

Ephesians: *What Makes for Peace*

Ephesians 4:1-6

4/16/2023

I'm going to begin with a few questions this morning: How many of you love the Church? How many of you have been hurt by the Church? How many of you love your family? How many of you have been hurt by your family?

So often it happens that we hurt or are hurt by the very people we love the most. This tendency is common in families as it is in the Church; and, to some extent, it almost seems inevitable. Whenever people live together in close proximity, even when they have deep ties such as common parents and a shared childhood, feelings will get hurt and the ties that bind can become strained. Sadly, we see more and more cases where husbands and wives simply give up on their marriages; adult children banish their parents and forbid them from seeing the grandchildren; and siblings go years without even speaking to one another.

The same hurtful behaviors are often found within churches as well. A senior pastor and an associate pastor get into a heated disagreement, and the church splits as people are forced to choose which pastor they will follow. The choir director manipulates the choir to become lobbyists who regularly defeat the Elders' attempts to bring about much needed change in a dying congregation. Prominent families leave a congregation when attempts are made to integrate suburban and urban youth into the Student Ministry.

In my 35 years serving the local church, I have seen and experienced just about every kind of painful scenario you can imagine. Even so...I continue to love Bride of Christ, and I suspect many of you do as well. Amidst our failures and the pain that we sometimes endure within the fellowship of believers, I remain convinced that the local church is the hope of the world. I remain convinced that true, authentic, God-honoring unity is only found in our common faith in Jesus Christ...and that unity...that Oneness in Jesus...is worth the struggle.

The Apostle Paul understood the urgency of maintaining the unity of Christ's church as he sat down to write Ephesians 4. As we return to our journey through Ephesians, I want you to take his words to heart because Paul is teaching us how to defend the Body of Christ against the hurtful divisions that so often compromise our witness and lead people to feel hurt by the Church. So, please stand, and let us read Ephesians 4:1-6.

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called,² with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love,³ eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.⁴ There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism,⁶ one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

My message will fall under three subheadings: 1) The Practice of Selfless Virtues; 2) Maintaining Unity; and 3) What Makes for Peace.

I. The Practice of Selfless Virtues

Paul begins by pleading, urging, literally begging with deep emotional affection, that the early church “walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called.” We touched on this a few weeks ago but remember that “the calling to which we have been called” is God’s unmerited favor and election. In other words, God chose us when we could never choose God. Jesus died on the cross for us while we were still sinners and enemies of God. We have been chosen, called, and saved by God’s unmerited grace; and as such, we should walk in a manner worthy of God’s amazing love that has been so freely given to us, His Church. Our calling has a second component as well: as those who have been saved by grace, we have been sent into the world as witnesses of God’s grace—we have been sent as ambassadors of our Lord Jesus Christ to make the good news of the gospel known and to make disciples of all nations.

Paul knows, however, that our calling will soon be compromised if we fail to live selflessly. Listen to the virtues that Paul associates with a walk that is worthy of our calling: “walk...with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love...” Each one of these virtues is an expression of selflessness, which is precisely what Jesus said in Luke 9:23, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.”

Although I suspect most of you would agree that (in theory) we should live selflessly when it comes to our life together as Christians, I think we also know that many, many people come to church on Sundays because they have very real needs. A person who limps into our sanctuary on a Sunday morning buried in grief because of a recent death in the family is not prepared to live selflessly...she needs comforting and a lot of support. A young adult who attends for the first time, not quite convinced that the Bible can be trusted is not likely to walk “selflessly”, nor is the homeless person who quietly sits in the back, desperate for a warm meal and a place to rest. The truth is that MOST of us come to church each week because coming to church meets a need that we have for biblical encouragement, a powerful worship experience, fellowship with family and friends, and/or an opportunity to serve in a way that gives purpose and meaning to our lives. There is nothing wrong with coming to a church with needs that you hope to get met; but it goes without saying that if we all come into the congregation prioritizing our own personal needs above the needs of others, we will inevitably be a gathering of self-serving, self-centered individuals with little regard for others.

