

Word & Spirit Bible Study Notes on Ephesians

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by Mark Heath

<http://www.wordandspirit.co.uk>

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Eph 1:1-2

¹Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, To the saints who are in Ephesus, and are faithful in Christ Jesus: ²Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

From Paul

The first word of this book is the most controversial one in it. Some people don't believe that Paul actually wrote Ephesians, but there are good reasons for believing that he did. If the Bible is indeed the "Word of God", then doubting the truth of the first word of this letter is not a good place to start. This letter has much to teach those who are willing to hear God speaking through it, rather than standing in judgement over it. Our attitude should always be teachable and especially when we study the Bible, we should ask the Holy Spirit's help to open our eyes to what he is speaking through the text to us.

We see that Paul introduces himself as an *apostle* – a very high and noble calling. But he is not being arrogant – he recognises that it was only by the will of God that he was what he was. True humility is not pretending we are less than we are, but acknowledging God as the source of everything good in our lives.

To the Saints

This letter probably originally went out to more than just the church at Ephesus – it seems it was a circular letter. The Christian recipients are described as *saints* and *faithful*. As saints, we have been set apart as a special, holy people, belonging to God, in the same way that the people of Israel were called God's holy people in the Old Testament.

In calling us faithful, Paul might be saying that we are people who have faith in Jesus, which would be true. But he could also be referring to our ongoing faithfulness to Jesus. This is possible because we are now "in Christ" – we have been connected to him, into his body. Now he dwells in us by his Spirit, enabling us to live out lives of holiness and faithfulness.

Paul opens the letter with his familiar blessing of *grace* and *peace*. Again, God's grace and peace are not one-off gifts, but a daily gift that we should draw on deeply. His grace gives us undeserved blessings every day of our lives, and his peace is more than just absence of conflict. When God gives us peace, we know that we do not need to worry even in times of danger or trouble, because the Father cares for our needs and has the resources to bless and protect us whatever happens. As well as praying for God's grace and peace for one another, as Christians we should seek to be agents of grace and peace as we serve and care for each other's needs.

Eph 1:3-4

³*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places,* ⁴*even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. [In love]*

Every Spiritual Blessing

After the introductory greeting, Paul does not launch straight into teaching or even giving them some news. Rather, he breaks out into a hymn of praise. He is not embarrassed to spontaneously and enthusiastically declare God's greatness, and neither does he think that it is inappropriate to do so in the context of a teaching letter.

Here the subject in view is the abundant blessing that God the Father has poured out on us through the Lord Jesus Christ. He packs an incredible amount of truth into every statement of this prayer, each one worthy of our meditation so that we too can respond with an overflow of thankfulness.

When Paul says we have every *spiritual* blessing, he knows that there are some material or physical blessings we might wish for but not have. But spiritually speaking, we have been given everything we need. If only we had our eyes opened to the richness of what we have, then we too would overflow with praise. We may not be greatly blessed in the earthly places, but in the heavenly places, we are rich beyond our wildest dreams. It is this kind of perspective that has helped Christians throughout history to be filled with joy even in the most difficult of circumstances, because they know they have blessings that can never be taken from them.

So what exactly does Paul have in mind when he speaks of us having *every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places*? It is a difficult phrase to understand, but thankfully he elaborates on what these blessings are over the next few verses.

Chosen for Holiness

First, we have been *chosen* before the foundation of the world. This is a cause for rejoicing that God should have chosen us before we had done anything. Our salvation is completely unmerited by any works that we have done. This truth gives us great confidence that he is not going to change his mind about us, or get tired of us.

Second, we have been chosen for a reason – to be *holy and blameless*. We are not blameless because we haven't sinned, but because our sins are forgiven. And we are not made holy in name only, but also in nature. God intends not just to forgive us for the past, but to transform our future lives to be characterised by holiness. We should never think that the fact we have been "chosen" means our behaviour doesn't matter. God has chosen us to change us.

This section of Ephesians is one great long gigantic sentence, which makes it a little hard sometimes to know how it breaks down into individual ideas. The phrase "*in love*", might refer to the Father's love, but it could also be taken to refer to our love. The chief characteristic of God's holy people is that they demonstrate love. God did not merely intend to repair the damage of sin, but to enable us to be all that he had originally intended for our lives – which is to reflect the character of the God who himself is love.

Eph 1:5-6

[In love] ⁵he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, ⁶to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved.

Adopted

The next spiritual blessing Paul considers is that we have been *predestined for adoption*. This is quite remarkable. God didn't just save us to be an army of servants or worshippers, but that we would be his children. Just as Jesus is called the "beloved" in these verses, so we too have the security of knowing that we are dearly loved by our Father, and we can approach him with confidence. Adoption also gives us a secure future.

Through Christ

How did we get all these blessings? Paul is very clear about the source of them. They came to us *through Christ*, we are blessed *in the Beloved*. Again and again he stresses that it is because of Jesus that we enjoy all these good things. The gospel is all about what Jesus has done and what that now means for us. Without coming to Jesus, none of these blessings are available to us.

God's Plan

Paul not only emphasises the role of Jesus in bringing these blessings, but the *initiative* of God. We got all this because it was his choice, his will, his predestining action. Rather than congratulating himself for finding such a great deal, Paul is overwhelmed with gratefulness that God should desire to bestow such undeserved grace upon him. In fact, it was not just God's will, but his *pleasure* to save us¹. God takes great delight in doing good to us.

Finally, notice that all of these blessings result in bringing *praise* to his *glorious grace*. As well as blessing us, God himself gets glory by displaying the greatness of his grace to such undeserving sinners. At the heart of everything God does, he desires to show his glory and to manifest his love. And the right and fitting response from us, as we see Paul doing here in this letter, is to praise and worship our glorious God.

¹ See NIV translation of 1:5

Eph 1:7-10

⁷In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, ⁸which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight ⁹making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ ¹⁰as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

Forgiven and Free

Don't think Paul has finished praising God. Once he gets going, he can go on for ages (as Eutychus can testify). There are yet more blessings that have been lavished upon us. We have been *redeemed* – bought out of slavery by the blood of Christ, and we have been *forgiven* for our sins, which again manifests the richness of God's grace. Forgiveness is not something that can be earned, but freely given. Freedom is not something that slaves can buy for themselves, but must be bought for them.

Wisdom and Insight

God has not given only a small portion of grace to us, but rather he has *lavished* it on us. He is unreservedly generous with these blessings. The phrase "wisdom and insight" may refer to God, but more likely, *wisdom and insight* are listed here as yet more blessings that God has given us. He wants to give us everything we need to live the holy lives we have been called to. As James teaches, God is generous with all his gifts, and especially so when we need wisdom².

Everything Put Back Together

Not only has God given us wisdom and insight but has made known the *mystery of his will*. This mystery refers to God's plan to unite everything in heaven and earth in Jesus Christ. It is essentially the great plan of God. Humanity is alienated from God, the physical world is fallen and spoiled, and even in the heavenly realm there is rebellion against God from Satan and his angels. But through Jesus, God will bring all things back to how they should be. He plans to put everything back together, to fix all that is broken, to regenerate and recreate³.

This is the great future hope of Christianity, that we will inhabit a renewed earth will finally be able to fulfil God's original intention for us. This plan is described as a mystery because it is not understood with human wisdom, but is revealed by the Spirit to those who have been saved.

² James 1:5

³ This does not teach that all will be eventually saved. The new creation will consist of some things from the old creation renewed and restored (most notably us), but there will be those things that do not carry through (for example Satan and the demonic forces).

Eph 1:11-14

¹¹In 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, ¹²so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory. ¹³In 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, ¹⁴who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.

God's Possession

The "inheritance" that is spoken of in these verses could be taken in two ways. It might refer to the fact that the church now is God's inheritance, just as the Jewish people were described as being his "portion" and "heritage" in the Old Testament. As he will go on to explain, this inheritance has now been expanded beyond the boundaries of the Jewish Christians only (those who were "the first to hope in Christ"), to include the Gentiles (referred to by "you also" in verse 13).

But it could also (and the ESV translation points in this direction) refer to *our* inheritance, to the rich store of spiritual blessings both present and future that Paul has been talking about. Both are true. The church is God's own possession, his inheritance, but we too have become heirs, inheritors of the hope of glory.

God's Purpose

Again and again Paul stresses that everything God has done in his wonderful salvation plan was done in accordance with his plan from before time. Does this mean that evangelism or faith are unnecessary? Not at all. Verse 13 tells us that both of these occurred for the Ephesian believers: they "heard the word of truth" and "believed". As John Stott explains, "It is only because of God's gracious will to save that evangelism has any hope of success and faith becomes possible."

God's Praise

Another recurring theme in these verses is that everything happens for "*the praise of his glory*". God's ultimate purpose in his salvation plan was to display his glory. And his ultimate purpose for our lives is that we display his glory. When God's glory is displayed it results in an overflow of praise.

God's Promise

How can Paul be so sure that the Gentiles have indeed been privileged to become part of the people of God and to share in the inheritance of the life to come? The proof was that the Holy Spirit had been given to them also. In the book of Acts, we see how the outpouring of the Spirit on the Gentiles in a dramatic way was instrumental in the early church coming to recognise that the gospel was not just for the Jews.

In describing the gift of the Spirit as a "seal", Paul means that God sets his mark of ownership on us. He also describes the Spirit as a deposit, or a down-payment, guaranteeing that we receive the inheritance. This means that we not only have the promise of the life to come, but now we have a foretaste of it. We may only have a small portion of all that is to come, but nonetheless, our eternal life has begun now. At the end of this age we will finally come into full possession of our promised inheritance, and God will similarly come into full possession of us as his inheritance.

