

The Priority of Unity

Scripture: Ephesians 4:2-6

Code: 49-17

Now, we are going back to the book of Ephesians, so open your Bible to Ephesians chapter 4. And you know that it's been really weeks and months that we have been talking about the issue of unity in the church. We have been talking about unity because this is what Paul keeps talking about in this epistle over and over again. And we're still there; and even after this morning, we won't be done with this issue. It's so very important. I hope to make that clear to you today. The text that we're looking at—and this will be our fourth look at this text—is Ephesians 4:1-6. Let me read it to you.

“Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.”

This is a profoundly significant portion of Scripture, and the heart of this text is in verse 3, where the apostle is calling for us to be diligent, to “preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” And what we've been learning along the way is that our Lord wants unity in His church—unity. In fact verse 3 is really the sum of this. It's the highpoint of this text: “[Be] diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” That is important to the apostle Paul. But more strikingly, Paul picked its importance up from Jesus Himself.

The unity of believers, which obviously Paul writes about a lot—and we've looked at all of those passages in past weeks—the unity of the believers which the other New Testament writers speak of and write about basically is a reflection of the prayer of our Lord in John 17. The unity of believers is crucial to our Lord and crucial to the mission of the church. It is the unity of the church that puts power on display, saving power. The divine gospel is most powerfully displayed in the unity of the church, this “unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

It goes without saying that just making that remark probably conjures up in your mind the reality that that doesn't seem to be the fact. Churches seem to be divided, filled with friction, conflict, animosity, breakups; and you would be right. Christianity, as a church, could never be defined as one church; it is so fragmented. This is a far cry from what our Lord desired and prayed for.

But let's go back to that prayer, John 17, and hear what He prayed to the Father. And He prays for many things, but He culminates it toward the end in verse 20. He writes, does John, reflecting this prayer. These are the words of Jesus praying to the Father: “I do not ask on behalf of these alone”—meaning these disciples who were with Him there that night—“but for those also who believe in Me through their word”—so, “I'm praying not only for the disciples but all the people in the future who will believe in Me through the word of the apostles, which essentially is the New Testament.” So He's praying for all believers through all history who will become believers because of the apostolic doctrine contained on the pages of the New Testament.

And what is His prayer for all of them? Verse 21, “That they may all be one.” And this is not some superficial oneness. This is not some organizational oneness. It is the kind of oneness that the Father and the Son enjoy—“even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us.” This is a profound union of shared divine life.

In verse 22, He says, “The glory which You have given Me I have given to them.” The Father and the Son have shared glory, and that glory has been given to us so that we literally are partakers of the divine nature. It’s further defined in verse 23 as, “I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity.” This is a profound unity of shared divine spiritual and eternal life, and this is our Lord’s ultimate prayer request.

For all believers through all ages, verse 20 says, all “who believe in Me through [the word of the apostles],” meaning the New Testament. And what is the prayer? Verse 21, “That they may all be one,” again in verse 22, “That they may be one.” Why is this? What is the importance of this? Back to verse 21, “So that the world may believe that You sent Me.” Or verse 23, “So that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me.”

The bottom line here is that the credibility of the gospel is built on the ground of the unity of the church. The purpose of our unity is so that the world may believe the gospel. Individual testimony is words in the wind if it’s not substantiated by a living, transformed, supernaturally infused church. It is the unity of the church, the power of the church that lays the groundwork for individual testimony.

I mean, I think all of us have experienced this, trying to give somebody the gospel, and they immediately jump into discrediting the church. One national evangelical leader this week said, “I love Jesus; I don’t like the church,” trying to distance himself from the discord represented in the visible church. Makes individual testimony difficult, because the ground of credibility is the unity of the church; and where that doesn’t exist, individual testimony is crippled.

Now what kind of unity are we talking about? Well first of all, let’s identify it as internal unity, internal unity. That is, it is the possession of the divine life. Anyone who’s in Christ is a new creation. Christ lives in us. We have become partakers of the divine nature. We have become temples of the Holy Spirit. We have become the abiding place of God; God has taken up His abode in us. Literally, the Trinity dwells in every individual believer; and therefore, when the church is the church, it is collectively the dwelling place of God. It is the unity of divine life. It is the unity of spiritual life. It is the unity of eternal life. It is the unity of common mind, common truth, common will—that will which is reasonable, as Romans 12 defines it, and pleasing to God. It is the unity of a common motive, a common purpose, a common mission. And so that prayer for the internal unity of the church was answered by the Father. We are one, we are one; all who are in Christ are one. We are the one church. We possess that internal spiritual life.

