

Teaching Tips

December 18
Bible Study Guide 3

Words You Should Know

A. Vocation (Ephesians 4:1) *klesis* (Gk.)—Invitation, calling.

B. Grace (v. 7) *charis* (Gk.)—God’s divine unmerited, undeserved influence upon our hearts.

Teacher Preparation

Unifying Principle—Living Together. The writer of Ephesians says that, although each of us brings different gifts, we find true unity as we grow in Christ, who is the head of the whole body.

A. Pray for your class that God will bring lesson clarity.

B. Prepare a list of spiritual gifts, clip the items out, and place them in a container.

C. Prayerfully study the entire lesson.

D. Complete the companion *Precepts For Living*® Study Guide.

O—Open the Lesson

A. Ask a volunteer to reword the Aim for Change as a prayer.

B. Read and discuss the In Focus story.

C. Have volunteers pull from the container of spiritual gift items and have others explain how the church can be blessed by use of the gift.

P—Present the Scriptures

A. Ask a volunteer to read aloud the Focal Verses.

B. Use the At-A-Glance outline to clarify the text.

C. Recite the Keep in Mind verse together.

E—Explore the Meaning

A. Summarize the Discuss the Meaning section.

B. Read and discuss the Liberating Lesson.

N—Next Steps for Application

A. Summarize the Application for Activation section.

B. Summarize the salient points about spiritual gifts and how they should be used to edify the church.

C. Close with prayer.

Worship Guide

For the Superintendent or Teacher

Theme: Unity in the Body of Christ

Song: “We Are One in the Spirit”

Devotional Reading: Romans 12:3–8

Unity in the Body of Christ

Bible Background • EPHESIANS 4:1–16

Printed Text • EPHESIANS 4:1–16 | Devotional Reading • ROMANS 12:3–8

Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will: EXPLORE characteristics of a life worthy of Christ's calling in building up the body of Christ; CELEBRATE our gifts that help build up the body of Christ; and UNDERSTAND the meaning of the statement "... one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all" as it relates to building up the body of Christ.

In Focus

Aaron said a quick prayer of thanksgiving to God that he was able to walk away from Deacon Foster without an argument. Deacon Foster was a fine deacon, but as he advanced in age, his temperament was becoming more disagreeable. Aaron still had great respect for him, but Aaron and many of the younger members of the church sought some changes in the ministries of the church, including its business practices. Some members were frustrated because they wanted to use their gifts within the church in a more meaningful way.

Aaron laughed to himself, "I'm 42 years old, but 'Deac' still looks at me as one of the young folks in the church."

Deacon Foster saw no need for changes. The church had operated just fine for 137 years, and would continue to do so. That's when Aaron prayed. There was a time when he would have exploded all over the elderly deacon for being so shortsighted. "By the grace of God," he thought, "I am maturing in Christ."

How can Aaron and the other younger church members use their spiritual gifts to help build up their church? Although each church has its problems, what are some of the ways you can use your gifts to build up your church? Paul helps us in today's lesson to find some answers.

Keep in Mind

"There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling;
One Lord, one faith, one baptism" (Ephesians 4:4–5, KJV).

Focal Verses

KJV **Ephesians 4:1** I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called,

2 With all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love;

3 Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

4 There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling;

5 One Lord, one faith, one baptism,

6 One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.

7 But unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ.

8 Wherefore he saith, When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men.

9 Now that he ascended, what is it but that he also descended first into the lower parts of the earth?

10 He that descended is the same also that ascended up far above all heavens, that he might fill all things.)

11 And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers;

12 For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ:

13 Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ:

14 That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive;

15 But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ:

16 From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love.

The People, Places, and Times

Gifts. Spiritual gifts are the skills and abilities given to all believers by the Father through His Spirit. These gifts are for the purpose of enabling Christians to carry out His plan. Jesus promised His disciples that they also would receive the gift of the Spirit, who would guide them (Mark 13:11; Luke 11:13). His promise was fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1–47). The Spirit was given to every believer. Paul's epistles (letters to the churches) reveal that this continued in all the churches. Every believer receives gifting from the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:4–7). Spiritual gifts are for the benefit of the body of believers, not just for

individual benefit or pleasure. The greatest gift, which Paul said every believer should possess, is love (1 Corinthians 12:31–13:1).

Background

In previous portions of his letter to the church at Ephesus, Paul laid the foundation concerning Christ and His Church. Now, he switches his focus to a more practical purpose, setting out guidelines for his readers concerning Christian conduct. But first, he decides to give them an overview of the church's place in the world. Paul called for the Ephesians to be true to who they are called to be in Christ and noted several truths for them to embrace: (1)

it's their responsibility to be one in the body; (2) the call for unity does not mean that they should strive for a type of dull sameness; (3) the church is a living organism, made up of living beings who are expected to grow according to their use of the gifts Christ has given them; (4) Christ desires that the church reach maturity and that the people of the church be prepared to exercise their gifts; and (5) as the church grows, its members should take on the nature and character of its head, Christ Jesus.

