

Union With Christ

Paul's Letter to the Ephesians

Rooted in a Deeper Strength

Ephesians 3:16 – 17a

Introduction: Texas A&M University Library

Tonight we're going to talk about the strength of our foundations. Let me tell you a story about foundations. There was once a brilliant young architect whose firm won a huge contract with Texas A&M University to build a great library. The library was to house the vast book collections owned by the university. The young architect was the rising star in the firm, so he was assigned to oversee the entire project, from initial design work all the way until the final completion of the building. He poured himself into his work, producing one of the most innovative and creative designs ever seen in library architecture. After months of fever-pitched activity, all the designs were given to the engineers and building contractors, and work begun on the library physically. The building rose slowly from its foundations up higher and higher into the sky. Finally, the finishing touches were put on it, like painting, carpeting, lighting, and furnishing. It was hailed as a complete success: it was aesthetically beautiful to look at, destined to become a hallmark of the campus. The only thing that remained was to move the books into the library, a gargantuan task that was finally finished after several more weeks of non-stop labor. Almost immediately after the building opened for the students, library employees began noticing stress lines and fractures. They were in the major support structures all over the library. Within just a few short weeks, the whole structural integrity of the library was called into question. The university officials threw a fit. They called in the young architect and the engineers for an emergency meeting. After a lot of debate and blame passing among all involved, one of the library staff asked the young architect a simple question: 'Did you calculate the weight of the books in your original design?' A silence followed. The man's face reddened. He hung his head, and said, 'No...I did not.' Some weeks later the library became so unsafe that it was permanently closed. What a pity: to build a structure and find that your foundation is faulty.

What a parallel that is to you. Right now each of you is building your life. It's a structure that is meant to house knowledge, experience, life, and other people. Each of you is young, energetic, and bright. But even the best and brightest must lay their foundations well. That is my concern for all of you. If you don't have a strong foundation to your life, built on personally knowing God who designed you, will you be able to hold all of the knowledge and relationships that you're building up? Or will cracks start to appear? Maybe they've already started?

If you are not a Christian, one stereotype you might have of faith is that Christians are weak. I understand where that comes from, but it may be news to you that Jesus encouraged us to find new strength. So I hope you get a new perspective on what belief in Jesus is about.

Text and Context:

That is why we are going to look at a prayer that Paul prayed in Ephesians 3:16 – 17. Paul was one of the earliest dynamic leaders of the Christian movement, and this was a prayer foremost in his mind. We – your core leaders and staff – felt this year that this prayer was to be central to the life of our community at BC. I'm going to talk about half of it tonight, and Wonho will talk us through the second half of it tomorrow morning. It is a prayer for strong foundations.

(show ppt slideshow page 1) ^{3:14} ...I bow my knees before the Father, ¹⁵ from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name,

¹⁶ **that** He would grant you,
according to the riches of His glory,
to be strengthened with power
through His Spirit
in the inner self,

¹⁷ so **that** Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and

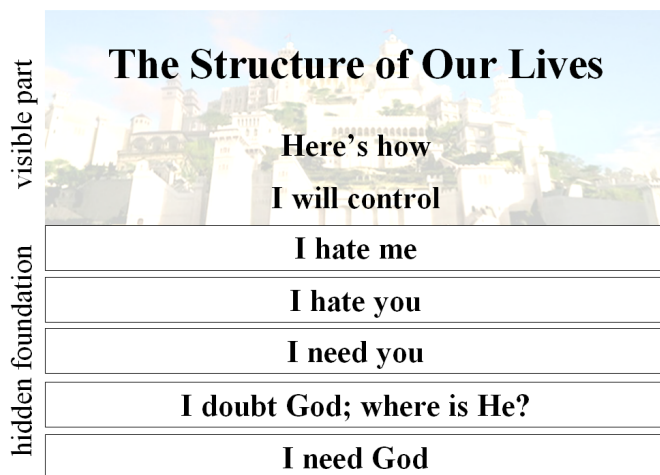
Christ Dwelling in Us

The main idea here is that we need inner strength to hold Jesus in us. We are meant to be a home. If you were to move into a house, would you want it to suck? To be weak? Imagine if you were lying in your bed in your dorm, and pieces of plaster kept falling on your head. Or if there was a bad window letting in cold air all the time. When my wife and I bought our three story house in Boston, we knew we wanted to start an intentional Christian community serving the inner city neighborhood around us. But when we started doing work on the third floor, we found huge problems. We took down the drop ceilings and found big holes in the ceiling above it. We took down the fake wood paneling – you know, the kind that was really popular in the 70's? – and found that someone used it to cover a window! The window had cracks in the glass, and water had leaked in and caused water damage. All this cosmetic stuff hid real structural damage. Jesus doesn't allow that. He doesn't allow the cosmetic stuff in us hide the real structural damage. He takes that stuff down and fixes the deeper things.

