



Reflections on Ephesians

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Introduction

I'm really not sure what to call this; is it a book, a Bible study, a devotional, a small group study, a commentary? To be honest, it isn't quite any of those things, yet it has aspects of all three. It's hardly long enough to be a book; it isn't complete enough to be a commentary. It's not quite a devotional, but it could be used for devotions. It's not quite a Bible study, but it could easily be used for that, too. If you're creative, it could also be used to teach a class, but it isn't in a proper format to be curriculum.

One thing differs here from the first two collections I have released. For this collection, I have not included discussion questions, but anyone could make up their own for use in a discussion or class setting.

This little "document" is freely given to you. By all means, feel free to share it with others for free. Please do not use any of this for commercial purposes! Make use of whatever helps you grow in your relationship with our Lord and anything here that isn't helpful, by all means set it aside. Helping other believers in their walk with Christ is my only purpose here!

All blessings to you in Christ!

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Introduction to Ephesians

Paul's letter to the Ephesians was probably written sometime between 58 and 60 AD and closely parallels Colossians. It is both encouraging and challenging, for it paints a picture of a victorious Christian life that might at first seem too difficult for us to achieve, yet viewing it carefully we will find some hints that show us it is more attainable than we might have thought at first glance.

The major themes of the letter are glorious indeed; that we are saved by grace through faith; everything follows from this premise. That we cannot earn our salvation is another of the letter's themes, and following from this we reach the climax of the letter in the theme that we are not only saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, but that we are saved by grace for a purpose, and that purpose is that God would work to build His Kingdom through us. This is precisely why I asserted that even though it may seem at first glance that Paul is setting out a standard that we cannot reach, since God is working through us, what was unreachable at first becomes attainable.

To set all of this out, Paul has divided the letter into two main sections. The first begins at 1:1 and continues through 3:21 and deals with God's plan for salvation. Then, beginning with 4:1 and continuing through the end, Paul describes our response to salvation.

I ran across something interesting as I was doing a little checking to be sure I remembered this outline correctly. I looked at a couple of commentaries and I saw two different ways to describe this second section. One of them is what I have written here, that it is our *response* to salvation. The other commentator called it our *responsibility*, rather than our response. At first, this may not seem like a big difference, and in one way it really isn't, after all if we perceive a responsibility we would want to respond. Yet this implies a duty or an obligation, and while this may be true, and I wouldn't argue against it, it has a subtle tinge of legalism implicit in the thought. Contrast that idea with our response to salvation; this is quite a different outlook, even though it may not be obvious at first. We have received salvation as God's free gift, so we respond to this gift gratefully and alter our lives, so that God may work in and through us. Doesn't this sound like love in action to you? Whatever changes that may take place in a Christian's life as a result of their receiving salvation should come from our love of God and of others, rather than merely as a duty required by some sort of regulation, and when this is the case, change becomes not only possible but it becomes inevitable.

I am really looking forward to our latest journey which will begin next time.

Off to a Fast Start

To a large degree, chapter one is an introduction to the letter. In the first two verses, Paul identifies himself and addresses his recipients in his usual style, and then he jumps into his introduction beginning in verse 3.

These verses can be summed up as words of praise and thanksgiving, words that are difficult to read without feeling the passion and excitement that Paul and his recipients must have felt; whatever you do, don't take them for granted!

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. (v. 3)

Have you ever really reflected on this verse? Read it again slowly and let it sink in...

This is one of those "wow" moments!

For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.

Ephesians 1:4-10

In these verses, Paul gives us a thumbnail sketch of the letter; you can see our redemption all though the passage. You can also detect the purpose for this great salvation in the last two verses, for God's grace came for a purpose that goes all the way back to Genesis, the purpose for which He created us in the first place. Even though things went crossways in the garden when Adam and Eve sinned, God desires to bring all things back together under the banner of Jesus Christ, and for this reason He saw fit to devise a plan of redemption for as many as will respond, a plan for which the elect are predestined.

I must point out here that many good Christians have been willing to make mischief with the concept of selection and predestination, usually putting things together in a way that results in their having been predestined, and most of the rest of us not. Naturally, we aren't going to venture into divisive mischief here. Paul, it seems to me, is talking here about all of those who have responded to God's grace, for are we not "predestined" to great things in Christ?

At any rate, I think that this glorious passage is best left for each to reflect upon, after all what could I possibly add to these words? No, they are best left to our individual worship and prayer time, for they will fill your day with glory and thanksgiving!

A Guarantee

In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory.

Ephesians 1:11-14

Picking up where we left off last time, Paul continues with his introduction recapping our redemption story. It seems to me that Paul removes most of the latter-day confusion on the predestination business when he tells his readers that we “also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation...” (v. 13)

The remainder of verse 13 and then on through verse 14 are simply amazing, telling us that we have been sealed as His followers with a seal comprised of the gift of the Holy Spirit “who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance ...” I’m not sure why this isn’t taught more than it is, and taught just like Paul lays it out here. The Holy Spirit as a seal, a guarantee; think about that.

All of us have those moments when we wonder what it is that we are up to with all of this Jesus stuff... am I on the right track? Maybe I’m crazy! Yet even in those darker moments, we have God’s seal, His guarantee, the Holy Spirit within us, rustling around in the back of our minds saying, “Hey, settle down, it’s going to be okay.”