At-A-Glance

1. The Church's Calling to Unity (Ephesians 4:1–6)
2. The Church's Gifts (vv. 7–12)
3. The Road to Maturity (vv. 13–16)

In Depth

1. The Church's Calling to Unity (Ephesians 4:1–6)

Paul considered himself a prisoner for the Lord as well as one who belonged to the Lord. Always positioning himself as the example, he issued a plea to the Ephesian Christians to walk worthy of their “vocation,” or to live in a manner that is consistent with their high calling from God (v. 1). The Christian's call is the divine summons that was answered at the time of conversion. Our calling is not a hobby or a pastime. It is our life's achievement—our job.

The word “walk” is a literal translation of a Hebrew idiom for everyday conduct. The word “worthy” makes the connection between God's plan for us and our acceptance of that plan, as demonstrated in the way we live. Paul had previously cautioned against boasting concerning good works. Now, he advises them to live out their calling with humility. He did not want them to become arrogant about their

godly living. They were also to exercise patience toward the faults and failings of others and among those with different personality types and temperaments. We are to genuinely have patience for one another with love. The reason for possessing these qualities—“lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing”—is for unity within the body of Christ (v. 2). When Christ established the Church, He abolished the greatest dividing line within humanity—the barrier that separated Jews and Gentiles.

Now it was the responsibility of the early church members to try with all earnestness to avoid creating human divisions among God's people. Arguments and dissension threaten to destroy the “bond of peace” within the body of Christ. There is but one Spirit in the church; nothing can destroy that unity. However, bickering and quarrels can destroy the peace that binds the members of the body of Christ. A healthy formula for keeping the unity is threefold: unity in those things that are essential to the faith, liberty in those matters that are nonessential or not absolute, and love in all circumstances.

In spite of the vast number of Christian churches worldwide, there is only one body of believers. The same Spirit who dwells in every believer also dwells in the body of Christ. There is but one hope in which every believer has placed his or her trust. Our one Lord is the Savior who shed His blood for our sins. We all share a common faith in that one Lord and Savior. There is one baptism by which we profess our faith in Christ. The one God and Father is supreme above all.

2. The Church's Gifts (vv. 7–12)

The unity of the church must be balanced by its odd twin, diversity. Unity is often confused with uniformity. The Christian Church is communal; every member makes a contribution. Each member of the body of

Christ has been given grace, or a particular gift or role to fulfill. No two members are alike. No member should try to imitate the other's gifts. In other letters, Paul outlines the necessity for giving equal value to the gifts of every believer. By His grace, He has given these gifts as He sees fit. The risen Lord bestowed these gifts by first sending His most excellent gift, the Holy Spirit. In Ephesians 4:8, Paul quotes Psalm 68:18 as a prophecy that the Messiah would ascend to heaven, conquer His foes, and lead them captive. As a reward for His victory, He would receive gifts for humankind.

In Ephesians 4:9, Paul wanted to show that the prophecy could have referred only to Christ. If Jesus ascended into heaven, He must have first come down from heaven. Paul and others understood "lower parts of the earth" to mean that Christ descended into hell. The Gospel of Luke, however, indicates that His spirit went to heaven when He died (Luke 23:43, 46). The prophecy of Psalm 68:18 was fulfilled by the birth, death, and burial of Jesus. The ascended Christ is the giver of all gifts and the source of all blessings. He fills all things. In giving us gifts, Christ has a specific purpose in sight. All of God's saints are to be equipped with the gifts necessary to discharge their duties in the world.

In Ephesians 4:10, Paul proceeds to explain the nature of some of these gifts of grace. Apostles were those persons directly commissioned by the Lord to preach the Word and plant churches. They were those who had seen the risen Christ. Prophets were the mouthpieces for God. They received revelations directly from the Lord, by the aid of the Holy Spirit, and passed them on to the church. Evangelists are those who preach the Good News. They have been divinely equipped to go out into the world and lead persons to Christ. Pastors are those who serve as God's under-shepherds, caring for the sheep of His flock. It is their responsibility to guide and feed the

flock. The New Testament gives the impression of a number of pastors at a local church instead of one (Acts 20:17, 28; 1 Peter 5:1–2).

Teachers are persons divinely gifted to teach and explain the Bible and what it means. A Bible teacher endeavors to connect God's Word into everyday life. The purpose of all these gifts is for leaders to enable "the perfecting (or equipping) of the saints" so that all are prepared "for the work of the ministry" and, ultimately, "for the edifying of the body of Christ" (Ephesians 4:12). These gifts should always be used to empower others to do even greater deeds for the sake of the kingdom.

3. The Road to Maturity (vv. 13–16)

At this point, Paul may have anticipated the question, "How long will this process of growing continue?" In verse 13, Paul explains that this will go on "Till we all come in the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God." Little can prepare the mind for the unity that exists in the afterlife. As long as we live, no matter how hard we try, we will have innumerable differences. This will continue until we are able to see Him as He truly is and to know as we are known. At that time the "unity of the faith" will occur. Until then, there will be room for growth. When we obtain full knowledge, we enter the state of "perfect man." The word "perfect," used in the King James Version, is translated as "complete." Our Christian journey is done when we come to the place of full knowledge of Christ and unity of our faith.

