

The Unity and Maturity Needed for the Mission

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[0 : 00] a good time to thank you all for being so gracious and kind to me over the last few days. Mostly because Tommy says that he preaches for 30 to 40 minutes, and I don't have that much content, so this counts.

So I've at least managed to spend 17 seconds saying thank you. And by way of further stretching, I think it's important for us to remember where we've been so far this week.

We began in chapter 2 in Ephesians, and we talked about how in the first part of verses 1 and 3 especially, Paul gives this comprehensive analysis of the human condition apart from God that we link to the baptismal idea of rejecting both the world, the flesh, and the devil.

And Paul talks about how different ways spiritual powers and forces and our own desires in the world lead us away from God and create this unstable community and rebellion against him. And then we talked about how he moves from that, one of the glorious conjunctions that you have in the New Testament, but God who is rich in his mercy.

And he talks about who we have now become in Christ Jesus. And then he talks about the unity that arises from the work of Christ, that the Gentiles who were once alienated from God are now a part of one family.

[1 : 15] And then we talked about in chapter 3, Paul's own description of his ministry, that Paul was a prisoner of Jesus Christ for the Gentiles.

And we talked about how Paul's lauding his prison ministry is an example to us of the fact that this gospel cost us something, that proclaiming the full gospel of Jesus Christ always carries with it opposition and oppression.

We moved down through the second half of chapter 3 relatively quickly on Saturday, and we talked about the stewardship of the mystery, the fact that we have been given this precious gospel of which we're stewards.

And this glorious gospel that involves the triune God, bring us into fellowship with him and one another, reconciling us both to God and to man, to create this church that is a picture of or a witness to the watching world, seems like much too big of a gospel for us to actually hold.

And so Paul concludes the section that we read with a prayer that the congregation would actually believe or have the strength to grasp what he's just told them. And the part that we actually didn't get to is at the very bottom, verses, chapter 3, verses 20 and 21.

[2 : 30] So he concludes this section. Now, him who is able to do abundantly more than all that we can ask or imagine, according to the power at work within him, to him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations forever and ever.

In other words, Paul is saying God can do more than we can even possibly conceive. And so one of the things, and I understand, like when people say you need to come to a church, you need to have a vision, you need to have a plan, you want to say in five years we want our church to be here, we want to have this building, we want to do these things, right?

We think we know what Advent might be in five years. And it's Tommy's job and the staff's job to pray for that. But we're told that God can do that which we cannot even imagine.

That it's possible for God to do things in and through this church that were actually unthinkable before they occurred. So when we talk about, you know, one of the things we've had happen here with the staff, we've had discussions of multi-ethnicity and diversity, and we want, you know, this church to be a possibly more diverse place.

And we may think it would be great if we made it to 10 or 20 percent. But what if God actually would do the unimaginable? What if God could use this church to begin to transform not just this one particular parish, but the ACNA's approach to ethnicity and diversity?

[4 : 01] That's unimaginable. But that's within the scope of what Paul talks about here. So now we're into chapter four, where Paul has, in some sense, in the first three chapters of this epistle, he has focused, not exclusively, but a lot on getting them to understand who they are in Christ, the glorious riches they inherit that they have as followers of Jesus.

And now he focuses on how they should live. You've heard this wonderful gospel. And what does it look like to actually live? And he says this, I, therefore, a prisoner of the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called.

What does it mean to walk worthy? Let me give you a brief example. So Tommy sent me a text message that some of you might have seen on the internet telling me not to wear my collar until Sunday because, you know, you guys are a little bit more of a casual tradition.

And I come from the tradition where Jesus only hears your prayers if you wear them in a collar. And I remember when I first came into the Anglican tradition and I put on the collar.

And it was actually during the time where there was a lot of the abuse crisis going on in the Catholic Church. And I would go out into the city, especially in Boston, and sometimes people would, like, yell at me.

[5 : 29] And I wanted to say, you know, no, no, no, no, that's not me. That's not me. Like, we're innocent. But what happened, though, what happened, what became clear to me, even in that context, when you put on the collar, people watch you carefully.

And I do enjoy wearing the collar because it reminds me of who I represent. And when I'm wearing the collar, especially as a parent, my sanctification level has to go much higher.

