



THE UNSEARCHABLE, UNFATHOMABLE, UNPARALLELED, INCOMPARABLE EXCELLENCIES OF CHRIST!

EPHESIANS 3:1-13

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I have one theme today. One focus. One glorious and multifaceted idea that I want you to consider. It is all about the unsearchable, unfathomable, unparalleled, incomparable riches of Christ! The basis for my focus is one phrase in Ephesians 3:8 where Paul speaks of "the unsearchable riches of Christ."

Before we jump into this text, we need to determine precisely what Paul meant by the words "riches" and "unsearchable."

When he speaks of the "riches" of Christ *he is not talking about what Jesus owns, but what Jesus is*. In other words, this term doesn't point us to his material wealth. We already know that he owns the entire universe and everything in it. Rather, he has in view Christ's spiritual wealth; all that makes him the most glorious and attractive person in the universe: his power, beauty, glory, honor, authority, majesty, mercy, grace, kindness, patience, goodness, and greatness.

As for the word "unsearchable," Paul is telling us that there is simply no end, no terminus, no measurable amount of the riches of Christ. He is saying that no exploration on our part will ever exhaust his riches. No amount of knowledge that we gain about Christ will ever come close to reaching its end. You can't dig deeply enough to find it all. You can't travel to the distant reaches of the universe and uncover it all. And when you and I, with the help of the Holy Spirit, discern and learn something about his riches, it only leads us to more and more.

Perhaps you've seen the movie, *National Treasure*, starring Nicholas Cage. It's a film filled with conspiracy theories, which probably accounts for its popularity. Cage and his family have been searching endlessly for a supposed treasure that was connected to the founding of our country. But with every clue he discovers, it only leads to yet another clue, and another after that. But finally, at the conclusion of the film, Cage finds the treasure, worth hundreds of millions of dollars. But the treasure he finds is but a dung heap, a rancid pile of refuse compared to the unsearchable riches of our Lord Jesus Christ.

So, why did Paul speak of Jesus this way? Why do I speak of Jesus this way? What was it about him that justifies this sort of adulation and praise?

Christ's Unsearchable Riches

Here was a man *devoid of hypocrisy*, unlike the Pharisees and Scribes. Never once did he say one thing, only then to conduct himself in a manner the opposite of what he had just declared. There was perfect consistency between what he believed and how he behaved, between what he preached and how he practiced.

Here was a man whom we also know to be *God*. Many down through the ages have claimed to be divine. Many have insisted that they are the perfect human embodiment of the creator. But they all died. And not one of them was raised to life again.

Here is a man who *cleansed lepers merely by touching them*. It is one thing to have the power of the Holy Spirit dwelling in you so that you could cleanse a leper. It is another thing entirely to do so by touching his skin! By the law of the land and the rules of ancient society, if you came into contact with a leper, you would be instantly defiled and rendered ceremonially unclean, not to mention the likelihood that you would contract leprosy as well. But not Jesus. He wasn't defiled by touching lepers. He wasn't rendered ceremonially unclean. And he didn't contract leprosy. Instead, the lepers were cleansed and healed and restored to their families and communities.

Here is a man *who knows the deepest and most secretive thoughts of our hearts*. I'm quite certain that all of us live in some measure of fear that others will discover our hidden thoughts and fantasies and dreams. We know that if they did, they would be repulsed and reject us. But not Jesus. He knows every thought, every impulse, every dream, every imagination of our hearts, and loves us anyway.

Here is a man who can **walk on water!** Yes, he is a man, but he is also God. His walking on water tells us much about Jesus, but perhaps most important of all it is a reminder that he is the sovereign Lord over all of nature, over floods and wind and hail and ice. He controls it all, but is never controlled by it.

Here is a man who would engage **an immoral Samaritan woman** in conversation and disclose to her the most intimate secrets of her life. If we had encountered the Samaritan woman and had learned of her sexual past, even her sexual present, we would likely turn up our nose and walk away in self-righteous contempt of her. But not Jesus. He didn't heap shame on her soul. He didn't avert his eyes. He didn't cast her aside as unworthy of his time and attention. He brought her sin to light not in order to humiliate her but to awaken her to the possibility of forgiveness and a new life.

Here is a man who could **heal and raise up a man who had been paralyzed for 38 years**. This was no sleight of hand. This was not a grand trick comparable to pulling a rabbit out of a hat or sawing a woman in two. This man hadn't pretended for 38 years to be paralyzed on the off chance that someone like Jesus would come along and fabricate his healing. Jesus is not only the sovereign Lord over all of nature. He is also the sovereign Lord over our bodies.

