

**Core Seminar**

**New Testament**

**Class 17: Ephesians**

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“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” That’s how Paul opens this letter. Grace, *charis[[1]](#footnote-1)*, the traditional Greek greeting. And Peace, *shalom*, the Jewish greeting.

And in 6:23-24, he ends the letter in the same way: Shalom *and* Charis. Peace *and* Grace. Jewish *and* Greek. In so many ways, that is the message of Ephesians. It is a letter about the grace of God that brings peace between man and God and between brothers in Christ. If you’ll turn with me to Eph. 2:14, we’ll see this central message: Paul writes, “For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace” God’s grace reconciles those who believe to God – on the vertical axis, we were God’s enemies, but now we’re his friends, adopted as sons; and God’s grace unites Jew and Gentile, so that all who trust him are no longer strangers, but, on the horizontal axis – we’re fellow citizens in God’s kingdom, brothers in Christ.

The message of Ephesians can be summed up in one simple sentence: “You have received supernatural *grace* for the glory of God, therefore, live in supernatural *unity* to the glory of God.” Grace and peace.

**Purpose and Background**

So, let’s turn to purpose and background. Why was this letter written? Unlike most of Paul’s letters, it wasn’t written in response to specific problems in the church. Instead, it is a very general book. So general, in fact, that it’s not even clear that it was written specifically to the Ephesians at all. In most of your Bibles, you’ll see a footnote next to the word “Ephesus” in 1:1 saying that in many early manuscripts, the letter just says, “To the saints (blank), the faithful in Christ Jesus.” It appears that this may have been intended for broad distribution, written to all the churches Paul had seen planted in the region of Ephesus during his nearly three-year stay there.

Paul likely wrote this around 60AD, roughly 6 years after he left Ephesus, while he is in prison in Rome (3:1, 4:1). And it is a glorious work of the Holy Spirit. Let’s dive in.

**Overview**

Though we won’t step through it, you’ll see an outline of the book on the back of your handout. The main thing to notice there is how the book cleanly divides into two major sections -- Chapters 1-3, where unity is described as an accomplished fact, and then chapter 4-6 where unity is seen as a goal. In other words, the book first describes unity as having been *already* accomplished by God, and then calls Christians to work toward the unity that’s *not yet* complete.

By way of an overview, I’ll summarize the book using the little paragraphs that you see under each point throughout your handout.

Praise be to God who predestined us to be redeemed through Christ, to the praise of his glorious grace. I thank God and pray for you, that you may know Christ better as well as his power for you. (1:1-23) As for us, we were all dead in our sins, but God graciously made us alive to show his grace and end our boasting. (2:1-10) As a result, God has destroyed the barrier between Jew and Gentile, building them into a single building in which God lives by his Spirit. (2:11-22) This is the mystery of which I am a herald and for which I am now suffering. (3:1-13) So I pray for the supernatural power of God to work this kind of unity in you. (3:14-21)

Stopping there, let’s take a deeper look at the first half of the book, chapters 1-3. (Turn back to the first page of your handout, where you’ll see our first point,)

**Chapter 1: God Elects**

*Praise be to God who predestined us to be redeemed through Christ, to the praise of his glorious grace. I thank God and pray for you, that you may know Christ better as well as his power for you.[[2]](#footnote-2)*

In the first part of chapter 1, Paul praises God for electing sinners to redemption in Christ. Let’s look at 1:3-4: “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, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.” And then Paul goes on to describe these spiritual blessings: God predestined us, he adopted us as sons, he redeemed us through the blood of Christ, he forgave our sins, he revealed his will to us. As Paul understands it, our salvation is no “right” that we possess by virtue of birth, goodness, or anything else. Election is a privilege we are given because of God’s great overflowing love for us in Christ. The language here is stunning. The riches of God’s grace that he “*lavished”* on us with all wisdom and understanding. Salvation is nothing that we deserved, but entirely God’s choosing. Some people think that the idea of God electing or choosing people to know him – even before the creation of the world, as it says in verse 3 – is inherently impersonal, transacational. But this letter says that couldn’t be further from the truth: verses 4 and 5, “in *love* he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ!” It’s because of God’s great love that sinners like us could become part of his family.

