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Bridgeway Church
John 13-17 / #2
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Sermon Summary (2)

It Takes God to Believe God John 17:1-5 Ephesians 3:14-21

Today is the second message in our new series in John 13-17 that we are calling, *Last Words*. That is to say, we are looking at what has also been called *The Farewell Discourse of Jesus*, the concluding words of instruction and encouragement that Jesus gave to his disciples on the night on which he was betrayed by Judas Iscariot. Some have referred to these five chapters as *The Upper Room Discourse* because that is where they gathered to celebrate the last supper.

Regardless of what one wishes to call this portion of John's gospel, it contains what is perhaps *the most intimate portrait by Jesus of the affection and love he has for his followers*, not only for those who were actually physically present with him in the upper room in the first century, but also for all of us who, by his grace, have become his followers through faith and repentance.

So the question you are undoubtedly asking yourself is this: "If we're supposed to be studying the Last Words of Jesus in John 13-17, why did we read from Paul's letter to the Ephesians? What does this prayer of Paul in Ephesians 3 have to do with what Jesus said in John 13?" You may recall that two weeks ago, in our first Sunday in John 13, we looked closely at John 13:1-11, and in particular, at vv. 1-5. There we read words that are almost too glorious to be true. There we heard Jesus speak of his undying, unending love and affection for his people. There we heard Jesus describe us as "his own". There we saw Jesus overcome and resist what we would perceive as the numerous obstacles that he faced in loving us.

I can only speak for myself when I say this, but *there are times when I struggle to believe that what Jesus said is true*. There are times when I simply can't bring myself to believe that Jesus could love people like Peter and Matthew and me, and you too! Let me put it this way.

You and I need help to believe John 13. My preaching a sermon on the text isn't enough. *We desperately need help not just to believe it but for it to take root in the depths of our hearts and to awaken our affections and to change how we think and live and make choices.* A passage like John 13:1-5 is designed to turn our value system on its head. It is designed to revolutionize how we think about what is of ultimate importance in life. *The point of John the Apostle in recording for us what Jesus was thinking, feeling, doing, and saying is so that the truth of God's love for us in and through Jesus might penetrate and soften our hard hearts and upend our value system and fill us with a spiritual energy that will forever transform everything in our lives.*

But here's the problem. We are weak. We struggle with doubt and we secretly question the truthfulness of what Jesus said and did. We are filled with anxiety, and live in fear that what we see in John 13 couldn't possibly be true.

I know the reaction of many people to the things we talked about two weeks ago. *"No one can love like that,"* they say to themselves. "I'd like to believe that someone can; I'd like to believe that Jesus can. But my nature and experience in life up to this point tell me otherwise. Sam, if you really want me to believe this, if you really hope that my life would be forever changed by this truth, I'm going to need a lot of help."

Yes, I know. So let me say it as clearly as I can: It takes God to believe God. When God describes in such breathtaking terms as he did through Jesus in John 13, "I love you," it takes God himself to enable us to believe that God himself is actually speaking the truth.

The "help" we need for John 13 to make a lasting, life-long impact on our lives won't be found in a self-help book or in the wise words of a counselor or good friend, or even in a really good sermon on the text! That's not to suggest that such folk can't help us at times in life, but this is an issue of a different order. *In order for you and me to*

believe and bank our lives on the truth of God's love we need God himself to do something miraculous in our hearts.

That is why we need to pause right at the start of our series in John 13-17 and ask God to help us believe that he's actually speaking the truth to us when he describes a love that, as Paul says in Ephesians 3, surpasses knowledge, a love that is so deep and profound that if anyone other than God had said it we would instinctively call them a liar.

My Personal Journey

Many of you, but certainly not all, know a little about my personal spiritual journey. Although there are numerous facets to my life as a Christian, some more theological than others, I want to briefly share with you my own pilgrimage when it comes to the experiential dimension of Christian living.

