

"A Life Worthy of the Calling"

A Bible study on Ephesians through a ministry lens

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Author's Introduction

I am a lifelong Christian and active churchgoer. I met my husband at Augustana College (now University) in Sioux Falls, SD, where I majored in Journalism, with minors in Religion and English. My two primary ministries since then have been a supporting role to his ministry in several ELCA congregations (first as Director of Youth and Education and as an ordained pastor since 1989), and raising our three daughters.

My job as Features Editor at our local daily newspaper in Wisconsin ended on Good Friday 2015, as part of a company restructuring. In anticipation of a new chapter in my life, I spent some time seeking guidance from God, my husband, and others. One of my next goals became "write Bible studies," and I decided to refresh my college studies by applying to the certificate program at Wartburg Theological Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa.

My first class toward Wartburg's Certificate in Theology and Congregational Leadership was titled "The Gathered-Scattered Church: Releasing God's People for Ministry in the World." Through readings and online discussions, class participants examined the connection between our Sunday-morning ministries and our weekday ministries. We are God's people in all settings, but we tend to recognize the "gathered" (for worship and other organized church activities) times as somehow being more "holy." Through this class, we were able to see the holiness – the God moments – in our "scattered" weekday callings: in caring for children and aging parents, through our many workplace activities, in trying to be gracious in a slow check-out lane, in casual conversations anywhere. As we open ourselves to God's leading through the week, God is able to work through us for ministry in every setting. This study is my final project for that online class.

It is my hope that working through this study on Ephesians will help people recognize and pursue their God-given ministries in "scattered" daily life, and that when God's people are "gathered" for worship or other congregational activities, they will celebrate those everyday ministries that sometimes get overlooked.

For the leader

This study is meant to help participants begin to think of themselves as ministers in the broad sense of caring for someone else's needs. We are chosen and adopted by God because of God's grace poured out for us through Christ's death and resurrection. Our adoption is a gift that we can't earn, but we can show our love for God by ministering to people around us. We don't have to go to a far-off place to do ministry; we can care for others in our families, in our workplaces and in our neighborhoods.

The study can be done individually or with a group. It is set up to be self-paced, so that participants have time for reflection (and discussion in a group setting). A group should decide together how much time to allow for the sections.

Bible Background

Scholars disagree on whether “The Letter of Paul to the Ephesians” really was written by Paul. Some say it was written by a disciple of Paul as an introduction to a collection of Paul’s writings. Or a less well-known Christian teacher in the Pauline tradition, who signed Paul’s name to give his document more authority, might have written it. This was an acceptable practice at the time. It might have been written anywhere from 50 A.D. to 90 A.D. Scholars also suggest that the letter was not written specifically to Christians in Ephesus, but was intended for a wider audience. It might have been a letter or a sermon that was written down and circulated among several Christian communities. This Bible study will not seek to answer these questions of origin, but will encourage participants to see themselves as part of the wider Church to whom this letter is addressed.

It is clear that Ephesians was written to help Christians live their daily lives. The first hearers of these words would have believed every morning that Jesus might return that day. As each day passed with no sign of the Second Coming, the early Christians might have felt discouraged.

Tools and Tips

Consider finding a dictionary, or access one online such as www.dictionary.com, for the opening exercise.

“Pastor” is a word that’s used specifically for church and spiritual care of a group, and comes from a Latin word meaning “shepherd.”

“Minister” is a more general word. It can refer to the pastor of a church or a certain high office in government (as in, minister of defense), but also can be used to describe the act of ministering to someone, as “to give service, care or aid,” or “to contribute, as to comfort or happiness.” The word derives from Latin for “servant.”

The “Ephesians 6” section invites a person who has served in the military to describe their service gear. Ahead of time, prepare this person by asking him or her to spend just a few minutes talking about their preparations.

For Further Reading

Discussions in the “Gathered-Scattered” class were based on readings from *Beyond Maintenance to Mission*, by Craig L. Nesson, and *The Scattering: Imagining a Church that Connects Faith and Life*, by the instructor, Dwight DuBois. Either or both would provide additional insight on recognizing and valuing the many ways people can carry God’s mission into weekday life.

For participants

Setting the Stage

The first Christians expected Jesus to return any day. Probably each day they woke up and looked for him. Early Christian leaders realized it was time to help people live in the “now,” and that was Paul’s intention with this letter to Ephesians.

Living “now” is what makes this little book so interesting for Christians today, more than 19 centuries since it was written. What can we learn about how to live in our day from this letter to our counterparts in the early Church?

Ephesians was written between 50 A.D. and 90 A.D, at least twenty years after Jesus’ ascension into heaven. Bible scholars disagree on whether Ephesians was written by Paul, as it claims to be. Some suggest it was written by a disciple of Paul as an introduction to a collection of Paul’s writings. For ease of discussion, this study will use “Paul” when referring to the author of this epistle. In addition, some scholars argue that the writer wasn’t writing only to people in Ephesus, but to Christians in several communities and the letter was intended to be copied and passed around. These questions also make it hard to pinpoint exactly when the letter was written. This study will not address these questions, but instead will help participants understand more about how to live as the “body of Christ” in the world.