I said, in the name of the Lord, if you don't put that candy back, I will rebuke you sharply. Wait. So when Paul, when Paul talks about, when Paul talks about, you know, you do that, I'm sorry, you do that parent where you're like, you're whispering in a key that only your children can hear.

If you don't stop this right now. Okay. Walk. Some of you are like, I never do this. You're better parents than I am. This is not, it's not total sanctification here.

So when Paul, Paul uses the language of walk, people, it points to a way of life. It actually first appears when his discussion of when we used to live in rebellion against God, right?

[6 : 45] When we were the walking dead, we talked about this zombie language. And now, now he has in mind, instead of walking along with the sons of disobedience, you walk in a manner that looks like someone who's gone from death to life.

Walking worthy then is always a matter, of discerning the will of God in a particular situation. It's not a series of rules, right? It says live in such a way that you honor God.

And let me tell you, I am a priest and I'm a New Testament scholar. I have a relatively confined understanding of what that means. I'm not a business person.

I don't work at Capitol Hill. I don't work in a secular context. So my expression of what it means to walk worthy is much different than yours. And so what Paul is asking you to do then is for each one of you to become contextual theologians.

Where you ask yourself, what does God require of me as a parent, as an employee, or as an employer in this situation? Walking with humility means walking with this acknowledgement of your status, vis-a-vis God, not people.

[8 : 02] So one of the things that can happen is, especially in the language of humility, it can get attached to often women or people of color to like humble yourself.

And when you're in a society that is consistently telling you to take up less space, humility becomes a cipher for oppression, right? So when Paul talks about walking with humility and gentleness, it is not you denying the gifts that God gave you.

If you're the best singer in the congregation, you don't say, oh, I just sing a little bit. And then you come up and you like blow the congregation away. You've just lied to the people. But it does, it means this, whatever gifts you have are precisely that.

They're gifts of God. And in comparison to what God can do, your gifts are ultimately not that impressive. You can sing, you can preach, God made the whole world.

You see it? You see it? And that actually does humble you. Listen, let me tell you, there's like the worst person in the world. Like, you can imagine like the most degenerate, horrible person in the world.

[9 : 15] There's that guy who's probably, and then there's everybody else. So everybody else is above that person, right? There's always someone that you can find, who is worse than you, who

you can use to exalt yourself over, right?

Unless you're at the very bottom, there's always somewhere. You're like, you know, I'm a bad pyramid. Those people over there, they're the worst, right? So when Paul talks about humility, he is saying that as you walk through life as a Christian, and you exercise your gifts, you exercise them as things that are offered to the community for their good, not as a means of exalting yourselves over others.

But it also means that if you have these gifts that God has given you, it is incumbent upon you to exercise them. So humility is not burying what you have because you don't want, because you're so worried about your pride.

Have sufficient trust in God that he will humble you. Exercise the gift that God has given you. He talks about, later on here, and I don't want to take too much time, because the first verses of every text always enthrall me.

He speaks about bearing with one another in love. And one of the things that is tricky is when you move from doctrine to practice in Christian community.

[10:32] So Paul is giving this wonderful picture of the Christian community as being united across race and class and the end of hostility, the dividing wall, the manifest of the powers and the age to come, the glorious nature of God's kindness towards us in Jesus.

And that sounds wonderful until you have to actually do that with other people. And then one of the things that, one of the signs of kind of Christian maturity is if you've gone through that process of becoming deeply, deeply disappointed in your church and loving it anyway.

Because every church will fail you. Every one of them. None of them are perfect. And there is a kind of Christian immaturity that can lead us to go from place to place looking for utopia and discovering in the place that you go, sin.

So bearing with one another in love means that we will disappoint one another. But it also assumes that we will forgive one another and love each other as often as it is necessary.

We don't get to throw away other Christians. And I have no idea how many of you all spend your time on the internet. But I will at least say that like social media teaches us to hate other Christians.

[11:52] Christians who are different than we are. Because you're rewarded for hating the right things. Like if you tweet, my pastor gave me a wonderful sermon that edified me and wanted me to love my neighbor better, you get like two likes.

If you go, here's this horrible prosperity gospel preacher who wanted a thousand dollars from me, tweet, tweet, tweet, tweet, tweet, you're viral, right? Now, what I want to say is when you hear this, it could easily lead to this idea that because you're bearing with one another with love, that it rules out truth-telling.

