

The end towards which we toil – Ephesians 4:11-16

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Preacher: Thomas Worth

[0:00] It's good to see you all tonight. And, yes, as your pastor mentioned, we've gotten to know each other through this rather motley! group of pastors that meets every first Friday of the month.

And Pastor Ipe is our Anglican at our group, and I'm their token Pentecostal charismatic. And then we have a congregational pastor, Rick Chafee, and we've got a Baptist, Scott Corbin, and now Nathaniel and Stefan, what are they nowadays?

E-Free. Pardon me? E-Free. Oh, even Jephle Free. Yeah, okay. So anyhow, it's an interesting group, and we've really encouraged each other over the years.

We've spoken to each other on various topics ranging from theological things to the American Civil War. I was in depth with that.

[1:23] No, that was the early days. Anyway. Ephesians chapter 4. And the topic is maturity in Christ.

You know, it's great when the pastor gives you the passage and the topic right off the bat.

That's half the battle. I don't have to seek the Lord about that. I can just seek him about what this says. And so, yes. And we're starting in verse 11 of chapter 4.

And the context here is this. Paul is talking about Christ's descent into earth and then his ascension into heaven.

And that through this wonderful work of redemption, he has given gifts to the body of Christ. He has given gifts to his church. And they are.

[2:32] Verse 11. And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, from the building up of 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 and deceitful schemes.

Verse 15. And this is the one that your pastor wanted me to emphasize. Rather, 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 with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

Paul's got quite a vision there. I grew up in the 1950s. And there was a Broadway musical called Peter Pan at the time.

And Mary Martin played Peter Pan. And I remember there was a song that Peter Pan and the Lost Boys would sing together.

And the chorus went like this. Because growing up is awful-er than all the awful things that ever were. I'll never grow up, never grow up, never grow up.

[4:25] No, sir, not me, not I. And that's kind of the way it went. Anyway, I won't grow up. You know, that sort of thing.

So... And you wonder sometimes if we, as believers, are afflicted with that kind of syndrome, the Peter Pan and the Lost Boys, where we don't want to grow up.

But this is what God is calling us all to. And this is what Paul is articulating here in Ephesians chapter 4.

And so this is the topic, Christian maturity. Traditionally, it's been called Christian perfection. Christian. But we don't have in our modern lexicon that notion of perfection that means completeness or maturity.

[5:32] We have some sort of Greek idea, you know, of someone who's absolutely perfect in that sense. And that's not what the scripture is talking about here.

So, but traditionally, if you look it up in theological works or whatever, the term is Christian perfection. And here's a definition that I just came up with.

Christian perfection is where the believer has become so Christ-centered that out of holiness of heart and life, this believer consistently loves God and loves people.

Now, there's a flaw in that definition that we'll get to. But I think it's good for starters. As we think of Christian maturity, Christian perfection, I was thinking about the attitude toward this desire to grow up in Christ.

How did that play out, for instance, in the early church? How did it play out in the church of the first few centuries? I think you had a lot more mature Christians in those early centuries because being a Christian cost you something.

[7:03] It was not. There were seasons of persecution under the Roman Empire. And people who dedicated their lives to Christ had to grow up very quickly, so to speak.

And so Christian perfection, Christian maturity was a given. It was understood. Oh, yes. This is what we're doing.

This is what we're growing into. And then Christianity triumphed in the Roman Empire with Galerius' edict of toleration at first, and then Constantine came along and was a Christian himself and paved the way for Christianity to become the official religion of the Roman Empire by the middle of the 5th century.

Or 4th century. Anyway, back in there somewhere. What happened, though, was that since Christianity not only was tolerated but became the official religion of the whole empire, people who wanted to get ahead in society became Christians and began to fill the churches.

And the trouble is the church became more and more worldly. And those who were really following earnestly after Christ began to lament the sad state of the church at large.

[8:41] And so they began to separate themselves, sometimes in communities that we would call monasteries or convents and that sort of thing. And Benedict pioneered the monastic orders in the West and Basil did it in the East.

