

Week 1: Introduction

Hook



Main Point: Ephesians shows us what it looks like to live as Christ's transformed people.

The Witness Security Program was established in 1971 by the U.S. Marshals and has relocated and given new identities to more than 19,250 witnesses and their family members.¹ Imagine that tomorrow you were placed in the Witness Security Program and given the opportunity to create an entirely new identity.

- What name would you choose?
- What career would you pursue?
- Where would you live?

As dramatic as joining the Witness Security Program might be, becoming a Christian is an even greater transformation. When you come to Christ, God doesn't simply give you a new label or ask you to pretend to be someone else. He changes you from the inside out. Your identity is fundamentally transformed, and that new identity affects every area of your life.

This definite "before" and "after" is the heart of Ephesians. As we begin this study, we'll explore the context of the letter and Paul's relationship with the Ephesians before considering who God has made us to be in Christ and how He calls us to live out that new identity together in unity and Christlike love.

Q: Do you think most Christians struggle more with understanding who they are in Christ or living like who they are in Christ?

Q: Have you ever had a season when your identity was wrapped up in something other than Christ? How did that impact your sense of purpose? Your peace? Your joy?

Q: What is one way your life today is different because of your relationship with Jesus?

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Book

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Ephesians 1:1–2, 15–17 and 6:21–22 [Read]

Talking Point 1: Paul loved the Ephesians like a spiritual father.

Q: How was Paul made an apostle? What does this tell us about his authority?

Q: Based on the language he uses, how does Paul view the Ephesians?

The apostle Paul was the chief persecutor of the Church until Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus, where he was converted and God called him to be His chosen instrument to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 9; AD 32). Before Paul was sent out on his missionary journeys, he spent many years preaching and ministering in various places (Acts 9–13; Galatians 1:15–24). Then he and Barnabas were sent out by the church in Antioch on his first missionary journey (AD 47–48). During his second missionary journey, he started writing letters to churches he had started or visited (AD 49–52); he wrote more during his third journey (AD 53–57). He wrote Ephesians (with Philemon and Colossians) while he was in prison in Rome in AD 61 and Philipppians a little later in AD 62. These four letters are called the Prison Epistles.

Most of Paul's letters are what we call "occasional" letters, written to a specific person or church for a specific reason, answering a question or addressing a situation happening with them. Ephesians is a more general letter, written to the church at Ephesus (the capital city of the Roman province of Asia) and then circulated to all the churches in the area.

Paul began this letter with the standard format: his name, the name of the recipients, and a greeting of "grace" and "peace" (1:1–2). "Grace" was a typical Greek greeting, and "peace" (*shalom*) was a typical Jewish greeting, so Paul often used both to emphasize that Jews and Gentiles were now one body in Christ (Romans 2:11; Galatians 3:28). Paul described himself as an apostle of Christ "by the will of God" (1:1). God's will alone gave Paul his authority as an apostle to speak to these churches.

Paul called the Ephesians "saints," pointing to their identity in Christ, not their own righteousness. All Christians are "saints" because we are justified before God by grace through faith (Romans 5:1; Galatians 2:16; Ephesians 2:8–10). But he also called them "the faithful in Christ Jesus" (1:1), and later he wrote that he had heard about their faith in Jesus and love for all of God's people (1:15). This was a faithful church who followed Jesus and loved each other well, not a church he was rebuking, like in Galatians. It was a

solid church, and he was writing to encourage them (6:21–22). Paul had a long, significant relationship with the Ephesian church. We can see his pastor’s heart for these people throughout the letter.

Paul first preached in Ephesus near the end of his second missionary journey, around AD 52 (Acts 18). He left Priscilla and Aquila there to continue preaching while he journeyed on to Jerusalem. He returned the following year during his third missionary journey and stayed for three years, an unusually long time (~AD 53–56; Acts 19–20). He preached in the synagogues boldly for months until the Jews opposed him, so he went to the lecture halls and held daily discussions for two years. Then the artisans became upset that people weren’t buying their idols of Artemis and started a riot, and Paul left. A year later (~AD 57), Paul felt he was being called by the Spirit to go to Jerusalem even though he knew it was dangerous for him. Along the way, he stopped to say goodbye to the Ephesian elders, believing he would never see them again.

