

A Foundation for Unity in the Church

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Lord's Day morning

Ephesians 1:1

Introduction: Open your Bibles to the book of Ephesians. The title of our message this Lord's Day morning is "A Foundation for Unity in the Gospel." We will be dealing specifically with verse 1 this morning. Let us stand together as we read the entire first chapter.

[Read Ephesians 1]

Ephesians is a book that tells us how we can have *unity in the church*. As we begin a series through this book and as I begin my ministry among you, my heart is full with expectation and hunger. I want to see that godly unity that the Ephesian believers be exemplified in our church. I have often meditated upon how the early church was known for its unity. We read in Acts 2 how those first century believers continued "*daily with one accord in the temple*" and how they had "*singleness of heart*" (Acts 2:46). Constantly throughout the New Testament we find that believers were to be "*of one mind*" (Romans 15:6; 1 Corinthians 13:11) and of "*one heart and soul*" (Acts 4:32). All throughout the record of the early church we find these words characteristic of true believers. There is a reason that the Gospel spread throughout the Roman Empire and churches grew and were planted in every city so much so that they "*turned the world upside down*" (Acts 17:6). I want that for our church. That unstoppable power comes only from our unity in the Gospel.

The book of Ephesians stops at nothing to bring us together as a Body with Christ as our Head. In these pages we are taken from the heights and harmony of heaven in eternity past to the war and noise of our past lives, to the peace we have in Jesus today, and finally to "the smell of the battlefield"¹ and fight daily as we remind ourselves that we "wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities" and "powers," and "the rulers of the darkness of this world," and "spiritual wickedness in high places" (Ephesians 6:12).

Without question, the book of Ephesians is one of the most profound and yet amazingly practical books in the entire Bible. Some have concluded that late in Paul's life as his letters were being gathered and beginning to be compiled, that Paul wrote this letter as a summary of the Gospel that he preached. Yet Paul was not content with just putting out a theological treatise for scholars or philosophers. What I am struck by is how concerned he is that people not just believe the right way, but LIVE the right way!

Now before we get right into the text this morning, let me explain what it is we will be doing here on Sunday mornings. Everything I have to tell you *today* and every other day comes not from my own mind or innovation, but will come the pages of this Book. I'm not here to innovate or invent, and especially not to entertain. God has called me here to go systematically with you through the Bible. We call that *expository preaching*. To exposit something is to dig for it, and to mine it out. There's no need to be creative or ingenious. It's like mining for a diamond. You

¹ Sinclair B. Ferguson, *Let's Study Ephesians*, Banner of Truth (East Peoria, IL: 2005), xi.

cannot improve upon it. So as we come to the text this morning, everything we learn will come right from the words of the Apostle Paul some 1943 years ago. We will proceed as the prophet Isaiah said "line upon line and precept upon precept" (Isaiah 28: 10). The points of the Scripture will be the points of my message. That's not sensational perhaps, but it will put our roots deep down in the text of the Bible.

Now let's come to our text and remember that we are talking about our unity in the Gospel. Let's gather around this Scripture this morning and see first of all what it was that set all this in motion. Its right here in verse one:

"Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God"

There it is—Jesus Christ by his own will, sent out the Apostle Paul to preach the Gospel And that is precisely the message of Ephesians. It is the GOSPEL ALONE that gives us our unity, our togetherness, and our community.

So that brings us to our first point:

- I. If we want to be unified in this church, there must be a commitment as God-called, God-sent messengers of the Gospel.

This is not new revelation. Listen to Paul explain this to the Romans:

Romans 10:14

How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and *how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they be sent?*

Without Jesus Christ sending out his preachers, there can be no Gospel proclamation, no people saved, no churches established in the faith, and therefore, *no unity!* Without a messenger there is no Word proclaimed, and without the Word, there is no FAITH and NO GOSPEL. Jesus commands us to go with His message:

John 20:21

...As my Father hath sent me, even so send I you.

Mark 16:15

Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.

Indeed, Paul says in Ephesians 4:11-12 that God "gave some, apostles...prophets... evangelists [church planters]...pastors and teachers; 12 For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ"

Without a Word preaching messenger, sinners cannot be won to the Lord and saints cannot be built up in the faith.

And so it is that this epistle begins with a man sent forth to preach the Word of God:

"Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God..."

And what a man he was! He was a man of spiritual prowess but was physically feeble.

- A. You see, the messenger need not be great from an earthly perspective.
 - a. Paul was not a man of great physical stature. Though he was a heavy weight among prophets in the Bible, his name, Paulus, which

is of Latin origin, means "little one."² Paul himself records the taunts of his enemies: "For *his* letters, say they, *are* weighty and powerful; but *his* bodily presence *is* weak" (2 Corinthians 10:10).

