

Made for More
3. More Love

March 6-7, 2021

It's hard to imagine that this week will hit the one year anniversary of living with COVID in Pittsburgh. Much of its impact on my life this year has been negative, but one of the good things is that I saved a ton of money on gas in the past year! I rarely need to fill up the tank. But when I do, I find a gas station to fill up my tank (generally a Get Go because somehow Giant Eagle has convinced me that unless I use my Advantage card I'm being ripped off when I go anywhere else). When I flip open the gas flap on my car, I'll read the words "regular unleaded only." This tells me that my car can only run on regular unleaded gasoline. That's the fuel it needs to go. I can put other things in there, but they won't work. If I try to put orange juice into my gas tank, I'm not going to get very far. I can figure that coffee has caffeine, so maybe that'll give it some energy... but still no dice. For my car to get me where I need to go, it needs the right kind of fuel.

In Made for More, we read in Ephesians 1 and 2 that we are created by God as His masterpieces and He created each of us for a specific calling! This calling flows from our purpose, which is to live life with God. When we are saved by Jesus, God the Father adopts us into his family. And once this happens, you could say God gets us involved in the family business of renewing the world by giving us each a unique calling toward that goal. Paul, the writer of Ephesians, knew living into this calling needed the right kind of fuel. In chapter 3, he prays for us to be filled with God's love. If we want to do what God is calling us to do, we need to be fueled by God's love so that's what Paul prays for: **Ephesians 3:16-19** ¹⁶ I pray that because of the riches of His shining-greatness, He will make you strong with power in your hearts through the Holy Spirit. ¹⁷ I pray that Christ may live in your hearts by faith. I pray that you will be filled with love. ¹⁸ I pray that you will be able to understand how wide and how long and how high and how deep His love is. ¹⁹ I pray that you will know the love of Christ. His love goes beyond anything we can understand. I pray that you will be filled with God Himself.

Think about this: in Ephesians 2, Paul tells us about our calling. We each have a role in bringing God's kingdom. Then he prays for us to be filled with God's love. His goal to move to help us pursue our calling is praying for us to be filled with more of God's love! A bit of a confession; as a pastor when I start to think about mission, I go straight to action steps. Let's have a strategic planning meeting and then execute! But that's not Paul's approach. Instead, he prays for God's love to fill the church. He knows if we don't have God's love, nothing else will matter! Paul knows that our calling depends on being filled with God's love ourselves.

God wants His love to fill us until it overflows to others.

Paul caps off his prayer with a doxology praising God. ²⁰ God is able to do much more than we ask or think through His power working in us. ²¹ May we see His shining-greatness in the church. When God's family is filled with more of his love and power, it will do "much more than we can ask or think." I want this to happen! Here's how it does. When we think of being filled with God's love, we need to remember that God's full is different from our full. My level of full generally means that "I am filled." God's love goes beyond that. Take this glass. When I fill it with water, I would say it's full when it's about to the brim. So naturally, when I think of God's loving filling me, I think that it means fill me until I am full. But Ephesians 3:19 says His love goes beyond anything we can understand. God's love is going to max me out and then some! So, God's version of full means that I'm filled to the point I'm overflowing until God's love is splattering everywhere! If you haven't been filled until God's love is spilling and overflowing to those around you, then my friend, you aren't filled yet!

It's also important that we know what we're talking about when we talk about "love" because love is a word that can carry a lot of baggage. Some ways we've learned to think of love might not be the fulfilling kind of love that God wants to give us. They're shallow. If I'm at a restaurant and I ask for the server to refill my glass with water, and they only put a teensy bit in, I'm going to ask them to keep filling it! It's too shallow- I'll need more.