We all received all spiritual blessings in the heavenlies in Christ, back to chapter 1. We have received justification, sanctification, redemption, conversion, adoption, and with all of that, comfort, peace, joy, security, inheritance—and one day, glorification. Literally, we have the promise and the reality of verse 22: that we already possess a shared glory, which will expand into full glory when we see Christ. We will be like Him, for we see Him as He is.

But even now, Paul says that as a believer in sanctification, you grow from one level of glory to the next, to the next, to the next, to the next, as you come more into the image of the all-glorious Christ. We have this glory in clay pots, Paul says. But it is glory. That is to say, it is the divine life. It is the real divine life. It is the divine nature placed in us. We therefore should possess all of the evidences of that, not only in our individual lives but in our collective life together.

The internal life of oneness with God, by the Spirit, in Christ should provide more joy, more comfort, more peace, more satisfaction, more tranquility, more love than anything and everything the world has to offer. This is where you ought to find all your satisfaction, all your joy, and all your delight in the reality that you are the possessor of already the glorious life of God, which is eternal.

Now, if that's not your most precious possession, then heaven will be a big disappointment to you because none of what you have in this world will be there—none of it. If there's something more important on this earth than all that is yours in Christ, heaven will disappoint you. Only if your highest joy is the reality of your eternal life and union with the triune God—only if that is your highest and supreme joy is heaven attractive to you, because there there will be nothing but that, and all the distractions will disappear forever. Pretty easy to do a little inventory to find out just exactly where your priorities are. Ask yourself whether you would immediately give up everything to enter heaven; and if you can't say that you would, you are prizing something passing, temporal, and earthly, rather than what is eternal and heavenly.

So we're talking about an internal unity. We have the same, shared, divine life. It is miraculous. We all possess it. But it's not just internal, because the whole point of this unity—back in John 17:21—is “so that the world may [know] that [the Father] sent [the Son],” and verse 23, “the world may know that [the Father] sent [the Son],” and that we are loved by God.

John 3:16 says, “God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” You can quote that and say, “God so loved the world that He sent His Son.” You can read John 13:1, “Having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to perfection.” But how do you put on display the fact that the Father sent His Son because He loved you so much that He wanted to make you one of His own children and give you His very eternal life? How do you make that believable? It has to be more than saying it is so; it has to be demonstrated that there is, in the presence of those who are redeemed, an inexplicable joy, peace, satisfaction, tranquility, patience, love, obedience, that could never have been caused by any human experience. So the Lord prays that we would be one internally—we are—but that we would also be one externally because that's the ground of our testimony. That's how we demonstrate to the world the transforming power of the gospel; and the collective unity of the church and the power of its united joy and peace and love makes individual testimony believable.

So the question that Paul is bringing us to—back to Ephesians 4—is, How do we make the internal external? How do we make that which is invisible, as to the life of God, visible? How do we live to make our divine calling visible? And that's what Paul is talking about here. Verse 1—we've gone through this now a number of times—Paul says, “I . . . implore you . . . walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called.” *Axiōs* is the word for “worthy”; it means equivalent. Your life ought to demonstrate your transformation since you have a high, holy, heavenly calling that has taken you out of the kingdom of darkness and put you into the kingdom of God's dear Son, that's taken you out of death and put you into life. Since you now possess the life of God, it ought to be manifest; there ought to be an equivalence between that identity, that spiritual internal reality, and

your external life.

So how do we take what is true of us internally and make it visible externally? What does a worthy life look like? Well, we went from the call to the characteristics—let's go back to verse 2, the characteristics of a worthy life: "with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love." And those will lead to verse 3, "[The preservation of] the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." The goal is in verse 3: "the [manifest] unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace"; the means is verse 2.

