

Unity Through Maturity

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[0 : 00] You know, I remember a few weeks ago, probably like many of you, sitting with my children and trying to explain why we live in a society where someone would try to assassinate a former president and current presidential candidate.

And as we sat there having that conversation, it reminded me of other conversations that we've had recently about Gaza, as we watch things on the news unfold, as we talk to and know and pray for people who are being directly affected by these things, or Ukraine, same is true there.

Conversations that we've had as they've gotten older and recognized that there are a lot of issues in our own city, issues around racial and economic disparity, for instance, division. Or the fact that there are some members of our extended family who barely speak to one another.

There are some members of our extended family who haven't spoken in years. And as we've had all these conversations, we come back again and again and again to this core truth that we live in a world that is, in fact, deeply divided.

I know this is something that everyone in this room has experienced. And often these days, it feels like things are only getting worse. The divisions are only deepening.

[1 : 30] This was not God's original plan for the world. And the good news that we come back to again and again every time we gather on Sunday is that God intends to put the world right again.

Ephesians chapter 1 verse 10 lays out God's purpose in salvation. It says that God's great purpose in history, which he set forth in Christ, is to unite all things in him, to unite all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth.

That is God's great purpose that he has laid out. God, he plans to unite all things, all of creation in himself. Now, the church plays a key role in this.

Christians are meant to be a living preview of things to come. The church is meant to be a sneak peek of what things will be like once God has accomplished all of his purposes and all of his plans have been fulfilled.

And specifically here we see that the unity of the church is meant to be a glimpse of what the world will be like once God has united all things in himself.

[2 : 46] So we're looking this morning at Ephesians chapter 4 verses 1 through 16, this great passage, where we see these two major themes emerge and they are very much intertwined.

Unity and maturity. Unity. And so what we're going to do this morning is to look at these themes and then we're going to look at how they relate to one another and then what that means for us and how we live together in this community.

Unity and then maturity. Let's ask God to help us understand what he's saying to us this morning.

Our Heavenly Father, we thank you for being a God who does speak, who is present.

Lord, we need, I need, we all need our hearts to be softened and our ears opened. Lord, there are people here who are desperately in need of comfort and you pray that, we pray that you would comfort them.

There are people here who are perhaps a bit complacent and we pray that you would stir them up. We pray for the people who are here who need to repent, Lord.

[3 : 52] We pray that you would convict them. Lord, there are people here who feel lonely and isolated and we pray that you would enfold them into community. Lord, in whatever ways we need to hear from you and experience you this morning, we ask your Holy Spirit, who knows better than we do what those things are, to do your work.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. So first of all, let's look at unity and how Paul talks about unity. You know, when I was 12 years old, I remember seeing on TV the iconic footage of the Berlin Wall being torn down.

For decades, that wall had, it ran right through the middle of this city, dividing east from west, dividing families, dividing friends, dividing two worldviews and ways of thinking about flourishing. And I remember how powerful it was to see people with sledgehammers literally breaking that wall down and standing on the rubble and celebrating.

Those memories are sort of pressed into my mind. And in the first half of his letter to the Ephesians, Paul says that Jesus Christ has torn down the ultimate dividing wall.

[5 : 09] That ultimate dividing wall has come down. For all of human history, this wall of sin has divided human beings from God and it's divided human beings from one another.

It's resulted in factions and tribalism and all kinds of things. And through the death and resurrection of Jesus, God took a sledgehammer to that wall and he tore it down.

And now, Paul says, God is creating a new humanity. He's building a new kind of humanity that is no longer divided, that is united in Christ.

And in Ephesians 2, he uses an amazing image. He says that these Christians, these new humans, are being joined together into a holy temple.

What he's saying is, is God building this new humanity and God intends to live in that new humanity. Right? So just pause for a second and ask, so okay, what does it mean to be a Christian?

[6 : 17] You know, a lot of people think that being a Christian just means, well, you know, I believe the things and I, maybe I go to church and, or maybe not. But really, it just means being a nice person and a good person and doing the right thing and helping the less fortunate.

You know, okay, you know, that's all part of it. But the way Paul would answer that question is, very simply, a Christian is someone who has the Trinity living inside you.

You have the Trinity living inside you. Right? And then beginning in chapter 4, Paul lays out the implications of this for how we live. He says, I therefore, in chapter 4 verse 1, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you've been called.

In other words, he says, if all this is true, I now call you, I now urge you, live lives that reflect this truth. And he goes on to talk about unity in the church.

He says, there's 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, one God and Father of all.

