

Ephesians 4:1-6 - Practical Theology

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[0 : 00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

It's the heart of what we're going to be talking about together this morning. We're in Ephesians chapter 4. Ephesians 4, we've hit the midway point of the book of Ephesians.

And this morning we're actually at a hinge point in Ephesians. And thus far, as we've gone through, we'll do a little bit of review. What's happened in the first three chapters is that Paul has given us this rich theology where he's extolling the grandeur of God's love and grace.

He's explaining the life-transforming reality that through Jesus, those of us least deserving of being in God's presence are connected to God by faith.

Those of us labeled enemy are now seated at the king's table with name tags that say connected to Jesus. Paul has explained how all the power, all the work, all the glory for this are all God's.

[1 : 14] Because we're saved by grace alone, he says. And so he's talked about how being connected to God connects us also to each other. Jews and Gentiles in the same family, one temple being built up.

Because what's most important about them, remember, is not their personal religious pedigree. It's the fact that they're connected to Jesus. That's what's most important. So some of the richest theological teaching in all of the Scripture on the grace of God, on the process of salvation, on the nature of the church.

And then we hit chapter 4. Listen to what Paul's going to do as he makes all that great theology, practical theology. Ephesians 4 at verse 1.

Hear God's holy word. 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 were called 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.

[2 : 33] The grass withers, the flowers fade, but these words of our God will indeed stand forever. Pray with me. Father, as these are your words, and as what we need is to hear from you rather than from a man, we ask that you would speak.

Would you speak to our hearts clearly? Would you take eyes that are easily blind and allow them to see? Would you take hearts that wander after other things and give us a heart for you?

Renew our affections after Jesus. Would you do that by your Spirit? We ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. I still remember holding my first child in the hospital.

I remember being overwhelmed with joy, thinking things like, how in the world could I love a little baby like this so much? And also thinking, I think this changes everything.

I had no idea. Listen, I love my girls. And what I'm about to say does not change that. It's bad when you start this way, isn't it? And something bad is coming.

[3 : 47] This doesn't take away from that at all. But they've changed everything about my life. That's what happens, right? We love them so much and, not but, and it's often hard to remember life without them.

Christy and I have had this happen several times on a vacation or a date where it's just the two of us. And we try to think back only seven years for us. And what did we do in the evenings back then?

How did we make decisions? Like, what did we talk about when that happened? And what happened was that everything changed. The reality of becoming a parent changes not just your tax

filing, but everything, right?

Sleep schedules are altered. Your daily plan is changed. You suddenly follow school rezoning decisions very closely. Where are we going to be?

Where will the kids be? Eating out for dinner is so much more complicated. It was already hard enough to decide where you wanted to go, but now you're also asking, where are the kids going to be able to make it through the meal without being too disruptive so we can get in and get out?

[4 : 56] And what will they like to eat? You have to live all of life as a parent, right? Many of you have also experienced the life-altering reality of parenthood.

Some of you have felt or seen the impact of a lifestyle-altering diagnosis. The reality, for example, of having an allergy. That means not just a line on my medical form, but it means every grocery store and restaurant I go to, I need ingredient lists and details about what I can and can't eat. It means now nothing with peanut butter near me or no milk products. I don't know how some of you manage it, honestly, if I couldn't eat peanut butter. But you have to start thinking about everything you do in light of that.

Every moment you live as someone with the allergy or whatever it is that you're dealing with. Some of you have felt life being altered when you put on glasses for the first time and all of a sudden you saw everything differently.

You didn't realize you could actually see the person over there or the sign on the road was something you could read. And all of a sudden, there it is. Everything looks different. Or you're coming out of school and you got a job for the first time and you thought it was just going to be a job, but now your schedule is completely altered.

[6 : 13] Your relationships are different. Your flexibility seems to be gone overnight. All of life has changed. We all know what it means to have one particular reality that alters the rest of life.

To live the rest of life in light of one reality. That's what Paul is going to say in the second half of Ephesians. All this glorious theology, all these wonderful truths that I've been talking about actually alters all of life.

It's doctrine with a purpose. Look at verse 1. What does he say? I, therefore, a prisoner of the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you've been called.

