

NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH

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Heaven on Earth_ Ephesians 4

Dr. Mark Batterson

From 1934 until 1961, a British historian named Arnold Toynbee published a 12 volume history on the history of civilization tracing the rise and fall of 19 civilizations. There's a question long debated by historians. Do all civilizations follow a predictable pattern a life cycle from birth to growth to decline to death? Or is it possible after a civilization experiences decline to experience a rebirth? Toynbee believed that civilizations could experience a rebirth but the key was something that he called a creative minority. According to Toynbee, the collapse of civilization does not happen because of outside attack or external threat. The disintegration of civilization is caused by the deterioration of this creative minority which begs the question, what is a creative minority. Toynbee actually cites the church as an example, but it's any minority that creatively responds to crisis and whose response makes revival, makes reformation, makes Renaissance possible.

Now, let me push that envelope. The biblical word for creative minority is remnant. It's the 7,000 during the days of Elijah, who would not bow to Baal. They stayed faithful to Yahweh and they called the nation to renewal. The remnant is a creative minority, often a moral minority, who don't cave to cultural icons, who courageously and compassionately live out their convictions who exercise prophetic imagination in the face of impossible problems.

I recently read a book by Roger Stronstad titled 'The Prophethood of All Believers'. Now he argues that the church has become a didactic community rather than a prophetic community. In other words, we're better at exegeting than exercising the gifts of the Spirit. In his words, sound doctrine is treasured above charismatic action.

Now listen, we need sound doctrine, right about now, but the goal is charismatic action. And I believe that our generation is going to experience miracle science in wonders with greater variety and frequency than we ever have before. Why do I believe it? Because we need it. What did Paul say? He said, our gospel did not come to you with mere words, but with power, and with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction. Long story short, Stronstad argues that we aren't just the priesthood of believers. We are the Prophethood of believers. We're the company of prophets. We are the remnant. We are the creative minority.

This weekend, we continue our series 'Heaven on Earth'. It's right around 62 AD Rome is at the peak of its political and military power, but it's showing signs of moral and cultural decline. And Paul is exhorting this church in Ephesus to step up and to step in, to its destiny as the creative minority. In the words of Timothy Gambass, "The church has its greatest relevance to the world when it's most unlike the world in its corrupted forms." The church offers a counter narrative, a counter culture, a counter

balance. Now I love the way Lesslie Newbigin says this, "We must live in the kingdom of God in such a way that it provokes questions for which the gospel is the answer." We have a very different vision; we have a very different way of valuing things, a very different way of making decisions, a very different way of treating people. When we bless those who curse us, pray for those who persecute us, love our enemies, guess what, it provokes questions for which the gospel is the answer. When we turn the other cheek and go the extra mile and when we care for the poor, it provokes questions for which the gospel is the answer.

And so let me go back to Arnold Toynbee one more time. Toynbee argues that the disintegration of civilization is caused by the deterioration of this creative minority. And here's where it gets fascinating. Creative minorities eventually implode, if and when they worship their former selves. In other words, when they have more pride in the past, than vision in the future Houston, we have a problem R. T. Kendall said it this way, "Sometimes the greatest opposition what God wants to do next come from those who are on the cutting edge of what God did last."

With that as a backdrop, I want to pick up where we left off last week Ephesians four, verses four, five, and six we will get as far as we can go.

"⁴ There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all."

Paul makes these seven, one statements and I love these; one body, one spirit, one hope, one faith, one Lord, one baptism, one God and Father of all. This was an early Christian creed and it was revolutionary in the Roman context. In 12 AD, Caesar Augustus the same Caesar who declared that a census should be taken, declared himself pontifex maximus or chief priest of Rome. He renovated 82 Roman temples he re-instituted sacrificing animals to the Roman gods. And upon his death, Augustus was declared the Son of God, simply put, Caesar is Lord. Anything less, anything else is treason against Rome. So when Paul says there is one Lord, when Paul says Jesus is Lord, it is in your face. It is a frontal assault. It is a creedal coup d'etat against Rome.

This is why Christians were persecuted. This is why they worshiped in catacombs. This is why they were thrown into Roman Colosseum. See, it sounds simple enough but this creed is more complex than we give it credit for. For starters, this creed is not politically correct. Instead of pledging allegiance to Rome, these early Christians risked their lives by reciting these words; they are bowing the knee to their king, and his kingdom. Plus, you've got one God, and three persons, Father, Son, and Spirit in this creed. Now that doesn't add up in four dimensions, but that's because God doesn't fit within the logical constraints of the left brain. The Trinity personifies this idea of unity in diversity. It's this beautiful picture of individualism and collectivism in perfect harmony. It's all for one, individualism and it's one for all collectivism. More on that in a minute.

