

“Learning to Pray: Part 5”

Text: Ephesians 3:14-21

Delivered at Central Baptist Church on November 10, 2019 by Pastor Barton Priebe

INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE 1)** We are doing a series on “learning to pray” and we are looking at the prayers of the apostle Paul. The prayer we are going to look at today fits perfectly with Remembrance Day. Remembrance Day is about remembering those who gave their lives so we could enjoy our freedom. This prayer is about experiencing relationship with God himself by grasping the great love of Christ in giving his life for us.
 - You see, this prayer describes the mountaintop of Christian experience. What Paul is praying for is not simply that we would *know* God or *obey* God but that we would *experience* God.
 - This prayer is like a trail that leads you higher and higher into the heights of relationship with God.
- But how can I possibly explain such breathtaking views to you? For instance, half way up the trail in verse 19 Paul asks that we might grasp the limitless dimensions of Christ’s love in such a way that he says it, **“surpasses knowledge.”** How am I supposed to help you understand an experience of Christ’s love that transcends understanding?
 - As if this was not high enough, Paul then prays that we would reach the peak where we, **“may be filled with all the fullness of God.”**
 - How am I supposed to show you what that means?
- This scripture describes the mountaintop of Christian experience. We are in rarefied atmosphere here. In fact, the relational communion with God that Paul is asking for is so awe inspiring that you will be tempted to think it is only for super Christian types.
 - But it is not. This letter was written to average Christians like you and I. And even in this prayer in verse 18 Paul asks that we **“may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ.”**
- So there is an intimacy, a closeness, and a communion that every Christian may have with God Himself. This communion is so exhilarating that, like the view from a mountaintop, it takes one’s breath away.
 - But too many of us are content to stay in the lowlands, to stumble through the mist and fog, catching only rare glimpses of God.
 - That’s why we need to learn how to pray. This pray is teaching us how to pray for this kind of relationship.
- So I thought that best way to go about today’s message would be to do an overview of what Paul is praying for and then spend some time illustrating it by giving examples Christians describing their experience of relationship with God. I want you to catch a glimpse of the heights that are possible for you. I want to whet your appetite.
 - So let’s do this in three parts. First, I will define communion with God. Second, I will illustrate communion with God from the experience of other Christians. Finally, I will describe how we also can ascend into higher communion with God.

DEFINING COMMUNION WITH GOD

- So let's begin then by surveying this trail. Let's do a quick overview of the prayer. Let's begin by **(SHOW SLIDE 2) defining communion with God.** I see three things here.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 3) First, communion with God means experiencing His presence.**
 - His first request is in verse 16. **READ 16-17 - *16 that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, 17 so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith***
 - Notice right away that we have to begin by asking the Spirit to strengthen us. We cannot even climb to the first lookout on our own strength. And we are asking the Spirit to strength us that "Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith."
- But this sounds confusing. Doesn't Christ already dwell in the heart of everyone who believes in him? In a sense, yes. But this isn't a request for Christ to first come and make his dwelling in us. We already have that.
 - The word "to dwell" means to take up a more permanent home. It means to experience more deeply the presence of the one who already dwells in you.
- To understand this, I want to quote you one of the most misinterpreted and misapplied verses in the New Testament, which is Revelation 3:20. Jesus says, **"Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me."**
 - Christians often apply this to non-Christians saying that if you just receive Jesus he will come to dwell in you. That is true but it is not what this verse is saying. Who is this verse written to? Christians or non-Christians? Christians. It is written to the church in Laodicea. They know him but he has not moved into every part of the mansion of their hearts. Those Christians, like so many of us, do have Jesus but so often they leave him standing on the front step of their hearts.
 - But in his grace, Jesus keeps knocking and calling out to us. And what a promise he makes. He says when we open the door he will come in and eat with us. In oriental lands, even more than today, the sharing of a meal indicated a strong bond of affection and companionship.
- Think of the greatest meals that you have ever enjoyed with family or friends. Those meals where you sat at the table for hours talking of wonderful things, eating the most delicious of foods, and laughing until your stomach hurt. In those moments you enjoyed sweet communion with each other.
 - Your God, your Maker, your Saviour, Jesus Christ wants this type of communion with you. He wants to sit and eat with you. He wants you to know the enjoyment of his presence.
 - Just as you have can have varying degrees of relationship with people so also Christians can experience varying degrees of relationship with God. To summarize, what we are asking for here is that the Holy Spirit would strengthen us that we might climb higher and experience more intimately his presence in our hearts.
- But this is only the first lookout. There are even higher experiences of Christ that Paul wants for us. In the second place **(SHOW SLIDE 4) communion with God means experiencing his love for us in Christ.**
 - Look at the second half of verse 17. **READ 17b-19 – *that you, being rooted and grounded in love, 18 may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, 19 and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge***

