

Week 8: Unity and Maturity in Christ: Ephesians 4:1–16

Hook



Main Point: As the body of Christ, we are given gifts to help one another grow in spiritual maturity.

Q: If you could choose one person from anywhere in history – or even a fictional character – to become one of your closest friends, whom would you choose? Why?

Q: How has a close friendship positively impacted your life?

We all know that right relationships shape us. They celebrate us in our victories, encourage us in our struggles, and challenge us to become better than we would on our own. That’s exactly how God designed the Church. Jesus didn’t save us to live as isolated individuals—He brought us into His family, where we grow together.

In Ephesians 4, Paul shows us what a healthy church looks like. As believers live with humility, use their spiritual gifts, and invest in the lives of others, the whole body grows stronger, more unified, and more like Christ. Today we’ll see that God has uniquely gifted every believer to help the Church grow into spiritual maturity.

RECAP: In the first half of the letter to the Ephesians (chapters 1–3), Paul gave them doctrine: how the Gospel transforms us into new creations in Christ, both individually and as a body of Christ:

- Individually: We were dead; God makes us alive.
- Corporately: We were separated; God makes us one in Him.

Paul also prayed for the Ephesians to be filled to fullness with the Spirit of God, which would give them wisdom, strength, love and every spiritual blessing.

Now that Paul had established our identity in Christ with doctrine, the second half of the letter applies that doctrine to our lives, teaching us how to live as transformed people:

- In the church community (4:1–5:21)
- In the home (5:22–6:9)
- In the world (6:10–20)

This lesson will focus on our unity as the body and our spiritual maturity in Christ.

Week 8: Unity and Maturity in Christ: Ephesians 4:1–16

Book

Main Point: As the body of Christ, we are given gifts to help one another grow in spiritual maturity.

Ephesians 4:1–6 [Read]

Talking Point 1: Because God has made us one in Christ, we must preserve that unity through humility and love.

Q: Why should Christians make every effort to be unified?

Q: How do humility, gentleness, patience and bearing with one another lead to unity?

Paul started with “therefore,” pointing us back to all he had just said: God has made us new creations in Christ, *therefore*, this is how we live that out. Walking in a manner “worthy” of the calling doesn’t mean we need to do something to earn God’s grace. Paul dealt with that misconception earlier in the letter, and here he said we “have been” called. We *have been* made new. The life we live as believers isn’t about earning salvation; it’s about reflecting who we are now in Christ. “Worthily” can mean “worthy,” “comparable” or “suitable.” Paul was saying our way of living should fit or align with our new identity. You *are* a child of God, so act like it! You *are* a temple of the Spirit, so act like it! You *are* a beautiful work of art created for good, so act like it!

In these opening verses, the focus of what it means to walk in a worthy manner is on unity in the Church. Paul had just talked about breaking down barriers between Jew and Gentile, but there were many types of diversity in the early church: rich and poor, slave and free, male and female. This was unusual in Greco-Roman culture; typically, there were thick dividing lines between those categories. But in the Church, people of all categories were brought together and told they were one in Christ (Galatians 3:28). The Gospel crossed the dividing lines of the surrounding culture and united believers as members of one body.

Paul explained that preserving this unity takes humility, gentleness, patience and bearing with one another in love (4:2), all of which are attitudes of Jesus (Philippians 2:1–8). Humility is putting others’ needs ahead of our own. Gentleness is handling others with care. If everyone considers the needs of others, we will all work together to make sure everyone gets what they need instead of fighting to take what we want the way the world does. Patience is being slow to anger. This heart attitude alone will prevent many fights. Bearing with one another means to endure others’ weaknesses. A Gospel attitude that recognizes “because we all are all sinners, I have weaknesses myself, and I have been shown grace by God” gives greater compassion and patience for others.

