

'to equip his people for works of service'

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[0 : 0 0] Heavenly Father, as we look into your word now, we pray that you would build us up and equip us for works of service. Amen. So I've always gone to church, I've always believed, and as a young teenager I went to a different church, a bunch of us who were at primary school together, we went our separate ways to secondary schools, and church was a good place to keep in touch with folk.

So whilst I believed what was taught, I wouldn't say I was ever an unbeliever, really my reason for going to church was friendship and keeping in touch with my mates.

But when Richard became a Christian, became a Christian? What did that mean? But there was a definite change in his life, a sense of purpose, a sense of joy that really changed him, and changed his priorities as well.

He actually wanted to go to church in a way that the rest of us really didn't. That began to challenge what I thought were my beliefs as being really quite shallow.

He was baptized, and it was a Baptist service, and before he was baptized he gave his testimony and really explained what had happened to me.

[1 : 3 9] And through that, and through the sermon that the ministers preached afterwards, I became aware that God was giving me a choice. Did I want to say, did I want to stay sitting on the fence, or follow Jesus?

And I have to say, I was a very reluctant convert. It was almost with a sinking heart that I responded to that gospel challenge. I know this is right, I know what am I letting myself in for.

But ever since, there has been that sense of, this is what life is for, and it was a decision that I had never, never regretted.

The other good thing about being a young Christian was that we were in a church that really encouraged us as young people to get involved.

Even as teenagers, we were encouraged, we were given opportunities to pray, to read, to give testimony, and later even to help lead services.

[2 : 4 2] One of the youth leaders was a lay preacher, and he went around the village churches in rural East camps. Some of them with congregations, most of them with congregations in single figures.

Sometimes it was, sometimes it was, you know, four or five people, faithful people. And that was where I gained early experience, still in my teams of leading worship, preached my first service.

And it was, it was so good of that church with so many older people, who were so encouraging of us younger people, to give us opportunity to gain experience and to play an active part.

And for me, a call to the ministry was a challenge, but it came as a natural progression of doing more of what I was doing already.

And this chapter in Ephesians, chapter 4, is really all about the call. Not everybody is called into the ministry, not everybody is called to preach, but everybody is called to play an active part in the body of Christ.

[3 : 46] And Paul alludes to this in chapter 3, and then he comes back to it in chapter 4, in his opening line, As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.

And he's not addressing an assembly of ministers here, he is assembling a church, and he is saying to every person who is having this letter read out to them, because that's what they would have done in those days, the calling you have received.

You have received the calling as well. And Paul is encouraging you to respond to that and live it out. And that is the way that the church in Ephesus would have received that message that very first time it was read out.

And it continues in that way that every church where it's read out ever since. So let's have a look at this chapter, predominantly looking in Ephesians, but I will mention that Haggai reading later as well.

First of all, Paul, in the opening six verses, reminds us as believers of what we have in common. When Paul says, live worthy of the calling that you have received, live a life worthy of this calling, he is saying something more than, oh, be good Christians and don't let Jesus down.

[5 : 12] As I say, chapter three, particularly the second half of that chapter, is setting us up as a congregation, as a people, for the fact that God has given us a calling.

That God has plans for us, he has a purpose for us, we don't just fumble through life wondering what life's all about, but there is a plan and a purpose for each one of us and for all of us together, because as God's people, we are his people, and he has his plans, and he wants to include us in them.

And so being, this is all about being church. Live a life worthy of the calling you have received, be completely humble and gentle, be patient in every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the calling of peace.

And Paul goes on to say, there is one body, one spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all.

There is so much that we have in common. This is very much us as a people together. But then, Paul then goes on in verse seven, that to each one of us, grace is being given as Christ the portion is.

[6 : 21] There's a combination here of the things, the great things that we have in common, and then the individual things that show how we play our individual parts in it.

And in a sense, it's very much like that pub side we looked at earlier, the four alls, that we are individuals with different contributions to make four all.

Together, it all works out. Being church doesn't mean turning our backs on the outside world, but working out how, in Jesus' name, we reach out with God's love.