Here is a man **of such gentleness, yet unyielding authority; a man of power and compassion; a man of love and justice**. Do you know of anyone else who can display these seemingly contrary characteristics and do it with the utmost consistency? I don't.

In the early days of his ministry, Jesus had a fairly large following. His teaching, his new and challenging ideas about God, his miracles, the authority he displayed when interacting with the religious leaders of Israel, all combined to mobilize large crowds to follow him. But as soon as they began to realize that he was more than just another rabbi, that he insisted on exclusive devotion to himself, as soon as he claimed that he alone was the way to eternal life, their applause ceased, and they simply walked away.

Consider how this happens all the time in today's world. Over these many years I've observed people who walk into church out of curiosity. They've heard of us. They are intrigued and perhaps even a little suspicious. Maybe a friend has invited them to attend. At first, they like the music and the freedom and passion of our worship. Maybe they enjoy the knowledge that comes from listening to our sermons. Then, suddenly, they truly hear and understand what we're saying, or more accurately, they hear and understand what Jesus is saying. They realize that we really mean what we sing! They are gripped with the realization that what we point out in Scripture is reality, and that eternal life is found only in Jesus, to the exclusion of every other religion and every other leader. They soon stop coming. When asked why, they may respond by saying, "Well, this isn't at all what I bargained for. You people actually believe what the Bible says. That's more than I can swallow." And they disappear.

It makes one wonder how Jesus felt about so many turning away, so many who before loudly applauded him but now reject him. It's quite clear that he wasn't in the least surprised by it. In fact, he knew from the get-go who didn't truly believe in him. And he actually cites the example of Judas Iscariot. It's as if he says, "even among my closest companions there is one who will take offense at me and eventually betray me" (John 6:64, 70-71).

Was he hurt by it all? Not in the sense in which you and I might be hurt. He was self-confident and secure. He knew who he was and what he had come to do. But he was undoubtedly grieved at the thought that so many who left would never find elsewhere or in anyone else what they most needed. In a very real sense I suspect that their departure left him heartbroken. So, he turned to the twelve and said: "Well, what about you guys? Am I an embarrassment to you too? Make up your mind. Most everyone else has left. Do you want to go with them?" Peter speaks up not only for himself but for the others as well:

When Jesus asked Peter and the disciples if they wanted to join the crowd and abandon him, Peter basically responded by saying: "Lord, no one ever spoke like you. Your words and the spirit behind them are entirely other than what we hear from the Pharisees. No one ever acted like you. No one has ever been so strong and yet so meek, so tough and yet so tender, so authoritative and yet so gentle, so profound in his teaching yet so simple in how you say it, so willing to be killed for sins you did not commit, so worthy of honor and yet so willing to be dishonored, so deserving of immediate and unqualified obedience and yet so patient with people like us, so capable of answering all of our questions and yet so willing to remain silent under abuse. There is no one like you, Jesus. Where do you suggest we go? To whom else do you suggest we give our lives?"

It's breathtaking to think that what offended others, attracted Peter. What they hated about Jesus, Peter loved. What they found intolerable, Peter enjoyed. What disgusted them, delighted Peter. "Lord," says Peter, "your words are filled with life! Your heart is filled with mercy! Where else are we going to go to find anyone who can do for us what you alone can do?"

You know what a Christian is? I've often said that *a Christian is the person who has nowhere else to go*. Of course, that's not because there aren't other religions and other leaders and teachers. There are countless philosophies and alternative ways of explaining reality. But they all come up short! So, if someone asked you why you are a Christian, why do you follow Jesus and not Muhammad or Buddha or some other religious faith; why are you not an atheist, what would you say? Aside from the reasons cited earlier, why do you give your life, time, money, and efforts to Jesus? If asked, I would respond by saying what Peter did: "To whom shall I go?" After all . . .

- Nobody else will love me the way Jesus does.
- Nobody else tells me the unvarnished truth like Jesus does, truth without compromise.
- No one else will always be there when I need him most, like Jesus is.
- No one else can comfort me in suffering like Jesus can.
- Nobody else can reassure my heart when doubts arise, like Jesus does.
- Nobody else can give me peace in the midst of turmoil, like Jesus does.
- Nobody else can teach with the authority that Jesus has.
- Nobody else will accept me as I am, no strings attached, the way Jesus does.
- Nobody else can die for my sins the way Jesus did.
- No one else has ever risen from the dead the way Jesus did.
- No one intercedes for me at the right hand of the Father the way Jesus does.

