

Character to Serve

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Date: 02 November 2019

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[0 : 0 0] everyone. Great to be in church with you today. You have already blessed me with your singing. It was phenomenal to be at the front this morning and to hear you sing those songs with a great deal of gusto and obviously with a great deal of connection in terms of what we're seeking to do as a church. So thank you for that, for serving me and serving each other in that way. Hopefully you've got to serve an outline in front of you. It's got some Bible passages in front of it.

If you haven't got that, you can also get on the St. Paul's app or stick your hand up and someone will get one to you. The great English theologian and pastor John Stott captured the urgent need for unity in diversity for the local church in his commentary on the book of Ephesians, which I've been reading in process of preparing these messages through Ephesians.

He wrote, It is simply impossible with any shred of Christian integrity to go on proclaiming that Jesus, by his cross, has abolished the old divisions and created a single new humanity of love, while at the same time we are contradicting our message by tolerating social, racial, or other barriers within the church fellowship. We need to get the failures of the church on our conscience to feel the offense to Christ, to weep over the credibility gap between the church's talk and the church's walk, to repent of our readiness to excuse and even condone our failures, and to determine to do something about it. I wonder if anything is more urgent today for the honor of Christ and for the spread of the gospel than that the church should be and should be seen to be what by God's purpose and Christ's achievement it already is. A single new humanity, a model of human community, a family of reconciled brothers and sisters who love their father and love each other, the evident dwelling place of God by his spirit. Only then will the world believe in Christ as peacemaker. Only then will God receive the glory due his name. I just read that and just want to applaud it. Absolutely, fundamentally true and something that we are deliberately working towards as a church here at St. Paul's. In the next few weeks, we're looking at Ephesians 4, 1 to 16.

To discover the means that God uses to maintain the unity of such a diverse bunch of people. If you've just joined us today, we are in our annual vision series. We're in Ephesians because this letter is about the church, it's about who the church is. And we're also looking at the year ahead and aligning ourselves to what God has in store for us next as we plan to move forward in our life together in this setting. So first of all, as we looked at last week on your service outline, gospel-centered unity is who God has made us to be. Over the last two weeks, we've seen that God, the creator, the God of the Bible, the creator of all things, has overwhelmed us by his grace and his mercy by giving us every spiritual blessing in the Lord Jesus Christ. That is, God has held no blessing back from us at all. He has lavished his grace on us in Jesus. We have been redeemed, we've been adopted, we've been given eternal life through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We've seen again and again the heart of the Christian message which separates Christianity from every other religion in the world and it's the gospel. It's on the back of your service sheet and it is about everything that God has achieved for you without a single bit of effort on your behalf. And the effect of the gospel is it so breaks us down that it also breaks down the barriers of hostility that we have built up between us and

God and us and other people. The pride that causes humanity to reject God and to live independent of him has been dealt with as the son of God himself humbled himself, became one of us, takes God's judgment for our sin upon himself. And because of his work of humility on our behalf, we have been liberated from selfishness and the ego to live, to praise and to serve. We've been set free to be who God has called us to be, who God made us to be in the first place. And the gospel also breaks down the deep divisions within humanity. In the gospel, Jesus has broken down the walls of hostility and he's building up a new eternal and united family of love and peace. It's called the church in Ephesians chapter 3.

[5 : 55] People with centuries of hatred have now been united in Jesus because they're making Jesus the main thing. They can do it because they've been given a much more significant identity in Jesus. In Jesus, we receive the praise and the affirmation of the praiseworthy. No higher praise can you get than the praise of the praiseworthy. This changes your life. Our new identity as God's much loved children means it changes us from the inside out because it fills us up on the inside, gives us everything that we want for in life.

And because of the amazing theological realities of chapters 1 through to 3, Paul urges the Ephesians in chapter 4 at the very beginning and us to live a life worthy of the calling that you have received.

He's calling us to be who we've been saved to be. The word worthy in verse 1 is translated from the word *axios* in the original New Testament language. This is the word from which we get our English word *axiom*, which means to be of equal weight. Paul is saying we should live lives equal to the great blessings described in chapters 1 to 3. How are we to live lives worthy of having every spiritual blessing in the gospel of the Lord Jesus? Well, the remainder of Ephesians unpacks that for us as we go through. But the immediate charge in chapter 4 verses 1 to 16 is to live lives worthy of our calling by living in unity as God's new family. See in verse 3, make every effort to keep the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace. 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, Paul has already been emphasizing our unity in this letter. In chapter 2, he uses the language of household household to describe it, which is the image of family. It's family language in the New Testament.

