



Thank you for your interest in Let the Church Be the Church—a fourteen-week study of the book of Ephesians.

The pages which follow include:

- An overview of this series (10 pages)
- A sample sermon/class outline (6 pages)
- A sample handout (2 pages)
- A sample small group handout (2 pages)

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Preaching through *Ephesians*

Paul's letter to the Ephesians comprises the "quintessence of Pauline thought" (to quote F. F. Bruce's comment. I'm not even sure who "Pauline" is, but . . .) More to the point for our purposes, *Ephesians* is Paul's most complete and profound teaching on the *church*. The word itself (ἐκκλησία) is used nine times in this book, each referring to a community of faith that is universal in scope. Most often in his other letters, when Paul speaks of the church, he refers to a local congregation (e.g., "the church that meets" in Priscilla and Aquila, Ro 16:5). But Paul is painting a broader canvas in *Ephesians*.

This book is Paul's grand treatise on the meaning of God's New Community. As we will see, Paul teaches that the church was purposed by God, initiated by Christ's sacrifice, populated by Jews and Gentiles, and now exists to show forth God's glory in the heavenly realms. It is a grand, cosmic vision of the church—one that must be captured again by those of us who struggle with local work and the all-too limited horizons which the tangible church can impose.

There are probably more introductory issues raised by *Ephesians* than any other letter in the New Testament. Many excellent and thoughtful commentators doubt that Paul wrote the book (a conclusion I do not share, but one which should not put you off in choosing a commentator to read). There are very real questions about who this book was written to, what "occasion" prompted it, and when it was written. Consulting the commentaries will acquaint you with the debates, but probably not settle your mind on all these matters. Lincoln's introduction (see below) is an especially good outline of these issues, particularly his discussion of implied readers (pp. lxxiv-lxxvii).

The following words or phrases, like threads through a garment, weave in and out of *Ephesians*. It would better prepare you to dive into this letter if you bounced up and down a bit on these words and grasped what Paul means by them. As in all studies of this kind, let the context determine meaning for you. Take off preconceptions and theological baggage before approaching these pivotal concepts, and look with fresh eyes at them.

1. *Grace*—sometimes mercy, sometimes saving power, sometimes ministry.
2. *Heavenly realms*—certainly not "heaven" in the classical sense. Try the spiritual dimension, an alternative reality, on for size. (See the third lesson in this series.)
3. *Power*—a prominent theme in this letter and highly relevant for the church today. What is it? How do we access it?
4. *Fullness*—a rare but powerful concept in *Ephesians*.
5. *Raised, seated, walking, standing*—these "kinesthetic" descriptions of our life in Christ are highly significant to Paul. They correspond roughly with Nee's *Sit, Walk, Stand*—a good reading of which will repay your efforts.
6. *Peace/reconciled*—central ideas to Paul's understanding of what Christ accomplished at the cross and how the church is constituted as a result.
7. *Mystery*—important, especially in chapter 3, to understanding why Paul feels so passionate about his ministry and his gospel.

8. *Church*—notice particularly the universal flavor of the word in this letter.
9. *Calling*—perhaps the single most important clue for understanding the overall structure of *Ephesians*.
10. *Head*—Paul’s repeated and important title for Christ vis-à-vis the church.
11. *Put off/put on*—a favorite imperative of Paul’s in chapter four.
12. *Holy Spirit*—notice how many and varied ways the Spirit is now at work to supply the needs of Christ’s church.

In addition, I have found it useful to think about some of the dichotomies which Paul sets out in *Ephesians*. Like the “two-ways” metaphor of 1 John, these dichotomies provide important insights into the themes of this letter.

1. Jews/Gentiles
2. dead/alive
3. grace/law
4. old self/new self

Ephesians requires more of the student and preacher than most books. You will experience, as I did, a constant sense of the material being bigger than yourself, of the vastness of the ideas, of the essential *spirituality* of the work. In reading through my own outlines, I can see the struggle I had. These outlines are probably a good starting place for your thinking, but I don’t think they represent the best preaching. There is too much *stuff* in them. They are too didactic. If I were preaching this again, I would be more careful to take a central idea in each sermon and drive it home. Rather than spending so much time *getting to* the idea, I would leave more room for applying it to the lives of my listeners. Ah well, such is the agony and ecstasy of preaching.

There are mysteries here too deep for any us. Don’t explain too much in your preaching. Leave a little mystery there after you have done your best. In the end, this book is intended to master us . . . not the other way around.

Bibliography

The following books are recommended, not because they are the best available on *Ephesians*, but because they are the best I know of and were useful to me in sermon preparation. I encourage you to purchase and read them.

Commentaries

Barth, Markus. *Ephesians*. The Anchor Bible (Vols. 34 and 34a). Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc. 1974. Over 1500 pgs! Everything you wanted to know about *Ephesians* and then some. This vast, voluminous, voluble, vaunting, verbose work is not for the faint of heart. Yet it can be used to advantage if you read it selectively. The Anchor Bible series is based on the commentator's own translation of the text (which can yield rich insights). Following verse-by-verse exposition, there are thematic comments which allow the author to range a bit wider. For instance, Barth has eight "comments" on Eph 4:1-16, including: Six Constituents of Common Life, The Church without Laymen and Priests, Meeting the Perfect Man. His insights in these comments are often quite helpful.

