

**28 Days in Ephesians – This was originally on my blog www.ryanstrattonblog1.wordpress.com
“The Gospel Changes Us”**

Daily Devotionals written by Ryan Stratton.

Bible verses are from the Common English Bible

Ryan Stratton grew up in small towns in South-Central Texas. He learned the value of family through the variety of relationships he has cultivated during his life. His love of faith development and the Christian concept of grace has guided him to become a pastor in the United Methodist Church.

For over nineteen years, Ryan has been teaching children, teenagers, and adults. While he was a teenager, he practiced TaeKwonDo and continued practicing and teaching the art form for fifteen years. While managing and owning his own schools he learned leadership, listening, marketing, and many other skills in order to be successful. After receiving a call to Christian ministry and leadership, Ryan retired from martial arts and transitioned to full time vocational ministry. Ryan’s priority in life is to help people see and experience life beyond themselves and the purpose God has for them.

The most important relationships for Ryan are with his wife and his children. When not leading the church, studying the Scripture, speaking, writing, or participating in community missions and outreach, Ryan is found spending time with his family while traveling, hiking, playing games, watching his son play T-ball, and supporting his wife in her Seminary work and calling to ministry.

New Start, Same Amazing Grace

Ephesians 1:1-2 From Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by God's will. To the holy and faithful people in Christ Jesus in Ephesus. 2 Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Time seems to be moving faster and we still have so much to do. We almost seem to have a never ending to do list and feel like everything changes all around us and we have to somehow keep up. This can cause added stress into our lives. One things that doesn't change is God, His will and His grace.

Paul knows he has been called into his profession by God. He has learned to follow God's will, even when it wasn't safe or completely clear for him. Paul has been all over the known world, during his missionary tours, and even after encountering all types of people, he can still begin his letters with "Grace and peace." Can we do this today? Remember God's will for us is to love God and love other people.

One thing that stands out to me is how Paul addresses the people he is writing to, "The holy and faithful people." The amazing thing is that he knew he was writing to imperfect people but he still called them "holy and faithful." I wonder how people would describe us when we are not around, or are trying to speak to us?

I believe this is a high calling for our lives. One that comes to completion over time. But we can still strive to be "holy and faithful" in our words, our actions, our thoughts, etc. So starting the letter to the Ephesians in this manner should also have us think today.

We have started a new month. Last month we made mistakes (and will continue to make mistakes this month); but God lavishes grace and riches upon us, even though we do not deserve it. This is grace that God can still look at us and call us "holy and faithful." Life does not have to be perfect or completely in order, but we have new chances to live into the calling God placed on our lives.

#AmazingGrace

Know Who & Who's You Are

Ephesians 1:3-8 3 Bless the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! He has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing that comes from heaven. 4 God chose us in Christ to be holy and blameless in God's presence before the creation of the world.5 God destined us to be his adopted children through Jesus Christ because of his love. This was according to his goodwill and plan 6 and to honor his glorious grace that he has given to us freely through the Son whom he loves. 7 We have been ransomed through his Son's blood, and we have forgiveness for our failures based on his overflowing grace, 8 which he poured over us with wisdom and understanding.

Ever have a day or days when you do not feel like you have enough? Where does this attitude or mindset come from? We can get too easily wrapped up in trying to get the better or best things in life and we can miss the true best that we have available.

Here's what I love about the first chapter of Ephesians: Paul is laying out the gospel and reminding the readers, and us, what we have that God has given us. The truth is that we have "every spiritual blessing that comes from heaven." What does this mean? This may not mean that we are gifted with material items, though it might. But we are blessed with even more important things than anything money can buy. We have received forgiveness which means we are released from the guilt that holds us back. We have received grace which means we can experience, and share, God in our lives and around us. We have been gifted and blessed with love, peace, hope, joy, etc. God has given us every spiritual blessing in heaven. We really do have everything, even if it seems others have more materially.

On top of all of this, each one of us is chosen by God. No matter what has been done in the past, there is redemption through Jesus Christ. We may not be able to forgive ourselves, but God will forgive because of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on behalf of our sins (past, present and future). There is a way to begin a new life and allow Christ to make a new creation out of us. Because of Christ, we are open for adoption into the King's family. This makes you a prince or princess in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Paul's letter is not meant to puff up our ego, but rather to remind us who we are. We can easily forget this; we are children of God and made in His image. Believe this and you can experience a freedom in this life and a new confidence that will help you and I be more loving, grace-filled, peaceful, forgiving, etc.

Christ poured out His blood on the cross, and we have been accepted into God's family. I encourage you to ponder what this means for you and to accept the gift God has given through Jesus Christ. We have the opportunity to continue to explore this gospel, good news, message over the next few days as we continue in Ephesians 1.

Believe in Jesus Christ and live. You are God's child and you are special and unique. God's grace is being poured on you today, just trust and accept it.

God chooses you!

Out in the Open

Ephesians 1:9-14 9 God revealed his hidden design to us, which is according to his goodwill and the plan that he intended to accomplish through his Son. 10 This is what God planned for the climax of all times: to bring all things together in Christ, the things in heaven along with the things on earth. 11 We have also received an inheritance in Christ. We were destined by the plan of God, who accomplishes everything according to his design. 12 We are called to be an honor to God's glory because we were the first to hope in Christ. 13 You too heard the word of truth in Christ, which is the good news of your salvation. You were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit because you believed in Christ. 14 The Holy Spirit is the down payment on our inheritance, which is applied toward our redemption as God's own people, resulting in the honor of God's glory.

So check this out, God's message is not hidden to us. Many people can go through life trying to "figure out" God and what God wants us to do in this life. So many people get caught up in this that it is easy to miss out on life and see all that God has revealed through creation and through the working of the Spirit within each person all around us.

Not only did God reveal everything to us through Jesus Christ, but we are reminded that each of us was thought of before time began. God has chosen to be in relationship with us even before anyone even dreamed of us. We were thought of by the Creator of the universe and thus each have a purpose to fulfill. We may begin to ask the question, "what does God want to accomplish in my life?"

Asking a question like this helps us realize that God can and does use us; but this questions can also cause us to think that we are not good enough for God to use. So, Paul goes on and explains more about the gospel (good news) message of Jesus Christ. We get to read more about this message as Ephesians goes on. Part of the message is that we get to bring honor to God because God accomplishes much in our lives. Yes, we have been given gifts but it is necessary to thank the One who gave those gifts and talents whenever we have the opportunity to use them and use them well.

There is a spiritual inheritance promised by God and we have received the down payment, the Holy Spirit. This is to remind us we are not alone. Jesus talks about the Holy Spirit being a comforter, the Holy Spirit speaks through us, the Holy Spirit gives power. Paul explains the Spirit prays for us, the Spirit gives gifts, etc. The Holy Spirit is an incredible gift we have because it means the Living God is inside us and is working in us and through us. It is God who is accomplishing the works through us because of the Spirit.

How will you live differently knowing the Holy Spirit of God is in you? Have you trusted Christ as Savior and Lord? Trusting and hoping in Christ is the first part of willingly unleashing the power of the Spirit within us. God has much to do in us and through us. All this have been thought of since before time began. We choose to live for ourselves or God. His message is out in the open, ready for ALL people. Do you believe?

