

Baptism: Steve and Marlo Hamer-Jackson

Shortly after Steve and Marlo started attending our church, they asked if they could have their daughter, Evyn, dedicated to the Lord. That Sunday my wife and I were sitting together and when Steve got up on stage, Naomi grabbed my arm and said to me, *“I went to high school with Steve.”*

Not long after that, we invited Steve and Marlo to join our small group. Steve was brand new to church and brand new to thinking about Jesus. Every week he would come to small group and join right in—he asked great questions, he told us when he didn’t understand something, and let us pray for him and his family.

I remember one particular night, our small group came to the church for an all-church prayer meeting. At one point in the evening, we were invited to turn to the people around us and pray together. As our group turned toward one another, Steve said, *“I think I’d like to try that.”* *“Try what?”*, I asked. *“I’d like to pray,”* Steve said. It was the first time Steve had ever prayed in our group—it was a moment I will never forget. God was working in his life.

A few weeks later Steve and I went for lunch at Browns on Lonsdale; I wanted to ask him what he was thinking about Jesus, about our small group, about the church. When I asked him, Steve said, *“I’m still the same guy I’ve always been, but Jesus is making me a better person.”* He went on to describe how following Jesus was shaping the way he did business, the way he honoured people, Jesus was shaping his thoughts about what really matters in life, and what doesn’t.

A small group is a great place to explore Christianity—it was for Steve, and it might be for you as well. Week after week, month after month, we would meet as a small group, open the Bible, and talk about what we believe—and these things shaped our lives. What we set our minds upon has the power to shape our identity—all of us become what we believe. The question is, *what do you believe? What are you becoming?*

This morning, I want to invite you to imagine a city where ocean, sky, and mountains meet. Imagine a city where commerce thrives and wealth abounds—a city where people come hoping to find a new life and good fortune. Imagine a city rich in art, culture, and beauty, the kind of city that attracts visitors from all over the world. I could be talking about Vancouver, but I am referring to a different city from an ancient time—the city of Ephesus.

A jewel of the Roman empire, Ephesus had it all and was home to all. Rich and poor, young and old, free and slave alike called Ephesus “home”—it was a cosmopolitan city, housing people from every nation. It was a city with beautiful architecture; the main road was 10m wide, paved in pure marble, with columns that ran the length of the road. The Temple of Artemis in Ephesus was considered one of the 7 wonders of the ancient world.

Ephesus was a profoundly spiritual city. The temple of Artemis was accompanied by two others; Artemis was worshipped alongside the Emperor and the pantheon of Greek and Roman gods. And it was to this city that Paul brought the good news concerning Jesus Christ. And by the time Paul left Ephesus, a church had been established in the heart of the city.

Over the next 12 weeks, we are going to be taking a closer look at the Book of Ephesians. In actual fact, what we call the “book” of Ephesians is a letter sent by Paul to the churches established in Ephesus and in the surrounding region. And apart from Paul’s discussion about masters and slaves, Ephesians could have been written to North Shore Alliance—it is a timeless letter that has as much to do with life now as it did 2000 years ago.

I have entitled this series “**Becoming What We Believe**” because the letter to the Ephesians is relentless when it comes to holding what we believe and how we behave together—they are two sides of the same coin. Our thoughts have the power to shape our identity—all of us become what we believe.

In this initial sermon, I’m going to set the stage for the entire series. I’m going to briefly talk about the genre of biblical letters, then I will explore a few key themes from Ephesians, and I will conclude by taking a look at Paul’s introduction in vs. 1-2. Let’s begin with the genre.

1. The Letter to the Ephesians

When it comes to reading comprehension, understanding the genre is absolutely critical. Genre is something we spend very little time thinking about, and yet, intuitively, it shapes the way we read.

Let’s see if you can fill in the blanks. If you were to read the words, “*Once upon a time,*” you would know that you were reading a fairy tale.