Verses 14–15 describe the growth process in the body of Christ. As we continue toward spiritual maturity, some things will become apparent. We are no longer like "children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine" (v. 14). As we grow to be more like Him, we grow in our knowledge of Him. Our understanding is solid and sure. No one can then

persuade us to change our beliefs. All disciples are called upon to grow. Discipleship is a process. It is not a course of study from which we will earn a diploma and never revisit again. There is always room for growth, for training, for new understanding, and for enlightenment. As we grow in Christ, so do our challenges. The longer we live, if we are achieving spiritual maturity, we learn to lean on Him more, trusting more fully in His promises and His providence. When we encounter brothers and sisters who have gone astray in their thinking and beliefs, we are commanded to speak “the truth in love,” helping each other to grow toward the head, which is Christ Jesus. He is both the goal of our growth and the source of our growth. As the church receives its life from Him who supplies all of our needs, quite naturally, growth comes from Him, too. But Paul adds that the church grows “toward” Christ as we as individuals grow “in” Christ.

Search the Scriptures

1. What did Paul “beseech” the Ephesian Christians to do (Ephesians 4:1)?
2. What reasons does Paul give them for exhibiting characteristics such as lowliness and meekness (v. 3)?
3. What are the seven things we are to share as one (vv. 4–6)?
4. How is the body of Christ put together through Christ (v. 16)?

Discuss the Meaning

Some Christians tend to forget that their talents and abilities are spiritual gifts from God. In what ways do believers begin to take credit for themselves? Include yourself.

Liberating Lesson

There is a real danger among Christians to look at ourselves as having “arrived” in regard to our spiritual growth. We can never fully know God in this life; therefore, Christian discipleship

is not a course of study to be completed. It is a process that causes us to change and grow continuously if we yield ourselves to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We are never too old to learn in matters concerning the kingdom. The oldest, most seasoned Christian can still learn about God’s love from a newborn baby. A true sign of Christian maturity is in knowing there is still more to be known.

Application for Activation

Are there ways that you stunt your own spiritual growth because you are not willing to lend yourself to new challenges that are presented to you? Do you ever think, “I’m too old to be learning how to do that now,” or “I’ve lived long enough to know what I’m talking about”? Think about an area of your life where you may be inhibiting your spiritual development, thereby building a wedge between you and the Father.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Ephesians 4:1–16

1 I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called,

Paul starts this chapter with an appeal for us to live a Christ-filled life. Using an emphatic first person pronoun “I” (Gk. *ego*, eg-**O**), Paul begins his appeal by reintroducing himself as “the prisoner of the Lord.” This emphasizes his apostolic authority. The use of the conjunction “therefore” (Gk. *oun*, oon) adds the emphatic nature of the ego. The phrase can then be reworded in view of this (i.e., in view of the things God has done through history): I, a prisoner of the Lord, appeal to you. The phrase “the prisoner” (Gk. *desmios*, **DES**-mee-os), or captive “of the Lord” means that Paul regarded himself as both a prisoner of Jesus as an apostle and as one in custody for the Gospel. Both his authority as an apostle and his conviction as a man under arrest motivates his appeal to believers. Paul urges them to conduct their lives in a manner worthy of their calling. Because the Christian life is a response to God’s call in one’s life, he or she then has to conduct themselves in a way that would show this commitment.

2 With all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love;

Paul gives five characteristics of the life worthy of our calling: lowliness, meekness, longsuffering (patience), mutual forbearance, and love. The unity of the church starts with individuals maintaining moral qualities. To maintain unity in the church, we are to walk in “lowliness” (Gk. *tapeinophrosune*, tap-i-nof-ros-**OO**-nay), or “humility.” Humility was a debasing quality and an unacceptable virtue in Paul’s society. This was especially true among people in the Greek world. The word is better translated as “lowliness of mind,” a state of thinking and operating in a way that

recognizes the value of others. We are to walk in “meekness” (Gk. *praotes*, prah-**OO**-tace) or “gentleness.” Matthew Henry defines meekness in this passage: “That excellent disposition of soul which makes men unwilling to provoke others and not easily to be provoked or offended with their infirmities; and it is opposed to angry resentments and peevishness.”

Meekness is the gentleness of the strong one who has their strength under control. Such a person, though he or she has a certain right or authority, would decide not to lay claim to it. The next two characteristics that will foster unity in the Body of Christ also go together. One of these characteristics is “longsuffering”—(Gk. *makrothumia*, mak-roth-oo-**MEE**-ah), or “patience,” “endurance.” This means not seeking revenge or being easily aggravated by others. This is a virtue God shows to us through Christ. Another characteristic is “forbearing one another” (Gk. *anekhomai*, an-**EKH**-om-ahee), which means “putting up with,” “enduring,” and “bearing” with someone’s errors. It means being tolerant toward others and cultivating a mutual understanding between people. These four characteristics are anchored in love, and they form the basis and foundation for unity in the church.

3 Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

In verse 3, Paul identifies the nature of the closeness among believers as the unity of the Spirit. He encourages the church in “endeavouring” (Gk. *spoudazo*, spoo-**DAD**-zo) to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. It means “sparing no effort” or, as we idiomatically express it, “leaving no stone unturned.” This is done in order to maintain the unity of the Spirit. In other words, we should do our utmost to preserve harmonious fellowship. Such unity starts within the individual hearts of its members. Preserving this unity, therefore,

depends on both individual and cooperative efforts of all members of the body of Christ.

4 There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; 5 One Lord, one faith, one baptism, 6 One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.

