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 Series: *In Christ - ONE*
 Title: *"Prayer that Builds Us Up"*
 Text: Ephesians 3:14-21
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If you are like me, you struggle with a particularly pesky problem when it comes to your private prayer life.

The problem I'm referring to is A WANDERING MIND. Have you ever experienced that? I have! Too many times when I pray—if I'm not very careful—my mind drifts.

To show you what I mean, let's say I start praying for my brother Jon. As you know Jon's been having a hard time lately--after tons of tests confirmed that he has an aggressive form of Parkinson's. So, I begin to intercede on Jon's behalf—praying that God heals him---that he has a good day. But as I pray, I remember where Jon works---at Andrews AFB. He's the meteorologist for Air Force One---a job he's done since Bush #2 became president. That thought reminds me of the exit I would take off of I-495 to get to Andrews---and then I remember that's very near the exit I would take to see MY grandson Luke. And then I think of how Luke loves *Paw Patrol*. Then I wonder if Sue might be able to find some *Paw Patrol* toys for Luke in her favorite thrift shops. Then I think of one of my favorite thrift shops ---- TINA's---and remember it closed during COVID. Then I start thinking about the latest news on the new variants of Covid and this nasal spray vaccine that is in the works.

Then I "wake up" from my mental meanderings and realize I stopped praying for my brother a long time ago! How many of you can relate? How many of you struggle with a mind that wanders when you pray---or listen to sermons?

Gotcha.

If you raised your hand, don't be too hard on yourself. It sometimes happens to even the most mature Christ-followers—and I'm talking about the APOSTLE PAUL—because he apparently had this particular *"prayer problem."* In fact, there's a great example of Paul's mental wanderings right here in Ephesians. In our text for last week, Paul began to dictate a prayer in verse one of chapter 3---only to be sidetracked by his introducing himself to readers who may not have met him. Paul comes back to this prayer in verse 14---the first verse of our text for today. But first, back up to verse 1 of chapter three where he says, ***"For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of CHRIST JESUS for the sake of you Gentiles---"*** Then, thinking about Jesus leads him to stop his prayer long enough to introduce himself---talking about all the ways His relationship with Jesus had changed him---molded him. He does this for 12 verses—after which he comes back to his prayer in verse 14 and says, ***"For this reason I kneel before the Father."*** Of course, Paul's mental wanderings are not JUST wanderings---these twelve verses are God-inspired---and as such are full of Scriptural truth we need to hear. But it's still comforting to know that even Paul's mind wandered when he prayed.

In any case, the prayer Paul RESTARTS here in verses 14-21 brings us to a TRANSITION of sorts in our study. The first part of this circular letter has to do with THEOLOGY---and by the way, this is how Paul usually structured his letters. In the first part of his epistles, he talks about the great DOCTRINES of the church—like Who God is and Who Christ is---or he writes about salvation and what that means. Here in the first part of EPHESIANS—among other things—Paul has spent a great deal of time talking about another very important doctrine—the doctrine of the church. But as he does in almost every one of his letters, at this point Paul moves from that kind of DOCTRINAL talk to more PRACTICAL talk.

And don't get me wrong, Biblical doctrine is extremely important. After all, we can only know how to LIVE right when we know how to THINK right. This principle is what Jesus was getting at in Matthew 12:34 when He said, ***"Out of the abundance of the HEART the MOUTH speaks."*** The fact is, right LIVING comes as a direct result of right THINKING. But the reverse is not necessarily true. Right thinking doesn't always RESULT in right living. I mean, sometimes our theology can be right on, but it doesn't translate over to the way we live our lives. As someone once said, *"Your theology can be as straight as a gun barrel and just as empty."*

So, we can't JUST focus on the theology—nor can we limit our focus to practical application. We need both! So, Paul wisely included teachings on both theology AND lifestyle in his letters.

The thing that is interesting to me is that here in Ephesians he BEGAN both his section on theology and his section of lifestyle with a PRAYER. If you remember back to the second sermon I did in this series on Ephesians—we covered Paul's FIRST prayer in chapter 1 verses 15-23. In that prayer Paul asked that the eyes of his readers might be opened to the THEOLOGICAL truths God wanted to show them. Paul prayed that they might be enlightened as to Who Christ is and what He did for them. After he prayed that prayer, Paul went on to talk about the theological basis of all that. He also talked about the fact that in Christ we are no longer Jew nor Gentile but one new race.

