

EPHESIANS #50 3:17-19 8-19-12
KNOW THE LOVE

(Ephesians 3) Some years back I was at home when a salesman came to my door and rang the bell. So, I answered and in the course of the conversation he discovered that I am a pastor. It is always interesting the reactions you get when people discover you are a pastor. This guy starts going on about how the Lord lives in him and, at one point, he said to me, “I can tell whether someone is a believer just by looking into their eyes. I said, “Really?” I doubt that our eyes give away that much and I once worked in ministry with a man who had terrible blood-shot eyes that definitely did not help him look Spirit-filled if you know what I mean. There are better ways to get into a person’s head. Our search committee here at North Park spent hours with me trying to figure me out. They had me take three written tests; they had me see a psychologist. But you know, if you could hear a person’s private prayers, if you were privy to what someone says to the Lord in those moments of breathing out their petitions, I bet, don’t you think, I bet you would learn a ton about them, and about what makes them tick. Someone sent me a list of somewhat humorous prayers, each of which do reveal the personality of the pray-er. Check these out: *Lord, help me to relax about insignificant details, beginning tomorrow at 7:41a.m. EST. (pause) Lord, help me to consider people's feelings, even if most of them are hypersensitive. Help me to take responsibility for the consequences of my actions, even though they're almost never my fault.* Maybe you can identify with some of those prayers. Well, today we get a look at a prayer of the apostle Paul. And it is a prayer which clarifies for us what this man of God believes that you and I as followers of Jesus need. Ephesians 3:**14-19** *For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, 15 from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name, 16 that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man, 17 so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, 18 may be able to comprehend 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 fullness of God.* Two things the apostle prays for in this passage. The first is strength. He prayed that we would be strengthened by God’s Spirit in the inner man. The second, which is our focus for today, is knowledge, but not just any ole knowledge. The knowledge Paul prays that we would have is a knowledge of the love of Christ. Charlie Brown was once asked his rules for living and he said, “Brush your teeth, wash behind your ears, and the shortstop handles a popup behind third base.”

Good rules to remember. You and I know lots of good rules like that; we teach them to our children, but if there was only one thing I could get my kids to remember it would be this. That Christ Jesus has loved them with a love that surpasses knowledge. Of all the things we can know, nothing is more vital than this -- *Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so*. Paul's brief prayer emphasizes this more than anything. Let's break down this grand petition into its parts as we see the apostle praying first of all that his friends would know the love of Christ with all the saints and *may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth*. The prayer is for knowledge, but specifically it is for a form of communal knowledge. He wants them comprehending the love of Christ along with all the other saints. Remember that "saint" is just a synonym for "Christian" or "believer." "With all the saints" - what is he getting at here? Why is this in here? Well, I think it is here to point out that the love of Christ is so vast, so tremendous that we will never be able to comprehend it alone. None of us is as smart as all of us. You have experiences that I don't have, and what you know will inform me on this infinite subject of God's love. This is why it is God's design that we share together in the life of grace. This is why you should take opportunity both to offer and to listen to the testimony of other believers. As we come together I am encouraged as I learn of what God has done for you. Your witness contributes to my awareness of how great God is. You have insights into God's love that I just don't have and never could have. That is why we must learn of the love of the Lord, communally, as a church.

Once I asked a pastor what he was preaching about and he told me he was preaching through a certain New Testament book. When I asked him if he had found any excellent commentaries on that New Testament book he shot back and said, "I don't use commentaries." I may be wrong, but he seemed to be saying that he was above the use of commentaries. I've met pastors like that. They don't spend any time reading what others have to say about the Bible because they want to dig it out for themselves, and they don't want to be influenced by men. In a way, I understand and appreciate that, but it flies in the face of what we read here. My comprehension of God's love and God's word will only be enhanced by my fellowship with other believers and by my attention to what they have said. I am learning about the riches of grace along with you and along with Charles Hodge, and John Piper and John Stott and Martyn Lloyd-Jones. It takes all the saints to figure out what is the breadth and length and height and depth.

Do you know where you got your view of God? Huh? What has shaped your understanding of what God is like? I hope you can say that the most important factor for you has been the Bible.

Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so. That speaks a great truth. The Bible is the only infallible revelation of God's character. But you know what? It's not the only thing that has shaped your view of God. Not by a long shot. That little girl singing that she knows Jesus loves because the Bible said so, more than likely learned that first of all from whom? From her parents. By word and by deed they shaped her concept of God. Parents do that, for good or for ill. You see, we learn a great deal about God's love as we experience it from one another. Some of you may have been to the big cities of Peru and other such places to minister to children that are without parents, that are the rejects of their society. I assure you that we will never convince kids like that that they are loved by God just by sending them a gospel tract. No, no, no. But when we take our time and leave our cushy homes to join them in their distress then there is hope that they will receive a word about God's love, because they see it and hear it from us. I remember hearing the testimony of one woman, when she joined our church, she told of how when she was carrying her twins that so many ladies from our church reached out to her, and loved her. And the love of Christians served to persuade her of the love of Christ. Oh yes, we get our concept of God from many sources. And we should consciously seek to grow our comprehension of that love - together, with all the saints.

