

## The Paradox of Understanding Self

A long time ago, when I was in my early 20's, I sat in a church garden at night praying. I was terribly lonely. My girlfriend had broken up with me. I was struggling with the concept of being alone and single. With great struggle, I surrendered to God and said to Him that if it was His will that I be single for the rest of my life then I would accept that. It was soon after this that I began dating the woman who would become my wife. Loneliness is not a state that God wants us to be in. Some have been called to a path of singleness, but none are called to live a life of loneliness. We were made for relationships. God's plan from before the beginning of time was to create a community of people connected with one another in His Son.

Think of art, songs, music, and drama. What is the focus? From "Romeo and Juliet" to great operas, from literature to pop music, so much of it all is about love and relationships. Even the very nature of our universe is relational. Modern physics doesn't understand it, but there is a kind of connection that the matter in this universe has with itself. From the attraction of objects to one another that we call gravity, to string theory, to the mysterious connection that subatomic particles have with one another no matter how close or far away from each other they may be - there is a relationship. The Bible teaches us that we were made for relationship. We were made to be in relationship with God



and with one another. It seems that there is much in modern science, pop culture, and classic music and literature that suggests that life is about relationships.



At the same time there is also a quest in our world today for understanding of the self. There is a great emphasis on self-expression. And the focus on self can cause strain on relationships. There is that saying, "Why can't we all just get along?" Selfishness is a large part of the answer.

This section of Ephesians speaks of unity and relationship. We saw in chapter two that Christ has torn down the walls that divide us by offering Himself on the cross creating something entirely new: God's new society. Paul says in this week's readings that the very essence of this new society that Christ has created through the cross is unity! We are one in

Christ, there is one Lord, one faith, and one baptism. Christ is described as ascended into heaven. What remains physically on earth of His body, is His people, the church. And in chapter four of Ephesians, Paul is forcefully exhorting the followers of Christ to uncover that unity, seek to maintain that unity, and discover our place in that unity.

This is the paradox of understanding the self. Paul is saying in essence to know ourselves we must know God (we saw this in chapter one – God has chosen to adopt us into His family.) And now Paul is saying that to know ourselves, we must understand our place in connection to the body of Christ. This scripture urges us to find our place in this new society, discover our unique giftedness, and conduct ourselves in such a way as to reveal that unity that is the spiritual reality of the church, united as one, the Body of Christ.

### **Day 23, Monday**

Preparation: As you come before God today, how are you? Take a few moments to talk to God about how you are feeling, about how your relationships with others are going. Thank Him that He desires a relationship with you. Then ask Him to speak to you.

Introduction: Paul has expounded mind-blowing theological truths in the first three chapters of this Epistle. Paul has prayed that the Ephesians come to grasp how these truths apply to them. Now Paul exhorts the Ephesians to live into those truths with very practical actions.

#### **Reading: Ephesians 4:1-6 **Maintaining the Unity of the Spirit****

1. *The word used in verse one is literally “walk”, walk in a manner worthy of the calling. Your translation might say “live” in a manner worthy of the calling you have received.*  
What is conveyed by this metaphor of walking? How does this bring out something different than “running the race” or “standing firm” which are used elsewhere? What is Paul wanting his readers to consider?
2. *The calling to which Paul is referring is the call to live as a part of God’s new society, formed by His work on the cross. The call is to live in unity with others who have been chosen to be adopted into God’s family.* What specifically does Paul say is the way to live that is worthy of that calling?
3. Note how many times the word “one” appears in verses 4-6. What is Paul urging us to see?
4. How does the theological foundation for Christian unity in verses 4-6 relate to the exhortations in verses 1-3?
5. What do you think is meant by the “unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” in verse 3?
6. How have you known a connection to others in the Holy Spirit or because of the Holy Spirit? How have you experienced Biblical shalom-peace as a bond with others?
7. Rate yourself. How are you doing at relating to others in the way described in verse two?

Close in prayer talking to God about your connection with others in the Body of Christ.

## Day 24, Tuesday

Preparation: Take a few moments today to thank God for His blessings to you. Then pray asking Him to grant you an awareness of what gifts He has given you and specifically what gift He has for you today.

Introduction: This section speaks of Christ's ascension into heaven. It is referencing a triumphal victory procession by citing Psalm 68:18. In that procession, Christ has given gifts to His people. Traditionally the church has understood "the descent of Jesus to the lower regions of Earth" as referring to Him going to Hades or Hell and preaching to those who had previously died. However, this could just mean that He descended to earth in becoming human in the incarnation.

Reading: Ephesians 4:7-12     **Christ's Gifts Given to Each One**

1. What is being given by Christ and to whom is it being given?
2. "To each one" means that Christ has given unique gifts to you. What has He given you? Ask Him to show you.
3. Jesus ascended into heaven. This means He is no loner on earth in bodily form. Why then, would it be important that He give these various kinds of gifts?
4. In verse 12, what is stated as the purpose for why Christ has given these gifts?
5. Where is the body of Christ on earth today?
6. How are you doing at using what Christ has given you for the strengthening of His Body? What might God be saying to you about this? Is there something He might be prompting you to do?

