

Adria W. Pearson
Ephesians 3:14-21

Grace Community Church, Tucson
August 15, 2010

"Transformation on the Inside"

We've been studying Ephesians, chs 1-2 ... Paul recounting the amazing work of God in Christ Jesus, about all that he did for us in the cross and in the resurrection, about how he brought down the walls of hostility between us and God and between us and others, about how he is creating a new community, the church, to demonstrate this hope to the world...

I have a question for you... how come if this is true, and if it is true that Jesus, when he was on earth, talked about the amazing, scandalous love of God, the relentless grace, about the healing and freedom and life and truth available in following him and being his disciple, --here's my question, why are there so many Christians whose lives haven't changed? why are there so many people who claim to be Christians, but the gospel hasn't made any difference in their lives?

Because if everything has changed, as the Scriptures say, that the event of Jesus changes everything, then why are there so many people looking at the church and saying, "I'm not going to bother with those hypocrites?" -- Gallup polls report that 78 percent of Americans say they are Christians and half of them say they have been "born again" -- why are the divorce rates and instances of domestic abuse among Christians no better than those of unbelievers? why is there some much unethical and unloving behavior among us?

-- I know someone who works in a restaurant on Sundays, and she says the church people are sometimes the rudest. What is wrong with this picture? Isn't Christianity supposed to change us?

If we are honest with ourselves, we can't just point at others... We aren't as changed as we wish we were. There is the change God promises in the Gospel, the glorious freedom and healing and joy that comes with Christ, and then, there's me, living a pointless struggle. So, we wear masks: feel the need to hold a mask of presentability over our unworthiness, a mask of happiness over fear and insecurity, a mask of busyness over desperation. Often we feel that we are hopeless, stuck with our own sinful selves, and no matter how hard we try, we can't seem to be better people.

But there is another way! There is good news that changes people! Hear the prayer of the apostle Paul in Ephesians... **[read Eph 3:14-21]**

Paul prays that we, God's people, for whom Christ died, will be transformed in our inner beings, that we will experience the love, the power, the strength of God. Paul prays for the strengthening of the Spirit, that we will have knowledge of the unknowable -- the limitless love of God. And he can't even get far in his prayer without bursting into praise at this powerful God who is, was, and will be at work in ways that we cannot even imagine.

The work of God in Christ is not just meant to be a password to give to Peter at heaven's gate, it is not just a secret handshake to get into God's crowd. The work of Christ is meant to transform us, to give us hope and a future! I think so many people see God as a vending machine: I put in faith, and out comes salvation, I put in good effort, and out comes blessing. We so often boil Christianity down to into a transaction between us and God! And if that is all that we think it is, it doesn't change us. It's just a transaction, not transformation.

But the gospel, the good news of Christ, turned the world upside down! It is meant to change us from

the inside out, to take away our fear and insecurities, to heal our deep wounds and shame, to lead us into a flourishing life of freedom and joy! the good news of what God has done for us is meant to change us completely! and it is out of our gratitude, our transformed hearts, that we are motivated "to act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with our God." That is why Paul *first* talks about the good news in 1-3, then spends the next three chapters instructing the church how to live out this new community that God has created. We only can be the church in the world and expand the kingdom of God if *we* are changed, if *we* experience the power and love of God for ourselves.

In Christ, we are moved into a new place, a new status, and this will begin to change us, if we let it, if we take intentional steps to open ourselves up to God and learn more about him. It is not just a transaction, just assent to a set of beliefs. Change happens when we make ourselves available to God and let him do the work. I'll talk more about the HOW in a minute. But first, I want to talk more about Paul's prayer: that we might experience in our inner selves the power and love of God.