So I've chosen to use this picture of Cair Paravel on the Eastern Sea of Narnia to illustrate who we are meant to be (show ppt slideshow page 2). We are meant to be the shining dwelling place of royalty, of Jesus, the one whom God has made king of all the world.

When Our Hidden Foundation is Weak

Like any building, the first thing Jesus comes to examine and fix is our foundation. He wants to be our foundation. Larry Crabb is a prominent Christian counselor who said in a book called *Finding God* that we are like a building, a structure with a foundation. (show ppt slideshow page 3):



Here's the main idea. At the deepest level of our being is a heart cry that says, 'I need God.' No one else can fill the God shaped void in our hearts, said Blaise Pascal. Even though God is invisible, we need to learn over time to know Him and feel that He knows us. God alone provides us with connection, power, love, forgiveness, and hope. No one can replace God. But if we turn away from God, saying 'I doubt God; where is He?' then we quickly turn to other people with our most vital needs and say to them, 'I need you.' Our need for God doesn't just go away. It gets channeled toward other people. In this way, we become dependent on the love and respect of others, like our parents and friends. Some of us turn to a boyfriend or girlfriend. Inevitably, the key people in our lives disappoint us in some way, but because we expect so much of them, we say, 'I hate you.' Then we think there must be something wrong with ourselves for being abandoned, or we dislike ourselves for what's happened, so we also say, 'I hate me.' No one can live in that conscious thought forever, so we develop some strategy for making ourselves feel better, so we say, 'I will control.' And on the top of the structure is our strategy: 'Here's how.'

Identifying Your Strategy: The Cosmetic Layers

I'm asking you to take a journey with me, like I did in my house. Let's take off the cosmetic layers and get to the real structural stuff. Let me give you an example from my own life of how this journey happened.

Early during my junior year, I went through a very painful breakup with a girl I dated. One reason is that she didn't feel she could emotionally connect with me. And I could kind of understand what she was saying. I was pretty stoic. So for several months, I asked the question, 'Why am I the way I am?' I had to go in reverse order, from top to bottom. It was like drilling down. I found that I really wanted respect. The statement in me that said, 'I will control' ended in the phrase, 'my success, my impact on others, the respect I get from the world.' I worked really hard, hard enough to get up at 4:30am everyday during high school swim seasons, and hard enough to get into Stanford. When I saw that I had real emotional needs and sexual desires, I thought that was a sign of weakness. Yes it was human, but I didn't like it. I said, 'I hate me' about those things. Plus, I got a lot of benefits out of being emotionally shut down: I accomplished a lot! I asked, 'Why do I want so badly to control the respect I get?' The reason: Because I wasn't respected when I was younger. Other kids made fun of me, both my parents were very critical of me, and my dad was an angry man; often I didn't want to be with him because he was so unpredictable. So I had decided that I was going to be an island. I had decided not to need anyone. I was just going to work really hard and be successful. I had said, in a way, especially to my parents, 'I hate you.' The primary way I did that was by being emotionally shut down. But Jesus started to rip off the cosmetic stuff I used to hide my structural damage.

How do you say, 'I will control?' There are probably one or more of three areas. You could say, 'I will control my performance.' Some of you have come to BC because you are insecure about your future, and you are here to hedge your bets. So you are really performance-oriented. You have just enough friends (maybe) that you can your work-life balance, although the balance tilts towards work. But your performance-orientedness limits your ability to care about other people, and the biggest enemy of kindness is busyness, and you know it.

Or, you could say, 'I will control my relationships.' A friend of mine says that some people are like dogs and others are like cats. Dogs run up to you and pant and ask, 'Do you like me? Do you like me?' But cats test people, they hold back, and they ask, 'Do I like you? Will you feed me first?' It's all a way of controlling other people's ability to affect you. Sure, some of it is personality, but there are probably some deeper things.

Or, you could say, 'I will control myself.' If you have an eating disorder, probably there was something painful in your past that you didn't have control over. Your response was to say, 'I will control' something, anything, even if it's just my own body.

What you need, what we all need, is the strength to push further down and break through these layers so that we can allow Jesus to rewrite those statements that we've written deep inside.

