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Group Bible Study

The priority of any Bible study is to seek to understand what the Bible is saying to the people to whom it was first written as well as to understand it for our particular day and generation. So, the top priority is first to understand the text and then to make it meaningful and relevant. Here are some pointers to help you as you study the Bible:

Pray

Our preparation for any Bible study should begin and end with prayer. We need to ask God, through the help of the Holy Spirit, to guide us as we read the Bible and prepare for a study.

Ask

In order to understand the Bible properly, we need to keep in mind six important questions:

1. **Who is speaking?** Everything in the Bible was written by men who were inspired by God. Though every writer of the Bible was inspired by God, sometimes the writers record words which come from the hearts of evil men. So, dealing with the question “Who is speaking?” will help us to know whether the words we are reading are words that we should obey today.
2. **Who is spoken to?** We need to realise that not every command that comes in the Bible is a command for us today. For example, the command by God to Noah to build an ark is obviously pertinent and relevant for Noah, but not for us.
3. **When is the Bible writer speaking?** In answering this question, we will need to make a distinction between those who are living under the law and those who live under the guidelines and principles as outlined to us in the New Testament, the way of Christ. Therefore, the

principles we see with regards to worship in the Old Testament have a relevance to us, but we need to read them in the light of the New Testament. It is always important to bear in mind that one part of the Bible can often help us to understand another part.

4. **What type of language is the writer using?** The languages used are usually one of two types: either literal or figurative. Sometimes both will be mixed together in one passage – for example, Jesus is spoken of as the Lamb of God, which is clearly a figurative form of speech. However, he is also described as the one who takes away the sin of the world, which is literally true for those who believe. So, Jesus was not an actual lamb, but he was the one who became the offering for our sins.

5. **What are the conditions or circumstances in which this writing is given?** If we can get to grips with the particular circumstances the writer is facing when he writes, it helps us to understand what he is saying.

6. **What is the context of the Bible passage?** Think about what has just been said and what is about to be said in the particular book of the Bible, as well as the context of the passage within the whole Bible.

The Bible is indeed God's inspired word, it is his revelation to all mankind. So in order for us to understand the Bible we must study it properly. Only then can we "*correctly handle the word of truth*". And if we keep these six simple questions in mind as we prepare our study, we will find that we can indeed get to grips with God's word.

Plan

For those who are preparing and leading a study, the following steps should prove helpful:

1. Try to break the passage into parts or sections so that you can clearly divide up the passage you are looking at.

2. Think about what you don't understand in the passage and therefore what others might not understand as well. What parts do you need to gain more background and information about? Be ready to deal with puzzles that people will ask you about. So, for example, when studying John 3, people might ask 'What is the kingdom of God?', 'What is a Pharisee?'. These are obvious things that people might need to have some more information about.

3. Having broken the passage up into sections, we then come to thinking about questions. You can use the questions that are in this book. However, you may want to write your own, which is of course perfectly all right. Questions can be one of three types.

Understanding. The first type of question should be aimed at trying to draw out our understanding of what the passage is saying.

Significance. Only once we have begun to understand the passage can we move on to questions that try to highlight the significance of the passage in the light of the particular book or letter, and of course against the backdrop of the whole Bible.

Application. Then we move on to questions which apply to the situations we are facing today.

Additional Comments

Do make use of clergy and commentaries and other Christians who have a maturity which you can rely upon when you are seeking to tackle Bible passages.

It will sometimes prove helpful to have more than one translation as this will give you some fresh insights into the verses which you are focusing on.

As we come to study the Bible we need to keep in mind that all the books of the Bible have one great theme: that is God's plan to save mankind from his sins through Jesus Christ.

Fundamentally, make sure that whatever you do, you seek to do it to honour and glorify God.

Introduction

What would you say was your calling in life? I guess we don't all think in those terms; but sometimes we do, often when we speak of someone having 'found their vocation'—whether this is as a doctor or an artist; as a minister or as a full-time mum. But, as Christians, all of these individual things which help to define who we are, take second place to the greater calling that we have all received together as Christ's church (not just the church in Moulton, but all over the world, down the centuries).

'I urge you', writes Paul in 4v1, 'to live a life worthy of the *calling* you have received.' This is the calling that he has just spent three chapters writing about: the calling to be the new people who have received new life in Christ, and are now members of God's household.

