

TO KNOW THE LOVE OF CHRIST

Ephesians 3:14–21

Key Verse: 3:19

“...and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.”

Have you ever run out of gas while driving? It's embarrassing. Without gas, the car won't go anymore, no matter how nice a car it is. It's a metaphor for Christian life. There can be times when we're just spent, when we've just got no more to give. We've reached our human limits. Paul has been explaining the mystery of Christ, how diverse people are united in him. But he knows that practically, this often isn't happening. Instead, we have walls between us. We're not so close. Sometimes, there's resentment, even hostility. How can unity in Christ become our real experience? In Paul's prayer today we find the secret. It's in being filled with the love of Christ. We may know his love in theory, but it may not really fill us. How can we be filled with his love? How can we consistently be showing it, especially to people very different from us? And why should we? May God open our hearts and speak to us through his living word today.

In chapter 2 Paul introduced how the grace of Christ destroys dividing walls of hostility between believers. In 3:1 he began by saying, “For this reason....” Then he went on to explain the mystery of Christ that brings unity. Now in verse 14 he says it again: “For this reason....” Paul knows this unity is more than just a teaching. He's got to pray and ask God to help them. In chapter 1 he prayed that they might have the Spirit of wisdom and revelation to know all the blessings they have in Christ. Now he prays for them especially to know the love of Christ.

How does he begin? Read verses 14–15. Paul is bowing his knees in prayer because this unity is so important. He's kneeling in submission to God's purpose in Christ. Also, he's kneeling because such unity is beyond what human beings can do. So Paul calls out to our Father God. He says every family in heaven and on earth is named by him. It means our Creator God is big enough to embrace all people. Paul adds in verse 16a, “... according to the riches of his glory...” Paul is confident of God's infinite greatness. Our Father God is able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or think (20). He never runs out of gas. He doesn't faint or grow weary, and his understanding is unsearchable (Isa40:28b). When we pray, it's good to start by thinking about our Father God. We

shouldn't be living in denial, but when we pray we should begin by thinking about who our Father God is.

What does Paul pray for? There's quite a bit here. It's all one long sentence, so it's all connected. Let's look at each part. Look at verse 16b. "...he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being..." Paul is again asking God's Spirit to work in them. In this case he's asking for the Spirit to strengthen them inwardly. It's good to begin to pray by asking for the Holy Spirit (Lk11:13). We need to learn to pray at all times "in the Spirit" (6:18) and to "be filled with the Spirit" (5:18). We especially need the power of God's Spirit.

For what? Look at verse 17a. "...so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith..." We receive Christ when we first repent and believe in him. But Christ needs to "dwell" in us also. In Greek this is a strong word that means to make his permanent home in us. "In your hearts" means in the center of your being. Paul is talking about a deep and fundamental change. In our sin, at the center of our hearts there's just "me." It's all about our ego. We perceive everything through the prism of our pride. But Christ sets us free from living for self. When he comes to dwell in our hearts through faith, he rules us, and we start living for him. We start seeing through his perspective. His presence within us happens through the Holy Spirit, and he's the one who fills us and makes us spiritually strong.

But that's not the end; it's just a turning point. Look at verses 17b–18a. "...that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints..." Paul isn't praying about outward activities here; he's praying for our *comprehension*. In chapters 4–6 he's going to speak specifically about many practical applications, but before that, he prays for our real comprehension. He adds "with all the saints." It's not a self-centered understanding, but one that comes from being in the community of God's people. Christ dwelling in our heart is a very personal experience, but the goal here is to comprehend something together with all his people. When Paul says "all the saints," he's talking about a diverse group—some used to live far off from God, some have always tried to stay near to him. There were many ethnicities and age differences. Like them, only as we get closer to each other can we all comprehend what Paul is talking about.

