

EPHESIANS

GOD'S PLAN FOR GOD'S CHURCH REVEALED

SERMON TITLE: "Unifying Grace, Part 1"

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SCRIPTURE: Ephesians 4:1-16

PASTOR: Jim Thompson

The Book of Ephesians is a beautiful picture of the spiritual blessings we have in Christ and as members together in Jesus' Church. When he arrived, Jesus revealed what was once hidden from us throughout the ages through the power of the Holy Spirit. As a result, we're introduced to something new—a life in Christ where we find THE answer to the brokenness of this world. But what should this look like? How should we, in the power of the Holy Spirit, live this new life? Jesus' church is meant to be a source of wholeness and life amidst a world of brokenness and death. What does this entail? What does it mean practically? In this letter to the Ephesians, Paul explains the mystery of the church and gives us practical insight into living as believers who have been raised from death to life by faith in Christ.

If we look at the history of the church for the past 2,000 years with all of its successes and failures, and we look at the different expressions and opinions of the church today all over the world, a couple of things stand out:

One, the church of Jesus Christ isn't going anywhere. If it can survive the persecution, division, abuse, and marginalization of its past 2,000 years, it will not fade. Or in Jesus' words "I will build my church and the gates of hell will not overcome it." Countries and empires will come and go, but the kingdom of God remains forever. The church isn't going anywhere.

Two, if the church isn't going anywhere and God has been faithful through our rocky past, how much more faithfully would we see him move if we were actually unified? Somehow, we're so inundated with making sure people know our personal opinions that we often can't even celebrate God clearly working unless those people being changed are just like us. That's a desire for uniformity and *not* unity. So, what should we do?

What constitutes true unity? What are the things it's supposed to accent and emphasize? Are there things that we should steer away from to maintain unity? And how do you know what those things are that give a false sense of unity? And the world is watching on. Just think – how much more of God's grace and beauty and truthfulness and faithfulness could we behold and put on display if we actually lived in unity with one another? Simply put,

What should we do to protect against false unity and preserve the true unity we have in Jesus?

Paul helps us answer this question in Ephesians 4:1-16. In 4:3, he encourages his friends to be "be eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit." The implication is direct: If you are called to maintain something, that means you already have it. He doesn't say, "Be diligent so that maybe one day we can have unity." Because of Jesus' sin-forgiving, death-conquering, shame-defeating cross and resurrection, if you're trusting him for real life and salvation – unity is already yours. You share a bond of peace with everyone else all over the world who is trusting Jesus. But often, our hyper-individualistic culture makes us think that the Christian life is a buffet, and we can put unity on our plate only if we really want to. But Paul's assumption is that unity is part and parcel to the main course. And if you can't eat without it, then you can't live without it. Meaning,

We must realize that unity is not primarily a future goal in the distance to be achieved but a present gift that we already have to be nurtured.

But there's more to our answer. In 4:7, Paul says, "Grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift." This means that the same grace that unifies us also gifts us differently precisely for the sake of that unity. John Calvin writes, "No member of Christ's body is endowed with such perfection as to be able, without the assistance of others, to supply his own necessities." This highlights Paul's point, that unity is maintained by our dependence on each other's giftings.

Christian unity is nurtured when we simultaneously understand how Jesus has uniquely gifted us *and* how we need the unique gifts of others.

And even though the list of gifts in this passage is often seen as a list of leadership-type gifts, this text still stands as an invitation for all believers to discover how God has especially wired them for service in and through his family (Paul gives other gift-lists in Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12). This is crucial to unity, to know what special role you're called to play in the function of Christ's body in the world. And there are practical ways to figure out how God has gifted you. First of all, patiently give yourself to community with other believers and your gifts will start to surface. Also, try to serve in different ways and see how people are most encouraged by your service. Discovering how God has gifted you is not a light switch. It'll take time. But the key in all of this is that, in the church, people need your gifting so you better figure it out, *and* you need the spiritual gifts of others, so you better get around other people who are trying to figure it out. This is how unity breathes.

After he lists different gifts, Paul says that we should *do* unity through diverse gifts "so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and from by waves, and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes" (4:14). This is why our initial question was also about protecting against false unity, because there will always be a counterfeit of God's gift of unity that the enemy uses to try to lure us in. When Paul warns against being carried away and deceived, he has in mind people who are trying to make something besides Jesus the central point of Christian unity. The suggestion in this is that,

We guard ourselves from false unity by viewing every other belief as it relates to our ultimate belief in the gospel of Jesus.

The point is that Jesus is not a line item in a long list of beliefs. He alone is our creed. If you're a follower of Jesus and you believe something – socially, politically, even theologically – and you haven't considered how that belief relates to the gospel of Jesus crucified and resurrected, then you either shouldn't believe it, or you should hold it so loosely that you're not offended when people disagree with it. The moment that you try to sit something beside Jesus on his rightful throne is the moment you open yourself up to being tossed to and fro by deceptive waves. And if you try to make something else central along with Jesus, you also open yourself up to being angry at other believers who don't want that thing beside Jesus on his throne. And this takes us to 4:15.

When Paul says "Speak the truth in love," it's just the verb form of the word truth. It means, "Truthing one another with the good news of Jesus, we grow up in unity." Yes, we need to be aware of false teaching. Yes, we should be hesitant about a culturally-contingent Jesus that somehow agrees with us on everything all the time. But the way that we do this is by a long obedience in the same direction. We learn to bow every belief before our belief in Jesus by slowly and communally seeing everything in light of who he is and what he came to do. That's "truthing in love."

This is how we live as Christ's body: We posture ourselves towards one another with humility, gentleness, patience, love, and an eagerness for unity (4:2-3). And we do this because Jesus did it first for us. In humility, he stepped from heaven to earth to rescue us. In gentleness, he welcomed us: "I am gentle and lowly in heart, come to me all you who are weary and weighed down and I'll give you rest." He is immeasurably patient with us. Time and time again, his disciples didn't get it. But for the good of their unity, he was beyond patient with them. And this patience led him all the way to the cross. There he bore the full weight of all our sin, and he took the full scope of the judgment we deserve. And he did it because of his great love for us. Jesus knew that his sacrificial death would purchase a unified people for himself, and he is eager for us to live as his unified people.

Jesus gave up his own body unto death. And his own body was raised, proving that hope isn't fiction and that living in unity is not wishful thinking. Now, he looks at us, his church, and says "You are my body. You are my life and love to the world around you." The church of Jesus Christ isn't going anywhere, and God's revealed plan for us is that we fix our eyes on Jesus and share a oneness and together that can't be found anywhere but Christ. This is what Paul means when he says, "Walk in a manner worthy of your calling" (4:1). He means, "Walk in step with the gospel. Trust Jesus, and walk in true, eternal, life-giving unity that is only found in him."

Community Group Questions

READ Ephesians 4:1-16...

1. What stood out to you the most about this passage/message?
2. What do you see as the biggest problems to unity in the church?
3. Who is someone you know who lives in harmony with other believers in spite of some disagreements?
4. Out of Paul's list of five gospel virtues in 4:2-3, which comes the least naturally to you and why?
5. How should we anchor ourselves in Jesus so that we're not lured away by false teaching or deception?
6. What do you think your "spiritual gifts" are? What spiritual gifts do you think you don't have?
7. Who is someone you know is serving the unity of the church by being humbly confident in their gifting?