

**Series:** What is Jesus saying to our church? (a study in Revelation)

**Sermon Text:** [Summary of Ephesians](#) (Slido)

**Key Word(s):** Courageous, Adventurous

As most of you know, we've been studying the book of Revelation and learning how the church on earth is to pattern herself after the church in heaven, which according to Revelation 5:9 includes: "*people for God from every tribe (lineage), language, people (self-defined), and nation (geography).*" Having studied what Jesus wrote to the 7 churches in Revelation, we're now celebrating the advents of Jesus (His past and future appearances) and pondering the question: "*What is Jesus saying to our church?*" Our first advent lesson addressed some "*non-negotiables*": how **certain things should be true of all churches**. Lessons 2-4 kicked off a multi-week conversation about "*negotiables*": how **the gospel creates beautifully diverse churches that welcome, value, and include a wide variety of people because the Advent of Jesus changes our view of everything**. This brings us to our final lesson of the series where we're going to get specific and unpack one last...

**BIG IDEA: Jesus wants us to channel His courageous and adventurous Spirit!**

Today, we'll answer 3 crucial questions: 1) *What are God's purposes for the church?* 2) *What are God's purposes for church leaders?* 3) *How should God's purposes shape our church?* Jot down your initial reactions to these questions, and we'll see how you did later. We often take question 1 for granted, but having clarity on God's purposes keeps us from building a church on personal preferences and faulty presuppositions. For example, if you think churches only exist to "*get people saved*" and "*prepare them for heaven*", then you'll expect pastors to only preach salvation sermons, always have an altar call, and never address earthly issues/personal choices. If you think churches are merely academic institutions, you'll prioritize being right over being with, idolize segregated learning over other forms of spiritual formation, and value only peers who are "*at your level.*" Here's the thing: Church is way more than consumable content (what we say, teach, sing--stuff we can download from anywhere). It's primarily about being spiritually reborn and formed (who we are, how we live--stuff that requires committing, relating, participating). Acts 2:42 says the early church "*devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching AND the fellowship, AND the Lord's table AND the prayers.*" Some of you really get this, and we love that about you--you're realizing that spiritual maturity involves way more than intellect and being formed and transformed by denying yourself and becoming interested in people who are not like you.

God's purpose for the church is clear in *Ephesians 1:7-10: In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon*

*us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.* While God's plan does include informing the mind and some people going to heaven, it's mostly about redemption which unites all things in heaven and earth. In fact, [the biblical storyline](#) says more about God *uniting people* so He can dwell with them, than it says about individuals going to be with God. Think of the Old Testament tabernacle where God came down to dwell, and the fire pillar and smoke cloud into which God came down and led Israel through the wilderness, and our Christmas lesson where Jesus was called Emmanuel (i.e., "God with us"), and Revelation 21:2 where John "saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband." So, we must ask: This being God's goal, how must our focus shift from "then and there" to what His Spirit is doing through churches "here and now"? (check out our notes section!).

God's goal is also expressed in *Ephesians 2:8-10: By grace you've been saved through faith. This is not your own doing; it's the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.* The Bible far more than "**B**asic **I**nstructions **B**efore **L**eaving **E**arth. It's the story of God sculpting a new humanity into a multi-faceted work of art (e.g., a poem, a sculpture, a coat of many colors, an orchestra that gives humans a new tune to hum). *Ephesians 2* explains that Jesus gave His life to *kill hostility between rival nations and people groups (11-16)* so *they could grow/be built into a united family/temple in which God can dwell (17-22)*. So, for example, instead of adopting the "us versus them" propaganda where we hate/fear people we've never met, we're to treat outcasts and refugees like Jesus did. Think about it: How was Jesus courageously hospitable to outcasts at a time when His Jewish people practiced things like racism, sexism, and classism? He condemned the religious mess that Judaism had become and stunned them by treating Israel and the church as 2 streams that flow into the one powerful river! His disciples were taught to provide resources for anyone in need and to welcome all sorts of "distasteful" people (in their minds) into the faith.

