

Walk Worthy, Ephesians 4:1-6

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May 3, 2020

Introduction

Good morning, my name is Brad and I'm one of the pastors here. Today we are crossing into the second half of Paul's letter to the Ephesians in a sermon series we have subtitled, "Into the Fullness of Christ." So I invite you to turn in your Bibles with me to Ephesians 4:1-6.

Here's where we're headed: the title of today's sermon is "Walk Worthy". And the main idea is this: In response to the unity Jesus has created, maintain it. I think Paul lays out that unity in two important ways:

- I. What Makes Unity Necessary - vv. 1-3
- II. What Makes Unity Possible - vv. 4-6¹

With that said, if you are able, please stand with me to honor the reading of God's word. Again, today's passage is Ephesians 4:1-6. Church, hear the word of the Lord:

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. Ephesians 4:1-6

The Lord has spoken to us. Let's say this together: thanks be to God! You may be seated.

Exposition

For parents far and wide, there has been one unsung hero, one ray of light in these dark times...that Frozen 2 came out last winter and the kids can be distracted for an hour or two. In one of the more serious parts of the movie, a character named Princess Anna

¹ Adapted from Clinton E. Arnold, *Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), Loc 6085

literally has lost her best friend and finds herself alone in a dark cave. She's paralyzed in grief and fear, and the only thing that finally gets her moving is a word of advice she suddenly remembers: "When one can see no future, all one can do is the next right thing." So she stands and forces herself to take one step at a time until she finally walks out of the cave. These may have seemed to her at the time as small acts of sheer survival. But they were, in fact, the first steps in showing herself worthy to be a queen.²

As Paul continues his letter today, he has concluded his doctrinal focus on who we are in Christ, and is beginning his practical focus on how we are to live in Christ.³ And the idea he is consumed with, which applies to all the rest of the letter, is that we stand to our feet, take one step at a time, and show ourselves worthy of the King who has called us.⁴ Not as a way of earning anything. But as a response to the free gift of his grace.

And to show us that Jesus really is worth it, Paul begins with this phrase again:

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, Ephesians 4:1

Really, Paul, do you need to remind us over and over?⁵ Yes! We need the reminder that Jesus is worth being imprisoned for and worth dying for.⁶ Not because our bodies will someday be imprisoned or put to death for Christ (although we could be). But—more relevant to us—because our pride and rights *already* need to be imprisoned and put to death for Christ. Otherwise we will never live as those who have been bound to Christ and to one another. Thus a "prisoner for the Lord" is just the kind of guide we need.

So what will Paul say is the first step? What's at the top of his list of ways we walk worthy? Well, it's similar to what my team leader told me and my housemate when we arrived as missionaries. When you have a conflict, don't even leave your house until you've resolved it. Why? Because how can you go out acting like you're united to God when you're not even united to one another? Church, we live as children of the one God by being one with each other.

² Frozen 2, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt4520988/>

³ Francis Foulkes, *Ephesians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove: IVP, 1989), 114

⁴ Foulkes, 115

⁵ Ephesians 3:1, 13; 6:20

⁶ John Piper, "One Lord, One Spirit, One Body for All Time and All Peoples, Ephesians 4:1-6," <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/one-lord-one-spirit-one-body-for-all-time-and-all-peoples>

I. What Makes Unity Necessary - vv. 1-3

This brings us to the passage's first emphasis: what makes unity *necessary*. Let's begin at verse 3 and kind of work backwards in what Paul is saying here. He writes, [be]

³ eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Ephesians 4:3

Of all that Paul is going to say, this is the primary exhortation in today's passage. The word here could also be translated "*make every effort* to maintain the unity," which is the word Paul uses elsewhere to describe the effort involved in making a long journey.⁷ This is not sit-in-first-class effort, but trek-over-land-and-sea effort. Which makes sense, if you think about the task of not just two people, but an entire body of people, staying unified.⁸ Is there anything that requires greater effort?!

Just think about the very first thing that happens when (Genesis 3) Adam and Eve are kicked out of the garden—(Genesis 4) their son Cain kills his brother Abel. We couldn't make it a chapter!