And so what began to develop in the later patristic and medieval church is a two-tiered notion of what a believer could be.

And that was the ordinary citizen who got married, raised a family, and was part of the local church there. But Christian maturity and Christian perfection was really out of his vision.

It wasn't something they strove for. They were happy just to receive the sacraments and be saved and that sort of stuff.

But then you had these people who were striving after perfection in the monasteries. And these were the ones who were striving to become what God wanted human beings to become, so to speak.

[9:56] The trouble is they were, I think they were infected, you know, by some Greek ideas of what perfection entailed because of the vows of celibacy and that sort of stuff.

But it's very far from the Hebrew notion of who God is. Anyway, but that two-tiered notion, and then you have people being recognized as saints during the medieval church and onwards.

And so the term saint began to designate someone who was very special, someone who really had come into fully loving God and loving people.

And, you know, the church began to canonize saints toward the middle of the Middle Ages. So then you had a three-tier system where you had the ordinary churchgoer, ordinary citizen within Christendom, and then you had those in the monastic orders who were striving after Christian maturity, Christian perfection, and then you had those who were called saints, you know, really heroes of the faith, so to speak.

And then Martin Luther came along, around 1400 or so, and tried to climb this medieval ladder of perfection and drove his confessor crazy because the way to achieve perfection and find full forgiveness of your sins was to confess everything.

[11:33] He'd get done confessing and then get back to his cell there in the monastery and remember something else. He'd forgotten to confess. And Stout, his confessor, who was also the head of the monastery, got so exasperated with him, he said to him, well, why don't you go out and kill your father and then you'll have something really good to confess.

But he was really, you know, I think he probably had OCD or something like that. He was just really obsessive about this kind of thing. But Stout put him to work and made him the professor of

scriptures in the seminary at the monastery there.

And so that was not a staple diet of medieval Christianity, oddly enough, the scriptures. But he began to discover that, as he taught the book of Romans and taught the Psalms and different books like that, that we are made right with God by faith alone.

That it's not the works that we do or our ability even to confess everything we can think of or you name it. But it is simply putting one's trust in what Jesus has done for us at the cross and resting and coming home, so to speak, to the Heavenly Father with that understanding.

So that was a big deal and that began what we know as the Reformation. One of the things, the outcomes of all of this was what Luther called the priesthood of all believers.

[13:05] There's no longer a two-tiered system in God's economy. All of us are called to be saints. All of us are believers.

And all of us, and this is what I'm getting at, all of us are called to grow up. We are called to maturity. And so that's been more or less, you know, our situation now in the centuries since then in one way or another.

Just this notion that we can't get away with not growing up. This is something that all of us are called to. And the flaw in the definition that I gave you is this.

That what I share with you is more like an individual accomplishment. And that is not what Paul is talking about here. You'll notice that it's a corporate accomplishment.

Until we all. I was listening to one preacher said, I looked up all in the Greek.

[14:40] And you know what it means? All. Until we all are until we all attain the unity of the faith, the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.

And so that's quite a calling. It's something that all of us are included in. We are all called to and you know, sometimes we've thought that we have to give teenagers some space to to grow up and then they'll be mature Christians once they get into their twenties and thirties.

But have we realized that the Apostle John, for instance, was a teenager when he was one of Jesus' disciples.

And yet he was the most faithful one of all. Was there with the Lord on the cross. So and John's life spans the whole first century and that's why we know he was a teenager by his calling.

So the promise of Pentecost there on the day of Pentecost your old men shall dream dreams and your young men shall see visions.

[16:09] That this work that God is calling us to is for everyone. God is calling us all to grow up into him. sometimes we make we make the mistake that the ministers are somehow ahead of us.

You know the Apostles and Prophets Evangelists pastors and teachers that maybe they're grown up but we aren't yet. And you know what these ministers are the scaffolding for the building and it's the building that God wants to build.

and so it's the church as a whole that's called to grow up into him who is the head. And then sometimes we catch glimpses of this.

