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THE UNFATHOMABLE RICHES OF CHRIST

Ephesians 3:8

By

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December 2, 2007
Ephesians Lesson 20

The Unfathomable Riches of Christ Ephesians 3:8

It is my normal, weekly experience to feel overwhelmed by inadequacy as I attempt to preach God's Word. But when I come to a subject as vast as the unfathomable riches of Christ, I am almost paralyzed! It makes me realize how little of these immeasurable riches of Christ that I experience personally. It overwhelms me to think about what I can say on so profound a subject. So I am unusually aware that unless God anoints His Word with power, my feeble words will surely fail.

You would think that if you announced on the sign out front and in the newspaper that someone was speaking on the unfathomable riches of Christ, people would line up hours before the services, waiting to get in. "Free eternal riches will be given out at Flagstaff Christian Fellowship! Come and get all that you can!" But, as far as I know, no one had to wait in line to get in the door.

Even among the Lord's people, some had "more important" things to do today than to come and explore more deeply the unfathomable riches of Christ. Some were too tired or too busy. I hope not, but perhaps some saw the title and thought, "Ho hum! That doesn't sound very practical! Why doesn't he talk about more relevant things?"

Maybe Jonathan Edwards sheds some light on this when he observed (*The Works of Jonathan Edwards* [Banner of Truth], 2:147), "The more holy any being is, the more sweet and delightful will it be to him to behold the glory and beauty of the Supreme Being." He was preaching on Ephesians 3:10, where Paul says that the manifold wisdom of God is now made known through the church to the angelic hosts. The angels, who are perfect in holiness, greatly delight in the manifold wisdom of God as seen in the unfathomable riches of Christ. So if the subject bores you, you had better check your heart. The glory and beauty of Jesus Christ should captivate us so that out of great joy, we sell everything in order to gain the treasure of Christ (Matt. 13:44-46).

I was going to preach on verses 8-13, which are a unit, but Paul not only talks about the unfathomable riches of Christ, but also of God's eternal purpose as it relates to the church and of two practical consequences of these mind-boggling truths. So I had to limit myself to verse 8, which shows us that...

Sinners may freely partake of the unfathomable riches of Christ.

1. The unfathomable riches of Christ are offered only to sinners.

Luke 1:53 states, "He has filled the hungry with good things; and sent away the rich empty-handed." The spiritually hungry are sinners who see their need for forgiveness. The rich see no need for salvation. Bill Gates doesn't spend his time standing in line at the welfare office. He doesn't need their help. If you think that you have enough righteousness on your own to get into heaven, then you will not see your need for the unfathomable riches of Christ. Three things in our text show that these riches of Christ are offered only to sinners:

- A. Paul preached the gospel to the Gentiles.

The Gentiles were not godly people! The religious Jews despised them as filthy dogs. They did not obey the Jewish Law. They made up their own standards for morality, which were abominable in God's sight. The Ephesians, as we've seen, were steeped in the occult, and so many of them were plagued by demons that it spawned an industry for professional exorcists (Acts 19:13-16). They "worshiped" at the pagan Temple of Diana, which involved immorality with the temple prostitutes. They did a thriving business selling idols, which ignorant people bought in hopes of solving their problems. These Gentiles were about as far from the living and true God as anyone could be.

And yet, when Paul came to Ephesus and preached the unfathomable riches of Christ, so many got saved that it threatened the idol-makers' business. The same thing happened when Paul preached the gospel to the notoriously immoral Corinthians. He wrote to them (1 Cor. 6:9-11):

Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators,

nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God. Such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.

Or, as he wrote to the Christians in Rome (Rom. 1:16), "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek." In fact, the most difficult sinners to reach are religious sinners, because they do not see their desperate need. If God has opened your eyes to see that you have sinned against Him and are guilty of eternal judgment, then He offers to you the unfathomable riches of Christ in exchange for your spiritual poverty.