At times we experience shallow loves that leave us wanting more

When I was in first grade, I experienced my very first crush! Her name was Taylor. She was a red-headed heartbreaker at 6 years young, and she had all the right qualities I was looking for in a significant other: she had great taste in toys, she was funny, and she hardly ever wet her pants. Those are the things that matter at that age! She made me get the butterflies when I was around her. I thought about her when I was at home. I secretly wrote her notes I never gave her. In my six-year-old mind, I was head over heels in LOVE! But when my family moved, I moved on with my life and didn't really think about her again. My ship had sailed! That's because my love for was a fleeting, shallow kind of love. The warm fuzzies of a crush isn't enough to can sustain a relationship for the long term- just ask any couple who's has a healthy marriage after 50 years! When the feelings wear out, the relationship needs to be built on a stronger foundation in order to last.

It's great to sense God's love with our emotions, but it goes way beyond that. We don't want to come to church like an addict trying to get the next fix of an emotional high. I'm a naturally emotional person, so I often feel God that way and I'm not discounting that. But if you're in a season where you don't have that, or you don't operate that way, don't feel like there's something wrong with you. The Holy Spirit is doing a greater work in you than just overwhelming your feelings. Our love for others can't depend on our feelings either. Sometimes we might not FEEL like serving others in love or logging onto Zoom to meet with our Life Group. But when we take these steps, God makes us more like Jesus. Feeling love is wonderful, but its bigger than that.

Those who are like me

When we surround ourselves with people who look, think and hold the same interests that we do, it's easier to feel included, understood and seen. In other words, it's easier for us to feel loved around those who are like us. Miles McPherson talks about this phenomenon in his book *The Third Option*, through what he calls "in-group and out-group bias." For example, as someone who went to school for music, musicians would be one of my "in-groups." I have similar experiences and knowledge as others who play music. Even when I meet another musician for the first time, we can play together without having to work it out or explain much. Even more specific than that, I love listening to metal so metalheads are one of my "in groups!" When I see someone wearing a band's t-shirt that I like, I instantly sense a connection with them! But by having an in-group, it naturally creates an "out group bias." So, if I meet someone and they are wearing metal band shirt that I like, I'll want to talk about it and my wife's eyes instantly glaze over and she isn't going to be much of a part of that conversation. She's outside of our metalhead in-group.

Apply this principle politically, racially or socially and you get the kind of divided society that we have today. McPherson goes on to say that following Jesus means that we resist this impulse and start to learn to bring others in and find our common value, even when on the surface it seems like you don't have anything in common.

Jesus says in **Matthew 5:46-47**, *If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?*

We naturally sense we are "in" with those who are like us. The problem is when we confuse being comfortable with being loved. Choosing to go beyond our comforts and preferences will model the same kind of love that Jesus showed us.

Another shallow love can come from: what I do

Our accomplishments and achievements can manufacture a sense that we are loved. We can be conditioned to think that we can be the object of love, but only as long as we earn it. Maybe you would only get your parents' affection if your grades were good enough or you performed well enough in sports. We can feel the same with God. As long as I'm good enough or nice enough, God will accept me. As long as I manage my sin well enough, then Jesus loves me. But as we read last week, the truth of the matter is that **salvation is a gift from God. ⁹ Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done. Ephesians 2:8-9** Your greatest accomplishments do nothing to move the needle on God's love for you! He gives it to you because of who He is, not for what you do.

Shallow loves leave us wanting more. But when we experience the kind of love that Paul is describing in this prayer, God's love fills us until it overflows from us. You can't ever fully comprehend God's love because God IS love and he can't be contained. But this verse describes a few ways...

God's overflowing love is one that Strengthens

Verse 16 says, **I pray that because of the riches of His shining-greatness, He will make you strong with power in your hearts through the Holy Spirit.** This verse is one of many that tell us that when God's Spirit comes upon us, it brings power. God's love is empowering! God especially seems to like empowering those who society deem to be small or weak. Jesus empowered those who were looked down on by the religious leaders, telling them that their sins are forgiven. God empowered women, who were not valued in a patriarchal Roman society, to be the first preachers of the Gospel after Jesus was resurrected. The Holy Spirit empowered a ragtag crew of uneducated, blue-collar workers to establish God's kingdom after Jesus' ascension. Paul is blown away that God would empower him of all people to bring the Gospel to the Gentiles. **Though I am the least deserving of all God's people, he graciously gave me the privilege of telling the Gentiles about the endless treasures available to them in Christ.- Ephesians 3:8** Many of us might feel like Paul, thinking there's no way God could use us. We feel too young or too old, not educated enough or too imperfect. In other words: we feel too weak. But in 2 Corinthians 12:9, God says, **"My power is made perfect in weakness."** God has a habit of empowering the weak, humble and meek. If you feel too small to be used by God, then you're in the right place. God's love wants to empower you!