Christian unity is not something believers create; it is something the Holy Spirit has already established by bringing us into the body of Christ. Paul therefore told believers to be “eager”—diligent and making every effort—to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace (4:3). We guard that unity by pursuing peace, working through conflict, bearing with differences and renouncing the pride, harshness and selfishness that divide people.¹

Paul then grounded this call to unity in seven spiritual realities shared by every believer: one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father of all believers (4:4–6). We belong to one body, have been given life by one Spirit and share one hope in Christ. We confess one Lord, share one faith in Him and the truth of the Gospel, and share one baptism that marks our identification with Christ. As God’s adopted children, we also share one Father, who is “over all and through all and in all.” Christian unity is therefore not based on having the same personalities, backgrounds or preferences. Nor is it unity at any cost. It is grounded in the Gospel truths and spiritual life we share through the triune God.²

This isn’t unity for unity’s sake or peace maintained by ignoring sin and doctrinal error. It is unity grounded in Christ and the truth of the Gospel. It requires us to lay aside pride and personal agendas, bear with one another’s weaknesses and pursue the good of others. We will not agree on every preference or secondary issue, but as we submit to the Spirit through His Word and treat one another with the attitudes of Jesus, we will preserve and display the unity God has already given us.

Q: Describe a time when you experienced strong unity with other Christians.

Q: What heart attitudes or things in our culture can be barriers to unity in the Church?

Q: Give examples of when Jesus stressed the importance of unity among believers.

Ephesians 4:7–13 [Read]

Talking Point 2: God has gifted us to help one another grow in spiritual maturity.

Q: How does the discussion of roles in the Church connect to unity in the body?

Q: What is the ultimate purpose of all these roles?

This passage is often read alongside Paul’s teaching about spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12. It is always helpful to read the whole witness of Scripture on a topic, but it is also important to look at the literary context of this passage within Ephesians. Paul was talking about spiritual gifts, but in the context of unity in the Church. In fact, all three passages have a similar context: God gives different gifts to individual believers so that they can work together for the good of the whole body. Our gifts are not given to

build our own platforms, but to serve one another and build up the body of Christ (4:12).

Paul had just emphasized the unity of the Church—one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father (4:4–6). But unity does not mean uniformity. Beginning in verse 7, Paul turned from what all believers share to the different ways Christ has equipped each of us. “Grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift” (4:7).

Here, “grace” refers to Christ’s gracious enablement for ministry. Paul had already used the word this way when describing his own calling. In 3:7–8, he called his ministry “the gift of God’s grace” and said, “this grace was given” to him “to preach to the Gentiles.” God graciously called and enabled Paul to carry out the ministry He had given him. Now Paul says that grace has been given to “each one of us.” Christ graciously equips every believer to serve, while sovereignly determining the particular gifts and ministry He gives each one.³

That emphasis on Christ as the One who gives leads Paul to focus on the Giver Himself. The spiritual gifts in this passage flow from the victory, authority, and generosity of the risen Christ. Quoting Psalm 68, Paul pictured Jesus like a victorious king returning from battle and distributing the spoils of His victory. Christ “led a host of captives” and “gave gifts to men” (4:8). Having triumphed over sin, death, and Satan through His death and resurrection, the victorious Christ now gives gifts to His people so that they can serve His Church.⁴

Paul paused to explain that before Christ ascended to heaven, He first descended “into the lower regions, the earth” (4:9). In the incarnation, the Son of God came from the glory of heaven down to earth, where He suffered, died, was buried, defeated death, and rose again. Forty days after His resurrection, He ascended back to heaven (Acts 1:9), where He is seated at the right hand of the Father (Acts 2:33). Christ is now exalted “far above all the heavens” and “fills all things” (4:10), meaning He reigns as the supreme Lord over all creation, exercising His power and authority everywhere. From this position of universal lordship, He sovereignly gives gifts to His Church (1:22–23). The One who descended in humility to accomplish our salvation is now the victorious and exalted Lord who graciously equips His people to accomplish His purposes.

Paul specifically pointed to apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastors and teachers as people Christ gave as gifts to His Church (4:11). These leaders were not given to do all the ministry themselves, but “to equip the saints for the work of ministry” (4:12). In other words, church leaders equip believers, and believers do the work of ministry. There are no spectators in the body of Christ. Every believer has received grace to serve, and Christ has equipped each of us to contribute to the building up of His Church. As believers use what Christ has given them to serve one another, the whole body is strengthened and grows.

Paul then described where all of this building is headed: the spiritual maturity of the whole Church (4:13). He described that maturity in several related ways. We are to grow together in unity in “the faith” and in our knowledge of the Son of God, into “mature manhood,” and ultimately “to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.” These are not separate destinations but different ways of describing the maturity toward which the whole body is growing.

