

EPHESIANS

an 8 week youth ministry series on the
book of Ephesians

Ephesians – Week 1

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Ephesians

Lesson 1

Bible: Acts 9:1, 1 Timothy 1:15, Revelation 2:2, Revelation 2:4-5, Romans 3:23

Description - The books of the Bible did not just magically appear in written form, translated into English, and ready for youth groups everywhere to read. Human beings under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit wrote them. Many New Testament books were written as letters to specific groups of peoples. They are called Epistles. The book of Ephesians was a letter written by the Apostle Paul to the church of Ephesus. By learning a little bit of Paul's story and the church of Ephesus we can better understand Paul's letter.

Opening Game

Supplies Needed

Large letters to spell out the words (if using our examples, you will need P A U L O V E S I N S), whether they are papier-mâché letters from a craft store, letters you cut out of a piece of cardboard or foam board, or the foam block rug with the letters that can punch out from your nursery, any will work. They just have to be large enough for the players to hold in their hands and feel to figure out which they are holding.

Four blindfolds

Space Requirements

Four chairs in front of the students during service.

Game Description:

Select four student volunteers and have them sit in one of the chairs upfront. Put a blindfold on each player and be sure they can't see. Select which word you are going to give them first, and hand each student a letter in that word, all out of order. You will then give them a clue as to what the word is. Each student will have to figure out which letter they have been given, then figure out as a group what the word is, and then put the letters in the correct order to spell the word, all while blindfolded. You could have different groups for each word or just keep the same 4 students.

Example Words and Clues:

Paul – author of Romans

Love – we are called to do this

Sins – violating God's will

Save – rescue

Teach

Paul's Job Interview

Have you ever wondered how some of the Bible's "heroes of the faith" would do if they were interviewing for a job at a church today? I think it is easy to remember some of the great things they did and forget that they were often, at best, average people. At worst, some of the men and women that God used to do amazing things had some rather sketchy pasts.

Take the apostle Paul for example. Imagine that he was sitting down with a church board to interview for a senior pastor opening. How do you think that conversation would go?

Board Member: Well, Paul thanks for coming in today.

Paul: No problem.

Board Member: Why don't we start by having you share with us some of your strengths? What are some of the things you've done for God over the years?

Paul: Well, let's see, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit I wrote thirteen books of the New Testament.

Board Member: Well, that's awfully impressive! What else?

Paul: I served for over thirty years in the mission field. I spread the Gospel to much of the known world.

Board Member: Awesome! You have missions experience! That's one of the things we're looking for. You sound really impressive! What about some of your 'negatives?' Tell me about your life before ministry.

Paul: (shifts uncomfortably in his seat) Okay, you asked for it. Well, before I became a Christian my number one goal in life was finding and killing as many Christians as possible.

(Long pause of silence)

Board Member: Um... come again?

Paul: (sighs) Yeah, I was actually present when Stephen, the first martyr, was killed. At the time, I was 100% in agreement with those killing him.

Board Member: So... you were a terrorist?

Paul: Yeah, I guess you could say that, but that was before Jesus—

Board Member: (interrupts him) Uh, thanks Mr. Paul of Tarsus. We will let you know... Don't call us. We'll call you.

The Worst of the Worst

Of course, since we know the full story... A man named Saul had a dramatic encounter with Jesus Christ, and his life did a complete 180. This man who was responsible for the persecution of so many was transformed into a man named Paul who was one of the key pillars of the early Church. That said, before his conversion he was a completely different person. Basically, if you were a

Christian during the first years of the church you were afraid of this guy named Saul. Listen to this ringing endorsement found in scripture:

Scripture Reading: Acts 9:1 (NLT)

Meanwhile, Saul was uttering threats with every breath and was eager to kill the Lord's followers...

Be honest, does this sound like the kind of guy you would want leading missions trips for Jesus? Years later, after Saul was transformed into an amazing man of God named Paul, he wrote,

Scripture Reading: 1 Timothy 1:15 (NLT)

This is a trustworthy saying, and everyone should accept it: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners"—and I am the worst of them all.

Paul was able to understand and appreciate that he was among the worst of the worst that ever was. Still, despite all of the horrible things that he had done, God still chose him anyway.

The Book of Ephesians

Before we dive into this study of the amazing book of Ephesians, we are going to take some time this week to understand a little background about when, where, and why this book was written.

