

TRUTH & LOVE: THE EPISTLE TO THE EPHESIANS

Week One: He Chose Us In Him (Ephesians 1:1-6)

Whenever Paul wrote epistles to individuals and congregations of the churches of Christ, he was well aware of how difficult it is, even for faithful believers, to understand God's eternal and transcendent nature. He also knew how easily all of us are distracted, intimidated, or tempted by the things of this world. Even faithful believers fall far short of the purity and perfection of God, so to catalog and correct all of our faults would be an exhausting and demoralizing practice.

Therefore, in all of his epistles, Paul emphasizes the love of God and the truth of God. This is nowhere truer than in his epistle to the Ephesians. Ephesians may be the most general of all of Paul's epistles, for everything in it (except perhaps for one brief personal remark towards the end) would be equally applicable to any believing recipient. The entire letter develops and then applies some of the most vital aspects of God's truth and God's love.

Even the brief greeting (1:1-2) is not without purpose. While humans of good will frequently exchange good wishes with one another, most of the things we care about in each other's lives are secondary to the things that truly matter. So, when Paul wishes the Ephesians God's grace and peace, this is by no means a mere convention. Rather, he wishes his friends the things they truly need, whether they realize it or not. To have our sins forgiven by God's grace, and to have peace with God through his Son Jesus, are of far greater value than the world's riches and glory.

The apostle praises God for the salvation he grants us (1:3-6), emphasizing the absolute nature of God's grace and God's wisdom. Paul offers a perspective that rises completely above this world, calling us to look beyond the things that pre-occupy us in this life, so that we can see things as they truly are. Even before he created our world, God had already made preparations to forgive the creatures he would create, for he already knew that we would be fallible, but worth saving.

This is what Paul means when he says that God predestined our salvation. To the fleshly mind, this may sound as if God had already decided who will be saved and who will be lost, but the spiritual mind realizes that this could not be the case. Jesus was predestined to come to this world and to bring grace through his self-sacrifice; and his Father had determined in advance that all who believed in the Son, and who turned in genuine faith to him, would be forgiven of all sin.

The kind of predestination that is taught in Scripture - as contrasted with the silly misconceptions of misguided human thinking - is tremendously re-assuring. God does not change plans arbitrarily as humans do; God does not delude himself the way humans do; God does not go back on his promises as humans do. God always merits our faith, our hope, and our gratitude. How sad, and how foolish, that we still look to worldly 'leaders' and 'heroes' for hope, satisfaction, and excitement. Paul's epistle can help to cure us of this worldly poison.

- Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, 2008

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Week Two: Marked With A Seal (Ephesians 1:7-14)

Paul's epistle to the Ephesians emphasizes the combination of God's love and God's truth. To the fleshly nature, God's truth can be unpleasant, and God's love can be incomprehensible, yet both are essential to a healthy relationship with God. So Paul now adds another idea. Since God is well aware of the challenge that his love and truth present to the fleshly mind, he gives us assurance, counsel, and security through his Holy Spirit.

The knowledge that we have forgiveness through the blood of Jesus opens the door for us to understand everything else that God in his love and wisdom has done (1:7-10). Grace, mercy, and forgiveness are the foundation of our relationship with God, and to accept this is the first step towards spiritual maturity and understanding. The Spirit helps us to remember this.

Believers who persist in following God only for what he gives them in this world will never understand him; "if only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men (1 Corinthians 15:19). It makes no difference who or what you are in the world's eyes; you need God to forgive your sins more than you need anything else, either in this world or the next.

It is, always has been, and always will be God's design to "bring all things in heaven and earth together under one head, even Christ". This indeed will be the fulfillment of all that God has done, from the Creation through the centuries of revelation to all that he does and shall do daily in the lives of his people. This has nothing to do with worldly affairs - no preacher or teacher, no president or king can bring this about. God cares little, if he cares at all, about our elections, our inventions, or our sports championships. If we wish to know our God, we must humble ourselves by acknowledging the trivial nature of everything else in our lives.

If we do humble ourselves, then we are given the kinds of spiritual blessings that the worldly cannot know (1:11-14). Simply to be 'included in Christ' is a privilege that surpasses any of the trivial honors that the world bestows. And to receive the presence of God's Holy Spirit provides us with the incredible promise of full redemption when our time here is done. Yet, if we are honest with ourselves, we know that we barely understand, much less appreciate, these blessings.

