

# **Grace Presbyterian Church Bible Studies**

## **Ephesians**

## Welcome to our on-line Bible study for 2015

### The Epistle to the Ephesians: “All Things in Him” (Ephesians 1:10)

#### Ephesians 1:15-2:10 – “The Power of Grace”

There is no more central concept in all the New Testament than that of grace. Grace as it is often said is God’s mercy and forgiveness apart from any merit on our part. Paul both expounds and defends this view through many of his epistles including the Letter to the Ephesians. The opposite of grace is not sin. Rather its opposite is works as defined by the law.

#### I. The Power of the Resurrection – Ephesians 1:15-22

Paul in his introduction in this epistle focused on the idea of “blessing” (Ephesians 1:3). He presents there a cosmic picture of God’s eternal plan of salvation, a salvation whose origin began “before the foundation of the world” and is centered in Christ (Ephesians 1:4). The goal of this salvation is nothing less than to “gather all things in him (Christ), things in heaven and things on earth” (Ephesians 1:10). This is a breathtaking picture. Paul will now discuss the power that will bring this to pass, a power on which every Christian needs to depend. This power is seen in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Power really is the key concept of this section.

Paul prays that the Ephesian Christians may grasp all this. He specifically prays that the eyes of their heart will be enlightened (Ephesians 1:18). What does it mean to see with the “eyes of the heart?” He really here is speaking of seeing with the eyes of faith. Faith resides more in the heart than it does in the head (although the head is certainly very important). The fact that the heart is so pivotal for Paul means that he doesn’t expect us to understand everything about faith in Christ (Romans 10:9; II Corinthians 6:11; I Timothy 1:5). Yet we perceive enough to be able to understand the hope that we have in Christ. This hope is what sustains and upholds us. Our hope is grounded in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. We can’t begin to understand everything about the Resurrection but there are several key themes we need to grasp with the eyes of our hearts.

Christ’s Resurrection is an incredible demonstration of power. This power has a threefold effect:

First, this power raised Jesus from the dead (Ephesians 1:20). This was not a momentary overturning of death as in the case of Lazarus who would eventually die again. Jesus, raised from the dead, has conquered death and can never die again. This kind of power has no equal anywhere in the world. Sceptics to this day have been trying to explain away the Resurrection because they sense the enormity of this power. This same power is “for us who believe” (Ephesians 1:19). We should therefore be the most encouraged and optimistic people in the world.

Second, the goal of this power was not simply to bring Jesus back to life but to raise him up completely to the right hand of God the Father. Jesus has been raised to the “heavenly places” (Ephesians 1:20). This is not the heaven of our own imagining but rather the place where God is fully present. We cannot picture that but we can still cling to it as a certain hope. This is the place prepared for us (John 14:2). It is the presence of the Risen Christ as promised to the thief on the cross: “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43). Jesus sits now with the full authority of the Godhead and that power in a real but incomplete way been given to us.

Third, Jesus has explicit authority over “all things” (Ephesians 1:22). Every human rule and authority is now “under his feet” (Ephesians 1:22). We want to ask why then is he not exercising that authority fully in our broken and tragic world? The only answer we have is that now is not yet the time. Yet that time will come with his Second Coming. Nonetheless Jesus has full authority now and he is free to exercise that authority whenever and however he chooses. We need to understand that all the powers of this world only function under his authority. In the “age to come” this will be completely evident (Ephesians 1:21). For the present we need to grasp the incredible power that exists for his church. Jesus is the head over all things for the church (Ephesians 1:22). When the church turns aside from Jesus even in subtle ways it loses this power.

How can the church maintain its faithfulness amidst the siren calls of false gods and false spirits? Beginning in the next chapter Paul will address these issues in terms of the fundamental reality of grace (Paul mentions “grace” no fewer than twelve times in this epistle).

## II. The Reality of Grace – 2:1-10

Grace is the most central concept in the Gospel. It is not mentioned by name in the first three gospels but it is clearly present in everything that Jesus does in terms of compassion and mercy. Beginning in John’s Gospel it is made explicit throughout the New Testament. Yet it is often misunderstood. Even when it is acknowledged it may be minimized. Apart from the full reality of grace we are left with a “different gospel” which finally is no gospel at all (Galatians 1:6-9). There is no salvation apart from grace.

Paul begins his discourse on grace by making it clear that the world is not a neutral place. After having spoken of the boundless authority of Jesus Christ over “all things,” he now refers to the “ruler of the power of the air” (Ephesians 2:2). Clearly this is the devil (Ephesians 6:11). We are under the power of Satan because we have chosen sin. We are

in its deadly grip. We stand condemned before God because we have disobeyed him. Like Adam and Eve we have preferred the counsel of the serpent to the commands of God to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with Him (Micah 6:8).

How can we reconcile the full authority of the Lord Jesus Christ with this dark ruler who is “now at work among those who are disobedient” (Ephesians 2:2)? Frankly we can’t. Both realities in this time in between the first and second coming of Christ are true. We can never doubt that the authority of Christ is far greater than the “the cosmic powers of this present darkness” (Ephesians 6:12). We need to turn again and again to the power that is in Christ (Ephesians 1:20).

Grace however makes it clear that God does not desire to be our judge. He does not want to condemn. Still less does he want to leave us guilty and broken in the prison of sin under the power of the Satanic ruler. **God’s eternal purpose in Christ is nothing less than to demonstrate his grace.** If we don’t understand that we will never comprehend what God has done and is doing in Christ Jesus. We were by nature children of wrath (2:3). We could not be further removed from God. God could have condemned us as he condemned the world in the time of Noah. But condemnation is not God’s ultimate purpose. Still less are we bound by the law or by the works it demands (which are, by themselves, “holy and just and good,” but faced with the reality of sin the law only makes sin worse (Romans 5:18-21; Romans 7:7-25)).

