

September 19, 2012

I Chronicles 29:10-14 / Philippians 1:3-11 / Ephesians 3:1-13

The Heart of Paul - Praying for the Church

Before I go any further into the book of Ephesians I need to pause and tell you the struggle I'm having in regard to preaching from this book -- a struggle I can't get around, because it continues throughout the book. I shared it with Randy on Tuesday and he suggested I tell you. So I will -- with the hopes that it will help as we continue on to the end of the book.

Anyone know what it is? Anyone know one of the major difficulties any preacher encounters in trying to be true to the message of Ephesians when speaking to a contemporary audience? It's communal tone of the letter. It's the fact that Paul DOES NOT write this book with the individual Christian in mind, or focusing on the individual Christian as the object of God's love and care and concern, but with the entire Body of Christ in mind, and the whole Church as being the object of His passionate love, care & concern.

In fact, most of the admonitions and points of application that we will find in the remaining chapters, are not made to individual believers, but to the church as an undivided whole, and even moreso, to entire racial groups, like the Jews and Gentiles.

And that's a problem. It's a major problem! Because the modern psyche -- self-focused and ruggedly individualistic as it has become -- has a hard time paying attention, or following any train of thought, or staying emotionally connected to any message that doesn't address them personally and individually.

That's the problem with the book of Ephesians. It's a book about the astounding mystery called the CHURCH, and God's immense love for His CHURCH (as a whole), and thus, it only addresses us as individuals in a very secondary way. And that makes it difficult in a culture where the heart cry (even in churches) tends to be: *"Tell me how God loves ME, and sent Christ to die for ME, and will take care of ME, and wants to minister to MY felt-needs, and help ME achieve my own personal life-dreams, ambitions and goals."*

So I want you to know that as a preacher I do struggle. Do I take material written to two entire ethnic groups or races of people, or to the Church Universal as a whole (or at the very minimum, entire church bodies) and present it as if it were written only to individuals (thus being untrue to the real message, but keeping our attention better)! / Or do I preach and apply it as it is, and understand as I must, that you may drift in the process!

LISTEN: Not because anyone is consciously trying to, but because our culture has so conditioned and trained our psyche / and programmed our emotional response mechanisms that we tend to disconnect emotionally unless something deals directly with us / or our own particular felt-needs.

As one friend told me a while back: 77% of all books sold at Christian book stores are of a "self-help" nature. And I tend to believe it, because "the self" tends to be the focus of our society.

In fact, if I were to host a conference on, "Loving and Striving for Unity in the Church Which God Loves Passionately" (something that this text says is part of the Gospel itself, and close to the very heart of God) / and right next door were to host another conference on the same exact day dealing with, "How to Reach Your Highest Potential and Achieve Your Personal Dreams in Life by Increasing Your Self-esteem" -- I can pretty much guarantee you (that is, in our culture) the conference that would be packed out, and the one that would struggle to get attendees.

Yet the real question is this: Which conference do you think would deal with things closer to the heart of God, and His redemptive purposes for this world, and the unfolding of His eternal plan for the ages? And if so, shouldn't my heart yearn to attend that one instead of the other?

So I've decided to go with the second option. Since as Christians one of our life-goals should be to learn to love what God loves, and be consumed by what consumes the heart of God, and consider of utmost importance what God considers of utmost importance. To be moved by that which moves the heart of God, and thus sacrifice my temporal desires and dreams at the altar of God's call to further His eternal purposes in Christ.

As I was trying to think of a suitable illustration of the mindset the church once had, and needs to recover (to counter the extreme focus on the self, or the individual, which is killing the Church in our culture) I would have to say it's the mindset of the Church as soldiers in an army. Like in those older songs: *"Onward Christian Soldiers, marching as to war..." / "Lead on of King Eternal, the day of march has come..." / "Oh, Church of God Arise, Lay not Thine armor down..."* You rarely hear that theme spoken of anymore.

Why? It's not simply because it's "militaristic language" and thus taboo in that sense. It's also because (at least in part) one of the things that any army does (and it's clear that this mind-set was present in Paul and the early church) is quickly teach all inductees into the military that the group, or the platoon, or the regiment, and the combat objective -- is more important than the interests, or the felt-needs, or the desires of any individual soldier. They are taught to ditch the cultural "it's all about me" mentality / and adopt an "it's all about the group" mentality.

Which leads us into the very **FIRST** thing we come to this week as we look at this well-known prayer of Paul: It's a prayer for the body -- the entire church body -- as a whole.

It begins (just as last week) with the phrase, ***"For this reason..."*** And as I pointed out last week, that phrase means that whatever he's about to say flows as the natural consequence of what he just said in the preceding section (starting in 2:11 and ending in 3:13). And what was that? The precious, earth-shattering and astounding news that, ***"through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus."***

That's why I also told you last week, that this week's text was nothing more than a continuation of the same theme we've been looking at for 2 weeks now. As Harold Hoehner rightly points out: Paul's prayer in vv.14-21, is a prayer that the ***"mutual love"*** between Jewish believer and Gentile believer in the church in Ephesus, ***"would be strengthened."*** It's a prayer asking for mutual acceptance and unity between Jewish and Gentile believers.

