not see us as the sum total of our sin and mistakes. God sees us as His beloved, adopted children, and He sees what we will become. Not only does He see us for what we will become, He is able to accomplish the transformation that is needed...which is precisely why Paul writes that God is able to do INFINITELY more than you or I could ask or even imagine.

Let me ask you a question. When average people like us walk through an old, rundown house, what's our default solution for making it like new? Paint and carpet, right? For the average person, that's it. Throw some fresh paint on the walls, lay down new carpet, and the house will feel new again. Sadly, we don't know what we don't know. Most of us would not know to check for black mold, or a cracked foundation, or the lack of integrity in load-bearing walls, or a sagging roof. Most of us wouldn't know how to check for rotting soffits or punky floors under the carpet in the bathrooms. Paint and carpet might address some of the obvious concerns, but to be quite frank, most homeowners wouldn't even know how to ask the right questions.

When it comes to the transformation of our souls, we are in the same boat. Given our limited vision and understanding, we will start with good intentions and something obvious...like, praying that we can stop drinking, or praying that we can have the discipline to read the Bible. Even as we pray to be made new, our requests to God will amount to little more than paint and carpet. We don't know what we don't know when it comes to soul transformation...we don't even know what to ask for...it is beyond our imagination and comprehension.

Church, hear the good news of the Gospel: even when we pray a high and profound prayer like Paul prayed here in Ephesians 3, God will do more than we asked...more than we could possibly imagine in a thousand lifetimes. And it is for this reason (and a thousand more), that God is to be glorified, and God alone! I'll come back to God's glory in a minute. But let us now turn to my second subheading:

II. According To

"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...*"

You may have noticed that in the first three chapters of Ephesians, this phrase "according to" appears nine times! Every time Paul uses the phrase, "according to," he is referring to the measure, the means, or the purpose by which God has acted. I'm going to run through several of those instances very quickly, but I invite you to look and listen carefully to see what we can observe about these nine "according to" phrases.

In Ephesians 1:5 God "predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ *according to the purpose of His will.*"

In Ephesians 1:7 "In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, *according to the riches of his grace...*"

In Ephesians 1:9 He made "known to us the mystery of His will *according to His purpose* which He set forth in Christ..."

In Ephesians 1:11 "In Him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined *according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will.*"

In Ephesians 1:18-19 Paul prays that the Church might know "what is the hope to which He has called you, what are the riches of His glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of His power toward us who believe *according to the working of His*

great might that He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places..."

In Ephesians 3:10-11 Paul writes, "...so that through the church the manifold witness of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was according to the eternal purpose that He has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord.

As we read this morning in Ephesians 3:16, "...that according to the riches of His glory He may grant you to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in your inner being."

And then finally, our text for this morning in vs. 20, "...according to the power at work within us."

I think we could build an entire message around this phrase, "according to..." but I will make two observations and then move on.

First of all, notice the work of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We see that the measure of God the Father's salvific and transforming work is according to His plan, the counsel of His will, His purpose, the riches of His grace, and the riches of His glory. These phrases capture the loftiest, almost unapproachable sovereignty and providence of God. But note how God's glory, grace, and purpose is revealed and made accessible according to the eternal purpose that He realized in Christ Jesus our Lord, "when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places...". The resurrected, exalted Christ presents what is the destiny of all who are in Christ...that we shall rise with Him and be seated with Him in glory! And finally, note the very personal power of God's activity according to His Spirit working in our inner being...*the power at work within us*. This is the power that will, eventually, over time in this life and in the age to come, bring to completion that which began at the moment we first believed.

Paul writes in Philippians 1:6: And I am sure of this, that He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. Our perfection...which is to be filled unto all the fullness of God...is a certainty because it has already begun...according to God's purpose and plan! As Jesus said in Matthew 13:33, "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened."

Alexander Maclaren writes of this truth:

There is already a Power at work within us, if we be Christians, of whose workings we may be aware, and from them forecast the measure of the gifts which it can bestow upon us. The first step is all the difficulty, and if you and I have been changed from enemies into sons, and had one spark of love to God kindled in our hearts, that is a mightier change than any that remains to be effected in order to make us perfect. One grain has been changed, the whole mass will be so in due time.