#TheGospelChangesUs

Everyday Prayers

Ephesians 1:15-19 Since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all God's people, this is the reason that I don't stop giving thanks to God for you when I remember you in my prayers. I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, will give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation that makes God known to you. I pray that the eyes of your heart will have enough light to see what is the hope of God's call, what is the richness of God's glorious inheritance among believers, and what is the overwhelming greatness of God's power that is working among us believers. This power is conferred by the energy of God's powerful strength.

One of the things I love about Paul is how much his life revolves around prayer. Paul prays all the time and for everyone he has encountered. This shows us how serious Paul took praying and how it impacted his life. Something else that stands out to me is not that Paul prayed, but what he prayed for.

What are some things you personally pray for? I hear people pray for healing, for successful surgeries, for health, for safe travels, for blessings on meetings and events. It seems many of us, including me, look at prayer as something to do only when there are health issues or we want God to bless "our" efforts and work.

There are also people who pray for so much more than just physical healing or ailments. They go straight to the human condition, adding in spiritual, emotional, mental, AND physical healing and wholeness for those they love and those they consider to be enemies.

Going back over this passage today, we can see what it was that Paul was praying for. Bottom line is, he prayed for the power of God to be evident in each person so that we remember who we belong to and what it is we truly work for. So Paul begins by saying he thanks God for each person. What a great prayer. A simple "thank you" prayer. Lately I have found myself praying and giving thanks for the challenging people and situations in my life. It has helped me to see them and work with them as children of God, brothers and sisters in Christ. Not everyone or everything will go smoothly, but we can thank God because He is with us and is also with the other people.

He also goes on to say he prays for the spirit of wisdom so that God is made known to the people. We should do this today so that others come to know the joy that is found in Jesus Christ. Who do you know that you can pray for to come to faith? Have you prayed for yourself in this area for your faith to become stronger?

Paul also basically prays for the light of Jesus Christ to be shown through each believer so that the incredible power of God will be made known among those around us. Think about this, Paul has been beaten and has been imprisoned, shipwrecked, thrown out-of-town, mocked, ridiculed, and so much more. Through all of this he can still praise God and give thanks for the people. Many of his converts were also people who did some of the things to him. Think of the

forgiveness Paul had in his heart. He remembered he was no where near perfect, and this helped him to pray for all people, give thanks for them AND for God's power and presence to be made known in them and through them.

We are challenged daily to go beyond superficial prayers, through we need to continue praying for physical healing and safety; but we should also look toward the spiritual realm, the emotional realm, the mental and relational. God is so incredible and big enough to handle things we may not want to lift up. This is part of the power of the gospel.

#TheGospelChangesUs

No Boundaries

Ephesians 1:20-23 God's power was at work in Christ when God raised him from the dead and sat him at God's right side in the heavens, far above every ruler and authority and power and angelic power, any power that might be named not only now but in the future. God put everything under Christ's feet and made him head of everything in the church, which is his body. His body, the church, is the fullness of Christ, who fills everything in every way.

We can go through life drained because we keep going through our own reserves of power and can easily forget to renew and refill that reservoir. Paul reminds his readers of the power of God that has been displayed through Jesus Christ. This is awesome that we can know of this power and tap into it.

Jesus Christ called himself the Living Water which means that anytime we need to be filled and refreshed we can just go to him. God has placed Christ as the head of the church. Often times we can think that we are the ones in charge and do not seek to find counsel or help to learn the direction to take. After all, Christ is the one we glorify and worship in the church, so we should seek after his council and direction.

So a question can arise, "what exactly is the 'church'?" We tend to think about the "church" as the place we go to worship, have Bible study, prayer chapels, etc; but the church is so much bigger than that because the church is not even a building. The church is the body of Christ, the community of faith, stepping out and bringing the message of Christ into the world through acts of loving service, reconciliation, speaking love and truth. We, as the church, also plant for the harvest which includes the Fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

Christ "fills everything in every way" because he is the source of life and the source to find life and the source of hope and peace in this world. Living for Christ means we have incredible opportunities to serve this broken, hurting world to bring light into dark lives. Since the church is not a building, we are not limited by anything except our own prejudices. Christ has given us life and light so that we can go anywhere and speak to anyone.

How is the life of Christ working through you?

#TheGospelChangesUs

Incredible Gift

Ephesians 2:1-7 At one time you were like a dead person because of the things you did wrong and your offenses against God. You used to live like people of this world. You followed the rule of a destructive spiritual power. This is the spirit of disobedience to God's will that is now at work in persons whose lives are characterized by disobedience. At one time you were like those persons. All of you used to do whatever felt good and whatever you thought you wanted so that you were children headed for punishment just like everyone else. However, God is rich in mercy. He brought us to life with Christ while we were dead as a result of those things that we did wrong. He did this because of the great love that he has for us. You are saved by God's grace! And God raised us up and seated us in the heavens with Christ Jesus. God did this to show future generations the greatness of his grace by the goodness that God has shown us in Christ Jesus.

So here Paul goes again, talking about how bad the person is who is in the world. This is something that deters people. Who wants to hear what a bad person they are, or who wants to hear they are dead spiritually? But this is something we all need to hear, be reminded of and speak about. We need to speak about this because it will be so easy to boast thinking that we are "self-made" and everything we have been able to do, we have done on our own.

I don't know about you, but I have not ever seen a dead person do anything. Paul is reminding the people, and us, of the fallen state of creation. We can see this all the time, everyday. All we have to do is turn on the TV or listen to the radio for just a few minutes to hear about beheadings, burning people, genocide, wars, corruption, etc, etc, etc. This can be depressing if we just focus on this. Yes, we do live in a fallen world and our actions lead us to a life further away from God, which leads to misery in the soul. We become desensitized to the violence around us, we act like nothing is wrong, we are dead spiritually because we do not care nor love anymore.

Verse 4 begins with "However, God..." Other translations use the phrase, "But, God..." I love this phrase because it points to hope. We can land on these words and know something different is about to happen. Then the sentence goes on, "who is rich in mercy." We often feel like we should not go to God because our "problems" are too big or too petty for God to listen to our forgive, but there is mercy for you and for me. Christ brings life into our soul and this means that we are alive again!

Because we are alive in Christ, we know and experience the incredible love God has for us; and we can pass on this love God has for us to those around us to help bring life and light into their lives. God gives us this gift of being alive so that future generations will know of his glory and his greatness and the incredible life He has in store for each person.

God giving us this gift is awesome. He places us with Christ. This gift is ready and available for you. How will you allow Christ to shine in your life so that others will know of his presence and love for them through you?

#TheGospelChangesUs

Not By Us

Ephesians 2:8-10 You are saved by God's grace because of your faith. This salvation is God's gift. It's not something you possessed. It's not something you did that you can be proud of. Instead, we are God's accomplishment, created in Christ Jesus to do good things. God planned for these good things to be the way that we live our lives.

This is the message of the gospel, "God freely gives grace to us." Receiving something for nothing is hard for us to do. We want to have to earn a gift, earn favor, earn respect; but that is not how God works. God freely gives grace, or does he? Grace has come at a cost, the death of Jesus Christ. So giving grace to us may not cost us anything, but it cost God greatly. He lived this life as a human to show how we are supposed to live, and people put Him to death. But that is not the end of the story! Jesus Christ walked out of that tomb three days later because death cannot keep God contained. His life, His presence is too powerful that it cannot be kept silent or locked up. There is so much power, so much grace, so much love from God, that He wants nothing more than to lavish His people with this amazing gift; and we do not have to do anything except accept the gift and allow it to change our life!