Digging Deeper

How do you do that? It's by progressively digging deeper into who you are. During my senior year, my mentor and three other guys formed a small group to talk about these things more. That was where I was challenged to see the more foundational levels. One of the guys said to me, 'It sounds like you were in denial about how much other people meant to you.' These levels of 'I need you' and 'I hate you' – those were hard for me. And yet I needed to acknowledge it. Two things helped me acknowledge it: (1) journaling my prayers and thoughts with God and (2) my younger sister's experience at home. That year also happened to be my sister's senior year in high school. And my dad's drinking had escalated to the point where my mom and my sister were afraid of him being out of control. So when he would go out, they would put a 2x4 wooden beam against the door to keep it closed. He'd have to sleep in his car in the driveway until the next morning. As my sister and I talked on the phone, at first my inward response was, 'That is hard, but hey, I went through hard things, too, and I came out okay.' But God started to break my heart for her. I saw how it was affecting her, and it wasn't okay. Then because my heart broke for her, it started to break for someone else. I saw me as a little boy feel overlooked, feel yelled at, and feel terrified that his parents had these loud arguments. Then I saw what I as a little boy had to do internally to cope with that. There was one day when I hung up the phone with my sister, and I started crying. In Jesus' presence, I felt full permission to not have to protect my parents' image, to not compare myself with other people who have suffered a lot, too, and to just allow myself to say to God, 'I wish things had been different for me.'

That was how I got to the level of 'I need you' and 'I hate you.' And I went through a period of time where I was really mad at my parents. Some of you are probably not as shut down emotionally as I was, so maybe it's easier for you to see that. But some of you do need explicit permission to be mad. What I mean is not an intellectual, 'Yes, I can admit I have needs, and that I'm mad and sad.' It's a deep, raw, confession that at the core of your being that says, 'I wish things had been different for me.'

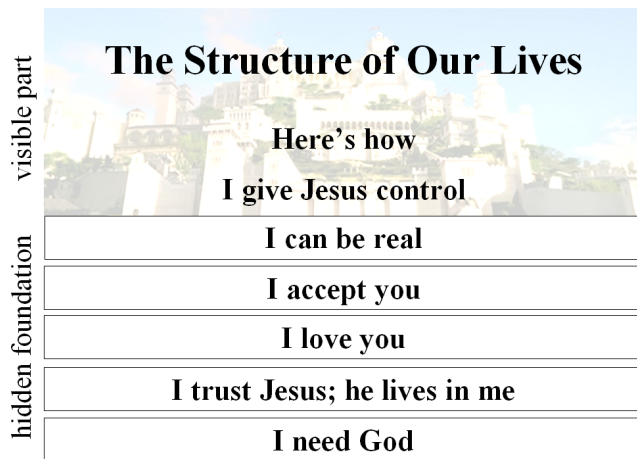
I want to make it clear that we are not doing this in order to 'blame our parents.' Actually, I have never talked to my parents about how angry I was, because as I was realizing these things they were getting a divorce and feeling very sensitive. The reason it's important to feel this is because you're probably afraid of your own needs. And you're afraid that God won't meet you. Unless you fully enter the 'I need you' and 'I hate you' levels, you'll never understand yourself and you'll never really feel like God understands you.

The Core Choice: The Structural Level

At that moment, I had a choice, a very core choice. And if *you* get to this point, *you* have a choice too. The choice is whether you're going to stop there and just hate people again for disappointing you, or whether you will ask Jesus for the strength to dig deeper, to rip off another layer. We have a choice to confront ourselves not just with our need but our sin. The next level down is 'I doubt God; where is He?' At some point in our conscious lives, we made a choice to turn away from God and turn towards others. And we continue to make that choice because people are more tangible and God is not. People are noisier and God is quieter. But God is GOD. He is our maker. And He formed in us a place for Himself, and only Himself. That is why no one else and nothing else satisfies us except for God.