Life and times

In Bible times, the city of Ephesus was a commercial seaport on the Aegean Sea, on the western edge of what is now Turkey, and a short sail to Greece. A visitor at the time could have expected to find people of several ethnic and cultural backgrounds. The city was under Roman rule. Magic and superstition were rampant.

The apostle Paul spent two to three years in Ephesus, working and preaching and developing the Christian church there. He faced conflict with Jewish leaders, with magicians, and with artisans who made and sold idols. Paul’s influence nearly led to a riot when the artisan Demetrius organized other tradesmen against him. Paul told people to worship only the one God, not “gods made with hands,” and it was cutting into their business. (You can read more in Acts 18:18 to 19:41.)

Getting Started

What does the word "ministry" mean to you?

“Minister” is a word that’s often synonymous with “pastor” in many communities today. There is overlap in definitions for the two words, but they do not mean exactly the same thing. Take a moment to look up the two words in a dictionary or online. What did you find?

Have you ever thought of yourself as a minister (someone who ministers to others)?

Who can do ministry? Where does ministry happen?

Read Ephesians Chapter 1: We are adopted children of God

When American parents adopt a child, they promise before a judge to love and care for that child. The judge declares that these parents are legally bound to provide food, shelter, clothing, and other essentials for this child until he or she reaches adulthood. From that moment on, the child becomes a permanent part of a new family. Adoptive parents can point out that adoption is a choice and that they went out of their way to build their family this way. Adoption usually involves social workers who investigate the suitability of the parents and attorneys who make sure the placement is done legally. Once the adoption is finalized in court, the law recognizes this new relationship as binding in the same way that a son or daughter born to those parents would be.

Ephesians 1 says that we are adopted by God. We are chosen. Through Christ, we are children of God. The binding promise is demonstrated through the Holy Spirit given to us by God as a promise to always care for us.

Re-read Eph. 1:4-7 and 13-14. Then read Gal. 4:3-7. What does it mean to you that God chose you? An adopted child might call for "Daddy." What names can we use for God?

If you receive an inheritance, would it change your life? Re-read Eph. 1:11-12. What hint do you get about how to use the inheritance you received from God? How has receiving this inheritance changed you? How might using your inheritance become ministry?

We think of "inheritance" as property or money, but Eph. 1:15-16 suggests that an inheritance of faith can be passed from one person to another by a person's words and actions. How does a person's faith show through actions? Who are you thankful for? Who gives thanks for you?

As children grow into adulthood, they can better understand the actions of their parents. Likewise, Eph. 1:17-18 shows that we "grow up" in our faith. How have you grown in faith? How can you "open the eyes of your heart"? How could being more in tune with God help you in daily living situations?

Paul is writing to "the saints" (see Eph. 1:1), and has spent most of Ephesians 1 suggesting that we are God's adopted children. In Eph. 1:22-23, Paul moves to another image, a body with Christ as the head. What is the body? How do you define "church"?

Read Ephesians Chapter 2: Conflict and grace

Conflict was one reason Paul wrote to the Ephesians and other early Christians. This chapter mentions conflicts over “following the desires of flesh and senses,” perhaps a reference to sexual promiscuity and pleasure-seeking. Other conflicts (over circumcision) within the religious community threatened to divide the fledgling Christian community. The details might have changed over the centuries, but people today still argue over morality and religious practices. Paul here argues that God’s grace is poured out on us all, to save us and to bring us together.

Have you ever been forgiven after having hurt someone? Has anyone let you go ahead of them in a line? Did someone give you the biggest piece of a treat instead of taking it themselves? Then you have been the recipient of grace. These are simple, human examples. Now multiply “skipping ahead in line” grace by an extravagant number: That’s God’s grace! We were “dead through the trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1)” that mark every human being. God loved us extravagantly, and sent Jesus Christ to raise us up again. We didn’t do anything to deserve it; God gave us grace anyway.

Look again at Eph. 2:1-3. What does it mean to live “according to the flesh”? How might a Christian life be different?

Paul then adds these words in Eph. 2:8-9: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast.” If someone gives you a gift, how does it make you feel? Would you want to tell someone about it? Would you want to do something with the gift? Why might God want to save us?

Look at Eph. 2:10. The previous verses state that we can’t earn God’s grace. This one says we were “created in Christ Jesus for good works.” What’s the purpose of good works? How can good works become ministry? How are grace, good works and ministry linked?

People, either as groups or individually, are separated for many reasons: age, income levels, race, cultural practices, political viewpoints – the list could go on. Yet God adopted us into God’s family, making us “siblings” with all kinds of people. Read Deut. 6:1-9, Micah 6:8, and Matt. 25:34-45. Think about what God requires of us and our “siblings.” What is God’s “ideal”? How does God’s “ideal” fit into the peace outlined in Eph. 2:14-17?

Now Paul returns to an image of the whole church in Eph. 2:19-22: What do these verses say about the Church (the whole people of God)?

