

Ephesians 4:11-16 - Church Growth

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Preacher: Will Spink

[0 : 00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

Better y'all singing that than me trying it during the sermon. Enjoy that more. That song's not just fun. It also reminds us of an important truth that we're going to talk about this morning.

This morning we're back in Ephesians chapter 4. Let's remember where we are in our study of the book of Ephesians. Paul has started out this letter to the church in Ephesus telling them about what God has done for them.

About how he's connected us by grace and in Christ to each other. Paul has begun in chapter 4 as we've kind of crossed the midpoint of the book to start applying that to specific situations in our lives.

What's that going to mean for us in this situation or in this stage of life or in this area? And he started inside the church with what it looks like for us to have true unity with brothers and sisters who are otherwise very different from us.

[1 : 10] And then we looked at how there's diverse gifts given to those people who are unified in order to serve and build up the body. And now he comes to his heart for the body of Christ.

What is it that he wants to see the church be and become? These people who have unity through having the same father. Who have this diversity of gifts for the sake of the kingdom.

God's now working them together toward maturity. Church growth. Not perhaps numerically the way we often think of church growth.

But spiritual maturity. What will that look like in the body of Christ? Will spiritual maturity be what we expect? Ephesians 4 starting at verse 11.

These are not my words about church growth. These are God's words. So let's pay careful attention to the reading of his word. And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers to equip the saints for the work of ministry.

[2 : 15] For building up the body of Christ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God. To mature manhood. To the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.

So that we may no longer be children. Tossed to and fro by the waves. And carried about by every wind of doctrine. By human cunning. By craftiness and deceitful schemes.

Rather, speaking the truth in love. We are to grow up in every way into him who is the head. Into Christ. From whom the whole body joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped. When each part is working properly. Makes the body grow. So that it builds itself up in love. All scripture is God breathed.

These are his words. Let's ask for his help now. Pray with me. Father, we do indeed ask for your help.

[3 : 14] We come to your word and are expectant. Because we know that you love. Love to make it come to life in our hearts. To show us what it looks like for your bride.

To be the church that you've created her to be. Oh Jesus, don't just teach us this morning. Change us. Transform us individually and as a church. That we would be everything that you've designed us to be.

We ask it in your name. Amen. I thought about playing on the screen this morning. A live feed from the one-year-old nursery. As an illustration.

Just picture it though. It would come in and you'd see a kid. And in the span of one minute, he would play with ten different toys or books. Right? He'd pick one up and he'd look at it and play with it.

And then he'd see another one. He'd throw that one down and pick up the next one. And then a shiny one would come over there being played with by another kid, of course. Which would make him want it even more. And he'd put his down. He'd grab another one. Continuing to move from one toy to the next really quickly.

[4 : 16] Kids are like that. Especially young kids. Easily distracted. Right? Not often intently focused on one thing for a long time.

I remember reading books with Lily, my two-year-old, when she just got strong enough to turn a page. When you read the book, there aren't that many words on a page of a kid's book to begin with.

But you'd only get four or five of them in and she'd just flip the page. And then you'd get the first four or five words on the next page and she'd flip right through and get to the end of the book and throw it down and grab another one. And you really wouldn't even know what the story was about.

But that's all she wanted was to make it through the book and turn the pages. Part of the immaturity of infants is that they lack focus. They're easily distracted or confused or tricked if you're that mean. But we can be like this in our Christianity, can't we? We can have what you might call a Pinterest Christianity. Where, you know, I met Jesus a while back and he was neat.

[5 : 17] But now what my Christian life looks like is grabbing at the latest and greatest idea. A blog over here, an article I read over there. And, oh, and then there's a really good book coming out.

I bet it's going to tell me what it looks like to really be a Christian. And pastors are really good at this, by the way. I'm describing something that I live with. You know how many articles and blogs there are about being the pastor you're supposed to be and making the new thing for your church so that you're really the church you're supposed to be?

There's a lot of those, and I read them. And we can fall into that, moving from one thing to the next and not ever going too deep for too long on any one thing.

We've certainly read more blog articles in the last year than chapters of the Bible. So we easily get blown around by every wind of doctrine.

We get distracted, for example, by the good feelings of the prosperity gospel that we hear so much. We think, I'll be a really mature Christian and avoid all that pain and suffering at the same time.

[6 : 21] That'll be great. That's what I'll do for a while. We begin to buy the bill of goods our culture has been selling for years, that truth is individual. It's what's good for me, but it may or may not be what's true for you.