Secondly now, Paul prays that we would know the love of Christ in all of its dimensions. I love this passage! Paul prays that we would comprehend the breadth and length and height and depth! I got an email forward that had some fascinating pictures in it. Take a look at these, and understand as you do that the objects of art you are seeing look three dimensional but are, in fact, two dimensional chalk drawings on sidewalks. (show pics) Have you ever been to a 3-D movie? Did you wear the funny glasses to see it? Epcot Center has always shown a 3D mini-movie. For a while it was this goofy show with Michael Jackson called Captain E-O, but then they got a really cool one called, "Honey, I Shrank the Audience." The 3-D effect is so gripping that there are times when its just too real for some people and they end up screaming. When my girls were little they would just bury their heads in my shoulder and try to hide. We used to have a computer game at home called *Descent*, that had these 3-D graphics and made it look like you were flying a plane. I could never do it because it was so real I would get motion sickness sitting there in my chair. That is with a 3-D perspective. It can be kind of intense. Paul prays that we would get a 4-D, quad-dimensional perspective on the love of God. You get that and it'll be so intense that, well, it won't make you sick. It will make you whole. Oh, that God would give us eyes to see His love in all of its

immeasurable vastness! It is a broad love. It is a love that covers men of all kinds, men of every tribe and tongue and people and nation. It is a love so broad that it covers sins of every type: theft and drunkenness, blasphemy and adultery, murder and slander. It is a love so broad that it encompasses every single occurrence, for God promises to make everything work together for our good. Oh the breadth of the love of Christ!

But then, at the same time, we may notice the length of that same awesome love. What has God said? “I will love thee with an everlasting love!” It is a love that is eternal, but not just one way eternal. It is a two-way eternal love. We read back in Ephesians 1 that God’s electing love was effective toward us before the foundation of this world. It didn’t begin when you began. It didn’t begin when Christ came, or when Adam was made. It began in eternity past. And it extends into eternity to come. None of us will outlive God’s love for us. Romans 8 is such a beautiful text. Romans 8:**35a** *Who will separate us from the love of Christ?* What person, being or event has this kind of power? And the answer, of course, is that nothing, or no one is so capable. **37-39** *But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.* As David has said Psalm 23:**6** *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.* His love is so long that it starts in eternity past, continues into eternity future and never pauses for a break in the interim. There’s never even a hiccup in God’s love, and that’s a good thing because we wouldn’t survive even a lapse of that duration.

Thirdly, we see what is the height of God’s love. It is a love so high, that it takes us right up into heaven with Christ. This love makes us into sons and daughters of the living God. This love so exalts us as to make us heirs of eternity. Behold, how great a love the Father has bestowed upon us that we should be called the sons of God! And then fourthly, consider the depth of that great love. Consider how deep the Father had to reach with His hand of mercy to pull us out of the pit of sin. Consider even more that it required a love beyond that. To rescue us from sin, Jesus could not just extend a hand of mercy to us in our need, He had to come join us down there. He who dwelt above the heavens humbled himself beneath the lowest sinner that He might lift him out of his misery into the arms of a gentle Father. Can you see it my friend? Oh, I know we cannot comprehend it all. Our own text says the love surpasses knowledge, but do you get a glimpse of it in its fourfold beauty?

There is nothing like the sight of Christ's love for sinners. No sight on this planet can compare. No wonder Paul made this awareness the centerpiece of his prayers.

We move on now to our third major point. Paul prays that we would know God's love with the saints, that we would know God's love in all its dimensions, thirdly he prays that we would know God's love with our hearts. This point isn't so obvious in the text so let me explain. When we read the word "know" in the New Testament we must remember that it means something beyond what we mean. To know something means more than having intellectual awareness. It refers to an intimacy. To know Christ's love means much more than being able to recite some facts about it. It means much more than being able to teach a class on it. It means you've experienced it for yourself. I can say that I know about Ben Roethlisberger, but I can say that I know my wife. And there is a huge difference there. Paul's concern is that we, by personal experience and intimacy, would know the love of Christ. In Ephesians 1 he prayed that the eyes of our hearts would be enlightened and it is the same idea here. Paul wants the truth to go beyond the cerebral to the core of who we are. I saw a T-shirt once that said, "Yes, God loves you, but don't let it go to your head." My plea and Paul's prayer is exactly the opposite, that you would indeed let the love of God go to your head and to your heart and to every part of your being.