So what is the Word of God asking of me? What is Paul begging for in this worthy life, this worthy walk? He starts with "all humility." Yes, it's a high, holy, heavenly walk. It is a privilege beyond comprehension that God, the triune God, lives in us. It is the most exalted reality in the universe for any created being. And yet we are to demonstrate it, not by being proud about it but by "all humility"—lowliness. Walk worthy of the Lord by recognizing how unworthy you are. We looked into that in detail a couple of weeks ago.

And then last week, we looked at the next one: gentleness or meekness. What is the Lord demanding of us? That we be gentle-hearted—no retaliation, no anger, no bitterness, no vindictiveness, no hostility, no revenge. This is not weakness; we talked about it last week. It's power under control. This is not passive acceptance of all that is wrong or all that is sinful, but it is righteous indignation only when God is dishonored, not when things don't go well for you or me. "It is zeal for Your house," the psalmist said, "that eats me up." And Jesus fulfilled that.

Second Corinthians 10:1 says about our Lord that He was meek; talks about the meekness of Christ. Matthew 11:29, "I am meek and lowly." And yet the meek and lowly Jesus thundered divine truth, thundered judgment, took out a whip, at the beginning and the end of His ministry, and attacked the false religion of the temple. But He was never defending Himself; He was always defending the honor of His Father. In fact Peter says in 1 Peter 2—you'll remember from last week—that when Christ "was reviled, [He] reviled not again." When they attacked Him, He didn't attack back; He "committed Himself to [His Father]." This is the meekness and the gentleness that doesn't get angry, doesn't get self-protective, self-assertive, vindictive, bitter, hostile, go after revenge.

There's a third virtue in verse 2: "with patience," *makrothumia*, very common word in the New Testament. "Patience"—it's just that. It's patience. It's endurance—endurance in trouble, testing, temptation, deprivation. It's the ability to stay faithful, joyful, peaceful, content, no matter what. Like Paul said, "I've learned in all conditions to be content."

Patience—let me just give you some ways to think about it—is the attitude that never gives in, in the midst of negative circumstances, never. It is said of Abraham in Hebrews 6:15 that Abraham patiently waited and received the promise. God made a promise to Abraham, and it didn't look like it was ever going to come to pass, or that it was even possible for he and Sarah to have a child. But he waited patiently in a very, very difficult situation.

In the book of James—because patience is hard, we need examples. So James 5:9, "Do not complain, brethren, against one another, so that you yourselves may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing right at the door." Be careful about complaining because things aren't the way you wish they were. "As an example, brethren, of suffering and patience, take the prophets who spoke in

the name of the Lord.” They were the blessed that endured. The prophets never saw what they prophesied come to pass; Peter says they looked at what they wrote, as to what person and what time it would even come about. Patience is the attitude that never gives in, in negative circumstances. It never loses its peace, its joy, its contentment, its sweetness, its delight, and its affection.

And you could stretch it even to a second aspect: This is the attitude that takes everything that comes from everyone. First Thessalonians 5:14 says, “Be patient with everyone.” That’s everyone. And not all people are easy to be patient with, and no one who maybe mostly is patient is always patient. What is this saying? This is to say that you are patient when you bear insult, injury, persecution, unfairness, false accusations, criticism, hatred, and those two ugly sins, jealousy and envy, and you take it; and there’s no bitterness, and there’s no irritation, and there’s no complaint, and there’s no wanting to strike back. First Corinthians 13:4 says, summing it up, “Love is patient.”

Patience is this third virtue. The attitude that can endure negative circumstances for a very long time, the attitude that takes anything from anyone and never retaliates. And a third way to look at it is the attitude that accepts God’s plan and time for everything. And that also takes me back to James 5, “Therefore be patient”—verse 7—“brethren, until the coming of the Lord.” Well that’s a long time. We don’t have any guarantee of any intervention until the Lord comes back. So that sets the standard.

How long should I be patient? Until the Lord gets here. “The farmer waits for the precious produce of the soil, being patient about it, until it gets the early and late rain. You too be patient; strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near.” We are basically told to be patient in extended negative circumstances, to be patient no matter who gives us what, and to be patient until the end of life or the return of Christ.

So how do you have unity in the church? You have it when you have humility and meekness and this astonishing endurance and patience. Now by the way, none of these were virtues in the Greek world. They’re not virtues today. You couldn’t sell this today if you tried to suggest that people live life humbly, gently, patiently; you’d go against the grain of everything in this culture.

