

WALKING IN UNISON

SERIES: LEARNING TO WALK



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Ephesians 4:1-16
1st Message
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You have probably been a participant in a variety of churches over your lifetime. Your experience of church life has probably included both negatives and positives, both confusion and clarity. But one thing you can be sure of is that God remains unwaveringly committed to the church.

The book of Ephesians describes and instructs the people of God in a life-giving way. This book is about the creation of God that means more to him than any other, the making of a people for his name's sake. God will not fail in his commitment to make the church what it ought to be.

As Danny Hall pointed out in his teaching of the first three chapters (Discovery Papers 4980-4985), Ephesians has two of the most passionate and beautiful prayers found in all of Scripture. The apostle Paul prays that we, the people of God, would understand all that our Lord has accomplished for us. One of these prayers is at the end of chapter 1, and the other is at the end of chapter 3. Both end with a wonderful reference to the church. In 1:22-23: "He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him [Jesus] as head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all." In 3:21 we read, "To Him [God] be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen."

In chapters 1-3 we have laid before us the grand scheme, the invisible reality of God's power. Now we hear the call to respond. Chapter 4 begins with a call to action, that indeed God may be glorified in the church.

Ephesians 4:1:

¹Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called. . . .

This verse is actually our entrée into the final three chapters of the book, as well as into the section that we're going to be looking at in this message. Some facts are clear at a glance in this sentence. First, we note that life in Christ is a privilege. Living for God's glory is the noblest calling of all. Another fact is that the Christian life is costly. "I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you . . ." The apostle has

been put in prison for his faith. Having chosen to follow Christ faithfully, he's paying a price, and so will everyone else who makes that choice. And finally, we see in this verse that our response is to be an active one. The verb is "walk." Some English translations say, "live," and that's a good rendering of the metaphor. But the Greek word clearly denotes activity. The church is not a contemplative society that meets together for literary reflection.

The word "walk" is going to be repeated a number of times in chapters 4-6. We'll later read, "Walk in love," "Walk in light," "Walk in wisdom," and so on.

You may remember the account in which Jesus came to a gathering of those who were unwell at the pool of Bethesda. He went to a lame man and asked him, "Do you wish to get well?" Based on the man's response, he later said to him, "Get up, pick up your pallet and walk" (John 5:2-14). It's good to ask ourselves whether we want God to do anything in our experience. Do we want to be different? Are we willing to be challenged by something great? Have we settled for sitting by the pool for the rest of our lives, or will we hear Jesus say to us what he said to that man? "Stand on your feet and engage life. Begin the process of walking forward. Become who God intended you to be."

In verses 2-16 there are two important ideas. First, we are to be one people. We should walk in unison with every other Christian. The second important idea is the call to grow up, to leave behind immaturity. Let's read verses 2-6, where we hear the call for Christians who take their faith seriously, to live deeply, and committed to one another.

Preserving the unity of the Spirit

Ephesians 4:2-6:

[Walk] ²with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, ³being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ⁴There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; ⁵one Lord,

**one faith, one baptism, ‘one God and Father
of all who is over all and through all and in all.**

This profound description and expectation of Christian unity is heartbreakingly ironic, given our history, isn't it? Jesus' followers have a two-thousand-year record of division and disunity.

You may be familiar with the joke about the man who was marooned on a small island by himself, where he lived for many years. Finally when rescuers came to take him off the island, they observed that he had built three huts. They asked him about them. He pointed to the first one and said, "That's my house." He pointed to the second one and said, "That's my church." And then he pointed to the third one and said, "That's the church I used to belong to."

That hits close to home. How divided and splintered Christians have been, despite the insistence of God that we all belong to him in the same way. God's presence should transcend every difference that we discover in how we look, in cultural expression, race, ethnicity, financial status, the languages we speak, or anything else.

One reason Christian unity is difficult is because we have an enemy who is intent on destroying it. Verse 3 says we are to be diligent to preserve Christian oneness. There is only one Lord, only one faith, only one baptism, only one Spirit, and only one Father of all of us, who does not have nieces and nephews or second cousins, but only children; and every child of his is his child by the same means, and to the same depth, and with the same commitment on his part as every other child. Therefore, the diligence required of us is to see the Lord in our brothers and sisters, to see God's presence and God's purpose in their lives, rather than focus on what human differences exist.

When we think about solving the problems of division between denominations, between classes of Christians, between generations, and so on, it's daunting. Where do we begin? The problems are too large. But look carefully at verse 2 if you want a clear, practical assignment: "[Walk] with all humility and gentleness," (in the King James, "lowliness and meekness") with patience . . ." These phrases together make a point. Choosing humility, meekness, and patience means setting ourselves aside. We'll quit paying attention to our needs, our rights, our fears, and our voice. With that setting aside of ourselves, the call is, "Show tolerance for one another in love . . ."

This text does not address our feelings. The calling is to put up with, even bless, people we find it difficult to be around. It's a very nitty-gritty term. If you want an

assignment from the Lord today, ask the Spirit to point out to you some person you wish were not in your life, someone you find irritating, frightening, awkward, or difficult, perhaps a fellow believer who is an ugly duckling who may never turn into a swan as far as you know; and do that person a kindness. For love's sake, endure them. This is how disunity of all sorts in the church is going to change—one heart at a time.

