

Ephesians 4

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Introduction.

- A. I don't know the technical term for it, but in many of Paul's letters, there's what I think of as a break point. Basically, that's the point of the letter at which Paul finishes whatever main discussion, usually doctrinal, is on his mind and starts talking about practical applications. Some notable break points are Romans 12:1, 1 Corinthians 7:1, and Galatians 5:13. Recognizing them is crucial to our understanding of the text.
- B. Now that we've gone through the first three chapters of Ephesians, we've come to the break point of this book. Paul is now finished with his discussion of God's cosmic plan for mankind and how that plan applies to the Gentiles. That means that for the rest of our Ephesians letters, we're not going to have to refer back constantly to Ephesians 1 and Ephesians 2 like we were doing. The subject has shifted from those things.
- C. Instead, beginning with Ephesians 4, we're going to begin the take-home-message sections of Ephesians. There have been applications throughout the first three chapters, but those have largely been, "This is what we need to think. This is what we need to understand." By contrast, what we're going to see in the remainder of the book are chunks of Scripture that tell us what we need to do.
- D. Specifically, in this chapter, we're going to examine the ways that we need to behave in the church, what the point of the church is, and the ways that we should behave even when we aren't dealing with other Christians. Although there isn't going to be anything explicitly referential in it, it's still based on the grand ideas Paul presented earlier. Paul's point is that because we have received so great a salvation, because we have been created in Christ Jesus for good works, there are many life choices that God now gets to make for us. If we understand and follow those choices, it will transform us. Let's look at how this works in Ephesians 4.

I. God's Plan for Christianity.

- A. The first big lump of text we want to consider in this chapter is Ephesians 4:1-16. Within this, the first important, discrete idea appears in Paul's discussion in vss. 1-3. As always, we need to pay attention to the "Therefore" here. Because our calling is so great, we are supposed to walk in a manner that is worthy of it. According to the way the world thinks, the greatness of our calling should lead us to be prideful, to make sure that everybody around us knows how special we are. Of course, the Christian response to our calling is completely different. Instead of pride, we are to conduct ourselves with humility. Instead of dealing harshly with those we perceive as less than ourselves, we are to be gentle. Instead of demanding of the world, "Don't you know how important I am?!", we are to be patient. That's conduct worthy of Christ.
- B. As important as it is to behave this way generally, Paul's admonitions here apply with special force to our interactions with other Christians. Instead of being touchy with one another, we are to bear with one another. In other words, even when another Christian does something to annoy or offend us, as long as their conduct is not actually sinful, we're just to brush it off and move on. Likewise, we are to do all we can to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. If there's one passage that brethren love to forget, it's this one. Too many Christians go through life with a chip on their shoulders, ready to quarrel with their brethren given the slightest provocation. As a result, this country abounds with splinter churches filled with people who believe they're right about some subtlety of application, when actually, their whole attitude is dead wrong. Let's strive not to be like that. Let's do all we can to maintain the peace and the unity of this church.
- C. There's a reason why unity is so important to God, and we see Paul define it in vss. 4-6. When we are united on earth, we mirror the unity that God has established in the heavenly places. There aren't a whole bunch of equally valid churches. There's just one true body of Christ. There aren't multiple, equally valid goals in life. There is only one hope. There aren't a whole bunch of equally good, righteous religious authorities. There is only one Lord. There aren't numerous different paths that lead to God. There is only one faith. There aren't a number of possible routes to salvation. There is only one baptism. In short, there is one way to the one God.
- D. This Scriptural truth inevitably changes the way we understand Paul's instructions before it. There are many in the religious world who believe in peace at any price. They will ignore any doctrinal difference imaginable just to produce a show of surface unity. That's not what this text is talking about, friends. We can compromise on our own will, but we can't compromise on God's will. What He says, we have to do, and no matter how much we might want to, we can't have fellowship with the disobedient, because God doesn't.
- E. To make sure that we could abide in the one true faith, God set up a way that it could be taught and learned. This system is described in vss. 7-12. After Jesus won His victory, He blessed all of us, not least by giving men gifts for the perpetuation of His gospel. Some of these gifts are no longer given to man today. There is no one alive at this time who can rightly claim to be either an apostle or a prophet. However, those men still benefit us in that we have the inspired record of their teaching. The other gifts, though, remain. We are blessed with evangelists and shepherds and teachers in this building this evening. Notice, though, what the

point is. God gave these gifts to men not so that they could serve us while we did nothing. Instead, the Scriptural pattern is that the teachers equip the saints so that the saints will go out, serve one another, and build up the body of Christ. That, in a nutshell, is God's plan for edification of His church.