There is no philosophy, no political party, no power, no amount of money or prestige that can do for me what Jesus does.

The resolve of the disciples to stay with Jesus wasn't because of any high hopes they had for fame and fortune. It wasn't because he promised them power and wealth and comfort. They didn't stay out of ignorance, simply because they didn't know any better. They stayed because they knew who he was: as John 6:69 makes clear: "*You are the Holy One of God!*" You are the Messiah, Lord, King, Redeemer, God in human flesh.

Let me ask all of you the same question, the very question I have often asked myself. "To whom will you go? What will you believe?" Will you run to a form of spirituality that denies the reality of sin, to those who insist our problem is merely one of bad education or adverse social influences? Will you align yourself with those who tell you that personal faith in Jesus is too narrow and exclusive, that God will in the end save all who are sincere? Will you run to another religious system that assures you any sexual expression you desire is entirely permissible? After all, it is only your will that matters, not God's.

Or perhaps you will run to and embrace the ever-increasing number of professing atheists. There simply is no God, and if there is no God, I can live however I choose and believe whatever makes me happy. But, of course, if there is no God and we are all no more than the accidental conglomeration of random molecules that collided at the end of an aimless evolutionary process, there is no basis for saying one system of belief is true and another false, or that one action is evil and another good.

In the final analysis, I am a Christian and will, by God's sustaining grace, remain so throughout my life . . . ***because of Jesus***. After all, if not to Jesus, to whom else shall I go? He has the words of eternal life (John 6:68).

Or consider the experience of John the apostle who was overwhelmed by his vision of the risen Lord, *your* risen Lord.

12 Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, 13 and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. 14 The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, 15 his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. 16 In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and this face was like the sun shining in full strength. 17 When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, "Fear not, I am the first and the last, 18 and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades. (Rev. 1:12-18)

Reflect for a moment on this portrait of Jesus after his resurrection and the portrait of him during his earthly sojourn. ***Can it possibly be that the Bible is describing the same person?*** Before his death and resurrection Jesus was an ordinary looking Jewish man. There was nothing uniquely special about his appearance. Contrary to some ridiculous modern portraits of him, he didn't walk around with a halo above his head. He didn't vibrate or quake and quiver. If you had seen him, you would never have thought he was any different from any other first-century Jewish man.

But John was given a vision of Christ Jesus after his resurrection, following his glorification, after he had ascended and sat down at the right hand of the Father, after all demons and dark forces had been placed under his feet.

Is Jesus Enough?

Why would we ever doubt his ability or willingness to meet our every need? Jonathan Edwards (1703-58) once preached a sermon entitled "The Excellency of Christ" that asks repeatedly the same question: ***What is it that you need or desire that cannot be found in Jesus. What possible reason could you have for not casting your life upon him?*** Allow me to paraphrase how Edwards put it.

"What are you afraid of that hinders you from venturing your soul upon Christ? Are you afraid that he is not strong enough to conquer your enemies or to supply you with what you need? But the risen Christ possesses infinite strength and all things are subject to him, even the demons that threaten to destroy you."

"Are you afraid that even though he is strong enough to take up your cause and defend you he might not be willing to do so? But if he was willing, for your sake, to subject himself to a Roman scourging and ridicule and public humiliation and eventually willing to be crucified naked in order to bear your sin and shame and the wrath you deserved, don't you think he is willing to come to your aid and to help you through every struggle?"

"Are you afraid that if perhaps Jesus might accept and receive you to himself, the Father will not? But could the Father ever consider rejecting his own Son, in whom he delights with infinite delight? And did not Jesus say in John 17 that the Father loves us with the same love that he has for Jesus himself?"

"What spiritual or moral excellencies do you desire in a Savior that cannot be found in Jesus Christ? What is there great or good, adorable or endearing that cannot be found in Jesus? Do you wish your savior to be honorable and dignified, strong yet compassionate, powerful yet humble, firm but at the same time gracious, both loving and just? Is that not what Jesus is at all times for us? Is he not both the Lion of Judah who roars with supreme power and at the same time the Lamb led to slaughter in the place of sinners like you and me?"

"Would you have your Savior to be one who is near to the heart of God the Father, whose prayers and intercession for you are readily and joyfully heard by our great God? But who is more near and dear to the heart of the Father than his only-begotten Son, who is, with him and the Holy Spirit, one God, who is beloved of the Father and is never denied anything he asks of him?"

