

Work of the Church

Focal Verses • Ephesians 4:1-16

Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will AGREE that our identity in Christ is foundational to Christian unity, VALUE the diversity of spiritual giftedness in the church, and COMMIT to exercising spiritual gifts according to Scripture.

In Focus

Alex was the oldest of three sons. He loved soccer and was a math whiz. The middle son loved basketball and reading, and the youngest was a star pitcher who also excelled on the debate team. The three were often in competition with each other trying to prove who was strongest, smartest, and the best.

Tension ruled the household as each son vied for his father's approval. Because of the constant arguments, family gatherings were never fun. At a family reunion, emotions erupted. When photos of the three sons flashed on the screen, the brothers started to make fun of one another with harsh, embarrassing words.

Their dad, Marcus, had enough. He asked his sons to excuse themselves and they went into the hall for a heart-to-heart talk.

"Listen, this competition between the three of you is way out of hand. Pride is the problem here, and there's a serious lack of respect for one another. Yes, you all are different, but different doesn't mean better or worse. It just means different."

The boys stood silently, looking down at their shoes. Their dad continued, "Boys, I'm so embarrassed. Your mother is, too. We're family! We're here to support one another. Each of you has gifts and talents. It's not about what you do, but who you are.

His father put his arms around his sons. "Let's huddle," Dad said. "We're a team—it could be mathletes, basketball, or baseball, doesn't matter! We're a team. We're in this together."

Each one of us has been given unique gifts by God. How important is it to support, respect, and value one another?

Keep in Mind

"I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, With all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:1–3, KJV).

KJV

Ephesians 4:1 I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called,

2 With all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love;

3 Endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

4 There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling;

5 One Lord, one faith, one baptism,

6 One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.

7 But unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ.

8 Wherefore he saith, When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men.

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- 9 (Now that he ascended, what is it but that he also descended first into the lower parts of the earth?)
10 He that descended is the same also that ascended up far above all heavens, that he might fill all things.)
11 And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers;
12 For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ:
13 Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ:
14 That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive;
15 But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ:
16 From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love.

NLT

- Ephesians 4:1** Therefore I, a prisoner for serving the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of your calling, for you have been called by God.
2 Always be humble and gentle. Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other's faults because of your love.
3 Make every effort to keep yourselves united in the Spirit, binding yourselves together with peace.
4 For there is one body and one Spirit, just as you have been called to one glorious hope for the future.
5 There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism,
6 one God and Father of all, who is over all, in all, and living through all.
7 However, he has given each one of us a special gift through the generosity of Christ.
8 That is why the Scriptures say, "When he ascended to the heights, he led a crowd of captives and gave gifts to his people."
9 Notice that it says "he ascended." This clearly means that Christ also descended to our lowly world.
10 And the same one who descended is the one who ascended higher than all the heavens, so that he might fill the entire universe with himself.
11 Now these are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers.
12 Their responsibility is to equip God's people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ.
13 This will continue until we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God's Son that we will be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ.
14 Then we will no longer be immature like children. We won't be tossed and blown about by every wind of new teaching. We will not be influenced when people try to trick us with lies so clever they sound like the truth.
15 Instead, we will speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church.
16 He makes the whole body fit together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love.

The People, Places, and Times

Paul. A well-educated Roman citizen, Paul's birth name was Saul. He was a Pharisee who persecuted Christians as proof of his zeal for the Jewish faith and way of life. On such a mission on the road to Damascus, he had a remarkable encounter with Jesus. Shortly after, he learned of his call from God to take

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His “name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel” (Acts 9:15, KJV). As an apostle, Paul’s life exemplified one of great sacrifice and persecution. He wrote about his experiences to draw people to Christ and strengthen and mature believers.

Ephesians. The church of Ephesus was first started by Paul. He visited the city at the end of his second missionary journey (Acts 18:18–21). Then he returned on his third missionary journey and taught there for approximately two years (Acts 19:1–41). As a result of the Gospel, many people turned away from worshipping the Greek goddess Artemis, and a riot was started by the silversmiths who created her idols. Paul wrote an epistle to the church, now known as the Book of Ephesians. In the letter, Paul does not address a specific problem. Many have speculated that the church at Ephesus, while not absent of problems, was a healthy New Testament church.