And so truth has become cheap, right? Pragmatism, individualism have become much more valuable. If we evaluate our Christian lives, our relationships with God, if we're really honest, we feel like we're just floating along, kind of in the same place I've been, just kind of making it through, wondering if I've really got this figured out, or if there's not something more to following Jesus, still feel immature, confused about what following Jesus is really about.

Have you ever felt that way? I've felt that way. Paul describes this kind of spiritual immaturity in verse 14 here. Remember what he says?

He talks about us being children tossed to and fro by the waves, carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness and deceitful schemes. Paul doesn't want this for us, but he says we're just kind of floating out there on the ocean, easily blown around, easily taken in.

And sadly, many days we're quite content with that, aren't we? It feels pretty nice out here on the waves, just floating around, nothing too much to think about.

[7 : 50] But not every day will be easy. Storms will come, and Paul wants us to be anchored, to have a mature and firm grounding. This passage is undeniably about church growth, not about numbers of people in the pews or dollars in the budget, but about spiritual maturity of the body and its individual members.

Just look in six verses, we read about building up, mature manhood, grow up, grow, build up, over and over. This is what Paul's getting at.

He's explaining, how does this unified body with diverse gifts develop and mature? What keeps it strong and healthy? What makes it flourish? How do you know when it's really going strong?

And our natural tendency, when we think about maturity, is to think that, hey, we'll get it to you. We'll be this great church, a strong, vibrant, healthy place where we've been around long enough that we've kind of figured church out, and we've got lots of good stuff going for us.

Maturity will be us getting it together as a church. Of course we think that, because that's what maturity looks like in the other areas of our lives, right? When you grow up into adulthood, maturity means you need mom and dad less and less.

[9 : 06] That's what your parents are raising you towards, right? That you can leave and survive on your own, that you'll be independent. And at work, you begin to mature into upper management, which means what?

You need the oversight of your boss less and less. You learn to work independently. But Jesus says it's different in my church.

Maturity is not independent success, but being increasingly dependent, being connected to, bound to, anchored in Christ, right?

In Him, the most important thing, and then to each other in His body. Look at verses 15 and 16, the way He says it. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we're to grow up where?

Grow up in every way into Him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, coming from Christ, the whole body, joined and held together and each part working properly is going to grow so that it builds itself up.

[10 : 08] That's how the body builds itself up. That's where growth comes from. The image is of dropping anchor into Jesus. Not running around looking for all sorts of new and improved ideas for the latest and greatest way to be a Christian or a church, but dropping our anchor down deep in Jesus, focusing on the one thing that's most important.

The Bible talks about it in a lot of ways. It talks about it as abiding in Jesus, finding our rest in Him, being connected to Him. We strengthen our connection to the head of the body, which builds us up and grows and matures us because that's what He does.

We need to learn of Jesus more as we grow in our faith, not less. We need to hear the gospel more as we mature in our faith, not less.

And that may seem obvious or churchy, like of course we want to talk about Jesus, but you'll hear very different things. You'll talk to people who will say, hey, you know, I heard a sermon about Jesus rescuing sinners and the wonderful grace of Jesus that saved us from our sins, and you'll hear somebody say, you know, that was a great sermon for someone who's never heard the gospel before, but I don't know, I'm a mature Christian.

I've followed Jesus a long time. I want more meat. I want something else. And Paul says maturity means never getting over Jesus, never moving beyond Jesus, always asking how Jesus impacts this situation in my life, dropping the anchor down deeper into Jesus, not hauling it up and going in search of more exciting waters, not setting him aside for the next shiny toy that we notice, going deeper into Jesus.

[11 : 57] It's actually why this passage says Jesus gave evangelists, shepherds, teachers, and so forth to his people, because they're supposed to build the body up in the knowledge of the Son of God, experiencing him more, becoming like him, verse 13.

That's maturity. He doesn't want the latest heresy to confuse you. He doesn't want the storms of life to wash your faith away. He doesn't want the shiny toy to outshine the beauty of Christ in your mind and eyes and heart.

So he says those who teach are to show us the beauty of Jesus over and over and over, to help us learn more of him, to know him more deeply, to drop our anchors down in Jesus.

Don't ever think you need him less, or that if you did, it would be real mature to need him less. I saw this pretty clearly in the text as I was reading it.

It's in other places in the Bible, but I thought it would be helpful to talk to some people who've been following Jesus a few more years than I have, to see if it's practically true, if they've found this to, in their lives, really to be true of what maturity looks like.

