

## Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

### Sermon Series: Under Construction

(studies in Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus)

### **How the Church Works**

(Ephesians 4:1-16)

### **Study #5**

#### Introduction: The way things work...

I suspect that internal combustion engines will one day be shelved for something cleaner. But I think we can all say *"Thanks"* to the engineers who dreamed it up, because it has fueled a lot of our world's progress over the past century.

For just a minute, let's consider how the internal combustion engine in your car works. (unless your car is electric, in which case, none of this applies)

The order in which things happen is - intake, compression, power, exhaust.

*Intake* describes the entrance of gasoline and air into the combustion chamber.

*Compression* happens as a piston rises in the cylinder, compressing the gas / air mix.

*Power* is generated when a spark from the spark plug causes an explosion in the combustion chamber, sending the piston down the cylinder, turning the crankshaft.

*Exhaust* describes the piston's rise that forces the residue of gas and air out of the combustion chamber.

Intake. Compression. Power. Exhaust. It happens thousands of times every minute inside your engine, rotating the crankshaft that puts power to the wheels and takes you to HEB.

Of course, we don't need to know all of this when we start our cars. But looking at the innards of our car's engine and knowing how it all works increases our appreciation for the marvels we drive.

This morning, we're looking at the innards of Jesus' church. The Apostle Paul will explain how the Manufacturer designed it all to work.

His explanation will greatly increase our appreciation for the marvel of this thing we call "church" AND it will help us, here, to become the church Jesus created us to be.

*Ephesians, so far...*

In Part 1 of the letter to the church at Ephesus (chapters 1-3), Paul has pointed out our lostness before God apart from Jesus, he's detailed God's work in saving us, and he's listed some of God's blessings to us in Jesus.

To this point, the only instruction Paul has given us has been to **"remember"** (2:11) God's saving grace.

Things change, though, with the **"Therefore"** of 4:1, as Paul shifts his focus to our response to all that God has done for us.

#### **Walking Worthy (vv. 1-10)**

#### **Walking Worthy - God's Call to You, Me, Us (4:1-6)**

*A begging apostle (v. 1)*

**[1] Therefore, I, the prisoner<sup>1</sup> of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called**

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<sup>1</sup> Paul's description of himself as a **"prisoner of the Lord"** highlights that even though he is in a Roman prison, he is ultimately in the hands of Jesus.

### The language of “implore”

The first thing I want you to note here is that Paul did not issue a command. He said, **“I...implore you.”**<sup>2</sup>

I have wanted to point out that it is contrary to the spirit of our faith for leaders to order people around. Paul didn’t. Elders and pastors don’t. The motivational vocabulary of Christianity is that of entreaty.<sup>3</sup>

So, picture Paul on his knees begging us to do something.

And, to his **“implore”** to **“walk worthy”**, issued on a sunny Sunday morning, sitting in comfortable chairs in an air-conditioned room and surrounded with friends, we say, *“Amen! I’m in!!”*

It can get tough, though, to **“walk worthy”** when we are in the presence of enemies, or when we are in a hostile-to-faith setting. This may be why Paul threw in this self-identifier, **“the prisoner of the Lord.”**

### From Paul, prisoner of Jesus, of Rome

Paul isn’t *implo*ring anyone to do anything that he himself has not done. He’s **“walked worthy”** in good times and bad. He’s writing from a Roman jail because that’s where **“worthy walking”** landed him.

Paul’s words to the Ephesians would have been like us, today, reading a letter written by one of our brothers or sisters serving time in jail somewhere for their outspoken witness for Jesus, urging us, imploring us, to **“walk worthy.”**

These **“implores”** have a certain credibility.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Other versions of the Bible translate the Greek word with **“urge”** (NIV), **“beseech”** (King James), and **“appeal and beg”** (Amplified and Living). I found no translation that renders the word **“order”** or **“command.”**

<sup>3</sup> This is not unusual vocabulary for Paul. See Acts 26:3, where he exhorts King Agrippa to respond to the gospel. Also, Romans 9:1-3, where he pleads with his fellow-Jews to receive the Lord Jesus Christ as their Messiah / Savior.

Any one of us who are facing difficulties or actual opposition to our faith in Jesus, might be tempted to hang up our Bible, and walk *away* rather than walk *worthy*.

Paul says, *“Don’t do it. It’s worth it. You’ll never regret hanging in there for Jesus’ sake.”*

So, we agree to hang in there. But, we wonder, what, exactly, does Paul have in mind when he speaks of **“worthy walking”**? Here it is.

