

The Foundation and Nature of Christian Ethics

Ephesians 4:1 – 5:20

As a church, over the last few weeks we have been looking at the letter to the Ephesians. We have looked at the significance of what Christ has achieved for us personally on our behalf by sheer grace in rescuing us from sin and what it then means for us to be “in Christ”.

We have also seen the grand and cosmic scale of what God has done and will do through Jesus in revealing to us the great mystery of his will, in uniting everything that exists in heaven and on earth under the Lordship of Jesus; in defeating and ruling over the rebellious powers and forces of evil through his ascension; and in creating one united people of God, to show those rulers the rich and multi colored wisdom of God.

So in these first three chapters we saw Paul take what could be described as a “wide angle shot” of the Gospel, looking at the incredible breadth and depth of what God has done in Christ.

This week we see Paul change tack and instead “zooming in” to look at some more specifically at what church and Christian living looks like in practice in the world of the first century that his audience lived in.

This shift has sometimes puzzled people – it would seem to some that Paul had shifted from waxing lyrical about the extravagance of God’s grace to talking about some sort of harsh, world denying moralism. However, as I think we see when we look at chapter 4 and 5 closely, what we really see is what those big ideas Paul talked about in the first three chapters look like in the midst of everyday life.

This is clear from the very first verse of chapter 4 where Paul “begs” that his audience leads “a life worthy of the calling to which have been called”.

This calling takes us back to think about what God has called his people to. It takes us back to opening of chapter 1 where Paul states that we have been “chosen in Christ” to be holy and blameless before him, or chapter 2 verse 10

where Paul describes us as “God’s handiwork” created to do good works which he had prepared for us.

So then in these last 3 chapters, Paul is not moving onto to something new, but rather bringing us to see how the Gospel he has talked about makes sense in the midst of real life.

There are three aspects of our passage that I’m going to talk about this morning that I think are helpful in understanding Ephesians. These are:

- the importance of unified, yet diverse church,
- the link between our Christian identity and ethics,
- and the way we then live ethically in a world that is largely antagonistic to the Gospel.

Paul’s thinking in each area flows out directly from what he has already talked about during the earlier chapters of the book.

Unity & Diversity in the Church

It is interesting that Paul begins unwrapping what it means to “lead a life worthy of God’s calling” by highlighting the unity of the church. He doesn’t begin as we might expect him – talking about “personal ethics” and good works. Rather he highlights the importance of Christians being characterized humility, gentleness and patience, being prepared to “bear with one another in love” – being prepared to deal with some of the frustrations of sharing life together.

Paul calls the church unity because unity is at the heart of the Gospel. This follows directly on from what Paul has already said about Jew and Gentile coming together in Christ in chapters 2 and 3. If God has broken down the cosmic division that existed between different Jew and Gentile and created “one new humanity”, it follows that churches should be committed to practicing unity on a more local level

Paul then expands to describe how such unity is worked out in the midst of diversity. Jesus, the one who is ascended on high and gained victory on our

behalf, has given different members of the church certain “graces” or gifts to be used for his purposes.

It is easy to get drawn into the attempts to define what each of these “offices” Paul highlights are and their relevance for us today – what did it mean to be an apostle or prophet, pastor, evangelist or teacher and how might such roles function today?

What I think is more important to us and to Paul is to see the purpose of having such a diversity of gifts in the church – that they lead to the body of Christ being “built up”, brought to unity, a knowledge of Jesus and a maturity of faith. Being mature in our faith, confident in our knowledge of Christ prevents us from being deceived by false teaching or the values of our culture. For Paul, the church is central to us coming to this kind of Christian maturity for it should be the place where truth is spoken in love.

I think this view of the church is deeply challenging for us today for a number of reasons. How many of us today view our church community as being central to our maturity and growth as Christians? It is easy to view church as something that we participate on our own terms – we turn up on a Sunday, go through the motions and have a cup of tea and a bikkie afterwards.

This is especially true within our culture in which individual privacy and freedom are seen as cardinal values. Being a community that “speaks the truth in love” means being a community in which we are open to being vulnerable with each other. This is something that needs to happen in our shared life together – in our time around scripture together, over dinner in people’s homes, in our commitment to prayer together.

This sort of living has some attendant risks. But ultimately, I think it should be something we value and are attracted to, rather than something we fear. In this regard we need to recognize the importance Paul places on *unity*. When we share the peace with each other on Sunday it should be reflective of both our standing with God as forgiven and our standing with each other as people who willingly forgive each other, bearing with each other and make every effort to have unity.

This can seem hopelessly idealistic – does Paul really expect us to get along as a group with frequently divergent opinions, values and tastes? I think its

important to note that Paul seems under no illusion that there will be conflict and frustration within the church – why else would he urge us to forgive each other and to bear with one another.

The key thing is that we aim to be a community that handles conflict with humility, gentleness and patience. We need to avoid bad habits like gossip, poor talk and passive aggressive behavior and instead be prepared to speak the truth gently in love. Again, I think this requires grace and willing vulnerability as virtues we require.

Identity & Ethics

The second major point I want to make about our passage today is the importance of our identity in Christ to ethical behavior.

For Paul, living in “a manner worthy of our calling” is more than communal accountability or hard work. Central to his ethics is his admonition to be who we really are. In Paul’s thought, the indicative – “what is really true about ourselves” always precedes the imperative – “what we are to do now”.