[13 : 14] I was thinking about some of our senior members here, and I thought, you know what? They pray a lot. They're here a lot in worship and Sunday school and small groups and Bible studies, and that's not necessarily a mark of spiritual maturity.

Attendance at Sunday school doesn't qualify you as spiritually mature, but I wondered why they're so regular. Even after all these years when six or eight decades into following Jesus, surely they're not coming to hear something new, right?

Thinking they're going to learn something else, and I know from talking to them it hurts to get up in the morning. It's not easy to get up early and get going. Why such a priority? So I thought I'd talk to

a few of them, and I won't mention their names.

Their ages are all under 100, but over 80, and every single one of them told me without hesitation that it's true. They feel their need for Jesus more now than ever before.

One lady I interrupted somewhere in the middle of Deuteronomy, I believe, said, and I quote, the older you get, the more you realize you can't do it yourself.

[14:28] They told me lots of things like digging into God's Word is the way they get their strength, that they're constantly learning and needing to remember that God's in control because they do things like worry about their kids.

Isn't that crazy? Worry about their kids? They're actually struggling with what I'm struggling with, and they need to go back to Christ and remember how much He loves their kids.

Other things like that. They said they need to hear about Jesus and be with people who point them to Jesus, that they're desperate for it. And I said to one, really, I said to one of them, seriously, like a Sunday school class taught by someone half your age, aren't you just being nice?

Oh, it helps me, she said. It helps me so much. Maturity. Dependence.

The older you get, the more you realize you can't do it yourself. Don't take it from me. Take it from people who follow Jesus longer than you've been alive. I find that's always a good idea.

[15:40] John Lennon wrote the number one hit that we heard just a minute ago. After he'd had a lot of success, a lot of things had gone well in his singing and songwriting career, and he'd been writing about a lot of things, but this was kind of a turning point where he decided to write a song that was honest and truthful about what he was learning about life and what he was seeing in himself.

And you see what he says? When I was younger, I never needed anybody's help. I was strong and capable and self-assured. But now something's changed.

My life has changed, and maybe my favorite line, my independence seems to vanish in the haze. I need you. I have need.

I'm not capable. It's not that I don't need anybody. I have great need. I'm not independent anymore. I thought I'd get here and find myself to have arrived, and instead not.

more of Jesus, being anchored in him. That's how maturity occurs. That's how church growth happens.

[16:44] I'd ask you this morning, what's informing your thinking? What's shaping the way that you live? Ask yourself that question. What things are impacting you?

Is it or he or she pointing you to Jesus, teaching you more about him? I'm not anti-blog articles. I read some of them.

I write some of them. I don't have anything against them. But we ought to ask ourselves, what's shaping me? Is it anchoring me to Jesus, or is it leaving me adrift on a sea of good advice?

We are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ. It's about him and knowing him more and going deeper into Jesus.

But how do I know? How would I know if I'm maturing? How would I look at my life and how would I look at my church and say, what would it look like if I was maturing in Christ, if this was really happening?

[17:49] Do I just kind of think, well, maybe I feel more mature than I used to. I'm kind of happy with where I've come. How can I look at my life and know if growth is occurring? If this is really going on.

Paul says in this passage that maturity will look like truth and love being connected. Let me show you this in the text and then we'll talk about what it means for us.

It's so, so beautiful. Truth and love being connected. Paul begins the passage talking about truth, about teaching truth, the importance of good teaching and understanding and learning things.

that we're building up the body of Christ as that happens. And he ends the passage saying that connected to the head, the body builds itself up in love. Verse 16. Truth and love, truth and love all through these verses.

And then notice verse 15 again. Remember, this is the verse that's contrasting with the immaturity of verse 14 where we're blown around by the waves, carried by every wind of doctrine.

[18:53] What's the contrast to that? He says, rather, rather, what I don't want you to be as spiritually immature children, rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into Him who is the head, into Christ.

Speaking the truth in love. There's actually not a word there in this passage for speaking. It's really, in the Greek, truthing in love.

Truthing in love, so connected to each other, living the truth. It's not less than speaking the truth, certainly, but it's not just, I say true things calmly and with a smile on my face.

Speaking truth in love. Sometimes that's all we think about when we hear speaking the truth in love. I will say, true things calmly with a smile on my face. It means more than that. It means being about the truth in love, living in such a way that truth and love are connected and intertwined that you can't pull them apart.

