

Opportunity for Ministry

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[0 : 00] So reading again today from Ephesians 4 verses 1 to 16. I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you accord to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it says, In saying he ascended, what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth?

He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things. And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness into deceitful schemes.

Father, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ. For whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow, so that it builds itself up in love.

[2 : 12] Well, being the youngest in my family, it's probably not surprising that I wanted to grow up to be like my older brothers.

I'm pretty sure I only got into soccer because my older brother was into soccer. In high school, I would hang around with my older brothers and their friends, and I thought I did a pretty good job of fitting in.

But Adam Collison was one of those friends. You can ask him how well I did. He told me not too long ago that he saw me as that annoying little brother that lingered around.

I thought I did a good job, but apparently not. I wasn't really game to ask Adam whether he still felt that way about me or not. My year 12 D&T project was, I think, really a chance to learn electronics and software design, which my brothers were good at.

Basically, my brothers did the project for me because I wasn't very good at it. In many ways, looking back, I wanted to be like my older brother, older brothers. And at some points, I just failed to live up to them.

[3 : 25] One of my brother's friends would smoke cigarettes, and even though I saw my brother just refused to join in, later on I asked that friend for cigarettes. I should have followed my brother's example at that point, but I didn't.

And then my brothers are really good at maths and physics. But the teacher who taught them maths and physics, and then taught me maths and physics, said, he's not like his brothers, is he?

Oh, ouch. Now, the depth of how much I wanted to be like my brothers is probably indicated by the fact that I can still remember those words all these years later.

I really wanted to be good at maths and physics like my brothers, and I still chose to do physics and try to do extension maths in the HSE, and that didn't turn out too well.

Now, I know that's a small point of failing to live up to them. The reason I'm raising all this is that I think whoever we admire, the image of the ideal person we look up to is going to capture our hearts and then control our lives for better or worse.

[4 : 40] Who we admire just takes hold of our heart and then influences how we live for better or worse. And I think that family likeness is exactly what God is so passionate about producing in us as a church.

This is what Ephesians is all about, Ephesians 4 in particular. God wants us to admire his son, Jesus Christ, and to become like him in every way.

You hear this passion in Paul's words in chapter 4, verse 1. He calls himself a prisoner for the Lord. Now, that might seem like a negative term, being a prisoner.

I don't think he's using it negatively at all. It's a bit of a play on words. He's saying, my entire life now is controlled by Christ. He's just taken hold of me.

And now I'm a prisoner for him. I think many unbelievers see the church as a man-made invention to control people through fear of punishment.

[5 : 49] But I think even more powerful than threat is if you can win someone over in the heart.

They'll give you a lot more if you can win someone over. And that's what Christ does. He doesn't control us through fear.

He loves us first. And he captures our hearts. And that's what happened to the Apostle Paul. And he wants us to think that way as well. The second way he's using that term, prisoner for the Lord, is Paul was literally in prison when he wrote the letter of Ephesians.

But he wasn't ashamed of that fact. Even though being in prison usually carries a lot of shame with it, he wasn't ashamed of being a prisoner for Christ.

I think it's because he loved Christ so much he's willing to hurt for him. I think if you want to get to know what someone really values, look at what they're willing to hurt for.

That'll show you what someone really values. We're all a prisoner of something. We all have some idea of what the ideal life looks like.

[7 : 00] And whatever it is, we'll sacrifice everything else to get it. Whatever captures your heart. Whoever you admire, you will want to be like them.

And everything you'll learn, you'll practice, you'll sacrifice other things to be like them. So the question is, what is capturing your heart and my heart?

Are we captured by the Son of God? Are we a prisoner for the Lord? We're told in chapter 1 that even before the foundation of the world, we each were chosen to become holy and blameless before God.

He predestined us for adoption, adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ. Now as his children, he wants us to become what we are.

He wants us to grow up in the likeness of our older brother. What's surprising is the means of how God plans to do that. He wants us to grow up in the likeness of our older brother.

[8 : 13] That's the whole point of this section in chapter 4. The goal of Christ equipping his people for ministry is seen in chapter 13.

If you've got your Bibles open, have a look at chapter 13. Otherwise, just listen in. Until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.

God's passion for his died-for people is that we would become mature in truth and love, becoming more and more like his Son. Unity in the faith, in the knowledge of God, to maturity, fullness in Christ.

That's God's goal. He's determined that we'll reach it. Now, there's a possibility that recent events in our church have left you disillusioned with the church.

Aren't you tired of the lack of unity in the church? And it may not just be this church. I am. What's the solution, though?

[9 : 36] Have you found that the world has a better solution for unity? I haven't come across it. There's superficial harmony where everyone agrees, you do you.

