**The Love That Surpasses Knowledge**

**Ephesians 3:17-19**

**February 7, 2021**

1. Introduction
   1. This morning we come to a subject that everyone is talking about but very few people really understand, and that is the subject of love.
      1. Let me call your attention to what Paul wrote in Ephesians 3:17-19…
      2. In these verses, we are dealing with the subject of the love that surpasses knowledge.
   2. Paul brings up love in the context of praying for the church at Ephesus.
      1. Because of God’s great work for them in Christ, Paul prays on their behalf to the Father.
      2. We have looked at his first request in vv. 14-17, which was that God the Father would grant them to be strengthened with power by the Spirit in the inner man so that Christ might dwell in their hearts through faith.
      3. Divine power leads to a life of obedience and a heart where Christ is at home within the believer.
      4. And so Paul prays that they might experience this close fellowship with Christ that comes when we have a living and active faith that trusts in the Word of God.
   3. Now Paul moves on to his second request in vv. 17-19, and he now shifts from focusing on divine power to focusing on divine love.
      1. Paul wants the Ephesian Christians to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge.
      2. He is praying that the Father would empower them to understand this incredible love God has for them in Christ Jesus.
   4. We have noted that the reason Paul includes these prayers in his letters is not merely to provide the readers information on what he is praying, but to instruct us on how we should pray as well.
      1. As believers in Christ, we should be praying not only to be empowered by the Spirit for holy living that results in intimacy with Christ, but we should also be praying for an ability from God to understand the love of Christ.
      2. That might come as quite a shock to many people, because we all think we understand love.
      3. The love of God is considered to be so basic even children can grasp it as they sing about it during VBS or in Sunday school.
      4. And yet here we see that Paul was praying for these Christians that they might understand and grow in their understanding of the love of Jesus Christ.
      5. And so we see that it is God’s will that we too should grow in our understanding of His love.
      6. We must therefore pray to that end and with that goal with the apostle as he prayed for the Ephesians.
   5. The question that arises is how we might grow in our understanding of Christ’s love.
      1. What should we pray for so that we might experience this greater knowledge of God’s love for us in Christ?
      2. This passage breaks down nicely into three basic sections that tell us how to pray and what to pray for so that we might grow in our understanding of Christ’s love.
   6. Number one, to grow in your understanding of Christ’s love, pray that you would understand…
2. The Indispensability of Christ’s Love (v. 17)
   1. This statement introduces the main request for which Paul is about to pray in vv. 18-19.
      1. It’s a fascinating statement in the prayer, because in it Paul asserts that if we want to understand God’s love in Christ, we need a starting point for our understanding.
      2. What is that starting point?
      3. It’s love.
      4. Without having experienced the love of God, we can never understand the love of God.
      5. The love of God is absolutely indispensable to understanding the fullness of that love.
   2. In the English text of v. 17 the phrase **in love** is moved to the end, but the phrase **in love** forms the first two words of the Greek text.
      1. There has been much discussion about what love Paul describes in this verse.
         1. Some have said that this is our love for other believers.
         2. If we really want to grow in our understanding of Christ’s love for us, we must live a life of love for others.
         3. Other commentators have said that this is our love for God.
         4. If we want to understand God’s love for us, we need to make sure that first of all we actually love God.
         5. And still others have said this is both of the above, our love for others and our love for God.
            1. It forms a sort of obedience to the two greatest commandments.
            2. We are to have our lives built upon obedience to love God and neighbor.
         6. It is true that we are called to love one another and to love God, but the I don’t think that’s what Paul is referring to in this verse.
         7. One reason for that is because Paul says that we have been rooted and grounded in love.
