

## **“PRESERVING THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH”** **(Ephesians 4:1-3)**

One of the scientific wonders of the human body was discovered in the 1870s when a Scottish medical missionary named Henry Faulds first observed the unique patterns of human fingerprints. Faulds put his observations to use when his hospital was broken into, and police arrested a member of staff whom Faulds believed to be innocent. To help exonerate him Faulds took impressions of his fingerprints and compared them to the ones he had found at the crime scene, and they were different. This convinced police that the man was innocent and he was released.

What Faulds discovered is that no two fingerprints on the face of the earth are exactly alike – we each have our own unique stamp on this world. It’s equally amazing to think that no two people on earth are exactly alike in personality and temperament. There’s no one in the world exactly like you – you’re one of a kind. Today you can tailor almost everything around your unique preferences – you can go to Subway and build a sandwich just the way you want it – you can go to a music site online such as Pandora and build your own radio station, and my particular choice of songs is going to look different than yours and everyone else’s. No one else is like you.

And then you get married, and you suddenly you bring two different people together. One likes the thermostat set cooler and one likes it warmer – one is a night owl, the other a morning person. There are differences, and yet you find a way to accept one another’s differences and coexist. The fun really begins when you bring new little fingerprints into the family, each with their own likes and dislikes and preferences. Wherever you go – to work or school or hanging out with friends, you encounter people different than you.

And church is no different. No one in church is quite like you. And yet Jesus, on the night before He went to the cross prayed for His disciples, “Father, may they be one... may they be brought to complete unity so that the world will know that you sent me.” I can imagine Peter looking over at Andrew. “Andrew and I one? We’re as different as night and day. I say cast the net over on the right side and he says left.” James peeks over at Bartholomew, “I love him as a brother, but he can drive me nuts sometimes with his perfectionism. I’ll love him, but I just hope I don’t get paired with him when we go out two by two.”

In the midst of our diversity, the Lord wants us to be one – to be unified. As we come to our study in Ephesians this morning, we’re going to see how we can be unified as a church despite our differences. We’ve made it through the first three chapters, and as we begin chapter four, we come to a major transition.

Chapters 1-3 describes our *position* in Christ – who we are, and chapters 4-6 talk about our *practice* in Christ – and how we are to live in light of who we are. The first three chapters tell us *what we believe*; the last three chapters tell us *how we ought to behave*. The first three chapters deal with *doctrine*; the last three chapters deal with our *duty*. Since we have been lavished with every spiritual blessing in Christ, it should have a profound effect on how we live.

The first thing our new position in Christ should affect, Paul says, is our unity with fellow believers. In chapter 3 Paul described the mystery – something that was hidden in past ages but now revealed – the mystery that through Christ’s death God brings everyone who believes – both Jews and Gentiles – together to form the church.

As we've seen, the church is not a building where people meet, but it's the people who meet in the building. The word "church" comes from the Greek word *ekklesia* which means "a called-out assembly or congregation" made up of redeemed people God has called out of the world to be set apart to Him. God takes people from every walk of life, every background, every race and language and unites them into the church.

This was nothing short of miraculous in the first century as Jews and Gentiles – who for centuries were separated culturally and spiritually – came together as one. Their unity was not easy, and tensions occasionally flared up, but their common faith in Christ outweighed any differences they had.

As Paul begins to lay out the practical outworking of our new position in Christ in chapter 4, it's no surprise that he first talks about unity, and he stays on the theme of unity through the first 16 verses. Today we'll look at verses 1-3, and here's what Paul writes... "As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. 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."

The key phrase in these verses is "keep the unity of the Spirit." Our unity as believers is not something we manufacture or create – it's something we already have through our mutual faith in Christ. Our job, our responsibility is to preserve it. In these verses we see three ways we can preserve unity as a church.

Number one, **we preserve unity by living up to our calling.** Paul says, "As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received." Paul once again refers to himself as a prisoner for the Lord. As he writes his letter to the Ephesian church, he is under house arrest in Rome, and the reason he's a prisoner is because obeyed God's call to take the gospel to the Gentiles. He was arrested because opponents of the gospel trumped up false charges to silence him, but Paul kept talking and kept writing – he was willing to suffer so that Gentiles can hear the good news of Jesus – and his willingness to suffer gives him credibility for what he says next.

"I urge you," he writes, "to live a life worthy of the calling you have received." By "calling" Paul means our calling by God to be saved and set apart for His purposes. God is the one who initiates our salvation, and offers salvation to everyone who will come to Him by faith. Theologians refer to this God's "general call" – whosoever will may come. Not everyone will, but there's also a "special call" in which He works in the hearts of those who will be saved and enables them to respond. Once saved, God calls us to live the rest of our lives for Him, set apart for His plan and purpose.

