

Ephesians 3:1-13 AM

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[0:00] Let's bow our heads and pray. Heavenly Father, now we pray that you would send us your Holy Spirit so that we might see and savour the love of Christ for us and get a picture of who we are for your glory, we pray.

Amen. Please be seated. You'll find it helpful if you open your Bibles back to Ephesians, that Mark just read for us, chapter 3.

We're going to bounce around Ephesians a little bit today. So I have it on page 977 in my Bible. There's a Bible near you if you'd like to follow along. That would be great. There seems to be a bit of a change in the Canadian culture on its view of the Christian church currently.

I should say views of the Christian church because there seem to be differences by age and backgrounds. White Canadians who are middle-aged and older, boomers and Gen X, generally have a pretty negative view of the church.

You might have come across this at a polite dinner party, the church not just irrelevant but oppressive and positively harmful. But amongst younger people, Gen Z and millennials, there's a greater openness to the Christian church and to the Christian faith.

[1:28] This is partly, I think, because of the collapse of the so-called new atheists. The very old new atheists, Harris and Dawkins, are generally not popular now, partly because they offered no positive purpose for life in their quest to pull everything down.

And so millennials, and I'm generalising, are intrigued by Jesus and many of them just have no opinion of the church whatsoever. I claim as my authority on that one of my millennial sons. And there's an increasing immigrant population in Canada who have a generally positive view of the Christian church. It's useful and helpful, even if seen from a distance. And I say that because we're in the second last week as we follow the story of God.

And today the topic is, what is the job of the church? It's a very good question for us to ask. I mean, you're here this morning. But it's a very good question to ask, what's the church even for?

What's the point of the church? Does God have a purpose for the church? Does the church have anything to offer to the world? And the reason I ask you to open the Bible to Ephesians is because unless you see it in black and white, it's hard to believe some of the astonishing things that the Apostle Paul reveals to us here.

[2:57] He's writing to this little church in a very powerful city of Ephesus. He's in prison. It's a fragile group. And the city is under the control of magic, the occult, and the worship of idols.

It was the centre for that. And he tells this little group that the church is at the heart of God's purposes, not only for his world, but for history itself.

But the church is not a temporary arrangement while we wait for heaven. But the church is the eternal purpose of God in the world.

In fact, the church is the goal of God's purposes as well as the agent of God's purposes. And it's a bit difficult to hear this, I think. I mean, our experience of the church is often quite dull.

Not just St. John's, but every church. And our lives tend to be small. We're very easily satisfied with a bit of travel and entertainment. And it's hard to imagine that God is doing something vast and cosmic in the ordinary circumstances of church life.

[4:07] So I direct your eyes back to chapter 1 for a moment, where the apostle is speaking about the resurrection of Jesus in verse 21. And he says he's raised him far above all rule and authority and power and dominion.

And these are words in Ephesus for the evil powers. Above every name that is named, not only in this age, but in the name to come. Why? Verse 22.

He put all things under Jesus' feet, Why? And gave him as head over all things to the church.

What is the church? Which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all. It's a bit surprising, isn't it?

That all that God is doing through Jesus Christ is for the sake of the church. That all the power and authority God has given Jesus after the resurrection are for the benefit of the church.

[5 : 17] What God does after raising him and seating him at the right hand is to give him to the church, not just to be head over the church, but as head over all things, as Lord and sovereign of all, so that God will fill the world with the glory of Jesus as Christ fills the church.

Do you understand the logic? As Christ fills the church with his glory, God fills the world with the fullness of Christ. It is through the church that Christ displays his fullness.

The body of Christ, the church, is filled with Christ. And I'm saying the same thing. Through the church, God fills everything with Christ's glory. What are we talking about?

What is his fullness? It's an Old Testament term. It's used for the glory of God when it comes and is physically present in power and goodness. So you remember that day in Isaiah 6 when Isaiah got to church and he saw a vision of the Lord and the seraphim were circling around and singing, Holy, holy is the Lord.

The whole earth is full of his glory. It's his visible burning presence, burning with beauty and holiness.

[6 : 40] That is the fullness of God and all the fullness of God dwelt in Jesus Christ. And now that Jesus has been raised from the dead and is seated at the right hand of God, the way that the power and presence of God is now made known to the world is through the body of Jesus, the church on earth.

It's pretty good, isn't it? What's the church for? The church is simply the most important thing in the world right now. It is the fulfilment of all God's purposes for the world and it is through the church that God is spreading and making known the glory of the fullness of the power and the presence of Jesus Christ.

You can't be a Christian and think the church is unimportant. So Paul gives two pictures of the church, astonishing pictures in chapter 2. So the first one is in verse 15, if you just cast your eyes down to that.

He says the church is simply, it's a new humanity created out of the old humanity. So in the cross of Jesus, God has broken down every division and hostility between Jew and Gentile, which is a complete miracle.

