

THE LETTER TO THE EPHESIANS: INTRODUCTION
Ben Reaoch, Three Rivers Grace Community Church
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INTRODUCTION

This morning we begin a series through the New Testament book of Ephesians, and my main goal today is to ignite a passion in your soul for this book. God Almighty, in His providence and for His glory, as well as for our good, inspired the Apostle Paul to write these words. And therefore, it is our duty, as well as our great delight, to feast on the truth and instruction that is contained in this letter. There is truth to be found here that is deep and profound, and as we meditate on it we will stand in awe of who God is and what He has purposed to accomplish. There is also practical instruction to be found here that will have immediate relevance for our lives. These six chapters, I pray, will have a lasting impact on each of our lives individually, and also on our church as a whole.

Ephesians has been extremely influential through the history of the church. Raymond Brown states: "Among the Pauline writings only Romans can match Ephesians as a candidate for exercising the most influence on Christian thought and spirituality." This letter of Ephesians was the favorite book of the Reformer John Calvin. He preached forty-eight sermons from Ephesians, beginning in May of 1558 and ending in March of the following year. I think as we begin to study through this great book it will be no surprise to us that it has had such a massive impact on Christians through the ages.

What I'd like to do today is get ready for what we'll be learning in the weeks and months to come. To do that, we'll look at four main topics that Paul discusses in these chapters. This is not an outline of the book, but rather four main things discussed in the book that I'm really excited about. You could also think of these headings as four answers to the question: "Why Ephesians?" Why will be spending 6 months or so in the book of Ephesians?

I. THE GLORY OF GOD

The first thing that strikes us as we look at the first chapter of Ephesians is Paul's teaching on the glory of God. Specifically, the glory of God is presented here as the ultimate goal of salvation. Verses 5-6 read, "In love he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, *to the praise of his glorious grace*, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved." The ultimate purpose of God is to make His greatness visible, and to call forth praise unto His Name. The reason He predestined us and adopted us, the reason He saved us, is because He desires that we praise Him for His grace. The goal and aim and purpose of salvation is the glory of God. As God pours out His grace (His glorious grace) on undeserving sinners, we then respond by praising Him for His grace. We get the grace, and He gets the glory. We get the forgiveness, and He gets the praise. And that is exactly how God designed it to be. It is all about the glory of God.

And lest we miss this all-important point, Paul repeats it. He writes in verses 11-12, "In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be *to the praise of his glory*." Here it is again. The

purpose of our salvation and the goal of our existence as Christians is the glory of God. The grace of God that saved us results in us highlighting the greatness of that grace. God chose us for the purpose of saving us, not because of anything good we did or because of anything special about us, but for the purpose of demonstrating the amazing power and beauty of His grace.

If two clear statements of this truth are not enough, Paul repeats it yet a third time. He continues in verses 13-14, “In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, *to the praise of his glory.*” Three times Paul states this profound truth. This is what salvation is all about! This is what our existence is all about! This is why we are here! These statements in the first chapter of Ephesians, along with all the other massive, deep, God-centered statements that Paul makes here, are the first reason why I’m so excited about studying this letter together.

I pray that we will see the glory of God’s grace, and that our hearts will be stirred to praise Him for that grace as we come to understand it in more and more of its beauty and splendor and fullness.

II. SALVATION BY GRACE THROUGH FAITH

The second marvelous truth that I want us to look at this morning is the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith. In Ephesians 2:8-9, which are well-known verses to many of us, Paul writes, “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.” God’s grace is glorious, and it is lavish, and it is free, and it is irresistible, and it is powerful and effective. Indeed, we are saved *by God’s grace!*

A few verses earlier, in verses 5-6 we see how powerful God’s grace is. “But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when *we were dead* in our trespasses, *made us alive* together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—” God’s grace is powerful enough to take spiritually dead sinners like me and you, and He can resurrect us to spiritual life. That is all God, and it is not our own doing. There is nothing we can do resurrect ourselves. We can’t raise ourselves from the dead. Only God’s grace can do that.

And faith is the human response that God calls forth in us as He raises us to spiritual life. He regenerates us, breathing life into our dead souls, and as we awaken and open our eyes we see Him for who He is, and we LOVE Him. We admire Him and cherish Him and stand in awe of Him. We trust Him and have faith in Him. Salvation is by grace through faith. It is not by what is earned through works.

As an application point I want you to notice the phrase in verse 9, “not a result of works, so that no one may boast.” As we better understand the fact that we are saved by grace through faith, it ought to make us humble. God designed a plan to save sinful humanity, and he decided to do it in a way that would make it impossible for any of us to boast in our own salvation. He wanted to cut out human pride and boasting completely and make it clear in the way He saved us that is totally His doing. He designed it so that He gets all the glory. And we have nothing to boast about, although we have much to rejoice in.

