

Back to Church Sunday SLIDE 1

Week 4: Together We Can Change the World

Good morning. We're glad to have you here with us. This morning we are finishing up our four-week celebration of Back to Church Sunday. For the past month, we've been exploring the theme *Together*, as we draw lessons from the book of Ephesians. Through the past three weeks, we've explored the themes Together We Find Peace, Together We Experience Love, and Together We Grow Stronger. Today we're going to discuss the idea that Together We Can Change the World. SLIDE 2

Monk Change The World, Nation, Town, Family, Self

Testimony of Sketchers Bobs

let's turn back to the book of Ephesians, where we've been studying these last few weeks. For a quick recap, in the first half of the book, Paul primarily deals with God's redemptive plan throughout history. It is God bringing humans together with Himself. The second half of Ephesians turns the gospel story directly toward our lives and explores how the truth of the gospel should impact how we live our life stories—personally, in our families, neighborhoods, and communities. The second half of Ephesians is much more instructional and practical.

Our key passage today is Ephesians 4:32–5:2: SLIDE 3

“Be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you. Imitate God, therefore, in everything you do, because you are his dear children. Live a life filled with love, following the example of Christ. He loved us and offered himself as a sacrifice for us, a pleasing aroma to God.” (NLT)

Dream Big, Act Small SLIDE 4

Be kind to each other. Be tenderhearted. Forgive each other.

Often, when we think about making an impact in the world, changing the world, we get hung up on thinking about big acts, superhero kinds of things. Or at least the kinds of things done by human outliers—like Thomas Edison or Albert Einstein or Nelson Mandela or Steve Jobs. But listen to that list again: be kind, be tenderhearted, forgive each other. Those are fairly simple acts. They may not always be easy, but they can be easy. Sometimes as easy as a smile or a question or five minutes to listen. Even those kinds of efforts, when multiplied by many people, consistently over time, build into a powerful force.

Think about those people who did change history, for better or worse: Mozart, Martin Luther King Jr, Mother Teresa, Adolph Hitler, Walt Disney, The Beatles. Who else comes to mind?

Now that we have a list going in our minds, ask yourself two questions about these people: 1) He or she may be best known for one big impact, but what were the steps along the way? 2) Did they do it alone?

In every case where the change was for good, we see small steps, and people who didn't act alone. Even if some of their work was individual, they didn't live in isolation. Other people influenced them, partnered with them, and played a role in their accomplishments.

I think we get too hung up on viewing changing the world as a giant mission. We think for it to be real and meaningful, it has to be big and impressive change. Too often we fall into negative comparisons of our everyday life activities to someone else's single, grandest accomplishment.

The reality is that the most powerful change is slow and steady. It comes through consistency over time—like the water flow that carves canyons or the winds that sculpt desert arches in places like Utah. Be Kind. Forgive. Love. Sacrifice. Together—over time.

This is important to remember, how we as a church together can change the world. The church gives us a place to find support, co-laborers, and even cheerleaders in our steps to change the world. It gives us a safe place to dream big and to plan for big ideas. But it also gives us the support and accountability we need to act small, to consistently take the incremental steps

needed to get there, to journey and grow together to become the authentic people God has created and called us to be.

In the later chapters of Ephesians, Paul writes to the church at Ephesus about what it takes to impact the world around them. He doesn't describe earth-shattering events. Instead he describes households, parents and children, families. Change in the world happens one person, one relationship at a time, so our choices to be kind, to show compassion, to choose understanding over judgment, to give grace instead of anger, to choose service over position—those are world-changing actions. Those are representations of Jesus in our world. They follow His example, just like Paul directs: **SLIDE 5**

“Live a life filled with love, following the example of Christ. He loved us and offered himself as a sacrifice for us, a pleasing aroma to God.” (Ephesians 5:2, NLT)

SLIDE 6

Recognize Eternal

True togetherness means a shared purpose. Being united in purpose keeps us working together and moving forward rather than getting caught up in the disagreements that cause us to work against each other.

Paul warns the church in Ephesus that they must be prepared to fight for their community. In the same way, we must be united against evil and ready to fight against division. In Ephesians 6 Paul instructs the believers to put on the full armor of God, not to fight each other, or even to fight against outsiders, but to stand against evil and to become one in the battle for the hearts and souls of the world.

