

Truth and Love in Action

Anchored in Truth, Abounding in Love

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Introduction

There's a phrase so familiar we almost stop hearing it. Paul drops it almost in passing, *speaking the truth in love*, but the more you sit with it, the more demanding it gets. Truth without love turns into a weapon. Love without truth turns into flattery. Getting both right, at the same time, in real situations with real people? That's one of the hardest things a Christian is called to do.

In this study, we're going to work on exactly that.

Paul's letter to the Ephesians brings us to the sharpest edge of all: how do we *stand firm* in truth while staying genuinely rooted in love? How do we grow up, not just in knowledge, but in the wisdom to know when to speak, how to speak, and who to be when we do?

These questions aren't theoretical. You'll face them almost every day of your life. You probably already did this week.

What This Class Is Not

Let's clear something up right away.

This isn't a class on how to win arguments. It's not a systematic theology course, and it's not a list of talking points for culture war debates. If you're looking for ammunition to prove people wrong, you're going to be a little disappointed and probably challenged in ways you didn't expect.

And it's not a class about being nice. "Love" in Paul's sense isn't softening every hard truth until it disappears. That version of love, the one that never offends, never confronts, never says the hard thing, isn't love at all. It's conflict avoidance with a Christian label.

What this class *is*, is a serious look at what mature Christianity looks like when it meets the messiness of real life.

What We'll Actually Cover

Thirteen weeks. Three movements.

The first section is about *recognizing error*: in media, in the church, at home, and among friends. We'll get honest about how false teaching travels today (spoiler: it's not usually through books with scary titles), and we'll think carefully about how to respond when someone we love believes something we think is wrong.

The middle of the study anchors us to *the gospel itself*. We'll stop and make sure we're clear on what we're holding to, because you can't speak truth faithfully if you're fuzzy on what the truth is. We'll look at the twin ditches of legalism and license, what it means to hold conviction in a relativistic world, and why the church as a *body* matters for keeping us doctrinally honest.

The last section is the most practical stretch: *living it out together*. Speaking hard things without destroying relationships. Handling conflict biblically. Bearing with people who are struggling.

Encouraging growth rather than just correcting failure. And finally, taking everything we've learned and walking out into the world with it.

What's Expected of You

Be ready to think, not just read or listen. Be ready to be challenged. Some of these lessons are going to press on areas where you're already comfortable. That's the point. Paul didn't tell the Ephesians to stay put; he told them to *grow up* (Ephesians 4:15). Growing up is uncomfortable. It's supposed to be.

Be ready to apply it. In each lesson, we'll work toward something you can do, a conversation to have, a pattern to change, a habit of mind to build. The goal isn't accumulating Bible knowledge. The goal is to be the kind of person who can hold conviction and compassion together without flinching.

Finally, be ready to be surprised by grace. Some of these topics feel heavy. The world around us is confused, relationships are complicated, and the pressure to either cave entirely or become harsh is real. But the same Paul who warned against being tossed by every wind of doctrine also said the whole body grows as each part does its share, *in love* (Ephesians 4:16). There's something genuinely freeing about that. We're not doing this alone.

A Note from Matthew

These are questions we're probably all still working through ourselves. The answers aren't tied up neatly. But we need to have a conviction that Ephesians 4:14-15 describes something real, a maturity that's available to every congregation, and to you personally, if we're willing to do the work.

Thirteen weeks. One text. One goal: that your congregation would be a community where truth is spoken, *and* love is felt, not despite each other, but *because* of each other.

Let's get started.

Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.

— Ephesians 4:15

PART ONE

Recognize

How Do I Know What's True?

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world.

— 1 John 4:1

LESSON 1

Spotting False Teaching in Everyday Media

Then we will no longer be little children, tossed by the waves and blown around by every wind of teaching, by human cunning with cleverness in the techniques of deceit. But speaking the truth in love, let us grow in every way into him who is the head—Christ.

— Ephesians 4:14-15.

Class Overview: False teaching doesn't usually show up with a warning label. It comes through podcasts, social media feeds, YouTube channels, and best-selling books... wrapped in good vibes and impressive production values. In fact, it usually looks and sounds enticing: "For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths." (2 Timothy 4:3-4). Paul's warning in Ephesians 4 isn't about scholarly details or some distant ancient threat. It's about the dangerous religious world in which we currently live.

This lesson is about sharpening our spiritual senses and stimulating our spiritual awareness. We want to feel confident in recognizing biblical error when we see it, and we need to see the importance of why that skill set matters for every Christian, not just elders, teachers, and theology professors.