            1. It seems out of place to think that we have been rooted and grounded in our love for God or in our love for others.
            2. When I think of the biblical teaching on holiness in the Christian life, our love for God and neighbor is never the root or the foundation of our life.
            3. Those acts of loving God and others are the fruit of a life that is rooted and grounded in God.
         8. And so as we consider this verse, we must conclude that Paul is not talking about our love here but God’s love for us in Christ.
      2. As I mentioned at the beginning, to talk about needing to grow in our understanding of God’s love seems almost nonsensical to people today because so many people think they know what love is.
         1. Love, defined by the world and often smuggled into the church by confused believers or by false teachers, is typically equated with approval and acceptance.
            1. We define love based on feeling that others approve of us, or that others accept us just as we are.
            2. That’s why, for example, if you say to someone who practices homosexuality that those desires and those practices are evil, you are considered to be unloving.
            3. Because you don’t accept them as they perceive themselves to be, you don’t love them, because love is equated with acceptance and approval.
            4. Furthermore, we see in the world that love is always focused on being loved, not on loving others.
            5. Worldly love is self-centered, self-focused, self-absorbed, with no concern to make sure that I show love to someone else.
            6. Worldly love is only concerned to make sure that you are nice to me, and if you are not nice to me, then I am justified in hating you, shaming you, canceling you, and banishing you from society.
            7. Worldly love always begins a sentence like this: “If you loved me, you would…”
            8. And we see this kind of thing all the time, whether it’s in how people respond to coronavirus, or husbands and wives arguing over hurts in their marriage, or parents and children, or friends, how often do we say, “If you loved me, you would…”
            9. Worldly love is selfish and always and only concerned to be loved, and only then, perhaps, to show love in some form to another.
         2. But the love of Christ is not primarily concerned with being loved but with loving others.
            1. The Son of God would never have come into this sinful world to die for sinners if His love was defined primarily as being loved.
            2. He came to His own, John tells us, and His own did not receive Him.
            3. He was rejected and despised.
            4. He was mistreated and hated by all.
            5. And He took all of that hatred and all of that rejection and bore it even to death on a cross because He came concerned not to be loved by sinners but to demonstrate His love for sinners.
            6. That’s why Paul describes biblical love in 1 Cor 13:5 as a love that does not seek its own.
            7. The love of Christ is never self-centered, self-absorbed, self-focused, but always is looking to show love to others, even to those who do not deserve it.
            8. We could do a study of 1 Cor 13 to fill this out, but for time’s sake, I would just encourage you to spend some time this week considering how the Bible defines love as you seek to grow in your understanding of God’s love for you.
   3. Paul says that we have been rooted and grounded in this love, this love of Christ.
      1. The soil of our lives, the foundation of our lives, is the self-giving love of Jesus Christ for us.
         1. That has to be the case because the love of Christ for us is the reason we are saved, right?
         2. We love, John wrote, because He what? First loved us. (1 John 4:19)
         3. The very beginning of our spiritual life is the love of Christ; we wouldn’t be saved if He did not begin by loving us.
      2. Think for a minute about these two images Paul uses: one of a field, and one of a building.
         1. He says that we have been rooted in love.
            1. The image here is one of a tree that has been planted in a forest.
            2. And it’s not some little sapling ready to be toppled over by any wind that blows through the forest, but it’s the image of a strong cedar tree, a massive tree with deep roots.
            3. What is the function of the roots?
            4. The roots feed the tree, provide stability, make it grow, keep it healthy and strong.
            5. The love of Christ is the soil in which we have been planted.
            6. It’s the love of Christ that gives us stability.