If you were to read, “*On Saturday night, at 7 p.m., in the 800 block of Robson Street, Vancouver’s best and brightest will gather to showcase their works of art,*” you would know that you were reading news.

If you were to read, “*The Canucks will win the Stanley Cup in 2015,*” you would know you were reading fantasy.

My point is that the genre shapes the way we read, and our expectations of what we read. We have to read a fairy tale and a newspaper quite differently if we want to grasp what’s going on. The same is true when it comes to reading the letter to the Ephesians.

Here are two keys to keep in mind. **First**, all letters are *occasional* in nature—in other words, we write letters to particular people, in particular locations, for particular purposes.

While biblical letters do contain theology, they are still letters not theology textbooks; the theology they do contain is aimed at a particular occasion. Our challenge in reading biblical letters is that we only get one side of a conversation; we don’t always know if the letter was written to address a question or a problem.¹ As secondary readers, the more we understand about the people, the location, and the occasion that prompted the letter, the more likely we are to understand the author’s intended purpose.

Here’s the **second** key: most biblical letters were written to church communities, not to individuals. It’s important to recognize that our cultural biases affect us as readers. As 21st century, western thinkers,

¹ Gordon Fee, *How To Read The Bible For All It’s Worth*, 58.

we are thoroughly individualistic—we see the world through lens of self, over against the lens of community. Accordingly, most of tend to read biblical letters as though they were a private letter from God to us; we tend to ask the question: *what is God saying to me?* This isn't the wrong question per se, but it isn't the only question, nor is it the first question.

If we read Ephesians as a private letter, it leads naturally to a privatized understanding of faith and practice. Paul's letters rarely refer to the internal life of individual Christians, instead, he speaks constantly about our life together as the people of God.

One last thought before I talk about Ephesians' major themes. Paul wrote this letter, along with Colossians, Philippians, and Philemon during an imprisonment (c.f. Eph 3:1). At a time when he was “sidelined,” feeling “useless,” and praying for release, God divinely inspired this letter to the Ephesians. Not only did it shape and encourage them, but it has been shaping the church for nearly 2000 years. For those of us today who are sidelined, feeling “useless,” and praying for release, take courage—God may be doing something in you that will be a gift to those around you.

2. Major Themes in Ephesus

The book of Ephesians could be compared to Toronto's CN Tower—it may not be Paul's longest letter, but it offers a breathtaking view of the major themes of the Christian faith. Let me take a few minutes to sketch some of the themes we will explore over the next 12 weeks. First, let's look at God as Trinity.

- **God as Trinity:** in every letter Paul wrote, his primary concern

was to answer the question, “*Who is God?*” Ephesians answers this question in a multitude of ways, but chief among them is Paul's insistence that God has revealed Himself as Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Ephesians 1:3-14 is a declaration of praise to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Ephesians 2:11-22 describes the work of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in creating the Church.

In Ephesians 3:14-21, Paul prays for the Ephesians in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

In Ephesians 4:3-6, Paul talks about how the church finds its unity and identity in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Everywhere you look in Ephesians, Paul sketches a Trinitarian reality. A **second theme** that emerges in Ephesians is the Church.

- **The Church:** if Paul's primary concern is to answer the question, “*Who is God?*”, his secondary concern is to answer the question, “*Who are we?*”

Lets face it—our city and our world is in a bit of a mess. Poverty abounds. We see famine, sickness, and war. People live under the crippling weight of guilt and shame; “stress” is commonplace. Marriages break down and families pull apart. Conflict exists between old and young, between women and men, and people continue to divide along racial lines.

Ephesians speaks not only about new life in Jesus, but about God's new society—the Church. A church that is aligned to Jesus, and filled with the Spirit, becomes the place where “old” relationships can become “new.” Predictably, Ephesians addresses themes such as conflict, individualism, and racism; Ephesians calls us to belonging, connection, mutuality, and love.

