Ephesians

Lesson 6

**Review**

In the first half of Ephesians, Paul lays the theological foundation for chapters 4-6. The main points of that foundation include:

(1) God the Father lovingly chose the Ephesians to experience redemption through their Lord Jesus Christ’s sacrificial death, and the presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives guarantees they will receive all the spiritual blessings of salvation;

(2) Paul prays that the same divine power that resurrected, exalted, and made Jesus head over creation will help the Ephesians deepen their relationship with God the Father;

(3) When the Ephesians were still spiritually dead members of Satan’s kingdom, God the Father lovingly made them spiritually alive by identifying them with Jesus Christ by grace through faith to equip them to perform good works in this lifetime and to experience God’s kindness in eternity;

(4) Jesus Christ founded and heads a new spiritual community lead by NT apostles and prophets when Jesus rendered the Mosaic Code powerless and provided a single means of access to God the Father for both gentiles and Jews; (gentile believers, who now constitute the majority in the Ephesian church, should therefore not neglect the Jewish believers who were now the minority);

(5) The Ephesian believers should not be discouraged by Paul’s imprisonment, because Paul’s custody and eventual trial in Rome is simply another phase in his divine commission to share the good news about Jesus Christ’s new spiritual community, especially with gentiles;

(6) Paul’s prayer is that Ephesians, having been lovingly rooted in the faith by God the Father, will grow in their appreciation of Jesus Christ’s vast love for them, and then display more of God’s attributes (i.e., love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control).

In short, Paul has repeatedly emphasized God’s love for the Ephesians, the incredible spiritual benefits of salvation by grace through faith (which include the very material benefit of eternal life), and that the Ephesians should strive collectively toward a greater appreciation of God’s love for them so that their character and behavior grows more like God’s attributes and so that the new multi-cultural spiritual community lead by Jesus Christ becomes a fit dwelling place for God.

**Eph. 4:1-6 Paul urges the Ephesians to live out their calling by maintaining unity among themselves.**

I, therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, exhort you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, forebearing one another in love, making every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” Based on the doctrine laid out in the first three chapters, Paul urges or exhorts the Ephesians. (See Rom. 12:1.) Paul again describes himself as a prisoner of the Lord. The reference to Paul’s imprisonment reminds us that Paul’s faith is authentic; he has literally bet his life on Jesus; so he is not the kind of leader who asks people to do things the leader is not willing to do. Paul’s exhortation is to “walk.” The NIV translates it as “live a life,” which captures the sense. It is a figurative verb meaning an ongoing and sustained manner of living, or lifestyle. Paul used it negatively in Eph. 2:2 to describe how, pre-conversion, people walk/live in a manner characterized by (1) the ways of this world; (2) the ways of Satan; (3) the thoughts and cravings of our flesh/sinful nature. Paul urges the Ephesians, now that they have professed faith in Christ, to walk in a different way, one “worthy” of their calling.

Paul earlier referred to “calling” at Eph. 1:18 in reference to God the Father’s election of believers, but the calling Paul has described in the first three chapters not only includes arriving at the point of relying Jesus’ sacrificial death; believers are called to grow collectively in their knowledge of and appreciation for God in a unified spiritual community. So believers’ calling is to strive individually and collectively toward a closer relationship with God.

Paul explains what a walk worthy of their calling involves: with all (meaning the highest degree in this usage) humility and gentle/mildness; with patience/long-suffering; forebearing one another in love; and making every effort/being eager to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

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| Eph. 4:1-3 | Col. 3:12-15 | Gal. 5:22 | 1 Tim. 6:11-12 |
| Humility | Humility | Love | Love |
| Gentleness | Gentleness | Gentleness | Gentleness |
| Patience | Patience | Patience | Endurance |
| Forebearing others in love | Bear with others/forgiving | Self-control/Kindness | Righteousness |
| Unity/Peace of the Spirit | Let Peace of Christ rule | Peace |  |
|  | Compassion | Joy |  |
|  | Kindness | Goodness | Godliness |
|  | Love | Faithfulness | Faith |

I don’t think any of Paul’s virtue list was intended to be comprehensive. Ephesians and Colossians might be more focused on virtues that make communities healthy, whereas Galatians and 1 Timothy might be weighted toward individual godliness. That Paul finds it necessary to urge or exhort the Ephesians to pursue these virtues shows they do not just happen without some effort, even among believers. Pursuing gentleness and unity does not mean overlooking sin. The NT also urges believers to rebuke or correct sin in the church. (1 Tim. 5:1, 20; 2 Tim. 4:2; Luke 17:3; Rev. 3:19.) But confronting bad behavior should be done with humility, self-control, gentleness, patience, and the goal of maintaining unity and peace, and forebearance indicates that there is sometimes a place for overlooking offensive conduct. (Prov. 17:9, 19:11.) Knowing which course to pursue often take some time and guidance from the Spirit.