My questions to you today could continue without end. And every one of them would be answered in the same way. There is none other than Jesus who can be for you and do for you everything your heart may require. So, will you not receive him today as Lord and Savior? Will you who have already received him lift your hearts and voices to declare his greatness and mercy and power and love? Will you now join me to exult in Christ and in so doing exalt him above all others?

If you think that is enough, that everything that could be said of Jesus has been said? Oh, dear friend, how wrong you would be. So, let me ask you once again: ***What is it about Jesus that makes him worthy of your adoration and praise? What is it about Jesus that makes him irresistibly attractive? Why is he alone worthy of your whole-hearted allegiance and love?***

Consider once again the portrait of Jesus in symbolic language. In Revelation 5:5 he is called ***"the Lion of the tribe of Judah,"*** but in Revelation 5:6 is also portrayed as the ***"Lamb"*** who had been slain, though now standing, because alive. So, which is he? Both! Jesus is both Lion and Lamb. And it is in this glorious juxtaposition of what appear to be two contrasting images that we find the answer to our question. Think about this for a moment:

- The Lion in whom we find unimpeachable authority is also the Lamb who embodies humility and meekness in the highest degree.
- The Lion who wields power and strength that none can resist is also the Lamb who walked this earth in weakness and suffering, resisting none.
- The Lion who rules the world and governs its every move is also the Lamb who was meekly led to slaughter by his enemies.
- The Lion who is known for his uncompromising commitment to righteousness is also the Lamb who overflows in love to sinners like you and me.
- The Lion whose majestic beauty captivates the human heart is also the Lamb who condescended to take upon himself the likeness of a man and was, in appearance, quite ordinary and unimpressive.
- The Lion who commands total obedience from everyone is also the Lamb who in his earthly life submitted himself in obedience to the law of God.
- The Lion who is holy and pure beyond our wildest imagination is also the Lamb who is gracious and kind and tender-hearted to all.
- The Lion who could silence a raging storm with a single word is also the Lamb who refused to speak or revile against those who nailed him to a cross.
- The Lion who is life itself is also the Lamb who willingly dies for his enemies.
- The Lion who is exalted high above the heavens, immeasurably beyond all of creation and myriads of angels, before whom the greatest and most powerful kings and commanders on earth are but a speck of dust on the balance, is also the Lamb who stooped low, who condescended to become one of us and suffer the trials and challenges put upon him by weak and sinful men.
- The Lion who is in himself infinite holiness and righteousness and purity and power is also the Lamb who welcomes broken sinners into his presence and makes intimate friends of his enemies.
- The Lion who in himself needs nothing, being altogether self-sufficient, is also the Lamb who gives and gives and then gives yet again so generously and abundantly.
- The Lion who is in himself of such blinding glory and brilliance that adoring angels cover their faces is also the Lamb who humbled himself and identified with his creatures so that they might behold him and enjoy him forever.
- The Lion who, as Paul says in Philippians 2, exists from all eternity in perfect equality with the Father and the Spirit, equal in all respects as to his divinity, is also the Lamb who in time and history humbled himself and took on the likeness of sinful men and women.
- The Lion who is known for his majesty is also the Lamb who is known for his meekness.
- The Lion who drove the robbers and thieves out of the Temple is also the Lamb who only days later allowed those very robbers and thieves to nail him to a cross.
- The Lion who commands absolute obedience from his creatures is also the Lamb who in obedience honored every command of his Father.
- The Lion who rightly burns with wrath against the rebellious and unbelieving is also the Lamb who in the place of the rebellious and unbelieving endured in his own body and soul that very wrath.

He is at one and the same time a Lion-like-Lamb and a Lamb-like-Lion without any inconsistency or contradiction.

So, in the final analysis, why do so many declare their departure from Christianity, and why have I remained firmly committed to it?

Rarely does a day pass that we don't hear or read or personally witness yet another professing Christian declaring that he/she is deconstructing. It's an ugly word. But it is less offensive than the biblical term with which it is synonymous: apostasy. My aim here is not to dissect the reasons why people feel led to abandon their Christian faith. But it did get me thinking about why I am a Christian and am determined, by God's sustaining gracious presence and power, to remain one forever. Deconstruction or apostasy or falling away or whatever language you prefer to describe it is not something I have ever seriously considered.