God does not leave us in this condition. God is “rich in mercy.” He loves us with “great love.” In the death of our sin he makes us alive in Christ (Ephesians 2:4-5). All of this comes to us through grace. Grace is nothing less than God’s underserved mercy, compassion and love. We receive this grace by faith, by believing and trusting in God. It is in no way dependent on us. It is not our own doing, not the result of works. Even faith does not come from us. It is a gift of God. God has no hidden agenda. There is no dark underside to God’s grace. This is where the gospel has been compromised too many times. In announcing God’s grace it is too easy to include some hint of works or action on our part. Paul will have none of that. This is the “different gospel” he so strongly rejects.

At the same time Paul calls us to account. We are to receive God’s gift. Those who knowingly reject are rejecting eternal life. Paul and his co-workers shake the dust from their feet faced with opposition (Acts 13:44-52). Yet can even such rejection nullify the grace of God? The answer must be an uncompromising no. Even in the face of his Jewish opponents Paul maintains that God has not rejected his people. There is a remnant but this remnant only exists by grace and is the guarantee that “all Israel will be saved.” Indeed God will be merciful to all (Romans 11:1-32).

God’s intention is to give us new life in Christ. The summary of this is “by grace you have been saved” (Ephesians 2:5). Grace is not cheap. Nor can it be taken for granted. Grace recreates us in order that we can do good works (Ephesians 2:10). God’s grace cannot be compromised. It cannot be used as an excuse to do as we please. Still less though can it ever be presented with conditions based on our own doing.

Grace calls us into community. That is Paul's next theme.

## Questions for Discussion –

1. How can we experience the power of the Resurrection more in our lives and in the life of our church?
2. How can we maintain the optimism of Christ's authority over "all things" when we still see the effects of the "ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient?"
3. Why is it so hard for us to accept grace as something that is not our own doing?

## Ephesians 2:11-22 – “No Longer Strangers and Aliens”

Paul has a major concern for the unity of the church. This is represented elsewhere by his famous image of the church as a body with different members (Romans 12:4-8; I Corinthians 12:12-26). Paul's concept of grace levels the field for everyone. No one is deserving. No one is superior to anyone else. There is no one pattern that defines all Christians. Paul's teaching has tremendous significance for today's church with its innumerable differences. The issue of Christian gay marriage is a prime example. For Paul, in the church and according to the gospel of Jesus Christ, no one is left being a stranger or alien.

### III. “For he is our peace” – Ephesians 2:11-14

The great crisis of the early church was focused on the role of Gentiles. Could Gentile believers be fully members of the church without observing the law of Moses? Many in the early church would say no (Acts 10:1-11:18; Acts 15:1-21; Galatians 2:1-10). Paul will confront this issue head on here and in related passages. Several things must be noted about the context in which he writes.

1. Gentiles were regarded by Jews as unclean in every sense of the word. They were immoral, degenerate and idolatrous. This is understandable given Israel's history. They had been slaves in Egypt surrounded by false gods (Exodus 12:12). On the plains of Moab the Israelites were seduced by the Moabite women and enticed to worship false gods (Numbers 25:1-5). In Babylon Daniel and his three friends had to resist the commands to worship the statues of false gods. During the time of the Maccabees a statue of Zeus was set up in the temple of Jerusalem itself. Utter debauchery took place even within the temple. The people of Israel were forced to worship Dionysus, the Greek god of wine and frenzy. It is no wonder that Paul describes the Gentiles as “having no hope and without God in the world” (Ephesians 2:12).

More hopeful views such as the promise to Abraham that in him all the nations of the world would be blessed and Isaiah's vision of “a light to the nations” (Isaiah 42:6) receded into the background. So did the best heritage of the Greeks in philosophy and literature (Acts 17:28). The only hope of the Gentiles was the outer court of the temple known as the “court of the Gentiles.” However Gentiles were strictly prohibited from entering the temple itself.

2. For Paul and his contemporaries, especially among the Pharisees, there was no separation of the ceremonial parts of the law such as the dietary prohibitions from the so-called moral laws like the commandments against stealing, murder and adultery. Such a separation would have sounded nonsensical to the Jews of Paul's time (Acts 15: 5). Therefore since the Gentiles even as Christians were not likely to keep all the requirements of the Old Testament Torah, they were regarded as “aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise” (Ephesians 2:12). The conclusion of the Jewish Christians was that unless the Gentiles submitted themselves to the whole law they could not be saved (Acts 15:1).

What is Paul going to say to all this?

Paul is consistent with his view of grace as stated in 2:1-10. The church is made up of sinners who have been brought together solely by the “blood of Christ” (Ephesians 2:13). There is neither Jew nor Gentile in the church (Galatians 3:28). Christ is our peace. Paul in no way is overlooking the degenerate reality of the Roman Empire in his time. However what Paul says that would have sounded so offensive to even the Jewish Christians is that “all of us” (Jew and Gentile) once lived “in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath” (Ephesians 2:3). The Jewish Christians would have said this certainly would describe the Gentiles, especially those in the Roman court, but it would definitely not apply to Jews who rather than being “children of wrath” were children of the covenant, of God’s promises.

Paul does not deny Israel’s identity as being in a special covenant with God. Yet he is at pains to say, as does the whole Old Testament, that this has nothing to do with any merit or achievement on Israel’s part. Israel like the Gentiles stands completely and totally under God’s grace (Romans 11:1-12). Christ is our peace. There is no peace apart from him.

#### IV. “One new humanity” – 2:15-22

Paul is emphatically saying that there is no ranked order, no privileged position in the church. There has, to be sure, been “hostility” between Jews and Gentiles (Ephesians 2:14). That is not too strong a word given the history. But Christ has broken down the “dividing wall.” He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances (Ephesians 2:15). Christ has put to death the hostility between the two groups “through the cross.” Christ has proclaimed peace to those who were far off, the Gentiles, (echoing Isaiah 57:19). The result is that neither the Gentiles nor anyone else have to be “strangers and aliens.” We are all now, through Christ, “citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus being the chief cornerstone (Ephesians 2:19-20).” In Christ we are all knit together “into a holy temple.” Jews do not have to cease being Jews nor do Gentiles have to cease being what they are. The fact is that both have become a new reality, the Body of Jesus Christ.

