

A Unified Church in a Divided World

INTRODUCTION:

Do you remember this commercial that played during the Super Bowl in February? There were a lot of mixed reviews about it, but one thing was certain... it portrayed the division in America that we all have felt or seen at some point. You may have even seen some of those images and had emotion well up inside of you. Maybe you've felt the tension those in the images have felt... maybe you're simply aware of it. The commercial ends with "Jesus loved the people we hate." A powerful statement for the world to be exposed to.

Underlying the individuals who seemed so at odds in the commercial, real people in our world and nation, are stories. Why are these people so mad? Are they gripped by fear involving their loved ones being affected by something? Are they riddled with anxiety because of a mindset that says their mindset is the only correct one? What's going on at home for them? What has moved them to this hateful, angry, fear-driven posture? "Love your enemies" seems easier said than done... because it is.

A similar division was also felt in the days of Scripture. Jews and Gentiles were at odds... so much so that there were consequences to their interactions. All throughout the Old Testament and into the New Testament time, Jews had been conditioned to believe so much in their chosen status as God's people that they became hostile towards any who wanted a part that wasn't in their community... so much so that in Jerusalem, at the Temple where the Jews worshipped, was a stone barrier separating the "Court of the Gentiles" and the inner parts of Temple reserved for the Jews that read:

"No foreigner may enter within the balustrade around the sanctuary and the enclosure. Whoever is caught, on himself shall he put blame for the death which will ensue."

Yet it is this stone barrier in Ephesians 2 that Paul talks about Jesus abolishing, therefore making peace among all believers. Jesus didn't come to build barriers; He came to tear them down. See, when Jesus comes onto the scene and begins to minister to Gentiles such as the woman at the well, a Roman centurion, and a

Caananite woman that would have been SCANDALOUS. But through His ministry, Jesus was making real the "mystery of the Gospel" that Paul talks about just before our passage today in Ephesians 3, that the Gentiles who would believe were always going to be invited into the family of God.

Jew divided against Gentile. Black divided against White. Democrat divided against Republican. Husband divided against wife. Presbyterian divided against Lutheran. Your heart divided against a fellow believers heart. Yes, it is easy to see the anger and hatred in the world just by turning on the news, but Paul is speaking about this worldly division that has crept into the early church of Ephesus... and creeps still into our church today. This prayer of unity for the body of Christ that we are going to study is needed for us, for Fellowship Dallas, today!

You might feel this division within your household; this prayer is for you.

You might have walked in this morning and sat on the other side of the room because there is a church member that frustrated you two years ago and you've never reconciled; this prayer is for you.

You might have pushed away a brother or sister in Christ because of differences in minor theological issues; this prayer is for you.

Friends, the division in our world can so easy leak into our church. We must take Paul's prayer seriously today and every day because our Christ-centered, Spirit-filled unity with one another is one of our greatest ministry tools. So why should we pray this? Why should we pray that we are moved to reconcile with our spouse and the person across the room? Why should we pursue unity in love over division in preferences? Because the love of Jesus Christ changed everything. No matter your background, views, or preferences, we all must bow down before God and submit ourselves joyfully to the unity in love that He brings our church.

So as we are in a series called "The Church That Changed the World Pt. 2", we are looking at the prayers and pleadings of Paul for the first church, and as we call one another to pray over our church today, we are going to see how Paul prayed for unity within the Ephesian church, and how that prayer must be the same for us in this church, in our lives, today.

I pray we are marked by unity and love that surpasses all understanding; I pray that we minister to each other through our radical reconciliation that was exemplified by Jesus Christ. Let's plead before Him today for these things that He lovingly offers us as those who have faith in Him.

LEADING FROM OUR KNEES:

Paul opens up Ephesians 1 by expounding on the doctrine of the Trinity. As Gary showed us last week, Paul prays for the believers in Ephesus, that the "eyes of their hearts would be enlightened" to the hope of His calling, the riches of His inheritance, and the power of him towards us who believe. This created a great commonality among the believers in Ephesus.

