

## The Second Sunday after Epiphany

January 21, 2018

Christ the Rock Lutheran Church

Farmington, NM

**Ephesians 3:14-21** For this reason I kneel before the Father, 15 from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. 16 I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, 17 so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, 18 may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, 19 and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

20 Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, 21 to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

### "God Gives Growth"

People mean well. They really do. But it isn't always clear how they are trying to help you. So they send you that invitation to play their favorite online game with them. They offer you recommendations for the favorite TV show. But they haven't learned what your tastes and preferences are. In their exuberance over amazing health results they have seen, they offer you diet suggestions. They sign up for a dream vacation giveaway and use your name as one of those three references they need to share. Thanks, but I'm not really interested. Even if their niceness confuses you, at least you know they meant well.

But prayer is always the gift we will accept from someone. And it's not just your cousin who can't get rid of that nagging cold or your neighbor who lost his job. Mere acquaintances who share small talk will be pleasantly appreciative if you offer to say a prayer for them.

That's why my heart is warmed just by reading these verses from Ephesians chapter 3. The Apostle Paul means well. But he isn't just offering a pleasant smile or trying to be nice. He offers a prayer for fellow believers. He prays for real and genuine growth. Growth that will not only see increased strength, but lead to greater joy and generosity. It's Paul who says and writes these words, but his prayer teaches us that God gives growth.

The Apostle Paul is thinking about what is absolutely best for fellow believers. So he gets down on his knees and prays: **"For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name."** (Ephesians 3:14,15) But it's obvious he is talking about prayer. That's what he's doing down on his knees. And I can't help but notice and admire that posture of humility. He's not coming to God thumping his chest about everything he's done right or asking for a favor in exchange for everything he's done for God. No, he approaches the majesty and glory of his Father's throne with humble awe.

We recognize that attitude. We come humbly to God. We know we could use some help. We recognize our needs. We come to God for minor emergencies and times when it seems only a miracle will work. Sometimes he's the first one we turn to. Sometimes he's our last resort.

We pray to God when finances are tight and when are jeans are too. We turn to God to repair relationships and to grant us success. And God wants us to come to him for anything and everything on our hearts. But it's the attitude behind those prayers that is most revealing. It's not wrong to ask for health or financial blessings. It's not really about the quality or quantity of our asking. It's that we have convinced ourselves that the answers we are after will give us what we really want. In reality, so often those things are just the easiest things and the things right in front of us. They will improve our moods or quality of life momentarily. They can lessen pain or fill holes for a short time. But they can't really address the ultimate issues in our hearts. An honest evaluation of the reasons behind our turning to God, the things we ask God for reveal what we value and value ultimately.

And here's the problem with that. Let's take money as an example. Here's what one non-Christian researcher has found: "We humans need food, rest, warmth and social contact. But having more than enough provides little additional boost to well being...Once we're comfortable, more money therefore provides diminishing returns...The correlation between income and happiness is modest, and in both the U.S. and Canada [it] has now dropped to near zero...Income doesn't noticeably influence satisfaction with marriage, family, friendship or ourselves — all of which do predict a sense of well being."<sup>1</sup> In other words, our own prayers mean well. But Paul teaches us God has something better in store for us.

Paul wants God to give you something of greater value: **"I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith."** (Ephesians 3:16,17) Paul doesn't just mean well. Paul knows God wants to give you growth. Paul wants what is best for you deep down on the inside, for your spiritual life. And it doesn't come from getting what you are so often after, what you so often appeal to God to give you. It comes through the power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is your connection, the umbilical cord connecting you to the life coming from your heavenly Father. The Holy Spirit is able to deliver that power to your inner being. And we don't have to worry about where it comes from. God's gift comes to you out of his glorious riches.

Maybe that sounds simple. But it's actually a dawning realization of what you have in your relationship with God. In that way it is like the student who has just learned that the earth revolves around the sun. Or just learning about the water cycle coming from the oceans into clouds dropping rain on mountain ranges. This information has been around for a long time, but when it becomes new to you, it is mind-blowing. It has always been at work, but now it changes the way you view things all around you.

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<sup>1</sup> Loehr, Jim and Tony Schwartz. "The Power of Full Engagement." p. 137,138.

As that prayer for strength takes effect, it brings another blessed result: **“that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.”** (Ephesians 3:17) Christ dwells in your heart through faith. It doesn't depend on your invitation, how cleaned up and hospitable your heart is, the strength of your feelings or the depth of your emotions. Trust in Jesus means Jesus makes a permanent habitation in your heart so that Jesus keeps increasing your trust in him.