And what Paul's saying is that as we connect truth and love, we grow up into Jesus, right? Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into Him.

[20 : 07] As we speak the truth in love, we grow up into Jesus, right? Why? Why? Because that's exactly who He is. You see, for most of us, truth and love are mutually exclusive in our lives.

Most of us are much more comfortable with one than the other, aren't we? And if you don't know it about yourself, ask your friends, they know. Are you more comfortable with the truth or love? Which one? For many of us, impersonally, we are very passionate about truth.

Look at your Facebook posts. Man, I'll tell you about the truth on Facebook, but then when I get face to face with you, I'm spineless. I don't want to hurt your feelings. All of a sudden, I can't love you and speak truth at the same time.

They seem mutually exclusive for us. We have to pick one or the other. But for Jesus, truth and love are never an either or, but always a both and. How is He described in John 1 when He comes from the Father?

Full of what? Full of grace and truth. Jesus spoke some of the toughest moral teaching in the history of the world and shared life with some of the most immoral people of His day.

[21 : 22] That's how He lived, right? Some of the most stringent moral teaching ever, and yet He's hanging out. He's relating with immoral people. He was a religious leader who befuddled religious leaders.

sinner. And then in the greatest union of truth and love ever in the history of the world, He went to the cross for sinners. The cross where the just and holy God of the universe speaks truth about sin, how He hates it, how serious the offense is, what it deserves, and He pulls no punches.

And the cross where the just and holy God of the universe loves sinners. Where He sends His Son and sacrifices His Son for them.

Absolute truth without compromise and amazing grace without measure in the cross. Isn't it glorious? Isn't it beautiful what Jesus has done on the cross?

We sing about the cross but stop to think about it. The truth and honesty about what our problem really is and the solution to it, I'm not just going to tell you what you deserve, I'm taking it for you.

[22 : 39] See Him again on the cross. No soft selling the truth. All self-sacrificing love. That's what our head is like, right? As we learn more about Him, anchor ourselves more deeply in Him, are equipped from His heart of love to grow as His body as verse 16 describes, that's what we will begin to look like.

People in churches who ooze truth and love in the same moment, whose lives are full of grace and truth. Listen, love without truth is at best mere sentimentality and at worst false hope.

And truth without love is at best mere moralism and at worst false teaching. They're both terrible if you divorce them from each other.

Francis Schaeffer once said, biblical orthodoxy without compassion is surely the ugliest thing in the world. Truth without love doesn't become truth anymore.

It becomes something ugly and disfigured. truth. But truth thing in love while not easy is Christ-like and counter-cultural and glorious.

[24 : 02] It's the glory of our Savior and who He is. How He came, how He lived, what He did on the cross. Truth and love together. together. So what might maturing look like at Southwood?

What would it look like for us to grow into Christ? To be true thing in love? I want to suggest a few things this morning some of which may make all of us think a little bit.

The first thing I think it would look like is that people would have trouble fitting us into a box. They wouldn't know how to categorize us. They'd hear what we teach and assume we must be conservative, Bible-thumping, intolerant fools.

They'd see how we love and assume we must be liberal, open-minded, anything-goes hippies. As we mature, this is what I mean, I should get calls from other pastors in town who see how we relate to, speak of, and befriend our homosexual and transgender neighbors.

Others who are marginalized and people might expect to find rejection from church people. And I ought to get a call from another pastor saying, hey, I'm confused, I'm a little concerned.

[25 : 25] Are y'all compromising? Have you gotten lax on biblical teaching? And I ought to be able to say, no, no, not at all. We're just starting to learn together what true thing in love means.

What it means to have truth and love in the same moment, in the same relationship. I think it would look like our small groups and our closest friends challenging us on personal things like how we spend our money, who we're starting to spend time with and getting a little bit too close to and pushing us away from those relationships back to our spouse.

Starting to hear hard things like that that we usually don't talk to, even talk about, even with our close friends. And it would look like us receiving those challenges as love, not antagonism.

You see, if truth is just individual, if I haven't firmly anchored in truth, then I have no basis on which to speak into your life and say anything because, I don't know, I might think this is good, but it might be fine for you to be doing that.

I can't love you enough to speak into your life at all. But if we've together anchored in the truth of Christ, then I have to love you enough to call you back to Him away from your idolatrous or immoral pursuits.

[26 : 49] And I may have to call them what they are in order to actually be loving you. You may need to hear it in a way that shocks you and gets your attention. And those people willing to speak and those people willing to receive would actually become best friends.