Of the obstacles to such spiritual understanding, a couple are particularly harmful. We fail to see our own sinfulness for what it truly is, and we trust the world more than we trust God. If we resist the truth about our sin, then we can never appreciate God's grace, God's compassion, or God's love. If we do not see the world's teachings and priorities for the shallow folly that they are, then we can never appreciate God's wisdom, God's providence, or God's Word.

As Ephesians continues, Paul will describe in blunt detail both the ugly nature of our own lives and souls without God, and also the empty, superficial nature of all earthly priorities and attainments. Are you willing to see these for what they truly are? Your answer to that question will say a great deal about your relationship with God.

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Week Three: Seeing With The Eyes Of Your Heart (Ephesians 1:15-23)

From the beginning of Ephesians, Paul has emphasized the importance of understanding both God's truth and God's love. He has also explained how God sent his Spirit into our lives to help us with the difficult process of appreciating and embracing these seemingly intangible subjects. But Paul is not a mere professor or schoolteacher, presenting facts for us to memorize. So now he offers a heartfelt prayer, asking God that we may strive with all sincerity to open our hearts and minds to him, so that his spiritual wisdom will save us from the false wisdom of this world.

When Paul prays for God to bless his readers with wisdom (1:15-17), he by no means wants us to indulge ourselves in pointless speculations or arcane debates. Rather, he hopes that we might grasp the importance of a genuine relationship with God, that we may truly know him. The only way that we can do this is if we shut out the noise and lies of the world, and listen instead to his Spirit and his Word. For the world seeks to appeal to the flesh and persuade the flesh, while God's Word is meant to speak to our souls; his Spirit speaks to our spirits.

The apostle thus hopes for us to see not with the eyes in our heads, which can see only the physical, but with "the eyes of your heart", which can see the physical (1:18). If taken literally, this phrase is, of course, impossible, which only emphasizes Paul's emphasis on the spiritual. So many persons, even so-called believers in Jesus, take pride in their knowledge of the events, the politics, the sports, and the culture of this earth. None of these things matter spiritually. Look deeper, and you can see how much more important it is to know and to understand God's will, God's Word, God's priorities, and God's values.

As Paul's prayer continues, it is obvious that he wishes us to understand things of an eternal, transcendent nature, not things that matter to those who live for this world (1:19-23). The apostle emphasizes the perspective from "the heavenly realms", for this is the viewpoint that matters. Jesus was not a philosopher or a moralist or an educator; he was God's Son made flesh. He did not come to rule here on this earth, but in eternity, where his true kingdom is. He had no interest in worldly position or power or recognition, because he knew how trivial these things are from his Father's viewpoint.

Paul prays for these things because they are God's will for us. This is not the plea of an eccentric philosopher who simply wants us to join him in his particular view of the world. It is the prayer of a humble, faithful servant of Jesus, who himself had to give up every earthly loyalty, every theological assumption, when he met Jesus. He prays for us that we may be able to do the same, for only so can we begin to see things through the eyes of the heart.

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Week Four: From Death To Life (Ephesians 2:1-10)

Paul has called the Ephesians to appreciate and understand the truth of God and the love of God. To help with this, God sends us his Holy Spirit, while the apostle himself has offered a heartfelt prayer on our behalf. Now, returning to his key ideas of love and truth, Paul reminds us of the transformation that we undergo when we turn from the world to Jesus.

Those who live outside of Christ are spiritually dead (2:1-3). Although the world tries to rationalize and even glorify selfish ambition, fleshly indulgence, and other sins, they are acts of disobedience and rebellion towards God. It is a sad irony that the worldly so often boast about being free from God, while in reality they are slaves, and not even to a powerful master, but slaves to their own weak, fallible flesh and its irrational desires.

The flesh cares only about feeling good, and feeling good right now. To exalt fleshly desires by calling them sophisticated or by turning them into philosophical positions is simply pathetic and silly. And to value the desires of the flesh above the soul's longing for God is even worse. No wonder, then, that Paul describes the self-seeking and self-indulgent as objects of God's wrath.

But God's wrath is nothing compared with his grace, and it is to this that we owe the chance of salvation (2:4-7). As he often does, Paul explains both sides of God's character, because we must understand both in order to appreciate what he has given us. Nothing in our life matters as much as our relationship with God, and this can be founded on grace alone. And the blessings that Paul mentions here further emphasize the extraordinary nature of what God has done for us.