If that is how much God has loved us, we should long to know God more. The creator of the universe has loved his people from all eternity – why would we not want to seek him?! And that’s exactly what Paul prays for these Christians in 1:15-23. 1:16: “I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him” May that be the longing and prayer of our hearts too. Moving on to our next section,

**2:1-10: Election Based Purely on Grace**

*As for us, we were all dead in our sins, but God graciously made us alive to show his grace and end our boasting.*

In chapter one, we considered the gospel from the perspective of God’s electing grace. And now we come to chapter two, where Paul shifts the perspective upside down; we’ve seen it from God’s eyes, now, in 2:1, he says “And you were dead . . .”

What about us? We were “*dead* in [our] trespasses and sins.” At root we are coconspirators against God and his sovereignty over his own creation. And so, under his good judgment against us as sinners we are dead. “But”, you see in verse four, “God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us . . . made us alive together with Christ –by grace you have been saved.”

These verses constitute one of the most glorious portrayals of our salvation in all of Scripture. They make it clear that we can never make ourselves right with God through enough good works. In fact, the question isn’t whether our good works will outweigh our bad: it’s are we spiritually alive, or spiritually dead? God must make us spiritually alive, so that we can repent of our sin and put our faith in Christ. Then, as Paul says in verse 10 -- having been saved totally by grace, responding to God in faith – then we can do the good works God prepared in advance for us to do – not in order to be saved, but because we’ve already been saved.

What kind of good works does Paul have in mind? Move ahead to our next section, where we see that:

**2:11-3:13: The Primary Application of the Gospel is Unity (on the second page of your handout)**

*As a result, God has destroyed the barrier between Jew and Gentile, building them into a single building in which God lives by his Spirit. This is the mystery of which I am a herald and for which I am now suffering.*

Paul begins with background: the Gentiles were at one 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.” (2:12). But what happened? Verse 14: Jesus “For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances” What’s that dividing wall? Most literally, the wall that divided the court of the Jews from the court of the Gentiles in the temple. The gospel has made peace between Jew and Gentile, and between them and God.

Paul then continues this thought into chapter 3, calling this a “mystery.” Not a mystery as in something hard to understand, but something impossible to understand until Jesus revealed it to us. What is this mystery? Paul states in plainly in verse 6. “This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.”

What’s going on here? From the time of Abraham on, God’s people were defined ethnically. That’s why Abraham’s descendents were prohibited from marrying with the nations around them. But suddenly, that wall has been destroyed. We are not saved, as we saw at the beginning of Chapter 2, based on our good works or our family tree—but based on the grace of God alone. So the kingdom of God has now been extended to all peoples.

This idea of peace and unity between Jews and Gentiles is *the* central application of Ephesians. Paul goes so far in verse 8 to state that preaching this unity was his mission. “To 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, and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things.” Again, what is the mystery? Verse 6: Jews and Gentiles together in the church. Unity is the primary application of the gospel. The central calling of Paul’s ministry. And, verse 10 says that this unity is central to God’s plan to bring glory to himself. It reads, “so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.”

So if you’ve ever thought of unity in the church as being icing on the cake, something nice but not that important, we should think again. Paul makes unity as fundamental to the application of the gospel as he could possibly express. But, the necessity of the gospel message to we heard in chapters 1 and 2 to create real unity is striking. Sometimes, especially in theologically liberal traditions, when individuals increasingly set aside the belief that Scripture is inspired by God and begin thinking instead that truth is discovered through one’s own subjective conclusions, they often begin emphasizing unity. Unity becomes an end in and of itself: the idea of folks from all races and backgrounds together in a loving community. But at the end of the day, unity doesn’t work unless something substantial actually unites you -- not just the idea of unity, but something so powerful that it really could join together all sorts of different people.

Ironically, it’s the true gospel that brings this kind of real unity. When we affirm that we are all depraved, that we are all dead spiritually, that we are in debt to God, that Christ is our only hope, a strange, helpless unity comes over us. A group of admittedly sinful people has nothing to brag about. So it is not surprising when the world’s most familiar barriers to unity are brought down in churches that are *not* focused on bringing them down but are focused instead on teaching the gospel faithfully and clearly. That’s real unity – that kind of bond that as 2:19 says comes from being “saints and members of the household of God.” And having established that that is the unity that God has created in the church, Paul moves in 3:14-21 to prayer…

**3:14-21: Prayer for the Supernatural**

*So I pray for the supernatural power of God to work this kind of unity in you.*

Does Paul realize that the unity he’s described is humanly impossible? I think he does. That’s why he prays as he does in verses 14 through 21.