So, if the first three chapters were about understanding *Christian doctrine* correctly, the next three are about our *Christian duty*, which flows from this doctrine. Or, in plain English: now that we have seen *what God has done*, we think about *what we must do*, in response. Or, in plainer English still: after all the theology of chapters 1-3, here we get the '*so what?*'

I wrote about the main themes in Ephesians last term, so I'll leave you to refer back to the previous booklet 😊. But it is safe to say that the emphasis on the church as God's newly formed household is once again at the forefront. We saw in chapter 2 how God's people have been reconciled to him, and also to one another by Jesus' death: much of chapters 4-6 goes on to deal with how we should live as this new people at peace with God.

Once again, may I recommend John Stott's 'Bible Speaks Today' commentary on Ephesians, published by IVP. If you read it, you will see how much I have drawn on its wisdom in writing these notes.

Study One: All for one, and one for all! Ephesians 4: 1-16

It is widely accepted that many of the best sports teams do not necessarily consist of the best 7 or 11 or 15 individual players— but of those who will combine most effectively as a team. As the saying goes, it is ‘greater than the sum of its parts’.

Unions exist because it is more effective for workers to band together in campaigning for their rights than for each to do it alone; two of the largest are known by the names ‘Unison’ and ‘Unite’.

‘All for one, and one for all!’ was the memorable cry of the Three Musketeers. But it might make a good motto for a Christian community completely devoted to their Saviour and Lord; who has proved himself utterly committed to them.

Unity, then, is a powerful idea, in literature, in sports, in the workplace—and in many other settings. And, as Paul begins to write about the *standards* that are now expected of God’s people, the first thing that he emphasises, in this first half of chapter 4, is *unity*. And because our unity as part of Christ’s household is eternal, it is more important than our allegiance to any other group, whether it is our family, our company, or our team.

This is pretty difficult for us to imagine, to be honest: we are so used to the idea that the church is fragmented, not just *into* denominations, but *within* denominations, that it is hard to get our heads around. And, of course, it is true that some churches have gone astray to the extent that their claimed allegiance to Jesus Christ must be in question. But this doesn’t mean we can just abandon the whole idea as idealistic and impossible, and get on with our own private faith. The world outside is hopelessly divided—from families to nations: So, for Paul, unity in the church is the first crucial area in which our new life in Christ is to be worked out.

The basis for our unity (v1-6)

If v1 is an introduction to the whole of the rest of Ephesians, v2 is the one which gets us started on this first theme: unity. If we are going to be able to guard our unity (v3), and reach unity and maturity in the faith (v12), we need to adopt a set of attitudes which are out of step with those that are often admired in our culture today:

‘Be *humble* and *gentle*; be *patient*, bearing with one another in love’. These are not the kinds of things that will get you very far on *The Apprentice*. But they are essential for building up our unity in Christ. It is worth considering each one of these qualities: We may need to take a look at ourselves...

Then, in v3-6, we are reminded of how the unity of the people of God is intrinsically linked to the unity of God himself, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The word ‘One’ is repeated seven times in vs4-6: once each for the three members of the Trinity; and four times for what we experience as Christians in relation to him. Because there is one Holy Spirit, there is one body (the church); because there is one Lord (Jesus), we have one faith (in him alone), one hope (eternally) and one baptism (the sign of all who belong to him); because there is one God and Father of all, there is one family of people belonging to him (the ‘all’ in v6).

In summary, what Paul is saying is that Christian unity is absolutely *necessary* because there is only one God; to put it the other way, Christian *disunity* is *nonsense* and a denial of reality. God cannot be split up, so neither can his church. Imagine a family where the parents divorce, and the sons and daughters dislike each other so much that they move to different parts of the world; there is so much enmity that surnames are changed by deed poll to emphasise that they have nothing to do with one another. But, however much they hide it, the underlying reality is that they are all related to one another. That’s how

it is with the church: our visible disunity cannot change the fact that all those who trust in Jesus are part of God's family. It is incredibly sad when we are divided from fellow believers—which is why Paul urges the Ephesians to guard their unity (v3)—we ought to apply this first within the local church, before thinking about wider Christian unity.

The shape of our unity (vs 7-16)

Unity is not the same as uniformity; and diversity is not the same as division. Just as an eye also needs a hand, and a head also needs feet (see 1 Corinthians 12), we need each other in the church even though we have been given different gifts by God: 'grace has been given as Christ apportioned it' (v7)—in other words, we have been given different gifts. And they are given to each one for the benefit of the whole church (vs 12,13). It's all about *unity in diversity*.

Vs 8-10 compare what Christ has done with a verse from Psalm 68. This verse reminds us of the presence of God with his people in his holy place on Mount Zion in Jerusalem at the time of King David; but it is also a psalm that would have been used to celebrate the festival of Pentecost, which commemorates Moses ascending Mt Sinai and returning with God's gift of the law for his people: this was God's great gift to his people before the coming of Christ. As Moses ascended and returned with the law, now Christ has ascended to heaven (having previously descended to the earth), and returned in the person of his Spirit, with even greater gifts for his people.