This plan is plainly expressed in *Ephesians 3:6, 9-10: This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel...to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things, so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places*. I can't possibly explain this text better than Professor NT Wright (pg. 36): "The heart of the present passage is verse 3:10, which is one of the New Testament's

*most powerful statements of the reason for the church's existence: the rulers and authorities must be confronted with God's wisdom, in all its rich variety, and this is to happen through the church! Not, we should quickly add, through what the church says, though that is vital as well. Rather, through what the church is, namely, the community in which men, women and children of every race, colour, social and cultural background come together in glad worship of the one true God. It is precisely this many-sided, many-coloured, many-splendoured identity of the church that makes the point... The 'rulers and authorities', however—both the earthly and their shadowy heavenly counterparts—always tend to create societies and social structures in their own flat, boring image, monochrome, uniform and one-dimensional. Worse: they tend to marginalize or kill people or groups who don't fit their narrow band of acceptability. The church is to be, by the very fact of its existence, a warning to them that their time is up, and an announcement to the world that there is a different way to be human."*

Grasping God's purposes enables us to answer our other 2 questions: **What are God's purposes for church leaders?** and **How should God's purposes shape our church?** Look with me at **4:11-16** where Paul's conclusions form a **chiasm**: *He gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.* See how his pairs of ideas are repeated in reverse order? Good church leaders guide us FROM BEING unstable, self-centered children who get wrecked by life's storms TO BEING mature and stable humans who desire to know and support every member of Christ's body. That's how we grow into a temple for His Spirit to indwell and illuminate us into His lighthouse!

I'm thrilled that every church officer, along with their spouse, has whole-heartedly pledged to help ***tear down the dividing walls between people (11-16)*** so that we ***grow into a united family-temple where God can freely dwell and operate (17-22)***. **Are you open to pursuing this vision with us--to have courageous conversations that tug at your rug of religious preferences? Are you open to discussing how narrow views can impede God's grander vision, or do you insist that churches cater to your preferences (why does this matter?)?** Like His Jewish disciples, who expected a militant messiah to wipe out Israel's

enemies, we all have narrow perspectives that Jesus intends to tug at and widen. The problem, as we've learned in this series, is that confusing negotiables with non-negotiables can hinder the Spirit's work of sculpting us into a beautifully diverse church that draws the world's gaze upon our uncommon unity and love for one another (cf. John 13-15)!

While we've made good strides this year, here's our vision for the upcoming year:

1. *To make our services less passive and more participatory*--less like a show, more like a family gathering; table-centered, not pulpit-centered. Our goal isn't necessarily to copy or not copy other churches, it's simply to represent the gospel with more clarity and accuracy.
2. *To reform our community groups*, so that instead of merely answering Bible questions, we're also practicing other disciplines and getting to know one another.
3. *To increase collaboration with diverse churches* to experience God differently, realize His kingdom is bigger than 1 church, and do more than we can on our own ([here's a great article](#)).
4. *To treat unbelievers and confused Christians with dignity and respect*, so that instead of acting like we don't have struggles and doubts, we seek to understand their experiences and encounter God working in us as we come alongside them.

We invite you to ask questions about our vision in the spirit of humility and curiosity. A focused church can be a healthy church, and of course, our leaders are open to improving and expanding as the Lord leads, so long as we're using our resources well and not overloading people. What I've outlined here are just a few ways that we believe **Jesus wants us to channel His courageous and adventurous Spirit!** Before the sermon, Pastor Gary based his prayer for us on Paul's prayer from chapter 1. As we wrap up, I will pray over us with the exact prayer found in *Ephesians 3:14-21*.

Let's pray: *"I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant us to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in our inner being, so that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith--that we, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that we may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen."*

*Note: Our pre-sermon, pastoral prayer was based on Ephesians 1:16-23* "I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his

glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.”

### **Considerations for discussion leaders:**

1. Keep circling back to the big idea and main points of the passage to stay on track.
2. Keep the group small for deeper sharing.
3. Keep the discussion around 30 mins. Once you hit the “sweet spot”, spend your time there.
4. Keep these simple questions in your back pocket: What is God teaching you? What are you going to do about it? How will it help you love & serve others?

