

HOW TO LIVE OUR LIVES WORTHILY

Ephesians 4:1-16

In our reading today, Paul tells us how to live out our lives as Christians in a way that is worthy of the calling we have received from our Lord. Paul may be a prisoner for the Lord in chains, but he's still Christ's ambassador all the same.

So as we look together at what it means to live our lives as Christians please open your Bibles at page [***] or follow on the screen where the relevant verses will be displayed. Let's start with verses 1 and 2: "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." (Eph 4:1-2 NIV)

Here Paul is telling us how to relate to our fellow Christians – humbly, gently and patiently and above all with that supreme virtue, love. Humility or Lowliness was much despised in the ancient world. The Greeks never used their word for humility (*tapeinotēs*) in a context of approval, still less of admiration. Instead they meant by it an abject, servile, subservient attitude, 'the crouching submissiveness of a slave'. Not till Jesus Christ came was a true humility recognized. For Christ humbled himself. And only he among the world's religious and ethical teachers has set before us as our model a little child. Moreover, the word Paul uses here means 'lowliness of mind', the humble recognition of the worth and value of other people, the humble mind which was in Christ and which led him to empty himself and become a servant.

In his commentary on Ephesians, Watchman Nee of China tells of a brother in south China who had his rice field on a hill. During the growing season he used a hand-worked water wheel to lift water from the irrigation stream that ran by the base of the hill to his field. His neighbor had two fields below his, and one night he made a hole in the dividing wall and drained out all the Christian's water to fill up his own two fields. The brother was distressed. But he laboriously pumped water up into his own field, only to have the act of stealing

repeated. This happened three or four times. At last he consulted his Christian brethren. “What shall I do?” he asked. “I have tried to be patient and not retaliate. Isn’t it right for me to confront him?” The Christians prayed, and then one of them replied. “If we only try to do the right thing, surely we are very poor Christians,” he said. “We have to do something more than what is right.” The Christian farmer was impressed with this advice. So the next day he went out and first pumped water for the two fields below his and then, after that, worked throughout the afternoon to fill his own field. From that day on the water stayed in his field, and in time the neighbor, after making inquiries as to what caused him to behave in such a fashion, became a Christian. This is humility. It is refusing to insist on our rights and actually putting our neighbor’s interests before our own.

Let’s move on to verse 3:

“Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.” (Eph 4:3 NIV)

In chapter 12 of his first letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor 12:13) Paul tells us “we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free persons”. Well, some practical consequences follow from this, not only for the Christians of Corinth but for all members of other churches too. The unity of the Spirit, which is to be kept, is not the fact that there is one Spirit. That’s a fact, and it can’t be affected by anything that human beings do. But the one Spirit, in whom believers are baptized into one body, gives unity to those who are baptized in this way. So, as fellow-members of the one body, Christians must all live in unity one with one-another. The humility Paul urged in verse 2 is essential to unity, because pride causes disunity more than anything else.

Verse 4-6 sound a bit like parts of an early Christian creed:

“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.” (Eph 4:4-6 NIV)

So the truths of, “one Spirit,” “one Lord,” and “one God” are successively emphasized and amplified. We see that our Christian

unity models and derives from the Trinitarian unity of God. Paul uses the word “one” a lot in these verses because it symbolises unity. In fact he uses it seven times to indicate completeness. Let’s look at these statements in reverse order. Firstly, the one Father creates the one family. Secondly, the one Lord Jesus creates the one faith, hope and baptism. Thirdly, the one Spirit creates the one body. Indeed, we can go further. We should say that there *can* be only one Christian family, only one Christian faith, hope and baptism, and only one Christian body, because there is only one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. As John Stott said “Is there only one God? Then he has only one church. Is the unity of God inviolable? Then so is the unity of the church. ... It is no more possible to split the church than it is possible to split the Godhead.” To put it another way, the one-ness of believers is based on the one-ness of God.

The church may seem to be visibly divided, but there is an underlying unity in Christ – that is why verse 3 urged *us* to maintain the unity of the Spirit. The Greek verb used by Paul there is emphatic, it means we are to spare no effort, it also has a sense of haste, urgency, even crisis to it. We are to demonstrate to the world that the unity we say exists indestructibly is not the rather sick joke it sounds but a true and glorious reality. So, the fact of the church’s indestructible unity is no excuse for accepting the tragedy of its actual disunity. But, where, I ask myself, is this eagerness for unity to be found among Christians today? We are guilty of largely ignoring this apostolic command. It’s interesting that Paul includes baptism in his list of unities. Christians often disagree about the how and when of baptism, but let’s not focus on that. Rather let us focus on what baptism signifies, namely our identification with Christ. Then we can find unity in what’s really significant.

