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## KNOWING THE UNKNOWABLE LOVE OF CHRIST

Ephesians 3:17b-19

By

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Ephesians Lesson 23

## Knowing the Unknowable Love of Christ Ephesians 3:17b-19

Do you find that spending consistent time alone each day with the Lord in the Word and in prayer is a difficult duty, not a joyous delight? Is your spiritual life often dry and routine? Are you often defeated by temptation and sin?

At the risk of being overly simplistic, I believe that all of these problems stem from a common source: You do not know experientially the love of Jesus Christ as deeply as you should. A young man who has just fallen in love doesn't regard spending time with his new love as a difficult duty! He doesn't think, "I really *should* spend time with her today but, nah, I think I'll skip it." Why not? Because he is motivated and captivated by love. He rearranges everything else in his schedule to make time to be with her. Such love is a powerful force that literally changes your life. It motivates you in ways that you do not understand.

But, as we all know, it's one thing to fall in love, but it's another thing to sustain it and cause it to grow deeper over the years. It doesn't run on autopilot! It requires focus and effort. The same is true with regard to knowing the love of Christ. You come to know it at salvation, but you've got to work at growing to know Him and His love in deeper and deeper ways.

We are in the middle of Paul's second prayer for the Ephesians. In the first part, he prays that God would grant according to the riches of His glory for his readers to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man, so that Christ may dwell in their hearts through faith. This prayer grows like a pyramid. Spurgeon compares it to Jacob's ladder, with each rung taking us higher toward heaven.

So the next step, built upon Christ's dwelling in our hearts through faith, is that we will be rooted and grounded in love. With that foundation, Paul prays that we will be able to comprehend with the saints the infinite dimensions of the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge. The final result will be that we will be filled

up to all the fullness of God. As many have said, this is the epitome or climax of all prayer. You can't go any higher! It is a prayer for our complete spiritual maturity. To summarize:

To grow to full spiritual maturity, we must build our lives on love and have God's power to lay hold of and know the unknowable love of Christ.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones (*The Unsearchable Riches of Christ* [Baker], pp. 181-301) devotes ten messages to these verses that I am skimming in one! So if you want more in depth teaching, I refer you to the good doctor. I offer four main observations:

1. The Christian life is rooted and grounded in love.

Paul mixes his metaphors, using one from botany and another from architecture to strengthen his point. We must keep the connection with the earlier part of the prayer in mind. The result of being strengthened with power through God's Spirit in the inner man is that Christ will come to be at home in our hearts through faith, resulting in our being rooted and grounded in love. Paul does not specify whether this is God's love for us or our love for Him or our love for one another. So at this point, he is talking about love as the main principle of the Christian life. God's great love for us as demonstrated in sending His own Son to be the sacrifice for our sins undergirds everything. Stemming from that, all of His commandments are summed up by saying that we are to love God and love one another. Thus the Christian life is rooted and grounded in love.

To be *rooted* in love pictures a sturdy, growing tree that sinks down roots that enable it to withstand drought and fierce storms. A tree is a living, growing organism. Even so, the Christian life is a living, growing relationship with God and with others. God's love is the soil in which it is rooted and it necessarily results in our growth in love for Him and for others. Love is the first-listed fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22). If you are walking in the power of the Holy Spirit, love will be manifesting itself obviously in your life. Conversely, if you are not growing in demonstrable love for God and others, it indicates that you are not walking in the Spirit. At best, you are a babe in Christ and He does not yet make His home in your heart. At worst, you may not be a genuine Christian at all.

To be *grounded* in love pictures a solid building, with a foundation that goes down to the bedrock. It can withstand a flood or an earthquake, because it is built on the rock. This pictures a love for God and for others that is not based on fluctuating feelings or circumstances. Rather, it is solid and steady, undergirding everything else in life.

We need to be very realistic and practical in applying Paul's point here. Some come into the Christian life from an upbringing where love was nonexistent. They have known only anger and abuse. But, they hear about the love of Christ on the cross, they trust in Him as Savior and Lord, and they step into a brand new world. But since they have never experienced genuine love, they don't know how to love others. Where do they begin in the Christian life? Paul's words here suggest that they must begin to sink down roots into God's love and they must build a foundation centered on loving God and loving others. Love must become the motive for all that they think and do.

Often, these new believers are directed into acquiring Bible knowledge. Knowing the truth of Scripture and its great doctrines is essential. There is no growth in the Christian life apart from knowledge. But, if you acquire knowledge without love, you only feed pride (1 Cor. 8:1). Paul says that if we have all knowledge, but do not have love, we are nothing (1 Cor. 13:2). So while we should strive to grow in the knowledge of God's Word, it must always be practically oriented towards helping us love God and others.

Sometimes new believers also are directed towards serving the Lord. Again, it is vital that every believer use the gifts that God has entrusted to him or her in some sort of ministry. The parable of the talents shows that God expects us to use and multiply what He has given us for His kingdom. But, if such service is not rooted and grounded in love, it profits us nothing (1 Cor. 13:3).