Paul urges us to live a life worthy of the calling we've received. The Greek word for "live" is *peripateo* which means "walk." Walking is a great way to describe the Christian life – it's a journey in which we put one foot in front of the other over a long course of time, walking in rhythm with God. As Galatians 5:25 says, "Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit." To keep in step with the Spirit means that you're not running ahead of the Spirit in your own power and you're not lagging behind, giving into sin. Your steps are in beat, and are synchronized, with the Holy Spirit, consistently moving forward in our faith

The word “walk” is also a figurative way of describing our behavior and conduct – how we live our lives as God’s children in this world. Paul prays that we would walk “in a manner worthy of our calling.” The word “worthy” in the Greek is the word *axios*, from which we get the word “axiom” or “axiomatic.” An axiom is a self-evident truth. Paul is saying that we should live lives that are obvious and befitting of someone who is called a child of God.

The word axiom was also used of weights that are balanced on a scale. On one side of the scale is our calling, and the other side is our conduct. Our conduct should match, or be in proportion to, our calling. Our conduct should rise up to the level and standard to which we have been called. For example, a policeman – as someone who represents the law – is expected to live up to the law. If a policeman is caught taking bribes, they give their profession a bad name. Queen Elizabeth, who died this week, was expected to act and dress and carry herself in a way that was befitting of a queen. As a pastor I’m expected to practice what I preach and set an example.

As Christians we have been blessed with a privileged position – we’ve been called out of sin, made a child of God, and blessed with every spiritual blessing. Therefore, our conduct and behavior should live up to our high and lofty calling. This is not only true for us as individual Christians, but as a church – as God’s called-out assembly we represent Him, and the way we live should reflect well on the one who called us.

The second thing we can do to preserve unity is to **practice the qualities that foster unity**. In verse two Paul says, “Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.” Here Paul presents four basic virtues that every church member should practice – virtues that foster unity. He begins with the virtue of **humility**. The biblical word for “humility” means to “think of yourself with lowliness.” You don’t see a lot of self-help books on thinking of yourself with lowliness, and the Greek language did not even have a word for humility before Jesus came – it’s a uniquely Christian word. Humility is thinking correctly about yourself. Romans 12:3 says, “Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment.”

Thinking of yourself with lowliness doesn’t mean that you view yourself as worthless and insignificant – the Bible tells us that we’re made in the image of God, loved and valued by Him. But in our fallen nature, we are selfish and think the world revolves around us. We love to take selfie pictures of ourselves doing something wonderful and post them online. And when someone posts a group photo that you’re in, who’s the first person you look at? You look at yourself – how does my hair look, am I smiling, do I look like I’ve gained weight? That’s human nature.

C.S. Lewis said that humility is not thinking less of ourselves, but thinking of ourselves less. Humility is recognizing that I am not the center of the universe, God is. Life is not about me, it’s about God. When we come to faith in Christ, we die to ourselves in order to live for Him.

The opposite of humility is pride, and pride is the root cause of disunity. Pride is the original sin that got Lucifer kicked out of heaven, and pride is what broke the perfect fellowship Adam and Eve had with God. The first step in eliminating pride is to be aware of how it lurks in our hearts. A few common signs of pride are:

- Thinking that I'm better than others – more important and more informed – or the flip-side is that I resent those who are better than me.
- I often have a critical spirit, finding fault in others.
- I'm easily offended and hurt if I'm slighted or wronged – I put a great deal of focus on how others perceive me.
- I'm not teachable and becoming defensive when someone tries to correct me.

In Philippians 2 Paul exhorted us to have the same attitude of Jesus who humbled Himself by coming to earth to be a servant and die in the place of sinners. In Philippians 2:3 he says... “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.” When everyone in the body of Christ has this attitude of focusing on others, it creates an atmosphere for unity to take place.

The second virtue that fosters unity is **gentleness**. Gentleness or meekness is the natural outflow of humility. The Greek word for gentleness is *prautes* (pra-OO-tace). Most older versions of the Bible, such as the KJV, translate this word as “meekness” while most of the modern versions translate it “gentleness.” When we hear the word “gentle” or “meek” we tend to make of think of someone who is weak and timid – someone who lets people walk all over them.

But the biblical word for “gentleness” has the idea of “strength under control.” Secular writers used the word to describe a strong stallion that had been broken to the point that it would follow the directions of a rider. It still had all the strength it had before it was broken, but now, that strength was under the control of its master.

King David is a great example – David was a mighty warrior who took down Goliath, but when he had an opportunity to kill his nemesis, King Saul, in a cave, but he controlled his emotions and held back – he showed strength under control. Jesus described Himself as gentle and humble in heart, but He was anything but weak. He knew when it was appropriate to express His anger, as he did with the money changers, and when it was time to keep silent and hold back. On the cross He could have called twelve legions of angels, but He held back. He showed strength under control.

Aristotle defined gentleness as a virtue that stands between two extremes – an excess of anger on the one hand and an absence of anger on the other. Gentleness is being angry at the right occasions with the right people at the right moment and for the right length of time.

Gentleness also carries with it the idea of not being harsh or rough with people. It starts with our words. Colossians 4:6 says, “Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt.” Make your words taste good and pleasing so that they go down better. Proverbs 15:1 says, “A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.” Gentle words bring down the temperature in sorting out a conflict.