Bruce, F. F. *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*. New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company. 1984. 442 pgs. Although this is not Bruce's best effort, the comments on *Ephesians* are still worth reading. I think Bruce misses it substantially on some points (e.g., the teaching on submission, 5:21ff) and his treatment of chapter 6 is abbreviated (less than 20 pages!) and not very helpful. But he is one of the more readable commentators and is usually reliable. His outline of *Ephesians* is good—at least he agrees with my own understanding of how the book is structured!

Lincoln, Andrew T. *Ephesians*. Word Biblical Commentary (Vol. 42). Waco, TX: Word Books, Publishers. 1990. 494 pgs. Lincoln is a careful and thorough scholar who has the knack of rising above the details often enough to keep focused on the book as a whole. He does not believe that Paul authored *Ephesians*, but the value of his commentary does not hinge on your agreement with that premise. He has excellent insights throughout. You keep from drowning in his scholarship by the layout of the Word series, in which verse-by-verse commentary is balanced by overview and summary. I like this commentary. Not an easy read, but good, solid work.

Stott, John R.W. *God's New Society: The Message of Ephesians*. The Bible Speaks Today Series. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press. 1979. 291 pgs. I like Stott. This is the easiest of the recommended commentaries to read and probably the most homiletically oriented. Stott preached for decades and always has his eye out for a good sermon outline. Certainly there is not the detail here that you will find in others. Nor is there the freshness and novel insights that Lincoln, for instance, will provide. But this is a good overview of *Ephesians* and probably represents a good place to start with your reading.

Homiletical and Study Aids

- Bailey, James and Lyle Vander Broek. *Literary Forms in the New Testament*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press. 1992. 219 pgs. Excellent introduction to the forms of writing and argument used in the NT, and their value for interpretation. Note especially pgs 21-87 for particular attention to Paul's letters.
- Bruce, F.F. *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company. 1977. 510 pgs. Good background reading for any of Paul's letters. For this study, pay special attention to pgs. 424-440.
- Fee, Gordon, and Douglas Stuart. *How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House. 1982. 237 pgs. An excellent reminder of some principles for interpretation. Review esp. chapters 3-4 on the epistles as you begin your work in *Ephesians*.
- Greidanus, Sidney. *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company. 1988. 374 pgs. This entire book deserves a good reading by all preachers. But Greidanus' comments on preaching from the Epistles will be especially helpful for you (pgs. 311-341).
- Hinkley, Karen (Ed.). *Ephesians*. Life Change Series. Colorado Springs: NavPress. 1985. 128 pgs. This excellent series of study guides on various books of the Bible provides a structured way to encounter biblical texts. The volume on *Ephesians* gives good introductory information about themes, culture, historical background as well as leading you through the book itself. It is designed not only for personal study but for groups as well. If you are using the Small Group component of *Look at the Church*, you might want to give your group leaders a copy of this work. After spending some time reading the text of *Ephesians*, this little volume will help you organize your thoughts on the story. [You can also use my Study Guide included in the weekly handouts. Though not as comprehensive, the studies are tied directly to the themes you will be exploring sermonically.]

Outline of Ephesians

Most commentators agree that *Ephesians* is divided into two major sections: an initial section of thanksgiving and assertions about the new nature of the world since Christ has come (chapters 1-3), followed by an appeal to live out these new realities in the church and in our personal lives (chapters 4-6). The first section emphasizes the work of God and his Son; the second focuses on our response to their work. The first section lays a foundation for the creation of the church; the second teaches us how to live appropriately in God's new society. The two sections are linked by the notion of "calling." If the first three chapters remind the readers of "the hope to which he has called you," chapters 4-6 urge them to "live a life worthy of the calling you have received." It would benefit your study of *Ephesians* immensely to carefully read Lincoln, pgs. xxxvi-xlvii. His discussion of how this book is structured is excellent.

Salutation (1:1, 2)

Thanksgiving (1:3-14)

A wonderful, convoluted, worshipful paragraph of praise to God for what he has done for us "in Christ." Paul enumerates blessing after blessing available to us in Jesus, including being chosen, adopted, and redeemed "in him." Even at this early stage, Paul begins to lay a foundation for both Jews and Gentiles having access to these blessings.

I. "You are God's Chosen People" (1:15-3:21)

In the first half of *Ephesians*, Paul is attempting to correct the *thinking* of his readers. These Gentiles have been religious outsiders for a long time. In their past is a catalog of vice and immorality which continues to make them feel unworthy before God. Paul assures them that they are chosen and beloved by God. Once, they were dead in sin; now, they are alive in Christ. Paul exults that, through faith, people from all backgrounds are being built into a holy temple. This temple (the church) is where God lives by his spirit, where the fullness of God can be experienced, and where people can find power to live resurrected lives.