Paul told them, “I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the Gospel of the grace of God” (Acts 20:24). He encouraged them to keep watch over their flock and be on guard against wolves among them (Acts 20:28–38). They wept together, and they hugged and kissed him. Paul left Timothy to oversee the church there (1 Timothy 1:3). He went to Jerusalem, where he was arrested and eventually taken to Rome to await trial before Caesar. While in prison there, he wrote this letter to the Ephesian church he dearly loved.

Paul had a close, personal relationship with the Ephesian church, as he did many of the churches he oversaw. As he said to the Thessalonians, he not only shared the Gospel with people, but he shared his life with them. He cared gently for them with great affection (1 Thessalonians 2:8). Lots of Bible readers tend to think of Paul primarily as a theologian, teacher or evangelist, but in his letters we see the heart of a pastor who loved his people deeply, following the example of Jesus, who cared for His people with the heart of a shepherd. Even while he was in prison, instead of worrying about himself, Paul was focused on encouraging his spiritual children in their faith (Philippians 1:7–8).

Q: What kind of model did Paul give us for church leadership today? How have you seen church leaders love their people like fathers, pastors and shepherds?

Q: Paul wanted to encourage the Ephesians even while he was in prison. What does that teach us about encouraging one another when circumstances are difficult?

Ephesians 2:1–7 and 4:1–6, 20–24 [Read]

Talking Point 2: Ephesians describes our identity in Christ and how to live in our identity.

Q: According to Ephesians 2:1–7, how did God transform us in Christ?

Q: If we are saved by grace through faith rather than by works, how should that truth shape the way we live each day?

Q: How did Paul describe the way Christians should walk? How is that different from the way we were before we were transformed in Christ?

Ephesians is a letter of encouragement, meditating on the greatness and character of God and the goodness of the Gospel. The letter has two main parts: doctrine, followed by its application to our lives:

- 1) Ephesians 1–3: Doctrine: How the Gospel Transforms Us
- 2) Ephesians 4–6: Application: Living as Transformed People

In all his letters, Paul focused primarily on the Gospel because it is “the power of God for salvation for everyone who believes,” the Good News of what God has done for us and in us, not anything we have done for ourselves (Romans 1:16). It is the foundation of everything we believe. The Gospel was paramount for Paul. His entire life’s purpose was advancing the Gospel (Philippians 1:12–18). Everything he wrote and preached came back to the Gospel, and Ephesians is no different. The Gospel makes us alive in Christ (2:1–10). It reconciles Jews and Gentiles and unifies the Church into one body of Christ (2:11–22; 3:6). We are made new creations by God’s transforming power, not by our own effort (2:1–10). The Gospel is all about what God has done and is doing in us.

In the first half of Ephesians, Paul described how the Gospel transforms us into new creations who find our identity in Him. In the second half, he fleshed out what it looks like to live out that identity in real life. Paul “urged” the Ephesians to live in a manner “worthy of the calling to which you have been called” (4:1). This isn’t about working hard to *become* worthy of that calling. It’s not about earning your salvation; that is a gift that has already been freely given. This was Paul urging his people to *live into* the identity God *had already given them* in Christ. When Paul wrote, “You are light in the Lord. Walk as children of the light” (5:8), he was saying, “You’re children of God, act like it!” You already *are* light. You’re not trying to become light or make your way to the light. God has already made you light; He has already changed you. God has already done that part. That’s the Gospel. Now you just have to *live into* that identity.

