

Unity

Ephesians 4:1-6

August 7, 2016

After urging us in Ephesians 4:1 to live a life worthy of the calling we have received, Paul now begins to articulate more precisely the things that God intends for His people. He begins in vv. 2-6 with a clear and resounding call to unity. Each of us has people that we positively associate with the word unity. And... each of us also has people who we negatively associate with unity. Some of them may be sitting nearby. Ephesians 4:3 calls us to “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.” Unity is a significant part of living out a worthy life for God.

Paul begins his discussion on unity with 3 key challenges for Christ followers. In Ephesians 4:2 he says to, “Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.” Let’s talk about these 3 challenges. The first two, humility and gentleness are linked. Both are immediately upgraded to the level of “completely,” meaning not partly humble, not sort of gentle, but rather completely!

Being humble carries with it the idea of lowliness. Often we see this as almost derogatory; there’s a sense of weakness or servility around being humble. However, all throughout Scripture, humility is regarded as something pleasing to the Lord. It’s the opposite of arrogance.¹ In Matthew 23:11-12 Jesus teaches us, “The greatest among you will be your servant. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” Proper unity within the church, should be protected and cherished by each one of us, as we humble ourselves. We should each be careful not to think of ourselves more highly than we ought.²

The second part of Paul’s challenge mentions being gentle. Gentleness can be understood as a mild “attitude and behavior, in contrast with harshness in... dealing with others.”³ So, for example, Gal. 6:1 teaches us, “Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently.” This word “restore” follows right along with the tone of being gentle. Restore is “used elsewhere in the NT for mending nets and bringing factions together.”⁴ We need to be firm about sin but we need to be gentle in the way we restore a brother or sister in Christ. There is little room for harsh or divisive attitudes and actions.

The church is not a place to be a hater. A little while later, in this same chapter, v. 15, Paul will mention an atmosphere of “speaking the truth in love.” This is the appropriate way for Christ followers to embrace unity in the church, while at the same time being honest and straightforward about sin.

As if Ephesians 4:2 hasn’t already been challenging enough for us, it continues with the third part of Paul’s challenge: “be patient, bearing with one another in love.” I don’t know about you, but I feel like Paul is just turning up the heat. I find humility and gentleness very challenging. God works on this part of my life daily.

But patience? To use a Scandinavian word, one never found in the Koine Greek, oofta! I’m inclined to quickly move on to the next verse. But, instead, let’s embrace the whole counsel of God’s Word.⁵

¹ In some languages humility is expressed indirectly by [the] phrase..., ‘to live without strutting.’ I imagine many of us are picturing a rooster right now; you get the idea.

² See Romans 12:3

³ Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 748). New York: United Bible Societies.

⁴ *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, 2011, note on Galatians 6:1, p. 1979.

⁵ See NKJV Acts 20:27

Being patient is much more serious than waiting in line at the DMV. (Which I did just last week without losing my cool even once! Of course... there was no line, so that made it a bit easier.) But patience is more than that; it's long-suffering. It makes allowances for the shortcomings of others and endures wrong, rather than flying off the handle.⁶ This is an important and necessary attribute, in order for Christ followers to dwell in unity with each other.

It's a difficult challenge though. It is further refined by the phrase: "Bearing with one another in love." Bearing means "to regard with tolerance, endure, bear with, put up with"⁷ And, please, don't let any of us skip over two of the most important words in this whole passage, "one another." It's so easy for me, for us, to assume that we're the one always bearing with the shortfalls of others. Keep in mind, there have been many, many times when the Christians around you, have had to bear with YOU. We've been putting up with you for years. Because we love you. We value you. We care deeply for you. But, sometimes, you are kind of a pain to be around!

We should also note two other words, "in love." This bearing with one another is only made possible by the love of God. He has shown us His love for us and He has shown us how to practice that love towards each other. Just a few verses earlier, Ephesians 3:17 taught us that God rooted and established us in love. This is why we should love each other and also how we can actually manage to accomplish it!⁸ Let's not sugar coat this today. To put it plainly, being a Christ follower means we are called to put up with each other.

Turn to the person next to you: "The Bible says You have to put up with me & I have to put up with you." ...Now smile ;) ...Now, ask yourself this sobering question: Is there anyone @ EFCB that I just couldn't bear to say that to?

Matthew 5:23-24, "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift." Really? Shouldn't I put my relationship with God 1st? Then, take care of my relationships with people? The fact is, it's unwise to separate the two. Scripture seems to convey that our love for God and our love for people are mutually linked. Consider 1 John 4:19-21, "We love because he first loved us. Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister."