A. A Prayer for their Understanding (1:15-23)

Having listed these blessings, Paul prays that his readers may truly comprehend what has already been given to them. We need a "spirit of wisdom and revelation" if we are to grasp what God did for us in Christ. There is hope and riches and power available "for us who believe." All things have been given to us because *we* have been given to Christ.

1. What God has done for us (vss 15-19a)

2. Exemplified in what He did for Christ (vss 19b-23)

B. God's "Workmanship" (2:1-10)

These verses develop a parallel with the 'dead,' 'raised,' and 'seated' progression (1:19ff) through which God showed his power in Jesus. Now God's power is shown in

us as we (though also dead) are raised and seated in “the heavenly realms.” Paul begins to develop the idea that salvation is grace and ethic is gratitude.

1. We live though we were dead(vss 1-5)
2. We are seated “in the heavenlies” (vss 6, 7)
3. We have a new role(vss 8-10)

C. Salvation is Corporate(2:11-22)

Lest his readers start to think only in terms of *personal salvation*, Paul asks that they consider a larger perspective. There are social, “political,” relational implications to the gospel message. The reality that others were also “raised and seated,” that others have also been reconciled to God through the cross, means that old loyalties have been destroyed and old walls torn down. There is not just a new *life* given in Christ, but a new *society* as well—God’s family.

1. Alienated from God *and* man (vss 11, 12)
2. Reconciled to God *and* man(vss 13-18)
3. Now, one big happy family(vss 13-22)

D. Paul’s Little Secret(3:1-13)

In an intensely personal section, Paul speaks of the “grace given” to him to tell the Gentiles that they have access to God just like Jews do . . . through Christ. There are no distinctions, no second-class members of this family. Full, confident, free access to God is the gracious mystery which Paul proclaims. When the church lives out this privilege, it proclaims the power and wisdom of God to the world and to those in the heavenly realms.

1. Gentiles are full participants.....(vss 1-9)
2. The Church and God’s wisdom(vss 10-13)

E. Prayer for Power(3:14-21)

The first half of *Ephesians* concludes with a rapturous prayer. The focus of Paul’s prayer is on *power*. The kind of life Paul is about to encourage requires power from a source beyond ourselves—indwelling power, transforming power. But that power is made available to us through knowing the one who is its source. First, we come to know God. Then, we are filled with his power. As a result, we can live a life which is worthy.

II. “Live Like Chosen People” (4:1-6:20)

In the second half of *Ephesians* (4:1-6:24), Paul stresses *living*. The emphasis is on behavior and how these people need to live in a manner that is “worthy” of the calling they received. Paul talks about maturing in Christ, living like Christ, relating to others in a way that is Christ-like. Finally, he encourages them to “be strong in the Lord.” Effective resistance against Satan requires spiritual weaponry. Paul ends the letter by describing the armor God provides for fighting spiritual warfare.

A. The Christian Walk(4:1-16)

Now, at last, Paul turns to ethics. A “worthy life” is the necessary result of relationship with God. However, the ethics to which Paul turns initially are social rather than moral. Humility, gentleness, patience and love—these are the virtues on which a worthy life is built. Indeed, it is only the context of a *community* that Paul sees any hope of developing mature, stable, Christ-like individuals.

- 1. The importance of unity(vss 1-6)
- 2. God’s gifts for unity(vss 7-16)

B. The New Self (4:17-5:2)

This section is closely tied to the preceding. Although the references to “living as the Gentiles,” “sensuality,” and “deceitful desires” lead the reader to think primarily of
till on unity. The “new self” is manifested by behaviors
which “build others up according to their needs” and results in “living a life of love.”

- 1. The old life-style(vss 17-19)
- 2. The new self(vss 20-24)
- 3. Living in the community of faith (4:25-5:2)

C. Walking in the Light(5:3-20)

Paul now focuses on morality, warning against behaviors which are “improper for God’s holy people” and admonishing his readers to live “carefully.” A worthy walk is not just about unity. It involves purity as well. God takes holiness seriously. So should his church.

- 1. Inappropriate behavior for saints(vss 3-7)
- 2. A life that “pleases the Lord”(vss 8-20)

D. Holy Relationships (5:21-6:9)

With the words “Submit to one another,” Paul introduces a radical appeal to mutual service and honor. Submission, like charity, must begin at home if it is to be genuine. Husbands and wives, fathers and children, slaves and masters are told to order their relationships by an imitation of Christ’s humility and service.

1. The basic rule(vs 21)
2. The rule in various relationships (5:22-6:9)

E. Stand Strong (6:10-20)

Finally, Paul wrenches his readers back into the “heavenly realms.” There is a battle being fought against the “spiritual forces of evil.” Christians and armament of God. This last, rousing word closes out the letter with a stirring call to battle—and issues a needed reminder to readers that we must be watchful and prayerful and on our guard.

1. The struggle(vss 10-12)
2. The weapons(vss 13-20)

Conclusion (6:21-24)

Sermon Summaries

There are fourteen lessons on *Ephesians*, most of which are based on units of text that assume a structure for *Ephesians* as outlined above. I have included two forms of support for your preaching. The first is a weekly handout for your congregation, which is closely tied to my sermon outlines. Any changes to the sermons may require you to make changes to the handouts as well.