But don't draw any unwarranted conclusions from my distinguishing between what is theological and what is experiential. Let me explain what I mean. If something you or I experience isn't theologically true, that is to say, if it isn't warranted and grounded by the clear teaching of the Bible, or happens to be in direct conflict with what is in the Bible, it is a bad experience, potentially a misleading and destructive experience.

Countless people, some of whom you undoubtedly know, have reported experiencing something in what they believed was their relationship with God which has no basis in the Bible. ***No one is questioning whether or not they had an experience. It may well be a life-changing experience. It may well be a deeply religious and spiritual experience. But if the experience itself is contrary to what the Bible says, it is useless. Worse still, it is dangerous.***

What I have in mind is my own experience of biblical truth. In other words, biblical truth isn't something only to be believed. Believe it we must! ***But much biblical truth is also something that God wants us to experience, to feel and to sense and to enjoy.*** And one glorious biblical truth that all of us should experience in the depths of our hearts but often fail to do so is the fact that God loves us. That God loves us is a fact. It is an undeniable, unshakable, unalterable fact that was demonstrated preeminently in the death of Jesus Christ. For example, we read this in Romans 5:6,

“But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:6).

Paul says this in Galatians 2:20b,

“And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2:20b).

One more example will suffice. Listen to the words of the Apostle John:

“In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (1 John 4:9-10).

So, we are told that God “shows” his love or “manifests” or “demonstrates” his love by sending his Son, Jesus Christ, to die in our place and to satisfy God's wrath against us. That is the heart of the Christian gospel. But God doesn't intend for it to stop there. ***The demonstration of God's love, the manifestation of God's love, is something he also intends for us to experience, to enjoy, and to feel deeply within.***

Although I have been a Christian since I was 9 years old, it wasn't until I was in my late 30's that I came to realize that this truth was designed to be more than a known fact, more than a theological confession; it was also designed to be ***a felt reality, a sensible experience.*** Now listen carefully. I'm not putting experience ahead of fact. I'm not saying that experience is more important than fact. I'm simply saying that this fact of God's love for us is something he wants us to feel in the depths of our inner being.

Do you realize that there are a lot of people who “feel” loved by God and are not? We read in John 3:36, “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.” A lot of people are persuaded that they are the children of God and will spend eternity in heaven when they die. But these same people do not obey the Son, they do not believe in Jesus Christ, they reject the gospel of God as

set forth in Scripture. They are not God's children. They are, as Jesus said of the Pharisees of his day, the children of the Devil. "You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires" (John 8:44).

My point is simply this: Unless your trust and hope and belief are in Jesus Christ as the incarnate Son of God who died in your place on the cross, that feeling you experience of being loved by God is a lie. You are deceived. Your experience notwithstanding, the wrath of God remains on you.

So, merely having an "experience" of being loved by God doesn't count for anything if the "God" you believe loves you isn't the God of the Bible. And if your religious encounter with the love of "Jesus Christ" isn't rooted in the historical reality of the incarnation and substitutionary death and bodily resurrection of the Jesus of the Bible, that's all it is: a "religious encounter". It counts for nothing. In fact, it's worse than nothing because it actually serves only to keep you from pursuing and knowing the true love of the true God in the truth of who Jesus Christ is and what he has done for sinners.

My own encounter with the passionate affection and undying delight that God has for me first came when I discovered **Zephaniah 3:17**. There we read that "the Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing." Our passage in John 13:1-5 comes in a close second to Zephaniah 3 in terms of its clarity concerning the love of God in Jesus.

But close on the heels of Zephaniah 3:17 and John 13:1-5 is the prayer of Paul in Ephesians 3. And what makes Paul's prayer so life-changing is that ***the single focus of his request is that God would work in our hearts through the power of the Holy Spirit to enable us to know and feel and enjoy and be forever changed by the truth of John 13:1-5 and Zephaniah 3:17 and other texts like them.*** Merely pointing you to the truth of God's love in John 13 and Zephaniah 3 would be like setting before you the most exquisite feast you've ever known, with every delicacy you most enjoy, but failing to give you a fork and a knife with which to eat it. Indeed, it would be akin to telling you how great the food is but not letting you open your mouth and make use of your teeth to chew it and ingest it. So let's look at Ephesians 3.