Verse seven, "*But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.*"

Now, let me make an important distinction right here. Theologically speaking, there are two kinds of grace there is common grace, which is a universal expression of God's goodness, truth and beauty to anyone in everyone at all times. In the Sermon on the Mount you remember Jesus gives this counterintuitive command to love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you that you may be sons and daughters of your Father in heaven. But the next verse is key because Jesus grounds this argument in common grace. He says, "*He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.*"

And so the sun that shines, the rain, that falls are every day examples of common grace. Common grace is universal, special grace it's as unique as you are. Just as you have a unique fingerprint, you have a unique grace print. Verse seven is speaking of this special grace, and it's only activated by faith. It's the grace by which God justifies, sanctifies and glorifies.

Long story short, please hear this. You are uniquely gifted and uniquely graced by God himself. There never has been never will be anyone like you're not a testament to you a testament to the God who created you significance of that is this. No one can worship God like you or for you; lead like you or for you, love like you or for you. It's this theology of dignity that we talked about last week; the image of God in me greets the image of God in you. It's the sanctity of life from womb, to tomb. The Talmud says it this way, if someone takes a life; it's as if they destroy an entire universe. If someone saves a life, it's as if they save the entire world. Every number has a name; every name has a story, every story matters to God that is biblical individualism.

Then you have to flip the script and flip the coin. What God does for us, is never just for us. Now I love the way that Bishop TL Roger said it on the upper zoom this week. He said, "The degree you earn isn't for you. You earn the degree for the students you teach, the clients you counsel, the constituents you represent, the athletes you coach, the patients you care for." What God does for us is always for others, to the third and fourth generation that is biblical collectivism.

Now, one of the distinctives of the early church is that they shared everything in common. That wasn't government mandated. This is not socialism, per se. These were free will offerings. Honestly, it's a little bit like our relief fund that you have given \$468,000 to during this COVID crisis. Why? To bless others, to help others. And I want to say, a heartfelt thank you because that is functioning the way that the early church did. And I might add this that'll provoke questions for which the gospel is the only answer.

Now, speaking of privilege, I think it's one of those words, especially if you add the word white that is so polarizing for so many people. There are those who deny it, there are those who use it to demonize others. And so let me try to walk that wire. The dictionary defines privilege as a special right or unique advantage gained by birth, by social position, by effort or by concession. I listened to a fascinating talk

this week by Dr. Brian Laurits and this is a paraphrase so I hope I do it justice but here it is. You don't need to apologize for privilege earned or unearned. You need to steward it, you need to leverage it for other people. That is precisely what Jesus does. In Philippians 2:7 it says he gave up his divine... What? Privileges. How? He took the humble position as a slave.

Let me paint a picture. In 1716 count Nicolaus Zinzendorf formed a creative minority called The Order of the Mustard Seed. It was an eclectic group; it included the king of Denmark, the Archbishop of Canterbury, the chief of the Cree tribe, and lots of ordinary people like you and like me. This remnant, if you will, pledged themselves to three simple but radical commitments,

- 1) To be True to Christ
- 2) To be Kind to People
- 3) To take the Gospel to the Nations

Two members of that creative minority, David Nitschmann and Johann Leonhard Dober got a burden for slaves in the Dutch West Indies. So they check this out, sold themselves into slavery in order to incarnate the gospel. That will provoke questions for which the gospel is the only answer. As their ship sailed from the docks they said to their families that they left behind, "May the Lamb that was slain receive the reward for his suffering." That is leveraging your privilege. That is stewarding your privilege for the cause of Christ.

Let me switch gears. I said it last week. I'll say it again this week. Words matter. Now, if we don't agree on definitions, it's difficult having a dialogue because we're speaking two different languages. A lot of things get lost in translation and often we miss the forest for the trees. Last week talked about these four cardinal virtues in verse two. Do you remember these - humility, gentleness, patience and tolerance.