**Preparing for our sermon based on a summary of Ephesians:** It’s helpful to repeatedly read over the chapter(s) we’re exploring. It would also be beneficial to utilize a commentary that lays out the variety of ways our ancestors have interpreted the text. If you need a suggestion, please ask! Also, the Bible isn’t merely meant to “*inform*” us but to also “*transform*” us, so we should expect the Spirit to reveal a “*next step*” which always begins with faith in Christ—either trusting Him for the first time or exercising faith to repent and change with help from Christ’s Spirit and His church body!

**Specific application questions** (Don’t forget the underlined questions in the sermon notes above!):

**Other Articles/Songs/Videos:** Please ask us for help obtaining other resources.

- [A podcast interview](#) with NT Wright about the Biblical storyline and God’s purposes.
- 2 podcast episodes about God’s purposes for [the temple](#) and [His people](#).
- A [6-minute video](#) summarizing the book of Ephesians.

### **Quotes related to this passage:**

- **The Biblical Storyline:** “Paul’s great prayer at the opening of this letter is a celebration of the larger story within which every single Christian story—every story of individual conversion, faith, spiritual life, obedience and hope—is set. Only by understanding and celebrating the larger story can we hope to understand everything that’s going on in our own smaller stories, and so observe God at work in and through our own lives.” (Wright, Ephesians, 8)
- **Acts 2:42:** “...is often regarded as laying down ‘the four marks of the church’. The apostles’ teaching; the common life of those who believed; the breaking of bread; and the prayers. These four go together. You can’t separate them, or leave one out, without damage to the whole thing. Where no attention is given to teaching, and to constant, lifelong Christian learning, people quickly revert to the worldview or mindset of the surrounding culture, and end up with their minds shaped by whichever social pressures are most persuasive, with Jesus somewhere around as a pale influence or memory. Where people ignore the common life of the Christian family (the technical term often used is ‘fellowship’, which is more than friendship but not less), they become isolated, and often find it difficult to sustain a living faith. Where people no longer share regularly in ‘the breaking of bread’ (the early Christian term for the simple meal that took them back to the Upper Room ‘in remembrance of Jesus’), they are failing to raise the flag which says ‘Jesus’ death and resurrection are the centre of everything’ (see 1 Corinthians

11:26). And whenever people do all these things but neglect prayer, they are quite simply forgetting that Christians are supposed to be heaven-and-earth people. Prayer makes no sense whatever—unless heaven and earth are designed to be joined together, and we can share in that already. (Wright, Acts, 44-45)