Ancient literature conforms to the Biblical record and says that Paul was "a man little of stature, thin haired upon his head, crooked in the legs, of good state of body, with eyebrows joining, and nose somewhat hooked."³

And so, the messenger need not be physically imposing as King Saul of the Old Testament who was head and "shoulders...higher than all the people" (1 Samuel 9:2). No it is actually more beneficially if the man of God is of a smaller stature because of our own innate pride. Did "Tall" King Saul kill Goliath? No, of course it was the "little guy" from Jesse's family who killed the giant and became the greatest King Israel ever knew. Whether we are talking of David, or the Apostle Paul, or even Zacchaeus, or the little children that came unto Jesus, it is clear that God uses people who know they are "little in their own sight" (1 Samuel 15:17).

Zechariah 4:6

Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the LORD of hosts. So PHYSICAL STATURE would have been of no use to Paul.

b. Neither was Paul a man of great speech. Listen to Paul's own testimony to the Corinthian believers who were trusting in great orators and smooth talkers.

1 Corinthians 2:1-5

And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God. 2 For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified. 3 And I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling. 4 And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power: 5 That your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God.

In fact Paul records in 2 Corinthians 10:10 that some of the people belittled he was writing to belittled him because "*his* [public] speech [was] contemptible." So Paul was a man of poor speech, and he was not of great stature.

c. Neither was Paul a man of natural spirituality. It took Almighty God to stop Paul in his tracks as he was on his way to Damascus. He was called Saul then, and he persecuted the church. He wanted Stephen killed, and he got his wish and the Scripture says he "consented" to Stephen's stoning. Back then Paul was a Pharisee—a religious man. He had large portions of the Bible memorized. But his religion did him no good. You see religion cannot save you. The Bible is not about some religion. The book of Ephesians is not about some religion. Saul the Pharisee read the Scriptures, demonstrated religion and truly seemed devoted to God. But Saul

² Latin *Paulus*, or "little one"

³ From the apocryphal book *Acts of Paul and Thecla* as quoted in Ferguson's *Ephesians*.

did not know God. If you this morning are relying on your religion to get you to heaven, what I'm telling you is probably quite shocking. I hope you are awakening to the fact that God will not save you because you are religious. You see, people can actually read the Bible and seem quite religious, but it does them absolutely NO GOOD. The Mormons read the Bible and weep over it. They are all lost at this hour. The Jehovah's Witnesses read the Bible, and at this moment they are "dead in their trespasses and sins" (Ephesians 2: 1). This morning not far from here, there is a Unification church⁴ that will open the Bible and seem very religious, but they gather together in vain! What man needs is not religion! What we need is Christ's righteousness!

- ∅ Paul boasts in Philippians 3: 4-6 ...I might also have confidence in the flesh. If any other man thinketh that he hath whereof he might trust in the flesh, I more: 5 Circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee; 6 Concerning zeal, persecuting the church; touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless.
- ∅ But listen to him in verse 9 of the same chapter. Paul testifies that all his religion was useless and says that "[I might] be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith

It is this righteousness that Paul never sought for himself. Well, what was he seeking then? He was living after the counsel of his own lost soul. He was listening every day to his own deceitful heart. He was comforting himself with a false zeal that he had for a God he thought he knew. He had a "*form of godliness but he denied the power thereof*" (2 Timothy 3: 3). Saul was as lost as lost could be. He was religious, but he was, as we all are by nature, a rebel. So Paul was obviously not a man of natural spirituality.

...Which brings us to our next point. Not only is it true that the messenger need not be *great* from an earthly perspective, but in fact,

- B. The messenger is wholly and completely reliant upon a heavenly intervention. It is that heavenly intervention that we all have in common. We call that the Gospel. Jesus does not physically confront us as he did the Apostle Paul, but we still are confronted in the same way by means of the Spirit of God applying the Word of God to our consciences.

So let's be clear. Saul, the Pharisee of Pharisees, did not pull himself up by his bootstraps and volunteer to be the Apostle to the Gentiles. What was it then? Well, it's right here in our text::

"Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God"

⁴ The "Moonies"

It was not Paul's idea to go out and evangelize the nations, and it certainly wasn't his idea to become a disciple of Jesus Christ. He hated the Lord. He persecuted Jesus by persecuting the Lord's people. Remember Jesus asked Paul on the Damascus Road "Why persecutest thou me?" (Acts 9:4; 22:7; 26:14). It was not in the will of Paul to serve the Lord. Neither Paul nor anyone else has any power in and of themselves to come to God on their own. It wasn't Paul's idea.

∅ You know the verses in Romans 3:10-18: *"There is none righteous, no, not one: 11 There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. 12 They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one. 13 Their throat is an open sepulchre; with their tongues they have used deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips: 14 Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness: 15 Their feet are swift to shed blood: 16 Destruction and misery are in their ways: 17 And the way of peace have they not known: 18 There is no fear of God before their eyes."*

That's a dismal and depressing thought, isn't it? But look beautiful picture of the Gospel presented as Paul gives his testimony before the grandson of Herod the Great, King Agrippa found in Acts 26:12-19. Turn over there now. Paul speaks up and says.

