

Working Together to Grow

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[0 : 0 0] I enjoyed playing soccer when I was much younger and I was even part of a church team that made the grand finals. We had a really good team, we had a great goalie, we had some really good defenders and we also had some really good shooters. In fact, one guy in particular scored 80% of our goals and that was not me. In fact, I was the only one on the team who had not scored a whole goal all season. All right, all right, all two seasons. So much so that the boys felt sorry for me and during a game where we were winning by a lot, the boys all shouted out, give the ball to Brycey and they did. And so with the ball at my feet, I took off towards the goal, there was one defender coming out towards me, I lined the ball up, kicked it to bend it like Beckham around the defender into the goal, but I bent it like a beginner and the ball went off to the side of the field. Luckily, there was a teammate there, he dribbled the ball in and scored the goal.

After the match, that teammate said to me, Pricey, you're such a team player, passing the ball when you could have scored a goal. I was trying to score a goal. It just isn't one of my gifts.

You see, to quote an old Qantas ad, we are one, but we are many. One team made up of different players and our team scored goals and won matches when we worked together as one, with each player playing their part with their gifts. I'll tell you my gift later. But my old soccer team isn't a bad picture of what Paul is talking about in our passage today, because he's talking about one church made up of diverse people with different gifts working together, and not to score goals, but to grow or build the body of Christ, both in number and maturity. But before we get to that, Paul kicks off, pardon the pun, with a general appeal. So point one, verse one.

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Paul wants them to live a life worthy of their calling. What is this calling? Sometimes in life, people talk about their jobs as a calling. You know, I was called to be a teacher. I was called to be a doctor. I was called to be a food critic. I mean, that's a pretty good calling, isn't it?

You know, getting paid to taste food. But we have an even more privileged place, an even greater calling than that. We've been called to be in Christ. And that comes with every spiritual blessing, as we've heard. Election, adoption, redemption, revelation, inclusion, assurance. Thank you to all those who emailed me with that different options to turn assurance into a shun word. But being in Christ also comes with the great hope, a hope of perfect body in a perfect creation with a perfect character. It means being God's treasured inheritance and those who've been spiritually made alive in Christ and seated with Christ in the heavenly realms, such that we've already got one foot in the world to come already. And being in Christ also means we have peace with God and with one another, united together as one church, one body of Christ. And so we Gentiles who were once no hopers, remember, we are now family members, fellow citizens with the saints, God's first people, the Jews.

[3 : 53] And it means we are the goal of God's grand plan. His plan, remember, is to unite all things together in Christ. That's church. And so we are part of his goal, his grand plan. In fact, last week we heard we are God's masterpiece that shows off his wisdom to the spiritual rules and authorities, both good and bad, the angels and the devil and so on. This is who we are in Christ. This is our very, very high calling. A friend of ours was called up to be on that TV show, Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?

They couldn't believe this calling. They were so excited. Unfortunately, they didn't get the million dollars. But even if they did, our calling in Christ is actually worth so much more.

Of course, it's sometimes hard to see it, isn't it? Which is why I'm spending so long reminding you of it. And while the Apostle Paul has spent the first three chapters lifting our eyes to see it and praying that we might know it. Remember, not just know it in our heads, but know it in our hearts.

To know our calling in Christ and the deep love of Christ that made it all possible. And so as you sit there in your PJs or your Sunday lockdown best, waiting for the Premier's announcement at midday to see how long this lockdown will last, you may not feel like you have a privileged place in this world. But the Bible tells us we do in Christ.

But now to misquote Spider-Man, with great privilege comes great responsibility. For now, in chapter 4, verse 1, Paul urges us to live a life worthy of that high calling.

[6 : 05] And this is the turning point in the letter. The word live is literally walk. It's popped up before in chapter 2, where our response to God's grace is to walk in good works. And now in the next three chapters, Paul will unpack some of those good works and repeat that word walk.

And so this verse is like the topic sentence that summarizes the big theme for the next three chapters. And notice Paul urges them to do it. He even ups the ante and reminds them that he is a prisoner. And this is what has cost him to walk worthily of his calling. And it's likely to cost the readers and us less. And so we have no excuse to make every effort. And so how do we walk in a manner worthy of our high calling? Now, is it skipping along or not drudging? Of course not. It's firstly by keeping our unity. I point to verse 2. He goes on to say, be completely humble and gentle. Be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. You see, we are to walk with complete humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance. This is how we are to exercise our bond of peace.