First, it is important to note that what we know as the book of Ephesians was not actually a book at all. It was originally written by Paul as a letter to the church of a town called Ephesus. Today, many—if not most—towns in America and much of the world have multiple churches. They represent a number of different styles and denominations. Back in the first century, however, it was much more common for there to be only one church in a city or town. This church looked very different from those we see today. People tended to gather in small numbers in homes and saw themselves as part of a greater whole.

Paul wrote this letter to the believers around A.D. 60 while under house arrest in Rome. His letter would have been read and reread by Christians as it circulated throughout the homes and groups of Christians that gathered together, people who were filled with hunger to learn more about Jesus. Ephesus was an important port town in a Roman province called Asia. One interesting fact about Ephesus was that it was home to one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World—the temple of Artemis.

The Church of Ephesus

We can learn a little bit more about the church of Ephesus in the book of Revelation. Speaking through John, Jesus addressed the positives and

negatives of this group of believers. This account can be found in Revelation 2:1-7. To sum it up, Jesus identifies some key positives and negatives.

Positive: They excelled at being able to identify false teaching and stick to the true doctrine.

In the early days of the Church there were many people teaching half-truths and outright lies about Jesus and His plan for His church. It's important to remember that early Christians did not have a New Testament that they could check to see if what they were hearing was truth. They had to rely on the Holy Spirit for discernment as well as the writings of the early apostles. Again, it is not like early Christians in say, Ephesus, had access to all of Paul's letters, all four Gospels, and so on. Even today, despite the fact that Christians have access to the printed Bible (not to mention digital versions), people are led astray by good sounding but ultimately false teaching. Back then it was that much easier.

Despite all of this, Jesus was able to commend the church of Ephesus for their ability to weed out the false teachers. Jesus said,

Scripture Reading: Revelation 2:2 (NLT)

...I know you don't tolerate evil people. You have examined the claims of those who say they are apostles but are not. You have discovered they are liars.

This is an impressive commendation. These believers obviously were in tune with the Holy Spirit and dutifully read and followed the teachings of apostles like Paul. That said the story doesn't end there.

The Ephesian church had its weaknesses as well. Jesus said,

Scripture Reading: Revelation 2:4-5 (NLT)

"But I have this complaint against you. You don't love me or each other as you did at first! Look how far you have fallen! Turn back to me and do the works you did at first..."

This church lost its first love. The meaning of this statement has led to much discussion among Biblical scholars. The New Living Translation of the Bible chose to strike a compromise in verse four by saying that they didn't "love me (Jesus) or each other." Basically, they lost sight of what was important to them when they first became believers. The reason for this isn't clear, but perhaps they became so focused on weeding out false teachings that they forgot to focus on Whom they were learning about. Regardless, we know that they were not a perfect group of people. It is worth noting, however, that unlike some of the other letters Paul wrote to the various churches, he did not write to the Ephesian church to specifically correct their mistakes or choices.

Main Themes We Will Explore

The book (letter) of Ephesians is far too complex and rich in content to adequately dissect each verse in this series. Instead, we are going to look at some key themes. The first is the idea of grace.

Dictionary.com defines grace as:

1. mercy; clemency; pardon
2. a manifestation of favor, especially by a superior

In short, grace is God's gift to mankind, despite the fact that we deserve quite the opposite. It is our pardon for our crimes against Him. These crimes should have resulted in our deaths—eternal separation from a perfect and holy God. Paul writes in Romans,

Scripture Reading: Romans 3:23 (NLT)

For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord.

Since the fall of Adam and Eve, man's "job" has been sinning against God. Our wages—our payment for our work—is death. In the greatest act of mercy and kindness man has ever known, God chose to forgo our just punishment by sending His son to die in our place. This is called grace.

Another key theme that we will study is adoption. God has chosen to adopt us as His children. This is a mind-blowing concept that we will try to unpack in more detail in a couple of weeks.

Finally, a third and important theme we will look at is Paul's instructions for how we are to live. God gives us this incredible grace, which begs the question, "What should we do with it? How should God's grace change us?"

Closing

God chose Paul—the self-proclaimed worst of the worst—to play an incredible role in the early Church. Isn't it interesting that Paul talks so much about grace? Wouldn't you if you had a resume like his?

The Ephesian church was far from perfect. They did some things well and failed in others. We aren't really all that different today. God chose Paul as a messenger of His word. Today, we have the benefit of learning from that same Holy Spirit inspired source that Ephesian Christians did so many years ago.