With God's riches giving you strength and the indwelling of Christ, Paul prays for another consequence. With God at work giving you growth, he can say: **“And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ.”** (Ephesians 3:17,18) Paul prays that you would be strong enough. Faith is always what God wants to give you. Yet there is always more growth God can do for you. More work God can do in you. Think of the difference between the bridegroom of the wedding Jesus attended and his disciples. Jesus did the same miracle. Everyone at the wedding banquet benefitted from it. The groom benefitted from the new supply of wine. Maybe he even tried to take credit for it. But the disciples experienced a dawning awareness of who Jesus was. They recognized this wasn't just a powerful teacher or great example. So we hear: **“his disciples believed in him.”** (John 2:11)

God doesn't just mean well. He wants real growth for you. So God works to help you grow in appreciation when you more fully realize the love of Christ. There's a deeper, more dangerous reason why we so often want more money or more success. We convince ourselves that if we had better looks or carried around fewer pounds or were a little more successful or better at relationships, we'd finally be good enough. Then we could love ourselves and accept ourselves for who we are.

That even happens when we know we are praying for the right kind of things with the purest motives. Faith still feels inadequate. How could I be as bold as Paul in prayer? I don't know if I have the prayer right. I don't know if I am praying strong enough. I wonder if I've done enough to move God to give me the answer I'm after. Is the situation serious enough to God when I come before him?

We've still got some growing to do to understand God's love for us in Jesus Christ. We've got a ways to go **“to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ.”** (Ephesians 3:18) In love God sent Jesus into this world with mind-blowing humility when the infinite power of the divine was wrapped in the flesh of a tiny baby. God's love for you is unfathomable when Jesus resisted every natural sinful urge we experience and withstood every temptation with a near-perfect track record of tripping up most mortals. God's love for you is incomprehensible in sending his own Son to suffer and die as the vilest criminal on the cross. Any parent wants their child to know they love them, through the pleasant and the painful. God's love for you goes beyond every normal human comparison. You can't measure it or quantify it. All we can know for sure is that as long as your need is, God's love goes just a little bit more. As big as your mess is, God's love covers just beyond it. As high as your rebellion, God's love goes up more. As profound as your hurt, God's love goes deeper. God doesn't just mean well. God's love is infinitely more than anything else you can experience.

Vibhu Sharma was raised in Texas by immigrants from South Asia. He did so well in school, he was able to skip a grade at his Catholic High School. After college, he had his pick of jobs. His first day at his first job at an accounting firm he met Julie, a Lutheran from Missouri. His faith journey prepared him for a situation no one would ever want. As the number 2 finance officer at the global giant Zurich Insurance Group, he was promoted in the worst possible way. But after the Chief Financial Officer took his own life, Vibhu was in a position to not only keep the company's finances running, we was able to address deeper issues than work pressures and economic demands. He found himself sharing his faith openly and often with people struggling with so many questions.

Even today his faith influences the integrity of his business decisions and guides the way he deals with employees. Joy is contagious when it comes from the overflowing heart of God. Generosity toward others overflows from God's incomprehensible love. He has a perspective that is so meaningful to the people around him: "Work, world, people, culture, and material things will always disappoint," Sharma said. "God won't disappoint!"<sup>2</sup>

God's growth helps you see God's purpose for you. And if you don't have to work and struggle and strive to find your own value, you can serve others who are still caught in that struggle. If your value doesn't come from your health or wealth, you can bring them an awareness of their value in Christ. If you don't depend on the depth or health of your relationships, you can direct your relationships to find their connection to Christ.

And when you think this will require exceptional growth, just remember the one who is behind that growth. When you think your prayers are a longshot, just realize who you are calling on. Paul points out: "**Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us.**" (Ephesians 3:20) There are no limits for God. Even your craziest imagination can't fathom what God can do. The God who performed the miracle of faith in your heart is still working. God means well. But God wants the best. And God is willing to make it happen. God gives the growth. For you. For those in your prayers. And God can do it. So there's only one thing left to say: "**Now.. to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever Amen.**" (Ephesians 3:20,21)

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<sup>2</sup> Zylstra, Sarah Eekhoff. "Workplace Trial: How One Executive Led During Dual Tragedies." <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/workplace-trial-how-one-executive-led-during-dual-tragedies/> Accessed January 18, 2018