Close in prayer talking to God about this.

## Day 25, Wednesday

Preparation: As you open in prayer today, take a moment to sit quietly in the presence of God with your palms turned upward as a sign of your receptiveness to receive from Him today. Thank Him for what He is giving to you.

Introduction: Paul talks about the varieties of gifts given in five categories. This may not be meant to be an exhaustive list of the kinds of gifts given. Different lists of spiritual gifts are noted in other places in the New Testament (such as I Corinthians 12 or Romans 12). However, some have seen this list in Ephesians as being the five general categories of gifts given to people in Christ's body. In a general sense they could be described this way: Apostle means those who are sent. Prophets are those who apply the Word of God to a contemporary situation. Evangelists invite others to consider God. Pastors care for the needs of the others. Teachers help others understand God.

Reading: Ephesians 4:11-16     **Finding Our Anchor in the Stability of the Church**

1. As you look over the general meaning of these five categories of gifts as stated above, do any resonate with you? Might the gifts God has given you align with one or more of those categories?

2. Why does the text say that God has given these gifts, for what purpose are they to be used?
3. How anchored do you feel in life right now? How has, or how might, others in the church help anchor, ground and stabilize you?
4. In verses 15 and 16 what are the two ways Jesus is described in relation to the church?  
*Note the text doesn't actually say "speaking" the truth in love. It merely has the verbal form of the word for truth. "Truthing" in love - living a life of truth does imply speaking truthfully but it means even more.*
5. How balanced are you between speaking the truth and loving? Are you more prone to speak the truth but in a less than loving manner, or more prone to act in a loving manner but neglect to speak the truth?

As you close, consider what God might have revealed to you in this time. Talk to Him about what you are sensing about yourself and His call upon your life.

## **Day 26, Thursday**

Preparation: Spend some time before God reflecting on your habits. What are your good, healthy habits? What are some habits that God might prefer you change? Ask Him to guide you toward the adoption of healthy life-giving, spiritual habits.

Introduction: In this section Paul is contrasting the former way of living. He describes the life of the "Gentiles", those who live apart from God, as the ways of the old self. Like taking off a garment, he encourages the Ephesian Christians to take off the old habits of life lived apart from God and put on a new manner of living that is consistent with the new community into which God has brought them.

### Reading: Ephesians 4:17-24 **Taking Off the "Old Self"**

1. How do the Gentiles live (literally "walk")?
2. What does Paul say makes them this way?
3. In contrast to that, how are Christians to live? What is said about how to do this?
4. How is the mind involved in this? (Note the words related to mind and learning.)
5. What of your "old self" (self apart from God) seems to cling to you still?
6. What practical steps might you take to remove the old self and adopt the habits of a Christ-like new self? How could you learn, and seek to have your mind renewed in Christ? Spend some time talking to God about this.

## **Day 27, Friday**

Preparation: Take an internal inventory - how are you doing at living a godly, righteous, and sober life? Ask God to help you be honest with yourself. Spend some time confessing your sins and seeking the assurance of God's forgiveness. Then with a new, clean slate, enter into God's presence this morning and ask Him to guide you.

Introduction: This section continues Paul's exhortation to live out what we say we believe. He has just one phrase in these verses to remind us of the theological foundation he has built earlier which provides the reason for such new holy living: "For we are members one of another". You belong to other believers in the Body of Christ, and they belong to you. The exhortations through all of chapter four speak about how we relate to others.

Reading: Ephesians 4:25-29 **Living Out What We Believe**

1. Three areas of the old self are mentioned: speech, emotion, and action. What example is given for each?
2. How "filled with Christ" is your speech?
3. How does Christ fill your emotions?
4. How is being filled with Christ seen in your actions?
5. Ask God to put His finger on an aspect of your old self that needs to change. What is it? Close in prayer asking God to transform your heart, mind, and spirit to enable you to live into your intentions.

### **Day 28, Saturday/Sunday**

Preparation: Spend time today praising God: tell Him how you have come to know Him as loving, rich in mercy, abounding in grace, and overflowing with kindness. Sit for a moment in the warmth of His loving embrace. Then ask Him to help you hear His voice today.

Introduction: This section ends where we began, with the metaphor of walking. Only this time, Paul references how Jesus lived, how Christ walked. In God's new society we are connected with Christ and with one another. These two fundamental truths compel us to live a life of love toward one another. In doing so we imitate Christ and live a life of love for God.

Reading: Ephesians 4:30-5:2 **Do Not Grieve the Holy Spirit: Walk in Love as Jesus Did**

1. How has God in Christ forgiven you – what self-centeredness and sin has He forgiven in your life?
  2. What is God asking you to forgive in another? How can you show kindness to that person (see v. 32)?
  3. What does Paul say it does to the Holy Spirit when we live into our old selves?
  4. What is the final injunction in this passage?
  5. How did Christ "walk"? How did He love (especially according to these verses)?
- Talk to God about forgiveness. Thank Him for how He has forgiven you. Ask Him to help you forgive that other person whom you need to forgive and to show them kindness.