Therefore. Therefore, he says a great word, therefore. Walk in a way, because of all of the things that you've heard, walk in a way that fits with that.

Live a life that fits with the reality of who you are and what God has done for you. In light of all the wonderful good news that I've told you about, here's what your life should look like.

[7 : 22] That word translated worthy is not do enough, be good enough, try hard enough, but it's telling us to live in a way that's fitting, that's appropriate, that's commensurate with the reality of who we are, with the calling we've received.

What fits with this? Live in a way that fits with what God has done, the salvation that you have been given by His grace. Interestingly, in the first three chapters of Ephesians, you know how many commands Paul gives to the church?

Three full chapters, 50-some verses, one command. In chapter 2, he tells them to remember some things. Remember. That's the only command they get for three chapters.

The commands are going to start coming fast and furious now. As you think through the next three chapters of Ephesians, Paul's going to say things like, Submit. Obey.

Love. Put on. Stand firm. Be kind. Forgive. Do not get drunk. Keep alert. Speak truth. And many, many more we're going to hit in the next few weeks.

[8 : 29] He's about to tell us what life should look like in light of our new reality. And this is not unusual for Paul, if you know his letters, right? This is how Paul often operates.

The truth he teaches always has practical implications. And likewise, he always roots his moral commands back in rich theology. In each letter, he tells both what is true, he does that first, and what to do next in light of that.

Romans, for example, has 11 chapters of intense theology, wonderful doctrines. And chapter 12, verse 1 says, Therefore, in view of God's mercy, offer your bodies as living sacrifices.

And there he goes telling us what it looks like. Galatians has four chapters on the doctrines of grace. And chapter 5, verse 1 says, Therefore, stand firm.

This is not just Paul. This is the biblical pattern, right? That we've seen over and over. God's grace comes first. Always. God's grace first.

[9 : 36] And you never leave it. You never outgrow it. You never pass beyond it. It's not moving away from the doctrine, away from God's grace onto something else.

God's grace motivates and empowers our behavior. That's biblical Christianity, because Jesus changes everything. The nature of his grace is that it meets us where we are, but it also doesn't leave us where we are, right?

It meets us there. We don't have to clean ourselves up, look better. God's grace comes to us, but it's a transformative grace. One that doesn't leave us where we are, but makes us new and changes all of life.

So it's vital that we keep our doctrine and our duty, our preaching and our practice connected to each other. Some of us love learning, right?

We love the new book, another class to take. I'm excited. I can't wait to do that. But it never makes much difference in how we live. We can deliver a great lecture on love, but we don't show it much.

[10 : 40] And that's no good. Others of us haven't read a book since we were in school, and we only read the ones that were required then. But we scorn doctrine.

We say it only matters how we live. Just be moral. Just love people. Isn't that really what matters? But the Bible says no. Be good for goodness sake falls short of biblical Christianity, because it skips the heart and the relationship with God that God so desires.

We've got to keep those two connected to each other. So that's what you're going to continue to hear as we go through the rest of Ephesians together. Paul is not leaving doctrine behind in order to get practical.

Paul is explaining what a life lived in light of the truths that he's been teaching us looks like. It's one of the reasons you hear us talk a lot at Southwood about experiencing and expressing grace.

That's our mission, right? Both experience God's grace and express it. That both of those are necessary together. We have to hear and receive and feast on God's grace for ourselves, and we have to share it with others.

[11 : 53] Either one without the other is anemic Christianity or no Christianity at all. That's why, for example, Sunday school and serving the poor are both important.

They don't work against each other. They work together. So here's where Paul's headed. He's going to walk into your workplace. He wants to sit at your dinner table.

He wants to talk about your relationships with the world around you. He wants to hone in on your speech, on your marriage, on your marriage, on our church life.

And one at a time, he's going to work his way through some of those things because Jesus changes everything, all of them. And when we say that in 21st century America, we get a little bit uncomfortable, don't we?

We've individualized and privatized our religion so much at every chance we get. So that what we think is normal is this, that religious people say, Jesus changes Sunday morning.

[12 : 58] The super spiritual, the really the most religious friends I have would say, Jesus changes Sunday and one hour of every other day of the week.

