

Living Word Small Group Study Guide

April 26-May 2, 2020

Sermon Series: U R The Church

Week One: “Everything Old is New Again”

Study groups can choose to use the daily Scripture readings and associated questions from either the current or previous week’s Daily Study Guide, or to focus on the Scripture reading from Sunday’s sermon. This study guide delves more deeply into the Scripture from the Sunday sermon.

Suggested Opening Prayer:

Both the opening and closing prayer are offered as suggestions. Feel free to offer spontaneous prayer instead.

Lord, You have promised to meet those who seek Your face. Come now and reveal Your presence to us as we make ourselves present to You. In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

Sermon Series Theme:

Where is God leading us as a church? In light of what we’ve gone through as a community/country/world, what are the ways God is moving us to be a new or renewed church?

This Week’s Sermon Theme:

In the midst of a reboot of society and culture, the Church was forced to rethink who we are called to be. In the end, nothing has changed, while everything about our approach has changed. We are still called to the Ephesians 4 image of the church, while looking at new ways that we become the church together.

Sunday Scripture Reading: Ephesians 4:1-6; 11-13 (A group member should read the passage aloud)

For Group Discussion:

What does the text actually SAY?

The goal of this discussion is to make sure group members understand the actual content of the passage.

What is Paul’s personal situation as he writes this letter? (4:1)

What is the gist of Paul’s “urging” of the Ephesians? (4:1)

What are the four attitudes Paul encourages them to adopt? (4:2)

What is the goal of these attitudes? (4:3)

What are the six things that Paul says exist as a unity of one? (4:4-5)

What additional unity of one supersedes and pervades all of these things? (4:6)

What five roles does Paul identify as spiritual gifts for the use of the church? (4:11)

What is the immediate purpose of these gifts? (4:12)

What is the ultimate goal of these gifts? (4:13)

What four ways of describing this goal does Paul name? (4:13)

What questions does the text raise for us?

The goal of this discussion is to allow group members to respond to their own emotions and reactions related to the passage. Questions are suggestions, but open discussion is encouraged. These are “I wonder” questions that the group might want to pursue together.

We might wonder, why was Paul in prison, and why does he point this out?

We might also wonder why Paul believes his readers have received a “calling”? Who is this calling from?

In verses 2 and 3, Paul seems concerned about interpersonal behaviors among the readers. We might wonder – was there a lot of infighting in that church? Pride? It sounds like people just weren’t getting along!

We might wonder if this is why there is such an emphasis on “oneness” – were people dividing into separate factions?

But with the emphasis on oneness, we might wonder why Paul suddenly starts talking about the diversity of spiritual gifts?

The list of spiritual gifts Paul lists might make us wonder if he thinks the ones he names are more important than other gifts. If not, why does he call out these specific ones?

We might wonder if Paul has any specific “works of service” in mind when he says that they are the purpose of the spiritual gifts.

A big question we might have is whether Paul thinks that “unity” means Christians never disagree about anything, ever!

Finally, we probably wonder just what a “mature” Christian, or a “mature” church, looks like. Can we really achieve “the whole measure of the fullness of Christ”?

Commentary on the text:

The goal of this section is to provide further background that provides context for the content of the passage.

See also: Ephesians 1-3; Philippians 2:7; Colossians 1:10; 2 Thessalonians 2:12; Ephesians 1:9-10

While scholars dispute the actual authorship of the letter to the Ephesians, it was probably written by Paul to the church in Ephesus while he was imprisoned in Rome, sometime between 60 and 62 AD. It

has a more “general” tone than many of Paul’s other letters, which tend to address very specific issues in the churches they were sent to, but Paul still shows a pastoral concern for the church in Ephesus. The letter was probably shared among several churches in the area of Asia Minor (modern western Turkey), and reads more as a sermon than a personal letter. He writes to both bolster their confidence, and to encourage them on to a greater sense of what it means to be “the church.”

The first three chapters of the letter really serve as an extended introduction. Paul gives thanksgiving for the church in Ephesus, and reminds his readers about their experience of salvation in Christ. The Ephesian church had many Gentile (non-Jewish) members, and Paul also reminds them that even though culturally they have been separated from the Jews before, they are now united with Jewish believers through what he calls a great “mystery” – the power of God to overcome such cultural distinctions. By addressing this issue in his introduction, Paul sets the stage for one of the primary themes of the body of the letter – unity in Christ.

Paul begins the main body of his letter with an exhortation for his readers to “live a life worthy of the calling you have received.” Paul has often used the language of “living worthily” in his letters – Philippians 2:7 tells his readers to “conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ,” in Colossians 1:10 he prays “that you may live a life worthy of the Lord,” and in 1 Thessalonians 2:12, he has urged his readers to “live lives worthy of God.” But what is unique about the language of Ephesians is that here, the reason for living “worthily” is clearly a response to something God has already accomplished in their lives – God has given them a “calling”! God has taken the initiative to bring them to the goal which He intends for them to accomplish. Notice back in Ephesians 1:13 that Paul writes of their being marked with the Holy Spirit. For Paul, God’s divine initiative and the human responsibility to respond with the way they live go hand in hand.