Eph 1:15-19a

¹⁵For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints,
¹⁶I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, ¹⁷that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him,
¹⁸having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, ¹⁹and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, [according to the working of his great might ...]

Faith and Love

Paul now turns from praise to thanksgiving. He has heard of the believers' *faith* and *love*. Their faith is their trust in God not just for salvation, but in all things. And here their love is particularly their love for one another. Faith in Jesus and love for Christians are two vital evidences of genuine Christianity. Those who make Christianity into nothing more than "say the prayer and get your ticket to heaven" have distorted the gospel. Let us determine to demonstrate our faith by our practical love for other believers.

Thanksgiving

We get some insight here into Paul's personal prayer life. He makes a habit of both thanking God for the work he is doing in other people's lives and also praying that that would continue. His prayer life contained a healthy balance of praise and petition. Paul is particularly concerned that these believers grasp the blessings and benefits of their salvation in the same deep way that he has. It seems likely that he refers to all three members of the Trinity in verse 17 as he prays that they would have wisdom and revelation and come to know Christ better.

Understanding the Blessings

The blessings Paul has described in the previous sections are real enough, and it is possible to theologially know about them, but they also need the "eyes of their hearts enlightened" so that they could more fully grasp them. Paul's concern is not so much to pray for *more* blessings for them, but that they would *understand* and *experience* more of what they have already got.

First we need to know the *hope* to which we have been called. Christians have a glorious future hope, but if we don't appreciate this we will be tempted to live just for this world, not setting our minds on "things above", and despairing when things don't seem to be going well for us.

Second, we need to know the *riches* of God's glorious inheritance. Have we truly understood how precious we are to God as his inheritance, and what a wonderful identity that gives us?

Third, we need to know the immeasurable greatness of God's *power* which is at work on behalf of those who believe. We need to recognise not only how awesome God's power is, but that he intends to use it for our benefit. When we grasp this, it will give us a tremendous confidence, knowing that nothing can thwart God's good purposes for us.

Eph 1:19b-23

[... the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe,] according to the working of his great might ²⁰that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, ²¹far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. ²²And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, ²³which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

The Resurrection of Christ

To help us get an appreciation of just how great God's power really is, Paul gives some examples of what that power has accomplished. First of all, it raised Jesus from the dead. Death is the great enemy that all of us must face one day, and yet in the resurrection of Jesus we see that even death itself is no match for the power of God. He is not only able to raise people from the dead, but to raise them with new bodies that will never again die. At the cross then, we see God's power working a glorious victory over sin and death, so to know that this power is at work on our behalf, gives us great peace and hope for the future.

The Rule of Christ

Jesus wasn't merely raised from the dead but highly exalted. He was seated in heaven where he takes the absolutely highest place. Seated at God's right hand he has authority over everything and everyone else who has power or authority of any kind. This does not just include human power, but all demonic and spiritual powers as well. In putting everything under his feet, God signifies that Jesus is the judge of all, and all powers are subject to him. So Jesus went from the lowest place at the cross, to the highest place in the heavens – and all this by the mighty power of God.

With regards to the church, Jesus is described as the head, which speaks of authority and leadership. Whatever roles of leadership or responsibility there may be in church life, Jesus is the one who is ultimately in charge and it is vital that we remember that. Continuing the metaphor, Paul describes the church as the "body" of Christ. Jesus is not just one part of the church; he fills it, dwelling in each one of us. The acts of the church ought to be the acts of Jesus, and the power to do those acts comes not from any human source, but is the power of God. This mighty power of God at work in Christ is now made available to us, power for holiness and power for mission.

Eph 2:1-3

¹And you were dead in the trespasses and sins ²in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience-- ³among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.

Dead

If we are ever to fully understand how amazing the blessings of our salvation are, we will need an appreciation of exactly what it is we have been saved from, which is what Paul goes on to describe. We were once 'dead' in our sins. In calling us 'dead' he speaks of the complete helplessness of our situation. A dead person can do nothing for themselves. Our bodies may be alive but our souls are completely unresponsive to God.

Our lives did not just contain individual sinful actions but were characterised by sinfulness. We were "walking" in the same direction of the people of this world, and like them, unwittingly letting the devil take the lead. So salvation meant a radical change of direction for us, as we started following Jesus instead, who leads us away from sin.

Disobedient

Those who are not Christians are described here as the sons of disobedience, influenced by the devil. Again, this is not so much about disobeying individual commands of God, but a lifestyle of independence from the rule of God. And what do people do instead when they defy God? They simply follow the passions of their flesh – whatever their body craves or their mind finds desirable they will chase after, without reference to whether those things are good in God's sight. And rather than bringing them the freedom and joy they are looking for, they become enslaved.

Deserving Wrath

This way of living has calamitous consequences – the wrath of God. As the all wise Creator of everything, he actually has the right to tell us how we ought to live. Our arrogance is unbelievable and ignorance is not an acceptable excuse. We owe God honour, obedience, thanksgiving and love and we have given him none of it. And before we were Christians, we were headed to receive the just punishment for our egocentric sinful existence. We should in no way imagine that we have been saved because we were somehow "better" people than others – we simply have been recipients of amazing grace.

We should be humbled to think that Paul could describe all Christians as having once been in such a state. We tend to think of ourselves as basically good people. True, we may not have committed gross atrocities against our fellow man, but against God we have committed high treason. And as we shall shortly see, that he should choose to save anyone despite this is evidence of his incredible grace and love.

Eph 2:4-7

⁴But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ--by grace you have been saved-- ⁶and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

Alive with Christ

So Paul has shown what a miserable predicament we are in – dead, enslaved, deserving wrath. What does it say about God then, that he should come to our rescue? It demonstrates that he is *rich in mercy* towards us and has a *great love* for us.

Paul stresses that our salvation was not granted in response to some kind of reformation on our part. In fact, we were still dead. God had to graciously take the initiative and raise us back to life. He draws a parallel with Jesus' resurrection from the dead. God has worked the same miracle of resurrection in our hearts, bringing us to life spiritually. This is why Paul says it is by *grace* that we have been saved. In no way can we claim that we somehow deserved God's mercy.

Seated with Christ

But Paul goes further. After Jesus was raised from the dead, he ascended into heaven and was seated with the Father. He then makes the astonishing claim that the same thing has happened for us as believers – we are seated in heavenly places.

In these verses we also see the heart of the gospel – salvation by grace. It is one of Paul's favourite themes, and something we should meditate on often. In no way were we deserving of God's goodness, yet instead of giving us what we deserved, we got mercy. And not just mercy, we have been given abundant blessings, and God's plan is to continually pour those out on us throughout all eternity and beginning now.

In Christ

Now this idea might seem strange to us. Quite clearly, our bodies, unlike Jesus' physical body, are still very much present on earth. In what sense are we seated in heavenly places? Notice that Paul does only say that we are seated "with Christ", but that we are "in Christ". He is referring then to our "union with Christ". Becoming a Christian doesn't just mean that Jesus has done something kind on our behalf, but that we have become united to him. What is true of Jesus now becomes also true of us. We are now sons of God, loved and accepted by him.

Verse 7 explains that the grace and kindness we have already received from God, does not just affect our present status, but gives us a glorious future. There is an endless supply of future blessing and grace that will be richly poured out on us in the "coming ages".

Eph 2:8-10

⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹not a result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

Saved by Grace

Paul briefly touched on salvation by grace in the preceding verses, but this truth is so vital that it needs to be properly explained. If we are saved by grace while we are still dead in our sins, what role is there for us? Do we literally do nothing? No, our part is to have faith in Jesus Christ. We trust in him that he is able to save us, we look to him as the one who will lead us to the Father, and we come to him as the only one who can give us what we need.

But even our faith should not be misunderstood as something we do to earn God's favour. Paul is at pains to point out that we are not saved by anything we do, not even 'works' by which he means living in obedience to God's laws. Salvation must be understood as a gift of God, and because of that no boasting is appropriate. To attempt to take credit for our salvation would be as ridiculous as a football fan trying to take the credit for the team he supports winning the league. No, we benefitted from God's grace, but contributed nothing. This is why Christians should consider themselves as inherently superior to others.

Saved for Good Works

So how should we think of ourselves as Christians? If we're not allowed to be proud, perhaps we should view ourselves as miserable and worthless sinners. Paul does not encourage that outlook here. We are examples of God's workmanship, his "work of art", his masterpiece. He created us to do good works and has even planned them beforehand. So Paul's doctrine of predestination went beyond who would be saved – it involved what good works they would do.

This will give us a tremendous sense of purpose in life if we properly understand it. Though we are not saved *by* works, we were saved *for* works. We are chosen not just for salvation, but for service. And it is by doing these works, which God has divinely and specifically ordained for us to do, that we will demonstrate the glory of God. The works we are called to do are both general and specific. On the one hand, we have the commands of Scripture showing us how to live lives as loving servants like Jesus did. But also we should be open to the Spirit's guidance, showing us specific ways in which we can serve God by serving others.

Eph 2:11-13

¹¹Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands-- ¹²remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. ¹³But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

Outsiders

We now come to an issue that was very important in the early church, even if it has faded somewhat into the background for us. How could a Gentile, someone who is not a Jew, become part of the people of God? The Jews had the ritual of circumcision – which was an outward sign of their covenant with God. It showed that they were God’s people and he was their God. The Gentiles, who did not have this outward sign, were excluded and were dismissively referred to as “the uncircumcision” by the Jews.

