

Rooted & Grounded in Love ~ Ephesians

Week 4 ~ 3:1-21

3:1-13

Have you ever had a secret that was really tough to keep? Inside you just wanted to burst out and tell someone, anyone, everyone this piece of information you had. Ever have that experience? If so, then you are in good company. That is pretty much how the apostle Paul felt...and, truth be told, he wasn't very good at keeping it secret (though, to be fair, it wasn't really his intent to keep it a secret, but rather to make it known.)

If you want a phrase that encapsulates the theme of this section it would be “make known the mystery”.

That obviously raises the question, “What mystery?” or “What is this mystery?” Our word “mystery” comes from the Greek word “musterion” which denotes the idea of a secret. Culturally, the reason Paul likely used this word was because his audience would be familiar with the mystery cults of the day. In those cults the mystery/secret was what those who were initiated would learn as they delved deeper into the cult. Paul, it appears, sort of co-opts that word and turns it on its head. What I mean is that whenever Paul uses the term “mystery” in his writings it's almost always in the sense of making the mystery/secret known to whoever would listen. So, as you read this passage, notice the word “mystery”, but also notice “make known...”. It is very telling.

So, what is the content of this mystery/secret? Here we want to borrow from Paul's similar use and thinking from Colossians (which Paul wrote within the same prison stint as Ephesians). In Colossians Paul writes: *“I have become its [the church's] servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness—the mystery that has been kept secret for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints. To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory....My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”* (Colossians 1:25-27, 2:2-3)

The crux of this mystery/secret is Christ; more specifically Christ in us, or as Paul has been stating throughout Ephesians we are “in Christ”; but to be very clear—and this connects with everything Paul wrote in Ephesians chapter 2—this is all-inclusive, for Jew and Gentile alike, thus for EVERYONE.

Notice the irony: Paul's intent and desire was to disclose, reveal, make known the mystery/secret...it's for everyone...he's not keeping it a secret, he's shouting it from the rooftops. So, really, from a literary standpoint, Paul (the ever clever thinker and writer) uses the term “mystery” as a synonym for “the Gospel” ...i.e. Good News!

But there is an important wrinkle we need to notice in verse 10. *“His [God's] intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms...”* Did you catch it? This task of making the mystery known (though in this verse he calls it the “manifold wisdom of God”) wasn't simply a personal quest of Paul's. It was part of the original design, intent, and goal of the Church. WE are to make it known!

The Gospel (or the secret/mystery) is so good, so sweet, so beautiful, so powerful, so incredible that even being cooped up in prison wasn't going to get Paul down, nor did he want it to get anyone else down. This is why Paul told them not to be discouraged due to his sufferings (vs. 13). This has a similar flavor to another of Paul's "prison epistles" (i.e. Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon...all of which have an amazing sense of joy despite the circumstances) as Paul writes in Philippians, *"But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish that I may gain Christ and be found in Him..."* (Philippians 3:7-9a NIV)

Another word Paul used twice in this passage is "administration" (vs 2 & 9 NIV) which can also be translated (and usually is elsewhere) as overseeing, management or stewardship (usually over the affairs of a household or estate). Management/stewardship of God's good creation was the original task and calling of humankind. Paul understood what God was/is up to...restoring everything to His original intent. So, Paul also, then, understood his ministry as a gift to be managed well. He also understood that this was being done in and through Christ...and Christ's body, the Church. This was staggeringly amazing to Paul, which is why he gushed about it as he did. Paul's gift and task, and his management of it, is the same as ours (at least generally speaking). How do you feel about it? How are you/we doing at it? What are you/we doing with it?

- *Please take some time to notice and dwell on verse 12: "In Him and through faith in Him we may approach God with freedom and confidence". How does that make you feel? How do you want to respond to that? How do you/we take advantage of your/our opportunity to approach God? Does "freedom and confidence" describe your relationship with God? Explain.*
- *What are you discouraged about today (or in this particular season/stage of life)?*
- *Paul was accustomed to pain and suffering, yet even in the midst of it he kept his focus on Christ and others. How are you encouraged by that? How are you challenged by that?*
- *Paul saw a bigger picture beyond his circumstances. What do you do to help keep your focus on the bigger picture? What tends to cause you to lose sight of the bigger picture? How can we as a Table Group encourage one another in this area?*
- *Some specific and practical pointers to help us when we face challenging times:*
 - *Be honest about our situation.*
 - *Be open about our situation and share with trusted people.*
 - *Avoid false hope and clichés.*
 - *Always remember that God is with us.*
- *Ideally, a Table Group is a community in which this is lived out, where we share life together (even and especially the tough parts), and where we find encouragement and support. How are we doing as a Table Group toward that end?*
- *Paul's greatest desire was to make Christ known. He was motivated by the grace and love of Christ that he had experienced. How does that relate/compare to what drives your life?*