I believe God gives us this gift freely, and without and human earning, is because He knows how pride can and does destroy the fabric of how society ought to live. He knows that we cannot handle trying to earn His grace because we would all think we are better than the person next to us; when in reality, we are in the exact same position as them. This levels the playing field so that we do not think, or are not supposed to think, we are better than anyone else.

Living in and accepting in God's grace means there is some work to be done. Each of us has been gifted with this grace to do works that God has lined out for us. We are all working toward a common goal, to work with Christ to show people the Kingdom of God, but each of us has roles to play and parts to work in. It is through these works that God's light shines through us and we remember what God has done in us and through us. This makes us God's accomplishment.

God knows we will mess up and turn away from Him at different parts of our life, but when we are doing what God calls us to do, God is proud and can revel in His masterpiece, His handiwork which is you and me. You may not feel like a masterpiece at times; but remember, it takes time to become the perfect instrument, or to play with perfection. You are an incredible person!

#TheGospelChangesUs

We Belong

Ephesians 2:11-13 So remember that once you were Gentiles by physical descent, who were called “uncircumcised” by Jews who are physically circumcised. At that time you were without Christ. You were aliens rather than citizens of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of God’s promise. In this world you had no hope and no God. But now, thanks to Christ Jesus, you who once were so far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

I know everyone one of us has felt like we wanted to be part of a certain group, but for some reason we felt like we did not belong. We have also felt like we do not deserve to have the people in our life that we have because we feel unworthy. This kind of attitude and mindset seems to be prevalent. There is only one problem with this kind of thinking: we devalue ourselves.

Yes, there is part of us that has made mistakes and has lived a life we did not want to live, but there is something incredible about grace. God grace is pulling us in and is giving us a new life that we never expected to have. Yes, we live lives separate from God. Yes, we do not have everything in a row. Yes, there are parts of our past that we wish we could escape from. Yes, yes, yes. This list of reasons why we do not belong goes on and on. We focus on our failures and God focuses on our future.

Our lives, without Christ, do not have the joy and peace; but when we realize Christ is already here and is calling us to know and follow Him, then we become filled with His Spirit. It is by the grace of God that we belong. We belong with groups who desire to help us live right. We desire to be loved. We desire to be with someone in life that will help us live out the life God has in mind. We desire all of this stuff and we belong.

We should just lay down our past, look to Christ and ask Him to be the central focus of our life. This makes Him Lord and Savior, and us His people. Our lives take on a whole new meaning because it is from a payment that we belong to God. This is a payment we did not give, but was paid for us. This payment was the blood of Jesus Christ who lived an incredible life that God wants us to live, died this death that is so incredibly cruel and humiliating and rose from the dead. He rose from the dead because, even though the world showed it did not want Him, He wanted to show the world that it was wanted.

What are you struggling with today that makes you feel like you do not belong? I hope you can see and hear the soft voice of God so loudly that your perspective changes and that you can see and know that God is pursuing you and even believes in you. You and I belong, we just need to believe this and trust this. Because of Jesus Christ everything is different. What once caused division and rule keeping, now invites all people to know grace. Your life will be drastically different if you find the grace that is around you.

#TheGospelChangesUs

Level Playing Field

Ephesians 2:14-22 Christ is our peace. He made both Jews and Gentiles into one group. With his body, he broke down the barrier of hatred that divided us. He canceled the detailed rules of the Law so that he could create one new person out of the two groups, making peace. He reconciled them both as one body to God by the cross, which ended the hostility to God. When he came, he announced the good news of peace to you who were far away from God and to those who were near. We both have access to the Father through Christ by the one Spirit. So now you are no longer strangers and aliens. Rather, you are fellow citizens with God's people, and you belong to God's household. As God's household, you are built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. The whole building is joined together in him, and it grows up into a temple that is dedicated to the Lord. Christ is building you into a place where God lives through the Spirit.

How do you feel about other people? What causes divisions between groups of people? Isn't it interesting how the Gospel of Jesus Christ promotes reconciliation and repentance of sin by God's grace, and we get it through our heads to "hate" other people because they are not like us. But we can also think, "how are this person, or this group, and I similar?" Doesn't this change how we might think about others? Thinking we could be like them?

Now, there are people who will disagree with this, but God does not want His people to divide the world. He wants the world to be reconciled to Himself and for all people to come to faith in Him. We are the ones who want to divide. We are the ones who think because someone is different, then they are bad and shouldn't be "in the group."

Does this sound like anyone you might know? As I am writing this, I realize I am describing ME. My guess is that description is also you. It seems to be human nature to be around people who are just like us. This makes us more comfortable. But God, wants us to be engaged in, not influenced by, the world around us. I believe the first thing to do is to come to faith in Christ so that we can be filled with His love, His presence, His life and see the world through His eyes. Jesus broke all kinds of cultural boundaries, but He did it because He loves. We like to ask the question "What Would Jesus Do?" This is a dangerous question to ask because we know what Jesus would do, we just don't always want to do what He would do. Jesus leveled the playing field. Because of Jesus there is no separation from lepers and society. Samaritans and Jews. Pharisees and citizens. Jews and Gentiles. Black or white. There is no distinction in any group because Christ breaks the veil we use to separate "us" from "them."

This reconciliation God did through Christ first restores our relationship and standing with God and then frees us to bring reconciliation and healing to those around us who are "different" from us. Having our relationship with God restored means we allow God to change our lives from the inside out and we allow Christ to lead our lives. It begins with a simple communication and belief. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is not just about our relationship with God, but also our relationship with other people. This is why Jesus summed up the Law with two phrases, "love God and love people." The Gospel changes EVERYTHING because now we can realize we are all

on the same playing field with God. Some are coaches, some are players, some are caring for the team, some are in the stage of learning, etc. We are all on the same team. The Gospel changes us.

#TheGospelChangesUs

Sharing What We've Learned

Ephesians 3:1-7 This is why I, Paul, am a prisoner of Christ for you Gentiles. You've heard, of course, about the responsibility to distribute God's grace, which God gave to me for you, right? God showed me his secret plan in a revelation, as I mentioned briefly before (when you read this, you'll understand my insight into the secret plan about Christ). Earlier generations didn't know this hidden plan that God has now revealed to his holy apostles and prophets through the Spirit. This plan is that the Gentiles would be coheirs and parts of the same body, and that they would share with the Jews in the promises of God in Christ Jesus through the gospel. I became a servant of the gospel because of the grace that God showed me through the exercise of his power.

At first when I read this, it almost seems that Paul is acting smug, "I know this...and was revealed to ME..." But I think there is something deeper to what Paul is saying. If this were this only passage we read of Paul's writings, we miss what the entire message is. Paul is overflowing with the grace of God and is held responsible to share this grace with all people he encounters. Think of a time when you were given knowledge. Were you the only one? Did it make you feel part of the group to know the same things they know? We all like to be "in the know" and to know things other people don't. This can give us superiority and authority over others. If we're not careful, we will use that knowledge for ourselves. There is always something more that we can know other people don't. Secrets and gossip are rampant. I have fun with people when I sing to them, "I know something you don't know." This is a fun thing to do.