You'll notice that Paul, in his prayer, doesn't ask Christ to love us. Why not? Because He already does. His love is such that it surpasses knowledge. It is that great. It is infinite. There is nothing more that Paul could ask for in the way of love. But he does ask for God to make us more acquainted with it. And there is a huge difference between those who are loved and know it and those who are loved and don't know it. Years ago I read a story in my son's World Lit book entitled, "Acres of Diamonds." It was about a farmer who was quite happy and well-off on his nice farm until someone came to town talking about the potential of finding diamonds of incredible worth. As the farmer heard, he began to feel himself to be quite poor. He longed to find diamonds and grow rich, so he sold his farm and began hunting for diamonds. His hunt cost him all the money he had and yielded nothing. Finally, poor, broken and hopeless the man died. As it turned out, the man who bought his land, one day noticed something shiny in a hillside on his property. Sure enough, it turned out to be a huge diamond, but only one of many. The man who left his farm in search of diamonds actually owned and then sold the greatest diamond mine in all of Africa. You see, having wealth and knowing it are two different things. Paul realizes that many Christians have received the rich love of Christ but don't exactly know it. He prays that they would know. And

again, this knowledge must be more than intellectual. So many people will tell you they believe God loves them, but their emotions betray them. Their actions reveal that their hearts have never been gripped by that truth. They say, “Sure Jesus loves me” just like they say, “Sure, water is two parts hydrogen, one part oxygen.” Something’s wrong if you can speak of Christ’s love like that. It must be more than a doctrine for you. But be careful when you hear that. I said it must be more than intellectual. I did not say it was not intellectual. The mind is part of it. Paul says that Christ’s love surpasses knowledge. That does not mean that it bypasses knowledge. It just goes beyond it. It is bigger than our minds can grasp. We cannot know it exhaustively, but that doesn’t mean we can’t know it truly. We can. We must. Unless the love of Christ is in your head it won’t be in your heart. So, when we talk about growing in your knowing, when we talk about advancing in your heart grasping of Christ’s love, don’t presume this to be entirely mystical. Step one is to read, and to listen and to learn what God says to you. Our goal is to experience the love, to know the love, but you get there by first knowing about the love. One of the greatest spiritual weekends of my life was attending the Philadelphia Conference on Reformed Theology when I was in college. That weekend we were taught about the atonement of our Lord. It was theology, heavy and rich, but in the midst of my study my heart was warmed and I went back home more in love with Jesus than ever before. It wasn’t dry theology to me. I knew the love of Christ. It reached my heart, and because it did it resulted in much more than academic advancement. It left me singing, ‘When we’ve been there 10,000 years, bright shining as the sun, we’ve no less days to sing God’s praise than when we first begun.’ Our hearts well up with eternal praise when we get to know, really know, heartily know, this love that is so vast we could never get our minds around it.

Those then are the three main headings: know it with the saints; know it in all its dimensions; know it with your heart. Figure with me now, what good it will do you to know Christ’s love in this way. Paul says it will do for you two things. First it will serve you as a spiritual root system and a foundation. In verse 17 Paul mixes his metaphors and says you should be “rooted and grounded” in love. One term comes from the plant-world, the other from the building world. But we understand that in buildings and plants there is something at the bottom, unseen and unnoticed that is critical for the health of the whole. Bob Vernon was an LA motorcycle cop who pulled a man over for running a red light. Little did Officer Vernon know that this man had just robbed a Jiffy Mart and had a bag of cash sitting next to him on his seat, along with a gun. The officer said, ‘Good morning, may I see...’ And he never finished the sentence. The driver shoved his gun in the policeman’s

chest and fired from inches away, blowing the copy seven feet away.” A few seconds later, to the shock of the criminal, Officer Vernon stood up, pulled out his gun and fired twice, wounding the would-be killer. What saved Bob Vernon’s life was dozens of layers of Kevlar, the super-strong fabric used for bulletproof vests. The vest was unseen, below the surface, but in time of trial it proved invaluable. So it is with foundations and roots. Their value emerges in times of trial. When famine comes, the plant can only survive with roots that dig deep in the soil to fetch out every last particle of moisture. When storms come, the building will fall unless that foundation holds firm. In the parables of Jesus it was the plant without roots that withered in the heat and the house without a good foundation that crumbled in the storm. Your Christian life must, it must have a good foundation, it must be well-rooted. And that means, that at the center of your faith must be a persuasion of Christ’s love. My faith in God’s love is where it all has to start. And if it doesn’t - someday some bad weather is going to come and I will wither. I will crack. But the man who knows he is loved is like Officer Vernon. He gets knocked down but stands up again and keeps going because there is something substantial right here (pound chest) that can absorb whatever comes his way. A knowledge of Christ’s love roots us, grounds us, and helps us stand when trouble comes.