[7 : 26] So here's what he's saying. One of the primary marks of a community where the Trinity lives is unity. And of course, that makes total sense if you think about it.

Because the Trinity itself is actually a perfect union of three persons. You have Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, distinct persons who are at the same time one, perfectly one.

And so it makes sense that a community where the Trinity dwells would reflect that reality. You would have many persons, individual persons, who are at the same time able to live as one together.

You would have the diversity and the unity of the Trinity. So Paul says, therefore live lives that reflect that. This is God's desire for the church, that unity would put his glory on display.

People would have an easier time understanding the Trinity when they look at the church. Oh, I kind of get a sense of how that works. Right? That we would be living previews of the world to come.

[8 : 30] So the question this morning is, how do we get there? And the answer is, we don't just sit down after this and say, guys, we got to start being more unified. We got to get on this.

Unity is a fruit. It flows out of the thing that Paul spends the rest of the passage talking about, which is spiritual maturity.

How do you know that a community is spiritually mature? Well, you see this Trinitarian unity running throughout it. So now let's look at what he says about maturity.

Pardon me. If we look at how Paul describes spiritually mature people, what you'll see is that all the qualities that Paul picks to describe maturity are qualities that would immediately lend themselves to unity in a community like ours.

Humility, gentleness, patience, bearing with one another in love. These are qualities that are lived out in relationship.

[9 : 38] Consider each one of these qualities and what they look like on a practical level. Maturity, first of all, means humility. What is humility?

Well, essentially it's people who aren't really overly focused on themselves. It's people who don't really spend time worrying about what other people think about them. It's people who don't worry about whether or not all of their needs are being met because they trust God to meet them in his

timing and they know that some of them might not get met.

Instead, mature people who are humble tend to focus on the needs of others. They're trusting God to meet their needs. They're worrying more about where are the needs around me.

And ironically, you know, if you can imagine a community where this were true of everyone, then most if not all the needs in that church would be met because you'd have so many people serving and volunteering in all kinds of ways that you'd have a surplus.

He says also maturity means gentleness. What is gentleness? Well, again, it's lived out in relationship. Mature Christians are people who are able to work through their disagreements.

[10:54] It doesn't mean there aren't disagreements. It doesn't mean there aren't differences, right? But mature Christians are able to work through those things with calmness, with mutual respect.

Right? They're very quick to admit when they're wrong. They're very quick and eager to repent when necessary. And we see this all over Scripture. I think Jeff preached on it last week.

Mature people are very careful in how they speak to one another. That's an aspect of gentleness. They're very careful in how they use language because they know that language can do a lot more damage than most people realize.

They don't talk behind people's backs. They don't gossip. They don't slander. Slander. Now, most of us, when we gossip, you know, or when we slander, it's not malicious.

Here's how it actually happens. It's somebody tells you something or you become aware of something and they say, don't tell anybody. I'm a vault. I won't tell anybody. And then you think, well, you know, but I've got my triad that I meet with.

[11:58] I mean, I tell them everything. And so you tell them. But, hey, don't tell anybody. And they all say, we're not going to tell anybody. And then they say, well, yeah, but I have my prayer partner. I mean, I tell my prayer partner everything.

So, and then they tell the prayer partner, right? And then they have a friend and then they have, you know, and then before long, everybody's talking, right? That's how it happens. It's well-meaning people who don't really take seriously how damaging things like this can be and how they can spread like wildfire, right?

Gentle people don't speak harshly to people. They're not harshly critical or judgmental of people. They tend to want to use words in ways that build up and give life and encourage and inspire faithfulness.

And then Paul says maturity means patience and it means a willingness to bear with one another in love. Bearing with one another essentially means this. It means you recognize that when you live in any kind of community, whether it's your immediate family or a big church, that things are going to happen all the time, that if you wanted to get offended, if you wanted to get angry, if you wanted to take it personally, you would have an endless list of reasons to be upset.

And bearing with one another simply means people who recognize community can be messy, relationships can be imperfect, nobody around me can read my mind and know what I'm thinking or what I need or how I feel.

[13:22] I can't read their minds. Most of what I think I know about why people do what they do is based off my assumptions. And so bearing with one another goes along with humility. It's just a recognition that, hey, being in community means I just need to be willing to forgive a whole lot of things.

Maybe on a daily basis all the time because community can be messy. Right? So people who bear with one another, people who are patient, they don't get easily offended. They don't worry about who has slighted them or disrespected them because they're eager to forgive.

Mature people always assume the best about other people's motives. You know? In the case of an ambiguous situation, they assume, what's the best possible explanation for this?