∅ *"... I went to Damascus with authority and commission from the chief priests, 13 At midday, O king, I saw in the way a light from heaven, above the brightness of the sun, shining round about me and them which journeyed with me. 14 And when we were all fallen to the earth, I heard a voice speaking unto me, and saying in the Hebrew tongue, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks. 15 And I said, Who art thou, Lord? And he said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest. 16 But rise, and stand upon thy feet: for I have appeared unto thee for this purpose, to make thee a minister and a witness both of these things which thou hast seen, and of those things in the which I will appear unto thee; 17 Delivering thee from the people, and from the Gentiles, unto whom now I send thee, 18 To open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me. 19 Whereupon, O king Agrippa, I was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision."*

"Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ" by what? "... by the will of God"!!

The will of God brought the apostle to every part of the Roman empire. Verse 1 tells us one of the places where Paul preached, for Paul writes "to the saints which are at Ephesus, and to the faithful in Christ Jesus." He knew these people well. He had ministered among them for a time span of about 3 years. He went into a pagan city, and He relied on the power of the Gospel alone to do its work.

So If we want to be unified in this church, we must be committed to be the God-called, God-sent messengers God has created us to be. As we go forth proclaiming the Gospel, people will be added to the church, we will grow in grace, and the unity of the church will become stronger and stronger. That is my goal. But it is not enough to be content to be God's messengers. That in itself will not preserve long-term unity. That will not ultimately unite us as God wants us to be united.

- II. If we want to be unified in this church, there must be a commitment to the God-ordained message of the Gospel.

If there is anything that we out to be together on, to base our community on and our commonality on, it must be based on a firm commitment to build this church on the Gospel alone in the midst of a Hostile and Heathen society. Today many churches fuel their growth on entertainment and people pleasing. Why do we not have a trap set on this platform? Why are we not just showing a good video instead of this outdated preaching? Why do we do the things we do in this church? Because we *believe* in the power of the Gospel. If we bring people into this church with entertainment, they will leave when they get bored. We will have to keep them entertained or they will leave. You see what you win people with is what you must keep them with. But if you win people with the Gospel, then God will keep them! They have been won to God, and God will never fail them! Do you see the importance of being committed to the Gospel?

- A. The Gospel's power will unify us in our position "saints"

Here is a heathen city, just like the city of Nineveh—totally wicked and unregenerate—completely given over to idolatry and wickedness. By ancient standards, Ephesus was a mega-city of over 300,000 people. It was the capital city of the Roman province Asia Minor and the home of one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World: the temple of the goddess Diana. Turn with me to Acts 19: 18-20. When Paul came Ephesus around 54AD there was such a response to the Gospel that people stopped buying idols, and the idol industry was facing serious financial shortfall. Acts 19 beginning with verse 18 records:

And many that believed came, and confessed, and shewed their deeds. 19 Many of them also which used curious arts brought their books together, and burned them before all men: and they counted the price of them, and found it fifty thousand pieces of silver. 20 So mightily grew the word of God and prevailed.

What a response from those heathen people! But it was not long before there were major problems. Look down at verse 24 and following:

For a certain man named Demetrius, a silversmith, which made silver shrines for Diana, brought no small gain unto the craftsmen; 25 Whom he called together with the workmen of like occupation, and said, Sirs, ye know that by this craft we have our wealth. 26 Moreover ye see and hear, that not alone at Ephesus, but almost throughout all Asia, this Paul hath persuaded and turned away much people, saying that they be no gods, which are made with hands: 27 So that not only this our craft is in danger to be set at nought; but also that the temple of the great goddess Diana should be despised, and her magnificence should be destroyed, whom all Asia and the world worshippeth. 28

And when they heard these sayings, they were full of wrath, and cried out, saying, Great is Diana of the Ephesians. 29 And the whole city was filled with confusion: and having caught Gaius and Aristarchus, men of Macedonia, Paul's companions in travel, they rushed with one accord into the theatre.

Paul was incarcerated briefly in Ephesus because of this, but what a ministry he had among them! We find in the book of Acts that Paul had labored among the Ephesians for three years—by far his longest time in one church. The church was probably begun by Aquila and Priscilla, but it Paul who labours among them and brings them together as a church—a unified body under Christ. Paul would later hand the Ephesian church over to young Timothy after his departure, and so when you read First and Second Timothy, you are reading a letter originally intended for the Pastor of the Ephesian church who succeeded Paul. Look at what these former idol worshipping heathens are called in our text:

“Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, to *the saints* which are at Ephesus, and to the faithful in Christ Jesus”

So you see the Gospel's power unified these people in their position as “saints,” and that same Gospel will unify us. What is a saint?