And so keep our unity in the Spirit. A couple of weeks ago, I suggested this meant that when we meet on Zoom and they've forgotten to unmute themselves yet again, we don't get exasperated.

We patiently bear with them. Or if we're calling others to encourage them, but they're not calling us, we patiently bear with them. Or for the families, if people in your house are annoying you because you're all cooped up, then we patiently bear with them. Or if people in our church express a different view about vaccination, we patiently bear with them. Can I say there are different views in our church when it comes to whether to be vaccinated or not? And I've written a paper on this, which I'm hoping to email out later today. Although I suspect the conversations have moved on and depending on what we hear at midday today, I may need to write another paper addressing vaccine passports and church attendance. But the more important thing than vaccinating or not vaccinating is actually how we treat one another, who have different views to us. We are to walk worthily with all humility and so keep our unity. Of course, this is sometimes easier said than done, isn't it? When our kids were young, we would listen to memory verse songs in the car like the one we heard today. This other one was of the fruit of the Spirit, you know, love, joy, peace, patience. But one of our kids actually sang love, joy, peace and painfulness. I think it was a mistake and she wasn't talking about her sister.

But it is sometimes hard to show love and patience, isn't it? And so why are we to make every effort to do that? Well, because of who we are in Christ. We are one. Look at verses four to six. And as I read, notice what word is repeated. Verse four, there is one body and one spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. Now, apart from the word all, what's the other word repeated? It's one, isn't it? We are to walk worthily by keeping our unity, our oneness, because we are one.

[10:19] Now, this doesn't mean we all have to think the same on issues where the Bible is silent or gives us freedom to think differently, like which football team is the best. Clearly, it's Carlton.

Nor do we have to like the same things in life. Some people love cauliflower. I don't know why. Nor do we have the same gifts and opportunities in life. Rather, we have different ones.

But we're not to let our differences destroy our unity. Rather, we're to use our differences to grow the body. Point three, verse seven. Paul goes on to say, but to each one of us, grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. Paul moves from unity with words like one and all to diversity with words like each and apportioned. And what he's saying here is that Christ's grace not only saved us, but is also given us different gifts to help grow the church. Whether those gifts are abilities or opportunities or resources or time. And notice each one of us has been given this grace. Each one of us has gifts which in turn make us a gift to the church to help it grow. And so each one of us has an important part to play.

I know for many who can no longer do what they used to do, you may not feel like you have an important part to play. But phoning someone to ask after them and to encourage them is an incredibly important part to play. Praying for people and for your church is an incredibly important part to play. I don't underestimate the importance of these gifts to the church, especially during lockdown. No, you are all important. I mentioned before that my gift in the soccer team was not scoring goals. What was my gift then? Well, it was being the substitute. Now, I know you think that's a dud gift, but it was actually an important role to play. Our good players needed a rest and I could give them a rest. And I also noticed when our team started losing, so I could sub them back on to help our team win. Even the substitute has an important part to play. And speaking and praying to people in church is way more important than being a substitute.

But when did Christ give us this grace? Well, as Paul goes on to say, when he ascended on high, which Paul sees as the fulfillment of Psalm 68, our first reading. But he did change a bit of it.

[13:36] So verse 8 of our passage goes on to say, this is why it says, when he ascended on high, he took many captives and gave gifts to his people. But if we go back to Psalm 68, there's a picture of God ascending in victory up to his temple in Jerusalem, leading captives behind him. And notice it's about receiving gifts from people, from the rebellious and even from other kings. But any good king would then use those gifts from the nations to then give to his people. And that's how Paul sees Christ fulfilling this Psalm. When Christ ascended in victory over death and the devil, he then gave gifts to his people. This seems to be Paul's point in changing the Psalm in verse 8 to giving gifts.