Now, what if we are given some incredible news, like anything God reveals to us, and we just try to keep it to ourselves and don't share? Paul is reminding us that he has a responsibility to share the good news that was revealed to him. I believe God still reveals wisdom and truth to us today through His Spirit. What is something you feel God has spoken to you? Paul is saying that the plan of God is to bring ALL people to God through Jesus Christ. This is an awesome plan because that means that God is wanting you and me to come to faith and knowledge in Him. This is something we cannot keep to ourselves. If we are given some insight to what God is doing, that means we are spending time with God and we see the world through His eyes which means we share what we have learned.

This is one of the things I love about the book of Ephesians, about the whole Bible really, that God's grace and mercy is available for all people. There are stories in the Old Testament through the New Testament that show God speaking to His people and giving them a word or insight the rest of the culture needs to hear. This is what Paul is doing. This is what we are called to do.

Because of Jesus Christ everything is different. It is the gospel of Jesus Christ that changes us and transforms us to new creations who go out and make a difference in the lives of those around us and share in the goodness of God in all aspects of our lives.

#TheGospelChangesUs

Me?

Ephesians 3:8-13 God gave his grace to me, the least of all God's people, to preach the good news about the immeasurable riches of Christ to the Gentiles. God sent me to reveal the secret plan that had been hidden since the beginning of time by God, who created everything. God's purpose is now to show the rulers and powers in the heavens the many different varieties of his wisdom through the church. This was consistent with the plan he had from the beginning of time that he accomplished through Christ Jesus our Lord. In Christ we have bold and confident access to God through faith in him. So then, I ask you not to become discouraged by what I'm suffering for you, which is your glory.

This passage reminds me of an ongoing conversation God and I have, "Why are you sending me into ministry? Don't you know there are better people out there?" I would venture to guess that you are in a similar boat. You may not be asking why you're in ministry as a vocation; but you may be asking why you are in a certain life situation. You may also think to yourself that you do not deserve to be able to do what you do. Whatever it is that goes through your mind, God has a plan for you.

Paul was heading on a completely different life course when he was struck down by a bright light. This was his vocational shift period that he realized what God would have him do with his life. Remember, Paul was going to arrest those who followed Jesus and all of a sudden, God made Paul change his life purpose to be an evangelist to the Gentiles (non-Jewish people). Or was it all of a sudden?

Sometimes I think the things we go through are situations that God wants us to go through so that we will be better equipped to handle the future plans He has for us. We always have to freedom to do things our way; but when we learn and follow the plans God desires, we will actually find more fulfillment. Not safety. But joy and peace and a filling of the spirit. I can look back on my life and see the different things I did, right and wrong, and see now how that experience is helping me today. Others may not ever see their life circumstances tie together, but God is somehow using our past to shape us for the future.

There has always and will always be a plan for your life and for my life. Jesus Christ is that plan. When we accept Christ, we allow him to transform us and become new creations. Our past does not define us; it only shows us where we have been. Our future does not define us. We do not know what will happen. Jesus Christ is our present who gives us new life and redeems our past so that we can live, not just in the future, but now in the present. God has a plan for your life. How do you find out this plan? Ask God and spend time with people who will lead you on the path to God through Jesus Christ.

You are valued. You have worth. You have a purpose. Trust God.

#TheGospelChangesUs

Changed From The Inside Out

Ephesians 3:14-21 This is why I kneel before the Father. Every ethnic group in heaven or on earth is recognized by him. I ask that he will strengthen you in your inner selves from the riches of his glory through the Spirit. I ask that Christ will live in your hearts through faith. As a result of having strong roots in love, I ask that you'll have the power to grasp love's width and length, height and depth, together with all believers. I ask that you'll know the love of Christ that is beyond knowledge so that you will be filled entirely with the fullness of God. Glory to God, who is able to do far beyond all that we could ask or imagine by his power at work within us; glory to him in the church and in Christ Jesus for all generations, forever and always. Amen.

Paul is saying something really interesting in this passage. He is asking God to strengthen the people in their spirits from the riches of his glory. Why would Paul be asking this? I believe this has something to teach us today. We often look to the physical appearance of people and do not pay as much attention to the person on the inside; but God is more concerned with the heart. So, if we were strengthened from the inside out, we would be able to handle life on the outside.

So what is something we should be strengthened with on the inside? Love. When we are strengthened with love, we know Christ in our hearts, and we can begin to see just how big love is. We want to downplay love as a simple emotion; but love is so much more than that. Love has to do with actions, attitudes, thoughts. It is something that changes us from the inside out. This is what should ground us in our life.

God is love. When we know God, we can know love. As we allow Christ to live in our hearts, we will know how to see people with soft hearts and show them the love and grace of God through Jesus Christ. Paul is asking his people that they know the love of Jesus Christ; but he says that Christ's love is too far beyond knowledge. This is something for us to think about today also. We should not want to make love as something easy to explain. Not should we make love as a check-list to fill out. The fullness of Christ lives in us, who know him, and this is what connects us together.

Every person and ethnic group is recognized by God. When we have love governing us, God gets the glory. Because the glory of God is so incredible, we cannot even fathom the incredible power he has. This is the same power that lives inside us when we accept love. The gospel of Jesus Christ is so powerful and life changing that we are changed from the inside out. Our challenge is to allow this love of God to change us.

#TheGospelChangesUs

Worthy Life

Ephesians 4:1-6 Therefore, as a prisoner for the Lord, I encourage you to live as people worthy of the call you received from God. Conduct yourselves with all humility, gentleness, and patience. Accept each other with love, and make an effort to preserve the unity of the Spirit with the peace that ties you together. You are one body and one spirit, just as God also called you in one hope. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father of all, who is over all, through all, and in all.

“But you don’t know what this person did to me!” “How can I treat them with gentleness and patience when they are the ones clearly in the wrong?” I have heard people say many times, “I wish everyone would just follow the Golden Rule (treat others the way you want to be treated).” As I heard the person say this, I remembered how they bad mouthed another person right before that.

Living in humility, gentleness and patience in this world is not easy. This kind of life is so against how everyone else wants us to live. We walk around wanting to get revenge, or even hold back forgiveness. But, in reality, who is holding back forgiveness and plotting revenge really hurting? See we want to have justice done, but we forget how damaging attitudes like that actually are to our soul. We become calloused and do not see people as God sees them. We’ll focus on the brokenness and become blinded to any amount of goodness in another person. There is no one too far away from God to come close and know God. We can be the people to show others this incredible grace by our words, actions, and even thoughts.

Our attitudes are the most important thing that people will remember about us after we have an encounter with them. This realization struck me several years ago when I found myself not wanting to offer forgiveness to a person who hurt me. Somehow, God brought healing into my heart and I was able to forgive. This doesn’t mean I condone or tolerate what the person did; instead I released the control that negative attitude had on my life.

Though I am far from being a very humble person, I ask God daily to show me the qualities in people He desires me to see. When I look at people, I am in awe at how God is moving in their life, even when they can’t see it for themselves. We are all called to show and teach people about the Kingdom of God and God’s grace. People will be turned away if we have, even the slightest hint of, a feeling we think we’re better than them. Jesus Christ has made it so that everyone is equal in the eyes of God. “There is no slave or free, Jew or Gentile....all are one in Christ Jesus.” This is the spirit we should work with because the Spirit of God is residing in us. God is working in all people, in some way. He has also called us to a life of serving and loving those around us, even the difficult ones (add your own phrase); but God still desires we live in humility, peace and gentleness with each other. This does not come easily to us; in fact it goes against our basic instincts. But, this means we have the chance to call on God and allow His Spirit to work through us.