Once again Paul is taking our breath away.

What does this all mean?

To answer that question we need to look at one of the ongoing controversies in Paul’s time, that of eating meat offered to idols (Romans 14; I Corinthians 8-10). Jesus had declared all foods to be clean (Mark 7:14-19). Peter initially could not accept this (Acts 10). Paul believed that all foods were in fact clean. They were only unclean to those who thought they were unclean (Romans 14:14). Paul’s point is one of broad tolerance. Christians who differ cannot pass judgment on one another (Romans 14:4). For us such issues as unclean food or even ritual circumcision, which were huge issues for Paul and the church of his time, seem completely foreign and remote. We have to ask, what are the comparable issues of our own time and how does Paul’s teaching inform us in our questions and controversies?

We will never understand the issue of food for the Jews of Paul's time until we have learned the story of the ninety year old priest, Eleazar. Eleazar lived in the time of the Maccabees. His story is found in the apocryphal books, II Maccabees 6:18-21 and IV Maccabees 7:1-15. At the time Israel was under the control of the Seleucids (a break off of the Greeks). Eleazar was a faithful priest who was commanded to eat pork, an unclean food according to the Torah (Leviticus 11:7-8). He absolutely refused to do so. Some of his captors who admired his devotion counselled him to eat any kind of meat and pretend it was pork in order to save his life. Eleazar refused. He was tortured mercilessly and put to death.

Jews who had grown up with the stories of such heroes were understandably horrified by Christian Gentiles who were willing to eat unclean food, especially food that had been offered to an idol. Peter's reaction in Acts 10 would have been a normal response to the idea of eating unclean food. Paul insists that the church must have room for both points of view. In fact he calls those unwilling to accept Jesus' blanket acceptance of all foods weaker Christians. They are not to have their consciences scarred by Christians exercising greater freedom. At the same time neither group is to judge the other (Romans 14:1-6). Neither party is to condemn the other.

We have to ask what would be comparable situations in our time? This can affect a host of issues ranging from the role of women in the church, smoking and drinking, same sex marriage on up to and including political views. When Paul says that the law is abolished he doesn't literally mean that it disappears. It still expresses God's will. Yet the law is abolished in the sense that it can neither condemn nor divide Christians. Some do prefer "one day to be better than another" (Romans 14:5). This must be respected. However there is no law governing the life of Christians. Put another way, the only law is the law of love (Matthew 22:34-40; Romans 13:8-10; Galatians 5:6). Love cannot be reduced to a formula, still less a list of rules. We are a "holy temple" only in Christ, not in the law (which truthfully defined Israel in the Old Testament). It is also the case that the law even in the Old Testament was not simply a list of rules but a call to the heart (Deuteronomy 30:6). David was a man after God's own heart in spite of his sins.

Paul says that the works of the flesh are obvious (Galatians 5:19). We don't need a law to define them for us. Love cannot be used as an excuse to indulge ourselves (Galatians 5:13). Yet neither can love be pressed into any kind of rigid formula.

"For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death" (Romans 8:2).

### Questions for Discussion –

1. What does this passage tell us about the nature of the church in Paul's view? How important is diversity in the Body of Christ?
2. How does the law or the interpretation of the law divide Christians today? How can we overcome those divisions?

3. Who would be the “strangers and aliens” in our time?

## Welcome to our on-line Bible study for 2015

### The Epistle to the Ephesians: “All Things in Him” (Ephesians 1:10)

#### Ephesians 3:1-21 – “God’s Great Mystery”

Paul continues here to unfold the full nature of God’s cosmic plan of salvation. The picture is an overwhelming one. It is rooted in Paul’s incredible view of grace, a view that we often find to be both comforting and disturbing. God is doing something new in the gospel. The Gentiles are *fully included* in God’s plan of salvation in Jesus Christ. God’s grace leads to the love of Christ (Ephesians 3:19). This love is not dependent on the law or any previous history of Israel or the Gentiles. It is in reality a “new creation” (II Corinthians 5:17).

#### I. Grace, Grace and Only Grace – Ephesians 3:1-13

Paul here is disclosing a mystery. He is speaking of a new truth something that was not revealed to humanity previously. This quite simply is a new revelation which Paul himself received and is now being shared by the Holy Spirit. It is because of Paul’s proclamation of this new truth that he is in prison. His Jewish opponents see him as doing nothing less than undermining the whole faith of Israel (Acts 21:27-28). Paul emphasizes three key points about his understanding of grace:

##### **1. Paul received the doctrine of grace as a new revelation.**

Paul refers to this special grace as a “mystery.” This mystery was not known previously. Paul was a special recipient of it. After his conversion he did not confer with any of the apostles but went alone to Arabia (Galatians 1:15-17). Paul experienced revelations that he could not describe. He even speaks of himself in the third person (II Corinthians 12:2-4). This new revelation concerned the place of the Gentiles in God’s plan of salvation. Paul was not unique in receiving such a revelation. A similar experience occurred in a special vision given to Peter (Acts 10). This revelation was truly monumental and even went beyond the revelation of the law given by God to Moses. So what was this revelation?

##### **2. The Gentiles are now fellow heirs of the promises to Israel through the gospel.**

To call this an astonishing statement puts it mildly. The whole nature of God’s law was to set boundaries between Israel and the “other nations” (Leviticus 18:24). These nations practiced horrible idolatries which included the sacrifice of their own children (Leviticus 20:1-5). They gave themselves over to the debased sexuality of their fertility cults which Solomon himself and all Israel eventually practiced as well (II Kings 11: 7-8; Jeremiah 3:2; Hosea 4:14). Israel’s call then was to separate itself completely from the Gentile way of life, a way of life that even pagan authors denounced especially with regard to the Roman Emperors (Tacitus, Suetonius). It is therefore not surprising that the early Jewish Christians were horrified at the idea of even going to the home of a Gentile much less eating with him (Acts 11:1-3).