The “fullness of Christ” does not mean that believers become divine or possess everything that belongs to Christ as God. Rather, Christ Himself is the standard and measure of spiritual maturity. The Church is growing toward maturity as its people increasingly reflect His character and likeness. So, building up the body means helping one another become increasingly mature and Christlike—grounded in the truth, growing in our knowledge of Christ, and increasingly reflecting Him in the way we live.⁵

This kind of growth happens as believers minister to one another. We can sharpen one another as iron sharpens iron (Proverbs 27:17). We can hold one another accountable and correct one another according to Scripture (2 Timothy 3:16–17). We cannot always see our own blind spots, but another part of the body can see them and push us to grow (Hebrews 10:24–25). Spiritual maturity is not something we pursue only by ourselves; Christ designed His Church so that we help one another grow.

When Jesus gave His disciples the Great Commission, He said the Church’s mission is to make disciples (Matthew 28:18–20). That includes both evangelism—spreading the Gospel so unbelievers will be saved—and discipleship—helping believers grow in spiritual maturity. As the Gospel goes out, people are brought into Christ’s body; and as believers use their gifts to minister to one another, the body is built up toward maturity.

Salvation is eternally important, but it is the beginning, not the end, of the Christian life. When we trust in Christ, we are justified—declared righteous before God (1 Corinthians 6:11)—and become new creations in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17). From then on, the Spirit works throughout our lives to make us increasingly like Christ; this is sanctification (2 Corinthians 3:18). Christ not only saves His people; He is also at work bringing His people to spiritual maturity. And one of the primary ways He does that is through His people ministering to one another with the gifts He has given them. The goal is that together we grow “to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (4:13).

Q: How have other people helped you to grow in your faith?

Q: What spiritual gifts has God given you? How can you use them to help others grow?

Q: How is being a part of a Life Group one of the best ways to disciple others and be disciplined yourself?

Ephesians 4:14–16 [Read]

Talking Point 3: Spiritually mature Christians uphold the truth in love and contribute to the growth of the whole church.

Q: What is the difference between spiritual children and the spiritually mature?

Q: According to verse 16, how does every believer contribute to the growth of the body of Christ?

These verses are a conclusion, telling us what will happen if we work together as one body: We will all grow in spiritual maturity, becoming more and more like Jesus (4:15). Paul's argument reaches back to verse 11. Christ gave leaders to the church to equip believers for ministry, and verses 14–16 describe the kind of mature, healthy church that results when those believers are equipped and serving together.

Paul contrasted the spiritually mature with spiritual children who are blown around by “every wind of doctrine,” easily falling for the world's deceitful schemes (4:14). Children are easily swayed by whatever they hear and the latest trends, but adults have the discernment to tell truth from deception. The same is true of the spiritually mature. This imagery is similar to what Jesus said about the man whose house was easily blown over because he didn't build it on the rock, the teachings of Jesus (Matthew 7:24–27). People who are not spiritually mature are more susceptible to false teaching because they don't have a firm foundation in sound doctrine.⁶

But spiritual maturity involves more than recognizing false teaching. Mature believers uphold the truth in love. The Greek wording behind “speaking the truth in love” carries the broader idea of maintaining the truth in both our words and our lives.⁷ We must never compromise the truth in the name of love, but we must also never use the truth as a weapon to attack people. Biblical truth and biblical love always belong together.

Speaking the truth in love means caring enough about other believers to tell them what is true, even when it may be difficult for them to hear. It means correcting others gently rather than harshly or self-righteously. It also means being humble enough to listen when another believer speaks truth into our lives. We need relationships with people who love us enough to tell us the truth and whom we trust enough to receive it from them.

As we speak the truth in love, we “grow in every way into Him who is the head—Christ” (4:15). Jesus is both the standard toward which we are growing and the head from whom the church receives its direction, strength and growth. The goal of spiritual maturity is not merely to know more facts about the Bible, though sound doctrine is essential. The goal is for the truth of God's Word to transform us so that we become more and more like Christ.