I think it would be wrong to read Paul here as saying that we should completely set aside our needs or deny that we have needs; rather, he is saying that we should seek to put the needs of others above our own. At the minimum, Paul is calling us as believers to walk in a manner that demonstrates the unmerited grace we received in Christ by demonstrating that same grace to each other, no matter what our needs might be. That grace takes the form of four predictable, God-honoring virtues: humility, meekness, patience, and love.

To walk with all humility is counter-intuitive to just about every human being. John Stott sums up this virtue with uncomfortable clarity:

The people we immediately, instinctively like, and find it easy to get on with, are the people who give us the respect we consider we deserve, while the people we immediately, instinctively dislike are those who treat us as dirt. In other words, personal vanity is a key factor in all our relationships. If, however, instead of maneuvering for the

respect of others (which is pride) we give them our respect by recognizing their intrinsic, God-given worth (which is humility), we shall be promoting harmony in God's new society (the Church).¹

If that quote did not make you flinch, you weren't listening, and I encourage you to go back and read it later when you can honestly think about what we just read. I had to spend a lot of time repenting after I read that statement...humility is much harder than it sounds, especially if you relish being respected.

To walk with gentleness or meekness is to be under the Spirit's control much like a bird-dog is under the control of its owner. In fact, that is one of the original meanings associated with the Greek adjective *praus*: an animal that has been trained and domesticated until it is completely under control.² My German Shorthaired Pointer, Molly, is well-trained and domesticated. She is the most beloved member of my household, and she is eager to please me as her master. However, you would be wrong to assume that Molly was weak, passive, or soft. Molly is a fierce hunter when she is commanded to hunt, so it would be wrong to think of her meekness as weakness. In the same way, to walk with meekness and gentleness as Christians is a matter of deferring to our Master—Jesus. Again, our meekness is not weakness—it is walking obediently with our Master and yielding to His control and His commands.

To walk with patience means we don't easily give up on one another. William Barclay writes:

Christian patience is the spirit which never admits defeat, which will not be broken by misfortune or suffering, by any disappointment or discouragement, but which persists to the end. The early church father John Chrysostom defined this virtue as the spirit which has the power to take revenge but never does so. It is the refusal to retaliate. It is the spirit which bears insult and injury without bitterness and without complaint. It is the spirit which can suffer unpleasant people with graciousness and fools without irritation.³

The Christian virtue of patience is possible only through the work of the Holy Spirit, as He reminds us of God's infinite patience with us.

Finally, to walk with *agape* love is to practice loving each other the way that God loves. Again, Barclay says it well:

This *agape* love is a thing, not only of the emotions, but also of the will. It is the ability to retain unconquerable good will to the unlovely and the unlovable, towards those who do not love us, and even towards those whom we do not like. *Agape* is that quality of mind and heart which compels a Christian never to feel any bitterness, never to feel any desire for revenge, but always to seek the highest good of every man no matter what he may be.⁴

These four virtues (humility, meekness, patience, and *agape* love) create the context for that virtue which every soul longs for: *peace*. The Christian virtue of peace may be defined as right relationships between people, even as our spiritual peace is a right relationship with God.

One last note for Barclay, and we'll move on:

¹ John Stott: *The Message of Ephesians*, 148-9.

² William Barclay: *The Letters to the Galatians and the Ephesians*, 138.

³ *Ibid.*, 138-9.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 140.

This oneness, this peace, these right relationships can be preserved in only one way. Every one of the four great Christian virtues depends on the obliteration of self. So long as self is at the center of things, this oneness can never fully exist. In a society where self predominates, men cannot be other than a disintegrated collection of individualistic and warring units. But when *self* dies and Christ springs to life within our hearts, then comes the peace, the oneness, which is the great hallmark of the true Church.⁵

Colonial, we have our work cut out for us, right? The obliteration of self is the slow and often painful work of the Holy Spirit on our souls...it is the process of our sanctification; and yet, anything less will lead to the “disintegrated collection of individualistic and warring units”...may it never be so! Let’s stop and pray right now that God will empower us to walk in a manner worthy of our calling:

