**Growing Together**

Ephesians 4:1-7

Ephesians is arguably the most symmetrical book in the New Testament. It is beautifully balanced between three chapters of truth and three chapters of application.



First the apostle Paul unpacks the truth of **what God has DONE for us in Christ**. We are loved and adopted into the family of God. We are saved from sin and death. And we are united in Christ into His body, the church.

Then we turn the page to chapter four and find the word **THEREFORE**. Based on this life-changing, eternity-changing truth, we must live differently. There are five “therefore, live” commands in the second half of Ephesians. Live worthy, live holy, live lovingly, truthfully and wisely. The call of Christ and the work of Christ on our behalf can change our lives and, indeed, ***it MUST change our lives***. Let’s dig into chapter four.

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

Here is the first “therefore, live.” The word is “walk,” referring to the conduct of our lives. Whenever you see redundancy in the Bible it is not redundant - it’s God’s highlighter. ***What is the CALL to which you have been CALLED?*** The Biblical image is of **a shepherd calling** his sheep in. The sheep know his voice because he is their shepherd. And when he calls, them come.

As those who belong to our Good Shepherd, “we are His people, the sheep of His pasture.” And our shepherd has ***clear and definite expectations for His sheep*** - we are not to trample on each other; we are not to head butt and have conflict with each other (unless it’s a playful thing and you know the other little sheep is having fun too - we saw this at the fair one time and it was quite hilarious - these two little goats just wouldn’t let up on each other, one would rear back and head butt the other then the other would rear back and return the favor.)

So be a good sheep. And what happens as you learn the rules of the pasture is that you become a SHEPHERD, serving with the head shepherd. You come to care for the flock. We have been called not just to come and be with the Good Shepherd but ***to come and be LIKE the shepherd and serve WITH Him.***

In this first part of Ephesians 4 we will see **four resources to help us connect and grow**. The first one is right here in verse one.

**Resources for Connection and Growth:**

1. The Identity of a **Servant** - Humbly **Grateful** for the call of Christ

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

Paul had a handful of ways he identified himself - most often a ***servant or “bondslave”*** of the Lord Jesus, but sometimes a prisoner. In this case it was more than a figure of speech as he was literally chained to a Roman guard on house arrest, probably around 60 A.D. Paul’s favorite term for believers was “saints,” - the holy ones of the Lord, set apart for Him. But he expected the believers to follow his example as he followed the Lord Jesus - and **establishing a new identity in Christ** was central for Paul.

Do you see yourself as a prisoner for the Lord? ***Do you see yourself bound to Jesus***, a captive to Him?

Do you see yourself as **a servant of the Lord**? Do you know Jesus as your Master and King? Have you joyfully chosen to commit yourself to Him for life and for eternity?

That was how it worked in **ancient Israel**. The Jews were not allowed to keep other Jews as household slaves for more than six years. That was the explicit limit for paying off debts - six years, then you had to be set free. However, if the servant loved his master and wanted to freely, willingly remain he could ***become a bond-servant for life***.

<https://nolongerlukewarm.com/2021/01/30/decide-to-become-a-bondslave-of-christ/>

To do this, the servant asked his master to ***pierce his ear***, in what must have been a painful process of driving an awl through his ear into the doorpost of the family home. That hole in the ear would be a visible sign for the rest of his life that he had pledged himself to serve that master.

That is the imagery Paul used most commonly to communicate his identity.

**Resources for Connection and Growth:**

1. The Identity of a **Servant** - Humbly **Grateful** for the call of Christ

“Paul and Timothy, servants [bondslaves] of Christ Jesus. To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi.” Philippians 1:1

Here in Philippians Paul includes Timothy in the writing of the letter and in the bondslave identity. This is the ***fuel for us as followers of Jesus*** - this is what drives us - our identity in Christ as servants united with Him, bound to Him in His love and grace. We humbly acknowledge that He paid the price for our redemption, and now we belong to Him by faith. We devote ourselves to Him out of gratitude for His infinite sacrifice and endless love.

We recognize that **He called us into relationship with Himself** - He called us out of darkness into His wonderful light.

**Resources for Connection and Growth:**

1. The Identity of a **Servant** - Humbly **Grateful** for the call of Christ

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So it is up to us to walk worthy of that calling. ***Ephesians 1, 2 and 3 establish the gospel basis*** for our relationship with God in Christ. Based on His finished work we are loved, accepted, adopted, forgiven, free, and filled with all the fullness of God. We don’t walk worthy in order to EARN the call of God. We walk worthy because we HAVE been called.