God is calling, and has called, you and me to change the world with Him by proclaiming Jesus

Christ in all aspects of our lives; and to make us a “city on a hill whose light cannot be hidden.”

#TheGospelChangesUs

Christ Among Us

Ephesians 4:7-10 God has given his grace to each one of us measured out by the gift that is given by Christ. That's why scripture says, *When he climbed up to the heights, he captured prisoners, and he gave gifts to people.* What does the phrase "he climbed up" mean if it doesn't mean that he had first gone down into the lower regions, the earth? The one who went down is the same one who climbed up above all the heavens so that he might fill everything.

There are a couple things that stand out to me and give me even more hope in Christ. First of all, Paul reminds us that each person has been given the gift of grace because of Jesus Christ. This means that we all have been given the same amount of God's grace. No one has more of Christ than anyone else. As we go through our life, we can remember this truth: everyone is equal in the eyes of Christ. He loves and reaches out to each person; and this is what we should do. Because God first loved us, we love other people. Because God pursued and continues to pursue us, we go out and pursue people for Christ with the Holy Spirit directing us in our steps.

The second thing Paul reminds us is that Christ ascended into heaven, a subtle reminder that Christ was resurrected and is with God. But even more than that truth, Paul is reminding the people of the other part of the gospel message: Christ came down to earth and lived as a human among us. This is the aspect of the gospel message that we can sometimes overlook. Christ's death and resurrection is the pivotal point of the message; but Christ also lived among us so he could show people how much God really cares.

If you ever get to a place where we doubt that God is for us, we can remember that God, in human form, Jesus Christ, walked among us. As it says in the book of Hebrews, "he was tempted in every way yet was without sin." His life was an example for us to show us what life should look like. The same person who is in heaven right now is the same person who walked among us and who walks among us today.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is so impactful to our us that if we allow it, the message will change us.

#TheGospelChangesUs

Body Builders

Ephesians 4:11-16 He gave some apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers. His purpose was to equip God's people for the work of serving and building up the body of Christ until we all reach the unity of faith and knowledge of God's Son. God's goal is for us to become mature adults—to be fully grown, measured by the standard of the fullness of Christ. As a result, we aren't supposed to be infants any longer who can be tossed and blown around by every wind that comes from teaching with deceitful scheming and the tricks people play to deliberately mislead others. Instead, by speaking the truth with love, let's grow in every way into Christ, who is the head. The whole body grows from him, as it is joined and held together by all the supporting ligaments. The body makes itself grow in that it builds itself up with love as each one does its part.

I have read this passage many times and each time I have read it, for some reason, I have always thought it said that it was the pastor, prophet, evangelist, teacher's job to build up the body of Christ. Then one day I was reading this again and I noticed that the verse really says that it is Christ's purpose to equip God's people to serve and build up the body of Christ. So, as I am reading this, I am reminded that it is Christ who does the filling of our spirit; and it is through the filling of our spirit that we are equipped to build the body of Christ, the church.

As we are working with Christ to build up the church, we are also working to help people develop and mature in their faith. If someone were to ask you, "how are you in your faith with Jesus Christ?", what would you say? Would you and I be able to show growth from the past to now? How about from last year to this year? How about from yesterday to today? We should always be on a path that will help us grow in our faith and come to know Christ on a more intimate level so our relationship with God becomes more real and more central in our lives. How can we grow in our relationship with Jesus Christ and move towards maturity in the faith?

It starts with Christ, himself. We have to be willing to spend time with him in order for him to fill our spirit. This means incorporating spiritual disciplines, means of grace, in our daily lives. Now, we should not do these because we want something from God. We should start, or continue, spiritual disciplines in order to learn more about God and allow the time to change us.

This is how unity can begin because we are interested in loving God and loving people; all of the other things that seem differentiate us can actually be seen as compliments and also help us remember that each person has a part to play within the body of Jesus Christ. This kind of mindset could help us establish deeper relationships with people. As each person grows stronger in their walk with Christ, the body of Christ actually becomes stronger and healthier.

Working out of love builds up the church and each person is empowered to live into the gifts they have been given and to do the part that God desires them to play. All of this is possible because of Jesus Christ.

#TheGospelChangesUs

Old vs. New Part 1

Ephesians 4:17-19 So I'm telling you this, and I insist on it in the Lord: you shouldn't live your life like the Gentiles anymore. They base their lives on pointless thinking, and they are in the dark in their reasoning. They are disconnected from God's life because of their ignorance and their closed hearts. They are people who lack all sense of right and wrong, and who have turned themselves over to doing whatever feels good and to practicing every sort of corruption along with greed.

The rest of chapter 4, Paul is talking about attitudes and lifestyles that cause division among believers. Today, we look at the first thing that Paul wants to address: pointless thinking. How many times do we go through our day and look back only to realize we spent the majority of our time thinking about things that really did not matter or had no consequential effect to what went on throughout the day? Where does your mind go when you want to be right? Where does my mind go when I think that my way is not wrong?

We can keep this mindset; but what will happen is that we end up allowing these thoughts, these paradigms to control, not only our thinking, but our actions and attitudes about other people. Paul is addressing the difference life can make in Jesus Christ. As I read through Galatians, last month, it dawned on me that we are completely free in Jesus Christ and we do not have to let our minds and other people control how we act and what we think. We are free to be the people God calls us to be. We are free to love, free to give, free to serve, free to forgive, free to empower people, and the list goes on and on.

This is the difference between the "old way of life" and the "new way of life." We do not need to allow pointless thinking, which actually drives us away from loving God and loving other people, to control our lives. When we keep our eyes and heart on Jesus Christ, we can see the true beauty and the redemption that God is doing today, in and through us.

Pointless thinking means that we spend so much time thinking about things that are wrong that we can forget to look at the things that are good. We do not need to live in any kind of fear or control, except through the control of love, which actually gives us even more freedom. Disconnection happens when we forget to see how God is moving in other people's lives. How can you, how can I, allow the Gospel of Jesus Christ to change and shape us to live a life that is "worthy" of our calling and bring people to faith in Christ because of our actions and words?

#TheGospelChangesUs

Old vs New Part 2

Ephesians 4:20-24 But you didn't learn that sort of thing from Christ. Since you really listened to him and you were taught how the truth is in Jesus, change the former way of life that was part of the person you once were, corrupted by deceitful desires. Instead, renew the thinking in your mind by the Spirit and clothe yourself with the new person created according to God's image in justice and true holiness.

Since we are in the section of discussing "old" way of life versus "new" way of life, we have to ask, "how do we learn how to live in a new way?" Paul shows the answer is Jesus Christ. He is the source of life and the focal point. His example of living and his presence among us today still guides and empowers people to be who they need to be.

We often allow culture and those around us to try to shape us without asking "why?" or "how is this really going to help me live life?" We do this because we like to fit in and feel a need to be part of a crowd. But, what if, the crowd is actually leading us astray? What if the crowd we want to belong to is the loudest voice and the most influential, but it is actually a path that leads us away from true joy and peace?

Instead of following the crowd and living a life that turns people away from Christ, Paul is showing that it is Christ that we should be learning from. It is Christ who can and does renew our minds. When we allow Christ to renew and transform us, we are "clothed" in a new way. Colossians 3 says it well, "Therefore, as God's choice, holy and loved, put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience." This is what it would look like to renew our minds. People would notice we are different from everyone else.