Lord, we ask that you come into our midst, into our hearts, into our lives, and even as you meet the deepest needs our souls, we pray that you obliterate the “self” and give us YOURSELF, that we might walk in a manner that is worthy of our calling—that your Church might become a refuge of peace that brings glory to your name. Through the power of your Spirit and in the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

Let us turn now to my second subheading:

II. Maintaining Unity

In addition to calling the church to practice selfless virtues, Paul writes that we should be “eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

I want you to notice that Paul does not call the Church to *attain* unity, but to *maintain* unity! In other words, the default reality of our Lord’s church...the default reality of the Spirit-filled Body of Christ is unity! I’ll come back to ways that we can work to maintain unity at the end of my message; but first, let us listen to Paul present the default unity of our Lord’s Church in vss. 4-6: 4 There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— 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 a world that is so divided, so stratified by class, race, nationalism, socio-economic disparity, language, and cultural norms, nothing is as compelling as the unity found within our Lord’s Church. Even here at Colonial we enjoy unity amongst a wide variety of people: we have KU fans and KState fans and “other” fans; we have people who live in Missouri and those who live in Kansas...two states who famously disagree about a great many things; we have lawyers and plumbers; doctors and carpenters; people who are single and married and divorced; white people and people of color; American citizens and citizens from other countries; the young and the old; Republicans and Democrats; dog lovers and even cat lovers! Such diversity, and yet such unity!

Now, on any given Sunday in the fall, you can find tens of thousands of people all gathered together under the banner of the Kansas City Chiefs. They all wear red, they all scream continuously for the better part of three hours, and they chant various things all together at the same time. There you will find all the same kind of diversity, if not much greater diversity than

⁵ Ibid., 140.

you would find on a Sunday at Colonial. So what's the difference between the unity of the Chiefs' fans and the unity of our Lord's Church? I'm so glad you asked.

First, Paul writes, "There is one body and one Spirit." It was Paul who first leveraged the metaphor of the Church as the "Body of Christ." For Paul, the Holy Spirit is responsible for assembling the body, and the Holy Spirit gives the body breath. In fact, you may remember that the Greek word for spirit is *pneuma*, which was also the standard Greek word for "breath." So, here's the picture: the unity of the Church is founded upon the calling of the Holy Spirit who assembles the parts of the body together and then provides breath to the Body!

William Barclay writes: Unless the breath be in the body, the body is dead; and the vitalizing breath of the body of the Church is the Spirit of Christ. There can be no Church without the Spirit; and there can be no receiving of the Spirit without prayerful waiting for Him. ⁶

Church, I was deeply moved when I read those words. The fundamental unifying power of the Church is the felt presence of the Holy Spirit in our midst, and Barclay reminds us that we don't receive the Spirit without prayerful waiting for Him. This call to "wait on the Lord" has been so redundant in my life in the past few months. My staff will tell you that waiting on God has become a major part of not only my spiritual discipline, but also that of our team. If you long to experience the power and direction of the Holy Spirit in your daily life and in our life together as a Church, there is no substitute for quietly waiting on the Lord for five to ten minutes every morning. I encourage you all to pick up a copy of Andrew Murray's *Waiting On God* and walk through 31 days of waiting on God each morning. It will change your life; and what is more, it will change our life together. The effective witness of any local church is the direct equivalent of the Holy Spirit's BREATH in the body. If we're barely breathing, we're mostly dead. If our lungs are full of the BREATH of God, every person who walks through these doors will be immediately affected by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit! So...let us prayerfully wait on the Lord, amen?

Paul continues to unpack our unity as the Church: "There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism..."

The Church finds unity not only in the powerful presence of the Holy Spirit, but also in the one shared hope that belongs to...is a product of...our call. And what is that hope? It's not a "what"...it's a WHO! Our hope is the LORD, amen? The LORD here is a direct reference to Jesus. This was the singular 'creed' of the early church: Jesus is Lord! Jesus is our hope in this life and our hope for the life to come as we look to His return. Jesus is also our faith. In other words, our One faith is not a set of doctrinal statements; our one faith is our unified trust in Christ and Christ alone.