Will we listen to Him?

We are God’s possession, bought at a very high price by the blood of Jesus, and we have an inheritance coming; eternity in His Kingdom.

Yes, I think I’ll listen!

Prayer, Power and Potential

Ephesians 1:15-23

Paul continues his opening of this letter by moving on from the glorious things he has been saying about our redemption into giving thanks for it. Yet as we continue reading this section, I'm sure that you, like me can't help but notice the contrast this prayer of thanksgiving has with the ones we usually hear today.

It would be useful for us to notice here that things aren't going particularly well in Paul's life; at least not on the surface, for he is sitting in prison as he writes. So, there he is, a prisoner, and do you see a single word about his situation?

No, not a single word; Paul is giving thanks for the Ephesians and their growth in the faith.

Beginning with verse 17, he tells us of his prayers that the Ephesians will grow in their understanding, that they will know God better, that they will know the riches of "the hope to which he has called you." As he continues his thought, Paul does an amazing thing; he brings it all back to the church, His Body.

He mentions the "riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people" and how, by the same great and mighty power with which God raised Jesus from the dead, the power that not only raised Him from the dead, but that placed Him in authority above every power, is being used for the benefit of His people both now and in times to come. How does God do this? He does it by using that awesome power not just to put Jesus over every authority and power, but to make Him the "head over everything *for the church*, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way. "

Did you catch "*for the church?*"

Why was Jesus placed above every power and authority? For the benefit of the church; His Body.

Think about that... Here is this guy Paul sitting in jail awaiting trial because he preached the gospel. His trial will take place in front of Nero of all people, and he is boldly telling the Ephesians about this hope that Jesus is above all authority "for the church".

Paul understands, as most today do not, that what becomes of him is of little account, for God Almighty is fully engaged to accomplish His purpose through the church and no matter how things might appear on this earth, He does not intend to fail. Thus, the very same awesome power that raised Jesus from the dead and elevated Him to the highest of all high places will ensure that our inheritance in Christ will be realized; the issue is not in doubt.

Indeed it shames me when I think about the prayers I hear today, prayers for this and that little thing, prayers for comfort and ease, prayers for an easy life, and it shames me even more when I think about how often the voice I hear praying these prayers is my own. Just think, dear reader, of the power that would be unleashed if we approached prayer with the same attitude as that of Paul, who focused his attention on the purpose of the church, rather than upon his

personal situation, who focused his thanksgiving and prayer upon the redemption and spiritual understanding of others, rather than upon his own relief.

I can't help but think that if we allowed ourselves a more mature orientation, that God would do even greater things through us for His purpose in the here and now.

Alive!

Ephesians 2:1-10

Beginning here in chapter two, Paul reminds us of how we have been made alive in Christ. It's a funny thing, but I nearly added the word "again" to that sentence, but Paul's point is not that we are now "alive again," rather he is making the case that we have never been "alive" before. How could we have been alive when we were merely following the lead of the one who is in opposition to the One who is "the Way, the Truth and the Life"?

All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. (v. 3)

Have you ever watched what dogs do? OK, maybe this isn't the most tactful comparison, but when we were not following Jesus Christ, we were a bit like a dog, following our noses to whatever feels good and then doing it with no thought of consequences; a dog just doesn't know any better, but a man does. Ah yes, that's where the "wrath" comes in.

Notice the contrast in verses 4 ff. In Christ, we have been lifted up from that old life with its ways to the heavenly realms, by grace through faith. Paul makes it very clear in vv. 8-9 that this "lifting up" in life has nothing do with any works on our parts, nor does it have anything to do with our great abilities, so no one can boast of their accomplishment of salvation.

After making these glorious points Paul throws us a bit of a curve in verse 10: "For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." You might wonder, as many have before, how "works" found its way back into the picture here...

We cannot work to earn our salvation; it just isn't possible. Yet now that we have received our salvation by grace through faith, God has work for us to do in His Kingdom, namely sharing its awesome blessings with others, just as Jesus did. I can testify, no doubt along with many of you, that entering relationship with our Lord is a wonderful thing, an experience that is life-changing as a matter of fact, but serving Him in His Kingdom work is even better!

Reconciliation in Christ

Ephesians 2:11-22

Paul, in these verses, completes the picture he began in the first 10 verses of this chapter that we covered earlier by tying together the picture of God's redemption and reconciliation of all people.

It is important to bear in mind that he is addressing Gentiles here, those who were not included in God's covenants in the past. They were excluded from relationship with God and to a great extent even from social relationships with the people of God. In fact, the people of God, the Jews, looked down upon the Gentiles, calling them dogs and treating them as second-class people. The Jews bore a sign of their covenant relationship with God that the Gentiles did not, a sign that would forever keep them separate; the sign of circumcision that denoted the offspring of Father Abraham. No, a Gentile man couldn't "fake it."

Then came Jesus Christ.