How do you go on when tragedy comes?

We lost two dear brothers in the Lord this week, and it was a hard week for us as a church family, and especially for the family members of Vic and John.

What is it that gives stability in weeks like we have had?

It’s the love of Christ.

We are rooted in His love, and we know that He loves us, so that when life is difficult and trials and temptation assault us and threaten to destroy our hope, His love keeps us stable, keeps us upright.

* + - * 1. It’s the love of Christ that helps us grow.

His love strengthens us so that we persevere in the Word and are made more holy through the sanctifying work of the Spirit.

The love of God has been poured out in our hearts so that in the middle of tribulations, God produces godly character.

* + - 1. Paul also says that we are grounded in love.
         1. That has the idea of a foundation of a building.
         2. We are built on the foundation of the love of Christ.
         3. Back in Ephesians 2:20, we saw that the church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ as the cornerstone.
         4. What is the message they proclaimed to us?
         5. It was the message that God loved us and sent His Son to die in our place!
         6. It says a few verses before that that Christ came and preached peace, peace through the blood of His cross, which demonstrated God’s love for us while we were yet sinners.
         7. The very foundation of our lives is built on the love of Jesus Christ.
         8. It’s what preserves us against the wind and the rain and the storms of life.
         9. It’s what gives us a firm foundation so that we are not blown here and there by every false doctrine that comes along.
         10. The love of Christ is a rock beneath our feet, a strong ground that keeps our lives from falling to pieces.
  1. If we want to grow in our understanding of the love of Christ, we need to pray that we would see how indispensable the love of Christ is to everything in our Christian lives.
     1. Our entire lives should be built upon His love, and His love should be what supplies us with the nutrients we need to grow in our faith.
     2. We are saved because of His self-giving, holy love, and we live our lives in that reality.
  2. Now second, we also need to pray that we would understand…

