

Church

Ephesians 3:8-10; 4:1-13

Here at Oakwood we use this image to visually present our purpose and pathway. [Baseball diamond w mission statement.]

Our mission is to join God in His work of transforming people and communities through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

You can see at the center of this is the cross of Jesus Christ and *our ultimate purpose – to glorify God*. Everything we do is to point to Jesus, not to ourselves – to direct everyone to the grace and love and power and supremacy of Jesus!

The cross is also at the center because *the gospel is the power of God* to save sinners who repent and to help believers grow toward maturity in Christ.



Ephesians is the New Testament book devoted to THE CHURCH. Today, in chapter three and four we will see *God's purpose* for the church and *the pathway* we are to follow. Sadly they did not have baseball in the first century of Paul might well have drawn this diagram himself. But Paul was all about the principles of baseball:

- ***Get off the bench and into the game.*** This isn't a spectator sport – it's for players only.
- Don't stand still – ***keep moving forward.*** Press on to the next step, the next base.
- ***Play as a team.*** Don't go it alone – you'll fall and you'll fail. You need the people around you.
- ***Keep going*** until the game is over. Don't let up, don't stop. Every pitch matters. Every play matters. Stay focused. Stay committed. Give it all you've got until the last out is recorded and the fireworks go off.
- Because mark my words – that last inning is going to be doozy. And there will definitely be fireworks!

The Church has one Compelling Purpose

- To Glorify God

“So that ***through the church*** the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known... to him be glory ***in the church*** and in Christ Jesus...” Ephesians 3:10,21

Here is the central message of the book of Ephesians and Paul's primary prayer: ***that God will be glorified THROUGH THE CHURCH.***

- How is the manifold wisdom of God being made known on this earth? Through the church.
- How is the gospel presented? Through the church.
- How are disciples made? Through the church.
- How is God glorified? **THROUGH THE CHURCH.**

The Church is God's plan to change the world. There is no Plan B. The angels have not been sent to make disciples of all nations. The church has. The creation sings the glory of God but is powerless to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. Only the church can do that.

Our single purpose is the glorify God. This is why He placed us here – in this place, at this time – to draw people to Jesus for the glory of God. “So that NOW – through the church – the manifold wisdom of God might be made known.” The next phrase in verse 10 is “to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.” That is a reminder that ***this whole story is not about US.***

We are so American – so individualistic – so self-obsessed. We think everything is about us – and by us, I mean ME. **I think this whole story is about me** – I’m the main character in my own little mini-series, that I think everyone should like and comment on and subscribe to.

But the truth is, ***I am a tiny supporting character*** who comes on stage for like a second and then disappears. Can you imagine if the dwarf in the **Greatest Showman** suddenly pushed Hugh and Zach out of the way, grabbed the top hat and cane thing and leapt into the spotlight, “This is the Greatest Show!” Hugh would be like – “Hey little man, this isn’t your scene – you come in later, for like a second, on the elephant.” Zach would say, “Yeah, dude – I take the hat and cane, not you.”

But you and I do this very thing when we make the story about us. We push Jesus out of center stage and try to take the spotlight – or we push him aside and put something else there – whatever we love and trust and serve most.

- We put ***our kids*** in the spotlight.
- We move ***our careers*** to center stage.
- We think of ***our comforts and pleasures*** and entertainments – and consider them entitlements rather than special blessings once in a while.
- But this whole story is not about us – it is only and ultimately to glorify God!

The Church has one Compelling Purpose

- To Glorify God – It is not about **me**.

“So that ***through the church*** the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known... to him be glory ***in the church*** and in Christ Jesus...” Ephesians 3:10,21

So let’s all pause for a minute and write in this answer. **“It is not about ME.”** I want to see pens moving. The single clear and compelling purpose of the church is to glorify God. It is not about you or me or any of us.

Look at your neighbor and say, ***"It's not about you."*** Some of you have been wanting to do that all weekend. I love that scene in **the Incredibles**, where Helen tries to explain things to her thick-headed used to be super-hero husband.

"I can't believe you don't want to go to your own son's graduation.// It's not a graduation. He is moving from the fourth grade to the fifth grade. // It's a ceremony. // It's psychotic. They keep creating new ways to celebrate mediocrity. But if someone is genuinely exceptional...// ***This is not about you, Bob.*** This is about Dash. // You want to do something for Dash – then let him actually compete – let him go out for sports. // I will not be made the enemy here. You know why we can't do that. // Because he'd be great! // ***This is NOT ABOUT YOU!***"

Oh – we are so quick to make everything about ourselves. But life and ministry – the church and history – are not about us. **There is one single purpose** – one reason God created everything, one reason Jesus came to die on the cross: ***to reveal the glory of God.*** To show the universe – the humans, the angels, the rulers, authorities in the heavenly places – the manifold wisdom and goodness and righteousness of God.

