

Power and Riches

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 29 June 2008

Preacher: The Venerable Daniel Gifford

[0 : 00] Well, I was thinking of the verse, I was glad when they said, let us go into the house of the Lord, when I heard the children at Sunday school going out.

That's a marvelous expression of joy at being able to go and hear about God and to be with God's people as well. And probably we have a lesson there on our enthusiasm about coming to God and His Word.

And I think that that's great for this passage, Ephesians 3, verses 14 through 21. This is a great prayer. It is a prayer of gladness. It is a prayer of enthusiastically coming into God's presence with full expectation that God will work in wonderful and marvelous ways.

It is a passage that is hard to preach on because it is so wonderful. It is something that we have the task today of trying to go into a little bit further.

As I was looking at the passage, one of the events that was in my mind this week was this lunch with Warren Buffett. I don't know if you've heard of this before, but once a year, the richest man in the world who is famous for his incredible investments has people bid to have lunch with him.

[1 : 27] And at the lunch, you can ask any question, you and seven of your friends of Warren Buffett, and you can ask any question except for what Warren will buy and sell.

And this year, the bidding, in fact, every year the bidding goes, the money goes towards a great cause. It's to help the homeless and those who are in various kinds of trouble in San Francisco. This year, a person paid \$2.1 million for this lunch. He is a fund manager from Hong Kong, and he has a similar philosophy of investing that Warren Buffett does.

But obviously, he sees a great privilege in having access to Warren Buffett. He sees that he can grow from this meeting.

And this has something to do with our passage, because in the last reading that we heard last week, Paul's talking about having boldness and access to God and his riches and his wonder.

[2 : 31] And in this passage, we are actually being prayed for by Paul to be able to grasp that thing that we have in God, the relationship we have with him and what that all means.

God is being asked to actually cause us to grow in our Christian life. And I think that when we look at this passage, we have this great privilege.

It's a privilege far greater than having lunch with the wealthiest person in the world. It is a deep privilege for us to look into Paul's heart with this sincere prayer, because it does reflect what is utmost in Paul's mind.

We are seeing in these verses not only the center of Paul's heart, but actually what God's heart for us is as well. Paul's prayer perfectly reflects God's will for the church.

And so it's of critical importance to us that we look at this prayer and pray it for ourselves. So what does Paul pray for? Well, basically, he's praying for people to grow and for the church to grow.

[3 : 41] He's not praying for the church to grow numerically. He's not praying for the church to grow in its influence in the world. He's not praying that the church will grow in its giving.

He is basically praying that people will grow in their relationship with God. Paul could have asked for anything here, but he is asking that people will experience God and his power in a deeper way. This is the growth Paul chooses to pray for. And this is very important for us, because one of the great dangers, I think, that we face as Christians is the spiritual plateau.

And what I mean by that, it is the time in our life when we feel pretty comfortable with the spiritual status quo. You know what is true, and you are familiar with it.

You are comfortable in the Christian community. You are familiar with many parts of the Bible, and you are friendly towards that. But if you take stock of your life, your spiritual life, you may realize that you are coasting along spiritually.

[4 : 52] You are very comfortable with the spiritual status quo. In a sense, it's like resting on your laurels. And what Paul does here in these five verses is he brings a spiritual earthquake to these times of plateau, because they ask God to change us and to bring continual growth in our relationship to him.

And at times, this will be uncomfortable. The church as a living body is meant to always be growing in their love for God and their knowledge of God. That's why Paul in the last chapter said that the church is being joined together.

It's growing into a holy temple in the Lord. So we must never think that we reach a point where we do not need to grow.

And that's why Paul's prayer is so earnest. Look at verse 14. He says, For this reason, I bow my knees. He starts by saying, I bow my knees.

And this is an unusual posture. It's something that Anglicans are familiar with, but not necessarily so when Paul was praying. It was an expression of urgency and humility in his prayers.

[6 : 10] He is urgently, earnestly requesting something of God for the church. And you can see it in the way he begins praying. He prays to God as the Father from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named.