In Ephesians 1, we are described as being adopted into God's family. In Ephesians 2, the church is compared to a building under construction. The Holy Spirit is the One who constructs the building, and Jesus Himself is the chief cornerstone around whom everyone and everything takes shape. In Ephesians 5, the church is described alternatively as being the body of Christ and the bride of Christ.

Paul knows nothing about the solitary Christian, instead, he is excited about the fact that when we are ushered into relationship with the Father, through the Son, by the Holy Spirit, we are bound to other believers. Ephesians tells us how to be God's people, the Church. A **third theme** that emerges is that of worship and prayer.

- **Worship and Prayer:** Ephesians doesn't just teach about worship and prayer, much of it **is** worship and prayer; Paul teaches by modelling. Ephesians 1:3-14 is an outburst of praise for God's glorious, saving, work through Jesus, and it's followed by a prayer for God's power and fullness to fill these Ephesians in every way. In Ephesians 3, Paul prays a prayer that reveals the heights and depths of God's love for us. A **fourth theme** that emerges is the renewing of the mind.

- **Renewing the mind:** Receiving God's forgiveness is

just the beginning of His saving work in our lives. He has in mind to make us brand new (in thought, desire, word, and behaviour). In order to become what believe, our minds need to be renewed.

We tend to let thoughts run around in our minds rent-free, but all of our thoughts are coming from one of three places: God, the enemy, or from our self. A lie from the enemy can take root and shape the way we live—*I'll never be good enough; I've got to take matters into my own hands; I can't trust anyone*. Or, a thought generated by self can shape who we become and how we behave—*my needs are more important than yours; I have to look good in front of my friends*.

Even God's voice may go undetected—*I have loved you with an everlasting love; come to Me, and I will give you rest*. All of us become what we believe; our thoughts have the power to shape us.

There is so much more ground that Paul covers in Ephesians—marriage, family, work, spiritual warfare; each week we'll look at what Paul has to say about God, us, our world, and life's most important relationships.

In the time remaining, we are going to take a closer look at the first two verses of Paul's letter; please turn with me to Ephesians 1:1-2. *“Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, To God's holy people in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”*

In our day, letters have a standard format. They begin by greeting the recipient of the letter (*Dear Naomi,*), followed by the main body of the letter, followed by a final greeting, and then an identification of who is writing the letter (*Love, Mark*).

In the ancient world, letters had a standard format too. They began by identifying the writer and the recipient(s), followed by a greeting or wish for health, then the main body of the letter, concluding with a final greeting and details concerning the sending of the letter.

What's interesting is that as Christians wrote to one another in the ancient world, they began to change and expand these traditional elements. Notice that in vs. 1 that Paul identifies himself and the recipients of the letter, but in both cases, this identification includes a reference to Jesus. Paul could have opened the letter saying, "From *Paul, to the church in Ephesus;*" instead he writes, "*Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus... To God's holy people in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus*".

Just as we can no longer talk about God without talking about Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, so too, Christians can no longer talk about themselves without talking about our relationship to Jesus—this relationship defines us at the level of our identity.

illus: Imagine you're at a party and you meet someone new. If they were to ask you to tell them a little bit about yourself, what would you say? All of us tend to define ourselves according to our most important relationships and activities. I might say something like, "*My name is Mark, I'm married to Naomi, and I've got two kids—Luke and Anna. I work at a church, and I love to to run, play soccer, read, etc.*"

Paul defines himself and the Ephesians according to their most important relationship, "*My name is Paul, my life belongs to Jesus,*

and your lives do too." What would it take to begin to see our lives' in this same light?

Let's take a closer look at the way Paul describes the recipients of his letter. "To God's holy people in Ephesus, the faithful **in Christ Jesus**". Paul's use of the expression "in Christ," is central to his theology. He uses the expression "in Christ," "in him," or similar variants, 164 times in 13 letters. In Ephesians, Paul uses this phrase no less than 36 times.

