

Lesson 3





Where We're Going

By the end of this lesson, participants will understand the necessity for bringing a variety of gifts together; understand the necessity for the building up of the body of Christ; and be able to develop a plan to become involved in a project that will help equip them for ministry.



Get Them Going

Have each participant take a random 3"x 5" card from a bag at the beginning of class. Each card should have a different body part written on it. Some good examples include eyes, mouth, right hand, etc. After each participant has chosen a card, explain that they are to represent that body part. Ask them to get you a cup of water—but they can only use the body part that is written on their card. Everyone has to go because all parts are needed. For example: only one of the two hands can carry the water, only the mouth can do any talking, etc. When the students return with the water, have a discussion about how easy or difficult it was to do that simple task.



The Gifts in Gab

James was a relatively new member of the church. This made him a little nervous about approaching Pastor Nelson with some questions he had about the church's sheepfold and other ministries. Although antsy, James waited for Pastor Nelson to finish shaking hands and saying goodbye to parishioners after Sunday's service. As the last person left, Pastor Nelson noticed James seated in the rear pews. Pastor Nelson smiled as he asked, "Are you waiting for me?" James quickly answered, "Yes, sir. May I please have a few moments of your time?"

"Absolutely, James!" the pastor replied.

James looked pleasantly shocked that the pastor knew his name. Though soft-spoken, James went straight to the point. "As a fairly new member of this really large church, I struggle with the awkwardness of not knowing anyone here. I'd like to participate in church activities and join a ministry or two, but I feel really lost here due to lack of guidance. Also, I used to be a member of a small Baptist church, and this is a really progressive nondenominational church, which often leaves me feeling a little disconnected." He continued, "Everyone seems to be on the ball and in the know but me. There are a lot of gifted people here, and I'm starting to feel like I might never fit in because I'm not sure what I have to offer. I'm positive that I'm not the only new member to feel this way. That's why I wanted to talk with you."

Calmly and sincerely, Pastor Nelson replied, "Thank you for being so honest. I'm sure it wasn't easy. And no, you are not the only new member to feel this way. A few others have brought this and similar things to my attention. I have been praying about it, and I believe I see the answer in you."

James looked puzzled as he continued to listen.

"I believe God put this on your heart, and moved you to address it for a reason."

"What can I do?" James anxiously replied.

"I believe your passion and concern not only for yourself but for others in this area, indicates that God has given you the spiritual gifts of hospitality and help."

With a big smile on his face, the only word James could utter was, "Me?"

"Yes, you!" the pastor continued. "I know at least five other members here with those same gifts. If I make arrangements for all of you to meet, would you be willing to work with us to make sure people feel welcome?"

"I can do that," James said. "I'd love that."

"I'd love to have you serving that way," the pastor replied.

"I would have never thought of this. I never even imagined that I would have a gift that would be beneficial to a church like this."

"Well, thank goodness we talked."

Before departing, they agreed on a few things James would do that week to move ahead in what he and the pastor were discussing.



Real Talk

1. What issues did James see with his new church?
2. How did the pastor respond to his concerns?
3. Why is it so important to maintain unity in the Body of Christ?



The Big Picture

In this passage of Scripture, Paul is speaking to the believers at Ephesus about the importance of unity in the Body of Christ. He teaches that God has given different spiritual gifts to His children. As each of God's children uses their gifts for the building up and advancement of His Kingdom, the whole Body is healthy, growing, and full of love.



Make It Stick

“For there is one body and one Spirit, just as you have been called to one glorious hope for the future. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Ephesians 4:4–5, NLT).



The Word (NLT)

Ephesians 4:1 Therefore I, a prisoner for serving the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of your calling, for you have been called by God.

2 Always be humble and gentle. Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other’s faults because of your love.

3 Make every effort to keep yourselves united in the Spirit, binding yourselves together with peace.

4 For there is one body and one Spirit, just as you have been called to one glorious hope for the future.

5 There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism,

6 and one God and Father, who is over all and in all and living through all.

