

A love greater than we can imagine!

(Ephesians 3:14-21)

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This sermon is a sequel to my last sermon titled “Getting it All Together” from Ephesians. In the first chapter of Ephesians, the apostle Paul describes God’s purpose as to **“get all things in heaven and on earth together in Christ”** (Eph. 1:10). God makes this move not just in the creation of humankind, but in what happens next. Our God doesn’t leave us to our own devices and destruction; rather, He breaks into history, coming in the flesh He pursues us!

Paul describes the work of God dramatically, with God the Father **choosing** us, the Son Jesus **redeeming** us, and the Holy Spirit **sealing** us. The very sovereignty of God at work in full force ... with you as the focus! We see how the sovereigns of the world behave. Sitting on thrones, in throne rooms, giving audience to few and deciding according to their whim and their own private (often greedy and gluttonous) interest. The sovereignty of God is exercised in just the opposite way. It’s a way called **“love.”** In fact, the apostle John describes God this way, very simply: **“God is love”** (1 John 4:8). He acts on our behalf in the powerful work of Jesus. Believers, know this:

**God has chosen us,
redeemed us,
and sealed us.**

We’re his! Captured and captivated by his divine love.

Do you see it? It’s because of his love that we’re the Body of Christ. All of us are gifted with ways to serve the Body. Each one of us is useful and needed in the Body. Not one of us is gift-less. Not one of us is useless. We’re in it together. With God, we’re united and serving each other for the sake of the world and the glory of God —who longs to get all things together in Christ. That’s why our leaders here at IBC organize things like the Ministry Fair, to say, “You are needed here. God has brought you here for a purpose. With gifts that only you have. For the sake of this Body of believers!”

Now, that’s a quick snapshot of chapters 1 and 4 of Ephesians. In between, there is some power that Paul gives to undergird this message. In chapter 2, we find a strong emphasis on unity and God’s purpose for each of us —together. But in chapter 3, there’s a hidden jewel to mine. It seems to be parenthetical. As if Paul was moving in a direction, and then this one thought took him on a divine detour. The thought at the opening of chapter 3 that is repeated at the beginning of chapter 4 is that Paul is a prisoner for the sake of Christ. But before he comes back to that thought in chapter 4, he

tells them not to worry about him because his ministry to the Gentiles and even his imprisonment were gifts from God. What?! It's by the grace of God that he had the privilege of taking the good news to the Gentiles. It's by the grace of God that he was even in prison for his faith. It was a gift.

That's not how we usually think of gifts or of grace. "Here's your Christmas gift. You're going to jail!" But because of the value of Christ, everything else pales in comparison. The love of God and the benefits of being in Christ outweigh everything. In fact, in verse 8 Paul calls himself "**less than the least of all God's people**" absolutely unworthy to carry the message of God's love. He coins a word here with his "less than the least." He combines the comparative with the superlative as if to say, "I'm the *least-er-est* of all God's people." All of this to say, "Don't worry about me. Any suffering I have is nothing compared to what I have received from God."

Now, let's read Ephesians 3:14-21 together.

Have you seen any throne rooms lately? There's one in the Alcázar de Segovia. Imagine the ones who were fortunate enough (or unfortunate enough) to kneel before the monarchs. Christopher Columbus requesting support to explore the ocean with a fleet of ships. Request granted, and the rest is history. In this text, Paul enters the throne room of God "the Father." And the request is for the Ephesian brothers and sisters. In essence, he prays for them to know something that's beyond comprehension. In fact, it will take great power to grasp it—even Holy Spirit power. Power:

- To be strong in spirit. (There's something on the inside of us! Barton Law commented at the open casket of a friend, "This is just the shell. The nut has gone home.")
- Christ indwelt hearts.
- Life strong in love and built on love.
- Grasp the greatness of Christ's love—how wide, long, high, and deep! (Consider Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *How Do I Love Thee? (Sonnet 43)*, "**How do I love thee? Let me count the ways. I love thee to the depth and breadth and height my soul can reach...**")
- Filled with the fullness of God!

Wow! What a prayer! An impossible prayer! A wonderfully impossible prayer: to know the incomprehensible love of Christ! Written to ones that Paul had prayed with on the beach at Miletus (before being torn away). Written to ones that Jesus would later address in Revelation, "**You have left your first love**" (Rev. 2:4). It's as though Paul (led by the Spirit) is working with the Ephesian church on the same issue. And he uses his personal friendship with them and his imprisonment for the gospel as leverage to get their attention. To another church with issues of lack of love, Paul wrote this: Read I Cor. 13. The greatest gift is **agape love**.

Even the world would say, "So true! Love is great! As long as it's ...

- "for my pleasure (Greek, *eros*),
- "for my family (Gk., *storge*),
- "for my friends (Gk., *phileo*)."

But from this description we see that **agape love** is not about my pleasure, or just my family (though that's an obvious starting point ☺), or just my friends (though that's part of it). How do you define love?:

- **Action.** (Not just saying, “I love you,” as you back away from the problems.)
- **Sacrificial.** (Not just saying, “I love you,” as you refer them to someone else.)
- **Commitment.** (Not just saying, “I love you,” then leaving when it’s tough.)
- **Not always reciprocal.** (Loving, even when they don’t love you back.)

You love, don’t you? You love God, don’t you? You’re here. You love each other, don’t you? You’re here. Perhaps there’s a touch more you could give. Do you know what water does at 211 F (99 C)? It’s very hot. But what does it do at 212 (100 C)? At 211 it’s hot. At 212 it can move a train. One degree makes the difference. You say, “I already love God. And I love my family. I love my friends. I even love my enemies and pray for them.” My challenge to you is to turn it one degree hotter. One degree. Love God a bit more; love family, friends, enemies ... just a degree more. Then, see what God wants to do with it.

I could spend all day talking about how we can love God more and love others more. However, this word from Paul is about God’s love. We can see it daily in his constant provision and care. Sometimes it’s all we can say to someone: “God loves you.” Ultimately, we see it at the cross where **“he gave his only begotten Son that whoever believes on him would not perish but have eternal life”** (John 3:16). Consider this indescribable gift. God gave the greatest gift imaginable. In fact, I’m convinced we cannot even imagine how great it is. His Son, eternal in the heavens, was given for our redemption. For us! Paul had marveled at the idea with the Roman believers when discussing the grace of God. The gift of Jesus’ sacrificial death and resurrection for us was given while we were helpless (Rom. 5:6a), guilty (Rom. 5:6b), enemies (Rom. 5:6c). Christ died for us while we were still sinners. In that way God showed us that he loves us very much (Rom. 5:8). If he would do that while we were helpless, guilty, enemy sinners, think how he wants to embrace us now. Now that we’re Spirit empowered, declared innocent, and cleansed friends, even children of God!

It’s impossible to fully grasp it. But maybe, just maybe this is why Paul mentions in the next breath that this God ... does exactly that. He does the impossible. He washes sins away. He puts camels through the eyes of needles. He does even more **“than we ask or imagine.”** And if Paul is the “least-er-est,” God is the “most-er-est” giving us more grace than we can imagine; even the grace to comprehend some smidgen of a particle of his love. Perhaps even, just ... one ... degree ... more.