

God's Holy People

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- [0 : 00] This morning we are commencing an extended sermon series in Paul's letter to the Ephesians.! So if you have not yet done so please turn to Ephesians chapter 1.
- ! Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus, by the will of God, to the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus.
- Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Let's pray together. Father, we thank you for your word.
- And we ask in this moment that you would speak to us through it. Lord, all of your word is inspired.
- Including these introductory words to this great letter. And we ask, O Lord, that in this moment you would cause us to turn our hearts to hear what you would say to us from this introduction.
- [1 : 37] And I pray, Lord, that you would use the sermon this morning to lay a foundation for the rest of the series.
- And indeed, O Lord, would you use it to speak to our hearts and to build up this church. We ask once again, O Lord, that you be glorified in the preaching of your word.
- We ask these things in Christ's name. Amen. In his preface to his commentary on this letter to the Ephesians, deceased pastor and theologian John Stott wrote the following as he expresses concerns for the evangelical church in his day.
- He wrote, For himself, a people of his own.
- We think of ourselves more as Christians than as churchmen. And our message is more good news of a new life than of a new society.
- [3 : 17] I think many of you would no doubt be surprised to learn that John Stott wrote those words in 1979, some 43 years ago.
- But those words still ring true. Those words still are true. Indeed, there is an evangelical blind spot by which we can so easily overlook the central importance of the church.
- And that is increased. That is increased because more and more people are proclaiming individual salvation without moving on to the saved community.
- And so as a result, many who profess to know Christ are living the Christian life in isolation rather than in community.
- And they are more aware and comfortable of living that way than seeing that it is the norm to live the Christian life in community with brothers and sisters.
- [4 : 30] And the COVID-19 pandemic has not helped it. As a matter of fact, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the problem and even added to the problem.
- Because now that live streaming is widespread among churches, countless numbers of people prefer to sit at home, though they profess to know Christ, they prefer to sit at home and watch a live stream as a matter of preference rather than out of necessity based on some health or other circumstance.

And so the result is that this overemphasis of this individual faith detached from community continues. And it points to the need for all of us, I would dare say, who profess to belong to Christ, to recapture a biblical understanding of God's plan for those whom he saves.

That he saves us, not to leave us alone, but to bring us into a new community of brothers and sisters joined together through their union with Christ.

And that is lived out in the context of a local church. It's one of the reasons why we find metaphors and descriptions of the church that talk about us being a family.

[6 : 15] That talk about us being brothers and sisters and in a household of faith. And in many respects, if we were to see some individuals and the way they approach those truths, they would be almost like wayward or runaway children who live outside of the community of the household of faith.

And so burdened by this reality of this increasing emphasis on individual faith, as I prayerfully considered the preaching diet for this year, last year, as I did that I sensed that the Lord led me and directed me to let this letter of Ephesians be our first sermon series for 2022.

But I pray that it not only lays a foundation for this year, but I pray that it would indeed lay a foundation or shore up our foundation about understanding God's vision for his redeemed community in the household of faith and our place within that context.

I pray that our understanding will grow. I pray that our conviction will grow. And here's how John Stott again expressed that conviction about this letter of Ephesians.

He writes, Nobody can emerge from a careful reading of Paul's letter to the Ephesians with a privatized gospel. For Ephesians is the gospel of the church.

[8 : 12] And again, may that be our experience from this sermon series. My goal this morning is to lay a foundation for the sermon series and to give us an overview of this letter and the series as a whole.

And so as we consider these opening verses in Ephesians, here's what I want us to see and to be convicted about. The letter of Ephesians was written by God's messenger, Paul, to God's people, the saints, and contains God's message, the gospel.

I think Paul introduces these truths in these two verses that we can read over so quickly.

For those of you who are taking notes, I've organized the sermon under three simple points, and they are, number one, God's messenger, number two, God's people, and number three, God's message.

So let's first consider God's messenger. Ephesians is a letter, and it begins in the customary way the letters in that day, in the first century, in early 80s, 70s, would have been written.

[9 : 40] Today when we read letters, if a letter appeared in your email that just began, dear so-and-so, or you got a letter in the post that didn't have a return address on it, to know who that letter is from, you'd have to go to the end of the letter to see who signed it.