And if they weren't yet grasping this concept, Paul spends Ephesians 2 leveling the playing field for those listening and reading, that they were "all dead" in their sins and that only by Christ's death and resurrection, they have been raised to new life. He talks about the peace that Christ has created among them, building them all into the temple of God.

In chapter 3, Paul begins by talking about the "mystery of Christ" which is the idea that not only Jews can be saved through Jesus, but also Gentiles. This leads him to our passage today, where thinking about this unity in God for all believers, despite their background, despite their differences, despite their blatant opposition to each other, causes him to kneel down and worship the Father for His plan and love. Let's sit in Ephesians 3 today, starting at verse 14.

He starts off in verse 14-15 saying,

"For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named,"

Can you see Paul, this pillar of the faith, this Jew of all Jews, bending down and placing himself in a position of humility and submission to the Father? Our reaction might be "well, of course! Paul was someone who imitated Christ," but the shock value comes when we explore why he is doing this. Paul is bowing his knees before the Father for the reason of the Gospel being accessible to both the Jews and the Gentiles. This idea was foreign, far off, and unheard of - salvation had always existed for the Jews and the Jews alone! They were, and arguably still are, God's chosen people. So much so that when Paul is first introduced in Scripture, he is operating under the name Saul and his sole mission is the persecution of any who claim Christ:

Jews and Gentiles. This tension persisted in the early church, specifically the one in Ephesus. The Jews and Gentiles evidently perceived each other in moments as strongly as "enemies" and opposing groups.

He gives this further language in v15 when he expounds that "every family in heaven and on earth is named [from the Father]"; since all have come from Him, it's His prerogative to offer salvation to whom He wills... and He willed it for all. The Father, the leader of the household, wants to invite all people into His family.

Paul, this leader and pillar of the new unified church of Jesus Christ, decided to lead from his knees. What would it look like if we did the same? What if we submitted our pride and high standing before God in the midst of believers and bent to His will? How much would our world be impacted if we decided that in **all things** we submitted to Christ? Many of us in here have yet to pray for unity in our church because we don't want it. We want to continue to feel like we are the ones who have it right, or punish the person that wronged us. But like Paul, we must submit to the Father, recognizing His authority to save those He desires.

Martin Luther King Jr. existed in a world of prevalent racial hate and discrimination. A baptist preacher and civil right leader, King knew what it was like to understand the unifying love of Christ, yet feel the divisive nature of the world around him. He said in a quote,

"Now there is a final reason I think that Jesus says, 'Love your enemies.' It is this: that love has within it a redemptive power. And there is a power there that eventually transforms individuals."

Can you imagine Dr. King saying that? What would it have been like to be a recipient of the extreme hate from others, only to say that the command to "love your enemies" said by Jesus should be followed? Paul leading from his knees and kneeling before the Father echoes through Dr. King's quote and challenges those receiving the letter to do the same; and thousands of years later, it challenges us to do the same.

John Piper, a prominent preacher, talks about his commitment to his wife to pray with her every night. He said some nights they are so at odds that all he can do is get on

his knees and pray "God, help us." His posture says it all; your next step today may be to simply go to your knees, both physically and within your heart.

LOVING LIKE CHRIST:

After kneeling before the Father and acknowledging His reach, Paul begins to pray for the believers in Ephesus to understand this "mystery of Christ" - in other words, the love of Christ towards all believers. If we look in verse 16, Paul begins by praying that these believers may be "strengthened with power through the Spirit" in their "inner being". J.I. Packer says of this phrase,

"Paul uses this phrase to denote the Christian's true self, as seen by God and known (partially) in consciousness. The contrast, implicit if not explicit, is 'the outward man' (2 Cor. 4:16), the same individual as seen by his fellowmen, a being physically alive and active, known (so far as he is known) through his behaviour."