Jesus brought the two groups together through His death on the cross in which He bore the sins of all in His own body, putting their sins, along with the very Law itself to death. After that, there is no more hostility between Jew and Gentile, for all who follow Christ are members of one Body; this is the theological truth. It was not, however, the practical truth. Paul knew only too well of the hostility that so many Jews still had for Gentile Christians... even within the church, and I have little doubt that there were some hard feelings among the Gentile believers as well. In the centuries that have followed, this has, sadly, remained the case in many places, not only between Jew and Gentile, but between rich and poor, black and white, aristocrat and common, social divisions that carry into the Body of Christ. Yet we must be reminded that secular cultural social divisions have no place whatsoever within the Body of Christ, for there is no Jew and no Gentile, there is no rich or poor, aristocrat or common, black or white... or any other social distinction in the Body of Christ, for in Him we are one people, bound together by the bonds of His love.

Of course, all too often, sin remains in our midst, as we are dwelling in a fallen world.

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

Ephesians 2:19-22

Thus Paul states the eternal reality that is the church, the reality as God Himself sees reality. Now, with that eternal reality set before us, let's consider whether or not we might carry forward our own earthly notions of "proper" social distinctions, and ask ourselves if this is pleasing in God's sight. Take your time, consider carefully...

As you consider, consider an example from history. After the Civil War in the U. S., slaves in the American South were emancipated. Slave owners, by and large, had encouraged their slaves to

be Christians, and now those slaves were free, churches were established outside of the plantations with both black and white congregations, but of course they were normally segregated, as were most other things in that society. The writings from that and succeeding generations left behind have some very creative justifications for this, and for a hundred years it continued, and even today the trend remains in many places. So that begs another question, don't you think?

What sort of testimony for the Gospel would we create (or have created) if we would *live* the gospel of Jesus Christ, rather than *just talk about it*, and actually, really and truthfully treat one another as brothers and sisters in Christ, even if it means incurring the wrath of the rest of the community?

Yes, it is surely something to think about... and possibly something to act upon.

God Has a Plan

Ephesians 3:1-13

Isn't this an interesting little chunk? Paul mentions "mysteries" several times here, and likens these "mysteries" to the "administration of God's grace"; what could he be referring to?

He mentions a mystery that was made known to him by revelation, and calls it the mystery of Christ. He ends the first paragraph telling us that this mystery has been made known, that through the gospel, the Gentiles are being made into one holy nation with Israel— the administration of God's grace! Consider this for a second; we usually think of the gospel as being all about salvation, our salvation. The gospel is the good news about the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ which made it possible for MY sins to be forgiven, so I can have eternal life... oh and by the way, you can have it too.

Yet Paul is telling us a much bigger story than MY story! He is telling us that God's plan was to unite all of us into one Body, the church... for a purpose, and that purpose was not merely how God would save ME.

His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.

Ephesians 3:10-12

The gospel is not just MY good news, nor is it just YOUR good news, it is God's eternal purpose to bring us into unity, through faith in Jesus Christ, to crush the accuser of all of us, the Devil, and this is no small thing. Did you notice the role of the church? No, it wasn't just to go through the motions on Sunday, it was to play a central role in this victory and be the means by which God's message was brought to the world to accomplish God's purpose.

Well dear reader, it seems like we are in the middle of something that is very big.

Why did Paul refer to this as a mystery? Simple, because God had not revealed it to anyone before it happened. There were prophecies for sure, but it is really only in hindsight that they become clear. In the gospel accounts, who was it that by all rights should have known right off who Jesus was when He first appeared on the scene? Well of course, it was the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, for they knew the prophets, and they were very intelligent and well-educated in these matters. OK, one more question: Who had Him killed?

Yep, you've got it, the very ones who should have welcomed Him.

Yes, it was quite a mystery!

But it is a mystery no more, and you and I are right in the middle of it, on the front lines you might say. Each of us has received gifts, as Paul received gifts from the Holy Spirit of God, and

also just like Paul, we have His power and authority behind us. So troops, what shall we do next?

Here's a hint: Did you notice Paul's reference to his circumstances in verses 1 and 13?

The Power of Prayer

Ephesians 3:14-21

This text is a prayer that Paul gave for the Ephesians, a prayer of power and of selfless love for the saints, a prayer that deserves our review and emulation.

Notice that as he begins this prayer, Paul points out that it is through God that every family derives its name. This is a curious statement, and we might be quick to slip right past it, seeing it as a sort of introduction and missing its amazing impact altogether; let's not make that mistake today. The sense in which every family derives its name from the Father is not a literal sense, for every family derives its name from God in the sense that it is a relational unit that is bound together by love... and genetics. Think of how God intended for us to live, go all the way back to Genesis, to the garden: We were created to live in harmony and fellowship together with God the Father. In a sense, we were to be bound with Him through genetics, for did He not breathe of Himself, His life, into the man when the man was first created, and then from the man, God created the woman? This illustration of familial unity is continued as couples produce offspring and build family units to this day, units bound up in love, and in the nature of their very beings.

I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

Ephesians 3:16-19

Looking at these three verses, we can clearly see this picture of “family” being carried forward in the church, for not only is it rooted in love, but it is bound together by the very life force of God Himself; genetics of a sort. We see this when Paul refers to our being strengthened “with power through his Spirit in your inner being” this Spirit being the ingredient that binds His church into a family unit. This life force, His Spirit who dwells within us, is what enables us to experience His great love within and between each other, this great love that surpasses human comprehension and binds us together in oneness, this is the power of Christ in us.