“There is (1) one body/church and (2) one Spirit, (3) just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; (4) one Lord, (5) one faith, (6) one baptism, (7) one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. Paul then lists 7 unifying elements common to all believers. First, all believers are part of a single spiritual community, the body of Christ. Second, all believers have access to God the Father by the same Holy Spirit. Third, all believers are called to the same the same future and eternal destiny. Fourth, all believers submit to the same leader, the Lord Jesus Christ. Fifth, all believers rely on the same object of faith, Jesus. The sixth element is the most debated. Some think it refers to the baptism of the Holy Spirit, others say water baptism, others think spiritual baptism in the sense that all believers are identified with Christ (which is how I refer to spiritual identification with Christ, but evidently some commentators see a distinction). The second and third views are both defensible. The argument for water baptism is that it is mentioned in the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20), and Acts portrays water baptism as being administered universally and usually very soon if not immediately after conversion. (Acts 2:41; 8:36-38; 9:18; 10:47-48; 16:33.) All orthodox believers have practiced some form of it, although differences quickly developed and persist concerning issues such as how and when water baptism should be done, who should perform it, who should observe it. The argument that baptism means spiritual identification with Christ include passages indicating that water baptism symbolizes the spiritual reality that God identifies a believer with Christ. (See Rom. 6:3-8; Gal. 3:27; 1 Cor. 12:13; Col. 2:11-12.) Paul seems more likely to use the universal spiritual reality as a unifying mark than the symbol performed by humans. (1 Cor. 1:17.) If Paul were thinking of unifying rites, one wonders why he did not also mention communion. But the spiritual reality and the rite symbolizing that reality are so closely tied together that this point is not worth fighting over. It would be very sad if this verse about unity became a source of division.

Seven is a significant number to Hebrews, so it is probably no accident that Paul chose to list 7 unifying aspects and saved God the Father for the seventh, or crowning, element. “Over all” emphasizes that believers are all subject to God the Father, “through all” emphasizes that God the Father is working through all believers, and “in all” emphasizes that God the Father abides with all believers.

The seven unifying elements shared by believers thus are:

1. Members of the same spiritual community
2. Access to God the Father by the same Holy Spirit
3. Called to the same future hope/eternal destiny
4. Serve the same Lord-Jesus Christ
5. Have the same object of faith/are trusting their spiritual destiny to same person-Jesus Christ
6. Are identified in God the Father’s eyes with the same savior—Jesus Christ
7. Are subject to, spiritually empowered by, and abide with the same sovereign God the Father

These commonalities should run deep. They should affect our behavior, what we talk about, how we spend our time, and ultimately make it possible for people from differing backgrounds to build deep relationships. This doesn’t mean you will find all other believers easy to love and connect with. If that were true, Paul would not need to urge the Ephesians to be patient or forebearing, nor would “every effort” be required to keep the unity of the Spirit.

**Eph. 4:7-16 Paul urges the Ephesians to live out their calling by using their unique spiritual gifts to**

**help all believers mature in Christ.**

“But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of the gift of Christ.” After emphasizing the need to strive for unity, Paul switches topics and asserts that each believer has received a gift of grace from Christ. In this context, the emphasis of “grace” is on divine empowerment for ministry. See also Rom. 12:6. “measure” conveys that Christ has given particular amounts and versions of this grace to particular believers. See Rom. 12:3.

“Therefore it says, When he ascended on high he captured the captives, he gave gifts to people.” Paul supports his assertion by alluding to an OT passage. Commentators agree that the allusion is to Psalm 68, but disagree whether he is alluding the entire Psalm or paraphrasing one verse, Psalm 68:18. That verse says, “When you ascended on high, you lead captives in your train; you received gifts from men,” so if Paul were thinking just of Psalm 68:18, he has changed the meaning from the Lord receiving gifts/taking spoils from rebellious humanity to giving out gifts to believers. If, however, one considers other verses in Psalm 68, there is a theme of God protecting and bestowing blessings on his followers, Psalm 68:5-10, enabling his followers to capture plunder, Psalm 68:12-14, 18, leading a triumphant victory procession, Psalm 68:24-27, and forcing previously rebellious people to bring tribute, Psalm 68:28-35. Paul’s assertion seems more like a summary of the entire Psalm than an attempt to quote a single verse, but his precise meaning is still difficult to discern. One option is that the “captives” are spiritual—Satan, sin, and death—and so Paul is saying that when Jesus ascended to heaven he plundered or captured those negative spiritual forces and distributed gifts to his own followers.