### *Hallmarks of a worthy walk (vv. 2-3)*

**[2] with all humility<sup>5</sup> and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, [3] being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.**

### Humility, gentleness, patience

*“Humility”* is looking at a selfie with no editing, and thinking, *“So that is who I am, beauty marks and warts and all. OK.”*<sup>6</sup> When we walk in humility, we adopt a reality-based assessment of who we are.

In the first century, *“gentle”* described a horse whose strength was under the rider’s control. The gentle horse is strong, but you can trust her around kids. A gentle Christian isn’t weak, but their strength is under control. A gentle Christian uses strength to benefit the weak.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> This would be similar to reading letters from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who wrote from a German jail before his execution in 1945, or from Martin Luther King, Jr and his 1963 “letter from a Birmingham jail.”

<sup>5</sup> If humility is not valued much today, it was not exactly a core value of the Greeks or the Romans, either. Neither ancient Greek nor ancient Latin even possessed a word that meant what Paul wanted to communicate here, so he coined a word on the spot to fill the bill.

<sup>6</sup> Church leaders are to be humble when correcting opponents (2 Tim. 2:25). All Christians are to be humble when receiving instruction (James 1:21); when witnessing (1 Peter 3:15); when rebuking someone caught up in sin (Gal. 6:1); when teaching (James 3:1-13).

<sup>7</sup> Moses is called meek (“the meekest man in the world”), yet he certainly was not afraid to confront difficult situations, and to lead God’s people boldly.

And “*patience*” is me, waiting for God’s timing for something I want desperately without losing my passion or my temper. Patience is mine when I put my trust in God.

And there is more.

### Forbearance in love

When Jesus came down off the Mount of Transfiguration with Peter, James, and John, He encountered a chaotic scene at the base of the mountain.

The other nine disciples had tried but failed to cast a demon out of a man’s son. (Their lack of success was due to a lack of faith.)

Using the exact same word that we translate here in Ephesians “*tolerance*,” Jesus said to them, “*How long must I PUT UP with you!?*” (Matthew 17:17)

Here (Ephesians 4), Paul is giving us the Christian doctrine of “*putting up with*.”

Paul’s not talking about putting up with abuse or domestic violence or lying or gossip. Sin is not to be put up with.

But if we want to “*walk worthy*,” you and I are going to have to learn to put up with each other’s mistakes and weaknesses and annoyances and differences. Honest mistakes due to forgetfulness or being late because someone miscalculated traffic...these we let slide.

And, one more thing.

We will be “*diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace*.”

### Preserving the unity of the Spirit

Not *create* a unified church. Not *orchestrate* the unity of the Spirit. Not *establish* unity.

No, our assignment is to *preserve* the unity the Spirit of God has created.

I think I’ve heard the Elders pray more about this over the past two to three years than at any point in our church’s history.

When we realized the amount of money that was going to be coming our way due to the sale of the ten acres (the land on which The Bristol apartments are being built), we recognized the blessings and the dangers of this financial windfall.

An influx of cash can be a great benefit to a family or to a church. But there are lots of stories about these types of blessings becoming nightmares of squabbling and in-fighting.

So, we have prayed fervently that we here would all “*be diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace*.”

God has been gracious to us. I praise Him for the unity we have continued to enjoy as we have discussed and prayed and determined how to best invest this money in God-honoring ways.

As well, with increasing diversity also comes possible unity-breakers. So, while the presence of Encuentro has been delightful, we have prayed fervently that we would be “*diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace*.”

It is my prayer that the coming years will see increasing ethnic and cultural diversity, opening up dramatic new ways to show a watching world that Jesus brings unity. We must continue to be diligent to “*to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace*.”

God has been so kind in the unity that we have enjoyed over the decades here. May God grant us continued protection as we continue to do all we can to preserve our unity.

When these five graces are in place, we are walking worthy. And given all that we have in common, we should, by all means, put them in place.

*Worthy walking is a group thing (vv. 4-6)*

**[4] There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; [5] one Lord, one faith, one baptism, [6] one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.**

While there are many churches and denominations, there is but one CHURCH, made up of all those who believe in Jesus.

We all call the same Jesus, "Lord." We have all submitted to the rite of baptism.<sup>8</sup> We all affirm the truth of the Bible, and the deity of Father, Son, and Spirit.

We don't hold out hopes for unanimity or uniformity. We are too different from each other for that. But the reality is that our unity is far deeper than *organizational*. We are *organically* united by purpose, heritage, faith and future.

A musical instrument can make beautiful music all by itself. But, to maximize the power of music, instruments join in an orchestra.