And what is it that we should be praying to comprehend together? Look at verses 18b–19a. "...what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge..." His love is so vast, so great, it's hard to comprehend. We think we know it but we really don't. There are many kinds of knowledge: life experiences, philosophical and historical ideas, technical expertise, etc. But the love of Christ surpasses knowledge. It's a paradox. Once we know his love, we've crossed a

threshold. Paul wrote elsewhere: “And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, but have not love, I am nothing” (1Co13:2). It’s good for us to know many things. It’s good to know more about each other. But all this knowledge is really nothing without love.

What is this love of Christ? Paul said it’s a love that surpasses knowledge. But what does that mean? From a human point of view, his love looks foolish. In fact, his love doesn’t make sense. Why love enemies? Why love people who are indifferent and will despise and use you? Why love when there’s no guarantee it will have any effect at all? Moreover, even our greatest human love is limited. We love those closest to us. We love those who love us. Even then, it’s kind of feeble. But Paul says here that the love of Christ has a breadth and length and height and depth that’s beyond our ability to comprehend, not to mention practice.

What’s the essence of it? Paul writes in Romans 5:8: “...but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” It was total self-sacrifice. John 3:16a says, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son...” We didn’t love him at all, but he took the initiative and loved us first (1Jn4:19). We only wanted to take something, get something, but he gave, and gave his best, his dearest only Son. It’s a love that placed all our evil, guilty, ugly sins on his lovely, holy, innocent Son and punished him in our places. It’s a love so deep, it reaches all the way down to the lowest. Why? Why did God do that? It’s beyond comprehension. But it’s a love Paul prayed for us to know. It’s a love we all need to keep praying to know.

How can we know this love? Paul said it’s through God’s Spirit (16). He writes in Romans 5:5b that “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.” Paul also says here that when Christ comes to dwell in our hearts through faith, we’re “rooted and grounded” in this love. It means his love becomes our source of nourishment. His love becomes our foundation. Not our efforts, not even our sincerity, but his love. Paul is saying here that even if we’re rooted and grounded in his love, we all need to kneel down and pray to keep growing in the love of Christ.

When we keep growing in his love, what happens? Read verse 19b. “...that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.” God’s love for us in Christ fills us with his fullness. This is Paul’s ultimate goal in this prayer: that believers may be filled with all the fullness of God. Filled with the fullness of his great love. Why? Of course, so that we may enjoy it. But in the context of Ephesians, it’s also so that we can contribute to unity in our church.

What builds unity? It's not a uniform program, not everybody doing exactly the same thing in exactly the same way. It's the great love of God. And this love is not just an emotion. In the next chapter Paul is going to say that it teaches us to bear with each other in love (4:2), to speak the truth to each other in love (4:15), and to build each other up in love (4:16). As we know the love of Christ, we learn to "walk" in his love (5:2), giving ourselves up for one another, just like he did. It's a love Christian husbands learn to practice toward their wives (5:25). Ultimately, it's a love that we grow to have for Christ himself (6:24).

In trying to work with others in ministry, we can reach our human limitations so quickly. We get tired and burned out. We say, "I'm done. I can't do this anymore." But when we're filled with the love of Christ, which is unending, we can keep going. Sometimes we encounter people who seem to have no inner capacity to love. They don't know how to love, even if their lives depended on it. But there's hope for all of us in the love of Christ. Knowing the love of Christ matures us from self-centered, egoistic people into Christ-like people who can keep serving, keep sacrificing, keep showing love faithfully, every day, to anybody, to the end. When we know the greatness of his love, we can stop trying to guard and defend ourselves. As C.S. Lewis said, in Christ's love we make ourselves vulnerable.

What's the ultimate goal of Paul's prayer? Read verses 20–21. It's to reveal God's glory in his church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. So, what are we praying for? We may have many good ideas. But let's learn from Apostle Paul to pray to comprehend the greatness of the love of Christ. Let's pray for each other to comprehend the greatness of his love. As his love fills us, may we grow in spiritual unity that glorifies God and makes us a blessing to the world.