

Maintain Unity

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[0:00] Thank you, my dear friend Waldorf. That's very kind of you.!

Bartlett wasn't persuaded by all the scientific reasoning that Lennox used. He wasn't persuaded to put his trust in Christ and Christianity due to all the reasoning.

But then at the very end of the podcast, he says to Lennox, he says, you know, what almost persuades me to become a Christian is you.

Not your reasoning, but your kindness, your thoughtfulness and your genuine character. Now that's what Paul is calling for us here in Ephesians 4.

As a prisoner of the Lord then, I urge you that you live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle.

[1:26] Be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. Let's move on from the last hymn for a moment, shall we?

And see where we get to here. Here we are. We're looking at unity. We're looking primarily at verses 3 and 4. We've had three fantastic chapters in Ephesians of theological truth of the highest, highest level.

And Paul is taking this gospel and applying it to our lives. If you go back to chapter 1 and verse 10, you'll see what God has been doing in his work over the years.

He has been bringing everything to a head under Christ. A unity. A unity between diverse kinds of people. And in this new humanity, there is Jew and Gentile worshipping together.

British and Israeli, Arab and Russian. All who belong to Jesus. And the world above.

[2:44] And the world above. And the world below. Is to marvel at our God. That's the purpose that God has been about.

If that's our future. One united kingdom under Christ. How do we develop our unity?

Our oneness? You see, for in our natural state, as we talked about earlier. All races and groupings are disunited. But in Christ Jesus, we are one.

That's what Jesus prayed, didn't he? For us to stay as one. Now have a look at verse 1 about the calling. As a prisoner of the Lord then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.

The calling here refers both to the gospel call, come to Christ, to follow Christ. But especially our call to be part of a unified body. Because that's where the passage takes us.

[3:48] If you follow the six verses through, look at the oneness at verse 5. Where you were called to one faith, one baptism, one Lord, one God and Father of us all.

Who's over all, through all, and in all. We're going towards oneness. But in order to get there, at verse 6, we have to start at verses 1 and 2.

And we have to start with the moral rather than the structural. So we're urged, urged, we're pushed to live a life worthy, worthy life.

You see, previously we didn't know Christ. And we lived differently. Chapter 2 and verse 2 said that we were dead in our trespasses and sins. Said we followed the ways of this world.

And of the devil. We were disobedient. But now, now we've taken hold of Christ. Or rather, Christ has taken hold of us. We've been reconciled to God. We've been brought into a brand new humanity.

[4:49] We're set apart for God. And that's what chapters 1 to 3 said. So that we might get into this idea of unity here at the beginning of 4.

In response to God's work in us. How then should we live? What now is our worthy walk? Well, chapters 4 to 6 would tell us.

Three moral imperatives this morning for us to chew over. Here's the first one. Live humbly. Live humbly.

That's what verse 2 is saying, isn't it? We're to live a life worthy of the calling that we've received. We're to be completely humble and gentle. Be patient. Bearing with one another in love.

It's not just be humble, actually. It's be completely humble, isn't it? Now, that's how we start the Christian life. That's how you and I started. We bowed down to King Jesus. We bowed down to King Jesus because we realised that something was wrong within ourselves.

[5:52] We realised that our troubles, our sin, wasn't being resolved by us. And that only that Jesus Christ could resolve it.

And we thought he was rather good and great. So we bowed down. We humbled ourselves. So we started. And we continue the Christian life every day by coughing and humbling ourselves.

That's what we do, don't we? Which reminds me I could do with your good health, Keith. Humbling, humbling ourselves.

Now, in the ancient world, humility was servile submissiveness. And Jesus did something that nobody else had done before.

Jesus elevated and demonstrated genuine humility. He offered the model, for example, of a little child who had no rights.

[6:55] This is a model of humility. But the text says, be completely humble. Now, I don't know about you, but I've been working on my humility for the past 70 or 80 years.

And it still troubles me. You see, the default position of every human being is to be proud. Proud of who you are. Proud of your achievements.

Humility is a downward attitude. Pride is always upward. Pride parades our worth. Even if we say it with humble words.

And that's the problem, isn't it? We can speak gently and we can speak kindly, but still not be humble. Humility is an inward attitude. It's a realistic assessment of ourselves before God.

Pride is always a comparison to others. Humility means restraining my entitlement to be the focus of other people's attention. In fact, we submit ourselves to other people, don't we?

[8:04] In order to promote their best interests, not mine. Now, God is calling us here in verse 2, not merely to humility, but to complete humility.

Just think how our world understands this today. In today's world, we overcome low self-esteem with what is called boosterism.

We realise perhaps we're not very good at something or we're not very gifted. That's what we tell ourselves. So we feel down and pushed under. Then we say to ourselves, God made you.

Think of that. He made you for his glory. He gifted you. He made you, you. And the more you hear that, the more it boosts your ego. And lo and behold, you're proud again.

You see? Humility recognises us as we are. As we are before God. As we are in need of Christ.