So why would Paul start with that which is humanly impossible? Well, more about this in the second half of the sermon, but for now, it points to who *God* is and what *he* has done. This wasn't some flaky unity among the Ephesians based on a common social class or trade union or political bent or urban identity or theological preference or part of town they were from or high school they attended or kind of education they preferred for their kids. No, united into one body of believers was everything from orthodox Jews to Wiccan wizards. Only God can do something like that!⁹

So that's why Paul starts here with unity as the necessary first step. Because (verse 1) "the calling to which you have been called" is never to a private relationship, but to a family.¹⁰ When we don't seek to maintain his unity, we suppress the truth about him.¹¹ As 1 John tells us, when we say, "I love God," and hate our brother, we are liars.¹²

Instead, here's what Paul says it looks like be eager to maintain the unity: (verse 2) to live

⁷ 1 Thessalonians 2:17; 2 Timothy 4:9, 21; Titus 3:12

⁸ Arnold, Loc 6174

⁹ Arnold, Loc 6394

¹⁰ Arnold, Loc 6132

¹¹ Romans 1:18

¹² 1 John 4:20

² with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, Ephesians 4:2

He specifies four things that are actually qualities of God himself:

1) Humility

The first, all humility. For the vast majority of history, this kind of lowliness was universally viewed as a bad thing. When was it first seen as a virtue? When a man named Jesus Christ literally suffered and died to his own preferences for the good of others.¹³ So to us who follow him, the apostle Peter says,

Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” 1 Peter 5:5

How can we maintain God’s unity with the pride that repulses him?

What I think this humility looks like is when we take the initiative to ask someone for forgiveness, even when there is mutual fault in the conflict. After almost twenty years in ministry, I have racked up quite a few instances of seeking forgiveness with others who have still never reciprocated it. You know what that does? It humbles my pride! It will do the same for you.

2) Gentleness

The second quality Paul mentions is gentleness. This meekness doesn’t describe being wimpy, but being in complete control of your submissiveness. It’s the picture of Jesus who allowed himself to be led like a lamb to the slaughter,¹⁴ who says to us, “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am *gentle* and lowly in heart”.¹⁵ It’s the spirit in which we are commanded,

Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Galatians 6:1

¹³ Foulkes, 115-116

¹⁴ Isaiah 53:7

¹⁵ Matthew 11:29

That's why I think this gentleness looks like us refusing to harbor hurt toward others, and loving them enough to confront them about it—*with gentleness*.¹⁶ Stuffing it down inside and pretending like it's no big deal, that's false unity! Over and over people come to me upset about someone else in the church. And you know what I've learned to say to them? The same thing I say to my three year-old: "I'm sorry to hear that—now go talk to your sister." You know what will happen most of the time? The person you confront won't even know they had hurt you, and they'll apologize, and you'll be closer, and Satan will be mad, and God will be pleased, and the unity will be maintained.

3) Patience

The third quality Paul mentions is patience. This word carries the idea of being slow, namely slow to anger or avenge. In the Old Testament God described himself over and over as "merciful and gracious, *slow to anger*".¹⁷ So it makes sense that his Son would hang from a cross and pray,

"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Luke 23:34

One of the ways I think this patience is lived out among us is by thinking the best of others, not the worst. Anyone else besides me ever take the words or actions of another and write up an entire novel in your head as to what you're convinced that person means by such words or actions? It doesn't even have to be that—let a person not respond promptly to our text message and what do we do?

- They're ignoring me.
- They don't have time for me.
- They disagree.
- They hate me.
- They have died.
- They're dead to me.

No! Stop it! We're thinking the worst of our brother or sister. Patience says I will choose to think the best about what I don't know for certain. Beyond that I go and gently confront.

¹⁶ Foulkes, 116; Arnold, Loc 6132

¹⁷ Exodus 34:6; Numbers 14:18; Nehemiah 9:17; Psalm 86:15; Joel 2:13

4) Forbearance

The fourth quality that Paul gives is bearing with one another in love, or forbearance. You might also translate this as “*putting up with* one another,” a phrase that might feel a bit more relevant to these days of quarantine. If patience is taking the journey one day at a time, forbearance is not bailing on the journey altogether. It’s what kept Jesus from giving up on his disciples, as expressed when he said to them,

“O faithless and twisted generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Matthew 17:17

For us I think forbearance looks like choosing to not criticize a person in front of others, which can easily take the forms of gossip or slander. It doesn’t have to be a full-on conversation; just a subtle reference, a little facial expression. And suddenly what we’ve done is bail on thinking the best about someone, and we’ve thrown a stone that invites others to do the same. But as therapist Chuck DeGroat reminds us in his book *Toughest People to Love*, putting up with a difficult person is always an invitation to look in the mirror.¹⁸

And to look to the God who created this unity we are commanded to maintain. Church, this is what makes unity necessary.