3:14-21

“For this reason...” you’ll notice that this phrase starts chapter 3, and now we see it again to start this section. 3:2-13 is sort of a digression of thought, from which Paul now comes back to his original train of thought. Of course, when we see a phrase like, “For this reason...”, the logical question to ask, or at least have clarified in our mind, is “what reason?” The answer, the reason, is basically everything Paul had laid out in chapter 2. Having contrasted life without Christ with life in Christ, and having laid out the result, especially as it pertains to the new humanity God is creating in Christ, Paul cannot help but enter into worshipful prayer as we see in this particular section.

Speaking of worshipful prayer, one way to conceive of Ephesians 1-3 is as an extended doxology. (“Doxology” literally means the study of glory and is usually used/understood as a liturgical formula of praise. Again, this is a good way to think of the first three chapters of Ephesians.) When Paul considers all that God has done, all that He has blessed us with in Christ, he becomes (rightly so) overcome/overwhelmed with a desire to voice worship and praise.

- *Describe a time when you have been overwhelmed/overcome by God. How did you respond?*

A key metaphor Paul has been using throughout this letter is that of family...which is one of the key metaphors of the church throughout the New Testament. Obviously calling God “Father” has major family connotations, and this is the main reason the metaphor is used. Remember back in 1:5 Paul says that we are “*adopted*”; in 1:14 Paul talks about our “*inheritance*” (while not an absolute, inheritance is typically passed down through family lines); in 2:19 Paul says that we are “*members of God’s household*”; in 3:6 Paul uses the term “*heirs*” (again, not an absolute, but typically a term used in family lines). All these terms and phrases have the family image in common and in mind. Now in our present passage Paul says, “*For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom His whole **family** in heaven and on earth derives its name.*” (3:14)

- *What has being part of your family of origin meant to you? (good and bad). How do you feel about the idea (the reality) of being part of another family?*
- *Describe a time when you really felt like you belonged, when you felt really connected and cared for by a group of people.*

What we do not want to miss—and it’s rather hard to miss—is all the “power” terms that are loaded into Paul’s short prayer. In 3:16 Paul prays that they will be “*strengthened with power*” (the word “power” there in Greek is “*dunamis*” from which we get words like dynamo and dynamite); in 3:18 Paul prays that they “*may have power*” (a different Greek word that means “*eminently able; to have full strength*”); and in 3:20 Paul mentions “*His power that is at work within us*” (back to “*dunamis*” again). Paul was stressing throughout this prayer that there is power outside of ourselves that is available and accessible to us, that is for us, and is good. Paul wanted his readers to experience this power.

Notice how Paul connects the idea of power to love in this prayer. In Paul’s mind power and love are intimately connected. That’s because God is the source of both. And ultimately Paul wanted his readers to know God, out of which would naturally flow knowing/experiencing God’s love and power. Notice in 3:16 that Paul’s prayer for power was “*through His Spirit*”; notice in 3:18 Paul’s prayer for power was that his readers would be able to grasp “*the love of Christ*”. Notice also that we see the Trinity (Father, Christ, and Spirit) represented/acknowledged in this prayer.

3:20-21 can be considered the doxology within the doxology or the doxology that concludes the doxology. God's glory in the church (that's us) and in Christ Jesus is according to His power that is at work within us. This is a key concept to grasp. The Christian life is one that is lived in partnership and cooperation with God. The Christian life is hard. In fact, we could say it's impossible...except that we've been empowered to accomplish what we're called to, the task we've been given. If we try to do it under our own power we will fail. Any success is due to God working in and through us...thus, He gets the glory. I like how Paul puts it in Colossians 1:28-29, *"We proclaim Him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. To this end I labor, struggling with all His energy, which so powerfully works in me."* This partnership, this working together, was the original intent for humans from the beginning...humans working in cooperation with God to govern, manage, steward, His good creation. So, really, Paul wasn't so much describing something new but pointing back to the original plan which has never been lost (even though it seemed like it) and that God is working to get back to...and His plans will not be thwarted.