In other words, he says, I'm coming to you, God, as the one who names creation. Everything in heaven and earth. Whether they are angels or demons or people of all beliefs, everyone in all creation is dependent on him.

Whether they know it or not. And it's to this God that Paul is praying. If this is true of the world, it's particularly true of the church.

We depend utterly on him. Everything good and important that happens in the church takes place because God provides it. And that's why Paul teaches in this letter about the church and what God has done in bringing the church into existence.

He's just finished teaching all these important things about who we are as a church. And he stops and he prays for the church. This is the second time he's done it.

[7 : 20] If you remember back in Ephesians 1, you can quickly go back there on page 181. He prays again in verse 15 of chapter 1. And he again is very glad to come to God in prayer for the church.

But he says in verse 16 to start out that prayer that I don't cease giving thanks for you and remembering you in my prayers. And then he goes on to ask God to change people by helping them to grasp the incredible gifts of grace.

To pray that the eyes of their hearts will be enlightened. To know the hope of God. To know the riches of his grace and God's power. It is the language of change and growth of knowing God more fully.

And what that means to us, because this prayer we're going to look at says the same thing, is it means that God is not finished with us. He is not finished with your life or my life or the life of this body of Christ.

He has not completed his work in us. And his will is to bring change and growth into our lives that we really can't imagine right now.

[8 : 35] He prays that this growth would come from God alone. It's something that the world cannot give. We can't create it by any method. We have to ask for it.

And so Paul's petition of asking is in verses 16 through 19. He prays there that God will bring his glorious change and growth into our lives. Very powerful prayer.

And it's a prayer that in a sermon is very difficult to analyze because it is overflowing out of Paul's heart. There's not point one, point two, point three. It is in a sense gushing out from within him.

And it is saying that God has everything that we need. So it says in verse 16 that according to the riches of his glory, in other words, God has far more to give than we can conceive.

And this is how Paul is asking. He's coming in his prayer for the church with great expectations. He believes God is going to act. He knows God's nature is to give his grace lavishly so that his glory will be revealed.

[9 : 43] And I think that this is a challenge for us. Do you come to your prayers expectantly? Do you have your minds, when you come in prayer, fixed on the grace and power of God to accomplish his will, to bring about the answers to our deepest needs and the needs of the church?

Do we come to God knowing that he has far more to give than we can hope to ask for? That's what Paul is praying like.

He's praying expectantly. He is praying that God will give out of his riches, that he may grant you to be strengthened with might through his spirit in your inner being, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.

Isn't that a powerful prayer? It is in verse 16, that he may grant you to be strengthened with might through his spirit in the inner man, and that Christ will dwell in your hearts with faith.

This is a powerful prayer that he is praying for us. He is praying to God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit to strengthen you. And notice how the work of the Holy Spirit and the work of Jesus are not separated.

[10:58] Jesus dwells in our hearts as we have faith in him. And faith means to warmly embrace God and his love for us. And what the Holy Spirit does very powerfully is to give us grace to trust in him.

That is what strengthens us. That's the heart of this prayer that Paul is praying on our behalf. Now, this verse must bring a question in our mind, and that is, didn't Christ dwell in me when I became a Christian, when I came to believe for the first time?

Did not Jesus come to dwell in my heart? The answer is, yes, he does. But Paul uses a very strong term for dwell. He deliberately chooses not the term that would have to do with somebody who's renting or visiting a house or is just there temporarily in a home.

He is praying that God will dwell in a way that involves settling down permanently, taking up a permanent residence in one's life. It's really a prayer that Jesus will be at the center of our lives.

I like the way John Calvin put it. He says, Paul points to the heart as the dwelling place where Jesus is going to be permanently to show that it's not enough if the knowledge of Christ dwells on our tongue or flutters in the brain.

[12:28] He's saying that the truth of Jesus dwelling in us must go into our heart, into the thing that is deepest in us. Because the heart that Paul is talking about is the core of our being.