Paul concludes his prayer by showing us that this power within us will continue to work to give Him glory through us in all succeeding generations; magnificent!

Oh, if only we would learn to pray like this! Yet it might just be that we seldom pray like this, because few of us have learned to think like this, to see the greater picture, to recognize the real significance of what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

May His Spirit within us reveal to us the truth of Paul's words, that each of us might better discern the family of God.

Unity!

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

Ephesians 4:1-6

As chapter 4 begins, Paul commences the next section of his letter, the section that relates to the Christian life. He starts this with a reference to his situation, but this is not a reference that should generate pity, it is a reference that shows his example of putting his faith into action, resulting in his being in chains. It is as though he is saying that he knows full well the implications of what he is telling them to do; live lives worthy of their holy calling.

He tells the people they should accomplish this through humility, gentleness, patience and love. They should “make every effort” to maintain “the unity of the Spirit” through the “bond of peace.” Remember his prayer and the illustration of family that we looked at earlier in the last post, for this is its application: “One body and one Spirit.”

Paul continues in verse 5 with the oft-quoted assertion of “one Lord, one faith, one baptism” but you no doubt see that in Paul’s context, there is no attempt to push one doctrinal position over another to win an argument. No sir, for Paul’s whole point in this passage is the importance of Christian unity. Verse 6 completes the sentence with the bold and unambiguous statement that cements Paul’s unity appeal: there is “one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”

Maturity!

Ephesians 4:7-16

Paul continues in this passage, moving on from unity in the Body of Christ into spiritual maturity. In verses 7-10, he discusses the fact that Jesus has risen to the highest position in the heavens, after having come all the way down to earth to be with us, to save us, to show us the way. In the remaining verses, he discusses the fact that this Jesus, who had come down to our level, gave generously of Himself so that we, being led by the apostles, prophets, pastors and teachers might share in His fullness to attain maturity in Him as his Body.

Pay careful attention to the wording here: “to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up 13 until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” (4:12-13) There is purpose in these words, intentional and deliberate purpose, for Jesus has made Himself available to us, and blessed us with His presence not only in body, but now in the Spirit, not simply for our own edification, but to build up the entire Body of believers through us. This is quintessential discipleship. Jesus came and made disciples while here in the body, and then equipped His disciples to make more disciples... now it is our turn to carry this work forward.

Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming.

Ephesians 4:14

The goal is for us to help other believers attain this maturity, the maturity that enables us to avoid being tossed to and fro in confusion. How will we help such as these? Surely, being tossed around by our own spiritual immaturity is not part of God's plan for us!

Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

Ephesians 4:15-16

We have surely each received amazing gifts and blessings from God of many kinds and types, yet they are given to us freely so that we may use them to build up His church in love. Some are leaders, some are teachers, some are helpers, and many other things, but none have been given gifts merely for their own enrichment. No, we have been blessed that we might bless those around us, and each of us needs to use those gifts intentionally to help build up others for His glory.

Well...?

So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, and they are full of greed.

That, however, is not the way of life you learned when you heard about Christ and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

Ephesians 4:17-24

I have the honor of having a large number of followers in the UK, so British readers, how would it strike you if I sent you an email that said, "You must no longer live as the British do...?"

I also have quite a few readers in Australia, so Australians, how would you respond if I wrote you, "You must no longer live as the Aussies do...?"

My guess is that in both cases, you would not really appreciate that coming from a loud mouthed Yank!

Along those same lines, I am really curious to discover how the Ephesians received this passage from Paul, the Jew writing to Gentiles telling them they must not live "as the Gentiles do" when in fact they are Gentiles, and Paul is not.

Yet as I read through the passage, I can see that the word "Gentile" can be replaced with "American" "Brit" "Aussie" "Canadian" or any other nationality with the same result and meaning... and be every bit as fresh and meaningful as it was when Paul first wrote it.

As followers of Christ, we must no longer live just like everyone else does, for their thinking is futile and their priorities are on the wrong things. It makes sense when you think about it, for we have received the truth of Jesus Christ and the others have not, so how could they know God's priorities and God's ways? To a non-Christian, looking out for number one seems logical and practical, and if this world is all a person knows, what would you expect from them? Yes, I agree that it seems a tad harsh when Paul says that their hearts have been hardened and they've lost all sensitivity, but consider this: He seems to be referring to people who have refused to respond to the good news about Christ, and if that is the case then harsh or not, it is the truth... as opposed to the ones who just haven't heard about Jesus yet.

The really important part of this text comes in the second paragraph, beginning at verse 20, because here Paul reminds all of us that we have been taught a different way of life. We have been taught to put off our former ways, to be new in the attitude of our minds, and to put on the new life in Christ and to follow His ways. Notice that Paul isn't likening the "new" to the future, but rather to the present; by implication he seems to be asking what we're waiting for.

Let's be entirely honest: For many of us, maybe even for most of us, there is little difference between the way we live our lives and the way everyone else lives their lives.

So, what are we waiting for?

Paul Becomes Practical

Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body. "In your anger do not sin": Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold. Anyone who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share with those in need.