All these ideas we've looked at regarding unity, take my mind back to a phrase in Ephesians 3:18 that has been pestering me for weeks now. When Paul is praying that we'll have power to grasp the love of Christ, he adds an interesting phrase in v. 18, "Together with all the Lord's holy people." Why does Paul stick this phrase in here? In v. 17, when he says, "I pray that you," the "You" is already in the plural, meaning "you all." So, in essence, Paul is saying, "I pray that all of you may have power together with all the Lord's holy people." But, the "you" he is praying for here ARE the Lord's holy people. It just seems so repetitive. Or, is there perhaps some point, that he is trying to drive home here?

Now, maybe Paul is simply referring here to the Universal Church. Perhaps he simply means that he's praying for Christians everywhere, not just in Ephesus. But, I would suggest that he may very well be hinting toward something else; something equally important: Individually, Christians cannot grasp the immensity of Christ's love. Apart from our fellowship and communion with other believers,

⁶ O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, Eerdmans, 1999, p. 278.

⁷ Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed., p. 78). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

⁸ O'Brien, p. 278.

we aren't able to get there. Unity with other Christians is an important part of living a worthy life. Certainly this brings God honor. But, unity is also the only way for us, as people, to truly understand, experience, and practice the deep love of Christ.

There is a history of rugged individualism in the fabric of Bemidji's history. Our own efforts to survive, sometimes cause us to separate into our own little bubbles. Christians do this as well sometimes. We huddle up in our own little cliques with just a few other people. And, often without even realizing it, we become a faction that stands apart in arrogant pride, scoffing at those around us. But this is not how we become the people that God wants us to be. If we are not pursuing unity with everyone in the church, then we are not living a life worthy of the calling that we have received.

This is why, at youth group, we developed the horseshoe principle. Whenever we catch a small group of people circling up, we say the word "horseshoe." This means it's time to create an opening in that circle to allow others to join in. God has designed us for fellowship within the body of Christ. We are called to unity. To bear with. To be one. You don't always have to like everyone in the church, but you are called to love them.

When Paul begins his instructions to the Corinthian believers about partaking in the Lord's Supper, he chastises them: 1 Corinthians 11:17-18a, "In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good. In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you." The Lord's Supper is meant to be a strong symbol of our unity with each other as believers in Christ. There is meant to be a rich communion of the saints that is illustrated in partaking of the one loaf.

In Ephesians 4:4-6, Paul grabs onto this "one another" phrase and gives us a whole list of ones: one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father. Hum... just can't seem to catch what Paul is driving at? Maybe oneness? Perhaps unity? I think so. As we partake of the Lord's Supper this morning, let's joyfully embrace the unity God intends. Jesus died to make us one in Him. Let's celebrate that this morning!

Even as we celebrate the work of Christ in making us into one body, we must recognize that unity between people takes a lot of ongoing hard work! Take a look at Ephesians 4:3, "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace." So, unity is not a "one time, got it done, and now we're good" kind of thing. Believe me when I tell you, I've encountered some pretty serious challenges to unity as a pastor. I have not always handled those challenges well. I've needed to apologize at times. I've needed to admit I was wrong. It's not fun but it is good to choose unity. And, it brings God glory to see His children working things out with each other.

In 4:3, Paul conveys a sense of urgency, an element of haste and eagerness.⁹ Make every effort! And so, we should not drag our feet when there is a lack of unity. I must confess I did that very thing with one particular relationship this year. It was an awkward and painful situation that seemed easier to just wait and pray about it. But, literally in the middle of my message prep this week, I felt convicted. So, I stopped writing my sermon; it was time to practice what I was preparing to preach. I contacted this person. I finally made the effort that I needed to make to work toward unity with them. Not fun. Not easy. But still what God expects from me.

Now, you may be thinking, "But Pastor Jerry, even if I do everything I can to be in unity and to make peace, I can't control what the other person does! Can I?" This is a fair question. And I can't help but think of the Serenity Prayer, which is not in the Bible, but it's a good prayer:¹⁰ God grant me

⁹ O'Brien, p. 279.

¹⁰ Serenity is about being at peace, a quiet calm on the inside.

the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference.”¹¹ Rom. 12:18 says it this way, “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.”

All we can do, is all we can do. But, we are not allowed to do less than we can do! Ephesians 4:3 says, “Make EVERY effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.” Being humble, gentle, and patient with one another is how we keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. It requires effort to love one another. At the same time, this unity is “of the Spirit,” so He is the source for the unity we need.¹² So even as we make a strong and urgent effort to do our part, we also need help from the Holy Spirit.

Ps. 133:1 says, “How good and pleasant it is when God’s people live together in unity!” Let’s pursue this good and pleasant thing!

This sermon was preached at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji
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¹¹ By Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971). Accessed 8/3/16 at <http://www.beliefnet.com/prayers>

¹² See O'Brien's note #30 on p. 279.