

A SERVANT OF THE MYSTERY OF CHRIST

Ephesians 3:1-21

Key Verse: 3:7

by Pastor Abraham Kim

"I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power." (vs. 7)

A prominent preacher pointed out that the greatest problem of Christians today is their lack of the knowledge of God and spirituality. This is precisely what Apostle Paul saw the Ephesians needed most. Do you know who the richest person in the world is? He is a Mexican business magnate named Carlos Slim, who has a wealth of 70 billion dollars. But all of his wealth is but "pennies" when compared with the spiritual wealth we have in Christ. If we live like poor children not knowing the riches we have, our heavenly Father will feel sorry.

In today's passage, Apostle Paul tells us about the boundless riches we have in Christ. He also shows us a glorious vision of the church which reveals the manifold wisdom of God. Then he prays that the saints may grow to all the fullness of God. The apostle wrote this chapter from his deep personal experience. May God help us to grasp the riches we have in Christ and grow to the fullness of God.

A prisoner of Christ Jesus for the Gentiles (vv. 1-9)

Verse 1 reads, "For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles--" Paul was suffering as a prisoner to Rome. But he confessed that he was the prisoner of Christ Jesus. Why? Because his heart was bound by the love of Jesus Christ. Christ became the treasure, hope, and purpose of his life. When he became a prisoner of Christ, he was freed from all bondage in life. Why did Paul become a prisoner? Because he preached the mystery of Christ.

Here "mystery" is not something like a detective story or a horror movie. It is a truth that was hidden by God and is now being revealed to those who are being saved. Look at verse 6, "This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus." Here we notice the word "together" three times. "Together" in the original text means "sharing equality in every way." Since the fall, it has been the most difficult word for humanity to embrace. Think about the discrimination, divisions and conflicts that have existed and still exist among peoples, nations, generations, and genders. Who can demolish the walls between people? Jesus proclaimed, "The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!" (Mk 1:15) Jesus welcomed social outcasts into his kingdom. Jesus welcomed Gentile sinners into his kingdom. He shed his blood to reconcile all of his people to God and to one another. Jesus Christ is our peace (2:14). In Christ, all peoples on earth are made equal members of God's family, equal sharers of the riches in Christ, and equal heirs of the inheritance in God's kingdom. In the Old Testament, God spoke about the salvation of all peoples through the Christ. But this wondrous new society of the redeemed people was a mystery until the coming of Christ. This mystery was revealed to Paul, a Jewish hardliner and persecutor of the church, when God forgave his sins and redeemed him through the blood of Christ.

Verse 7 reads, "I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power." With the revelation of the mystery of Christ, God also revealed to Paul the good work he had prepared for him to do (2:10). The Lord said, "This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name" (Ac 9:15-16). The good work for Paul was to preach the gospel to the Gentiles and the scattered Jews. This work involved much suffering. He would be misunderstood, hated, flogged, stoned, imprisoned, and martyred. But Paul was most thankful for his mission, for he always remembered what kind of sinner he was. He said in verse 8a, "Although I am less than the least of all the Lord's people, this grace was given me..." As a servant of the gospel, what did Paul do? Verses 8b and 9 read, "...to preach the boundless riches of Christ, and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things."

As God's servants, we are called to preach the riches of Christ. We should know the boundless riches of Christ. Then we should teach the full gospel so that God's flock under our care may have life and have it to the full (Jn 10:10b).

This whole epistle enumerates the riches we have in Christ. They are God's grace of choice and predestination for sonship; redemption and the forgiveness of sins. They are the spiritual life, power, sanctification, and wisdom and knowledge of God and his will through the Holy Spirit. They are the hope of the resurrection and the glorious inheritance of the kingdom of God. They are a holy and victorious new life and peace, unity and fellowship among believers. And, most of all, the riches are God's love through which all these spiritual blessings came. Nothing in the world can give us any of these riches. Praise God who gave us the boundless riches of Christ and a glorious mission of preaching them!

God helped Paul to serve his work through the working of his power. No one can do God's work by his own ability. God works in us through our obedience. We must depend on God and seek his help every day. How did God manifest his power through Paul? God gave him a deep understanding of the mystery of Christ through the word of God. God gave him courage to proclaim God's truth. God gave him love to embrace even his enemies. God gave him strength, peace and joy to endure all hardships. And God manifested his power through the miracles of transforming, healing, and restoring people through his ministry. When Paul humbly submitted himself to Christ, the Holy Spirit worked in him to have the character, mind, and heart of Christ. He was filled with the compassion of Jesus. He was filled with Jesus' zeal and vision. He had Jesus' humility and endurance. So he could say, "I can do all things through him who gives me strength" (Php 4:13).

Let's read verse 7 again with my name in "I." God has also revealed his mystery to each of us. He has also revealed the good work he has prepared for us to do. God has helped us to serve his work through the working of his power. We need more and more of God's help to serve his greater work. May we always remember God's grace! May we lay down our pride and self-reliance and humbly submit ourselves to God.