Even if you were raised in a Christian home where you were loved and you were taught from childhood to think of others ahead of yourself, you still must work to sink down roots and lay a foundation in love. At the heart of loving God and others is dying to self, and none of us dies to self without a lifelong struggle. You may think that you are a loving person, but then you don't get your way. Maybe God doesn't answer your prayers as you think He

should. Or, you've been obedient to Him, but then you get hit with an unexpected, difficult trial. Maybe your family members don't go along with the way you want things done. Or, you show love towards someone who responds by betraying you or slandering you. Or, you give yourself in what you thought was selfless service, but nobody notices or says thank you. So your feelings get hurt.

Just as the test of a tree's roots is a strong storm and the test of a building's foundation is an earthquake or flood, so the test of your love is when these sorts of trials hit. Do you shake your fist at God because He disappointed you? Do you get angry with those who have wronged you or who were insensitive to your hard work? If so, you've got more work to do on the foundation of your Christian life. You've got to sink your roots deeper into love.

2. Being built on love, we must have God's power to lay hold of Christ's love with all the saints.

The focus shifts in verse 18, from love in general to Christ's love for us. The Greek verb translated, "may be able," means, "to have the strength." The verb translated, "comprehend," means, "to lay hold of or seize." So Paul is praying that we may have the power to lay hold of or comprehend the immensity of Christ's love for us, which, paradoxically, is beyond comprehension.

- A. Comprehending Christ's love does not come naturally, but supernaturally.

"To be able to comprehend," or, "to have the strength to grasp" this immense love of Christ shows that it is not an easy or a humanly attainable goal. We must have God's power. And, as we will consider in a moment, this is not a one-time attainment, but a lifetime and even an eternal quest. We can never say, "I've arrived!" And, we will not grow towards this goal if we are not experiencing God's power through His Spirit in the inner man, so that Christ is coming to dwell in our hearts through faith.

We have to be careful, because we all flatter ourselves by thinking, "I'm just a naturally loving person. The problem is all of these selfish, unloving people I have to live with! But me, hey, I'm just a naturally loving guy!" Nonsense! To become a loving person and to be able to grasp the love of Christ, you must die to self. To do that, you need God's power.

B. Comprehending Christ's love is the need of believers.

D. A. Carson (*A Call to Spiritual Reformation* [Baker/IVP], p. 191) points out that the remarkable thing about this prayer is that Paul "assumes that his readers, Christians though they are, do not adequately appreciate the love of Christ." It's not a prayer that we might love Christ more, although we should. Rather, Paul is praying that we might better grasp Christ's immense love for us. While there is an intellectual side to this, it is not merely intellectual. Paul is praying that we who already know Christ's great love might come to experience it at ever-deepening levels.

Every child of God knows the love of Christ in some way. Probably when you first heard the gospel, you heard John 3:16, "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life." Or, you heard Romans 5:8, "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." Coming to know the great love of God in Christ is at the heart of responding to the gospel.

Yet, while every true Christian knows something of Christ's great love as shown at the cross, we do not all know it to the same extent. Some are babes in Christ, who, like all babies, are quite self-centered. They assume that Christ loves them because they are so loveable! But as you grow in Christ, you begin to see how wretchedly sinful your heart was and, apart from God's preserving grace, still is. And yet, wonder of wonders, He still loves you! You see examples in the Bible, such as Peter, who denied the Lord. And yet, the Lord still loved Peter and restored him. You grow deeper in Christ's love as you realize that He loves you in spite of all your failures and sins.

I was blessed to grow up in a home where my parents loved me and made me feel secure in their love. But I never appreciated *how much* they loved me until I held our firstborn in my arms. I felt this wave of love for her as I thought, "I would lay down my life to protect this helpless little one, who depends totally on me!" Then, it hit me, "That's how much my parents loved me!" And then I realized, "And God loves me far more than that!"

So comprehending Christ's love requires God's supernatural power, because it is not naturally discerned. It is our need as believers, no matter how long we've known Christ, to know His love on an even deeper level. But, also...

C. Comprehending Christ's love must happen in community.

Paul prays that we may be able to comprehend *with all the saints* this measureless love of Christ. *Saints*, of course, is a reference to all believers, not just to some superior believers. The word means, "holy ones," or those who are set apart from the world unto God.

There are at least two ways in which it requires all the saints for us to grow in our comprehension of Christ's great love. First, we grow in our own comprehension of Christ's love when we hear other believers tell of how He saved them and how He has sustained them through difficult trials. No one of us has even come close to experiencing the fullness of Christ's love, so we grow to appreciate it and comprehend it more as we hear the stories of His love toward others. Even if we could pile up all the stories of all the saints down through history, we'd still fall short of the depths of His love, but we'd be closer. That's a good reason to read Christian biographies. You gain a richer experience of His love.