Ephesians 4:25-28

In verses 17-24, Paul told the Ephesians that they must no longer live according to their old ways, instead urging them to live lives worthy of their calling, according to the ways of the truth they had been taught in Christ. Here, in this passage he becomes more specific in his instructions.

It would be well for all of us to consider carefully his words here, for they are both wise and practical. I hardly need to elaborate, for there is nothing in these few verses that will be news to anyone. We know that we should take care in what we say, that dealing with each other truthfully is the right thing to do, and of course we all know that we shouldn't let our anger carry us away into rage. Oh yes, we all are angry sometimes, and often with good cause. But anger for a good reason is no excuse for losing control; everybody knows that... don't they?

Well, maybe not. I know one young lady who, with good reason may become angry, but she seems to feel that since she has been wronged... yet again... by a certain individual, that she can let her mouth go completely out of control, after all, she has been wronged again, so it's OK.

Well, it isn't OK. It's pretty easy for me to see how this gives a foothold to the devil, particularly when the same incident is still the object of her wrath days later.

Stealing: Nobody is likely to tell me that stealing is OK, right? Well, of course if it's just a box of pens from work, that doesn't count does it? Spending your time at work on Facebook, no of course that isn't stealing; after all, you haven't actually taken anything, right? Well, except for the money you were paid to do actual work; no that doesn't count...

What does Paul say about that?

Gee, on second thought, maybe we can all take a little look into the mirror and ask how we can represent Jesus better in everyday life.

Notice how Paul redirects all of this: No, we shouldn't steal; everyone should do something useful so they can have something to share with those in need! I would take away from this the notion that Paul wants us to consider the effect all of our actions have on others, and in the process perhaps we will worry less about ourselves. Now if I were irritated by the comment above about doing Facebook at work, shifting my focus onto how things I do can effect others might just stop the rationalizing about how wasting time at work is my right, for I would come back to the realization that others are supposed to be put first in all our lives.

I'd love to hear your thoughts on this!

Big Boy Thinking

Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

Ephesians 4:29-32

As we review these verses, it becomes pretty clear that Paul is addressing the role of “self” in our lives. Right off the bat, notice what he says about “unwholesome talk”; he does not say “Don’t cuss or you’re going to hell.” No, he tells us that our speech should be for the benefit of others. Yet he goes even further than that when he says our speech should benefit others according to “their needs.”

Who does that? Don’t most people talk about *their own needs*, express their feelings to resolve *their issues*, let you know how *they feel*? Don’t the shrinks tell us we need to express our feelings...?

Unwholesome talk...?

I’ve often said in these posts that following Christ is counter-intuitive; this is one of those times.

He goes on, and raises a second question: What does he tell us is grieving to the Holy Spirit of God? Maybe we should come back to that one.

In the final piece of this text, Paul tells us to get rid of “bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.” OK Paul, now you’re sucking all of the fun out of everything!

What are we to replace these with? Kindness, compassion and forgiveness...

It’s beginning to sound like “love one another” isn’t it? Can we love one another if we are filled with bitterness and rage?

No.

Are slander and malice expressions of love?

No.

How about anger and brawling; are they expressions of love?

No.

Now let’s try kindness, compassion and forgiveness; are these expressions of love?

Yes.

Did you notice that all of the “no’s” were self-focused? Did you notice that the “yes” ones were outwardly focused for the benefit of others?

Yeah, I thought so. OK back to speech...

We all know that Jesus taught us to set our own interests aside and put the interests of others ahead of our own; what does this sound like when we speak? Is our speech grieving to the Holy Spirit within us?

I’ll let you answer those on your own.

A couple of sections back we spoke of spiritual maturity. To me, spiritual maturity is a fairly simple concept: *deal with self*. A mature Christian is one who puts others first... really. I don’t mean to help out when you have time or when you feel like it, or so you will be recognized. I mean really change our orientation and worldview.

Well, I said it was simple, I didn’t say it was easy. One thing is for sure: we won’t get there by following the ways of this world, and with that, this passage just slipped back into Paul’s larger context.

Love's Perspective

Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Ephesians 5:1-2

We've now seen

Paul's transition from general to more specific instruction, and we left off at the end of chapter 4 where it seemed that Paul was really getting to the point that he was describing love among believers as the main priority in Christian living. Now, in the first two verses of chapter five he confirms this impression with his brief comments on love, in what is really a bridge between instructional passages.

When you take these verses in with chapter 4 in mind, they are even more beautiful than when they are quoted alone, as they often are. Why? Because they show us that as we treat others as we should, which is to say that we place their interests and well being ahead of our own, we are actually following God's example.

We love to think of ourselves as children of God, and Paul takes this thought and brings it into sharp focus pointing out that we express this relationship in following God's example in the way we live our lives; this is true. Yet we sometimes seem to feel like we are being asked to make sacrifices living for others instead of ourselves. I know I have heard this mentioned by some who are perhaps not having their best of days... yet Paul manages to put even this into perspective in the way he mentions Jesus, reminding us of how Jesus showed His love for us in giving Himself up as a sacrifice for our sin. Thus we can ask, what is the sacrifice we offer in no longer living according to old ways, when compared to the sacrifice Jesus made for each one of us?

