

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Under Construction

(studies in Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus)

A Life and Church-Changing Prayer

(Ephesians 3:14-21)

Study #4

Introduction: The Greeks, on geeks...

The ancient Greeks were great storytellers. Their stories (we call them myths and often involve gods and goddesses) explained life and taught wisdom.

And, given the passage in the Bible we're exploring today, I thought it fitting to re-tell a part of the Greek myth of Prometheus.¹

The story goes that in the early days of our race, humanity had been dealt a tragic hand. People were nothing more than pawns, used and abused by the gods. No one had any reason to hope for a better life than the hard, primitive, brutish life they knew.

Prometheus, one of the gods, felt compassion for our plight and gave us gifts.

One of those gifts was "blind hope." This was an internal change. He gave people the capacity to want more, to be more than they were, to be ambitious.

Then, Prometheus gave us the gift of fire. With fire, people could learn to cook food, forge weapons, fire pottery. By this gift, he opened up the possibility of the world of technology.

You and I live in a very Promethean age. We have hopes for something better *and* we have technology, neither of which are bad.

When I'm trying to figure out how to repair my lawn mower or chain saw or toilet (all tech stuff), I quickly go to YouTube for "How-to's".

I appreciate the advantages of technology and believe that we should feel free to use today's high-tech gizmos.

And Jesus isn't anti-tech, either. I'm confident that He used the technology of His day in His carpentry work.

But the story of Prometheus and his gift of technology didn't end well, for humanity or for Prometheus.

He was punished by Zeus for giving technology (fire) to people. And humanity learned that, while increased reliance on tech brings advantages, there can also come an increase in suffering. We get that.

Today's fantasy is that, regardless of the question, tech is the answer. 5G networks will perfect driver-less cars and resolve communication problems. Quantum computing will solve many of the remaining, vexing problems of the day.

Just a little more fire and we'll finally get the world running right. The problem is that technology overpromises, underperforms, and brings with it unintended consequences.

Tech can allow us to communicate, but it can't tell us how to communicate well or deeply. Tech can fix a leaking heart valve, but it can't mend a broken heart. And the same technology that creates life-saving drugs gives us designer hallucinogens, nuclear power plants and nuclear bombs.

The myth of Prometheus warns us that fire/technology can lead to dangerous places.

¹ I'm indebted, again, to Eugene Peterson, for his re-telling of the Prometheus myth in Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity. Pp. 19ff...

And history serves as a cautionary tale of the dangers of high hopes and high tech absent a dependence on God - even when pursuing the things of God.

I notice this in my own life and in my role as a pastor.

- I hunger for personal transformation. I want change in character so that I am more like Jesus - and I look for things that I can do to bring about the change.
- I long to see our church better reflect the love of Jesus to our community, to be more impactful for Jesus - and lie awake at night thinking of programs to launch that will ratchet up disciple-making.

Did you catch it?

Did you hear my inclination to think in terms of technology? How can I do it better? How can I improve? What can we try? What will work? How very Promethean of me.

Paul is going to tell us today that while there's nothing wrong with spiritual technology, there is a step to take prior to the tech step. That first step is a step into prayer. It is a step into dependence on God.

So, for the second time in this letter, Paul prays. And he prays because he knows that only God can bring about the transformed character we hunger for and the eternal impact we long to see.

Who Art in Heaven? (vv. 14-15)

When Posture Says Something in Prayer (v. 14)

[14] For this reason², I bow my knees before the Father

Physical posture in prayer is not all-important in prayer. If you read through the Bible, you'll find people praying in different postures.

Some people prayed while standing (out of reverence)³ and others while face-down on the ground (in abject terror).⁴

King David prayed while lying in bed at night.⁵

Personally, I most often enjoy prayer when I'm walking. But here, in Ephesians, Paul says that he "*bows/bends the knee.*"⁶

That posture says something. It indicates submission. Subjects bow in the presence of royalty. The lesser bows before the greater. Paul bows in the presence of God because he sees God's greatness and majesty.

When you and I pray, we delight in the freedom we have to posture ourselves any way we please. Really. You're free to stand, sit, walk, lie down.

But take a cue from Paul - who bowed down - and be mindful of the greatness of God when you pray.

Praying to a Loving, Sovereign Father

Paul was mindful - and he bowed before "***the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name...***"

At the very beginning of humanity, in the Garden of Eden, God named the first man, Adam. That naming ceremony signified God's authority over Adam and over all who would come after him.