Well, in our passage for this morning—where he begins to talk in more PRACTICAL terms—Paul prays a SECOND time and this one is quite a bit different than the first. This time, instead of praying that they would understand the THEOLOGY he was teaching, he prays that as individuals and as the church—we would all have the ABILITY to follow through with Christ's commands—the ability to LIVE out our theology in day-to-day life.

Warren Weirsbe describes it like this: *“In Paul's first prayer the emphasis is on ENLIGHTENMENT but in this prayer the emphasis is on ENABLEMENT.”*

Well putt Warren! This time Paul prays that his readers will be up to the task—he prays they will be able to LIVE as God wants them to live. Okay take your Bibles and turn to Ephesians 3. Follow along as I read verses 14-21 and if able stand in respect for God's Word as it is read.

Ephesians 3:14-21

14 – For this reason I kneel before the Father,

15 – from Whom His whole 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 saints, 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, forever and ever! Amen.

This morning, as we STUDY Paul's second Ephesians prayer, I want each of us to remember that we can't do the works God requires us to do on our own. No—we need God's help. Yes—we CAN do all things—but only THROUGH CHRIST Who strengthens us—ENABLES us. To show US how to pray for that kind of ENABLING, we're going to look to Paul's example here in Ephesians.

If we do, we'll see three things in Paul's prayer that we must imitate if we want the strength to do all the work God calls us to do—and I am indebted to Jim Drake, pastor of Parkview Baptist Church in Bluefield, West Virginia, for this alliterative outline.

1.) The first requirement of this kind of enabling prayer is the right POSTURE.

Look at verses 14 and 15 where Paul says, *“For this reason I KNEEL before the Father, from Whom His whole family in Heaven and on earth derives its name.”* This tells us that Paul got on his knees to pray at times—and knowing that—I can't help but wonder how Paul's prayer posture impacted the Roman soldier he was chained to 24 hours a day! What did this soldier think every time he had to give Paul enough slack to get down on his KNEES to talk to God? In any case, this part of Paul's prayer should remind us that whenever we pray—we must have the right posture.

This week I read the story of a teen-age boy who went into CVS to buy three boxes of chocolate. He picked out a small box, a medium-sized box, and a really large box. When he went to pay for his purchases the man behind the counter was curious and asked the boy, *“Why three different-sized boxes?”* The boy answered him, *“There is this really beautiful girl*

and I have been talking for a few weeks. She's invited me over to dinner tonight to meet her parents. After dinner, we're going out. Here's the plan: if she lets me hold her hand, she gets the small box of candy. If she lets me put my arm around her at the movie, she gets the medium-sized box. But, if she give me a kiss at the end of the date, she gets the big box."

Then he paid for the candy and left. Later that evening, as he sat down to dinner with his girlfriend and her parents, this teenaged boy asked if he could say the blessing. He bowed his head and folded his hands in front of his face and prayed and prayed and prayed. It was the longest blessing ever. When he finished, his girlfriend leaned over and said, "You never told me you were such a religious person." He leaned back and said, "You never told me your father works behind the counter at CVS."

That boy might have had good PHYSICAL posture in his prayer, but he certainly didn't have good MENTAL posture. Paul on the other hand embraced the correct prayer posture—or attitude. As verse 14 says, he got down on his knees before God.

Now, does that mean the only right way to pray is on your knees? No—of course not. God doesn't require a particular physical position for us to approach His throne in prayer. We can be standing up, sitting down, lying in bed. Our eyes can be open or closed. We can pray out loud or silently.

Our PHYSICAL posture isn't really important—it's our MENTAL posture that matters. But sometimes, our physical posture can help us GET IN the right mental posture. It can help us get our attitude right as pray. Kneeling like Paul was doing or falling on our face before God in prayer—physical postures like this can remind us who is serving Who—and in that way, it gets us in the right posture to talk to God—God Who enables us to do His will.

That reminds me of the time several Redland men attended the *Promise Keeper Rally* that was held on the mall back in 1997. Some rode the Metro in—but about 20 of us got on the Rock Creek trail and rode our bikes down there. Now—I don't know how many men were there on the mall that day—but it was a lot. The closest to the stage on the Capital Steps that our Redland contingent could get was the foot of the Washington Monument with the White House to our left.