It would really be more than we deserve if God simply forgave the sins of those who believe in Jesus, and withheld punishment without granting anything positive. But God also gives us the blessed status of being his sons and daughters, and he offers the promise that we can share in his blessings for an eternity of glory. Unfortunately, because we think too highly of ourselves and too highly of this world's toys, we often fail to appreciate what God offers to believers.

The realization that our salvation truly comes by grace alone provides us with a new perspective on our lives here (2:8-10). Since we are saved by grace alone, we can serve God and help others freely, without needing to measure up to a 'standard' set by others. As beings created in God's image, we have the capacity for a wide variety of constructive actions. But the fleshly mind is pulled away from the godly priorities instilled in us at creation, and the world's law-oriented mind-set conditions us to act out of selfish motives (to receive reward or to avoid punishment).

Jesus Christ is the cure for such ills. Jesus crucified proves to us that there is a better way to live, and Jesus resurrected proves that it is truly possible to be reborn. Jesus longs to rescue each one of us from spiritual death, and to give new, spiritual life to all who believe in him.

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Week Five: He Himself Is Our Peace (Ephesians 2:11-22)

It is a feature of the human species that we differ from one another in appearance, background, and personality. In human history, these differences have been a source of all kinds of ills. Human leaders and experts have tried for centuries to find a way to bring together those of different races, cultures, and nationalities. Sometimes their efforts are sincere, at other times they are merely self-serving. But in all cases they are futile because, as Paul now explains, it is only in Jesus that we can truly be made one.

The apostle reminds us that, in any division that results in different classes, most of us will be among the non-privileged (2:11-13). Without Jesus, the Gentiles, solely through the accident of birth, could never know the kinds of spiritual blessings that the ancient Israelites experienced. Paul knew, of course, that a great many of the ancient Jews also failed to appreciate the covenants and blessings that Israel received. Yet his point still brings out an important truth.

Not only do divisions into elite and ordinary work against those in the 'ordinary' group, they also are of no genuine long-term benefit to the 'elite'. The majority of the Israelites were jealous of their status as a spiritual 'elite', not grateful for it. Since most of us must endure being treated as ordinary and thus as expendable, it can be difficult for us to see that the world's ruling classes often get little of lasting value from their favored position. With very rare exceptions, they have an insecure craving for more, and a selfish inability to appreciate with humility what they have.

But Jesus puts aside all barriers and obstacles for those who trust in him (2:14-18). It is not our goodness that allows us to love one another, but Jesus himself; his grace, his compassion, and his sacrifice provide what our weak flesh and weak minds could never provide. It is to him, not to our morality or our ideas, that we must look if we want to rise above the world's prejudices and hatreds. It is to him, not to ourselves, that we owe thanks whenever we are able to do this.

The world is full of persons who profess loudly that they love everyone without distinction, and yet it is not hard to see how many divisions there are in every society. This happens because the world seeks outward harmony, not inward change. The worldly think that fine-sounding words from the mouth can substitute for humility in the heart, and they think that fancy plans by governments and experts can substitute for an honest discussion of our struggle to understand one another. Only in Jesus can hypocrisy and phoniness be replaced by grace and compassion.

With Jesus as the true cornerstone, we can escape the limitations of the fleshly world and be joined together by his blood (2:19-22), so that we have peace. When we experience such blessings, even on a small level, we ought to remember the one who brought them to us. Jesus does not make us one with brilliance or rhetoric, but with blood and grace. Let's be grateful for them as we humbly experience the blessings that come from them.

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Week Six: The Mystery Of Christ (Ephesians 3:1-13)

Only in Jesus can we find true and lasting meaning in our lives, and only in Christ can we truly be made one with each other. Clearly, then, 'Jesus Christ' cannot be a mere slogan, a mere magic phrase that replaces thought and action. If we wish to enjoy the kinds of deep spiritual blessings Paul has been describing in his epistle, then Jesus Christ must become a reality to us. This is not easy for fleshly minds and hearts to do, or else Paul would not refer to it as a 'mystery'.

But neither is Jesus impossible to understand - he is only a 'mystery' because we have to discard our preconceptions and personal agendas if we wish to understand Jesus as the apostle does. And, through Paul and other faithful believers, God openly proclaims the meaning of this 'mystery' (3:1-6). It is no more and no less than God's gracious desire for his Son Jesus to draw out of this world all those from every era, nation, and race who believe and trust in him.

