

NEW TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

Lesson 63

Prison Epistles – Part Three Ephesians, Part Two

I. BACKGROUND

Last week, we went through the first three chapters of Paul’s letter to the Ephesian church. We mentioned that it was likely a circular letter that was written not only for the actual church in Ephesus but also for the surrounding churches.

The first three chapters centered on doctrine/theology. In those chapters, Paul wrote about God’s work in and among his people, the work of Christ both in our salvation and in our post-salvation walk, God purposes for the church, as well as several passages of prayer and praise. The final three chapters of Ephesians take a practical turn. In the final half of the letter, Paul writes applications of the doctrine and how it should affect our lives.

We look at the practical section this week.

II. TEXT

Paul begins his practical section harkening back to two matters he wrote of earlier in the letter. Paul references himself as a prisoner and the Ephesians as recipients of God’s calling. With both in mind, Paul urges the Ephesians to live a life worthy of the calling. What kind of life would a prisoner for the Lord consider worthy of the calling we have? (Keep in mind the calling is one of a graceful salvation, imbued with the power of the same Spirit that resurrected Jesus.) The life worthy of the calling is to be “completely humble and gentle” to be “patient, bearing with one another in love” (4:2). Humility, gentleness, patience, and love – Paul sets out markers we are to model and become. No doubt the Ephesians were similar to many today. Humility, gentleness, patience are fine until someone upsets us or we don’t get our way! Then, it’s time for people to know who we are (not humility! ☺), to get rough enough for the right response (not gentleness! ☺), or to let loose so folks get in line (not patience! ☺). But, Paul says otherwise.

Paul wants the Ephesians to make every effort to keep the unity of the Holy Spirit through the bond of peace. While the world sets many reasons for us to separate from each other, Paul sees another truth. The world may see many

reasons to splinter us into separate groups, but not Paul. Paul sees the church in the eyes of God. As Paul writes, there is unity. There is:

ONE: Body
 Spirit
 Hope
 Lord
 Faith
 Baptism
 God and Father

Paul sees this as the crux of the world. It is the same God and Father for all of us. He is the one who is over all of us. He is the one who is through all of us, and the one who is over all of us (4:3-6).

The distinction among us is not who we are or whom we follow. The distinction is that Christ has met each of us individually as opposed to a group. In other words, while we are one for purposes of our interactions and lives together, God did not meet us as a unity. We have unique and individual walks with him. So, Paul writes that grace has been apportioned to us individually (“to each one of us”). Paul uses a passage from Psalm 68:18 to explain his point. As Paul explains the Psalm, when Christ ascended, “he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men”¹ (4:7-8).

Paul sees Christ having descended² and then ascended beyond anything recognized in the natural world into the very throne of God. In doing so, Christ gave gifts to people that build up the church and the work of Christ on earth. Paul does not offer an exhaustive list, but rather an illustrative list. Some have the gift of apostleship, some as prophets, pastors, and some as teachers. The

¹ The translation of the same passage in our Bible reads differently than the way Paul uses it. Our translations note “you *received* gifts from men” rather than “*gave* gifts to men.” Why the difference? Scholars differ in their suggested reasons. Some teach that Paul was using a rabbinic approach that allows a translation of the word “receive” allowing for a meaning of “take and get” or “redistribute.” Others offer that Paul made a purposeful shift in the passage to emphasize that Christ has a greater focus on giving than an earthly king about whom the passage was originally written. It is useful to note that Paul will later (verses 11-13) explain his understanding in a bit more detail. As Paul does so, Paul shows that the gifts Jesus “gave” are all gifts that bring more to Jesus. In other words, he gave gifts that lengthen his train and the gifts he receives from men.

² Scholars in church history have differed over whether Paul is referencing Christ incarnated as a man “descending” in the sense that he left his heavenly reign for an earthly existence or whether Paul is referencing the descent of Jesus into the realm of hell as taught in certain versions of the Apostles’ Creed.

point of the gifts is to build up the church to unity in faith and intimacy with Christ and to grow the church in maturity.

This result on the church allows us to grow past following deceitful teachings that use people rather than glorify Christ. The church will hear the truth spoken in love and as a result will grow up in Christ, united, whole, and functioning as a body should! (4:9-16)

Paul then contrasts the way the Christian should live with the ways of the pagans. God enlightens the Christians at work in the world and their lives should reflect that enlightenment. Those still living in darkness live simply for the moment and the sensation, seeking to satisfy lusts, desires and impurities. But in coming to Christ, we are to live the enlightened life of righteousness and holiness. What does this mean practically? Paul gives a good set of examples.

Christians can and should embrace truth. The Christian walk is one of truth at its core. It is the walk that truly understands what God is doing in the world, what life is about, and what is real and eternal. With this view, it is not surprising that Paul begins his list insisting that the Ephesians put off falsehood and speak the truth to their neighbors. Anger must be monitored lest it lead to sin. Anger should be resolved as it arises yet resolved in a proper way. There is no reason for Christians to take what is not rightfully theirs (a/k/a “stealing”), but should work for their own needs and to share with others.

