

Ephesians 4:1-16 Early Morning

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[0 : 0 0] Let's pray. Lord, open our hearts now to hear your word. Make us like those trees planted by streams of living water that bear good fruit in every season. We pray this all in Jesus' name. Amen.

You may be seated. So if you've been with us the past few weeks, you'll know that we're in a series where we're looking at what God does, God's works throughout the story of Scripture, and what that teaches us about him.

The past couple of weeks, we've looked at the God who saves, how God saves us in Christ, the God who fills, how he sends his Holy Spirit to not just dwell with us, but to dwell in us. And this week, we turn our attention to God's purpose in creating a new people for himself and actually building up that body to full maturity through the fruitful ministry of his people.

And our text is Ephesians 4, 1-16, which Lori's just read, and it would be very helpful if you follow along as we go. So here's the three big ideas that we'll be considering from this passage.

First, the unity of Christ's church. This is verses 1-6. Second, the ministries of Christ's people. This is verses 7-12.

[1 : 2 6] And third, the maturity of Christ's church. Verses 13-16. So unity, ministries, and maturity. And we'll start in verse 1 with the unity of Christ's church.

So Paul's eye, therefore, in verse 1 of this reading, is the great hinge or turning point in his letter to the Ephesians. In the first three chapters of this amazing epistle, Paul unfolds the eternal purposes of God.

These chapters are majestic in their beauty, cosmic in their scope, and profound in their depth and truth. In these chapters, Paul pulls back the curtain to show God's eternal will and eternal plan in sending his son Jesus to reconcile people to himself from every tribe, tongue, and nation, and to make for himself one new humanity, which we call the church.

In these chapters, Paul shows how those who are far off have been brought near. Those who are enemies have been reconciled. Those who are dead in their sins have been made alive with Christ and seated in heavenly places.

And he concludes in verse 3 by showing how this mystery, which was hidden in God for all ages, has now been unveiled for the world to see in Jesus Christ.

[2 : 5 5] So that's Ephesians 1-3, or at least my one-minute summary of it. And now in chapter 4, Paul turns from this sublime, cosmic theology to the outworking of God's saving purposes in the everyday life of his people.

And he begins by urging the church to become who they really are, to become who they already are in Christ. So look with me at verse 1.

Paul writes, And Paul urges them to live this way because they are one body.

I'm willing to admit that this next statement might sound a bit absurd, given how fractured and even broken the church appears in its history and in its present state.

But, nevertheless, in the sight of God, there is one church. Christ only has one body.

[4 : 18] This is what Paul is on about in verses 4-6. There are seven ones that Paul lists off. One body, one spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God, and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

So Paul is going out of his way to repeat over and over again that the unity of the church in Christ is something that's indisputable and indestructible.

The unity of the church in Christ is indisputable and indestructible. And then he exhorts us, the church, to make this unity, which is the reality of our life in Christ, visible in our life together.

And we don't primarily do this through programs or structures, although good church structures are a good thing. We do this as we serve one another in humility, in gentleness, in patience, in love.

In other words, we do this as our hearts and minds are conformed to the mind of Christ, who came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.

[5 : 30] And the ordering of this is really important, I think. The unity of the church is not something that we manufacture. It's something that we manifest.

It's not something that we bring about by the way that we live. It's something that's given to us, which we make visible in the way we live with one another. You can think of it like this.

Some of you know that my wife and I have four young children. Our older two kids, who are six and three and a half, sometimes fight.

I know, it's shocking. Let me be very clear to you, being a children's minister doesn't mean that you have all the answers to unlock the secrets of parenting. But especially when our oldest is having a bad day or is being mean to his younger sister, I'll often appeal to the bond that they share as siblings.

I'll say something to him like, you can't treat her that way because she's your sister. If you're a parent, you'll know the kind of power of this logic.

[6 : 42] It may not work, but you'll see the idea behind it. The point is that the way that our children treat one another doesn't define their relationship.

The relationship comes first. They are inextricably bound to each other. They are brother or sister, whether they like that or not on any given day.

Nothing can change this. And so it's actually imperative that they learn to love each other well. Because this relationship that they have is deep and given and will never change.

And it's the same with the church. We are one family in Christ. And so it's imperative that we learn to love one another as brothers and sisters. Because at the most fundamental level, that's what we are.

Now this brings us to our second point. The ministries of Christ's church. So in verse 7, Paul moves from the unity of the church to its diversity.