Paul's Prayer for the Power to Experience the Love of God in Christ

Paul's Posture (vv. 14-15)

The opening phrase in v. 14, "for this reason," picks up on the same phrase in Ephesians 3:1 which points back to 2:19-22 and its discussion of how God has incorporated believing Gentiles into fellowship with believing Jews as the one people of God, the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit. Also included is Paul's description in 3:1-13 of his role in assembling this ethnically diversified group. It is thus "for this reason," that is to say, ***because of what God has done in overcoming ethnic barriers and uniting his one people as one temple for the indwelling of the Spirit that he now prays as he does.***

Paul's posture is significant: ***he bows his knees***, whereas standing (1 Kings 8:22; Mark 11:25; Luke 18:11) was normal among the Jews (although, see 1 Chron. 29:20; 2 Chron. 29:29; Ezra 9:5; Ps. 95:6; Dan. 6:11; Lk. 22:41; Acts 7:60; 9:40; 20:36; 21:5). Kneeling may be an expression of Paul's intensity. For him, intercession was a struggle, a battle, a fight (see Rom. 15:30; Col. 4:2,12). Kneeling points to the recognition that we are coming to a sovereign, on whom we depend. It also is often associated with extreme passion and neediness. It reflects our desperation!

Those "families" in both "heaven and on earth" is probably a reference not only to angels but also Christians in heaven who are still viewed as organized for worship like earthly families. That our "Father" is the one who "named" them is Paul's way of declaring that he not only created them but also exercises ultimate and absolute authority over them.

Paul's Petition (vv. 16-19)

Paul is asking God to give his readers strength. That's clear enough. But strength for what? In what way are we "weak" and in need of the sort of strength that only God can give? It will become immediately clear that ***our weakness is in our failure and inability to wholeheartedly believe in and feel and rejoice in the love that God has for us in Jesus.***

Notice carefully that Paul's prayer for us to be "strengthened" is qualified in four ways.

First, it is "*according to the riches of his glory*". Sometimes glory is God's brightness, his greatness or renown, but it also has connotations of power, as in Colossians 1:11 (see also Rom. 6:4). So Paul prays that God would give his people fortitude or strength and do this out of the infinite treasures of his majestic might and power. That's important to remember because all along the way you are going to find yourself battling doubt as to whether God can pull it off. Can he genuinely enable me to feel and enjoy his love? Does he have sufficient resources to overcome and subdue my fearful, anxious heart? Yes!

The word translated "according to" points beyond the idea of source/origin. In other words, it is not merely "out of" his riches, but "according to" or in proportion to his infinite wealth. The idea is that of *correspondence*. It is on a scale *commensurate with God's riches* that Paul asks for power.

Second, it is to happen "*through his Spirit*". The Spirit is always the one who does things for us on the inside, producing qualities and characteristics we wouldn't normally be able to attain (see Rom. 15:13; 2 Tim. 1:7). Without the ever-present operative power of the Holy Spirit none of this will ever happen. He is the one who strengthens us.

Third, it is "*in your inner being*" where this strengthening occurs. This lets us know that the sort of strength we need can never be gained by lifting weights or faithfully going to Cross Fit or by doing push-ups (see 2 Cor. 4:16). The inner being is the interior life, the core of our personality and the center of our identity. Our "inner being" is literally our "inside man" or "inside person". Heart, mind, will, spirit, soul, affections, are all encompassed by this phrase. That's where the battle rages. That's where the enemy wants to convince us that God is lying to us about his love. That's why we are "weak" in the inner man and need to be made strong!