If the apostle Paul were to write to your church today, would he consider it a healthy church?

Background

Paul writes to the Ephesians while under house arrest. His testimony about Christ took him to Rome, where he waited for trial before Caesar. During this time, he sent a letter to the Ephesians explaining the great mysteries of the faith and, specifically, the mystery of the church. While the first part of the letter is a theological explanation (1:1–3:21), the latter is a practical exhortation or encouragement (4:1–6:24).

In today’s verses, Paul begins with the encouragement of unity in diversity. The “body of Christ” imagery is powerful because it calls all believers to rise above their circumstances and backgrounds to focus on Christ. The challenge, of course, is functioning as a unified body when people are so different. While the task of unity has not become any easier over time, the need for it is as urgent now as when Christ first called His believers to be one, just as He and the Father are one (John 17:21).

What contemporary issue(s) causes the greatest divide in the church?

At-A-Glance

1. One Calling (Ephesians 4:1–3)
2. One Hope (vv. 4–10)
3. One Church (vv. 11–16)

In Depth

1. One Calling (Ephesians 4:1–3)

Paul describes himself as a prisoner of the Lord, yet this contrasts his pedigree as a Pharisee and a “Hebrew of the Hebrews” (Philippians 3:4–5, KJV). Although Paul had every right to retain his stature within the Jewish community, he preferred instead to be identified by his calling to advance the Gospel of Christ through great suffering (Acts 9:1–20).

Paul’s instruction to answer the call with “lowliness and meekness, forbearing one another in love” helps us focus on God’s intentions for us; when we put aside our desires and ideas, we can put our attention where it belongs. Paul makes it clear that just as he has been called to be a prisoner of the Gospel, so must everyone else cast aside their worldly possessions and enter a similar state of servitude to answer the call of Christ.

How does division in our churches hinder our witness for Christ?

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2. One Hope (Ephesians 4:4–10)

Hope expresses expectation. It is not a conditional statement that allows room for chance or human failure to factor in; instead, it is an assurance as we focus our attention on future things. All believers have this hope: Jesus is coming again! We will be united eternally with Christ, so let's be united now. The Resurrection hope is for all believers, no matter their ethnic background or social class.

When Paul speaks about “one body and one Spirit,” he refers to the body of Christ, into which all believers are united by the Holy Spirit, according to Jesus’ promise (Acts 1:8). The one hope of our calling, which comes from our one Lord, is exercised in one faith, and is expressed within one baptism.

How does the love of God and others support unity amongst believers?

3. One Church (Ephesians 4:11–16)

Paul acknowledges that apostleship, prophecy, evangelism, and even pastoring and teaching the flock of God are all God’s gifts, which He gives to whomever He chooses. These gifts are not to cause division but to equip or train believers. Whether the gift is to pastor, teach, or preach, the goal is the same.

Most importantly, the church is the body of Christ. We are all called and encouraged to occupy our proper place and exercise the gifts uniquely given to us by God. The body is “fitly joined together,” which implies that nothing is out of joint. The gifts assure completeness (v. 16). The goal for the body—the saints—is that we mature into the knowledge of the Son of God.

With all the gifts operating as they should, the church will be vibrant and effective with everything it needs to guard against false teaching. Believers will not be confused and deceived by the “sleight of men” and “cunning craftiness” (v. 16). The diverse gifts were given to guarantee that the church matures and grows in love, just like a healthy body.

How do the diverse gifts of the church complement each other to fulfill our holy mission?

Search the Scriptures

1. How should we respond when people attempt to justify divisions between churches (Ephesians 4:4–5)?
2. How do you know if you have been “called” for a particular ministry work (Ephesians 4:11–12)?

Discuss the Meaning

1. What does it mean to “walk worthy” of the calling to which we are called?
2. How can imperfect people attempt to “walk worthy” in this way? What do we have at our disposal that makes such a walk possible?