They always give people the benefit of the doubt. So in mature communities, instead of factions and divisions, there's a deep sense of interconnectedness.

You know, for example, in a community like this, people know that whatever political differences, whatever cultural differences there might be, whatever familial differences there might be, those pale in comparison to the spiritual bonds of baptism and the Holy Spirit.

[14:34] This is no comparison. So mature communities, because of all this, tend to be diverse. Socioeconomically, racially, politically.

Because everyone coming into the church feels welcome. Like, this is a place I could belong. You know, in a community like this, you wouldn't dread going into the election. You wouldn't be terrified to talk about what you think politically.

Because you wouldn't be afraid of being criticized or judged for what you think. And you would know that even if we completely disagree on everything about what's happening this fall, that doesn't even come close to the bond that we share in baptism in the Holy Spirit.

It doesn't even come close. We don't get worked up about it. This is God's vision for the church. And I imagine, as I say this, maybe it's only me, this is the kind of church we all want to be a part of. Here's the question. What do we do with this? Right? Because this, on its own, can kind of get a little bit like this. So, what do we do with this? Well, we have to hold a couple of things together in tension.

[15 : 36] Okay? On the one hand, what is this saying? We should never be surprised when we encounter spiritual immaturity in other people or in the church.

We should never be surprised. We should never say, oh, I thought this was a more mature place. I thought that person was a little more grown up in their faith.

Look at verse 13. Maybe the most, arguably, one of the most important words in the passage. Paul says, let me just get back to it here. Paul says, the word that he uses when he's talking about growing up into the image and the stature of Christ is not you, but we.

He says, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God. This is the Apostle Paul, trained as a Pharisee, top of his class, graduated magna cum laude, right?

He's a rising star in the world of the Pharisees. Sees Jesus face-to-face, massive, dramatic conversion. Has all the gifts, plants churches all through the known world.

[16 : 45] Rock star Christian. He's like, I'm still spiritually immature. I still need the church. I still need all of you to help me grow until we all attain, right?

So never be surprised when you encounter immaturity in other people. If this applies to the Apostle Paul, with all due respect, it probably applies to you. So there are people who hear sermons like this and they say, I can already think of people that I want to send this sermon to.

That is not what you do. So don't be surprised if you've seen other people. On the other hand, we should take it very seriously when we see this in ourselves.

We should take it very seriously when we see this in ourselves, in our own lives. Because Paul is very clear. We need to devote ourselves to growing in maturity.

We should be able to look back over the last year, over the last three years, over the last five years. You know, this is one of the things there. Every summer we try to spend a couple of weeks away at a cabin in West Virginia.

[17 : 57] One of the things I do with that time is to try to look back. Because a lot of the times that I was struggling through stuff, praying through stuff, making hard decisions, have been at that cabin.

And so I will look back and the last time I was here, what was I wrestling with and how was I wrestling with it? And can I see evidence that over time I'm somehow growing and maturing? Am I becoming a little more patient? Am I becoming a little more gentle? If not, why not? What's happening in me? We should be able to see growth. So if you see it in yourself, you should take that very seriously.

If we want to grow, how do we devote ourselves to growth? Last thing we'll talk about. Paul gives us a few ways to get started. Number one, serve faithfully.

Serve faithfully. Maturity cannot be found off on your own, reading books, in your quiet space.

That's a part of it. But it has to be found in community.

[19 : 01] God has designed the church in such a way that it actually requires every single person in the church to be actively serving in order for us all to grow. He's designed it.

He hasn't designed it to be efficient. Because that's probably not the most efficient way to go about it. But efficiency isn't his goal. Unity and holiness and maturity and righteousness, those are his goals.

And those are accomplished very differently. So God is not ultimately about smooth logistics. The messiness is a part of it. Right? The volunteers, like, no showing the last minute.

Right? The having to work out who does what. The people who are willing to do the most menial jobs because nobody else will do them. That's all a part of it. Now, you can hire people to do all that stuff. But that's not God's goal.

That's not what God is aiming at. God could take care of all the needs by himself. It's not about really the needs. It's not about God has designed a system.

[20 : 00] He's designed the church in such a way that it requires every single person in the church to be actively serving in order for us to grow. That's how he's designed it. And that's really what the spiritual gifts are all about.

Now, these are essentially ways that God pours his grace into the lives of believers. Instead of just dumping it all at once, here's all the grace, he pours some of that grace through every life, through every person.

Right? Through every single person in the church, God is pouring some of his grace into the community. So what that means is if there are people who aren't engaged, they aren't serving, then the community is deprived of that grace.