Secondly, Paul says this knowledge will fill us. He says you will be filled to all the fulness of God. You feel empty? In Christ there is fulness. The more, in our hearts, we know His love, the more we are filled with peace. And the more those pains of guilt and worry are gone. Understand - we can believe in the everlasting love of God and yet our emotions can be and often are controlled by the little piddly stuff that makes life so uncomfortable. We get disrespected by somebody and we go on some emotional tailspin. Why? For the same reason that you can block out the light of the sun if you hold your thumb close enough. We do that with our little insults. Yes, the Almighty God, the Creator of the ends of the earth, loves me with a love that is broad and long and high and deep, but did you hear what Heather said about me? Aah! I expect you do this because I do it. And the sermon I am learning to preach to myself in those moments is this – The love of God is bigger, greater and more important than anything else that happened to me today or will happen tomorrow. Hold that love close. Don’t let anything eclipse your heart’s vision. That, my friend, is the key to peace in the face of your sin, in the face of the sin of others. The word of God says that Christ’s love surpasses knowledge. It never says that about your sin. His love is deeper, higher, broader,

longer than all your sin could ever be. Why his love is so rich and powerful that it turns all your trials to gold. That's why those who know the Savior's love have peace in their hearts.

There is one other thing they have in their hearts as well. They are filled with love. Some types of knowledge fill a man with pride but when you know the love of Jesus it fills you with God and with His love. Listen to me. Stay with me a few more minutes. Our knowledge of Christ's love, frees us up to love because it settles our fears. So often we are afraid to love people because it's risky. The Gaithers used to sing a song that went like this, "I am loved, I am loved, I can risk loving you. For the one who knows me best, loves me most." Not great poetry, but very good psychology. In his book "The Marriage Builder" Larry Crabb tells the story of a woman who had turned to her children for emotional fulfillment. Her husband had shut her out of his life, leaving her hungry for affection which she sought from her children. As you might imagine she found herself unable to be anything but cold with her husband. Although a Christian, she was unable to love. Dr. Crabb directed her in three ways. He told her to be honest with God and admit her feelings. He told her to meditate on the love of Christ for her. And thirdly she was to commit herself to loving her husband, knowing that his response to her could not diminish the love of Christ for her. He showed the lady the diagram in your Scripture sheet. Please look at that. You see, for this woman, trying to love her husband was risky - like jumping out over the abyss of rejection. Her fear will keep her on the Cliff of Safety, that place of emotional withdrawal. Only one thing can answer her fear. It is that rope of love in the strong hand of God. That rope allows her to leap out in love without hitting the abyss. If she knows its there. The problem is that while she stands on the cliff she won't feel the strength of the rope will she? It just hangs there without use. But if she believes it is there, if she has come to know it, she will find courage to step out and love her husband, supported by that awesome love that never fails. Oh, it's scary the first few times you step out there. But that's how faith grows, and soon you find yourself swinging from cliff to cliff, like a spiritual Tarzan, drained of fear and filled with peace and love.

Our church's mission statement is to worship, connect and impact. The first of those three goals pertains to exactly what I am talking about. It involves that vertical relationship with our God. We must begin by knowing, discovering, experiencing with some intimacy the love of God in Christ. Out of that everything else can flow. As I look out here this morning, are there some, maybe many of you, who do not know you are really loved by God. Oh, you say you believe he loves you - sort of. But your lack of praise, your lack of peace, your lack of love, your fear to draw near to God

says otherwise. You keep looking to others things to fill your emptiness, that empty spot that God's love is meant to fill. This is not a rare problem. I understand why Paul prayed this way. I am forever asking God to do this for some of you. "Father, let him know, let her know how much you love them." For some this is made doubly hard because of bad theology you've been taught. For others it is harder because of bad parenting. Listen, God wants you to know that if you are his child He loves you. You don't have to do a thing to win that love. It is freely given. Your obedience to God must not flow from fear and deprivation but from peace and love and fulness. We serve God not so he will fill our cups but out of the overflow he has poured into us. It's not "fear and obey" but trust and obey. There's no other way. Trust in that love that is so broad, so long, so high, so deep. Our musicians can come on up, but let's go together to our Father and speak with Him. Some of you are wounded and weary – bring that to the Lord. Some of you have allowed your heart to be hardened in unbelief. You have allowed your circumstances— some very tough, to cloud your vision of His love. Maybe you have blamed God for your despair. Come in repentance to the Lord this morning. Tell Him where you are. Ask His help, *O Lord I believe help Thou my unbelief*. Then, as God opens the eyes of your heart receive His lov afresh and anew.