A second reason that it requires all the saints to grow in our comprehension of Christ's great love is that the outworking or expression of His love comes to us through other believers. Quite often we grow in love when another believer demonstrates the love of Christ to us during a time of need. Sometimes, we grow in Christ's love when we have to work through relational difficulties with another believer. Any love that is merely theoretical and has not been forged in the fires of real life relationships is not tested. Genuine love must be worked out with people. That requires that we grow in forbearance, patience, kindness, and forgiveness. John Stott (cited by Carson, p. 198) writes, "It needs the whole people of God to understand the whole love of God."

So, the Christian life is rooted and grounded in love. Being built on love, we must have God's power to comprehend Christ's love with all the saints. Third,

3. Knowing Christ's love is a never-ending process, because it is unknowable.

Paul writes (3:18-19), that we may be able to comprehend “what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge...” It is a deliberate paradox. We can know something of His great love, and it is definite knowledge, not just speculation. But, in another sense we can never know it completely, because it is unfathomable. Throughout eternity we will never come to the place of saying that we know all that there is to know of Christ’s great love for us.

The measurements that Paul gives emphasize the immensity of Christ’s love. You can go left or right, forward or backward, or up or down as far as you can, and you still haven’t explored all that there is to know of Christ’s great love. While Paul probably did not have anything in particular in mind with each dimension, many writers have expounded on the various aspects of it. (Spurgeon, *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* [Pilgrim Publications], 12:475-479) goes into great detail on each of these dimensions. Lloyd-Jones devotes an entire chapter to it, pp. 218-229.)

Briefly, we can consider that the *breadth* of Christ’s love encompasses a great multitude that is beyond number, consisting of people from every nation and tribe and people and tongue (Rev. 7:9). It also takes in every concern of every child of God in every age. No care of ours is beyond the breadth of His love.

The *length* of Christ’s love extends from eternity to eternity. We have already seen (Eph. 1:4-5) that “He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will.” It is an eternal love that will not let us go!

The *height* of His love lifts us up to our exalted position of being seated with Him in the heavenly places (Eph. 2:6). His eternal purpose for us is that we will be holy and blameless, lifted far above the temptations here below that so easily beset us.

The *depth* of His love caused Him to leave the glory of heaven and His exalted position there and come to this earth to be born as a baby. It moved Him to go to the extreme suffering of the cross, where He who knew no sin was made sin for us (2 Cor. 5:21). It reached all the way down to where we were in our sin. Although

we were rebels and enemies of God, the love of Christ redeemed us from the slave market of sin and made us heirs with Him. As Charles Wesley wrote, "Amazing love, how can it be, that Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?"

We can never get to the end of such immense love! We need to ask ourselves, "Am I growing more and more to know this unknowable love of Christ?" Do I know His love experientially more today than I did a year ago? Finally,

#### 4. Knowing Christ's love results in spiritual maturity.

The top rung of the ladder (to use Spurgeon's phrase) is, "that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God" (3:19). "The fullness of God" probably refers to the perfection of which God Himself is full. Paul is praying that we will attain to spiritual perfection, having all that God is fill us to overflowing. As our capacity to receive it grows, He keeps filling us again and again. The idea of fullness implies total dominance or control, so that God perfectly controls our minds, our emotions, and our will. Paul uses similar language in Ephesians 4:13, where he says that the goal of the ministry is that "we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ."

Can we ever attain such perfection in this life? The greatest of the saints have all lamented on their deathbeds that they are miserable sinners, saved by God's grace alone. They all have been quick to admit their many remaining faults and shortcomings. But, as Paul states (Rom. 8:29), God has predestined us to be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ. We know that He will accomplish His purpose for all of His elect. As John tells us (1 John 3:2, 3), "We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is. And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure." So we should join Paul (Phil. 3:14) in pressing "on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."

#### Conclusion

D. A. Carson (*ibid.*, p. 196) points out that just as a loving home is required for children to grow to personal maturity, so we must come into the knowledge of Christ's great love for us, in His

household, the church, if we are to grow to spiritual maturity. Martyn Lloyd-Jones wrote (*ibid.*, p. 219), "Indeed, our chief defect as Christians is that we fail to realize Christ's love to us." He adds (p. 223), "How important it is that we should meditate upon this love and contemplate it! It is because we fail to do so that we tend to think at times that He has forgotten us, or that He has left us."

If you were to ask the apostle Paul, "What motivated you to give up everything for Christ and the gospel? How could you endure all that you did for Christ and keep going?" I believe you would see tears well up in his eyes and he would answer, "I live by faith in the Son of God, who *loved me* and gave Himself up *for me*" (Gal. 2:20). He might add (Rom. 8:38-39), "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." Live there and you will grow to spiritual maturity!

### Application Questions

1. How would you define biblical love? (See John 3:16; 13:34-35; Eph. 5:25-27.) Why is it important to keep the *biblical* definition in mind as you seek to grow in love?
2. How can a person from an abusive background learn to love God and others in a biblical way? Be practical.
3. Discuss: If I frequently get my feelings hurt, I am deficient in knowing experientially the love of Christ.
4. What does it mean to walk in the power of the Holy Spirit? Describe practically how you do it.

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