[9:07] And as we are now, clothed in Christ's righteousness. Do you have a realistic assessment of yourself? Are you humble? And then we're to be gentle.

We're to show kindness, not roughness. We're to be patient. We're to be long-suffering. We're to be slow to rebuke. We're to bear with one another in love. See that all in verse 2?

In other words, Christianity isn't just me and God in a sort of vertical relationship, enjoying one another. It's us together with God.

It's relational. And it requires love. Bearing with one another in love. Indeed, that's a good test, isn't it? To test your gentleness and patience, ask yourself how well you bear with one another.

Particularly with one another that you don't get on with too well. Or like. Do you ask about others before you talk about yourself?

[10:08] Do you always want the last word in a conversation? Now that leads Paul, having looked at this moral background, this humility, that leads Paul to stress unity in verse 3.

Correct relational attitudes lead us to being united. Notice that the unity he's going to talk about is unity of the spirit.

I think the translation is quite right to put spirit in capital letters. It's the work of the Holy Spirit. The spirit of God through the bond of peace. And that's because of this oneness that's coming up.

The great oneness in verses 4 and 5. The one body. The church indwelt by the one Holy Spirit. The one eternal hope because of one Lord. One faith.

One baptism. Because there's one God and Father over all, who is over all and through all and in all. It's a brilliant description of the essentials, isn't it? One God. One Lord.

[11:09] Produces a oneness in his people. Not an identicalness. Not a bland sameness. But a unity. And you see how this unity arises.

It arises because it starts with a worthy life. The worthy life. Yes, you see, whatever our circumstances are, following God's eternal work in us, we can now live lives that please God. Now remember, Paul's in prison when he's writing this. That's what he says, doesn't he, in verse 1. As a prisoner of the Lord, he's in prison at this time. But he knows to whom he belongs. He knows his identity.

And he wants to live a worthy life even while he's chained up. Our calling, too, is to live a life that matches our Lord Jesus. Worthy of our calling, in verse 1.

Our calling to follow Christ. And the specific calling, to be one people, one local body, representing God on earth. How do we live this worthy life and become one with God and one another?

[12:17] That's the rub with others that tests our humility. You see, all the attributes in verse 2, being humble, gentle, patient, bearing with one another, only come into play in community, don't they?

They're not solo. Paul is talking about relationships within the church, in the body of Christ. This is where our humility is tested, where our love is checked, and where the world looks on.

Now, I'm trying to get a handle on verse 2. I'm trying to make sure that I grasp it. What do I need to do to be completely humble?

What do you need to do to be completely humble? What do we need to do corporately to develop humility? Live humbly. Think of yourself less.

Not think less of yourself, but think of yourself less. And then, prioritise unity. Humility is essential for unity.

[13:26] As we strive to be completely humble, so we're to make every effort, verse 3, make every effort. It's another urge idea, isn't it? We're urged to live a life worthy of the Lord, and we make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit.

Unity isn't automatic. It takes a great deal of effort. We have to work at it. Make every effort. I'm shouting away, so excuse me.

You know, in church life, bust-ups are easy. Having an argument, walking away, can be very brief. The hard work is the repair, the reconciliation.

Paul isn't saying here, don't disagree. He's not saying, don't hold strong opinions. But he is saying, put your energy into oneness, into unity, into a working togetherness.

That's why in the Bible, teamwork is always preferable to the lone worker. Paul works in teams. Jesus gathered people around him, his disciples and a close team he had as well, the inner three.

[14:42] Teams. It's a great witness to the world that for all our differences, and we do have them, we function as one body. We show how God can take, for example, Jew and Gentile, friend and enemy, and form a brilliant, united group that works together well, reflecting Christ.

But it demands hard work. That's what Paul is saying here. Notice it's the unity of the Holy Spirit as well. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit.

Unity of the Holy Spirit. And we need the Holy Spirit. He's the glue to bring us all together, keeps us together. The past 30 years has seen a great unity in our country amongst those of us who call ourselves conservative or evangelicals, conservative evangelicals, or Christians who hold a high view of the Bible, or Christians who believe that Jesus' death is the only atoning sacrifice to get us into glory.

Across our groupings, there's been a unity. That's certainly in my lifetime. In the past, you see, we found our identity in our tribe, or our denomination as we called it.

And there's still a tendency for that. But here, you see, this passage is talking about gospel unity, working in gospel partnership. We belong to a partnership of gospel churches, like-minded churches.

[16:15] The denomination doesn't matter so much. We make sure that Jesus is central in all that we do. We do it here in the town. Don't agree necessarily with the other church on some things, but we agree on Jesus.

We agree on the central work at the cross. We agree on the central book, the Bible, that we're taking our truths from. That's what keeps us together, you see. That's our unity. Now, why does

Paul add the phrase, through the bond of peace?

Make every effort to keep the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace. Why does he say that? Well, because peace is a quality or an attribute that we receive as a result of the gospel.