And, to maximize the impact of His people on earth, God created this beautiful, diverse, many-membered church, so that through the music we make together, the many beautiful facets of God's grace and mercy will be on full display.

So, sure, there is an individual component to our worthy walking. But our calling is ultimately a group thing.

We, here at Northwest, are called to this unity, and it is within reach for us.

I say that not because of a confidence in positive thinking, but because of the victory won by Jesus.

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<sup>8</sup> Some Bible students believe that there probably was no such thing as an unbaptized believer in the first two or three centuries of the church. If you had believed in Jesus, you were baptized.

**"Walking Worthy" - Possible Because of Christ's Victory! (4:7-10)**

**[7] But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift. [8] Therefore it says, "WHEN HE ASCENDED ON HIGH, HE LED CAPTIVE A HOST OF CAPTIVES, AND HE GAVE GIFTS TO MEN."<sup>9</sup>**

**[9] (Now this expression, 'He ascended,' what does it mean except that He also had descended into the lower parts of the earth? [10] He who descended is Himself also He who ascended far above all the heavens, so that He might fill all things.)**

The Old Testament quote here is taken from a victory psalm sung in celebration of one of King David's military conquests.<sup>10</sup>

David led the soldiers in his army who had been captured by the enemy to freedom and gave gifts to them after the battle.

The background to this hymn is relevant to you and to me because Jesus has conquered His enemies: Satan, sin, and death.

Jesus descended. Not to Hell, as some believe, but from Heaven to earth. Then, He descended even lower, into obedience, sacrifice, pain, and death, all the way to the grave.<sup>11</sup>

But His descent wasn't the end of the story. He next ascended to new life on Easter and then to Heaven.

In Jesus' ascent, He led captive "**a host of captives.**" And who are these captives? Us!

We have been set free by King Jesus.

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<sup>9</sup> This is a quote from Psalm 68:18.

<sup>10</sup> It recalls the victory over the foes who had inhabited Jerusalem, formerly called "Jebus".

<sup>11</sup> In referring to the earth as "**the lower parts of the earth**" I believe that Paul is simply highlighting the incredible condescension of Christ in coming from Heaven to earth. Abasement before exaltation. Incarnation before glorification.

As He has led us to freedom, He has distributed gifts - victory gifts of grace - forgiveness of sin, eternal life, the presence of the Spirit.

And, together, when we are working like a united team and are “walking worthy” we bring honor to the Lord who has redeemed us.

To borrow from the sports world, we might say that we, the church, are the team that is assigned to fulfill Jesus’ Great Commission.

And, like any team, different members of the team have different functions. Some of those on Jesus’ team will serve as equipper-coaches.

### **Jesus’ Great Commission Team (vv. 11-16)**

#### **The Church’s Players (4:11-12a)**

*Behind the scenes equippers (v. 11)*

***[11] And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, [12a] for the equipping of the saints...***

Those who fill the offices Paul lists here either served as the original foundational leaders of the church or serve among the leaders of today’s churches.

In terms of the leadership they provide within the church context, these are often up-front people. We, in the church, know them.

However, in the broader context of our world, these equipper-coaches are generally not well-known.

True, there are some coaches who have been around so long and have had so much success that we know their names. But, for the most part, more people *don’t* than *do* know the names of the coaches of this or that team.

For that reason, I’m referring to these equipper-coaches as “behind the scenes” people. Among them are apostles and prophets.

### **Apostles and prophets**

In the most technical sense, there fourteen apostles.

At first there were twelve. Then, with the loss of Judas Iscariot, there were eleven. Then, Matthias was added.<sup>12</sup> And then, some years later, Saul of Tarsus (Paul) became an apostle.<sup>13</sup>

But there were others who were identified as apostles (small “a”) in the book of Acts.<sup>14</sup> And, there have been men and women who, through the centuries, have had “apostolic” ministries - starting Christian works, planting churches, launching movements.<sup>15</sup>

The second group of equippers listed are prophets. In the early days of the church, prophets sometimes spoke fresh revelation from God to the followers of Jesus. Sometimes, they foretold something that would happen.<sup>16</sup>

As the centuries have passed, those with prophetic gifts more often use them to proclaim truth revealed in Scripture through preaching.

### **Evangelists**

Paul next mentions evangelists. Evangelists grow the church by bringing people to an encounter with Jesus.

<sup>12</sup> The Eleven stipulated (in Acts 1) that an apostle had to be someone who had been among the Lord’s followers from the baptism of John until the ascension of the resurrected Christ into heaven.