The manifold wisdom of God (vv. 10-13)

As we preach the riches of Christ, God works out his purpose for the whole church. What is God's grand plan for his church? Read verses 10-11. "His 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, according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord." These verses open our minds to understand what is being done in the spiritual world. God is showing his work to the angels through the church. We don't see the angels, but they see us. As they watch people being saved and God's wisdom being displayed, good angels shout "Wows!" while demons scream "Boos!" God displayed his glory and wisdom through the creation of the world. God has been displaying his manifold wisdom through the re-creation of his people. The word "manifold" means "many-colored" and was used to describe flowers, crowns, embroidered cloth and woven carpets. God is displaying his wondrous and many-colored wisdom through the church. He does this according to his eternal purpose that was accomplished in Christ Jesus.

In Ephesians, Paul describes the redeemed people of God using four metaphors: citizens, members of God's household, members of one body, and members of a temple (1:22-23, 2:18-20). We are citizens of God's eternal kingdom. All of our fellow citizens are a new creation--a new people. As members of one body with Christ as our head, we are all interconnected and we support one another. As a new creation, the church is a revolutionary society without any distinction. The church is a shadow of the eternal kingdom of God to come. God the Father and God the Son live in each of us and in the church through the Holy Spirit. We must always remember that God is the Lord of our church and community. Do you know that the Holy Spirit dwells in you? We should feel God's presence and seek his help daily. We should follow the will of our Head, Christ. Most of all, we must believe in the Triune God who is working in our ministry.

No matter how people see the church, the church is central to God's history. When we ponder how God reveals his salvation to people, we marvel at his wisdom. Those whom we could never imagine would believe become Christians. People who look as if they would never change are changed. Throughout history, the church has been persecuted, but she stood victoriously while all the worldly powers perished. In this troubled world, even unbelievers find their hope in the church for truth, love, and righteousness. Let's pray that all churches in America may stand for the truth, love, and righteousness. The church is the light of the world. She is mysterious, invincible and glorious. God continues his sanctifying work in each believer so that all churches together shine with the beauty of his design. Do you see the glorious vision of the church that displays the riches of the Christ?

In the church, each member has its unique role and position within the whole as God assigned. What is our role as an organization in God's church? We are Jesus' disciples who are committed to world campus mission. If we compare the whole church to a military, we are among the marines that engage in the battle at the frontlines. We diligently go to campuses to invite students, nourish them with the words of God, and send most of them to local

churches, though we don't like the last part. If we see our ministries from an investment-profit concept, we are not doing a good business. But if we see our ministries from God's point of view, we are doing a beautiful ministry. What is the inmost heart of God? It is to seek and to save the lost. World mission is God's heart-beat. Think about God's sorrow when Christians do little to rescue the perishing people. Think about how God is pleased and comforted when he sees us diligently inviting students and teaching them the gospel. Our one-to-one Bible study is a very powerful tool of evangelism. Therefore most of those who studied in UBF become Christians. When Bible students leave, shepherds are sorrowful. But there are cheers of the angels in heaven on behalf of our shepherds. The Lord will say, "Well done, my faithful servants. You added many members to the family of God." When we enter the kingdom of God, we will be surprised at so many people coming to us to say "Thank you! Thank you!" Who will they be? They are those who met Christ through UBF Bible studies and all of those who were saved through their ministries. When we serve God's purpose with a big perspective, we can joyfully serve one-to-one ministry. We should continue evangelizing and disciple-raising through one-to-one Bible studies. As we do so, God will raise many disciples who will keep the beauty of our ministries and serve God's purpose for his whole church. All members in our community are equally precious and indispensable. Our Lord valued one soul more than the whole world. The late Dr. Samuel Lee labored in the pains of childbirth in order to help many individuals to be restored. Mother Sarah Barry daily serves many persons through Bible studies and counseling. We should value each coworker and each Bible student more than the whole world. The major cause of conflict between members is seeing the weak side of others rather than seeing their strong side and becoming judgmental or demanding. This is not God's mind and heart. We should remember how God has patiently served us in hope and love. We should accept our coworkers and students as they are and serve them with God's hope and love. Each person does certain things well and other things not well. We can respect all members equally when we recognize their gifts, encourage them to work together according to their gifts, and value their contributions equally. When our chapter becomes such a loving and respectful community, all members are happy and the Holy Spirit is pleased to work powerfully among us.

Look at verse 13, "I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory." Paul encourages the Ephesian Christians not to be discouraged because of his sufferings. Paul shared God's joy when people approached God with freedom and confidence in Christ and through faith in him (12). Paul found supreme glory and joy in his service for God's wondrous work of building his church. May we also find our supreme glory and joy in our service for building up God's glorious church!

Be filled to the measure of the fullness of God (vv. 14-21)

Now Paul prays on his knees for the Ephesians. Paul prays for all believers to be sanctified so that they may be filled to the measure of the fullness of God (19b). What a glorious and fantastic prayer topic this is! But he was not fantasizing. He had a clear understanding what believers need in order to grow to the measure of the fullness of God. He prays for three things: One, our inner being may be strengthened by God's power. Two, Christ may dwell in our hearts. Three, we may grasp and know the love of Christ. These are like three upward steps toward the fullness of God.