The "new person" we would become would also produce more fruit in life. We would be able to develop and grow fruit that is sustainable and more powerful than anything; but we need Christ to help the fruit grow. What kind of fruit are we talking about? Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness, goodness, self-control. Imagine the possibilities and impact that would be made to transform the world if these were the qualities we were striving for. Christ is our teacher. We should spend time with him daily. The Gospel message of Jesus Christ is so powerful that it changes who we are.

#TheGospelChangesUs

Old vs New Part 3

Ephesians 4:25-28 Therefore, after you have gotten rid of lying, *Each of you must tell the truth to your neighbor* because we are parts of each other in the same body. *Be angry without sinning*. Don't let the sun set on your anger. Don't provide an opportunity for the devil. Thieves should no longer steal. Instead, they should go to work, using their hands to do good so that they will have something to share with whoever is in need.

This is a passage that seems to hit me right between the eyes. There are many times I feel scripture is actually trying to tell me something and is directly in my face about it.

“Be angry without sinning.” Ouch! How many times have I personally allowed feelings of anger to lead me to say things I do not really want to or act a way that I do not want to (Romans 7 is a great passage about this). How easy it is to just react and not think about the consequences. But there is a difference in anger. There is righteous anger and there is anger that is just plain wrong.

We all have been angry at some point in time. Some people even hold on to their anger and cannot see past the cloud that had formed. Righteous anger, on the other hand, is okay. Righteous anger is what Jesus displayed and set an example for. So, what is righteous anger? This is the anger that moves us to want a change in society. To work towards ending prejudices and unjust treatment of people. This is the anger that shows us that every person is valued by God and has been made in the image of God.

When we display this anger, we do have to be careful not to just focus on the issue at hand and try to change people's minds. Change happens when we point people to Christ and allow him to change hearts. We must work toward changing the hearts of people and not just their attitudes. This means we should be passionate about directing people to Jesus and helping them see him. Righteous anger, can and should point people to the life that God is calling each of us to live which will point people to God Himself.

Jesus works to recreate us and to make us “new creations.” I pray we all can remember this and live in a manner that brings people to faith because of our actions, attitudes, thoughts and words. Christ is calling us to live differently and the power of the gospel is that it changes us from the inside out.

#TheGospelChangesUs

Old vs New Part 4

Ephesians 4:29-32 Don't let any foul words come out of your mouth. Only say what is helpful when it is needed for building up the community so that it benefits those who hear what you say. Don't make the Holy Spirit of God unhappy—you were sealed by him for the day of redemption. Put aside all bitterness, losing your temper, anger, shouting, and slander, along with every other evil. Be kind, compassionate, and forgiving to each other, in the same way God forgave you in Christ.

This is where I feel Paul is really stepping on my toes. How can he write this and expect that people live like this? It almost seems too difficult. After all, don't the people around us make us do the things that we do? Aren't we obligated to speak what we want to say and "need to say" so the other person knows how they are in the wrong? Paul is finishing this chapter with this seemingly negative command. It can almost seem like he is in your face and telling you directly that you and I are the ones in the wrong and he is proving it to us. But, this is not what Paul is talking about. For the past few days, we have been looking at the differences between the "old" way of life and the "new" way of life.

So, why should we desire to live this way? What's in it for us? The truth is that we should live this way because it is God who forgave us and is compassionate toward us. How bad is it when you give a gift and the person you gave it to treated everyone else as poor? This is the same kind of thing. God has shown us grace, forgiveness and mercy, why shouldn't we freely give as we have been given?

Jesus said the greatest commandments are to love God and love people. Even if someone treats us wrong, we should look at our response. We like to justify our actions and show people why they are the ones in the wrong; but we are all asked to live to a higher standard. This means loving our enemies, feeding them, turning the other cheek, not judging, etc (**see Jesus' Sermon on the Mount**). This kind of life is not easy with out Christ. For, when we lean on Christ and trust in Christ, we can see the value in other people and live lives of humility and patience toward all people. God has freely given us grace and forgiveness, how can we pass this on to others so they too know God's grace and love personally?

#TheGospelChangesUs

Imitate

Ephesians 5:1-5 Therefore, imitate God like dearly loved children. Live your life with love, following the example of Christ, who loved us and gave himself for us. He was a sacrificial offering that smelled sweet to God. Sexual immorality, and any kind of impurity or greed, shouldn't even be mentioned among you, which is right for holy persons. Obscene language, silly talk, or vulgar jokes aren't acceptable for believers. Instead, there should be thanksgiving. Because you know for sure that persons who are sexually immoral, impure, or greedy—which happens when things become gods—those persons won't inherit the kingdom of Christ and God.

Paul has been talking and teaching about the old life versus the new life. This is something that is of utmost importance because our faith in Christ is supposed to change us from the inside out. The power of the gospel is not just to show people heaven and bring people into the Kingdom of God; the power of the gospel is that it transforms and recreates us into new creations to live a life that is holy before God and we can bring people to faith through our life. We are supposed to live like Christ; he was and is our example of how to live. How can we know how Christ lived? I would recommend reading the gospel accounts. Start with the Gospel of Luke to see the compassion of Christ, then go to the Gospel of John to see the divinity of Christ and the new life that comes from him. After that, go to the Gospels of Matthew and Mark. Reading all of the gospel accounts will give a great picture of who Jesus is and how we should imitate him in our life.

The first thing that Paul speaks against is sexual immorality. We live in a culture that is obsessed with this and the truth is we do not realize how much this has control over us. It is important that we do not live in a way that immorality does not live in us because we should view each and every person as a child of God and a beautiful creation of the creator. People are made in the image of God, we just help them realize that fact to guide them to faith in Christ. If we look at people with the wrong set of eyes, we end up devaluing them and it is much more difficult to express the love of God through Jesus Christ when they are hearing a different message from immorality.

Paul then goes on to teach about how we speak to each other. Our words have much more power than we sometimes remember. Our words can bring hope and joy, and then the very next minute bring devastation and fear. Instead of talking down to another person, what if our language, jokes, and communication exuded love yet truth? This is a much more effective way to bring people to faith because they feel as if they are truly valued enough to become who they are made to be.

Finally, Paul warns that sexual immoral, impure or greedy are actually serving other gods, which is idolatry. The first and second commandments God gave Moses was "You must have no other gods before me," and "Do not make an idol for yourself." (Exodus 20:3-4) Idols are anything that distract us from the One God. We may or may not have idols in statue form today; but we do have idols in our life: money, sex, power, and anything else that forces our attention off of

God. For us to embrace all that God has to give us, we should be of singular focus and see the Creator working all around us and in us.

God does not want us to acknowledge Him some of the time; He wants it all of the time. We do this when we treat others as the precious creations they are and help them see their value, not only to us, but to the Creator of the universe. Our entire lives (attitudes, thoughts, actions, words, etc) should reflect Christ to all we encounter and show that we are changed. That is an incredible power of the gospel.

#TheGospelChangesUs

Light

Ephesians 5:6-14 Nobody should deceive you with stupid ideas. God's anger comes down on those who are disobedient because of this kind of thing. So you shouldn't have anything to do with them. You were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord, so live your life as children of light. Light produces fruit that consists of every sort of goodness, justice, and truth. Therefore, test everything to see what's pleasing to the Lord, and don't participate in the unfruitful actions of darkness. Instead, you should reveal the truth about them. It's embarrassing to even talk about what certain persons do in secret. But everything exposed to the light is revealed by the light. Everything that is revealed by the light is light. Therefore, it says, *Wake up, sleeper! Get up from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.*

Have you ever felt like you were just going through the motions in life and did not really know where you were going? That is kind of like what Paul is talking about here. He is writing this letter to show people the life in Christ that is waiting for everyone. We can all live in such a way that would embarrass other people and even fill us with guilt. Paul is reminding the readers that Christ came to extinguish the former way of life and move us into this new life that looks so different from how everyone else in the world wants us to live.