Imagine if you were born unable to walk. But one day, a doctor performed surgery and healed your body. Would you say, “Thanks, anyway” and stay in your wheelchair because that’s what you were used to? Or would you jump up and start walking? Or even running and dancing and all the things you couldn’t do before? You would take advantage of your new body and live your life to the fullest. That is what Paul was encouraging the Ephesians to do, to live their new life in Christ to the fullest. He was saying, God has healed you, He has made you new and whole and given you abundant life, so live it! This is what Paul encouraged the Ephesians to do throughout this letter—

live into the calling they had been given. Live into their identity as the people of God. And he fleshed out exactly what that looks like.

Q: In what ways has God transformed you since you started following Jesus? How is your life different?

Q: Why is it hard to live as children of light in this world of darkness? How should the Church be different from the culture? What impact could we have on the world?

Ephesians 4:1–6, 14–16 and 5:1–2 [Read]

Talking Point 3: Following Jesus is walking in the way of self-sacrificing love.

Q: Who are Christians supposed to imitate? Why? What does that look like?

Q: How does the body of Christ build itself up in love?

Q: Who is our reason for walking in love?

The Christian life is not easy, but it is simple – follow Jesus. That’s it. That’s all we are called to do. That doesn’t just mean to listen for His voice and go where He tells us to go, like to move to this city, go to this college, or take this job, though it can mean that. What it means, most basically, is to follow in Jesus’ footsteps – to do what He did, walk as He walked, love as He loved, pray as He prayed, live as He lived. Following Jesus means *being like Him*. In the ancient world, disciples of a rabbi not only memorized his teachings, but they also imitated the way their rabbi lived.

Ephesians first tells us what God has done for us and who He has made us in Christ, then calls us to walk worthy of that identity together as His united people (4:1–6). We are to be *imitators* of Christ because Christ is where we find our identity (1 Thessalonians 1:6). The word “Christian” means “little Christ.” Like parents might call a child who looks a lot like them their little shadow or little carbon copy, Christians should look like little copies of Christ to the world around us. As children of God, we should imitate God our Father (5:1), and Jesus is the perfect revelation of God because He is God (Colossians 1:15; Hebrews 1:3). Being a Christian means growing to become more like Christ. We will not fully achieve Christlikeness in this life, but we continually pursue it (Philippians 3:12). Sanctification is a process of becoming more like Jesus every day (2 Corinthians 4:16).

Though Ephesians gives us lots of tangible, practical ways to live out our identity in Christ, the overarching characteristic of Jesus to which Paul points is self-sacrificing love. We see it repeated throughout the letter and spelled out very simply in 5:1 – live like Jesus, walk in love. Not the worldly definition of love, but the kind of love Jesus showed when He gave Himself up for us (5:2). The Bible tells us over and over that this is real love, *agape* love, godly love, Christlike love, divine love (John 15:13; Romans 5:8). *Agape*

love is how we are loved by God and how we are to love others because we are His people (Matthew 5:43–48; 1 John 3:16). Philippians tells us our attitudes should be like Jesus, who humbled Himself so much that He left His throne in heaven and laid down His life for us (Philippians 2:1–8).

Self-sacrificing love is the defining characteristic of what it means to be like Jesus. It is not just the most important characteristic to have; it underlies everything else we are and everything we do as followers of Jesus. In 1 Corinthians, Paul described it by saying we could do all the religious stuff in the world, but if we do it without *agape* love, it is just empty, meaningless noise (1 Corinthians 13:1–3). Love is “the greatest of these” because it’s the foundation of everything else (1 Corinthians 13:13).

So Paul wrote, “Walk in love, as Christ loved us” (5:2). He also described what that looks like – be completely humble, putting others’ needs ahead of your own. Be gentle and patient, bearing with one another in love (4:2). Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace (4:3). This unity is grounded in what all believers share: one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father of all (4:4–6). Speak the truth in love and relate to one another with emotional and spiritual maturity (4:15). Build up the body of Christ through this kind of love for one another (4:16). Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ (5:21). Love one another just as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us (5:2).