Paul declares implicitly that the oneness of the church arises from the unity of the Godhead—referring to the Trinity. First, the church is one Body because there is one Spirit who created it. The unity of this Body is because of the work of the Holy Spirit who also indwells it. The one Spirit unifies the Body and works through it. The various parts of the Church are joined as one Body by the Holy Spirit to the head, who is Christ. The Church is called into one hope, which refers to the present reality and the future benefit of life everlasting.

Second, the reality of the Christian calling and hope is founded on the one Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus is the object of our faith and the One in whom all Christians hold their belief and in whom all are baptized. “One faith” refers both to the Gospel, which embodies the doctrine of the Christian faith and the gift of faith whereby all Christians are saved (see Ephesians 2:8-10). One baptism is the liturgical rite through which we profess our faith when we believe in the atoning death and resurrection of Christ for our sin. By being baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we declare our union with the one Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Third, the church is described as one family in which every believer belongs. There is only one God who is the “Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all” (4:6). This cluster of phrases describes the greatness and magnitude of this one God who all Christians have in common as our Father.

7 But unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ. 8 Wherefore he saith, When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men.

Although there is unity of belief and purpose, there is also diversity and uniqueness of gifts and function. In Ephesians 4:8, Paul quotes Psalm 68:18 to confirm his emphasis on the gifts through Christ. The sentence, “When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men,” refers to Christ’s position at the right hand of the Father as conqueror over death, having defeated Satan and his agents. Christ liberated those who were bound and took them like captives into heaven. From there, He gives gifts to the Church, which refers to the bestowing of gifts of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost.

9 (Now that he ascended, what is it but that he also descended first into the lower parts of the earth? 10 He that descended is the same also that ascended up far above all heavens, that he might fill all things.)

Verses 9–10 in parentheses serve as support and elaboration of Christ’s ascension. Paul argues in defense of the death, resurrection, and Ascension of Christ. Since Jesus ascended into heaven, He must also have descended from heaven. Verse 10 insists that the one who descended is the same who ascended far above everything else, that He might “fill all things.” The phrase “fill all things” (Gk. *pleroo*, play-RO-o) means to accomplish or fulfill all things. It speaks about completing His mission. The purpose of His ascension into heaven is then to free Him to accomplish fully the purpose for which He descended. That purpose includes the distribution of gifts to the Church by the Holy Spirit.

11 And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; 12 For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ:

Through the Holy Spirit, God equips the church with special abilities He bestows on each member for the benefit of all. In this text, there is an emphasis on gifts given to leaders of the church. The word “apostle” (Gk. *apostolos*, ap-OS-tol-os) is used in several ways in the New Testament. In this case, “apostle” refers to those who were eyewitnesses to the risen Lord, chosen and authorized by Christ (Acts 1:21, 22; 10:40–41; 1 Corinthians 9:1; 15:8–9). Some of these apostles were still alive during the time of the writing of Ephesians. The next gift is the “prophets” (Gk. *prophetes*, prof-AY-tace) with special ability from God to give guidance to the Christian community and to declare the will of God (e.g., Acts 13:1–4). Next are the “evangelists” (Gk. *euaggelistes*, yoo-ang-ghel-is-TACE), preachers or those who proclaim the Gospel (e.g., Philip, Acts 21:8; 2 Timothy 4:5). The use of euaggelistes in Ephesians 4:11 relates to the spreading of the Good News. Then we have the “pastors” (Gk. *poimen*, poy-MANE), or “shepherds” and “teachers” who give instructions.

These gifts have a twofold importance of function and purpose. The primary function is to equip the saints for the work of ministry. The other function is for building up the Body of Christ. The word translated “perfecting” is the Greek word *katartismos* (kat-ar-tis-MOS), which means “equipping, preparing, or making ready.” Therefore, the function of the apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers is to prepare God’s People, equipping them for the work of “ministry” (Gk. *diakonia*, dee-akon-EE-ah). They are endowed with the grace of God in order to train people to do the work of service within the church community. They are

“equippers” who provide others in the church with necessary tools for the ministry.

The ultimate purpose of these special gifts is to edify or build up the Body of Christ. The word used here in the King James Version is “edifying” (Gk. *oikodome*, oy-kod-om-AY), with an architectural undertone. It means building a house, but used figuratively here, it refers to building up the Church of Christ. We have been called to build one another up in the Lord in love.

13 Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ: 14 That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive;

The church is called to unity, and this is made possible only by our spiritual knowledge of who Christ is and why He died. The full unity and knowledge of the Son of God leads to maturity—“unto a perfect man” (v. 13). “Perfect” (Gk. *teleios*, tel-I-oce) refers to that which has reached the age of maturity or adulthood, rather than moral perfection. The proof of maturity is the unity that the church attains through its knowledge of Christ. This matured personhood or “perfect human” is measured according to Christ’s standards: “unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ” (v. 13). In verse 7, Christ is the measure of God’s grace. He is the measure—or the yardstick—of all maturity. Although the concept of growth into maturity is corporate, the maturity of the church depends on the growth of individual members.

