

Ephesians 4:15

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[0 : 00] Now let's turn to the passage we read in Ephesians, and especially to verse 15. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the head, that is, Christ.

And especially I want to focus on that idea of growing up into Christ. It could be said that there are far too many childish Christians around, and far too few grown-up Christians.

Now you might wonder what on earth I mean by that. But I think one of our problems, and no doubt we have many today, one of our problems is that of Christian maturity, or the lack of it, within the church today.

If we just think for a moment about what we mean by childishness and grown-upness, we perhaps begin to see what I'm getting at.

We know that sometimes in the Bible, the idea of being like a child is held before us as a good thing. We know our Lord Jesus said that unless we become as little children, we shall not enter the kingdom of heaven.

[1 : 27] So there is definitely a simplicity or a childlikeness that is to be a characteristic of our faith and of our relationship to him.

We, after all, are the children of God. But I think our English words, childish and childlike, give us a good division of what exactly is meant in the Bible by us, by the fact that we ought to be childlike, but we shouldn't be childish.

Because after all, if we think of what childishness is, we think, first of all, of things that are just part of being a child. When we're children, of course, we're weak.

We're not as strong as what we are when we get older. There's nothing wrong with that. It's just a fact of life. That is what we are as children. And also, as children, we are ignorant.

And again, usually there is nothing blameworthy about that. We have to learn as we grow up as children. Also, as children, we tend to be unstable.

[2 : 37] You know how very easily a child can go from one extreme of emotions to the other and be very easily swayed. Now, of course, there are exceptions in this, as in everything, but generally speaking, when we're children, we're more prone to that kind of instability.

Because, again, we're developing. We're developing as personalities and developing, as we get older, more stability. Also, of course, we use the word childish in the sense of people being petty.

A kind of pettishness is an aspect, or pettiness is an aspect of being childish. Now, when we think of all these things in relation to the Christian, in relation to the Christian church, we begin to see how, in many ways, these characteristics crop up.

We may see them within ourselves. We may see them within the wider church. The characteristics of maturity or adulthood would be things the opposite of those I mentioned.

Things like strength, knowledge, stability, and magnanimity. Now, these very often are the kind of characteristics we see lacking in ourselves, lacking in others, lacking in the church as a whole, perhaps.

- [3 : 57] So it's very important that we should focus on what the Apostle Paul is teaching us here concerning Christian maturity. Let's see if we can learn something for ourselves, for our own congregation, and for the wider church.
- Now, the first thing that the Apostle Paul makes very clear throughout this passage is that no one can become mature in isolation. And here, I think, he strikes right at the root of a problem that often occurs within the Christian church.
- And that is the idea of the lone individual working out his salvation in isolation, fighting a lone battle.
- Now, there are occasions when the Christian may be in that position. And there are many occasions when people have been in that kind of position and have had to fight through these lonely battles.
- But that is the exception and not the norm, as we see from this passage. First of all, there is the, we might say, the whole atmosphere that surrounds the Christian and surrounds his growth and his development to maturity.
- [5 : 20] The whole atmosphere of the grace of God. Notice how this passage really begins. In verse 7, Paul says, But to each one of us, grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.
- And it goes on with the quote from Psalm 68. And then in the verses after that, verses after that, verses 9 and 10, Paul goes on to explain what that reference in Psalm 68 means.
- And of course, it's all about the work of our Lord Jesus Christ. On completion of his work, after he had descended down to the very depths, not only of this earth, but the depths of human experience and the depths of bearing the punishment of our sin.
- After that, he ascended. He ascended up on high and led captivity captive, receiving and giving gifts to men.
- So the very atmosphere in which the Christian is to live and move, the very origin of his being as a Christian, involves very much someone else and what he has done.
- [6 : 34] It begins, of course, with the Lord Jesus Christ himself. So that not only is it a fact that we become Christians through grace, through a gift of God, but we live by grace and continue to depend upon the grace of God in Christ Jesus.
- Now, particularly, we have the reference here to what Christ actually did when he ascended up on high.
- And there's a reference in Acts chapter 2 and verses 22 and 23 that really explain what the Apostle Paul is meaning here.
- Actually, it's Acts chapter 2, verse 32 and 33. In other words, the work of Jesus Christ, if you like, purchased a certain gift for us.
- The gift is free to us, but the gift in itself was costly and it required the price of the death of our Lord Jesus Christ to win this prize for us.
- [8 : 01] So that when Christ died, rose again and ascended up to heaven, he received this gift of the promise of the Holy Spirit who was to come upon the church.
- And there we see the emphasis that the gift is the Holy Spirit himself. That is what was poured out at Pentecost, the Holy Spirit himself upon the church.
- And so we see that yet again, the whole context here is upon something that has been given to us. So that the church has to exist and has to work by what Christ has done and by the gift that he has given of the second person of the Trinity, of the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit.