II. What Makes Unity Possible - vv. 4-6

But Paul isn’t finished. There’s no way we can maintain the unity like we’ve been talking about unless our focus remains on what God has already done. This brings us to the second emphasis: what makes unity *possible*. We read in verse 4,

4 There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— Ephesians 4:4

Our calling doesn’t begin with activity, but identity. That’s what Paul is reminding us of when he talks about “the hope of our calling” here and in verse 1 and all the way back to 1:18.

Once when Katie and I were on a mission trip, we came across a village that had a huge crowd in the streets. When we asked someone what was happening, she told us

¹⁸ Chuck DeGroat, *Toughest People to Love: How to Understand, Lead, and Love the Difficult People in Your Life—Including Yourself* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014)

that two people had been fighting, and a peacemaker tried to step in between them. Unfortunately, that person was stabbed and had died. It was a graphic reminder of the dangerous task of creating unity and peace.

This is what gives great *hope* to our calling: that Jesus was the One who took on the dangerous task of creating unity and peace. Ephesians 2 told us that “he himself is our *peace*, who has made us both one” (or *united*); that he “might reconcile us both to God in *one body* through the cross, thereby killing the hostility”—he was killed to kill anything that could ever possibly divide his people again.¹⁹ We don’t create it, and we can’t destroy it. Children can disown their parents and each other, but the reality is, they’re still of the same family.²⁰

And that’s what makes our divisions so grievous and confusing to the world. Look, we live in a time that isn’t just divisive, it’s polarizing. Everything is pushed and viewed as the opposite extreme. There are lots of reasons for this, but one that’s important for us to be aware of is that the United States isn’t just individualistic, we’re also a “guilt/innocence” culture. That means our underlying question is “What is the right way?”²¹ It’s what leads us to say not just, “I disagree,” but “You are wrong” in the way of “You are guilty—and I am innocent.”

Combine that with the reality that there is a massive grasping for power in the United States. And the philosophies that inform it, such as modern Critical Theory, even if they carry some measure of truth, they demand that you view everything through the lens of oppression and power.²²

The reality for Christians is, we view everything through the lens of Christ having all power; and Christ declaring who is guilty and innocent on the basis of trust in his blood and obedience to his commands. That doesn’t mean we don’t engage culturally or politically, but that these things are not definitive for us—and certainly not for how we relate to one another in the church.

That is overwhelmingly clear in how Paul completes the rest of today’s passage. It’s like in every way we might possibly say, “No, here we’re divided,” Paul shouts, “One!” Here

¹⁹ Ephesians 2:14, 16; Arnold, Loc 6174

²⁰ John R.W. Stott, *God’s New Society: The Message of Ephesians*, (Downers Grove: IVP, 2014), 151-152

²¹ Jayson Georges, *The 3D Gospel: Ministry in Guilt, Shame, and Fear Cultures* (Timē Press: 2014)

²² Neil Shenvi and Pat Sawyer, “The Incompatibility of Critical Theory and Christianity,” <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/incompatibility-critical-theory-christianity/>

Paul includes seven different references to *our* oneness grouped in such a way as to emphasize *God's* oneness²³:

1) God the Spirit

The first grouping is in verse 4:

4 There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— Ephesians 4:4

One body, one Spirit, and one hope:

- That is, *one body*, as in all the parts that make up Christ's body, just like a human body.²⁴ If we really believed this, how much would it change how we think, speak, and behave toward our diverse family?
- *One Spirit*, as in he who created our unity when he was poured out on the day of Pentecost²⁵ (not the many spirits that the Ephesians consulted in their pagan days).²⁶ Just as Paul is bound to his chains, we are bound to one another by one Spirit.²⁷
- *One hope*, as in that which the Spirit serves as a guarantee, that we are inheriting not an earthly kingdom, but God himself, forever.²⁸

As you can see, this grouping all very clearly points to God the Spirit. And one unique application it has to us, I think, is the spirit in which we will walk during the ongoing debate about reopening. To sum it up, disagreements over acceptable post-pandemic social norms have the power to tear us apart. Christians are going to have different perspectives. So church, when you say or write things in a self-assured spirit that communicates you know the right way, you will polarize some number of your brothers and sisters in Christ. How about instead of being quick to speak, let's be quick to listen. In the days ahead we will all need a spectrum of voices that are both cautious and optimistic.²⁹

²³ Stott, 149

²⁴ Ephesians 2:16; Foulkes, 118

²⁵ Acts 2:1-4

²⁶ Ephesians 2:18; Arnold, Loc 6236

²⁷ Ephesians 4:1, 3; Arnold, Loc 6194; Foulkes, 117

²⁸ Ephesians 1:13-14; Foulkes, 119; Arnold, Loc 6236

²⁹ Costi Hinn, "Navigating Different COVID-19 Recovery Convictions,"