There are two things Paul prays for here. First, v. 16, “according to the riches of his glory he may grand you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.” In other words, that through his Spirit God would give you the supernatural faith you need to accomplish this supernatural unity. And second, “that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge.” Why pray that we would know the full extent of Christ’s love for us? Because that is what powers our love. “We love because he first loved us.” (1 John 4:19)

How are Jews to love Gentiles? And how are we to love those in our own church with whom we have nothing in common but Christ? Pray that we would comprehend the supernatural love He has shown us. That will empower supernatural love for him and for each other.

And so it makes sense that Paul ends with his doxology, his praise, to the God who can do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us. How do we pray for the supernatural to happen? We can use these verses as a blueprint, praying that his Spirit would give us supernatural faith, and that we would understand the supernatural love Christ has shown us in the gospel, so that we in turn might love with supernatural power.

**Why God Has Done This**

Before we exit this first half of the book, though, I want to point out something I’ve skipped over. Perhaps nowhere else in Scripture do we see such a concise description not just of *what* God has done but *why*. Why did God create the world? Why did he reconcile us to himself in grace and grant us peace with one another in the church? Let me retrace our steps so far, and introduce you to three reasons behind God’s purposes.

First, God has done all this *For the Praise of His Grace.*

Look back at chapter 1, verse 5. “he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Chrsit, according to the purpose of his will.” Why? Because we’re so wonderful? No. Verse 6: “to the praise of his glorious grace.” And similarly in verse 11, “In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory.” God did these things to showcase the immensity of his grace.

That’s what we see again in 2:7. Why did God raise us from being spiritually dead? “so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.”

*For the Praise of His Wisdom*

But there is a second answer to the question “why.” It’s for the praise of his wisdom. Look at 3:10. Paul is explaining his calling to preach the gospel so that Jews and Gentiles might be united in Christ. He says, God’s “who created all things, so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.” Why is church such an uncomfortable place to be sometimes? Because these are people with whom you have nothing in common but Jesus. But that’s exactly God’s plan. When we are able to love each other supernaturally, it makes such a statement about God’s wisdom in creating the church that even beings outside our physical world sit up and take notice. The church is the crown jewel that displays God’s infinite wisdom to the whole cosmos!

*For the Glory of God*

And there is a third answer—it somewhat encompasses the other two. God did all this for his own glory. Look at 3:20-21. “Now 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, to him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”

God will be glorified forever in the way we his people are redeemed, in the way we live it out, and in the way we will forever be his. God has decided to bring glory to himself through our redemption—we who are sinners! Isn’t this amazing! The all-powerful God of the universe chooses to glorify himself through us, his church. We display the character of God to his creation, and so we bring him glory. That’s God’s purpose for all that he does, and that is the driving force behind this first half of Ephesians. *ANY QUESTIONS SO FAR?*

**Intro to Second Half**

And that takes us to chapter 4. Thus far, the letter has been entirely descriptive. God *has* chosen us. He *has* rescued us from death. He *has* destroyed the wall between Jew and Gentile. But starting in chapter 4, Paul’s language turns from the indicative to the imperative. Verse 1: “I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called.” Just like we did with the first three chapters, let me summarize what we see here in the last three; again, you’ll see this summary across your handout.