I've been doing mission work in Bulgaria for the last 30 years and ever since the Iron Curtain rusted out you know in about 1989 or 90 I began I made my first trip over there in 1991 and then from 1993 began to travel there every year until COVID happened.

But we established friendships we got to know pastors in various churches and we became good friends you know as the years went on.

[17:38] And so this one couple has a church in Solistra Bulgaria that's right on the border with the Romania there on the Danube River and they knew some believers in Ukraine and when the war broke out in Ukraine their friends up in Ukraine and the believers in churches up there were in trouble needed help humanitarian aid you name it and so Marcho and Setzi this couple that I that we had ministered to over the years there in Solistra and they were pastors of a small church they wanted to take aid up into the Ukraine and they did and our little mission you know would help them with that and we would talk together on Facebook Messenger you know it's a wonderful thing you can see each other's faces and talk with someone halfway around the world and so we were talking about what they were doing and how they were that now they were ministering in churches in the

Ukraine and encouraging the believers there as they were going through a time of trial and this terrible war that's still going on but the wife Setzi made this comment to me she said you know Tom you've been traveling here year after year and encouraging us and now we are traveling to the

Ukraine and encouraging those believers and she says we've grown up I thought wow that's pretty cool sometimes you catch a glimpse like that sometimes I've run across another rendering for the word used in the

ESV for equip he gave apostles prophets and so on to the English Standard Version says to equip the saints for ministry I believe or works of service how does it read here yeah for the to equip the saints for the work of ministry there it's in verse 12 I looked up that word in Robertson's word studies in the Greek there and the word means to mend to repair to heal and so what if we were to render it like this um got it written down here somewhere and he gave the apostles the prophets the evangelists the shepherds and teachers to repair and restore the saints for the work of ministry to mend them to heal them that the church is supposed to be

I believe a safe place like a hospital where we can find healing and restoration and growth and nourishment and all the rest this is what God has called us to and I ran across a wonderful quote by Pastor Barbara Brown Taylor she put it like this since I sew more than I shoot arrows I think she was dealing with the notion of sin meaning to miss the mark and now an arrow is supposed to hit the mark or it misses anyway since I sew more than I shoot arrows I cannot help but extend the image it is a needle I am wielding on my way through the word with a sturdy brown thread looped through the silver eye by the grace of God I am being mended and God has called me to be a mender too since many threads are stronger than one

God has put me on a sewing team day by day our job is to hunt the places where the world is ripped and bend over the damage to do what we can every good deed every kind word every act of justice and compassion tugs the torn edges closer together the truer our aim the smaller our stitches and the longer our patch will hold we made plenty of rips ourselves and some of the worst ones show evidence of having been mended many times before but that does not seem to discourage anyone mending is how we continue to be mended and we would not trade the work for anything we in verse 14 he says then we will no longer be infants tossed back and forth by the waves blown here and there by every wind of teaching boy we're getting some winds tonight aren't we we can feel it and so on winds of doctrine winds of teaching that cause people to go astray that's the mark of infants who are moved by this kind of stuff you all don't know me and

[23:48] I don't know you so I may offend some people and I may not but I will say this I was really impressed by the immaturity of the American church during the pandemic when so many people were tossed to and fro by all these conspiracy theories on the internet that's a mark of immaturity when they got their eyes off Jesus and began to worry about this that and the other God has called us to focus on Christ God has called us to center on him and to take our cues from him and we haven't gotten to the end of all that stuff but there's a passage in Isaiah that says do not call conspiracy everything that these people call conspiracy but the Lord is the one you are to fear the Lord is the one you're supposed to pay attention to so