Christianity is not primarily a philosophy, or a set of propositional truths; it is a deep, mysterious, relationship with God. This relationship is so deep, that Paul can only describe it as living **in Christ**. Because of Jesus, we have been **included** in God's family—we have been saved, redeemed, reconciled, and transformed.

One author writes, "Nothing short of attachment to [Jesus] will rescue us from the human plight, and nothing can define us as human beings more than attachment to him."² He embraces who we were, He redefines who we are, and He is shaping who we will become. Where do we live? **In Christ**.

But lest we get lost in a disembodied spirituality, Paul locates his recipients not only **in Christ**, but also **in Ephesus**. Christianity is not about escape from the world—we have been included, in Christ, in the church, for the sake of the world, to the glory of God.

All throughout this Ephesians series, we will be asking the question, "*What does it mean to be **in Christ** and **in North Vancouver**?*" What

² Klyne Snodgrass, *NIV Application Commentary*, 18.

does it mean to be **in Christ**, and **in West Vancouver**? We can't separate ourselves from the place that we live; neither can we abandon the One in whom we live.

As I conclude this morning, I want to draw your attention to Paul's blessing found in verse 2. After defining himself and his recipients in connection to Jesus, he spoke two words that give shape to this letter and to our life in Christ—grace and peace. *“Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”*

I could give you a theological definition of grace, but the best way to define grace is to describe what it's like when you receive it. I want to tell you a story from my grade 12 year. I was out on a Friday or Saturday night with my friend; it was the middle of the winter, it was cold, dark, and rainy. It was late at night and I was driving my friend back to his house. We came to a corner and I took it way too fast.

Did I mention I was driving a 1981 Oldsmobile station wagon? It was like driving a boat. When I came around the corner, the back end kicked out, I overcompensated and it fishtailed the other way; we went straight into a deep ditch. The station wagon stopped dead, just inches away from slamming into a cement drainage pipe.

I just sat there for a few moments—my heart pounding, my hands hurting; I was gripping the steering wheel so tightly. I looked over at my friend and his eyes were as big as saucers; I suspect mine were too. We were in one piece, praise God—it could have been much, much worse.

I got out of the car, hoping, praying that we could get the car out of the ditch, but we were too far gone for that. It was a long, silent, walk

back to my friend's house, remember, these were the days before cell phones. When we got to his house, I used his phone to call my parents.

My dad and mom had been asleep for some time when I called. My dad picked up the phone, I told him what happened, and he said that he would call a tow truck and be right over. I hung up the phone and immediately felt sick to my stomach; I had blown it and I knew I was going to get it. But when dad arrived at the ditch, he got out his car, threw his arms around me, and said, *“Mark, I'm just glad you're okay.”*

That's grace—I got what I didn't deserve. I expected to be punished but I was met with the face of love; I received mercy and forgiveness I did not earn. The grace I experienced from my dad was but a taste of the grace that is available to us in Christ.

In Ephesians 2 Paul writes of this grace saying, *“4 But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, 5 made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.”* When we were powerless to save ourselves, God drew near through Jesus. Jesus didn't come to condemn people, He came to rescue people headed toward certain destruction. He came to offer us mercy. He came to invite us into God's family. There is no greater invitation. Will you receive it today?

This word, *grace*, is paired with the word *peace*; and together they make a dynamic duo. We need grace to get in; without grace, none of us could ever earn our way into God's family. By grace we enter in, but the question is, *enter into what?* This is where *peace* comes in.

We tend to define *peace* as the absence of something—the absence of difficulty, frustration, conflict, or war. Instead, the Bible defines peace as fullness. The peace that God invites us into includes wholeness, completeness, abundance, well-being, and safety.

Through grace, we are invited to enter into peace—the fullness of life that God promises to those who seek Him. Because of Jesus, we have peace with God, and one day this peace will lead to fullness in every direction.

Next week, we are going to explore the height, breadth, length, and depth of this grace and peace; I look forward to seeing you all next Sunday.

Pray