“Filled With The Fullness of God”

Ephesians 3:14–21

Randy D. Starkey
Introduction

Can you imagine the perfect church? Sure, the perfect church doesn’t exist in this age as long as sin is present in this world, but what would it look like if it did? The better questions might be what does the Bible indicate would be the perfect biblical God glorifying church? I can only imagine what it would be like to be part of a church that came even close to being the perfect biblical church.

In our text today, Paul closes his prayer for the Ephesian church with these words,

“No, to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”

Our imaginations are limited by our finite abilities. But we serve a God who is able to do far more than we can even begin to ask Him for or even think of.

In Ephesians 3, Paul expresses part of his desire for the Ephesian church with the realization that God is able to do far more than what we as humans can conceive of.
Ephesians 3:14–21

“For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”
Context

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul begins by expressing the source and goal of the salvation of sinners. He then reminds the Ephesians and us of the extent of our sinfulness by stating that we were “dead” in our sins, but by God’s grace sinners are saved through faith apart from any human works of our own. In chapter 3, Paul reminds the Ephesians that God used him to unveil the mystery of the gospel especially to the Gentiles so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might be made known . . . For this reason, Paul says, he bows his knees before the Father. In short, Paul prays to God that through the church God’s glory and wisdom would be clearly revealed.

Paul sums up his prayer with the desire that the Ephesian believers be filled with all the fullness of God. Paul arrives at this goal of being filled with all the fullness of God through two means:
1. That God would grant them to be strengthened with power by the Spirit in the inner man
2. That they would be able to comprehend and know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge.

In other words, Paul perceived it necessary for the church to be filled with all the fullness of God they must be empowered to live victorious lives over the temptations of the flesh in this world and that they increasingly grow in their understanding and experience of the love of Christ that exceeds mere logic and reason.

While Paul’s prayer for the Ephesians in this particular text is not exhaustive it along with other clear texts helps us to understand what is necessary if we are to experience what being Christian is truly all about.
1. While being filled with all the fullness of God is personal it is not individualistic. Paul and the rest of the New Testament make it clear that God's glory is tied most closely to the corporate church which is made up of individuals. There is much that we as individual believers must grow to understand but with all our individual abilities we cannot obtain the fullness of God apart from the community of faith.

2. The struggle that we face with sin in this age is great. We all are subject to the deceptions and temptations of this world and stand in need of help to live for God's glory. Part of God's granting of power by the Spirit in the inner man to overcome in this life is the company of saints who walk with us and serve to hold us accountable and compel us to strive to be more than what we currently are.

3. The love of Christ, while broad in scope is something that surpasses knowledge. It cannot be perceived or experienced based on knowledge alone, but while it surpasses knowledge it is not something that is experienced apart from knowledge. We must grow in our knowledge of truth about this great love of Christ that often goes against mere human logic and requires something more than mere reason to comprehend it. We grow in our comprehension of the breadth, length, height, and depth of the love of God when we sit under consistent and challenging teaching of God's Word which is the means by which all come to understand the marvelous love of Christ.

4. Being filled with all the fullness of God assumes first the basics of our faith. That is, that we have come to understand the extent of our sinful condition and recognized the sufficiency of Christ's life, death, and resurrection and as a result; repented of our sin and believed the good news of the gospel.

5. The extravagant nature of being filled with all the fullness of God, though it may sound like a extravagant wish (much like winning the lottery) is far from an impossibility with a God who is able to do far more than we could ever imagine!

I have said on many occasions that I know what it is like to be a part of a
good church. A church that on most levels is average and in some cases a little above. But it isn’t my goal to be a part of an average church. To settle for this is to settle for far less than the glory of God. What I want is to be a part of something that I have yet to experience . . . A church that has had enough of average and strives to go beyond the world’s view of “a good church.” The problem I run into is that the path to such a church is a trying and difficult one. Such a church will likely not be popular and might not even be all that big. But such a church would be clearly marked out by the world as a church that believes and lives corporately what the Bible teaches.