Liberating Lesson

Our world has made a church out of celebrity and a god out of money. How can we aspire to financial success and stability without lapsing into idolatrous behavior? The most straightforward answer is to remain committed to seeking God for all we need. Some may encourage a more extreme avoidance of popular culture or social interaction, but that would deny others the chance to see Christ at work in us. Therefore, we should be confident in knowing what we believe, establish healthy boundaries, and keep our trust in God.

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How is unity developed and maintained among the body of believers?

Application for Activation

1. Think about your spiritual gifts and ask for opportunities to serve.
2. Encourage someone in the local church and someone who does not go to church with a phone call or text.
3. Pray for the church leaders to be faithful in “equipping the saints for the work of the ministry.”

More Light on the Text

Ephesians 4:1–16, KJV

1 I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called,

Using an emphatic first-person pronoun “I” (Gk. *ego*, EH-go), Paul begins his appeal by reintroducing himself, as in 3:1, as the prisoner of the Lord. This is likely to assert his apostolic authority. The use of the conjunction “therefore” adds to the emphatic nature of the ego. The phrase can then be reworded as, “Therefore (i.e., given the things God has done through history), I myself, a prisoner of the Lord, appeal to you.” “The prisoner of the Lord” probably means that Paul was a prisoner of Jesus in loyal and loving obedience as an apostle and a prisoner for Christ because he was under arrest and in custody.

“To walk” (Gk. *peripateo*, pair-ee-pa-TEH-oh) is an idiomatic way of saying “to lead a life,” “conduct oneself,” or “behave” (2:2). Paul urges them to conduct their lives in such manner that would match their calling, i.e., their commitment in Christ. Since the Christian life is a response to God’s call and willing obedience to Him, life is lived moment by moment and day by day in a way that demonstrates true commitment.

2 With all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love;

Paul gives five characteristics of such a life: lowliness, meekness, longsuffering (patience), mutual forbearance, and love. Paul seems to imply that the unity of the church starts with individuals. Earlier, Paul prays to God that “Christ may dwell in (our) hearts by faith, that (we may be) rooted and grounded in love” (Ephesians 3:17, KJV); love, he implies, is the soil in which we must grow and the foundation in which we must build a unified church.

To maintain unity in the church, we should walk in lowliness (Gk. *tapeinophrosune*, ta-pay-no-fro-SOO-nay)—a debasing quality and unacceptable virtue, especially among the Greek world and today. The word is better translated as “lowliness of mind,” a state of mind that prioritizes others’ worth and value over the self. The same mind was in Christ— He emptied Himself and took the form of a servant even unto death (Philippians 2:3–8). We are also expected to walk in meekness (Gk. *praotes*, prah-OH-tees) or “gentleness.” Meekness is strength under control—a gentle nature that does not want to fight or impose upon others. It defers to those who might harm you, which is related to the next virtue. We are also called long-suffering (Gk. *makrothumia*, ma-crow-thew-ME-ah), which means “patience” or “endurance,” i.e., not seeking revenge or being aggravated by others. This is a virtue God shows to us through Christ. Forbearing one another (Gk. *anechomai*, ah-NEH-kho-my) is the idea of putting up with, or enduring and bearing with, someone’s mistakes or attitude. It speaks of being tolerant toward others and having a mutual understanding.

3 Endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

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Paul identifies the nature of the church's unity as the unity of the Spirit. He urges the church to endeavor (Gk. *spoudazo*, spoo-**DOD**-zo) to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. The word *spoudazo*, translated in different ways in the New Testament (e.g., "diligent," Titus 3:12; "study," 2 Timothy 2:15; "do diligence," 2 Timothy 4:9), means "to spare no effort" or leave no stone unturned to preserve the unity of the Spirit. In other words, we should do our utmost to preserve the Spirit's unity.