The fact that God was not abandoning the Gentiles in his election of Israel is however also a major theme in the Old Testament. Abraham's call included the fact that in him "All the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:3). Isaiah's prophecies all include promises for the Gentiles. God's servant will bring justice to the nations (Isaiah 42:1). All the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of God (Isaiah 52:10). At the last day all nations will come to Jerusalem (Isaiah 66:18-20). All flesh will worship God (Isaiah 66:23). One day Egypt and Assyria will be included among God's people along with Israel (Isaiah 19:24-25).

Yet we have Jesus' own statement that he was sent only to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matthew 15:24). In the first mission of the disciples Jesus explicitly forbids them from going to the Gentiles or the Samaritans (Matthew 10:5-6). The nations (Gentiles) only become a mission field after the resurrection (Matthew 28:19-20). Therefore it is not surprising that the early church had misgivings about the role of Gentiles in the community of faith.

Paul's revelation of the "mystery" goes beyond anything that Jesus taught in his earthly ministry. Paul is insisting that the Gentiles have equal standing in the Body of Christ. They do not have to keep the law to achieve this. To the contrary, keeping the law actually prevents them from following the gospel (Galatians 2:21-3:14).

### **3. *Grace was God's cosmic plan from eternity***

Before the call of Abraham, before Adam and Eve, before even the creation of the world, God's eternal plan and purpose was to demonstrate his grace in Christ Jesus. In Christ we have God's "boundless riches." This is not just personal salvation, nor the salvation of certain groups such as Israel and the church. It is a cosmic salvation revealed even to "the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 3:10). We are to remain steadfast in this faith without turning aside from this hope to anything else (Colossians 1:15-29).

We can have many questions at this point. Couldn't this have been done without the tragedy of sin (humanity went quickly from eating forbidden fruit to murder, Genesis 3-4)? Could it have been done without the cross? Apparently not. Love and grace only exist alongside the same freedom which can turn away from God. With the psalmist we may want to cry out, "Why, O Lord? (Psalm 10:1)," "How long, O Lord? (Psalm 13:1)?" Paul has a succinct statement: "where sin increased, grace abounded all the more" (Romans 5:20).

## **II. "filled with all the fullness of God" – 3:14-21**

This next section almost defies description. We would like to reduce even a major subject like God's grace to something manageable, something we can define with a measure of precision. Paul will not allow us that privilege (or that escape). Paul can only go to prayer at this point. He prays for the Ephesians and, by implication, all of us. Paul prays that we may be strengthened in our inner being "with power through his Spirit" (Ephesians 3:16). He asks that we may have "the power to comprehend with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God" (Ephesians 3:18-19).

How is any of this possible? Can we really be filled with “all the fullness of God?” Isn’t that blasphemy? Some of Paul’s critics obviously thought so (Acts 24:5-6). We can only begin to sketch out some of what Paul is saying (praying):

1. Grace leads to love. Grace certainly calls us to gratitude (“Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift,” II Corinthians 9:15). The ultimate fountain of grace, however, is love. We are to be rooted and grounded in love.
2. The love of Christ surpasses knowledge (Ephesians 3:19). This is the ultimate conclusion of Paul’s doctrine of grace. Love cannot be reduced to a definition or a formula, much less can it be based on the law. The law points toward love in its incomplete way. Love is the fulfilment of the law (Romans 13:8-10). The law is a means to this end. Paul is bringing us into an area of boundless freedom (Galatians 5:1). This freedom cannot be used as an excuse for self-indulgence (I Peter 2:16). There is also a love of the world which really is only an excuse for the love of sin (I John 2:15).
3. These warnings are real and Paul will discuss them later in this same epistle. Yet, we cannot move too quickly to them. The danger of legalism lurks constantly in the background. Paul is calling us to an all surpassing love, a love based on his concept of grace. This love cannot be reduced to the law in any of its forms. To turn to the law is to go backward (Galatians 3:23-29).
4. Paul is challenging us to a Christ centered love that is ultimately part of the nature of God himself (I John 4:7-8). The church beginning from the time of Paul up to now has struggled to demonstrate this love. This love only becomes real for us as we focus on the full meaning of God’s grace. The challenges are great. There are risks (Paul after all is writing from prison). The Gentiles symbolize all those who have been excluded from the community of faith. These include liberals, conservatives, radicals, racial minorities, divorced persons, homosexuals, persons suffering from addictions and sexual brokenness of whatever kind. We are eager to call for repentance (more for others than ourselves). However, we must always begin first with the proclamation that the kingdom of God has come near (Mark 1:14-15). The essence of this kingdom is God’s grace which alone can ground us in the love of Christ.

Paul can only end with a benediction (Ephesians 3:20-21). We need to pray with Paul that this benediction be lived out in our lives.

### Questions for Discussion –

1. Why do you think God’s plan of grace for the Gentiles is described as a “mystery?”
2. What are some of the ways that we limit God’s grace both for ourselves and for others?
3. What are the implications of our being “rooted and grounded in love?” Why do we so often try to exclude people from God’s love?

Next Study – Ephesians 4 – “Truth is in Jesus”

## Welcome to our on-line Bible study for 2015

### The Epistle to the Ephesians: “All Things in Him” (Ephesians 1:10)

#### Ephesians 4:1-32 – “Truth is in Jesus”

Paul in this chapter is offering nothing less than a blueprint, a model of the church not as it is but as it should be. Paul affirms again and again the unity of the church. The unity however is not an end in itself. It is the result of focusing on the truth which is in Jesus alone. Paul mentions the theme of truth several times throughout this chapter (vv. 15, 21, 24, 25). This truth stands over against the darkened futility of the world which is simultaneously a danger and a mission for the church.

