



Lesson 7: Praying Like Paul

Teacher's Edition

Overview: Paul prays that the Trinity would strengthen and ground the believers so that they may fully understand what God's love looks like, thus filling them with God's fullness. Paul concludes this section with a benediction of praise to God and a wish that God would get glory through Christ in the church.

Purpose: Believers should learn to think about prayer and to pray as Paul did – for spiritual understanding and for God's empowering presence.

Passage: Ephesians 3:14-21

Note: [Do not skip the end of the lesson! Point III. B. is crucial to go over with your group! Make sure you save some time for that thought at the end!]

Introduction: Have you ever timed your prayers? Have you ever tried to meet a certain goal for praying, say an hour? Or even 15 minutes? Ever struggled and been frustrated with what exactly to pray? In this section, Paul concludes the doctrinal half of this letter (chapters 1-3) with a prayer that all the teaching Paul has given will sink down into their hearts. He prays that believers will "get it," that their lives will be changed as a result of what they have learned. Part of the reason we struggle to pray as we do is because we so often miss the spiritual dimension of our prayers and focus exclusively on the temporal issues. Paul shows us how our prayers should go much deeper, and the types of things we should be praying for.

What is the difference between temporal prayers and spiritual prayers? What is the danger in making this distinction? Why would this distinction be helpful?

This is the second time Paul prays for the believers in Ephesus (cf 1:15-23). When comparing those two prayer, John MacArthur makes the observation, “The first prayer is for believers to *know* their power; the second is for them to *use* it.”¹ *Because apparently we can know truths in our heads that haven’t gripped our hearts.* We can have our mind opened to the resources and wealth we have been given in Christ and live lives that act as if nothing is different now that we are in Christ. Paul has just finished sharing and teaching on God’s election, adoption, redemption, sealing, and the inheritance, glory, and hope that is ours in Christ. Now, he prays that God would help believers to see how that should impact them and then live differently because of it!

In what ways does what we know about the gospel change our everyday lives?

Why do people who know what the Bible teaches still struggle so greatly with sin?

I. Paul prays that believers would be strengthened by God (vv 14-17a).

Explanation: As Paul has done elsewhere in the book of Ephesians (1:3, 7, 13; 1:17; 2:18; 2:22) he emphasizes the work of the Trinity. All three members of the Trinity are involved in our sanctification (growth in holiness) in many different ways, but in this passage the Father gives us the ability to grow, the Spirit is the one who strengthens us, and the Son dwells in our hearts.

¹ John F. MacArthur Jr., *Ephesians*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 100.

A. Our strength is possible because of God’s great glory.

Explanation: Paul here states that every family in heaven and on earth is named by the Father.² “Being named by God” is another way of saying every family that exists exists because of God. This is true both of humans and of all spiritual powers (we have already noted several times the importance of spiritual powers in the book of Ephesians).

Paul again alludes to God’s riches, a theme he has developed throughout the beginning of the book (1:7, 18; 2:4, 7; 3:8). God has more than enough power and glory to help us change. God never has to worry that he won’t quite have enough to accomplish his purposes, he is fabulously wealthy in glory and power to do what he has decided to do.

B. Our strength is possible because of God’s Holy Spirit.

Explanation: The Holy Spirit is often called the agent of change. It is the Spirit himself who indwells and empowers us to live for God (cf 2 Corinthians 3:18). Once again Paul uses synonyms to hit us with the full impact of what God is able to do (strengthen, power).

C. This strength enables Christ to live more fully in our hearts.

Explanation: We run into a bit of a dilemma with the phrase “that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.” After all, doesn’t Christ already dwell in the heart of every believer through the Holy Spirit? What about Christ’s promise at the end of the Great Commission: “I am with you always, even unto the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20)?

The Greek word for dwell here is a unique one. It has the idea, not just of living somewhere, but of living there permanently;

² KJV has “the whole family” while ESV, NASB, NIV all have “every family.” Both are possible from the Greek, but “every family” makes the most sense. The idea is not that we are all part of one big family but that every family that exists derives its existence from God.

“settling down”³ we might say. In other words, the goal of this passage is that Christ’s presence will control us more fully. The heart in the New Testament refers to our entire inner person and not just our feelings. Paul is saying that as the Spirit strengthens our inner person, as we in faith respond to his work in our lives, Christ dwells *more* fully within us.

Illustration: “In the little booklet *My Heart Christ’s Home*, Robert Munger (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1954) pictures the Christian life as a house, through which Jesus goes from room to room. In the library, which is the mind, Jesus finds trash and all sorts of worthless things, which he proceeds to throw out and replace with his Word. In the dining room of appetite, he finds many sinful desires listed on a worldly menu. In the place of such things as prestige, materialism, and lust, he puts humility, meekness, love, and all other virtues for which believers are to hunger and thirst. He goes through the living room of fellowship, where he finds many worldly companions and activities, through the workshop where only toys are being made, into the closet, where hidden sins are kept, and so on through the entire house. Only when he had cleaned every room, closet, and corner of sin and foolishness could Christ settle down and be at home. To have Christ dwell in our hearts through faith means for him to be at home in every corner of our life, because we believe his promises and therefore become obedient to his word.”⁴

II. Paul prays that believers would know Christ’s love (vv 17b-19).

Explanation: The purpose behind our internal strengthening is so that we might know Christ’s love for us. Our growth in Christ comes

³ The Greek word (*katoikeo*) has the root for “down” (*kata*) and “live” (*oikeo*).