Love is patient and kind. It does not envy or boast; it is not proud. Love does not dishonor others. It is not self-seeking or easily angered and keeps no record of wrongs (1 Corinthians 13:4–5). Jesus called us to love everyone in the world this way, even our enemies (Luke 6:35). This is what makes us different from the world. The world only loves those who love them back, but followers of Jesus love all people (Matthew 5:43–48). These descriptions of love tell us what each of our individual lives should look like as followers of Jesus and what our church communities should look like as the body of Christ. It’s really that simple. Christian people, Christian homes, and Christian communities should look like Christ. Of course, no one is perfect, and we will all fail miserably at times. But if our church communities don’t look like Jesus, then we aren’t the body of Christ; we’re something else.

It was this kind of self-sacrificing love and unity that defined the very first church in Jerusalem just after Pentecost (Acts 2:42–47; 4:32–35). The world around them noticed something different going on there. They saw the way they loved and cared for one another and were attracted to it. The same is true for us when we live out the self-sacrificing *agape* love of Christ in our churches and the world around us. People will take notice. They will see how different it is from the way the world lives and loves, and they will want to be loved that way, too. The body of Christ reflecting the love of Jesus is the greatest witness there is.

Q: Why is it hard to love people the way Jesus loves them? How might it help to remember that this is how Jesus loves us?

Q: Describe a time another Christian loved you in a self-sacrificing way. How did it feel? How did it impact your life? How did it impact your relationship with them? Your relationship with God?

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Took

Main Point: Ephesians shows us what it looks like to live as Christ's transformed people.

Our world constantly encourages us to build our identity around what we do, what we own, what others think of us, or what we've accomplished. But Ephesians reminds us that our identity is not something we create – it is something God gives us. If you are in Christ, then God says you are:

- Chosen (Ephesians 1:4)
- Adopted into His family (Ephesians 1:5)
- Redeemed and forgiven through the blood of Christ (Ephesians 1:7)
- Sealed with the Holy Spirit as God's own possession (Ephesians 1:13–14)
- Made alive with Christ by grace (Ephesians 2:4–5)
- God's workmanship, created for good works (Ephesians 2:10)
- A fellow citizen with God's people and a member of His household (Ephesians 2:19)

These truths are not earned by your performance; they are gifts of God's grace. They don't change when your circumstances change. They are the foundation of who you are.

This week, spend time reflecting on who God says you are. Before your feet hit the floor each morning, remind yourself of your identity in Christ instead of allowing your circumstances, successes or failures to define you. Then ask yourself, *"If this is who God says I am, how should I live today?"* Throughout Ephesians, Paul moves from identity to action – from who we are to how we should walk. As you study this letter, ask God to help your daily life increasingly reflect the new person He has already made you to be.

CHALLENGES

THINK: Think about how God has transformed you since you started following Jesus. What is your identity in Christ? How is that different from the way you found your identity before or the way the world encourages us to find our identity and self-worth? If our identity is found in Christ, what does that tell us about the way we should live? In what ways are you reflecting Christ to the world? If someone looked at your life from the outside, would they know you are a Christian without your telling them?

PRAY: As you enter this study, pray that God will speak to you through Ephesians. Pray to fully commit to finding your identity in Christ and nothing else. Ask the Lord to show you what it looks like to live into that identity in your daily life. Ask Him to reveal any ways you are not walking with Him and following in the footsteps of Christ.

ACT: Walk in love. Choose one person whom it is difficult for you to love. Pray intentionally for that person every day this week. Not that God would change that person but that He would change your heart toward him or her. Ask God to work in and through his or her life and shower that person with spiritual blessings. Pray for God to reveal to you how you can show him or her self-sacrificing love this week, in a big or small way. Then do that thing, whatever it is. Intentionally choose to show that person love in the way Jesus would.

¹ <https://www.usmarshals.gov/what-we-do/witness-security>