Then there are the sermon outlines themselves. They range from 4 to 6 pages—a lot of information! I tend, however, to speak quickly and for about 30 minutes. You may want to use these outlines verbatim, modify them to your own style and situation, or throw them out entirely. I hope they can at least serve as a starting point for your own preparation.

Sermon Title	Text	Page #s Outline	Page #s Handout
1. Fresh Words from an Old Book	Overview	1-6	1-2
By doing an overview of <i>Ephesians</i> , I attempt to paint a rough portrait of who these first readers were and to show in how many ways they were like us. Especially when you understand what they were struggling with (e.g., a lack of spiritual confidence, power and maturity), it is easy to see the modern church in this ancient audience. Paul's words to them can be aimed directly at ourselves.			
2. Remember Who You Are	Eph 1:3-14	7-12	3-4
Paul's introductory thanksgiving functions to establish the identity of his readers: they are a chosen, forgiven people, loved by God and included in Christ. Spiritual self-esteem is vital for living holy lives. Until Christians understand <i>who they are</i> , they will never have the power or confidence to <i>live up to their calling</i> .			
3. The Fifth Dimension	Eph 1:15-23	13-17	5-6
We live with a foot in two worlds—the physical and the spiritual. Paul's understanding of “the heavenly realms” is intended to fortify these Christians. There is power available to us on this plane. And Jesus continues his ministry, working for the benefit of his church, in the heavenly realms. Thus, <i>Ephesians</i> begins with a discussion of who we are and where we live. Basic stuff for the church.			
4. Power for Living	Eph 2:1-10	19-23	7-8
Power is a prevalent theme in this book. Here, Paul talks about the power available for Christians—it is the same power God made available for Christ in raising him from the dead and seating him in the heavenly realms. That power is at work in us: to make us alive and to secure our salvation and to create us for good works.			
5. God's New Society	Eph 2:11-22	25-29	9-10
Paul is talking about something larger in <i>Ephesians</i> than personal salvation. There is a <i>community</i> which is being established in God's divine plan. Christ raises us to reconcile us, joining us into a family. Those who have been given new life have been given a new society in which to live out that life.			

- 6. A Call to Greatness** **Eph 3:1-12** **31-36** **11-12**
 We pause here to think about Paul himself, and the great ministry given to him by “God’s grace.” Paul, as the apostle to the Gentiles, was God’s chosen agent both to reach into the Gentile world and to understand the gospel in terms that made such a ministry possible. We have inherited Paul’s mission. Will we be as faithful?
- 7. A Prayer for Power** **Eph 3:14-21** **37-42** **13-16**
 This lesson is a period of worship rather than a sermon. I thought it would be appropriate to let Paul’s prayer guide the worship experience. There are songs, readings, comments and prayers woven to form a praise and celebration service.
- 8. The Unity of the Spirit** **Eph 4:1-6** **43-47** **17-18**
 Paul “turns the corner” of his letter at this point and begins to talk about walking worthily. But, to our surprise, he takes up first the issue of unity. There is an essential oneness in the church that the Spirit has created. It is up to us to be worthy of that unity by doing everything we can to protect it. A lifestyle which promotes harmony and peace is the first step we take in walking worthy of our call.
- 9. Equipping the Church** **Eph 4:7-16** **49-54** **19-20**
 Jesus has given gifts to his church to ensure its unity and maturation. Some of these gifts are *ministries* (cf. Ro 12 and 1Cor 12). But some are *ministers*— specific people given to the church to see that it grows and thrives. Evangelists, pastors and teachers feed the body with God’s word, build it up through service, and present it unified and mature to Christ.
- 10. The School of Christ** **Eph 4:17-24** **55-60** **21-22**
 As Christians, we have been enrolled in the school of Christ. We studied Jesus and learned from him the three “R’s” of discipleship: renouncing the old self, renewing of the mind, and resurrection of a new self. These lessons, harking back to our baptism, must be constantly reaffirmed if we are to live as God commands.
- 11. God’s Family Values** **Eph 4:25-5:2** **61-65** **23-24**
 Paul outlines how Christians should act in the family of God. Truth telling, peace making, hard working, healthy talking, and godly loving must be characteristic of the members of this family. The Spirit of God teaches us to live this way, as does the example of Jesus.
- 12. The Holy Life** **Eph 5:3-20** **67-70** **25-26**
 There is a life-style that, by its very nature, disqualifies us as Christians. We may well act in certain ways, but should not expect to be part of God’s family as we do. In God’s family, there is a tangible hunger for holiness. Paul provides four tools for building holy lives.
- 13. That Dirty Word “Submission”** **Eph 5:21-6:9** **71-76** **27-28**
 Submission is essential to the Christian walk. Although Paul has talked a lot about submission in Ephesians, he doesn’t mention the word until chapter five. Then, however, he teaches an attitude which is truly revolutionary—a submission practiced by all, toward all, because of Christ.
- 14. Rambo Christianity** **Eph 6:10-18** **77-83** **29-30**
 There is a cosmic battle going on and Christians need to be armed and ready. Paul closes his epistle with a clarion call to arms, reminding us that our enemy is dangerous, our weapons are powerful, and our God is faithful.