And that can work out in different ways for different churches. My son is ministering in a church in Cheltenham, in Gloucestershire, down in England.

And recently, they've started a new project in partnership with the local maternity unit, the hospital, providing baby packs for the new mums.

[7 : 21] That's something the church is sponsoring. It's a way in which they can support the work of the NHS, and it is a good witness to God's love. The church, where I became a Christian, well, it was decades ago now, recently began a holiday school ministry project.

The other churches in the town where this is have been doing a scheme to fund school uniforms, the farmers that have struggled to afford school uniforms, and my old church has got involved with the holiday school meals project because they've run a church cafe.

So they're willing to provide that. And again, they are working together as a congregation to reach out to the community. You might well be involved with the food bank here.

We are involved in Oki. You've got the outreach to the cruise ships and the seamen who come into the port. Each church works out what it does, and there are so many different ways in which churches work together to reach out and support and bless the community.

This is a very active thing, and whatever each church does, however it works out, is something that we can enjoy doing together, but we are conveying and communicating an awareness of God's love through doing so.

[8 : 47] And there are partnerships between the church and the community, but also there is a sense of togetherness as it draws us together as individual believers. So in the opening six verses of this chapter, there is a question and a challenge we can draw from that.

As Paul says, live a life worthy of the calling you can see, and he reminds us of what we've got in common. There is one body, one spirit, one rule, one faith, and so on.

How, how, how do we here serve together to gently but positively and effectively explain that this is what following, what knowing Jesus is all about?

And bear in mind how supernatural a thing this is, because it is so natural for people to do the opposite and live their own quiet, quiet lives, or indeed to fall out with one another and to fragment.

And what the Holy Spirit is working in our hearts to do is to bring us to work together, which is the complete opposite. But it's not more automatically, we need to work to nurture, to value, to sustain this unity, to treasure the fact that we are together called God's people.

[10 : 12] And the communion service that you had last week was such a blessing, because it declares and emphasizes the fact that we are one people sharing one bread and one cup, because we all alike belong to Jesus.

This is the change, or part of the change, that the Lord gives us when he calls us to follow him. That instead of the self-serving of me, I live for me, I live for level one, is now a new we.

I'm a member of the body of Christ. My way is no longer my theme song. I no longer sing, I did it my way.

But instead, we are one body, led by one spirit. That's the opening third of this passage. I'm going to jump to the last section, the last paragraph, verses 13 to 16, and see where this is leading.

At the end of this passage, it says that then, we are no longer the infants tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching, the tellingness, craftiness of men.

[11 : 34] Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will, in all things, grow up into him who is the head that is Christ. The conclusion of this passage presents us with Jesus as the head of the body, drawing us all closer, ever closer, to himself.

And like the spokes of the wheel, the closer we get to the hub at the centre of it, the closer to one another we get as well. The picture of a wheel with different spokes is a useful one.

The nearer we get to the centre, the closer we all are to one another. And that can allow us even to differ over things at times.

We all still have our own opinions, we have our own different politics, our own tastes, we have our own characters. We are such a diverse people at the same time.

We've all of us got completely different stories, different experiences, different tastes, different ideas. We are, in what's that, no two of us are going to be 100% alike.

[12 : 44] As a younger Christian, I used to think this was a problem, that Christians should actually always agree. I'm not so sure that is the case now, because in a very increasingly polar on this world, where disagreement is a terrible thing, we need to learn how to have different views and still love one another.

These days, if you don't agree with somebody, you're deemed to hate them. That isn't the case. If you don't agree with somebody, you're not supporting them, you're opposed to them, and there is a power you put up.

One of the things about the Church, and one of the strengths of the Church, is the fact that it can hold different people together. When Paul wrote elsewhere in his letters, in Christ, who is neither male nor female, slave nor free, Jew nor free, and so forth, he was identifying in the fact that in those congregations there were men, there were slaves and there were free people, there were Jews and there were priests.