- *Describe a time when you felt paralyzed and powerless to do anything, to make any positive change or impact in a situation.*
- *Describe a time when you felt/experienced a power outside/beyond yourself empowering you to accomplish something, to understand something, to get you through something, etc.*
- *How often do you put yourself in a position where you need God to come through for you, where your power will not be enough, versus playing it safe...not really attempting anything beyond what you're confident you can handle on your own?*

Just a couple more ideas/concepts to highlight before we wrap up this first half of Ephesians (And please remember, we want to keep the depth and richness of the first three chapters of Ephesians in mind as we prepare to dive into the second half of this letter.) A favorite word of Paul's seems to be *"fullness"*. We see it in 1:23, here in 3:19, *"that you may be **filled** to the measure of all the **fullness** of God."*, and we'll see it again in chapter 4. If we think of ourselves as a cup, what are we filled with? Paul's desire for his readers was that they/we would be filled to the brim, to the max we can hold, with God. There is no greater honor for us than to be filled with God. And God desires to fill us. This brings us to another word picture for us to grasp, and that is the word *"dwell"*. Both individually and communally we are where God chooses to dwell. Back in 2:22 Paul writes, *"And in Him you too are being built together to become a **dwelling** in which God lives by His Spirit."* And here in 3:17 he writes, *"so that Christ may **dwell** in your hearts through faith."* Images of "fullness" and "dwelling" reinforce the idea that Christianity is not about religion but about relationship; it's about union with God. (The theological term for this is "theosis".) God's very Being intermeshing with ours. This is what we were made for.

Notice Paul's almost poetic way of speaking about the supremacy of love. After praying that his readers would grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, he prays that they/we would *"know this love that surpasses knowledge"* (3:19) Knowledge is good, but love is better—love exceeds knowledge, love goes further than knowledge, love is greater than knowledge.

- *Be really honest now...if you could choose to have 10x the amount of knowledge you currently have or 10x the ability to love others than you currently do, which would you*

choose? (We all know the “right” answer, but what is the honest answer? And—reality check—one will be far more painful than the other.)

- *Who do you know that is clearly filled with God? How did they get that way?*
- *When people think of Christians and/or the Church, do they think, “Oh, that’s where God dwells.” or “That’s where I can find God.”? Explain.*

In closing, I just want to emphasize one more time that through the first three chapters of Ephesians we have seen only one imperative (one command; one thing to DO)...and that is to “remember” (2:11). Beyond that, the first half of Ephesians has been all indicative (statements of truth/fact) from which Paul is building a foundation. As we approach the second half of this letter we’ll see Paul shift gears and pile on the imperatives...i.e. what to DO based on (and consistent with) the truths he has laid out.

Bonus: Here’s a podcast episode from Truth Over Tribe in which they have as a guest Tim Mackie from the Bible Project. What he shares is relevant to our study of Ephesians.

[What Do Demonic Powers Have To Do with Politics? with Tim Mackie](#)

Soul Training Exercise ~ Administering/Stewarding/Managing our Gifts

In this chapter of Ephesians Paul mentions his “administration” (stewardship; management) of his gift.

Each of us has a gift, or gifts, given to us by God to use to serve others. Paul’s happen to have been preaching/teaching the gospel and apostleship. What’s yours? And how are you exercising your gift(s)?

This week’s invitation is two-fold. First, identify your (spiritual) gifts. If you’re not sure, here’s a link to a short assessment that may be helpful. <https://giftstest.com> Of course, you can always ask those who know you well...they can probably tell you what they observe in you.

Second, evaluate how you’re managing/stewarding your gift. Take a piece of paper and divide it into three columns. At the top of one column write “For Me”; at the top of another column write “For Others”; at the top of the last column write “For God”. Then review the past week or two, jotting down things you’ve done that fit into each column.

Take some time to reflect on what this little exercise reveals about how you use your time, energy, skills, and resources (i.e. your gifts). Maybe take some time to also share your reflections with a friend or your Table Group.