Read Ephesians Chapter 3: The Power of a Story

The apostle Paul experienced a dramatic conversion. You can read about it in Acts 9:1-22. Other portions of Acts, along with some of the letters, tell more about his experiences of being imprisoned for preaching about God's grace poured out for every person through Christ.

Paul refers to his own story in Eph. 3:1-4 and 7. Why is it significant that Paul reminds the Ephesians of his story? Whose faith story has had an impact on your life? Whose life has changed because of your story? Think of a setting in your life where your faith story might have an impact.

Describe Paul's commission, as outlined in Eph. 3:8-10. What does ministry look like for Paul? Which words suggest that Paul is working within a group of Christians gathered together, perhaps for worship? Which words suggest Paul is working outside an organized group?

If we assume that Ephesians was written to encourage Christians to live confidently in their faith whether they are gathered together or "scattered" to carry on with their daily activities, how might Paul's prayer in Eph. 3:16-19 be applied? Note the key words. What does Paul expect the Ephesians to do?

Read Ephesians Chapter 4: A Life Worthy of the Calling

God adopted us, giving us a gift of grace. So what? Isn't it enough to attend worship and be a good person? Remember God's "ideal" (Micah 6:8 and Deut. 6:1-9)? Ephesians 4 gives us more details about how God calls us to live.

Gathering to worship is a good thing. It's there that we rub elbows with some of those people we might disagree with, and learn to tear down some of those walls through shared experiences. It's in worship that we hear words of grace through the confession and words of forgiveness, through the lessons and message or sermon. In worship we are reminded to pray for each other and for the world. We share a meal where God is the host and there is enough for all.

Then we are sent out . . . for what?

Read Eph. 4: 1-3 and make a list of the qualities Paul names. Then read Col. 3:12-13 and Gal. 5:22-23. Who do you know who displays several of these qualities?

Eph. 4:11-12 lists several gifts of Christian leaders. Name some other, similar gifts. Check 1 Cor. 12:4-11 for more. Are there other gifts?

Read Eph. 4:12-13. Why does God give these gifts? Why does it make sense that different people would have different gifts? Would God give these gifts for use only during worship and other organized church activities? What weekday activities could put these gifts to use?

Paul describes the church as a body with Christ as the head in Eph. 1:22-23, and again in Eph. 4:15-16. A similar comparison is found in 1 Cor. 12:12. What makes "body" a good metaphor for the Church?

The Old Testament tells stories of God's people and how they failed to live up to God's "ideal", as outlined in Deut. 6:1-9 and the Ten Commandments (see Ex. 20:3-17 or Deut. 5:7-21). Compare these commands to Paul's directions in Eph. 4:22-32. What does it mean to be renewed? Has God's "ideal" changed? Where do you see ministry in Eph. 4:22-32?

Read Ephesians Chapter 5: Imitate God

Common toys for young children include dolls, trucks, kitchen play sets and toy tools. These are all toys that let children “imitate” their parents. In a similar way (but without the toys), Paul invites his readers to imitate God in Eph. 5:1-2. What does it mean to imitate Christ?

Paul spends much of Ephesians 5 and 6 discussing relationships. Have you ever thought about ministry happening in your family or your work? Recall a family or work scene from the past week. Does it fit better with Eph. 5:3-5 or with Eph. 5:8-10 and 15-20? Can you think of a better outcome for your scene?

Fairy tales often end with, “They lived happily ever after.” Most adults would say that’s not real life. However, Eph. 5:22-33 describes a perfect marriage, one that implies the fairy tale ending. How realistic is this description? If you are a wife, can you see yourself being “subject to your husband as you are to the Lord”? If you are a husband, can you see yourself loving your wife “as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her”? Can you imitate Christ through your marriage? How is marriage a ministry?

Read Ephesians Chapter 6: Preparation to serve

Families can be complicated, but Paul reminds children of the commandment to honor parents, and warns parents against provoking their children in Eph. 6:1-4: How are family relationships a ministry? How can guidance from loving parents or other caring adults help children grow into people who can minister?

Try to read Eph. 6:5-9 in the context of today's workplace; assume Paul is writing to workers and employers. What do these verses say about how to relate to each other? How is ministry done in a workplace?

If you know someone who has served in the military, ask them to describe preparations for their particular service, and what kind of gear they put on to help them in the field. As Jesus left his disciples, he gave them a commission. "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...." (Matt. 28:19-20) If you think of yourself as headed out to do ministry rather than battle, how would you interpret Eph. 6:10-17, "put on the whole armor of God"? What would help you be successful? How could your congregation help you to do ministry individually?

What is the role of prayer in ministry? Read Eph. 6:18-20, and then take some time to pray for our role models, for each person in the group (if this study is done in a group) and for your congregation.

Concluding questions

This study has tried to open discussion of the many ways that individuals do ministry, not just during worship and related times, but every day and in many roles. As you think about your congregation, consider these questions:

How have you been equipped for ministry? Who participated in that equipping? Was it adequate? What might have helped you feel better prepared for ministry?

How do you affirm others in their ministries? Who have you helped to equip?

What are ways the Church can affirm, support and encourage people in their ministries as they leave the church building?

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