B. Paul saw himself as the least of all saints.

Paul coins a word that means, "I am less than the least." This was not a mock humility on Paul's part, but rather his honest feelings as he thought about his sinful past. In his self-righteousness, he had persecuted the church. His spiritual pride led him to think that he was doing God a favor by killing sincere, innocent believers! So, after God graciously stopped him in his tracks, Paul never got over the great mercy that God had shown to him. In 1 Corinthians 15:9, he said, "For I am the least of the apostles, and not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God." Here, he sees himself as the least of all the saints. And, later in life (1 Tim. 1:15), he says that "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all." He uses the present tense.

The closer you draw to God and see His holiness, the more aware you become of the sinfulness of your own heart. We see this with Isaiah, who instantly became aware of his sinfulness when he saw the Lord. Job, the most righteous man on earth, repented in dust and ashes when he had his encounter with God (Job 42:6). That has been the uniform experience of every saint throughout history. The closer they are to God, the more they lament their own sinfulness. John Calvin points this out often in his writings. For example, he wrote (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker], on Psalm 32:1, p. 526), "The more eminently that any one excels in holiness,

the farther he feels himself from perfect righteousness, and the more clearly he perceives that he can trust in nothing but the mercy of God alone.”

The point is, the unfathomable riches of Christ are only offered to those who see themselves to be poverty-stricken sinners. The only servants that God uses are those who see that they are inadequate clay pots, but that God has put His treasure in them (2 Cor. 2:16; 3:5; 4:7).

C. Paul could only preach Christ because God had given him grace.

As we saw last week, Paul was so overwhelmed by God's grace that he couldn't stop repeating himself. He mentions it in 3:2 and 3:7, as well as here in 3:8: “this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ.” Paul knew that the only reason he could preach Christ was that God had given him grace.

Paul was like the workers in Jesus' parable (Matt. 20:1-16) who got hired late in the day. The story involved a landowner who went into the marketplace early in the day and hired some workers, agreeing to pay them a denarius for their day's labor. Later in the morning, he hired some more, promising to give them whatever is right. He did the same thing in the early and mid-afternoon. Finally, an hour before quitting time, he hired some others.

When it came time to pay the workers, those who were hired at the last hour were paid a denarius. Those who had worked all day thought that they would get more, but they just got the denarius that the owner had promised them. When they grumbled, the owner told them that they had no right to grumble. He gave them what he had agreed on. But, if he wanted to be generous with what is his, why should they be envious?

That parable illustrates God's grace. We wrongly start thinking that God owes it to us because of our hard work for Him. But if He owes it, it's not grace. Grace is always undeserved. Since we did nothing to deserve it, we can't demand it. So, if we grew up in the church and God saves us and calls us to preach His good news, it is pure grace. If we grew up in the streets as gang members and God saves us and calls us to preach, it is pure grace. As someone has

well said, when we share the gospel with others, it is just one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread.

Before we leave this point, that the unfathomable riches of Christ are offered only to sinners, note three applications:

- ü When you present the gospel, you must speak about sin, righteousness, and judgment.

If the person you are talking with is clearly broken and repentant over his sin, you don't have to hammer it so hard. But in my experience, most people think of themselves as basically good. They think that God will let them into heaven because they aren't as bad as the child molesters and terrorists of the world. If you tell these people that God loves them and recite John 3:16, they think, "Yes, of course, I am so loveable! But, thank you for reminding me!" But if they are not convicted of sin and do not see the absolute righteousness of God and do not fear His impending judgment on their evil thoughts, words, and deeds, then they do not see their need for the Savior. Take them to the Sermon on the Mount and show them that in God's sight, anger is murder and lust is adultery.

- ü When you pray for the lost, pray that they will come under conviction for their sin.

Unless, as Spurgeon put it, they feel the rope around their neck, they will not weep for joy when the Savior cuts it and frees them. Pray that unbelievers will read God's Word and that the Holy Spirit will convict them of their guilt in God's sight.