- Note carefully that we are not asking that we would love Christ. We are asking that we would know Christ's love for us. And this is not just an intellectual knowledge. It is an experiential knowledge. The word for "comprehend" means so amazed that you are left speechless. You're staggered. You're awestruck.
 - Paul is asking that as Christians we would be awestruck by the limitless dimensions of Christ love for us. That we would look into the depths of it, the heights of it, the length of it, and the breadth of it.
- Again, this is written to Christians. Notice in verse 17 that they are already rooted and grounded in love. They are mature believers.
 - But Paul says there are higher experiences of Christ's love for us to know.
- He wants us to experience what I experienced when I first went to the Grand Canyon. I was speaking at a youth retreat. Vanloads of teenagers all got out of the vehicles. We walked up to the edge.
 - In that moment, no one got out their phone. No one started talking about the latest movie they saw. No one complained about school. We all just stood there in awe: "look at that!" Such an experience surpasses knowledge. I can't explain it to you if you haven't been there and seen it for yourself.
 - This is what we are asking the Spirit to strengthen us to receive. That we would grasp the love of Christ and so that we say in awestruck wonder, "look at that!" Such an experience surpasses knowledge. Words fail us. You just have to experience it.
- But this is still not the top of the mountain. I told you this was astonishing. The communion with God that Paul is praying for goes beyond knowing Christ's presence and love. In the third place we are asking for a communion that means **(SHOW SLIDE 5) experiencing the glory of God.**
 - **READ 19 - that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.** How do I even define that for you? What does it mean for a human soul to be filled with the fullness of God?
 - It is an experience where the Christian so beholds God in all his glory that everything else pales in comparison.
- I confess that I have rarely felt so incompetent in expounding a passage of Scripture to you. We are in rarified atmosphere here. I have caught glimpses of this view but I want more. How about you? Do you know something of this communion with God?
 - In order to help us catch a glimpse of this I thought it might serve us best to hear of the experiences of other Christians. Before I relate these to you I would remind again that there are degrees of communion with God.
 - You may not know the communion of some of these people but I still think it is worthwhile to hear their descriptions so that we will yearn for higher communion with God. I give you these examples to whet your appetite and to try to capture in words what surpasses knowledge.

ILLUSTRATING COMMUNION WITH GOD

- So having defined communion with God let's turn in the second place to **(SHOW SLIDE 6) illustrating communion with God.** Let me just give you some examples from people in the last few hundred years and then I will talk about how to interpret their experiences.

- D.L. Moody was the Billy Graham of the 19th century. I give you his experience because he was a very uneducated man. He shows us that we do not have to be great Bible scholars to experience communion with God.
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 7) “Well, one day, in the city of New York -- oh, what a day! -- I cannot describe it, I seldom refer to it; it is almost too sacred an experience to name. Paul had an experience of which he never spoke for fourteen years. I can only say that God revealed Himself to me, and I had such an experience of His love that I had to ask Him to stay His hand.”**
 - So Moody experienced the love of Christ in such an overwhelming way that he could hardly take it. It was an experience that surpassed knowledge.
- Or let’s take the example of someone who was not famous at all. Daniel Steele was a teacher in Britain. He wrote a letter to a friend because he’d been experiencing sweet communion with God. He says in his letter:
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 8) “Almost every week, and sometimes every day, the pressure of His great love comes down upon my heart in such measure as to make my brain throb and my whole being, soul and body, groan beneath the strain of the almost insupportable plethora of joy. He has unlocked every apartment of my being, and filled and flooded them all with the light of His radiant presence.”**
 - Again, it is the same type of thing. Notice that although he prays everyday, it is not a permanent thing. But he experiences the presence, the love and the glory of God in a way that fills his whole being.
- Here is one from the great evangelist and preacher George Whitfield. He writes in his journal,
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 9) “... the freeness and riches of God’s everlasting love broke in with such light and power upon my soul, that I was often awed into silence and could not speak!”**
- David Brainerd was a missionary to the Indigenous peoples in America during the 18th century. He wrote this in his journal on April 27, 1742:
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 10) “I retired pretty early for secret devotion; and in prayer God was pleased to pour such indescribable comfort into my soul that I could do nothing for some time but say over and over, ‘O my sweet Savior! O my sweet Savior! Who have I in heaven but Thee? And there is none upon earth, that I desire besides Thee. . . . My soul never enjoyed so much of heaven before. It was the most refined and the most spiritual season of communion with God I have ever yet felt.”**
- An indigenous woman who had just become a Christian was speaking with Brainerd. At one point he interrupted her, asking her the question whether, **“Christ was now sweet to her soul?”** With tears in her eyes she said:
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 11) “I have many times heard you speak of the goodness and sweetness of Christ, that He was better than all the world. But oh! I knew nothing what you meant, I never believed you! I never believed you! But now I know it is true!”¹**
- Let’s be careful how we understand these. Let me make a few quick comments on **how to interpret the experiences of others.**
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 12) First, do not make another person’s experience normative.** Notice that all of these experiences are different from each other. Don’t look for the exact same thing in your life.