So we see, first of all, that groundwork of the work of Christ involving the gift of the Holy Spirit. So we see that right at the very root, the heart of Christianity, there cannot be an isolationism.

We depend upon what Christ did for us and how that's applied to us through the Holy Spirit. But then as Paul moves on here in Ephesians chapter 4, he makes it clear that there are other contexts, broader contexts, for the Christian life.

[9 : 24] And the first of these is when he moves on in verse 11 to talk about apostles and prophets. It was he, that is Jesus Christ, it was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets.

Now, earlier on in this same letter, in Ephesians chapter 2, we have the apostle Paul there talking about apostles and prophets.

He's talking about the church of Christ from verse 19. He says this, Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.

Now, that whole picture that the apostle Paul is using there is the picture of the church as a building.

And he says, that building has a cornerstone. That is the Lord Jesus Christ. Now, we've thought about that basic work of the Lord Jesus Christ, without which there would be no church and there would be no Christian.

[10 : 46] But then, Paul moves on and he says, there is a foundation. The Lord Jesus gave a foundation. What is that foundation? The foundation is that of the apostles and prophets.

Now, people debate as to what exactly is meant here by prophets, is it? New Testament prophets or Old Testament prophets? Well, I would lean towards the interpretation that it's Old Testament prophets.

When he says in chapter 2 here that this is the foundation of the Christian church, apostles and prophets. Now, you could hardly call New Testament prophets foundational for the church.

They just occur very briefly and slightly in the history of the New Testament church. But rather, the Old Testament prophets are indeed foundational for the Christian church.

They are being quoted in the New Testament constantly. They're references to Christ. The whole background of the Old Testament is indeed foundational to the church. So, what the apostle Paul is talking about here is the fact that God gave certain men to be his instruments in founding the church and in giving it a foundation of his word.

[12 : 00] After all, the prophets were those who communicated God's word. The apostles were those who were sent by Christ to speak his word and also to write his word.

So, what we're thinking about here quite simply as far as we're concerned is the scriptures, the writings of those prophets and apostles.

So, again, we see here a wider context than just the individual. We see that our Christian faith depends not just upon our own experience or upon our own decision.

It depends, first of all, it depends upon Christ and his work. But then, secondly, it depends upon the historic work and witness and writing of his apostles and prophets.

And that is what we depend upon today, to feed our souls and to grow in the Christian life. That is why it's crucial that we study the scriptures to do so here together in church, but also to do so individually.

[13 : 06] Because in this way, our life is being fed and nurtured upon this historic basis that the Lord Jesus has given it.

Giving us the information that we need to know about him and about his church and about his will for us. But then also, there is an ongoing work.

We may say that foundational work of the apostles and prophets is something that was completed. You don't go on building a foundation forever. It was completed at a certain historic point in time with the completion of the scripture.

But there's an ongoing ministry, and Paul mentions some of these. Because Jesus also gave some to be evangelists and some to be pastors and teachers. Now that is referring to what we would loosely call today, missionaries and ministers.

There aren't two distinct groups thought of here as pastors and teachers, because they're linked together. He says he gave some to be pastors and teachers.

[14 : 11] The same group of men are pastors and teachers. And also some evangelists. Now again, people would differ and argue as to whether this office, if you would call it that, of an evangelist, was something that was just a New Testament one.

People like Philip and Timothy. Or whether it's an ongoing one. Well, we could debate about it for a long time. But the important point is that the ministry of evangelism is something that is constant.

Something that is to be an ongoing work of the church. So, therefore, it is right to have missionaries or evangelists, call them what you will, who are preaching the gospel where it has not been preached before.

And seeking to bring people to Christ and to found churches. Also, there are those whom we today would call ministers. Those who are pastors and teachers. The shepherds of the flock seeking to give guidance and also seeking to teach.

On the basis, on the foundation of what the apostles and prophets have revealed that Christ has given through them.

[15 : 16] And so, this ongoing ministry is not something that is, if you like, important in itself. It is only important as it is based firmly upon that historical background of Christ, the apostles, and the prophets.

This is the medium through which this teaching comes to us today. Now, the work of pastors and teachers, indeed, the work of all this that goes before in verse 11, is given in verse 12.

That work is to prepare God's people for works of service so that the body of Christ may be built up. The word used here that's translated to prepare God's people could be translated to equip God's people.