#### I. Worthy of Your Calling – 4:1-6

Paul is calling the Ephesians (and us) to live out the calling we have in Christ Jesus. As Paul has reminded us this calling began in Christ “before the foundation of the world” (1:4) and brought us life in Christ when we were dead in our sins (Ephesians 2:5). Paul in this section emphasizes the fact that we are “one body and one Spirit.” By Spirit he clearly means the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 3:4; John 16:7; Ephesians 20:21-22; Matthew 10:19-20). We are united in Christ. We are not all the same. Unity doesn’t mean identity here. We are all different but at the same time we are all parts of one body (I Corinthians 12:1-7; John 17:20-23). The purpose of this is that we exercise humility, gentleness patience and bearing with one another in love (Ephesians 4:2). If we were all the same or if we were faultless this would not be necessary. Gentiles are different from Jews. Men are different from women. Servants are different from masters. Yet we are all united in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28). This unity is not automatic. Still less is it something we can achieve on our own. It is part of the grace given to us in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2:5, 8).

The purpose of this unity is to build up our neighbor (Romans 15:1-2). We are to bear one another’s burdens (Gal. 6:2). We are to work side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel so that the world may believe that God has sent Jesus to be its savior (Philippians 1:27; John 12:47; John 17:20-21). Paul speaks of this unity as being a source of joy for himself (Philippians 2:1-2). While this unity is a gift it needs to be exercised very intentionally.

There are three basic barriers to this unity in the New Testament. The first is what may be called “party alliances.” In today’s world they could be classified as denominational or even congregational differences (I Corinthians 1:10-12). In no way are we to compromise the basic truth of the gospel (Galatians 1:6-9). Truth is a major theme of this chapter. Yet there are many ways to articulate the one truth of the gospel. That is why we have four written Gospels and twenty one epistles from not only Paul but also from Peter, John, James and “Unknown” (Hebrews). A second barrier could be called an unforgiving spirit. Paul concludes this chapter with a call for mutual forgiveness (Ephesians 4:32). We see an example of this kind of conflict in Paul and Barnabas’ arguments over John Mark. This argument became so heated that they had to break up (Acts 15:36-41). A third barrier is a resistance to change. This particularly affected the Jewish Christians with regard to their acceptance of the Gentiles (Acts 10:9-23).

The unity of the church is not something we have created or chosen. Paul speaks of this as being “in the Lord” (Ephesians 4:1). Individual Christians and congregations will certainly have their differences. These differences cannot become divisions however. In an America that is less and less Christian we need a united Christian voice more than ever. In Paul’s image the eye can’t say

to the hand “I don’t need you” (I Corinthians 12:21). Paul’s view of unity is not an open ended acceptance. He calls for the Corinthian member in flagrant sin to be cast out (for his eventual salvation, I Corinthians 5:5). All who hold to a biblical faith in Christ need to manifest “one Lord, one faith, one baptism (Ephesians 4:5). Christ is not divided. Neither can we be.

## II. The Measure of the Full Stature of Christ – 4:7-16

Paul now discusses the outworking of this unity in Christ. He reminds us of the power displayed by Christ in the cross. He quotes from Psalm 68:18, “he made captivity itself a captive.” This is the critical theme of the victory of Christ over sin, death, hell and Satan (John 12:31; Acts 2:24; I Corinthians 15:54-57; Colossians 2:15; Hebrews 2:14-15). Peter speaks of Christ proclaiming the gospel to “the spirits in prison,” the dead (I Peter 3:18-20; I Peter 4:6). These are all references to the descent into hell mentioned in the Apostles’ Creed. While Paul here is speaking of Christ’s victory he more probably has in mind the cosmic battle taking place in earth and the “heavenly places” (Ephesians 1:20).

Paul’s purpose here is not to engage in speculation but to give assurance to all of us of the power of the spiritual gifts we have received. We are not to fear opposition, physical or spiritual. We are not to be intimidated. Remember Paul is writing to a small church in a pagan and idolatrous city. People lived in fear of the magic spells which the Ephesians were known to use (cf. Acts 19:19). He is challenging his readers to build up the body of Christ, which is, of course, the church. The church is not built on human talent and ability. It is built up as we all exercise our gifts understanding that a gift is something that has freely be given to us whether we are apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers or artists, builders, helpers, cooks, youth workers, choir members or whatever else. In another passage Paul asks the blunt, rhetorical question, “What do you have that you did not receive?” (I Corinthians 4:7). All we have is a gift from God and that includes our salvation (Ephesians 2:8).

Paul clearly believes in Christian growth. He calls believers to come to “maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.” For Paul this implies the ability to speak “the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15). These two form an essential unity which cannot be broken. Truth without love can be harsh and judgmental. Yet love without truth easily degenerates into sentimentality. Paul is clear which has the priority. It is truth without which there is no gospel, no “good news.” Paul warns against being “tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine.” If we don’t have a good grasp on truthful doctrine (which is simply “teaching”) then we are vulnerable to trickery and “deceitful scheming” (Ephesians 4:14). When Jesus asks the disciples, “But who do you say that I am?” he knows that this is a life and death question. Everything depends on having the right answer: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:15-16). The body must however grow into this truth in love. Love is the most important response to the truth of the gospel, even more so than faith and hope (I Corinthians 13:13). The sinful woman (prostitute) in Luke 7 confesses the truth by her love (Luke 7:36-50). An essential truth of the gospel is that God is love (I John 4:7-8).

## III. The New Self – Ephesians 4:17-32

Paul now addresses the social and cultural context in which the Ephesian Christians are living. As truth is a major theme in this chapter (Ephesians 15, 21, 25) Paul now discusses the opposite, the futility and darkened understanding of the Gentiles. Paul here is not speaking of the enlightened Greeks he encountered in Athens. His remarks focus on the kind of cultic behavior associated with a goddess like Artemis of the Ephesians. To quote from a major study (Sexual Culture in Ancient Greece by Daniel H. Garrison University of Oklahoma Press 2000, pp. 234-235),

“To us, and perhaps to the audiences of New Comedy, there is something suggestively lurid about a nocturnal religious orgy with its provocative hints of unfettered sexual opportunities under cover of darkness.”