<sup>13</sup> Paul was an exception to the rule set forward by the other apostles, an exception to which he himself admitted. (See 1 Corinthians 15:8)

<sup>14</sup> In the New Testament, the term “apostle” (literally “one who is sent”) is sometimes used more generically of those with an *apostolic* ministry. It is used of Barnabas (Acts 14:14), Silas (Romans 16:7), and James, Jesus’ half-brother (Galatians 1:19). Interestingly, the term is not used of anyone in Acts after 16:4.

<sup>15</sup> Apostles traveled widely, taking the Gospel with them, making disciples and establishing churches. Prophets seem to have been more tied to one location, grounding fledgling churches in God’s truth.

<sup>16</sup> As in Acts 5, when a prophet (Agabus) told about a soon-to-come famine; Acts 21:9. Also, when referring to Philip the evangelist (See Acts 6; NOT the apostle) who had four daughters who were all prophetesses.

Of course, every Christian has the assignment and the privilege of sharing the good news of Jesus with others.<sup>17</sup>

But some Christians are especially gifted by God in evangelism. They see fruit as they share the Gospel. People come to faith as they witness. These are evangelists.

### Pastors and teachers

And then, God has provided for the on-going shepherding and instruction of the church through “***pastors and teachers.***”

It has been my honor to have served here at Northwest in that capacity for a long time. We pastor-teachers<sup>18</sup> are charged to make disciples within the context of a local church.

Pastor-teachers are to help Christ-followers grow in Jesus and to help the assembly grow together in worship, love, and witness.<sup>19</sup>

The four equipper-coaches Paul lists here represent the church’s *inaugurators* (apostles & prophets), *incorporators* (evangelists), and *establishers* (pastor / teachers).

But, as we all know, God’s church is made of up more than equipper-coaches.

Each local church is mostly comprised of players, and they are anything but “behind the scenes” people. They are Christians, charged with the front-line assignment to carry out Jesus’ Great Commission.

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<sup>17</sup> See 2 Timothy 4:5, 1 Peter 3:15.

<sup>18</sup> Most scholars agree that the two descriptors “pastors” and “teachers” are best linked as in “pastor/teacher”.

<sup>19</sup> There are different ways to refer to the primary office of leadership in a church. Very often, the New Testament seems to use the term “pastor” (which means, literally, “shepherd”) interchangeably with “*overseer*” and “*elder*” and “*bishop*”. These terms are used to refer to the same ministry in a local church, each term having a slightly different shade of meaning. In 1 Peter 5, for instance, Peter instructs the *elders* to be good *bishops* as they *pastor/shepherd* (1 Peter 5:1ff). Significantly, references to leadership in the church is almost always in the plural, not the singular. Yes, the New Testament is really big on team leadership.

Paul refers to them as “***saints***”.<sup>20</sup> If you believe in Jesus, you are a saint. And if you are a saint, the “ministry” belongs to you.

*Front-line servants / ministers (v. 12)*

***[12] for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ***

### The crucial element of equipping

Anything involving sports or computer programming, music or car mechanics involves training. If you want to do something well, you’ve got some learning to do. You need to be equipped.

If you want to serve Jesus, equipping is required. And “equipping” is why Christian ministries do what they do.

When I went to India in April with Paul Lere (Paul leads International Training Partners), I took part in a workshop consisting of nineteen modules requiring nearly thirty hours of interactive learning that was designed to equip those of us in attendance with relational skills. I needed that equipping.

We all need equipping if we’re going to serve Jesus well. And equipping for service is a big part of why we do what we do around here.

- Every time I speak to you on a Sunday morning, I am aiming to equip you with truth from Scripture to serve Jesus.
- Every time you meet with a Care Group or with an Adult Bible Fellowship, you will find both life-changing content and a loving culture that will equip you for service.
- “Interface” mentoring groups equip the women who participate in how to walk with God and with life skills.
- The study meeting on Tuesday evenings is designed to equip men to excel in life with God at the center.

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<sup>20</sup> One who is set aside for God’s purposes.

- Our age-specific ministries (children - Elevate, youth - Refining Fire, young adults) seek to do the same thing through classes and social gatherings, service projects, and missions trips.

Paul doesn't beat around the bush here, and I'm not going to, either. It was clear from Ephesians 1 (verse 4) that God saved you to be *holy*. It is just as clear from Ephesians 4 that God saved you that you would *serve*.

### The point of equipping: service

You were not saved to be a spiritual bench warmer and you weren't saved to cheer on the starting five. You, a saint, are an integral part of Jesus' Great Commission team. You, like every other believer, are a ministry somebody.