Or really, to make them fitting or suitable for the work that they have to do. It's a word that was used of the disciples mending their nets.

When Jesus was walking by the shore of the Sea of Galilee and the disciples were mending their nets. There, James and John and the others. That's the word that's used.

[16 : 30] They were making their nets useful or fitting again, fit to work again. It's the word that was used by doctors in the ancient world of mending a break, mending a fracture.

Again, making something useful and fit again. That's the word that's used here by the Apostle Paul. That the work of all this, this foundation of the Apostles and Prophets and the ongoing ministry of missionaries and ministers, is to make the Church of Christ useful, to prepare God's saints, to prepare the saints for works of service so that the body of Christ may be built up.

Now, that is the right translation of this passage. We shouldn't read this passage to mean that it is the pastors and teachers who have to perform the work of ministry.

That's what we usually think of today. The work of ministry is the work of the person that we call the minister. But rather what's meant here is that God's people are to be performing the work of ministry.

The saints, that is those who believe in Christ and were being made holy by him, it is their work to do this work of service.

[17 : 57] The word ministry just means service, serving the Church of Christ, seeking to help that cause. So then we get another step along this process that Paul is revealing here as he speaks, first of all, about Christ's work, then about the foundation of Apostles and Prophets, then about the ongoing role of missionaries and ministers.

But then, fourthly, there's another ongoing role, and that is what we've just been leading on to here, the ongoing role of the saints, of the Church of Christ.

So if this whole process is to be completed, it requires that the saints, individual Christians, and collectively as a Church, that they are fulfilling their role.

Because you could have all the rest. You could have the historical work of Christ. You could have the historic foundation of the Apostles and Prophets. You could have the ongoing ministry of missionaries and ministers.

But if this final step was not completed, the whole would be, if you like, ineffective. Because it is only as the people of God take what is given upon the basis of this foundation and this process and implement it that the Church of Christ is really doing and living as it ought to do and live.

[19 : 25] Now notice here that this work of ministry or work of service that God's people is required to do is so that the body of Christ may be built up.

Now, there's a strange thing. We usually think of the body of Christ, that is the Church, being built up by someone else, by the Holy Spirit or by the Lord Jesus himself.

And of course, without their work, the body of Christ could not be built up. But notice what is said here. It is that the pastors and teachers are to prepare God's people for works of service so that the body of Christ may be built up.

Now that's exactly the same thought that occurs in verse 16 again, in this same chapter. Literally, it would read like this. From him, the whole body, and then if we skip the next few phrases there, from him the whole body grows and builds up the body in love as each part does its work.

That is the main clause of that part of what this is a very, very long sentence that we're looking at here in this part of Ephesians chapter 4. But that is the main thought of that verse 16.

[20 : 43] From him, that's from Christ, the whole body builds up the body. Now that is an important truth that we need again to grasp today.

That it is the whole body that is all members of the Church of Christ whose work it is to seek to be building up the body, strengthening the Church, seeking to get the Church to grow in maturity.

Now when we're talking here about growing, we often today think about growth in terms of numbers. So that if we've got more people coming to Church, we think we're growing.

Well, we may be or we may not be. Because in New Testament terms, the real growth is growth in quality. What kind of Christians are we?

What kind of congregation are we? Are we growing to the maturity that's talked about here, the maturity of Christ? I think if we would concentrate maybe more on that aspect of what the New Testament says, then in many ways the growing in numbers would be a natural follow-on from that.

[21 : 58] So then we've looked at this fundamental truth that Paul makes clear here, that no one can become mature in isolation.

The whole context here is one of the context of grace in Christ, the foundation of the apostles and prophets, and the ongoing role of missionaries, ministers, and God's people, all involved together in this great work.

But then we have to look next at what exactly is this maturity that we're talking about. We've been banding this term about, we should be growing and becoming mature. But what exactly is Paul meaning here by this maturity?

Well, if we read from verse 13, continuing what I've said is a long sentence here that runs really from the beginning of verse 11 right to the end of verse 16 in the original.

In verse 13 we read, Until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature or reach complete manhood, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

[23 : 10] Now the first thing we see there about this unity is that there is a recognition of our corporate unity. in verse 13, until we all reach unity in the faith.

Now the emphasis upon the words, we all. So the emphasis of the Christian life is not just upon you and I as individuals striving to reach maturity for ourselves, but there is a corporate struggle, if you like.

There is a corporate work to be done. The New Testament emphasis is, concerning unity, be one because you are one.

