

## STRENGTHEN YOUR INNER BEING

(07/23/2023)

Scripture Lesson: Ephesians 3:1-21

*“For this reason, I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love.”*

This morning we are continuing to explore Paul’s *Letter to the Ephesians* as a sort of Sunday morning Bible study.

Some biblical scholars have raised questions about the authenticity of this letter, not in regard to its significance in the developing theology of the early church, but with regard to the assertion that it was written by the apostle Paul. Because the literary structure or style does not match that of some of Paul’s authenticated letters, some scholars believe that a fellow Christian who accompanied Paul on his missionary journeys wrote it on Paul’s behalf. The author was probably not trying to be deceitful by claiming that Paul wrote this epistle because he knew that this is what Paul said or might have said.

Other biblical scholars disagree. They believe Paul wrote the letter while he was imprisoned in Rome. They believe the differences in literary style are not great enough to warrant the assumption of a different author.

I am not a biblical scholar. I have never studied New Testament Greek and I am not competent to make a judgment on this matter. I also don’t care who wrote it. Let me explain why it makes no difference to me whether it was Paul or a fellow missionary who accompanied Paul on his travels.

When I read scripture, I am not interested in whether something actually happened as described. I am not interested in determining who wrote a particular passage and to whom it was addressed. I am interested in whether the passage is true on a psychological and spiritual level. I am interested in the implications of the passage for my faith, for the deepening of my relationship with God through Christ.

If the passage of scripture doesn’t strengthen or enlighten my faith; if it doesn’t help me to deepen my relationship with God, and if I can’t see how it would do this for my parishioners or counselees as we struggle together with what Orlo Strunk, one of my professors at Boston University, called “the eternal recurrent problems of human existence,” I am not particularly interested in it. This, by the way, applies to a lot of

passages in the Bible and a lot of passages in the other holy books of the world religions, as well.

I don't particularly care who wrote Paul's Letter to the Ephesians because the teaching contained in it strikes me as profoundly true. When I say it resonates as true, I mean that I find it consistent with the teachings of Jesus; I believe it gives us guidelines for living a healthy and fulfilling life. I am less interested in an analysis of the literary style of this letter than I am of its meaning, its message, the helpfulness of its teaching.

As you know, I like the approach to spiritual teachings that was articulated by the Buddha 2,500 years ago. The Buddha said, "Don't believe something just because your teacher tells you it is true. Don't believe something just because it is written in sacred scripture. Don't even believe something because I, the Buddha, tell you it is true. Try it. Try it out in your own life. If it strikes you as true or helpful, hold it fast. If it doesn't, let it go."

Let's apply this validation criterion to Jesus' teachings. For example, we read in the Bible that Jesus told Peter he should forgive those who offend him not seven times but seventy times seven. (That's 490, by the way.) Don't believe this because Jesus purportedly said it. Don't believe this because it is written in the Bible. Don't believe this because you heard it from me in one of my Sunday morning sermons. Try it out!

First try forgiving someone who has hurt you. This person may be living or dead, part of your present life or not. Begin by trying to understand him/her. Try to remember, to realize how often what people say and do is unconsciously motivated. Even though they are hurting you, they aren't always consciously intending to hurt you; they are doing the best they can, but they are not playing with a full deck.

In the case of people who are consciously trying to hurt you, try to remember, to realize how often the intentionally hurtful interactions between people arise out of ignorance, weakness, or fear. With people who intentionally try to hurt you, just as with people who unintentionally hurt you, you need to create or strengthen healthy boundaries between you and the other person. Once you do, once you are safe, then you can try to feel compassion for the person who has hurt you. So, try this and see how it feels to you.

Then try holding onto your resentment. Tell the story of how the person hurt you over and over again to yourself, and tell the story to anyone who will listen. By doing this, by repeating the narrative over and over, you can keep the feelings of hurt and righteous indignation alive. Identify yourself as a victim. Nurture your resentment and

let it smolder deep within you. Harbor fantasies of revenge. Keep your hatred close to your heart. Try this and see how it feels to you.

In your relationship with people who have hurt you, try it both ways. Then choose the one that feels better. Choose the one that leads you into a more beautiful, loving, and compassionate experience of life. Take the option that is most consistent with the heart and the mind of Jesus, and then let the other one go. If you really try them both, I'm not particularly worried about which option you will choose!

I do want to say, however, that holding onto the hurt, the resentment, the anger may be an important step in establishing, maintaining, or strengthening healthy boundaries between you and the person who has hurt you. It may be an important part of the healing process. Once you become stronger and establish healthy boundaries, you'll find that you can let the anger go. You simply won't need it anymore.

This, of course, does not apply to narcissistic people; they always see themselves as victims, even when they are the perpetrators, the ones who causing the hurt. They have a stake in not letting go of their resentments. But these people are not apt to be listening to or reading my Sunday morning sermons! I think they would be quite annoyed by most of them!

Try out the Buddha's validation criterion when it comes to the spiritual practices of prayer, meditation, and worship. Don't pray, meditate, or attend Sunday worship because it tells you to do so in the Bible. Don't pray, meditate, or attend Sunday worship because Jesus tells you to do so. Don't pray, meditate, or attend Sunday worship because I, your pastor, encourage you to engage in these spiritual practices and lay a guilt trip on you when you don't (which, by the way, I am not above doing!). Try them! See if they bring you closer to God, to other people, and to the deepest parts of yourself. If these spiritual disciplines don't help you deepen your relationship with God, let them go. It would be stupid to pray, meditate, or come to worship if it were of no benefit to you!

By the way, if you really try these spiritual disciplines, I'm not particularly worried about whether you will continue them or not!