<https://ftc.co/resource-library/blog-entries/navigating-different-covid-19-recovery-convictions#.Xqhry46bV3Q.twitter>

2) God the Son

Paul's second grouping is in verse 5:

⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism, Ephesians 4:5

- *One Lord*, as in Jesus Christ as more than a man or prophet or angel or historical figure, but as God himself. If you *are* ever to go to prison or death, it will be because of this, the exclusivity of this confession. This is why our sacred confession at baptism is “Jesus is Lord!”³⁰
- *One faith*, as in the core convictions shared by those who are truly in Christ;³¹ as Jude says, “the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.”³²
- *One baptism*, as in the outward act of public immersion in water as a sign of the inner reality of immersion into Christ and his body. This is why we hold baptism as a prerequisite to communion.³³

As you can see, this grouping all very clearly points to God the Son. And the specific application I want to make here has to do with the reality that it's an election year. My desire for Antioch is that we would be a church who has unity in the midst of diversity; that we would have members with a wide range of political opinions who are still united—not on the basis of a certain president—but on the basis of a common King, the *Lord* Jesus Christ. But you know the only way that will be possible? If we have a church body who values our church's unity more than our first amendment rights. That's not an attempt to silence your voice, only an exhortation, like Paul, to express yourself in ways that show you are eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

3) God the Father

Finally, Paul's third grouping comes from verse 6:

⁶one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. Ephesians 4:6

That is, *one God*, as in the only God who both created us and restored us. Not the other so-called gods like Artemis to whom the Ephesians once prayed things like, ‘All things

³⁰ Ephesians 1:20-23; Foulkes, 119; Arnold, Loc 6276

³¹ Ephesians 4:13; Foulkes, 119; Arnold, Loc 6276-6297

³² Jude 3

³³ Foulkes, 119-120

are from you, and all things end in you.’ But our true God and Father, of whom we say with Paul,

³⁶ For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen. Romans 11:36³⁴

See it? God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit—one God in perfect unity making it possible for his one body to be in perfect unity.

And a fitting application here is to what I’ve learned to call “the tribes of Antioch”. Even in such a young church, we have quite a story. When I first came, I thought our diversity would be reflected in the many ethnicities of 40214. Instead, much of the diversity has been the unique tribes already within: the old Antioch tribe, the new Antioch tribe, the New Heights tribe, the Asa tribe, etc. So I’ve often thought, “What’s gonna really get us all fired up and unite the tribes?” Is it one strategy, one outreach, one preacher, one project, one ministry, one vision, one partner? No, it’s that which binds all those things and us together: one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

This is what makes unity possible!

Conclusion

When Princess Anna finally steps out of the dark cave and into the light, she knows exactly what is the *next right thing*. You see there was a great dam that her people had wrongfully built on another people’s land, and it had broken the relationship between them for generations. So despite the devastation it would cause to her own kingdom, she had the dam destroyed. At great cost, unity was made possible. This princess of peace had walked worthy of becoming a queen.³⁵

Church, before we are sent on our way to follow in Paul’s example as prisoners for the Lord, prisoners to our pride and rights, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, here’s the most important thing we need to have ringing in our hearts: you have a Prince of Peace who always did the next right thing; who saw the broken relationship between God and man (between man to man), and despite the devastation to his earthly kingdom, had *himself* destroyed—step by step by step all the way to the cross. At the greatest of costs, unity was made possible. The Prince had walked worthy of becoming King. In other words,

³⁴ Ephesians 1:3; Arnold, Loc 6341; Foulkes, 120

³⁵ Frozen 2, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt4520988/>

though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped,⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.⁹ Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name,¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Philippians 2:6-11

So church, in response to the unity Jesus has created, maintain it. With all humility, gentleness, patience, and forbearance. And even in the friction of a reopening debate, an election year, and the tribes of Antioch, stand to your feet, take one step at a time, and show yourselves worthy of the King who has called you.

And for those of you who are not in Christ or his body, if you haven't felt the deep urge to walk worthy of this calling, it's probably because you haven't truly encountered the grace that makes it possible. Here is the next right thing for you. Admit it. When it comes to crisis and chaos, we can all get "Christian" real quick. We can point to the church we once attended or the prayer we once prayed or the good we once did...But why even leave the house acting like you're united to God and his people when you're not? Admit that. And let that be your first step toward the One who is worthy, Jesus Christ. He's calling your name. Let's pray.

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