He also uses the image of a building to stress our unity, our togetherness, our oneness. We're cemented together like blocks. Now, he takes us a step further and uses the image of the body to emphasize our unity. We are one body. And it's an image of intimate connection.

[9 : 32] There are very few certainties in life. I mean, people say death and taxes are a certainty. There's another certainty that I generally operate with day by day, was when I went to bed last night, I didn't have the expectation that when I woke up in the morning, my hand wasn't going to be there.

I just assumed when I went to bed at night, my hand was going to be there in the morning that it hadn't just decided, I'm off to get my nails done.

And it just left the body. It just doesn't do that. Intimately connected. Your body is not sewn together. It's not stapled together. It grows together.

And that's what happens when you have new life in Christ. It's an image of intimate connection. And he uses the same image in other parts of the New Testament, like 1 Corinthians.

Notice Paul calls us here to keep the unity that we have. He's saying that the unity that we have together isn't something that we can attain.

[10 : 49] It's not something that we gain. We only keep it. We are called into unity. And Paul alludes to this when he says, You were called to one hope when you were called.

What he's saying is that our experience of new life in Jesus is what creates the unity that we have to keep. There is only one hope for humanity.

There's one hope and the only hope is salvation in Jesus. New life in him. Acts 4 says there is no other name by which people can be saved than the name of Jesus.

But our unity is also grounded in the nature of God himself. This is about who God is in and of his essence. Our God who made us in his image is himself unified.

Three persons of the Godhead but operating as one in total perfect unity. The very nature of their operation is mutual love relationships.

[12 : 02] Each member of the Godhead exists for the other members of the Godhead serving the other. Technical term is perichoresis.

Which means mutual indwelling. Mutual love sacrifice and service for the other. The Holy Trinity is mentioned here.

Spirit verse 4. Lord verse 5. God the Father verse 6. Each of the seven great unities mentioned in verses 4 to 6 is connected to one of the persons of the Trinity.

After all is said and done, in all of our diversity, in all of our difference, we have the same Father being rescued by the same Son and indwelled by the same Spirit.

We are his family. We are his temple. We are his body. Our unity is eternal. It is unbreakable because we have been united with the eternal and the unbreakable.

[13 : 13] And even though our unity is a gift, verse 3 calls us to be diligent in working every effort to keep it. Make every effort means to spare no effort.

It is a matter for urgent, diligent and continuous activity. Unity is not something that gets worked out through committees and task force.

Chapter 4 reveals two means that God works in us so that we keep the unity that we have been given. The rest of the New Testament, I want to use the rest of the New Testament to back up some of this over the next couple of weeks.

Those two things are spiritual fruit and spiritual gifts. As members of God's family, he's in the process of changing who we are and what we do so that it more reflects his family values.

So over the next three weeks, I want to talk about being a community that serves, serves God, serves each other, serves the world. And it's essential, however, that I begin where God begins.

[14 : 35] The fruit of the Spirit. Not the gifts. We want to talk about gifts. We want to talk about my talents, my abilities, what I can bring to the table. God doesn't start there.

He starts with your character. He starts with who you are. Galatians 5, it's on your service sheet. Galatians 5 is a list of the fruit. The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Notice the word fruit is singular in its original language, which means there is one fruit, one fruit that has seven components to it.

Every Christian should have the fruit of the Spirit as they're outlined in Galatians 5 verses 22 to 23.

Every single one of the components. Some of us are naturally default to being more patient than others, but not necessarily courageous.

[15 : 44] Every Christian must be balanced in all the fruit. There's one fruit with seven different components. You're meant to be growing in all of them, collectively. But no Christian, apart from Jesus, if you want to call him a Christian, has all the gifts of the Spirit.

We must all have all fruit, but we don't all have all gifts. Spiritual fruit is something we are, but a spiritual gift is something we do.

That's why fruit has supremacy over gifts in the New Testament. And it's why we need to talk about it first. But that's not what our culture wants to do.

Our culture values gifts, talents, abilities, as unfortunately the church often does. We often get blamed by gifts and talents and abilities. It is perilous to honor gifts over godly character, or for gifts to be mistaken for godly character.

The Bible indicates it's possible to... So hear this. Very important. The Bible indicates it is possible to touch lives through gifts, while your own spiritual growth is in a downward spiral.

[17 : 14] In fact, there have been unregenerated people, like Judas Iscariot and those mentioned in Matthew 7, verses 22 and 23, who come into the church, and whose natural talents God used to convert and to build up, but who later showed that they were never really Christian, according to 1 John 2, verse 19.