- a. A saint is one who is reserved for God in a hostile world. We read the word “saints” and we think these were extraordinary and holy people. No, these people were ordinary people who were saved by grace. The word “saint” means “separated to God” or someone who is reserved for God's holy purposes. In the Scripture, it never speaks self-righteousness, so do not jump to conclusions. Listen to what an old-time London preacher said many years ago. He said:
“[T]his is not a letter addressed to some unusual and exceptional Christian people, it is not a letter addressed to some great scholar or theologian, it is not a letter addressed to teachers, it is not a letter addressed to so-called scholars who study the Scriptures. It is not a letter to specialists but a letter to ordinary church members.”⁵

So this book is addressed to people like ourselves—people who, yes, were reserved for God because they had put their faith in Jesus Christ, but as you will see in the weeks to come from the content of this letter—these people had major struggles with sin, and needed help in fighting the every day battles of life!

- b. A saint, secondly, is one who is resurrected by God to spiritual life and not by His own efforts. What makes you and I saints is not our own righteousness, but it is through the power of the Gospel, that we are made holy in Christ and resurrected like Lazarus to spiritual life! Look at how Paul describes how they became saints in chapter 2 and verse 1:

⁵ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones. *God's Ultimate Purpose: An Exposition of Ephesians 1*, Baker Books (Grand Rapids, MI: 1978), 23.

“And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins; Wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience: 3 Among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others. 4 But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, 5 Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved;) 6 And hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus:”

God has raised us from the dead, so let us unify ourselves around the Gospel and live like saints! We are raised together to sit with Jesus, so though we do not have our own righteousness, we are robed in His righteousness. Indeed “For ye were sometimes darkness, but now *are* ye light in the Lord: walk as children of light” (Ephesians 5:8).

So the Gospel’s power unifies us in our position as saints, and finally let us see that:

B. The Gospel’s power will unify us in our practice “faithful”
Look at our text again:

“Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, to the saints which are at Ephesus, and to the faithful in Christ Jesus.”

This is my first day on the job as your pastor. I have asked myself the question, what is this church known for? I can tell you what it is known for: it’s love one for another. Yet, I know that the unity that we have today can be destroyed in days to come. Usually it does not come overnight, but slowly the church loses its focus on the Gospel—one wants this kind of music and another that. One has this special issue, and another that. Listen, let me encourage you ahead of time. We have one focus in this ministry: we are unified around the Gospel! Jesus died for our offences against His holy law as a substitute for us. He was raised the third day for our justification! He showed himself alive after His resurrection to many, and forty days later he ascended to be seated at the right hand of the Majesty on high! That is what we are united around this morning. That is why we are gathered here today. Your calling and my calling from God today is to be what the Ephesians were in their part of this ungodly world that we live in: FAITHFUL. We are called to PRACTICE our faith. The last three chapters deal with how to be faithful. We will get there if the Lord permits, but for now, are you committed to the Gospel?

CONCLUSION: Our unity, our community, our love that we have one to another comes right from the Gospel that we believe. Are you committed to be a messenger for the Lord? Are you committed to the message of the Gospel?

Romans 1:16

For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek.

APPEAL: Let us have every head bowed and eyes closed. This time is an appeal to you to respond to the message you just heard preached. Are you unified with God's calling and purpose for us? Are you united to Christ in the Gospel? Have you been saved by grace alone, through faith alone, for God's glory alone? Or are you still "dead in your trespasses and sins." You may be like Paul here this morning, religious, but without the righteousness that only comes from a right relationship with God. Do you know Christ today? Today of all days would be the time to turn to Christ. Repent of your sins and trust in Christ today! We need no music to sweeten the atmosphere if the Holy Spirit has already sweetened your heart. With our heads bowed and eyes closed, perhaps you would say, I want to repent and believe! God is opening my eyes! You say I was not saved when I walked into this building this morning, but I want to be. If so, would you just raise your hand so I can help you and pray for you? Don't be ashamed of the Lord this morning. If you deny Him, He will deny you. Repent and believe the Gospel.

Now perhaps you are a church member today, and you say, God touched my heart with this message. Perhaps you've been struggling with sin and not living as a saint. Perhaps you have been bickering and not unified with this church. Perhaps you have become lackadaisical in your walk with Christ and in your responsibilities to this church. Perhaps you have grown cold in your responsibility as a Messenger of the Lord Jesus Christ. Oh you are missing out on God's blessing! You say, Pastor, will you pray for me? Would you lift your hand: you say, please pray for me Pastor. Amen!

CLOSING HYMN: Let us turn to number 411 in our hymnal, "My Hope is Built on Nothing Less Than Jesus Blood and Righteousness." Let's sing this out as a testimony to our UNITY IN THE GOSPEL!