

“Unity: Essential Attitudes”

Ephesians 4:1-3

Baxter Exum (#1001)
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Introduction:

Perhaps it would be an understatement, but over the past year, most of us here this morning have observed a number of snowflakes. And yet this morning we are reminded of a very important spiritual lesson. Someone has said that snowflakes are one of nature's most fragile things, and yet when they get together they have a tremendous amount of power. This morning, then, as we consider the power of unity, we consider the snowflake as an example—each unique snowflake will hardly be noticed on its own, but when they all get together the impact can be amazing to behold.

As we look at each individual member of the Lord's church, the diversity is truly impressive. We look around us, and we see people of all ages, men and women, in all shapes and sizes, with different racial and ethnic backgrounds, with all levels of education being represented, with each of us in our own financial situation, and with each of us coming together bringing our own distinctive religious history. Like those snowflakes, each individual is unique in almost every way. And in this regard, we praise God for bringing us together. And yet at the same time, we are also aware of the **challenges**—challenges going back for nearly 2,000 years.

- We read in the book of **Philippians**, for example, about those two women who were encouraged to get along. As Paul said in **Philippians 4:2**, ***“I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to live in harmony in the Lord.”*** There is a story there! We don't know it now—hopefully we will—but Paul had to interrupt one of the most positive letters in the New Testament with an encouragement for two women to get along!
- We remember Paul's words to the church in Rome in **Romans 16:17-18**, ***“Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them. For such men are slaves, not of our Lord Christ but of their own appetites; and by their smooth and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting.”*** There were false teachers who caused tension and division in the early church.
- We remember the words of Paul to the church in Corinth in **1 Corinthians 1:10-11**, ***“Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there be no***

divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment. For I have been informed concerning you, my brethren, by Chloe's people, that there are quarrels among you." There were quarrels in the early church! There were arguments! The early Christians got in fights with one another!

As the old jingle goes, **"To dwell above with saints we love, O that will be glory! But to dwell below with saints we know, well, that's another story!"** This morning, then, I would like for us to look together at a rather well-known passage on the importance of Christian unity. The passage was written by the apostle Paul as he was under house arrest in Rome.

The passage is found in **Ephesians 4**, **»PPT»** and in our pew Bibles it is found on **page 1830**. We looked at this Scripture several years ago, but it is time we look at it again. In fact, I would like for us to divide this morning's lesson into two parts. We will look at **verses 1-3** this morning, and (Lord willing), we will go on to look at the next few verses next week. This morning, though, let us lay a foundation, and let us consider the essential attitudes that are necessary for Christian unity. **Ephesians 4:1-3...**

¹ Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, ² with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, ³ being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

As we look at this one sentence (and as we get ready to study the next sentence next week), we notice that unity within the starts out as something very personal. Like those snowflakes, we are all unique, and we notice here that unity depends on our own individual Christian character. Unity depends on our own personal attitude, because as Paul begs the Christians in Ephesus to ***"walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which they had been called,"*** he tells them to behave like Christians. Perhaps, then, we can agree with C.S. Lewis, when he said, ***"Of all the awkward people in my home and in my office, there is only one I can do very much about."*** As we look at ourselves, then, we notice ***several personal qualities that encourage unity within the congregation.***

I. **One of the first things Paul points out is that we are to walk with all HUMILITY.** **»PPT»**

Literally, the word ***"humility"*** refers to being ***"low of mind."*** The word is used in **Philippians 2:3**, and the idea is illustrated there with the example of Jesus who lowered Himself to the point of coming to earth in human form, as a bond-servant—and to give up His life on the cross. Jesus is our example, then, of what it means to be a humble person. In humility, we look at others as more important than ourselves.

And when we think about it, humility is absolutely necessary for unity. Or the opposite: Pride will always lead to division. Pride results in disunity. When we demand our way over others, when we always think our way is better, when we always try to be on the top—when we do these things, we damage the unity of the congregation. It has been said that a man wrapped up in himself makes for a very small package. And I would add: Such a man is very dangerous to the Lord's Church—an arrogant man causes division.

Where I went to elementary school, we had a playground full of little hills—30 feet apart and maybe six feet tall, scattered all through the playground—and as kids we would go out there and play **"King of the Mountain."** One kid would go up on top of a hill, and he would try to throw off anyone who challenged his position. That's fine for little kids, but Paul is saying that there is no place for **"King of the Mountain"** in the Lord's church. But rather, in all humility, we are to cooperate and we are to work with each other.

For just a moment, we need to dream a little bit as we imagine a congregation of God's people where every person lives in humility—where every person lives to meet the needs of others. In such a group, there would be no trouble with unity in matters of opinion, but we would all be working together. That is the first attitude that is essential for Christian unity according to the apostle Paul.