7 However, he has given each one of us a special gift through the generosity of Christ.

8 That is why the Scriptures say, “When he ascended to the heights, he led a crowd of captives and gave gifts to his people.”

9 Notice that it says “he ascended.” This clearly means that Christ also descended to our lowly world.

10 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.

11 Now these are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers.

12 Their responsibility is to equip God’s people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ.

13 This will continue until we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God’s Son that we will be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ.

14 Then we will no longer be immature like children. We won’t be tossed and blown about by every wind of new teaching. We will not be influenced when people try to trick us with lies so clever they sound like the truth.

15 Instead, we will speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church.

16 He makes the whole body fit together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love.



The Players

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).



Backstage

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 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.



Combing Through

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.

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 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 division 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 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. We all share a common faith in 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 and 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. 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 are those persons directly commissioned by the Lord to preach the Word and plant churches. 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.

Teachers are persons divinely gifted to teach and explain the scripture and what it means. A Bible teacher endeavors to connect God's Word to 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 eternity. Division 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 completeness.

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.



Diving Deeper Quiz

Have the participants read BACKSTAGE and COMBING THROUGH. Then, have them answer the following:

1. Paul begs the believer to live a life worthy of his or her calling. In what ways can the believer live "worthy" of his or her calling?
2. What was the purpose for which God gave these gifts to the church?
3. According to Ephesians 4:13–15, what are some of the indicators that a believer has matured in his or her faith?



Next Steps

Are there ways you stunt your own spiritual growth because you are not willing to lend yourself to new challenges that are presented to you? Think

about an area of your life where you may be inhibiting your spiritual development, and recommit to building yourself up.



Put It Out There

A. Group Application

Have participants plan a social gathering. The guest of honor is "the Body of Christ." Each participant will have an assigned body part and will give a greeting connecting it with a corresponding spiritual gift. Here are a few possible examples: the mouth might represent the gift of prophecy, the hands may represent the gift of helps, and so on. Have each participant explain the spiritual gift they represent with their body part.

B. Personal Application

Have each participant take out a piece of paper and make three columns on it. In the first column, have them list the things they do well. The second column should be a list of things they are really passionate about. The third column is for them to list the things they enjoy doing. They can write the same thing in more than one column. The list may help them identify their spiritual gifts through prayer



Wrap It Up

A. Journal

Reflect on the importance of balancing spiritual gifts with spiritual maturity.

B. Talk to Him

Prayer: Lord, show me what my gifts are and how I can use them to be a blessing to other believers. Help me to be gentle with myself and encouraging to others in the process. In Jesus' Name, Amen



Say Word?

Stature. STACH-er.
Sleight. slite.

SWAG
(Spiritual Wisdom and Guidance)

A woman's gifts will make room for her.—Hattie McDaniel

Lesson 4





Where We're Going

By the end of the lesson, participants 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.



Get Them Going

Ask the class to think about what Christmas has to do with justice. Let them respond and then introduce a version of the Magnificat you are familiar with or read Luke 1:52.



Web of Secrets

Jazz looked at her brother, Quentin, as if he was crazy. She asked him to repeat himself. "I don't think I heard you right," she said.

"You heard me, Jazz," Quentin answered. His eyes were sharp and small, and he looked at her the way he always did when he was serious.

"Humor me," she snappily replied.

Sternly, Quentin said, "If you have to keep this engagement a secret, then maybe you shouldn't be planning a wedding!"

Jazz had been engaged for 14 months, and though she and her fiancé had not set a wedding date, she wasn't planning on calling it off.

Quentin had not been in support of any of his younger sister's engagements. He repeatedly told her that she wasn't ready. He said that her relationships were spotty. When she asked what Quentin meant by "spotty," he told Jazz that she treated men like she treated her career as a musician: on and off, lacking true commitment and dedication.

"I love my music," Jazz protested.

"Yeah, but you don't write it, sing it, or practice it nearly as much as you know you should. You take your musical gifts for granted. You love and listen to all types of music, but do you really study and work hard at your craft the way you should?"