Paul's making the point that all these different characters and different backgrounds, all that diversity, doesn't matter in Christ. Because despite all our differences, in Christ we are one.

What we have isn't uniformity, but unity. And that is a much richer thing than uniformity. We need to pray that we have more young people, we need to pray that we've got a greater mix of different backgrounds and such like that, because that's the way that God wants us to be.

[14 : 20] the more the differences, the more the differences, as they say, shows that what we have in Jesus is more important than the differences that we have.

And again, that can be a powerful witness to the outside world that tends to light, seeps light. But here, in verses 14 to 16, we've got another challenge there.

That we are talking about then, then we will no longer be influenced, tossed back and forth by the waves. Where is the Lord taking us to? What is his purpose?

Where is he leading us towards? And the challenge is, am I steering, am I setting forth for that future that God is drawing me towards, or am I trying to go up in a different direction?

And Paul gives three very silver principles here to help us to steer the future God has for us. First of all, seek wise understanding.

[15 : 25] Paul says, study to know the truth, check it out, learn, find out. We don't want to be blown a year and a day by every wind of teaching and the kind of darkness of men in their deceitful scheme.

We want to be able to understand more and more what the Lord's ways are, what the Lord is saying, what he wants to do. Because the better I know the truth, the easier it is to make the spot perception is.

Study to be wise and understanding. That goes on in verse 15, instead, speaking the truth in love. Here we have an emphasis on both truth and love, that we should be honest people truthful people and loving people as well.

And holding those two together, sometimes people speak the truth in a very unloving way, sometimes people dare not speak the truth because they're caring. But here there is that combination, that blend of truth and love.

And how? By the fact that Christ's truth and love reaches out to us. He knows what we're like. And he still loves us. And by his grace, he accepts us.

[16 : 43] He shows us his truth and also how much he loves us. And then in verse 16, from him, the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting thing.

And he grows and fills itself up in love as each part of its work. The conclusion of this section is, seek to serve willingly.

Because we'll find that we are all given a role, a part to play, that fills up both us, ourselves, and one another as we have, as we serve one another.

And Paul isn't explicitly mentioning the body of Christ, but it's that sort of imagery here, that we've got all our differences put together, we have a functioning body that needs all those different parts and all them, and members, and bits and pieces, to all work together.

That's where this passage leads us to, recognizing our differences, but valuing our differences and contributing from our different positions to benefit one another.

[17 : 54] I can do what you can't, you can do what I can't, we need one another, and as we support one another, share what we have been given, that draws us closer together.

And in this slide, we've got this middle paragraph where it spells out what that involves, that as we accept our differences and recognize the contributions that other people can give to me and that I can give to others because they've got what I haven't got and I've got what they haven't got, and together we serve one another and make up for what shortfalls are.

We've worked together as a body, as a team. Some years ago, I did a bit of study on sports history, fascinating study, I was surprised at how interesting it was.

One of the things that struck out to me was in the history of football, in the 1870s, in the early game, the way people used to play football, historically not into football, it was a bit like kids in the playground, you've got the ball, and wherever the ball was, every player was, it was a kick and rush, and you'd have all 22 players in and not, rushing around, getting as close to the ball as they can, and that's the way they all used to play.

The Scots, and I say this coming from England, learnt better. They learnt what's called the passing game. It was the Scottish footballers who first recognised actually spread out of the team and passed the ball to one another and play as a team, that would give us an advantage.

[19 : 34] So you suddenly have 11 Scots won passing the ball up around the pitch, and 11 Englishmen in a bunch, not able to keep up. Guess who won when they played each other?

But the English learned and other people have learned since. But it was the Scottish footballers who learned the passing or invented the passing game. It is better to work together as a team.

And that is very much at the heart of this passage here. As we look at this passage, there's a strange passage in verse 8 that says, this is why it says, when he ascended to the high he lived captive in his trade and gave gifts to men.

Paul's just said to each one of us, grace has been given as Christ as fortune gifts. This is why it says, when he ascended, what's that all about? Well, simply, Paul's making the point here that Jesus is the team captain, he's the leader, he's the head of the body, it's Jesus' right to say who gets to do what.