Paul urges the Ephesians to speak nothing unwholesome. Instead, their words are for building others up and benefiting those who hear them. For Paul, these life changes are not merely a list of rules. These are part of a life that glorifies God, as opposed to grieving God and his “Holy” Spirit. The very term “Holy” means set apart—different—from that found elsewhere. We are marked with God’s Spirit which is set apart and we are similarly to be set apart in our behaviors. So, we eliminate bitterness, rage, anger, fussing, and negative talk of others (“brawling and slander”). We are to live in kindness and be compassionate with forgiveness to those who wrong us (4:25-32).

These changes produce a life that imitates God himself. God walked among us in perfection, not as a bitter, raging, grudge bearing man. No. Christ was a giver for others who lived a life of love, and we should do likewise.

We should not even have a hint of sexual immorality or any other impurity. We are not to be greedy or obscene. Coarse jokes are not even to be our hallmark. Instead, we are to use words of thanksgiving, words that reflect the light we walk in as opposed to the darkness we knew before Christ.

Living as children of light means living to please God. It means living lives shining goodness, righteousness, and truth. We are to show deeds of darkness for what they are rather than dally with them in our lives. As children of the light, we expose darkness rather than live in it. Our light is the light of Christ that shines first and foremost on us and then through us to the world.³

In summary, Paul urges the Ephesians to live carefully and wisely. Each day, each moment, is an opportunity in eternity. We should use each opportunity carefully seeing the value in every moment. So, instead of using time to get inebriated with wine, we need to overflow with the Spirit. We speak to each other with scripture and words of encouragement. We sing songs to God. We give thanks for everything in the name of Jesus (5:1-20).

At this point in the letter, Paul begins addressing relationships, as opposed to his earlier comments on individual choices and habits. Paul tells the Ephesians to submit to one another out of their reverence for Christ. Wives are to submit to husbands, seeing the husband in a leadership role, as Christ was a leader for the church. Husbands are to love their wives in the same leadership way that Christ loved the church as well. Folks who never pause to see how Christ loved and led his church misconstrue this section. Christ never came to earth expecting service and faithfulness to come first from his church. The lesson of the gospels is that Christ came to model service and faithfulness that the church then learned and returned. We, the church, love BECAUSE he FIRST loved us. For husbands to be called into that role with their wives places the obligation first and foremost on the husbands to model love, respect and submission to wives, somehow never abdicating leadership responsibilities. Within that, however, is a profound mystery. We should see in a proper husband and wife relationship an understanding of Christ and his church, a relationship of love and respect (5:21-33).

Paul then speaks to children, urging them to love and honor their parents. Parents are to train and instruct their children in the Lord, being careful not to exasperate their children.

Slaves are told to live in respect and sincerity with their masters. The obedience is not merely to win favor of the masters but also to show respect to God in their walk in this world. Masters should treat slaves recognizing that both master and slave belong to God and God does not view the master as any better!

³ Paul quotes something lost to time here: “This is why it is said: ‘Wake up, O sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.’” We suppose he is quoting a contemporary hymn.

Historically, some used this passage to justify slavery as an institution. That is not a fair reading of the passage. Paul is neither promoting the institution nor approving of it. Paul is merely instructing those in the relationship on how to live.

A final passage on lifestyle is given using a soldier's armor as a teaching tool for life. Paul begins urging the Ephesians to be strong in the Lord. Our strength is not found in others or ourselves. Our strength is in the Lord. It is his mighty power that makes us strong. We put on his armor, not that of the world. His armor protects us against the wily schemes of Satan and his forces. With God's power and God's armor, we stand our ground when any force threatens us.

God's armor has a belt of truth. We have a breastplate of righteousness. Our feet wear shoes of the gospel of peace. We have a shield of faith that extinguishes flaming attacks of evil. Our head is covered with a helmet of salvation. We also have a weapon – a sword of the Spirit, the word of God. This is the Spirit we pray is always alert and seeking God on behalf of others and ourselves.

Paul's use of the armor has many facets that help us understand the thrust of his point: Jesus Christ and his work are to encompass us fully enabling us to live conquering lives. We have in Christ all we need for our life in this world and the next. Jesus is our truth, our righteousness, our gospel and peace, our defense and faith, and our salvation.

Paul ends his letter asking for the prayers of the Ephesians. Paul wants specific prayer for him to have the words to continue to teach and proclaim Jesus fearlessly. Paul is sending Tychicus, most likely with the letter, to fill the Ephesians in on the details of Paul's life.

III. POINTS FOR HOME

1. Unity.
2. Live light.
3. Let Christ in relationships.
4. Wear Christ.