Now, I know that this subject of "one faith" may draw some skeptical thoughts into your mind as you consider the various denominations within the larger Church, some of whom do not pray

⁶ Ibid., 140.

well together. Let me once again remind you that our UNITY as the Church comes in our one faith in Jesus as the Son of God by whom we are saved through His finished work on the cross. That is to say, our unity is found only in the Jesus who is revealed in the four gospels and the unified witness of the Old and New Testament. We will not find unity in a Jesus of our own making or our preferred, edited Jesus. This is what we know to be historically true: The “big C” Church in every tribe, tongue and nation experiences supernatural unity in Jesus, our one and only Lord...in whom we place our unwavering trust as the savior of sinners. It is this deep affection and trust in Jesus that binds the global church together in a unity that far surpasses the Chiefs game or American patriotism or even our common experience as human beings on planet earth. You will know exactly what I’m talking about should you travel around the world to various countries. Wherever you go, from the busy streets of Shanghai to the remote villages of Malawi, from the suffocating slums of Nairobi to the rural villages in India...all over the world you will find your brothers and sisters in Christ, and you will recognize them immediately when you see their love for Jesus!

The Church has one hope—one Lord, one faith, and that is expressed in *one baptism*. Paul is no doubt referring to the baptism of water that served as the only rite of conversion in the early church. Regardless if you were a Jewish convert or one who formerly worshipped idols in the temple of Artemis...regardless if you were a Roman centurion or a household slave...all those who placed their faith in Jesus were initiated into the faith through the same baptism--a baptism in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit just as all those who make up this body of believers were baptized in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit!

Church, again, if you could only step back from your busy, Western, distracted life to see how powerful and precious is the unity we find in our Christian baptism both here in our nation and throughout the world--you would be amazed! I remember the first time I visited Kenya in 2005. Just about every Christian I met introduced themselves by stating their tribal name and then their Christian name; and then they would say, “I am a baptized Christian, and Jesus is my Lord and Savior!” I suggest we all give that a try this week! Church, our confession of Jesus, along with our Christian baptism, creates a bond and a brotherhood throughout the world that is unrivaled and unparalleled!

Paul concludes in vs. 8, “there is...one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.” Remember that many of Paul’s readers in Ephesus are those coming out of pagan mystery religions and cults. These men and women were raised to believe in a variety of gods and spirits. Most people in Ephesus were accustomed to calling the Greek goddess Artemis “lord”. Many “people of the land” believed that there was a unique god or group of gods for every region, tribe, or people group. The non-Jews in the ancient world had no concept of ONE GOD who was “the Father of all.” So, Paul reminds them that as new Christians, their fidelity to Christ and the unity of the body requires setting aside all other competing lords and bowing before the one God who is the Father of both the Jew and the Gentile, the slaves and free, the Greeks and the barbarians.

Paul emphasizes that God is not only the Father of all, but He is over all—God is all powerful and always in ultimate control. He is through all—every bit of this world belongs to God and God alone. And He is in all—God’s presence is everywhere and at all times...we are never alone!

NT scholar John Stott, having examined the seven “one” statements of Paul writes:

We are now in a position to repeat the three affirmations, this time the other way around and in the order in which the Persons of the Trinity are normally mentioned. First, the one Father creates the one family. Secondly, the one Lord Jesus creates the one faith, one hope and one baptism. Thirdly, the one Spirit creates the one body.⁷

Church, I hope you can see that the UNITY of the church is found in the UNITY of the Trinity. Such is why we are not called to attain unity in the church...the unity is already there because of the unity found in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Our unity is established...and this unprecedented, unparalleled unity is the default condition in the Body of Christ.

Sadly, the default unity of the body is often disrespected and neglected to the extent that the visible witness of a local church looks NOTHING like Ephesians 4:4-6. Such is why Paul states that those who are walking in a manner worthy of their calling will be EAGER to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. That brings me to my third subheading:

III. What Makes for Peace

Church, how is it that the Body of Christ, which is by default completely unified as one body in one Spirit, with one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God who is the Father of all...how is it that we so often fail to enjoy and represent our unity to a watching world? How is it that we often fail to preserve the bonds of peace?