We watched the rally on one of those giant Trinitrons. I loved the speakers but for me it was moving just to see that great throng of men and know I wasn't alone in my desire to follow Jesus. Men of every skin color—every tribe and tongue and nation—stretched almost as far as my eyes could see! It was a foretaste of Heaven. Well, at one point during the day I had to answer nature's call and the Porta-johns had long lines, so I walked up to the Museum of Natural History to use their facilities. When I came out my eyes beheld a powerful sight and my ears picked up a powerful sound. All along the mall from end to end there were thousands and thousands of men lying face down on the ground—and as I reverently made my way back to our group, I could hear them praying. These tens of thousands of men were praying for the church—for a lost and dying world. And they showed that their mental attitude was right by their posture—the posture of humbly prostrating themselves on the ground before God. That posture showed they were bowing their hearts and wills to the Lord of Lords. It was a very moving moment for me. I won't ever forget it.

Well, sometimes physical posture like this HELPS, but, as I said, it's not a REQUIREMENT. No, the thing that is absolutely necessary is having the right MENTAL posture. As I said that boy who bought those three boxes of candy had his head bowed and his eyes closed. He had his hands folded and probably used the best King's English in his prayer—but he had the wrong mental posture—the wrong ATTITUDE. The only reason he was praying so fervently was to keep from having to face his girlfriend's angry father.

But we can read and see that PAUL'S mental posture was correct. He knew Who it was he was praying to. He humbly acknowledged that he was a sinner addressing the Holy Creator of the universe.

Let's stop and ask ourselves—could the reason our prayer life is less impacting on our day-to-day life than it could be—could it have anything to do with the fact that when we pray, we are too casual about it? Are we too nonchalant about our prayers?

Of course—we can come before God’s throne boldly—but I wonder—do we ever abuse this privilege? Do we treat our conversations with God—do we treat them with the awe and reverence they deserve? And again, please don’t get me wrong. I’m not saying that we always have to fall prostrate before the Lord when we pray. There are times of quick prayers. There are times of very informal prayers. The Bible tells us to pray without ceasing, so of course we aren’t always formal in our conversations with God.

But I think the quick prayers and the informal prayers and the “without ceasing” prayers are made meaningful by the more intimate and formal seasons of prayer. When we start the day with a quiet time—alone with God and His Word, humbling ourselves before Him—when we pray with this RIGHT attitudinal posture—it sets the stage for all the other communications with Him throughout the day.

In any case it is important that we have the right posture of prayer if we are to get the strength we need to join God in His work.

2.) The second requirement for an enabling prayer is the right PETITION.

Look at verse 17 where Paul says, *“I pray that you, being rooted and established in LOVE, may have power, together with all the saints—to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the LOVE of Christ, and to know this LOVE that surpasses knowledge.”*

- Now—why should THIS be part of our prayers?
- Why do we need a better grasp on the LOVE of Christ if we are to work for and with God?
- What does Paul mean when he prays that we would be ROOTED and ESTABLISHED in it?

Well, “rooted” is an agricultural term and this tells us that to do God’s work, requires that the very root structure of our life—the source of our strength, stability, and sustenance—must be the love of God. Knowing that He loves us with an everlasting love—THAT knowledge is what we should be rooted in—nourished by. Like deep roots, an awareness of God’s love is what keeps us grounded. And, “established” is an architectural term that “builds” on this principle. This Greek word referred to the FOUNDATION of a building—which is vitally important if you want a building to stand—especially a well-built-up one.

The same thing can be said of our spiritual lives. We can’t go high—we can’t “build up” anything significant for the kingdom of God—we can’t DO the works He calls us to do—unless we go deep with Jesus. For a Christian—a Church—to be built up—we must each build an ever-closer—deeper love relationship with Him in our innermost being. So basically, Paul is praying for us to have a FOUNDATIONAL understanding of God’s great love. And I use that word “FOUNDATIONAL” because understanding God’s great love is like a deep root system in that it FEEDS and stabilizes everything we do. A growing knowledge of God’s great love is something we can cling to amidst the storms of life. If we are “rooted and established” in it, nothing will knock us down.