1 Corinthians 13. I've got that in front of you as well. We see a clear example of the need for Christian character over Christian giftedness. Church of Corinth. We've just spent a bit of time in Corinthians, but the Church of Corinth in 1 Corinthians was a growing congregation, blessed with abundant gifts in tongues, verse 1, prophecy, verse 2, teaching generosity and social concern, in verse 3, and yet the chapter also reveals all the ways in which this Corinthian church was ungodly.

They were impatient and proud, verse 4, envious, critical, rude, jealous, self-absorbed, egotistical, and Paul went on to so far as to say that it was possible to have all of these gifts in a dynamic church and yet, in his words, to be nothing.

Most Bible commentators agree that Paul is saying it is possible to do miracles by the power of God and have revelations and not even to be a Christian.

To have no character at all. No inward work of the Spirit at all. In other words, it's possible for you to do ministry through the power of God without any grace in your heart or without knowing, as verse 8 says, his true love that never fails.

[19 : 14] That's why Jesus said, by their fruit, you will know his disciples rather than by their gifts.

By their fruit, you will know his disciples. Love, joy, peace, humility cannot grow and flourish when our hearts are far from God.

But teaching, evangelism, counselling, leading, can. So friends, the danger is that we look to our ministry activity as evidence that God is with us or as a way to earn God's favour.

If, however, we are remembering the gospel, if we're rejoicing in having received every spiritual blessing in Jesus, then our ministry will be a sacrifice of thanksgiving.

And the result will be acts done in love, humility, patience and tenderness. If our hearts are not solely centred in the saving work of Jesus and if we're not speaking the gospel into our hearts regularly, we will, by default, seek to control God, to attract his favour with, and I'll use the language of 1 Corinthians 13, attract his favour with our clanging symbols of service, noted by the telltale signs of impatience, irritability, pride, hurt feelings, generosity, jealousy, sorry, not generosity, lack of generosity, jealousy, and boasting.

[21 : 10] We will identify with our ministry and we will make our ministry an extension of ourselves. We will be driven, scared, we'll either be too timid or too brash, and the end result will be disunity and fracturing of the family.

We will shut down anyone who attempts to interfere with my ministry. We will shut down anyone who tries to take a little bit away from me. Our character is of supreme importance.

Scottish minister Robert Murray Mishane was a remarkably gifted man, remarkably gifted man, especially as a preacher of God's word.

There's hardly anyone, apart from probably John Knox, who's had as much of an impact on the Church of Scotland historically than Robert Murray Mishane, and he was dead by the time he was 31.

Remarkably gifted. He's quoted as saying, the greatest need of my people is my personal holiness.

[22 : 32] holiness. That is his character in Christ. Before his death in 1841, Mishane preached his last sermon on Isaiah chapter 60 verse 1.

Arise, Shane, for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee. He preached the sermon, went home to bed with a fever, he was feeling unwell, and he died a week later.

After his death, a letter was found in his bedroom beside his bed. Part of it, that letter which read this, I hope you will pardon a stranger for addressing to you in such few lines.

I heard you preach last Sunday evening, and it pleased God to bless that sermon to my soul. It was not so much what you said as your manner of speaking that struck me.

I saw in you a beauty of holiness that I never saw before. You also said something in your prayer that struck me very much.

[23 : 49] It was this. thou knowest that we love thee. Oh, sir, what would I give that I could say to my blessed saviour, thou knowest that I love thee.

His character shone even more than his remarkable gifting. He unity. The unity which Paul urges upon us is maintained as we get reshaped into the character of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Before he gets to any gifts, he says this in verse 2, be completely humble and gentle, being patient, bearing one other in love.

The key here is humility. Humility will lead to gentleness and patience and forbearing with each other in love. In the ancient Greco-Roman world, when Paul first wrote this letter, humility was despised.

It was what was regarded as a slave-like quality. What was admired was the mega-souled man or the great-souled man, the self-made man who was complete, self-sufficient.

[25 : 30] That's what was admired as much as power and influence is admired today. pride is the opposite of humility.

Pride not only appears to be the earliest of sin, but it's also the core of all sin. Maybe that's why God hates the sin of pride so much. Proverbs 8 verse 13 quotes God as saying, to fear the Lord is to hate evil.

I hate pride and arrogance. Of course he hates all sin, but pride seems to be particularly offensive to him.

Why does God hate pride so much? It's because pride is when sinful human beings aspire to the status and the position of God and refuse to acknowledge dependence upon God.

Pride is the essence of sin, it's the foundation of it. Pride takes many forms but it all has it all directed towards one end. self glorification, the self made person.