But again, when did Christ give these gifts? Well, after he ascended to rule in victory. And so Paul goes on to say in verse 9, what does he ascended mean except that he also descended to the lower earthly regions? He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens in order to fill the whole universe. Christ, as we've heard before, as Vijay said at the start of the service, is the ascended king. He is like God in the Psalm who ascended to rule in victory.

And Jesus fills the universe with his victorious rule and then gave gifts to his people. But it's a bit tricky to know what Paul means by descending, I think. In verse 9, is Paul saying Christ also first descended to earth as a man to die? I mean, that's what we're familiar with and might naturally think of. But the context is about giving gifts. And so I wonder if Paul is saying Christ then also descended via the Spirit to give gifts. And so I think day of Pentecost, when the Spirit descended to gift his people to speak his word. Either way, Paul's point is, this ascended Christ is the one who gave gifts to his people. And so that's what he emphasizes in verse 11. See verse 11? Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ. Here, Paul seems to focus on the early church and how the readers grew as the body of Christ, because he speaks of how Christ gave past tense. And he mentions particular gifts like the apostles and prophets. We don't have apostles today. You see, Paul's focus is back then. And he says,

Christ gave these leaders who notice all speak God's word to equip God's early church for the work of ministry and the building of the body. Now, your English Bibles might say to equip God's people for the works of service, but it's literally the work singular of ministry. And what is the one work that builds the body, both in number and maturity? Well, it's the gospel.

So Christ gave these leaders for equipping the early church to share the gospel, to build the body. That's how these readers became Christians and were built into the church as they heard the gospel.

[17 : 36] And it's how they were built up in maturity as they've grown in their understanding of the gospel until they've reached a level of maturity where they're no longer infants, but can themselves keep building the body. And so look at verse 13. He says, this equipping to speak the gospel continues until we all attain to the unity of the faith and 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 infants tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness and deceitful schemes. But instead, speaking the truth in love, we might grow up in every way into him who is the head, Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love as each one part does its work.

You see, God is into bodybuilding. Not this bodybuilding, what a pastor you St. John's people have, but this bodybuilding. Don't try and find yourself there. I had to buy a random picture because of privacy issues. But you get the point though, don't you? God is into church bodybuilding.

And the way it worked for these first readers is this. Here's the flow of the passage. Christ gave those gifts to equip the early church for the work of ministry, for building the body, both number and maturity, until we all reach a level of maturity in terms that Paul's actually used of the church earlier in the letter, so that we're no longer infants, but can ourselves speak the truth and play our part to keep building and growing the body more like Christ.

Of course, for us today, those first leaders who spoke God's word have gone, but we have the word that they spoke in the Bible, don't we? And so, as Paul said earlier, we are still built on the foundation of those early leaders, the apostles and the prophets with Christ himself as the cornerstone.

And Christ still gives, present tense, evangelists like some I know in our church. And pastor teachers are like me or Mark or Vijay or Michelle, Jeff, for equipping you as the new group of saints to do the work of ministry, sharing the gospel, to build up the body more in both number and maturity. And so, as you do this through things like our outreach ministries or in your own conversations, sharing the gospel, people will become Christians. And they have, even during COVID.

[20 : 50] And as we keep sharing the gospel with them, these young Christians might grow to be mature Christians, so that they might no longer be infants, but know enough to now speak the truth in love themselves and be mature enough to use their gifts to play their part in continuing to build the body.

That's how it works. See, even if we are no longer infants tossed around by every teaching that comes across our desk, and many of us at our church are not infants, but we have still got more growing to do, don't we? We've not yet, verse 15, grown up in every way into Christ, who is our head.

It's kind of like those bobble dolls, you know, those dolls with the small body and the big head that people put on the dashboards, or like in the American parades, again, small body, the big head.

Well, the church is like the body and Christ is the head. And we've still got more growing up to do, to fit our head, or more accurately, to reflect our head, Christ, in every way.

Or to use Paul's other picture, we've still got more body building to do. Not by going to the gym, of course, but by doing two things. Firstly, by speaking the truth in love.

[22 : 27] To speak the truth refers to speaking the gospel. That's how Paul refers to the truth earlier, the gospel. In a sense, this is the same as the work of ministry we saw back in verse 12.

To speak the gospel, not just to non-Christians, but also to fellow Christians. Because speaking the gospel to one another still encourages us, doesn't it? I mean, it's why we just had the Lord's Supper.