Well, in the first century, it wasn't that way. In the first century, letters were written with the author's name at the front of the letter.

And so from the very outset of this letter that Paul wrote, we're able to see that he identifies himself as the author of this letter. But Paul does a bit more than identify himself as the author in a generic sense.

Paul gives us some additional information that helps readers to understand that he is not writing a letter in his personal capacity.

He's not taking the time to share with them his own thoughts or his own ideas in this letter. And the additional information that Paul gives us is that he is an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.

[11 : 06] Now, calling himself as an apostle, calling himself an apostle, was no small thing. Paul was claiming to himself the same title which Jesus gave to 12 of his disciples whom he selected out of his broader group of disciples and he commissioned them and called them apostles.

And he didn't just commission them with a word, he commissioned them with authority. He gave them authority to preach the kingdom of heaven, to tell people that it was at hand, and he gave them authority to heal the sick, to raise the dead, to cleanse lepers, and to cast out demons.

And so an apostle is one who was chosen and sent in the name and authority of the one who chose to send him. And Paul was saying, that's who I am.

Now Paul's story would have been well known to the Ephesian church. We read in the book of Acts, in Acts 19 and 20 in particular, how Paul labored in this city and helped to build this church.

Paul's testimony would have no doubt been famous. Paul was the notorious persecutor of God's people. They would have known that one day when Paul was on his road to Damascus, the Lord Jesus himself confronted Paul.

[12 : 44] Paul was going to persecute Christians. He had exhausted all the territory in Jerusalem and Judea and he was now going to a foreign city to find Christians to persecute them and to put them in prison.

But Luke tells us in Acts chapter 9 that when Paul was on his way to Damascus, a light shined from heaven and he, Saul at the time, was knocked to the ground.

He fell to the ground and he heard this voice saying to him, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? And he answered, who are you, Lord?

And the Lord answered, I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. This was Paul's introduction to the nature of the church that he was persecuting but he would eventually be helping to build.

His introduction to the church was that the church was the body of Christ and what is done to the church is ultimately done to Christ himself.

[14 : 01] That was Paul's introduction to the church. He thought he was fighting and doing a good thing and persecuting these individual people but the Lord told him that day, no, Paul, no, Saul, you're persecuting me.

And Paul understood that day something about the nature of the church. In persecuting Christians before his conversion, Paul was persecuting Christ.

But on that day the Lord Jesus enlisted Paul to be one of his apostles and sent him to preach to the Gentiles and to Jews and to kings.

And so he did not volunteer himself for apostleship. Indeed, it would have been foolish for him to do so because apostleship was more than just name.

It was authority. And Paul would later write in one of his letters that the marks of an apostle were done in his ministry.

[15 : 20] And so Christ commissioned Paul as his sent one, as his messenger. And Paul tells us in verse one that all of this was in accordance with the will of God.

God will be to very outside of this letter is we see we come face to face with the first and second persons of the Trinity.

God the Father willed that Paul would be an apostle and a messenger to his people and the father didn't wake up one day and say oh you know what I think Paul will be an apostle he'll make a good apostle no he willed that from eternity past and God the Son executed that plan on that day when he confronted Paul on the road to Damascus and commissioned him as one of his apostles and therefore to reject Paul and his message is to reject God himself because Paul did not come in his own name Paul did not volunteer for this he came in the name of Jesus Christ and by the will of God and so we must not overlook this important point to reject God's messenger or

God's message is to reject God himself I can't stress that too much to reject God's messenger or God's message is to reject God himself Paul did not assume unto himself this task of being a messenger of God and I suspect that even as he wrote these words claiming to be one who is bringing God's message there was a sense of holy awe upon him and holy fear upon him that the last person that you would want to impersonate and say has sent you is the God of the universe and so it is no small thing for Paul to write to the Ephesians and indeed to write to us

Paul an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God this brings you to my second point Ephesians is a letter written by God's messenger to God's people in verse one Paul identifies God's people to whom he is writing as saints he addresses the letter to the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus now in today's world when people hear the word saint or saints they tend to think about someone who is a super spiritual perhaps experienced and accomplished Christian who kind of lives with one foot in the world and one foot in heaven they're the ones that you look up to to address the ones of the

