

Expectations & Realities of Church

Good morning. If you have your bibles, go ahead and turn with me to Ephesians 4. We are now officially right at the halfway point of our series on Ephesians. We also happen to be right at the midpoint of the book. So far, Paul's been talking largely about "what God is done." Put another way, about how we should think about the realities of what God has done. Today, he's gonna turn the corner and talk a lot more about what we should do in response to what God has done. Things are gonna start being a little less theological and a lot more practical. He's going to start giving us instructions on how we as a community of people should specifically put on display who God is. What it looks like to live in light of that when it comes to all sorts of arenas of our life.

And he starts with how we should think about the church *itself*. What is this thing exactly that we are a part of? The church is an interesting animal I think. Because when I think back over my life, some of the greatest frustrations and hurts I've experienced have come from the Church. And at the same time, some of the greatest joys and life-giving things that have ever happened to me have happened *through* the Church. So the Church is sort of this weird, volatile, powerful thing. **And today Paul is going to give us a picture, as well as some practicals as to what the Church is *supposed* to be like.**

But to set things up, I want to give us a principle to consider that will frame up the passage. Here's the principle: ***our ability to enjoy something depends greatly on our expectations of it.*** A lot of people have a hard time enjoying marriage for what it is, because they expected it to be something completely different. A lot of people can't enjoy parenting for what it is, because they expected it to be something completely different. Let me give you one specific example of this from my life. Several years back, my friend Jeff (who's a pastor here) wanted to introduce me to a new Ramen restaurant in town. And in general, I have a life rule that when Jeff tells me to try a restaurant, I always say yes. Now I don't know about you guys, but at that point, when I heard the word "ramen", I thought of the little packets you get at the grocery store for like .08 cents a piece, you add water, and then after you heat it up you add this little powdered flavor packet that almost definitely gives you cancer. That, in my head, was what ramen *was*. I was very familiar with it because it had literally kept me alive through college. **So my expectation was that when we went to this Ramen restaurant, they were going to serve us a better quality version of that.** A bowl of noodles. But for any of you that have had authentic Ramen, is it like the Ramen you get at the grocery store? *Not at all.* It's almost an entirely different thing. It's more like a soup with noodles *in it*, and other stuff in it as well. But because I went into that experience expecting Ramen to be one thing, I had a hard time enjoying what it truly *was*. And that was because it didn't meet any of my expectations of what I thought it *should be*. And here's the crazy thing—actual Ramen is *so much better than fake Ramen. It was so much better than what I wanted it to be.* But in that situation, **it was actually that my bad expectations of what it should be, kept me from enjoying the goodness of what it actually was.**

Okay, here's where that connects to our passage. **I think many of us have a hard time enjoying church for what it is, in part because of our expectations of what it *should be*.** A lot of us come into church experiences with all these expectations and assumptions of what church should be. And sometimes those expectations aren't even our fault—they're just things we've been trained to believe over time *about* the church. But what happens is we come in with these expectations, and then find ourselves very confused, or disappointed or even frustrated that those expectations aren't met. And so

what we often do is either leave and go find a church that *will* meet those expectations, we try to *force* the church we're *in* to better *meet* our expectations, or we just grow internally *bitter* and resentful at all the ways the church *isn't* meeting those expectations. But ironically the one thing we often neglect to do is **examine the validity of those expectations in the first place. We neglect to take a step back and go "is the problem with this church or these churches? Or is some of the problem in what I'm expecting a church to be?"** We forget to ask *are the expectations I have of church formed by me, or formed by what God says the church should be?*

So what Paul is gonna give us the chance to do today is exactly that. **He's gonna give us a picture of how the Church is supposed to function, what it's supposed to be. And I think what we get to do as he does that is examine our own expectations of church to see if they line up with what he says or not.** So as we work through this passage, I'm going to periodically jump off to the side and give some *expectations* and *realities* that I think this passage speaks to about the church. And remember as we do this, the goal is to consider **if our expectations of what church should be are preventing us from enjoying the reality of what it is.** Does that make sense? Okay, let's take a look at our passage, starting in ch. 4, v. 1:

*[1] I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner **worthy of the calling** to which you have been called, [2] with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, [3] **eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.** [4] There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— [5] one Lord, one faith, one baptism, [6] one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.*

Okay, I know it seems like there's a lot in there, but Paul's point in these six verses is actually fairly simple. He's just saying that **in light of Jesus making unity possible through the cross** (which we talked a lot about the past two weeks), that **we should do whatever it takes to maintain that unity. Jesus has made it possible, and now we should make it a reality.** We together should "walk in a manner worthy of the calling (unity) to which we have been called."