Light and darkness are a key theme throughout the New Testament, and one of the things I have thought about is how much of a difference light makes. When the light shines, we can see the path we should be on and see obstacles that are in the path that are trying to trip us up and cause us to change course. But when we trust that Christ is guiding us, our entire life is different and has a different purpose – life has an incredible purpose!

I love how Paul brings to light the life that is dark, that is going away from Christ. This kind of dark life leads us astray and we only think about ourselves and what we want and how we're going to get it. But Christ, invites us to a new way of life that encompasses the entirety of humanity and desires us to bring more people into the light. This kind of life, where we embrace the life Christ gives, produces more fruit (lasting rewards) than anything we could do solely by living for ourselves.

When we walk in ways of darkness (see the end of Ephesians 4 and the beginning of chapter 5), it is like our soul is dead and sleeping and we cannot see or experience the life that Christ has to offer. But Christ comes along and shouts to our sleeping souls, "Wake up sleeper! Get up from the dead, and Christ will shine on you." This life is not always easy, but it is definitely rewarding and worth everything to have Christ shine his light on us so we can reflect his glory where ever we are and whatever we do.

#TheGospelChangesUs

Filled

Ephesians 5:15-21 So be careful to live your life wisely, not foolishly. Take advantage of every opportunity because these are evil times. Because of this, don't be ignorant, but understand the Lord's will. Don't get drunk on wine, which produces depravity. Instead, be filled with the Spirit in the following ways: speak to each other with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs; sing and make music to the Lord in your hearts; always give thanks to God the Father for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ; and submit to each other out of respect for Christ.

Paul has been talking about how the Christian life should look. Part of me thinks that this life would be difficult; but then I realize it is Christ who equips us, fills us and gives us all we need. He is reminding the readers, and us, that life with Christ is not foolish, but it is very intentional in how we think and how we give thanks for what we have been given.

We have been given the invitation to be filled with the Holy Spirit. This is not talking about a one time filling; but rather a filling that continually takes place. We are all called to allow Christ to fill us on a daily basis. Christ has identified himself as the Living Water. This means whenever we get thirsty, we get to be filled again with the source of Life.

Life is difficult and we have many differing opinions on how we should live and what our convictions should be, but there is the Lord's will for our lives that is so much more than we could ever imagine. This will for us help us to navigate these "evil times." How does this happen? Paul outlines what this would look like for us.

He says to be filled with The Spirit and not filled with the spirits of alcohol. The Spirit gives life and direction; the spirits in alcohol reduce our inhibitions and can cause depravity. How can we know someone is filled with the Spirit? It is how we speak to each other and our attitude. Paul is reminding us we should have an attitude of gratitude and when we speak to each other, we should speak in a way that brings people to faith in Christ.

When we believe in and accept the Gospel of Jesus Christ we are different people and as such we will treat those around us differently so that we live a life that is worthy of our calling and is a life which brings people to faith.

#TheGospelChangesUs

Relationships

Ephesians 5:22-33 For example, wives should submit to their husbands as if to the Lord. A husband is the head of his wife like Christ is head of the church, that is, the savior of the body. So wives submit to their husbands in everything like the church submits to Christ. As for husbands, love your wives just like Christ loved the church and gave himself for her. He did this to make her holy by washing her in a bath of water with the word. He did this to present himself with a splendid church, one without any sort of stain or wrinkle on her clothes, but rather one that is holy and blameless. That's how husbands ought to love their wives—in the same way as they do their own bodies. Anyone who loves his wife loves himself. No one ever hates his own body, but feeds it and takes care of it just like Christ does for the church because we are parts of his body. *This is why a man will leave his father and mother and be united with his wife, and the two of them will be one body.* Marriage is a significant allegory, and I'm applying it to Christ and the church. In any case, as for you individually, each one of you should love his wife as himself, and wives should respect their husbands.

So, this is a passage that has been used many times in an attempt to keep women “in their place.” I do not believe this passage talks about that at all. This is a passage which shows that marriage relationships should be as highly valued as the relationship of Christ to the church. This is an incredible relationship which allows for each other to be the best they can be and grow in faith in Christ.

What does it mean to “submit?” I do not believe that it means to be in a lesser role as a servant in any way. What I do believe this passage talks about is how men and women process love. It has been said that men value respect more and this is how we feel loved and women feel love on an emotional level. Basically, each person has their own “love language” and in order to feel valued and loved by the other person, speaking in and communicating in that love language is important.

Think of what Christ did for the church. He was emotionally humiliated, tortured and put to death only to be raised up again. But he also did more, even before his death. He restored people to society, removed the illnesses and demons so they could be free, he healed people and brought the dead to life. This is what Christ did for his love, the church. Should we do anything less?

Giving respect may seem as a form of being second rate, but it is about allowing the other person to be built up and live into the gifts and life that God has planned. Showing emotional love, in our society, sometimes feels as if it is a sign of weakness to be vulnerable, but this is how people feel connected – emotional connection can be and is more powerful than physical connection. Both of these actions (love is an action not just a feeling) are ways of taking care of the other person's needs which is compared to the metaphor of taking care of our bodies with the right food.

When each party in the relationship treats each other in the way that Christ treats the church (with grace and unconditional love), just think of our radically different our human relationships would be. We would be more in love with the other person because we put their needs before ours and showed it daily. We would feel valued and loved because it is the love of Christ through the other person that we would feel.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is incredible because it changes how we act toward each other and show love to each other.

#TheGospelChangesUs

Obeying and Respecting

Ephesians 6:1-9 As for children, obey your parents in the Lord, because it is right. The commandment *Honor your father and mother* is the first one with a promise attached: *so that things will go well for you, and you will live for a long time in the land*. As for parents, don't provoke your children to anger, but raise them with discipline and instruction about the Lord. As for slaves, obey your human masters with fear and trembling and with sincere devotion to Christ. Don't work to make yourself look good and try to flatter people, but act like slaves of Christ carrying out God's will from the heart. Serve your owners enthusiastically, as though you were serving the Lord and not human beings. You know that the Lord will reward every person who does what is right, whether that person is a slave or a free person. As for masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Stop threatening them, because you know that both you and your slaves have a master in heaven. He doesn't distinguish between people on the basis of status.

Paul has been talking about the life that God desires us to have. This life looks completely different from how we want to live, but it is the life that gives more freedom and more peace. Most of the things he has talked about so far seem fairly easy or at least simple to do, but now we come to this passage.

The end of chapter 5 has Paul discussing relationships in marriage and how the relationship should be between Christ and the church. This is an incredible picture because Christ is placed in his right placement as head of the church. And now Paul goes into how children should behave with their parents and how slaves should treat their masters.

Children honoring and obeying parents? What kind of life would this look like? When we read this, Paul does talk about the parenting relationship as a two-way street. The children should honor and obey their parents because the parents have lived life and have important wisdom and guidance to pass on that will help give the children long lives and be able to navigate the challenges life can and does bring. The flip side of the relationship is the relationship from the parents to the children. Children are going to do things and say things that will cause the parents to become frustrated, so Paul is not talking about those times. Paul is talking about the rest of the times when parents have the opportunity to build their children up and instead actually tear them down.