I have in my mind what is necessary for a church to strive to be such a biblical church. I believe with all my heart that their are some non-negotiables for a church to truly be striving to be the kind of church the Bible has in view. Again, it would still not be a perfect church, but I imagine it would stand out as a true testimony for the glory of God. This kind of church would result in praise from some and tribulation from others. This kind of church would either be loved or hated. Loved by those who cherish the gospel and hated by the world because it would bring conviction. While I cannot communicate all the non-negotiables for such a church I want to give a few of the more prominent ones today. The church that is seeking to be filled with all the fullness of God will include:

1. **Expositional Preaching of God’s Word**
2. **Passion for the Gospel**
3. **Regenerate Church Membership**
4. **Biblical Church Discipline**
5. **An Active Role in Missions**

When I was first interviewing with this church, these are the things that I sought to major on. I believe I made it clear during that time that these are the issues that I would strive to promote among the body. I believed this
when I first came here and I still believe it today.

Let’s briefly take a look at each of these understanding that these 5 things are what will continue to guide me in my ministry here in the days ahead.
Expositional Preaching

Expositional preaching simply means a method of preaching or teaching that seeks to expose the text in its context and makes the main point of the sermon the main point of the text.

Topical preaching seeks to take an idea and then find as much Scriptural support as you can to prove your point. The problem with this method is any point can be proven with biblical text when taken out of its context and allows the preachers agenda to be in control.

Expositional preaching requires the preacher to stay within the framework of the original text and limits the freedom of the preacher to stray away based on his own agenda.

God gave us His inspired word in a particular context and order. The best way for us to understand God’s word is to view it in the way He gave it to us.

It is for this reason that I choose to preach primarily through books of the Bible though expositional preaching does not require this exclusively.

Any other method of preaching limits the congregations growth to the growth of the pastor. Expositional preaching requires the preacher to handle text that might otherwise be avoided and allows the congregation to grow exponentially even beyond that of the preacher.

There are times when we have and will deal in topical series, but even these will be handled expositionally.
Passion for the Gospel

One of my great desires for you is that you grow in your hunger for the word of God, namely the gospel itself. The gospel is not a means to an end. It is our goal because God is the gospel.

The gospel never gets old and we must rehearse it day after day. That doesn’t mean that we preach John 3:16 week after week but that we grow to discover the gospel in every corner of God’s inspired word from Genesis 1 to Revelation 22. I have at times heard a preacher preach some random topical sermon and never preach the gospel in it, but then at the end invite lost people to ask Jesus into their hearts. The problem with that is, how do we expect someone to come to Christ if we don’t proclaim the gospel. What would they be responding to?

It is no secret that I don’t give a hard sell at the end of my sermons to get people to come to the front. Honestly, I personally don’t place a lot of confidence in that methodology. Sure, I welcome anyone to come at anytime wanting to repent of their sins and trust Christ, but there is no magical power in the few minutes after the sermon. I have been told that I didn’t do a very good job giving the invitation before. My response is that I spend 40 to 50 minutes every Sunday giving an invitation.

Take special note in the weeks ahead to see if the sermons aren’t saturated with the gospel.

Rarely, if ever, will you hear me preach and not labor over the depths of our sinful condition and our need to recognize the futility of our own efforts to please God. Then listen to see if I don’t spend some time telling of the perfect sinless life our savior lived for us because we don’t live the life required to please God and then how Christ died the death we deserve in order to satisfy the righteous wrath of God due sin so that we don’t have to pay the debt that we could never pay.

This is the gospel! It isn’t a pitch we give to get someone to raise a hand or pray a prayer. It is life! It is the message we are to proclaim in every conversations we can whether from a pulpit or on a playground.

And I want you to love this gospel so radically that it consumes you and takes over every part of your life!
Regenerate Church Membership

In my time here I have sought to ensure that those who become members of this church truly evidence a testimony of a true believer. It is not my responsibility to merely grow the church membership but to grow the church. The church by definition is a community of believers. It therefore goes without saying that in order to be a member of the church you must be a Christian. And while I understand that one of our traditional ways of joining the church is by profession of faith, that doesn’t mean we just take you on your word.

A lot of people claim the name Christian. Many of them are far from it. If the church is going to grow toward being filled with all the fullness of God, we must take care to ensure the church is made up of believers.

This is why we ask people to go through a process of a class and fill out an application. We want to make sure that those who wish to be named among Riverside Church can communicate the gospel and give both verbal and visible evidence that they are truly believers.

This is how we guard the unity of our faith and the testimony of the church and ultimately the testimony of Christ that the church presents as a corporate body.

This doesn’t guarantee that no unbeliever joins our church, but it reduces the chances.