This is not the kind of 'mystery' that we associate with the likes of Sherlock Holmes or Agatha Christie. It is instead a mystery to the flesh, because it comes so naturally to the earthly mind to think of others in terms of culture, nationality, talent, and other worldly characteristics, instead of in spiritual terms. Worldly persons talk obsessively about the differences between us, and then act surprised when the differences don't go away. God does not expect them to go away, but instead he hopes that we can learn how unimportant they are, compared with our spiritual health.

The 'mystery' of the gospel can only be understood if we first understand grace (3:7-13). When Paul calls himself "the least of all God's people", he is not using false humility or a rhetorical tactic. He knows that each one of us stands in an equally desperate need of God's mercy and forgiveness. If we fail to grasp this, then much of the gospel will remain 'mysterious' or even frustrating. Yet to those who are humble enough to see the universal need for grace, the gospel's message can bring blessed clarity to the mind, comfort to the soul, and hope to the heart.

This also is what God wishes to "be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms". It is not especially amazing for a great Creator like God to display his power or his imagination. What he wants the spiritual universe to see, more than anything else, is his merciful compassion upon the creatures that he made in his image. This brings him the kind of glory that baffles the shallow fleshly mind, because most humans would selfishly prefer to be known as brilliant or powerful than to be known as loving and gracious.

God is not glorified by those with superficial understanding who praise God only for pleasant things. He is, rather, glorified by those believers who endure this world's injustices and dangers with faith in him and in his ultimate compassion. The knowledge of God's grace and compassion does not lead us to dominate or to rule in this world, but to overcome and to rise above this world. This is the mystery that is revealed through Jesus Christ.

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Week Seven: How Wide & High & Long & Deep (Ephesians 3:14-21)

For the second time, Paul sets aside his exposition to offer a prayer for those who read his words. This uplifting prayer, with its assurance that God is able to do “immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine”, has encouraged many believers. Yet many do not understand that this is not a prayer for God to bless our own goals, our lives in this world, or even our ministries. Rather, Paul prays for God to enable us to see spiritual reality, just as God has allowed Paul to do.

The apostle first prays for us to be strengthened inwardly (3:14-17a). This happens only because of God's attributes, not because of ours. We bear his name, not ours; and it is his glorious riches, not ours, that strengthen us. His Spirit and his Son live in our hearts and make our own faith worthwhile. Thus Paul asks for us to have strength inside, not necessarily in the flesh.

Paul also hopes for us to become more aware and more appreciative of the love that Jesus and his Father have for us (3:17b-19). He knows that it will take much prayer as well as much humility for this to happen. Most Christians are too preoccupied with the external and superficial aspects of Christianity to take much time to dwell and meditate on the things that matter most to God.

The love of Jesus, like the grace of God, is a concept too large for our earthly minds fully to grasp. When we substitute dictionary definitions or scholar's tricks for a true understanding, it leaves us with a dry, shriveled-up concept of grace, and with a generic concept of love that barely affects our hearts. God's love and grace are wider, higher, broader, and deeper than our language can express. We do not need a neatly encapsulated definition, but a devotion to the task of better understanding and appreciating just how God feels towards his creations.

This too is what the apostle is aiming at when he promises us that God can do more than we ask or imagine (3:20-21). He is not saying that God can bless us in ways we expect, just to a degree greater than we anticipated. He is saying something more important, less exciting to the flesh, but a welcome spring of life to our thirsty souls. Despite our flaws and limitations, we can still learn how wide and high and broad and deep the love of God is. We need be constrained neither by the world's trivial concerns nor by the clichés that often plague Christian teaching.

We would benefit ourselves and others if we could pull away from thinking of God primarily in terms of how he can fulfill the goals we have set. It may seem right by human logic to assume that God always wants numerical growth, personal happiness, and the like - but in truth we don't know this; we only wish it. It is a frightening thing to relinquish control over our lives and ministries so that God truly reigns in them. But it is still what God desires us to do, and it can enable us to experience blessings that we didn't even know existed.