That's a common phrase now. You do you. Just leave me alone. I'll do me. Is that unity? What's the cost? The cost is truth.

There's no more truth. You've got to throw out truth if you're going to live like that. And where's the love in the world? Where's the commitment? Where's the motivation for forgiveness in the world?

I haven't seen it. I don't know if you have. The solution for us not yet being mature and unified in the faith is that we need more of Christ.

We need more truth. Verse 13. We need to see Christ more and know him more. So we attain the unity through the knowledge of the Son of God so that we admire him.

[10:45] And then we become like him. So I'll put it this way. We don't need less church. We need more church to grow in our unity in truth and love.

Our God is a serving God at heart. We see that with Jesus dying on the cross for us.

David Corderwood introduced the term of perpetual adolescence. Just not wanting to grow up. Josh Fotheringham, he accidentally called it eternal adolescence.

Thankfully, we don't have eternal adolescence. We will be mature one day. But I think if we don't want to grow to be like Jesus, I think there can only be one reason for that.

We don't admire him enough. Because if we did admire him, we would want to grow up to be like him. We've got to know him better. And that's why the word of God is so central to everything we do as a church.

[11:58] But as I was preparing this week, to be honest with you, I felt like a hypocrite. This passion to become like Jesus, for you to become like Jesus, it's not very strong all the time in my own heart.

So I reckon that one of the first steps to ministry is actually confessing that to God. I don't have this passion, as I should, as often as I should, as consistently as I should.

I think we need to confess that, seeking forgiveness. And the second thing is ask God to make Christ dwell in our hearts through faith. That's what Paul does in this letter.

He prays amazing prayers. God fill us. That resurrection power fill us. Changes from the inside. And then he gets busy working, trusting God to answer his prayers.

I think that's the start of ministry. We need that admiration of Christ. And we can't produce it ourselves. We need God to give it to us.

[12:57] And once we admire Christ, or as we grow in our admiration of Christ, we're going to share his passion for his church, his household, his body.

And from there, opportunities for serving are just going to explode. You'll see them everywhere you walk. Every conversation.

Everyone you bump into. But it all comes from that passion. That admiration of Christ.

So for basically the rest of our time, I just wanted to give a snapshot of the opportunities that are there for us to be servants like Christ.

I think ministry is both bringing others into the body and building up those in the body. It's both those things. The priority here in Ephesians is our love for one another in the church.

[14:04] And Jesus said in John's Gospel, the world will know you're my disciples if you have love for one another. I reckon we saw this earlier this year. If you remember Chris and Jess's wedding.

Jess's sister came along and visited us at Grace. And what she was impressed by wasn't anything up front. It was just so many people were happily helping out Chris and Jess to make their wedding happen.

And she was just blown away by that. That community, that genuine community that would happily give up so much for them. The world will see that we're his disciples if we love one another.

And the ultimate goal of our Nova meals. What is that? These women are going through awful times. We want them to feel loved by receiving a meal from someone in the community. We want them to know they're not alone.

But surely we're giving them more than meals. Surely our goal is more than that. We want them to come into the church. Not because we're trying to build our own organisation. But because God's church is his people.

[15:16] To know God. To come into eternal life. We want them to know God's love, in other words. Ultimately. So the church is central to all we do.

We want the goal of evangelism is to bring people into God's household. And it doesn't stop there. We've all got maturing to do. I have a lot of maturing to do.

So you guys have no time to waste. You need to encourage me. You need to convict me. You need to support me. Obviously not just me. We all have lots of maturing to do.

It's not for lack of opportunity that we don't minister. How do we mature? It's not just those up front. It's the whole body. Have a look at verse 16. Let's be reminded of that again. Verse 16. From Christ our head, the whole body, joined and held together by every joint.

[16:17] Every joint. With which it is equipped. When each part is working properly. Makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

So how do we build one another up? Verse 15 tells us. Instead of just being tossed around by all these different ideas in the world about what is really valuable about life and God.

But verse 15, rather speaking the truth in love, we're to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.

So literally that phrase is truthing in love. I like that because I think it breaks down any distinction between practical acts of love and speaking.

It's just truthing in love. So if you think of in Galatians, when Paul rebukes Peter, because Peter, when the Jews turned up to the church, he separated himself from the non-Jews and didn't eat with them anymore.

[17:29] Choosing where he sat and who he did or didn't eat with was an expression of the gospel or a lack thereof in Peter's case. So Paul rebuked him. That's not the gospel.

The gospel has broken down every divide between us. Even who you eat with should be demonstrating truth. So our practical acts of love should demonstrate truth.

And obviously our words should be filled with the truth. And I was particularly convicted by Ephesians 4.29 when I was at uni. Have a look at Ephesians 4.29.

Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths. But only such as is good for building up. As fits the occasion that it may give grace to those who hear.

Every word, every joke you tell should be for the sake of building up. Every word has the goal of building up.

[18:38] Not just making each other feel good about ourselves, but expressing the gospel truth and grace that help each other grow in our faith. Always the goal of building up.

Perhaps that's going deeper in relationship. That's part of building up. This doesn't mean quoting the Bible in every conversation. But it does mean pushing each other towards the truth in the gospel.

So let me give you a snapshot of what this truthing in love looks like. While my dad was stuck in New Zealand, the borders cutting him off from his family.

There were people in his church in Invercargill that demonstrated the truth. So on a Tuesday night, a couple had him over for dinner, a meal. On a Thursday night, another couple had him over for a meal.

They were from the church. And I was really thankful that the church family there looked after him while he was cut off from us. And they really are his family in Christ.

[19:48] So they demonstrated the truth through providing that meal and sharing that meal. But he said to me the other day that more than that, the best part of that was when they discussed God's word together and prayed together.

Because that was the source of their unity. What really helped him was focusing on the goodness of God. So they demonstrated the truth through the meal and they spoke the truth.

Sharing their basis of unity together. And now I reckon we can all do things like that. That's pretty simple. Our home can be one of the best places for ministry.

You don't need fancy meals. You don't need, you just need sausages and salad. That's fine. Or maybe just salad if they're vegetarian.

You don't need a spotless house. Let's be real with each other. We've got dirty houses. You just need truthing and love. Now I think ministry is also formal and informal.

[21:08] I think we can sometimes assume when we use the word ministry that it requires a formal role like being a small group leader. That's ministry. But turning up to small group isn't ministry.

I think we can somehow slip into that divide. But serving is formal and informal. I think that's the point of the human body. We're not really told what all the gifts and all the components are in the church.

I think that's so that we don't get stuck in this rigid idea of what service is. It's going to look very different according to the people and the needs in the community.

So we need the formal roles. And the elders are planning to do some training for up front things like Bible reading and praying and kids talk soon to raise up more people. So I'm saying it now for you to think about when the time comes.

We do need those formal roles. But not everyone needs to be up front. It would be chaos if we all tried to get up front. We need most service happens not up front, not in formal roles.

[22 : 18] So I'm going to steal an example from Tim Keller from a person in his church. So let me quote Keller for a minute. Fred, I'm guessing that's not his real name.

Fred has been attending a small group for months. At one point he realises that he assesses the value of the group strictly on what he gets out of it. He then decides to begin preparing well and praying for the group.

When he comes, he looks for opportunity to help the Bible study leader by making good contributions and for ways to speak the truth in love so others are encouraged and help to grow. So no formal role. But someone like Fred would be essential to our small groups if we turned up ready to contribute. Let's not underestimate the power of setting a good example and just everyday words.

And ministry can be planned and spontaneous. When it comes to planning, I wonder before you arrive at church, do you have a plan of who you want to speak to after the service?

[23 : 35] I'm not saying you have to do it. I'm just saying it could be a good thing to do. Maybe you have one or two people you just want to catch them before you leave. I think we should all have our newcomers radar on all the time.

Because it is really hard to walk into a group of people for the first time. It's really hard. I hope you might not have done it recently, but it's really hard. We should have our newcomer radar on.

I think it's good to have one or two people in mind to talk to. But of course we have those spontaneous conversations as well. And let's take that as God's providence that he wants us to build them up in that conversation too.

It can be good to plan meals with people in advance, a couple of weeks in advance. Because on the day, you probably just don't feel like it. You just want to go home and put the Netflix on.

But if you prepare in advance, I think it's better. Some friends of ours in Japan, they were saying that to actually catch up with someone, you've got to book ahead two months.

[24 : 42] We expect someone to be busy for a week or two. Two months in advance. If you're in Japan, you have to be planned to do ministry. Of course there's spontaneous opportunities as well.

Andrew Wilkinson, he's up in Tamworth today. But Wilco was saying to me the other day, he was playing goalkeeper in soccer. I wasn't there. But here he is in goalkeeper, five a side.

So they're booting the ball from one or two metres away near his face. And there's guys behind him asking him, what does EV stand for in your team name?

And he said, oh, that means evangelical. He's like, evangelical? What's that? Oh, it's our church that I go to. Instead of shutting the conversation down, they kept asking him questions.

What church do you go? Where is it? What do you do there? They just started asking questions. Here he is in goalkeeper, having this witnessing opportunity. Talk about spontaneous.

[25 : 42] So ministry can obviously be planned. It can be spontaneous. One last thing I just want to point out the obvious when it comes to planning.

If you don't show up, it's really hard to serve. I think we need to plan to be there. Sunday afternoon. Sorry.