And I want to double back to tolerance because we live in a culture that prides itself on tolerance. But it doesn't always practice what it preaches, okay. In the words of Inigo Montoya, you keep using that word, I do not think it means what you think it means. Tolerance by dictionary definition, is a fair, objective and permissive attitude towards those whose opinions beliefs and behaviors differ from ours. Now, the opposite of tolerance is bigotry. Bigotry, by definition, is intolerance towards those who hold a different opinion from us and therein lies the irony.

You know, the culture at large often accuses the church of bigotry, and I am not claiming innocence on all counts, okay. But listen, Westboro Baptists does not represent the Jesus way. The Jesus way is humble, gentle, patient tolerant. Again, not making excuses, not pleading innocent, I want you to hear this - The accusation of bigotry is all too often an example of bigotry. Stick with me. Our culture preaches tolerance, and then it practices cancel culture if you make a mistake. Our culture preaches tolerance, but it practices social media shaming, if you dare disagree. And when biblical convictions conflict with political correctness, it is so often written off as bigotry or hypocrisy or even hate speech.

Again, not making any excuses or pleading innocent for groups like Westboro Baptist, but I'll say it like I see it - its smoke and mirrors.

Let me push this mail in ballot a little further. Biblical tolerance is not putting a stamp of approval on anything and everything that's called relativism. Your truth is your truth, my truth is my truth, love is love. Everybody gets to define it, or redefine it the way they want it. But that's a logical fallacy if you believe in absolute truth. Now, I know many people do not but you can't have it both ways.

So what is biblical tolerance? Biblical tolerance is giving other people the same measure of free will that God has given us. Everyone is entitled to their opinion and I will treat you as the image bearer that you are no matter what, no matter when, no matter who. It's against my religion to impose my religion on anybody else; you are entitled to your opinion. A person convinced against their will is of the same opinion still.

All right this is so critical. In the coming weeks we are called to be grace givers, peacemakers, tone setters. We don't cancel people we disagree with. Biblical tolerance is disagreeing freely and loving, regardless and it's even giving an extra measure of grace. And so in my opinion, part of what is causing what seems like a deterioration of our civilization, is polarization caused by politicization of everything. We have got to rise above that. How? Well, civility is an expression of grace. It's public grace in the public square. And so we need to be humble in victory. We need to be gracious in defeat, and I'm talking about November third, or whenever we find out who wins the election, because that will provoke questions for which the gospel is the answer.

Now in the last half a chapter four Paul exhorts us to wax on and wax off, sort of, to put on and put off. I mean, there's a bunch of these adjectives that he kind of throws out and so let me go rapid fire. He says,

- Put off lies and put on truth,
- Put off anger and put on forgiveness,
- Put off greed and put on generosity,
- Put off gossip, put on encouragement,
- Put off cursing and put on blessing
- Put off promiscuity and put on self control
- Put off meanness and put off kindness

In other words, operate in the opposite spirit and when we do that, it provokes questions for which the gospel is the answer.

All right, let's look at verses eight, nine, and ten. There's a fascinating phrase in the apostles creed. That creed dates back to the Synod of Milan around 390 AD. If you grew up in a more traditional church, the phrasing is familiar. And most of it is pretty straightforward, right? I believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son. But then there's this

little line sandwiched in there, okay. He was crucified, died, and was buried; (here it is) he descended to the dead. And on the third day he rose again.

Now that little line he descended to the dead, begs this question. Between the crucifixion and the resurrection what did Jesus do? And where was he? The Bible doesn't tell us a whole lot. And listen, this is not without some theological controversy, but many theologians would call this the harrowing of hell. The word harrow means to plunder. We've been talking about heaven invading earth. This is heaven invading hell. John Piper says it this way, "Following his death for sin Jesus journeys to Hades, the city of death (I love this) and rips the gates off of its hinges." It's like this Marvel movie moment. He liberates Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and the rest of the Old Testament faithful ransoming them from the power of Sheol.

Now what does that have to do with Ephesians? All right, verses eight, nine and ten hint at the harrowing of hell.

"⁸ This is why it says: "When he ascended on high, he took many captives and gave gifts to his people."

Notice it says he ascended this clearly means that Christ also descended to our lowly world, and the same one who descended is the one who ascended higher than all the heavens so that he might fill the entire universe with himself. Now Paul is playing off of Psalm 68. But he's also referencing a Roman ritual. When a conquering army would return from battle they would parade their prisoners of war and Paul flips the script, Rome would parade their captives. What does Jesus do? He sets the captives free.

