

# EPHESIANS

*blessed to be a blessing*

## WEEK SIX

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### Ephesians 4.11-16

Growing up in Christ takes a village. That's why it is particularly irksome when someone claims to have a 'private' faith. It's like saying that they don't use the doctor, grocery store, local school, city services, or caring friends or neighbors in their town for their foundational needs. All of these services are provided so that people can grow to be healthy and mature and, in turn, make a positive impact for others in the world.

Likewise, faith in Christ should be seen as a progressive movement where we take advantage of the richly gifted people God has placed in our midst to help us grow to this end. Apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers, of which you may be one, are foundational gifts given to the body of Christ to build it up, maturing the people of God so that they too may have a contribution to this growing body. God has the divine eye to see that what the body of Christ needs is people specially gifted in spiritual leadership, to be special messengers, to bring many others to faith, and to spiritually nurture people through care and the communication of God's word.\* They are vital contributors! They help us to grow in Christlikeness in our character, attitude, and a growing love towards others - signs along the path to a maturing faith in Christ. And we need each other to help us along this path.

Christ led a surrendered life, deeply connected to the Father's will. We, too, are to live surrendered to the Father's provision and Christ's will, moving toward unity and steadfastness and not drifting on some private island on our own. So, get connected, greatly appreciate the giftedness around us and in us, and become an active contributor in this growing body.

\* For more in-depth descriptions of each of these gifts, please refer to Bryan Carraway's *Spiritual Gifts: Their Purpose and Power*.

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### Ephesians 4.15

*Speaking the truth in love.* This is a phrase often used in Christian circles, usually to refer to telling someone something difficult-to-hear about themselves. And we justify ourselves in telling this "truth" because it's written right here in Ephesians 4.15, and if we say it in a loving fashion, however hurtful it may be to the other person, then it'll be ok.

Although there may be times when a situation calls for us to help someone see their unhealthy or destructive "blind spots," this passage is not teaching this here. Many times, in biblical interpretation, context is everything. This is particularly true for this phrase. If we read what comes directly before this verse, we see that Paul is talking about those who "by their cunning and craftiness" deceitfully scheme and teach, by implication, what is false. And, if we are not maturing into Christlikeness, then we may easily fall victim to this false teaching and be led astray. By nature, then, the message of those who Paul is speaking about in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century is in error because of their reproachable conduct.

The phrase, "*speaking the truth in love*" is talking specifically about Truth with a capital 'T' - the gospel message of salvation. Refresh your memory of what this message is by reading Ephesians 2.1-10. Jesus Christ is Truth and He is Love, and likewise we are to communicate *His* Truth in word and deed in exceedingly loving ways! The Church's growth is dependent on these two very significant elements. They must exist side-by-side always, not necessarily in a perfectly balanced equation, but love must accompany Truth at some level. Meditate on this quotation today: "Ultimately, at the heart of the proclamation of the truth is love, and a life of love is the embodiment of the truth."<sup>1</sup> Many of us (author included) could probably stand to sprinkle a little more love in our proclamations of Truth....I'm just sayin'.

<sup>1</sup> Lincoln, A. T. (2002). *Vol. 42: Word Biblical Commentary: Ephesians*. Word Biblical Commentary (260). Dallas: Word, Incorporated.

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### Ephesians 4.17-19

Morality is a tricky thing. It has roots much deeper than many of us really think. There's a lot of blame that gets thrown around when it comes to immorality. We blame society, we blame the person, and we blame the environment, to name a few. This passage makes it clear that a **hardening of heart** is at the core of a downward spiral that takes a person from there to ignorance to estrangement from a life of God to a dark understanding and then to an insatiable craving for things that go against God's laws and man's laws. The cycle is complex, but it is certain that bad fruit such as long-standing greed, lust, dishonesty, cynicism, hate, bitterness, and anger can be produced from this process. Unfortunately, it is clear from this passage that the person will remain in this condition.....unless something changes.

There are so many reasons to love and heed this proverbial verse: "*Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.*" (Proverbs 4.23) One of the most caring things we can do for people in the situation described above is to pray that God would tenderize their hearts (and keep ours tender!). God can use situations in a person's life to soften their hearts. These situations are not always pretty, but they can in effect break the hardened heart cycle. Raymond Brown states it well: "...there is nothing more effective than suffering to make one recognize a need for God."<sup>1</sup> Harsh, but powerful and so true. Starting with your family and working your way out to other friendship networks, begin to pray for God to soften and guard hearts. Ask God to keep them sensitive to His love and care for them and His calling on their life. Our prayers for others are vital to their life and well-being, especially in a time when they may not even realize their dire need for them or for God.

<sup>1</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*. New York: Doubleday, 1997 (p157)

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### Ephesians 4.20-24

This passage is telling us to take it off?! That's right...strip down the old, formerly corrupted self and put on the newly created, Christlike self once-and-for-all! A spiritual wardrobe change of sorts. If we really believe the gospel message that Christ died to obliterate our sin, then we have been created anew in Christ Jesus, and we are to walk forward in this new life by shedding the old life, leaving the rags behind for good! Our minds (and the enemy) can play lame tricks on us, getting us to think that bad or destructive habits cannot be broken and that we are stuck in our ways. That is simply not Truth, my friends! There is a good reason why we call it "the Good News," and it is because Christ stood in the gap for us so we can be transformed in eternally significant ways, and these changes are critical for us living the rich, abundant life that He died to preserve.

Yes, we will have wardrobe malfunctions along the way. Awareness will be key to continue moving forward in Christ. We don't have to beat ourselves up, ignore it, blame, or be shamed when we take two steps back. Surrender, my friends, once-and-for-all, to our Lord Jesus Christ and the life that He desires for us. The Spirit will fill us and change us as we surrender our desperate lives to Him. Believe! Trust that God can make sweeping changes to you over time. Then you will be surprised by fruit, the fruit of the Spirit which is given as a witness to His glory and goodness. Whatever you lack but need, ask for. Is it love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, or self-control (Galatians 5.22-23)? Ask, surrender, receive, and be transformed.

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### Ephesians 4.25-28

This passage is Imperative Central! Paul must have thought that his readers would now be ready to hear the instruction he slaps down in writing here. The key to absorbing and applying all of this instruction lies in us clinging to our new identities in Christ (which Paul spelled out for us in previous chapters). Remember, we are not islands adrift on our own but serve an all-powerful, all-loving God Who is present and active in our lives. This relationship provides the power by which real change can happen.

This relationship also provides the reason we are to change and be changed; with relationship in Christ comes responsibility to act in such a way that tips others off to a power source that is beyond our human capacity. Who else can replace lies with habitual honesty? Or, turn anger and bitterness into calm, grace, and love? Or, replace the desire to steal with the desire to labor for one's needs? Only God can provide the means by which these radical transformations can happen. These are deep heart issues, which remain mostly out of reach to us or any psychologist. Only a loving, caring, present Savior can access them and remedy them with the healing touch of His Spirit.

We are not puppets, though. A genuine, almost desperate, desire from us must accompany any movement forward. But do not be dismayed - as we grow in knowledge and love of Christ, He begins to change us from the inside out. He is faithful if we align our hearts with Him in relationship. And, this means time spent with Him, seeking His face. And, it's especially important to note the order in which the book of Ephesians is laid out: grace and abundant life from Christ and our surrendering come first; the desire and power to change flow from these. The remedies have a triple benefit, too: 1) they purify our hearts, thereby benefitting our health and welfare, 2) they give something of worth to others around us, and 3) they confirm to the world what Christ has said all along, that He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life (John 14.6).