And in verse 15, that he might create in himself one new human, one new humanity in the place of two, so making peace.

[8 : 04] So God is not just combining people of different backgrounds and languages. He's not just overcoming hostility and infusing us with niceness.

In Jesus Christ, God has done what the UN could never do. He's creating a new human race, a third human race. That's the church. That's you. What's the second picture?

Verse 21 and 22. He says we're a holy temple. Not that each of us are a holy temple, although we are. We know that from 1 Corinthians. But each church, each body is a holy temple which God is building together so that he can come and dwell in us.

I know God is everywhere, but his dwelling, his personal presence and glory dwell in the church.

You with me so far? The natural thing to say at this point, I think, is really?

I mean, Paul, have you been to church lately? I mean, have you seen how Christians behave? I mean, Christians can be very, very nasty, whiny, complainy, selfish.

[9 : 17] Church can be boring and repetitive. You know, most of the churches, the sermons are either far too theological or not theological enough. The music everywhere but at St. John's is okay, but sometimes not so much.

The leaders are dysfunctional. The people are cliquy. How can you say this is the new humanity, the temple where God lives? How can you say this is the place of the fullness of the glory of God? And the answer the apostle gives is we cannot. We can't say it or even see it like Will's picture here unless the Holy Spirit reveals it to us. And that's the point of chapter 3, 1 to 6.

It's all about the mystery of the church. And the word mystery is not a puzzle or a riddle for us to solve. The mystery is something God himself only knew that none of us humans could figure out or penetrate unless God revealed it to us.

And that's what God has done to the apostles. And what is the mystery of verse 6? The mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, partakers of the promise of Christ Jesus through the gospel.

[10:31] Never knew that before the Holy Spirit revealed it. No one in the Old Testament times would have any idea that God would, in the body of his Son, bring together a new humanity.

So Paul says in verse 3, the mystery was made known to me by revelation. Or in verse 5, as it now has been revealed to his holy apostles.

What's remarkable about this is that before he met the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus, Paul was a very proud Jew and he absolutely hated Christians and specifically hated Christian churches and was dedicated to the complete annihilation of Christianity and he volunteered to the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem to destroy churches.

And he did. He broke up churches and threw Christians in prison. And the day he met Jesus, Jesus said to him, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? And Saul says, I'm not.

I'm persecuting the church. Yes, says Jesus, the church is my body. You touch my body, you touch me. And it was a day of deep humbling for this man and out of the kindness of God's grace in a massive irony, God makes this man the apostle to the Gentiles.

[11:58] And that's what he means in verses 8 to 10. To me, that I'm the leastest of all the saints because I persecuted the church.

This grace was given to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, to bring to light for everyone as the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things.

And here it comes, verse 10. Here is the purpose of the church. It's taken a few minutes to get here. This is the topic. Remember, I started out at the beginning for those of you who did a wake-up call. Why does the church exist? Verse 10. So that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

That's the job of the church. That's the purpose of the church. See, God is not just filling all things with the fullness of Christ through the church. God is in a massive public relations exercise of universal proportions.

[13:07] And the audience is not just the watching world. It's not just our friends and neighbours and family. The audience here are the evil powers, Satan, demons, the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

And if verse 10 is true, God says to the evil powers, look at that group, look at that St. John's group. You want to see my wisdom?

That's where it's displayed. In that ordinary, angular, imperfect life of that congregation, that is my manifold wisdom. And manifold is just the word many-coloured, like a kaleidoscope.

God's wisdom and it's all its creativity indifference. As Satan and his demons look at the church, at every true local church, they are baffled and bamboozled and astonished.

They hate every living church. They want to divide and deceive and distract and discourage and destroy every living church. They don't care about dead churches. But the life of living churches defies the devil and his demons.

[14:23] So every time you reach out in love to someone in this congregation who is not like you, every sacrificial act, every tiny prayer, every sin forgiven, for no other reason than it's for Christ Jesus, it makes the demons shake their head in frustration and shock and they see something more of the wisdom of God.

It's great news for the first readers in Ephesus. Their whole life was lived in fear of the gods and the spirits. At the centre of Ephesus was the worship of Artemis.

she was the goddess of the underworld and you could buy amulets which had spells on them and the spells, you know, they promised you a sexy life and money and power but the spells and the magic were all about trying to manipulate and manage the gods.

It was a very scary existence. But when the gospel of Jesus Christ first came to Ephesus and they heard the proclamation that Jesus who has been placed at the right hand of God above every lord it was so effective that all the Christians brought their magic paraphernalia and burnt it in the city square roughly tens of millions of dollars worth.

See, the wisdom of God is the complete opposite of the wisdom of this world because the wisdom of this world is driven by the wisdom of Satan and the spirits.