Children have the tendency to be easily deceived and attracted to new things. When children grow to adulthood these tendencies diminish. Maturity in the knowledge of Christ will protect the Church from being misled. In

verse 14, Paul illustrates this with use of the words “tossed to and fro” (Gk. *kludonizomai*, kloo-do-NID-zom-ahee), or “tossed here and there” and “carried about” (Gk. *periphero*, per-ee-FER-o), which means to be “driven around” or “carried around.” Such people cannot make up their minds but change from one opinion to another “by every wind of doctrine.” This often happens as a result of the last teaching or the latest books they’ve read or information they’ve received. As a result, they become easy prey to people’s cunning craftiness, those who lie in wait to deceive. “The sleight” (Gk. *kubeia*, koo-BI-ah) literally means “dice playing” and is used metaphorically here to describe the deception, trickery, and manipulation of unscrupulous men who take advantage of people’s ignorance.

15 But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ:

Paul moves from the mark of immaturity, which is doctrinal instability, to the qualities of mature, or perfected Christianity that will promote unity and peace within the Body. Truth and love are essential in the life of the Body of Christ, both leading to Church growth. It is important for the Christian to hold firm and be loyal to the truth on the one hand and to have loving concern for others’ welfare on the other.

16 From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love.

Paul then employs biological metaphors using human anatomy to describe the Church’s relationship with Christ. Paul compares the natural body and the Christ’s mystical body, the Church. As the Body has many component parts, which are joined fittingly together by different ligaments to the head, with each part working corporately with other parts, so it is with the church. The Church has many members with various functions, joined fittingly together by the Holy Spirit unto Christ—the head. The Holy Spirit has endowed every member with various gifts and skills; each member should then work corporately with every other member in love.

Consequently, love is essential for the proper function of the Church. Love is the life line that keeps the Church alive and united. Mutual love encourages church growth and allows the Church to develop in the love of Christ.

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Say It Correctly

Stature. **STACH**-er.
Sleight. slite.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

One Lord
(Zechariah 14:6–11)

TUESDAY

One Faith
(Philippians 1:27–30)

WEDNESDAY

One in Christ Jesus
(Galatians 3:23–29)

THURSDAY

One God
(Exodus 20:1–7)

FRIDAY

One Spirit
(1 Corinthians 12:4–13)

SATURDAY

One Body
(Romans 12:3–8)

SUNDAY

Building Up the Body Together
(Ephesians 4:1–16)

Notes

Teaching Tips

December 25
Bible Study Guide 4

Words You Should Know

A. Magnify (Luke 1:46) *megaluno* (Gk.)—Root word for “Magnificat,” Mary’s song of praise, which is the first word of Mary’s song in the Latin Vulgate scriptural text, and it means “glorify.”

B. Soul (v. 46) *psuche* (Gk.)—The seat of feelings, emotion, desire, and affection.

Teacher Preparation

Unifying Principle—Celebrating Promises Fulfilled. Because Abraham was faithful to God and God was faithful to the promise to give Abraham many descendants, God acknowledged Mary’s faithfulness to Him by choosing her to be mother of the Savior.

A. Read today’s lesson text. Then read the Old Testament verses on which Mary based her words of praise—Deuteronomy 10:21; Psalm 103:17; and Psalm 111:1–9.

B. Review material concerning the promised Messiah, including the prophecies of Isaiah.

C. Complete the companion lesson in the *Precepts For Living*® Study Guide.

O—Open the Lesson

A. Open in prayer, incorporating the thoughts from the Aim for Change.

B. Read today’s In Focus story. Talk about ways to look for God’s faithfulness in our lives, in spite of difficult circumstances.

P—Present the Scriptures

A. Compare Mary’s song of praise with other songs of praise, such as Hannah’s Song (1 Samuel 2:1–10), Moses’ Song (Exodus 15:1–18) and Miriam’s Song (Exodus 15:21).

B. Discuss the Hebrews’ expectation concerning a Messiah and how Mary’s Song affirms the fulfillment of God’s promise through her.

E—Explore the Meaning

A. Have volunteers summarize the Discuss the Meaning, Lesson in Our Society, and Make It Happen sections.

N—Next Steps for Application

A. Summarize the lesson.

B. Close with prayer and praise God for the victory He’s won in our lives and for who He is.

Worship Guide

For the Superintendent or Teacher

Theme: According to the Promise

Theme Song:

“Hark the Herald Angels Sing”

Devotional Reading:

2 Corinthians 1:18–22

According to the Promise

Bible Background • LUKE 1:26–56; GALATIANS 3:6–18

Printed Text • LUKE 1:46–55 | Devotional Reading • 2 CORINTHIANS 1:18–22

Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will: REVIEW Mary's song praising God's faithfulness; APPRECIATE the faithfulness of God's people from generation to generation; and EXAMINE areas in our lives where our faithfulness to God can be strengthened.

In Focus

It was Christmas morning, and it was Brenda's ex-husband's turn to have the children. Brenda felt so alone. Life just had not worked out the way she had thought it would. She walked into church and Michelle gave her a great big hug.

"Where are the kids?" Michelle asked.

"Their father has them," Brenda answered, as the tears streamed down her face.

"Come sit by me," said Michelle, as she enfolded Brenda in her arms.

Michelle allowed Brenda to freely cry out of her pain and disappointments. She did not try to console her with words; just her touch seemed to comfort Brenda.

Brenda remembered how her family had once been whole – intact. She vowed that her children would never have to live and deal with the problems of a dysfunctional home as she did. She vowed that she would do all she could to honor God with her marriage. She did all she could, but problems still came into marriage and ripped it apart. No matter what she did or did not do, her husband still chose to leave the marriage. Now, on Christmas Day, her precious little ones were spending time with their dad, instead of with the two of them together. Brenda's heart seemed to break in two.