But Paul questions the true significance of circumcision. If it remains merely an outward sign, performed in “the flesh” by humans, then it is little more than a religious ritual. There is a deeper, inward work, that circumcision pointed to, and just because you had been physically circumcised, didn’t necessarily mean that you had been spiritually. The tragedy of Jesus’ ministry was that many Jews, though they bore the mark of circumcision, rejected their Messiah.

Brought Near

So under the terms of the Old Covenant, Gentiles were outsiders. God had revealed himself to the nation of Israel, but those on the outside did not even know God’s covenant and promises. They were in a dire predicament, without hope and without God.

How then did this situation get resolved? Was it by the Gentiles converting to Judaism and submitting to the ritual of circumcision? No, it was by the blood of Jesus that they have been brought near. The cross of Christ changes everything. Now, everyone comes to God on equal terms. Membership in the people of God is no longer symbolised by circumcision. There needs to be an *inward* work done by *God*, not an outward work by man. We are not excluded anymore.

Eph 2:14-18

¹⁴For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility ¹⁵by abolishing the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, ¹⁶and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. ¹⁷And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. ¹⁸For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.

The Dividing Wall

We now come to see how it is possible that God has overcome the divisions between Jew and Gentiles. It was all through Jesus – he is the source of the peace because he has broken down the “dividing wall of hostility”. At the time of writing, there was a literal dividing wall present in the Temple in Jerusalem, that kept Gentiles out of the inner parts on pain of death. But Jesus came to smash down that wall so that we might not only enjoy peace with God but peace with one another.

Another great division between Jews and Gentiles was the “law of commandments and ordinances”, which the Jews observed but Gentiles typically didn’t. Previously Gentile converts had been expected to obey the Jewish law, but now because of what Jesus has done, a new family has been created, not defined by adherence to the law, but by being in Christ. So when Paul talks of the “dividing wall of hostility”, he is also referring to the Jewish law. Now as Christians, we are no longer under that law (although that is not to say that we are not under any law at all), but we have a new covenant, prophesied by Jeremiah where God would write his laws on our hearts⁴.

Made Peace

It is important to note that the cross was for *everyone* – the Jews needed to be reconciled to God just as much as the Gentiles did. This is why new believers aren’t simply added to the Jewish family but are part of the “new man”, or “new humanity”. If you are in, it is simply because of what Christ has done, not because of your ethnicity or because you keep certain ceremonial laws. This means that ethnic hostility or superiority has no place in the church, and we must actively seek to demonstrate our unity with brothers and sisters from different nations.

Jesus preached peace by both his life and death, not just to “those who were near”, that is, the Jews, but also to those who were “far off”, the Gentiles. He calls us too, to continue to preach peace to those from every nation. This is what the early church and Paul himself did, as we see in the book of Acts, where God’s acceptance of Gentiles was powerfully demonstrated that they too were recipients of the gift of the Holy Spirit.

⁴ Jer 31:33

Eph 2:19-22

¹⁹So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, ²⁰built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, ²¹in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. ²²In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

New Family, New Nation

Until the coming of Christ, the people of God consisted of the Jews, with the Gentiles as outsiders. But now that in Christ, God has destroyed the “dividing wall of hostility”, unity is possible. God’s people, the church, have already been called a “new humanity”, and now Paul explains that we are a “new nation”, and a “new family”. Gentile believers are in no way outsiders or second class citizens in the church, but fully included and welcome.

New Temple

Paul introduces another picture for the church here – we are a new temple. God is creating a new building. The first thing to notice about the new building is that Jesus is the cornerstone. He is the one on whom the entire church is to be built. A church that is not built on Jesus is no church at all. But all who are connected to Jesus are part of the true church, irrespective of their ethnic background, or even whether they are part of a particular denomination or affiliation of churches.

The second feature of the church is the foundation of the apostles and prophets. Some take this to mean the twelve apostles and Old Testament prophets, representing the authors of Scripture. And the church is certainly to be built on the solid foundation of the Word of God. But it more likely refers to people with apostolic and prophetic gifting who God raises up as he continues to build his church throughout the world. These people have a responsibility to ensure that new churches have the right foundation with Jesus at the centre, and the Word of God honoured. We don’t just build church however we feel like, but churches that have real continuity with what Christ started and the first apostles and prophets continued.

Thirdly, the church is intended to be a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. We should expect to see evidence of God present amongst us and at work in our lives as we build churches according to his intention. And one sign that our churches are indeed these new temples is that there is a genuine sense of family, with people of all backgrounds and nationalities living in harmony and loving one another. This should not just be true of us at the local church level, but we should recognise that these things should also be true of the entire universal church, made up of all believers throughout the world. We are one new nation, one new family, one new temple.

Eph 3:1-6

¹For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles-- ²assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you, ³how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly. ⁴When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, ⁵which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit. ⁶This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

The Apostle to the Gentiles

Why has Paul been writing so much on the subject of Jews and Gentiles? True, he was a Jew and his readers were Gentiles, but he wasn't just making an effort to be 'relevant'. In this section Paul explains why the inclusion of the Gentiles into the people of God was a subject close to his heart, something he was even willing to go to jail for (he writes this letter from prison).

Paul had been given a special commission by God to take the gospel to the Gentiles. He views himself as a "steward" of God's grace. In other words, God has given him grace, not just for him to enjoy personally, but to go and offer it to others. But before he could take up this call of God on his life, Paul needed to have his eyes opened to a mystery, by means of revelation.

The Mystery of Christ

The mystery in question was an understanding of the cross of Jesus, and how it enabled the Gentiles to be saved. Though the Old Testament prophets had pointed towards the gospel, very few if any had expected things to turn out how they did. However, Paul is not claiming he is alone in understanding this mystery. The mystery has also been revealed to other apostles and prophets. The revelation came by the Spirit, because it needed a supernatural work of God to overcome the prejudices they had.

In verse six, Paul elaborates on the content of this mystery. First, the Gentiles are *fellow heirs* – that is, they stand to inherit God's blessing on an equal footing with Jews. Second, they are *members of the same body* – they're not another group in addition to the Jews, but part of the very same family of God. Third they are *partakers of the promise* – the promise of the Spirit is just as much for them as it is for Jews. But the mystery is not complete without an explanation of how this was possible. It is Jesus who opened the door for the Gentiles to come in, through the gospel.

Eph 3:7-13

⁷Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me by the working of his power. ⁸To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, ⁹and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things, ¹⁰so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. ¹¹This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord, ¹²in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him. ¹³So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory.

The Unsearchable Riches

Paul was well aware that his calling to be a minister of the gospel to the Gentiles was something that he neither deserved nor had the ability in himself to do. That is why he is so conscious of God's grace that commissioned him and God's power that enabled him. He even thinks of himself as "the very least of all the saints", doubtless aware of the deep irony that a Jew who so violently persecuted the church should now be inviting Gentiles to join that church.

The privilege for Paul wasn't that he had a platform from which to demonstrate his public speaking gift or expound his own great philosophical insights. No, he was simply proclaiming the gospel, which he describes here in terms of *riches*, a *plan* and *wisdom*.

Paul has already spent much time in this letter enumerating the wealth of blessings we have in Christ. These *unsearchable riches* include being raised to new life, being seated with Christ, being reconciled to God, being given access to the Father, and being made part of a new family. And there is more to look forward to. God has promised a glorious future inheritance to us.

The gospel also is a magnificent demonstration of the *wisdom* of God. The church, God's beautiful new society, now displays God's wisdom to the whole world, and especially to the hostile spiritual forces. What the devil had managed in setting nation against each other, God had undone in the church by creating a new society made up of people from every nation.

The Eternal Purpose

The gospel wasn't a hurried fix to a problem that God was struggling to deal with. It is the culmination of a marvellous *plan*, a mystery which prophets in earlier generations had only caught glimpse, but now the full details have been revealed for all to see.

Although we are part of the plan, it centres on Jesus, and he who was responsible for implementing it. Because of this, we have great boldness and confidence to approach God as Father. Our faith in Jesus means that we partake in the benefits of what he has already accomplished.

Having considered all this, Paul doesn't feel that his suffering in prison is anything that people should lose heart about. The riches he has cannot be taken from him, and the plan that God has cannot be thwarted. More than that, he has been captured by a vision of the glorious church that God is building, and it is a vision he is willing to suffer for.

Eph 3:14-19

¹⁴For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, ¹⁵from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, ¹⁶that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith--that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Strengthened with Power

Paul is now moved to pray for the Ephesians, so that what he has been teaching them so far in this letter will be more than intellectual knowledge, but they will know it as objective reality in their experience. He talks about God as Father being the basis for all earthly families. All human family relationships are a reflection of the relationship in the Godhead.

His first request for them is for *inner strength*. This will come by the power of the Spirit at work within us. In fact, another way of thinking of this, is that Jesus himself dwells within us, making his home in our lives. Our faith in him is the key to letting him give us the inner strength we need. It is true that Christ dwells by his Spirit in each and every believer, but here we see that we need to let him fill us more completely in order that we may be strengthened for the life of obedience we are called to.

Rooted in Love

Paul's second request is that they would be *loving*. We need to be "rooted" and "grounded" in love, because love is foundational to the Christian life, and we should allow nothing to distract us from this chief priority. And it is not just *our* love that is the foundation stone of godly character, but *God's love* for us too is the solid ground on which we stand. To know God loves us is to be secure and happy, regardless of the external circumstances of life.