It actually assumes truth-telling. There's like false visions of unity. One of the visions is we bear with one another in love, which means I don't tell you the things that I don't like and I keep an interior record of resentment, right?

So like I don't like the fact that we do this in church and it basically perpetually bothers me forever and I kind of, I consider it my version of sanctification not telling the church about the things that it does wrong, right?

But it actually assumes that you're going to tell the truth, someone's going to receive the truth, and then you're going to get to the other side of that.

[13:04] Everyone knows that true friendship is only true friendship on the other side of an argument. And what I want to encourage you to say, you're mature enough as a church to go through disagreement, come through the other side of it, and still be a part of the community.

So walking worthy here in the first section involves community. It involves us doing this together. And community assumes accountability.

That's what community involves, accountability. And accountability involves forgiveness. Let me explain something to you. The accountability would never be done perfectly. And then it assumes continued community on the other side.

Paul goes on to talk about there's the unity that we have arises from the gift of the Spirit. He says there's one body, and there's one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope that belongs to your call.

One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all. The unity of the church.

[14:13] The unity of the church. In diversity. This is what Paul has talked about this entire letter. The unity of the church. In diversity. Is a manifestation of the unity of God.

You see it? Unity across difference is a manifestation on earth of the triune unity of God. And so I think it is time for the church, and this may not be you, it is time for the church to get over all its fears as to what diversity is going to bring.

And trust that the gospel is true. That our unity together across difference will bring a particular manifestation of God's glory. And you ask, how is this possible in our context?

He talks about the same Spirit. The same Spirit that draws us all into the body of Christ allows us to live together. I have heard, if one more person asks me how to reach black people, like there's a different spirit that you need to evangelize, that you need to call upon in the proclamation of the gospel to reach ethnic minorities, that is a faulty anthropology.

And it's a low doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Paul says, we are all baptized into the same Spirit, by the same Spirit that draws us all into the community.

[15:34] How do you reach ethnic minorities? So part of it involves preaching the gospel. There's not a gospel, like there is no gospel for the Jews and gospel for the Gentiles. There's one gospel. How that gospel is enculturated, yes, it matters.

Yes, it matters. But there isn't like this magical set of tools that's going to result in, now here come the black people. He also speaks about the same hope that functions as our foundation and the fact that we confess the same faith.

This is important because diversity as a mere social good is insufficient to maintain community, right?

Why should we be together because diversity is good? It's not worth the suffering that diversity brings. But the confession of the faith, the doctrine of the church matters.

The fact that we all agree that Jesus Christ is Lord is sufficient to make the suffering worth it. I cannot correct, I have four children, four children.

[16:49] And for the most part, they've grown up much different than I have. I grew up in Alabama in the shadow of Jim Crow and there was a strong black-white binary.

And from kindergarten, I was very, very race conscious. My first, like, racial slur was throwing at me in first grade. And so my life was marked by this.

My children have lived a much different life. They lived on three continents, at least the oldest has. The others have lived on two. And for the most part, they don't have the same racial consciousness. My son, when he was in, we first went to Scotland, and I asked him, how many black people are, you know, this is probably, I knew it was probably going to be many, how many black people are in your class?

And he goes, well, the only kid is kind of like, my color is, you know, this other kid who is Korean. And I was like, as close as he could get. And like, for him, like, him and Korean were like the same team.

[17:53] I was like, buddy, America's going to be complicated. But, here's the truth. Here's the truth. Right now, he's cute, and he's not dangerous.

And the church loves him. But the church, at a certain point, is going to begin to see him as a danger. And they're going to be skeptical towards him. And he's going to get frustrated. And he's going to get angry.

He's going to want to leave. Trust me, it happens to all of us. And I cannot say to him, when that happens, son, it's simply good that we're together.

But what I hope to be able to say to my sons and my daughters, that Jesus Christ died upon the cross so that we might be reconciled to one another and created one family.

And as those who are built upon the foundation of this sacrifice, we are stuck in this together. And I think that the sacrifice of Jesus at least makes our suffering somewhat worth it.

[18:54] So, this confession of faith builds a unity that is unshakable.

The last thing he talks about here is the fact that we have all sharing one baptism. And forgive me, my low church brothers and sisters. I try to be ecumenical.

But apparently, the apostle Paul believes that collars and slacks are important. No. That's not what Paul says. That's not what Ephesians says.

