

Ephesians Reading Guide

If you had the opportunity to offer words of encouragement and challenge, a divestment of wisdom, to a group friends and family, what would you say? More to the point, if you could take by the hand your brothers and sisters in Christ and show them what it means to grow as a Christ follower, how would you do so? Perhaps you would remind them of the very foundations of their identity in Christ, pointing them toward their indissoluble hope in Christ and the grace that is theirs because the God of the universe set his love upon them before they took their very first breath. Perhaps you would invite them to remember that a part of their new, resurrection life in Christ is to be inextricably bound to other believers, living with humble selflessness that reflects the very heart of Jesus. Perhaps you would exhort them to realize that this new resurrection life will produce in them holiness and love and an existence that speaks of their place as citizens of the *now and one day* Kingdom of God. Perhaps you would extol them to filter all of their relationships through the lens of their own gospel transformation. Perhaps you would warn them of the fact that their allegiance to Christ brings real, spiritual opposition, and preparation for battle looks like a maturing faith and an ever-growing intimacy with the Lord.

The Apostle Paul spent nearly three years investing in the Church at Ephesus, and his letter to the group of churches in and around the city is filled with these exhortations, challenges, reminders, and more. In what is his most general letter to any church, Paul offers a robust exposition of the resurrection life that is now to be the lived experience of these Christian men and women.

Despite the general nature of the letter, Paul isn't writing into a cultural vacuum. These are believers who daily feel the tension of living new lives in Christ in the midst of real opposition in the form of false gods, lustful hedonism, idolatrous worship of the state, and the various and sundry everyday challenges of living in one of the largest and most influential metropolitan centers of the entire Mediterranean world. And when we think of Paul's letter to the Ephesians in those terms, it's easy to see a resemblance with our world today. We would do well to humbly sit under the wisdom offered in these six chapters, ingesting each encouragement and challenge and reminder in turn, and live together as a people whose identity is defined by our union with the resurrected Christ.

Ephesians is not a command to white knuckle our way into a new kind of behavior. It isn't some campfire singalong call to a cheap sense of camaraderie. It's an invitation to believe that God's redemptive work in our lives changes us completely, it binds us together, and it produces a new existence in us that speaks of hope and joy and humility and love that resemble the life of our Savior. Ephesians is a call to believe God when he says that we are new in Christ and, from that believing, live differently, ever in step with the Spirit. And this resurrection life touches everything about us.

May we be enthralled with the mystery of the gospel. May we see the glorious vision of a gospel-transformed community of faith living with Christ-exalting, others-serving humility. May we be a resurrection people in a dying world.

Ephesians 5:22-6:9 Reading Guide

Overview

Ephesians is a wonderfully gospel-centric letter that speaks of God's redeeming, transforming love for an undeserving people. It offers a powerfully counter-cultural view of the Church as a unified Body of believers from many backgrounds, some of whom would have been considered enemies of one another, all of whom apart from Christ were enemies of God. From that gospel source and gospel hope, we have heard commands, especially beginning in Ephesians 4, to live compelled and controlled by the hope that we have in Christ. These are implications of gospel transformation that the Lord has accomplished in believers. This passage is no different. Paul's engagement with what would have been a culturally familiar household code is further evidence of his desire to press the transforming reality of the death and resurrection of Christ into the everydayness of believers' lives.

It is from this vantage point that we understand Paul's call to husbands and wives, children and parents, slaves and masters. Paul does not stop, mid-letter, offering words of hope and challenge and life rooted in the resurrection power of Christ, in order that he might now pile on already-oppressed people groups. In Christ, as a community of faith, these brothers and sisters (and us, too!) are to walk worthy of the calling to which they have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. They are to be imitators of God, as beloved children, walking in love as Christ loved them and gave himself up for them.

That is not to say, however, that these verses are not distinctly challenging, because they are. They have been used at times, throughout Church history, to oppress and demean. Perhaps you have even heard these verses come from the lips of those claiming the name of Christ in order to justify ungodly abuse or to wickedly and selfishly give their sin a mask of biblical fidelity. These are grievous things.

Because of this, we should be all the more diligent to read carefully and think well about this text of Scripture. It's with that in mind that we've expanded this Reading Guide to combine two teaching sections into one Guide (5:22-33 and 6:1-9). Ultimately, these sections speak of three relational categories that were central to the first-century economic household, and there were various "codes" that were prevalent in society that sought to outline how such relationships should function. Paul is, therefore, utilizing a well-known form and well-known categories in order to demonstrate how the reality of the gospel transforms all of life for believers. But that doesn't necessarily eliminate the challenges and questions associated with this text. Because we want to invite you to engage it for yourself and with your life group, this Guide contains some background information that will hopefully fill in some of the gap between first-century Roman society and our own, along with the questions and other resources that have been present in the previous Guides.

We pray and trust that the Lord will use our time together in these challenging but promise-laden verses to encourage our growth in Christ.

22 Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. 23 For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. 24 Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.

25 Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, 26 that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, 27 so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. 28 In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. 29 For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, 30 because we are members of his body. 31 "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." 32 This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. 33 However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.