Paul is speaking against a whole way of life which existed in the major cities of the Roman Empire including Corinth and Ephesus. This way of life involved sexual liaisons, both heterosexual and homosexual, often with slaves, cult prostitutes or “Hetaeras” (female companions). Sexual indulgence apart from any loving commitment was widespread and often associated with the worship of a goddess figure like Aphrodite or Artemis of the Ephesians (a fertility goddess unlike the Greek Artemis or Diana). Plato in reacting against these trends unfortunately came to the point of despising one’s body altogether. Early Christianity, reacting against the darkened understanding of “the Gentiles,” later made common cause with Platonic schools of philosophy which led to the conclusion in Augustine and others that sex itself was sinful, in contradiction to the Old Testament (cf. Proverbs 5:15-19; Ezekiel 16:6-14; Song of Solomon). The end result in this tragic development can be seen in the great theologian Origen who castrated himself.

Paul’s concerns are very valid in this passage and yet we must be careful not to draw extreme conclusions which Paul himself doesn’t make.

Paul now goes on to address the characteristics of the new life in Christ. Truth is in Jesus and we are to frame our lives around his example. We are to speak the truth (Ephesians 4:25). There are times when we need to be angry (as Jesus frequently was, Mark 3:5; Matthew 17:17; John 2:13-16). Yet we should not prolong our anger (Ephesians 4:26). Paul makes the general statement, “do not make room for the devil” (Ephesians 4:27). There are many ways this can happen and clearly some of those had already appeared in the church. These included stealing, evil talk, bitterness, wrath, wrangling, slander and “all malice” (Ephesians 4:28-31). When we give in to these things we grieve the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 4:30).

The church at Ephesus which Jesus would later describe as having lost their first love (Revelation 2:4) needed, as we all do, to “be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another as God in Christ has forgiven you” (Ephesians 4:32). Paul is not calling for a bland amnesty. In forgiveness he still wants accountability. He warns us to avoid those who cause dissension in the church (Romans 16:17; Titus 3:10). Paul no doubt forgave Alexander the Coppersmith but he was not about to trust him (I Timothy 1:20; II Timothy 4:14-15).

The truth we follow is not an idea or a concept. It is Jesus himself (Ephesians 4:21; John 14:6).

### Questions for Discussion –

1. Why has it been so hard throughout history even up to the present to maintain unity in the church of Jesus Christ?
2. How would you define Christian maturity? What does that have to do with using our spiritual gifts?
3. What are some of the ways we can live out the truth that is in Jesus in today’s world?

Next Study – Ephesians Chapter 5 – “Living in Love When the Days Are Evil”

## Welcome to our on-line Bible study for 2015

### The Epistle to the Ephesians: “All Things in Him” (Ephesians 1:10)

#### Ephesians 5:1-33 – “Living in Love When the Days Are Evil”

Paul here is confronting the Christians in Ephesus with the pagan environment that surrounded them. Clearly some of the same behavior that was going on among non-Christians was also being practiced by those in the church. Paul will not appeal to any law or code of behavior. The law is not the standard for the Christian (Ephesians 2:15). He does appeal throughout this chapter to the example of love which is the sole basis for the Christian life modeled on Christ himself.

##### I. “Be Careful then How You Live” – 5:1-20

Paul does not begin talking about the various problems and conflicts both within the church and the city of Ephesus itself. He begins by setting the standard for Christian living. He calls the Ephesians to be “imitators of God.” This is an unusual expression found only here in the entire Bible. The idea is to be a follower of God. The essence of this is “to live in love as Christ loved us.” Christ’s love is fully demonstrated in his going to the cross as a “fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” As we will see by what follows, Paul is very concerned about widespread immorality and indulgent living apparently on the part of the Ephesian Christians themselves. Paul however is not going to give a list of rules or a detailed code of conduct (which churches did after his death). The rule of life is love. The essence of sin is self-centeredness. The focus on self leads to idolatry since eventually we want to be like gods (the temptation of the serpent in the Garden of Eden, Genesis 3:4-5). Paul saw the unrestrained indulgence of the Romans leading to idolatry (Romans 1:18-32). The opposite of self-centeredness is self-giving. This is the essence of the love of Christ who gave himself for us.

Paul then has a lengthy section warning the Ephesians about how not to live. As he says elsewhere the sins of the flesh are obvious. Again he doesn’t have to refer to some law (Galatians 5:19). Paul’s warnings here strike a very concerned note. He seems to be more aware of the spiritual warfare of his age. The Ephesians are warned to make the most of the time because “the days are evil” (Ephesians 5:16). Whereas Paul could appeal to the Emperor when faced with charges in Jerusalem because he seemed to think he would get a fairer hearing, he now seems more pessimistic about his world. As serious as things were in Rome and Corinth one gets the impression here that Ephesus is the real “sin city,” at least at this point in time.

Paul’s basic concern here, as it was elsewhere, is with unrestrained, self-centered indulgence. The lives of the Roman emperors and their families was evidence enough of that.

This may be why Paul’s warnings seem to take on a strident tone. Sexual indulgence as well as greed, which he labels directly as idolatry, are clear threats to the Christian community. He is

concerned even with “obscene, silly and vulgar talk” (Ephesians 5:4). He says bluntly that people who are sexually indulgent or greedy have no inheritance in the kingdom of God. Lurking behind such a strong denouncement may be the image of Artemis of the Ephesians and everything associated with her cult. These included the silversmiths who sold little silver shrines of her (Acts 19:23-27). This also may account for his strong criticism of the women of Ephesus who may have been dressing in a manner inspired by the goddess (I Timothy 1:8-15). Modesty apparently was in short supply.