It is the center of all that is important to us. Paul is asking that Jesus will be at the center of our lives and that he will actually exercise his rule over all the things that we say, the things we do, the decisions that we make, and that that rule over our hearts is going to be permanent, not temporary. God's power comes into our lives in this way so that we are spiritually invigorated. We are strengthened in our relationship with God.

Now what this implies is that if God dwells, if Jesus dwells in us in this way by the power of the Holy Spirit, it means that you will be transformed into the likeness of Jesus.

And this is growth. This is change. I want you to notice if you jump ahead to chapter 4, Paul is going to talk a lot about changing into the likeness of Jesus Christ.

[13:39] So 4.16. And I want you to notice how often love comes into this as well. Chapter 4.16 says that we are to grow in every way.

Verse 15. Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ. And then jump down to 4.24.

We are called to put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God, in true righteousness and holiness. And then in verse 32 of chapter 4. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another.

How? How? As God in Christ forgave you. And then finally in verse 2 of chapter 5. Walk in love as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

You see, the change that God is bringing about in our life is a change into the likeness of Jesus Christ. And it will involve love at the center of that change, of that deep and powerful change.

[14:51] Paul's prayer means that you need to grow and I need to grow in this way, whether you have been a Christian for 7 months or 70 years.

And I think that we have both situations in our church congregation this morning. We must all humbly ask God to strengthen us. Verse 16 actually assumes that we are weak.

And it's good to echo this prayer for God's strength for ourselves and for those around us, our brothers and sisters in Christ, who sit with us in church. It's the fundamental activity that ought to be happening in our lives, that we are growing in Christ.

Well, I want to talk about how that dwelling of Jesus within us, what is the fruit that that brings in our lives? There's two things. There's two fruit I briefly want to mention.

They both have to do with love. The first one is found in verse 17, towards the end. It says that you are rooted and grounded in love.

[15 : 58] What Paul is praying for is a deep love for each other in the church. And it's a love that flows out of us because Jesus dwells within us.

And Paul deliberately uses the words of roots, of trees, and the foundation of buildings to say that our lives must actually go deeply into the soil of love.

Love should be foundational in our lives, in the way that we live towards one another. It should be that which keeps us strong strong and vital and stable as roots do, as good foundations do.

If it doesn't happen, we are a bit like the trees in Stanley Park. And the reason I say that is because you probably know that a couple years ago there was a massive windstorm with thousands of trees falling.

And when they fall, many of them, the roots fell, not just being snapped, but the roots actually came up out of the ground. And you can see them all exposed. And what you see is that they did not go deep enough to withstand wind from that direction.

[17 : 04] And Paul is saying to us that he wants people to overcome anything that would divide them by being strong and stable in love. That they would plant their roots deep into that soil and have foundations that are very strong so that any storm that would buffet that congregation would be withstood because the roots go down deep because God dwells in their hearts in Jesus Christ.

So that's the first thing, that love, and this is the activity that we are about in this prayer, actually causing the roots of our lives to go deeply into love.

Paul is going to talk about that for the next three chapters. The second part of the fruit of what comes from Jesus dwelling in us is that we will be able to have the power to, in verse 18, to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge.

This is a powerful verse. How do we get to the bottom of that verse? Well, the very nature of it is that we cannot. It's not a prayer to love Jesus more, although that is important.

It is a prayer to grasp Jesus' loves. It's not about a mental exercise. It is about personal knowledge of Jesus. Paul wants us to embrace all of the dimensions of his love in our experience.

[18 : 34] And the dimensions of that love are what the gospel teach us. They tell us how deep and how wide, how incredibly all-encompassing the love of Jesus Christ is for us.

Again, God must do this work. The world does not get this. It surpasses knowledge. Not only that, but I believe that in our lives we have many experiences of relationships that actually prevent us from seeing what true love is all about.

We can transfer experiences of pain and betrayal. The sinful things that happen to us in this life can be transferred and so that we do not understand fully the love of God.

But here is a prayer that says God must give it to you. It cannot come from this world. It must come from the outside as a gift of grace that we would understand God's love fully.