Some of these spiritual gifts are mentioned in v11. This is not an exhaustive list of gifts (Paul himself includes other ones in some of his letters)—indeed, some of those mentioned here seem to be specifically associated with the first generation of believers at the time when God's church was founded. The point is, they are given by God, and they are for the purpose of building up the church so that his people can grow to maturity (vs 12-16). These verses help us to understand

just what it is that we are called to be in Christ—and it is important to notice that all of the gifts of the Spirit that Paul mentions in this context are associated with the communication of God's *truth* to his church—it is this truth which sets the context (and also the limits) of our unity; which helps us to grow in maturity; and which enables us to be built up in love (v16).

Study Questions

1. How does unity differ from uniformity? Or diversity from division?
2. Consider the qualities Paul calls for in v2. What does each one mean? Are there areas here where we need to take an honest look at ourselves?
3. How can unity be threatened within our church fellowship in Moulton?

How could we go about ‘making every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace’? How might the qualities in v2 help us to build unity. How does the unity of God in vs 4-6 relate to the unity of his people?

4. In v7, there is a change of emphasis from ‘all of you’, to ‘each one of you’. Do we see ourselves as each having received gifts of grace from God by his Spirit?

What is the significance of the particular gifts that Paul includes in v11? How are they similar?

5. What is the purpose of the gifts given by God to his people (vs 12-16)? How can we make sure that we all correctly handle and use the gifts we have been given?
6. What are the dangers faced by the Ephesians, in v14? How can these gifts help them to avoid these?
7. How good are we at ‘speaking the *truth in love*’ (vs 15)? What happens if we emphasise one or other of these two vital qualities?

Study Two: What not to wear Ephesians 4: 17- 5:2

You don’t wear sports kit to go to a wedding. And you don’t wear a dress to go scuba-diving! It’s not that you physically *couldn’t* do these things—it’s just that they would be totally inappropriate! So far in Ephesians, Paul has reminded his Christian friends of all that God has done for them in Christ—that they have been brought from death to life, created into a new people, showered with blessings, and equipped with gifts for the benefit of the church. Now he turns specifically to *how they should live and behave, given that all of this is true*.

‘You were taught’, he writes, ‘to put off your old self’ (v22), and ‘to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness’. It’s not that we immediately become sinless and perfect when we become Christians: it’s just that it’s completely inappropriate for us to go on behaving as though nothing has changed. *Everything* has changed—remember chapter 2 vs 1 and 5; and v13! If the emphasis in the first half of chapter 4 is on the importance of **unity**; in this next section it is on the importance of **purity**.

The way the Ephesians used to live before they came to know Jesus—and the way *anybody* lives before becoming a believer—is based on a set of premises that have now been proved to be misguided and ungodly: ‘You must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their thinking and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts’ (4:17-18). And, as v19 explains, this leads to all kinds of selfishness and immorality.

It’s not that no one can ever do anything good until they become a Christian—that is demonstrably untrue, as we all know well. It’s rather that those whose basis for living is not God’s way but their own way, are liable to live selfishly and godlessly—and the Christian cannot just

carry on like that—it would be as inappropriate a gaffe as turning up to a wedding in your gym shorts!

A better analogy might be with a new smart pair of shoes to replace a battered but comfortable pair. The new pair feels strange and first—it's a lot easier to stick with the old pair: you're used to them—you feel self-conscious in the shiny new ones! But, as Christians, not just the old shoes, but the old clothes have to go—the new ones are so much better, even if they feel a bit odd when we first put them on.

This passage basically divides into two halves. Vs 17-24 remind us of the **basis for a new way of living**: the unbelieving life (17-19), and the Christian life (20-24). Then, from v25 onwards, we are given a series of **concrete examples** of how someone who is in Christ should now live:

4:25: Not lying, but telling the truth.

4:26-27: Not with violent anger or grudges, but only righteous anger.

4:28: Not stealing, but working, in order to be generous.

4:29-30: Not speaking destructively, but for building up.

4:31-5:2: Not bitter and angry, but kind and gentle.

Then in 5:3-4, there is a final example, that Christians should not treat sex lightly or selfishly, but should give thanks for it. It's actually hard to decide where to divide the long passage that runs from 4:17- 5:20. I've gone for 5:2, as you can see, as there is a kind of summary here of all that has been said up to this point—but do be aware that what we study this time and next time is all part of one theme—*the contrast between a worldly way of living, and a Christian way of living*. A theme verse might be 5:8, which reminds us that we should not live in the darkness but as children of light.