And Paul says the way we *do* that is by being "eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." The word for "being eager" there is probably better translated "being *diligent*." Most literally it's to "make haste" or we might say "make every effort." **We are to make every effort in being unified with each other.** Which leads us to our first expectation and reality about church...

Expectation: Everyone in our church should just get along.

So there's this expectation for a lot of people that the way you know you've found a good church is that everybody just gets along. Everyone is really pleasant with each other at all times, there's not really any conflict to speak of—relationships there are just breezy and effortless. And because of that, for a lot of people, when they start experiencing conflict with other people in our community, they internally freak out just a little. They start pushing away from relationship with them, or maybe even distance themselves from the community as a whole. Because they think that everyone should just be "getting along." But think about that for a second—if **that were the case, Paul's instructions to the church here wouldn't make any sense.** If unified relationships happen effortlessly, why would a church need to "make every

effort to maintain unity”? Effort wouldn’t be required for that at all. But Paul knows that’s not how it works, because he knows the reality about church. And that’s...

Reality: Unity takes work.

The idea Paul is trying to get across is that **unity among followers of Jesus does not happen by accident**. It’s not something you just happen to land on. It takes effort. It takes energy. It takes tears. It takes wading through conflict. It takes a willingness to embrace awkward conversations. It takes uncomfortable moments and follow-up discussions. **And it takes *all of us doing that persistently***.

Okay, because I live and breathe in church world a lot of the time, let me tell you a scenario that I’ve seen play out a *lot*—one that I think these instructions speak directly to. All the time I’ll hear about somebody in the church who isn’t around much, or is super irritable when they’re around, or is passive-aggressive towards others in the community when they’re around or whatever. And when you ask them what’s going on, a lot of times that person will say “well so-and-so said this one time, or did this one time, or neglected to do this one time—and I was really hurt by it.” And often, it’s not even something *recent*. It’s something that happened a month ago, three months ago, a year ago. And it might be that someone really did hurt them, someone really did say or do something that caused some damage. But as a result of that, what happened was that as a result, *neither person* “made every effort” to make it right. And yes, I said “*neither*” person.

Here’s why I say that. There’s two different places in the gospel of Matthew where Jesus explains how we should handle conflict with other followers of Jesus. In one of them, he says “if you realize that your brother has something against *you* (meaning if *you’re* the one who caused the conflict), then you should go and talk to them about it.” But then in the other passage, he also says that if your brother sins against *you* (meaning it’s the *other* person who caused the conflict), *you* should go talk to them about it. **So according to Jesus, when there’s conflict between you and another person in the church, whether you think it’s your fault, or their fault, it’s *always your* responsibility to go and talk to them about it.** In other words, “they started it” is not an acceptable excuse for unresolved conflict in God’s family. Regardless of whose fault I think it was, *I* should take it upon myself to go, as soon as I have the opportunity, and try to sort it out. That’s the type of thing that Paul has in mind when he talks about “making every effort.” Unity takes *work*.

Okay next, Paul is gonna shift gears a little, take a look at v. 7:

[7] But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift.

So Paul says “**even though we’re all a part of this one body and we’re called to be this thing together, that doesn’t mean we’re all called to be a part of it *in the exact same way***.” We might say it as “unity is not the same as uniformity.” *Unity* in the church is not the same thing as *uniformity* in the church.” **We can be united in our purpose as a community, we can *unified* and yet still be *different in the roles we play to achieve that goal***. Think about a football team—everybody on the team has the same purpose: *to win the game*. Some are successful at that goal—some are more 2017 Tennessee Vols-like in that goal. But they all have the same goal. But different players on the team go about it in very different ways. A quarterback works towards that purpose by making good throws and good hand-offs. A receiver works towards that purpose by running routes and catching the ball. A kicker works

towards that purpose by kicking the ball through the uprights. A defensive player works towards that goal by keeping the *other team* from scoring too much. But this is how a football team works—**everybody working towards the same goal, but each in their own way.** That is also a picture of how the church works. **We're all called to work towards the same goal—making Jesus known in the world. But we all are going to have our own unique role to play in how we contribute to that purpose.** And this speaks into the next expectation and reality about church.

Expectation: Everyone should be passionate about the things I'm passionate about.

It seems like often in the church, people want everyone else to care about the same things that *they personally* care about. For example, let's say you are a part of our church and you are really passionate about something. Maybe it's caring for the homeless, maybe it's foster care, maybe it's women's ministry—could be anything. Maybe it's a *spiritual topic* like theological training or the role of the Holy Spirit. But whatever it is—it's just something you are especially passionate about. **The temptation is to look at people who are less passionate about that thing than you are and make it a point of *temptation*.** "Well, I'm just out here really caring about this, it just seems like other people don't care about it at all. I think our church is unhealthy because nobody cares about this thing as much as I do." And you start growing really frustrated and resentful because they don't. That's the posture a lot of people take. But here's the reality...