Keep the unity of the Spirit required by your new lives in Christ; (4:1-6) to accomplish this, God has given us gifts to build unity. (4:7-16) So you must no longer live as godless Gentiles. Instead, speak the truth, building each other up and forgiving just as Christ forgave you. (4:17-5:2) Don’t misunderstand me, however, I am not telling you to have unity with those who lie and say that immorality is okay. (5:3-14) Instead, make the most of every opportunity (5:15-20), submitting to each other in the following ways: (5:21) Wives, submit to your husbands; husbands love your wives as Christ did the church. (5:22-32). Children, obey your parents; fathers, bring your children up in the training of the Lord. (6:1-4) Slaves, obey your earthly masters; masters, treat your slaves with respect and fear since you serve the same master. (6:5-9) Finally, put on the full armor of God so that you can continue to stand, praying even for me, that I might continue to stand. (6:10-20). So first,

**4:1-5:2: Build One Another Up**

*Keep the unity of the Spirit required by your new lives in Christ; to accomplish this, God has given us gifts to build unity. So you must no longer live as godless Gentiles. Instead, speak the truth, building each other up and forgiving just as Christ forgave you.*

Now that we’re firmly in the application section of this epistle, it becomes critical to tie these commands back to the first three chapters of the book. Chapter 4, verses 1-3 is, in a sense, a summary of how we should live based on all we’ve discussed in chapters 1-3, and thus it’s also a summary of the challenge that chapters 4-6 set out to address. “I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

All of the admonitions in Ephesians 4-6 are answering the question “how can we keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace?” in a congregation so diverse that it even encompasses Jews and Gentiles.

Chapter 4 answers this challenge very practically.

*Gifts*

For starters, we use the gifts that Christ has given us—apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. (4:11) As with every other examination of Spiritual gifts in his letters, Paul makes it clear that the goal of gifts is the unity of the church, not our own personal fulfillment. We so often think that we have received gifts, and must use gifts, in order to be fulfilled as individuals. Paul writes that gifts are given the church “for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God . . . “ (4:12b-13) And notice what the result is when those gifts are put to use to guard the unity of the church. Orthodoxy, sound doctrine. Verse 14: then we will no longer be “tossed to a fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.” As Bible-believing evangelicals, we often think of unity as a goal that, if pursued, might *compromise* what we believe. But in fact, when we pursue unity founded on the gospel as God intends, that unity is what protects us from compromising our doctrine.

*Wisdom*

Next, Paul says that unity in the church depends on us living in *wisdom*. When we were spiritually dead, he says in verse 18, we were “darkened” in our understanding and separated from God because of the ignorance in our hardened hearts. Now, though, we are called to put off the old self with its evil desires, and, verse 23, to “be renewed in the spirit of your minds.” Paul is telling us that fleeing sin and living in godliness starts with our minds. If we pay attention to God’s wisdom rather than the fleeting desires of the flesh, we will grow in righteousness and the church will grow in unity.

*Speech*

The next thing we see in this passage is that we can use our speech to build each other up. We are not to lie (v. 25), speak in sinful anger (v. 26), or use unwholesome talk (v. 29) but speak in ways that build others up. And we are to forgive each other as Christ forgave us. (v. 32)

*Money*

And we can build each other up with our finances as well. Verse 28 is a great, and humbling, purpose statement for your work: “Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need.” If you’ve ever thought that being motivated by earning money when you work is necessarily vulgar and ungodly, I’d encourage you to spend some time with this verse. Money can be a good and Godly motivation for work. But Paul moves on from these encouragements to a section of caution:

**5:3-14: Do Not Partner with Darkness**

*Don’t misunderstand me, however, I am not telling you to have unity with those who lie and say that immorality is okay.*

Now we get to chapter 5, when Paul’s tone turns from encouragement to warning. Verses 5-7: “For 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. Let no one deceived you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not become partners with them.” (5:5-7)

Wow! Quite a shift from love and forgiveness. What’s going on here? In a letter about gospel unity, Paul takes time to warn us about a *wrong* kind of unity. A congregation should never seek unity in diversity if it means tolerance for greed, impurity, impropriety, or immorality. God’s people are to separate themselves from such things.

Christians are to run to each other with open arms, regardless of background or nationality. But the severity of Paul’s language is indicative of how strongly we must also oppose any attempt to force unity where the gospel is not the ground of our friendship. Instead, we should as the next section says,

**5:15-6:9: Make the Most of Every Opportunity**

*Instead, make the most of every opportunity, submitting to each other in the following ways: Wives, submit to your husbands; husbands love your wives as Christ did the church. Children, obey your parents; fathers, bring your children up in the training of the Lord. Slaves, obey your earthly masters; masters, treat your slaves with respect and fear since you serve the same master.*

With that caveat behind us, Paul returns to answering the challenge he laid out in 4:3—how can we keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace? What he writes in the next few paragraphs might surprise you.