Paul could mean one of two things when he refers to "the unity of the Spirit." First, some translate it to mean Christian spiritual harmony, using the small letter "s" for spirit (also meaning "heart" or "soul"). The idea is that Christian unity is in the heart; it does not lie in one set of thoughts or one form and mode of worship but in one heart and one mind. The second and more accepted meaning is the unity that the Spirit creates or gives, starting in the individual hearts of its members. Preserving this unity, therefore, depends on both individual and corporate efforts of all members of the body of Christ and begins with the attitudes in our hearts.

4 There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; 5 One Lord, one faith, one baptism, 6 One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.

In these three verses, Paul declares implicitly that the unity of the church arises from the unity of the Godhead, making deliberate reference to the Trinity. The church is one body because there is one Spirit created by it. Earlier, in Ephesians 1:23, Paul calls the church the body of Christ, comprised of Jews and Gentiles. The unity of this body is due to the work of the Holy Spirit, who also indwells the body. One Spirit unifies and works through the body, which is the church.

This cluster of phrases describes the greatness and magnitude of this one God whom all Christians have in common as Father. The God, whom the Jews acclaim as "One" in opposition to the Gentiles' many gods, is now the Father of all. This Father God is "above all" (i.e., over all things). This refers to the sovereign, supreme, and transcendent nature of God. He is "through all," which probably speaks of active participation in the activities of His creation—human lives in particular. He is "in you all" with particular reference to the church at Ephesus, which is comprised of the Jewish and Gentile believers, and it also refers indeed to the universal church.

7 But unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ. 8 Wherefore he saith, When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men.

Paul begins the section with the conjunction "but," which suggests that despite the unity (oneness in the body), each member also has room for individuality, which is evident in giving gifts. Paul says we are "given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ." The word for "grace" (Gk. *charis*, **KHAR**-eese) used here is the same grace by which sinners receive forgiveness (2:5, 8); they both are God's favor to those who don't deserve it. The difference is that God's favor comes in different forms at different times in a believer's walk— sometimes as forgiveness of sins, other times as the gift Christ is pleased to give.

The sentence "When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men" refers to Christ's ascension to the right hand of the Father as conqueror over death, defeating Satan and his agents. Jesus liberated those who were bound and took them like captives into heaven; they are secure. From there, He gives gifts to the church, which might refer to the bestowing of gifts by the Holy Spirit.

9 (Now that he ascended, what is it but that he also descended first into the lower parts of the earth? 10 He that descended is the same also that ascended far above all heavens, that he might fill all things.)

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As an aside, Paul supports and elaborates on Christ's ascension (vv. 9–10). Here, Paul argues—by pointing to the death and resurrection of Christ—that before Christ ascended into heaven, He came to the earth as a human and died. But in His resurrection, He snatched the keys of death, hell, and the grave. Paul alluded to the same idea earlier in the letter (1:20–22) and explained this further in his letter to the Philippians (2:6–10, where he talks about how Christ humbled Himself to die on the Cross but was then resurrected and exalted above every created thing).

Paul insists that the One who descended is the same who ascended far above everything else, that He might fill all things (v. 10). The phrase “fill all things” (Gk. *pleroo*, pleh-ROH-oh) means “to accomplish” or “fulfill” all things. It seems to speak about completing His mission. The purpose of His ascension into heaven is to free Him to accomplish the purpose for which He descended. One of those purposes is the distribution of gifts to the church by the Holy Spirit.

11 And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; 12 For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ:

Here, Paul lists four administrative offices given to the church, often read as five. One, apostles; two, prophets; three, evangelists; four pastor-teachers or pastors and teachers. The first is “apostles,” used in three ways in the New Testament. One means “the ones sent” (John 13:16). In this case, it applies to every Christian, for we are all sent as ambassadors of Christ to proclaim Him to the world. Two, there were apostles of the church (which is probably the sense in which Paul uses the word here), sent out as messengers and missionaries (2 Corinthians 8:23). Three, a small group was named apostles, consisting of the Twelve (including Matthias), Paul, and James (the brother of Jesus.) They were eyewitnesses to the risen Lord, chosen and authorized by Christ (Acts 1:21, 22; 10:40–41; 1 Corinthians 9:1; 15:8–9).