You see if we BELIEVE God loves us, then we will know that anything He allows to come our way is prompted by that love. We’ll believe that even the bad things—are somehow good for us—we’ll believe that as Sarah Groves sings, even in the tough times of life *“God withholds no good thing from us.”*

And, by the way, it does indeed take the POWER of God for fallen beings like you and me to even BEGIN to comprehend the extent of His great love. We need God’s help to grasp its dimensions for it is indeed a limitless love.

Let me take a few minutes to use Scripture to try and describe it.

- God’s love is WIDE!
It is wide enough to embrace the whole world—every human that has ever been born or ever will be born! Do you remember Jesus’ description of it in John 3:16? He said, *“For God so loved THE WORLD—that He sent His only Son!”* That’s how WIDE it is. It’s wide enough to embrace all people!

- God's love is LONG!
It is long enough to last forever. 1st Corinthians 13:8 says it ***"never fails."*** You and I may fail. We may sin---but God still keeps on loving us! His love is LONG-suffering!
- God's love is HIGH.
It is a love that is HIGH enough to take us all the way to Heaven. In John 14 Jesus said, ***"In My Father's house are many rooms; I am going there to prepare a place for you. I will come back and take you to be with Me that you may be where I am."***
- God's love is DEEP.
It is DEEP enough to motivate Jesus to reach out to the worst sinner you can imagine. Romans 5 says, ***"At just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates His own [GREAT] love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."***

And if you need a WORD PICTURE to be more rooted or established in God's love—all you need to is look at THE CROSS--for it a symbol that easily reminds us of the height, depth, breadth, and width of God's great love. I say this because in my mind those crossbeams are perpendicular lines that extend four different directions into eternity. They literally point to the height, depth, width, and length of God's love for you and me.

In the 19th century, when Napoleon's armies opened a prison that had been used by the Spanish Inquisition, they found the remains of a prisoner who had been incarcerated for his faith. The dungeon was underground. The body had long since decayed. A chain was fastened around his anklebone. But this prisoner---long since dead---had left a WITNESS. On the walls of his small, dismal cell this faithful soldier of Christ had scratched a rough CROSS with four words surrounding it in Spanish.

- Above the cross was the Spanish word for *"height."*
- Below it was the word for *"depth."*
- To the left the word *"width."*
- To the right, the word *"length."*

Clearly this prisoner wanted to testify to the surpassing greatness of the love of Christ, perceived even in his suffering. I'm sure that love STABILIZED and STRENGTHENED this poor man as he lived out his life in that dark prison cell.

So, to review—Paul's example shows that when we pray for God's enabling, we must have the right posture---the right petition:

3.) Finally, he says we need the right POWER.

Look at verse 16. Paul writes, ***"I pray that out of His glorious riches He may strengthen you with power through His Spirit in your inner being."*** And then listen to verses 20 and 21, ***"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, to Him be glory in the church---and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever! Amen."***

Paul is reminding us here that people who pray correctly address their petitions to our ALL-POWERFUL God. Keep in mind that Paul has just spent the first couple of chapters explaining Who God is and what He's done for us. At this point in his letter, he's reminding us that God is omnipotent—all powerful—so powerful He can do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think.

In fact, I think of these last two verses in our text as sort of a tower of PRAISE. Paul begins with a simple assertion: GOD IS ABLE. But Paul went further and higher still. He said that God is not only able to provide that for which we ASK---but also He can supply anything we even THINK about. All the dreams which ever pass through our minds---all the things we have thought of accomplishing for God in our wildest imagination---God is able to do even THOSE things. God is able to supply everything we need! He's able to respond to everything we ask---and to provide everything we have ever THOUGHT about. And at this point I feel like I'm doing one of those infomercials because I need to say: BUT THERE'S MORE! Paul said God is not only able to do those things—He is also able to go BEYOND all of those things.

Can you sense Paul's EXCITEMENT in all this? If you can't let me help by saying that I have learned that when Paul gets excited, he does one of two things. He either goes off on a praise tangent, or he makes up new words---like the word "leaster" we talked about last Sunday. Well, Paul must have REALLY been excited when he wrote this letter because he does BOTH. He just did the former and at this point he does the LATTER---AGAIN. You see, the word that we translate, "**exceedingly abundantly above**" is a word that Paul just kind of made up.

