

Closing Words for Expedition Ephesians
The Bottom Line

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Ephesians 6:21-24

Last spring we began an eight-month expedition through one of history's most important pieces of literature – the apostle Paul's brief but stirring letter to the first century church at Ephesus. Today we reach the finish line. It's time to celebrate. One of our challenge goals was to memorize all 155 verses of this book. Please raise your hand if you memorized at least one verse in the book of Ephesians this year. How about five verses? Ten verses? I believe I can say without fear of contradiction that less than half of our congregation memorized every verse in Ephesians. Please know that God is faithful, and the Holy Spirit will use every verse that you determined to make your own to help catapult you into a deeper walk with him.

Today we're going to discover that Paul's closing words are almost a carbon copy of Paul's opening words – confirmation that there has been a single theme threading its way through this whole letter. But before we find out how Paul signs off, let's pause for a few moments and look back to see where our journey has taken us.

We began at chapter one, verse one: "To the saints in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus." That was a surprise. We're not used to being called saints (or "holy ones," as the Greek literally reads), and we know for a fact that our faithfulness rises and falls about as sharply as November temperatures in Indiana. But Paul wasn't patting his readers on their backs because of something *they* had accomplished. He was assuring us of something that has been accomplished for them and for us by *God himself*.

Paul lays that out in chapter one, verses three and four: "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight." Bible scholars agree that the rest of the book of Ephesians is just commentary on these two verses.

God has blessed us because he loves us. He has chosen us so we can live a particular kind of God-honoring life. Notice that there is nothing here about what we think, or what we are doing, or what we are planning next. *This is all about God*. As one teacher puts it, here's the Bible's bottom line: There is a God, and it is not you. Your life is not your own project. Your life is God's project.

Now that flies in the face of everything our culture stands for. We want to be in charge. There is something inside us that is so deeply twisted – the Bible calls it sin – that we actively resist God's leadership in every area our lives. In chapter two Paul says

that we're not just spiritually sick. Every one of us is spiritually *dead*. But God himself has come to our rescue. In perhaps the most famous and stunning verses in all of Ephesians, Paul says, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast" (2:8-9).

Do you remember S&H green stamps? In 1896 a company called Sperry & Hutchinson came up with a brilliant idea. They began to sell green-colored stamps to retailers, who then gave those stamps away in direct proportion to how much stuff consumers bought at their stores. As soon as you collected 1200 green stamps and put them in an official savings book – and you had to lick the back of every one of them – you could head off to an S&H *redemption center*. And what happened at the redemption center? You could trade your stamp book for some really neat stuff. What do you remember getting in exchange for your green stamps? Shout it out!

It may be that you're drawing a complete blank right now. You have never heard of S&H green stamps. When it comes to redeeming products or points, you might think of Coke tabs or Box Tops for Education. At one point S&H was printing three times as many stamps every year as the U.S. government. You could even negotiate what prizes you were seeking. An elementary school in Erie, Pennsylvania, redeemed 5.4 million green stamps so they could buy two gorillas for the local zoo. Even though all those redemption centers are now closed, you can still cash in any S&H stamps you find in your attic this weekend and get "green points" online.

Now look at what Paul writes concerning Christ in Ephesians 1:7: "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace." There is a redemption center that will never close. *It is the cross*. And we never need to bring anything to receive what is offered there. We don't have to work hard or save up our best efforts to somehow deserve the mercy of God. To the cross we can bring our own spiritual brokenness and exchange it, straight up, for God's gift of eternal life. That's grace. By means of the cross Jesus has furthermore leveled the spiritual playing field in order to bring about peace. All the old dividing lines – men vs. women, Jews vs. Gentiles, slaves vs. masters – are now erased. That's also grace.

Grace is in fact the ultimate religious watershed. Every other sect and creed and religion in the world, in one form or another, teaches: "I obey God — therefore I am accepted." Only the way of Jesus teaches: "I am accepted and loved by God — therefore I obey."

That call to obedience brings us to the very center of the book of Ephesians, where we find a single word on which the entire letter pivots. It balances the first three chapters with the last three chapters. The hinge point of Ephesians is the Greek word *axios*, which is translated "worthy" in chapter four, verse one: "I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received."

You might recall that in ancient Greece the word *axios* was associated with a set of balancing scales. You can still go to any farmer's market these days and buy green beans by using essentially the same instrument. In Bible times, if you wanted a pound of dates, the merchant would put a one-pound lead weight in one of the pans, and then keep adding dates to the other pan until they were exactly level. When equilibrium had been achieved, your dates were *axios*. They were worthy. They were balanced according to a fixed standard.

Ephesians 4:1 is the balancing point of Paul's letter. The first three chapters are all about what God has done: God choosing us, God loving us, God forgiving us, God redeeming us through Christ's work on the cross. The last three chapters are all about what we must now do in response. We must put on the new life that God has given to us and be continually filled with the gift of his Holy Spirit. How then should we speak, and work, and pray, and deal with anger, and express our sexuality, and get married, and stay married, and raise our kids, and stand up to what is evil? Our response must be *axios*. It must be worthy. It must represent a balance between what we *know* of God and how we should actually *trust* God as a way of life.