Esau, stay in the text. Okay. Apparently, Paul believes there's something about what happens in baptism that involves a real participation in the life, death, and resurrection, and actual ascension of

the Lord to reign on high.

It actually happens not in the sense that baptism is magical, but it's not nothing. I'll say that. It's not a mere symbol. Paul doesn't say you're unified because you've all done the same ritual.

[20 : 07] But in the same way that we encounter the living God and the preaching of the word, and we encounter the living God and the word and the sacrament of the table, I think Paul believes that we encounter the living God in the waters of baptism, and the waters of baptism unite us as one family.

I think Augustine said that even those who are in hell are marked with the sign of baptism. You're sealed and marked as Christ-owned forever.

So, we cannot be anti-sacramental. When my sons and my daughters tend to despair, I will say to them, remember your baptism. If you look at this entire section, you've seen the discussion of the Spirit, right?

Drawn together by the Spirit, the Lord and God the Father. You have once again a Trinitarian argument for the unity of the church across difference, walking together in love as a manifestation of his glory.

He goes on to talk about in the second part of this that in this church, the grace is given to each of us to use our gifts in accordance with what Christ has given us.

[21 : 21] And he uses this psalm, and I can only talk about it really briefly. He says, he ascended on high and led a host of captives captive, and he gave gifts to men. Now, one of the problems is if you're one of these Bible people, which I would hope that you are, that the psalm seems to be speaking about God's victory over his enemies.

And Paul seems to be using it to refer to God, Jesus, giving gifts to us. You see this? There seems to be a disconnect between what Psalm 68 says and what Paul does.

Some people say that Paul adjusts this reading and simply uses it to his ends, right? That when Christ ascended into heaven, that he then gave gifts to us.

But I think the better way of looking at it, if you actually read the entirety of Psalm 68, I think it's better to look at this not as a direct quote of the part that you see here in verse 8, but a summary of the entirety of the psalm.

Because in the psalm, God defeats his enemies. And I think what Paul is getting here is that because Christ has defeated death and ascended on high, we receive the gifts to do the things necessary.

[22 : 36] Jesus Christ is the one who has bound the captives. And here you once again in this place where the Christian is faced with this call or this reality that the things that we battle are not simply the things that we see, but in a real sense, Jesus has defeated the spiritual powers.

And why does he do so? He does so so that we might receive gifts and the church might be able to function as the Christ body in the world. And he begins with the apostles as the foundation.

Here I get to be Anglican again. The apostles are seen as foundation. And those who, what do the apostles actually do?

And I don't think we like take this seriously enough as Anglicans and how it relates to our polity. You have people going around planting churches in different places, right? And then when there's a problem, the people in those churches write to the apostles and the apostles write back.

And you have the apostles taking money from one church and delivering it to another church. So from the beginning, even within the New Testament itself, there is a, there's a communion across cultures led by people who are trans-jurisdictional.

[24 : 00] It was not simply that the local church did what they wanted to do and there was no accountability. So the good news then is that our polity, I think, is broadly speaking biblical.

The bad news is that our polity, broadly speaking, is biblical. We're stuck with our bishops. And I do think it's important.

I do think that the fact that we believe that when the apostles passed away, they passed on both apostolic faith and what became the New Testament and apostolic authority and what we now know as the episcopate as goods for us.

And I know that, and I have no idea actually what your experience of your bishops is, but I'm going to speak broadly. We love our bishop. We love your bishop because Bishop Reed love is wonderful. But I know that sometimes it feels like, in general, that authority is inefficient.

That there are things that we could do on a local level that would be more effective than what the national church, what our bishops may say to us. But I think that there's something of the bearing of one another in love that is manifested in Episcopal government as it relates to a global communion. [25 : 16] I think that we need one another, even if that means we're a slightly more inefficient bunch. He then goes on to speak about the prophets.

And I think that these are the people who build up believers, the shepherds and the teachers. And I don't want to actually go through and exegete each one of these gifts because I don't think that this is like the point, that we find these six gifts and then we have like a biblical instead of a heretical thing like the Enneagram.

Sorry, I shouldn't have said that. The Enneagram is super in the Bible. Okay. So I don't think that the purpose of this is to create these spiritual gifts that we then fit everyone into.