I confess that I am not humble, although I long to be humble. It’s my prayer that as I study the book of Ephesians and learn more about this tremendous salvation I have

received by grace through faith, and as I understand this truth not only in my head but also in my heart, I pray that God will chip away at the pride in my life and make me a humble man. And I pray this for you, too. Oh, how great it is to give up the desire to make much of ourselves and rather be consumed in the great pleasure of making much of God. Here lies the happiness of humility and the power to defeat pride.

III. CHURCH UNITY

A third emphasis in Ephesians that I pray will powerfully impact us is Paul's teaching on church unity. Let's look at what chapter 4:1-6 says about this. "I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all."

At the beginning of chapter 4 Paul turns a corner. In the first three chapters of the letter he states the truths of the Gospel, he prays for believers, and he praises God for what He has done! And then in chapter 4 Paul begins his section of practical instruction, ethical admonitions. Here he shifts from making *indicative* statements about the reality of the Gospel to making *imperative* statements about how we ought to live in light of the Gospel.

In these verses Paul begins his admonitions by focusing on unity within the body of believers. This is not easy, as we all know, but it is so important. Any time you put sinners together there are going to be problems. As sinners, we sin on our own, we sin with others, and we sin against others. This is certainly true in marriage, for example. Stacy and I love each other very much, but that doesn't mean our relationship is pure bliss. We are sinners, and we sin against each other and say hurtful things sometimes. It's the same in the body of believers. We're all sinners. By God's grace, we have been forgiven. But we still sin, and we're capable of doing and saying very destructive things even against our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Paul commands us here to "walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called." Then he gives us some specifics. We are to be humble, gentle, and patient. This brings us back to what we were talking about in the previous point. Humility is an extremely important virtue for us to develop in our personal lives. Pride produces division and dissension and resentment and jealousy, but humility will produce unity and harmony and peace and contentment. We also need to be gentle and patient. And then Paul goes on to tell us we need to "bear with one another in love" and be "eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." The beauty of the church is that each individual is at a different place in their walk with Christ. There are some who have been walking with Christ for a very short time, and everything is totally new to them. Then there are those who have been walking with Christ for decades, and they have experienced the goodness of God through good times and bad. And there are those of us who are at every point in between on that continuum. God is working on us, sanctifying us, and yet each and every one of us, no matter how long you've been a Christian, we all still have many rough edges. We all still have sinful tendencies and prideful attitudes, and we can be harsh and impatient and insensitive.

So let's all seek humility in our lives, as well as gentleness and patience, so that we can foster unity in our fellowship that will result in powerful evangelism and ministry and strong community and support for one another. It will bring us great joy, and it will greatly honor and glorify our Lord and Savior who granted us this unity.

The other thing we need to say about unity is that it is unity around *the Gospel*. It is not unity just for the sake of unity. It's not the mentality of our postmodern, relativistic world that says, "It doesn't matter what you believe as long as you agree there are plenty of other legitimate belief systems." Paul is crystal clear in his explanation of the kind of unity he's talking about. Christian unity is *CHRISTIAN* unity! It's believers uniting around the truths of the Gospel. And Paul seven times in verses 4-6, uses the word "one." "There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all."

Make no mistake, this is what unifies us. The Gospel! Christian unity ceases to be Christian unity when these unifying truths are abandoned. So many individuals and churches and movements have sacrificed the truth for the sake of unity. But what they don't realize is that when they give up the truth of the Gospel, they are also giving up any hope of real unity (Christian unity).

As the wise statement goes, "Unity in essentials, liberty in incidentals, and in all things charity [love]." We need to be united around the fundamental truths of the Gospel. Things like the Trinity, the deity of Christ, the substitutionary atonement (which means Christ died as our substitute to bear the wrath of God), justification by faith alone, the inerrancy of Scripture, and the reality of sin. These are essential biblical truths that cannot be compromised, and without which there cannot be Christian unity. There are *other* theological issues that are very important and yet Christians can disagree while still maintaining unity around those fundamental beliefs. Here I'm thinking of issues like baptism, namely, the difference between Presbyterians and Baptists (whether we should baptize infants or only believers). Also things like one's view of the end times. In these areas we can, of course, fervently discuss and debate with one another what the Bible teaches about baptism or the end times, but we must also realize that we can disagree while still maintaining our unity around the essentials.

"Unity in essentials, liberty in incidentals, and in all things charity [love]." Hold on to the truth, and demonstrate humility as you do so. Paul's phrase in 4:15, "speaking the truth in love," captures the essence of these admonitions. Truth and love are like the two wings of our airplane. If we lose either of them, we'll crash. Each is essential. Truth spoken in hatred and anger does no good. Likewise, falsehood spoken in love does no good. We must speak the TRUTH in LOVE, and thus maintain the unity of believers.

IV. FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

Fourthly, and finally this morning, I want to look at Paul's teaching on family relationships, and since it's Father's Day today I want us to see specifically how this applies to husbands and fathers. In chapter 5:22-33 we read commands for wives and husbands, and then in chapter 6:1-4 we read commands for children and fathers.

Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. “Honor your father and mother” (this is the first commandment with a promise), “that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land.” Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

God has a plan for marriages and families. He is the One who created these things, and as in all things, He designed it to bring glory to Himself. The relationship between a husband and wife is designed to be a picture of Christ’s relationship to His bride, the church. Just as Christ sacrificially gave himself up for the church, husbands are to love their wives. Christ is our model here, men. We must emulate this kind of servant leadership in our homes.

And wives are called to graciously submit to their husbands and support them and respect them, thus providing a living example of how the church submits to Christ’s leadership. God’s designs in creation are so beautiful and awesome. God came up with the idea of marriage, and even though Christ had not yet come to earth to establish His church, God ordained that the marriage relationship between a man and a woman would be a parable of Christ’s relationship to His church. And maybe if we keep that truth in mind we will be more intentional and thoughtful in the way we treat our spouse. Wives, the way you respect your husband is a picture of how the church ought to respond to Christ. And husbands, the way you serve and lead your wife is a picture of Christ’s sacrificial love for the church. The way we relate as husbands and wives could bring great shame on the name of Christ, or it could be our greatest evangelistic tool.

There is so much confusion about marriage, and if we can model marriage relationships that follow *God’s* guidelines, I believe that God will be honored as we experience the joy of living according to God’s plan and as others observe a genuine, authentic, godly marriage.

Husbands, the primary responsibility falls on us. Some may read this passage and think, “My wife is commanded to submit to me!” This is my new favorite verse. If that’s your attitude, then you’ve totally missed the point of this passage. If you think you can take verse 22 and quote it to your wife in a manipulative way, then you are blind to what Paul says in the following verses. Notice that Paul spends 3 verses (40 words) exhorting wives, and he spends 9 verses (115 words) exhorting the husbands. So if you think you’re going to remove the speck from your wife’s eye, you have a huge plank in your own.

It has to start with us, men. We must take the initiative in sanctifying our marriages. And to do that we must begin by giving attention to our own personal sanctification. Fathers, husbands, men, what are you doing to foster a greater love for Jesus in your heart? Are you spending time in prayer? Are you studying the Scriptures? Are you seeking godly counsel from mature men?

As we do these things we then need to step up and become the spiritual leaders in our homes. This will involve things like initiating prayer before meals and initiating times of family Bible study. This could happen around the breakfast table or around the dinner table or at bedtime. This doesn't mean that you always have to be the one who reads to the family or leads the devotion. Maybe your wife knows more about the Bible than you do, and you're kind of intimidated by that. At the very least, though, you can be the one who gathers the family together and says, "Let's read God's Word." We also need to make sure our family is part of Sunday school and worship services on a regular basis. It's about taking the initiative. It's about leading in a godly way. It's about setting a holy example for our wives and children.

Two final admonitions from chapter 6:1-4. The first is to children. "[O]bey your parents in the Lord, for this is right." And then in verses 3-4 Paul quotes from the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20, "Honor your father and mother." Children, you are commanded by God to obey your parents and to honor your parents. Anytime you disobey your father or mother, you are sinning against them and you are sinning against God. Provided they aren't asking you to rob a bank or do something unlawful or sinful, you are obligated to obey them. If they tell you to clean your room, you need to do it. And you need to do it without an attitude. Because it's just as easy to dishonor your parents as it is to disobey them. You may be obeying them outwardly, but dishonoring them in your heart. Humble yourself and realize that your parents really do know best, and trust that you will find the greatest joy in life if you follow God's plan and submit to the leadership of your parents. And on this Father's Day, I hope you will take the opportunity to express your love and appreciation for your Father. Honor him, and commit in your heart to show an ongoing respect for him and to obey him.

The next admonition is to fathers. Here, again, I think we see the headship and leadership responsibility of the father in the home. Notice the focus on fathers. Mothers are not mentioned here, but fathers are exhorted, "do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord." There is a negative and a positive in this verse. First of all, "do not provoke your children to anger." Then the positive admonition to "bring [your children] up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord." Yes we must be firm, and we must discipline, but we must also be tender and loving. We shouldn't be overly harsh or condemning. We shouldn't yell or nag or humiliate our children in front of others. We need to lead them and teach them and discipline them in a way that let's them know we really care for them and love them. Spank, if need be, but then hug. Father's, take some time today to think about your relationship with your children. Are you pushing them away from you and provoking them to anger? Or are you constantly striving to draw them into a closer relationship with you as you seek to bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord?

CLOSING

The glory of God, salvation by grace through faith, church unity, and family relationships. This is a preview of what's to come. I look forward to searching into these

passages more deeply in the coming weeks, and I pray that you are eager to do so as well. I hope you'll spend time reading the book of Ephesians. You could sit down and read all six chapters in less than thirty minutes probably. And you could certainly find some time to look over chapter one before next week. It is so good that the God of the universe chose to reveal Himself to us by giving us the Bible. Don't take this Book for granted! Read it! Study it! This is our lifeline! May we all pray, as Paul does in chapter 3, that we "may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that [we] may be filled with all the fullness of God."