1 Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. 2 "Honor your father and mother" (this is the first commandment with a promise), 3 "that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land." 4 Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

5 Bondservants, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, 6 not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, 7 rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man, 8 knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a bondservant or is free. 9 Masters, do the same to them, and stop your threatening, knowing that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and that there is no partiality with him.

Ephesians 5:22-6:9

Background Information

It's important to remember that this passage in Ephesians does not exist in a vacuum, neither within this letter or the broader culture. In fact, Paul has just called all believers, in 5:21, to submit to one another out of reverence for Christ, so it seems clear that Paul cannot simply be making the biblical case that some have a biblical right to subjugate others. But what is Paul saying, then? Here is some background information to help provide some context:

"HOUSE CODES" is the label assigned to those sections of Ephesians, Colossians, and 1 Peter that give instructions to wives and husbands, children and parents, and slaves and masters. While these

same three relationships were frequently addressed by Greek and Jewish writers in somewhat stereotypical fashion, no source for the Christian house codes has been discovered, nor do Greek or Jewish writers use the same language as the New Testament writers. The specific wording of this material emerged within the church.

Christians had to treat these subjects, at least in part, because they were accused of destroying society with their focus on freedom, love, and following Christ. Non-Christians needed to know that this was not the case, and Christians needed to be taught the relevance of their faith for their primary social relations. Unlike other house codes, Christian house codes focused not only on wives, children, and slaves, but also on the *responsibilities* of the the more powerful persons (husbands, parents, and masters)."

Klyne Snodgrass. *Ephesians* (NIV Application Commentary). 293-294.

Moreover, as we would expect from Paul based on the whole of Ephesians thus far, we see that every party involved in these relationships has a part to play in embodying Christ's love, and that alone would have been a revolutionary notion. One final bit of background information from Tim Mackie (The Bible Project) is in order:

"Paul's innovation is to adopt this cultural form of the house-hold code but entirely reshape the foundation on which it rests: the assumed superiority of the patriarch. Instead he places the risen Messiah in that position, which enables him to transform the code in two noticeable ways...He addresses first the traditionally subordinate parties (wives, children, slaves) as dignified moral agents who are not inferior but active participants in a household of the Messiah. This is outstanding in ancient household codes...Paul's address to the patriarch in all three roles is a radical undermining of his inherent male authority. Instead, he becomes an agent of the Messiah's dignifying love to each group in his household."

This background information certainly does not answer all questions, nor does it apply for us the ways in which the Lord is inviting our response in ultimate submission to *His* authority within the key relationships in our lives. But we hope that this provides at least some measure of context and a place to begin as you continue to engage this passage in your individual and group study.

Supplemental Passages

Genesis 1-2

Paul quotes directly from Genesis 2:24 in 5:31 as he speaks of the oneness between husbands and wives and applies that same concept of unity to the relationship between Christ and the Church.

Ephesians 1-5

As mentioned above, it's crucial to consider this passage in light of the broader context of Ephesians. Re-read through the first five chapters to be reminded of Paul's previous assertions about God, about our identity in Christ, and his acknowledgement of the supernatural, transforming work of God in all believers.

Mark 10:35-45; John 13

There is a call to self-sacrificially emulate Christ embedded in our Ephesians passage. In these two Gospel passages, we hear and see that expressed in the life of Christ, as he reminds the disciples that he came not to be served but to serve, and as he washes his disciples' feet.

Exodus 20:1-21

Paul quotes Exodus 20:12 as he speaks to the relationship between children and parents. It is worth revisiting the whole passage as we consider God's concern for integrity and care expressed in our relationships.

Romans 3

Even as Paul speaks to the relationship between slaves and masters, we would do well to be reminded of a passage from another of Paul's letters, wherein he shares that none are righteous before God and all are dependent on God's grace for salvation.

Songs to Consider

"Tis So Sweet to Trust in Jesus" by Louisa M.R. Stead and W.J. Kirkpatrick

"King of Kings" by Hillsong Worship

"Grace" by CityAlight

"Let Everything We Do" by Sixteen Cities

"All I Am" by Phil Wickham

Life Group Discussion Questions

- 1) Why might some historical background/context help inform our understanding of this passage? How does the rest of Scripture inform our understanding of it?
- 2) As you look back over Ephesians 1-5, what has Paul said that is important to bear in mind as we study this passage? How does his characterization of who God is and what he has accomplished in the lives of believers help us understand his message to all of the groups mentioned in this passage?
- 3) How does Ephesians 5:21 inform our understanding of this passage?
- 4) If married, how do I regularly seek to sacrificially serve my spouse? How might the Lord be inviting me to grow in that?
- 5) Does my treatment of others, broadly, reflect an imitation of God and a life of sacrificial love (as we see in 5:1-2)? How am I serving my brothers and sisters in Christ in a way that benefits others at cost to myself? How might the Lord be inviting me to serve more, or serve differently?
- 6) Consider the various relationships in your life (spouse, children, friends, co-workers, etc). How should the transforming work of God in my life shape the way that I think about and engage those relationships? Where have I failed to love and serve others well?
- 7) This is a weighty passage, without a doubt. But what words of hope and promise are found in these verses (either explicit or implicit) and how do they apply to our lives as Christians?