Yet you know what? I've heard this text preached on many times, but in all those times I have NEVER heard it preached from that vantage point. Each time I've heard it, the preacher has made it seem as if this was a prayer that God would bring the individual Christian to fullness in Christ.

But it's not! The words, "***For this reason...***," which tie this prayer into the preceding section, make that clear enough. And the rest of the verse makes it even clearer, where Paul writes: "For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom the WHOLE FAMILY in heaven and on earth derives its name."

So who's Paul praying for? He's praying for the CHURCH as a collective whole. For the CHURCH local and universal. For the entire body of believers on earth! And not just them, for he also prays remembering even the believers who have died and are in heaven. He even includes them!

And that's the key! This is NOT a prayer for individual Christians per se, but for the entire Church as one undivided entity / or one new body or person in Christ.

Not a bunch of individuals all doing their own Christian thing, but a unit -- a cohesive, unified, interdependent body -- that is meant to work together as one.

Though WE tend to think in strictly individualistic terms; PAUL thought as God does -- in group terms / or family terms / or whole body terms. He thought in terms of the entire Church functioning as one, entire, complete, undivided entity.

Or to put it another way (for the sake of clarity): Have you ever seen pictures taken from a plane of a great herd of elk running across the frozen tundra? Have you ever seen films of huge schools of fish swimming as synchronized whole? Have you ever looked up and seen a flock of geese flying in formation, or a huge flock of black birds darkening the sky?

Because if you've seen them, you know how both Paul and God view the church.

Whereas we tend to focus on the individual parts, they tend to focus on the church as a whole. / They focus primarily on the herd, we tend to focus on each bull or cow. / They focus on the entire school of fish, we focus on each individual fish. / They focus on the whole formation of geese, we focus each different goose. And that makes a difference on how we see and understand things. We're actually taught to be afraid of anything that diminishes one's individuality.

In fact, when Paul DOES focus on the INDIVIDUAL BELIEVER (as he will in this prayer) it is ALWAYS with an eye toward how the health of those individuals affect the health, the unity, the efficiency, the objectives, and the witness, of that local Body as a whole.

With God the BODY is primary, and the INDIVIDUAL is secondary. The GOALS of the Church are primary, the goals of each individual in it are secondary. The LIFE of the Church is primary, the life of each individual believer is secondary. And I know that doesn't sit well with most modern day Christians -- though it is true.

So again, let me say: Each individual believer (if they are ever to attain a biblical perspective of themselves in relation to the Church), needs to see him or herself as if they are a soldier in the army. An army where the focus is primarily on the regiment as a whole and the accomplishing the task given to it to carry out, and NOT the desires or wants of each individual soldier in the ranks. It's a group focus, not an individual focus -- hard as that is for our self-focused culture to hear.

Yet only now can we dig deeper into the text and understand the **SECOND** thing Paul makes clear: That the health and spiritual vitality of each individual believer is important primarily because the health of the entire body is either affected either positively or negatively as a result.

A diseased limb, if not taken care of, leads to a diseased body. Thus, the individuals health is important primarily because the health of the whole is affected by it. That's why Paul's first petition is that God would strengthen the inner man of each individual believer. He prays that the arm, or the hand, or the eye, or the mouth, or the thyroid or colon may be healthy, so that the body as a whole may be healthy.

Which means what? ***That contrary to what we can often be led to believe, God doesn't simply want me to be strengthened for me, he wants me to be strengthened, because when I am strong, it adds to the health and strength of the entire body.***

Thus we read in v. 16: ***"I pray that out of His glorious riches, He [the Father] may strengthen you [that is, you plural or you as a group -- he's talking to the entire church as one interconnected body] with power, through His Spirit, in your inner being [or again, the inner being of you all] so that Christ may dwell in your hearts [every one of your hearts, collectively] by faith."***

In that sense, this is a prayer for the group. A prayer which focuses on the group's health, and the group being empowered by the Holy Spirit, and the increase of the group's communal experience of Christ dwelling in their hearts, as together (as a group) they all look to Christ in faith.

Paul writes in the sense that Christ is looking down at the entire church, and seeing, not just one face looking up to him in faith, but a whole group of faces staring up at Him in faith! The primary emphasis here is a concern for the health of the body as a whole, which begins when all the individual believers together are (literally in the Greek) ***"empowered mightily, in the inner man,"*** by the Holy Spirit.

Yet this is where the problem comes in when we wrongly see this prayer as speaking only to us as an individual. In most churches there are some individuals -- a couple here, another there -- that do pray to be "empowered mightily" by God.