Even though we know Jesus has died for us, we have the Lord's Supper. We speak the gospel to keep encouraging us. Remembering Christ then rose as Lord, even of lockdown, is also encouraging.

That he can use even COVID to build his church, which he has. Or to put differently, God's love in the gospel spurs us on to grow in love towards one another.

That was the memory verse today. Or God's generosity in the gospel, as we hear it again and again, spurs us on to grow in generosity towards others.

[23 : 33] You see, speaking the truth of the gospel still builds the church. But we're to do this in love. Which means the way we speak is to be loving, gentleness and respect.

But also the actions that accompany our speaking are to be loving. We don't speak the gospel in a gentle way to someone and then act in an unloving way to them.

That's hypocrisy, isn't it? No, we're to speak the truth of the gospel in a loving manner with loving actions. This is the first way to build the body.

The second is by each one part doing its work. I remember back in verse 7, each one of us has been given grace. Gifts we can use to build the body.

Whether they are abilities or opportunities, resources or even time. And we're to use our gifts to play our part in building the body. Even if it's the gift of being a substitute on a soccer team.

[24 : 39] Now I realize all this is made harder in lockdown. For some it's harder to use their gift of reading the Bible using technology than being in the room.

Often because the technology has hiccups. We had one hiccup at the 9 o'clock service this morning. And it's certainly harder to use our gifts of serving one another. Like serving morning tea or chicken and chip lunches in lockdown than in the room here, isn't it?

It's even more effort to make phone calls to speak the truth in love to others than simply seeing others in the room here and being reminded, I should go and talk to that person.

It's one of the many reasons why in-person church is so important. Because it helps us to keep building the body. But even despite lockdown, we can still all build the body, can't we?

In fact, lockdown has created new opportunities to build the body. In God's timing, COVID has come at a point in history where we have the technology to reach people. And not just from our church family, but interstate and even internationally.

[25 : 48] And I know people are tuning in from those places. And if that's you, then it's great you can join us. I hope you're encouraged and built up. And we can still all make phone calls and send cards or messages where we speak the truth in love.

We can all still use the opportunity of less activities, not to watch more Netflix, but hey, pray more regularly. I know it takes more effort to think about it because it's out of routine.

And we're all mentally fatigued, aren't we? But part of walking worthily is not only keeping our unity, it's also using our diversity to build the body in whatever way we can.

One of our members is stuck in an aged care home. He cannot leave, nor can he have many visitors. But he has a TV and a chapel in the home.

And it gives him the opportunity to see our service tomorrow morning. They watch it on Monday mornings where there are more staff to set it up. But initially, it was just him.

[27 : 01] But he didn't just watch it by himself. He took the opportunity to actually walk around his floor with his walker, walk around his floor, knock on people's door and tell them that it's on. Come and watch the service with me.

Here is an opportunity to build the body. And he took it. That's bodybuilding in lockdown. Or someone in my Bible group last week told us about her sister overseas who contracted COVID.

But a Christian doctor visited her each day of her quarantine period to give her medical treatment. And the kids, the children, the kids of the doctor sent her prayer messages each day to encourage her.

How cool is that? These kids used the gifts they had to speak God's truth in love. And it built her up. That's bodybuilding in lockdown.

And so if a person stuck in aged care and kids with limited resources can both build the body, then we too can, can't we?

[28 : 06] During lockdown, when people couldn't go to the gym, were buying up toilet paper and stuff, there were all these pictures online about doing bodybuilding at home, like this guy using toilet paper and a broomstick as a dumbbell.

It was all a bit of a joke, of course. But by speaking the truth in love and using our gifts in whatever way we can, we are doing bodybuilding without even going to the gym.

This is how we're to work together to grow in Christ. And so to wrap up, know your high calling in Christ that you may walk worthily of it by keeping our unity and by using our diversity and by using our diversity.

And using our diversity and using our diversity and using our diversity. Let's pray. Our gracious Father, we thank you for the high calling we have in Christ. Help us to walk worthily of it by keeping our unity and by using our diversity so that together we may keep building the body into Christ our head.

We ask it in his name. Amen.