But the Bible says, Jesus changes everything, every moment of every day. He's not a side dish to fill out your life. The truth of Jesus is life altering.

Everything changes now because he's redeeming and renewing all of it, all of life. All of it is his. Just like becoming a parent, having an allergy, getting a job, everything changes now.

And I'll be honest with you and myself, there are a lot of days I'm really not sure I'm up for that. I'm really not that interested. In fact, I don't have the bandwidth for it. I feel like I just, I don't have the time or the energy to stop and think about how Jesus shows up here.

I just, there's some things that need to get done. I know some things that are really important to me and I just don't really care to stop and to put in the effort to think, what does Jesus have to say about my marriage or my money or my job?

[14 : 07] Anybody else ever felt that way? Am I the only one that sometimes feels like, man, there's just so much and I already know most of what I need. I don't really need to know what Jesus says about this.

Can I just do some things? But Jesus won't share his glory with my idols. Jesus won't allow me to talk like a Christian on Sunday and ignore him on Monday and avoid what he loves.

Jesus loves me too much to let me shipwreck myself by leaving him out of my life. He doesn't want me to miss what he created and redeemed me for.

He wants to see me flourish and honor him in all of life for his glory because it's also what's best for me. That's why he says, I urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you've been called.

I know what's best for you. I'm calling you to something. Walk in a way that fits with the great gifts I've given you, with the great things that I've done for you. So buckle up.

[15:13] Ephesians part two. Practical theology. Subtitle. Paul the theologian becomes Paul the meddler. Today, in the rest of our passage, he begins with one area that's already been a big theme in Ephesians.

It's unity. He wants to start by talking about unity. He's going to begin right here in the church and he's going to say, Jesus has already united you to each other.

Now live out the unity that already exists. That's what he's going to tell us in the rest of this passage. Look at verses four to six. He's reminding us of what's true.

There's one body, one spirit. You were called to the one hope that belongs to it. One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.

That's not what he hopes will happen one day. That's already true, right? He's reminding us of that. Seven times there's that one. What you share in common, what you all have because there's one of it is more important than your differences.

[16:25] You're in one family because having Jesus for your brother means you have the same father and are indwelt by the same spirit. It's what Jesus does when we're connected to him.

He makes us family. Remember how Paul told us he did that back in chapter two? Jesus, Jesus himself is our peace. He is the one who's made us both one, took the two and made them one. He did it by breaking down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility. He was creating in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace and reconciling both of us to God in one body through the cross where he killed the hostility.

He preached peace to those far off and those who were near and through him we both have access in one spirit to the Father. Jews and Gentiles, those who've known Jesus a long time and those who met him yesterday are one.

They have one father. They're in the same family, especially through the cross. That's what Jesus did for us, right? He made this true. So the call for the church here in our passage is not to fabricate togetherness out of nothing, to try to act like there's something we have in common, but rather to reflect what's already true.

[17:47] We're in the same family, like it or not. You may get to choose your friends, but family is family, right? We're already connected, but do we act like it?

Does the way we live reflect the biblical reality? That's the question for us. Paul says, I'll tell you what it looks like when you practically live out that Jesus has connected you to each other in the same family.

You're eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. You long for that. You work for that. You're eager.

Eager to maintain. Notice, not create it, but maintain what already is true, the unity of the Spirit. That sounds a lot like our last membership vow, doesn't it? We're promising to study the purity and the peace of the church, to work proactively and intently toward her unity.

We're eager, not just don't sow discord, although that's certainly important, but positively, we're supposed to be working towards peace, longing to see it come. in our relationships.

[18:57] How? How? What's that going to look like? With all humility and gentleness. Verse 2. With all humility and gentleness.

That only makes sense when your salvation is all of grace. Be humble. Think less of yourself because you make much of Jesus.

When the focus of your heart is on what He had to do to rescue someone like you from yourself, you begin to be humbled. You do begin to think of yourself less and can therefore be gentle rather than harsh with others.

Think about the connection there. Who is it that you speak harshly about? Be honest with yourself. When you're by yourself, when they're not around and you let your hair down and you say what you really feel, who gets the harsh criticism?

Think of that person. Think of the words you say. Isn't it because, at least in the area that you're criticizing them, you feel superior?