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Week Eight: One Body & One Spirit (Ephesians 4:1-6)

What Paul has called the 'mystery' of Christ is indeed hard for earthly beings to grasp in all its glory and truth. Yet this is what God wills for us to do, and in these next few verses we see the kind of good fruit that we can have if we accept his challenging call to fathom "how high and long and wide and deep is the love of Christ".

These verses are well-known for their persuasive reminder to us that there is truly only one body of Christ, not many; that there is only one Spirit, not one for each school of theology; only one baptism, not one for each denomination. Yet this is not a checklist or a measuring stick, but rather an assurance and a promise. To use these verses as a checklist is contrary to their intent. Nor are they intended to identify the 'essentials', for there are other matters equally vital to Christianity that aren't mentioned here.

Humility and gentleness are the inevitable fruits of a life based on genuine love and godly truth (4:1-2). There will never come a time when we do not need humility, nor will there ever come a time when we shall not need to ask others for grace and forgiveness in return. Paul says that this is simply "worthy of the calling you have received", for Jesus humbly endured every manner of mistreatment from a world that did not understand who he was or what he came to do.

To "keep the unity of the Spirit" (4:3) is something different from attempting to create unity. Humans inevitably think that they can create unity through their own efforts, knowledge, or goodness, but they always fail. Indeed, most humans who try to push through some kind of 'unity' are actually seeking conformity, a cheap and deceitful substitute. When human leaders urge 'unity'- whether in politics, the workplace, or even in the church - it is usually just an excuse for demanding that everyone else should let them have their way.

The church does not need to create unity, for God has already made us one. All we need to do is not ruin it by forcing everyone to conform in superficial matters such as methodology, dress, or personality. If we would follow the apostle's example and "preach nothing except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2), then we could experience the unity that God brings us.

Thus this passage's 'one body', 'one Spirit', and the rest (4:4-6) are meant as a reminder that we need not create unity on our own initiative and on our own terms. Rather, we should strive to understand the one Spirit we were given, the one baptism that God grants, the one hope of lasting life that the gospel promises, and so forth.

The one Spirit is real and alive, the one baptism gives life through the forgiveness of sins, and the one hope of heaven transcends this world's shabby rewards. If we were to take the time to understand these and other basic blessings on a more spiritual level, then we might find it both easier and more effective to share them with others who understand them imperfectly. And we would certainly have a better appreciation for what God has given us.

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Week Nine: Becoming Mature (Ephesians 4:7-16)

Ephesians is filled with promises of God's love, glory, peace, grace, and truth. Just reading the epistle gives us many reasons to desire these spiritual blessings. Yet even believers often have only a vague sense of these things, and don't feel them to be realities. Paul exhorts us, then, to become more mature in Jesus, because it is when we experience spiritual blessings that we can rise above the petty problems and sordid behavior of the worldly.

Grace is the foundation of all other spiritual blessings (4:7). Without God's grace and Christ's blood, there is no forgiveness of sins, and thus no spiritual peace, security, or hope. Without grace it is still possible to enjoy earthly blessings for a time, but they will always come to an end. To appreciate God's most valuable blessings, we first should accept that they cannot be earned.

Paul quotes a slightly obscure passage from Psalm 68 to emphasize that Jesus, not the church or any human agent, brings God's blessings (4:8-10). The Psalms passage (Paul quotes from the Septuagint, which reads differently than most English-language Old Testaments) portrays God as an all-powerful, transcendent ruler, on whom everyone else is dependent.

To this idea, Paul adds the fact that Jesus himself also descended to earth in human form. The same God who is above all also made himself, in Jesus, more humble than all, in order to bring blessings to those who believe in him. We are thus doubly blessed by the nature of God, for he has both the transcendence to give us anything he wishes, and also the compassion to do what it takes to give us the blessings he brings us.

We can view our personal situations and personal blessings differently than the worldly do (4:11-13). Worldly persons compete for the things they consider important, but godly persons realize that all can share the greatest blessings equally. God is infinite, and each of us can know him as closely as we wish to. His grace is unlimited, and each of us can have all that we need.

Even one's role or 'position' in the church doesn't matter much to God, for he sees things in terms of responsibility, not privilege. Each believer has a ministry to which God has called him or her, and none of these is more important than any other. If we would cure ourselves of the world's addiction to numerical results and popularity, then we might understand this a little better.

All of these perspectives are difficult for the flesh to accept, and yet it is only by accepting them that we can be freed of the spiritual turmoil caused by fleshly viewpoints (4:14-16). Paul's description of being blown and tossed by everything one hears and sees is, unfortunately, applicable to a great many believers.

