

Ephesians: Living in Sync with Reality
Part 7: Rooted in Love

April 28, 2024
By Pastor Ricky Stephen

Ephesians 3:14-21

Love Is All You Need

Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3:14-21 is full of intense language and his prayer being 'on his knees' demonstrates an extreme depth of feeling. Letting God's love in is Paul's major concern for early Christians. He must need to focus on this because, typically, we are bad at accepting love.

1. Participation in God's Loving Power

The 2014 film 'Whiplash' demonstrates one of the blockages to our ability to accept love, the cultural assumption:

Work Harder and You Will Earn More.

The film has a severe rating for language because it is about bullying and abuse. It follows a young jazz drummer who is abused by his professor, Terrence Fletcher. Fletcher hopes this abuse will cause the drummer to be 'great'. It's part of his philosophy and one of his maxims is:

"There are no two words in the English language more harmful than 'good job'".

In the movie, the young drummer sacrifices his mental, emotional, physical, and relational health to become 'great'. But he does it without stopping to ask: what am I working so hard for? What am I trying to earn more of? And from whom?

For him, it is the applause of a sea of strangers and the approval of a bitter professor.

We also need to stop and ask ourselves, if we're overworking, what am I doing this for?

Who am I doing this for? Strangers and acquaintances?

Paul is not opposed to effort. Nor is the gospel. As Dallas Willard once said:

"Grace is not opposed to effort; it is opposed to earning. Earning is an attitude. Effort is an action."¹

Paul had lived under the Jewish law and knew what it felt like to try to earn love. But with the death and resurrection of Jesus, he knew that a new power was available to believers. The Holy Spirit.

For Paul the Spirit is someone we are in 'fellowship' with (Greek: *koinonia*). This is a term that denotes a close working relationship. We *participate* with God and in His loving power.

The movement towards God's love is one away from earning through our effort and towards participating in his loving power.

¹ Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus's Essential Teachings on Discipleship*

2. Strengthened in the Inner Person

Paul prays that believers would be “strengthened in your inner being[s]” and that Christ would “dwell in your hearts through faith.” He prays for this inner experience instead of a change of outward circumstances. This challenges the common cultural notion that:

If It Looks Good, It Is Good.

The Old Testament wrestles with this point, with proverbs that seem to point to righteousness leading to outward flourishing (Proverbs 13:25). Then the book of Job challenges the whole notion that righteousness leads to earthly flourishing. In the pagan world Paul was addressing, one had favor with the gods if their life looked good—health, wealth, and happiness.

Today, our image-soaked social media culture propagates the same notion, if it looks good it is good.

Ephesians is one of the most encouraging documents ever to be written and Paul wrote it from prison in Rome facing judgment from the most powerful person in his world.

Paul did not base his understanding of God’s love on outward appearances, he was *strengthened in his inner person*.

He wrote, in 2 Corinthians 4:16:

“Therefore, we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So, we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.”

Our outer circumstances are not a reliable indicator of God’s opinion towards us. We are to allow God to strengthen us on the inside.

3. With the Father there is Immeasurably More

The board game ‘Life’ demonstrates the standard cultural storyline for human life. Good grades, good schools, good jobs, good houses, spouses, and families, retirement and then death. It reduces our lives to economic realities. Many of our young people feel burdened to live out this narrative and suffer when they feel they can’t.

This storyline is based on a demonic lie, the lie that:

There is Not Enough.

We present the need to compete based on a lack of opportunities and resources. We imagine a world in which there is not enough so I better ‘get mine’.

Paul refers frequently to God’s love as ‘glorious riches’ (Eph 1:18, 2:7, 3:16). Paul calls God ‘Father’ like Jesus did. And like Jesus, he fills that title with very specific content: a Father who knows what you need before you ask and wants to give it to you (Matt. 6:8). He makes it rain on the righteous and unrighteous, providing even for those who want nothing to do with Him (Matt. 5:45; Luke 6:35). He gives an inheritance to the son who doesn’t value Him (Luke 15:11-32).

Our resource issues, for scripture, are not a problem based in creation they are a problem based in human sin. They are a problem based in our fear and scarcity mentality. They are a love problem.

But Paul tells us that with the Father there is ‘immeasurably more than we ask or imagine’ (Eph. 3:20).

What if we lived like that was true?

Where would you jump to if you knew those arms would catch you?

4. Together with the Lord’s Holy People

We can struggle to live this reality because God’s love is invisible, but the hatred and pain caused by others is all too visible. And part of that vitriol comes from a scarcity mindset leading to a culture of competition.

And it is this aspect of believing there is not enough that is demonic. C.S. Lewis once wrote:

“The whole philosophy of Hell rests on recognition of the axiom that one thing is not another thing, and, specially, that oneself is not another self. My good is my good and your good is yours. What one gains another loses... ‘To be’ means ‘to be in competition’.”²

Put as a cultural assumption:

If I Have, You Have Not.

Paul challenges our competitive mindsets two ways.

First, in Ephesians 3:15 Paul reminds us that humanity and all creatures are one family. As many Christian thinkers remind us, the family is the smallest unit of society. And this is because society is a family—a group of individuals interdependent upon each other.

Second, Paul reminds us of the mission of the church:

“And I pray that you...may have power, together with all the Lord’s holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.” (Eph. 3:17b-19)

We can only grasp the dimensions of God’s love ‘together with all the Lord’s Holy People’. The church is the visible expression of God’s invisible love. Some think the language of dimensions—width, length, height, and depth—is a reference to the ‘New Temple’ made of Jew and Gentile in Ephesians 2. If so, it’s as if Paul is saying, you are an important part of the architecture of God’s love in the world. There’s a place for you, as you are, to help us grasp the dimensions of God’s love.

² C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*

Praying the Prayer

As you consider these truths, consider praying this prayer over yourself, your family and our city, country, and world:

Father, I kneel before you now, you who have written your name on all the families in heaven and on earth. I pray that out of the abundance of your glorious riches you would strengthen us with power through your Spirit in our inner beings that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith. And I pray that we would be rooted and established in love, and we would have power together with all the Lord's holy people to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that we would be filled to the measure with all the fullness of God.

You are able to do immeasurably more than we ask or imagine according to the power that is at work within us, to You be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.

Discussion Questions

Open Up

Spend time as a group considering the following question:

For you, what is the most significant hindrance to knowing and experiencing the love of Jesus?

Dig In

Re-read **Ephesians 3:14-21**

- Paul's prayer is one of the most powerful in scripture. What words or phrases really resonate with you? What might God be trying to say to you through them?
- What other aspects of our culture make it hard to experience God's Love?
- Which of the four cultural narratives do you feel most affected by? The narratives were: earning through effort, basing our worth on our circumstances, operating with a scarcity mindset, and seeing others as competition.
- What are some ways you can organize your life around knowing and demonstrating this love?

Prayer

If there was a word or phrase from the prayer that stood out to each individual, get them to share that word again. Have someone in the group pray based on that word or phrase for them.

Or pray the above prayer in the 'praying the prayer' section above.