Now, there are, as we see in verse 11, a few people in every church who have equipping gifts.

Right? Pastors, shepherds, ministry leaders.

But their role, as we see in verse 12, is to equip the saints for the work of ministry. Is to get the rest of the church engaged so they're using their gifts to serve the whole.

[21 : 10] One of the great dangers that we have to constantly fight against in the church, especially as we grow as a church, is the professionalizing of ministry. It's the professionalizing of ministry.

The idea that ministry is really the job for people on staff. And that the best way to address unmet needs in the church is to hire more staff.

That's a trap that we can always fall into. What you see statistically is that as the percentage you spend on staff goes up, volunteer engagement drops.

And attendance and ultimately engagement drops. Why? Because people are falsely told there's no longer a need for you here. You no longer have a, you know, you can come, you can leave.

There's, nobody's going to notice because it doesn't matter because you don't matter. Because we're paying somebody to do that. Right? There's a couple of problems with this way of thinking.

[22 : 12] Number one, it just doesn't work. Hypothetically, if we had a massive influx of money and say we could, say we could quadruple our ministry staff. Say we could hire, let's call it 20 full-time ministry professionals.

All with seminary degrees. All licensed therapists. Whatever we want them to be. Right? Ten men, ten women, all that. Imagine we could do that. If they're the only ones doing ministry in a church our size, most of the needs are never going to get addressed.

It's just sheer math. The only way to care for everyone in the community is for everyone in the community to care. For at least a handful of people around them.

It's the only way it happens. So this is why it's crucial to make sure that if you're in a church, whether it's ours or another church, it's crucial to make sure you have some smaller group outside of Sunday that you're a part of.

It could be a core group. It could be a ministry team. It could be a Bible study. It could be a prayer group. It could be a triad. But anything will do. Sunday school class. But some place outside of Sunday where you were able to form deeper relationships so that when you get sick, when you go into the hospital, when the bottom drops out, there are two or three people at least in this church that you know you can reach out to and they'll be there for you.

[23 : 27] That's essential. So number one, it doesn't work. Second reason why professionalizing ministry is a bad idea, it robs us of what we need most. As I said already, God designed the church to function the way he did where everybody has to serve in order for us to grow.

He designed it that way because he knows what we most need. The thing that we most need to grow spiritually is not to get our immediate felt needs met. Now, we have legitimate needs. Don't get me wrong.

The needs are legitimate. But there is a need that we have that goes deeper than that. And that's the need to give ourselves away. It's the need to love and serve others.

Because doing that is an active response. You can't do that unless you ultimately trust that God's going to meet your needs. You can't do that if you have this mentality, it's like if I don't do it, then nobody's going to do it and I'm on my own and I've got to make the best.

Right? That's a kind of orphan mentality. If you're thinking that way, then you can't really serve and engage and meet needs around you. Only if you trust that God is going to meet your needs, that God is there for you in your life, then you can give yourself away freely.

[24 : 38] Right? Jesus said the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve. And I would say the same is true for Christians in the world. That should be our primary orientation. So, number one way that we can devote ourselves to growing toward maturity as a community is just to move in the direction of every single person figuring out how can I serve?

How can I contribute? How can I give life to this greater whole that I'm a part of? That's the first thing. Number two, grow theologically.

Paul says in verse 14, maturity means growing in our knowledge of Scripture so that we can tell the difference basically between solid biblical doctrine and deceptive erroneous doctrine.

If you have an infant and you set a bunch of food down to that infant, thanks, and you set a bunch of food options down and say, well, I mean, you wouldn't do this because you're good parents.

Say the infant sits down and there's some healthy food, there's junk food, and there's poison, rat poison. Now, I don't know about your kids, but I wouldn't have trusted my kids in that environment when they were infants.

[25 : 50] Right? An infant can't tell. If it looks good, if it smells good, if it looks like something that might feel good in the mouth, they're going to put it in their mouth because they can't tell the difference. So they're just as likely to eat poison as they are junk food or healthy food.

Now, as a kid gets older, hopefully, ideally, they're learning. They can identify poison. They maybe know a little bit about what healthy food is.

They know exactly what junk food is. And there's probably still a strong tendency for junk food. And if you're not looking, if you're not there, if you're not enforcing, chances are, you know, if no one's around, they might sneak into some of that junk food.

You know, if they know where the snacks are, they're going to get into it. Then ideally, as an adult, you know the difference between poison, you know junk food, and you have a pretty good handle on what's healthy.

And ideally, and I say ideally, ideally, as a mature adult, you not only know what healthy food is, but you actually have developed a taste for it. You've developed a preference for it.

