

Growing Up in Jesus series ~ A Study of Ephesians

Week 1: *The Church in Ephesus* - (Drawing from Eugene Peterson's *Practice Resurrection*)

Rev. Scott McGinnis - First Presb. Church of Newton, KS - Feb. 28, 2021

What a wild world we live in? How do we get through it? Well, we have some help. Read Ephesians and you are no longer an island, alone in the world. Read Ephesians and you can see that God has given us each other to live a full life and grow up in Jesus. Read Ephesians and you are no longer on your own. Read Ephesians to learn how to *grow up healthy in God, robust in love*.

We learn in Ephesians that we are not left alone to follow Jesus. He has gathered Christians around the world into His Church and we are connected to Jesus. Ephesians says Jesus is our Head and we are His body. In a world that seems like it's lost its head. Jesus promises to put our Head back: He is the Head of us, His Church.

We are going to look at the book of Ephesians in the Bible. It's a letter written to the church in Ephesus. Ephesians 1 says, **Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, To the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.**

There is much we can learn at church, but to be sure, there is also much we can learn on our own following Jesus. There is much about a relationship with our Heavenly Father that we personally can enjoy on our own. There's no substitute for this daily one-on-One relationship. No one can do that relationship for us.

Attend church every Sunday and it still doesn't mean you have attended to God.

We are called to grow mature in Jesus and His Church is where we can connect with other Christians, where we are encouraged by other Christians, and where we learn from other Christians, but again just attending church doesn't mean you have also attended to God. We need our own story of knowing God, a personal relationship with Jesus our brother and God our Heavenly Father. No one can do that for you, but when we gather with other Christians, we can also learn from others who are following Jesus. I can commend the books by Wayne Jacobsen and John Eldredge on loan in the Narthex. For a helpful way of learning from others. But then we don't just know God, we are called to maturity in Jesus.

Sooner or later, if we are serious about maturity in Christ, we have to deal with His Church. But you know, church is sometimes really difficult. Many Christians find church to be the most difficult part of being a Christian. So difficult that many drop out. Today in 2021, there may be more Christians who don't go to church or only go occasionally to church, than those who embrace it, warts and all. And it's not any easier for pastors. The number of pastors leaving church ministry is alarming. The Church around the world has many problems.

So, why church? Why bother? The short answer is: it's the key witness to Jesus' Kingdom come to this world.

The Holy Spirit formed the Church to be an outpost of heaven, to be a visible piece of Jesus' eternal life Kingdom in our dying world. We need Jesus' Church.

Church is more than just the building, and more than just the building plus people inside. Church is real people, you and me, choosing to live the resurrection life Jesus' gives. (Resurrection Life: see underlines.) What does that mean?

It's about enjoying God, it's about enjoying our resurrection hope; it's about celebrating the Lord's Supper, it's a meal with a covenant promise; it's about learning to live the Holy Spirit filled resurrection life from Scripture; it's about drawing close to God through prayer; it's about embracing the Big, Big Story of God's Love for the World that's bigger than any lead story on the Nightly News.

The resurrection infused life we have been given is one free from condemnation - *don't let anyone or any church hold your sin over your head. Your Head is Jesus.* In Jesus, you are forgiven. *Your sin is no longer the truest thing about you, since you've come into union with Jesus.*

And there's more to the resurrection infused life. The resurrection infused life means working and speaking for peace and justice; and it's about care for God's creation.

Now all of these, we can do alone, but together, we are a resurrection life community that people can join. Together

we witness to this resurrection hope. We testify to a larger story of God's love and grace. Together we are a place for strangers, outcasts, and heartbroken people to join, both in person and online. Simply put, a resurrection infused life embraces life.

Now don't get me wrong. The Church is not a utopian community. But maybe the church as we have it, warts and all, maybe it provides the conditions needed for growing up in Christ, for becoming mature in Jesus. Do you think maybe God knows what He is doing, giving the world His Church, giving us this church?

In the book of Ephesians, Paul writes to a real church. His letter gives us an inside look at church. It talks about what is involved in the formation of church. Ephesians is about God's good plan, Jesus' real presence, and the needed work of the Holy Spirit.

Now unlike the other letters to early churches in the Bible, Ephesians wasn't written because of a problem. The other letters to early churches were written because of their problems. You know, sometimes we hear people say romantically, "*We need to get back to being just like the early church.*" Heaven help us! These churches had problems. I'll give you a quick overview of their problems.

In Thessalonica, some members of the church were so sure that the Lord was returning any day that they quit working.

The Corinthians were a group who argued and squabbled about behavior having to do with food, sex and worship.

The Colossae Christians thought Jesus was a secret to be figured out.

The Galatian Christians were regressing into old legalistic ways.

The Roman church with Jews and Gentiles were having a hard time finding a common foundation in Jesus.

Timothy and Titus led a less than ideal church and needed Paul's specific instruction and encouragement.

What an amazing group of early churches. These churches were a mess, and Paul wrote to try to clean up the mess. But for the Ephesians, it seems Paul is not addressing problems. Instead, he writes as clearly and completely as he can about what makes church *church*. And what becomes clear is that church is not what we do; it is what God does.

Church bears witness to God's good plan, Jesus' real presence, and the needed work of the Holy Spirit, but let's be honest, none of us ever sees the church in its entirety when we look around. We may want to see the whole thing, but what we see is more a local history of one or a few congregations. We see these Presbyterians or these

Mennonites. We only see something partial; it's incomplete.

So what does the entirety of the Church look like? What are we aiming at or hoping for?

Ephesians provides for us a feel of what maturity is, what growing up in Christ consists of. Ephesians gets us in on what God is doing and how the Holy Spirit is working in every church congregation.

But before we start to idealize the church in Ephesus, if we read 1 Timothy, we will see it had some problems. And thirty years later, Rev. 2:2-5 says the Ephesians showed courageous character for not caving into persecution, but also it says they lacked "one thing needful": love. As a church, they were determined, but loveless.

Oh man, that about says the exact reason most people I've known have run from churches. Their church was "determined," maybe purpose driven, but lacked love. God help us, if that ever describes us.

So what I want to do in these next weeks, as we study Ephesians, is to set aside the historic problems of churches: the problems of behavior, the heresies, and the immaturity. I want us to set aside concerns we may have when considering a church to attend. Those are addressed in the other New Testament letters. Addressed at length, actually.

Instead, in these next weeks, I want to give Paul free rein in teaching and encouraging us as Christians growing up in Jesus. I want to make the most of Paul's description of the work God is doing in us, His Church. I want to talk of who we have been created and saved to be. I want to talk about living in the glory of God, which broadens our worldview with resurrection hope. I want to talk about living in the enjoyment of God.

To close, Ephesians is the best book for getting us in on what God is doing behind-the-scenes in our congregations as we **“grow up healthy in God, robust in love”** (Eph 4:16 MSG).

Again, God help us, if we have determination, but lack love. We need to grow up healthy in God, robust in love. I'll close by reading the longer section of Ephesians 4:14-16, to Jesus' church,

No prolonged infancies among us, please. We'll not tolerate babes in the woods, small children who are easy prey for predators. God wants us to grow up, to know the whole truth and tell it in love—like Christ in everything. We take our lead from Christ, who is the source of everything we do. He keeps us in step with each other. His very breath and blood flow through us, nourishing us so that we will grow up healthy in God, robust in love. Ephesians 4:14-16 MSG