God is the source of life and He is the Sovereign over us all. In that sense, He is Father to all of humanity. In a more intimate sense, He is Father (Abba / Daddy) to all those - in Ephesus and in San Antonio - who believe in Jesus.

This is the God to whom Paul prays. He is asking God to do something in the lives of the people to whom he is writing.

His first, big request is for internal change and growth in our relationship with Jesus.

⁴ Number 16:45; Joshua 7:6; Ezra 10:1.

⁵ Psalm 63:6.

⁶ Ezra 9:5; Psalm 95:6; Daniel 6:10; Luke 22:41; Acts 7:60.

² "***For this reason***" points us back to all that we have seen in the letter so far.

³ 1 Samuel 1:26; 1 Kings 8:22; Mark 11:25.

Requests That Change Lives - and Churches (vv. 16-19)

That Christ Would Be at Home in Your Heart (vv. 16-17a)

[16] that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory⁷, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit⁸ in the inner man [17a] so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith

The “inner man”

Different kinds of strength are required for different tasks. You need mental horsepower for calculus, endurance strength for distance running and explosive strength for sprints and weightlifting.

Paul prays here that God’s Spirit would spiritually strengthen believers in the **“inner man.”** (i.e. - “the inner person”)

When the Bible wants to describe the essential nature of who we are in Christ, the going-to-Heaven, forgiven people we are now that we have trusted Jesus, it sometimes uses the term **“the inner man.”**⁹

That is to distinguish from the **“outer man.”** Listen to how Paul contrasts the two in another passage.

[2 Corinthians 4:16] Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day.

That **“outer man”** is our physical body. And, yes, our physical body is in decline. But the term, **“outer man”**, is also a way of referring to the gradual wasting away of our life of struggling with sin.

The **“inner man”** is different. The **“inner man”** is being renewed day by day. Both the inner and the outer are involved in a process, one of renewal and the other of decay.

Eternal life is received as a gift in an instant, at the moment we believe. Being justified before God is not a process.

We are, though, taking part in an on-going process in which the old ways of living are being done away with and the new ways of life in Christ are being adopted more and more.

This process is what Paul refers to when he prays that we will be **“strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man.”**

Getting strong

It’s possible to be a healthy, robust, strong Christian externally, and yet be frail on the inside. It is also possible to be a physical wreck and infirm on the outside, yet be strong in **“the inner man.”**

I had a rich visit with a good friend on Friday, Ken Eberhardt. Ken and Pam have been a part of Northwest for over twenty-five years. Their three daughters grew up in our church.

During all of those years, Ken has had several surgeries and has been in chronic pain due to a brain malformation (Arnold-Chiari). For many years, Pam has been suffering from Multiple Sclerosis.

Some years ago, due to neurologic symptoms, Ken had to stop working. He is now limited in his physical abilities, continues to endure chronic pain, and recently began having problems with his eyesight.

When I got to his house, I found that he had fixed lunch for us both, as usual. He honestly told me what he was going through, but I never heard a complaint. He expressed sincere gratitude to God for the many blessings of his life. He’s hopeful for good things for his loved ones. He prayed fervently for me and for our church.

I sat with this man whose outer life is wasting away. But just as true is that his inner life is strong and vibrant. Ken isn’t perfect, but he’s a great picture to keep in mind when thinking about what Paul is praying for us.

He is praying that we each would be **“strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man.”**

⁷ Paul assures us that God will give graciously, not grudgingly.

⁸ The Holy Spirit is the One who strengthens us.

⁹ See also Romans 7:22.

Most of us here will never become world class athletes. We either lack the genes or the grit or both.

But every Christian has the capacity to become strong in the inner man through the Holy Spirit. Everyone one of us can run the race set before us. The power is there for the asking. That's why Paul asks.

Growth in Jesus starts with the asking. And, when that prayer for inner spiritual strength is answered, the result is Christ, ***“dwelling in [our] hearts through faith.”***

Christ - “at home” in our hearts

But, haven't we been taught that Christ already lives in our hearts. Why pray that He will *“dwell”* there, if He's already there?

It's because Paul is asking for something for us that is *different than* and *more than* the indwelling presence of Christ.

He is praying that Christ would settle down and be comfortable in our hearts, that He would make Himself at home in our hearts.¹⁰ That's what he means by the word, ***“dwell.”***¹¹

Your heart - Christ's home

Nearly seventy-five years ago, a Presbyterian pastor, Robert Boyd Munger, wrote a short pamphlet that picked up on this idea of Jesus making Himself at home in our hearts. He titled his pamphlet, *My Heart - Christ's Home*.¹²

Munger imagines your heart having a library and a dining room, a living room, a recreation room and a workshop.