[20 : 04] More worthy, perhaps. You wouldn't say it, but honestly, more holy. Can you believe what she said about her kids, about her friends, about her church?

Can you believe what they decided about Sunday school, about schooling their kids, about VBS?
Can you believe?

Can you believe implies you can't believe it because you're better than they are. You would never do, think, say such a thing.

What brother or sister are you treating harshly because you've forgotten you're no better than he is? Paul reminds us that in this regard, walking in a manner worthy of the calling we've received involves deep humility, knowing who we really are.

You're not the one who figured it out first, right? You were dead and he made you alive. That's how the call worked. That calling we received came that way to a dead person that God made alive.

[21 : 15] The good works you've done were planned ahead of time by him for you to walk in them. All the glory goes to him, so don't think you're better than your brother or sister. Jesus thought they were valuable enough to die for.

Have you decided they're worth less than you? So making every effort to live out our unity looks like humility and gentleness.

And then Paul says it looks like patience and love, the end of verse 2. The idea behind the word for patience here has a long-term perspective that one would be long-suffering.

I love how Pastor Sinclair Ferguson says it. He says, this is taking a long-term view, especially when things go wrong. That's really what it has in mind.

It assumes disappointment, offense, conflict, but it urges us to bear with one another, to stay in relationship rather than bail, to suffer hurt but respond with blessing time and again.

[22 : 23] And that requires a long-term perspective, doesn't it? It doesn't make sense in the moment. It requires a long-term perspective because when I'm acting ugly to you, you have to believe that Jesus is making me beautiful or else you're done with me.

In the moment, I'm ugly and you see it and you know it. You have to believe Jesus is making me beautiful because when I hurt you, you have to actually believe that Jesus is going to heal all that hurt rather than it feeling better to hurt back in the moment.

A longer-term perspective. Because when I continue to be that kind of person you can't stand, you have to believe that I'm more family that you're stuck with forever than a friend you can drop at no cost to yourself.

Have you ever had that conversation with your kids? If you've got more than one kid, you may have had this conversation. I, of course, haven't, but you've said to them something like, hey, y'all are sisters.

Don't treat your sister that way. You shouldn't speak that way to anybody, but especially not your sister. She'll be your sister forever. I mean, you may move and your friends may move or you may develop a new group of friends, but she'll always be your sister.

[23 : 53] Right? That relationship is valuable. It's lasting. That's the long-term kind of view in all of our relationships with each other that being patient and bearing with one another in love calls for.

In Christ, these really are your brothers and sisters. You really will be with them long-term. And when I say that already, all the objections in your head are starting.

Oh, yeah, that's sweet and nice, but biological family is different from spiritual family. Don't make it seem. I know those objections because I've heard them and because I've thought them.

But I say to you, the biblical, spiritual reality is more true and longer lasting than the other. You have one Savior.

And so you have one Father. And it really does matter that they're your brothers and sisters forever. And that's really hard for us to think about in a Bible Belt culture where there's churches everywhere and our culture says church is something you approach as a consumer commodity.

[25 : 02] You go look down the menu of churches in your town and find the one that is most, where the people there are most like you and it best serves your needs.

That's what church is, our culture says. Very rarely do you hear people talking about wanting church to be a place where you find hard people to love. When you hear that, it's not a compliment. Usually it's a complaint, right? That's what it means when we say it now. Oh, man, I don't fit with them. They're hard. They're difficult. Who are you unwilling to admit to yourself as family forever?

Here's what we do. Instead of being eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit, we harbor bitterness rather than forgive, don't we? God says, same family.

Don't live at odds with someone I've connected you to. Bear with them when they fail. Be humble because you'll fail next. Instead of being eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit, we care only about our own church.

[26 : 13] Listen, this passage isn't anti-denominations. That's not what it's saying. It doesn't say we'll all think and act the same about every issue. But it does say same family to other Presbyterians, to Baptists, to Methodists, to non-denominationalists, to Pentecostals.

Do you remember what's most important Paul says? Are you able to major on the majors so that you can love and work and cheer for others who go to another church?

And then perhaps the epidemic problem in my generation in America. Instead of being eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit, we're not living at odds with other Christians.