And that is exactly what his third request entails. He asks that they would *understand and experience the love of Christ*. In fact, the full extent of Christ's love for us is beyond our comprehension. It is truly infinite, immeasurable in any dimension or aspect from which we consider it. Even so, it is important that we have a strong understanding of how great this love for us is.

Filled by God

The final request in this prayer is for them to be "*filled with all the fullness of God*." By this Paul desires that God fills and enriches their lives in every way possible. Despite the inexhaustible riches we have in Christ that he has just been telling us about, there is still the need for us to open ourselves to more of God, to press in to know him more, to seek to be filled by him to a greater measure. We should never be content with a nominal or superficial knowledge of God, but earnestly desire to be filled more and more with the Spirit of Christ.

Eph 3:20-21

²⁰Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, ²¹to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

Power

Having prayed for his readers, Paul now concludes his prayer with a doxology. He has asked for a lot; that they would be filled with all the fullness of God. Perhaps we might think that he has overstepped the mark and asked for too much. But no, in verse 12 Paul has already explained that it is through what Jesus has done that he can approach the Father with such boldness and confidence. Now he explains why it is possible to make such an audacious request: God has the power to do far more than all we ask or think.

If we truly understood that God's power is without limitation, we would not have such small expectations. His ability is not just beyond our requests, it is beyond our ideas. God can do things that we can't even conceive of. This is perhaps part of the mystery as to why he does not always act in the way that to us seems best.

We must not miss the emphasis that this power of God is the power at work *in us*. We should not just believe that God has the power to do great things, but that he can do them in and through us. God loves to work through people to achieve his purposes on earth. When we pray, instead of asking God to do things on our behalf, we should ask him to enable us to do things on his behalf.

Glory

Since the power is all God's, all the glory rightly belongs to him. Jesus brought God glory through a life of obedience to the Father, empowered by the Holy Spirit. Paul desires that the church too, like Jesus, would bring great glory to God. The way we live our lives and run our churches really matters, because the glory and honour of God is at stake. Our churches should be places where the power and grace of God at work in people's lives is evident.

Eph 4:1-3

¹I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ²with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Walk Worthy

Chapter 4 marks the beginning of a new section in Ephesians. Until now, we have been considering God's plan of salvation and all the blessings it brings, especially in joining people from all nations into one family. Now we go on to see the implications of our salvation for how we live our lives.

We are called to behave in a manner that is worthy of the calling we have received. Since we are recipients of such immeasurable riches, how inappropriate it would be to live as though nothing had changed. Paul is not calling for us to deserve or earn our salvation by our good behaviour, but simply reminding us that our love and gratitude towards God should be expressed in living to please him.

Humility and Gentleness

Pleasing God however, is not a purely personal and private concern. It revolves around how we treat one another, since we are now part of a new family. First there should be *humility*. All of us have received undeserved grace from God, so pride is utterly inappropriate for the Christian. If we only realised much God treasures and delights in us, perhaps we would place a lower emphasis on seeking admiration and praise from others. A truly humble person delights in encouraging and blessing others.

Second, there should be *gentleness*. We easily hurt one another by what we say and do. Even when we need to correct someone, or do something that will disappoint them, we should try to do it in as gentle a way as possible.

Patience and Unity

Third, we need to be *patient* and to *bear with one another* in love. This is a very realistic instruction. Even if we are really humble and gentle, there will be people who still respond badly to us. There will be those who no matter how much help we offer or how hard we try will still fail or hurt us. We might be tempted to give up on them or pay them back what they deserve, but as Christians we seek to show to others the same incredible patience with which God deals with us.

Finally, we are to be eager to maintain the *unity* of the Spirit in the bond of peace. The fact is that God has one church. We are one new society, whether we like it or not. Since we have been joined together by God into a single family, it is vital that we learn to get on with each other. This call to unity is one that the church throughout all ages has found extremely difficult to fulfil. Our sinful nature tends towards divisiveness. This is why we need to make unity in the church a high priority. We should be careful not to be the cause of disunity in the church, and where possible we should strive to heal broken relationships between others.

Unity matters both internally, within a local church, and externally, between local churches in the same region, and throughout the world. If we are truly to display God's "manifold wisdom" to a watching (and often sceptical) world, then it is vital that we truly love one another.

Eph 4:4-6

⁴There is one body and one Spirit--just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call-- ⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

One Body and One Spirit

Paul has just been encouraging Christians to work hard towards maintaining the unity that God has created between them, and now he goes on to explain the realities that lie behind that unity. First, there is *one body*. Essentially, although there are local churches all over the place, there is actually just one people of God. Instead of viewing ourselves as competing denominations or congregations, we need to start thinking of ourselves the way God sees us, and embrace all of our fellow believers as brothers and sisters.

There is also *one Spirit*. All who are Christians have received the same Holy Spirit. This common experience of new birth is the same for those who were born into Christian families and those who had pagan upbringings. It is the same for leaders of churches or even groups of churches as for ordinary Christians. Because of this, there should be no feelings of superiority amongst us.

One Hope and One Lord

Next, we share *one hope*, of life after death in the everlasting kingdom of God. Often people unite around common interests or hobbies. But we have something that binds us together that will last for eternity. This should draw us together in a way that no earthly cause could.

We also have *one Lord*, Jesus Christ, who we are all seeking to follow and obey. This fact also places a certain limitation on our unity. Whilst we are courteous and respectful to those of other religions, we are not 'one' with those who do not acknowledge the lordship of Christ.

One Faith and One Baptism

There is *one faith*. All believers share a common trust in Jesus for our salvation. We also share the gift of faith that enables us to live continually trusting God.

That there is *one baptism* reminds us that we all enter God's family the same way, through repentance and faith, which we demonstrate by obediently being baptised in water symbolising our death to sin and resurrection to new life in Christ. Paul may also be thinking of the one baptism in the Holy Spirit, which he expected all believers to have experienced.

One God and Father

Finally, there is *one God*, who is the Father not just of Jesus, but of all believers, since we have been adopted into his family. In saying he is "over all and through all and in all" Paul means that God is the centre and focal point of everything in the universe. All we do is for him and through him.

If these are the things that we share in common with other believers, it must be admitted that the things that divide us are so often insignificant in comparison. We are worshippers of the triune God, members of the one universal church and fellow recipients of God's gracious gift of salvation. If then we are disunited, it simply demonstrates how blind we are to the implications of these glorious truths.

Eph 4:7-10

⁷But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. ⁸Therefore it says, "When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men." ⁹(In saying, "He ascended," what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? ¹⁰He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.)

Gifts of Grace

Although as Christians we are one body, and share in the same blessings and benefits as each other, we have each been individually bestowed with grace from God, that we might bless the church. Shortly, Paul will explain some of the specific gifts that Jesus has bestowed upon his church, but first he considers how we came to receive these extra gifts, albeit with some reasoning that is quite perplexing at first glance.

We are all individually recipients of grace, grace that has been given to us by ascended Christ. His ascension into heaven was the occasion that he poured out his Spirit on the church at Pentecost, and it is by the Holy Spirit that he continues to pour out gifts. As Paul has argued elsewhere in 1 Corinthians, the church is a place of unity and diversity; there is one Spirit but many gifts. Our oneness is a beautiful harmony of different people with different gifts, rather than an army of identical clones.

Ascending and Descending

Paul then uses Psalm 68 to talk about how Jesus first descended – not only from heaven to earth, but even into the grave – “the lower parts of the earth”. It was from this lowest place that God raised Jesus up not just to life but to the highest place in heaven. This is with the expressed intention that he now assumes the role of ruler over the entire universe.

The gifts and blessings we receive by the Spirit are therefore reminders not just of what Jesus went through to purchase our salvation, but the exaltation that he has been given. If we bear this in mind, it will prevent us from becoming conceited about what gifts we have been given but rather give honour to Jesus. The gifts we have received speak not of our worth but his generosity. In using them seek to bring glory not to ourselves, but to the Giver.

Eph 4:11-14

¹¹And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, ¹²to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, ¹⁴so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.

The Ascension Gifts

The gifts Jesus bestows upon the church that are listed here are somewhat surprising, since they are not abilities given to people, but people given to the church. Five gifts are mentioned here, although some people may have a mixture of one or more of these roles (like Paul himself did). They are of course, not the only gifts, as evidenced by several New Testament passages that list many other gifts.

The *apostles* most likely refer to those who were involved in church planting and oversight. They ensured that the church was always moving forwards to new territory but also kept guard against going off the rails. Since Paul explains that these apostles are gifts given by the *ascended* Christ, it is wrong to assume that they refer only to the twelve apostles. Whilst there are elements of their ministry that were unique, there is still a need for those with apostolic ministry as we seek to advance the kingdom.

Prophets bring timely messages from God that bring encouragement, direction and even correction to the church. Prophets are sensitive to what God is saying. In the book of Acts we see several examples of how the gift of prophecy operated in the early church. We should pray that God raises up those with a genuine prophetic gift in our churches, in order that we may allow him to direct our ways.

Evangelists focus their ministry on building the church by adding to it, and are often especially gifted at gospel proclamation. Although all believers are called to be witnesses and spread the gospel, it is apparent that some are especially gifted for this task. Again, we should seek God that he would raise up many bold and effective evangelists who can reach people from all cultural and social backgrounds. Many of these evangelists will also feel the call of God to go as missionaries into new contexts, pioneering new works to reach more people with the gospel.

Pastors are those with a caring outlook and make sure that both the physical and spiritual needs of believers are met in the church. These are also known as the elders of the church and have authority for the leadership of the church.

One of their key roles is to provide good biblical teaching, so all pastors are to also be *teachers*, although there will be some who particularly specialise in the gift of teaching. Good teachers are able to apply and explain God's word to people in a way that impacts their thoughts and behaviour.