I find these words to be incredibly encouraging. I know the renovations on my old heart have begun...but there is yet much in me that remains unfinished. I am not yet who I am to become, but I'm not who I was. I am being changed, according to God's plan and according to the riches of His glory. Thus, I live in the tension of the already but not yet...we all do.

Again, Maclaren captures this tension so beautifully:

The present operations of that power carry in them the pledge of their own completion. The strange mingling of good and evil in our present nature, our aspirations so crossed and contradicted, our resolution so broken and falsified, the gleams of light, and the eclipses that follow-all these in their opposition to each other, are plainly transitory, and the workings of that Power within us, though they be often overborne, are as plainly the stronger in their nature, and meant to conquer and to endure. The whole threefold divine cause of our salvation supplies the measure and lays the foundation for our hopes in the glory of the Father, the grace of the Son, and the power of the Holy Ghost. Let us lift up our cry: ‘Perfect that which concerneth me, forsake not the works of thine own hands,’ and we shall have for answer the ancient word, fresh as when it sounded long ago from among the stars to the sleeper at the ladder’s foot, ‘I will not leave thee, until I have done that which I have spoken to thee of.’

Church, let us be grateful for the measure, the means, and the purpose of God’s saving work in Jesus Christ and His transforming work through the Holy Spirit, amen?

Our destiny is certain: We shall be changed! We shall rise! Surely goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our lives, and we shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever! Be encouraged...He is able to more than we ask and more than we could even imagine, amen?

My second observation is a bit ironic, but I hope you will be able to see it and appreciate the irony even as it applies to our own lives. The irony is found in the relationship between God’s measureless blessings and our faith.

If you noticed when we went through the nine “according to” phrases, God is always working on our behalf according to the riches of His grace and the riches of His glory! In other words, God’s work on our behalf is INFINITE in grace and glory! Such is why Paul strains to come up with the words here in vs. 20 to express his point that God is able to do abundantly more ABOVE what we ask or think. As we’ve seen in other verses, Paul literally makes up a super- superlative as he attempts to express just how much greater are the gifts of God’s grace as compared to what we ask or even think about.

Now...some of you get stuck on this point because you have asked for a car but thus far, you’re still riding a bike! So, let’s be clear about something: Paul is writing about...he is praying about...the transformation of your soul, not the transformation of your bank account. He is praying about changed lives that lead to a Spirit-filled community called the Church that brings glory to God. He is not referring to our earthly longings that bring pleasure and glory to us. Lord, have mercy! Can we agree that part of God’s mercy is that He does not give us everything that we ask for in terms of earthly wishes and desires? Do any of you give your children everything that they wish and desire? God forbid! You would ruin your children for life, right? We don’t treat our kids that way...grandkids maybe, but not our children!

Church...the Father knows whom we are to become...we are to become creatures akin to Jesus, His Beloved Son, and so we should trust Him that His “no” to our earthly prayers is often, if not always, in alignment with His intentions to make us perfect and to fill us with all the fullness of God.

However, when it comes to our requests for strength in our inner being that Christ might dwell in our hearts in faith...that our souls might be rooted and grounded in love...that we might come to know the deep, boundless love of Jesus...that we might be filled afresh and anew unto

all the fullness of God...not only is our Father's answer a resounding YES!...but we can be assured that His gifts in that regard are so much greater than our capacity to receive those gifts. In fact, we already have been given more than we can possibly understand or appreciate.

Christy and I bought our first home in 1997. The house that we bought had been built in 1976, and aside from the kitchen, it felt like 1976 when you stepped inside. It had deep red shag carpet, dark stained trim, and lots of wallpaper. We got a great deal on the house, but we knew going in that it was going to take a lot of work to get it right. There was only one problem: I had no tools! Until recently I had been a full-time student, so aside from a few screwdrivers and a hammer, I had no tools. Thankfully, a very nice man in our church...a professional carpenter by trade, took me under his wing. He came to the house and built a very nice workbench in my garage and then gave me several boxes of tools (apparently, they were extra tools that he could afford to do without). I was very grateful for the abundance of tools I had been given, but truth be told, I did not even know what I had received. Given my age and limited experience, I didn't know what all the tools were capable of, or in what settings I would need some of those tools. My friend, however, had a very good idea of what I was up against and what tools I would need...even if I didn't.