Fourth, the purpose or goal of this inner spiritual strengthening is so that "*Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith*." These people, just like you and me, have already been sealed by the Spirit (1:13) and united with Christ in his resurrection and exaltation (2:5-6), and incorporated into one body where the Spirit now dwells (2:22). So it can't be that Christ doesn't already dwell in them or in us. What we lack is the encouragement and incentive to draw on this truth; the ability or capacity to experience it in life-changing ways.

Paul is clearly praying to God for our *sensible experience* of the person of Christ. He prays that we might be internally strengthened by the Spirit so that Christ might dwell in our hearts. But how can that be, if we have *already* received Christ into our hearts when we were born again? The only viable explanation is that Paul is referring to an *experiential enlargement* of what is already theologically true. He wants us to be strengthened by the Spirit so that Jesus might exert a progressively greater and more intense personal influence in our souls.

The result of this expansion of the divine power and presence in our hearts is the ability to "comprehend" or grasp "what is the breadth and length and height and depth" of Christ's love for us. But this is not merely some intellectual exercise. This is Paul's way of saying that God intends for us to feel and experience and be emotionally moved by the passionate affection he has for us, his children.

When Paul says that we need strength to experience the indwelling presence and power of Christ, he says this comes through "*faith*." I think his point is that our weakness is in the area of faith: we simply don't believe what we read in John 13 or Zephaniah 3. We waver in our confidence. We worry that it might all turn out to be only a dream, perhaps a nightmare. Our "faith" must be strengthened and intensified! And only the Holy Spirit can make that happen!

There are two words typically used for the concept of indwelling. The first, *paroikeo*, means to abide or to inhabit, but not necessarily permanently. The second, the one used here, is *katoikeo* which emphasizes "a settling in or colonizing tenancy" (Best, 341); i.e., to live permanently (cf. Col. 2:9). ***Christ doesn't sojourn in our hearts. He is no divine nomad! He is, reverently speaking, a squatter. He is a permanent, abiding resident.***

This indwelling influence is in some way related to being "*rooted and grounded in love*". Here Paul employs a double metaphor: one from agriculture and one from architecture. Love, says Paul, "is the soil in which believers are to be rooted and grow, the foundation on which they are to be built" (Lincoln, 207). Clearly, then, a precondition for experiencing the fullness of Christ's indwelling presence is having been rooted and grounded in love. But whose love? Is it God's love for us in Christ? That would mean: you are rooted and grounded in God's love for you so that you can know God's love for you. That seems a bit odd. Is it our love for God? No, for how can that enable us to

know his love for us? Is it our love for one another? Yes. In other words, *this is not merely an individual experience. It happens in community, as together we live and enjoy and grow in our ability to believe and be satisfied with God's love for us.*

Here in v. 18 Paul comes full circle. He has prayed that God would strengthen us through the Spirit. We asked the question: what for? Here is the answer. We need "strength" in our inner being *"to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth"* of God's love. Stop! Note again the *communal emphasis* on this experience; we experience God's love together *"with"* all the other believers in our local church.

For all its glory and the great heights from which it came, such love can only be experienced "together with all the saints" (cf. 1:1, 15; 6:18)! Our experience of Christ's love is personal, but not private. *It is meant to be felt and proclaimed and enjoyed in the context of the body of Christ.* It is a personal, yet shared, experience. This is no isolated, individualistic, esoteric experience "but the shared insight gained from belonging to the community of believers" (Andrew Lincoln, 213).

But how are we to compute such love? What are its dimensions? Does it come in meters or miles? Do we measure it in yards or pounds? Does Paul intend for you to think in terms of mathematical proportions, as if to suggest that God loves you one-hundred times more than he loves the angels or fifty times less than he loves a purportedly more godly Christian?

