

Ephesians 6:21-24
(Psalm 133; John 17:20-26)
“Finally”

Introduction

As we come to an end of our study of Ephesians, it is important, I think, that we not miss the final note Paul sounds. Several very fine commentaries I own that go into great detail on the body of this letter practically skip these final words, as though they are a merely insignificant afterthought. But I think that they serve to summarize Paul’s call to live out the reality of the gospel, a reality that usually occupied at least half of his letters. His practice was to proclaim the gospel of Christ in the first half of his letters and then, at some point, write, “therefore,” and begin to draw out the implications of the gospel.

In fact, I think that what he describes in the second half of his letters actually amounts to more than “implications” of the gospel. For the gospel involves nothing less than God taking human flesh, and such a flesh and blood gospel cannot be declared faithfully in word alone. The word must always “become flesh” (John 1:14) and be lived out for it to have the reality and power to transform lives.

It is easy for us, who only know Paul through his letters and through Luke’s account in the book of Acts, which often focus on his controversies, to find Paul a brilliant, energetic teacher and missionary, but a rather difficult person, someone with whom we are not sure at all that we would want to spend much time. However, that was clearly not what Paul was really like, nor how those who knew him felt about him.

One of the most moving scenes in Acts is an account of Paul’s final visit with the elders of this Ephesian church, whom Paul had asked to meet him in Miletus on his way to what turned out to be his final visit to Jerusalem. Paul reminds them of his ministry among them and calls on them to care for the church for which Jesus died and of which he made them overseers. He tells them that they will never see his face again and commends them to the Lord. The scene ends with these words:

And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. And there was much weeping on the part of all; they embraced Paul and kissed him, being sorrowful most of all because of the word he had spoken, that they would not see his face again. And they accompanied him to the ship (Acts 20:36-38).

When we read this, we realize how much Paul loved this Ephesian church, and how much its people loved him. So it should not surprise us that he ends this letter with an assurance of Christ’s love for them and with a call for them to respond with “love incorruptible” for Christ. So, also, we will end this study with a reminder of five things that the church should always remember, ending with the call to love.

Body

1. Remember that salvation is a life:

As we have just said, Paul is never satisfied merely to state the doctrines of grace. He always seeks to apply the gospel to key representative areas of life. So here we have heard him call us to imitate Christ in marriage, in family and in the workplace.

The call, as we noted, was both radically counter-cultural, since Greco-Roman culture was built upon an oppressive social structure, and it was counter-intuitive, since Paul insists that the way to realize godly, Christ-like power and authority, is not by taking the highest place, but by humbling oneself and seeking to use one's position to lift up those entrusted to us. Paul expressed this principle in these words: "submit to one another out of reverence for Christ" (5:21).

The key is to remember that in every relationship of life, our model is Jesus Christ, who laid aside his power and glory in order to bring all those entrusted to him to a place where they could share fully in his life and ministry. He is Lord, and all glory is his by right, but he saved us by humbling himself and serving, even unto death.

2. Remember who is for you and who is against you:

However, as we saw last week, there is an area where we are never to submit, never to defer, never to compromise or step aside: namely, in spiritual warfare. It is easy to see the people that oppose us or make our lives difficult, as the enemy. But Paul reminds us that they are not the enemy, "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (6:12). Rather, they are victims of the enemy, the devil and his legions, whose schemes we must learn to recognize and resist (6:11).

Are we alone in the battle? No! "Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil" (6:10-11). Satan is a defeated foe, and if we stand in the strength of the Victor, then the devil has no power over us.

3. Remember all that is yours in Christ:

But how are we to live out that victory? We have heard Paul call us to "Put on the whole armor of God" (6:11). Earlier in the letter, he wrote, "put off your

old self ... and put on the new self, created after the likeness of God” (4:22&24). In many different ways he describes the implications of our union with Christ. As he said in another of his letters, the Christian should have this view of the normal Christian life: “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20).

If we habitually think of ourselves as living our lives far removed from God, then we shall hardly know how to stand in the day of temptation. But if we think of ourselves as united with Christ in his death and victory, of being members of his body and having his Spirit within us, then we will realize in times of trouble that we are not alone and that all that is his is also ours, including his victory over sin and death.

4. Remember to pray:

Nothing so powerfully reminds us of our union with Christ as does a life of prayer, not just observing the various daily times of prayer – important and helpful as those are – but especially by living in an attitude of conversation with the Spirit of Christ within. As we learn to pray more deeply, we begin to join the Spirit of Christ in prayer, not only for those whom we know and love, but also for the Church of Jesus Christ scattered through out a world that desperately needs to know him.

Again, it is crucial that we not simply think of Christ as somewhere out there or, as Paul writes in chapter one, “at the right hand of the Father” (1:20), as though far removed from us. Because of our union with Christ, because we are members of his body, Paul writes in chapter two that God “made us alive together with Christ ... and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (2:5-6). When we begin to believe that great mystery and seek to walk it out day-by-day, our life of prayer becomes far more intimate and confident.

5. Remember to love:

Paul closes with a call to “love incorruptible” (6:24). His final words, in fact, are filled with expressions of love: he speaks of sending Tychicus whom he calls “the beloved brother” (6:21). His words of benediction are, “Peace be to the brothers, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (6:23). It is a reminder of how much God loves them. And Paul’s final appeal is that they never forget how deeply linked together are the Lord’s grace toward us and our love of him, not merely a passing love, but “love incorruptible” (6:24), that is, a love that never ends.

Why is this so crucial? Why does Paul end with this final exhortation? After Paul was arrested, condemned and beheaded on the Ostian Way just outside Rome, John, the last of the apostles, made his home in Ephesus. Then he, too, was arrested, and was exiled to the Isle of Patmos where he received and recorded the Revelation that serves as the last book of the Bible. As the Revelation opens, John is told to write letters of warning and encouragement to the seven churches of Asia Minor, present day Turkey. The first letter is addressed to this same Ephesian church, and in it John commends them for holding to the truth of the gospel and for laboring to live it out. However, he then writes this warning:

But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent” (Revelation 2:4-5).

If you visit Ephesus today, what remains of that once great city? Nothing but ruins: a rubble heap of potsherds and broken columns. And the church of Ephesus? It is no more. Its lampstand has been removed.

Conclusion

The warning to us should be clear: we can have all of our doctrine right and even be trying to live our lives in accordance with God’s Word. But if it is not motivated by love, if it is not expressed in love, if the character of that love is not – at least in some measure – an expression of the self-sacrificial love of Christ for us, then the work we are doing will not stand. Those of us who are getting old and have given a significant part of our lives to this congregation, a church that has known much of God’s grace and has served Knoxville and the world for over two hundred years, should remember as we approach the end that the one thing that matters most to the Lord is that we continue to love him and to love one another with “love incorruptible.” If we fail to do that, this congregation’s lampstand will be removed.

Let’s encourage each other, in good times and bad, to remember that salvation is a life, to remember who is for us and who is against us, to remember all that is ours in Christ, to remember to pray, and – above all – to remember to love the Lord and to love one another as Christ has loved us. “Grace be with all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with love incorruptible” (6:24).