In Christ Jesus we are one. Christ has only one body, only one church. There are not different churches as far as Christ is concerned, only his body.

And in any local situation, in any local manifestation of his body, such as we have here, there is to be unity. Because we are united in Christ.

[24 : 18] There is no other way that we can be Christian apart from being united to Christ. And if we are united to Christ, we are one. We are one body. Therefore the emphasis of the New Testament is, be one.

Show that unity. Demonstrate it. So in Christian maturity, there ought to be a recognition of this corporate unity, this unity as the body of Christ.

Without that recognition, then our Christian lives, individually and as a church, will be stunted because we don't recognize our vital connection to one another and above all, to the head who is Christ Jesus.

And if we are not recognizing that and not developing these connections, then how can there be growth and development? It's as if a part of a plant was trying to cut itself off from all the rest of that plant.

How could it develop or grow? But then also, there is to be in Christian maturity an acceptance of the need for Christian attainment.

[25 : 23] In verse 13, again, Paul says, until we all reach unity in the faith. And the word reach there could be translated attain.

It's something that is to be arrived at and something, therefore, that is to be strived at, that we want to reach that point. Reminded of Paul's own words when he talks about pressing on towards the mark, the idea of someone in a race trying to reach the finishing tape first.

Now that's the idea that is at the back of a lot of what Paul says concerning the Christian life. As Christians, we must accept the need for Christian attainment.

There is something to be achieved in this life concerning our own individual lives and concerning the Church of Christ. And that, I feel, is one of the great things that has been lost sight of today.

There is a tremendous work to be achieved that God has given us to do in this life. And the question we have to ask ourselves is, how are we doing?

[26 : 34] How are we working in terms of what he has commanded us? Too often, perhaps, we have had just the idea that we'll be able to glorify God perfectly in heaven, forgetting about the fact that God wants us to glorify him here on earth.

I'm reminded again of some of my favorite words by a covenanter, Donald Cargill, who, when he heard a jibe by a non-covenanting minister saying that, why was all this a duel being made by these covenanters?

We would get heaven and they shall get no more. Donald Cargill said, aye, we will have more. We will get God glory on earth, which is more than heaven.

Now, I think that's something that we have lost in our Christianity. The idea that there is something to be attained, there is something to be achieved here and now, something to be reached towards in this life.

Because it was only as Paul was striving towards that goal that he saw in the future, that is life, and the present was effective and useful in the service of God.

[27 : 47] Now, I'm not saying here, far from me to imply it, that we can reach perfection or full maturity in this life as Christians. But unless we have that aim, we're not going to be effective witnesses for Christ in the present.

And then, there is to be a firm grasp of the Christian faith in verse 13 again. Until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God.

that is here right in, wrapped up with all these other things. Now, today, as we know, there's a great deal of talk, maybe in some circles, about Christian unity and about some of these other things I've been saying.

But unless it is bound up with unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God, then it is empty talk. The unity of which Paul speaks here is the unity among those who have living faith in Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord and those who know him as the Son of God.

And there's this emphasis upon the great facts, the foundational facts of our Christian faith. Without these, all the rest disintegrates.

[29 : 03] All the rest simply becomes a matter of human feeling or human emotion or human experience. things. And people will just then compare their experience with the experience of others.

Whether Christian or non-Christian, all kinds of people have aspirations of one kind or another. But the unity of the Christian faith is based upon our knowledge of Jesus Christ, who he is, what he has done, that he really lived, that he really died, that he really rose again, and that he is the Savior of the world.

Now, of course, as we know, there is a danger of divorcing various things in the Christian life one from the other. Here we have the danger of divorcing faith and knowledge.

Paul keeps them together in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God. Today, there's a tendency for people maybe to talk a great deal about faith and not so much about knowledge, saying that they believe in Jesus Christ, although they wouldn't lay much stress upon exactly what they know concerning Jesus.

Or on the other hand, we may have the other extreme, maybe laying a great emphasis upon what we know, the intellectual, and not really having any living faith at all.

[30 : 28] Paul keeps the two together, and it's essential that they are kept together. Living faith and true knowledge of Jesus Christ. And so, in this brief look at Christian maturity, we come to the fulfillment of what Paul is talking about here.

And that is that if we are to have Christian maturity, we are to have a sense of measuring up to Christ. Now, that's putting it very bluntly, but getting the thought of what Paul is saying here at the end of verse 13.

and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Now, as in the authorized version, the word stature is used there. And it is something akin to this, the idea of stature or height.

Not in any physical sense, of course, but in the sense of Christ's stature as the perfect man. And that's the expression that's used here by Paul, the perfect man.