Finally, let's close by dwelling for a moment on just how amazing God's grace is. God chose a terrible sinner to write a book with amazing truths about grace to a church that had drifted from its first love. What do you think that He could do with you and your church?

Small Group Questions

1. Who are some of the "great" people of the Bible (not including Jesus)? What makes them "great"?
2. How do you think they would do in a church job interview?
3. Why do you think Jesus chose Paul of all people to be such an important part of His church?
4. What is discernment? How can we tell the difference between teaching that is truth and teaching that is false?
5. Think about a time when you felt the closest to Jesus. Share it with the group if you feel comfortable. What has changed between then and now?
6. Describe grace in your own words. What is so amazing about God's grace?
7. Why do you think God gave us the gift of salvation freely?
8. So, after hearing about Paul's early life, why do you think he talks about grace so much?
9. How often do you take the time to appreciate God's grace? How could you do better at this?
10. What are some ways you need to "return to your first love"?

Lesson Leader Notes

- I. Paul's Job Interview
 - a. The Good
 - i. Wrote 13 books of the New Testament
 - ii. Served for 30 years in the mission field
 - iii. Gave his life for Jesus (beheaded in Rome)
 - iv. Spread the gospel to much of the known world
 - b. The Bad
 - i. Early life goals included finding and killing as many Christians as possible
 - ii. Attended and approved of the murder of Stephen, the first martyr
- II. The Worst of the Worst
 - a. If you were a Christian during the first years of the church, you were afraid of a guy named Saul.

Scripture Reading: Acts 9:1 (NLT)

Meanwhile, Saul was uttering threats with every breath and was eager to kill the Lord's followers...

- b. Does this sound like the kind of guy you would want leading missions trips for Jesus?
- c. Paul later writes

Scripture Reading: 1 Timothy 1:15 (NLT)

This is a trustworthy saying, and everyone should accept it: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners"—and I am the worst of them all.

- d. Later, after his conversion, Paul was able to understand—and appreciate—that he was among the worst of the worst that there was.
- e. But God chose him anyway.

- III. The Book of Ephesians
 - a. It is not so much a book as it is a letter.
 - b. Written by Paul sometime around A.D. 60
 - i. He was under house arrest in Rome.
 - c. It was written to the church of the town called Ephesus.
 - i. Ephesus was an important, wealthy port town in a Roman province called Asia.
 - ii. One of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World—the temple of Artemis—was located there.

- IV. The Church of Ephesus
 - a. Description in Revelations
 - i. Revelation 2:1-7
 - ii. Positives - Did a good job of rejecting false teaching, adhering to true doctrine

Scripture Reading: Revelation 2:2 (NLT)

...I know you don't tolerate evil people. You have examined the claims of those who say they are apostles but are not. You have discovered they are liars.

- iii. Negatives – Lost some of their love for Jesus and one another

Scripture Reading: Revelation 2:4-5 (NLT)

"But I have this complaint against you. You don't love me or each other as you did at first! Look how far you have fallen! Turn back to me and do the works you did at first".

- 1. Stopped doing the good works for each other that they did in their early days
- b. Unlike some other letters Paul wrote, he did not write to the church of Ephesus for a specific reason of correction.

V. Main themes we will explore

- a. Grace
 - i. Dictionary.com
 - 1. mercy; clemency; pardon
 - 2. a manifestation of favor, especially by a superior
 - ii. What is Grace?
 - 1. A gift of life when we deserve death

Scripture Reading: Romans 3:23 (NLT)

For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord.

- 2. We "earned" our payment for living life on our terms. God gave us life instead.
- b. Adoption
 - i. We are the adopted children of God.
 - ii. What does that teach us about our identity? Our worth?
- c. Instructions for living like Christ
 - i. We have been given amazing grace. Now what?
 - ii. How should this change us?

- VI. Closing
- a. God chose Paul, the “worst sinner there was” to lead so many to Jesus.
 - i. What should this tell us about the grace that Paul writes about in this book?
 - b. In Revelations John writes that the church in Ephesus had “abandoned their first love”.
 - c. Sometimes when we have been saved for a while it’s easy to forget how amazing God’s grace is.
 - d. God chose a terrible sinner to write a book with amazing truths about grace to a church that had drifted from its first love (and most likely appreciation of grace).