It would be worth taking time to think closely about the specific examples from v25 onwards. I suspect there are some real challenges

here regarding how we live our lives. It is always easy to pat ourselves on the back because we have steered clear of 'big sins', like burglary or murder; here, we are faced with some of the details of how we live in our relationships every day, and how easy it is to do so in ways which betray our saviour, and potentially damage ourselves and others:

When we are angry, is it for selfish reasons, or because we are concerned for truth and justice (26-27)? Even if we stay clear of stealing, do we think of our work as something to enable us to help others (28)—or do we think, 'that's mine, I earned it!'? Is our speech wholesome and helpful to others in every way (29)? Perhaps most of all, are we *kind* (32)? This is not the most popular of strengths, because it can easily be seen as weak! Would you put it on your CV or mention it in an interview?

Study Questions

1. How pure is your life?
2. How does Paul describe the situation of the unbeliever (17-19)? How does their thinking affect their behaviour? Where can we see evidence that this diagnosis is still true today?
3. In contrast, what have the Ephesians, as believers, been taught (20-24)? Why should we live differently now that we are Christians?
4. How might we be motivated to live in this new way? In particular, what effect might our behaviour have on the body (v25), and what is the significance of our having been sealed with the Holy Spirit?
5. 'Put off' (22) and 'put on' (24) are active commands—how is this significant in how we go about living the Christian life? Related to this, Paul says a lot about 'thinking' and 'minds' in 17-24; and about 'ignorance' versus 'truth'. Why is this so important?
6. In 4:25-5:2, make a list of the things Christians are commanded to put off, and put on. What reasons are given for each of these? Which of these seem most common in our culture today? *Which do we find the hardest* (this might be a good one to pray through together).
7. These verses from 4:25-5:2 could almost be a description of how Jesus lived: the things he avoided and the things he modelled. How can we go about helping each other to be 'imitators of God' (5:1)?

Study Three: Living in the Light Ephesians 5:3-20

Light is a powerful weapon when someone is hiding something. Think of a police helicopter training its searchlight on a criminal seeking to make his escape. Think of Gollum in *The Lord of the Rings*, creeping around in the caves and the shadows, trying to keep his evil intentions secret. Paul takes this metaphor in Ephesians 5, and applies it to those who are Christians—who were once in darkness, but are now light in the Lord (v8).

Throughout this passage, he uses two sets of contrasting ideas, as he continues to explain the difference between those who have been given new life in Christ, and their former selves: *darkness* versus *light*; and also *being wise* versus *being foolish*.

The results of foolish living (3-7)

Paul continues looking at ways of living which belong with the old self and need to be put off, contrasting these with the new Christian ways of behaving. This time, the area he is writing about is **sex**. We live in a society that is obsessed with it: on the internet, in the papers, on adverts, everywhere. It is an area in which it is hard for us to be godly, because it sets us so much at odds with the world. There are two really important things that Paul says about it here:

First, we must steer clear of *anything that even goes near* to twisting and misusing this great gift of God which unites a man and a woman—'among you there must *not be even a hint* of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of [sexual] greed...' (v3). In particular, we should have no part in treating it lightly, or coarsely joking about it (v4). Paul was not naive—he knows human nature, and that the only safe and pure way forward for the Christian is to keep well away from danger. Sometimes (especially in youth groups!), Christian leaders are asked things like, 'So—how far *can* I go with my girlfriend?' But this is the wrong question—don't let there be even a *hint* of immorality. As

Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 6, ‘*Flee from sexual immorality!*’ Get as far away from it as you can!

Second, the attitude that there should be among God’s people with regard to sex, is one of thanksgiving (v5). We are not to be ashamed of it, or embarrassed about it—but give thanks to God, as with all of the good things he has created and given to us.

All of this comes with a warning, which is also an incentive to the kind of holy living described not just in vs 3 and 4, but from v25 of chapter 4 onwards: **judgment is coming**. None of these idolaters, who live in darkness, will inherit Christ’s kingdom (v5); God’s wrath is coming on the disobedient (v6). Here is something serious, and unpopular, that we are often uncomfortable talking about today. We need to be clear that this is not about Christians who sometimes fall into sin, and then genuinely repent and ask for forgiveness—by God’s grace, there is always forgiveness available; or there would be no hope for any of us! No, this is a warning about the kind of people in 4:17-19—the ones whose hearts are hardened to the ways of God and who have not received new life.

The fact is, of course, that many of those who ignore God’s ways as described in vs 3-4, simply get away with it, on earth. But God warns that they will not get away with it *forever*. Judgment is coming: ‘Let no one deceive you with empty words’, writes Paul, ‘for because of such things, God’s wrath comes on those who are disobedient’. So—we have here both a powerful motivation to watch our own lives; and also to evangelise others who are in frightening danger.