We're out of sync with God naturally, and probably with one another too, but provoked by the Holy Spirit, we take hold of Christ, and we discover a wonderful peace with God.

Not just vertically, myself, but together, a restored relationship, a healing of the soul. We're bound to one another. Why?

[17 : 19] Because we're bonded to Christ. So how are you getting on striving for unity? If you look back over church history, and you see all the fallouts and schisms, unity needs a great deal of maintenance, doesn't it?

A great deal of humility, doesn't it? We're not entitled to fuel division. Make every effort to keep the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace.

Think of Paul's appeal at the beginning of Corinthians. He said, I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Think of the church at Corinth, with all its oddities and differences and peculiarities.

I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree with one another in what you say, and that there are no divisions among you, but that you're perfectly united in mind and thought.

So we live humbly. We practice unity. We prioritise it. And I think the last section we could sum up as reflecting God.

[18 : 34] You see, we believe from Scripture that there is one God. One God, but he isn't a solo God. He exists in Trinity.

This is a unique Christian truth. It's not a Jewish truth, not a Muslim truth, not a Hindu truth, not even an atheist truth, not even a man-made truth.

It's a biblical truth. A biblical truth that there is one God. The emphasis here is on the oneness. You see it in all these verses. One body, one spirit, now one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all.

One God. Ah, yes. But one God in three persons. All functioning together in complete unity. Always the oneness goes with God and always the three goes with the persons, Father, Son and Spirit.

A oneness of God. But a diversity of persons. That's very helpful, this. Really helpful. Because there is a oneness that we hold to.

[19 : 44] But there is diversity within that oneness. And that's our calling. Our calling is to reflect this Godhead. Especially its unity and its working together.

Now you see how this is stressed. Just read these verses with me with the one in mind. Verse four. There is one body and one spirit. One hope.

One Lord. One faith. One baptism. One God. Isn't it striking how the unity is seen in God and the Gospel? That's what Jesus prayed.

That we might be one. When Jesus prayed that we might be one, by the way, the we is Jesus and his Father.

And that they might be one, is his church, the body, us. So based on the oneness of God himself, the oneness of the Trinity, we his people are to be one also.

[20 : 47] That is one in Christ, one in the Gospel. I'm sorry to tell you this, but whenever a church has a split, and sometimes they do, there's a falling out and people leave, it takes an enormous amount of time to recover.

Not very far from here, there was one excellent church in Hampshire doing a great job. They practiced what we call dual baptism.

You could have your children baptized by immersion, or if you were a family with a young child, you could have your child, might use the word christened, but baptized as a baby.

They practiced both of those. They were a fantastic church. They were doing really well. Then they had a split. Then they had a second split. We're about 20 years from there, and they're just barely talking to each other for three groupings.

It is a tragedy. You can say, well, there's three Gospel churches. You can put the positive spin on it, but it is a tragedy. It takes a long, long time to recover. In fact, it's worth thinking this out for ourselves.

[22:07] If some people leave a church in a healthy manner, say, to form a plant, a new church, and we're all very excited by that, it takes a long, long time to rebuild the home church and replace those who have left.

And as new people are added, we have to work really, really hard at embedding people into the one body. In other words, unity doesn't happen by chance.

It's not a bright by-product. It has to be worked out. Make every effort. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. Why? Because we're trying to reflect the God that we represent, the one God that we represent in three persons.

No, we don't believe in unity at any cost. We must be united around Gospel truths. That's why we teach the Gospel. That's why we repeat the teaching of the Gospel.

We continually teach the Gospel. We drive the Gospel into our hearts. Because like a wheel, the closer the spokes are to the hub, the stronger it is.

[23:19] God is the hub, and we are the spokes. And this passage this morning is pressing us. Are we playing our full part? Are we completely humble?

Are we making every effort to keep Gospel unity? Are we reflecting our God? You know, the danger.

The danger is to make our Christian faith performative. In other words, if we do all those things, humility, unity, model God, if we do all those things, then we're holy.

That's the danger, isn't it? If we do all those things. If we put on a good performance and show. The truth is, according to Ephesians, that the Christian life begins with God.

With what God has achieved. With what God has achieved on our behalf. Chapters 1, 2 and 3. Solid theology. And out of that work, we are enabled to live the life that we're called to.

[24:25] To live humbly. To prioritise our unity. And to reflect our God. It's the Gospel that does the work, you see. It's the Gospel that's held out and believed in.

It's Christ who is exalted. And it's his glory which fills our hearts and minds. We're driven to humility. We're driven to unity.

And we're driven to reflect God. But it starts with the Gospel. And how we live it out. Let's pray together. Our gracious God and Father, we thank you that our Lord Jesus was a humble, gentle, patient man.

Please make us like him. Help us to strive for a real unity around your Gospel, your good news. So that we reflect you as a Trinitarian God in all your oneness.

Please help us to live humbly as Jesus did, bearing with one another in love. For this is our prayer. In Jesus' great name. Amen.

[25:36] Amen. Amen.