That is our one compelling purpose. Now let's look at the baseball diamond and talk about the clear ***pathway Paul outlines*** here for believers in the church to glorify God by making disciples. We have four bases we run.

[Baseball diamond image w/ 4 bases]

1. Love God
2. Grow in Christ
3. Serve the Church
4. Reach the World

There is a sequence here but the point of the baseball analogy is ***more about MOVEMENT than sequence.*** The point is to keep moving. Don't get stuck on one base.

- Great – you love God and you come to **worship once or twice a month.** That's a good place to start, but it's not the end of your growth as a follower of Christ. That's just the first step.
- Say you're active in **personal evangelism** and you support five missionaries on your own – even taking a missions trip every year. Awesome! Keep it up! But you're just bouncing between first base and home plate. That's not a complete process. You're missing some critical steps.



- Or say you are in a **small group and you serve** in our youth ministry – but you only attend worship once every month or two and you don't really do anything to reach our city or the world with the gospel.

The point of this diagram is to think about **your balance and progression**. Are you in the game? Are you moving forward? Are you touching all the bases? AND – are you bringing other people with you? ***Are you encouraging other people to run the bases with you?*** If there is one key to this diagram that's it – be a part of the team! Encourage and challenge the other players to keep after it!

This is the culture we are trying to create **in our small groups** – ***a culture of MOVEMENT AND MISSION*** – of prayerful personal growth and outreach. Let's consider how we can spur one another on to love and good deeds. How can we challenge each other to keep running the bases? How can we push each other to keep God in the center – so it's actually about Him and not about us? How can we keep pointing each other to Jesus to trust more fully in His finished work and to orient ourselves around His plan for the world?

Here are the four bases. First base is to:

Believers have a Clear Pathway to follow:

1. Love God Passionately

“To know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.” Eph. 3:19

This is Paul's prayer for the believers in Ephesus – to have such a living experience of the love of Christ that they would ***be filled up to overflowing with that love***. Think of what that would mean for your life if you were “filled with all the fullness of God”! Think of how our church would be different if every one of us was operating in this kind of fullness to overflowing – “filled with all the fullness of God.”

How is it possible to “be filled with the Spirit”? The answer is right here in Ephesians 3 – PRAY for an ongoing KNOWLEDGE – a personal, experiential knowledge – of the love of Christ. In other words – think about the gospel. Reflect on all that Jesus has done for you. This takes SPIRITUAL insight and spiritual power – which is why it's a matter of prayer.

Can you truly say that you ***love God with ALL OF your heart, soul, mind and strength?*** Do you love and delight in God as your first and ultimate heart allegiance? Or do you have competing gods in your heart and life? Are there other things that secretly hold your heart?

Brother, sister, friend – the first step toward living a life – and being a church – that glorifies God – is here at first base: love God PASSIONATELY. **Love Him above all**. Give Him 100%. Give Him everything.

The only way to do that is ***to EXPERIENCE the truth that Jesus gave everything to YOU***. Paul prays in verse 16, “that out of his glorious riches he would strengthen you with power

through his Spirit in your inner being so that Christ would dwell in your heart through faith.”

This takes spiritual power deep in your heart and mind – but the result is that Jesus HIMSELF dwells in your heart through faith. Of course, the Spirit of Jesus is always in your heart – but **Paul prays that believers would KNOW this – believe it – experience it.** “That you, being rooted and grounded in love may have strength to comprehend with all the saints...”

Believers have a Clear Pathway to follow:

1. Love God Passionately by delighting in His perfect love

“That you may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth and to know the love of Christ.” Eph. 3:18-19

We say that first base is to love God – but really it is **to be LOVED BY GOD.** It is to realize how perfectly we have been loved by God in Christ. Jesus has given us EVERYTHING. We have every spiritual blessing in Him. As we learn to delight in God above all other things we are filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. In other words, we begin to live a life that overflows with the love and grace and power of Jesus. He lives in us and through us.

Oh, what a church that would be! If we would just abandon ourselves to the love of God in Christ!

Believers have a Clear Pathway to follow:

2. Grow in maturity

“I therefore, a prisoner of the Lord, urge you to **walk in a manner worthy** of the calling to which you have been called.” Eph. 4:1

Ephesians is a beautifully balanced book. Paul writes three chapters of inspiring theological truth about who we ARE in Christ – all we have in Christ. Then he writes three chapters of application. The hinge is that little word, “**THEREFORE.**” Because of all that God has done for us in Christ – because of the fullness of His love we can experience in Christ – “I urge you to WALK in a manner worthy of that calling.”