The importance of wise living (8-20)

There are *three things* that Paul calls on his Christian friends to do in this section:

First, ‘**Live as children of light**’ (v8). In order to do this, we need to ‘find out what pleases the Lord’ (v10)—here is a clear reminder of our need to be regularly immersed in scripture. Paul uses a great mixed metaphor here—‘the fruit of light’! This is found in *goodness, righteous* and *truth* (v9)—I wonder which of these we are better at emphasising, and which we need to be reminded of. The contrast is with deeds of darkness which are ‘fruitless’—in other words, they produce nothing good, and nothing that will produce healthy growth. There is a lot to think about here in terms of how we live, and what our priorities are.

Another aspect of light here is that it **exposes** what is kept in darkness (v12-14): in the light of the gospel, ways which are not God’s ways can be seen as they really are. The statements in vs13 and 14 are hard to pin down precisely—but when Paul writes of light making everything visible, it seems that he is also reminding us that light **transforms**—when it shines in the darkness, the darkness is *lighted*: as we live the life of Christ, others too may be lighted, as their sin is exposed and they are brought to turn to our saviour.

Second, ‘**Be very careful how you live—not as unwise, but as wise...**’ (v15) Wise people make the most of their time (v16) and are careful to understand God’s will (v17). This reinforces what we read in vs8-10; but it also challenges us to think about how *we* make the most of our time—do we prioritise our Christian growth as highly as our job, our families, our homes or our hobbies...?

Third, ‘**Be filled with the Spirit...**’ (v18)—which is better than getting drunk on wine! The point is this: we are all under the influence of *something* or *someone*—as Christians, let it be God, and his Holy Spirit. The command to be filled is a ‘present continuous’ one: the Spirit *has* come to *every* Christian—it is by him that we have been sealed (1:13); now we need to go on being filled with the Spirit every day. This will

bring us the benefits of fellowship, worship and thanksgiving (vs 19-20).

Finally, as we are filled with the Spirit, we will be enabled to *submit to one another out of reverence for Christ* (v21). We'll pick up on this more in the next study, as the verses which follow give us several examples of what this submission might look like in practice.

Study Questions

1. What messages about sex do we receive from society today?

Why is Paul's warning so serious in v3? The warning is collective: how can we help one another in this area?

2. Why does Paul call these people 'idolaters' in v5? In what areas are you most tempted to idolatry? Are we prepared to take vs5-7 seriously in the church?

3. How can we make sure we 'live as children of light', having nothing to do with the 'fruitless deeds of darkness' (8-11)? How can we expose these deeds to the light?

4. What are the characteristics of the wise person (vs 15-17)? How can we be sure that we are as 'careful' (15) with our Christian life and growth as we are with other things that we prioritise? How could you live more wisely?

5. How does being filled with the Spirit contrast with getting drunk (v18)? Why is speaking, sharing and learning psalms, hymns and spiritual songs such a helpful thing to do? How can it help us? What can it protect us from?

Study Four: Marriage made in heaven Ephesians 5:21-33

The website of the Office for National Statistics states that the number of marriages registered in England and Wales in 2008 (the most recent year with complete statistics available) was 232, 990. This is the lowest figure since 1895, when the population was a lot smaller, and part of a gradual decline from a peak of nearly 500,000 in 1972. Is marriage irrelevant?

It is certainly the butt of many jokes: Marriage is not a word, it is a sentence; Marriage is an institution—and who wants to live in an institution? Marriage is like a city under siege—everybody is either trying to get in, or get out; Marriage is the highest compliment a man can pay to a woman—and usually the last...

But the second half of Ephesians 5 is one of the places in the Bible where it is made clear that marriage is God-given and extremely significant—whether or not you happen to be someone who is married at the moment. *It is significant, primarily, because of what it tells us about God, and about his relationship with his people.* People come to a passage like this in different ways: some come looking for practical tips about who should do what in marriages; others come ready to get defensive about what it apparently has to say—but both of these are taking the wrong approach, because the emphasis here has more to do with our understanding of God—and the practical applications follow on from this.

Marriage is primarily about God, which is why this whole passage is about our relationship to him as his obedient people. We mustn't forget that this section follows straight on from the last one—there were no headings or chapter numbers in what Paul wrote. In particular, he gives an instruction in v18—'be filled with the Spirit'; and then, grammatically, four things follow on from this: we should speak (v19), sing (v19), give thanks (v20)... and *submit* (v21). Then, in the rest of

chapter 5 and the first part of chapter 6, Paul writes about what ‘submitting’ like this might look like in practice—beginning with the relationship between husbands and wives.