Ephesians may have been a circular letter addressed to several churches. Perhaps even in the city of Ephesus itself there were by then so many Christians that they met in several distinct house churches. So Paul may have in mind the need for unity *between* as well as *within* the churches. If so, his concern would apply to inter-church relationships today. We should all be eager for some visible

expression of Christian unity, provided always that we do not sacrifice fundamental Christian truth in order to achieve it. Christian unity arises from our having one Father, one Saviour – Christ – and one indwelling Spirit. So we cannot possibly foster a unity which pleases God either if we deny the doctrine of the Trinity or if we have not come personally to know God the Father through the reconciling work of his Son Jesus Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit. Authentic Christian ‘unity’ in truth, life and love is far more important than ‘union’ schemes of a structural kind, although such union schemes should be an expression of the spiritual union.

Let’s move on to look at verses 7 to 10:

“But to each one of us grace [or gifts as most translations would have it] has been given as Christ apportioned it. This is why it says: "When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men." (What does "he ascended" mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.)” (Eph 4:7-10 NIV)

So here Paul moves from the “all” of verse 6 to “each one of us” in verse 7 – so he’s moving from the unity of the church to its diversity. There is to be unity but not uniformity. The diversity of the church is due to God’s gifts distributed amongst church members and verse 7 tells us that these gifts are given by Christ. Paul reinforces this with a quotation from Psalm 68. Psalm 68 is a call to God to come to the rescue of his people and vindicate them again, as in olden days. I’m sure Paul selected it because he saw in the exaltation of Jesus a further fulfilment of this description of the triumph of God. Christ ascended as conqueror to the Father’s right hand, his train of captives being the principalities and powers he had defeated on the cross, these powers being dethroned and disarmed.

As Moses received the law and gave it to Israel, so Christ received the Spirit and gave him to his people in order to write God’s law in their hearts. Although Christ is exalted, he did not draw back from descending to earth in his incarnation and humbling himself even to death on the cross.

Returning to our verse 7 Paul always speaks of a variety of gifts. Paul develops this in verses 11 to 13:

“It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” (Eph 4:11-13 NIV)

It’s a mistake to try and restrict these spiritual gifts to those listed here, or as some do to healing or tongues or prophecy. The NT has five different lists of gifts (1 Cor. 12:8–10, 28–30; Rom. 12:6–8; Eph. 4:11; and 1 Peter 4:11) which contain over 20 different kinds of spiritual gifts – and I don’t believe this is by any means exhaustive. These gifts are for the purpose of growing and developing the body of Christ, the body of Christian believers. All spiritual gifts are ultimately service gifts. This variety of gifts used for the common good is the true diversity of the church. Note also that Paul isn’t talking about the work of ordained ministers here, he’s talking about lay people. As Robert Barclay pointed out in the seventeenth century and Elton Trueblood emphasizes so well in modern times, “the conventional modern distinction between the clergy and laity simply does not occur in the New Testament at all.” Sir John Lawrence said: “What does the layman really want? He wants a building which looks like a church; clergy dressed in the way he approves; services of the kind he’s been used to, *and to be left alone.*” So the laity abandon their God-given tasks and the professional clergy pick them up ... to the church’s impoverishment. That’s not to say we don’t need the clergy. Of course we need their instruction, leadership and pastoral skills. BUT, all of us here in this church should be using the gifts God has given us to build up the church. You may not be a Billy Graham or a theological scholar, but that doesn’t matter, you can use the skills God has given you to meet the needs of those around you. The way the whole body grows is for all its members to use their God-given gifts. Ministry is not as the prerogative of a clerical elite, rather it’s the privileged calling of all the people of God.

Our verse, verse 13 gives us our goal, let's just read it again:

“until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” (Eph 4:13 NIV)

The Greek word translated attaining, speaks of arriving at a destination, it literally means to come to meet, so the whole church is to go out and meet Christ both physically as a body and in unity, in faith and in knowledge as mature believers.

Let's now look at our final verses 14-16:

“Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.” (Eph 4:14-16 NIV)

Verse 14 tells us that if we actually have the unity we've been thinking about we shall be mature believers. Verse 15 tells us that this will enable us to be united with Christ and verse 16 says that is in and through Christ that we shall be united and held together and enabled to work effectively using the various gifts each one of us has been given as useful and functional parts of the body of Christ. Only in and through Christ can we be truly united and only in and through him can the church, the body of Christ, truly grow because he is the source of all our support and nourishment.

Paul sets before us the picture of a deepening fellowship, an eagerness to maintain visible Christian unity and to recover if it is lost, an active ministry involving all the laity and not just clergy and a steady growth into maturity by holding the truth in love. We need to keep this biblical ideal clearly before us. Only then shall we live a life that is worthy of it.

So how shall we respond to Paul's teachings. Firstly we see that we must be united. Don't do anything to break that unity. Don't create

divisions within our church or with Christians in other churches either. Secondly, we need to be humble and gentle with others and deal with them in love. This will do more to bring people into the body of Christ than anything else we can do – remember my Watchman Nee story! Finally, each and every one of us needs to recognise our spiritual gifts and employ them as they were meant to be used in the service of the church and our fellow men. If we do all those things we'll be well on our way to achieving unity in and through Christ, and thus well on our way to attaining the goal of verse 13!