⁴ Max Anders, *Galatians-Colossians*, vol. 8, Holman New Testament Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 131.

as we seek to understand better and fuller what it means for God to love us.

Application: When was the last time you spent time you spent any portion of time meditating on what it means that Christ loves you? How often do you consider what it means for Christ to love you?

A. Paul shows what is necessary for growth.

Explanation: Some debate whether this section goes with what comes before it or what comes after it. Most likely, it is discussing what comes after it. Having experienced Christ's love for is necessary for knowing fully what Christ's love means for us. Paul uses an agricultural (rooted) and a construction (grounded) illustration to show that until we have experienced Christ's love in salvation, we are not able to know God's love. This makes sense, after all, how can we comprehend God's love if we have never experienced it?

B. Paul highlights the importance of the community.

Explanation: Another theme Paul repeatedly returns to is the importance of growing in community. On several occasions he has already reminded these believers that God's purposes include all the saints (cf 1:1, 15, 18; 2:19). Here he says that we are able to comprehend *with all the saints*. Not just some, not just the ones we like, but all of the saints. According to Paul, the only way we can grow in our faith is as we grow with other believers (see 4:1-16).

Why do we need other Christians to help us grow? What happens if we try to live the Christian life without the help of other Christians?

This will be the main theme of our next lesson as we study Ephesians 4:1-16. Paul ties together the beautiful doctrine of Christ and the nitty-gritty practical commands of Scripture by talking about the importance of living together in a community.

C. Paul wants believers to know the greatness of Christ's love.

Explanation: "Jesus loves me" is a simple truth we learn as children yet never will never fully grasp. Our desire in this life should be to understand better what it means that Christ loves us. There is an intention paradox here – Paul wants us to know the love that passes knowledge. Our goal should always be to know better that which we will never fully know.

Application: Sadly, many Christians never dwell on God's love, because they think they understand it. If you think you have God's love figured out, that just means you don't even know how much you don't know.

Illustration:

Could we with ink the oceans fill,
And were the skies of parchment made,
Were every stalk on earth quill,
And every man a scribe by trade.
To write the love of God above
Would drain the oceans dry.
Nor could the scroll
Contain the whole
Though stretched from sky to sky.

III. Paul prays that God would be glorified (vv 20-21).

A. The God who should be glorified (v 20)

Explanation: Paul's ultimate desire at the end of his prayer, the great reason God is doing everything that he is doing is so that he can have more glory. Paul shows how God's powerful work on our behalf should result in God's glory.

1. The extent of God's power

Explanation: God's power is far greater than we could ever imagine. What God can do far exceeds our greatest expectations, only to have God answer it in such a way that you later felt a little guilty that you didn't ask for more? Hebrews 11:6 reminds us that when we pray, we need to

pray believing 1) that God exists and 2) that God rewards those who seek him.

If God can do more than we ask or think, why do some prayer requests go unanswered?

What kind of prayer requests does Paul have in mind here based on the two prayers he has prayed in Ephesians? How often do we pray prayers like those?

2. The sphere of God's power

Explanation: Paul shows how the power he is thinking of is primarily the work of God going on in our hearts. This power is far greater than we can imagine and if we trust God in faith he can change us!

Why do so many people continue to struggle with sin if God's almighty power is at work within them?

We must accept by faith what Scripture says about God's power, rather than trying to fit our understanding of God into our life's experience. Experience should be interpreted by theology; theology should never be interpreted by experience. Whether it feels like it or not, we have the power of God working within us, and we must hold onto and believe that simple truth in faith!

Paul will discuss in great detail in the next three chapters what work will look like. He will show how God's work in our lives should show up in very specific ways, but he first wants believers to know that any change that needs to happen in their lives **can** happen in their lives as they seek to live for God's glory, trusting in his wealth of glory and power!

B. The way God wants to be glorified (v 21)

Explanation: Our theme for this study comes from this verse very intentionally. Many people understand that God wants them to

change to be more like Christ. They understand that this will result in God's glory. Yet many people miss that God wants them to change in grow in a community of other believers, in a church! You can't live for God's glory and not be a part of God's church! God wants believers to join with each other and learn to love, submit to, and help one another out. It is as people who should never get along get along, and as they live for Christ and become more like him together that angels in heaven shake their heads in amazement at the wisdom of what God is up to in this world.

How do most people in America today view the church? Why is this? How should a Christian view the church?

Can a Christian glorify God and not be a part of a church?