Parenting is difficult and I am nowhere pretending to think I have all the answers or understand the unique situations each family faces. This is one of the incredible things about Scripture – that all aspects of human life are discussed. We can learn God's will for individual families by spending time in prayer and listening for the voice of God as a family unit. We do not like the fact that the Bible talks about slavery, but this is a different form of slavery than we might think of today. Again, Paul is talking about this relationship as a two-way street. He says that if you are working for someone, then you should have the attitude that you are working for Christ and not the human boss. This does not mean to treat the human boss as a god; it does, however, mean that when working, we do our work as if we are doing it for Jesus

Christ himself. This means we will do the best job we can do. The bosses are not to mistreat their workers. They are supposed to remember that the Master in heaven treated them with respect and this is how the workers are to be treated also.

There are many things talked about in the Bible we do not like to talk about; so this is one of the reasons I love to read the Bible and discuss it. There are so many things we can learn from Scripture and from discussing Scripture with other people. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is not meant to keep us away from other people; it is meant for us to engage the culture and people around us. We become changed people because of the Gospel and we have the opportunity to show people and bring people the transforming message of Jesus Christ.

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Guarding

Ephesians 6:10-17 Finally, be strengthened by the Lord and his powerful strength. Put on God's armor so that you can make a stand against the tricks of the devil. We aren't fighting against human enemies but against rulers, authorities, forces of cosmic darkness, and spiritual powers of evil in the heavens. Therefore, pick up the full armor of God so that you can stand your ground on the evil day and after you have done everything possible to still stand. So stand with the belt of truth around your waist, justice as your breastplate, and put shoes on your feet so that you are ready to spread the good news of peace. Above all, carry the shield of faith so that you can extinguish the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is God's word.

As Paul is wrapping up his letter, he teaches about the most important thing we need to do in our lives. He has already talked about the relationships we have with those around us, and those in our families; now he is talking about our relationship with God. So in this, Paul is showing what it means to keep God as our guide and power of strength to live this life in a manner that is worthy.

How can we keep our hearts and minds focused on the power of God as we go through the day ahead? We have the opportunity to put on the tools and "armor" that will protect us, save our hearts, and guard our minds against those things and attitude that take our focus away from God. What is really fascinating, to me, is the manner in which Paul describes how we can allow God's power to be our guiding force in our lives. We simply "put on the full armor of God." This imagery may conjure up negative images for some people, but this is really an important thing for us to do each day. When we get up for the day, we put our clothes on to protect our physical being, so why not put on the clothing that God provides to protect us emotionally and spiritually? So, Paul goes into the items that we should "put on" to help us allow God's power to work in us and around us. There are so many forces around us that we are battling and that are fighting for control of our minds, emotions, spirit, relationships; but God provides a way to protect us from those things that are trying to pull us down and go against God.

We should put on the "belt of truth." This means that we are allowing God's truth to be wrapped around us so we constantly are reminded it is God's truth that is holding us together and keeping us intact. Over our hearts, we wear the "breastplate of justice/righteousness" to guard our hearts from following those situations and ideals that culture can and does embrace but is not as God intends. Then we always have to have the "shoes" on our feet. This is what allows our feet to move so that we can travel to those who need to hear the good news of Jesus Christ. We can pick up the "shield of faith" to block those attacks that attempt to destroy us. The "helmet of salvation" protects our minds and allows us to meditate on God's word and presence around us. The "sword of the Spirit" means we have the word of God ready within us so we can speak truth to people in love.

Putting on this "armor/clothing" is us allowing God to transform our lives and to be the light in the world. Since we are to be the light of the world and reflect God's image and grace to those

around us, why not put on shiny armor that reflects light. The Gospel of Jesus Christ protects us and changes our lives from the inside out.

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Praying in Confidence

Ephesians 6:18-20 Offer prayers and petitions in the Spirit all the time. Stay alert by hanging in there and praying for all believers. As for me, pray that when I open my mouth, I'll get a message that confidently makes this secret plan of the gospel known. I'm an ambassador in chains for the sake of the gospel. Pray so that the Lord will give me the confidence to say what I have to say.

Now we are getting toward the end of the book of Ephesians and Paul is shifting his focus on teaching the people to asking for prayers for himself and his ministry. Normally when we ask prayers for ourselves, we will ask about physical healing and for circumstances to improve. This was not the case for Paul. Not once does he ask to be free from the prison he's been placed in or asking for people to pray for any physical limitation or condition he may have or may be going through. All he says is "Offer prayers and petitions in the Spirit all the time."

Our lives should be constant prayer. We should have lives that reflect constant communication with God. What kinds of things should we pray for? We should pray for our situation and for God to be known through the situation. We should pray for healing: physical, emotional, spiritual, relational. We should pray for other people, our leaders, our family, our friends. We should pray for and about anything. Praying keeps our focus and attention on Christ and we are better able to see the world through His eyes than solely through our own eyes.

Paul asks for something unique, in a way, that he would like people to pray for. He doesn't ask for his situation to be improved in the way that we might. He asks for the confidence to speak the message of Jesus Christ to any and all people he encounters – especially the guards. His life is in prison, at this point, and he is asking to be able to speak the peace of Christ to those who are guarding him and all those he is able to encounter.

So, who is it around you that needs to hear the message of Jesus Christ? Who is it that you will encounter that you will need the courage and confidence to speak the truth about Christ? The truth is all people need Christ. Many people just don't know that's who they need. Maybe there is a part of you that doesn't feel confident enough in the gospel. This may be God reaching out to you right now to show you that He is with you and is giving you the confidence and the words to speak when they are necessary. The only "magic formula" for presenting the gospel to others is trusting in the power of Jesus Christ to help give you the words and equip you at the time you need it.

The power of the gospel is that it changes everything about us, especially about what and who we pray for.

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Grace With You

Ephesians 6:21-24 Tychicus, my loved brother and faithful servant of the Lord, can inform you about my situation and what I'm doing. I've sent him for this reason—so that you will know about us. He can reassure you. May there be peace with the brothers and sisters as well as love with the faith that comes from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. May grace be with all those who love our Lord Jesus Christ forever.

Paul always ends his letters with a statement of grace. Even though there are times when he had to scold the congregations he planted, he wanted them to know and live into the grace that God was giving. I believe we could take the example of Paul and be sure to send people who will keep information correct about us, but also be there to support and build up the community.

These are trusted people by Paul and he knows their gifts and graces. Paul sends Tychicus because he knows the job he will do and that he will be able to reassure the people. Can you imagine what it would be like to have your leader thrown in jail and you are carrying on after this happened. What must have been going through their minds. But Paul is as calm as he can be and find great excitement in showing people the love of God in all his words and actions. This is Paul's purpose.

He also longs for there to be peace among the brothers and sisters because there can be strife; but Paul wants the people to live in peace because this is the life that Christ calls us to. Peace even when everything seems to be going wrong around us. This peace is not just everything working out; but it is an inward peace which we have opened ourselves up to to show we are trusting in the Living God. This peace and faith comes through Jesus Christ and is offered to those who love the Lord Jesus Christ forever.

Paul's salutation is full of life and grace. Is this how we leave people when we're not around them? How can we work with God toward bringing the message of peace to those who need it most?

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