Pray that prayer for yourselves. Pray it for those around you. It is a marvelous gift that God has given because it overcomes anything that would prevent us from seeing God's love.

[19 : 48] And so as we close, I want to say that this love of Christ is a subject that ought to occupy our minds daily and nightly.

It is something that our whole being should be plunged into, Paul is praying. We ought to meditate on this love because we can't fully take it in. In fact, heaven will be about exploring the dimensions of this love.

But the marvelous thing is that as we know this love, as God gives us the power to know it, we will act differently. We will think differently. We will speak differently.

We will make decisions very differently as well. And in fact, what happens through that is that you come to full spiritual maturity. The way Paul puts it in his prayer is that you will be filled with all the fullness of God.

And so that's why Paul prays for you and I, the church, to grow towards this fullness. And he prays that as a church, we need that vitality, we need that growth, we need to change, and God will do it in his power as Jesus resides in us.

[21 : 01] I want to go away from this sermon praying. And so if you'll take out your prayer books, turn to page 226.

It is the collect for the day. And it is prayer that I did not choose for the day, it just happened to be a sign for today, but I think it has everything to do with what it is to look at this passage, this prayer for us.

Page 226, there's a collect at the bottom. And we'll pray it out loud together. O God, who has prepared for them that love thee such good things as past man's understanding, pour into our hearts such love towards thee that we, loving thee above all things, may obtain thy promises which exceed all that we can desire.

Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. Amen. We'll continue in prayer.

Please could you open and just put your finger in page 39 of the Book of Common Prayer. Amen.

Glory to you, Lord God, whose power working in your people can do more than we can ask or imagine.

[22 : 39] Glory to you from generation to generation in the Church and in Christ Jesus. Father, we pray for our world, thinking of post-election chaos in Zimbabwe, thinking of the absence of normal life in so many other places, Palestine and Israel, Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Sudan.

Please, Father, bring your peace to these places, using your people where they are present. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

we want to thank you, Lord our God, for the meetings in Jerusalem this past week. We thank you for the faith, strength, commitment, wisdom, and patience of Anglicans around the world who have prayed and worked over many years to bring us to this place.

thank you for the sacrifices of time and emotional energy made by people from our parish, David Short, Cheryl Chang, George Edgerton, Don Lewis, and Jim Packer.

We thank you for their families, for all the dinners and all the conversations that they have given up. We pray for them all for a restoring summer, Lord Jesus, dwell in their hearts, root and ground them in your love.

[24 : 25] And we'll pray for our parish, page 39 in the prayer book. Actually, we're praying for the whole church, but specifically for our parish.

Most gracious God, we humbly beseech thee for all thy Catholic Church. Fill it with all truth, in all truth, with all peace.

Where it is corrupt, purify it. Where it is in error, direct it. Where anything is amiss, reform it. Where it is right, strengthen and confirm it.

Where it is in want, furnish it. where it is divided and rent asunder, make it whole again, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Amen. Father, we thank you for summer when we see people that we miss through the rest of the year. help us to grow together this summer, planted and built on love.

[25 : 28] Help us to grow deeper into the love of Christ and to be filled with your fullness. Help us to listen to your guidance as we try to be your presence in Vancouver.

We pray for these people in our parish. Caroline, Edith, Rowena, Fiona, Janet, Harold, Margaret, and we pray for Mehran that he will be allowed to stay in Canada and grow in his faith.

We also pray silently for other friends. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Glory to you, Lord, our God, whose power working in your people can do more than we can ask or imagine. Glory to you from generation to generation in the church and in Christ Jesus.

Amen. Now, we continue on the back page of the bulletin with the prayer of St. Chrysostom.

Together, Almighty God, who hast given us grace at this time with one accord to make our common supplications unto thee and thus promise that when two or three are gathered together in thy name, thou wilt grant their requests.

[27 : 09] Fulfill now, O Lord, the desires and petitions of thy servants as may be most expedient for them, granting us in this world knowledge of thy truth and in the world to come life everlasting.

Amen. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all evermore.

Amen. Amen.