Church, if for just a moment, you had the vision to see you as God sees you...if for just a moment you could see the glorious creature that you will become according to the riches of God's glory and grace...according to His perfect plan and providence...according to His purpose set forth in Christ Jesus our Lord...then you might begin to appreciate the INFINITE, matchless, perfect gifts that He has bestowed upon us as His beloved children...gifts that we don't even realize that we yet possess until that trial comes upon us, until that temptation begs our attention, until that conflict arises at work, until that opportunity to share our faith presents itself. Our Father knows EXACTLY which tool will be needed in the renovation of our souls and the work of His Kingdom, and He is able...He is both able and already doing more...abundantly, infinitely more than we are even asking or imagining. The irony is this: until we dream bigger dreams; until we pray higher prayers; until we step out in faith and follow Jesus beyond the safety of our comfort zone...so many of the gifts that He has showered upon us will remain unopened.

Again, Alexander Maclaren says it best:

He is 'able to do exceedingly abundantly above what we ask or think.' Therefore, let us stretch desires and thoughts to their utmost, remembering that, while they can never reach the measure of His grace in itself, they make the practical measure of our possession of it. 'According to thy faith' is the real measure of the gift received, even though 'according to the riches of His glory' be the measure of the gift bestowed.

Trust God as He leads you into uncharted territory, and then...and only then...will you discover and put to use the gifts that He has entrusted to you. Our faith is the measure of the gifts that we actually employ.

Let us now turn to my third and final subheading...

III. Soli Deo Gloria

The closing line of our text, vs. 21 reads, “...to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”

Many of you are familiar with the five “solas” of the Reformation: *Sola Scriptura* (Scripture Alone) *Sola Gratia* (Grace Alone) *Sola Fide* (Faith Alone) *Solus Christus* (Christ Alone) *Soli Deo Gloria* (To God Alone Be Glory).

The fifth and final sola, *Soli Deo Gloria*, hardly belongs in a list because it rises above everything else...every other doctrine...every other truth...every other priority. The Westminster Confession states that the chief end of man is this: to glorify God.

But I would have you notice what Paul just wrote: Now to Him...to Him be glory *in the Church in Christ Jesus*. God’s glory...the fame of His very nature and light...has been entrusted to the “assembly in Christ Jesus.” That is to say, the glory of God has been entrusted to...us.

Maclaren writes:

His glory is to shine in the Church, the theatre of His power, the standing demonstration of the might of redeeming love. By this He will be judged, and this He will point to if any ask what is His divinest work, which bears the clearest imprint of His divinest self. His glory is to be set forth by men on condition that they are ‘in Christ,’ living and moving in Him, in that mysterious but most real union without which no fruit grows on the dead branches, nor any music of praise breaks from the dead lips.

So, then, think of that wonder that God sets His glory in His dealings with us. Amid all the majesty of His works and all the blaze of His creation, this is what He presents as the highest specimen of His power—the Church of Jesus Christ, the company of poor men, wearied and conscious of many evils, who follow afar off the footsteps of their Lord.

Church, you are the glory of God! You may not feel like the glory of God, and at times, we may all fail miserably at giving God the glory He is due. But make no mistake: this is who you are. This is who we are. We are image bearers...we are those whom God points to as the evidence of His glory. We are the Redeemed; we are the Bride; we are His glory...and it is God’s intent that His Church will bear His glory “in all generations of the age of the ages”...which is to say, forever and ever. Amen.

Does that feel ironic to you? Given what you know about yourself and the church, does it seem ironic that God would entrust us with His glory? Well, to be fair...it has always felt ironic, but that does not make it any less so. Maclaren concludes with this observation, and with it I shall close my message:

How dusty and toil-worn the little group of Christians that landed at Puteoli must have looked as they toiled along the Appian Way and entered Rome! How contemptuously emperor and philosopher and priest and patrician would have curled their lips, if they had been told that in that little knot of Jewish prisoners lay a power before which theirs would cower and finally fade! Even so is it still. Among all the splendors of this great universe, and the mere obtrusive tawdrinesses of earth, men look upon us Christians as poor enough; and yet it is to His redeemed children that God has entrusted His praise, and in their hands that He has lodged the sacred deposit of His own glory.

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