Introduction

Think about the last week. How many hours did you spend listening to a bible teacher or spiritual influencer who isn't connected to the church? Podcasts on the drive in to work. A YouTube sermon while you folded laundry. An Instagram Reel with a verse and a quote that hit just right. There's nothing automatically wrong with any of that. Christians have always learned from teachers beyond their own congregation. But we must always be on the alert. Here's something to consider: *are we more careful about what we eat for dinner than what we feed our souls?*

Television, radio, and the internet constantly bombard us with information – mostly things we don't need and don't even want. All subjects are on the table, including many questionable perspectives on religion and the bible. Many of these teachings and opinions are grounded in human thinking, promoting a false and worldly perception of God's word. The bible is still very popular, and Satan knows he can't keep people from reading the scriptures. Instead of always trying to suppress the bible (which he still does fairly effectively), Satan often manipulates our thinking by presenting a false conception of the truth. He tells us what we *want* to hear and not what we *need* to hear. It is important to remember that

social media merely mirrors the attitudes and mores of the society that creates it – it can't teach us *anything* about God! Underlying all these false teachings are the common themes of **humanism** and **self-worship**.

In our text, Paul describes spiritual immaturity as being tossed around by waves; every wind of teaching sending us in a new direction. That's not a picture of someone who rejected Christianity. That's a picture of someone who loves God but never develops the ability recognize truth and test what's being heard. This study is about growing up – learning the full truth, so we can spot falsehood and condition ourselves to spiritually respond appropriately. Let's go back to Paul writing and see his concerns...because he clearly saw the handwriting on the wall.

What Paul is Warning Us About

Paul is writing to a church filled with real people: some are growing, some are struggling, some are being pulled in different directions by competing voices. His vision for what the church should look like includes every member reaching maturity "with a stature measured by Christ's fullness" (v. 13).

The warning in verse 14 is the obstacle to that goal. The Greek word for "cunning" here, *kubeia*, literally comes from dice games. It's the word for loaded dice, a rigged game - *deliberate manipulation*. Paul isn't saying these teachers are just confused. He's saying some of them are working an angle. Some false teachers are sincerely misguided, but some **know exactly what they're doing**.

What "Every Wind of Teaching" Looks Like Today

The Ephesian Christians Paul addressed understood their specific dangers: the mysticism and worldly philosophies of Gnostics, Docetists, and Cerinthians; the sensual and selfish focus of the gentiles; and the tradition-worshipping Judaizing teachers. All these questioned Christ's reality, His identity, His holiness, and the reality of the resurrection – all calling men away from Jesus and even back to Judaism. Our present-day dangers have different names and focus on different lies, but the methods of deception remain the same.

Today, "every wind of teaching" blowing through the media includes:

- **The Gospel of Prosperity:** the idea that faith is a mechanism for getting God to bless you financially and physically, more than spiritual growth and eternal life; this is usually tied in with a belief in physical entitlement.
- **Therapeutic Christianity:** self-help Christianity that suggests the heart is the ultimate guide to 'salvation'; Jesus exists primarily to help you 'feel better about yourself', and sin is reframed as trauma, wrong thinking, or low self-esteem
- **Self-Deification and Modern Narcissism:** media often promotes "self-love" and "high self-esteem" as biblical mandates, putting the focus on self rather than Christ
- **Progressive 'deconstruction':** we have a right and are free to renegotiate nearly every historic Christian conviction, based on modern philosophy and cultural pressure

- **Universalism:** all people will be saved, regardless of faith, if there is some belief in a 'deity'
- **Mystical speculation:** extra-biblical "words from God" from modern "prophets" who claim to be authentic messengers of God, making claims that go beyond or change scripture
- **Antinomianism ("without law"):** the belief that grace removes the need for any moral effort or following of biblical commands; often used to justify modern societal norms; almost a modern offshoot of Gnosticism.
- **Nationalistic Christianity:** Christian identity and political/national identity get fused inappropriately to distort the gospel; this usually promotes the idea that "God is always on our side"
- **Works-Based Salvation:** Implies that good deeds, hard work, or specific religious actions will earn salvation; this contradicts salvation by grace through faith in Jesus; many people in the church today still secretly feel this way inside (even when they know better).

Practical Markers of False Teaching

Knowing these dangerous philosophies is helpful, but what we really need are tools: things you can use when you're sitting in your car listening to a podcast or discussing faith with friends. You hear a speaker or message, but something feels slightly off. Here are frequent markers of false teaching we should commit to memory.

It Flatters Rather Than Transforms

Think about the last time you got feedback that really changed you. Real feedback... not the kind that just made you feel good. Maybe it was a coach, a mentor, a friend who cared enough to say something hard. It probably stung a little. But you're better for it. Now, think about a teacher who only ever makes you feel great about yourself. How much have you changed from listening to them? Flattery feels like love. But it isn't.

For the time will come when people will not tolerate sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, will multiply teachers for themselves because they have an itch to have their ears scratched.