II. As we look at verse 2, there is a second quality necessary for Christian unity as the apostle Paul also tells us to walk in GENTLENESS. **»PPT»**

A lot of times, people look at the word **"gentleness,"** and they assume that it refers to weakness. The King James Version, for example, translates the word as **"meekness,"** and a lot of times people assume that meekness equals weakness, but that is far from the truth. Literally speaking, the word translated here as **"gentleness"** refers to **power under control**. In the ancient world, the word referred to oxen, or workhorses, or even to battle stallions—very powerful animals whose strength had been harnessed—power or great strength **under control**. Aristotle described the word as the **"mean [or the balance] between being too angry and never being angry at all."** It is the opposite of roughness or severity—power under control.

If those from the ancient world were with us today, perhaps they would use the word to refer to a powerful car, or a jet, or maybe the space shuttle—all of these machines have tremendous power that has been channeled in a productive way.

I think we see, then, how this term can be applied to Christ. In Matthew 11:29, Jesus said, **"Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am GENTLE and humble in heart, and YOU WILL FIND REST FOR YOUR SOULS."** When Jesus said that He was **"gentle,"** He was not saying that He was a weak person, but He was saying that His great power was under control. As we sometimes sing, **"He could have called 10,000 angels, but He died alone...for you and me."** He was **"gentle,"** in that His great power was under His control.

We understand, then, why *“gentleness”* is a necessary quality for those who serve as leaders in the church. The term is used in 2 Timothy 2:24-25, where Paul wrote to the young preacher Timothy and said that, *“The Lord's bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, WITH GENTLENESS correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth.”* The Lord's bond-servant, then, must be a powerful man, but that power has to be under control. He must not be someone who explodes with rage. And certainly we can see the value of having this attitude in the Lord's church—having our emotions under control and using our power in a controlled and productive way.

III. As we look back at verse 2, we also see that we are to walk with PATIENCE. ▶PPT▶

As I understand it, the word *“patience”* here refers literally to having a long fuse. Some translations may refer to *“longsuffering.”* And the idea is that the fuse is long, that it takes a long time for us to blow up over something. The idea is that it will take us a long time to come to anger over something. Sometimes, even in the church (or in our own families), we may be tempted to just give up—to just *“throw in the towel,”* as we might say. In the heat of a situation, we may be tempted to say, *“That's it! I'm out of here!”* And yet at those moments, the apostle Paul would encourage us to have *“patience.”* He would encourage us to have a long fuse. He would encourage us to follow God's example, outlined for us in 2 Peter 3:9, where the apostle Peter said that, *“The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is PATIENT toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.”*

Unfortunately, this quality of patience is often most lacking with those we love the most. It is interesting to me that the very first murder in the history of the world happened in a family setting—one brother murdered another. As I understand it, even today, a majority of murders happen in a family setting, in what is sometimes referred to as *“domestic violence.”* Hate builds up over time to the point where it suddenly explodes. I have talked to police officers who dread responding to a *“domestic.”* They know that in the heat of the moment, people do not always think very clearly, and that fuses can be very short. Sometimes a member of the family will even turn on the police. And the idea is, *“I may hate my wife, but if you touch her I will hate you more, and I will explode.”* We see this between siblings. Brothers and sisters may fight, but may God have mercy on the one who intervenes! This morning, then, let us remind each other about the importance of having *“patience”* as brothers and sisters in the Lord. Let our fuses be long, and let us have *“patience”* with one another.

IV. As we go back to Ephesians 4:2, we also find that we are to SHOW TOLERANCE FOR ONE ANOTHER IN LOVE. ▶PPT▶

And again, showing tolerance is one of the key attitudes that are necessary for Christian unity. We are to show tolerance in love. And I need to point out here right away that Paul is not talking about doctrinal compromise. If I suddenly decide to

change baptism to sprinkling, I could take this verse (as some have), and I could insist that you must accept me because you love me. But that is not what Paul is saying here. That is not what this verse is about. We are talking here about matters of opinion—personality issues.

If we are not committed to getting along, then we will never achieve the unity that Paul talks about here. But as it is, we are commanded to show tolerance for one another in love. One key definition of the word *“tolerance”* is, *“to put up with.”* Paul, then, is telling us that we need to put up with each other! Paul recognizes that all of us have our own little quirks, our own little personality traits that may annoy other people, our own little character flaws.

Speaking for myself here, I would say that if I have not yet upset or irritated you personally over the past eight years, then just give me a little more time and I’m sure I can manage to do it! If I have not annoyed or disappointed you yet, then just hang on for a little bit, and I am sure it can be arranged! But as Paul says, in spite of these disappointments, we are to put up with one another in love. As Christian brothers and sisters, we are people who must be endured! He is not telling us to tolerate sin, but he is telling us to make a decision to put up with one another.