And you'd really have a small group. You'd be truthing in love with each other. I think we'd start to realize our dependence on Christ so much more that we'd need a new room for prayer gatherings due to overcrowding.

We'd repent of the scorn and hatred in our hearts for others in the church who we felt were underdressed, too wealthy, or made the wrong schooling decision for their kids.

We'd stop looking down our noses at them across the sanctuary and we'd repent of our sinful hearts. Our concerns about the worship and the sermon would be that it didn't exalt Christ enough, not that it didn't entertain me or it went too long.

We would no longer be comfortable letting the church be known as the place of truth and the government the place to get love and help. We'd have session and diaconate meetings where we brainstormed and discussed how to maintain our commitment to biblical truth while reaching out in new ways to our community.

[28 : 03] There's lots of things. Go think for yourself what would it look like. I had to stop the list at some point but I do have one more. I think we'd become a refuge for the broken that they run to when crisis and hard times hit because we're anchored to a rock.

People struggling through divorce. People beaten down by alcohol addiction, caught in pornography would find hope and a home right here.

Gordon McDonald visited an Alcoholics Anonymous group for several months to report on what he learned and to watch and observe and be part of the group. He writes this about one interaction in the group.

One morning Kathy, I guessed her age at 35, joined us for the first time. One look at her face caused me to conclude that she must have been Hollywood beautiful at 21.

Now her face was swollen, her eyes red, her teeth rotting, her hair looked unwashed, uncombed for who knows how long. I've been in five states in the past month, she said.

[29 : 13] I've slept under bridges on several nights. Been arrested, raped, robbed. She's crying now uncontrollably. I don't know what to do. I don't want to be homeless anymore.

But I can't stop drinking. I can't stop. I can't. He says, next to Kathy was a rather large woman named Marilyn.

Marilyn had been sober for over a dozen years. She reached out to Kathy with both arms and pulled her head to her chest and stroked her hair. He writes, I was close enough to hear Marilyn speak quietly into Kathy's ear.

honey, you're going to be okay. You're with us now. We can deal with this together. All you have to do is keep coming. You hear me?

Keep on coming. And then Marilyn kissed the top of Kathy's head. I was awestruck. The simple words, the affection, the tenderness, how Jesus like.

[30 : 18] I couldn't avoid a troubling question that morning. Could this have happened in the places where I have worshipped? Would there have been a space in the program for Kathy to tell her story?

Would there have been a Marilyn to respond in this way? How Jesus like. I'm so thankful that I've seen Marilyn's at Southwood.

They're great, great people to have in your congregation. It's a gift to have someone who will pull you close and comfort you like that. I've heard just recently from a former member who shared with some of us a deep addiction a few years ago.

She says looking back, quote, I thought guilt and shame would absolutely kill me, but not one person looked on me with judgment, only love and grace. And these loving members got her to rehab.

They wouldn't ignore the truth. Today she calls her story a story of redemption. She met Marilyn's at Southwood, full of truth and grace at the same time, both extended to her.

[31 : 33] I think that's what happens as we grow. We more and more are a refuge for broken people for each other. We meet each other right there. And this isn't simple. It's not neat and tidy.

Every one of these situations requires wisdom and talking together about how best to approach them. There are lots of challenging cultural questions these days. Lots of questions we could ask in each one of them.

But one filter we should have on every Facebook post, every conversation, every decision is, does it connect truth and love? What great conversations to be having, y'all.

Oh, that we would have conversations like that more and more. We'd be having them. The great thing about having a tough conversation like that is that you can have them in the comfort that this is true.

You're not going to out-truth Jesus and you're not going to out-love Jesus. Neither of them. Neither of those things is going to happen in what you come up with. So having these conversations will push us into Jesus, will anchor us deeper in Jesus, make us increasingly dependent upon Jesus.

[32 : 42] Our head because he's the one we know who's the only one who's perfectly brought grace and truth together. He's perfect in truth and in love. He's the one who ultimately guides his body and grows his body and that's good news for us.

Let's ask for his help. Jesus, help. Help us. We do not naturally love people like this, but you do. It's how you love us. It's what you did on the cross. We're so thankful for it. It means we know it's costly and we're not really eager honestly to sacrifice a whole lot.

Oh, Jesus, would the fullness of grace and truth that we see in you be so beautiful, so glorious to us and so grip our hearts that we would grow into our head in every way.

Father, make us like Jesus. We pray in his name. Amen. For more information, visit us online at southwood.org.