1. The Immeasurability of Christ’s Love (v. 18)
   1. Not only is Christ’s love indispensable to us in our understanding of it, but it is also immeasurable, as Paul highlights in v. 18.
   2. We can a small glimpse of that in the very beginning of the verse with the words **may be able**.
      1. That verb in English is pretty benign, and it falls short of how the verb in the original would have been understood by the reader.
      2. It’s a rare word, only used here in the NT, and it means literally *to be strong enough*.
      3. It’s a more intense form of the verb *to be able* that indicates the ability in question requires some amount of strength to accomplish.
      4. In English, we might ask someone, “Can you meet me on Tuesday at noon?” and there is no inherent concept of strength needed to do so; it’s a matter of availability.
      5. But if you asked someone, “Can you help me lift this table?” and the table is really heavy, then you’re not merely inquiring about someone’s availability to move the table but if they have the power to help you.
      6. That’s the idea here.
      7. When we put this with the idea of a tree having strong roots or a building having a solid foundation, we see the point that Paul is making in his prayer.
      8. He is praying that their roots would be strong enough in Christ’s love that they would be able to understand it.
      9. He is praying their foundation in the love of Christ would be so solid it would allow them to truly understand the magnitude of His love as they grow in Him.
      10. By putting it this way, Paul is pulling back the curtain on just how immense and immeasurable Christ’s love is.
      11. It’s so great that to really grasp how great it is, you need a solid foundation and deep, strong roots in His love.
      12. And so Paul is praying that they would have this kind of depth of knowledge of Christ’s immeasurable love.
   3. Notice also that this immeasurable love is universal for all the saints in v. 18.
      1. Some of the mystery religions of Paul’s day had certain knowledge that was only for an elite class of spiritual people.
         1. You had to climb the ladder of spirituality to become enlightened.
         2. And only as you became part of this select group were the secrets of the divine revealed to you.
      2. But here Paul shatters all of that pagan nonsense, and says that this immeasurable love of Christ is so great that all Christians need to know it, and all Christians should know it.
         1. This follows on the heels of Paul talking about the glorious unity in Christ that exists between Jews and Gentiles.
         2. And he once again is showing that no one has an advantage over anyone else in their relationship with Christ based on anything special about them.
         3. It’s an amazing thing to think that what the most educated, intelligent, sophisticated believer knows about the love of Christ may also be known by the illiterate, uncultured slave who has come to faith in Christ.
         4. Some people settle for such a small knowledge of Christ.
         5. They claim they can’t know what others know because they aren’t smart enough, they aren’t theological enough, they don’t read enough.
         6. But here, Paul says that knowing the love of Christ isn’t about human intelligence but divine enablement.
         7. Most of the smartest people in the world know absolutely nothing about the love of Christ, while some of the most uneducated people in the world have a vast and deep and rich knowledge of His boundless love.
         8. We might think of John Bunyan, who was derided as “that tinker,” because he only had a grade school education.
         9. But he was given the strength by God to know the love of Christ.
         10. He knew that love so personally, so intimately, that he composed *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, the best-selling book in the world in the English language after the Bible.
         11. You can be an uneducated tinker, but if you have strong roots and a firm foundation in Christ’s love, God can enable you to grasp what the most renowned philosophers could never conceive.
      3. This love is immeasurable, then, because it is available for all of Christ’s people to know if only they would seek God for this knowledge in prayer.
   4. Then Paul takes us still higher up the mountain of Christ’s immeasurable love by saying that he is praying we would comprehend the breadth and length and height and depth.
      1. Now, I can’t tell you how many different views I read speculating on what Paul is talking about with these four, dimensional terms.
         1. The reason there is some debate is because there is nothing that specifies in the immediate context what exactly the height and width and depth and length refer to.
         2. But it seems clear enough to me, as it did to John Calvin, that the topic at hand is the love of Christ, since that is the subject of both what comes immediately before in v. 17 and what follows in v. 19.
         3. Paul is saying that he is praying these believers would have the divine enablement to understand and comprehend the width of Christ’s love, the length of it, the depth of it, the height of it.
      2. By using these four terms, Paul is essentially saying that this love of Christ is infinite and therefore immeasurable.
         1. How wide is the love of Christ?
            1. It is wide enough that it reaches out to all nations and all peoples and all languages.
            2. There is no one on planet earth who can say that he is excluded from the love of Christ because the love of Christ did not reach wide enough for him.
            3. This love embraces people from every tongue, tribe, nation, and people group.
         2. How long is the love of Christ?
            1. The love of Christ is so long that it stretches all the way back to eternity past before the foundation of the world.
            2. Remember what we learned in Ephesians 1:4-5?
            3. Paul wrote in the opening of this letter, **“In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself.”**
            4. Before the world was created or you were ever born, God loved you and through Jesus Christ He determined that your destiny would be to be part of His glorious family.
            5. He has never stopped loving you all through the years of history.
            6. And even after you were born, and though you had committed so many grievous sins against the One who loved you from all eternity, He still continued to love you and pursue you until He brought you to repentance and faith in Christ.