Paul clearly is very concerned about what is taking place, more so than he seemed to be with the Romans and Corinthians (who clearly had their share of problems). Writing to those churches Paul seemed to allow for some contact with the pagan world in issues like eating meat offered to idols (Romans 14; I Corinthians 8-10). Paul, like scripture as a whole, is clearly not opposed to sex or even to the erotic (cf. Song of Solomon, Ezekiel 16:1-14). He could say things like “I know and am persuaded in the Lord that nothing is unclean in itself” (Romans 14:14). Yet he doesn’t seem to be exhibiting the same degree of freedom here. In Ephesus the world seems sharply divided between light and darkness. He warns the Ephesians, “Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness” (Ephesians 5:11).

He reminds them that once they were darkness but now they are light in the Lord. Paul’s severity here may be due to what was becoming more and more known about the Roman emperors. When he says that “it is shameful even to mention what such people do secretly,” that could certainly reference things in the Roman court that, while being done in secret, nonetheless became known. What we know from contemporary Roman writers of the time certainly bears out Paul’s statement.

Essentially everything he refers to has to do with unrestrained and uncontrolled behavior. This applies particularly to sex, greed and drinking. Paul is obviously concerned that some of these things were taking place even within the church. He lifts up the standard of being filled with the Holy Spirit and singing “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” (Ephesians 5:18). Again he presents thankfulness as the motive for Christian living (Ephesians 5:20).

Paul’s words have to resonate with us. We live in a society that is increasingly coarse and indulgent. We frankly are not at the point of ancient Rome but we see plenty of sexual and material indulgence (fornication and greed) all around us. Our media in both broadcast and social forms increasingly assaults us with “obscene, silly and vulgar talk” (Ephesians 5:4). At the same time we need to recognize, as Paul emphatically affirms here, the temptation of the darkness. Statements like “the days are evil” (Ephesians 5:16) show a more pessimistic Paul than in earlier letters. Here, as we will see later, he is very conscious of being in intense spiritual warfare.

## II. The Marriage of Christ and the Church

Paul now turns to a much more positive subject, that of marriage. He will use the model of Christ and the church as a symbol of marriage in general. Given the serious deviations of the Roman Empire, and no doubt the continuing influence of the cult of Artemis of the Ephesians, Paul talks about Christian marriage as an antidote to the sexual anarchy that existed in the world around him.

His opening statement is striking, “Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Ephesians 5:21). Paul begins his discussion with a strong statement of mutuality between husband and wife, “one another.” He then speaks about the different roles of husband and wife. He tells wives to “be subject to your husband as you are to the Lord” (Ephesians 5:22). This statement has not been without its controversy especially in today’s more egalitarian world. However we need to note what Paul says and what he does not say. He is not saying that wives should submit to their husbands, which certainly would have been the view of his time, both Jewish and Gentile. Nor is he saying that wives should simply obey their husbands. Women are subject to their husbands as Christians are to their Lord. If this is a statement of authority think of what kind of authority Jesus was over the disciples, or over us his followers. The image of head is essentially that of leader. Its root is that of a military commander who leads his soldiers.

The wife’s submission is to be the same as the church’s submission to Christ. It is interesting that Paul commands husbands to love their wives. There is not a similar command for wives. This may reflect the cultural standard that women often had little choice as to who their spouse would be. A woman was under the authority of her father or other male figures in her family. Presumably a man could initiate a marriage proposal. However that proposal would not be to the woman directly but to her father. In the absence of the father it would be an uncle or other male relative.

Paul’s view of the husband’s love is to be the same love Christ showed to the church. Christ serves the church. He washes the feet of the disciples (John 13:1-11). Finally, and most dramatically, Jesus gives his life for the church (and indeed for the world). In more simple terms Paul says the husband should love his wife as he does his own body (Ephesians 5:28). The related idea here is that the church is Christ’s body (I Corinthians 12:12-13). Paul then quotes the classic text from Genesis that “a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh” (Ephesians 5:31; Genesis 2:24). His summary is that a husband should love his wife and the wife should respect her husband (Ephesians 5:33).

This then is one of those passages that clearly is part of its culture. Based on what Paul says elsewhere, such as I Corinthians 13, wouldn’t the goal be for husband and wife to love each other? We need to read this text as we would read Paul’s advice to slaves (Ephesians 6:5-8). He is lifting up a basic standard for human relationships in the social context in which he was writing. Yet the larger themes of justice and love call us to a higher standard. Respect in a marriage is certainly important. However even Paul would grant that it is not as important as love.

This section for Paul is not primarily about marriage. He is using marriage as a symbol of Christ and the church, another example of a “great mystery” (Ephesians 5:32). The message here is not only for married persons. It is for all Christians. It is to remind us of the great love that Jesus has for us even when we don’t love him fully in return. That love is what sustains us in evil days.

## Questions for Discussion –

1. How should we live in the “evil days” of our time? What should be our reaction to the “obscene, silly and vulgar talk” all around us?
2. What would be an example of living as “children of light” (Ephesians 5:8)
3. Married or not, how can we be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ (Ephesians 5:21)?

Next Study – Oct. 7 – “The Whole Armor of God” – Ephesians chapter 6

## Welcome to our on-line Bible study for 2015

### The Epistle to the Ephesians: “All Things in Him” (Eph. 1:10)

#### Ephesians 6:1-24 – “The Whole Armor of God”

Paul concludes this epistle with one of his most vivid statements of the Christian life and the struggles that are part of that life. He begins by giving advice regarding living in an imperfect world in a way that glorifies Christ. He then goes on to a stirring and powerful picture of the spiritual warfare which all Christians face. He concludes with a strong admonition of prayer. Paul is preparing for a final defense before Nero in which he will state boldly the nature of the gospel.

#### I. Following Christ in an Imperfect World – 6:1-9

Paul addresses here standard issues of day to day life. What is most important in this section is the concept of mutual responsibility. Paul in a sense is using the covenant model of the Old Testament in which both parties have obligations, the superior figure as well as the inferior. This clearly goes against the authoritarian model of Roman society in which the superior figure – emperor, general, father, husband, master – exercised almost complete domination over those under him (and in this context we are almost invariably talking about a male figure).

