

The Calling We Have Received

Ephesians 4:1-6

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One time at Annual Conference I was visiting with one of my pastor friends named Randy. He told about when he was in school there were two brothers who terrorized everybody. One in particular behaved terribly and troubled Randy and his friends. Over the years Randy struggled to forgive what was done and he prayed for that man. At that conference, when Criminal Justice and Mercy Ministries gave their report, that man was introduced. He gave his testimony about the difference the Lord made in his life through the people in that ministry. As soon as the report was done, Randy hurried to meet the man. He asked if he was the Johnny that he knew in school. He said he was. Now he was out of prison, had a job, was following Christ, and was part of a church. Randy said, "This is the stuff!" It's gospel stuff, transforming power of God stuff, the kind of stuff that God's call makes possible.

Here in Ephesians we see that we're all called to new life. Earlier in the letter, we see that we're called to be in Christ, to praise God's glorious grace, to hope, to be saved by grace through faith, to be united as God's people, to be indwelt by God and filled with God's love. Having heard and responded positively to that call, we're to walk or live worthy of that calling.

We've been exploring God's call from different angles. There are various levels of calling and different ways we hear and live out God's call. Our basic calling, or vocation, is rooted in a covenant that includes creation, redemption, and new creation. We have a calling to be genuine human beings, with genuinely human tasks to perform as part of God's purpose for God's world. The main task is to bear God's image. We're meant to reflect the Creator's wise stewardship into the world and reflect the praises of all creation back to the one who made it all (N. T. Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began* 76).

Because we've failed to do that, God initiated a new program to rescue and restore the good creation that's been defaced and corrupted by human idolatry and sin. Now we're called to receive forgiveness and new

life that God offers in Jesus. When we've been forgiven, set free, and given new life we're now called to walk in it, to live it out, and to be part of the work of new creation.

We're called to *Someone* before we're called to do *something* (R. Paul Stevens, *The Other Six Days* 72). We're called into a relationship with God through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit. The diverse people of God live out that relationship in a variety of ways, in various "callings" that God guides us to. In our different situations, jobs, families, and relationships we live out the calling to belong to God and to be God's people. When that basic commitment is in place, we can glorify God in any of a number of good ways.

Frederick Buechner gives some clues to identify specific ways we can follow God's call. He says that all different kinds of voices call us to all different kinds of work. How do we find out which voice is God's and not just the voice of Society or Self-Interest?

By and large, a good rule for finding out is this. The kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work (*a*) that you need most to do and (*b*) that the world needs most to have done. If you really get a kick out of your work, you've presumably met requirement (*a*), but if your work is writing TV deodorant commercials, the chances are you've missed requirement (*b*). On the other hand, if your work is being a doctor in a leper colony, you have probably met requirement (*b*), but if most of the time you're bored and depressed by it, the chances are you have not only bypassed (*a*) but probably aren't helping your patients much either.

...The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet. (Listening to Your Life 185-86, emphasis added)

So we have a basic, primary calling to bear God's image and to be renewed in God's image as we follow Jesus, as we are in Christ and live new life with God's Spirit filling us. We live out that calling in our individual

situations, in our relationships, in our families, on our jobs. And we do all of this together as the church, the people of God, the body of Christ.

Paul goes on to describe what it looks like when we walk worthy of this calling we've received. He mentions some qualities of this new life. He uses relationship words; these have to do with how we treat each other and get along with each other. Humility and gentleness are very close. We don't have to put ourselves first, but we're considerate of others, we're willing to learn, and we deal with each other with kindness the way Jesus deals with us. Patience and bearing with each other in love are very close as well. The word for "patience" here is sometimes translated "longsuffering." It's having a long temper instead of a short temper. It doesn't fly off the handle.

These qualities, and many others, are part of the unity the Holy Spirit creates. We're urged to make every effort, to work energetically at keeping this unity in the bond of peace. Peace with God, the peace of God, peace among each other holds us together as we walk out our calling in Christ. We're called together and live our calling together.

Paul has already talked about this unity earlier in Ephesians (2:11-22). Jesus died to bring us together. He broke down the wall that divided Jew and Gentile. He reconciles both to God through the cross. He gives us all access to the Father by the one Spirit. He builds us together into a dwelling where God lives by the Holy Spirit.

Another pastor friend of mine, Puong Lau, serves Edmond Chinese International United Methodist Church. It started with international students at UCO. It's a very diverse congregation. They have members from mainland China, Hong Kong, Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, as well as Central America. Their worship services are in Mandarin (with numerous accents and dialects) and English. They worship together, serve together, study together. At one time, the church included 350 new Christians. At that time ten new churches had come from this one. Numerous Bible studies were planted in various countries as members of the church went back to their home countries. Fuxia Wang was converted through this church's ministry and now she's an ordained minister and leads the international student ministry at the OU Wesley Center. What an example of walking

worthy of our calling together; different as we are, maintaining the unity of the Holy Spirit in the bond of peace.