The Purpose of the Gifts

It is vitally important that we go beyond simply identifying the gifts, to understanding the purpose behind them. They are not actually intended to boost our ego or make us feel important. Paul lists several purposes of the gifts.

They equip people for ministry. These gifted individuals are not to think that they should do everything themselves, but they have a heart to help all of God's people achieve great things for the kingdom. Additionally, they *build up the body of Christ*, so that the church is growing numerically and also spiritually. A church that is lacking in one or more of these areas of gifting will fail to grow in the way that God intends.

They promote unity, by keeping us focussed on what the essentials of our faith are. They also help us to *know Jesus better*, by their example, prophetic insight and teaching. Not only that, but they desire to *bring us to maturity*, so that we become like Christ in our godly character and our resolute commitment to obeying God.

If all of these gifts are being exercised properly in church life, the result will be to *protect the church*

from immaturity and deception. Sound teaching guards against false doctrine, and prophetic direction will protect against heading down unhelpful paths. Pastoral care will protect against struggling Christians dropping out of church life unnoticed or uncared for. Evangelistic outlook will protect against an introspective stagnating church, and apostolic leadership will lift people's eyes beyond their local boundaries. Every church should pray that the risen and ascended Christ would be pleased to bless them with each of these important ministries.

Eph 4:15-16

¹⁵Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ,
¹⁶from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

Speaking the Truth in Love

We have seen how various ministries and gifts can prevent the church from being immature and falling into error, and now we see what true Christian maturity looks like. First, we must *speak the truth in love*. This does not just mean we are not supposed to lie, but that even the truth we speak should be motivated by love. Sometimes speaking the truth will upset someone or contradict their opinions, and unless we can speak in love we will just stir up conflict. True unity comes not by covering up differences nor by loudly promoting our own agendas, but dealing with our differences in an honest and loving manner.

Speaking the truth does not just refer to our general conversation, but specifically reminds us of our call to speak the truth of the gospel as a church. As we proclaim the good news of Jesus to an unbelieving world, it is especially important that we do so in a loving manner, since unbelievers will pay little attention to our message if they perceive us as being merely arrogant and judgmental towards them.

Growing up into Christ

Second, we are grow up to *become Christlike*. This is true both on the individual and the corporate level. As individuals, there should be a continual growth in holiness and godly character; we should expect to be “growing up” spiritually into mature believers. But also as a church we need to grow up. This happens as we acknowledge and submit to the rule of Christ in *everything*. Since he is the head of the church, the one who holds it all together, true unity will be impossible unless we are all committed to following him.

Paul uses his familiar analogy of the church as a body to help explain his point. If all the parts in a body are working properly, then it will grow and become stronger, but if a part is not working properly, the whole person is sick. Each member of the church should seek to “work properly”, by building each other up in love. The “joints” may refer to the leadership ministries previously discussed with their special responsibility to hold the body together, but even so, all of us must ensure we are playing our part to promote unity and maturity.

Eph 4:17-19

¹⁷Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. ¹⁸They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. ¹⁹They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.

The Old Way of Life

The early part of this letter explored the way that the gospel has opened the door for the Gentiles to be welcomed in to the family of God, but this should not be misinterpreted as saying that Gentile Christians can just carry on behaving as they were before they were saved. Our adoption into God's family marks the start of a completely new life. The believer has a new Master, and this means new priorities, new desires, new hope, new relationships, new values. It would make no sense to act as though nothing had changed.

As unbelievers we had a futile way of thinking, but now we have had our eyes opened to the truth of the gospel. Given this new understanding, we see the world very differently and this has impact on our choices and priorities.

By contrast the unsaved know nothing of the new life in God, being cut off by their ignorance and hard-heartedness. This has led them into greed, impurity and sensuality. It should not surprise us that in our own culture, people are following these paths. For those who do not have new life in Christ, self-gratification by whatever works for them is the natural path to follow.

As believers, we will not be immune from the temptation to follow the same route, indulging the desires of our 'flesh' in ways that dishonour God. And just as the Gentiles here are described as becoming "callous", so Christians need to beware that they do not become hard-hearted and insensitive to God by compromising with sin.

When tempted to go with the flow of a culture that does not know God, we need to remember our true identity. We are followers of Jesus Christ, God's holy people and partakers of the "unsearchable riches" of Christ. Whatever pleasures may be found in sin, they are only short-term, and are spiritually ruinous. We need to be convinced that the only way to truly live life to the full is to follow Jesus.

Eph 4:20-24

²⁰But that is not the way you learned Christ!-- ²¹assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, ²²to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, ²³and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, ²⁴and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

Learn Christ

Being a Christian is more than just taking on a few extra beliefs; our faith must be accompanied by a radical change of lifestyle. When we are born again, we learn about Jesus; about his teaching, his way of life; his death and resurrection, and what they mean for us. It is this completely new way of thinking, this “renewed mind” that will result in an entirely new way of living, as our values and desires are brought into alignment with God’s will.

The New Self

So when Paul called people to faith in Christ, it was at the same time call to *repentance*. He reminds the Ephesians that this had been made very plain to them from the start – those who turn *towards* Christ, cannot do so without also turning *away* from their old way of life.

In fact, the change is so radical that it can be thought of as taking on a completely new identity. In the place of the corrupt “old self” is the “new self”, a new creation. The old self was corrupted through what Paul calls “deceitful desires”. Just as Adam and Eve in the garden desired the fruit and were deceived into thinking it would do them good, so all humans since them fell for the same trick of the devil, believing the devil’s lie that we can find pleasure through disobeying.

Created in the Likeness of God

By contrast though, the “new self” is righteous and holy. God has declared us righteous in Christ, having completely forgiven our sins. He has also declared us as holy, his own people, set apart to belong to him and to live to bring him glory. It is nothing short of a re-creation. Adam and Eve were made in the image of God, and yet that image became distorted through sin. Now God has begun a recreation, a new humanity, and this time it will truly bear his image and likeness.

However, we need to understand that there is nothing automatic about living according to the new self. When we become Christians we do not switch off our brains and live on autopilot for the rest of our lives. We need to make a conscious decision every time we face temptation that we will turn our backs on the old way of behaving. We no longer do things because “that’s what everyone else does” or even because “it’s what I want”, but now, as Jesus did, we seek to glorify God in all we do. We are to live according to our new identity, to become what we are, to demonstrate the reality of what God has done inside us.

Eph 4:25-28

²⁵Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbour, for we are members one of another. ²⁶Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, ²⁷and give no opportunity to the devil. ²⁸Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labour, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need.

Speak the Truth

Now it's time to get really practical. How do we live according to the new self rather than the old? Paul gives a number of simple but profound instructions to help us do this.

First, we are to be completely *honest*. The "old self" perhaps used to tell lies to get out of trouble or to gain an advantage for ourselves, but this is no longer acceptable behaviour. Not only should we not lie *to* one another, but we should not lie *about* one another. Instead we are to be those who speak the truth (in love of course, remembering verse 15) on all occasions.

Of course it's not always easy to do this, but it is essential because as Christians, we belong to one another. We're undermining our unity if there is any form of deception or slander amongst us. As Christians we should have a reputation as people of uncompromising integrity, no matter the cost. Honesty also involves being willing to apologize when we offend others, rather than lying to ourselves that we are always in the right.

Control your Temper

Second we need to *control our temper*. The verse does not tell us we can never be angry, in fact, the opposite is true. It assumes that there are times we will be angry, and it is at these times that we must especially guard against sinning. Some people resort to physical violence or verbal abuse when they are angry. Others are more subtle and say unkind or untrue things to get whoever has offended them back. If we allow anger to build up unchecked, we will give the devil opportunity to tempt us to react wrongly. It is best then to sort out situations you are angry about immediately. If you can't resolve it with the person who has offended you, then at least be at peace about it in your own mind before going to bed. We can't fix every wrong situation, but we can trust God that he will give us grace to persevere in doing the right thing.

Share your Earnings

Third, we need to be *generous*. The old way of life was simply about getting as much as possible to spend on my own needs. Some even resort to theft or fraud to get what doesn't rightfully belong to them. But the gospel way of life is radically different. Not only is stealing now out of the question, but we are to have a wholly new motivation for the work we do.

No longer are we working in order to that we should satisfy our own needs and desires, but we now have a new desire to meet the needs of others. Paul here encourages everyone who is able to work and earn money to do so, and to avoid the temptation to use their earnings selfishly. Of course, there are those who do not earn a wage for their work, or may not be able to find employment, but their attitude is to be the same – to selflessly give of themselves to benefit others wherever possible.

Churches that are full of people living this way will be places of real harmony and trust, and be able to meet the needs of their members and the wider community around them. This will serve as a powerful witness to the world, showing the wisdom of living according to God's word.

Eph 4:29-32

²⁹Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. ³⁰And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. ³¹Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamour and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. ³²Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

Corrupt or Built Up?

In these verses, Paul provides us with several more down-to-earth instructions on how we ought to live according to the new nature. It is important that we do not allow “corrupting talk” to come out of our mouths. This is a solemn reminder that our words don’t just reflect our own attitude but have power to affect others too. If what we speak provokes others to anger, or perhaps stirs up disunity then we are corrupting those we speak to.

Instead, we are to be looking for things to say that build people up, things that are appropriate and things that give grace. There are lots of ways that we can bless others in what we say – by encouraging them, offering advice, even simply being friendly. We should aim that everyone who speaks to us should come away feeling blessed and refreshed. The instruction to only say what fits the occasion is a reminder that there are some things that we may feel are acceptable for us to say, but it is not always the right occasion to say it. We need to be slow to speak and quick to listen to what God is prompting us to say, before launching into saying something we cannot retract.