Paul begins by addressing children. They are called to obey their parents. However the obedience is not unconditional. They are to obey “in the Lord.” This would imply that some parental commands could be resisted such as asking a Christian child to worship an idol. Paul does remind them of the commandment to “honor your father and mother” (Exodus 20:12). The fact he does this does again points out that there was clearly a Jewish contingent in the church (cf. Eph. 2:11-22). Therefore we can assume that the Ten Commandments would have been known in the church even with Paul’s emphasis that the law had been abolished in Christ (2:15). Following the mutual responsibility of the covenant model Paul counsels the fathers not to provoke their children (6:4). Why does he not mention the mothers? Paul is writing in the context of a patriarchal society where fathers were clearly the ruling authority in the home. Paul is providing Christian guidance in the context of his imperfect society. We are challenged to do the same in our society which is equally imperfect but also different from New Testament times.

Paul next addresses slaves and masters. This text was misunderstood in an earlier context to be a defense of slavery. It is hardly that. Paul is writing in a world in which slavery was a given. No one can read the story of the Exodus and think that slavery is God’s will. We are

dealing here with an imperfect world in the between times between Christ's resurrection and his second coming. Paul is calling slaves who are presumably Christians to a Christ like posture. Their true obedience is finally to Christ, not to their earthly masters. They are really "slaves of Christ" (6:6). Paul insists that the Christian slave is really serving the Lord not men and women. Paul then speaks to the masters who again are presumably Christians also. They are not to threaten. Such a command would have had no meaning for purely Roman masters who treated their slaves as property and abused them whenever they liked. Paul's final word is that master and slave are both answerable to God with whom there is no partiality (6:9). These instructions then apply to any situation in which one person has authority over another – employer/employee, ruler/citizen, teacher/student. Human rank carries no weight with God.

## II. Spiritual Warfare – 6:10-17

Paul now shifts emphasis to a critical description of the Christian life in a world that is not only imperfect but under the power of dark, spiritual forces. He had alluded to this in chapter 5 but here he is drawing a vivid picture of the Christian in actual spiritual warfare. This may be the result of Paul's confinement in Rome. His earlier appeal to the emperor would seem now less an example of Roman justice than of the tyranny and indeed barbarism of idolatrous Roman emperors like Nero (It is perhaps important to remember that Nero's reign appeared to begin well. People were optimistic about him but he soon descended into degeneracy. History gives us other examples such as Hitler). In any event Paul sees the surrounding Roman Empire as a clear threat and he now calls the Ephesians to be prepared for battle. In this dramatic picture he draws on the symbolic picture of God's armor in Isaiah 59:17. This is his final word to the Ephesians. They are to be "strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power" (6:10).

Paul's overarching point is a twofold one. First, the struggle is not against "enemies of blood and flesh." The focus is not the emperor nor Gentile or Jewish adversaries. The battle is against spiritual forces, "against the cosmic powers of this present darkness" (6:12). When the church has focused on human enemies, real or perceived, she has done badly (i.e. inquisitions, witch hunts, heresy trials). The real enemies are spiritual. Paul's second point is that these spiritual forces do not often confront us directly. Their goal is often to seduce and confuse us as Satan tried to do with Jesus in the wilderness (Matt. 4:1-11). This is why Paul warns against the wiles, literally the schemes, of the devil (6:11).

Therefore we are called to put on "the whole armor of God:"

1. "the belt of truth" – Satan delights in falsehood
2. "the breastplate of righteousness" – God's righteousness is given to us as a gift (Rom. 3:24). Righteousness is also justice. Martin Luther King spoke of being a drum major for justice. We are called to do the same. This of course has nothing to do with self-righteousness.
3. Shoes to proclaim the gospel of peace – we are to go out with the message of peace protected by the belt of truth and the breastplate of righteousness. Our message of peace will invariably be met with opposition from "the spiritual forces of evil."
4. The shield of faith is our protection against "the flaming arrows of the evil one."

5. The helmet of salvation is our assurance that we belong to God in whatever struggle we find ourselves.
6. The ultimate weapon is the word of God which is “the sword of the Spirit.” We are not only to be defensive. We are called to attack. However when the focus passes from the spiritual forces to human ones the church creates problems which rob it of its spiritual strength. The cosmic powers can and will work through human agents but the battle is still a spiritual one (In the words of Sherlock Holmes, “The devil’s agents may be of flesh and blood.”). This requires discernment and also prayer as Paul states next.

### III. Final Words

It is not surprising that, given all Paul has said about spiritual warfare, that he now talks about the importance of prayer. We are to pray in the Spirit. That means we are to pray depending on the Holy Spirit. We are to keep alert. That should be obvious given our struggle against the “cosmic powers of darkness.” We are neither to be naïve or unaware. The Christian life must be lived with eyes wide open. We need to pay close attention to the world in which we live just as a soldier needs to be aware of what is happening on the battle field. We are to pray for each other. This is the meaning of always persevering in supplication for the saints. Finally Paul asks for prayer for himself. He twice asks for prayer to give him boldness. He may well be contemplating his coming appearance before the emperor

Paul as we have said is presumably in the house arrest that is described at the end of the Book of Acts (28:16, 30-31). Tychicus would have been his liaison with the church in Ephesus as he had been in other contexts (Col. 4:7; Titus 3:12). We know little about such figures but it is important to recognize that they provided encouragement in the early church (6:22).

Paul concludes with peace, faith and above all, grace and love.

Amen.

### Questions for Discussion –

1. How can we apply Paul’s advice to fathers (parents), children, masters and slaves today?
2. How do we both recognize and oppose the “the cosmic powers of this present darkness?”
3. Why do you think Paul thinks it is so important to proclaim the gospel “with boldness?”

Next Study – Colossians 1:1-20 – “The Supremacy of Christ”