Every Christian is to be at maximum when it comes to serving Jesus. And serving Jesus is so multi-faceted. There are lots of places to serve, some of them right here at church.

There are lots of avenues for service you could pursue here at church, and some of them are listed in the weekly program.

In fact, for some of you, your primary front-line service for Jesus may take place here at church. But all of us will also serve outside of the church.

You will serve Jesus at your job, in your home, in your neighborhood, with friends. Who knows where and in what capacity you will serve?

I think you'll find inspiration and maybe even direction from one of my favorite biblical characters when it comes to Christians serving Jesus: Archippus.

Paul writes, ***[Colossians 4:17] Say to Archippus, "Take heed to the ministry which you have received in the Lord, that you may fulfill it."***<sup>21</sup>

So, what was Archippus' ministry?

We don't know. Small groups? Street evangelism? Work Bible study? Kids' ministry? Youth work? Helping widows and orphans?

It could have been anything, and that's why I love Archippus. The vagueness of Paul's words says volumes about the wideness of possibilities for serving Jesus.

What is your Archippus ministry?

Some here would say that their primary kingdom ministry is nurturing their family. Others serve prisoners. There are some here who disciple college students, help grieving neighbors, befriend internationals, financially resource Christian ministries, give to the food pantry, teach kids...The sky's the limit.

You are especially gifted by God to be at the pointy end of the spear, on the front lines, serving Jesus in ways that no one else can, reaching out to people no one else has access to.

When you take advantage of the equipping that's been provided to you and put that training to work in serving Jesus, and when the rest of us here do the same, we will become, together, Jesus' *"Dream Team."*

That is the church Paul goes on to describe. It isn't a church that is perfect or that has "arrived." It is, though, a church that's moving toward maturity.

### **Team Play (4:13-16)**

*A church moving toward maturity (v. 13)*

***[13] until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fulness of Christ.***

Here is a picture of a church where everybody is taking "next steps" with Jesus.

<sup>21</sup> Archippus is also mentioned in the introduction of the short letter to Philemon.

Some are taking a “next step” to stop an addictive habit, others are learning to pray or to give generously. Some are just taking first steps into faith.

There’s nothing that brings a smile to God’s face like seeing a church fellowship, made up of people who are at different places in our faith journey, move toward maturity by taking next steps together.

Next, Paul describes a stable church.

*A church moving toward stability (vv. 14-15)*

***[14] As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; [15] but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him, who is the head, even Christ***

It is the mark of *immaturity* to be *unstable*. We expect that in children and in adolescents. Every piece of new information changes a child’s perspective. Immature people are easy to manipulate.

An immature church is, too. So, a church that is regularly equipped by solid, biblical truth is protected from manipulation. That church isn’t derailed by every new teaching that comes down the pike. You can’t pull the wool over the eyes of that church. They don’t fall for tricks and schemes.

That church is child-like in its whole-hearted trust, but it isn’t child-ish. It’s learning to “adult” (the verb) into service. It isn’t boring and it isn’t predictable, but it is stable.

Then, the church that “works” is moving forward into growth.

*A church moving forward (v. 16)*

***[16] from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by that which every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.***

Here, Paul uses the image of a human body to picture the life of Jesus’ church. Each part is to be healthy and engaged, serving the needs of the body.

So, imagine a human body performing a simple act like walking, or something more challenging, like a complicated gymnastics move.

If every part of the body isn’t pitching in and doing its part, the body walks with a limp, and it sure can’t do a backflip.

Likewise, if everyone in the church isn’t “working”, the church doesn’t work, either.

But, when each one of us is contributing what we have to offer to the work of Jesus, the body (that church) gets healthy and grows in all of the ways that the Lord Jesus wants it to grow.

There will always be *qualitative* growth. The worship of the church will be more genuine, the relational connections will be more sacrificial, and the passion to bring friends to Jesus will be more loving and intentional.

Sometimes, it will mean growth in the *numbers* of people who come to a church. As people taste and see that the Lord is good through the ministries of the church, they will become a part of that church.

And, God willing, it will mean growth in *impact*. One of our greatest dreams here is that our church will have impact outside of our church that is completely disproportionate to our size.

We want to be a church that has a growing “touch” into our San Antonio community in ways beyond what would be expected by a smaller church. We want to be growing in our support of Missions partners so that our cross-cultural impact is far greater than anyone would expect from us.

And we long for all of these kinds of growth because it will leave people who observe thinking, “*What a great God those people serve!*”