Fresh Words from an Old Book

Among the French, there is a proverb which translates roughly:

“The more things change, the more they remain the same.”

It is a statement which, like so many proverbs, captures an essential truth in a memorable way. The truth contained in this proverb is that no matter how much conditions change, humanity itself remains a constant. You can adjust our environments, overhaul our political systems, alter where we live and how we work. But there is something about the heart of mankind that will not change, that reasserts itself and holds true no matter how things vary around us.

Just one example: Scientists told us that if only we would take the technological leap, the human condition would be forever altered. Having jumped into the Industrial Revolution with both feet, we can certainly testify that technology has changed us. Or has it? We are better clothed, more comfortably housed, more quickly and safely transported, better informed than previous generations. But are we changed?

Now, we are so technologically advanced that we can kill a man at a thousand yards with high-powered, infrared-scoped, recoilless rifles. We can kill ten men with a laser-guided, user-friendly Stinger missile that is carried around in a suitcase. We can kill a million men with one strategically placed nuclear bomb. Technology has made us more efficiently violent. It has not made us less so. “The more things change, the more they remain the same.”

To much of the world, that little French proverb is a statement of resignation, cynicism, and despair. For the Christian, however, the idea expressed in that proverb is at the core of our belief in the continuing relevance of Scripture.

1. We believe that God breathed the words in this book, that these are inspired and true statements given by an omniscient God.
2. We also believe that—for those who first heard them—these words were living and active and relevant when heeded and obeyed.
3. Furthermore, we believe that these words continue to be relevant through the centuries precisely because “The more things change, the more they remain the same!”
 - a. *Conditions* change constantly.
 - b. But for all the changes which have occurred over the past two millennia, things remain very much the same—at least when it comes to the human heart.
 - c. Underneath, human beings remain the same ... same needs ... same questions.
4. That is why a book 2000 years old continues to be relevant to people in our time.
 - a. It is a book that addresses issues which never change or go away.
 - b. It answers the timeless, ubiquitous, ever-pressing questions about life and death and love and evil.
5. In a world full of change and chance and chaos, it is good to know we can turn to something for the part of us that “remains the same.”

Today: We begin a series in the book of Ephesians, one of the letters found in the NT, penned by the Apostle Paul. As we start this study, we need to affirm once again our faith that this book—so old, written to people in such different times and circumstances—still holds fresh and living words for us. For, in the end, these people are just like us!

1. Yes, 2000 years separate us from the original readers.
2. We pride ourselves on having made so much progress in that time.
 - a. The veneer of technology and the scientific method
 - b. The patina of culture and civilization and education
 - c. A thin crust of material security and economic power
3. But scratch the surface of the modern American Christian and we look very much like the people to whom Paul addresses this letter.

I. Some Demographics [The sections which follow are intended to illustrate the points you are making and hit the highlights. Don't spend too much time on any one point.]

A. They are Christians

1. Chapter One
 - vs **1**—[Paul addresses the letter] “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, To *the saints* in Ephesus, *the faithful* in Christ Jesus”
 - vs **5**—“he predestined us to be *adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ*”
 - vs **7**—“In him we have *redemption* through his blood, the *forgiveness* of sins”
 - vs **13**—“And you also were *included in Christ . . .* you were marked in him with a seal, the promised *Holy Spirit*”
2. Chapter Two
 - vs **5**—“*made us alive with Christ* even when we were dead in transgressions”
 - vs **8**—“*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith*”
 - vs **13**—“But now in Christ Jesus you . . . *have been brought near* through the blood of Christ”
 - vs **19**—“Consequently, you are . . . *fellow citizens* with God's people and *members of God's household*”
3. Chapter Four
 - vs **1**—“I urge you to live a life worthy of *the calling you have received*”
 - vs **20**—“You, however, did not *come to know Christ* that way”
 - vs **25**—“. . .for we are all members of *one body*”
4. Chapter Five
 - vs **3**—“these are improper for *God's holy people*”
 - vs **8**—“. . . now you are light in the Lord. Live as *children of light*”
5. Chapter Six
 - vss **10ff**—They have been given the *full armor of God*.
 - vs **24**—“Grace to all who *love our Lord Jesus Christ with an undying love*”

Transition: These people are Christians, and in that they are very much like us. The very things Paul says of these people can be said of us as well. All these things that have happened to them—as they have been saved and then sanctified—have happened to us also.

B. They are Gentiles

1. Two explicit references:

2:11—“Therefore, remember that formerly you who are *Gentiles by birth* and called ‘*uncircumcised*’ by those who call themselves ‘the circumcision’ . . .”

3:1—“I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of *you Gentiles* . . .”

2. Two important points:

a. *They lived like Gentiles in their former lives.*

2:1-3— “As for you, *you were dead in your transgressions and sins*, in which you used to live *when you followed the ways of this world* and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, *gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts*. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.”