¹ David Brainerd, *The Life and Diary of David Brainerd* ed Jonathan Edwards 8th edition, pg 83, 280.

- **(SHOW SLIDE 13) Second, do not make the mistake of seeking an experience.** These people were not seeking an experience. They were seeking Christ. It is not feelings we want. It is Christ we want. We don't base our lives on feelings or experiences but on Christ.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 14) Third, notice that these people did not live forever on the mountaintop.** God takes his people to the mountaintop but he also makes them walk through dark valleys. And sometimes it is the valley's where God gives us the greatest experiences of his presence, love, and glory.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 15) Fourth, their experiences arise out of Scripture and do not contradict it.** These are not people claiming to have spent 90 minutes in heaven or 90 min in hell. These are not bizarre mystical experiences. They are all about Christ and his love for us in his death, his resurrection, and exaltation. It does not contradict Scripture.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 16) Fifth, they all shared in something that includes the intellect but is an experience that surpasses knowledge.** It is an experience of God. It is an encounter of his love in Christ. Do you know this? If God is merely facts to you then you are likely a religious person but not really a Christian.
- Sixth, what all these stories share in common is that **(SHOW SLIDE 17) they all speak of knowing the sweetness of Christ and His love.** Oh yes there are degrees of this. But do you know even a little what it means to commune with him? To taste him? To be thrilled by him? To have him capture your heart? To know that He is sweeter than anything else?
- **(SHOW SLIDE 18) Finally, I say again that this is not just for certain super spiritual Christians.** Notice that these were all different types of Christians. Educated. Uneducated. Men. Women. Teachers. Preachers.
 - Christ wants all of his people to experience his presence, his love, and his glory.

DESCRIBING COMMUNION WITH GOD

- Are you yearning for more? Do you want to know how to ascend into higher communion with God? We have defined communion with God and we have depicted communion with God.
 - We are ready in the third place now to **(SHOW SLIDE 19) describing the way to higher communion with God.**
 - So how do we do this? The short answer is that there is no formula. But I do think we see a few things we can glean from this passage.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 20) First, if you want higher communion with God ask Him for it.**
 - This is a prayer. Paul is asking that the Ephesians would experience to a higher degree what they already know. So come earnestly in prayer saying, ***“Father, I want to know you.”*** Pray as Paul did in chapter 1 that God would give you the Holy Spirit who is revealer of God in order that you may know him better.
 - Ask for the Holy Spirit to strengthen you because your heart must be prepared for this ascent. The Spirit needs to rid our hearts of sin and get us in shape for the ascent.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 21) Second, if you want higher communion with God commit yourself to Christian community.** Look at verse 17. Paul asks that we **READ 17 - *“may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ.”***
 - The isolated Christian can know something of Christ's love but your grasp is limited by your own personal experience. It is together with other believers that we learn of Christ. It

is in corporate worship that God often communes the highest with his people. It is in prayer together at small group. It is in reading the teachings of the great teachers in history that we learn of Christ.

- So be a member of a church. Commit yourself to Christ's church.

➤ **(SHOW SLIDE 22) Third, if you want higher communion with God fill your mind with God's truth.**

- Notice that the experience follows the mind. Paul is praying that we "grasp" his love. That means we have to first learn about it. Paul begins the prayer by saying "**For this reason.**" He has been thinking all about what God has done for us in Christ – redeeming, forgiving, adopting, making us alive, and saving us by grace.

- It is as you grow in your knowledge of Christ that the truth begins to shine, that the truth catches fire, and you grasp the limitless dimensions of Christ's love. So, don't go looking for some mystical experience of the Holy Spirit. Live in this book. Learn more of what Christ has done for you. And you will find that the Spirit uses it to lead you into higher communion with God.

➤ There is no formula to higher communion with God but we can be like Blind Bartimaeus. From the story in Mark 10 we know that Blind Bart, as I like to call him, had heard about Jesus and the blessings that he could bring. So Blind Bart sat by the road and waited for Jesus to come. He did not know if or when Jesus would come but he waited. In the same way, if you want higher communion with God you must put yourself on the road where Jesus will meet you. That road is his word and his people. This is where God meets us.

- And then when blind Bart heard Jesus coming he yelled out, "**Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!**" Many people told him to shut up but he kept yelling. Jesus stopped, called him over and restored his vision.

- As so as we put ourselves in the path of potential blessing we cry out, "**Father, we want to know you. Father, take us higher. Give us your Spirit to strengthen us. Come take over every part of our hearts. Let us be awestruck by Christ's love. Let us see your glory.**"

➤ More often than not God will graciously allow you to catch glimpses of himself. And sometimes, he pulls back the clouds and overwhelms you with a view of his love and glory. There are higher degrees of communion with God for you.

- Seek Him for as He says, "**You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.**"