

Ephesians 3:1-13

Week 5 - Stewarding The Mystery Of God's Plan

Learning Objectives

- Discuss what it means to be a steward of the gospel.
- Observe how believers are called to be stewards just like Paul was.
- Explore God's purpose for the Church.

Pray for your time together as a group!

? Previously, we talked about Ephesians 2:11-22, where Paul wrote about the unity of the church.

Summarize that study. What were some of the key takeaways, challenges, and questions?

Possible Answer: Concluded with the idea that the unified church, with barriers broken, is built on Christ, then the apostles and the prophets. Gentiles who hear the message of equality are brought into unity ("once far off now brought near").

Section One: Prisoner of Conscience

Read Out Loud: Ephesians 3:1-6 (NIV)

For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles—

²Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, ³that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. ⁴In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, ⁵which was not made known to people in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. ⁶This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.

? Paul refers to himself as an administer of God's grace. Other translations use the word "steward."

What do you think he means by this?

Possible Answer: A steward is someone who has responsibility for something that does not belong to them, often for the benefit of another. A person who has authority that comes from a higher or greater authority, e.g. the CEO of a company has authority and responsibility, but this power ultimately comes from the company's shareholders. Paul's stewardship is rooted in authority that was given to him from Christ.

? Does it seem like Paul is bragging about his administration of God's grace? What do you know about his conversion to follow Christ that might make him speak this way?

Possible Answer: Paul clarifies the grace was given to him by God, not because of anything he had done. In verse 8 he calls himself the least of the saints. However, he doesn't take lightly the significance of this stewardship that was given him.

This is the first time in this letter Paul mentions being imprisoned. (See Acts 28:16-30 for reference.) We know that this letter was written while Paul was under house arrest in Rome. Ephesus is in modern-day Turkey, and Rome is in Italy; the Ephesians may have been a little alarmed at Paul's imprisonment, hearing about it from so far away!

Leader's Note: Feel free to reference Acts 1:11-24, especially verse 16.

? What exactly is the mystery that has been 'made known'? What makes it a mystery?

Possible Answer: God wants to save everyone. He planned on a diverse church from the start, not a singular "purified" people group. God started with one nation, but Jesus has paved a way for all to have a redeemed relationship with God.

? How do we as modern Christians sometimes act like the opportunity to have a relationship with God is closed off to certain types of people?

Possible Answer: We sometimes struggle to accept those who don't line up with our ideal behavior. We are tempted to believe that those who fail to meet our moral standards should be shunned or ostracized or rebuked, but Jesus approaches everyone when they are a sinner.

Section Two: Less Than The Least

Read Out Loud: Ephesians 3:7-13 (NIV)

⁷I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. ⁸Although I am less than the least of all the Lord's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ, ⁹and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. ¹⁰His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, ¹¹according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. ¹²In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence. ¹³I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory.

? What are the different ways Paul describes his apostleship? Paul calls himself the "least," so what do you think made him uniquely suited for this position as a steward of the gospel?

Possible Answer: Paul was a Roman citizen and a highly-educated Jewish scholar who zealously persecuted the early church. Since he was the last person anyone would have expected to become an Apostle of Christ, he had a deep understanding of why someone might reject Christ. He had an intimate experience with God's transforming love.

? How is Paul's stewardship of the Gospel a good model for all Christians today – not just those in paid ministry? Do you see yourself as a steward of the gospel? (Break into smaller groups?)

Possible Answer: We are all called to ministry – but it's not always paid. The Gospel is the greatest news. Our Creator wants to have a relationship with us, and thanks to Jesus we can! Paul was continually aware of God's amazing grace and that knowledge seemed to pour out of him.

? How might you reword verse 10 for a modern audience? What exactly does God desire for the church?

Possible Answer: God desires that the entire created universe would be aware of this wisdom, power, and love – and He wants to use the Church to display that glory. God doesn't need to use us, but we get to be a part of His plan.

? The church has an important role in both the spiritual and earthly realm. How does that make you feel?

Possible Answer: It might seem daunting that God would use us to reveal his plans, but it should also be exciting that God wants to use us.

Leader's Note: Don't worry if people are confused by the specifics of what Paul is saying, but focus on its significance. Paul asks us to zoom out and see the big picture of the gospel. The uniting of Jew and Gentile is so great that it shows the angels that Jesus is Lord. (see also: 1 Peter 1:12)

? Paul inserts this strange statement, "do not be discouraged over my state." Why would he say that to people who care for him? How might this be relevant to what Paul has been talking about?

Possible Answer: He doesn't want them to worry. He has spent so much time zooming out that his suffering should not matter compared to God's purpose. As Paul says in verse 12, "In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence."

? How can we, like Paul, stay focused on God's big picture even when we suffer?

Possible Answer: By "zooming out" and reminding ourselves of our place in God's greater plan, and the unsearchable riches granted to us through Christ.

For Discussion and Accountability

? Are you being a good steward of God's gifts, especially the gospel? Who specifically is the gospel encouraging you to move towards? Does your life display God's glory to His creation?

Next time, Paul is going to continue his train of thought with a prayer. This week think about what typically drives you to pray for, and/or what you ask God to do in the lives of others.