Why? Because we're not living with other Christians at all. Because that's become the new thing, right? I'm not leaving Jesus. The institutional church, on the other hand, is quite another matter. We disconnect in a split second rather than doing the hard work to stay engaged. And that can happen at any age, but those of us who are younger are really, really good at it. We usually think we know better.

[27 : 25] And those of us in the church need to begin by admitting that they have some really valid concerns. They often offer really true critiques, don't they? They look at the church and they love Jesus and many churches are full of people who've lost their passion for Jesus if they ever had it.

Who've lost the priority of gospel ministry and seem content just to make themselves comfortable and peaceful. So I see why the Jesus-loving individualist wants out. Why would I sit in there with them?

And to be honest, God doesn't want the church to stay stuck there either. He calls us to repent and regain the love we had at first, right? But, unity does demand that we not give up on the church even at her worst.

Why? Because God hasn't. God says to those in the church, same family, even the ones that don't seem to get it, and the church may be ugly at times, but she's Jesus' bride.

When we disengage because of our perhaps accurate critiques of the church, we too miss the biblical vision of humble and gentle, patient and loving community of what it really means to be family.

[28 : 50] But you might be thinking, I'd never choose to be in a small group with them. They're so awkward. And how could I ever trust her again after the way she betrayed me? Theologian D.A. Carson says this about the church.

He says, ideally, notice that word, ideally. This is the way it should be. The church is made up of natural enemies. What binds us together is not common education, race, income levels, politics, nationalities, accents, jobs.

Christians come together because they've all been loved by Jesus himself. They're a band of natural enemies who love one another for Jesus' sake.

Ideally, that's what the church is. That's the way it's supposed to be. That's why Jesus called Jews and Gentiles together into his church, right? That wasn't an accident. He wasn't forced to.

Why did he make it that way? Why did he bring together a band of natural enemies? Because how else could they display the love of God? How else could they show the world the love of a God who sacrificed himself for his natural enemies?

[30 : 02] He wanted to be in relationship with them enough that he sent his son to the cross for people he should, by all regards, have had nothing to do with. And so he sets us up in the church and designs the church to be a place where we find people we'd otherwise have nothing to do with.

And he says, be eager to be connected to them. Work hard on it. Be patient. Bear up with one another when you rub against each other the wrong way.

The church is the place where we have the chance to be patient as God has been patient with us. To love and bear with one another in love as he has stuck with us and continued to love us.

It shouldn't surprise us when that is needed to stay connected to each other in the church. That's not shocking. That's the way he designed it. It's hard.

It's needed that we bear with each other. It's needed that we suffer long, that we're humble and gentle. And it's not easy. But it's worth it.

[31 : 07] Unity may not sound real exciting to you. I just want to go hear about unity today. That'd be good. That applies to my life. Unity. You'd probably rather hear something on marriage or the armor of God and we're getting there.

Those are coming. But while it may not seem real important to us, it was at the top of Jesus' list for his followers, wasn't it? When Jesus prayed, what did he want for those who would believe in him? He came before the Father pouring out his heart in the garden in John 17. Do you remember it? He prays for them that they may all be one. It gets close to using one as many times as Ephesians 4, but not quite.

Just as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us. Why? Why does he want us to be one? So that the world may believe that you have sent me.

The glory you've given me, I've given to them. That they may be one even as we are one. I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one.

[32 : 12] Why? So that the world may know that you sent me and that you loved them even as you loved me. Oneness, unity, so that the world will believe Jesus is God and that he loves them.

Don't you want them to know that? Don't you want the people you care about to know Jesus is God and he loves them? The one thing we're called to so that people will see and believe that a holy God loves sinful, hostile people, that that would be the truest story of all is loving each other like that.

Church, Jesus has connected you to each other. He's picked your family. Now live out the unity that already exists.

By this, all men will know that you're my disciples. If you formally stay together in one denomination, no. If your church never splits, no.

If you always look, sing, pray, and minister exactly the same way, no. If in all the diversity, all the mess, and all the brokenness, you still love one another.

[33 : 40] Father, forgive us. We don't long for that as much as we long for getting what we want, for having things our way.