[15:59] And you see that most starkly in the cross of Jesus Christ. As Jesus dies on the cross Satan and the powers of darkness believe they've won over God they've completely destroyed the Son of God and his attempt at salvation but the opposite was true and the cross overturns the wisdom of the world because it's exactly through the death of Jesus that God works the most magnificent salvation.

In his death we have life. As he is held there by the nails we are given freedom from condemnation and guilt. He becomes sin so that we might be righteous.

This is the wisdom and glory of God. It's a perfect combination of love and power and it stupefies demons and it shocks the world still.

and now the devil and the demons have gone to work they can't touch Jesus in heaven he is beyond beyond their any effect whatsoever and so he goes to work on the body of the body of Christ in the world.

That's why this is intensely practical and personal. We are to showcase the wisdom of God in our lives that is what the church is for.

[17:19] That's our job. So every day when we take up our cross and deny ourselves and follow him specifically and especially when we don't feel like it which I really do we demonstrate the wisdom of God.

And you can just go through chapters 4 and 5 and make a list of how we show the wisdom of God. When we bear with one another in love. When we seek to be humble and not arrogant. When we choose to maintain the unity of the spirit and not act for ourselves.

When we serve others and use our gifts or speak the truth in love or act with generosity and not greed or decide to put away bitterness and slander and gossip or make a concerted effort to build each other up.

Or when we come to church on those days we'd rather be anywhere else. We come to church gripping on by our fingernails. God demonstrates his wisdom to the rulers and authorities.

This is our task as a church. By doing these things we display God's wisdom. And you say how do we do this? Because you could hear this and feel a failure.

[18:33] You know it can sound like try harder jump higher work longer doing all these things. But the apostle gives two answers to us and I want to finish with this.

How do we do these things? He gives us two answers. First is the armour of God and the second is the love of Christ. So firstly the armour of God.

If you flip over to chapter 6 and look down at verse 10 for a moment. I'll read a couple of verses here. Finally the apostle says be strong in the Lord and the strength of his might.

we're not going to be able to do it on our own. Put on the whole armour of God that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil.

He's much cleverer than you are. We don't wrestle against flesh and blood but against the rulers, authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

[19:32] Therefore take the whole armour of God that you may be able to withstand in the evil day and having done all stand firm. And then the apostle lists the different pieces of armour, the belt and the shoes and the sword.

And every piece of the armour of God is a picture of the gospel of God's grace. So the belt of truth, well that's given to us, it's the truth of Christ, to deal with the devil's lies and deceptions.

The breastplate of righteousness, that's to help us deal with condemnation. And every day we don't just live a small horizontal life trying to figure out how to get to the end of the month, not being too far in debt.

We lead a big, dramatic life with cosmic enemies more powerful than we are and Christ has given us everything we need to stand in his might so that each day we have to put on the gospel.

That's the first way we do this, putting on the armour of God. And the second is the love of Christ. If you look back in chapter 3, Paul goes into prayer for the end of chapter 3 because we need God's strength.

[20:45] And in chapter 3 verse 80 he prays, we may have the strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowing that you may be, here it is, filled with all the fullness of God.

So this word comprehend is not an intellectual word, it's a wrestling word. word. It's when something catches you off guard and takes your breath away. It's when you're seized by something and gripped with intensity.

And Paul is praying we'd have the strength to be gripped with the dimensions of Christ's love. Because the love of Christ is so much better and more wonderful than we can imagine. It's greater than our experience of it and always will be. You know, you can ski whistler but you can't grasp it. You can know something of the love of God in Christ but it's only when God gives us increasing strength and expands our grasp that we're able to live out the wisdom of God. It's only the love of Christ that can draw us out of self-pity and petty jealousy and fear and self-preoccupation. I love these dimensions.

[22 : 08] There's breadth and length and height and depth. I mean, some people see the shape of the cross in it. But you think about this, you know, how wide is Jesus' love?

Is it wide enough for you? Is it wide enough for your friends and family? Is it wide enough for others? How long is it? And this is the love of Jesus Christ who promises never to leave us or forsake us.

How long is it? Or height? Is it high enough to take us to the Father's side? Or depth? How deep is his love? I mean, you know, we sing about we love you deeply.

He came down from heaven. He plunged to the depth of the bottomless pit to raise us up. love. This is the love of Christ and we need God's strength to grasp it.

So, St. John's, Vancouver. The Lord has kept us for about 100 years, roughly four generations by my calculation. And during that time, a lot has happened in the world.

[23 : 14] The world regards as very important and it was important. You know, the Depression, the World War II, the Atomic Age, the Space Age, the Digital Age. And views of the Church in Canada have gone up and down and up and down and they'll continue to do that.

But what God regards as truly important is to fill the world with the glory of Christ through the humble, ordinary work of Christian churches, communities created by the gospel of his grace, who seek to live out of the love of Christ, demonstrating the wisdom of God to the world and to the cosmic powers.

And that's our task today, tomorrow and until he comes again. So kneel with me and pray that God would help us do that.