- F. God's purposes for this system are set forth in vss. 13-16. There are several of them, all related. First, God wanted to ensure that we would share the same spiritual understanding and spiritual maturity. Second, He wanted to ensure that when the devil stirs up a doctrinal storm, that we have the spiritual strength to remain anchored to the Lord instead of being driven wherever Satan wants us to go. Third, He wants us to grow to be like Jesus, which, once again, is the point of our Christian discipleship. Being a Christian doesn't mean that we go to church. Being a Christian means that we strive to be like Christ. Finally, those teachers were sent so that they could teach the church to function in a useful and systematic way. It's like the church is a car. We know that there are no useless parts in our cars' engines. Otherwise, they wouldn't be there. In the same way, there are no useless parts of the church. It's the teachers' role to make sure that each part is doing its part, so that the entire church can work together to fulfill God's plan.

II. Old and New Ways of Life

- A. However, there are things that we need to do on an individual level as well, and Paul addresses these things in Ephesians 4:17-32. He begins his discussion by examining the old way of life in vss. 17-19. According to Paul, what's at the core of this old way of life is what he variously describes as callousness or hardness of heart. In one direction, hardness of heart produces ignorance. Ignorance in turn produces being excluded from the life of God, which is accompanied by darkened understanding and futility of mind. In other words, friends, once we harden our hearts to the gospel, there is no other way to find either meaning or God.
- B. In the opposite direction, Paul says callousness leads to sensuality, a mind that is set on the pleasures of the flesh. Sensuality in turn produces the practice of impurity and greediness. That's the recipe for life without God. People who lived that way were everywhere in the first-century Roman Empire, and they're everywhere around us today. Once we reject God, that sensual, depraved lifestyle is where we inevitably end up.
- C. As Paul emphasizes in vss. 20-24, living like the world is NOT the point of being a Christian. If we think we can put on Christ and go on doing everything we want to do, we are sadly mistaken. Instead, in Christ, the truth is that God expects us to lay aside the old self, because otherwise, the old self will continue being corrupted. If we don't make a clean break with the past, it's like being bitten by a snake and only sucking out half the poison. The other half of the poison that we leave in will kill us just fine on its own. Likewise, Paul is warning us here that if we continue in even part of our old practices, we will be entirely lost.
- D. Instead, what we are to do is to be renewed in the spirit of our mind. Instead of being hard-hearted to the gospel like we were, we are to allow it to transform us. Then, once we've done that, we can put on the new self, the new us that God wants us to be. Whereas the old self is given to debauchery and greed, the new self is focused on righteousness and the holiness of the truth. Now, "holiness of the truth" is not a familiar idea to us, but it's a Scripturally interesting one. The point is that as we study and practice the gospel, it inevitably separates us from those around us. It shifts us into the category of people who are bent on serving the will of God, and not their own wills any longer. That's the way that the truth makes us holy.
- E. Paul describes some of the ways that the truth will lead us to behave in his chronicle of godly actions in vss. 25-32. Throughout this text, Paul follows a consistent pattern. He begins by highlighting the bad way we used to be, then contrasting the good way that we now should be. The first evil deed he examines is falsehood. Rather than being liars like so many people around us, we are to be honest people, particularly with other Christians. This is just common sense. The thing about lying is that it may seem to offer us short-term advantage, but it does long-term harm. Once others discover our lies, they'll never trust us again.
- F. Likewise, we are to be people who control our anger, just as we studied at length a few weeks ago. Sometimes, it's tempting to behave oppositely; that's why wrath is a temptation, after all. However, even when we are so sure of ourselves, we must remember that our anger does not approach God's righteousness.
- G. Next, Paul warns us against theft. Instead, we are to be people who work to earn our living. Most of us probably aren't going to be tempted to hold up the 7-Eleven, but this text is an important warning against other, more subtle kinds of theft. Friends, when we download a song or a movie from the Internet that we haven't paid for, that's stealing. When we don't report income from our side business on our taxes, that's stealing. We can't do it and please God. True, honesty does cost us money, but dishonesty costs us our souls.
- H. We must also control not just our actions, but our speech. Paul warns us to put off unwholesome words, which could be anything from a profanity to a put-down. Instead, we should look to favor others with our speech and build them up. That doesn't mean that everything we say must be pleasant, but it must be good.
- I. From actions to speech, Paul moves finally to hearts. In vs. 30, we see a whole list of evil attitudes that we are to reject. It's comparatively easy not to steal, but sometimes it's hard not to be bitter. More challenging still are the attitudes we are to put on. It's one thing to be neutral in our dealings with others; it's another thing to be consistently forgiving, tender-hearted, and kind. Nonetheless, that's what God expects.

Conclusion. However, God also expects us to be saved and become Christians.