Have you ever been around kids when they get really excited? They try to squeeze as many words into one breath as possible. And when they do that, they tend to make up new words. Well, that's what Paul did here. He got so excited talking about God's goodness and love and power that he squished three words together to invent a brand-new word. He took the word that means "giving abundantly" or "abounding in giving" and he put the word for "over and above" in front of it.

But that still wasn't descriptive enough for Paul. He had to add one more word. It's the word that we get the prefix "hyper" from. Basically, Paul is stringing a whole bunch of words together to try and describe the indescribable. He's excitedly saying, "**Try and imagine all the things that God can do—well—He can do MORE—SO MUCH MORE—that it will blow your mind!**"

This week I came across the testimony of a Chinese Christian leader named Brother Zhong. He writes:

"I was attending a training course for my house church network's council members and youth leaders. The Public Security Bureau (PSB) raided us the first day. All the leaders were arrested. The prison authorities shaved our heads and interrogated us. We were warned that the hardened inmates would beat us. So, with much trepidation, another brother and I entered our cell. We were greeted by the sight of 16 other inmates, lined up in two rows and thumping their fists. My heart beat rapidly as I sent prayers up to God. The leader of the gang asked, 'Why are you here?' 'Because we are Christians,' I replied. 'You don't beat people up?' 'No,' I assured him. 'Do you sing?' 'Yes,' I answered. The leader ordered me to sing a song. I wept as I sang. The Holy Spirit moved in our midst, and by the time I finished singing, every prisoner was also in tears. To my shock, the gang leader then asked to hear the gospel. After that, my cellmates hungered to hear the gospel every day. One Sunday, we held a worship service. The prison guard demanded to know who was behind it. He threatened to punish everyone if no one spoke up. I stood up and confessed. I was forced to remove my clothes and stand at an inclined angle to the wall. The gang leader couldn't bear it anymore. He asked to be punished with me. All the others volunteered to do the same. The infuriated guard stormed out. I was moved by my cellmates' actions. One of them, who had been there for three years, became a believer that day."

God is ABLE! He is, "**able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to His power that is at work within us.**"

If we are to be built up as individuals---as a church---we must understand this mind-blowing fact. Our ALL-POWERFUL God will put that mind-blowing power at our disposal—enabling us to do His will—whatever it may be. I mean, whatever we need to do His will, He is more than more than able to provide it. Whatever we are called to do, God is able to help us accomplish. Whatever task we have before us, God will empower us to complete it. Whatever we dream for our church and our lives—God is able to help us realize those dreams. God is able!

What about your life? Is there some WORK God is calling you to do but it's beyond your ability?

It may be too much for you—but it's NEVER too much for God! Maybe you dream that your marriage could be better than it is. You have tried your best and have failed. You've come to believe a great marriage is just a pipe dream. It's not a pipe dream to God! He is ABLE!

Maybe you struggle with some emotional or physical burden. You've tried to deal with it on your own but try as hard as you might—you have failed. I don't care what it is you are facing: anxiety, grief, depression—God is ABLE to help you beat it.

Perhaps there is some task you dream of accomplishing—something that would help a lot of needy people but it's just too big to be anything more than a dream. It's not too big for God. He is ABLE—and if it is His will—HE WILL EMPOWER YOU TO DO IT.

I want us to close with a time of prayer---using what we have learned from our study. First, I want you to get in the right posture. If that means getting on your knees or laying prostrate in the aisle---do it. Just make sure your attitude is correct. Make sure you know you are a sinner praying to the one and only God---HOLY---ALL-POWERFUL---ALL-KNOWING---ETERNAL. Now—ask God to help you be more rooted more established in the knowledge that HE LOVES YOU. Ask Him to make that awareness part of your mind set. And now humbly ask Him to empower you to do the good work that He has placed on your mind and heart whatever it may be.

In a moment I'll close our time of prayer.

“Father God, we are in awe that You would love sinners like us—love us so much that You would send Your only Son to die our death. I humbly ask that You would further “root” each of us in this knowledge of the height, depth, width, and length of Your great love. Give us a ‘LOVE-CONFIDENCE’ God. Use each of us to do things that could only be done in Your power. Use our lives to bring You glory. Use the things we do for You to draw others to Jesus. I ask this in His name...AMEN”

As we stand and sing I invite you to respond publicly as God leads. Come and profess your faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior. Come and ask to join this church. Come and share something you have been praying about---but come as God leads.