How we say something is just as important as what we say. The Bible also tells us to be gentle in our manner. The Apostle Paul was a strong, rugged missionary, yet he reminded the Thessalonians that “We were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children” (1 Thessalonians 2:7). Even if we need correct someone in church Paul says in Galatians 6:1, “Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently.” Gentleness, combined with humility, fosters unity.

The third virtue that promotes unity is **patience**. The Greek word for patience is *makro-thumia* – a combination of two words – *makro* meaning “long” and *thumia* meaning “anger.” When you put them together it’s the idea of taking a long time to get angry. You are “long-suffering” or you could say “long-fused” when responding to trying people or circumstances. Like humility and gentleness, none of us are naturally patient – we hate waiting in lines and we hate getting behind a slow car. We have places to go and things to do. The natural response is anger. People are in our way – don’t they know where I have to go?

This leads directly back to humility and putting the interests of others before ourselves. Patience is slowing down to look at the world through the eyes of others. That’s what Jesus did. Matt 9:36 says, “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” We often see others as standing in our way, but Jesus saw them as people who needed compassion. Being part of a church with lots of different people supplies us with ample opportunities to practice patience, and the more patient we are the more unity we enjoy.

The fourth virtue that fosters unity is **bearing with one another in love**. Bearing with one another is very similar to patience. Patience has more to do with not retaliating over momentary incidents, whereas forbearance is bearing with hard-to-get-along-with people over the long haul. Forbearance is putting up with people who bug you. No matter where you are – whether it is at school, at work, in your family, or at church, there are going to be people that drive you nuts. They have a particular way of doing things – they have personality traits that don’t mesh well with yours – they have ways of talking and relating that annoy you. And guess what? You probably drive people nuts too – you have ways of doing things and ways of talking and relating that test other people’s forbearance.

And yet God calls us to live in community, accepting one another for our faults and imperfections. All of us are in the process of becoming more like Christ and none of us has yet arrived. It’s like the saying, “Please be patient, God is not finished with me yet.” Jesus was extremely patient with His disciples, who were often thickheaded, selfish, and slow to believe. It would be hard for anyone to get along with them, much less the Son of God who had to put up with them daily. Yet Jesus did – He didn’t complain to them or insult them or try to avoid them. He put up with them. He bore with them, realizing that they all were in the process of learning. We are like Christ when we bear with one another.

Paul then adds, “Bear with one another *in love*.” Agape love seeks the highest good of another person. Agape love is not so much a feeling or emotion but a choice to love others despite what we get out of it. Agape love requires sacrifice – putting aside our self-interest for the interests of others.

When we practice the virtues of humility and gentleness and patience and forbearing love, it sends a powerful message to the world. In the second century writer named Aristides wrote a famous letter to the Roman Emperor Hadrian explaining the Christian religion and here’s in part what he says: “They love one another, and he who has gives to him who has not, without boasting... and if they here that one of their number is imprisoned or afflicted on account of the name of their Messiah, all of them anxiously minister to his necessity... and if there is any among them that is poor and needy, and they have no spare food, they fast two or three days in order to supply to the needy their lack of food... Such, O King is their manner of life, and truly there is something divine in the midst of them.”

Historians say that in the first 100 years of Christianity, even though it was illegal, 23 million people became Christians – which is pretty incredible considering the population size of the world at this time. Christianity flourished because people could see that Christians really loved one another.

Paul says, “To preserve unity – live up to your calling, practice the qualities that promote unity, and third – he says in verse 3 – **make every effort to maintain it**. Paul says, “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.” Remember, unity is not something we create – we already have it by our common faith in Christ – but we must be diligent to preserve it. I know in our deacon’s meetings we pray often for unity – even when we’re enjoying unity, we pray for it because it can be lost very quickly and suddenly.

Just as our nation is divided over a number of issues, there are any number of ways the church can become divided. Paul himself dealt with many potential divisions in the early churches. He was part of a church counsel called in Acts 15 over a disagreement of whether Gentiles could be saved if they weren’t circumcised – a huge hot-button issue in the early church. The church in Corinth divided over preferences in teachers, they divided over culturally issues such as eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols, and they divided over poor people in the church feeling looked-down by wealthy people.

Because the church is made up of fallen, broken people there will always be potential for conflict, which is why Paul says, “Make every effort to preserve the unity of the Spirit.” We must make every effort to hang in there during hard times and not be quick to leave when something or someone rubs us the wrong way – we must make every effort to be humble, to be gentle, to be patience and bear with one another in love.

The bond that preserves unity is peace. Peace is a bond – a glue – that holds us together. As a church we are called to be peacemakers. Romans 12:18 says, “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” Not everyone is going to agree to peace, but we must make every possible effort to promote peace.

Psalm 133:1 says, “Behold, how good and how blessed it is when brothers dwell together in unity.” Unity is a precious thing and it creates an atmosphere for the Holy Spirit to work. Unity is what Jesus says shows the world who He is. The church is not just another group or something we casually invest time and energy in – being part of God’s church is a high and holy calling – Christ died for the church and has left us as a church to represent Him in the world. He prays that we will be one – that each individual fingerprint, with all our many differences – would be united in Christ and do everything possible to preserve the unity to which we’ve been called.