

¹ As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. ² Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. ³ Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. ⁴ There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

⁷ But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. ⁸ This is why it says:

“When he ascended on high,
he took many captives
and gave gifts to his people.”

⁹ (What does “he ascended” mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? ¹⁰ He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.) ¹¹ So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, ¹² to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up ¹³ until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

¹⁴ Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. ¹⁵ Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. ¹⁶ From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

¹⁷ So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. ¹⁸ They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. ¹⁹ Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, and they are full of greed.

²⁰ That, however, is not the way of life you learned ²¹ when you heard about Christ and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. ²² You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; ²³ to be made new in the attitude of your minds; ²⁴ and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

-- Ephesians 4:1-24

What did you want to be when you grew up?

A hockey player? A police officer? A doctor? An astronaut?

This is the question that you and I have had asked of us from the moment we knew the difference between being a grown up and being a kid. Grown ups, we thought, were the ones who were not only bigger, but they knew exactly what they wanted to do with their lives. Grown ups were the ones who had everything figured out, who had a map for life and were following it to a tee.

Now that many of us here are “grown up”, we find it funny that a child might look at us and think we became exactly what we’d planned to become. Some of us have gotten the careers we planned for. Others have gotten the family lives we prayed for. Yet almost none of us had any idea that we’d have the character qualities we do now. None of us answered “what do you want to be when you grow up” with “*I want to be kind. I want to be big-hearted. I want to laugh and cry when I’m supposed to.*” And, for those of us who grew up going to church, none of us (except the most precocious of us) would ever have said “I want to reflect the character of Christ.” Being like Jesus is far down the list for most children. And if we’re honest, it’s far down the list for most of us grown ups who are supposed to know better.

Yet most of us don’t know better, or if we do, we don’t behave like it. We go from being little kids and dreaming of what we want to be when we grow up to still dreaming of what we want to do when we turn eighteen. We study hard (or maybe not), we get jobs, and we even get married and get kids—but we still don’t grow up. Most adults I know still feel like kids inside; kids who decide to do the “right thing”. We keep our jobs

and we keep our families. We get into maintenance mode and keep our heads above water on the long journey towards retirement—which by the world’s definition is nothing more than a few years of cruises and casino junkets before we die. Sadly, most of us don’t grow up—we just grow old. And, even more sadly, some of us will grow old without ever truly responding to the call of God.

The call of God isn’t just a call to a certain job—though it might involve that. The call of God isn’t just to fulfill certain roles like being married or having children. The call of God for us all is a call to become one of his people, to be adopted into his family, and to participate with him in the redemption plan he’s been working out all along. This is something that a world that’s been weaned on the milk of individualism and moral relativism shudders to hear. We want to hear about how God is good and maybe even how we might prosper by committing our lives to him, but what we don’t want to hear and what most Christians stumble over is the idea that committing our lives to Jesus means becoming a part of his Body. There’s a saying you and I have heard more than once, a saying that stings me whenever I hear it: *“I love Jesus. I just can’t stand his people.”* Yet if we love Jesus, we cannot help but learn to love his Body.

So would your answer change if it was God asking you “what do you want to be when you grow up?” If the Almighty God thrust his finger out of the heavens and pointed squarely at your forehead and asked you “what do you want to be”, I imagine that after soiling ourselves, most of us would say *“like you, God. I want to be like you.”*

This is a good sentiment, and not a bad place to start. Yet it’s not exactly what God has in mind, as Paul shows us here in Ephesians. It’s not enough to say *“I want to*

grow up to be like Jesus”—mature faith also says *“I want to grow together with others to become the Body of Christ.”*

If that sounds like a lot of gibberish, that’s because from a certain perspective, it is. When you’re on the outside looking in, committing your life to grow with people just as touched by sin as you sounds like sheer lunacy. None of us ever came to put our trust and faith in Christ because we were convinced we needed to be a part of God’s people. Most of us were afraid of dying or maybe liked the idea of becoming nice people. Yet the challenge that faces most of us today isn’t whether we believe (because we mostly do), or even whether we want to be like Jesus (because we kinda like him.) The true great leap of faith we make is when we decide, Sunday after Sunday, to seek the presence of God with his people. You know you’re growing as a Christian when you finally become convinced that becoming like Jesus doesn’t happen outside of the Body of Christ.

This is Paul’s argument in the passage we’ve just read—which can feel like a mishmash of high-browed theology. Yet it makes better sense when you view it within its context and within the argument Paul’s been stringing along for the majority of his letter. In chapter 1, Paul outlines the historical work of God and the gift of the Spirit to the people. In chapter 2, he speaks about how we who were once dead in our disobedience have been made alive in Christ, and how this now leads to a reconciliation between Jew and Gentile to make a brand new people.