I would just say be careful of all that stuff yeah then we come to verse 15 which is the one that Pastor Ebe wanted to emphasize instead of speaking the truth in love we will all things grow up into him who is the head that is the Christ I was thinking about in the New Testament now are there examples of immature churches we can think of those good old Corinthians aren't they great you know Paul tells them you know he says you're carnal you're immature I have to still give you milk because that's all you can handle right now yeah so there's a great example I think probably the Galatians are another example of a very young church who were swayed by the Judaizers that came along and tried to lay a whole layer of legalism on their faith and that sort of stuff so those are some examples I think of immature churches that we have in the New Testament and I was wondering well where's an example of a mature church or one that's more mature and what came to mind was the Philippian church because when you look at Paul's letter to the Philippians he's not taking them to task for any of their faults or errors what he's doing is he's thanking them for an offering they sent to him in other words they were mature enough to be concerned more about the work of the Lord at large than their own little deal they were more concerned about giving than receiving and that's a mark of maturity and so they sent to Paul and Paul in turn writes to them and thanks them for helping him he hadn't asked for it but he was sure grateful he received it and here's the interesting thing if you look in

Acts 16 I'm just giving you a quick survey here that's the story of how Paul's apostolic company came to Philippi they were the first church in Europe Paul there is in Troas there in Asia Minor he sees the vision of the Macedonian man come over and help us and at that point what's curious is

that Luke changes the pronouns in his narration of Acts and instead of saying they and so on he begins to say we we crossed over in other words we understand that at Troas was when Luke joined Paul's apostolic company he was probably a mature believer already but Paul took him on board as an asset and one that could help in the ministry and so Luke joins the apostolic company sails across the Aegean Sea with Paul and Silas and perhaps some others and there they meet with

Lydia and her friends there by the river at a place of prayer and they begin their ministry with them telling them the good news of Jesus and then they land in jail we know the story Paul and Silas are singing praises to God there there there there there's an earthquake and all the prison doors fly open the chains fall off and the jailer is getting ready to kill himself because he's responsible for all these prisoners and Paul cries out in the dark and says don't harm yourself we're all here and the jailer says well what must I do to be saved and that's the brought his physician's heart to the pastor ministry and he began to see the church as a place where folks could find healing and restoration and repair

[29:38] I may be reading between the lines a little bit there but I would like to think so and could it be that under his tutelage I think it's in your tradition that one of your words for pastor is curate which is someone who is responsible for the cure of souls and I think that's a valid image or way of thinking of the local congregation and what goes on here and I would like to think that Luke fostered that kind of healing atmosphere there in the church in Philippi where they learned as Paul is talking about here how to speak the truth to one another in love what does that entail!

and I would like to open things up now can you recall a time when someone has spoken to you the truth in love I'd like some testimonials just I'm opening it up here yes can you recall a time when someone spoke the truth in love and it touched you it drew you closer to the Lord you know we preachers like to think that that's what's happening Sunday by Sunday as we minister the word and certainly that's one of our callings but I think oftentimes this occurs on a personal basis where we're just kind of one on one with someone and someone gives us a word of encouragement something that that just helps us along the way in our own pilgrimage any thoughts or

I think it's interesting it says referring to verse 15 rather speaking the truth in love we are to grow up in every way unto him who is the head I think oftentimes I've heard speak the truth in love as a sort of guidance on how to correct somebody or something like that but this is referring to growth in the Christian life some immaturity that's the context of that right which I don't think I thought about!

so it could entail correction but it could entail encouragement or any number of things really which goes into Hebrews where it talks about not falling away from the living God we encourage each other daily to know who God is and to know Jesus and yes my son who had to remove himself from a toxic situation I no longer call him my son who ran away but the son who needed to leave and I have had an incredible period of allowing the Lord to work in our hearts and allowing us to speak the truth and love as we both seek after who God is and to be able to know that we've caused each other pain and yet know that we have a redeemer and so that's an example of I guess

I'd put a spin on the question do you love God enough and do you love the other person enough to speak the truth because sometimes we withhold the truth for various reasons you know how much do you love God and how much do you love the person who needs to hear truth from God might be a question I would add to your question that's a great question that's a great job all the little love to be a great part of the first of the time to about you you have the that you have to lip lip lip that in you and you have to you have to that you have to this and lip you have you have to lip lip lip lip lip

Again, I marvel at Paul's vision here.

[34:35] It's until we all come into this thing together. What a marvelous thing. Roushan and I were talking earlier, and one of my theories concerning the body of Christ is that it's practically impossible for one particular gathered congregation to fully express all the differences of Christ's ministry, as he's called us to.