And then if you feel like my gift is not articulated here, then I don't have a use in the church. What I think that Paul is saying is that every person in the church has been gifted for the sake of the building up of the body.

And that we need each other to thrive. What does the mission of the church look like here then according to Paul? It is the entire church using the gifts that God has given them.

[26 : 27] Not exalting one gift over the other but not engaging in false humility so that the mission of God might go forward. Here's one more thing that I want to highlight and then I will sit down.

How long does this work last? One of the things that is great about my wife's job is that she is a doctor and so she can see a patient, diagnose the patient, the patient can get better and she can like go home and like her weekend is done.

Right? But when you are a priest and your vision is the evangelization of the world and every Christian reaching full maturity it never ends. Right? It's not like my entire congregation is spiritually mature all of the DC is effectively evangelized I'm going to take a nap.

How long? Paul says the ministry of the church continues until all attain the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the son of God to mature manhood.

Here he's talking about adulthood mature womanhood it's just fine. Okay? Till we all reach the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ so that we're no longer children tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine.

[27 : 46] Rather speaking the truth than love we are to grow up in every way in him who is Christ Jesus. The ministry of the church continues until the unity called for in the gospel rooted in faith is actually achieved.

until we get the full knowledge of the son of God. Here's the reason why this is such a complex thing because Paul has said repeatedly that the knowledge of God is actually inscrutable.

So you keep going until you understand the understandable. But I do think that this part is important. I do think this is a sign of maturity that even though that the work that Paul speaks about here is ultimately eschatological.

The church never reaches its fullness until Jesus comes. but I do think that what Paul says in verse 14 is relevant to the church here and I may end with this.

So you no longer be children. There's a difference between having struggles in your faith. I mean we all have our ups and downs.

[28 : 52] It's actually the same thing in a relationship right? There's the like dating phase like I'm not sure this is going to work out. Then there's the like we're together phase.

I'm assuming this is going to work out. There's the marriage phase and I wish I could say that the marriage phase means no that's not it either. There's a point in the marriage where you're like too old to start over.

We're like we're in this together. And so no fight has stakes that are too high because no matter what like the mortgage is really high.

No you Christians you're Christians is not the mortgage you're Christians so you're going to be together no matter what. And that's when I think the real genuine sincerity of love manifests itself.

And anyone who and this is understand this is the analogy not the judgment. I understand that marriage is complicated and all of you have different histories. So do not hear me as a judgment on anyone.

[29 : 55] Hear the analogy for its intent. We have all anyone who has been a Christian long enough have seen relationships fall apart.

It's a part of the human experience. And then there is kind of like the people who you begin with. Maybe there's seven or eight couples who you think we're going to do life together forever. And you see the things that kind of happen in those relationships.

And like now I'm 14 years into my marriage. And a lot of the people who are married at the same time together like they're no longer together. And me and my wife talk about this.

Like what did we do that was right and what did we do that was wrong? We don't know it's actually the grace of God. But what we can say is that there's a sense in which at this point we know that we're in this together.

And I think it's the same thing as it relates to the Christian faith. Like you start off with these people. And I'm telling you, I have people who I'm with the seminary with who are no longer walking with the Lord.

[30 : 56] But I also know people who've gone through real suffering and have come through the other side and they are Jesus people. And I hate to be like a stereotypical Anglican and refer to C.S.

Lewis when it talks about the ones who are no longer friends of Narnia. Is it Susan? Susan's no longer a friend of Narnia. The saddest line in children's literature.

But I do think that even if we don't reach the full maturity of understanding who we are as Christians, I think we can come to this place as Christians where I know in a way that I can articulate that Jesus is the one who will be with me until the very end and I'll be with him until the very end.

And I think that is what Paul is calling the church and Ephesus to do in a culture that we talked about earlier was exerting extreme pressure for them to abandon the faith.

And I will say this too. I think there's something to be said for making a similar commitment to a local church. I think there's something to be said for that.

[32 : 08] That I can say these are my people. That whatever Tommy does, and I'm sure he'll do something, that gets on your nerves, short of him apostatizing, right?

These are my people. We'll work through it together. Because unity has developed through relationship over time. Rather, right, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint which is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow up so it builds itself up in love.

My prayer for you all is that the gospel will be a sufficient worth to you to engage in the sacrifice of living together and growing at the full maturity as Christians. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.