[26 : 42] Pride is so dangerous for a church. Pride works to undermine the unity of a church. It elevates individual, it elevates groups, cultural groups above others. Pride brings down leaders.

Spiritual pride sets us up against the world as well. and the truth which radiates from verse 2 is that Christian unity doesn't begin with external structures but it begins with attitudes of the heart.

Humility and mildness and patience and loving tolerance of one another. power. And a character of humility means that we will hold any gifting that we have received as simply that.

It's a gift. It's a gift. Any ability that we have, any talent that we have, anything that we have, any name that we have for ourselves, it is a gift.

gift. They are gifts from God for his glory and for the good of others. Our gifting will not be about serving our ego, our need for approval, or the building up of positions of power and influence.

[28 : 04] Pride and self-promoting arrogance sow seeds of disunity but a humble, gentle person is like a cool breeze on a hot day.

They're a delight. Charles Simeon, the great preacher of King's College and Holy Trinity Cambridge, was one humble man who over a long course of time, God beat him into humility.

He was highly influential very successful in ministry. However, in 1801, Simeon's health broke down.

Sorry, 1808, his health broke down and he had to spend about eight months recuperating on the Isle of White. His assistant stepped into the gap to preach as many as five times on a Sunday in Holy Trinity and another church in stable foot.

The assistant surprised himself and as it turns out, the congregations as well, by developing a preaching ability almost equal and some would say better than Simeon's.

[29 : 26] someone reported to Simeon while he's on the Isle of White, recuperating from, oh, by the way, no need to rush back, your assistant's doing a fantastic job.

Totally free from any suggestion of pride or professional jealousy, Simeon greatly rejoiced. He quoted this scripture, Peter, he must increase, but I must decrease.

And he told a friend, ah, now I see why I have been laid aside with this illness for this time and I bless God for it.

Some of you may still be seething, still holding on to issues because you've been laid aside by somebody.

So how did Simeon get to the position where he had grown in humility to the point where he was rejoicing in the gifting of others in such a way that even that gifting was surpassing his own?

[30 : 45] After Simeon had been a Christian for 40 years, he wrote this. Simeon spent 40 years of applying the good news of the gospel to his life in such a way that it humbled him.

He never let go of the fact that everything was a gift. Never let go of the fact that he was sinful. He's quoted as saying, I spend my days mining, mining the depths of my sinfulness and at the same time clutching to the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

The deeper I go in understanding my sin, the greater I see his glory and grace to me. He labored, labored to know the God in the Bible and also to know his true vileness at the same time.

And this clicked him close to God through the many, many difficult seasons of life and ministry that he faced. But that's not all.

He didn't labor by himself. As I said last week, we cannot know an individual by ourselves. We cannot even know ourselves by ourselves. One of the remarkable things about Simeon was that he could take a rebuke and he grew from it.

[32 : 39] I could go on and on and on about it. But back in 2009, I wrote a core value for us to address this issue.

If there is one thing that I'd love us at St. Paul's to be known for, it would be this, humble authenticity. I'll read it to you.

We seek our words and actions to be what we believe and teach from God's word. We desire for our lives, ministries, and church policies to give explicit evidence that we treasure Jesus Christ above everything else.

We will pursue loving honesty in all our communication. We will seek to serve others and consider them more important than ourselves. In disagreements, we'll assume the best of others and ask clarifying questions before making judgments.

When we have offended another, we will be quick to confess error and sin. We will pursue reconciliation and we will work towards change. We will not tolerate contention.

[33 : 44] We value unity in Christ and so we work together as one team to fulfill our mission. We are committed to being rigorously honest, financially accountable, and above approach in all of our dealings.

I could go on and on and unpack that for you, but I've got a gift instead. I wrote this in 2010, humble authenticity, over a series of posts for a church bulletin that we had at the time.

I wanted to unpack what it might look for us to shape our corporate life together. It's not the final word on humility. What is the final word on humility? And it would be somewhat ironic if I actually wrote the final word on humility.

But I gave a go at it anyway. I was thoroughly convinced then, I am even more thoroughly convinced now, if it's possibly more thoroughly convinced, that there is no effective service, there is no effective mission without the cultivation of humility in the heart and the weakening of pride in our life.

It is the very foundation before we move on to any talk about giftings. character comes first. May we all, like the Lord Jesus, descend into greatness, laid aside, his glory became one of us, and now been ascended to the highest heights that every name will bow to him and confess him.

[35 : 21] The last word on this goes to God himself. This is for all of us who think that through our good works we can earn God's attention, his gaze.

The last word goes to God himself, Isaiah 66 verse 2. This is the one I esteem. This is what draws my attention. This is the one I notice.

He who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word.