2:12— “remember that at that time you were *separate from Christ*, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, *without hope and without God in the world.*”

4:18, 19—darkened in understanding, separated from the life of God because of hard hearts, given over to sensuality, indulging in impurity with a continual lust for more. “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, *with a continual lust for more.*”

- Does that sound like any of us? Was that same lifestyle characteristic of anybody here before coming to know Jesus?

b. *They owed everything to the saving work of Jesus Christ.* They couldn’t rely on correct ancestry or having the Law and Covenants or on their righteous works—as did the Jews. They knew the only thing they had going for them spiritually was the grace of God and the blood of Jesus.

2:4-5— “But *because of his great love for us*, God, who is rich in mercy, *made us alive* with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions”

2:13— “But now in Christ Jesus *you who once were far away have been brought near* through the blood of Christ”

3:6— “. . . through the gospel the Gentiles are *heirs* together with Israel, *members together of one body*, and *sharers together* in the promise in Christ Jesus”

5:8— “For you were once darkness, but now *you are light in the Lord*. *Live as children of light*”

- How true that is of us also. We know that we would have nothing if not for Jesus. The only thing we have to rely on is not the faith of our parents or the righteousness of our deeds but the saving grace of Jesus our Lord.

C. They have heard of Paul but do not know him personally.

1. Paul tells them that he has *heard* of their faith (1:15) and expects that they have *heard* of his ministry (3:2).
2. But there is no *direct and personal* relationship between these people and Paul. What they know of Paul comes from the reports of others and whatever they might have read of his writings.
3. Yet they have benefited directly from his ministry.
 - a. As Paul says in this letter, God gave *him* the mission of preaching to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ.
 - b. It was Paul who pounded on the fact that Jesus had torn down the wall between Jew and Gentile and made it possible for both—without discrimination or preference—to “approach God with freedom and confidence.”
 - c. And now he writes them a letter to minister directly to these Gentile Christians who do not know his face but can still benefit from his teaching.

Transition: That’s us! We stand in exactly the same relationship to Paul as do these people. There are so many other ways in which these people sound like us.

1. They are husbands and wives and children and parents.
2. They struggle with relationships and morality and the culture in which they live.
3. They are members of the church and have to learn how to live in this new society and how to treat each other in the household of God.
4. They are battling Satan at every turn and need courage and weapons to fight him effectively.
5. But there is something else I want you to see that may make you squirm as you hear that they are more like us than we would care to admit.

II. A Spiritual Profile

Though they are Christians and are members of God's church and have experienced many rich blessings in Christ, there are still many ways in which they need to grow up into mature Christian men and women.

A. They are suffering from a severe lack of spiritual *confidence*.

1. They are self-conscious about being Gentiles and of the lives they used to live. (Paul admits and even harps on the fact that they lived immorally—2:1-3, 11-12; 4:17-19.)
2. They have a hard time believing that God's mercy and grace is grand enough and great enough to cover all their sins. (Paul keeps stressing that salvation is by grace, as if they weren't getting or couldn't believe the point—1:6-8; 2:5-9.)
3. They feel outnumbered and outgunned. (Notice Paul's emphasis throughout on
 - a. Looking at the prevailing culture and feeling small and insignificant to accomplish the task which has been given them.
 - b. Looking at the forces of evil and feeling inadequate to stand against Satan.

B. They suffer from a lack of spiritual *power*.

1. They haven't quite grasped that the God who resurrected Jesus from the dead has raised them up from their dead lives as well (2:1-10).
2. They have trouble experiencing a resurrected life, a new life, a changed life (e.g., 2:11-13; 4:17-32; 5:3-20).
3. And they're tempted to turn tail and run when Satan rears his ugly head in their lives; they are not really sure that they have the power they need to resist the Devil and be good soldiers for Christ (6:10-18).

C. They suffer from a lack of spiritual *maturity*.

1. Though they have probably been Christians for several years now, they are still infants in Christ, vulnerable to false teaching and unchristian ideas (4:14).
2. They've been stuck on the milk about Christ and need to know him better and understand him more fully (1:17-19a; 3:17b-19; 4:20; 5:17).
3. Paul tells them they need to "grow up into . . . Christ" (4:15).

D. They suffer from a lack of spiritual *relationships*.

1. They're not sure how to treat each other in their families (5:21-6:9).
 - a. Wives are being rebellious; husbands are not loving and serving their wives.
 - b. Children are being disobedient; fathers are being overbearing.
2. And they are not treating each other as they should in the church (chaps 4-5).
 - a. The unity of the church is being threatened by selfish, sinful behavior.
 - b. There is lying and anger and unwholesome talk going on.
 - c. They are not as humble and patient and gentle with each other as they should be. They need to be more forgiving.

E. They suffer from a lack of spiritual *lifestyle*—(4:25-5:18).

1. They struggle with sexual immorality and greed and drunkenness.
2. They have to be warned about obscenity and coarse joking.

