

God's New Community
How to pray for our Christian friends
Ephesians chapter 3:14-21
November 21st 2021
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Introduction

Sixteen years ago, my wife and four sons moved into our present house. The house had been lovingly adapted and decorated for its previous owners, but it was not so well suited for our own families' needs. And so little by little, over the years, we have made many little changes in order to turn a house into a home: a place where we feel comfortable and relaxed. Most of you will know what I am talking about. Turning a house into a home is a life-long project isn't it?

Something like that is the first prayer request of the apostle Paul for his Christian friends in Ephesians chapter 3: verses 14-21. Paul prays that the power of God would so transform the inner-beings of his friends that their hearts would become suitable homes for Jesus Christ to live in, "so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith." (verse 17)

"May your mighty power O Lord, so renew and change the hearts of my Christian friends that Jesus Christ would find their hearts a happy and a holy and a comfortable place to live!"

What a wonderful prayer!

On Sundays, we are making our way through Paul's letter to the Ephesians and we've arrived at his second prayer for his Ephesian friends; the first one was back in chapter 1:15-23.

How can we pray for one another? What shall we ask for? What petitions shall we bring? Well today we discover three requests: We can pray for Power (16 and 17), for Love (17 and 18) and for Fullness (19)

But before we land on runways Power, Love and Fullness, let's circle the airport for a few moments and notice with me, first that:

First, that all Paul's prayers are spiritual. We saw this in chapter 1, didn't we? You and I tend to pray material requests for one another, for health, for employment, and there is nothing wrong with those requests, but Paul always prays spiritual prayers. Back in chapter 1 you may remember he prayed that his friends would know Jesus better, would grasp the glory of heaven to come and more fully understand how much power is available to live out the Christian life. All spiritual prayers!

Our prayer requests reveal what really matter to us, don't they? Just as what we are willing to pay reveals how highly we value something, so what we pray for, reveals what we really value.

If you and I are to learn from Paul's prayers at all, brothers and sisters, then we must learn to pray more spiritual requests for one another. "May John, may Mary know Jesus better." That would be a great place to start!

Second, Paul is always thinking of the church, even in his prayers!

Look at verses 14-15. As he prays to God the Father, he is immediately reminded of the whole family of God, the whole church, the family that is already in heaven, those who have already gone to be with the Lord (the Darrens, the Peters, the Patricias) and those presently living on earth. We are all one big family sharing the same Father's name!

This concern shows up again in verse 18 (read). You and I cannot know the full love of Jesus Christ in our hearts without the help of God's people! Why? Because so often Christ's love is mediated to us through the kindness and forgiveness and encouragement of our brothers and sisters.

It shows up in verse 21. Where is God glorified? Through the beauty of creation, yes, but even more so in the church, where his truth and grace is seen in his people.

Paul is a church Christian even in his prayer life! The church ranks very high in his priorities.

There's a man by the name of Ken Smith who has been living all on his own in the wilds of Scotland for 40 years. It's not how God has created us to live. When he was 26 a bunch of thugs beat him up, he lost consciousness for weeks and was told he would never speak again. He made a full recovery but that painful event drove him away from people and to the life of a hermit. We can perhaps understand his thinking, but whatever people may have done to us in the past—and there are few people who had more hurtful enemies than Paul!—let us never take the path of Hermit Smith but let us learn to forgive and remain church people.

Paul thinks of the church, the bride of Christ, the body of Christ even in his prayers.

Finally, on the same theme, we should note the simple fact that Paul prays for others. It's quite unusual for Paul to tell people his praying posture, but he does here because he is so earnest, so concerned, so fervent, "For this reason I kneel before the Father.." We see him in his prison cell, chained to a guard, on his knees pleading to God the Father for his Christian friends.

Do you and I pray for others? People outside of our families? Paul has a big Christ-like heart that goes out to Christians across the world in prayer. May God give to us big hearts like that. And listen, if like the apostle Paul, you can no longer get around to serve, if your home has become your "prison" because of circumstances or illness, you can still serve your brothers and sisters by praying for them! In fact prayer is a ministry promotion is it not?!

It's time to land on the first runway, which is.....

(1) POWER, Paul prays for power (verses 16-17)

What can I pray for brother John or my sister Mary? I can pray for supernatural power. My don't we all need power?! Verses 16-17.

Every believer has the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, living within them, it is a wonderful truth! But our experience of his power is an incremental thing, we can know more and more of his power working within us. And Paul prays that out of God's great store of power he would give some to his Christian friends so that they would be strong on the inside—to what end, verse 17? “So that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith.”

The power of God working in our hearts makes our hearts more habitable, more homely, for Jesus Christ! The Holy Spirit changes our hearts so that they become more suitable dwelling places for the Lord Jesus Christ. When we are first converted, to be sure, our hearts are a pretty shabby place for Jesus to take up residence! Filled with selfishness and sins of all kinds!