**This is who we ARE**. Just as Paul was a prisoner for the Lord, you and I are joyfully and freely shackled to Jesus. Just as Paul was a servant, a bondslave of Jesus, you and I have let Jesus pierce our ears and bind us to His house, His family. We are His.

That new identity is fuel for you for both connection and growth. You’ll see Paul exhorts us to both. And verse two shifts from identity to attitude.

**Resources for Connection and Growth:**

1. The Attitude of a **Child** - Patiently **Gentle** as those loved by Jesus

“With all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love.” Ephesians 4:2

As those who have been loved infinitely, we are called to love like that. ***Jesus washed the disciples’ feet*** and then said - “There you go - love each other like that.” That is our example of servant leadership - taking the lowest position, the most humble tasks.

Jesus also used **children as an object lesson** to teach about His kingdom - he said ***to receive the kingdom*** in the first place you must be like a child - humble, dependent, simple in your faith. And ***to be great in the kingdom*** you must be like a child - not posturing and playing for power and status, but simply being loved by Jesus and humbly loving others.

Look at the exhortation here - **ALL humility**. All gentleness. Patience. Bearing with one another in love. Easy peasy, right? All humility to start with. That comes from letting God be God and seeing ourselves in light of His glory; not thinking of ourselves more highly than we ought to. Humility is not thinking less of yourself, it is thinking of yourself LESS. Humility recognizes you don’t deserve anything, because everything you have is from God. Even the good things you have worked hard for and achieved - even those things are gifts from the hands of God.

All humility and gentleness. ***Is this how we approach one another?*** Oh, we are such GROWN UPS, aren’t we? We fret and worry. We stress and strive. We posture and push. This is why we need to embrace the identity of a servant and the attitude of a child. Not the me-first, immature, selfish CHILDISH attitude of a child - but the humble, gentle, low expectations attitude of someone who believes other people are more important and should be listened to.

***“Bearing with one another in love.”*** Are we patient and understanding with each other? Are we humble and gracious? Are we quick to forgive and slow to anger and resentment?

If we have the identity of a servant and the heart posture of a child it will help us to be patient and long-suffering with the EGRs among us. Do you know that term? **Extra Grace Required**. Some people are like that and God places them in our lives precisely so we can grow in humility, gentleness and patience.

**John Newton** had a rough childhood. His mother died when he was only 6. After two whole years of education he went to sea with his father and became a sailor. He was captured and impressed into service in the English navy, because that was a usual recruiting strategy in the 1700s. If they won’t sign up, just snatch ‘em. He tried to desert and was captured, receiving a severe flogging and was busted down to the lowest rank. The young Newton considered killing the captain and throwing himself overboard but thankfully did neither.

For over two years Newton was “a servant of slaves” in Africa - treated as a slave until rescued by a friend of his father and brought back to England. On that sea voyage in 1748 a great storm struck the ship and all aboard, including Newton, thought they were going to die. In desperation, ***Newton cried out to the God he had heard about*** from his mother many years before. The storm immediately began to subside and Newton always looked back at that day as the BEGINNING of his conversion. God had his attention, but not yet his heart.

For the next six years ***Newton served on slave ships*** and eventually captained slave ships in the gruesome middle passage, transporting African men, women and children across to the Americas. A severe stroke in 1754 finally prevented him from sailing anymore. It took a lot to get this man to change. But God was patient in the pursuit.

While working as a tide surveyor Newton began to study the Bible, and it would take him almost ten years to earn an assignment at a church in Olney. At the age of 40 John Newton became a pastor, serving 16 years there in Olney and another 28 in London. During that time Newton became not only an ***exceptional preacher and hymn writer, but also a warm and tender shepherd.***

The man who wrote the immortal words, “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me; I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see,” was so marked by the grace of his salvation that he became a compassionate and enduring friend to hundreds and hundreds of fellow believers. One was ***William Cowper*** who wrote *There is a Fountain Filled with Blood* and this inspiring hymn:

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| --- | --- |
| God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform;He plants his footsteps in the sea, And rides upon the storm.Deep in unfathomable mines Of never failing skill;He treasures up his bright designs, And works His sovereign will.Ye fearful saints fresh courage take, The clouds ye so much dreadAre big with mercy, and shall break In blessings on your head. | Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, But trust him for his grace;Behind a frowning providence, He hides a smiling face.His purposes will ripen fast, Unfolding ev'ry hour;The bud may have a bitter taste, But sweet will be the flow'r.Blind unbelief is sure to err, And scan his work in vain;God is his own interpreter, And he will make it plain. |

***Cowper was a very troubled man*** - attempting suicide numerous times and struggling most of his life with deep and dark depression. So the lines we just heard were not pious platitudes, they were wrought in the furnace of severe personal pain. The man who helped Cowper through his lowest points, and often had the poet living in his own house, was John Newton, the former transporter of slaves.