God's overflowing love is one that Sticks around

Verse 17 says **I pray that Christ may live in your hearts by faith. I pray that you will be filled with love.** Being filled with God's love means that he comes to live inside of us. God's Spirit has made his home inside of us, the church. We are God's permanent address. He's not going anywhere! Jews and Gentiles lived out this truth in their time because they experienced this reality. "Gentile" was the term used by Jews to refer to anyone who wasn't a Jew. In other words, Jews had an in-group with other Jews which meant that the Gentiles were out and the same was true in reverse. When you were Jewish, you were used to things being a certain way. You followed the laws of Moses and practiced Jewish traditions like eating certain foods and circumcision. Gentiles didn't do any of that. But when both Jews and Gentiles decided to follow Jesus, it meant they knew they needed to learn to be together. As you would imagine, disputes broke out in the church as they tried to figure out what following Jesus looked like. I imagine some of their conversations got heated, probably very awkward too. Just think of a Jewish believer asking a Gentile believer if they were willing to be circumcised. Now that was an uncomfortable conversation! But Paul writes in **Ephesians 3:6: This is God's plan: Both Gentiles and Jews who believe the Good News share equally in the riches inherited by God's children. Both are part of the same body, and both enjoy the promise of blessings because they belong to Christ Jesus.**

Despite their differences, they decided they were better together than apart. God was calling them to live as one body and they needed to stick together. When we experience the stickiness of God's love- a love that lives with us- it's easier for us to persevere in relationship with others, no matter how far the gap might seem. I'll admit, it's hard to want to be around someone who's unlike us, let alone sticking with them.

This is one of the ways we've reached the kind of divisive climate we have today in our country. Right now, we have two halves of a country that are ready to disown the other half. But God wants the church to resist that impulse. It's easy to stick with those who think like us and assume the worst of those not a part of our in-group. We can even talk a good game about spreading God's love, but sometimes we barely even know anyone who isn't already a Christian, let alone love them well. But what if we became known as Christians who stick with people no matter how tough things get? Who keep coming to the table for conversations so that healing can take place and divisions can be overcome? Jesus wants us to follow his lead and bring those who are "out" to the inside by living a love that sticks around.

God's overflowing love is one that Stretches

Verse 18 **I pray that you will be able to understand how wide and how long and how high and how deep His love is.** This verse is describing the omni-directional love of God. There's nowhere that you are that God's love isn't. God didn't wait for us to get our stuff together. In Jesus, God's love stretched and pursued us, wanting to bring us in. He meets us where we are. His love chases us and grows around us, even when we are prone to wander or choose to be selfish rather than reciprocate His love. In Jesus, we see that God chose us and accommodates to where we are. I experienced a love that stretches around me no matter what through my parents. They fed me, clothed me and consoled me as a baby no matter how tired they were or how much they didn't feel like it in that moment. As a teenager, they let me blast terrible punk music even when they didn't want to hear it. When I dyed my hair orange in high school, I said, "Dad! What do you think?" and he said, "I don't love the hair, but I sure love you." During college, I started making decisions that were painful for them to deal with. Yet their love grew around me no matter how uncomfortable my life made them and they accepted me no matter what. When I avoided them, they kept inviting me to family get togethers. When I ignored their calls, they let me know that I was always welcome. Their actions made it clear; their love had no limits. Their love stretched to meet me where I was.

As we worship, spend time asking God to fill you with his love.