I am reminded of a 5-year old boy who was playing with his 2-year old little brother when the 2-year old reached up and pulled his brother’s hair. The older brother screamed in pain, and the mom came in and explained that the older brother needed to tolerate his little brother, because after all, the little brother doesn’t know what it’s like to have his hair pulled. Well, the mom left, and just a few seconds later the 2-year old is screaming, and the big brother says, **“Well, you said he didn’t know what it feels like, so now he does!”** But that is not what Paul is teaching here. Instead, we are to show tolerance for one another in love.

In our Wednesday evening class two weeks ago, we looked at **1 Peter 1:22**, where Peter said, ***“Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls for a sincere love of the brethren, fervently love one another from the heart.”*** We are to start by assuming the best of our brothers and sisters in the Lord.

I have told you many times about something my grandfather often said when talking about various challenges in the Lord’s church. When I was growing up, I remember visiting Nashville from time to time and driving around as my dad and grandfather rode in the front seat...talking about various problems and challenges they were facing in the church. On several occasions during those discussions, I very clearly remember my grandfather turning around over the seat and reminding me, **“The church is a perfect organization made up of imperfect people.”** He had served as an elder and a minister and the director of a Christian school, and whenever they talked about things like that when I was a child, my grandfather would always make that statement. It is something that all of us need to remember—let us not get disillusioned. The church is perfect, but it is made up of imperfect people. We will all have struggles and differences with each other from time to time, but love helps us make it past those struggles. Love is a decision to treat other people as we ourselves would like to be treated.

V. As we come to the end of our passage for this morning, we notice in verse 3 that **WE ARE TO BE DILIGENT—WE ARE TO MAKE EVERY EFFORT—TO PRESERVE THE UNITY OF THE SPIRIT IN THE BOND OF PEACE.** **»PPT»**

And again, this is not some kind of man-made unity, this is not some kind of unity that ignores what God says—but this is the *“unity of the Spirit.”* This is the kind of unity that God approves—the kind of unity that is based on the word of God, the kind of unity that is based on the sword of God’s Spirit—we are to make every effort to preserve this unity in the bond of peace.

This is the opposite of that attitude that says that we need to constantly be fighting over something—the opposite of the idea that we need to always be arguing about the latest issues—the opposite of the idea that we always need to be riled up about something—the opposite of the idea that we always need to be picking a fight over something. But in contrast, we are to make every effort to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

You know, if we wanted to have something to argue about in the church, we could certainly find it, couldn’t we? Right after I became a Christian, I used to attend the Men’s Business Meetings at the church where I grew up. Someone always brought a large box of Duncan Donuts, and I would go to those meetings just to get the donuts. But I can remember one meeting early on that went into the wee hours of the morning, as there was a huge discussion on the purchase of a riding lawnmower. It went back and forth for hours as the men debated which brand was best, how much to spend, and what options to purchase. They finally decided on a John Deere 111 with hydrostatic drive. I remember it very well! Thankfully the church did not split over that decision, but as I sat there eating the donuts, it did seem to get pretty tense at times! As I look back at that decision that was made, I realize that the mower is long gone...but the church is still there! Ultimately, they were, *“diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”*

As we make decisions, there is so much we could argue about if we decided to do so, but as we discuss, we also need to realize that in matters of opinion we are to make every effort to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. In matters of opinion, we can bend, and yield, and surrender for the sake of unity. That is the message that Paul is passing along in **Ephesians 4:3**.

Conclusion:

This morning, then, we have looked at the attitudes that are necessary for Christian unity:

- We are to walk in humility—considering the needs of others as more important than our own.
- We are to walk in gentleness—keeping our power under control.
- We are to walk in patience—reacting with a long fuse.

- We are to show tolerance for one another in love—we are to put up with one another.
- We are to make every effort to preserve the Spirit's unity in the bond of peace.

As we look at this list, and as we prepare to study the next few verses next Sunday morning, let's ask ourselves: Where are we lacking these qualities? Are we missing something here? And I do not mean: Is someone else missing these qualities? I mean: Are we personally missing any of these qualities? Do we personally fall short in any of these areas? And if so, let's make a commitment to change ourselves—we do not change others, but we start with ourselves. As we think back to the words of C.S. Lewis, **"Of all the awkward people in my home and in my office, there is only one I can do very much about."** And so if we fall short, then let us repent! Like those snowflakes, we are unique but quite fragile on our own. The real power comes when we join together.

If you need the prayers of the whole church, you can let us know about that right now—write it down, pass it up to the front—we can pray about it together. If there is something else that is weighing you down this morning, we can pray about that. If there is something you are especially happy about this morning, we can pray about that as well.

But if you are not yet a Christian, you need to know the good news, that Jesus came to earth and died as a sacrifice for our sins. He was buried and was raised up from the dead three days later. We respond to God's sacrifice by allowing ourselves to die to sin, to be briefly buried in water for the forgiveness of our sins, and to then be raised up to start living the Christian life. If you are ready to obey the gospel today, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: church@fourlakescoc.org