So, in the rest of our passage, Paul is writing about what it means to live as people brought to life by God and filled with his Spirit. And as we read through the passage, we quickly see that it is less about our relationships with one another than with our relationship to God in Christ: In v21, submission is to be *out of reverence for Christ*. In v22, a wife’s submission is *as to the Lord*. In v23, the husband’s authority is related to *Christ’s salvation of the church*. A husband’s love for his wife is to be as *Christ’s love for the church* in v25. He is to care for her as *Christ cares for his people* (v29). And ultimately, what Paul is writing about here *is the relationship between Christ and his church* (v32)—he really drums home his message.

Earlier in Ephesians, we saw how the church was Christ’s *household* (chapter 2), and his *body* (chapter 4). Here we are given a third way of understanding what the church is—it is *Christ’s bride*. The first question we need to come to this passage with is one we should always have in mind when we study scripture: *what does it teach us about God?*

Given, then, that marriage is *primarily about God*, there are two imperatives which follow from this—Wives, submit to your husbands; Husbands, love your wives.

The wife’s priority: submit to your husband

It’s hard to think of a more unpopular verse in the New Testament, as it seems to go against the way that our culture teaches us to think. Some people have tried to argue that this whole passage is the product of an alien culture and is therefore of limited value to us today. There are various reasons to reject this idea though—the most important reason that it transcends culture is in v22: a wife’s submission to her

husband is *directly related to her obedience to God*; one follows from the other.

Once again here, we mustn’t forget what this passage is about—God and his relationship with his people—and, in writing about this, Paul uses the example of marriage. This is *marriage as it should be*; as God designed it. In a world in which we are all too aware of the things that can go wrong within marriage, we need to be clear that Paul is not writing this to give practical advice to someone who is being oppressed or exploited within marriage—he is describing what marriage is for, and what it should look like, as a living picture of what God has done for his people. The wife’s submission, as we see in the next few verses, is not submission to a bully—but submission to a lover. (There are always problems when the two imperatives in these verses get turned upside down, into ‘Wives, make sure your husband is loving you’, or ‘Husbands, make sure your wife submits’).

One of the reminders that this passage gives us is that while men and women are *equal* before God (all people are, as we have seen repeatedly in previous chapters), they are not *identical*. And it’s not primarily about who gets to be in charge; the actual issue turns out to be, *who will lower themselves the most?* And, in vs 25-30, this is the husband’s job.

The husband’s priority: love your wife

It sounds easy doesn’t it? Love your wife. But, v25, ‘husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her...’ The husband to whom the wife is submitting is not bossing her around, exerting his authority, or exploiting his greater physical strength. Christ didn’t do that: he took himself to the cross to be hung there for his bride. That is the picture of the husband in marriage.

And the reason he is to love his wife like this is to liberate her, so that she may become who she was created to be (vs26-27)—in other

words, he is to be her saviour, a picture of Christ who is the saviour of the church. He is to take the initiative in loving her and caring for her (vs 28-30); and again, the husband who rejects this call to be a real lover, effectively rejects what Christ has done for him—it is all to be done as Christ loved the church, ‘for we are all members of one body’. (v30).

The final verses of chapter r (31-33) remind us again of the purpose of this passage—to teach us about the ‘profound mystery’ that is the relationship between Christ and his church—which we glimpse in every human marriage, because it was created by God (‘For this reason...’, v31), as a window into heaven.

Study Questions

1. What would a perfect marriage be like?
2. Why do we all find it hard to submit, as v21 says?
3. What does this passage teach us about the church? How is this a challenging passage in our society today?
4. Why should wives submit to their husbands, and how is this related to their submitting to the Lord?
5. What instructions are given here for husbands? How is the comparison with Christ’s love in v25 a safeguard against the husband abusing the wife’s submission?
6. What does ‘love’ mean today? What does Paul mean by it in this passage?
7. Why is the Genesis 2 quote in v31 particularly significant?
8. What would our marriages be like if we did what this passage says? What particular challenges are there here for those of us who are husbands, or wives?

Study Five: Rights vs Responsibilities? Ephesians 6: 1-9

‘If you don’t get your homework done *tonight*, you’re not going out at the weekend!’

‘If you value your job, you’ll get it done—and I don’t care how long it takes!’

Or...

‘Quick! Put it back! Dad’s coming!’

‘Look busy! The boss is here!’