Newton was tough as nails, fighting alongside Wilberforce to end the slave trade in England. But he was also tender, patiently sitting with a dear friend who was drowning in sadness. Between the two of them ***Newton and Cowper wrote over 300 hymns***, many of which are still sung today. Writing those poems and songs was part of the therapy Newton encouraged Cowper in - a way to keep his mind occupied and focused on positive things.

From his rough and sinful past to his years as a pastor, Newton developed the identity of a servant and the patient, gentle attitude of a child. And he also represented our third resource for connection and growth:

**Resources for Connection and Growth:**

1. The Mindset of a **Family** - Peacefully **United** in the one body of Christ

“Eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” Ephesians 4:3

Newton became a great friend and mentor and encourager of Wilberforce, even coaching the young man to stay in politics rather than going into preaching ministry. Together they labored for decades to limit and then abolish the slave trade. Newton was also close with and influenced by George Whitefield, who shared his Calvinistic beliefs. And Newton loved and supported John Wesley who did not share those Calvinistic beliefs but did share a passion to reach lost people with the gospel. (They did break in later years over the issue of Wesleyan perfectionism which Newton took as an incursion of works on the free grace of Jesus.)

The 1700s were the time of the first great awakening - but they were turbulent years, often filled with conflict and persecution. So being a voice for unity and peace and collaboration was no small thing.

***Are WE eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit?*** Most of you know that my passion and hobby is networking in the city. I enjoy meeting up with other pastors and ministry leaders to hear what God is doing in other churches and other places and to help connect people with one another.

Do we really believe verse four?

**Resources for Connection and Growth:**

3. The Mindset of a **Family** - Peacefully **United** in the one body of Christ

“There is one body and one Spirit just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call.” Ephesians 4:4

One body. I like the trick question: How many churches are there in Tampa Bay? We did some research last year and found there are 1,827 churches in the tri-county area. But that’s not the answer. ***How many churches are there in Tampa Bay*** (and really, in the world)?

ONE. The body of Christ is not divided.

**Resources for Connection and Growth:**

3. The Mindset of a **Family** - Peacefully **United** in the one body of Christ

“One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.” Ephesians 4:5-6

**We worship ONE GOD** - three persons united in one God - so we are united in His one family. There is only one faith because there is only one gospel, only one name under heaven by which we can be saved. And God is everywhere, working in everyone, and His plan for the fullness of time is to unite all things in Christ. ***God is the great Unifier.*** Jesus is healing and restoring, uniting, and binding and reconciling all things to Himself.

The question is: ***are we joining Him in that work?*** Or are we continuing in the very human, very American process of DIVIDING? Some divisions are necessary, of course, when part of a denomination abandons the Bible and the gospel, it is necessary for the faithful to draw a line and stand for the truth. But many divisions - probably most of them - have been over minor conflicts, minor differences of opinion that got blown up into seemingly major ones. Or they came just from personality conflict and nothing more.

We see division on the large scale of history, but we also experience it ***in the small scale of personal relationships***. Some people UNITE and heal and reconcile - some are **peacemakers**. And others divide and stir up conflict and resentment - some are dividers.

Which are you? ***Are you a peaceful unifier***, knowing there is one body and one Lord - so you smooth over misunderstandings and take a humble and gracious posture toward others? Or are you a “prophet” who feels the need to always be drawing lines and picking fights? Again, sometimes those fights need to be had. But it takes great discernment to know when to “bear with one another in love” and when to take your stand against the schemes of the enemy. Two women got called out in Philippi for their bickering:

3. The Mindset of a **Family** - Peacefully **United** in the one body of Christ

“I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord. Yes, I ask you also, true companion, help these women who have labored side by side with me…”

Philippians. 4:2-3

***Is this how you would want your name preserved in holy Scripture?*** For having a drawn out public feud? Notice what Paul does here - he enlists the help of a specific person or maybe the whole church there as a “true companion” to help these women make peace.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.” God is the great peacemaker, sending His only Son as a sacrificial offering to resolve the conflict He had with the world. No greater price could have been paid. ***This is “the bond of peace.”*** We are united in this unbreakable, eternal bond of SHALOM with God in the Lord Jesus Christ.

***He has demolished the dividing wall of hostility***, taking Jew and Gentile and making them ONE in Himself - those “far off” Gentile sinners have been forgiven and cleansed and those “nearby” but legalistic, stubborn Jews have likewise been forgiven and changed from the inside out - and so now, in Christ, the two have become ONE.