When we study church history, and even as we reflect upon our own experiences, we find that disunity is often a result of majoring on the minors. Whenever peripheral issues become primary and our worship, adoration, and obedience before Jesus becomes secondary, we’re in trouble. I think you know that we will never all agree on music styles, appropriate dress, various social issues, political parties, infant baptism, or even how to think about the end times. There are so many opportunities to disagree whenever a group of people get together...limitless opportunities to disagree! However, we do not assemble each week to find new and exciting ways to disagree! We gather to praise JESUS who is our one hope, our one faith, and the One who called us to be baptized in His name. We come seeking the presence and power of the HOLY SPIRIT, who empowers us to breathe as one Body. We come claiming our unity as those chosen and adopted by our FATHER in heaven as His beloved children! So, one way we can be peacemakers and maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace is to redirect our focus from peripheral issues to the Oneness we enjoy in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. By the way, I’m not suggesting that we avoid disagreements or discussing controversial issues...I am pleading, along with the Apostle Paul, that we practice humility, meekness, patience, and agape love while eagerly maintaining our unity in the Spirit!

⁷ Stott, 151.

I have also observed that disunity in the church is often the product of unresolved conflict. When people feel wronged...when feelings get hurt...nothing good comes from sweeping things under the carpet and pretending that all is well. Listen: true peacemakers are not those who lie and say there is peace when there is no peace. Such “false prophets” were soundly condemned in scripture, and for good reason. There can be no unity when there is blatant dishonesty or injustice that goes unchecked within the Body. We must be willing to “go there” with each other, speaking the truth in love, always willing to repent, willing to ask for forgiveness, and eager to extend forgiveness. Those hard conversations can happen when we are walking with humility, gentleness, patience, and agape love. I know it’s hard and a bit scary to confront our brothers and sisters when they sin against us, but this kind of honest confrontation for the sake of reconciliation is critical if we are to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Remember, peace is the establishment of right relationships with one another, and that will require a lot of hard conversations and a lot of grace. Our leadership team lives in this tension all the time, and we have tried very hard to live honestly and yet graciously with one another and our staff. At times we...I...fail in this regard; and when that happens, there is work to be done to repair relationships, but it’s work that is required if we are fully committed to maintain the unity of the Spirit. The same is true for our small groups, our Christian homes and our Christian workplaces. Wherever two or three are gathered, there is the opportunity to disagree and get sideways with one another. But Church, wherever two or three are gathered in Jesus’ name, He is there with us, amen? Whenever we are together, we have the opportunity to claim and enjoy the Oneness that is ours to enjoy because of what Jesus accomplished on our behalf when He went to the cross for our sins.

Now, I don’t want you to think that this call for maintaining unity is equivalent to demanding conformity. On the contrary, we’ll see next Sunday how Paul unpacks the blessed diversity that is critical to our unity as the Body of Christ. We’ll look deeper into that truth next Sunday.

For now, as we get ready to step out into the world, can we agree that the unity of the Spirit in this Church is worth the hard work that comes with maintaining that unity? And can we also agree that our witness is horribly compromised whenever we fail to protect that unity? So...let us pray every day that we will be empowered to walk in a manner worthy of our calling...that we will increasingly exhibit the virtues of humility, meekness, patience, and love...and that we will be constantly eager and ready to maintain the unity of the Spirit by keeping the main thing the main thing and dealing graciously but firmly with conflict in order to maintain right relationships in the bond of peace. And remember that this commitment extends beyond the walls of our church to our Christian marriages, our Christian homes and our Christian businesses.

Now...you all know...as do I...that none of what we just committed to is possible without the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. So, let us wait prayerfully upon the Lord every day. Every day, every morning be silent and open your hearts to Him...simply pray, “Come Holy Spirit, come”...and be silent. He will come...and His coming will change everything in your life... and in our life together. Will you pray with me?