[26 : 56] You actually want the salad instead of the burger, right? Now, we all have a long way to go, and some of us longer than others, okay? But here's the point.

The same is true spiritually. Same is true spiritually. Right? As we grow, the goal is not just to figure out the difference, to learn enough about Scripture, to know it in our hearts, to know theology.

The goal is not just to know the difference between lies that will destroy you and half-truths that sound good and appeal to the base parts of us but aren't really that true biblically and in solid biblical truth.

The difference between those things, right, you should be able to discern with greater clarity when you hear something, when somebody says something, you know what is true about God, you know what is true about human beings and human nature, and you know how the world works.

And so you can say that's a lie or that's a half-truth that is pretty dangerous or that's solid truth. But ideally, maturity is not just growing in our ability to discern it, it's preferring it.

[27 : 58] It's saying I always, at the end of the day, want what is biblically true regardless if I have a taste for it right now. And I want to grow in my taste for it. I want to get to the point where, you know, Jonathan Edwards said that one of the greatest signs of spiritual growth and life in a person is not just that they know biblical truth but that they love it.

They don't just know God's Word, they love God's Word. Even if it means immediate challenging implications for them, that's what they want. This is the vision of maturity that Paul lays out. So we should be seeking to grow in this way.

The third thing, the final thing that I'll say about devoting ourselves to growth goes with that. We're not only growing in our theological maturity, but we're learning how to speak the truth in love with one another.

Speaking the truth in love. In order to grow, friends, we cannot just grow in our head knowledge. This is not just about writing a good exegesis paper or passing a theology exam.

We need people in our lives to speak truth in love to us, which means encouraging us and helping us apply these truths to our lives so that we can live it out faithfully.

[29 : 09] We need people who can speak the truth in love, and both are vital. Love without truth is deadly. You would never tell your child, eat whatever makes you happy, if you know they can't tell the difference.

That might lead to sickness or death. In the same way, it's not loving to tell somebody, go and do whatever makes you happy. Unless you have a very clear understanding of who God is, who you are, and what human nature is like, how the world works, where true joy and happiness are to be found, you can't answer that question any more than an infant can answer what they should eat. You don't know what makes you happy. You know what looks bright and shiny and might taste good for a few seconds. But you have no idea of the long-term consequences. At the same token, truth without love can also be deadly.

Because you begin to realize that apart from God, when you look at the truth about you, and the truth about God, that can and should lead most of us to utter hopelessness.

Right? So we need truth and love together. And I don't have time to get into it because we need to wrap this up. But if you want to know a shorthand way to know, am I speaking truth and love to this other person?

[30 : 26] You can ask yourself this question. Is what I am wanting to say to this person, is it ultimately something that will benefit them?

Maybe even at my own risk? Or is it something that is actually meant to benefit me? Am I saying this to this person because I'm trying to manage my own internal anxiety?

Am I saying this to this person because it's going to make me feel superior? Am I saying this to this person because it's going to help me vent my anger? Am I saying this to this person because I need to feel like I control their perception of me?

And unless they're okay with me, I don't feel okay. Right? Am I saying this or doing this ultimately to manage my own internal world? Or am I saying and doing this thing because it will truly benefit them?

But it might mean I'm taking a risk. It might mean I'm not going to be as comfortable. It might mean I'm not going to feel as good about myself. That's a good shorthand way to know if you're heading in the right direction. All of this though, just to bring it together, is why in order to be a community of people who speak truth and love, we need to be able to keep the gospel central.

[31 : 36] Because the gospel brings truth and love together by grace. Right? It says the truth about us, apart from God's grace, is that we are utterly hopeless.

And yet it also says that God's love is so strong, so powerful, that he was willing to take on our sin and die in our place. And so when we step back and we look at this great vision that God lays out to bring all things together in Christ to unify the heavens and the earth, the gospel is the key to that plan.

Because the gospel says that Jesus Christ, who was perfectly one with the Father and the Spirit, was cut off. But because of that, we who were far off, far away from God, far away from one another, we can now, because of the cross, be welcomed in and become members of the new humanity, the great household of God.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word. Lord, we ask that you would do in us what only you can do. And we ask that as we come together to pray, to confess your creed, our creed, Lord, as we come together around this table, Lord, as we confess our sin, as we hear grace pronounced, as we share the bread and the wine, we pray that in all these ways we would have a celebration and an embodying of the unity that we have in you.

And we pray that through these things, you would give us the strength to live it out, to live lives worthy of the calling to which we've been called. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.