

Ephesians 3:14-21 — Rethinking Spiritual Maturity

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Good morning CrossWinds. What comes to mind when I say the words, “spiritual maturity”? Most of us think about Bible knowledge. In the first century, the spiritually mature were the Pharisees. Most of them memorized the entire Old Testament word for word. They could quote vast amounts of Bible trivia. They were walking libraries. If Bible knowledge means spiritual maturity, they would have been the spiritual kings. If you know about Jesus, and how he felt about them, you know they weren't his favorites.

Today, we define spiritual maturity the same way. The spiritually mature people are the ones who can quote Bible verses. They read Christian books all the time. Every time the church is open, they are there. They are Bible trivia kings. Just like in the first century, we consider them the spiritually mature ones among us.

While Bible knowledge is part of spiritual maturity, this morning we will discover it is not the most important part. There are many Christians in church who know a ton of Bible trivia but are spiritual toddlers. What is the missing piece at the center piece of this puzzle? This morning, we will find out.

We are in a series called, “Who Am I?” This is a study through the book of Ephesians. This morning, we finish Ephesians 3. After this morning, we are exactly halfway through the book. Those of you who took the challenge of reading the book of Ephesians twice a week know that Ephesians was written in two parts. In the first half of the book, Paul shocked us by telling us how much

God loves us through Christ. In the second half of the book, that begins next week, things get very practical. Paul wrote about living the Christian life. Here is what most people miss. The ability to live the Christian life, that Paul talks about in the second half of the book, only comes from understanding how much God loves us through Jesus, that we discover in the front half of the book.

If you open Ephesians, and skip the first three chapters, you will get really frustrated when it comes to living the Christian life. You won't be able to obey God's commands. The reason we can't follow the second half of the book is that the second half of the book is about responses. How we live as a Christian is a response to what God has done for us in the first half of the book.

For example, in the summer I occasionally come home and Cindy has left a note on the counter asking me to do a few things for her. Imagine I came home and she left me a note asking me to mow the lawn. I am happy to do it. The more the love between us has grown, the happier I am to do whatever she asks. I love to serve her *in response to her love for me*. I mow the lawn out of a heart filled with gratitude to her.

Now imagine I come home and on the front door is a note from a neighbor down the road. I don't even know who the guy is. He lives a few blocks from me. I have never met the guy. His note simply says, "Mow my lawn" and has an address on it. I am just being honest. I am not likely to obey his note. It is an annoyance to me. My first thoughts are, "I don't know you. I don't want to take my precious Saturday to mow your lawn. Get out of the recliner and do it yourself." Why should I mow his lawn if he gives me nothing more than a raw

command? There is no power in his request. My heart rebels against those things and so does yours.

The same is true in the book of Ephesians. The second half of the book tells husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the church. The male brains says, "Who are you to tell me to love my wife? You don't know my wife. She doesn't deserve to be loved. She is difficult. She is annoying. She always yells. Why should I love her?" It also says, "...as Christ loved the church." We are the church. In the first three chapters of Ephesians, we learned how much Christ loves us. We are the most blessed beings in the universe because of Christ's love that we do not deserve. We will sit on Christ's lap in eternity exalted above all spiritual and physical beings in the entire universe. We deserve eternal hell but are made the most blessed beings in the universe as a gift from God. We are hard to love. We are difficult to love. We keep straying away but God doesn't give up on us and he loves us anyway.

Now when the God who loves us that much asks husbands to love their wives *like he loves you, it takes on new meaning*. The way husbands express their gratitude to Christ for his love is by loving their wives like Christ loves them. It is a response, not just a command. Without the first half of Ephesians, there is no power in that command.

Last week, Paul took a little aside to talk about serving the church and why ministry is worth the sacrifice, even when it is really hard.

This week, Paul prayed for the Ephesians in this section of the book. He prayed for their spiritual maturity. Paul said spiritual maturity isn't what you think. Spiritual maturity is not just knowledge about God.

What position did Paul use in prayer?

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named... Ephesians 3:14–15 (ESV)

Why was Paul praying for them? When Paul said, "For this reason..." he was referring to everything we learned in chapters 1 and 2. It is all God has done for us to bring us back to God and to one another through Jesus. This is the reason Paul prayed for them.

Look at the position Paul prayed in. He prayed from his knees. Prayer from the knees is not the way Jews usually prayed. They typically prayed standing. Sometimes they would sway back and forth. You can see this today in Jerusalem.

Sometimes they prayed on their knees, but it was rare. When they prayed on their knees, it meant either an extraordinary event was happening or they were praying about something extraordinarily important. For example, when Solomon dedicated the temple in 2 Chronicles 6:13, he prayed from his knees because it was an extraordinarily important event. When Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane in Mark 14:35-36, he prayed from his knees because it was an extraordinarily important prayer. He was about to be crucified. He was so stressed he was sweating blood.

What we find is when it comes to Paul praying for Ephesians and their spiritual maturity, it was something he took very seriously. It was serious enough

to get on his knees. This was not a generic bedtime prayer or a bless-this-food prayer. Paul was on his knees seeking God for them.

How do we pray for spiritual maturity?