One more thing. I don't want anyone to conclude that I am oblivious to the numerous ways in which the church has failed certain professing Christians. I've been a pastor far too long to remain ignorant of or indifferent to the wounds incurred by many and the reasons they give as to why they want nothing more to do with Christianity or the local church. Almost every person that I've spoken with who is in the process of deconstructing their faith cites "church hurt" as one of the primary reasons behind their decision.

I suspect that some will say that I've lived a sheltered life, that I know little of the wickedness and hypocrisy and betrayal to which so many have been subjected. I beg to differ. I have seen the very worst of human behavior. I have

spent hundreds, if not thousands of hours, listening to the most horrific tales of abuse and abandonment and selfish disregard that so many have endured at the hands of other professing Christians. And I have done my best, with God's help, to enable victims of this sort of reprehensible conduct to find healing and joy and forgiveness in their hearts toward their perpetrators. So, I do not speak from either ignorance or as one who is insulated from the vast array of sins that people commit against each other. That being said, why, then, am I still a Christian?

There are, of course, numerous reasons why I find Christianity compelling: its ability to provide the most reasonable explanation for why there is something rather than nothing; the beauty, persuasive power, and self-authenticating glory of the Bible; the overwhelming evidence for the resurrection of Jesus; the existence of the church itself; together with arguments from history, fulfilled prophecy, archaeology, and the inescapable internal testimony of the Holy Spirit bearing witness to the truth of the gospel and the identity of Jesus.

But the primary reason I am a Christian and will, by God's grace, remain so, is Jesus himself. I am and will always remain a Christian because of *the unsearchable, unfathomable, unparalleled, incomparable riches of Christ Jesus*. There is none wiser than he. There is none more powerful than he. There is none more loving and kind and patient and forgiving and glorious and beautiful than he.

Earlier I mentioned the great Puritan pastor and theologian Jonathan Edwards (1703-58). In one sermon he issued this heartfelt appeal to all non-Christians, and I want to conclude this morning by repeating it for all present today.

"And here is not only infinite strength and infinite worthiness, but infinite condescension, and love and mercy, as great as power and dignity. If you are a poor, distressed sinner, whose heart is ready to sink for fear that God never will have mercy on you, you need not be afraid to go to Christ, for fear that he is either unable or unwilling to help you. Here is a strong foundation, and an inexhaustible treasure, to answer the necessities of your poor soul. Here is infinite grace and gentleness to invite and embolden a poor, unworthy, fearful soul to come to it. If Christ accepts of you, you need not fear but that you will be safe, for he is a strong Lion for your defense.

And if you come, you need not fear but that you shall be accepted, for he is like a Lamb to all that come to him, and receives them with infinite grace and tenderness. It is true he has awful majesty, he is the great God, and infinitely high above you. But there is this to encourage and embolden the poor sinner, that Christ is man as well as God. He is a creature, as well as the Creator, and he is the most humble and lowly in heart of any creature in heaven or earth. This may well make the poor unworthy creature bold in coming to him. You need not hesitate one moment; but may run to him, and cast yourself upon him. You will certainly be graciously and meekly received by him. "

Don't ever think that you are too sinful to be saved. Don't ever fall prey to the lie that Jesus only receives those whose lives have already been fixed. Don't believe the lie that he will only embrace those who are physically attractive, wildly famous, and financially successful. You are never too sinful to be saved by Jesus. But some of you are too self-righteous to be saved. You think salvation is only for those beneath you on the socio-economic ladder, or whose IQ scores rank in the genius category. Or you survey your life up to the present moment and are confident that you don't need saving. You haven't yet committed murder or adultery or taken illegal drugs. You've never watched pornography or gotten drunk or stolen anything of real value. Why, then, you ask me, do I need to be saved?

For one simple reason, among many others. All your righteous deeds are like filthy rags, said Isaiah the prophet. The best and brightest and boldest of men and women are hardly worth comparing with the infinite, incomprehensible, measureless beauty and riches of Christ Jesus.

The apostle Paul wrestled with the same questions that fill your mind and keep you from coming to Jesus. Listen to how he describes himself in Philippians 3:4b-11.

[4] If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: [5] circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; [6] as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. [7] But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. [8] Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ [9] and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends

on faith—[10] that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, [11] that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

"But Sam, are you absolutely certain that if I come to Christ and put my faith and hope in him that he will really take me in?" I'll let Jesus answer that for you:

"I am the bread of life," he declares; "whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst" (John 6:35).

And again,

"whoever comes to me I will never cast out" (John 6:37b).

And finally,

"For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day" (John 6:40).