I want to tell you a story that I read to my kids for bedtime. It's by Max Lucado and it's called *You Are Special*. The Wemmicks were a wooden people that lived in their own town. They had all been made by Eli the Woodcutter. All day long, the Wemmicks gave each other stickers. If a Wemmick was tall, or good-looking, or jumped far, the other Wemmicks would gather round and give that Wemmick gold stars. But if a Wemmick had chipped wood, or fell down, or was clumsy, that Wemmick would get gray dots from the others. Well one of the Wemmicks was named Punchinello. He wasn't especially good looking so he got gray dots. He wasn't especially talented so he got more gray dots. In fact, the other Wemmicks gave him gray dots just because he had so many gray dots already. Punchinello felt rotten. Then he met a Wemmick named Lucia who had no stickers on her. Punchinello watched as other Wemmicks came up to her and tried to make a gold star stick on her, but it fell off. Others tried to make gray dots stick on her, but they fell off, too. Punchinello asked her, 'What is it about you that these stickers don't stick?' Lucia replied, 'I go to see Eli the Woodcutter, and I listen to him.' Punchinello went to Eli's cottage on the edge of town, and he was greeted by a booming voice. 'Hello, Punchinello!' 'You know my name?' asked Punchinello. 'Of course I do. I made you. I see you've been given a lot of gray dots by the others.' Punchinello looked down and said, 'Yes. I came because I met someone who had no marks. Why don't the stickers stay on her?' 'Because she has decided that what I think is more important than what they think. They stickers only stick if you let them. And I think you're pretty special, Punchinello. I love you. The more you trust my love, the less you care about their stickers. Come see me everyday and let me remind you how much I care about you.' And as Punchinello left Eli's cottage, he thought to himself, 'I think he means it.' And a gray dot fell to the ground. What will it take for us to acknowledge that gray dots and even gold stars aren't enough?

I am going to share with you what can be possible for us with a new, solid foundation. (show ppt slideshow page 4)



In this foundation are two core statements: 'I need God' is at the base. That doesn't change. I need God for everything, more than I even feel like I need other people for whatever. But then, right on top of that is the statement 'I trust Jesus; I'm joined to him.' That's what it means to let Jesus rip off all the cosmetic layers and deal with the real structural weakness in us. This is what Paul prays in Ephesians 3:16 – 17 'that [God] would grant you...to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner self, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.' That's the critical difference, and it's in contrast to 'I doubt God; where is He?' Jesus Christ is in himself the union of God and humanity; he is not just a teacher of morals, or a miracle worker. He is in his being the reunion of God in His fullness and humanity in our fullness. Jesus is the normative human being. God wants to create a living connection to Jesus for each of us so each of us could also share in who Jesus is. Once we are joined to Jesus and understand that Jesus meets the deepest needs we have, we can turn to other people and not demand little gold stars. We can say to others, 'I love you.' Not a soft and mushy feeling but a profound commitment to want and do what is best for other people, even when it comes at a cost to you. That always includes people who bug you, that you would just rather tolerate. We will not be cliquey. Then on top of that, when other people annoy you in big and small ways, you say, 'I accept you.' I may adjust myself in certain ways but I can hang with that. It's not that I assume you can't change; I do hope we all change to become more and more joined to Jesus and like Jesus. But fundamentally, I will enter your world. Then on top of that, we say, 'I can be real.' I can give my deepest needs to God, not to others. I don't have to fake it or pretend I don't have needs. But I can *share* with others *without demanding* something in return. And on top of that, rather than saying, 'I will control,' I will say, 'I give control to Jesus.' And based on our specific situation, we say, 'Here's how.'

Wonho will focus on the 3rd, 4th, and 5th levels tomorrow morning, and I'll come back to the top most visible levels later. I want to still focus on the baseline structure of 'I need God' and 'I trust Jesus; he lives in me.' You need strength to even get down to that bottom-most level, and you definitely need strength to build the second level. It's not strength that you can get from other people. If you think of yourself as having been Christian a while, you might say that you're already over here on slide 4. And there are probably a few ways in which you are. But I would encourage you to reflect more deeply on slide 3. Why? Because building a new foundation for all of your life is a lot of work. I'm sure none of us is done.

The Context of Our Core Choice: Solitude Even in Community

In actual fact, the people God seems to use in a really significant way, He seems to bring them into a test. Think about the pattern: Joseph, Moses, David, Elijah, Daniel, Esther, Jesus, and Paul. Every one goes through a personal crisis alone, a lonely trial that pushes them to the limit. In most cases, those trials happen in the desert. Even Luke Skywalker goes through a trial in the desert, because George Lucas was playing off the archetypal hero story. When God calls us, He calls us first to be in His presence, absolutely alone. In that place of unspeakable solitude, God would begin to remake His people.

What does God need to do now that we don't live near a desert? Well, usually we become friends with certain people at BC and with other Christians here at the level of 'I need you.' And then we don't like the aspects of certain other people that don't serve your needs. *But that whole approach is wrong.* So now, at certain times, God will make you feel *alone* here at BC, and even here in the fellowship, to make you feel like you're in the desert with Him. Let me repeat: *God will make you feel alone even in this community.* The people to whom you said, 'I need you' will say back to you, 'I can't do that.'