God was still caring for Brenda and loving her, even in a very rough situation. God is always faithful. Sometimes we just have to ask God to help us see things from His perspective.

Keep in Mind

"And Mary said, My soul doth magnify the Lord, And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour" (Luke 1:46–47, KJV)

Focal Verses

KJV **Luke 1:46** And Mary said my soul doth magnify the Lord,

47 And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.

48 For he hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden: for, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.

49 For he that is mighty hath done to me great things; and holy is his name.

50 And his mercy is on them that fear him from generation to generation.

51 He hath shewed strength with his arm; he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.

52 He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree.

53 He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he hath sent empty away.

54 He hath helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy;

55 As he spake to our fathers, to Abraham, and to his seed for ever.

The People, Places, and Times

Angels. Angels are created beings whose primary purpose is to serve God and worship Him. Some angels are used specifically to bring messages to people from God. These angels appear like human beings and are never described as having wings. They are never described as children or women. The angels with wings are the cherubim and seraphim. The cherubim and seraphim never leave the immediate presence of God and are continually worshipping Him. Since angels are created, they have a beginning. They are not all-knowing or present everywhere as God is. They do not marry.

Background

Mary sang the beautiful words of today's Scripture passage while she was visiting Elizabeth, her relative. Elizabeth and her husband, Zechariah, were an elderly, childless couple. They had prayed many years for a child until they reached the age where they no longer expected God to answer this request. Both Elizabeth and Zechariah were of the tribe of Aaron, so Zechariah was in rotation for serving at the Temple in Jerusalem.

After Luke's introduction to his Gospel record, he plunges right into the story of the birth of John the Baptist. It was Zechariah's turn to serve at the Temple, a great privilege for a godly Jew. As he went in to burn incense, suddenly the angel Gabriel was standing beside the incense altar (Luke 1:11). Zechariah had the same reaction that all who have ever been visited by an angel had—he was afraid.

After telling him not to be afraid, Gabriel told Zechariah that God was answering his and Elizabeth's prayers for a child, a very special child that they were to name "John" (v. 13). Unfortunately, Zechariah found this hard to believe, and so he became speechless until after the birth of John, their baby. John grew up to be the prophet we know as John the Baptist (or Baptizer).

Word must have traveled, in spite of the lack of modern communication devices, because Mary heard that her elderly relative was now pregnant. Mary was on the other end of the age spectrum, probably only around 15 years old, the age when women of those days usually got married. Gabriel had also visited Mary to tell her that she would be pregnant in the most miraculous way ever (vv. 26–38). Mary was going to give birth to the Son of God and this would be a virgin birth.

Shortly after Gabriel's announcement to Mary, she hurried to see Elizabeth (about an 80-mile hike). As soon as she walked in the door and Elizabeth heard her, baby John in her womb leaped in praise at the presence of the Baby who was growing within Mary. At this time, Elizabeth was already six months pregnant, while Mary's pregnancy had just begun. After Elizabeth had finished praising God for the coming Savior, Mary began singing a song of praise to God that reminds us very much of Hannah's song of praise when she became pregnant with baby Samuel in answer to her prayers. The similarity of Mary's prayer to others in the Bible makes us think that Mary studied Scripture and meditated upon it even in an era when women had little access to formal education.

At-A-Glance

1. God's Personal Blessing on Mary (Luke 1:46–49)
2. God's Blessings on His People (vv. 50–53)
3. God's Faithfulness in Sending the Messiah (vv. 54–55)

In Depth

1. God's Personal Blessing on Mary (Luke 1:46–49)

This stanza of Mary's song sings of how blessed she is. From a worldly perspective, this would seem to be the opposite of Mary's situation. Mary came from Nazareth, a town that was so poor that many of its few inhabitants lived in caves. She was engaged to a very godly man with a respectable job, but now she was pregnant – and not by him. Where are the blessings in such a situation?

First, she rejoices because God is her Savior. Every Christian, regardless of his or her

situation, should remember that the greatest blessing is to have God as Savior. Then, thinking upon the news from angel Gabriel, Mary praises God for choosing her for this blessing, in spite of her humble status – she is poor and a woman, two things that in that era assigned one to an automatic inferior status.

But Mary does not see her lowly status as a disadvantage in the sight of the Lord. God delights in blessing the ones who are of a very humble socio-economic status, but who put all of their trust in the Lord.

2. God's Blessings on His People (vv. 50–53)

Mary has trust in the Lord showing mercy to His people, because she knows that Scripture details how God had blessed His people in the past. This is more than simple optimism. This is hope based upon knowledge of how God has worked in the past. Based upon how He has blessed His people, Mary knows that He will continue to do so in the future.

As we look closely at the things that Mary sings about concerning how God acts, we see that when Jesus came to the earth, He brought about a moral revolution. He is using His mighty arm to sweep aside the proud. Pride has no place in the Christian because our standard is Jesus Christ. When we see ourselves compared to Him, we realize how far we are from how God desires us to be.

Then we see a social revolution. Jesus brings an end to the labels and titles that people think elevate them. In the sight of our Lord, the lowest person is just as important as the person with money and power.