The second record of an administrative office is the “prophets,” they have the special ability from God to guide the Christian community and declare His will (e.g., Acts 13:1–4). The third are the evangelists, preachers, or those who proclaim the Gospel and bring others into the community of believers (e.g., Philip, Acts 21:8). The fourth is the pastors or shepherds who instruct, mentor, and guide the believers. They are also teachers, who instruct on the word of God, its meaning, and interpretation. These functions are twofold: to equip (“perfecting”) the saints for the work of ministry and to build up (“edifying”) the body of Christ.

The word translated as “perfecting” is the Greek word *katartismos* (kah-tar-tees-mahs), which means “to equip,” “to prepare,” or “to make ready.” Therefore, the function of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers is to prepare God's people for ministry or service. The second function of the people endowed with special gifts is to edify or build up the body of Christ. The word used here in the King James Version, “edifying” (Gk. *oikodome*, oy-ko-do-MEH), can be understood as “building a house” but is used figuratively here to refer to building up the members of the body of Christ.

13 Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ: 14 That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive;

Here, the word “unity” modifies both faith and knowledge. We are to continue to grow until we attain a complete unity of the faith (cf. v. 3, unity of the Spirit). Paul speaks of Jews and Gentiles being knit together in the belief of the Gospel of Christ (v. 5). The ministry of all members will also help the church grow to the full knowledge of Jesus. The apostle has already mentioned our knowledge of God (1:17); now, the focus is

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on the knowledge of Christ. The aspiration of all Christians should be to attain this unity, which is based on our mutual understanding of who Christ is.

The full faith and knowledge of the Son of God leads to maturity and being “perfect.”

“Perfect” (Gk. *teleios*, **TEH**-lay-oce) here refers to that which has reached the age of maturity or adulthood rather than moral perfection. Although some interpret this as individual maturity in Christ, which is also a New Testament concept, the maturity here refers to the whole body of Christ. This maturity or perfection is measured “unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ,” i.e., according to Christ’s standards. In verse 7, Christ is the measure of God’s grace. Here, He is the measure or the yardstick of all maturity.

Paul uses the picture of a boat in a rough sea being tossed to and fro by the waves and “carried about by every wind of doctrine.” Some people cannot make up their minds but often change from one opinion to another, according to the last teaching they heard, books they read, or information they received. Such people are easy prey to those who wish to deceive them.

“Sleight” is a word we don’t use today except in the phrase “sleight of hand”; it means “cunning” and “guile.” The Greek word it translates, *kubeia* (koo-**BAY**-ah), literally means “dice playing” and is used metaphorically here to describe the deception, trickery, and manipulation of unscrupulous people who exploit other people’s ignorance.

15 But speaking the truth in love, may grow into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ:

Paul moves from the mark of immaturity, which is doctrinal instability, to the qualities of mature Christianity, which will promote unity and peace within the body. These qualities are a rare combination: truth and love. Paul says we can communicate the truth to maintain unity by speaking the truth in love. This statement also suggests that we should speak truthfully and with genuineness to one another instead of using insincerity and cunning behavior, aiming to deceive others for our selfish gain.

16 From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love.

Using the human anatomy, Paul employs biological metaphors to describe the church’s relationship with Christ. Paul compares the natural body and Christ’s mystical body—the church. The body has many parts that are joined fittingly together by different ligaments to the head, and each part works corporately with other parts, so it is with the church. Love is the important trait, or lifeblood, that controls the functionality of all parts of the church body in relation to one another (vv. 2, 15–16, 5:2).

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Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

Luke 20:1–47
Psalm 107:9–22

TUESDAY

Luke 21:1–38
Psalm 107:23–32

WEDNESDAY

Luke 22:1–46
Psalm 107:33–42

THURSDAY

Luke 22:47–71
Psalm 108

FRIDAY

Luke 23:1–56
Psalm 109:1–15

SATURDAY

Luke 24:1–53
Psalm 109:16–25

SUNDAY

John 1:1–51
Psalm 109:26–31