III. The Lessons Paul Teaches are Lessons We Need to Hear

A. Lessons about who we are in Christ—God’s holy people (Chapters 1-3).

1. Chosen, adopted, and saved by God’s grace and eternal plan (1:1-14).
2. Raised from the dead, seated in the heavenly realms, and given a holy mission to accomplish (1:15-2:10).
3. Reconciled not only to God but to each other and placed into one, holy family where God lives by his spirit (2:11-3:13).
4. Given all the power that is needed:
 - a. to have Christ living within us (3:14-17a),
 - b. to know his love that is filling and transforming us (3:17b-19),
 - c. to receive everything we could ask or imagine for living victorious lives (3:20-21).

B. Lessons about living up to the calling we have received (Chapters 4-6).

1. The first result of all that God has done for us is that we live in unity (4:1-16).
2. The second result is that we are given a new life-style, a way of living we learn not in the world but in the “school of Christ” (4:17-5:20).
3. The third result of God’s work in us is that we learn how to treat people right: the people we’re married to, our children, people over us and under us (5:21-6:9).
4. The fourth result is the capacity to take a stand (6:10-20). It’s a war out there, and not all our foes are the flesh and blood kind. But God has given us the power and the weapons we need to fight victoriously.

Conclusion:

A. Why study *Ephesians*?

1. Perhaps it ought to be enough to say, “Because it’s in the Bible.”
2. But it is appropriate to say, “Because it is relevant to us.”
 - a. There are Biblical books which are more difficult for us to study precisely because it is harder for us to see the relevance of those books for living the Christian life in 20th Century America.
 - b. When was the last time you did a careful study of the Song of Solomon or 2 Chronicles or Zephaniah? All have relevant messages for us, but that relevance has to be *demonstrated* before we can get excited about studying them.

B. *Ephesians* is written to people just like us and has a message we need to hear.

1. “The more things change, the more they remain the same.”
2. These early Christians struggled with the same issues, asked the same questions, made the same mistakes, had the same doubts that we do.
3. This book, which we believe God inspired to minister to Christians living so long ago, now speaks a word to us that will encourage and comfort and inspire.
4. Because people “remain the same,” this book remains relevant and deserves our closest attention.



FRESH WORDS OLD BOOK

Among the French, there is a proverb:

The more things change, the more they remain the same.

It is a statement which captures an essential truth in a memorable way. No matter how much conditions change, humanity itself remains a constant. We can adjust our environments, overhaul our political systems, alter where we live and how we work. But there is something about the heart of human beings that will not change no matter how things vary around us.

To the world, this proverb is a statement of resignation, cynicism, and despair. For the Christian, however, it expresses something critical about the continuing relevance of Scripture.

We believe that—for those who first heard them—these words from God were alive and relevant and life-changing. We also believe these words *continue* to be relevant because “The more things change, the more they remain the same.”

Because human beings remain the same, have the same needs, and ask the same questions, the Bible continues to be relevant to people today. It is a book that addresses issues which never change or go away.

Today, we begin a series in the book of Ephesians. As we start this study, let us affirm once again our faith that this book—so old, written to people in such different times and circumstances—still holds fresh and living words for us. Scratch the surface of the modern American Christian and we look very much like the people to whom Paul addresses this letter. If his words helped them to live more godly lives, the same words will help us also.

*Paul, an apostle of Christ
Jesus by the will of God,
to the saints in Ephesus,
the faithful in Christ Jesus:
Grace and peace to you
from God our Father and
the Lord Jesus Christ.*

Eph 1:1-2

THINK ABOUT IT:

- ♦ It is strange. An ancient book on chemistry might be a curiosity today, but little more. An ancient book on spirituality, however, can speak as powerfully now as when first written. Perhaps it is the difference between books about facts (which are ever-changing) and books about truth (which remain constant).



LET THE CHURCH
BE THE CHURCH

SERMON 1

- ◆ *It is humbling for us to realize that, for all our technological advancement and social sophistication, we struggle with the same problems faced by the earliest Christians.*
- ◆ *On the other hand, it is heartening to realize that the God who spoke to those problems so long ago still has a word to speak on the subject today.*
- ◆ *Pride makes us think we are better than those who have gone before us. Insecurity makes us wonder if we are worse. There is a certain comfort in recognizing that Christians of every age have struggled with finding spiritual power and growing up in Christ.*

WHAT'S YOUR POINT?

To whom was *Ephesians* written? We can glean numerous facts about the first readers of this book from a careful reading of the book itself. They were Christians (Paul calls them “members of God’s household”), and recipients of many rich blessings in Christ. They know about and have benefited from Paul’s work, but evidently do not know Paul personally (1:15; 3:2; 6:21, 22).

For all the good things God had done in their lives, though, there were still areas in which these early Christians needed to make significant improvement. They suffered from a lack of spiritual *confidence*. Self-conscious about being Gentiles, they had a hard time believing that God’s mercy and grace could cover all their sins.

They suffered from a lack of spiritual *power*. They did not understand that the God of the universe was making his power available to them. They weren’t really sure they had the strength to resist the devil and be good soldiers for Christ.

They suffered from spiritual *immaturity*. Though they had been Christians for years, these people were still infants in the Lord, vulnerable to false teaching and unchristian ideas. Paul will tell them they need to “grow up.”