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***This is the unity Jesus prayed for*** - that we would all be one just as He is one with the Father in the loving bond of the Holy Spirit. He has filled us with His own glory and is sanctifying us through His Word for this precise purpose: that we would be ONE in Him.

So in addition to having the identity of a servant, and the humble attitude of a child we should have the mindset of a family - saying, “for better or for worse we are stuck with each other, so let’s commit to loving each other and protecting the unity of the Spirit.” One more wonderful resource the Lord has given us for our connection and growth.

**Resources for Connection and Growth:**

1. The Interdependence of a **Body** - Sharing **Grace** to help each other grow

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

Within the one body of Christ, there are ***many different parts***. 1 Corinthians expands on this, as does Romans, with two different lists of spiritual gifts, but both places reinforcing the key principle of ONE BODY, many parts. This passage in Ephesians 4 is arguably the most poetic with the picture of growing up into Christ together, the body “building itself up” in love.

And of course, that’s what the human body - remarkably - does. Doesn’t it amaze you that you have such a wonderful ***immune system and healing ability***? Wouldn’t it be so helpful if our cars and houses had this too? Oh, the van just has a sniffle in the engine - it will get better. Oh, just let the roof sleep it off for a few days, the leak will heal. If only, right?

Obviously not everything in our bodies can heal itself, but a lot of things can - and that alone should move us to worship and gratitude to our Almighty Creator.

In our family we have read a lot of books by Brandon Sanderson, who has become the modern J.R.R. Tolkein, expanding the world of wizards and sword-fighting. One of his first books was **Elantris**, which was inspired by the idea of a leper colony. Sanderson wanted to wrestle with a place where people could not heal. He made it extra disturbing by making them immortal - so they could not heal but neither could they die - so it’s actually a colony of leper zombies. That’s just what Sanderson does.

Just hearing the premise, and in the opening of the book, you immediately see the protagonist trip and stub his toe - and the pain NEVER goes away. Just a little trip and fall - a little bump of the toe. You and I would rub that toe for a few seconds and be thankful that the stinging pain would quickly subside and then disappear. But what if it didn’t? Can you imagine?

Some of you deal with ***chronic pain*** that doesn’t ever go away altogether. That is one of the hardest life situations to manage. It’s a sign of the brokenness of this world and a pointer to our need for a NEW heaven and a new earth and new bodies when Jesus comes back to restore all things.

I’m helping to coach a volleyball team and was working with a young guy who had never played before. He was showing me his forearms that were all pink from learning how to pass the ball. His eyes were big and he was like, “Ow - this really stings.” Yep. Welcome to volleyball. But thankfully, the pain doesn’t last long and you get used to it. Try it now if you want. ***Smack your forearm and see the pink.*** Aren’t you glad for how quickly the blood comes to that area? Those T cells or whatever they are rushing to the affected area to bring healing!

That is a picture of **what the CHURCH should be like**. Pain in one area should bring the helper / healer blood cells to quickly respond. Oakwood usually does a good job with this. Someone is sick and we pray. If there is a need, often someone will set up a meal train and people will bring over meals. If other help is needed, like transportation or childcare, small groups often step up to help.

It’s like blood cells responding to a need - and bringing healing right to where the problem is. Look down at verse 16.

4. The Interdependence of a **Body** - Sharing **Grace** to help each other grow

“The whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.” Ephesians 4:16

Doesn’t that blow you away? ***God designed each local church to work this way*** - whether it’s 5 people or 5,000 people. The whole body, joined and held together by every ligament and tendon, every bone and joint - builds ITSELF up in love. But notice the qualification: **WHEN each part is working properly**.

What happens when your immune system is NOT working properly and instead of healing it starts attacking? What happens when your heart is not working properly so the blood isn’t pumping at the right rhythm or the right pace? What is the kidneys or liver aren’t effectively filtering things? That’s the limit of my knowledge of anatomy and physiology, so find your own examples.

The point is clear: ***the human body needs every part to do its job***. And so does the church. You might be the right thumb or the pinky toe, but we will not work as well without you as we will WITH YOU connected and contributing!

And the picture here is of the love and **grace and power of Jesus flowing through the body** - that’s how the body can build itself up in love. It’s not OUR grace and power - its HIS. Jesus is the blood flow, we are the body parts. But as we are CONNECTED, as we support each other and work together, healing takes place and so does ministry. Read over this whole chapter this week and pray through it to be even more inspired.