Paul has a unique way of describing this. Many times over in Ephesians he says that followers of Jesus are "in Christ." What does it mean to be in Christ? It's like living in an entirely different geography. Even though all the citizens of Minnesota and Florida live "in the United States," there's quite a difference between those two groups during the winter. Those who are "in Minnesota" know that life for them is going to be different. It will entail sub-zero wind chills, the possibility of frozen fuel lines, and quarterbacks who will retire and un-retire several times before summer.

Paul says that those who follow Jesus are "in Christ" all the time. We have a dual citizenship. Even as we live physically in this particular part of God's world, we live spiritually under the canopy of God's love, God's grace, and God's serious call to holiness. That means that our lives have to be different. We cannot claim to know Christ yet remain unchanged.

I read recently that books on Buddhism are out-selling books on Christianity in American secular bookstores. Why might that be true? Leadership guru Peter Senge suggests that Buddhism presents itself as a whole way of life – which is the very thing that many Americans are seeking – whereas Christian books all too often come across as lists of things we ought to believe. Ephesians is a call to a whole new way of being. We believe what God has accomplished for us *so that* we might live obediently as transformed men and women.

We come now at last to the end of Paul's letter. Please turn to Ephesians 6:21-24. Here we find the only personal name beside Paul's that appears in this book. It is Tychicus, one of Paul's ministry partners, who had apparently been given the job of carrying the original letter over the unpredictable terrain of the ancient world to the

city of Ephesus itself, and then to serve as both a listener and a reporter on behalf of the apostle. Whether reading from your own copy of the Bible, looking up here at the screens, or reciting these words as the icing on the cake of your eight-month-long Scripture memory project, let's stand together for the last time and speak aloud this part of God's Word:

Tychicus, the dear brother and faithful servant in the Lord, will tell you everything, so that you also may know how I am and what I am doing. I am sending him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are, and that he may encourage you.

Peace to the brothers, and love with faith from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace to all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with an undying love.

Notice the four key words that jump out here at the end: Peace, love, faith, and grace. Those are the very themes that Paul established at the beginning of chapter one. We might paraphrase his final wish for us like this: "May God grant you peace by continually revealing his loving nature to you."

As we come to Thanksgiving, it's appropriate to thank God for the book of Ephesians. What's the best way to do that? We must believe what it teaches and do what it commands. Paul's letter brims with built-in applications, of course, and this year we have tackled at least a dozen of them. Now let's add one more that captures the spirit of the whole book: God's call to generosity as a way of life. Now I know that *human* generosity does not appear as a theme in any one of these six chapters. But Ephesians is Paul's supreme attempt to proclaim the generosity of *God*. How should we respond? As God's own adopted children – called, chosen, loved, redeemed, and forgiven – generosity must become like the water we drink and the air we breathe.

God's call to generosity in ancient Ephesus would have involved particular challenges and opportunities. Here's what God's call looks like in our own time and place: *We are rich people who are facing a serious crisis and therefore a have a wonderful opportunity*. Let's take few moments to break down that sentence down.

First, we are rich people. If your household is going to receive in one form or another at least \$50,000 this year, then you are a member of the elite class of the world's richest 1% of human beings. The staggering truth is that we who comprise that 1% control 33% of the world's wealth. This 1% of the world manages more of the earth's riches and resources than the bottom 90% of the world's population combined.

Within our own culture, of course, we see further gradations of wealth. Every two weeks the CEO of Wal-Mart makes what an average Wal-Mart employee will earn during his or her entire *lifetime*. We may assure ourselves, "At least I'm not *that* rich." But all we have to do is raise our eyes to the horizon of the world's developing nations to realize that we live in luxury while much of the world knows only poverty.

And that puts us in extreme spiritual danger. Ephesians declares the supremacy of Christ. Jesus is all we need. But we live as if all we need is a lot more stuff. The love of material things is our culture's signature sin. And we are willing to die for what we believe in. We are literally killing ourselves and our families to attain a higher standard of living. We want to take care of ourselves materially so we never have to worry about the future. Essentially what that means is that we would like to put ourselves into a position where we will never have to seriously trust God.

But God will not allow such rebellion to stand. We cannot hold on to the promises of Ephesians as if they are all about us – a kind of spiritual hedge fund against future problems – while refusing to trust God in the moment. That brings us to our second observation. *We are rich people **who are facing a serious crisis.***

These are amazing times. Our country has been at war for more than eight years. We're struggling to survive the worst economic downturn in the last *eighty* years. Jobs have vanished. Hundreds here at ZPC have been impacted. Retirement portfolios have collapsed. America's stock exchange indexes fell about 50%, and unemployment has crept up to 10%. Three weeks ago the President on whom so many people placed their hopes was, in his own words, shellacked in a national voter referendum. What is our foundation for hope? Where are our boundaries? Who is going to help us?