But I think all the churches in an area, in a region, together can express the many facets of who Jesus is and the way he wants to express himself in the world.

That we have different expressions. I thank God for it. Hallelujah. That we... This thing that God calls us to, as the body of Christ even, is something that's going to have infinite variety in it and will be as different as our respective churches are.

And it's not that one church is better than another or that sort of thing. No, it's that one church has a strong point here, another church has a strength here. Some are gifted in one way, some are gifted

in another.

And hallelujah. I think... Overall, you know, we see the Lord working in so many different ways.

[36:10] And that's... I think that's where you see the ministry, this variety of ministry also taking place. He calls it apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. Again, depending on the group that you're in, you can be more or less comfortable with some of these ministerial titles.

But for most of us, we're in circles that mostly have what we call pastors and teachers and evangelists. One example I can relate to is when our family was struggling, beginning to leave another church.

And Tom Hayes was a good friend. And Morris was a pastor at the Episcopal Church. And he invited us to dinner.

And he specifically said, not to proselytize, but you really need to belong to a church family. And he cared enough about us to spend time with us and to talk to us and, you know, just let us know.

They were there for us. And we went to a beautiful church for many people. How cool is that? Yeah, that's great. Super.

[37:33] And that's wonderful people. Yeah. Yeah. I think one other example, especially in light of thinking about what trajectory of maturity looks like for Christians.

you exercise that it's not a, it's a collective thing. It's we are all grown. And Paul here is, he's saying we're grown in Christ. He's the picture of maturity.

He's the fullness of maturity in Christ. That's our model. That's our standard. And one example is my wife is, many times, when I say many times, but as, you know, either both encouraging, but at times also, I've said, you know, also sort of, what's the word I'm looking for?

Corrected. Uh-huh. Right? And, and, and help me to see when I'm, you know, spewing in my own, you know, pity party. and, and I, and I think it takes both someone who's willing, and goes to what Brian is saying earlier, and rephrasing the question, someone who's willing to, to love you, which is what we're called to, this is why this is in the context of the church.

Someone who's willing to love you, not to say, you, you need correction in this area, or, you need to grow in this area, or you, you're, you're thinking about yourselves, you know, you know, a lot of Corinthians, but you should be thinking about others, a lot of Christ-wise, who are really great for it.

[39:10] And then it also takes someone who's actually willing to, who wants to grow, to receive that as not a, you know, an attack. Yes. And it's helpful that, you know, it comes from someone like, my wife, well, I know that's, you know, it's not attacking me, but, but that should be the setting that we all have in the church, where it's both give and take.

So, we must be willing to, to, to correct, you know, in love, that's the setting, but also humility not to say, well, this is part of the process of growing.

Yeah, yeah. And, and, um, speaking the truth in love to one another can also, I think, open up new possibilities, where we say to one another, have you ever thought about it like this?

And, uh, and then, you're just opened up to a new aspect of God's working in his kingdom. And, uh, so, there are many ways in which this can work.

Can I add to that? Yeah. Yes. So, in the first chapter, it says in him, you also, when you heard the word of truth, gospel, your salvation, and believed in him, pursued with the promised Holy Spirit.

[40:19] So, when you said, like, it leads to other things, it's like, now you've got that Holy Spirit, once you've heard that word of truth, and you've believed in it. Well, yeah. And then, you've got the, the working of the Spirit, in your heart, once you embrace that truth.

Yeah. it, um, and that's the, one of the marvelous things about the words that God has for us. Jesus tells us in one of his parables, or men meet more than one, that these words are like seeds.

They get planted in us, and then they grow. And, uh, uh, first the blade, and then the, the stock, and then the, the ear, and the stock.

In other words, it'll take on many forms before it finally comes back, uh, into fruit, uh, fruition. Uh, but yeah, uh, the word of God that, that we speak to one another is something vital and alive.

It grows. Hallelujah. Pastor Ife. Thank you. Thank you.