The way that the believers are interacting with one another and correctly portraying the love of Christ, must first be established and strengthened in their "heart" by the work of the Holy Spirit. This is an interesting dynamic, because it is through the "outer man" that people see and experience our love for them and Christ, but it is only through the "inner man" that this is authentic. To give an example, while I could work out, change my diet, and sleep patterns to change my outward appearance, it is only through the work of the Holy Spirit that my heart, or inner man, can be changed and formed into the image of Christ.

Is there any person, or group of people, that your inner being struggles to love like Christ? To forgive like Christ? To serve like Christ? If Paul was here among us, he would say that he is praying for you, that your inner being would be strengthened by the Holy Spirit to love like Christ.

Paul goes on to expound that once this inner man is being strengthened by the Holy Spirit, Christ truly can dwell in the heart of believers through faith. This dwelling is rooted and grounded in love (17b), and impossible to naturally comprehend (18-19). This is why Paul prays that the believers would know the love of Christ that **"surpasses all understanding"**; this understanding does not come from studying

hard enough or knowing enough knowledge; it only comes through submission to the Father, the inner work of the Holy Spirit, and the love of Jesus Christ towards all believers.

Does our prayer align with Paul's? Are we pleading with the Father daily that the Holy Spirit would have His way in the formation of our heart? Are we asking for a supernatural understanding of just how far Christ's love goes? Is our theology of this love restricted just to ourselves and the people we think deserve it; or does it extend to all who have faith in Jesus... the one who wrongs us, the one who treats us poorly, the one who commits a horrendous crime? This love should surpass all understanding...

STORY:

In the middle of WWII, an American POW camp was started in Aliceville, AL for German POW's. Given the atrocities of WWII, and the general understanding of the abuse and neglect of American POW's on German soil, many expected this camp in Aliceville, AL to reciprocate accordingly. The citizens of the town, however, surprised everyone. One story writes, "When the soldiers first arrived at the camp, they found fresh linens and shaving equipment waiting for them on their bunks. In short order, they were introduced to the twin American delicacies of peanut butter and sliced white bread. They were given so much ham and so much corn to eat that they couldn't finish it all. As to not offend their "hosts" they ended up digging a hole and burying it. They got away with it for a while but they eventually got caught when the corn started growing!"

I use this extreme example of a group of people loving their enemy because we would be remiss to forget that the love that Paul is praying for the Ephesians to understand was first extended to them... and eventually extended to us. Christ Jesus Himself died for us "while we were still His enemy" (Romans 5:8). In every way we did not deserve the love of Christ that He expressed through the laying down of His life on our behalf; and we therefore have no right to withhold that love towards those around us that we would be tempted to neglect. Just like the Jews and the Gentiles being reminded of their unity in the love of Jesus, so we too are reminded of the unity we have as believers in that same love. To make this even more tangible, Jesus' love is not segmented to one group.

He has the same height of love for the Jews as He does for the Gentiles. He has the same width of love for a black man, a white man, and a hispanic woman. His love is just as deep for the republican as it is for the democrat. His love transcends all of our personal hurts, shortcomings, and hate towards someone who wronged us; when our forgiveness for someone falls short, His never does. This love should move us towards rectifying the division within the body of Christ - in our family, church, and church connections.

When we begin to understand this love in its fullness, we once again are drawn back to our knees in the praise of our faithful and merciful God!

LETTING GO & LETTING GOD:

In the midst of all this talk of submission, are you struggling with the idea of control? I know I do. Our culture is obsessed with control. Control the way you look, control the hours you work, control the money you make, control the way you look, control the actions of others... how do we counteract this? Paul shows us in v20-21... by letting go and letting God. Through Him, and only Him, He can accomplish far more abundantly than we could dream.

It was unthinkable in the time of Christ for Gentiles to have the same opportunity for salvation as the Jews. It was unthinkable in the time of Martin Luther King Jr for a black man and a white man to be judged not on the color of their skin, but on the integrity of their character. It was unthinkable for a group of small town Americans to treat soldiers of an enemy nation with love and respect in time of war. Paul ends this prayer by giving glory to the God who is able to do "abundantly more than all we ask or think." This is imperative to understand.