Reality: God gives different people different passions.

Here's the thing: you may have more of a passion for certain things than other people—and *that's fine*. That's actually *great*. **It doesn't necessarily mean that you're right and they're wrong. It might just mean that you are gifted and equipped in a way that they aren't.** To bring back the football analogy, imagine if the kicker on the team were to go to the coach and go "coach, I don't know if you've noticed this, but our quarterback isn't kicking the ball *at all!* You know, it's almost like he doesn't even *care* about kicking the ball! I'm gonna go be a part of another team where all the quarterbacks care about kicking as much as I do." That wouldn't make any sense, and he wouldn't ever find that team. On a football team, the quarterback has one role to play, and the kicker has another—that's how it's supposed to be. That's the best way for a football team to function. Now, they still have the same purpose—winning the game. But they go about it in different *ways*. **And in the church, we all have the same purpose—making Jesus known to the world around us. But that doesn't mean we all go about it in identical ways.** That doesn't mean we all need to be equally passionate about all the same things. We *need* different people with different passions.

Paul goes on, v. 8:

[8] *Therefore it says [and this is a quote from the Old Testament] "When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men."*

So it's kind of easy to get lost in the details here, but all Paul is doing here is drawing on the imagery of an ancient king or ruler. What would happen is that when a king like this led his army to victory in a battle, he would distribute the "spoils of war" to his people in his city as *gifts*. So Paul uses that imagery to say that when Jesus won the victory through his death and resurrection, he also gave *his* people gifts.

And then v. 9-10, that are probably in parentheses in your bible, are just him drawing parallels between Jesus and the Old Testament passages he mentions—we'll skip those just for time's sake.

But to see what these gifts are, let's take a look at v. 11:

[11] And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers,

So the gifts Jesus gave to the Church are actually *people*: people who function in various types of leadership roles—he lifts five of them—for the good of the Church as a whole. Now, we could talk for hours about what the role of each of those should be in each local church, and what exactly they should look like. But I think **Paul's point is what all of these people are given to the church for**. Which is in v. 12. The reason God gave these people to the Church is...

[12] to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ,

So the point of all the various gifts in the church—leadership or otherwise—is that they would all “equip the saints for the work of ministry.” So here's our *next* expectation and reality:

Expectation: Church is something pastors do.

I think a lot of people get the impression that if church is a sport, those in leadership are the **athletes**. (Which would be about the only way I could be considered “athletic.”) Which would mean every Sunday is like a game, you guys are the fans, and so your job is to show up and drop your price of admission in the offering basket, and then watch me and Eric and Sara get up here and do our little ditty, while you guys enjoy it (or don't enjoy it). And then the rest of the week, you go about your life as normal, and maybe show up the next week if you liked it enough the week before. I really think that's low-key how a lot of people think church works. And because of that, there are plenty of churches that try each Sunday, to put on the best possible show they can. But behind all that is the belief that church is mainly something pastors do, and I watch or attend. But the reality is that...

Reality: Church is something we all do.

According to what Paul says in this passage, our job—the job of the *leaders* of the church—is to *equip the saints for the work of ministry*. Meaning, **if anything, it's more like you guys are the players and we as the leaders are coaches**. It's our job to make sure you have the right tools and the right mindset so that you can get out there and “play the game” 24/7 in your workplace, your friendships, your homes, at your dinner tables. *That's* the point of what we do *in here*, is to get you guys ready to be the church the rest of the week *out there*. To round out the metaphor, what we do here is just the halftime pep talk. What we're doing here is circling up the wagons and going “here's a reminder of why we exist, here's a reminder of what makes it all possible, now let's get to work.”

And this impacts the way we think about what we do here on Sundays. Because **it means our goal isn't so much to entertain you or impress you, as it is to equip you. We want to put as many tools in your belt as we can so that when you walk out that door, you feel equipped and empowered to love and serve and build relationships with people in our city the rest of the week**. Sure, we could set up tons of lasers and fog machines in here if we wanted—but we simply don't think that would get you any closer to that goal. So we'd rather spend our time and energy and money getting you closer to that

goal. We want to help equip you to “build up the body of Christ.” That’s our goal. Church is something we all do. Make sense?