Jazz left that question unanswered. It was obvious that the conversation was not going to end on a good note. Opting to ignore her brother's advice, Jazz still had not told her fiancé that she had been engaged three times before and that one of her exes was her current fiancé's best friend.

As she stomped down the hall, Jazz yelled, "Well, I'm not ready to tell him about it!"

Quentin firmly replied, "Well again, I question whether you're ready to marry him or anyone else right now. Secrets are at the foundation of every single relationship you have, which means that something is wrong and you need to change."

"You think you know better than me," she yelled from the staircase as she headed toward the front door.

"Of course I do," Quentin said with a laugh, and yelled back, "because I'm older and wiser!" Then he whispered to himself, "And because I'm your big brother, and I care about you."

Jazz was upset with her big brother, but Quentin was pushing her to think through her decisions.



Real Talk

1. Sometimes we want to cover up things that can hurt us—and even others. Why do we sometimes hold back from telling the truth?
2. How can we appreciate those who call us to accountability?
3. We know pride can keep us from seeing ways we need to change. How does God interrupt our problematic lives to confront us with the need for change?



The Big Picture

Luke's Gospel tries to capture as much detail as possible in sharing the story of Jesus' life starting before He is born with Mary's pregnancy and John the Baptist's birth. Luke's audience is given context that Jesus is not simply the Messiah, but the promised Son of God and that John the Baptist is the prophesied forerunner.



Make It Stick

“The Magnificat: Mary’s Song of Praise Mary responded, ‘Oh, how my soul praises the Lord. How my spirit rejoices in God my Savior!’” (Luke 1:46–47, NLT)



The Word (NLT)

Luke 1:46 The Magnificat: Mary’s Song of Praise

Mary responded, “Oh, how my soul praises the Lord.

47 How my spirit rejoices in God my Savior!

48 For he took notice of his lowly servant girl, and from now on all generations will call me blessed.

49 For the Mighty One is holy, and he has done great things for me.

50 He shows mercy from generation to generation to all who fear him.

51 His mighty arm has done tremendous things! He has scattered the proud and haughty ones.

52 He has brought down princes from their thrones and exalted the humble.

53 He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away with empty hands.

54 He has helped his servant Israel and remembered to be merciful.

55 For he made this promise to our ancestors, to Abraham and his children forever.”



The Players

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.



Backstage

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 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.



Combing Through

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 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. Probably that ideal community 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!



Diving Deeper Quiz

Have the participants read BACKSTAGE and COMBING THROUGH. Then, have them answer the following:

1. How does Mary respond to the news that she will give birth to the Savior?
2. What does the birth of Christ mean for those in power?
3. How does the coming of Jesus into the world demonstrate God's faithfulness?



Next Steps

We don't often think about the way that the birth of Jesus brought hope to the oppressed people in Israel in the first century. This week

think about ways God brings hope into the lives of people who feel forgotten or marginalized in your community.



Put It Out There

A. Group Application

Have your participants coordinate a Gospel trivia night (Jeopardy style) which can be done online or in person. Have them come up with five different categories and form a list of Scripture questions for each of them. The theme of the evening may be something like "Stay Faithful" Some suggested categories are: Christmas Songs, CHRISTmas, Keep the Faith, SHERoes of the Bible, and a "Potpourri" category in which students can include questions about anything in the Bible.

B. Personal Application

Ask each participant to journal this week about how they have seen God be faithful this holiday season. Invite them to bring back one testimony the next time you meet after the holiday break.



Wrap It Up

A. Journal

Reflect on the ways Jesus is a liberator of the oppressed and forgotten. How does Christmas reflect this reality?

B. Prayer

Heavenly Father, please remind me of your faithfulness in keeping your promises. Help me to not be so prideful that I miss your humility in saving us.



Say Word?

Ephesians. ih-FEE-zhuhnz.
Ephesus. EF-uh-suhs, EH-fuh-suhs.

SWAG
(Spiritual Wisdom and Guidance)

The face is the mirror of the mind, and eyes without speaking confess the secrets of the heart.—St. Jerome