

The Extraordinary in the Ordinary

AN EXTRAORDINARY UNITY

How are you finding Ephesians? I hope challenging! I also hope you are finding it encouraging. I have heard a number of comments from people to the effect of how powerful this series has been. I hope that all of these things are true – after all, this is the Word of God to His people, the Church.

At this point in the letter we come to a distinct change. Up to now in Chapters 1-3 Paul has reminded us who we are in Christ – the glorious truth of what God has done; the blessings He bestows on His people; the lavish love of God for all people and how He had made it possible for all to come near to God and live in His blessing. He has also reminded us of the incomparably great power that is at work within us, through the Holy Spirit, which God graciously gives to all who believe. He's also shown us by the power of his prayer, how important it is for us to grasp these magnificent truths.

Now he will turn his attention to how we must live, but these are not two separate and unrelated things. The point of all that Paul is trying to say is that we are to live in the light of the truth about God and what God thinks about us and has done for us. In fact – the two are inseparable. What you think and believe about God will necessarily influence how you live. So in Chapters 1-3 Paul has said, “here's the truth about God and you – His church – this extraordinary community” and now in Chapters 4-6 he'll go on to say – so this then is how you should live in the light of that truth.

Ephesians 4 v1

“As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.”

Paul begins this part of his letter by urging the Ephesians to live a life worthy of their calling. How are you doing, brothers and sisters? How much, now, today, does your life reflect the calling of God on your life? How much are you living in a way that honours all that God has done for you? How much does it reflect all that God has lavished upon you – his love, his grace, his mercy, his forgiveness, his coming near to you? How much does your life, right now, reflect how God sees you: chosen, special, precious, loved, alive, accepted? These things are lived out in the body of Christ - His church – this extraordinary community – but they are also lived out in all the places you go – as a part of God's holy temple. So how much does your life at work reflect the calling of God on your life? How does your life at home, in the places you go day by day – whatever you do – reflect the calling of God?

Paul urges us to live a life worthy of our calling. So how are you doing? It has been helpful and powerful to have these doors. They are meant as a symbol to the transforming power of God in our lives, and by walking through these doors we have been asking God, by the power of His Spirit that is at work within us, to come powerfully into our lives. Now the point of this is that, with the help and power of the Holy Spirit working in and through us, we may live changed lives. So, how is God transforming you – what transforming work is God bringing about in you? How is your life changing to reflect and honour all that God has done for you? Paul, in describing this worthy life, first emphasises unity – in verses 2-16.

Ephesians 4 v2-16

“Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one spirit – just as you were called to one hope when you were called – one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. This is why it says: ‘When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men’. (What does ‘he ascended’ mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.) It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.”

Paul tells us that living a worthy life will be one that demonstrates unity, and he is urging us to reflect Christ in the way we live – to be rooted and established in love. I urge you ... to be completely humble and gentle. Both are ways that Christ Himself was described. Humility means putting others first – thinking of others before ourselves. Humility is not about drive, energy or ability, but about valuing. Genuine humility means knowing ourselves, accepting ourselves and being ourselves to the glory of God. Humility is essential to unity, because pride lurks behind all discord. Truly humble people rarely come to blows. Think about it this way – most of the time the people we like and click with are people who give us the respect we think we deserve, while the people we instinctively dislike are those who treat us like dirt.

John Stott writes: “If, however, instead of manoeuvring for the respect of others (which is pride) we give them respect by recognising their intrinsic God-given worth (which is humility), we shall be promoting harmony in God’s new society.”(1)

Be gentle, i.e. careful how we treat others. Gentleness recognises that people are valuable but fragile and must be handled with care. I have the power to crush a daddy long legs if I wish. Gentleness is power and inner strength that comes from a God-controlled life. Jesus was gentle, and our lives should reflect His. Be patient ... it requires humility and gentleness to be patient. Patience is not short-tempered, quick-tempered or ill-tempered. Patience is long-tempered! This is how God is with us – or there would be no Chapters 1-3 of Ephesians. And we are to bear with one another in love. It is not putting up with one another, but getting along with one another. It is refusing to strike back or become bitter. It happens when we set our own feelings aside because the welfare of others is more important.

How do we do this? In tolerant love. Then we are to make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit, through the Lord of peace. This is interesting because in v4-6 Paul basically tells us that unity is indestructible. Unity, he says, is not something that we have to invent – it already exists. Just as God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit are one, so, now are all believers because of what God has done through Christ. No-one can take this away – so there is unity - one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all. So what does Paul mean in v3 - make every effort? We are united in Christ – always true. Paul is urging us to live so that that truth can be seen in the way we live – it is visible – and we have to work at that ... don't we! Disunity flies in the face of all that God has done and what the Holy Spirit does. To live in unity is to live a life that reflects God Himself. To be a vibrant family is to live in unity, and friends it takes effort! Growing partnerships across churches takes effort too, you know. We have the same unity in Christ with them as we do with one another, but it requires all the same effort to keep that unity alive in the way we live. This is not about denominations, styles of worship, different ways of doing church. How much effort are you making and keeping the unity of Spirit with other believers, whether in this church, other churches in this town, or with brothers and sisters in churches in other parts of the world?

In v7-16 Paul tells us that unity does not mean uniformity. There is great diversity in the church because it is made up of many individuals and God gives grace to everyone – different gifts and ability as He sees fit to build up His church. We all have gifts – and we should use them in the body of Christ. Without you exercising your gifts, the body cannot grow into the fullness intended for it. The particular emphasis here is on gifts that enable the body to grow in the knowledge of Christ. There are two reasons for this:

- i) Without a growing knowledge of what God has done for you in Christ, you cannot grow in love.
- ii) Without a growing knowledge of God you cannot grow in maturity and “grow up” in Christ

and this is why teaching is such an important part of the church. You notice Paul spent 3 chapters telling us who we are in Christ before he told us how to live! It's my job to provoke, prod, stir, challenge, teach, encourage, exhort and guide you so that you can grow in knowledge of the Son of God and so that you might attain to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ - that means that you may fully live in the truth of Chapters 1-3 – and if we grow, we'll be doing what Colin talked about a couple of weeks ago – reaching

out – and whether we are at work, church, school, home, wherever we are, we will be living lives worthy of our calling. What a beautiful picture of this church – every church – one where you can see unity, where you can see diversity through the use of different God-given gifts, where you can see a growing maturity so that we are becoming more stable, less subject to doubt and confusion and more able to live consistently for the Lord.

So the characteristics of a life worthy of our calling is a church that displays unity, diversity and growing maturity. It should be marked by humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance and love.

We should see deepening fellowship, an eagerness to maintain visible Christian unity and to recover it when it is lost, an active every-member ministry and a steady growth into maturity by holding the truth in love. And where does all this begin? By being rooted and grounded in love. Maybe today you need to walk through the doors we've already established. You want to know that you are loved, precious, special, accepted, chosen and alive. You want to know the power of forgiveness or peace. You want to know again you are rooted and established in love. Maybe you know it's time to reach out and see others as God sees them. Maybe today you want to commit to unity: humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance. Maybe you want to commit to using your gifts or to studying the Bible. Come, trusting that the incomparably great power is at work within us.

(1) Stott, p.148/149

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