Don’t Grieve the Spirit

Our words and actions may not always offend other people, but verse 30 warns that it is possible to grieve the Holy Spirit. The Spirit in us is a reminder of the guarantee that God has put on our future redemption, and our acting in a way that grieves him demonstrates a blatant ungratefulness on our part. The next verse lists some ways that can especially grieve the Spirit – bitterness, wrath, arguing, slandering, spitefulness. All of these have to do with our attitude to others – if we hold something against someone and don’t forgive them, then one or more of these unpleasant characteristics will develop in us. It is not possible for us to please the Spirit if we are at the same time hating our brothers and sisters.

Be Kind

The opposite of these malicious attitudes is a desire to be kind to one another. This is a call to kindness not just in our actions but in our words and even our thoughts. We are to be tender-hearted, which means that we will not get pleasure from seeing others suffer or receiving criticism, but we will genuinely desire the best for them. Finally, we must be ever willing to forgive, because the reality is that there will be times that people sin against us. If we feel we have a ‘right’ to withhold forgiveness, then we ought to consider the way that God forgave us, through Jesus Christ.

These verses present a serious challenge to all Christians. We all struggle to put this into practise consistently, particularly when there are some people who repeatedly do things that annoy or upset us. We cannot change other people, but we can and must decide to react according to the “new person” and not the old.

Eph 5:1-2

¹Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. ²And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Imitate God

Small children love to copy their parents – what they do, what they wear, even how they talk. If they are secure in the knowledge that their parents love them, they will want to be like them. And as dearly loved children of God, we too are to desire to be like him in every way possible. This means studying his character closely so we can imitate as closely as possible.

It is primarily through the Scriptures that we see what God is like. They are his clearest and most accessible self-revelation to us. Of course, the ultimate example of what a human life that imitates God looks like is the life of Jesus. As we read the gospel accounts, we are confronted with the inspiring and provocative way in which he lived, and challenged to respond to his call to “follow me”.

Another great way to learn to be imitators of God is to watch and learn from those who are more mature than us in the faith. We should be on the lookout for those people full of faith, grace and wisdom, who we can get to know, to learn from, and be disciplined by them.

Walk in Love

The most important way in which we can imitate God is to be loving. Love is fundamental to God’s very nature; so much so that John could say “God is love”. A person who is not loving is not even remotely like God. Again, it is Jesus who sets the perfect example what it means to “walk in love” – it is expressed in sacrificial self-giving on behalf of others.

Paul explains that the sacrificial love that Jesus showed throughout his life, which reached its pinnacle in his giving of his life at the cross, was considered by God as a fragrant offering, an act of worship. Worship must never be limited to simply singing songs of devotion, but our very lifestyles have the potential to either glorify God or to bring his holy name into disrepute, depending on whether we as individual believers and as churches demonstrate the love of God in the way we freely give of ourselves to bless and serve others.

Eph 5:3-4

³But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. ⁴Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving.

No to Impurity

Here we continue with some more very practical explanations of what living according to the new nature looks like. The world not only is full of sexual immorality, impurity and greed (probably sexual greed is in mind here), but these things are even celebrated. They are not considered vices by many, and Christian disapproval of them is violently objected to. We are not here asked to change other peoples' behaviour though, but to act in a way consistent with our calling. Christians should not be found guilty of having worldly attitudes to sex.

Not only should we avoid these types of behaviour, but we shouldn't make them the subject of our regular conversation. As Christians, our humour should not descend into the gutter in the way that it so often does in popular culture. We may have to turn the TV off, and even decline to hear somebody's latest 'joke' they want to tell us. Especially important is that when we gather together as Christians, our conversation is wholesome and edifying, and brings honour to God.

Yes to Thanksgiving

Some people have become so accustomed to talking about sex that they wouldn't know what else to speak about if they had to stop. Their mouth speaks the overflow of their dirty mind. People like this who become Christians should learn the art of thankfulness which is the antidote to an impure mind. Thankfulness to God and to others who serve us is always a profitable topic of conversation and builds our relationship with God and one another.

It is sad but true that many high profile failures of Christian leaders stem from the fact that they did not refrain from sexual immorality and covetousness, and probably these are also factors in many of those who drift away from God. We need to be on guard against these things, and not allow society's uncritical acceptance of them to cloud our judgement. It is God we are to be imitating, not the world.

Eph 5:5-8a

⁵For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. ⁶Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. ⁷Therefore do not associate with them; ⁸for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord.

No Inheritance

Continuing on the theme of sexual immorality, Paul issues a solemn warning. Living an immoral or impure lifestyle is evidence that a person does not have the new nature. Even just having a covetous attitude, which speaks here of a greed for illegitimate sexual gratification, should be seen for what it is: idolatry. When we make our bodily desires our god, and live in obedience to them, rather than obeying the one true God, we have become idolaters.

Paul spoke earlier in the letter of the inheritance that every believer has in Christ, but here he states quite bluntly that the sexually immoral should not expect to be recipients of it. This does not mean that sexual sin before becoming a Christian is not wiped clean. It does not even mean that impurity after being born again is unforgivable. God's grace is able to cleanse us and his Spirit is able to empower us to turn away from sin.

But we should be careful not to nullify this warning, which is given to us for a purpose. A sexually immoral way of life is utterly inconsistent with a Christian profession of faith, and if there is no sign of repentance, such a person can have no assurance that they are indeed truly saved.

Do Not Associate With Them

Possibly some people had been teaching the Ephesians that it didn't really matter how you behaved sexually. All that mattered was that you loved God. But Paul warns against this type of deception. This false teaching may sound appealing but it is nothing more than "empty words", not carrying the weight and authority of the Word of God. The truth of the matter is that God is angry with those who flagrantly disobey him. It is sheer folly to assume that God's grace gives us a license to sin.

Although Paul had a deep concern for unity, it was not at any price. These sexually immoral pseudo-Christians were endangering the holiness of God's new community. They could not be accepted as though right behaviour was an optional extra for Christians. The church is a haven for repentant sinners, but those who feel no shame and show no repentance do not belong. These false teachers needed to be ejected from the church, and their destructive ideas rejected.

Darkness and Light

Paul introduces another metaphor for the dramatic change that has come upon those who are born again. We have gone from being "darkness" to "light". As 'lights' in a world of 'darkness' our lives are to stand out as radically different. Our witness to the world is spoiled if we fail to shine as those in the image of Christ, and simply blend in with the practices of a culture that is still in the dark.

Eph 5:8b-14

Walk as children of light ⁹(for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), ¹⁰and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. ¹¹Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. ¹²For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret. ¹³But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, ¹⁴for anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says, "Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you."

Pleasing the Lord

In these verses Paul uses something of a mixed metaphor to explain how we should be living. The main concepts are *light* and *fruit*. The light speaks not just of the revelation of truth we have received, but also the righteous lives we are now to lead. It should be obvious that we are people of the light because we now do what is "good and right and true".

In fact, we have an entirely new motivation that guides our behaviour. We no longer live to please ourselves, but our desire is to bring pleasure to the Lord. Our obedience to him does not flow from a cringing fear of judgment, but a childlike desire to hear "well done" from our Father. It is for this reason that we commit ourselves to regular careful and prayerful study of the Scripture, that we may become better acquainted with God's will for our lives.

Expose the Darkness

The opposite of light is of course darkness, which speaks of ignorance and evil. When the lights are on, everything is exposed. There are things that people do when no one can see them, which they would never do in public. As Christians, we have a twofold responsibility. First, we are not to walk in darkness ourselves, since this is an "unfruitful" way of life: it does no good to anyone. But second, we now have a responsibility to expose the darkness wherever we go, and to shine the light of Christ in its place.

Obviously, not everyone welcomes our 'exposing' of the darkness of their behaviour, and some may even be offended by it. Part of the way we shine the light is to bear testimony to what God says about the works of darkness. But our ultimate goal is not to judge and condemn, but rather to bring people to the place where they are convicted of their sin, and to open their eyes to see the Saviour.

We are warned that we shouldn't dwell on the sins that unbelievers are committing. A morbid fascination with sexual immorality or other sins is not healthy for Christians. Indeed, part of the reason the world views us as 'judgmental' is that we have so much to say about sin. But that is not to say that these subjects are 'taboo', as Paul himself has been discussing them, but it is much more profitable to focus on the good that Christ would have us do.

Wake Up

Paul's quotation, perhaps from a hymn, pictures the new birth as an awakening from sleep. We sleep in the dark with our eyes shut, but when we awake, we open our eyes and turn the light on. It would be thoroughly bizarre for a person who has woken up to attempt to get dressed and eat their breakfast with the lights still off and their eyes still closed. The light of Christ has shined upon us, and we need to open our eyes and live in the light. To continue to live the old way is to remain asleep; worse, it is to act as though we are spiritually dead.

Eph 5:15-17

¹⁵Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, ¹⁶making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. ¹⁷Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.

Walk Wisely

If we are to be people who live according to the new nature, rather than slipping into the old habit of fitting in with the world around us, then we are going to need to pay careful attention to how we live. This applies to every area of our lives: our job, our family, our friends, our leisure time, our money; all these need to be carefully thought through if we are to ensure that we are living wisely.

Use Time Wisely

If we are willing to do this, then we will identify areas of our lives that need attention. In particular, there are often ways in which we are not making the best use of our time. All of us have less time than we would like, so we need to pray for wisdom about how best to spend what we do have. We might need to cut out some activities that are not wrong in themselves, but are preventing us from finding the time to do more profitable things.