[7 : 46] Paul says that grace has been given to each one according to the measure or quantity of Christ's gift. And then in verses 8 to 10, Paul describes Christ almost as a conquering king.

He describes how Christ descended to the realm of death and darkness to claim its captives. And then ascended in glory to fill all things and to shower his people with gifts of grace.

You can think of it as like the plunder of his victory that he's pouring out to his people in generosity. Paul says these gifts are given to each one, but they're not the same gifts.

Gifts are given to each one, but they're not the same. God gives diverse gifts to his people for the building up of his body. And this is why we need one another. We considered this when we were looking at 1 Corinthians in quite a bit of detail.

We need one another precisely because we are not the same. And we're not gifted in the same ways. Now in verse 11, Paul highlights five gifts that Christ has given to the church.

[8 : 53] And these gifts are not skills or competencies or spiritual charisms. They are people. People given to the church by her Lord for a specific purpose.

So look with me again at verses 11 and 12. And he, that's Christ, gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers.

Why? To equip the saints. That's you. For what? The work of ministry. For building up the body of Christ.

And friends, this is amazing. God wants to build his church through the work of his people. All of his people. Christ has not given the church apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds and teachers so that they can do the work of ministry on their own.

These people are given to equip you, the church, for your faithful and fruitful work of building up the body of Christ. This is my job.

[10 : 04] This is Jordan's job. This, it is. But I mean, I mean, it has been David Short's job, at least a part of it.

It will be the job of our next rector who God calls. This should be the job of all clergy, all ministry leaders, all people who are gifted in these ways. I'll confess, it's easy for leaders in the church to become controlling and to resort to doing the work of ministry themselves, rather than empowering and equipping others to do that work.

And sometimes I think it's easy for churches to allow leaders to do this, either because it's more comfortable or because it's the only kind of leadership that they've ever known.

But this isn't how Christ designed his body to function. Christ builds his church through the work of his people, all of them, his saints, those who he has forgiven, sanctified, gifted, equipped and empowered for gospel ministry.

And I think in a year of transition at St. John's, in our hundredth year, as we look back to what God has done and we look forward to the future, it's important to keep this vision of the church at the forefront of our minds and hearts.

[11 : 24] Now finally, we come to the purpose of this unity and shared ministry, and that is maturity in Christ. Look at verse 13.

We are called to keep building up the body of Christ 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 are no longer children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine and human cunning.

I think this so beautifully describes God's fatherly love for his children. In the last 12 years of ministry, I've had the privilege of walking with parents, lots of parents and families in every age and stage of family life.

I think it's fair to say that most, if not all parents, long to see their children grow to maturity. This is why we teach our children.

This is why we love and discipline and pray for our children. We want to see them become strong, wise, gentle, and loving people. We want to see them become courageous and bold in the knowledge and love of God.

[12 : 45] We want them to be like those trees in the reading from Jeremiah, planted by streams of water, rooted and grounded in faith, hope, and love, so that they are immovable, that they would endure in faith in whatever season the Lord brings to them or the world brings to them.

And the thing I love about this passage is Paul saying, this is exactly what God is doing for each and every one of his children. As God builds his body through the work of all of his people, each of his children are moving step by step toward real maturity, which is the fullness of life in Christ.

And we know that God will accomplish this when we stand before him in glory. God will complete the work that he has begun in each one of us, will be perfected in the image of Christ.

But for now, we have the immense privilege of actually helping one another toward this glorious goal. As we become mature in Christ, we are not tossed to and fro by the changes and chances of this fleeting world.

At least we're tossed less and less. I hope that's the case. That we're tossed less and less. And instead, Paul says, speaking the truth to one another in love, we grow up into Christ as a healthy, connected body grows up from infancy to childhood to adolescence to adulthood.

[14 : 21] You may not think that your contribution to this church or to the church universal is particularly significant.

But if you think that, you're wrong. I'm happy to tell you that you're wrong. In the mystery of God's grace, your loving witness to a brother and sister in this place could become the sun and water that God uses to make the seed of the gospel grow and take root and flourish in their life.

And as one part of the body flourishes, all of us grow up toward the goal, which is the fullness of life in Christ. I'm so thankful for you all.

And I pray that the Lord will fill us with all humility, gentleness, love and grace, so that we can walk in a manner worthy of this high and rich calling.

Amen.