We live in a world in which many relationships are broken—because all that people are looking for is what they can get out of it; or what they can get away with. In these early verses of chapter 6, Paul continues to expand on his instruction from 5:21—‘Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ’ (which was itself one of the four things which followed from the instruction in v19 to ‘be filled with the Spirit’). Having addressed husbands and wives, he moves on to children and parents; and then slaves and masters: for each of these groups, becoming a Christian changes everything in terms of how they live within these relationships.

Once again, the first thing we need to see is how all of this is driven by the Christian’s new relationship with God, which was expounded in chapter 2:

Children are to obey their parents *in the Lord* (v1). Fathers’ (actually this word is a plural which can also include mothers!) priority is to educate and instruct their children—*in the Lord* (v4).

Slaves are to obey their masters as they would obey Christ (v5) ... because the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does...

(v8). And Masters are to treat their slaves well, since he who is both their master and yours is in heaven...

So: once again, as with husbands and wives, the whole motivation for godly behaviour within these relationships is based on who God is, and what he has done in Christ.

Children and Parents (vs 1-4)

The instruction for children is to *obey* their parents—this is stronger than the ‘*submit*’ which is given to the wives in chapter 5. Of course, at the time Paul was writing this was probably less radical than it might sound to some people today—of course children would obey their parents—they were regarded virtually as their property in many cases. What is striking, though, is that the reason Paul gives is based on a promise, not a threat—reminding his readers of what was said in the fifth commandment. In an important sense, nothing has changed since the time of Moses: one of the building bricks for loving family life which benefits all, is obedience to parents—‘that it may go well with you...’

What is more radical, though, is what Paul writes to the parents in v4. In the ancient world, children (and slaves) were simply to be obedient. As (some of us) might say today: ‘Endov’. But in the Christian household, Paul calls for mutual responsibility and understanding—parents must also behave appropriately towards children—not exasperating them or treating them unfairly, which might drive them away—instead, they must remember the responsibility they have: which, first and foremost, is to ‘bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord’. This last part is a key challenge for us today—it’s not *just* that we mustn’t infuriate our kids—but that we must make it our priority to bring them up to know and trust the Lord Jesus. As with the husbands in chapter 5, the parents’ responsibilities end up looking more daunting than their children’s.

We should also note that there is a real affirmation of the importance of family life in these chapters. Marriages, and parent-child relationships, are really important to Paul. All of us, of course, know of homes where things have not worked out well—certainly far from the ideal presented in chapters 5 and 6. But this is not because families are a bad idea—but because what is good is so often messed up in our broken world. As Christians, we are called to live counter-culturally in the area of family relationships, as we are in so many other areas of life.

Slaves and Masters (vs 5-9)

First things first. We naturally, and rightly, flinch, when we read of instructions to slaves, because we are horrified by the thought of a trade in human beings. In Paul's day, however, slavery was a fact of life—and slaves played a vital part in the vast majority of households. As one writer has expressed it, 'Paul could no more envisage a world without slavery as we could without electricity.' In the ancient world, there were slaves who were respected and treated well; and others who were abused and treated horribly. It would have been a waste of time for Paul to call for slavery itself to be abolished. What he does, as with the previous examples, is call for Christians who were slaves, and those who owned slaves, to live according to what Christ had done for them.

So, in vs 5-8, slaves are not to rebel or run away, just because they had come to Christ. And the motivation for their obedience was to remember that, even when the boss's eye was turned away, they were serving Christ by doing their work wholeheartedly.

Once again, though, the radical bit is directed at the people with the power. First husbands; then parents; now masters—who are called (v9) to treat their slaves well, remembering (with just a hint of warning) that they have a master too, one who is in heaven (v9). Although a

slave basically had no 'rights'—the Christian master was to treat them as if they did—because they are both humans, loved in the sight of God.

We can't perhaps apply all of this directly to boss/employee relationships, which (thankfully) are far removed from master/slave ones in the ancient world. But there *are* some helpful principles here: all that we do is done in God's sight—it is him we should be seeking to please in our work; our colleagues are people first, and bosses or employees second—and, if they are Christians, we must go further—they are our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Study Questions

1. What is your attitude to your work? How do you view your boss (or your employees)?
2. How are children to behave towards their parents? What problems do we see in society when vs 1-3 are ignored?
3. What priorities are given here for parents in bringing up children? What might cause them to become exasperated? How can we support parents in the tough challenge given in v4?
4. How should Christians view their work? How might this be different from non-Christians? What is our motivation for this?
5. What challenges are there here for Christian employees, and Christian bosses?
6. Look back over 5:21- 6:9. Which of the examples here particularly apply to you? What challenge, or area to work on, do you need to take away from these studies?