One thing I've learned in my ministry is that I'm called to be the pastor of everyone in the congregation. That's one way I work to maintain the unity the Holy Spirit creates. Our differences may not be dramatic, and we may do a good job of keeping them in the background. But we still have them. We may have different political ideas or theological opinions. We may have diverse perspectives on social issues. God gives grace to deal with differences in the church with humility and gentleness, with patience and forbearance, in love and peace.

Paul goes on to talk about the basis of our unity in living our calling together. He lists seven unities: one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all.

The one body is the church, the body of Christ, all God's people everywhere. The one Spirit is the Holy Spirit, who is God within us, who creates our unity. The one hope of our calling is the final outcome, made sure by the Holy Spirit, that will be fully realized when Jesus appears again and ushers in the new heaven and earth. We live in that hope now and it transforms the present as it brings into the present the power of the future God has for us.

We're guided by the great commandment, the "Jesus Creed" we talked about last week: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength, and love your neighbor as yourself." That's our calling. It guides life as God intends it to be lived. Living that way, "the people of God, by the power of the Holy Spirit, are meant to be the hope of the world, the model for all humanity and ... the living defense of the faith—that God is present and that God's loving purposes will come to pass" (Mark Labberton, *Called* 19).

The one Lord is our Lord and Savior Jesus the Messiah, God's Son, the embodiment of God with us. The one faith is the church's belief in Jesus and our own trust and confidence in him. The one baptism is our initiation into the body of Christ, the sign of our identity as Jesus' followers.

The one God and Father of all is the Lord God, the living God, the God of creation and covenant. He's the God and Father of our Lord Jesus

Christ, who saves us in Jesus through the Holy Spirit's power. This is the God who makes us, who redeems us, who calls us to flourish as we bear his image and reflect his glory.

When we live in unity as the people of God, we start to fulfill God's intention, we begin to bring God's kingdom to bear on earth as it is in heaven.

In his book *Called*, Mark Labberton tells about a time when he was in a long process of getting clarity from the IRS about a particularly technical and complicated aspect of his taxes. After several months of correspondence and legal advice, the day finally came to begin talks in person. People with experience in this told him it would take many months to get the issue settled.

He went to the IRS office in Oakland, CA, where he waited and waited. Eventually he was escorted through a maze of cubicles to the one where he was to meet the agent who would help him. He describes his feeling then as alone in the bowels of a large IRS office—without hope.

The agent listened to his case, took all the relevant paperwork, and excused herself to consult with someone else.

Mark waited for ten minutes. Then fifteen minutes. Twenty minutes. Thirty ... forty ... forty-five minutes. No one checked in. As far as he could tell, the agent had disappeared. There was no apparent sign of life—just a cubicle in the void.

Suddenly, the agent was back. She handed him a sheet and said simply, "There, it's all done. It's settled."

He was stunned and didn't know what she meant. He assumed she was saying she had taken the first step. But she meant that the whole process was settled. She turned the paper over and showed him the nine signatures she had acquired all the way up the IRS ladder so the case was now closed—in his favor.

There, in the middle of a maze of bureaucratic anonymity and powerlessness, he encountered a person who became his advocate, who heard his appeal and took the initiative to do for him what he could never have done for himself. She met him in a moment of isolation and fear and sent him out with resolution when all he expected was delay.

He says that experience is a parable of what the body of Christ can be in the world. In the vastness of the universe and in the context of human powerlessness, God calls us and enables us to show up as advocates who represent and incarnate the presence of God, who is the hope of the world.

We may not make such a practical difference or reach such resolution every day in our work. We may not always perform in outstanding ways. But each of us has a vital role in the company of God's people. We find life by living our call to love and follow Jesus Christ and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Labberton concludes:

This is the glorious promise of our calling—for us and for the world: to live life abundantly. In Jesus' terms, that means being a people who live in deep, loving communion with the God of the universe, where life has been given away in love so a broken world can flourish. (20-23)

The church isn't all about us—it's about God and God's purposes for all of creation. Worship isn't all about us and what we like or what meets our needs—it's about God. Service and witness aren't about calling attention to ourselves, but about directing attention to God.

The interesting thing is, when we focus on God through Jesus in the Spirit, we get blessed. God cares for us and wants to make us whole, to remake us into all that God intends us to be. It's in that holiness that we find true happiness and joy. If we try to grasp it for ourselves, it slips through our fingers. But if we look away from ourselves to loving God and others, grace and peace and joy and love come to us from God's Spirit. That's the calling we've received.