Quite to the contrary, says Paul. *There is a width and length and height and depth to Christ's love for you that goes beyond human measurement. The immensity and magnitude of that love is incalculable. Its dimensions defy containment. It is beyond knowing.* Yet, Paul prays that we might *know* it! This deliberate oxymoron serves to deepen what is already too deep to fathom.

Thus v. 19a simply restates v. 18b. To grasp the incalculable love of Christ for his own is to "know what can't be known"! This oxymoron (statement of apparent inconsistency) is designed to emphasize that what we might know in part is ultimately incomprehensible. We may know Christ's love in some measure but *we will never exhaustively comprehend it.* No matter how much we learn, no matter how much we think we know and see and feel and grasp, there is always an infinity left over!

In any case, God's love for us in Christ is so vast and immense and immeasurable that it takes God himself strengthening us through the indwelling Christ to make sense of it.

The ultimate result is that you and I might *"be filled with all the fullness of God,"* a reference to his moral perfections or excellencies, as well as his empowering presence; i.e., all that God is as God.

But with what are we to be filled? The "power" of God? The "love" of Christ? The Spirit? Certainly, but there is more in Paul's mind. Note well: we are to be filled *by God*, "and presumably if they are to be filled up to the fullness of God, it is *with this fullness* [emphasis mine] that they are to be filled" (Lincoln, 214). In some sense, then, it is with the *radiant power and presence of God himself* that we are to be filled, the measure of which is *God himself!* Whereas the church as Christ's body already shares in, embodies, and expresses his fullness (Eph. 1:23), we have not yet experienced the plenitude of God in the way that is available to us. That is why Paul now prays as he does.

Paul's Doxological Conclusion (vv. 20-21)

God's Greatness (v. 20)

Has Paul gone too far in this prayer? Has he asked for something that not even God himself can provide? Has his boldness gotten out of hand? No, and vv. 20-21 tell us why. Paul's effusive praise of God reflects the unbounded bounty of his ability to bless his people in response to their prayers. Let me break this down into its many parts.

(1) He is able to *do* or to work, for he is neither idle nor inactive, nor dead (contrast the dumb idols in Ps. 115:1-8).

(2) He is able to do what we *ask*, for he hears and answers the very prayers that he commands we pray! When it is God's will to bestow a blessing, he graciously incites the human heart to ask for it!

(3) He is able to do what we ask or *think*, for he reads our thoughts, and sometimes we imagine things which we are afraid to articulate and therefore do not ask. In other words, his ability to provide for us must never be measured by the limits of our spoken requests.

(4) He is able to do *all* that we ask or think (not just some of it), for he knows it all and can perform it all. *There is nothing that is proper for us to have that transcends or outstrips his power to perform.*

(5) He is able to do *more than* all that we ask or think, for his power infinitely exceeds the most expansive requests on our part.

(6) He is able to do *more abundantly* than all that we ask or think, for he does not give his grace by calculated measure.

(7) He is able to do very much more or *far more abundantly*, than all that we ask or think, for he is a God of superabundance (the single Greek word that stands behind this idea has the idea of an extraordinary degree, considerable excess beyond expectations, etc.).

(8) All that he does he does by virtue of his power that even now energetically works within us. This is the same power that raised Jesus from the dead and seated him in the heavenlies above all principalities and powers (see Eph. 1:19-23).

God's Glory (v. 21)

To him be glory “in the church.” This is amazing! Of all the places one might think God would choose to reveal and embody and express his manifest glory, the church, with all its weaknesses and divisions and failures, scarcely seems to qualify! Yet such is God’s intent.

And also “in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.” Amen indeed!

Conclusion

Do you still struggle to believe John 13? Do you feel weak, perhaps filled with doubt and skepticism? Does it strike you, quite simply, as something too good to be true? Or perhaps you “believe” it intellectually. After all, it is a biblical truth. But you don’t feel it in the depths of your inner being. If that is you, and I suspect it is most of us, we need to pray as Paul did in Ephesians 3. So let’s pray.