All right, let me fast forward to verse 14, *"Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming."*

We need an hour to talk about this, because I think a lot of us are getting tossed back and forth blown here and there by every wind of doctrine. We have got to be grounded in God's word, we've got to, in some instances, deconstruct and reconstruct our theological footers.

"¹⁵ Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. ¹⁶ From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love."

Now, there's this little phrase, then you will no longer be infants. Let me play off of that for a moment. I was listening to a podcast interview with Ken Jennings, the Jeopardy champion this week. And he was talking about the lies that we believe as children that then shape the rest of our lives. And he tells a story about his wife and her younger brother who went camping when they were kids. And he was playing some music that she didn't like. And so she told him to turn down the music because it would attract the

mosquitoes. Now, she knew that this was fake news, but her brother did not. And so he did it he turned down the music. Now, fast forward a few decades. Ken Jennings and his wife are hanging out with her younger brother, who is now 35 years old. And get this he tells him to turn down the music, because you know, it will attract mosquitoes. They bust out laughing, but this is serious business. In the words of the Jeopardy champion he said, "The power of things you learn when you're five years old, they have the power to stick with you and to rule your life."

There are lies you have believed about yourself for far too long. Our pastor of prayer Heidi Scanlon says it this way, "Wherever there is a loss of hope you have believed a lie of the enemy." All the enemy wants Ephesians 4:27 is a foothold. But if you give him an inch, he will take a mile and that foothold will become a stronghold. Now I do have some good news. Second Corinthians 10:4, "*The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds.*"

I want to close with this, a few weeks ago, a member of our worship team shared her testimony with me, gave me permission to share it with you. When I was seven years old, I realized that I had a natural talent for singing. I started singing all the time, everywhere I went. Then the following year, I stopped singing. My mother was verbally abusive, growing up and she would constantly yell at me and put me down. One night I was in my bedroom singing a song and my mother barged in and started screaming at me to shut up. After that night, I couldn't sing in front of even one person for nearly eight years. And I had no idea why because I couldn't even remember that night. It must have been so traumatic that my body protected me by helping me forget it. I tried auditioning for solos and musicals but all I could get out with something a little louder than a whisper. So eventually, I gave up. When I was 16 I went to a youth conference and on the final night they had an altar call for anyone who needed to forgive their parents. I felt like God was nudging me to go to the altar, most of the kids who came forward because their parents had gone through a divorce or parents who had physically abused them. I didn't know at the time, that what I experienced all my life was also abuse. So I didn't know why I needed to go to the altar, but I went anyway.

While I was praying, I saw myself singing in front of a huge audience. And I remember thinking God, how could I sing in front of that many people if I can't even sing in front of one person? That was the first time I remember the night I stopped singing. I knew immediately that I needed to forgive my mother. As I began the process of forgiving her, my confidence grew little by little; I pushed myself to go to auditions at school at church. I later told her how the abuse had affected me throughout my life. And she shared about the night that caused me to stop singing. Now, at first, she was angry, she pushed back and refuse to believe me. But the first time she heard me sing at church, she cried and asked me to forgive her. 16 years later, I can say that vision of singing in front of many people has come true. Many times I've been able to share my gift with thousands of people. I'm so grateful that through his love and kindness, God pulled me from a place of brokenness and insecurity, to help heal me.

Some of you have stopped singing. Some of you have stopped laughing. Some of you have stopped doing what you love to do, because someone told you, you can't do it, or you're not good enough, or they made you feel foolish. And so you stop believing that God could heal you, deliver you and change you. I want you to hear this. If God did it for Sarah, he can do it for you and if God did it before he can do it again. Why? Because He is the God who sets captives free. Would you do it again? God, would you do it again in Jesus name?

I want to double back to verse 13. Paul reveals the bullseye that we're aiming at. He says

"¹³ until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God as we mature to the whole measure of the stature of Christ."

Let me give you a little equation to close. Maturity equals unity in diversity. All too often we settle for uniformity, and then we call it maturity. But there's another name for that it's called legalism. It's conformity to an external code. Biblical unity, listen to me, is celebrating diversity, while maintaining unity as we become a beloved community. I love the way David Grizzle says this, "Unity amongst dissimilar people, serves the purpose of being indisputable proof that God is in the house." Love that. Let's not settle for this facade called uniformity. Let's model unity in diversity with humility, gentleness, patience and tolerance. And guess what if we do that, it will provoke questions for which the gospel is the answer. In Jesus name. Amen.