



Christian Unity

EPHESIANS 4:1-6

Baxter T. Exum (#1281)
Four Lakes Church of Christ
Madison, Wisconsin
September 28, 2014

Over the past few weeks, we have been looking together at the book of Ephesians. The apostle Paul, of course, had spent three years teaching and preaching in the city of Ephesus, but now, several years later, he is writing a letter back to this congregation while under house arrest in the city of Rome, as he waits for his case to be heard by the Roman emperor. In the first three chapters of Ephesians, Paul emphasizes some of the amazing blessings that we as Christians have ***“in Christ.”*** We have been adopted, we have been redeemed from our sins, we have been brought near to God by the blood of Jesus, and because of this, we are now fellow citizens with the saints in God’s kingdom, we are a part of God’s household, we are now members of God’s family. And then, in Chapter 3, as we continued last Sunday morning, we looked at Paul’s prayer. He prays that the Christians in Ephesus might be strengthened with God’s power through His Spirit in the inner man, he prays that they might be able to understand the love of God, and he prays that they would be filled up to all the fullness of God.

All of this now brings us to a turning point in the book of Ephesians. Up until Ephesians 4:1, Paul hasn’t really told us to DO anything. Up to this point, we’ve been reading about blessings – this is how good we have it ***“in Christ.”*** But now, the book takes a turn toward the practical. In other words: Because of everything that God has done, this is now what we need to do. And this will be the focus for the rest of this book (in chapters 4-6).

So now that we are at this transition, I would encourage you to turn with me to the opening verses of Ephesians 4 (p. 1830). As we make our way to Ephesians 4, I would point out that this is the rather well-known passage where Paul outlines the ***“Seven Ones,”*** ***“...one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God.”*** And these seven ones are so important. We have looked at these a number of times over the past 14+ years together. God has made us one.

This morning, though, as we look at these verses, I would like for us to focus on the first part. Yes, the seven ones are important, but that’s what God has done. We can’t really do anything but accept that part of it. The part we can do something about comes in verses 1, 2, and 3. If you are already in Ephesians 4, I would point out even before we read this passage how Paul starts out. He starts out with the word ***“Therefore.”*** As we sometimes say, when we see the word ***“therefore”*** in the Bible, we need to ask ourselves what it is there for! When Paul starts out by saying ***“therefore,”*** he is referring to everything we have learned in Chapters 1, 2, and

3. He is saying: Based on all of your blessings ***“in Christ,”*** this is what you need to do. This is what all of this actually means. With this in mind, then, let us please look together at Ephesians 4:1-6,

¹ Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, ² with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, ³ being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ⁴ There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶ one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.

In this passage, Paul begs us to ***“walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called.”*** In other words, this is a message for each of us personally. When it comes to getting along, when it comes to Christian unity, we are not talking, here, about changing other people! This is not one of those lessons where we need to be elbowing our neighbor. I like the way C.S. Lewis put it, “Of all the awkward people in my home and in my office, there is only one I can do very much about.” So the lesson here is personal! Paul then tells us what this means in very practical terms. How do we live together in the church? How do we get along? In light of what the Lord has done, what do we do? What should our priorities be?

- I. I’d like for us to open ourselves up to the word of God this morning, and I’d like to start where Paul starts in verse 2 as he tells us that when it comes to interacting with our Christian family, we are to walk with **“HUMILITY.”**

The word ***“humility”*** here literally refers to being “low of mind.” We are to be ***“low-minded”*** toward each other. The word is used in Philippians 2:3, where we are to ***“with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves.”*** In that passage, Paul went on to write about Jesus, our example in being humble, who ***“...emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, ...He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross”*** (verses 7-8). Jesus, then, is our perfect example. He did not act in a high-minded way (as he had every right to do); instead, the Lord poured himself out into human form, he emptied himself, he humbled himself. Like Jesus, then, we are to look at others as being more important than we are. There is nothing we can do that is “beneath us” in the church. Instead, our goal is to be like Jesus; we are to walk with humility.

In practical terms, I love what one preacher said about this – he said that we are to be “relationally low-maintenance.” In our relationships, we are to be “low-maintenance.” In other words, it’s not always about us! We are not to be the ones causing the drama. Instead, we are to be ***“low-minded.”*** We are to make ourselves small. When we talk to people, we are to do more listening than talking. We are to lift up our brothers and sisters, making sure we are truly interested in them, not always dominating the conversation. Humility puts others in a place of honor.

Imagine being part of a church where every member lives to meet the needs of every other member. That seems to be the picture Paul is painting for us here – everybody considering his or her own needs as less important than the rest – living with humility.

II. As we look back at verse 2, we see another quality necessary for unity within the congregation as Paul refers to "GENTLENESS."