As a church, our ill-conceived tendency is to try to 'head off' the lies of the world by pre-programming our members with the 'answers' to every erroneous teaching they might hear. Instead, we should "speak the truth in love", that is, continually remind one another of God's true nature and of the things that matter most to him. This enables each of us to be a fruitful part of the body of Christ as it grows in strength and in faith.

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Week Ten: Put On The New Self (Ephesians 4:17-24)

All of the things that Paul has discussed in the epistle so far can help us to see God's transcendent nature as well as Jesus' unlimited grace and love. These concepts are hardly meant to be mere theories, for they are the most real and relevant truths we shall ever know. If we understand them, even to a small degree, then they will transform our thoughts and actions. Since this is essential to any genuine form of Christianity, Paul says that he will “insist” upon us doing so.

Part of making this change is the realization that sin represents the depravity of mind that results from not knowing God (4:17-19). Contrary to the world's propaganda, sinning is not a statement of independence, but rather is a state of slavery to one's own flesh and its desires. Contrary to the depictions in Hollywood's infantile productions, sin is never sophisticated or brilliant, but is always shabby and pathetic.

The person who sins willfully is hardened by a lack of godliness, and has become shallow and bestial, unable to see through even the feeblest excuses for sin. The person who sins out of weakness or despair is not hardened, but has, at least temporarily, forgotten that life without God's abiding presence is even more hopeless and desperate. Any person who sins continually, regardless of the reason, will gradually find it more difficult, not less so, to repent. So it is always better to turn to God in humility than to commit a sin and hope that it 'helps' in some way.

But the Christian life involves much more than mere abstention from sin and from error. The new life in Christ allows us to live positively, not negatively (4:20-24). In this respect, the manner in which one comes to Christ is crucial. Those who come to Jesus with the expectation of an easy, pleasure-filled life will live in ways that differ only superficially from unbelievers' lifestyles. Those who see Christ primarily as a lawgiver will fight against sin and self using only fleshly resources, only to find that mere outward obedience can never by itself produce true faith.

It is when we realize that Jesus calls us to renew ourselves from the inside that we can see what the Christian life is truly all about. A change of mind, rejecting the world's false values and replacing them with godly priorities, allows us to change outward habits because we wish to please God, not because we want to avoid punishment or peer-pressure. The knowledge that this world will never be more than a temporary home enables us to endure our own hardships while trying to lighten the load for others, rather than the other way around.

Too often in the church we place the emphasis on outward and physical things, just as the world does. We try to deal with problems through methods, slogans, programs, and the like, rather than adjusting the ways we think and the things we value. Seeking God's truth and love the right way is much more difficult at first, but it leads to fruit that will last far longer.

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Week Eleven: Imitators Of God (Ephesians 4:25-5:2)

The calling to be transformed into "the new self" has many implications. It means no less than to allow God himself (particularly through the life of Jesus) to be our example in all things. The world provides many possible 'examples' to follow, and many of them seem to be supported by worldly logic. But we are called, and also enabled, to avoid such distractions.

God wishes for believers to be truthful in all things (4:25). God is truth, and Satan is lies - and thus our own words will testify as to which one we worship, by whether our words are true or false. God never wants false worship or false testimony, even if superficially it seems useful. We are, as Paul says, all part of one body. If the body lies to itself, there will be problems.

If you are struggling with sin, then confess it to a believer whom you can trust. Don't hide from those who might help. If you have little enthusiasm for God, then find a discerning believer who can help you to understand God a little better. Don't pretend that you enjoy Christianity when you really don't. If you are talking to an unbeliever, be as honest as you can about God's importance to you. Don't try to pretend that Christianity is always fun and pleasurable.

Likewise, believers must handle anger and similar emotions differently than the worldly do (4:26-27). Note that Paul does not teach the value of anger, but rather the need to transform it into a more useful emotion as quickly as possible. If our anger truly is for the right reasons (and it can be, since the capacity for anger was instilled in us by God), then this will always be possible. If our anger is unquenchable, this warns us that our anger may be for the right reasons.