- **In Christ:** “With the expression ‘in Christ Jesus’ we encounter one of the most significant and difficult points in Paul’s writings. Paul is not merely saying these people believed in Christ; rather, they were in Christ positionally. This concept of being in Christ is one of—if not the—most important parts of Paul’s theology, for this is the center from which he understood and explained salvation. The thirteen Pauline letters use ‘in Christ,’ ‘in the Lord,’ ‘in him,’ or some similar expression 164 times to express a variety of ideas. ‘Christ’ is usually used in contexts talking about salvation and its benefits, whereas ‘Lord’ is usually used to talk about Christian behavior and life.” (Snodgrass, 38)
- **One new humanity in Christ:** “The point of it all, as he says in verse 15, was to create a single new humanity in place of the two. Today’s church may no longer face the question of the integration of Jew and Gentile into a single family, though there are places where that is still a major issue. But we face, quite urgently, the question which Paul would insist on as a major priority. If our churches are still divided in any way along racial or cultural lines, he would say that our gospel, our very grasp of the meaning of Jesus’ death, is called into question. How long will it be before those who claim to follow Jesus, not least those who claim also to love Paul’s thinking, come to terms with the demands he actually makes?” (Wright, Ephesians, 27-28)
- **God’s historic secret revealed:** “The secret plan is that God always intended to bring Gentiles, the non-Jewish peoples of the world, into fellowship with himself, on equal terms with his ancient people the Jews. And the good news—the ‘gospel’—is that God has now accomplished this through Jesus the Jewish Messiah, Jesus who is also the world’s true Lord.” (Wright, Ephesians, 33)
- **Reading Bible Letters:** “When modern believers attempt to Christianize letters or other aspects of our culture, the result is often archaic and artificial. We may copy Paul’s theological language without grasping its depth or finding adequate words to convey it. The difference may be that we are imitating something we have not experienced. Paul is not merely using nice theological words, but expressing his encounter with, and his life with, the God that confronted him on the Damascus road. If we are to bridge the years and cultural differences in biblical texts, we must do more than merely copy theological words. We must experience the reality to which the words point and find contemporary ways to describe it. We must not only ask what the text teaches about God, humanity, life with God, and other subjects; we must own what it teaches and create language to give the reality a home in our own souls. Especially in a short section like this, texts often assume more than they express. If we can see the assumptions by which Paul lived and thought, we have important material for reflecting on our own life with God.” (Snodgrass, 39-40)
- **The layout of Ephesians:** “Love and power, power and love: these are the themes of perhaps two-thirds of the novels, plays and poems ever written. The love of power has laid waste continents and empires. The power of love has driven weak people to do powerful things—and, not infrequently, powerful people to do foolish things. These are the forces which shape our lives, our homes, our countries, our politics, our world. And these are the themes that run through the great prayer that Paul prays for the young Christians to whom he is writing. People sometimes say that in a letter like Ephesians the first half is ‘doctrine’ and the second half is ‘ethics’—half of the letter on what to believe, half on how to behave. But in fact, as a glance

back through the first three chapters will reveal, much of Ephesians 1–3 is not ‘teaching’ so much as prayer.” (Wright, Ephesians, 38-39)

- **Spiritual Formation:** “We use Christian formation to refer to the process of Christians being formed, transformed, and conformed to the image of Jesus Christ. Biblical passages such as 2 Corinthians 3:18 indicate that the Spirit is the instrument of change: ‘we’re being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.’ Other passages indicate that the person also has a role in this transformation. Romans 12:2 says, ‘do not conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.’ Beyond this personal agency, Paul indicates that being formed into the image of Christ is also a process in which other believers are involved: ‘My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you’ (Gal 4:19). Among other implications of this verse, we want to emphasize that Paul recognizes that his influence with these believers—his prayer for and presence with them—will in some way affect the forming of Christ in them. Therefore, we believe that while Christians are in the process of being formed, conformed, and transformed into the image of Christ by the Holy Spirit, they are actively involved in that process both personally and, significantly for this book, communally. We build closely on Ephesians 4:11-16.” (Allen, 20-21)
- **The Gospel and Culture:** “The gospel defines life for Christians, but that life is always lived out in a culture, a culture that also seeks to define us. Christians must therefore understand the culture they live in and must decide what in culture may be legitimately adapted and enjoyed and what must be rejected. All too often we confuse our cultural expression of Christianity with the gospel itself. The early Church faced this problem in Acts 6 over the distribution of food and in Acts 15 with the “Jerusalem Council” over the necessity of observing Jewish legal practices. In a similar manner, we must separate the heart of the gospel from our cultural expression of the gospel. Christianity in African tribal communities, for example, does not need to look like Western Christianity. We must also determine how to relate to our culture. Will the use of religious language help or hinder a conversation? Given the religious fanaticism and the division between the “religious right” and other groups in the United States, for instance, religious language often hinders communication about Christianity. Acts 17 and 22–26 present a much different tone from Paul in addressing non-Christian audiences from what appears in his letters to Christians. Sensitivity to the reception of the message determines the selection of the words. The primary ingredient for Christians in relating to culture surely is authenticity. We should not try to communicate Paul’s experience of Christ; we must communicate our own. We learn from Paul, but our own experience of the gospel must be lived out authentically before God and people.” (Snodgrass, 41)

### **Quotes related to the larger context:**

#### **Bibliography** (Note: Our use of these materials does not imply full agreement with them)

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