They needed more spiritual *relationships*. They didn’t know how to treat each other in their families and in the church. They were not as humble, patient and gentle with each other as they should have been. There was lying, anger, and unwholesome talk going on.

And they struggled with an unspiritual *life-style*. Paul has to warn them against sexual immorality, greed, drunkenness, obscenity—all those sins so characteristic of their past lives.

Why should modern Christians spend time and energy studying this ancient book? Because these people sound so much like us. We also need a word from God about spiritual confidence and power, about maturing in the faith and developing Christ-like relationships, and about a life-style that draws more from our master than from our culture.





ONE HOLY PEOPLE

Small Group Member's Guide

ICE BREAKER

Every family develops their “pet” lines—things that parents predictably say in particular situations. For instance, the last thing I traditionally say to our kids before they leave the house is “Don’t forget who you are!” (Of course, their pet rejoinder is “Mom wrote my name on my T-shirt, I think I’m alright!”)

What about your family? Any predictable lines?

TO THE SAINTS . . .

[This reading is edited from *The Epistle of Paul to the Ephesians*, pages 42-44, by Francis Foulkes; in the Tyndale Commentary Series.]

*Paul, an apostle of Christ
Jesus by the will of God, to the
saints in Ephesus, the faithful
in Christ Jesus: Grace and peace
to you from God our Father and
the Lord Jesus Christ.*

Eph 1:1,2

The frequent NT designation of Christians as *saints* is the first of a number of words in chapter 1 whose meaning can be understood fully only by a consideration of their OT background. The saints are the holy ones. In OT days the tabernacle, the temple, the sabbath, and the people themselves were holy as they were consecrated, or set apart, for the service of God. A person is not a “saint” in this sense by personal merit; he is one set apart by God, and in consequence he is called to live in holiness. Thus the word expresses at once the privilege and responsibility of the calling of every Christian, not the attainment of a select few.

The faithful, a term often used for Christians in the NT, may mean those who have faith, or those who show fidelity. Here both ideas may be included; they are believers and their calling is to faithfulness. Nor is the meaning simply that the people addressed have faith in the Lord. The phrase *in Christ Jesus*, so frequently used by Paul, especially in this Epistle, sums up very much of his understanding of the gospel. It, or an equivalent, is used 11 times in verses 1-14 alone.

Christians not only have faith in him; their life is in him. As the root in the soil, the branch in the vine, the fish in the sea, the bird in the air, so the place of the Christian’s life is in



LET THE CHURCH
BE THE CHURCH

Christ. Physically his life is in the world; spiritually it is lifted above the world to be in Christ.

There is the implication that wherever the Christian may be, in whatever difficult environment, threatened by materialism or paganism, in danger of being engulfed by the power of the state or overwhelmed by the pressures of non-Christian life, he is *in Christ*. This is not mysticism, but is intended to express the very practical truth that the Christian, if faithful to his calling, will not try to be self-sufficient, or to move beyond the limits of the purpose and control and love of Christ, nor will he turn to the world for guidance, inspiration and strength. He finds all his satisfaction and his every need met in him, and not in any other place nor from any other source.

When two men meet for the first time, they are likely to ask one another, "What do you do?" It is a customary and socially acceptable way of really asking, "Who are you?" Knowing another's occupation tells us something about *who* they are--and forms the basis of how we will interact with them.

Just as it is important for us to know who another is, we must also know who we are. Consequently, we define ourselves in numerous ways: by occupation, by family, by significant relationships, by social status and on and on. We even understand what it means when we hear someone say, "I'm taking some time to find myself." They're trying to understand who they are. (We may not be sympathetic to the notion of "finding oneself" but we *do* understand!)

Paul wants to impress on the Ephesians what their true identity is. He knows the way they live depends on an understanding of who they are. So before addressing lifestyle issues, he makes sure they have a sound grasp of their true identity. Though he will spend the first half of his letter dealing with this idea, this thrust is apparent in his opening lines.

He addresses them as *saints* and *the faithful in Christ Jesus*. Further, he subtly reminds them that they have received *grace* and *peace* not from an abstract ethereal power but from the God who is *Father* and *Lord*. Paul knows that these young Gentile converts are struggling with a faltering and inadequate sense of self-worth. No doubt the lifestyle they left behind has given them plenty of reason to feel guilty. And perhaps they are further intimidated by Jewish Christians in their midst who might seem to them to have a nobler birthright.

Paul won't correct their behavior until he can convince them of their standing before God. They have, after all, been lovingly adopted into the very family of God!

To Discuss

- ♦ *How do you describe who you are to another person? Does the way in which you choose to identify yourself reveal how you feel about yourself?*
- ♦ *Why do you think these Gentile converts in Ephesus might have suffered from feelings of low spiritual self-esteem? How might this have affected their behavior?*
- ♦ *We don't seem to be comfortable anymore using the term **saints** to describe ourselves. Why do you think this is? What might we have lost along with that term?*
- ♦ *What does Paul's greeting say about who he is? About who the Ephesians are? How is everything else he writes in this letter influenced by the truths revealed in these opening lines?*
- ♦ *He has, in fact, expressed who he is, and identified who they are. How do both of these identities form the basis of action?*