It should then be clear that all kinds of sin and misbehavior are inappropriate for those who profess to believe the gospel (4:27-31). If we have to be shown a specific verse that prohibits us from using foul language, from fighting, from gambling, or from abusing our bodies, then we do not understand the gospel to begin with. It is thus a foolish policy when we find it necessary to hunt for proof texts to prohibit such things.

We should instead seek positive ways that our lives can more closely resemble Jesus' life, rather than trying to justify practices that we wish to engage in for the sake of our fleshly pleasure. "Everything is permissible for me' - but not everything is beneficial. 'Everything is permissible for me' - but I will not be mastered by anything" (1 Corinthians 6:12). If we simply and sincerely try to please God, rather than the flesh, then we can avoid a lot of fruitless debate.

This is also why we must learn to forgive one another (4:32-5:2), for Jesus' grace is an essential part of who he was and is. We cannot have relationships at all without some grace, and we could not have any relationship at all with God without his unlimited grace. Jesus' grace was self-sacrificing, unmistakable, and complete. How does this compare with the measure of grace that we bestow on one another?

- Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, 2008

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TRUTH & LOVE: THE EPISTLE TO THE EPHESIANS

Week Twelve: Children Of Light (Ephesians 5:3-21)

Believers in Jesus are called by God's truth and love to get rid of the old self, which is ruled by fleshly desires, and to put on the new self that lives to follow Jesus in all things. Such a change of identity and purpose must inevitably bring changes in actions and words, as the apostle has been explaining. But outward changes are only a part of the picture. The gospel can and should change our perspectives, our thoughts, and our attitudes.

We find it relatively easy to accept that violence, adultery, criminal activities, and other such things have no place in the lives of Christians, but we should also avoid even the appearance or the suspicion of such things (5:3-7). This means that we are called to abstain from things that are not in themselves 'sins', but that others might associate with sin or might consider to be tip-offs of sin. To make such decisions, we must be willing to give up our 'rights' for the sake of others.

Likewise, believers are called to break out of the worldly habit of tacitly protecting one another from the exposure of sin (5:8-14). In the pagan world, perhaps, the inappropriate self-righteous zeal with which our society enjoys punishing wrongdoers might explain why many persons cover up for friends or family members who do something sinful or illegal. But in the body of Christ, we should learn to trust one another, and should practice showing grace to the erring, so that it will be easy for those caught in sin to get help and healing.

This is why Paul says, "everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for it is light that makes everything visible" (verse 14). It is quite possible to help each other to get rid of our rationalizations for sin, without being harsh or judgmental. It is quite possible to help a brother or sister to overcome a sin without resorting to negative motivation. But such things are only possible for those who live in the light.

The call to "find out what pleases the Lord" (verse 10) leads into Paul's exhortation to make the use of every opportunity (5:15-21). This does not necessitate the implementation of a comprehensive plan. Instead, the apostle simply explains that, as we learn to channel our time and energy away from unconstructive things, we shall realize how many natural, unforced ways there are to remind others of God and to show God's light to them.

And, while attention often focuses on the following verses relating to husbands and wives, the call in verse 21 to "submit to one another out of reverence for Christ" is of even broader significance. Regardless of one's worldly status, and regardless even of the particular ministry or responsibility one has in the church, none of us should ever claim any kind of superiority or spiritual authority over others.

Whatever we know, whatever we are able to do in the name of Jesus, it is by the grace of God and the blood of Jesus, not because our own merit. Every one of our brothers and sisters in Jesus has the same blessed relationship with God that we have, and every unbeliever simply has the same need for God that we once had. When we come to understand this, it is then only natural to allow humility to guide our relationships with one another.

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TRUTH & LOVE: THE EPISTLE TO THE EPHESIANS

Week Thirteen: A Life Of Humility (Ephesians 5:22-6:9)

Ephesians reminds us that as believers in Jesus we have been transformed, so that we have new values and perspectives on everything. Truth and love, not the values of this world, must guide us in this new life. One particularly important aspect of this transformation is humility, which should affect every area of the Christian's life, and which should be particularly evident in our relationships with one another.

The apostle uses a marriage relationship to illustrate how mutual humility allows us to mirror the relationship between Jesus and his church (5:22-33). His actual instructions are simple, for he merely calls the wife to be respectful and submissive towards her husband, and the husband to be gentle and compassionate towards his wife. Naturally, all of us ought to be both respectful and gentle towards one another, so Paul merely tells each spouse what they most need to hear.