Pray for an understanding of God's love that is more than I can humanly comprehend.

...that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth... Ephesians 3:16–18 (ESV)

This verse is a little complicated. Let's take it slow. How does the Christian life begin? It begins with Christ dwelling in our hearts through faith. It is when God breaks into our lives and helps us see Jesus and know Jesus. It is when we understand that God loves us through Jesus.

You see, everyone starts out thinking that God doesn't love you. Everyone starts off thinking God hates you. We know about our sin. We don't know how bad it is but we know it separates us from God. We know we are in deep trouble. We are lonely. We are isolated. We are depressed. We are hopeless. We come up with ways we think we can earn our ways back into God's good graces. We promise to break sin habits. We do good things. We make lists of ways to improve ourselves but none of it works. We can't fix ourselves. We keep doing stupid sinful things.

What God does is when we are hopeless, he breaks into our lives, just like he did for Paul on the road to Damascus. We hear the gospel message, that God loves us in spite of our sin and that he sent his son to die for our sins. God's Spirit works in our hearts to soften us to the message. We respond to the

message. We trust God to save us from our sin through Jesus. We love God because he first loved us. We place our trust in God because he loved us. That is the way the Christian life begins. Paul said here we are rooted and grounded in that love. That means the Christian faith is about God's love for us that none of us deserve. That is, when somebody becomes a Christian, the Holy Spirit opens the eyes of their hearts to see their sins and to see God's love for them through Jesus in spite of their sin and they are blown away by it. We place our faith in God and his love.

Here is the problem. We treat God's love for us through Jesus like a check box. We look at it like something that is one and done. In reality, our understanding of God's love for us through Jesus just begins at salvation. Paul's prayer was that God would supernaturally expand the capacity of the Ephesian's hearts so they could get an even bigger grip on how much God loved them.

...that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth... Ephesians 3:16–18 (ESV)

We need God to supernaturally enlarge the capacity of our hearts to take in the immense amount of love God has for us through Jesus. Spiritual maturity is found in our hearts grasping more of God's love for us through Jesus. *The more God opens our hearts to get our spirits around this, the more spiritually mature we will become.*

You see, we think spiritual maturity is about information. That isn't the centerpiece of maturity. God uses information to bring us to spiritual maturity but

information isn't spiritual maturity. The center of maturity is an ever-expanding grasp of God's love for us through Jesus. This is a supernatural comprehension of how much God loves us through his son. The more we understand that, the more we will be changed.

Paul prayed that God would get the hearts of the Ephesians he loved wrapped around this. It is also my prayer for you. It is the prayer that we need to pray for others, that God would open our hearts to drink in his immense love for us that will transform us into the most blessed beings in the universe through Jesus.

Growing in the love of God is more important than growing in the knowledge of God.

...and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Ephesians 3:19 (ESV)

We think spiritual maturity is about information. More than information, it is being touched by the love of God for us through Jesus. *You see, information doesn't change behavior. It doesn't cause us to love people. It doesn't free us from the power of sin. Information doesn't do any of that. It is God's immense love for us through Jesus that changes our lives.* It is God's love for us that frees us from the power of sin. It is knowing that no matter how much we sin, God's love for us is so strong that he won't love us any less when we do sin. That is what breaks the power of sin. It is God's love for us that leads us to love people. We love because he first loved us.

Pray for a better understanding of God's power toward us that is more than we can ask or think.

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, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen. Ephesians 3:20–21 (ESV)

Paul said we need to supernaturally comprehend not just God's love for us, which is more important than knowledge, but that we also need to comprehend God's power. The problem is many times we don't pray because we don't think God can do anything about a situation. The reality is that a situation is never hopeless. God can do abundantly more than we ever ask or imagine.

Conclusion

What we just studied in the first three chapters of Ephesians, on how much God loves us through Christ, is the centerpiece of the Christian life. Everything in the Christian life comes out of God's incredible love for us.

I intentionally made this message short because, this morning, I wanted to do something different. Instead of just giving you more information and knowledge of about God's love for us, I thought it would be a good idea if we actually spent time meditating on God's love and praying for spiritual maturity in our lives and the lives of those we love. I think it would be a good idea that we ask God to take what we learned in Ephesians 1-3 about God's incredible love for us through Jesus and we ask God to supernaturally open the capacity of our hearts to comprehend it. We ask God to just melt us with his love as we roll it

around in our minds that God's Holy Spirit would supernaturally melt us and change us.

I will lead us in a time of prayer and then we are going to end with worship. Worship is our opportunity to respond to God and thank him for his love, to sing from our hearts thanking him for all he has done that we don't deserve.

Prayer time.

- Pray that God would open our hearts to supernaturally comprehend how much he loves us. Change us with that love. We don't change by information. We change by love. Help us to understand how much you love us that you sent your son to die for us and make us the most blessed beings in the universe.
- Pray for those we love. Pray for our children, our spouses, our parents and our friends. We pray that God would open their hearts to take in more of his love for them. We pray that this love would change them and become the power that changes their lives.
- Pray for our church family. We want to be a church family that is known for the love of Christ. Help us to not just know of God's love for us but to extend it to one another in the church.



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