Paul prays that we will experience the power of God at work in our lives and in our church, and that power will strengthen us on the inside. He says elsewhere that *the same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead lives in you!* Wow! When that same powerful Spirit is in control, people are healed of diseases; fathers and sons who have not spoken in years are reconciled; terrible tragedies are turned into good; the frightened, battered woman finds meaning in life once again; addictions are overcome, the blind see, the lame walk, the poor sing for joy! This is what the power of God can do! Imagine what could happen in your life and in the lives of those around you, if that power of God got a hold of you! The same God that set the world in motion, the same Jesus who walked on the water, the same Spirit that raised Jesus Christ from the dead can do amazing things in and through you!

It is my hope and prayer that we, individually and as a church, will experience *that* power of God. But I think most of us, at a more foundational level, need to know and experience the limitless *love* of God, shown to us in Christ Jesus.

Let me ask you this -- do you truly believe that God loves you beyond limit? that you are known fully, and loved? -- for the scriptures say that God sees everything, nothing is hidden from him, and yet, despite, or perhaps because of that, God loves you. He loved you so much that he created you so that he would have someone to love. He loves you as you are, and not as you should be. We are not loved because we are in any way good or lovable, but because of his grace and unconditional love, because God IS love.

God our Father loves you as you are right now. Ephesians 2:4-5... While we were still sinners, far from God, he did his work of love. He was the one who pursued us, who moved heaven and earth, that we might once again have peace and life with him.

I think most of us have trouble believing this. Because one of two things--pride or fear:

1. Pride -- because if God truly loves us, then it is really not about us, it is about *him*. It is not about how wonderful, how scrubbed clean *we* are. It's about his grace and how we didn't earn it--He's the good guy. This is hard for us, because we are taught by society that we are in charge, that we must do the work, do it all. And it's embarrassing to admit that we can't change ourselves on our own, that we are in desperate need of God. So often it's an issue of pride, because we want to accomplish it for ourselves. Perhaps even an issue of resentment, since we make such an effort at being good people, we resent how God extravagantly gives his grace to people who don't seem to deserve it, who haven't

worked as hard as we have. But the gospel is not about deserving--thank God!--it is about God's grace.

Some of us may hold ourselves aloof because we think this is all too good to be true...

2. we're afraid, wary -- we don't actually have confidence in his love or in his character. But there is no reason to be afraid. When the Scriptures talk about fearing the Lord, they are talking about wonder and amazement that shuts you up and drives you to your knees. But does that mean that God is scary--the Scriptures tell us that God is good, that he there is no dark side of God. God IS love, he is good, and he is faithful.

It's hard for us to believe this because we may not have had good examples of love, and we often don't see this kind of unconditional love. God loves you more than you can imagine, and he will never, ever abandon you. His love will never ever let you down. It says in Romans that nothing can separate us from the love of God. He loves you no matter what--no matter what has happened to you or what you have done! *You are God's beloved child*. We were meant to belong to God, and from the beginning, he has been and is still at work to bring us to himself.

If you have a hard time believing this, I encourage you to read again the parables of Jesus, and discover again the reckless generosity and extravagant love of our heavenly Father. Or read the Psalms -- There was a time in my life where I really needed a constant reminder of God's love, so I read Psalm 103 every day--every day for a year or so I read, "The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love... for as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us." -- words deep inside me.

There are a lot of people who claim to be Christians, whose lives are unchanged, who are the same mean, greedy people they were before. And if we are honest with ourselves, we aren't where we wish we were. I believe this happens because we have a limited view of the gospel, and we haven't really experienced the power and love of God. Writer Brennan Manning once said, "Christianity happens when people experience the reckless love of God."

Paul's prayer is that we will know Christ and that through the Spirit, God's power will permeate every part of our being. And that the experience and awareness of God's power and love will transform us.

The next question, of course, is *how*? How do we experience this? How do we let the Spirit have it's way in us? *We intentionally open ourselves up to God*. I say intentionally, because I think this is a choice and commitment, a daily choice and a lifelong commitment. It's a choice to listen, to read, to grow, to know.

This is not about effort -- I'm not saying that you should try harder. There is a huge difference between intentionally putting yourself in a place where God can work --- and *doing*, trying harder, in order to change ourselves or earn approval. I'm saying there are ways to intentionally open yourself up to God and then let *him* do the work.