First, "Be strengthened in your inner being." Read verse 16. "I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being..." Our spirit is made alive but our inner being needs to be strengthened by the power of the Holy Spirit. What makes us weak? It is our sins and wounds. In our weakness, we cannot resist the devil and his temptations; we cannot build up sound relationships. The root of our sinful nature is deep. In order to uproot it, we need a deep study of the word of God and sincere repentance (Heb 4:12). Personal reflection and application of the word of God is essential for inner healing. James 5:16 says, "Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed." We should keep the beautiful Christian fellowship of sharing testimonies together and praying for each other in love. Our past wounds make us sick. Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners" (Mk 2:17). No one who ever came to Jesus failed to receive healing. Do you still have any sin problem or wounds? Please come to Jesus and pray, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean" (Mt 8:2). Do you still have any anger or bitterness or sorrow? Please come to Jesus, sincerely confessing that you need healing. The blood of Jesus has power to cleanse and sanctify us from any sin and sickness by the power of the Holy Spirit (Heb 9:13-14). Second, "Christ may dwell in your hearts." Look at verse 17a. "... so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith." This prayer is closely related with both the first and the third prayer topics, for union with Christ is the core of a Christian's life. Here the word "dwell" is for a permanent resident, not a guest. So this prayer is that we may always be ruled by Christ in our hearts through faith. Because Paul had Christ who was crucified, resurrected and glorified in his heart, he could be more than a conqueror in all hardships through the working of the power of the Holy Spirit. He expressed this experience in the phrase "in Christ." The phrase appears 216 times in the Pauline epistles, including 27 times in Ephesians. We should give Christ the first place in our hearts. When we do so, we can

confess like the Apostle Paul, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me" (Ga 2:20).

Third, "Grasp and know the love of Christ. Read verses 17b-19a. "And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ and to know this love that surpasses knowledge ..." Next Paul prays that we be rooted and grounded in love. Here "love" is agape. Anyone should examine whether or not his foundation is solidly laid on the love of God and love for God. Based on this solid foundation, Paul prays that we may have power to grasp and know how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ. To "grasp" is to lay hold of it and make it our own. To "know" is gaining intimacy with a person through experience. A Bible scholar said, "The love of Christ is broad enough to encompass all mankind, long enough to last for eternity, deep enough to reach the most degraded sinner, and high enough to exalt him to heaven."

Christ's love is fully manifested on the cross. The most difficult thing for us is to bear those who are proud and rebellious. The characteristic of proud people is that they are groundlessly proud. They give deep hurts by their words and actions. This is what all mankind has done to God. How much is the holy God hurt by the evils and rebellion of people who reject their Creator? Martin Luther said, "If I were God, I would judge the world ten times a day." Yes, mankind deserves what he said. But God withheld his wrath by his compassion, and his justice by his love. Instead of judging, God decided to forgive and restore a love relationship with us by any means. An agapic love is possible through a decision, not feeling. God did what was the most difficult thing for him to do. He gave his one and only Son as a sacrifice. The Son emptied his glory as God and became a servant. He bore the sins, weaknesses and wickedness of people to the end. He gave his life for us all. On the cross, he prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Lk 23:34a). In his prayer, there is no hint of accusation. Jesus understood why people sin. He forgave them and prayed for God's forgiveness.

Christ's love is an unconditional love. It is a sacrificial love. It is a life-giving love. The width, length, height and depth of Christ's love can be grasped and known through experiencing Christ in our lives. Paul wanted to know Christ and his love by participating in Christ's sufferings, becoming like him in his death (Php 3:10). What does it mean to become like Christ in his death? In order to know Christ and his love, something has to die in us. What is it that has to die? It is another love—the love of self. This self-love is the root of sin.

God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them (1Jn 4:16). To Paul, to be filled to the measure of the fullness of God was to grow to be like Christ in love. Paul's prayer teaches us what the mark of Christian spirituality is. It is love. It also teaches us what the ultimate goal of discipleship and church community building is. It is to help each member through our examples to become a man and a woman who grasp Christ's love and practice it. "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." (Jn 13:34-35) What did the Lord say the mark of a disciple is? Is it talent? Is it devotion? It is love. There is nothing stronger than love. Love is power. Love does not make us tired. A mother never feels tired of caring for her child because of her love. Paul could serve God and people by God's power in all hardships because he was filled with the love of Christ. Are we tired or troubled? Do you have a sense of loss? Do we have conflicts with our coworkers? Let's pray that we may grasp and know Christ's love. When our church becomes a community of love, we will shine as a light in the world, God will be glorified, and there will be a great revival through the powerful working of the Holy Spirit.

We have learned and seen the glorious vision of the church that displays the riches of the Christ. Where are we in the measure of the fullness of God? Can the glory of God fill our community as it once filled the temple? By mere human efforts, it won't happen. But we have amazing resources which make it happen. Let's read verses 20-21. "Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen." Our heavenly Father is able to do far beyond what we ask or imagine by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Son cares for his church, interceding for us even at this moment. Let's not be discouraged by our situations. We started this new year with the words, "Always pray and not give up." Let's pray to our Father by faith so that we may carry out our glorious mission through the working of his power by the Holy Spirit. Amen.