Paul then returned to the picture of the church as Christ's body. Christ is the head from whom the church receives its growth, and every member has a part to play. This brings us back to the leaders Christ gave the church in verse 11. Their role is not to perform all the ministry themselves but to equip the saints for ministry. Verse 16 describes what happens when those equipped believers serve as they should: "each part" works properly, and the whole body grows and builds itself up in love.⁸

Spiritual maturity, then, is not merely an individual pursuit. Paul emphasized the growth of the entire body. As every believer uses the gifts Christ has given them to serve others, the church becomes stronger, healthier and more like Christ. There are no spectators in the body of Christ. Every member is needed, and every member has a contribution to make.

We need Christ, and we also need one another. Christ is the One who gives the body its life and growth, but He has designed the church so that its members grow by serving one another. When every part is working properly—upholding the truth, serving with its gifts and acting in love—the whole church grows into spiritual maturity.

Q: Why do you think some Christians stay "spiritual children"? What tools, resources, relationships or experiences have helped you grow in spiritual maturity?

Q: Why is it so hard to speak the truth in love to someone when you don't have a relationship with them?

Week 8: Unity and Maturity in Christ: Ephesians 4:1–16

Took

Main Point: As the body, we are given gifts to help one another grow in spiritual maturity.

When you were a kid, what did you want to be when you grew up? Children dream of becoming doctors, teachers, athletes, firefighters, astronauts—but almost no one says, “I want to become a mature person.” Yet that’s God’s goal for every believer and for the whole church together.

Whatever your career or stage of life, God’s desire is that you become someone marked by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Jesus has provided what we need for that journey: the Holy Spirit to transform us, His Word to ground us in truth and the church to encourage, challenge and strengthen us. Christ causes His whole body to grow through the leaders He gives to equip the saints and through every member using their gifts to serve one another.

So step into the relationships where growth happens. Begin serving. Consider how Christ has gifted you and where you can use those gifts to help others grow. Pursue a discipleship or accountability relationship. If you don’t know where to start, reach out to your minister or a LifeGroup leader. They can help equip you, connect you with a place to serve and point you toward relationships where you can help others grow while continuing to grow yourself.

CHALLENGES

THINK: Reflect on what it means to “walk in a manner worthy of the calling.” Would you say you are walking that way? In what ways does your life reflect the character and heart of Jesus? How might you still be walking in the ways of the world? In what ways have you grown in spiritual maturity since you started walking with Jesus? In what areas do you still need to grow? What practical steps can you take toward spiritual growth? What can you do to put yourself in a position for the Spirit to grow you more? How can you let others in the church help you grow?

PRAY: Pray for unity in the church, both in our church and the Church universal. Pray that we would all seek the leading of the Holy Spirit in all we do and be diligent to maintain unity in the Spirit. Pray that we would have the humility to receive needed correction and the strength to speak the truth in love when we need to correct others. Pray for every church to be led by the Holy Spirit, not human beings.

ACT: Accountability. If you don’t already have an accountability partner or group, ask God to lead you to someone who can be like “iron sharpening iron” for you. Ask that

person this week if he or she would like to start meeting with you for accountability, prayer and encouragement. If you already have a partner/group, ask that person/persons to meet an extra time this week to check in with each other. Ask your partner or group to openly and honestly speak truth into your life and show you things that might need to change or ways you can grow.

¹ Tony Merida, *Exalting Jesus in Ephesians* (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2014), 95–96.

² Harold W. Hoehner, “Ephesians,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 633–634; Merida, *Exalting Jesus in Ephesians*, 96–97.

³ Merida, *Exalting Jesus in Ephesians*, 97; Hoehner, “Ephesians,” 634.

⁴ Merida, *Exalting Jesus in Ephesians*, 97–98.

⁵ Merida, *Exalting Jesus in Ephesians*, 101.

⁶ Crossway Bibles, *The ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 2268–2269; Tony Merida, *Exalting Jesus in Ephesians* (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2014), 101.

⁷ Hoehner, “Ephesians,” 635–636; Merida, *Exalting Jesus in Ephesians*, 101–102.

⁸ Crossway Bibles, *The ESV Study Bible*, 2269; Hoehner, “Ephesians,” 635–636; Merida, *Exalting Jesus in Ephesians*, 102.