We can’t know for certain that those who say they are believers truly are, but we can be more responsible and take serious the call to protect the flock. That is what we are seeking to do.
Biblical Church Discipline

This is one of the most difficult subjects of all because it is the most misunderstood and most neglected.

While we can’t guarantee that no unbeliever enters the church, church discipline seeks to root out those who are in the church but refuse to live in accordance to the gospel and so bring shame to the testimony of the church and to Christ.

Church discipline is exactly that . . . CHURCH discipline. It isn’t pastoral discipline or leadership discipline even though it is often left to the leaders to handle. It is a discipline that the church is responsible for.

Many see this subject as a witch hunt in the church and has at times become just that. This is one of the reasons why it has been neglected over the years. In the past, it has sometimes been abused and misused and as a result considered ungodly.

However, the practice is biblical!

The big question is what sins are worthy of church discipline? The answer is . . . All of them! If they are done without repentance. We know we are all sinners and we all sin, but believers cannot walk in unrepentance. When we sin we either experience conviction privately and repent or we are confronted by a fellow believer and repent. If a professing believer refuses to repent of sin, then the church is responsible according to God’s word to pursue them to repentance. If they continue to refuse to repent, they are to be placed outside the membership of the church. This doesn’t mean they can’t come to church but it does mean they are to be treated as an unbeliever.

Unbelievers need to hear the gospel! Which is a gospel of repentance. Unbelievers cannot take communion with the church. And they need to know that the Word of God calls believers to live a life that is worthy of the calling to which they have been called and that is a call to repentance.

The goal in church discipline is the good of the sinner and the good of the church.

The church that is comfortable looking like the world and treating sin the same way the world does, as no big deal; is a church that will never be filled with all the fullness of God.

We will never practice church discipline perfectly in this age, but that is no excuse to ignore clear biblical teaching and not practice it at all.
Missions

A church that is not actively pursuing missions is a church that cannot be obedient to the word of God. The church was established for the purpose of displaying the glory of God to the nations. That means we begin outside these doors and go to the ends of the earth wherever God opens the doors for us to serve.

The opposite of being mission minded is trying to build a kingdom inside these walls. Those who are not mission minded seek to attract the world into the walls of the church instead of taking the gospel to the world even though it may never directly benefit the church. In fact doing missions will guarantee that we will give resources away that will never give us any return personally in this life.

Giving money to missions will not help pay our bills or renovate our buildings or pay our salaries.

Giving time to missions will mean less time you will be able to do something for yourself.

Allowing me to spend time on the mission field means you will be paying me to do ministry that will not directly benefit the everyday life of this church.

But a church who truly has a heart for the glory of God and redemption of sinners will gladly make the sacrifice.

We need to do missions for the gospel to go forth.

We need to do missions to set our hearts on the greater things rather than the mundane.

We need to do missions because we are commanded to go into all the world.

We do missions by supporting missionaries such as Dan and Christa (who will be coming home in 2 days).

We do missions by supporting church plants wherever new churches are needed.

We do missions by giving to the missions offerings such as Lottie Moon and Annie Armstrong.

We do missions by giving to build a mission house in Haiti to support mission teams and pastoral training.

We do missions by giving coats and other cloths to the New Orleans Mission or buying Christmas presents for families who are less fortunate or giving food for the food pantry.

And we do missions by sacrificing our time and comforts and going on the field ourselves when God opens the door for us to go.

We have done well in this area, but we can do much more!
Conclusion

I share this with you this morning because we are on the brink of a new year. We are supposed to seek to develop vision for the days ahead and we often think that means something new and innovative. Instead, what I am offering you is more of the same. We will seek to labor to promote the basics of what a church must be in order to be filled with all the fullness of God. Be sure that my desire for this church is great. My hopes for this church are grand, far beyond anything that I could imagine accomplishing. But be assured that whether it is a good thing or a bad thing in your view, I believer the word of God and will strive to remain faithful to it. I won’t do it perfectly I’m sure, but I will seek to do it consistently. And when I fail, I too will repent and trust that God is able to do far more than I could ever ask or think.

My prayer for you is that God will grant you to be strengthened with power through the Spirit in your inner being so that you can live above the world’s ways. I pray that God will use your fellow brother’s and sisters in Christ to hold you accountable to your profession of faith and compel you to live for God’s glory.

I pray that you will be able to increasingly understand what is the breadth, and length, and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge . . .

That you (the church) may be filled with all the fullness of God.