Many times people today see the word *"gentleness,"* and they think that it refers to weakness, that a gentle person is a weak person. The King James Version translates the word as *"meekness,"* and again, people think of a meek person, and they think of that person as being weak. However, that assumption is far from being the truth. I saw a headline online this week, "Meek oversight allowed a company on Wall Street to get out of control." No! Meekness did not allow that to happen. Meekness was not the problem. It is rather difficult to get a lot of information on this word (because it is used so rarely in the ancient world), but as far as I can tell, the word translated here as *"gentleness"* literally refers to "power under control." In the ancient world, the word was sometimes used to refer to oxen, or workhorses, or even to battle stallions – very powerful animals whose strength had been harnessed – power or great strength under control. Aristotle described this word as the "mean [or the balance] between being too angry and never being angry at all." It is the opposite of roughness or severity – power under control. If those in the ancient world were with us today, they would use this word to refer to a powerful truck, for example – a huge engine, lots of power, but power that has been harnessed for a purpose, power that has been channeled in a productive way.

I think we can see, then, how this term can be applied to Jesus. In Matthew 11:29, Jesus said, *"Take my yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am GENTLE and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."* When Jesus said that he was *"gentle,"* he was not saying that he was a weak person, but he was saying that his awesome power was under his control.

We understand, then, why *"gentleness"* is a necessary quality for those who serve as leaders in the church. The term is used in 2 Timothy 2:24-25, where Paul wrote to the young preacher Timothy and said that, *"The Lord's bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, WITH GENTLENESS correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth."* Paul was not saying that the Lord's bond-servant needs to be wimpy; but instead, Paul was saying the exact opposite – the Lord's bond-servant must be a powerful man, but that power has to be under control. The Lord's bond-servant must not be a man who explodes with rage, but he is to keep himself under control, especially when dealing with those who are in opposition to the truth.

And certainly we see the value of all of us having this attitude as we interact with each other in the church. We are to be considerate, caring, and kind, realizing that some of our fellow Christians are sometimes much more fragile than they appear to be on the outside. Would that be an accurate statement? One preacher has suggested that *"gentleness"* is the opposite of being rude or pushy. We are not to blow up at each other. We are to be gentle. Our power is to be under control.

III. As we go back to Ephesians 4:2, we see a third quality we need to have if we are to have any chance of maintaining unity within the congregation, and that is, we are to be "PATIENT."

As I understand it, the word *"patience"* literally refers to having a long fuse. Some translations, in fact, may refer to *"longsuffering."* And the idea there is that the fuse is long, that it takes a long time to blow up over something, it takes a long time for us to get angry over something. Sometimes, even in the church, even in our own families, we may be tempted to just give up, to just "throw in the towel," as we might say. In the heat of a situation, we might get to the point where we just say, "That's it! I'm out of here!" And yet, in those moments, the apostle Paul would encourage us to have *"patience,"* he would encourage us to have a very long fuse.

Someone has looked at this word and has suggested that we are not to “overreact to people’s humanity.” We are not to heat up quickly when somebody does something we disagree with. We are to be more like a crock-pot than a microwave. We think of what Solomon said in Proverbs 19:11, ***“A man’s discretion makes him slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook a transgression.”*** Patience cuts people a little slack. One ancient author described the quality of patience as having a spirit which could take revenge if it liked, but utterly refuses to do so.” Another has suggested that patience here is “the self-restraint which does not hastily retaliate a wrong.”

When it comes to patience, when it comes to having a long fuse, we think of God’s example. Hasn’t God had a long fuse with us? We think of 2 Peter 3:9, where Peter said that, ***“The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some count slowness, but is PATIENT toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.”*** Aren’t we glad that God has been patient toward us? Paul is saying in Ephesians 4:2 that we are to turn around and have that same patience toward our brothers and sisters in the Lord. Our fuses are to be long; we are to put up with a lot before we get angry, just as the Lord has done for us.

IV. As we go back to the end of verse 2, we find another instruction on unity here, as we are told to “SHOW TOLERANCE FOR ONE ANOTHER IN LOVE.”

I should point out here at the beginning on this one that we are not talking about doctrinal compromise. If I suddenly say we need to add Pepsi and fried chicken to the Lord’s Supper, I cannot go to this verse and insist that you tolerate me on that issue, “Well, Paul said you guys need to be tolerant!” Some people have made that argument, but that is not what Paul is saying here. We are not talking about matters of faith here. In this verse, we are talking about getting along. We are talking here about personalities.

One key definition of the word ***“tolerance”*** here is, “to put up with.” This is what the word means. Literally, we are to put up with one another. Paul recognizes that all of us have our own little quirks, our own little personality traits that may annoy other people. We all have our own little character issues. And speaking for myself here, if I have not yet upset or irritated any of you personally over our past 14-½ years together, then just give me a little more time, and I am sure that I can manage to do it! If I have not annoyed or disappointed you yet, then just hang on for a little bit, and I am sure that it can be arranged! As Christian brothers and sisters, we are people who must be endured! He is not telling us to tolerate sin, but he is telling us to make a decision to put up with each other.