[19 : 03] Roman Catholic Church would canonize they would say that person is a saint that's not what Paul has in mind in his letter to the Ephesians Paul is addressing all of God's people as saints all of them without exception and by saints he means that God has set them apart as holy unto himself that's what it means to be a saint that's what God does to all whom he saves out of the world although they continue to live in this world he sets them apart from the world as his very own people as his holy people his set apart people and they are to live lives that are consistent with what the

Lord has done they are to live as a holy people because God has made them a holy people and so Ephesians is written to God's holy people and all who belong to God are his holy people they are saints I think it is so easy to hear something so much that even when we that may not be true that is not true that when we hear the truth that false idea that we have can be so ingrained in our minds that the truth kind of like just goes over our head and I suspect that this is one of those occasions I suspect this idea of thinking of yourself even though you have trusted in Jesus Christ even though day by day you seek to live for him and serve him when we talk about being a saint we tend not to reflect on the truth that what it means is that the

God of the universe has been kind and pleased to save you out of the world and to set you apart in this world as belonging to him we tend not to think so much about that we tend to think about maybe the last failure that we had or why that word saint just does not relate to us it doesn't aptly describe us but brothers and sisters we are not saints because we live holy lives we're called to live holy lives we should endeavor to live to please the Lord in all that we do but that's not why we're saints you are a saint and I am a saint because we belong to God and he has set us apart as his prized possession and you know the amazing thing about that is he has done that knowing full well that many times the reality of our lives will be a contradiction that we have this declaration about us this truth about us that we are saints and so often we look like anything but saints but it is pleased the

Lord to do that I'm sure all of us at some point or another have experienced some kind of embarrassment by association with an individual in a particular circumstance and there's a myriad of circumstances we can think about and where we just wish that people didn't associate us with that person or those group of people not so the Lord he did this as an expression of his amazing love and grace and so our holiness is not defined by what we do it is defined by what God has done through Christ he has redeemed us from sin he has set us apart as saints as his holy people and that's what it means to be a saint that's what it means to be God's holy people

Paul also identifies God's holy people as being faithful people he identifies them as being faithful people and indeed it is consistent that God's people whom he has set apart for himself will be faithful to him and being faithful speaks to living in accordance with what we are called to be and to do as God's people it speaks about being trustworthy for example a faithful police officer will uphold the oath that he made on the day that he was enlisted as a police officer and the same is true of

[25 : 12] God's people since God has set us apart as his holy people being faithful calls us day by day to seek to live lives to please him as we serve him set apart from the world set apart from those who are living their lives in rebellion to him that's what faithfulness looks like and although this letter from Paul was written initially to the saints who were in Ephesus those who are faithful my extension is really written to all of God's people what was true of the saints in Ephesus is true of all of God's people and the idea is that all of God's people are as holy people who are to be living faithful lives in the world as his holy people and so really we should not be preoccupied with the whole idea of holiness in terms of practice we should be preoccupied with faithfulness am

I living faithfully in accordance with the holy people that God has called me to be a part of see while holiness or while being holy is a declaration that God places over us when he sets us apart faithfulness is not the same thing we are called to live faithful lives in light of that holy calling that we have been given by God in this world to live apart from it to be unstained by it to be his holy people God

God God God holy holy and faithful he also gives another important description in verse one he describes God's people as being in Christ Jesus that is a very important description in Christ Jesus so although God's people are in the world in places like Ephesus or in Nassau or wherever they are yes they are in the world and in those cities but more importantly they are in Christ Jesus indeed that is how God's people are his holy people that is how we are separate from the world because we are in Christ Jesus and that is something that God does it is not that we do something and then we can qualify to be in

Christ no God puts us in Christ when he gives us new life and so this whole idea of us being in Christ is what makes us united together this is what makes the community of God this new society that God designed and planned in Jesus Christ if you want to think of it another way the Bible talks about two Adams the Bible talks about the first Adam and the last Adam all of us were born in the first Adam all of us and then those who belong to Christ are born again in the last Adam and we share our commonality based on which Adam that we are in those who are in the first