And that's better than no one doing it. But it's still not what Paul is getting at here. Because what God wants (and it's clear from this prayer) is that all the believers as a unified whole would -- together -- pray to be empowered mightily by God! ***Not just "empower me," but "empower us all!"***

We need to recover and adopt that communal mindset where we join as one to pray for such things as a unified group or body that moves as one! That herd, or school, or flock mentality. And I know I'm going against years of cultural influence that has implied just the opposite.

But unless we do, we will never really reclaim the biblical mindset of the church as the church, and us as those called to work for its health and vitality.

So let me reread verse 16 as it is intended to be understood: ***"I pray that out of His glorious riches, the Father [that is, the Father of a worldwide family called the Church (v. 15)] may grant you [that is, you plural, you as a group -- and the words "grant you" imply that they have been praying for this also] to be mightily empowered, through His Spirit, in your inner being [and again, in the inner being of you as a collective whole] so that Christ may dwell in your hearts [all your hearts, collectively] by faith."***

Do you see the difference it makes? It's the difference between thinking that all I'm called to do is pray privately that I personally might be mightily empowered by the Holy Spirit / or realizing I need to gather together with all of you and pray together with all of you that all of us as one unified body would all become empowered mightily by the Spirit.

Or to use Chuck's illustration from Wednesday night, it's the difference between praying that I, as a single piece of charcoal, might by myself burn hot, alone / or that all of us like many pieces of charcoal poured into the bed of a grill, might burn hot together!

It's the difference between many solitary prayers going up in private for one's self, and 150 prayers all going up simultaneously in unison for us as a church. It's the principle mentioned in Ecclesiastes, where two is said to be better than one, and three is said to be better still. Or the principle we find on the Day of Pentecost where all 120 believers are gathered in one place and are all praying for one thing -- for "the gift the Father promised."

And we need to do it, my friends, not simply to be mightily empowered, but to the end that, ***"Christ might dwell in our hearts by faith."*** That is, our experience of Christ increases as our experience of the Holy Spirit's power increases. That's Paul's prayer for the church!

Have you asked him? Better yet, will you join in unison with everyone here that WE might ask him together to empower us with the Holy Spirit?

Then **LAST**, Paul comes to his final petition for the Church: ***"I pray that you," he says (and again, he means you as a Church, you as a Body, you as a whole) "being rooted and established in love, may have power, together***

with all the saints [There it is again! He's always got the whole Church in mind -- you together with all the saints in Antioch and Colossae and Rome and Thessa-lonica and Galatia and Jerusalem, and everywhere else!] to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ -- and to know this love that surpasses knowledge -- that you [you as a church] may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God."

And here again, your outlook -- that is, whether you think in communal terms or individualistic terms -- determines how you understand and apply this request. The person who sees it through an individualistic lens, can only think that what Paul is asking, is that they as an individual might come to grasp (between them and God alone, in their own private relation-ship with Him) how wide and long and high and deep is God's love for them as an individual, so that they as an individual might come to be ***"filled to the measure of all the fullness of God."***

But can I say that's NOT what Paul is praying for? Putting on the communal glasses instead, which see this petition as a request for the Church as a whole, one sees that what Paul is really asking is that they as an entire body, no one left out -- might come to grasp together how wide and long and high and deep is God's love for them as a church -- as a group of chosen, cherished people! So that together as a group, they might all be, ***"filled to the measure of all the fullness of God."***

To use Chuck's analogy of burning charcoals again: When does a coal burn white hot and attain the full measure of all the fullness of its heat? / When its set aside by itself, alone, or smoldering in the midst of hundreds of other coals underneath, beside and on top of it?

You know the answer. The coal set off by itself will NEVER reach the fullness of heat that it would have if placed in the middle of all the others. In fact, as Chuck also pointed out Wednesday night, without the other coals around it, it will lose its heat faster, and even go out completely.

And if the love of God can be compared to that heat, and the measure of all the fullness of God is that heat burning at its hottest, we can see that it will NEVER HAPPEN so long as the individual Christian is thinking in terms of himself or herself alone. The individualistic mindset, as I mentioned, is killing the church.

It's one thing for a person to say: **"There are a couple of loving people in that church."** But it's another thing altogether, for that same person to say: **"That's a loving church. They all work together so well. They love each other so deeply. They're always there for each other."** That's what Paul means when he prays, "that you [you plural, you as a group] may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God."

You see, as believers, we intuitively know that we are to love what God loves. So, if I think this prayer is a prayer solely about me as an individual, it helps me to love myself. And that's ok -- I should in the biblical sense of self-acceptance.

But if I understand what's been said today, then I also realize I must take it a step further. Because when I rightly understand this prayer I realize its primary focus is the church as a local body and a world-wide body. And therefore, I realize I must also love, and accept and care for the health and well-being of the church!

And not just this church, but THE CHURCH worldwide. For all believers, in all bodies, of gathered bodies across the globe. I must love and pray for all to the extent that I am able -- that we would all be "mightily empowered" by the Spirit, know the love of Christ, and "be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God."