And to be clear, Paul lets us know that we are not to do this grudgingly. In other words, we can’t be like, “Well, Paul says I have to put up with you, so I guess I need to put up with you.” Notice: Instead, Paul says that we are to show tolerance for each other ***“in love.”*** Biblical love means that we are to do what is best for the other person, even if it involves sacrifice on our part, even if we do not feel like it at the time.

V. As we come to the end of this instruction, we find in verse 3 that we are to do all of these things, “BEING DILIGENT TO PRESERVE THE UNITY OF THE SPIRIT IN THE BOND OF PEACE.”

When Paul says that we are to be ***“diligent,”*** he uses a word that brings with it a sense of urgency. The same word is used in 2 Timothy 4:9, where Paul begs Timothy, ***“Make every effort to come to me soon,”*** and again in 2 Timothy 4:21, ***“Make every effort to come before winter.”*** It is the idea of urgency combined with an all out effort. And so the idea is, ***“Make every effort to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”*** Make peace in the church an urgent priority. One author points out that, “A united congregation is more than a happy accident – it is the result of conscious, determined effort.” That is what Paul is saying here. If we want

to get along in the church, it takes a focused effort. This ***“unity of the Spirit”*** is something that demands our immediate and undivided attention. For those of us who are married, we think about the relationship we have with our spouse. We know that if we don’t pay attention to it, the relationship tends to deteriorate over time. It takes a focused effort to keep a marriage strong and alive. It takes making the relationship a priority. And that’s the same way it is with relationships in the church. Paul tells us that we need to ***“make every effort to preserve the unity of the Spirit.”***

He then refers to the ***“bond of peace.”*** The idea is: We need to focus on the unity of the group. Especially in our culture, we tend to value the individual. In our culture, we tend to try to set ourselves apart from the group. In our culture, we try to be different. Paul, though, tells us in the church that we are to focus on those things that hold us together. We need to focus on what we have in common. And that seems to be what Paul has done in the first three chapters, right? We are ***“in Christ,”*** we are in this together. So the focus is on the ***“bond of peace.”*** That word ***“bond”*** was used in the ancient world to refer to ligaments that keep two bones together. The word was used to refer to the chains that held a prisoner to his Roman escort. Paul is saying, then: Make sure you stay connected to your brothers and sisters in the congregation. Be diligent to preserve that unity.

Conclusion:

This morning we have looked at some of the attitudes that are necessary for all of us to get along together in the church.

- We are to walk in humility – considering the needs of others as more important than our own.
- We are to walk in gentleness – like the Lord, keeping our power under control.
- We are to walk in patience – reacting to our brothers and sisters with a long fuse.
- We are to show tolerance for one another in love – we are to put up with one another.
- And finally, we are to make every effort to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

As we look at this list, I hope we can ask ourselves: How are WE doing with all of these? And I don’t mean WE as a congregation, I don’t mean WE as in someone else, but I mean, how are WE personally doing with each of these qualities?

- When I talk to another member of this congregation, am I truly concerned about what they are going through? Am I approaching the conversation with the other person in mind, or am I just eager to talk about myself?
- When I interact with a fellow Christian, am I personally gentle? If I have the power to make a cutting or sarcastic remark, am I holding myself back, or do I let it rip?
- When we come together as a church, am I personally patient? Do I personally have a long fuse? Or, am I the kind of person who would be more likely to throw a fit and leave? Am I long-suffering with others as God as suffered long with me?
- When it comes to others in the church, am I tolerant? And not just, do I put up with people, but am I tolerant in love? Do I do for others as they have done to me in the past, or do I do for others as I would like others to do for me if I were in the same circumstances?
- And then finally, am I personally making the unity of this congregation a priority in my own life? Do I just show up here and there and throw some comments around, or have I made the unity of this congregation a priority? Am I personally making every effort to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the

bond of peace, or do I need bump it up a notch or two in this regard? Is there more that I personally can do to bring this congregation closer together?

As we close, I would take us back to those words from C.S. Lewis I quoted earlier, “Of all the awkward people in my home and in my office, there is only one I can do very much about.” Mr. Lewis was a wise man, wasn’t he! If we fall short, Paul is calling us to repent. Paul is calling us to change. Paul is calling us to do something now. In the book of Ephesians, Paul has now crossed over from our blessings to what we need to do about it. There’s not a whole lot we can do to change others, but we can keep on working on ourselves.

I am so thankful for your kind attention this morning. If you need the prayers of the church, you can let us know about that at this time – write it down, pass it up to the front, bring it up to the front, talk to me after the service. If there is something weighing you down this morning, we can pray about it.

But, if you are not yet a Christian, we want you to know the good news, that Jesus came to this earth and died as a perfect sacrifice for our sins. He was buried and was raised up from the dead. We respond to God’s sacrifice by allowing ourselves to be briefly buried in water for the forgiveness of our sins, and to be raised up to start living the Christian life. If you have any questions, let us know. But if you are ready to obey the good news right now, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let’s stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com