Adam are part of the community of the world those who are in the last Adam are part of the community of the people of God but exactly what does it mean to be in Christ Jesus listen to John Stott's very clear explanation and I am going to be quoting John Stott a whole lot for this series because I have not found a clearer expositor of God's word and I would be unwise to try to improve upon what he has written here's how he describes what it means to be in Christ listen to this to be in Christ is to be personally and vitally united to Christ as branches are to the vine and members to the body and thereby also to

[30 : 48] Christ people for it is impossible to be part of the body without being related to both the head and the members much of what the epistle later develops is already here in the bud according to the New Testament and especially Paul to be a Christian is in essence to be in Christ one with him and one with his people I want to read that again to be in Christ is to be personally and vitally united to Christ as branches are to the vine and members to the body and thereby also to Christ people for it is impossible to be part of the body without being related to both the head and the members much of what the epistle later develops is already here in the bud according to the

New Testament especially Paul to be a Christian is in essence to be in Christ one with him and one with his people and brothers and sisters the church has degenerated so badly that for so many people to be in Christ is to respond to an altar call and pray a prayer to be in Christ is to the way that you may take a seed and just throw it on the ground and maybe something comes up or maybe something doesn't come up but there's no intentionality there's really no care I I am mindful that I am this is being live streamed and I want to be discreet but it is heartbreaking to hear people that get on social media and say oh

I led someone or these people to Christ today they prayed to receive Christ today at some location some place some happenstance moment and they don't realize we don't see that in scripture we don't see that in the book of Acts the very first example we have of people coming to Christ here's what it says about them in the book of Acts the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved there's no such thing as just randomly leading someone to Christ and not connecting them to his body not talking to them about baptism and obeying Christ in a way of life that is so contrary and so foreign to what we see in in scripture being in

Christ is being united to his body as well as Stott said you cannot be say I'm connected to the head if you're not connected to the body and so this idea of just randomly going up to someone and quote unquote leaving them to Christ and then leaving them alone is foreign to what scripture teaches and it's not one or the other it's both we need both the head and we need the body and being united to Christ and being united to his body is a work of the Holy Spirit and all those whom he saves are united to Christ and to his body and they are the visible expression of the body of Christ in the context of local churches and so friends there's no legitimacy in claiming to belong to

Christ while also claiming not to belong to his body and as John Stott rightly points out in this phrase in Christ that is the bud that is developed throughout the rest of this letter what does it mean to be in Christ what are the implications of how we live because we are in Christ what are the implications of how we relate as husbands and wives because we are in Christ what are the implications of how we parent because we are in Christ what are the implications for how we relate to the world and renouncing things of darkness because we are in Christ.

[36 : 05] The letter of Ephesians lays out what it means and what it looks like to be in Christ. God's people are saints.

God's people are faithful. And God's people are in Christ. So Ephesians was written by God's messenger to God's people.

And third and finally, it contains God's message. The message of Ephesians is good news. It is the good news of what God has done through Christ to bring to pass his plan of redemption to reconcile sinners to himself.

And in verse 2, the Apostle Paul uses two words that have come to consistently communicate God's message of redemption and reconciliation.

And those words are grace and peace. Notice what he writes in verse 2. Grace and peace. Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

[37 : 20] And immediately what these two words do is they bring into focus the message of the Christian faith, which is the gospel. The good news of what God has done through Christ, that he brought grace and peace to those who deserve judgment and wrath.

The word grace points us right at the outset of this letter to God's free, sovereign initiative and kindness in bringing salvation through Christ to undeserving sinners like you and me.

Grace is God's divine and uninfluenced initiative to act favorably towards those who do not deserve it and cannot earn it. We don't receive grace because of anything we have done or will do.

And what a wonderful reminder it is to people who have already received grace to be reminded again of the grace of God as Paul addresses them and he addresses us.

Grace to you. And really it is a reminder that this life that we have in Christ, it started by grace and it continues by grace.

[38 : 47] It is still by grace. It will always be by grace. That grace keeps coming to us. And one of the wonderful ways that almost every New Testament letter begins is it brings us face to face with the grace that we have received and the grace that we continue to need as we live the Christian life.

Friends, grace by its nature is sovereign and totally determined by the one who gives it and totally uninfluenced by the one who receives it.