Study Six: Defence Against the Dark Arts Ephesians 6:10-24

In the classic *Screwtape Letters*, C.S. Lewis points out the two dangerous attitudes that people can take to dark spiritual powers: to ignore them, mocking and laughing at the idea; or to become overly fascinated by them. In our culture today, the former is clearly the more common problem; although there is certainly a significant minority who fall for the latter temptation.

One of the themes of Ephesians is that we need not fear the devil and his minions because we have a greater saviour in Jesus Christ—but this does not mean that we can simply ignore the ‘powers of this dark world and the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms’ (v12). Ephesians 6 is also a call for us to **wake up to the reality** that there is more to the world than that which we can feel or see—so we must be ready and equipped to face it. To some of us this may come as a surprise. We know that we often struggle with aspects of the Christian life—prayer, forgiveness, or resisting temptation for example—but are we all aware that this is all just a small part of a much greater spiritual war that is taking place?

The illustration that Paul uses is that of a *soldier getting prepared for battle*—and what soldier would go into battle without the necessary equipment? Similarly, Christians are in the midst of a spiritual battle—and we also need to be equipped and prepared.

What is our goal in this battle (the goal of our Christian lives)? It is actually very simple—it is to **stand firm**. Paul hammers this home: ‘take your stand’ (v11); ‘so that... you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand’ (v13); ‘Stand firm then...’ (v14). This should be a great encouragement to us! It is not our job to go out there and defeat the devil—as we have already seen, this has already been done, by our commander and Lord, Jesus Christ. The battles we fight in, are the final sorties of a defeated enemy; but there

is no room for complacency—the danger is real, even though the final outcome of the war is not in doubt.

We are to ‘stand firm’ then, against the evil ‘rulers and authorities’ who remain at large in the world. It should therefore be no surprise that five of the six weapons at our disposal are *defensive*—and they also remind us what it means for us to ‘take your stand against the devil’s schemes’.

The belt which holds everything else in place is **truth**: the truth of the gospel, which brought new life to us. Second, there is the breastplate of **righteousness**: we are protected because we are made righteous in God’s sight by Jesus Christ; and we are to work on ‘righteous living’, as a way of resisting the devil’s schemes. Then there are the boots in which we are able to stand firmly, because they are fitted with ‘the readiness that comes from the **gospel of peace**’: we have heard the message ourselves, of the peace with God and with one another (chapters 2 and 3), to which we can hold fast when the devil brings doubts to mind—and which we must be ready to pass on to others. Fourthly, we hold the shield of **faith**: faith in our saviour who has given us life—and this shield will ‘extinguish the flaming arrows of the evil one’, whether they are doubts, temptations, tragedies, or successes. Fifthly, there is the helmet of **salvation**—we cannot be moved, because we have already been saved by Christ, and will rise with him on the last day.

The final weapon is the only offensive one: the **sword of the Spirit**, which is the **word of God**. John Stott describes this as the sword by which God ‘cuts through people’s defences, to prick their consciences and to stab them spiritually awake’. And it is also placed in our hands, ‘so that we may use it both in resisting temptation (as Jesus did)... and in evangelism.’

There is more though. In the battle in which we find ourselves, it is vital that we stay awake (v18)—even while the devil has induced so many in our society into a spiritually drugged sleep. And everything needs to be covered with **prayer**. Most Christians pray on *some* occasions, with *some* kinds of requests, *sometimes* praying for *some* of the saints—but see v18! The great apostle Paul is very much aware that he is also in need of prayer if he is to faithfully carry out his work (vs 19-20). As an archbishop once commented—whatever people might say about prayer, he noticed that when he prayed, ‘coincidences’ happened; and when he stopped praying, the ‘coincidences’ stopped happening...

As we come to this serious passage which deals with the dark forces at work in God’s world, it would be especially appropriate to devote a good amount of time to prayer for one another at the end of this study.

Study Questions

1. How do you feel as you are reminded that you are in the midst of a spiritual battle? Is this how you think of the Christian life?
2. In vs 10-13, how should we prepare for battle? What is our aim in this battle? Why is this all we need to do?
3. List the six pieces of armour—for each one, think about how it can help us in the spiritual battle in which we find ourselves. Are there any in this list that you tend to forget to use? What is different about the sword of the Spirit, and how we may use it?
4. How can we actually ‘put on the full armour of God’ in our daily lives?
5. What kinds of ‘flaming arrow’ does the evil one fire at us (v16), which we need shielding from by the shield of faith?
6. Why do you think it is often so hard to pray like v18? How can we practically help one another to be more committed and dependent on God in prayer?
7. In Paul’s final greetings (vs 21-24), he closes by wishing his friends *peace* and *grace*: how are these two words particularly appropriate in summing up much of the message of this great book.