— 2 Timothy 4:3

One of the clearest markers of false teaching is that it makes you feel great about yourself without calling you to change. Sound doctrine is comforting, but it should also be convicting. It shows us where we fall short and points us to grace for change. Teaching that never challenges you, never warns of sin, and never calls you to hard obedience... that's a definite red flag. Ask yourself: when's the last time that teaching made you feel genuinely uncomfortable - uncomfortable in the way that genuine truth makes you squirm a little before setting you free? True biblical teaching should affect us emotionally, but also handle the word of truth correctly and faithfully.

It Minimizes or Replaces Scripture

Watch how teachers handle the Bible. Do they use it as the foundation or as decoration? There's a version of teaching that quotes lots of verses but never actually lets Scripture speak... every passage is bent to support a conclusion the teacher has already arrived at.

John said:

Anyone who does not remain in Christ's teaching but goes beyond it does not have God. — 2 John 9

Going "beyond" what Scripture says. That phrase is still relevant. Whenever a teacher's authority rests primarily on personal experience, special revelation, or cultural consensus rather than the Word of God, that's worth noticing.

It Focuses on Self and Minimizes Jesus

It's so much easier to focus on ourselves instead of God. We are great about forgiving our mistakes and shortcomings, but struggle with seeing our honest reflection in the Word. Many false teachers try to make the message easier to digest – focus on removing our stress, focus on happiness only, focus on the ever-forgiving nature of God. You'll never hear Hebrews 10:26 ff quoted with the “feel good” gospel or prosperity gospel. Jesus will be OK with us. Another red flag.

It Gives a False View of God

Too often false teacher may present a distorted view of the nature of God; He is a loving Father who designed us in His image and created us for a relationship with Him – to do so, it was necessary for the sacrifice of His son, and we give Him our obedience out of our love. Too often, however, God is pictured in two false ways - a harsh taskmaster who demands obedience, or else will destroy us, or a loving and benign cosmic Santa Claus who constantly tries to correct us but will eventually accept us all into heaven anyway. The direction of these distortions usually depends on the audience the ‘teacher’ is trying to play to (sometimes a combination of both: the OT ‘vengeful’ God, or the NT ‘loving and cuddly’ God).

It Gives a False View of God's Grace

Scripture is clear about the essential nature of grace – we can't earn out salvation, but it must be human nature to want to try. Grace should not only remove our sins, but remove our guilt. Some Christians just can't seem to overcome that problem, and feel driven to earn their reward just the same. This just worsens the anxiety that “I haven't done enough.” And there are false teachers that play on this, heaping up the need to “always do more”, because “it's never enough”. Unfortunately, this can even lead to spiritual competition, where we compare ourselves to each other to bolster our fragile egos.

Conversely, some teachers prey on this and suggest we shouldn't worry so much about our behavior, as God's grace will always “cover it”, no matter how little we do. It just becomes, “don't worry – be happy now.”

It Redefines the Gospel

The gospel is specific. It has content. Paul wasn't vague about it, he called out anyone who preached a different version, including himself:

But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, a curse be on him!

— Galatians 1:8

A gospel that doesn't require repentance isn't the gospel. A gospel where Jesus is mainly a life coach or social reformer isn't the gospel. A gospel that promises health and wealth as a sign of God's favor isn't the gospel. The real thing is specific: humanity is lost in sin, God sent His Son to die in our place, Jesus rose from the dead, and salvation comes through faith, repentance, and baptism in Him alone.

It Exploits Emotion

There's nothing wrong with being moved in worship or during a sermon... that's often the Spirit at work. But here's a useful test: after the feeling fades, what's left? If the answer is mostly just the memory of a powerful experience and not something that changed your heart, what have you learned? If you can't articulate or examine the spiritual benefit, what should that tell you? Emotion can confirm truth but can't create it.

Emotion isn't bad. Worship should move us. Scripture should stir our hearts. But false teaching often works by bypassing the mind entirely, generating strong emotional experiences and then tying those experiences to the teacher's credibility or message. "I felt the presence of God when I heard this." Maybe. But feelings aren't a truth-test. The Bereans didn't just feel good about Paul's preaching. They checked it against Scripture (Acts 17:11). That's the model. The emotional pull of false teaching doesn't stay internal; it attaches itself to a person and can be easily changed, like clothing.

It Promotes Greed and Exploits the Believer

We all know the typical televangelist caricature: flaunting wealth, promoting physical prosperity along with spirituality, constantly asking for donations, and tying the level of the listeners' holiness to the size of the "faith gift". Of course, the teacher wants YOU to share in this wealth because "God wants you to have it", and "you deserve it"; financial failure and poverty are a result of a lack of faith...and a lack of donations.