            7. And now that you are in Christ, although you sin against Him often and stumble in many ways, He continues to love you and make you holy by the power of the Spirit through His Word.
            8. When you come to death, He will still love you and bring you safely into His heavenly kingdom.
            9. And throughout all the ages to come, for endless days, He will never stop loving you, but He will pour out His kindness on you for all eternity.
            10. His love is immeasurable in its length as well as its width.
         3. And then should we mention its height?
            1. How high does the love of God go?
            2. It goes high enough that it seats us with Christ in heavenly places.
            3. It takes us right into the presence of God in Jesus Christ.
            4. Through His great love we have access to the throne of grace so that we might enter into His heavenly and holy presence with confidence and boldness.
         4. And O the depths of His love!
            1. There’s an old hymn, O the Deep, Deep Love of Jesus!
            2. Vast, unmeasured, boundless, free!
            3. It is so deep that it plunges down to the depths of our sinfulness and rescues us from hell.
            4. It’s as the psalmist said in Psalm 139:8, **“If I ascend to heaven, You are there. If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, You are there.”**
            5. God’s love is inescapable for us as it pursues us no matter how far down we are, and it lifts us up the glorious heights of heaven.
      3. In Romans 8:38-39, Paul is listing the things that can never separate us from the love of Christ, and in v. 39 two of the things he mentions are height and depth.
         1. Height cannot separate us from the love of Christ.
         2. Depth cannot separate us from the love of Christ.
         3. Why not?
         4. Because His love goes higher than any created height, and His love plunges deeper than any created depth.
         5. It is the immeasurability of His love that gives us the assurance that nothing in all creation can separate us from a love so wide, so long, so high, so deep.
   5. Brothers and sisters, how we need to pray that God would give us the strength to understand how immeasurable Christ’s love is!
   6. And finally, third, we need to pray that God would empower us to understand…
2. The Incomprehensibility of Christ’s Love (v. 19)
   1. If we think we have a grasp on how great the love of Christ is at the end of v. 18, Paul arrives at the summit in v. 19 and utterly destroys that notion as we survey the true greatness of Christ’s love.
      1. He tells us that the love of Christ **surpasses knowledge**.
         1. The word translated **surpasses** is the Greek work *hyperballo*, from which we get our English word *hyperbole*.
         2. In English, hyperbole is an unrealistic and somewhat ridiculous exaggeration of the truth for effect.
         3. “Wow, that hole in my yard is like the Grand Canyon!” is clearly a massive exaggeration, but it expresses how I feel about the dog digging up my grass.
         4. In Greek, this term literally means *to throw beyond*.
         5. And that’s where this idea of exaggeration came from.
         6. In the context of Eph 3:19, however, you can’t exaggerate the love of Christ.
         7. The point that Paul makes is that Christ’s love is so great, so immense, so marvelous, so profound, so glorious, that it goes infinitely beyond human knowledge.
         8. It’s a love so profound you can never fully know it intellectually.
      2. The great jazz musician Louis Armstrong was once asked to explain jazz, and he replied, “Man, if I’ve got to explain, then you ain’t got it.”
         1. That’s like an echo to the shout of the love of God.
         2. You can explain the love of God to a degree, as you must when you tell someone the gospel or seek to deepen your own understanding of Christ’s love.
         3. But there is a sense in which after all that you have said, all that you have explained, every illustration and form of analysis, you come to the end and realize you still haven’t fully explained it or understood it or analyzed it
         4. And you realize you never really can, because it is inexhaustible and incomprehensible to the finite human mind.
   2. But Paul prays anyways that we would know this incomprehensible love.
      1. In the Bible, when something about God is incomprehensible, that means we can never fully understand it, but it doesn’t mean we can’t understand it at all.
      2. We can know the love of Christ at some level.
      3. And we can and should grow in that knowledge continuously throughout our lives.
      4. But on the day we breathe our last and enter into His presence, we still will not have exhausted all there is to know about His love.
      5. And then, when we’ve been in His presence for 10 million years, we will still be learning about His love.
      6. And so the point Paul makes here as he prays is not primarily that we would accumulate information about His love, although that is necessary.
      7. The point is that we would know His love because we have experienced His love.
   3. This is even true at a human level.
      1. I can tell someone about how my wife loves me.
      2. I can talk about how she takes care of our kids, and cooks, and cleans, and thinks of things I like to eat or drink to stock the kitchen, and all the ways she shows her love.
      3. But at the end of that explanation, you still don’t really understand it because it’s an experience that can’t be adequately captured in words.
      4. If that is true of two sinners, how much more when the eternal Son of God shows us His love and we experience all the ways He loves us.
      5. We can describe it to people, we can explain it in words, but at the end of every explanation we have to conclude, “You just have to experience it to really get it.”
      6. His love is incomprehensible.
3. Conclusion
   1. Let me ask you, have you experienced the love of Christ in your life?
   2. Are you growing in your understanding of His love?
   3. Do you know this love that goes beyond human knowledge?
   4. The root of our lives is the love of Christ; the foundation of our lives is the love of Christ.
   5. And the goal of our lives is to know this great love of Christ.
   6. We need to pray that God would help us understand its indispensability, its immeasurability, and its incomprehensibility, that we might love Him, and love others for His glory.