Why can't God move your heart towards reconciliation that has never seemed obtainable? He can do the unthinkable.

Who says that God can't do a work in your heart to heal the prejudices you have towards groups in the body of Christ? He can do abundantly more than you ask. What is stopping God from bringing Fellowship Dallas to a place where we are known by nothing other than our love for Christ and others? He's beyond our thoughts.

God isn't restricted to our human mind. He does the "unthinkable". In fact, it's the very reason why Paul is praying this prayer. He is brought to his knees at the idea that God did the unthinkable through Jesus Christ. Jesus, His one and only Son, took on the form of a servant to sympathize with us and provide us... **all of us**... with the opportunity to be with Him forever through faith in Jesus Christ. He did the unimaginable by sending the Holy Spirit to strengthen us in power and form our inner being. His mind is unreachable, His ways are unknowable, and His love is unending... and yet, we must plead with the Father that as a body we would be able to grasp the depth of His love for each one of us. The Ephesians coming together as one body in Christ was unthinkable; what would be unthinkable for Him to do in your life? What would be unthinkable for Him to do in our life as a church?

The good news, church, is that there is unity in the love of Jesus Christ. For you, for me, for our perceived enemies, for our neighbors, for our political rivals, for different cultures, for Jew and Gentiles, black and white, rich and poor.

And the starting point for this to become a reality in our lives is to pray Paul's prayer over our church. We must plead with the Father that He would lead us to be marked by Christlike love and unity as a body; we must pray that Fellowship Dallas will be known as a place where radical love is experienced for all people who walk in, even if they are the opposite our preferences... or in direct opposition of a belief of ours.

When Paul wrote to the Ephesians, none of them were exempt from joining in this prayer for unity; and none of us are either. One of the ways we can practically experience this is by pleading together in our pre-service prayer that happens in the chapel, in our life groups, and over coffee or lunch with a friend.

For others of you, God is going to take you a step further. You may be adding to the division within our body, some of you knowingly.

You may be led to call a family meeting at home, apologizing for the ways you haven't been Christlike, and then leading your family through a prayer for unity.

You may be led to reconcile with that church member that you have pushed away from.

You may be led to called to seek forgiveness from a fellow believer that you've written off because of something they said or did that wasn't in line with your preferences.

Whatever it is, every one of us must be on our knees before the Father, pleading for unity through the strengthening of the Holy Spirit and the knowledge of the love of Jesus Christ.

Now **that** would be an amazing testimony and witness to a divided world.

ENDING FOR SONG RESPONSE AND COMMUNION:

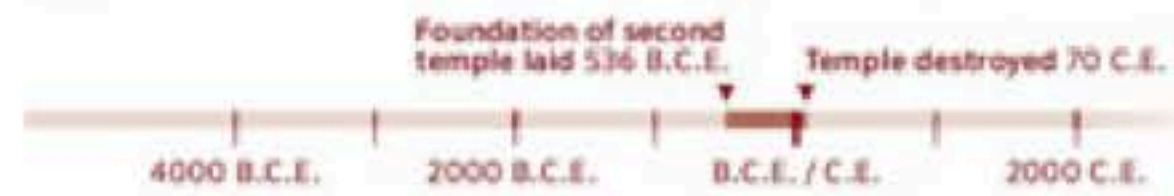
Friends, as believers, we are not led to live a life of love, faith, unity, reconciliation, endurance and encouragement on a whim - everything asked of us as believers has been exemplified by Jesus Christ, led by the Father, and strengthened by the Spirit. As we sing this closing song, let us lift up our voices as one to glorify our God who has done the unthinkable and united us in Christ; let us prepare our hearts for communion that we will take after the song.



Jesus loved the people we hate.