But in order to do that, we need to grasp last thing. Which he unpacks more in the next verse, v. 13:

*[13] until we **all** [if you like to circle or highlight things in your bible, I want you to circle or highlight that word “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, [14] 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. [15] Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, [16] from whom the **whole body** [circle or underline that phrase “whole body”], joined and held together by **every** [circle that word “every”] joint with which it is equipped, when **each** [circle that word “each”] part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.*

Are you seeing a theme in those verses at all? Seems like Paul is emphasizing here that **for us all to mature and become more like Jesus, we need everyone chipping in. We need each of us contributing so that all of us grow.** So here’s our last expectation and reality:

Expectation: Other people should help me grow.

I think the default questions we start asking when we come around a church is “who can pour into me? Who can help me grow? Who can disciple me? Who can mentor me?” And those are valuable questions to ask. But asking those questions *only* can be a little short-sighted. We have been disciplined by the consumeristic world around us to evaluate all our relationships based on the question *what can they do for me?* But Paul paints a different picture—here’s the reality...

Reality: Everybody growing is everybody’s job.

According to this passage, **the key to us being a healthy church is everybody seeing it as their job to contribute to that.** We need to first ask “how am I helping others grow?” before we ask “how are people helping *me* grow?” **Being a follower of Jesus means being more focused on what we give to others, than what we get from others.** Jesus says that he came “to serve, not to be served.” Imitating that attitude of Jesus is how we achieve growth and maturity in the church.

And on top of that, here’s the great irony—when everyone is focused on who is benefiting them, nobody really benefits. But when everyone is asking how they can benefit others, everyone ends up benefiting. Everybody growing is everybody’s job.

So let me ask, as you look out at our church, or on your LifeGroup, who would you say is better off in their relationship with Jesus because of your efforts? Who loves Jesus more now than they did a month ago because of you? And listen—the answer to that question is not intended to puff you up with pride or to shame you—neither of those. It’s simply intended to be a litmus test of whether we are living into who God has called us to be as a community. The question to ask is not “who is helping me grow?” But rather the other way around. “Who am I helping to grow?” Because according to this passage, **everybody growing is everybody’s job.** For us all to become who God intends for us to be, we need all of us chipping in.

So this is the picture that Paul paints of the church. **Not a magical organization that is built around me and my preferences and my needs. Not a group of people to rally around my idealistic picture of what a church should look like—but a a family.** A group of people that I am called to belong to and contribute to. And I think at the end of the day, **this is actually the type of thing that all of us crave.** Whether we are able to articulate it or not, we all long to be a part of an organization where everyone is radically committed to the well-being of other people in it. **Where people aren't driven by their own agendas or preferences but by a sacrificial, self-denying interest in other people's benefit.** Where we live together in unity, but not uniformity. Where everyone can use their varied passions and callings to work towards a common goal. Where we all are equipped and empowered to go out and be who God made us to be. Where everybody is helping everybody grow. I think deep down, we all know that is a community worth belonging to.

But in order to get there, here's what it's going to take. **It's going to take us showing up each Sunday, every week to LifeGroup, ready to be radically committed to each other.** Not to our own good, not to our own idealistic picture of how church should function, not to our own passion projects and hobby horses, but to the kingdom of God and a radical love for one another. That's the roadmap to a healthy church. If we continually circle back to those realities, while letting our expectations fall by the wayside, we will slowly but surely, become the type of church Paul describes in this passage.

And where does the ability to do that come from? Take a look with me at Philippians 2. Here's what Paul says to another church he writes to:

[3] Do nothing [do how many things? No things] out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, [4] not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

So listen, just because the “interests” you have are spiritual interests, wanting church to be a certain way or look a certain way, or wanting other people to contribute to your discipleship in a certain way—just because they're spiritual interests doesn't mean they aren't selfish interests. And Paul says that instead of looking to those own interests of ours, here's what we are to do instead:

[5] In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;

So Jesus was the one person who had the right to sit back and demand that everyone else meet his demands. He was the one person who had the right to force every other person to orient themselves around *him* and what *he* wanted—even though he would be within his rights as God to do any of those things—here's what he did instead:

*[6] rather, he made himself **nothing** by taking the very nature of a **servant**, being made in human likeness. [8] And being found in appearance as a man, he **humbled himself** by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross.*

Jesus instead chose to *empty* himself of his rights, his preferences, his demands of others, and instead die on a cross for them. He chose to take the form of a servant, radically committing himself to the good

of others. **The way that Jesus leads his Church is with the posture of self-denial.** So in light of that, let's honestly evaluate any of the demands we make of others in the church, or of the church itself, and let's honestly ask ourselves, ***does this look like self-denying sacrifice for the good of others? Or, does this look like asking other people to orient themselves around my own preferences?*** If they look like Jesus, let's pursue them with everything we have. But if they don't, let's put them to death for the good of Jesus, for the good of each other, and the good of our church.

Let's pray.