Now let's look at the other important idea in our text: maturity.

Building up the body

Ephesians 4:7-10:

**⁷But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift.
⁸Therefore it says,**

**"WHEN HE ASCENDED ON HIGH,
HE LED CAPTIVE A HOST OF CAPTIVES,
AND HE GAVE GIFTS TO MEN."**

⁹(Now this expression, "He ascended," what does it mean except that He also had descended into the lower parts of the earth? ¹⁰He who descended is Himself also He who ascended far above all the heavens, so that He might fill all things.)

In the prior verses, the word "one" was repeated: one Lord, one faith, and so on. Now we have a turn in the other direction. In verse 7 it says, "To each one of us grace was given . . ." Now we will see things that distinguish us from each other. We know from the rest of the New Testament teaching about spiritual gifts (Romans 12:3-8; 1 Corinthians 12:1-14:40) that there is a variety of gifts. The Lord Commander has won a great victory, descending to the lowest depths, ascending to the highest heights, leading a train of captives behind him. Having conquered the strong man, he has plunder to give away.

If we are going to grow and mature, it becomes crucial to know what our gifts are, and to know how to function together with others who have gifts. That is Paul's great concern: how will the people of God grow from weakness and immaturity into something grand and beautiful? How will we each find our place, and how will we all move forward together to become the people we ought to be?

James 4:11-16:

¹¹And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, ¹²for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; ¹³until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. ¹⁴As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; ¹⁵but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ, ¹⁶from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.

The apostle uses strong language and mixes metaphors in this description of the church becoming mature. He is clear that the individualism so common today is not God's intention for us, nor is a life of shallow immaturity that never changes. We are to grow up and to do so together.

The model of a grown person is Jesus Christ himself. We are to grow "to the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ." He is the standard that measures maturity. And together we are to become like him.

Let me draw for you a picture that is analogous to Paul's thinking here. Imagine a village in an out-of-the-way place in ancient times. It is part of a great empire. The glorious Lord Emperor himself comes to the village with his army. He has won a great battle—the magnificent victor. He's bringing behind him his vanquished enemies and he has gathered up great gifts. When he comes to the village, he brings the young people of the village together, and he says, "You should no longer be children. I want you to become mature." And he gives them gifts. To one he might give a bow and arrows, to one a knife, to one a compass, to one a map, to one a telescope, to one medical supply. Then he sends all these young people on a dangerous quest together. Paul mentions waves that buffet, winds that blow hard—deceivers and tricksters putting forward lies. "No longer tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine." The assumption is that these young people must learn how to deal with such things.

So these people who want to become mature take off

together. They each have different gifts, and they've got to count on each other; they will make it together, or they won't make it at all. On this dangerous quest hard things will happen, but at the end, they will have grown up.

Notice that there are mentors, disciplers, and teachers along the way: apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers. We don't learn anything all by ourselves. There are some who have gone ahead of us who will lead us, teach us how to use the gifts God has given us, and help us learn to work together. They will set us on the right path to eventually live out the things we've been taught.

Many of us are fascinated by J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. The movie version of the third book, *The Return of the King*,¹ doesn't have the ending that Tolkien wrote. In the book, Merry, Pippin, and Sam returned to the Shire, where Saruman and Wormtongue had come and were abusing the hobbits. These three, who had gone on a quest together, threw out the villains and established peace in the Shire. The greatest era ever in the Shire took place after they came back and set things right. They left young and vulnerable, but they came back warriors.

The amazing thing is that this is what Paul believes about the church. We have a great Emperor, victorious in battle, who has come and given gifts to his people. His intention is that we will take on important tasks and do them together, because we need each other.

There are two issues from this text that I want to highlight in closing. One is the role of equipping. Apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers exist to equip those who are nearer to the beginner stage. There are nuances of difference between the four types of leadership, but the main idea is that they will equip others, rather than doing everything themselves.

Some churches are led in such a way that little is expected of their members other than funding professionals who will run all the programs. In some cases professional clergy guard their privileged status by implying that ordinary saints are not able to do "spiritual" work. This text makes it clear that God intends for leaders to function as mentors and coaches who call those younger in the faith to discover their place in the body, so that together we all gain "the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ."

The other issue I want to highlight comes from the phrase "speaking the truth in love" in verse 15. This is a very difficult balance to achieve. Often folks who speak the truth are harsh about it, while those who are gentler don't get around to speaking the truth. To love people from

your heart, but not shy away from saying difficult things, requires the Spirit of God. The great way of contradicting the enemy who deceives, tantalizes, and tricks is to major in truth-speaking with love.

This is a high calling, a great privilege. It's an activist vision. We start out with diligence to be connected to one another and not set aside anybody in whom the Spirit of God resides. We are committed to discovering our place in the adventure, to discipling those who are coming behind us, to listening to some who have gone before, knowing that we'll get there only if we go together, that all of us have a contribution to make, and that the things that are really worth doing are the things that God is doing.

NOTES

¹J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings, Part Three: The Return of the King*, © 1954, 1965, 1966, 1982, 1983, 1994, Ballantine Books, New York.

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