It’s in light of how God is gathering all the people of the earth and making them one that Paul talks about how great the love of God is in chapter 3. Yes, it’s true that

the love of God for you alone is incredibly great, but Paul's point isn't directed at individuals. It's directed at the people who have been living in darkness, the people who have never known the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the Gentiles. These are the people God is finally including in the new covenant in Christ.

When we arrive in chapter 4, we're to read this with a sense that all of this is somehow addressing this brand new people of God. It's telling that in the entire epistle to the Ephesians, Paul never once uses a second person singular verb—everything is plural. That means to read Ephesians well means reading every occurrence of the word “you” as “you all”—a big change from how we usually read the Bible. It's worth noting that these are letters not just from God for you alone at your kitchen table “doing your devotions”, this is the word of God for the people of God. (Thanks be to God.) Thus the best way to read this text is to read it as one of many who call on the name of the Lord.

You see, the point of this entire passage is not that we are simply called to new life, but that this new life happens in the context of God's people, the Church. Speaking the truth in love? Done amongst believers. The roles of pastors and evangelists and prophets and teachers? To build up the whole body of believers. All of what Paul is so passionate about here in chapter 4 is the calling and development of God's new covenant people.

You may be wondering how this relates to your calling on this side of death. Much of the anxiety you and I carry around has to do with aiming for particular goals in fear that we not only might fail and be humiliated, but that we might also somehow disappoint God because he's “called” us into it. While it's true that calling can often

extend into what you do for a living, calling is more correctly what you do to stay *alive*. Our lives are full of onerous tasks like taking courses we don't really want to take and taking jobs we don't really feel passionate about, yet each one of us has communal callings that first call us into the people of God and gives us *life*. If this sounds like I'm espousing the idea that you ought to be a churchgoer, you're wrong. What I'm after is that you can't just be a churchgoer, you need to be the *church*.

This is the first reality of Christian calling—we are all called towards God and towards each other. Without actively living in the reality that we are the *church*, we will always fall short of becoming like Christ because it's the Church that shapes and informs our lives. For better or for worse, the Church is a crucible for our formation. If we stay in it long enough, we may well be melted down, but this is for our refinement. And, as if to underscore this, Paul says to the gathered community of God, "*when you, by virtue of your life together, put off your old way of living together and put on the new way of living together, you become God's new creation, right-related and set apart for continuing God's redeeming mission.*" By sticking with the people of God and by submitting to the process of discipleship, we grow into our true selves and become people on the move with God.

Secondly, what it means to follow your calling is that we respond to our calling *in amongst* the people of God. The exercise of your gifts is first for the people of God because the gifts you've been given have been given *by* God. And that's what calling is: a gift. Not just a tally of strengths and weaknesses, but very often calling is so far outside your expectations of yourself and of others that it can only be thought of as a

gift. And while you may not be called to be an apostle or evangelist or pastor or teacher, you *do* have other gifts that need exercise in order to develop properly. So where does the exercise of these gifts begin? Within God's people. This isn't so that we alone might be built up and strengthened by them, because the Church doesn't exist for itself. Rather, because the Church exists for the world, the gifts we discover and apply here with the people we call brother and sister are bound for God's work in the world.

The third, and most controversial aspect of pursuing your calling as one of God's people is that your calling is in part determined *by* the people of God. We innately don't like the thought of this because we're saturated with the idea that "no one tells me what to do with my life." We're suspicious of authority—and sometimes rightfully so—to the point that we shy away from giving weight to the wisdom and perspective of people God places in our lives to walk with us. We live in a world that values privacy and discretion, but often we uphold these values because we don't believe people will be trustworthy with our innermost selves. Yet if we're to find meaningful connection and community, there comes a time when we must be the first to take steps towards being open with others and to break down the walls that separate us from each other. Without community, we lose our calling, and ultimately we lose our way because we lose the voice of those who are close to God, who know Jesus, and whom we can help build up even as we are built up ourselves. Though it scares us to death to do so, each of us needs to develop an attitude of looking for friends who will build us up by speaking truth into our lives and won't merely fatten us up with cream puff flattery.

In the end, the practice of putting on our new self only happens as we, the Spirit-filled people of God, are empowered and obey his leading to live together in unity and peace. Yet putting on our new selves doesn't happen in isolation. It doesn't happen just with our spouses—the people we choose to live our lives with. Community doesn't just happen with children or with friends who look and act like us. We grow into becoming like Christ with people who start out as strangers and end up becoming family. The people of God consists of people who have put their trust in Jesus, are attempting the dangerous and difficult task of following him, and are willing to do it together.

What do you want to be when you grow up? A carpenter? A scientist? A teacher? As we get older, we realize that we can't be everything we want to be, and that we need to make decisions that will lead us down certain career paths. Yet the question is, if we're willing to make decisions and sacrifices for the sake of pursuing a career, what decisions and what sacrifices are we making to grow up into Christ?

1.) What are some of the decisions or sacrifices you have made in order to be connected to the Church?

2.) How does your call into God's people inform your individual vocation?