That's blocked out. I'm committed already. Now, I know there's some good reasons not to turn up to things. Don't hear me wrong. But let's plan ahead to serve one another.

Let's block out the time. And I know that sometimes we just like fall into church exhausted. Some of you might be only just keeping your eyes open.

Maybe all of you right now. But just turning up can be an encouragement. Just turning up. And you can let others serve you. And that's okay too.

[26 : 44] So what if you're weak? And this is my last point. What if you're weak and debilitated?

Do you have anything to offer? Maybe you're mentally and emotionally drained or you're just really, really tired or stressed.

Or maybe you're just so sick you can't turn up. Do you have anything to offer? I think so, yeah.

I think you might have the most to offer. Let me tell you a story to try and illustrate this. So while I was in Sydney, a friend at Bible College, he struggled with chronic fatigue.

And it got better. And so he decided, okay, I'm going to do it. Let's go to Bible College. He signed up for the three-year course. But a few weeks in, the chronic fatigue just hit him hard.

[27 : 45] And he just couldn't go to his classes. He could barely have a five-minute conversation. He was just exhausted after five minutes. He couldn't come to the common room to eat meals.

He couldn't show up. But let me just share how he encouraged me. First of all, his dependence on God was just, it was necessary.

It was so obvious that he had to depend on God. And that encouraged me to see myself in the same way. I'm just as dependent. More than that, when he spoke, he only had a few words he had the energy to say.

But when he spoke, he made every word count. It just carried a weight to it that was encouraging. His prayers were to the point. It just brought eternity into the room.

But because he was debilitated, it also meant that I had to step up sometimes. I had to pray for him. I had to learn what it meant to look after him as my friend.

[28 : 54] I didn't know at first how to care for someone with chronic fatigue. So he actually has provided me the opportunity to step up. And I think he taught me more fully the theology that we talk about all the time, that our righteousness has to come from Christ.

This guy could not do anything to earn his righteousness. He couldn't even read his Bible. It was just too taxing. What could he do to earn his righteousness? He couldn't.

But we don't have to. That's the gospel, isn't it? Christ has given us his righteousness. I think my relationship with him helped me grasp that a bit more. I hope you can see that God used his debilitation to encourage my faith, to build me up.

God works his power through our weakness. Even when you're debilitated, you are an essential member of the body of Christ.

So urge us all on in faith and love and hope. Okay, so that's a snapshot of opportunities that I think we have for service.

[30 : 08] Can I just finish very briefly? I think there's a danger in a sermon like this. I think there's a danger that we naturally think that we have to do things for God to accept us.

I think we just naturally believe that. I often find myself thinking, if I do this for you, God, you owe me. That's not service.

That's not the mindset we're meant to have. Being able to serve is always God serving us. God is always serving us, even in giving us opportunities to serve.

Now, I want to show that in three ways through Ephesians. It's always God's grace. Now, first of all, in chapter 2, we're told plainly that we were happily just going along with the rest of the world, living for ourselves.

We were dead towards God. We wouldn't even have good works to do if God didn't first make us alive. It's by grace we have been saved and made alive.

[31 : 14] Verse 10 of chapter 2, we're created for good works. Created for good works. It's by grace that we can even do any good. That's the first way it's by grace.

The second way it's by grace is that he provides us with what we need to serve. He promises that in chapter 4, verse 7. Grace is given to each one as he apportioned it.

We need to trust that he provides what we need when we're serving. It's never in our own strength. It's always his grace. It's always what he gives, and then he gets the glory for it.

And the third way that God is serving us is that God is a servant-hearted God. By providing opportunities to serve, that is the very way that we're going to grow up to be like Christ.

He's always serving us when he gives us opportunities to serve. It's a gift.

[32 : 19] A gift of grace. So brothers and sisters, let's be captured more and more by our older brother. Let's admire him. We need to go deeper in knowing him so that that passion overflows in serving, and opportunities are endless.

Each part needs to do our bit. Let's become like our older brother. Will you pray with me? Father, we forgive us for not admiring your son as we ought to, how quickly our heart goes to other things. Forgive us for that. We thank you that you don't leave us where we are, but that you're committed to taking hold of our hearts and forming us into the likeness of your son.

Lord, how good it will be when we are finally there, when we are fully and finally united household in truth and love.

Lord, we look forward to that day. In the meantime, please, yeah, take hold of our hearts. Grab and capture us. Spur us on, each one of us, wherever we're at.

[33 : 52] I pray that you would speak to each one of us and urge us on to serve so that we might grow up together. Lord, please bring glory to your name through the love and the truth that is in this church.

In Jesus' name I pray. Amen. Amen. ■■ Tiger die Changi Hillarystadt