“Now what is the meaning ‘he ascended,’ except that he also descended to the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is himself who ascended above all the heavens, in order that he might fill all things.” This verse is also much debated. It appears to me that Paul is arguing that, if Jesus ascended/went up, that implies he must have descended/come to earth so that he would be in position to ascend. In other words, if Jesus had always remained in heaven, he would not have needed to ascend to heaven. The extent to which Paul is saying Jesus descended is also debated. Some interpret “lower parts of earth” to mean Hades/Sheol, other think it refers to being buried in a tomb, still other just think it refers to living on the surface of the earth. Since the theme appears to be Jesus’s victory of dark spiritual forces, perhaps Paul is thinking of the journey from tomb to heaven.

The main point, however, is clear: upon ascending to heaven, Jesus was given authority over all creation and gives out unique spiritual gifts of grace to each believer, like a victorious general distributing plunder. “Namely, he gave some to be apostles, and some to be prophets, and some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers.” Paul describes the gifts in terms of functions (not offices), suggesting that the spiritual gift is an equipping to perform a ministry task. In this context, “apostle” includes the functions of authoritatively proclaiming the gospel and helping with planting and building churches. They are ambassadors for Christ in a hands on, productive way. See, for example, Barnabus in Acts 14:3-4, 14; and Titus at 2 Cor. 8:23 and Titus 1:5; and Epaphroditus at Phil. 2:25-30. “Prophets” literally speak God’s words. 1 Cor. 14:29-33. Men or women could fulfill this role. For ex., the daughters of Phillip and Agabus in Acts 21:8-11. Many evangelicals believe the gift of prophecy ended with the close of the canon. See Rev. 22:18 (warning against adding words to Revelation). Charismatic Christians disagree. An “Evangelist” shares the good news about Christ with unbelievers. See Phillip at Acts 21:8 and 2 Tim. 4:5. “Pastors” derives from a word literally meaning shepherd and is the function of discipling and caring for believers. “Teachers” explain and instruct spiritual matters. This is another instance where there is a NT example of a woman exercising this gift. Acts 18:25-26. We immediately picture a classroom, but in the first century most teaching probably took place in practical settings.

It is certainly possible for one person to have more than one of these role/gifts. Paul had the gifts of apostle and evangelist and probably prophecy as well. It also important to distinguish offices from function. For example, a church might have only one person serving in the office of “pastor,” but any number of people in the congregation could be gifted at the function of discipling and caring for other believers. This distinction is also important when thinking about gender roles. Those who believe that the NT reserves certain offices (elder, senior pastor) for males typically acknowledge that women can and do have any of these gifts, including leadership, pastoring, etc., and that there are numerous settings or outlets where they can exercise those gifts even if a couple of offices are reserved for males.

Comparing the gift lists in the NT shows Paul did not try to list every spiritual gift in any particular gift list:

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| Eph. 4:11-12 | Rom. 12:4-8 | 1 Cor. 12: |
| Apostles | Prophesying | Apostles |
| Prophets | Serving | Prophets |
| Evangelists | Teaching | Teachers |
| Pastors | Encouraging | Miracles/Healing |
| Teachers | Helping others | Helping others |
|  | Leading | Administration |
|  | Showing mercy | Speaking in tongues |

The contexts for the lists have subtle differences. Ephesians emphasizes the purpose of the most visible spiritual gifts—so that all believers can achieve maturity in Christ, not for the aggrandizement of individual believers having those gifts. Romans emphasizes that each believer should enthusiastically exercise their particular gift. 1 Corinthians emphasizes the relationship between gifts, especially the visible, spectacular gifts, and the virtues of faith, hope, and love. Paul probably just listed some important examples relevant to the context of each epistle rather than trying to set forth a comprehensive list of gifts, which would likely be an impossible task, as the lists indicate that any function genuinely beneficial to other believers can be a gift.