Next, there is an economic revolution. Just think about the first Christians in Acts 2:44–45. No one went hungry in that first Christian community, because the rich sold their riches so the poor could have the basic necessities of life. That ideal community probably existed for

only a short time, but no Christians should go hungry while others have an abundance. We live in a very materialistic and greedy society, but Christians should have a different set of values than that of the world.

3. God's Faithfulness in Sending the Messiah (vv. 54–55)

Mary acknowledges that all these great and revolutionary changes in us can only come about through the coming of the Messiah that God had promised to send. Mary is thinking about God's promises to Abraham, Father of her people; but God promised Mother Eve back in Genesis 3:15 that He would send a Savior that we all so much need (see also Genesis 4:25). God is always faithful to keep His promises, even if we have to wait!

Search the Scriptures

1. What specific blessings does Mary thank God for (Luke 1:46–49)?
2. What sort of people does God bless (vv. 50–53)?
3. What attributes of God did Mary recite (vv. 50–55)?
4. How did God treat the descendants of Abraham (vv. 54–55)?

Discuss the Meaning

When Jesus was born, He brought blessings for individuals and for certain groups of people. What sort of people does Jesus favor? Why do you think He reaches out to those who fear Him, and to the poor, the humble, and the hungry? Compare these categories of people to the ones who are blessed in the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3–12).

Liberating Lesson

Mary's song highlights the different set of values that emerged from the birth of Jesus. God is concerned for the people who are on the

bottom of society. In what ways can Christians as individuals bring about some of the things that Jesus came for? How can churches model His values?

Application for Activation

Some people are facing a difficult Christmas. Look around you and see if you can find someone to help before the day is over.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Luke 1:46–55

Introduction

Verses 46 through 55 constitute what is generally known as “the Magnificat” or “Mary’s song.” The song can be divided into three strophes (stanzas). The first strophe, verses 46 through 49, speaks of God’s grace or favor on Mary. The second strophe, verses 50 through 53, talks about what God has done in the life of the people of Israel. The third strophe, verses 54 and 55, is about God’s faithfulness in keeping His promise to Abraham by sending the Messiah.

46 And Mary said, My soul doth magnify the Lord, 47 And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.

We first notice that Mary praises the Lord after Elizabeth, by the Holy Spirit, has revealed to her the mind of God concerning her, confirming what the angel had told her earlier. Overwhelmed with joy and gratitude, and in acceptance of the promise of God, Mary reacts spontaneously and glorifies God. The statement “My soul doth magnify the Lord, And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour” indicates a total involvement of the whole of self (emotional and spiritual) in the praise of God. The use of both “soul” and “spirit” underlies this fact. The word “soul” is a translation of the Greek word *psuche* (psoo-KHAY), which generally means self or inmost being. It is the center of and makes up the whole being. The soul is the seat of feelings, emotion, desire, and affection. The word “magnify” in Greek is *megaluno* (meg-al-OO-no), and it means to make great, to extol, or to esteem highly. “Spirit” in Greek is *pneuma* (PNYOO-mah), and oftentimes it is synonymous with “soul.” Here, “spirit” speaks of the rational, or mental, disposition—the core of the inner being. Mary employs the totality of

her being (the soul and spirit) to glorify God in grateful worship of God her “Saviour” (v. 47).

48 For he hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden: for behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed. 49 For he that is mighty hath done to me great things; and holy is his name.

In verse 48, Mary gives the reason for her rejoicing and gratitude—God “hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden.” This means that God looked upon her with respect, that God showed favor to her, an otherwise insignificant person. Mary calls herself God’s “handmaiden” (Gk. *doule*, DOO-lay), which means female slave. This is the lowest position one can get in Jewish custom. Women and slaves were regarded as the lowest class in the Jewish community of the day. They were relegated to the background, to the place of dishonor. To be both (woman and slave) makes her place even worse; the society has no regard for her. In contrast, God has regard for her. He has looked upon Mary with favor, and has given her a place of honor. The magnitude and extent of her elevation is brought to bear in the person who made it possible, the “mighty” and the “holy” (v. 49).

Here, Mary brings out what systematic theologians call the immutable (i.e., unchangeable) and the incommunicable attributes of God—His omnipotence (all-powerfulness) and holiness. The incommunicable attributes of God are those characteristics that are not true of us human beings and which we lack sufficient words to define. We are not omnipotent (all-powerful) and we can never be. We are not holy and we can never be holy as God is holy. But here we see God, who is so mighty and holy, yet He is able to look upon and have regard for Mary, who is of the lowest class. Her low estate is not only because of her person, but also because of her heritage—Nazareth. Nazareth

was one of the most insignificant and despised villages in Galilee.

When the apostle Philip told Nathanael, “We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph,” Nathanael replied, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (John 1:45–46, ESV). In spite of these seeming “disadvantages,” God is able to exalt and honor Mary. She has been tremendously blessed of God, she says. For “all (every) generations shall call me blessed,” which means every generation will acknowledge her as one blessed and most fortunate woman among all women (Luke 1:48; cf. vv. 28, 42). As the mother of the Messiah, Mary is uniquely blessed. We have seen that the first strophe deals with God’s blessing to Mary. She next sings about what God has done in the life of the people of Israel (vv. 50–53).