But little by little, the Holy Spirit goes to work, changing this dreary wallpaper and bleaching that mouldy sink; painting that scratched up wall and replacing that ill-fitting door, until the Holy and Spotless Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ, feels more comfortable living in the home of our hearts!

“This prayer is a plea for power, power to be holy, power to think, act and talk in ways that are utterly pleasing to Christ, power to strengthen moral resolve to do right, power to walk in gratitude to God, power to be humble, power to grow in conformity to Jesus Christ and power to forgive!”

What a wonderful prayer to pray for one another! May John, may Mary experience the mighty sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit in their hearts and lives, so that Jesus feels more and more at home in their hearts!

(2) LOVE, Paul prays that they would know how much Jesus loves them

Paul's second spiritual prayer for his friends is in verses 17 through to 19. The Christian life, Paul says is rooted and founded in love. The greatest Christian virtue is love, Paul teaches in 1 Corinthians chapter 13. The Christian life, like a plant is rooted in the soil of love, and like a building built on the foundation stones of love. The greatest Christians are not the most knowledgeable nor the most gifted Christians, the greatest Christians are the most loving Christians!

Even though that is so, Paul does not pray that we would be more loving, not here, but rather that we would understand how much we have been and are loved, Verse v17a-19a. We need divine power to grasp how much God loves us! So Paul prays for the power to grasp the vastness of God's love for us!

How do you explain how much someone loves you anyway? What scales can we use? Can love's magnitude be defined by the barrel or by weight or by acreage? How much does God love us? Paul

uses two scales to help our feeble minds:

Imagine a love that fills a gigantic box! One is the dimensions of space—imagine a gigantic box, wide and long and high and deep! That’s how much Jesus loves us. “How wide, long, high deep”

*Jesus love is very wonderful
Jesus love is very wonderful
Jesus love is very wonderful
Oh wonderful love*

*So High, You Can’t Get Over It,
So Low, You Can’t Get Under It,
So Wide, You Can’t Get Around It,
Oh, Wonderful Love!*

The other scale Paul uses is supra-knowledge! Imagine the scale of knowledge and especially the marker “maximum knowledge.” Now imagine a love that is beyond the marker, beyond the mind to comprehend! “To know this love that surpasses knowledge.” (19)

*It passes knowledge, that dear love of thine,
my Saviour Jesus; yet this soul of mine
would of thy love, in all its breadth and length,
its height and depth and everlasting strength, know more and more.*

*It passes telling, that dear love of thine,
my Saviour Jesus; yet these lips of mine
would fain proclaim to sinners far and near
a love which can remove all guilty fear
and love beget.*

*It passes praises, that dear love of thine,
my Saviour Jesus; yet this heart of mine
would sing a love, so full, so rich, so free,
Which brings a rebel sinner, such as me,
nigh unto God.*

*At last, when Jesus face to face I see,
when at his lofty throne I bow the knee,
then of his love, in all its breadth and length,
its height and depth, its everlasting strength,
my soul shall sing.*

The lady who wrote that hymn, Mary Shekleton spent many years of her life in a wheelchair, but she did not think her circumstances disproved or contradicted or negated or invalidated the love of God for her!

We all need to know that we are loved, don't we? Parents tell your kids and husbands tell your wives. Love is life-transforming isn't it? I was reading about an American Christian couple who fostered many children. One day they were asked to adopt twin 18-month old boys. The first night after putting them to bed, the loving foster parents came in to check the boys were OK. They found both boys awake, pillows wet with tears but not a sound did they make. Why? Because the home they had come from beat them if they cried!

Over time those foster parents loved those little twins and their human love transformed those two little lives, so that by the time they left the home, the twins were assessed as being normal.

Human love transforms lives, does it not? How much more, then, the changeless vast love of God! No wonder Paul prays that his friends would both understand and experience the limitless love of God!

(3) FULLNESS, may my Christian friends be filled with God (verse 9b)

This may be a separate third prayer request, or it may be the consequence of the first two prayers being answered. Either way Paul wishes that his friends the most transcendental thing we could ever wish for one another, "that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God."

Not just that God would fill your heart, but that all that he is, his fullness, would fill your heart! I don't think we can really grasp what this prayer even means, it is so high, so lofty, so heavenly! It's perhaps a little like what John writes will happen to us in heaven: "Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2)

Well, may that happen now, prays Paul!

What shall we pray for one another? We can pray that we will have more power to make our hearts a pure and happy home for Jesus Christ! We can pray that we will understand more and more how much God loves us! And we can pray that we will be filled, brim full, with the fullness of God!

Isn't that asking too much Paul? No, says Paul in verse 20! For God is able to do more than we can imagine.