- ü After you have trusted in Christ, you become a saint who is yet at the same time a sinner. Don't lose the balance.

There is some popular, but badly unbalanced teaching on this matter. Neil Anderson's books emphasize that as a believer, you are not a sinner, not even a sinner saved by grace. Rather, you are a saint who occasionally sins (see, *Victory Over the Darkness* [Regal Books], pp. 44-45; see my review on the church web site, under "Articles"). He is rightly trying to present our new identity in Christ, but he denies what every godly person in the Bible and down through history has affirmed, that we are *both* saints and yet sinners. The closer we draw to God, the more we feel the tension.

If we let go of either side, we are out of balance spiritually. The unfathomable riches of Christ are offered only to sinners. Second,

2. The unfathomable riches of Christ center on the person of Jesus Christ.

If we have Jesus Christ, then we have every spiritual blessing (Eph. 1:3). All of God's promises are "yes" in Christ (2 Cor. 1:20). God's "divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence" (2 Pet. 1:3). Note two things:

- A. The gospel is not about rules, regulations, or religious rituals, but rather about knowing Jesus Christ Himself.

Paul did not proclaim to the Gentiles the moral rules of Christianity, although there are obviously moral standards in the Bible. He didn't proclaim to them how they could go through baptism or receive the Lord's Supper or pray the rosary or go through any other religious ceremonies or rituals to get right with God. Rather, he proclaimed to them the good news of the unfathomable riches of Christ.

Paul himself had sought to please God by keeping all of the Jewish rituals. In fact, he prided himself in how well he observed the Jewish law (Phil. 3:5-6). But he said of these things (Phil. 3:8), "More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ." Christianity is at its heart a matter of knowing Jesus Christ personally. If you do not know Him, then all of the religious rituals in the world will be of no value to you. You must know Christ and be growing to know Him more deeply.

- B. Jesus Christ possesses in Himself unfathomable riches and He gives these riches to all that call upon Him.

Here is where I'm in way over my head! Jesus Christ is the infinite, eternal God who took on human flesh so that He could give Himself as the only satisfactory and perfect sacrifice for our sins. As Paul expresses it (2 Cor. 8:9), "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich."

The person of Christ is unfathomable, in that we can never completely get to the bottom of who He is and what He did for us on the cross. The word, "unfathomable," is used only one other time in the New Testament, in Romans 11:33, where Paul exclaims, "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!" The word is used twice in the Greek Old Testament to describe God's unfathomable ways in His creation (Job 5:9; 9:10). One preacher compared it to a man who was tracking out the confines of what he thought to be a small lake. But he discovered that it was an arm of the ocean, and so he was confronted by the immeasurable sea (J. H. Jowett, *The Passion for Souls*, p. 10, cited by Francis Foulkes, *Ephesians* [IVP/Eerdmans], p. 97).

"Riches" refers to true, lasting, eternal spiritual wealth that we have in Jesus Christ. Jesus told the parable of the rich man who decided to build bigger barns to hold more wealth, but God required his soul of him that very night. Jesus said (Luke 12:21), "So is the man who stores up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God." He instructed us not to lay up treasures on earth, which can and will be taken from us, "But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal" (Matt. 6:19).

The fact that Christ possesses in Himself unfathomable riches and that He gives these riches to all that call upon Him means that He can and will supply our every spiritual and personal need. He allows trials into our lives to drive us to a deeper experience of His all-sufficiency for our needs. Are we depressed? He is our joy! Are we discouraged? He is our hope! Are we troubled, anxious, or fearful? He is our peace! Are we weak? He is our strength! I could go on and on, but for sake of time, I just went through Ephesians up to where we're at and came up with these ten needs that Christ richly supplies:

- (1) We need redemption and forgiveness; He is our redemption and the substitute for our sin penalty.

Ephesians 1:7-8a: "In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace which He lavished on us."

- (2) We need love; He predestined us in love to adoption as His children.