Watch It!

But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving. For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person—such a person is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient. Therefore do not be partners with them.

Ephesians 5:3-7

Take a look at these verses again; see the things that Paul is telling us not to do? What is the common thread between all of them?

Exactly, good work!

They are all *self-centered*. The things Paul tells us we should do are all outwardly focused. Yes dear reader, that is how these verses fit into the larger context here... and Paul's theme continues on to the next batch of verses that we'll look at next time.

That is the most important part about this short text, it is the main lesson here, and now that I have done my teaching duty, I have a couple of observations of a slightly more "advanced" nature that may not be for the faint of heart.

In verse 3, Paul refers to "sexual immorality" and "greed". These are the most obviously self-centered things he mentions... and oddly in today's world they are the most controversial. We live in a time when we can't, as a culture, define sexual immorality, because the word "immorality" implies that there is a standard of conduct beyond the statutes adopted by the government. Nobody would have been concerned with that before the 20th century, and "morality" was even a highly prized virtue at one time, but sadly, that time has passed, and now we seem to think, as a society, that anything that is legal in a court of law is just fine, but that is a bald-faced lie! Human governments decide what they will permit, but they cannot over rule Almighty God. If you are tempted to argue with me on this point, just remember that the Nazi Holocaust was all perfectly legal, as were most of the outrages of history.

Yet Paul's point here is not based upon a legal issue, for Paul's focus is not legal or transactional; it is entirely relational. You see the real danger to the believer in things like immorality and greed comes from the fact that these impulses, unchecked, are very strong indeed, and can pull a man or woman completely away from their relationship with Christ. In fact, a person falling into this kind of trap can be pulled so far away from His loving arms that they may not be able to return, assuring their destruction...

In verse 4, Paul tells us that obscenity, foolish talk and coarse joking are "out of place" and I think many will also understand this in a transactional sense. It is important that we all recognize that sin and its consequence isn't the point, for remember that Paul is writing to Christians whose sins are forgiven. However, the way we talk reveals a great deal about the way we think,

for if we speak in a sloppy and undisciplined way, the chances are that our thinking is sloppy and undisciplined as well, and thus if we are in the habit of speaking in a way that is far from reflecting our relationship with Christ, then the chances are very good that we do not have a healthy relationship with Him. Now obviously I'm not saying that we can engage in pious talk and fool God into thinking we are pious; we probably won't fool anyone around us either. Paul is trying to teach us that if our talk is "out of place" our thinking probably is as well, and we are on a slippery slope with our faith.

We need to be more focused on our relationship with Jesus Christ; all of us! Can we just change our thinking and living entirely on our own power? Maybe, maybe not. If we are waiting for the Holy Spirit to jump into the fray and zap us with perfection however, we'll be waiting for a very long time, because that isn't how it works. You see, the Holy Spirit is waiting for us to make the first step. He has given us the instruction to make an effort; you've just read it.

We make the effort, we make a commitment and seek His strength and His presence and He sustains us through the process; that's how it works.

A Shining Light

For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. It is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. But everything exposed by the light becomes visible—and everything that is illuminated becomes a light. This is why it is said:

*“Wake up, sleeper,
rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you.”*

Ephesians 5:8-14

This is an interesting piece of text, following along in context with that of our last passage. Actually, it's quite simple: We were once darkness, now we are light, so pursue those things that are produced by the light of God's truth and avoid the old ways of darkness.

Simple; you knew that, right?

There are two things about this that are curious; the first of which is found in vv. 11-13. We are to stay away from the fruitless deeds of darkness, instead exposing those nasty dark things done in secret...

As I read it, you can take this one of two ways. First, maybe Paul means that we should sneak into those secret places where things are going on that are shameful to even discuss, and then tell everybody what you saw so those deeds will be exposed. This sounds like a politician's method to me. The other way you could take this is that we share the light with those who live in darkness so that the light may shine in their lives and shed truth on their misdeeds...

Personally, I think Paul gives us a pretty good clue as to his intention when he mentions that even discussing what goes on in secret in certain places is shameful. If it is shameful to mention such things, then big public announcements seem even more shameful to me.

The other curious thing is the quotation in verse 14. I have no clue who or what Paul is quoting; obviously it isn't the Old Testament, even though Paul set the quote up just like he would an OT quotation. Might he have made a mistake, thinking this was a Scriptural quotation? Frankly I doubt it. More likely it was something very familiar to the Ephesians that has been lost to history; maybe it was something Paul taught there, or an Ephesian's representation of Paul's words. In any event, it's a pretty good saying, don't you agree?

Be Filled with the Spirit

Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is. Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Ephesians 5:15-20

These words are as fresh and vibrant today as they were 2,000 years ago, and they point us to one inescapable conclusion: Place your priority on God.

It matters how we live our lives, where we choose to place our priorities and what we think about and do and say. It matters that we let opportunities slip through our fingers, or that we don't lend our brother a hand when he needs it. It matters when we make ourselves so very busy that we aren't available to serve our Master or our loved ones or our neighbor, yes dear reader, it really matters.

Verse 17 is key: We are not to be foolish; instead we are to understand the Lord's will.

Great Paul, but what is His will?