In the third chapter of his letter, as we heard this morning, Paul writes to his parishioners about what he calls "the mystery of Christ." I love this phrase: "the mystery of Christ." I suspect that for Paul, "the mystery of Christ" is the resurrection, the realization that Christ lives in the world and in us. Remember, Paul never met the historical Jesus of Nazareth. He encountered or, more correctly, was encountered by the risen Christ while he was traveling on the road to Damascus. This was when Paul

realized that Christ had risen from the dead, that Christ was alive in the world and also in him. This was the experience, the realization, the epiphany that totally changed Paul's life!

You see, Paul did not preach the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ because he felt this was his duty. His theology, his beliefs did not come to him as a result of deductive reasoning. Paul's beliefs, his faith, and his ministry rose out of an intense personal experience that transformed his life! In his letters he often recalls the kind of person he was before he met Christ, when he was an enemy of Christ and actively persecuted Christ's followers. The experience on the road to Damascus totally changed his life. He liked the person he now was! This is why he could preach with such conviction, why he could preach with such joy!

In the first section of Ephesians 3, Paul goes on to say that he wants to help everyone, both Jew and Gentile, "see" the plan of the mystery which is hidden in God. His use of the verb "see" goes back to the verse in Chapter 1 where Paul expresses the hope that "the eyes of our heart might be enlightened." I love that phrase! Paul wants us to see God through enlightened eyes, through vision that has been shaped by the teachings of Jesus and the presence of the Holy Spirit within us. Paul is telling us that we have access to God *in* or *through* Christ Jesus.

By the way, don't believe this just because Paul said it or because it is written in the Bible. Try it out in your own life! See if *being in* Christ Jesus helps you to see others more clearly. See if being in Christ Jesus helps you to respond to others more lovingly. See if being in Christ Jesus brings you closer to God. See if being in Christ Jesus helps you to "tear down the walls that divide us from each other."

Paul closes his letter with a prayer for his parishioners. This is also a prayer to us and for us. He says,

*For this reason, I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love.*

Paul prays that we may be "strengthened in our inner being." This is one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit that comes to us if we live our lives as disciples of the Way. When we discover the Holy Spirit, the presence of the risen Christ within us, this presence strengthens the core of our inner being. It pulls us back to our true center. This gives us not only the courage and the strength to deal with life, but also the wisdom to

live our life as God would have us live it, not only to rise above the anxieties and fears that beset us, but to bring a loving, caring, compassionate Christian spirit to everything we do.

When, as Paul says, we are “strengthened in our inner being” through our discovery of the Christ who dwells within us; when, as Paul says, “Christ dwells in our hearts through faith;” then, Paul says, our lives will be “rooted and grounded in love.” Then we will know “the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge,” and we will be “filled with the fullness of God.” This is an absolutely beautiful passage!

And it’s true! However, don’t take my word for it. Try it out! Discover or rediscover the Spirit of Christ within you! Place yourself “in” Christ Jesus by taking on his heart and mind, and then see how this shapes the way you see your brothers and sisters. See if it leads you to see them “with the eyes of your heart enlightened.” Let Christ dwell within your heart and see whether you will find yourself “filled with all the fullness of God.”

Maybe it won’t work for you. If it doesn’t, then I would advise you to do something different on Sunday mornings. Perhaps you could stay home and read the paper to catch up on the latest examples of insanity in our government, in our nation, and in governments and nations around the world. Perhaps you could try to understand why your beloved Red Sox and my beloved Yankees are fighting for last place in the American League East, why the Bruins and the Celtics choked, and why our hopes and dreams for the New England Patriots, at least since Tom Brady left, are so often dashed on the rocks of despair.

By the way, if you really open yourself to the potentially transforming experience of worship, I’m not particularly worried about what you will be doing this time next Sunday!

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson  
The First Community Church of Southborough  
[www.firstcommunitychurch.com](http://www.firstcommunitychurch.com)  
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An audio version of this sermon will be posted on our church website later this week.

## **RESPONSE TO THE WORD: A CALL TO STEWARDSHIP**

This morning, as we reflect upon the stewardship of our time, talent, and treasure, that which we have received and that which we share with the world through this little

church, let us return to the guidance of the Lebanese mystic Kahlil Gibran who, in *The Prophet*, told us,

*There are those who give little of the much which they have—and they give it for recognition, and their hidden desire makes their gifts unwholesome.*

*And there are those who have little and give it all.*

*These are the believers in life and the bounty of life, and their coffer is never empty.*

*There are those who give with joy, and their joy is their reward.*

*And there are those who give with pain, and that pain is their baptism.*

*And there are those who give and know not pain in giving, nor do they seek joy, nor give with mindfulness of virtue; they give as in yonder valley the myrtle breathes its fragrance into space.*

*Through the hands of such as these God speaks, and from behind their eyes He smiles upon the earth.*

Gibran, like Jesus, is reminding you that while your gift is important, while your gift is an important contribution to the betterment of the world, the spirit in which your gift is given is even more important to your soul. Are you like those who “give little of the much which they have?” Or are you among those who “have little and give it all?” Those who do not believe in life hoard; those who believe in life share. Believers in life give with joy, a joy that arises within them simply because they are able to give. They give freely and spontaneously, just as flowers release their beautiful scent into the air to brighten the spirits of all who come into their presence.

When we not only share what we have with others, with the world, but share with a sense of joy, as Gibran says, “God smiles upon the earth.”

Let us consecrate the offerings that we place in the offering plate and on the altar of our hearts and dedicate them to God’s ongoing creative work in the world. We ask God to bless our church with all wisdom in the use of the many gifts you share with us, that they may truly go to bring about God’s kingdom on earth.