This is one of the most important truths to grasp in the Christian life. And the reason is that it is the foundation of the Christian life. If we don't understand grace, we don't really understand the Christian life.

Now I'm not saying that if you don't understand grace, you're not a Christian. Because God's grace comes to those whom he saves. But if we don't understand grace, we don't understand the Christian life, and we miss the joy and the wonder and the majesty of what it means to be a Christian.

It means that we miss the wonder and the joy of what we sang about this morning when we could talk about a wondrous cross in which the Prince of Glory died and where in the face of that cross we can take our greatest gains and say it's nothing in face of that.

[40 : 34] I grew up in a church where we memorized from Sunday school the definition of grace. We would say, they would say, what is grace? And we would say, grace is God's unmerited favor.

But the widespread reality for us in that church, and I love that church, I came to Christ in that church, I thank God for that church. But the widespread reality in that church was that we function by works, not by that definition that we gave that grace is God's unmerited favor.

And I pray this morning that you would see how easy it is to have a correct theology in our heads, and then in a functional way we live contrary to that.

We live trying to earn our way, trying to please God in salvific ways. We have a works orientation grace.

Even though we would say, grace can be earned, and grace is not deserved. And how kind of the Lord to remind us at the beginning of this letter, and indeed most of the letters in the New Testament, that it is God's grace that has come to us, and it is God's grace that continues to come to us.

[42 : 10] And we have peace because God's grace has come to us. God's grace has brought peace to us.

It has brought us peace with God, and it has brought us peace with others. We're no longer enemies of God. We're no longer objects of His wrath because His grace has come to us.

His peace has come to us. We no longer, we fear Him because He is holy and because He is our transcendent God and our Heavenly Father.

But we don't fear Him. We have peace. We don't fear the day of judgment because wrath has already been poured out on Christ in our place and in our stead.

We can know peace with God and we can know the peace of God because the grace of God has come to us in the Lord Jesus Christ.

[43 : 25] And like that grace, that we have received and we are reminded of in an ongoing way, so is the peace. Because again, even though we have received peace, sometimes we can live though redeemed, though belonging to Christ, as if we are under the wrath of God.

grace and peace and peace and so grace and peace are shorthand words that point us to the gospel and they are the basis for the new community and the new society of God's people.

And why do they do that? They do that because by God's grace we have been saved and united with Christ and with one another as a new people who are at peace with God and who are at peace with one another.

And this, brothers and sisters, is what we get to look forward to as we work our way through this letter of Ephesians. We get to learn about God's free grace in creating this new society, the redeemed community who are in Christ and who enjoy peace with God and with others.

As I conclude this morning, I want to share with you a very helpful outline that John Stott has put together that gives us an overview of this letter of Ephesians and they are in four parts.

[45 : 14] Number one, new life. That's chapter one, verse three, through chapter two, verse ten. The new life which we have in Christ.

Number two, new society. Chapter two, verse eleven, through chapter three, verse twenty-one. This is the new society which God has created through Christ.

And then new standards. Chapter four, verse one, through chapter five, verse twenty-one. The new standards that God expects of his new society in unity and purity.

And then finally, new relationships. chapter five, verse twenty-one through chapter six, verse twenty-four. The new relationships into which God has brought us harmony in the home and hostility to the devil.

This is a wonderful overview of the letter. And may I encourage you to read on. May I encourage you, maybe sometime today or some other point of the week, pick up the letter of Ephesians, read it.

[46 : 30] Contemplate it, think about it. And may God bless us to have a vision not only of I am saved and I belong to Christ, but also I am saved and I belong to the community of God's holy people.

So for the next five months, may the Lord cause us to grow in our love for the gospel, our love for the church, our love for God's new society, but most of all, may we grow in our love for this God, this amazing God who made it all possible through his marvelous grace.

Let's pray together. Oh, Father, we thank you for your word. We thank you, Lord, that you have cared for us by sending your messenger, the Apostle Paul, to communicate the grace and peace of God in this letter of Ephesians.

O Father, I pray that you would help us to deepen our conviction that not only do we belong to you through Christ, but we also belong to one another through Christ.

Would you glorify your name as we study this letter? Father, we pray in Christ's name.

[48 : 17] Amen. Amen. That's time for our closing song. Amen.