But the apostle also emphasizes that what he says goes beyond any particular relationship in itself. Our respect and consideration towards one another should not be of a worldly kind, for the worldly show deference and false humility to the powerful or popular only in order to achieve selfish gain of some kind. We, instead, should realize that everyone is of equal importance in God's eyes, and should act accordingly. Likewise, our love for one another should be the sacrificial kind of love that Jesus practiced, not the self-centered kind we see in the world.

The relationship between parents and children also has many spiritual parallels and applications (6:1-4). Such a relationship is inherently less equal, at least temporarily, than most others. Thus children are called to give honor and respect to their parents, not because the parents are perfect, but because of what parents must give and sacrifice for the sake of their children.

Parents themselves have a serious responsibility, and should never view their position as one of privilege or superiority. When Jesus lived on this earth, he was God in the flesh, but he did not expect to be treated like a lord or a ruler. His humble patience and perseverance should be the model for all Christian parents. No matter what shortcomings children may have, parents never have to forgive their children more than God has already forgiven the parents themselves.

Even the relationship between slaves and their 'masters', as offensive as the very idea is to most believers, can be softened by these principles (6:5-9). Many today also find these verses to be of useful guidance in more constructive relationships, such as that of employee and employer. In their own time, they showed oppressed believers how to set a Christlike example in hopes of leading others to repentance.

It is erroneous to infer that Paul (or God) is implicitly approving of slavery with these instructions, and it is equally erroneous to criticize the Scriptures for not being more explicit in their condemnation of slavery. God is well aware of the human capacity for exploiting and oppressing others, yet he is patient with these sins just as he is with all other sins, and for the same reason. God always gives sinners every chance to repent, even if it means allowing them to continue in sin. To God, any human situation can be used to guide sinners to the truth.

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TRUTH & LOVE: THE EPISTLE TO THE EPHESIANS

Week Fourteen: Strength In The Lord (Ephesians 6:10-24)

All of the things that Paul has discussed in the epistle can help us to see God's transcendent nature, and can help us to live transformed lives, based on truth and love instead of the distorted values of this world. The new self lives in humility before others and before God. But this does not make us helpless, for we now have God's inexhaustible strength to replace our own feeble fleshly powers. "When I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:10).

Paul's lengthy metaphor of "the full armor of God" is quite familiar to many believers (6:10-18). Indeed, the apostle is resourceful in taking the typical pieces of physical armor worn by soldiers of the era and making parallels with the far more important ways that we can protect ourselves spiritually. His use of a shield to represent our faith, for example, reminds us that a strong faith can guard us against many kinds of attacks from Satan and from the worldly.

Yet the real point of the "armor of God" is not to analyze each detail so that we can establish a precise parallel between each piece of armor and some spiritual quality. The overall point is, instead, to impress upon us that Christians do not rely on the weapons or tactics of this world, but on spiritual qualities that come from God. We should not rely on worldly leaders, worldly wealth, or worldly wisdom, but on the truth, grace, wisdom, and love that come from God.

Before closing his letter, the apostle Paul asks the Ephesians to pray for him (6:19-20). Although Paul is in prison as he writes, he still wishes to follow his own advice by making use of any opportunity to proclaim the gospel that might arise. Paul never thought that his status as an apostle should exempt him from hardship or should provide him with special privileges. Instead, he felt an extra sense of responsibility. Just as he so often taught others not to let unpleasant situations prevent them from teaching the truth about God, so now he determines to do the same.

In inspired writings, we can learn even from the opening and closing words, even if they may at first appear commonplace (6:21-24). Here, Paul comments favorably on Tychicus, who is delivering the letter to Ephesus. This faithful brother in Jesus is also mentioned in several other Scriptures (Acts 20:4, Colossians 4:7, 2 Timothy 4:12, and Titus 3:12).

Although Tychicus is barely noticed by today's Bible readers, he was constantly involved in ministry alongside Paul and others. He is an example of a devoted spiritual servant who knew that, while his ministry might not be noticed by many humans, it would always be remembered and appreciated by God.

Likewise, Paul's final words are heartfelt, not routine. The worldly wish for one another to have wealth, fame, popularity, or pleasure, but the faithful apostle wishes for his fellow servants of Christ to be blessed with the spiritual qualities of peace, love, faith, and grace. These are the things that we really need, and that our souls desire. May God bless us also to be able to value and experience these things.

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