Ephesians 1:4b-5, "In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will."

- (3) We need holiness; He chose us to be holy and blameless in Him.

Although we formerly lived according to the lusts of the flesh (2:3), Ephesians 1:4 tells us, "He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him."

- (4) We need a sense of purpose; He made known to us the mystery of His will and created us in Christ for good works.

Ephesians 1:9, "He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him." And (2:10), "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them."

- (5) We need an eternal inheritance; He predestined us to obtain that inheritance in Christ.

Ephesians 1:11 says that in Him we have obtained an inheritance, while 1:14 adds that the Holy Spirit has been given to us as the pledge of our inheritance.

- (6) We need hope; God has made us fellow-partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel (3:5).
- (7) We need power; the surpassing greatness of His power brought us from death to life (1:19-20; 3:7).
- (8) We need life; He raised us from death to life (2:1, 5).
- (9) We need peace with God and with one another; He Himself is our peace (2:14, 16).
- (10) We need access to God for all our needs; He is our access through the Spirit to the Father (2:18; 3:12).

If you want to read more about the unfathomable riches of Christ, read Spurgeon or Martyn Lloyd-Jones, who are far more eloquent than I am and who both experientially knew the riches of Christ far better than I do. But I hope that from this brief survey, you can see that we do not need to turn to the worldly insights of psychology to meet our deepest needs. We need to go deeper in our knowledge of the unfathomable riches of Christ for our souls.

One final thing to consider:

3. Christ invites you to come and partake freely of all that He is.

The word translated “preach” is literally, “to proclaim the good news.” It would not be good news to hear that Christ has unfathomable riches to offer, but you must earn them. It would not be good news to hear that you must first clean up your life to qualify for these riches. It is only good news if, as is really true, Christ offers these riches freely to all that call upon Him. He invites sinners (Matt. 11:28), “Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.” He promised (John 6:37), “All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out.” Will you come to Christ?

It would be unthinkable foolish to hear that a treasure is available for the taking, but to say, “Sorry, I’m too busy!” It would be an insult if a wealthy man sent his limousine to bring a hungry beggar to his lavish banquet, and the beggar said, “I can’t come until I can pay for it.”

Christ offers Himself freely to every sinner. He has unfathomable riches to bestow on you for the asking. Come to Him and begin to enjoy the treasure that you will go on discovering more of throughout all eternity!

Conclusion

John Newton, a drunken slave trader who experienced the unfathomable riches of Christ and became a pastor and the author of “Amazing Grace,” put a plaque with Deuteronomy 15:15 over his mantle: “Thou shalt remember that thou wast a bondman in the land of Egypt, and the Lord thy God redeemed thee.”

Late in life, a pastor friend noticed that Newton was showing signs of old age and urged him to stop preaching and take life easy. "What!" he replied, "shall the old African blasphemer stop while he can speak at all?"

He wrote his own epitaph: "John Newton, clerk, once an infidel and libertine, a servant of slaves in Africa, was by the mercy of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, preserved, restored, pardoned, and appointed to preach the faith he had so long labored to destroy." Late in life he said, "My memory is nearly gone; but I remember two things, that I am a great sinner and that Christ is a great Savior!" (In *A Frank Boreham Treasury*, compiled by Peter Gunther [Moody Press], pp. 72, 77, 78.) Newton knew that sinners may freely partake of the unfathomable riches of Christ. Do you?

Application Questions

1. Can conviction of sin and repentance come *after* conversion or must these things be present for conversion to take place?
2. Neil Anderson argues that if you see yourself as a sinner, you will sin. Thus we should see ourselves only as saints who occasionally sin. Agree/disagree? Why?
3. Christian psychologists argue that sometimes a Christian needs more than the Bible to help with severe emotional problems. Agree/disagree? Why?
4. Discuss: God permits problems in our lives to teach us more about the all-sufficiency of Christ. If true, what implications does this have for "Christian psychology"?

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