Let me show you something that helped me understand this--this illustration from John Ortberg (although the drawing is mine):

- * us and God, abyss
- * salvation through Jesus, God's grace bridges the gap
- * who I am, and who God wants me to be, abyss -- I feel that I need to build my own bridge
- * God's grace also bridges this gap, work of the Spirit

It's not about changing ourselves... This is God's work too. But we have to be intentional to make ourselves available to God. We intentionally put ourselves in places where God can do his work in us, where God can change us. Kind of like if you knew you needed open heart surgery, you wouldn't grab an exacto knife and some rubbing alcohol and get to work. You let the experts do it, heart surgeons. You would make an appointment, and then show up. You walk in, and they would take it from there. Like that, we make appointments with God, we show up, and say, "Here I am, do your work in me. You are the potter, I am the clay."

This passage shows us some ways to be intentional and available for God to do the work, ways for us to show up.

1. prayer -- seems so obvious we might miss it! Paul prayed for this, so why can't we? This is the kind of prayer that God loves to hear: "God, change me. God, make me a person of truth. A man of integrity, a woman of grace. God, turn off the lies that are playing in my mind like a broken record, telling me that I don't matter. Give me new repeating messages about your incredible, unrelenting love." I urge you to spend time in prayer by yourself and with others. Learn different kinds of prayer.

2. community -- this is a harder one for us individualistic, independent Westerners -- but it's a huge part of the Gospel: God has done all this work to create a new kind of community. He calls us into the body of Christ, a new tribe where God is the boss. Look again at vv 17-18: "I pray that you, together with all the Lord's people" -- in community is where we get a fuller picture of God, in community is where we both experience and practice love. God is at work in powerful ways through the gathering of his people. [testimony of Kat and Joel -- they are on the journey of transformation since they started intentionally hanging out with God's people.]

3. knowledge -- vv 18-19 -- as we grow in knowledge, we will grow in understanding, and grow in Christ. How do we gain more knowledge of God and his ways? Reading, listening, and studying Scripture, both by ourselves and with other people, for it is the record that we have of God's words and of God's works. Read books, take classes, study God's ways in history and in the world today.

4. worship -- vv 20-21 -- Paul ends his prayer with a short doxology, or short praise song. He is so overwhelmed by the deep knowledge and experience of God that he bursts out into praise. Worship is a place where we learn to praise God, a place where we are pulled beyond ourselves. Abraham Heschel, a Hebrew scholar once wrote, "Worship is an act of inner agreement with God." Music, singing, the sacraments can all touch us deeply, remind us of our awesome, loving God.

There are other ways to experience God's power and love, other ways to see God at work in the world-- such as service in the church, loving the least and lost, even counseling, or the traditional spiritual disciplines. That is for you to explore. What leads you into God's presence? What reminds you of the good news?

So, I have a challenge for you:

I challenge you *to make a choice to be open to God,*

and then, *to take one step of intention this week:* choose one of these areas we talked about: prayer, community, knowledge, worship, and make a commitment. "I will intentionally put myself in a place where God can work: I will _____." I will join a small group, read a Psalm a day, learn more about contemplative prayer, or make Sunday worship a priority. I will take this one step to open myself up to God and experience his power and love in my life.

And to tell someone. You won't really move on it unless you've told someone about it.

If we intentionally make ourselves available to God, open ourselves to experience the power and love of God, and then can we be changed. Once we begin to have the tiniest awareness of being loved, that seed that will grow, if we let it, grow and grow into a strong tree that will bear fruit in all seasons and will not wither in times of drought. And when we experience God and let the Spirit do its work, we will be motivated to be the Church in this world that so desperately needs to see and hear the good news.

In a moment, the worship team is going to come forward now and lead us in a time of response. Feel free to use this time to stand or sit, to sing or pray -- use this time to meet with God and to respond to him. Let's pray.