Paul quotes Psalm 68 which is a victory psalm about God defeating his enemies and leading them captive in a train, distributing the spoils of victory to His people. Jesus descended from heaven to earth and ascended back into heaven in victory in order to pour out the gift of the Holy Spirit and all of His other gifts, such as church leaders (the apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds and teachers). Don’t get hung up on those titles, the point is ***Jesus gave us all the gifts and all the leaders for THIS PURPOSE***:

**Resources for Connection and Growth:**

4. The Interdependence of a **Body** - Sharing **Grace** to help each other grow

“To equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.”

Ephesians 4:12

Different kinds of grace, different kinds of gifts, different measures of grace are given to different people but all for the same purpose: to build up the body of Christ.

4. The Interdependence of a **Body** - Sharing **Grace** to help each other grow

“Until we all attain the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.” Eph. 4:13

There is the goal: the fullness of Christ. His character growing in us. His ministry calling fulfilled through us. Unified in the one faith. United in our knowledge of Jesus and our worship of Him, our devotion to Him. Growing out of the divided hearts and minds of children and finding stability in Christ in the midst of the storms and turbulence of this world.

4. The Interdependence of a **Body** - Sharing **Grace** to help each other grow

“Rather, speaking the truth in love we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.” Ephesians 4:15

Grow up. Like a family; like a tree; like a body. **Grow up IN EVERY WAY into Christ**. How? By speaking the truth in love. Both sides are necessary: truth and love. Love without truth is empty emotionalism. Truth without love is rigid legalism. Together, we are the body. Here is our summary for today:

**Resources for Connection and Growth:**

1. The Identity of a **Servant** - Humbly **Grateful** for the call of Christ

2. The Attitude of a **Child** - Patiently **Gentle** as those loved by Jesus

3. The Mindset of a **Family** - Peacefully **United** in the One Body of Christ

4. The Interdependence of a **Body** - Sharing **Grace** to help each other grow

God has given us all of His grace for the purpose of our CONNECTION and GROWTH in Christ.

* Are you developing the identity of a servant?
* Are you growing in your humility and gentleness, with faith like a child?
* Are you embracing the mindset of a family, “eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace”?
* And are you playing your part in the body - channeling the grace of Jesus to the other parts of the body?

In his young and turbulent years, John Newton needed godly friends and mentors to guide him to Jesus and to speak to him the truth in love. Unfortunately, there were ***very few positive influences*** serving as sailors in those days, and plenty of negative influences. Over the years, as the language and habits of the sailors became normal for Newton, he became a negative influence himself and led one young man, Job Lewis, away from his childhood faith and into a life of sin - actively preaching the merits of escaping your parents’ religion.

<https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/magazine/article/amazingly-graced-john-newton>

Years later, speaking of his first true Christian friend and mentor, Newton said:

“I was all ears,” he wrote, “and what was better, he not only informed my understanding but his discourses inflamed my heart.” John Newton, about Alexander Clunie

Clunie helped Newton get established not only in his own faith but in his approach to preaching the gospel and helping others.

So, Newton knew both sides of the **influence of friends** - both for good and for ill. He reconnected with his friend Job Lewis after coming back to the Lord, but it was too late for Lewis. As much as Newton tried to plead with him to turn from his sins and call on Jesus, Lewis was hardened in his sin and would not repent. Even as fever consumed his body and he lay dying, with Newton pleading for his soul, Lewis refused Jesus. This experience haunted Newton for the rest of his life and he resolved to never lead another man astray, but to bring as many as he could to saving faith in the Lord Jesus.

John Newton was, of course, the author of the great hymn, Amazing Grace. By the end of the 1700s he was the most respected and admired evangelical preacher in England, paving the way for the rapid growth of the evangelical movement there in Britain and the modern missionary movement. Newton inspired Wilberforce, supported Cowper and mentored others like preacher Charles Simeon. To the end of his life Newton was marked by God’s grace:

“What a poor creature I am in myself, incapable of standing a single hour without continual fresh supplies of strength and grace from the fountain-head.” John Newton, “The Old African Blasphemer”

Let’s close today singing of God’s wonderful, though mysterious grace. Newton’s dear friend and fellow hymn writer William Cowper wrote of this reality - that God moves in a mysterious way.

Ye fearful saints fresh courage take,

 The clouds ye so much dread

Are big with mercy, and shall break

 In blessings on your head.

We will not always understand the painful, difficult parts of life - sometimes dark thunderclouds move in. But we know that God is always working in us and around us - and the dark storms that worry us will bring the rain that we need. May you have a John Newton in your life so you can see the good that the rain will bring and not stress about the thunder and lightning.

Let’s pray.