It Builds an Unhealthy Following on the Teacher and Not God

Paul was concerned about teachers who drew disciples after themselves (Acts 20:30). He warned to watch for teachers whose equated criticism of the teacher to attacking God Himself. Healthy Bible teachers point to Christ and encourage the believer to test everything. They welcome questions. They don't position themselves as uniquely anointed gatekeepers of truth.

Most of us have seen this play out online. A teacher builds a massive following, and over time, criticism of the teacher (even fair, substantive criticism) is considered an affront to God. The followers stop being Bereans (those who search the scriptures) and start being defenders and even fanatics of their philosophy. A healthy teacher doesn't want that. They point you to Christ and then get out of the way. When a teacher needs your loyalty more than your growth, something's wrong.

We have discussed nine characteristics of false teaching. Knowing what to look for is only half the solution, however. The other half is developing the habit of *looking* for these traits. Here are four practical ways to do that.

Developing Discernment: Practical Steps

Spotting false teaching isn't a gift only some special people have. It's a skill every Christian *can* and *must* develop. Here's how.

Know Your Bible Well Enough to Notice When Something's Off or Contradictory

You don't need a seminary degree. But you do need consistent engagement with scripture - not just devotional reading, but actual careful study. The more time you spend with the real thing, the faster you recognize a counterfeit.

Think about how bank tellers are trained to spot counterfeit bills. They study genuine currency so thoroughly that fakes feel wrong the moment they see them. That's the goal.

Always Evaluate Carefully and Ask Questions, Especially Before You Share

Before you pass along a sermon clip, a quote, a blog, or a book recommendation, pause and think. Who is this author? To what church are they connected? What do they believe and teach about Jesus, the Bible, and salvation? A quick search can tell you a lot.

We all know about the "smell test". If we're not sure about a food, we first smell it before consuming. Smart. Or sometimes we smell an odor that just hits us as "wrong", so we search it out to uncover the problem. We should be that same way about our spiritual food, as well. Not every time someone says, "hear, taste this," should we suddenly gulp something down without a few questions first. We're often more careful about forwarding a recipe or a news article than we are about forwarding teaching that will shape someone's view of God. That needs to change.

Don't Consume Alone

Talk about what you're hearing. Bring it to other trusted Christians - ask your spouse, your small group, your elders. Don't be afraid to ask for the opinions of other Christian brothers and sisters - you may learn new perspectives or applications, and you may stimulate them to study further. The body of Christ exists partly for this interaction. Ephesians 4 is all about the church functioning together: "joined and held together by every supporting ligament" (v. 16). Discernment and scriptural learning are community projects.

Treat Spiritual Hunger as a Gift, But Don't Let It Drive the Bus

Some of us are drawn to false teaching precisely because we're hungry for something more or new. Peter tells us to "desire the sincere milk of the Word," which will create an appetite for the deeper and more fulfilling meat that causes spiritual growth. We want depth, experience, something beyond the routine. That hunger is good, but one must be nourished by "pure milk" before moving to deeper food.

Otherwise, we can become vulnerable to teachers who offer spiritual intensity without biblical grounding.

Feed that hunger here. Ask your teachers for more. Dig deeper in the Word. Don't let legitimate hunger pull you toward illegitimate sources.

Conclusion

Paul did not write Ephesians 4 to frighten us or cause paranoia. It is not meant to make you avoid reading books, listening to religious media, or learning biblical principles outside of walls of our building. Paul's goal in Ephesians 4 is to spur us on to spiritual *maturity*. We shouldn't have to worry when we go to school, go to work, read a book, or engage with our friends about moral or religious topics. Discernment isn't a defensive crouch. It's having the skills engage the world with confidence, share the truth boldly, and trust what we believe because we've tested it. It is our anchor.

On the shoreline, do you ever wonder why ships are tied to moorings or anchored and not lashed tightly against the dock? A ship tied down to the pier is still battered by the waves and will eventually break apart, since it cannot move. The ship with the anchor is free to move about in the water and can ride and withstand the waves without being pounded apart. It is also prevented from blowing away from shore and being lost at sea. The anchor of God's word doesn't prevent us from facing the world, but it keeps us from being lost from God's grace. We should not be afraid of the waves – we should put our trust in the anchor.

But speaking the truth in love, let us grow in every way into him who is the head—Christ.

— Ephesians 4:15

Memory Verse

Test everything. Hold on to what is good.

— 1 Thessalonians 5:21

For Discussion

1. What media sources, podcasts, YouTube channels, books, and social media accounts are you currently getting spiritual content from? How often do you think critically about what you're hearing?

2. Have you ever realized, looking back, that something you believed or taught others was actually off-base? What helped you see it? How did it feel to change your mind?