We should seek unity by living wisely, “making the best use of the time” as he says in 5:16. That means being filled with the Spirit in verse 18, encouraging each other through song in verse 19. And, most significantly, we are to make the most of every opportunity in our homes and workplaces as well, which is where Paul turns in the next verses by exhorting the Ephesians to “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” (5:21) The remainder of chapter 5 and beginning of chapter 6 are specific ways in which we must submit to each other.

These passages are likely familiar to most of you. 5:22-33 contains profound teaching on marriage, viewing marriage as designed to image Christ’s love for his church. In chapter 6 is teaching on relationships between children and parents, and between slaves and their masters. We certainly should note that when Paul tells wives to submit to their husbands and for husbands to sacrificially love their wives, he’s speaking about how the distinct, complementary roles that God has ordained for men and women in marriage provide a picture of Christ’s relationship to the church. All throughout Paul’s writings and the whole Bible, it’s clear that men and women have equal dignity, value, and worth but complementary roles in the home and in the church. We could spend all day on this or on any number of other issues that this section raises, but where I want to focus is what we learn when we put these passages into their overall context.

The first thing to notice is that this idea of headship and submission is under the larger point of “making the best use of the time” from 5:16. Have you ever thought of submission in that category? Not as an inconvenient or difficult to understand burden—but God’s design for how we might make the most of this life for his glory. And then moving to the larger context—these commands sit within a book on how the gospel drives unity in the church between those who have nothing in common but Christ. What this means is that your marriage matters for more than just its own sake. It images Christ’s love for his church, his body. And when roles of husband and wife are attended to, your marriage contributes to unity within God’s new society of the church. So, marriage is far more profound than merely a bond between two people – it’s one of the ways that God pictures his love for us, and therefore it’s one of the ways that God builds unity in his church.

**6:10-23: Stand to the End**

*Finally, put on the full armor of God so that you can continue to stand, praying even for me, that I might continue to stand.*

And that brings us to the famous section on spiritual warfare in 6:10. Remember, that’s where we began this section. The end of chapter 3 is a prayer for the supernatural to happen; chapter 6 ends with a description of the supernatural at work. But now the call is a broader one—the call to stand. Paul repeats that word four times. So if you read through chapter 6, expect Paul to stare you in the eye and tell you to “Stand! Stand! Stand!.” Not an easy thing to do. If you reach the end of your days on earth and can say that you have stood fast, what an accomplishment to the glory of God! And so Paul tells the Ephesians to put on the whole armor of God. To be strong in the Lord.

And so how appropriate are his last words of instruction: “take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, praying 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, and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel.” (6:18-19)

Now doesn’t that get your heart? There is Paul in prison, an old man, praying and asking others to pray that God would make him fearless. Paul knew courage was needed to continue, and so he asked for it. And that is where this book on the unity that comes from the gospel concludes: with Paul desiring to continue to preach this gospel, so that the unity of the church might continue to grow. ANY QUESTIONS?

**Conclusion**

How do we stand firm in the faith? You notice that in 6:15 Paul says “as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace.” The gospel of peace will make us ready to stand and persevere. As Eph. 1:20 tells us, Christ is seated at God’s right hand in the heavenly realms. His victory is sure. But we do not yet *see* everything subjected to him – we are still waging battle against the spiritual forces of evil (6:12). I hope that this overview of Ephesians has helped you to see that the strength for this battle comes from the gospel of peace. As we saw in the first half of the book, our strength comes from knowing that our right standing with God is purely the result of his mercy and grace. Having been raised with Christ, we can pray with Paul that we would know the “immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe.” (1:19). And as we saw in the second half of the book, our strength to live for God comes from the peace that we know within his church, where as it says in 4:12-13, we are “building up the body of Christ, until 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.” With that hope in mind, we can join Paul in worship: “Now 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, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.” (3:20-21).

1. Pronounced “karis” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I wouldn’t waste time repeating this summary, which is also in the handout. But it’s reprinted here so you know what your class is looking at. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)