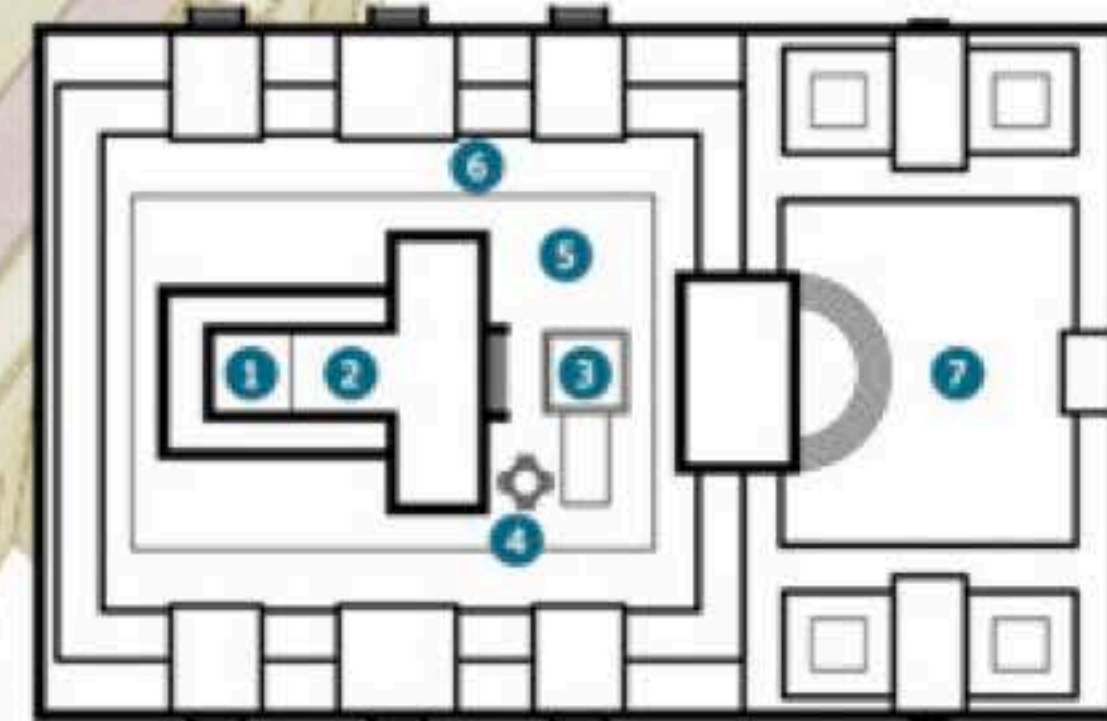
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Temple Mount in the First Century



Temple Features

- | | |
|---------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1 Most Holy | 7 Court of Women |
| 2 Holy | 8 Court of the Gentiles |
| 3 Altar of Burnt Offering | 9 Barrier (Soreg) |
| 4 Sea of Cast Metal | 10 Royal Colonnade |
| 5 Court of Priests | 11 Solomon's Colonnade |
| 6 Court of Israel | 12 Fortress of Antonia |



LEADING FROM OUR KNEES

14 For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, 15 from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named,

EPHESIANS 3:14-15 (ESV)





Now there is a final reason I think that Jesus says, 'Love your enemies.' It is this: that love has within it a redemptive power. And there is a power there that eventually transforms individuals.

— *Martin Luther King* —

AZ QUOTES

LOVING LIKE CHRIST

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,

EPHESIANS 3:16 (ESV)

"Paul uses this phrase [inner man] to denote the Christian's true self, as seen by God and known (partially) in consciousness... The contrast, implicit if not explicit, is 'the outward man' (2 Cor. 4:16), the same individual as seen by his fellowmen, a being physically alive and active, known (so far as he is known) through his behavior."

-J.I. PACKER

17 so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—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, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

EPHESIANS 3:17-19 (ESV)



8 but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

ROMANS 5:8 (ESV)

LETTING GO & LETTING GOD

20 Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, 21 to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

EPHESIANS 3:20-21 (ESV)