To each one of us, grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. Jesus will say to you and to you and to me, this is what I want you to do. And if you do that, you'll find other people doing other things, we learn to play as a team, we work very well together.

[21 : 07] But Jesus is the one who tells us what to do. And then we go on to this probably the bit this passage is best known for. people. It was he who gave some to the apostles, some to the prophets, some to the evangelists, some to the pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ, Christ, may be built up.

All these different roles, each taking the turn to lead, and as a result, the body of Christ as a whole is built up. they go on to say, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up, until we all reach unity in the faith and knowledge of the Son of God, and become mature.

There's a beautiful picture here. You've got these different leadership roles that have varied in emphasis over the years. We don't tend to think so much these days are the apostles and prophets.

That's not quite as much as we should about evangelists, and we tend to think of the minister as being somebody who is pastor and teacher, who even blends those two together, rather than pastors and teachers, other pastors and teachers.

Same person has got to do them both. So once we pay lip service to this verse, in practice we think of the minister as, well, not brackets, apostle, brackets, prophets, evangelists, pastor, and teacher, that's the bit that happens.

[22 : 52] Perhaps with the challenges that the church has got on this facing at the moment, we need to think more about the evangelist, at least, because there is a need to work out.

But the point always made here is there is more than one form of the ministry. ministry. Don't think in terms of the ministry and the minister, because as Paul sees it, he's writing as an apostle and he recognizes that there are different key roles that need to work together for the church to be effective.

And the reason that they're given is to build everybody else up. The picture of the church isn't of a passive congregation watching the minister do the work. I pray for all, as we saw on the slide earlier.

But the minister, more as a trainer, encouraging and equipping and steering and leading and guiding everybody to play their part. Because there's what, 50 or 60 of us in the room today, 50 or 60 people can do 50 or 60 times more than one person at the front.

And Paul says this, every form of the ministry is given to equip everybody to mature and be active. To find their faith, to know the role, that's perhaps the evangelist role, to develop their faith and grow strong, to find out what your part is, what purpose God has for you, and the youth in their fruit as well.

[24 : 33] And with that equipping, as you play your part and the leaders play their part, we build everybody else in turn as well.

That is the Ephesian model of the church, that every member has a valuable part to play within the body of Christ, and together the whole church is built up.

But also, they learn from each other, and they individually are themselves built up, until at the end of the day we all become, through those different paths like Jesus.

And that is really exciting. And that's what it says, until we all reach unity in the faith, all our shortfalls are made up by the contributions of other people, until we reach unity in the faith and knowledge of the Son of God, and become all of us mature, attain the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

I start as me, you start as you, but together we encourage another, and we end up being like Jesus. What about that Haggai passage?

[25 : 43] Drop that within, partly because it's associated with this passage, but because Haggai was a prophet, and in his day he was there to encourage the Israelites to get on to the rebuilding of the temple.

This is after they returned from their exile in Babylon, they're rebuilding everything, and they've been neglecting the temple. And it's Haggai's role to say, hang on, don't forget the temple, we need that rebuilt as well.

He was called to be a prophet. The two most powerful characters in Israel at the time were Zerubbabel and Jehoshpat, the high priest and the governor.

And you then say, well the governor is the head of state, and the high priest is the head of the church. They are very much senior to Haggai, but because God has given him a part of play, when he speaks, even they listen.

It's not so very hierarchical as that. The message that God had given to Haggai was for everybody, and that included the guys at the very top as well.

[26 : 59] Even they needed a prophetic stir-up. Just because they were the top guys didn't mean that they had it all on you at all. They too, there were times when they too had to listen.

And it was Haggai who was given the message to tell them. So, coming back Ephesians chapter 4, it's not particularly about leaders and members, actors and audiences, but perhaps as trainers and trainees, each of us sharing what we know to encourage everyone else to learn and grow as well.

And as we do that together, we build ourselves up in the Lord and become mature and ultimately more like Jesus. Amen.