Yesterday I heard about a pastor who recently asked his congregation to spend the next four weeks praying to God that He would reveal His purpose to them. It seems that pastor told his flock that no one can know the purpose and will of God, so as I come to this verse today I'm struck by the contrast between Paul and this pastor... yet maybe they just have different ways of saying the same thing. Maybe he was trying to teach his congregation to spend time in their relationship with Christ, clearly that is where Paul is taking his readers.

We mustn't fill ourselves with wine, but with the Spirit. He expresses his thought further in the remaining verses by saying we should speak to one another in psalms, hymns and songs from the Spirit. Some will disagree with me on this, but I see this musical approach as a metaphor, maybe because I'm a poor singer. I see this as a metaphor for being focused on our relationships with Him and letting Him speak and work through us, so that when people see us, they see Him at work in us. If this means we sing, then I guess we ought to sing!

However you see the musical aspect of this, Paul's meaning is clear: If our lives are centered on our relationship with Jesus Christ, then He will live in us and through us. If our lives are centered on self and the things of this world, we will be on a difficult and fruitless path.

Husbands and Wives

Ephesians 5:21-33

With these verses, Paul moves from the general instruction about a Christian's life to a more specific instruction, beginning with the relationship of marriage, a subject that he writes about in more than one letter, as you know. To be perfectly honest, these aren't my favorite topics to blog about, for it's easy to get the wrong impression about where this is headed; a post on this text tends to run a bit long as a result; even so, let's try the short version today.

The main point to keep in mind as you read this, (ladies in particular) is that the relationship between husband and wife isn't even Paul's main point. Gentlemen, I think it is also very important that we recognize right off, that historical and cultural attitudes of the past might color our view of some of this, for over the centuries in male dominated societies, our forefathers sometimes ignored the rules of context here, preferring to seize upon certain verses to impose upon their wives some pretty idiotic ideas, ideas that are entirely in opposition to Paul's teaching.

Yep, one of these days, I'll do a series of posts, maybe a whole book on Biblical marriage; that's probably what it would take to it justice. Biblical teachings on marriage aren't what most people think they are, at least in my view, for they are always really about our relationships with God more than anything else.

Context: "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ." (verse 21) Did you catch "to one another"?

Verses 22-24 are historically our favorite verses in the entire Bible to quote out of context: Yes sir, wives should submit to their husbands in everything! Ladies, please bear in mind that I usually refer to my wife as "She Who Must Be Obeyed"! Paul is using a cultural attitude from the first century Roman Empire to illustrate the relationship between Christ, represented here by husbands, and the church, represented by wives. He is not authorizing husbands to mistreat their wives, for that would be a violation of the marriage covenant.

Verses 25-31 are instructions to husbands, who are supposed to love their wives as Christ loved the church... "and gave Himself up for her." Jesus gave up His very life on the cross for the church, and likewise, Paul is telling husbands they should give up their very lives for their wives. Most of the time, husbands don't need to give up their physical lives for their wives, no it's more like their will, ambitions and "self". Thus, for a preacher to teach, and a Christian husband to assert domination over wives is purely a perversion of the text.

Wives give up self by submission, husbands give up self by devotion, and the result is a partnership, not domination; everybody wins.

Consider this: Isn't this what we've been saying all along? Giving up self and serving others? Sounds like love doesn't it?

The final two verses were seldom quoted in days gone by, and they aren't always mentioned now either:

This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

Ephesians 5:32-33

You see, this whole conversation is about Christ and the church; marriage is supposed to be the illustration of that relationship, an illustration that we all recognize and understand, but thanks to the sinful nature of this world, it requires a lot more explaining than perhaps it used to in Paul's day.

Oh yes, and by the way, husbands really should love their wives as they love themselves, and wives really should *respect* their husbands.

Isn't that really a no-brainer?

Focus on the Family

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. "Honor your father and mother"—which is the first commandment with a promise— "so that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth."

Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.

Ephesians 6:1-4

As he did in Colossians, Paul follows his instruction for married couples with instruction for children and parents, after which he will address masters and servants. These relationships are the three areas in which most people spend the majority of their lives. As with the marriage relationship, each of these three major areas of human interaction is illustrative of an aspect of our relationship with God. In the case of children and parents, are we not all someone's child? Are we not also a child of God... and is not God our Heavenly Father?

Children are told to obey their parents "in the Lord." That children should obey their parents is universally understood, but what does he mean by "in the Lord?" I doubt he means that children should only obey their parents if they follow the Lord, or only if they are being godly, for this would require judgments that children are generally not qualified to make. It is clear, however that obedience is within the Lord's will for children and in this way it would be "in the Lord." Next, Paul tells us that for a child to obey his or her parents is "right."

It is also a commandment carried over from the Old Testament, and finally, that commandment carries with it a promise of God. Thus, Paul gives us four solid reasons for children to obey their parents... and for us to obey our Heavenly Father.

As with his instruction to husbands and wives, Paul is not one-sided in his instruction: Fathers (and mothers) are not to exasperate their children, but instead they are to raise their children in the knowledge of the Lord. If you think about it, for a child to be naughty from time-to-time is to be expected, they are children after all. For parents to misbehave towards their children is quite another matter, for aren't they supposed to be adults?