Each of these rooms represents an aspect of your life in which Jesus wants to ***“dwell.”*** Munger pictures Jesus walking through your heart, with you as tour guide, leading from room to room.

When you and Jesus get to the library, He notices and then asks about the books on the shelves and the posters on the wall. You take down some that aren't doing your thought life any favors and replace them with God-honoring materials.

He enters your dining room, notices the junk food you're feeding your soul. He introduces you to healthier, more nutritional food that's so much better for satisfying healthy appetites.

He walks through each room, breathing life and meaning and holiness into your hobbies and projects and friendships.

The Lord is getting comfortable. He's settling down. He's ***“dwelling”*** in your heart as you submit to Him and become strong in the *“inner man”*, in the *“inner woman”*.

At a certain point in the tour, though, Jesus uncovers a secret closet that's hiding something rotten. It's an arena of life you haven't turned over to Jesus. He refuses to ***“dwell”*** in a heart that allows blatant rebellion.

Jesus doesn't leave, but He's not going to ***“dwell”*** in your heart when you wall off a part of your life from Him.

And, you, having tasted fellowship with Jesus, can't stand the thought of distance, of Jesus not dwelling in your heart. So, you repent.

You open the closet door to expose the rotten thing, invite Jesus to clean it out, and once again enjoy an abiding, intimate relationship with your Lord.

That, in a nutshell, is *My Heart - Christ's Home*. It's available online and is well worth the few minutes it would take to read it.

And this morning, you and I could have a long discussion about how to make the home of our heart a fit place for Jesus to dwell.

¹⁰ Paul normally uses the Greek *“οικεω”* or *“ενοικεω”* when speaking of Christ *living* in believers. Here, he highlights the intimacy and comfortableness of the living arrangement in view with Jesus by using *“κατοικεω.”*

¹¹ There is a parallel between Paul's use of *“dwell”* here and John's use of the term *“abide”* in his writings.

¹² This pamphlet was written in 1951.

We could talk together about the discipline that is necessary to effect change. That would be a good discussion.

If athletes have to discipline their bodies to run a race, and computer programmers have to apply themselves to learn a new language, it is certainly true that effort will be required to become strong in ***“the inner man.”***

But I’m going to suggest today that we put off the, *“What are we going to do”* discussion.

That is to talk about spiritual technology, “How to”. It is a Promethean discussion. And that discussion will be perfectly appropriate, *second*. But, *first*, we follow Paul’s lead and pray.

Our spiritual development, the transformation and strengthening of the inner man, this is God-sized stuff.

So, let’s not talk technology right now. Let’s not jump toward a new program to begin, a new technique to try, a new discipline to put in place. Let’s ask God to do what only He can do.

Let’s pray that our heavenly Father would, through the Holy Spirit, strengthen us in ***“the inner man”*** so that Christ will not only be present, but will ***“dwell”*** in our hearts.

That’s the first prayer Paul offers us and that he would want us to pray for ourselves and for others. He includes one more request into this life- and church-changing prayer.

To REALLY KNOW the Love of Christ (vv. 17b-19)

[17]...and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, [18] may be able to comprehend with all¹³ the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth,

¹³ Harold Hoehner noted that genuine spiritual growth cannot occur by association with only certain believers, those we prefer because they are of the same ethnicity or demographic or socioeconomic or intellectual or professional realm. ALL the saints are needed to help All the other saints grow healthy.

[19] and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fulness of God.

Rooted and grounded in love

Fundamentally, Christians are those who are protected by the strong grip of a God who is perfect and good and loving. And love, if we understand it biblically, is not a feeling. It is a resolute decision to seek the best for the one we love.

God has committed Himself to providing the best for us. He has redeemed us, made us alive, and raised us up with Christ. He has blessed us with every spiritual blessing imaginable in Christ. That’s the extent of the love of God for us.

We are so completely loved by God that Paul can say that we are ***“rooted”*** and ***“grounded”*** in love.

The idea behind being “grounded in love” comes from the world of construction.

Your life is an architectural marvel. With each month and year that passes, you have new experiences, failures and successes. These add stories to the structure of your life.

But the foundation of your life is solid and secure. There is never a danger of the foundation cracking, because the foundation of your life is the rock-solid love of God.

Your life, too, is an agricultural marvel. I happen to love trees, so I love this image of being “rooted” in love.

The life of a tree is dependent for its health on its root system.