Illus: For me, I felt alone in my fellowship because of a lot of conflict. First, I had conflict with my Christian friends about what the Bible said. During the first Bible study I ever helped to co-lead, we came to what Jesus said about money: 'Do not store up treasure on earth, but store up treasure in heaven.' I was feeling my own materialism, so I said, 'How do we live this out?' My friends said, 'We're not interested in what Jesus said here.' I said, 'What? How can we do that with Jesus?' And the group polarized with all my friends on one side, and me on the other. Then, LA erupted in racial tension because of the Rodney King incident, and because I'm from LA, I was really hit hard. I followed the unfolding story really closely. But my friends didn't really care. I said, 'This is my city! You suck!' Then, I had conflict with my parents over my future. Early on in college, I met the high school teacher that led my little sister to Christ, and during that time, I felt like Jesus said, 'You see Mako, that could be you.' I said, 'No!!!' But I couldn't brush that aside either. God kept putting that idea back into my heart. And I felt like none of my friends understood that struggle either, or was really open to a future like that. So I felt like none my friends understood me. What would have been easy was for me to say, 'Fine, you hypocrites, screw you. I don't give a crap about you.' But instead, Jesus kept saying, 'Why are you in these conflicts?' I said, 'Because I'm growing with you...You! You're causing this!' Jesus said, 'Yes, I am. Despite the fact that they don't understand you and what you're going through, I am with you, I know you, and will you let that be enough for you? Furthermore, I want you to still let me love them through you.' Each and every aspect of this dynamic was very basic. It was Jesus stopping me from saying, 'I need you...I hate you.' It required me to say, 'I need God...I trust Jesus' every time. I felt annoyed and isolated when I was with other Christians. But letting Jesus teach me how to handle conflict and not idealize other people's ability to understand me was key for me, and it'll be key for you.

That might seem unkind of Jesus to do that. But let me tell you that he is good, even in this. You never outgrow this dynamic. You always need Jesus as your foundation. When Ming and I were first married, I had idealized hopes for our marriage, that we would have perfect communication, that I could say to her, 'I need you,' and she would always understand me. But early on in our marriage, she and I had very different opinions about a group of people we both knew who made some significant mistakes. I was asked to help heal the situation, and I was very critical of them for hurting others, whereas she felt defensive of them for having good intentions. So I was saying, 'I need you' to her but she wasn't delivering what I was asking for. And vice versa. We fought a lot about this. I started to say to her internally, 'I hate you.' I needed to break through again to, 'I need God,' and 'I trust Jesus.' Any time you find yourself building on the 'I doubt God' level, and therefore the 'I need you' level, you're going to cause trouble.

That's why Jesus ruthlessly removes the 'I doubt God' level. That is the structural damage that must be uncovered and fixed. It's to say, 'All my life, I have been making a mistake. My mistake has been trying to get other people to satisfy me. All my needs are so intense they can only be met by God.' You may be asking, 'But wait. How thick is that level – the 'I doubt God' level?' If we had a crowbar and some tools, and it was a physical part of a house, how hard is it to pry it off? In a sense, it's really hard. We get used to these layers. This structure is designed to get you gold stars (good grades, lots of money). Even though you know the system is stupid, it's hard to let go, isn't it? Many of you like those gold stars. Some of you would rather hold on to your anger with your parents or your friend or whoever, and you actually like that angry feeling. And you're right, if you let Jesus go deep in you, you won't be the same. Without these layers, who would you be?

But here's a way it can be easy to take this 'I doubt God' layer off. Just look at the reality of this structure, and how it sucks. It sucks! Look at how God sees this. Look at how much pain I inflicted on other people because I had said, 'I doubt God. Therefore I need you. Now I hate you. And so on.' Like most men, I brought a lot of pain to the women in my life. I had left my little sister at home when I wanted to escape. I had used a girlfriend. Then, I had lashed out at people at certain times. I had a pretty vicious sense of

humor at other times. All I wanted was little gold stars. I had cut other people off when I had no use for them or when they got too close to me. If you are genuinely sorry for what you've done and what you're capable of doing, it's easy to move past the 'I doubt God' level. You just don't want to repeat all the mistakes that go on top of it. That's why this is not something you can just intellectualize. You need to sit with this and let God speak to you about it. We're going to have some time to do that in small groups right after this.

Conclusion

There is a hidden quality to a building – its strong foundation. Usually no one sees it. But without a strong foundation, a building would collapse. Likewise there is a hidden quality to us. Individually, of course, if we have a strong foundation, that's an inward quality that will help us not only weather all kinds of difficulties, but do what we are made to do and be who we are made to be.

I'm going to turn us loose into our small groups now. Each of you will have a diagram of this picture. In small groups, please share about (1) what level do you tend to get stuck at? Or (2), how do you need Jesus' help to dig deeper?