Let's take a step back and look at this passage with a little perspective, can you see the pattern?

For a child to be obedient he or she must submit his or her will to that of the parent; hasn't Paul mentioned "submission" just before this? Yes, I believe he did. For the parent not to exasperate their child, don't they need to exercise restraint? Yes, I think being a parent requires considerably more restraint than anything else.

Does that remind you of another relationship?

As God's children, we are asked to submit our will to His, and God's most notable attribute is His restraint. Interesting isn't it?

Master and Servant

Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people, because you know that the Lord will reward each one for whatever good they do, whether they are slave or free.

Ephesians 6:5-8

Paul continues now in the third area of human relationship, that between master and slave (servant). In our day, it's safe for us to accept that these principles apply just as much to employers and employees, since few of us live in a slave economy as they did in the first century. Beginning with the servants, Paul instructs them to honor their masters (employers) with their sincere best efforts and good attitudes, reminding them that they are really working for the Lord.

It would be more than fair to ask just how or in what sense a worker is working for the Lord in his or her job, so let's remember that we have been redeemed for a purpose. The purpose for which we have been redeemed is to share God's love with those around us, and when we are at work, we can show God's love in the way we do our jobs and in the way we treat people. Recall that in marriage each party is to put the other ahead of themselves. In the parent child relationship, the same is true. In the workplace, Paul is spelling out once again this principle; workers, put the interests of the boss ahead of your own.

And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him.

Ephesians 6:9

Masters, bosses and employers, the same principle applies to you; put the interests of your workers ahead of your own, you also are charged with sharing God's love with those around you!

This relationship, like the first two illustrates an aspect of our relationship with God: Master and servant. Jesus is our Master, and as such He has given everything to redeem us to God and make possible the forgiveness of sins and the gift of eternal life. We are His servants, charged with putting the interests of His Kingdom ahead of our own.

I wonder, if we were to receive a "report card" from God, how would our grades look in each of these three areas of life? Hopefully we'd all receive high marks, but more likely each one of us has some need for improvement, after all, this life is a journey and we are all works in progress. My prayer is that all of us will prayerfully consider Paul's instructions in this chapter.

OK, one more thrill-packed episode from Ephesians... the "season finale" you might say!

Armor of God

Ephesians 6:10-20

Ah yes, the famous passage on the armor of God, a passage many know by heart, a favorite sermon passage and a favorite devotional passage rich with metaphor and meaning; a wonderful passage. I thought that I'd approach it a little differently this time. Accordingly, I'll not really comment on the metaphoric aspect, but focus on the underlying strategic circumstances that all of us face every day.

The whole armor metaphor is a way of communicating an important issue that for most of us is not easy to understand, the issue of spiritual warfare. Over the centuries, people have understood this in various ways and many legends and ballads have been the result, both in literature and other art forms. There have been times when people in superstitious cultures have gone to bizarre lengths, burning witches, so called heretics and almost anyone who incurred disfavor in high councils, at the stake; history is full of such insanity. I can't help but wonder how otherwise good people couldn't see where the evil one was really operating, but then maybe they forgot to put on their armor!

In our day, the idea of spiritual warfare is often limited to the oddball fringe, "nutters" as our British friends might say; you might hear a lot on the subject on radio talk shows that air in the wee hours, along with spacemen and such. Oh my, how clever our adversary can be!

The truth, as Paul points out, is that we are very much involved in a spiritual war; in a sense we are on the front lines. Yet as physical beings, we can't always see the action, even though we might discern the result. Putting on the armor of God is a series of metaphors that are telling us that we need to be centered on our relationship with Christ, who is the source of truth. In a close and vibrant relationship with Him, we are not likely to be fooled or sucked into things we have no business getting into, as well as being protected from spiritual attack. This requires maturity to understand... and maturity is attained through relationship with Him, so we must not neglect that relationship!

Spiritual discernment is something that all of us should have, but not so many actually attain. Spiritual discernment is not a matter of seeing spooks in the dark, but rather the comprehension of the source of certain things. There is also a spiritual gift of discernment which some have; a person with the spiritual gift of discernment can discern the source of a teaching or the source of a person's personal issues. Yet, we don't need the spiritual gift of discernment to be discerning, the gifted person may understand more and more easily, but any of us can be discerning enough to stay out of trouble.

Look at the world situation today; consider cultural trends, trends in families, homes and personal habits of people. Include values, morality and motivations. Also consider items in the news, and our various institutions...

God is at work in our midst, and so is the other guy. Ask yourself where God is working, and where the Adversary is working; can you see the difference? I'll offer a hint, one that I mention quite often here:

Nothing in this world is quite what it appears to be!

This is Paul's message in our passage, and is the reason that he concludes it with an appeal for us to be in prayer. Verses 18-20 deal with this: Pray for each other, pray for Paul, and others who spread the gospel, pray for the gospel, for many to receive it, for others to grow in their relationships, for God's Kingdom and will to be done: Grow in your relationship with Jesus Christ.

That dear reader is the summation of the armor of God, that we grow in our relationships with Him and remain in His presence, and that is also the summation of the entire letter to the Ephesians:

Relationship with Jesus Christ!