We are reminded that “the days are evil”. In other words, now is not a time for putting our feet up and leaving other people to do good and overcome evil in the world. We have a part to play in God’s plan to bring salvation to the world, but to do that we need to deliberately set aside time for the kingdom.

Discern God’s Will

Ultimately, the way to avoid living foolishly and wasting time, is to learn what the will of the Lord is. Reading the Bible, hearing God’s word preached and spending time in prayer are all ways in which we can do this. The more we understand God’s will, the more we will see how it should be applied in the various areas of our lives, and we will have a growing desire to make time to serve him more effectively.

Eph 5:18-21

¹⁸And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, ¹⁹addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart, ²⁰giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Don't Get Drunk

In contrast with the practises of the pagan Gentiles they lived amongst, Paul commands his readers not to get drunk with alcohol. Drunkenness leads to a variety of sins from violence to sexual immorality, all due to the lack of self-control that it brings. Though many in our culture celebrate excessive drinking, this is not something that believers should be getting involved with. Whilst we are free to enjoy wine if we desire, to drink too much is evidence that we are not living wisely as Paul has just been encouraging us.

Be Spirit-Filled

By sharp contrast, we are commanded here to be filled with the Holy Spirit. This is not a one-off event that happens at conversion, but is an ongoing process as we daily surrender ourselves to the Spirit and allow him to increasingly fill us. Neither is this an optional command, or only for a select few. All believers should seek to be filled with the Spirit on a daily basis.

Give Thanks Always

One of the chief characteristics of a Spirit-filled person is that they naturally overflow in worship and thanksgiving. They do this first in the context of the gathered church where we praise God and encourage one another to do the same. But also, wherever we are, and whatever we are doing, there should be an atmosphere of joyful praise and worship that permeates our lives.

It is easy to get into a habit of moaning and complaining, but when we are filled with the Spirit, our attitude is completely transformed into one that overflows with thanksgiving to God for all he has given us through Jesus.

Submit to One Another

Another result of being filled with the Spirit is that we are willing to submit to one another as believers. This shows our reverence for Christ, who every believer gladly submits to. Submitting to others doesn't mean mindlessly following any instruction that someone gives us, but it does mean that we abandon any selfishness and pride, and instead follow the example of our Lord, who humbled himself to serve others.

Eph 5:22-24

²²Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. ²³For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Saviour. ²⁴Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.

Marriage

When we approach this passage, it is easy for us to focus immediately on how politically incorrect it sounds in our modern culture. Not many would dare speak so bluntly today, but of course Paul was speaking in a time very different from our own, and we must be sensitive to how this section fits in to his whole argument. He is talking about how we can practically live in keeping with the new nature, and in contrast to the world around us. He has just called on all believers to have a submissive attitude to one another, and now gives us the first of three everyday scenarios in which submission is called for.

In Christian marriage, we are not to behave selfishly, but in a way that honours and serves the other partner. Paul has specific instructions for both the wives and the husbands, and although they are different, it reminds us that we each have our own responsibilities that we should see to first, instead of commanding others to fulfil their obligations. These instructions to wives must be prefaced by a reaffirmation of the consistent biblical teaching of the equality of the sexes, and the dignity of women, who, along with men, are made in the image of God.

Submission

Wives are asked simply to submit to their husbands. God has given them a position of responsibility, and they will honour God by respecting that. It is also an expression of their love for their husbands that they desire to be supportive of the way he attempts to provide leadership and direction to the family. Although they are told to “submit in everything”, this should not be interpreted to mean that they don’t express their opinions, and even in some cases may have to refuse to submit because they are submitting to the higher authority of God’s word. Submitting in this way will not always be easy, but will strengthen a healthy marriage further, and could be what saves a struggling marriage.

Ultimately, Paul has something bigger in mind than just marriage here. The marriage relationship is a reflection of Christ and the church. Christ is the head of the church and saved her by his sacrificial act of love. The church responds by glad and willing obedience to him. It is this loving relationship that a good Christian marriage should reflect. It may be counter-cultural, but we will bring praise to God and blessing to our families if we are willing deny ourselves by obeying God’s commands for our lives.

Eph 5:25-30

²⁵Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ²⁶that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, ²⁷so that he might present the church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. ²⁸In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, ³⁰because we are members of his body.

Love your Wives

These verses get less attention than the instructions to wives because they are less controversial, but they are equally important, and actually even more radical. Husbands are expected to love their wives to the point of death for them. They are to love their wives as much as they love themselves. This means that the husband must always be considering how his wife is feeling and what he can do to please her. The lengths he is willing to take to satisfy his own desires or to comfort his own pains are the measure of what he must be willing to do to meet her needs and desires. He cannot do this without learning to appreciate what his wife's desires, hopes and concerns are, so he must be a listener. Jesus considers us in the church as his own body, and the husband must similarly care for his wife in that way.

In fact, Paul raises the bar in this section and asks husbands to love their wives in the same way that Christ loved the church. No higher standard of love could be called for. In one sense it seems an impossible ideal, but nevertheless a husband needs to be very clear that whatever the implications of being "head" of his wife may include, sacrificial, self-giving, servant-hearted love is right at the centre of its meaning.

Christ and the Church

Although on the surface Paul is talking about husbands and wives in this section, he is also making some profound points about Christ and the church. Jesus' great goal in dying to save us was that he might create a people who were pure and holy, pleasing in his sight. If this was a primary reason why he died, then it follows that our purity is not a matter for complacency.

The "word" of the gospel was the means by which God washed us and made us clean; the picture in mind here is of the bath a bride would have to be ready for her wedding day. Jesus has an incredible love and passion for the church, and to this end the Spirit and the Word are means he uses to continue to bring us more and more into conformance with his will.

Eph 5:31-33

³¹"Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." ³²This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. ³³However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.

One Flesh

Paul brings this section on husbands and wives to a close by appealing to the account of Creation in Genesis. God has always intended for it to be this way; that a man and woman should become one flesh. This is why the man is told to love his wife as his own body: he really has become one flesh with her. Similarly the wife does not view herself as detached from her husband, but part of a unity with him and because of this she will want to be heading in the same direction as him. A healthy marriage does not consist of a tussle between two people each trying to get their own way, but a cooperative partnership between two people who have become united in love and purpose.

Love and Respect

The instructions to married couples are briefly recapped in verse 33: husbands must *love* their wives as themselves, and wives must *respect* their husbands. This elaborates slightly on the earlier instruction to wives: by submitting they are essentially showing respect for their husbands, and trusting his judgement. Organising a marriage in this way will result in both husband and wife feeling secure in the relationship: the wife will know she is loved, and the husband will know he is appreciated. If these things are missing, then the marriage will fall far short of what it could be and is even in danger of falling apart.

The Profound Mystery

Even here though, Paul has not lost his focus on the relationship between Christ and his church, which he calls a "profound mystery". Christ has fulfilled the husband's obligations of sacrificial love, and there is wonderful joy and security we have in knowing how great his love for us is. Now it falls to us as the church to fulfil our obligation of humble submission to his headship, and respect of his leadership.

Eph 6:1-4

¹Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ²"Honour your father and mother" (this is the first commandment with a promise), ³that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land." ⁴Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

Obedient Children

Here we see that Christianity is not just a religion for "grown-ups". Children are addressed personally by Paul, about how they are to live as God intended. They are to obey their parents, a command that is backed up by appealing to the Ten Commandments. While it is true that Paul indicates that we are no longer under law but grace, we can see here an example of how he felt that the Old Testament laws still had something to teach us about God's character and his requirements for our lives.

We are reminded that this command had a promise attached to it: children will be blessed by God with prosperity and long life if they honour him by honouring their parents. Of course, as Jesus pointed out, sometimes living as a Christian will bring you into conflict with your parents, which is why the command is qualified with "in the Lord". As much as is possible, children should seek to obey their parents. Once they have left home, their parent's authority over them diminishes, but the importance of showing them respect continues. Christian parents should strive to maintain good relations with their children.

Godly Parents

What about parents? Fathers in particular are addressed here, although these instructions apply equally to mothers⁵. They are given a warning and a command. The warning is the danger of 'provoking' or 'exasperating' their children, through harsh or unfair discipline. It can be all too easy for parents to take out their tiredness and frustration on their children. Instead, we should take our model for parenting as the way that God the Father himself treats his children: with a constant atmosphere of love and grace, such that even discipline is performed in a loving manner.

Positively, parents are to take seriously their responsibility to teach and discipline their children. In terms of discipline, they will require wisdom to steer the fine line between being too disciplinarian on one hand and too lenient on the other. But we should also note the command to *instruct* our children in the fear and knowledge of the Lord. This will not happen automatically. Neither should it be abdicated to the church. Parents need to take the initiative to teach God's word to their children, to pray and worship with them, and to talk with them about God's will for all aspects of their lives.

⁵ The word translated "fathers" may be legitimately understood as "fathers and mothers" in much the same way that "brothers" often means "brothers and sisters"

Eph 6:5-9

⁵Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, ⁶not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, ⁷rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man, ⁸knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a slave or free. ⁹Masters, do the same to them, and stop your threatening, knowing that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and that there is no partiality with him.

Slaves of Christ

Slavery was a fact of life in the Roman empire, and from this passage we can see that there were both slaves and slave owners in the early church. These instructions remind us that our work life is not exempt from the requirements to live according to the new nature. In the new society, the lordship of Christ applies to every aspect of life, not just to the “religious” parts.