Meekness is a positive virtue that replaces anger with love; long-suffering is a negative virtue that withholds anger and waits on God. This is what you need to see in the church. Paul is a living testimony of this. Second Corinthians chapter 6, a few verses, starting in verse 4. This is just his life: “In much endurance, in afflictions, in hardships, in distresses, in beatings, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness, in hunger, in purity, in knowledge”—which is to say with all of that, he remained pure, he remained faithful to the truth that he knew—“in patience, in kindness, in the Holy Spirit, in genuine love, in the word of truth, in the power of God.” What amazing truth.

You want to be able to endure anything? Remain “in purity, in knowledge, in patience, in kindness, in the Holy Spirit, in genuine love, in the word of truth, in the power of God.” Paul took anything and everything, everything: evil report, good report, persecutors after his life. It was important to teach the early believers this because there was so much persecution.

Listen to 1 Peter 3:8, “To sum up”—here’s Christianity 101 again—“all of you be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kind-hearted, and humble in spirit; not returning evil for evil or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead; for you were called for the very purpose that you might inherit a

blessing.” You’re willing to inherit a blessing, maybe you might be willing to give one, right?

This is Christian living: humility, meekness, patience. And then there’s a fourth characteristic: “showing tolerance for one another in love.” I like the LSB on this one: “bearing with one another in love.” Bearing something, carrying a person in love, even though they’re hostile, even though they’re difficult, even though they’re an enemy. Matthew 5, you’re never more like God than when you love your enemy.

So the path to preserving the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace is the path of humility, gentleness, patience, and forbearing love. What do we mean by that? I think Peter gives us a good insight in 1 Peter 4:8. A lot of places you could look, but this one I think is vivid. 1 Peter 4:8, “Above all”—now this is above all; again, we’re back talking about the priorities of our Christian life—“keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins.” “Keep fervent,” it’s *ektenēs*. It means to stretch a muscle as far as you can stretch it. In other words, extend love as far as it is possible to extend it—to the point, Peter says, that it “covers a multitude of sins.”

This is where the unity of the church comes: from humility and gentleness, and from patience, and forbearing love that extends itself, even to covering people’s sins, even sins against us. Listen to the love defined in 1 Corinthians 13, “Love is patient,” verse 4, “love is kind, and is not jealous; love does not brag, is not arrogant, doesn’t act unbecomingly, does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never”—what?—“fails.” This is a love that endures everything and covers that with silence. Love covers; that’s taken from Proverbs 10:12, “Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all transgressions.” This is a love that seeks nothing but someone else’s good.

No matter what anyone does to me, I will never seek harm on that person; I will never seek to get revenge. I will ever and always only seek for that person’s highest good. This kind of love is unconquerable benevolence. It is invincible good will. And by the way, the word “love” here is *agapē*, which is the love of the will. You can’t command people’s emotions. This is not emotional love, this is the love of the will that says, consciously and matter-of-factly, “I will set myself aside for the sake of another even though the other is my enemy who has done evil against me.” This is the love that we control.

Again, it doesn’t mean that we’re spineless and sentimental, because times come when—to borrow from a little later in Ephesians 4—we have to speak the truth in love. Nothing more loving than confronting sin. We have to rebuke and speak the truth in love when it is appropriate because that’s what love does. But look, only humble people can live like this. Only humble people are gentle and patient and so extensive in their loving that it’s godlike, and they actually love their enemies and they stretch their love to cover a multitude of sins. And when you live like that, verse 3 becomes a reality: “being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” You get to unity. You don’t create it; it’s been created internally, right? We saw that—by the Spirit. But you get to preserve that and make it manifest when you take the path of humility, gentleness, patience, and forbearing love.

This is the diligence required “to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” Be “diligent”—that’s *spoudazontes*; it means to endeavor. Paul used it, writing to Timothy and Titus. “Make every effort,” the NAS translates it, “Make every effort.” Or 2 Timothy 2:15, same thing: “Make every effort to rightly divide the word of truth.” Do everything possible in your life to preserve this

unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace by the path that we have just laid out. Working at unity is primarily working, not on somebody else but on your own life, right? Working on unity means humbling yourself. You pursue it by being concerned about others, not being concerned about yourself.