50 And his mercy is on them that fear him from generation to generation.

Mary brings to bear the merciful attributes of God, His consistency, and His faithfulness. In verse 50, she celebrates God’s mercy on all those who “fear” (Gk. *phobeo*, fob-EH-o) Him, meaning those who venerate or reverence Him. The fear of God is verifiable by the people’s obedience and keeping of God’s Law. God’s mercy is accorded specifically to the people of Israel in keeping with God’s promises, which started with Abraham (Genesis 17:7; 18:18; 22:17). This mercy is demonstrated in the display of God’s strength and power (Luke 1:51–53).

51 He hath shewed strength with his arm; he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. 52 He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree. 53 He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he hath sent empty away.

Here are two pairs of contrasting parallels that are the direct results of God’s mighty act in the coming of the Messiah. This one act results in the reversal of the human principles of living or thought. By His show of strength, God has completely altered the human view of life in general. The “proud” (Gk. *huperephanos*, hoop-er-AY-fan-os), the haughty, or those who exalt themselves, are scattered (v. 51). The verb “scattered” (Gk. *diaskorpizo*, dee-as-kor-PID-zo) is figuratively used here and has either a military or an agricultural idea in view. In its military sense, the strong, proud army, which relies on its own strength without God, is brought to nothing and is driven and dispersed by a stronger force. In its agricultural sense, “scattered” refers to the winnowing process, where the chaff is separated from the wheat and is blown away (or abroad in the air) by the wind.

Not only are the proud scattered, like chaff, or put in disarray, like an egotistical army, but God has also “put down the mighty from their seats” (v. 52). Here the mighty are synonymous with the proud. They are the “powers that be,” the oppressors of the poor, the self-exalted who look down on and tyrannize others. The mighty are deprived of their self-exalted positions, while those who are truly humble (“them of low degree”), the insignificant, are exalted.

In verse 53, the next pair of parallelism starts with the insignificant, “the hungry,” which is synonymous with “them of low degree,” and associated with poverty. The hungry here describes those who realize their need for God and aspire for spiritual food, those who “fear him” (v. 50). They are fed—“filled . . . with good things” (v. 53)—and are shown mercy (v. 50). On the contrary, those who are “rich,” proud, and self-sufficient without God are sent “empty away” (v. 53). This is revolutionary indeed; it describes the purpose of Christ’s coming into the world (to change the human view and principles of living). Christ spells out

this principle in His Sermon on the Mount, generally known as the “Beatitudes” (esp. Matthew 5:3–6), and teaches the same to His disciples (Matthew 23:12; Luke 11:1–4; 18:14). Mary insinuates God’s transformation of society, whereby the proud and powerful are brought low, while the lowly are brought up. Not only does Mary represent the humble who have been exalted, but Nazareth as well, which signifies the revolutionary aspect of God’s act through the coming of the Messiah.

Historically, the Old Testament is full of examples of the “proud” and “mighty” whom God, by His infinite power and design, brought down. Examples include Pharaoh (Exodus 15:1–11), Haman (Esther 6:6–14), and Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 4:24–37). The Scriptures include “all proud” and haughty people (Psalm 33:10; 1 Peter 5:5; James 4:6). Likewise, there are abundant examples of the humble exalted by God: Joseph (Genesis 41:16), David (1 Samuel 18; 2 Samuel 7), Mordecai (Esther 6:6–14), and Daniel (Daniel 1:8–21). The Bible includes all the humble (James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:3–6; cf. Matthew 23:12).

54 He hath helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy; 55 As he spake to our fathers, to Abraham, and to his seed for ever.

The third strophe of Mary’s hymn reveals God’s faithfulness in fulfilling His promises to Abraham by sending the Messiah. Here, Mary celebrates God’s mercy to Israel. Just as He promised Abraham and his descendants, God has kept His promise in keeping His word to Israel and helping them partake in this promise, not forgetting His promise but remembering His mercy. This act of mercy is an old promise (covenant) God made to Abraham and to all his generations after him. It is a living covenant to all humankind that is fulfilled in the incarnation of Jesus Christ—the Son of God.

Through this hymn of praise, Mary reveals the excellent nature of God: His divine power and authority over all things both spiritual and human (Luke 1:49, 51); His holiness (v. 49); His mercy and justice (v. 50); and His faithfulness and trustworthiness in fulfilling His promises (vv. 54–55). Through the incarnation of Christ, we realize the omnipotence, holiness, mercy and justice, and faithfulness of God.

Sources:

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Say It Correctly

Anakims. **AN**-uh-kims.

Chaldees. **KAL**-dees.

Debir. **DEE**-buhr.

Eleazar. El-ee-**AY**-zuhr.

Negev. **NEG**-ev.

Seir. **SEE**-uhr.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

God Is Faithful
(2 Corinthians 1:18–22)

TUESDAY

A Faithful Heart
(Nehemiah 9:6–10)

WEDNESDAY

Descendants of Abraham
(Galatians 3:6–12)

THURSDAY

Inheritance through the Promise
(Galatians 3:13–18)

FRIDAY

Jesus' Birth Foretold
(Luke 1:26–38)

SATURDAY

Elizabeth's Blessing
(Luke 1:39–45)

SUNDAY

Mary's Song of Praise
(Luke 1:46–55)

Notes