And the picture that we should have in our minds there to give us something of the flavor of what Paul is saying is of a mature male, someone who is strong and virile.

[31 : 44] That is the word that Paul uses here, the word for a man, a male, not just the word for a human being. So the idea here is of someone who has reached maturity, reached strength, who is full of power, and able to achieve things.

That's the picture that Paul is using. Now what does that mean in spiritual terms? It means that we are to have as our aim the Lord Jesus Christ, his kind of humanity, his kind of perfection.

That is our ultimate goal. That is our model. We may ask ourselves, in the Christian life, who do we see as our example? Who do we compare ourselves to?

Who do we measure up against? We may have all kinds of models that we may model ourselves on. We may look at other Christians around us and we may say, well, I'm not too bad because I'm perhaps just as good as other people around in this church or perhaps I'm a little bit better than some.

Perhaps I'm not just as good as some other people. But if we go around measuring ourselves in that kind of way against other people, we're not really going to have any start in this work of Christian maturity because that's not what we're asked to measure ourselves against.

[33 : 11] We're asked to measure ourselves against Christ, his perfect manhood. Now once we start doing that, we begin to see how very far short we come, how miserably we fail in the Christian life.

And yet, that is the standard to which we want to attain. That is the goal that we have. And that is the goal that Christ promises us eventually will be ours, will be achieved because when we shall see him, we shall be like him, he says.

Now unless we have that goal, unless we have that aim in this life, how can we really grow and develop in the Christian life? So then finally, just one or two implications of this maturity and particularly here verses 14 to 16.

If we have or are developing or striving towards this maturity, there will be certain consequences. There will be, first of all, stability in verse 14.

will no longer be infants tossed back and forth by the waves, blown here and there by every wind of teaching and so on. Now, this is something very, very important today.

[34 : 31] We live in a day when this is just commonplace. People being blown here and there by all these different changing ideas, both within the so-called Christian church and outside of it.

We have all kinds of ideas and changing opinions and yet, not one of them is better than the next one. We need a firm foundation in Christ and in his knowledge in the word of God and when we have that, when we have that sure foundation, we're not going to be blown about, blown off course, driven here or there by the changing ideas of this world.

Rather, we're going to be measuring every idea that we hear, every teaching that we hear against Christ and against his word and then we'll know and we'll be able to stand firm.

And as part of that, there is, Paul says here, speaking the truth in love. Our adhering to truth hasn't got to be in any kind of hard or harsh way, but it's to be in love.

If we're going to speak to this world concerning this great foundation that we have in the Christian life, this stability that we have, it is to be done in love, seeking the very best for other people as we have found it for ourselves in Christ.

[35 : 58] And then also, there is to be a developing vital relationship with Christ as a consequence of this maturity. We will in all things grow up into him who is the head that is Christ.

If we are on this road of Christian maturity, seeing some of these things that Christ reveals to us here and striving towards that end, we are indeed not striving just to gain intellectual knowledge or striving to have stability in the Christian life, but we are striving towards Christ, into Christ.

That's the idea that's used here of something that is growing in vital union and vital connection with Christ. Christ here thought of as the head of the body, the picture that the Apostle Paul often uses.

So, if we're developing, if we're growing in the Christian life, we're to be growing in this vital relationship with Christ. How is our relationship with Jesus Christ?

Our relationship with other people may be very good, with our families, with our friends, with our fellow Christians perhaps, but how is your relationship with Christ? How is that developing?

[37 : 14] How are you getting to know him? Are you studying his word? Are you drawing near to him in prayer and loving to do those things? That is a measure of how we are developing in the Christian life.

But then finally, there is, as a consequence of this maturity, the building up of a fit and active church. From him, in verse 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.

The more Christian maturity there is, then the more fit and active the church becomes as an instrument in God's hands for working his work in this world.

And it depends, you see here, upon each part doing the work. in verse 7, if we jump back there, we see that to each one of us, grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.

Christ has distributed the gifts, the abilities, the talents, whatever these may be, maybe many of them hidden. He has distributed them and he wants each part to do the work and to see what we can do together for the building up of the body of Christ.

[38 : 32] Christ. So, if we have got a vision of this Christian maturity, then it is going to have untold consequences, not only for our own lives, but for the life of our church.

If we have got this vision of growing up into Christ, not in any kind of sanctimonious or self-centered way, but because this is the greatest aim in the whole of life, that we should become mature in our Christian faith and we want to see our church developing to maturity, growing in numbers, yes, but growing especially to be Christ-like in every way.

Let us pray. Amen.