We don’t walk in holiness and unity and love IN ORDER to be saved from our sin. We walk in holiness and unity and love **BECAUSE we have been saved from our sin.** We don’t live a righteous and devoted life in order to be forgiven. We live a righteous life devoted to God’s glory and purposes because we HAVE BEEN forgiven. And it’s clear that our growth will happen IN COMMUNITY with other believers:

Believers have a Clear Pathway to follow:

2. Grow in maturity by loving His imperfect people

“Walk in a manner worthy... with all humility and gentleness, with patience, **bearing with one another in love,** eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit...” Eph. 4:1-3

This is our first application of the gospel: to love one another; to bear with each other; to be patient; to protect the unity of the church. John writes the same thing in his letters – the primary ***expression of true love for God is love for other believers***. If you don't love your fellow believers then don't deceive yourself into thinking you love God. All of chapter four is about this – look how the chapter ends:

Believers have a Clear Pathway to follow:

2. Grow in maturity by loving His imperfect people

“Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.” Eph. 4:32

How can we bear with one another and forgive each other? Only as we experience the forgiveness and grace of Jesus. But those who have been marked by grace are grace-filled to others. Forgiven people are FORGIVING people. When you know you've been forgiven a 10 billion dollar sin-debt it is quite easy to forgive your brother for a ten dollar sin debt. Did he say something insensitive to you or about you? Yes. Can you forgive him once, twice, seventy-times-seven times? Yes. Because God has forgiven YOU that many times and more.

The goal is MATURITY – look at verse 12:

Believers have a Clear Pathway to follow:

2. Grow in maturity by loving His imperfect people

“For building up the body of Christ, until we all attain... to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.” Eph. 4:12-13

Paul prays that believers would be **filled with all the fullness of God** as we experience the perfect love of Christ. Then Paul commands believers to pursue this goal of maturity – growing deliberately, intentionally more and more into the perfection of Jesus.

Our goal is Christ-likeness. He lived a life of perfect righteousness. He never sinned once. He obeyed the Father with perfect faith and discipline. He was perfect in love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness – in every way Jesus was and is PERFECT.

Brothers and sisters – for all of eternity that will be our experience. God will make us perfect in the end. He will finally burn all sin away and ***we will be LIKE CHRIST forever***. But in this world our job is to increasingly reflect the glory of Jesus – disciplining ourselves in pursuit of this final outcome.

Think of the last project you worked on.

- A business proposal; a house you flipped; a class you taught; a patient you saw; a homeschool lesson you taught; a toddler you disciplined.
- The bigger the project the longer you worked on it – the more you updated and improved it.
- Eventually you had to say, “That’s good enough.” Nothing we do will ever be totally perfect, as much as you perfectionists long for it to be.

Imagine a construction project. You get a house that's in pretty rough shape. You gut it and replace the roof. You re-do the plumbing and electrical. Then you paint and put in floor and update the kitchen and bathrooms. I have no idea if that is the right order.

You have a vision for what that house can be. And you work to realize that vision as much as you can. Then you sell the house or rent it or whatever. You have a PURPOSE for the house and you WORK ON IT to make it as useful for that purpose as possible.

This is precisely what God is doing with each of us. You are His project and so am I. We – Oakwood Church – are God's project. ***We are a growing house, each of us living stones being assembled together.*** Brothers and sisters, we are God's masterpiece. Listen to chapter 2:

Believers have a Clear Pathway to follow:

2. Grow in maturity by loving His imperfect people

“For we are ***his workmanship***, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” Eph. 2:10

We are the building God is constructing for His own glory. He is chiseling away on you just as He is on me so we fit together into a unified building. That chiseling process is painful, not pleasant – but the builder has the master plan, not the brick. We submit to God's process because we trust Him as the architect. And some of that chiseling happens through God's imperfect people.

We feel this in all of our relationships but marriage makes it especially clear. ***Marriage is like sandpaper.*** It will grind off your rough edges. Living with someone every day quickly exposes your selfishness – both of your selfishness. And we don't like to have those edges ground off. It's hard and humbling and painful. But God is doing something bigger than us. He is shaping us more and more into the image of Christ – and preparing us as a community to more perfectly reflect His glory.

Often it is through our cracks and brokenness that God's glory shines the brightest. It is when we are weak that God's power is seen in us. It is when we struggle but trust God in the midst of the struggle that our faith becomes contagious and attractive.