“for the preparation of the saints for the work of the ministry for the building up of the body of Christ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature person, to the measure of Christ’s full stature.” Paul unleashes a string of prepositional phrases elaborating on the purpose of the spiritual gifts. They were given to prepare or equip the saints/believers for the work of service or ministry. The word for service or ministry is a form of deacon. This has the further purpose of building up the body of Christ, recalling Paul’s descriptions of the church as a living temple and a body. The idea is that the most visible gifts, the ones we associate with leadership, are for the purpose of equipping other believers, so that all believers can serve/minister productively, benefitting the entire community. The participation of all believers in ministry is needed because the goal is for all believers to reach (1) unity of faith, (2) unity in the knowledge of the Son of God, (3) to become a mature or fully grown body of believers (4) attaining to the measure of Christ’s full stature. It is a corporate goal/purpose, and the measuring stick is everyone in the community reflecting Christ’s character.

“in order that we might no longer be children, being tossed back and forth by the wavs and carried about by every wind of doctrine by the cunningness of people by deceitfulness toward the scheme of error.” This mission of corporate maturity is urgent; if believers are children, i.e., less than full-grown, they can be “tossed back and forth” or “carried off by wind.” Both phrases convey being subject to outside forces rather than choosing one’s own course. The force is “teaching” or “doctrine.” Again, Paul probably is thinking of academic teaching but rather the ideas about life and what to do in life. Paul strings together more prepositional phrases to describe this bad teaching/doctrine: “by the cunningness of people,” “by deceitfulness” “toward the scheme of error or going astray.” The forces of the world do not ignore believers and leave them to mature in peace. They will try to deceive believers with false ideas in order to knock them off course. Spiritually immature believers are vulnerable.

“but rather being truthful with love, we might grow up to him with reference to all things, who is the head, the Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together through every supporting connection according to the working in measure from each individual part, causes the growth of the body to building itself up in love.” Instead, Paul wants believers to take a different path, “being truthful with other-centered love.” This implies that the world’s ideas are false and ultimately selfish and harmful to believers, whereas Christian teaching should be true and taught with love, i.e., for others’ genuine spiritual benefit. As Paul taught in 1 Corinthians, spiritual gifts should be exercised in love for others’ benefit. For ex., it is not enough to be a gifted leader; a believer must learn to exercise that gift in truth and with love for those being lead. The goal is that believers would collectively “grow up to Christ with reference to all things,” i.e., all areas of spiritual life. A believer cannot say, well, I am good at knowledge, so I don’t have to do anything for anyone else. Nor can a believer say, I am good at leadership, so I don’t need to worry about mercy. Christ embodied all of God’s moral excellence, and we should aim to follow his example. Paul returns to the body metaphor, re-affirming that Christ is the head, the pre-eminent leader of this community/body. Paul continues to mix construction images with the body metaphor by saying that this body is fitted together and held together from Christ. Christ holds the body together “in contact with the other parts by means of every supporting connection.” Christ does this according to the working in measure provided by each individual part. This phrase conveys that, in some mysterious way, Christ holds the community together through the individual contributions of each believer, which should align with the measure of the spiritual gift provided to that believer. This utilization of gifts provided by Christ and fitted together by Christ causes the body to grow or mature, building itself up “in love.” The repetition of love—a genuine concern for others manifesting itself in concrete behaviors like patience, kindness, not being envious, not boasting, humility, politeness, not self-seeking, not being easily angered, keeping no record of wrongs, not delighting with evil, rejoicing with truth, protecting others, trusting, hopeful, and persevering. 1 Cor. 13:4-8.

**Concluding Thoughts**

All believers have a responsibility to grow in the qualities/virtues displayed by Christ, including all the fruit of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, Gal. 5:22-23) and manifestations of love (patience, kindness, not being envious, not boasting, humility, politeness, not self-seeking, not being easily angered, keeping no record of wrongs, not delighting with evil, rejoicing with truth, protecting others, trusting, hopeful, and persevering, 1 Cor. 13:4-8).

All believers have a responsibility to develop and use their Christ-given spiritual gift to benefit other believers. How does one identify spiritual gifts? Here are some random thoughts:

--Trying/doing things is a better guide than guessing or taking tests

--Serving in your giftedness will involve work but it should provide a sense of satisfaction that keeps it from feeling like drudgery or pure misery

--Serving in your giftedness should have a positive spiritual effect on other people; this does not mean you will always get positive feedback or always feel a warm fuzzy glow; Paul had his share of rejection and set backs; but you should, over time, be seeing some positive effect or feedback;

--natural talents and skills are different than spiritual gifts; but spiritual gifts often align with natural talents or interests, so it makes sense to try ministries that emphasize some talent or interest and see what happens;