SLIDE 7

“Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” (Ephesians 6:10-12)

SLIDE 8

When we know that the real battle is a spiritual one, it helps put the rest in perspective. Is what we disagree about really worth fighting over? Is the person who disagrees with us an idiot, a loser, our archenemy—or a fellow sinner who needs God’s grace and salvation just like we do? How can we keep our focus on the eternal and maintain unity? Because the battle is not about what’s temporary or finite. Even when we can’t see it or understand it, we know the real battle is about the eternal.

Notice that in Paul’s description of our metaphoric armor, he highlights prayer as a tool and a weapon: “And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord’s people” (Ephesians 6:18). Besides a way to bring our requests and needs and desires to God, prayer is a great way to refocus our attention on the eternal. We are shaped by it as we connect with God and realign our spirits with His.

SLIDE 9

Stay Connected

Even when we recognize the eternal, changing our world together takes effort—and it requires connection.

Looking at another Bible letter to a different group of believers, Hebrews 10:23-25 says, “Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”

An important part of life for us as the church is getting together. That can mean physically gathering for worship or study or fellowship. Unfortunately, there are a lot of things that can interfere with that. Schedules, commitments, disagreements, loneliness [NOTE: Loneliness may need a bit more explanation.]—the list goes on. It can be easy to let our time at church together get squeezed out.

Getting together can also mean figuratively coming to a place of unity in our mission and how to live it out. Sometimes that kind of working together can be hard. Sometimes it just seems easier to skip the discussion or conflict and plow ahead on our own with our head down. But isolation kills. And if we do that, we're forgetting all that we've learned these past few weeks about the importance of being together—together we find peace, experience love, and grow stronger.

Being together, staying connected, is vital for us as we seek to impact our world. Even Jesus, God Himself, surrounded Himself with a group of people. He invested in relationships and took time to be together with others. Jesus' closest disciples and followers provided community and fellowship. They lived daily life together, and they shared a common purpose.

The theme of this Back to Church Sunday is *Together* because church is where we commit to that kind of togetherness. We invest in the relationships among believers, and we are challenged and supported to pursue togetherness in other ways in our relationships outside the church—with family, neighbors, coworkers, friends, teachers, students, etc.

Our culture offers us many counterfeit ways of staying connected, like the yearly Christmas card or scrolling through endless posts on social media. While those aren't intrinsically bad, they do not provide the real, relational connection we need. We come back to church and pursue being together because we all need more than a Facebook group. We need real connection and authentic relationships. We need support and a place of belonging. We need encouragement and reminders of who we are and what we're called to.

None of us is immune to those needs. The great apostle Paul wasn't, and he knew it. He faced his own obstacles—he had many of them, not the least of which was prison. But even as he traveled, Paul stayed connected with fellow believers. He visited them and stayed long periods with them. He wrote letters, sent messengers, prayed for them, and asked them to do the same. And he constantly reminded them of their calling and their purpose to follow Christ and to change the world around them in small and large ways.

This is the kind of connection we need and the kind of connection we can have together. Why does Back to Church Sunday matter? Because community matters. Connection matters. Unity matters. Living as a part of God's family matters. When we pursue these things together, we find that . . .SLIDE 10

Together We Find Peace—the peace of Christ in our own spirits and peace and unity among our brothers and sisters.

Together We Experience Love—God's love poured out in and among us and the flow of God's love out into our greater communities.

Together We Grow Stronger—We experience the grace to journey together and be a part of God's greater collaborative work in our world.

And Together We Can Change the World—We are able to discover our purpose and plug into ways that we as a church can accomplish God's world-changing work around us.

CUE KIRK FRANKLIN – LEAN ON ME

As we close out our series, let me offer this ongoing invitation to all of us: Let's continue pursuing togetherness in God's love. Let's lean into the concept of *Together* to deepen relationships. Maybe that means taking the next step, from joining us regularly for worship to joining a small group or a service outreach. Maybe it's just greeting someone around you who you don't know. Or going to lunch with a casual acquaintance. There is a place in this community for every single one of us—together.

I think it's only fitting to close with Paul's final words to the Ephesians as a benediction: "Peace to the brothers and sisters, and love with faith from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace to all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with an undying love" (Ephesians 6:23-24).