As such, Paul’s offers a unique and perhaps unparalleled way of thinking about ethics, certainly within the history of western thought. Beginning in verse 17 of chapter 4, Paul urges the Christians he is writing to not live like the Gentile’s who live enslaved by sin, ignorant of God. But Paul’s command is not a shallow form of “self help” moralism or attempt to win favour with God through moral effort.

Rather, Paul’s states things rather more encouragingly – while his audience once did live and think like the Gentiles, they no longer do. They are to “clothe themselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God”.

Paul repeatedly brings the church back to their true identity in Christ that he talked about right at the start of the letter. As he says, “For once you were in darkness, but *now* in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light”.

Likewise, we are warned to against sin, lest we grieve Holy Spirit, whose presence within us is a kind of guarantee of our future hope. Our *ethics flow from what is already true about us* due to the Gospel.

This is a vital point if we want to become more like Jesus and radically different way of thinking about ethics from our surrounding culture. Our culture tends to think a couple of different ways about living ethically.

The first is a kind of existentialist ethic – we should simply be ourselves, acting out how we feel, provided our behavior doesn't negatively effect the freedom of others. All we need to do to live a moral life is be ourselves – this is the message that is popular in countless films today.

On the other hand, others advocate strong moral codes – a set of precepts or moral imperatives we are supposed to live up to – ethical consumerism (fair trade etc), is a good example, as is the conservative call to “family values”.

Both approaches to ethics are not entirely wrong. But ultimately, from the perspective of Paul, they are tragically flawed. Simply “being ourselves” gets us nowhere – if we as humans are universally sinful and confused about who we actually are and supposed to be, self expression only leads to rebellion against God.

Likewise, following a moral code may change the way we live on the surface, but it isn't going to change the state of our hearts and ultimately from our heart flows our words and actions.

Paul's ethic defies the ethic of self-expression or the mentality that we just need to try harder to be good people. Instead we are to go back to *our identify in Christ, united with him, saved by his grace, sealed and filled by the Holy Spirit*. Our lives are to express this true identity, not our old identity in sin and death. We are living God's new age, his future has burst into the present. We are called to live like this is true – because it is.

Christian growth, then, is not fundamentally about hard work, though this still remains important, but about living out of our new identity. As Paul states in Romans 6, we are to count ourselves “dead to sin but alive to God.”

How then do we live?

This brings me to my third and last point about how we then practically go about living out our identity in Christ in the real world, a life characterized by righteousness and holiness.

While Paul's teaching in our passage on how to live is quite wide ranging in some ways – even exhorting thieves to make real living that they can then provide for other who are needy – there are two distinct emphases in the passage that are important for us today.

The first of these concerns attitudes and speech and is once again heavily connected to his desire for unity. Paul warns people away from divisive and evil talk – the kind of talk, with its associated attitudes of bitterness, unjustified anger and slander, which destroys communities. Such behavior is said to grieve the Holy Spirit. Rather, our speech is solely to be used to build others up, giving grace to those that hear.

It is really easy for us to overlook the impact that our words have on others in our families, in our church, in our work places and in our friendships. With a single word we can either deflate or encourage others. We need to be watchful about the way we use language especially things like our sense humour. Language is deeply important to God; lets use it for his purposes and not to injure others.

The second, and perhaps most troubling, ethical injunction Paul makes is against behavior he describes as “entirely out of place” for those who are God's people. This includes “obscene, silly and vulgar talk”, along with sexual immoral behavior and greed – patterns of sin-behavior that probably would have been characteristic of the wider culture that many of Paul's original audience would have lived in. Paul writes that those whose lives are characterized by such behavior may not have any inheritance in God's coming kingdom.

Interestingly enough, Paul clearly describes such sin as *idolatrous* – it leads to people finding significance, hope and worship that only God can provide in the love of material wealth and in improper, selfish and damaging sexual relationships.

We need to be cautious that we do not misinterpret what Paul is saying here. Paul is not suggesting that everyone who struggles with such sins is automatically going to miss out. That would compromise the magnificent assurance of forgiveness Paul gives believers in the first few chapters of the book. Rather, it is a warning to those people whose lives are consumed with a

consistent, unrepentant pattern of behavior contrary to our own identity in Christ. It is very easy for us to be indifferent about our sin, especially in a culture that struggles with sin as a concept. The reality is that sin is radically hurtful to others, to us and to God. Paul speaks here in our best interests.

Ultimately, the ethical teaching we get in Ephesians 4 and 5 is fundamentally about us being called to live *wisely*, “making the most of our time” within a world that is usually opposed to God and his purposes.

Living ethically together as God’s people is not about a retreat from society, or a restrictive and austere moralism, but rather a call to distinctive, holy and missional living as the church. This is ultimately expressed in a gathered life as a church that exhibits real love and a commitment to both unity and diversity in which people from all walks of life are welcome.

Our shared ethical life, one focused on serving each other and living out of the hope we have in Christ, should not be looked upon as burden or some sort of other worldly ideal. Rather, in living lives worthy of calling to the good works God has prepared for us, we live as people that God is “re-humanising” – making us more like Jesus, the one who was truly human. Such living should be a joyful life, constantly thankful that we have a part to play in the grand drama Paul speaks about in Ephesians. In this way, our lives are called to truly reflect our real identity and hope in Jesus.