Slaves are addressed first, and are asked to be respectful towards their masters and to do an honest day’s hard work. In fact, they are not primarily to think of themselves as working for their human masters, but as working for Christ himself. In this way, even the most menial of tasks can be dignified and become an act of worship.

This was by no means an easy command for slaves, as those who had unbelieving masters could find themselves on the wrong end of harsh and unjust treatment. They may find their masters almost impossible to please, but that should not matter, since they are working to please the Lord. This sets them free from the hopelessness of slavery, knowing that the deeper reality is that they have been set free to serve the King of Kings.

These verses also contain a promise for all who go about their daily work in this way, whether slave or free, that they will be rewarded with blessing from God. For this reason, even though your job may not seem like it is making a great difference for good in the world, you should perform it to the best of your ability as an act of worship to the Lord. As Christians we should be noted for being reliable, trustworthy and hard-working. Often this will win us favour in the eyes of our employers, but even if it doesn’t, it is the Lord’s opinion that really counts. He does see, he is pleased, and he will reward you.

Masters’ Responsibility

Slave masters had great power in those days, far more than most employers do today, but they are not to focus on their rights. Instead, they are to consider their *responsibilities* towards those who work for them. They too must remember they are working for the Lord, and should not use threats to persuade workers to do what they want. Whether you are high up in the world of work, or right at the bottom of the ladder of responsibility, your Master is Jesus and he does not make distinctions based on worldly status.

Slave owners who became Christians had an opportunity to make a real difference to those who were normally a downtrodden underclass. The way that they treated their slaves with dignity as equals would be a powerful witness to the counter-cultural values of the kingdom, and would begin to undermine the institution of slavery from within. It is vital that those of us who enjoy any measure of authority over others should exercise it in a way that reflects the love and grace of God.

Eph 6:10-13

¹⁰Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. ¹¹Put on the whole armour of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. ¹²For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. ¹³Therefore take up the whole armour of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm.

Be Strong in the Lord

We have come now to the end of a section full of practical guidelines about how we should live in the light of who we now are. But even with the best of intentions, can still fall back into the old, unrighteous way of living. How can we find the strength to do what is right?

The answer is that it is the Lord himself who is the source of the strength we need to obey. The transformation of our characters that is needed is only possible with his enabling. The good news is that God has given us a whole host of blessings and sources of grace that will equip us to stand firm in the spiritual battle we are in.

The Real Enemy

We need to be aware that there really is going to be a fight, because there is a real and powerful enemy seeking to undermine what God is trying to do in and through us. It is in fact the devil who is presented here as one who is scheming against us, along with evil spiritual powers. Although opposition might come to us in human form, or through oppressive political or social structures, we need to discern what is leading them to act in that way.

If we identify our battle as being against people, then we could be tempted to fight in a human way, with verbal or even physical attacks. But when we realise that the darkness of our world is caused by these demonic forces, then we will direct our spiritual warfare more appropriately. Paul goes on to explain the type of weapons and armour we will need to engage in this spiritual battle.

The Whole Armour of God

We are twice asked in these verses to take up the *whole* armour of God. This means that *all* the means he has given us of resisting the devil should be used. If we do this then we will be able to stand firm against the fiercest of attacks, to remain standing after the devil has thrown his worst at us. Though the battle is certainly real, we should not approach it with fear, for God has provided us in advance with all the resources we need to emerge victorious.

Eph 6:14-17

¹⁴Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, ¹⁵and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. ¹⁶In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; ¹⁷and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God,

The Belt of Truth

If you were asked to fight in a battle, there's no way you would want to leave without all the protective and offensive gear available to you. In this section, Paul lists all the armour of God that we will need for maximum defensive protection and offensive force in our spiritual battle.

First there is the belt of *truth*. Our lives should be characterised by truth – not just that we are honest people, but that we believe the truth of God's word and we proclaim the truth of the gospel. As a belt holds the armour together, a commitment to truth keeps the Christian from falling apart.

The Breastplate of Righteousness

Second is the breastplate of *righteousness*. Our righteousness is both a gift from God, and something we actively demonstrate as we learn to live according to the new way. The breastplate was a vital piece of protective armour; it guards your heart. Similarly living in the righteousness we have been called to protects us from fatal blows from the enemy. Also, the right standing before God, accepted and forgiven by him, that we have been freely given in the gospel, is all we need to know to deflect Satan's accusations against us.

Gospel Shoes

The shoes of the armour represent our willingness and readiness to bring the gospel of peace. If we are soldiers in the Lord's army, then we must be ready to cover some ground⁶. God sends his people all over the place with the gospel. But there is one great difference between God's army and a worldly army – we come to bring peace not war.

The Shield of Faith

Next is the shield of *faith*, which we need to have with us in all circumstances. It is confidence in God, not confidence in our own abilities that will protect us from spiritual attack. The devil may throw many "flaming arrows" at us, representing all types of attacks from temptation to persecution or suffering, but faith in God will see us survive unscathed.

The Helmet of Salvation

The helmet of *salvation* is also essential, and again it is something we are given rather than something we do for ourselves. Paul elsewhere calls it helmet of the "hope of salvation"⁷ – we do not enter this fight unsure of whether we will prevail or not, but have a sure confidence that we are on the winning side, because of the victory already procured by Jesus.

The Sword of the Spirit

Finally, the sword of the Spirit is the Word of God. This is the only offensive weapon in the armour – it is by speaking the Word of God as we are filled by the Spirit that we will actually defeat our adversaries, and win battles for the Lord. This is not referring to directing words against Satan, but as we proclaim the gospel we release the captives in darkness and so take ground from the enemy. We can also use the Sword of the Spirit against the devil when he comes at us in temptation, as Jesus demonstrated when he was tempted.

⁶ The significance of the shoes may also be in their ability to help us stand firm, without slipping against the onslaught of the enemy.

⁷ 1 Thess 5:8

Eph 6:18-20

¹⁸praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, ¹⁹and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, ²⁰for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak.

Continually Praying in the Spirit

You may have noticed that the armour of God did not include any mention of prayer. But that does not mean that prayer is unimportant for spiritual warfare – far from it. We are instructed here that we should be praying at all times. Prayer should not just be a once a day activity, but something that characterises our whole lives. In doing so, we bring God into every aspect of our lives, seeking his direction and wisdom.

To pray “in the Spirit” means to be filled with the Spirit as we pray. Throughout the Scriptures, those who are Spirit filled instinctively start to pray and praise God. The Spirit-filled person’s prayer life will not be dry and repetitive, or a self-centred list of requests, but a joyful overflow of praise and thanksgiving to God. Praying in the Spirit also includes us being guided by the Spirit to pray for those things that God wills for us, for his kingdom to come, and for our brothers and sisters.

In prayer we need to be both *alert* and *persevering*. We are so often like the disciples who fell asleep in the garden of Gethsemane when they should have been praying. Instead we should be alert to the dangers around us so that we can pray about them, but also persevering in prayer, realising that not all battles are won instantaneously.

Boldly Proclaiming the Gospel

What sort of things should we be praying for each other? Here, Paul lists what he would like his readers to ask God on his behalf. He wants God to give him the words to say and that he would be bold in his proclamation of the gospel. He mentions here that he is in chains – imprisoned for preaching the gospel, but his priority was that he would continue spreading the good news, not that he should be freed. He sets a wonderful example of a person whose passion was seeing God glorified through the spread of the gospel. Likewise, our desire for ourselves and other believers should be that we fulfil God’s call on our lives, rather than simply that we manage to stay out of trouble.

Paul was very conscious of the immense responsibility he had been entrusted with of preaching the gospel. He wanted to communicate it as effectively as he could, with clarity and boldness. The church has great need for God to raise up more preachers of his calibre and passion, who will be courageous and persuasive preachers of the gospel. He knew too that it was not just his words that mattered. He was an “ambassador” for the gospel; his whole life was to be a testimony to the gospel.

Eph 6:21-24

²¹So that you also may know how I am and what I am doing, Tychicus the beloved brother and faithful minister in the Lord will tell you everything. ²²I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are, and that he may encourage your hearts. ²³Peace be to the brothers, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴Grace be with all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with love incorruptible.

Faithful Minister

Paul brings this letter to a close by telling the Ephesians that he will send Tychicus who will fill them in on all the details. Though a letter is a helpful way of communicating, Paul believed in the importance of face to face communication. He also knew that there would doubtless be questions raised by the rich theological teaching of this letter, and Tychicus was someone he could trust to represent he meant.

The great love and respect Paul had for Tychicus can be seen in the way he is described: a *beloved brother* and a *faithful minister*. Paul was confident that Tychicus would be more than just a messenger; he would be a real encouragement to the believers. Like most “ministers” of the gospel, Tychicus is virtually unknown to most of us. What mattered is his willingness to serve faithfully, and thus he stands as a role model for all who want to be used by God. Can we be trusted to bring encouragement wherever we go?

Grace and Peace

Paul’s closing prayer is his trademark prayer requests of “grace” and “peace”, to which he also adds “love with faith”. Grace and peace sum up the essence of the gospel: by the rich grace of God we have been freely given peace with God. Faith and love sum up the gospel way of life: the church is the community of believers, those who have put their faith in Christ; and love is the primary characteristic of those who are born again. This is love both for the Lord, and for our new brothers and sisters in the new family we have become members of.

The book of Ephesians teaches us much about the blessings of our salvation, God’s plan for the church to be a united worldwide family, and the ethical implications of the new birth. These lessons are never out of date, and if we take them to heart we will become those who bring pleasure to God, light to a dark world, and harmony in our churches.