The primary marks of this way of life are listed as humility, gentleness, and patience. In the Christian context, the humility called for arises from his readers’ own recognition of dependence on God’s grace, as well as their inherent equal value to other believers in their community. It is directly contrasted with being “high-minded” or “haughty.” Gentleness is not so much set in contrast to aggression, as we might understand gentleness, but rather, it is a depiction of the virtues of courtesy, considerateness, caring for the needs of others, and seeking the common good, without regard for personal gain or recognition. As such, it is a sort of co-attribute of humility. Since both of these attributes are intimately connected to how we interact with each other, the third mark of this way of life is “patience.” To live in this way requires us to tolerate others’ shortcomings, and even their exasperating behaviors! Paul also urges us to “bear with one another in love” – a further amplification of what is required of us to live “patiently.” It is not a mere passive resignation, but an active, positive attitude toward others that takes exertion on our part! It is a fully realistic addressing of the social problems inherent in coming together in community, where there are inevitably clashes of character and attitudes. Bearing with one another in love means accepting each other in spite of weaknesses, faults, and character flaws.

The purpose of these virtues, Paul says, is to “keep the unity of the Spirit.” To KEEP it, not to GENERATE it! The meaning of what Paul says here is that because the church community is born of the Spirit, it is ALREADY a single unity. The purpose of behaving toward each other with humility, gentleness, and patience is to maintain the unity that already exists in the Holy Spirit – to prevent it from falling into disunity, out of relationship with the Spirit who is One. The unity of the Spirit is a spiritual reality that the body of the church is called to make visible through their interactions with each other. If the church

is truly the body of Christ on earth, it is a unity in its very nature, because Christ is One. Paul underscores this truth by emphasizing the oneness of the body of Christ, the oneness of the Holy Spirit, the oneness of the Christian hope, the oneness of the Lord, the oneness of the Christian faith, the oneness of Christian baptism, and ultimately, the oneness of God the Father Himself! The whole existence of the church **DEPENDS** upon all of these fundamental unities! The church, then, is called to be the embodiment of this unity, until the final, cosmic unity toward which creation is moving (see Ephesians 1:9-10) comes to pass.

How is this to be achieved, though? The answer Paul gives is that it is through spiritually gifted church leaders! While Paul lists other spiritual gifts in his other letters, here in Ephesians he specifically points to the gifts of leadership whose purpose it is to build up the entire body of Christ and to prepare them for works of service. These include apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. These ministers are Christ's means of bringing both individual believers, and the church as a whole, to a state of spiritual maturity. At the time Paul writes, apostles and prophets were understood as the way God had worked through human beings in the past – the apostles had been appointed by Christ to be the foundation of His church, and prophets were long recognized as mediators of divine revelation to God's people. Evangelists, pastors, and teachers point forward to important roles in the current and future church – with evangelists planting new churches (as the apostles had done), pastors shepherding Christ-followers (as Jesus Himself had done), and teachers interpreting and applying God's word (as the prophets had done). Thus, all of these gifts are to be used to proclaim, preserve, and apply the apostolic traditions to new believers in new contexts, toward the goal of a unified spiritual maturity. It is the job of those so gifted to sustain a unified community that proclaims the truth of the gospel in love.

Paul's somewhat paradoxical conclusion is this: the church is called to become what it already is in Christ. The church is called to **BECOME** what it already **IS** in Christ. The church needs to recognize who it really is – the one body of Christ, unified in purpose and mission. Still, the church needs to “grow up” into the fullness of this reality. It needs to cooperate with the grace of God to reflect to the world what it truly already is. To this end, God has gifted some to be ministers who faithfully and creatively transmit the gospel message in order for the church to actually attain this “fullness of Christ.” For Paul, it is not an impossible ideal – the church has been given, by God, the resources it needs to both demonstrate its unity, and to proclaim its truth in love.

Final Thoughts for Discussion:

The goal of this section is to get people thinking and talking about how the passage should affect their behavior after they leave the group.

Do you feel like you have received “a calling”? Or do you associate that only with people called to professional ministry? Why do you think Paul tells all the hearers of his message that they have received a “calling”?

Which of the three necessary marks of a “life worthy of the calling” is easiest for you to model – humility, gentleness, or patience? Which is most difficult?

How hard are you willing to work at “bearing with one another in love”? Are there people you can think of who it is especially difficult to “bear with”? Why do you think Paul insists we work harder at this?

What spiritual gifts do you feel like you have received that would move the church community toward greater unity? Of the three examples of evangelist (planting new churches), pastors (shepherding and providing care for people), and prophet (interpreting and applying God's word), which, if any, do you see in yourself?

How do you see yourself as part of what the church is still "becoming"? Do new opportunities for church in a post-COVID-19 world open up new ways for you to use your giftedness for God's Kingdom?

Suggested Closing Prayer:

Gracious God, lead us ever closer to the unity of the church that reflects Your Oneness. Fill us with humility, gentleness, and patience, so that we can live lives worthy of Your Name. Reveal to us our giftedness, so that we might serve You in the way You have intended us to. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.