We are in a serious crisis. To which we can only say, "What an incredible opportunity!" What a chance to remember that this is our Father's world. We are not at the mercy of market fluctuations. The Good News will never change, and the life-transforming work of the Holy Spirit can never be stopped. A crisis is a good place to be, because it compels us to question everything and to make up our minds as to who or what we really trust.

Who can we count on? We can count on Christ. Peace doesn't come from finding an ocean that has no storms. The peace, faith, love, and grace that Paul talks about at the beginning and the end of Ephesians become ours only if we choose to receive the security that comes from being in Jesus' boat.

*We are rich people who are facing a serious crisis and **therefore have a wonderful opportunity.*** Our opportunity is to embrace generosity as a way of life. Donald Trump infamously once said that money is life's scorekeeper. But that's true only if we fundamentally misunderstand the so-called game of life. More is not more. Generosity is the true measurement of human character. We are the children of an eternally generous God. We cannot love Jesus and what he has done for us and not be generous ourselves.

Throughout the gospels we see Jesus hanging around rich people. What was his aim? He didn't want their money. He wanted their souls. He aimed to rescue them

from the heaven-threatening danger of putting their hope in mere stuff. From time to time most Christians ask themselves, "If Jesus came to me later today and said, 'I'm calling you to drop your fishing nets, to walk away from your life as you currently know it, to be generous with everything you have, and to come and follow me,' would I actually do it?" Most of us console ourselves with two answers. First we say, "If Jesus ever calls me clearly like that, I hope I'll do the right thing and follow him." But second, "So far today he hasn't called me."

Really? Exactly what kind of call are we waiting for? Most of us are going to turn on our TV sets this afternoon and watch the Colts play the Patriots. Have we received a clear call from God to do that, or are we going to do it simply because we wouldn't miss it? How many of us are waiting for a clear sign from God to take a vacation next year, or for God to instruct us to buy a new pair of shoes when our old ones wear out? Jesus' call to surrender everything and follow him is not a theoretical construct that may or may not happen in the future. That is his call that's been spoken to every one of us *right now*. Our obedience is reflected in every entry we make on our calendars, every check we write, every purchase we make, and every plan we draw up for the future. The truth is that most people who attend church – including this church – have not yet decided to follow Jesus. That's evident in the way we live.

Our plan, of course, is to become more generous when this crisis is finally over. And when will that be? What year in American history, when adjusted for inflation, saw the greatest percent of generosity toward the church and the poor? It was 1933 – at the height of the Great Depression. Even today, Americans who are in the lowest fifth of personal wealth give away 4.3% of their income, while those in the upper fifth contribute just 2.1%. Generosity is not a matter of arithmetic, and it's never an issue of waiting for the right time. It's a matter of the heart. Do our hearts belong to Christ, or do they belong to the life-suffocating idol of trying to take care of ourselves?

In a culture of greed, enough is never enough. That's the first principle of a market-driven economy. But there are two foundational principles in God's economy: (1) There is always enough (2) if we will share it. The wonderful opportunity that awaits rich people who are facing a serious crisis is that our generosity will not only help rescue others; God will use our generosity as a means to help rescue our own hearts from spiritual darkness.

That brings us, finally, to an important question: **Where do we invest?** We invest where Jesus is at work. What was at the top of Jesus' list of priorities? "Go therefore and make disciples" of every nation. Making disciples should be at the top of our own list of what to support through generosity.

There are almost two million not-for-profit organizations in the United States today. And ZPCers are very generous. Every year people who attend our church collectively contribute millions of dollars to social agencies, hospitals, research projects, global impact organizations, and universities. Those are wonderful things.

Furthermore, we live in an era in which people want to see a real bang for their buck. We want to see a direct link between what we give and the difference our giving makes. As donors we can increasingly choose the circumstances of our financial generosity

Our time, our treasure, and our talents always follow our hearts. Helping to finance the eradication of cancer, for instance, is a compelling and heartfelt goal for many of us. But the Bible makes it clear that there is one goal that stands above every other – and that is growing more disciples or lifelong learners of Jesus Christ. That is an investment has an eternal impact.

I know that 99% of you could care less about our church's budget. But I also know what you *do* care about. You care about whether we are living out our own stated mission of being disciples who make disciples. It's been a crazy couple of years for ZPC. We are far from perfect. But God is merciful. And he is the Lord. And our disciple-making DNA is absolutely secure. Dave Gall is just one of countless people whose lives have been changed forever by the grace of God here at ZPC. Now he is giving back his life – including his time, his thoughts, his money, and his energy – to help grow up even more disciples of Jesus.

For generations God's people have contributed a tithe or 10% of their annual income to disciple-making endeavors as a generosity starting point. What if you're not there right now? Then step out in faith and choose to grow the % of what you're already sharing. Give *something* to the Great Commission. Give sacrificially to what Jesus values more than anything.

Generosity is like taking our spiritual blood pressure. It helps reveal the condition of our heart. What do we really believe in? We believe in what we give to, in what we spend our time on, in what we daydream about, and in what we sacrifice to make happen. Here's the bottom line as our study of Ephesians comes to a close: Will we genuinely live out what we say we believe? Will we do our utmost to serve the God who pulled out all the stops to bring us to himself?