The roots send nutrients from the soil through the trunk to the branches and then to the leaves. The root system gives stability in strong storms and on windy days.

Paul likens you to a giant oak. Your life is secure because your roots are sunk deep into the love of God.

That, more than anything else, is what Paul wants us to get, that we are perfectly loved. He wants us to embrace the greatness of God's love for us in Jesus.

Fathoming the unfathomable love of Christ

[17]...and that you... [18] may be able to comprehend¹⁴ with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, [19] and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fulness of God.¹⁵

In speaking of God's love for us, Paul lists all the dimensions we might imagine. So, let's imagine...

In your mind's eye, stretch a long line from sea to shining sea that takes in all of the United States. Or, consider the breadth of human emotion, including fear, anger, joy, anxiety and worry, depression and peace. Jesus' love expands beyond those borders.

Think of the deepest part of the deepest ocean (the Philippine Trench in the Pacific) and the highest peak on the planet. Consider those highs and lows as symbolic of the highs and the lows of human experience:

- job promotions and demotions;
- weddings and divorces;
- health and sickness;
- births and funerals;
- victory and defeat;
- relational connection and fracture.

Jesus' love soars with us to our highest highs and never leaves us at our lowest lows.

Paul knew that you and I would often be thrust into situations where we would be tempted to give up and lose hope unless we had a buoy strong enough to keep us afloat.

That buoy is the truth that *"Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so."*

Many of you here today can testify that the certainty of Jesus' undying love for you has seen you through tough times when nothing else could have.

His love is not a mushy sentimentalism. It is a concrete reality sourced in the historical act of His sacrificial death on the cross for you and His resurrection from the dead for you.

The more we discover about it, the more we discover that there are yet more facets to consider. The more we learn about Jesus' love, the more we are amazed by it. His love for us is beyond comprehension.

And Paul's prayer for us is precisely that we would comprehend that love for us.

Knowing we will never plumb its depths, Paul prays that we will keep digging. Knowing that we will never fully "get it", he prays that we keep pursuing it.

Paul has prayed two mighty prayers. As God answers them, transformation and impact (the things we so often, like Prometheus, try new technologies to achieve) will come.

Christians who are growing strong in the *"inner man/woman"* and who are becoming more and more *taken* by the incomprehensible love of God for them find everything touched. Friendships. Marriage. Internet habits. Financial dealings. Work. Play.

¹⁴ The Greek word for "comprehend" (*καταλαμβάνω*) is a military term, used of conquest. Paul's prayer might be rendered, *"I want you to triumph over this concept. Don't give up trying to grasp it until you really 'get it'."*

¹⁵ Grammatically, this phrase explains (is expegetical to) the preceding. Being filled up to all the fulness of God IS to know the love of Christ.

And if you are skeptical that this could be true for you or that this could be true for us, here at church, listen to how Paul wraps up.¹⁶

Doxology! (vv. 20-21)

[20] Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, [21] to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.

Personal transformation and congregational impact are, first and foremost, the work of God, who is more than up to the task.

That's why, at the mid-point of this letter, before launching into Part Two where we will hear lots of personal assignments to obey, Paul focuses exclusively on God and prays to God for us.¹⁷

So, it isn't that our obedience is irrelevant to transformation and impact. It is that it is secondary. Our Promethean instincts to use technology to accomplish things aren't all wrong, just out of order. God first. Pray first.

Conclusion:

When it comes to receiving eternal life, we do no work. (See Ephesians 2:8-9) God saves us and we are passive recipients of a priceless gift God gives to us when we believe in Jesus.

When it comes to personal transformation and growth as Christians, though, God is at work...and so are we. (See Ephesians 2:10)

The biblical picture of Christian growth is not of our passivity, but neither is it solely a picture of our activity. No, God changes our lives as we cooperate with Him, obey Him, submit to Him.

When we pray for the things Paul mentions in Ephesians 3, we aren't saying that we have no part to play in our own growth (faithful obedience).

We are simply admitting that unless God also does the things that only He can do, radical transformation and life-changing impact will never happen.

First things first. Prayer. Do what you can do, but remember that you have the least control over the things that matter most to you. Ask God.

Brothers and sisters - let us pray!

¹⁶ This doxology is not only a fitting conclusion to the prayer. It is a fitting conclusion to the entire first half of the letter to the Ephesians. It also serves as a perfect transition in preparation for the last three chapters.

¹⁷ This prayer is placed right in front of Paul's discussion of what the church is all about, and how a Christian is to live as a light in the middle of a very dark world.