Love God passionately. Grow in maturity. And keep moving forward! Third base:

Believers have a Clear Pathway to follow:

3. Serve sacrificially

“We are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ... ***when each part is working properly***... so that it builds itself up in love.” Eph. 4:15-16

We are the BODY OF CHRIST. He is the head – giving direction. We are the body, each part playing its assigned role. When each part is doing its job, the whole body works together as a unified whole.

When a church works like this it is a beautiful thing. Leaders set direction. Workers jump in to work. Musicians make music. Artists make art. Organizers keep us organized. Encouragers cheer us on. Yes, there is even a place for the engineers to think through the details and iron out a detailed plan. All the parts are different and each is vital to the body working.

Look at that picture in verse 16 – “so that the body BUILDS ITSELF UP IN LOVE.” The church is like **a body in that it repairs itself and builds itself up.** Isn’t the human body amazing? How so many things just get better on their own with some rest and fluids. Wouldn’t it be amazing if everything was like that?

- We wouldn’t need car repair shops you would just leave the car in the garage for a couple of days, fill up the fluids and it would self-repair.
- We wouldn’t need plumbers or electricians. You’d just call your wife and say, “Leave the AC off for a few days – that thing will straighten itself out.”
- If only, right?

Believers have a Clear Pathway to follow:

3. Serve sacrificially by using your gifts in the body

“But grace was given to each one of us, according to the measure of Christ’s gift.” Eph. 4:7

Every believer is given **a spiritual gift** – this is part of His grace to us in Christ. You have a gift of grace, just as I do. Every believer does. The gifts vary and come in specialty packages and mixtures. The common point is that all gifts come from Jesus – the giver of all grace. And all gifts have the same purpose – ***to build up the body of Christ.*** Again, it’s not about you. Your gifts and abilities are not for your self-actualization, so you can feel fulfilled. ***Your gifts are FOR THE CHURCH so we can fulfill our mission together!***

- Do you have the gift of **service**? Then serve!
- Are you gifted with **mercy**? Then care for people.
- Do you have the gift of **leadership and administration**? Help us run projects and events!
- Do you have special **discernment and wisdom**? Don’t be obnoxious about telling people what to do – but as you get to know people in your small group, you will have opportunities to share that wisdom.

There are all kinds of gifts. Grace was given to each one of us – assigned by the Spirit according to the measure of Christ’s gift. All for the common good. The point of the gifts is not to impose yourself on others but to SERVE others sacrificially. Chapter five describes a Spirit-filled church with believers:

Believers have a Clear Pathway to follow:

3. Serve sacrificially by using your gifts in the body

“Submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.” Eph. 5:21

Maturity is placing your own desires and preferences below the needs of others. The first application of this is in marriage but it applies in every relationship. ***Do we joyfully submit to one another*** in the church or do we selfishly demand?

The healthy church follows this progression: first the believers love God passionately, this love moves them to grow toward maturity in Christ. Third base is serving the church sacrificially. And home plate is a body of believers mobilized to reach the world with the gospel.

Believers have a Clear Pathway to follow:

4. Reach out boldly with good news

“This grace was given, ***to preach to the Gentiles*** the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery...” Eph. 3:8-9

This was Paul’s calling and it is our mission – to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ and His unsearchable riches. How will this mystery of the gospel be made known in the world? THROUGH THE CHURCH!

The world is lost in darkness and only those of us with the light of Christ can bring the light to the lost and blind. Paul closes his book asking the believers to pray for him:

Believers have a Clear Pathway to follow:

4. Reach out boldly with good news

“For me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel... ***that I may declare it boldly***, as I ought to speak.” Eph. 6:19-20

Let’s continue to pray for our lost friends and family members. As Christmas comes up, let’s boldly pray for opportunities to connect with our friends and neighbors to point them to Jesus – invite them to church, share your story of faith, share how God has been working in your life.

Pray for your own opportunities, watching for God to bring them. And let’s keep praying for one another – lifting up the loved ones of your small group members and others in the church. Keep using the prayer board – use that supplication line to post names of people you are praying for right now! One more point:

Believers have a Clear Pathway to follow:

4. Reach out boldly with good news and good deeds

“For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus ***for good works*** which he prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” Eph. 2:10

We are the light of the world. Let’s be watchful for opportunities to love and serve our neighbors so they may see our good deeds and praise our Father in heaven. That is our one compelling purpose: to honor and please and worship the Lord our God. We do this by following this baseball diamond pathway: loving God, growing in Christ, serving the church and reaching out in the world. Let’s pray!