What is the bond of peace? If we're going to preserve the unity of the Spirit—that is the internal unity of common life—in the bond of peace, what is the bond? What causes peace in a congregation to be a reality? I think Paul answers that in Colossians 3:14 when he says the bond of perfection is love, the bond of perfection is love. That's why Paul in 1 Timothy 1:5 says, "The goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart." "The goal of our [commandment]," the LSB says, "is love from a pure heart." I mean, the goal of everything we do in teaching you the Word of God is this kind of love that leads to the preservation of unity, so that the testimony of the church is one of loving transformation; and that ground, in the collective assembly of God's people, becomes the ground of credibility for personal witness.

So what do we say to sum it up? It's the obliteration of self; that's what it is. That's the path. As long as self is at the center, as long as your feelings, your desires, your rights, your privileges, your prestige, your place, your concerns are the chief concern, we will never see this kind of unity. And if we don't, we will have denied the very essence of the Christian faith, because the Christian faith is all about unity. And that brings me to a few comments about verses 4 to 6.

We saw the call to the worthy life in verse 1, the characteristics of the worthy life in 2 and 3. Here's the creed, the creed. This is magnificent, verse 4: "There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all."

This is stunning, absolutely stunning. In my mind it is the single greatest statement on the exclusivity of the Christian faith, anywhere on the pages of Scripture. There's one body; that's the church. There's just one church. I know people say, "We have denominational distinctives." Well, get rid of them. There's only one church, and there's one Spirit, and there's one eternal hope, and there's one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father. That is as narrow as it gets. That is the exclusivity of biblical truth. That is the exclusivity of Christianity.

There's only one church, one body, not many churches, not many acceptable religions, only one. There's only one Spirit: the Holy Spirit. All other spirits are demonic, false spirits. Only one Spirit. Only one hope of your calling; that is to say, one heavenly hope, one eternal calling, one election that settled that eternal calling. And then there's only one Lord—just one. Not more than one; just one. And there's only one faith, and that's the objective common faith, the faith once for all delivered to the saints, the content of the gospel. It's called by Jude the "most holy faith." There's only one baptism; that is to say, there's only one union with Christ, in His death and resurrection, that brings about salvation and eternal life. And there's only one God, not many; only one. This is the most hated of all Christian truths: that there's only one, and anything else is a fabrication of hell; it's a lie.

I reiterate what I said, some months ago, that stirred up the Internet. I'm not in favor of freedom of religion, I am in favor of preaching the one true religion and exposing all others as concoctions of hell. And if you're looking for a place where you see the exclusivity of Christianity laid out, it is there in the seven repetitions of the word "one." It's a sad evidence of the doctrinal ignorance of the church that it is so doctrinally diverse. That's not a good thing, because there's only one true doctrine. And

just to remind you of what is obvious: Our visible unity is built on doctrine.

Having said all that he did about the virtues in 2 and 3, he goes back to the foundation of all of it: back to God and His purposes. Verse 4 relates to the Holy Spirit; verse 5 relates to the Lord, the Son; and verse 6, God the Father. This trinitarian theology, with its elements in singularity, expresses the utter and absolute exclusivity of the Christian faith. So we have to have sound doctrine; we have to have the right creed to know how to live the right kind of life. I'll say more about that creed next time.

The worthy walk, then, is to be a preservation of the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. It will appear as a reality, a manifest reality in those churches where people are marked by lowliness, gentleness, patience, and love. That's the prayer for our church, as it always has been. And where that unity is put on display, the world can see that the Father loved us and sent His Son to save us; and that's the only explanation of why we are who we are. Let's bow in prayer.

We're literally overwhelmed, our Father, that You have sought us in Your sovereign love, and redeemed us, and brought us to Yourself, and given us that internal spiritual life, that we are partakers of the divine nature, the very dwelling place of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, that we have eternal life. You filled us with Your own glory. May our lives reflect this reality as we live humbly, meekly, patiently, and lovingly with one another, so that the unity of the Spirit, which is manifest as peace and love, can lay a foundation to make individual testimony believable.

Thank You for the calling You've given to us. Thank You for the empowerment we have by the truth and the Spirit to live in a way that honors You and that fills our lives with joy. Be glorified in Your church, we pray in the name of Christ. Amen.

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