

SCRIPTURE FOCUS	Ephesians 4:1-6	DATE	10.13.19
	FROM: Mike Smith, Discipleship Minister	First Woodway Baptist Church	
LESSON SUMMARY	Unity is an integral part of Christians' callings. This is so because Christ paid a high price for us to be included in a "new humanity."		

all scripture taken from NIV unless otherwise noted

ENCOUNTER THE TEXT

A NOTE ON TEXT DIVISIONS

Dividing biblical texts into digestible chunks is an important part of Bible study and Bible teaching. Sometimes, though, folks disagree on the best points for divisions to be made in the text. Explore the Bible divides the first half of Eph 4 into vv 1-10 and vv 11-16. In my mind, this is not the best way to understand the text. Rather, Ephesians 4:1-16 breaks down along the following lines:

- 1-6: Unity in the church
- 7-13: Diverse giftings contributing to the church's unity
- 14-16: What mature unity looks like

Really, vv 1-16 are all one unit that drives toward themes of unity and maturity in the church and can be taught as such. If we are to break the text down, though, I would argue that vv 6 and 7 are the most natural dividing point. This in mind, this week's lesson plan will focus on vv 1-6, and next week's will focus on vv 7-16.

^{4:1}As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. ²Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. ³Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. ⁴There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; ⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

Earlier in the letter, Paul laid groundwork for the Ephesians to understand his imprisonment in a positive way (see 3:13). Now, he leverages his imprisonment to speak from a place of moral authority. It is as if Paul, who has pursued his calling even to the point of prison, is now calling the Ephesian congregation to pursue their callings with just as much tenacity. If the Ephesians do so, they will live lives "worthy of the calling you have received."

Because we American Christians are individualistic in the way we think about things, we might assume that living a life worthy of our callings would be personal in nature. Thus, we would assume that Paul is talking about personal devotion and actualizing our personal callings, whatever they might be). While Paul will eventually get to personal devotion, that is not where he starts.

For the past chapter and a half, Paul has been talking about Gentiles being included in God's family. Here are two parts of that conversation that inform ch 4:

- “For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.” (Eph 2:14-16)
- “His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, 11 according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Eph 3:10-11)

When Paul talks about calling in ch 4, he thinks first in terms of *corporate* calling, meaning the calling to be part of a people. If Christ has created a new humanity in himself and God is displaying his wisdom in this new people (the church), then how should we Christians live? The answer comes in vv 2-3: “Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.” Importantly, whereas Paul spoke before of unity on a grand scale (Jew and Gentile), he now boils the theme down to individual responsibility, which has everything to do with interpersonal relationships.

One thing to note as we examine what we might call Paul’s keys to unity is that Paul does not have a Pollyannaish view of the church. Yes, we have been made one in Christ, but that doesn’t mean that we’re always going to agree or even like each other! We will therefore need to be humble, gentle, and patient. More than this, we’ll need to “bear with one another” in love. Note here that we “bear with” people whom we’re having trouble getting along with! Let’s take a moment to view each of these virtues in turn.

- **Humility** puts pride in its place. Pride, of course, is a destroyer of community because it pushes people to exalt themselves over others. To be humble is to know your own worth without needing to lord it over others. Truly humble people are confident in themselves and affirming of others.
- **Gentleness** has to do with how we treat one another. The call is to approach one another in ways that are healthy and caring. Of course, this does not mean that we never challenge one another. Instead, it means that we speak to be heard (meaning that we take the other person’s hearing into account) and with the other person’s good in mind.
- **Patience** is all about long-suffering. It comes into play when people annoy us and when people wrong us. Patience enables us to remain in relationship when it is hard.
- **Bearing with in love** is closely related to patience, but it adds love to the mix. Not only are we patient with people, we also love them, meaning that we seek their good.

Following the call to unity-strengthening virtues come a call to action: “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” Literally, the Greek says, “Be eager to keep the unity...” The idea here is that we will be eager to head off divisive conflict before it starts and eager to repair breaches in unity when they occur. Note here that we are not creating unity. Rather, we are “keeping” or “maintaining” a unity that already exists. It is a unity of the Spirit (it is through the Spirit that we are bound to God’s family) that has created a bond of peace. In a real sense, we Christians are stewards of the unity that Christ achieved in the cross and resurrection.

Paul ends this call to unity by underscoring the shared nature of the faith. Though Christians are individuals who have individually received grace, our salvation is a shared reality. Thus, there is only one body of Christ

into which we are incorporated, there is only one Spirit that indwells all of us, there is one hope that we all share, one Lord that we all kneel before, one faith that we all believe, and one baptism that we have all received. And there is ultimately one God and Father of all whom we all worship together.

TEACH THE TEXT

In six verses, Paul offers us quite a bit to talk about! I would focus on unity as part of our calling, virtues that promote and maintain unity, and readiness to maintain unity.

UNITY AS PART OF THE CHRISTIAN CALLING

As has already been noted, we American Christians often think of calling in deeply personal terms. This, of course, is a true way of understanding calling. After all, Paul has just spoken of his own personal calling in ch 3! Calling is also corporate, though, and we need to celebrate this aspect of who God calls us to be. Here we have a huge if/then. If Christ has paid a great price to make a new humanity, then how should we live?

VIRTUES THAT LEAD TO UNITY

Certain kinds of people are able to maintain unity. They are humble, gentle, patient, and willing to bear with one another in love. It is no surprise, then, that Paul calls the Ephesians to be a congregation that exhibits these virtues. In one sense, these are virtues to be embraced by personal discipline. In another, they are grown within us by the Spirit. In Gal 5, gentleness, patience, and love are all named as part of the fruit of the Spirit. This means that as we follow Jesus, the Spirit makes us into people who are naturally gentle, patient, and loving! We are called to unity-protecting virtues, but we aren't simply to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps. Rather, God himself, is bringing them about in us through the Spirit.

READINESS TO MAINTAIN UNITY

Being eager to maintain unity can be a tough thing. After all, breaches in unity are not easy to confront. If they were, they wouldn't be problems in the first place! At the same time, we Christians should value Christ's sacrifice for our unity so greatly that we are willing to sacrifice for it. This requires us to hold on to the bond of peace in the face of all that seeks to drown it.

At the same time, the call to unity is not an excuse for unfaithfulness. This means that there will be times on this side of eternity when unity cannot be kept due to disagreements over what it means to live faithfully before God. While disunity is never optimal it is sometimes necessary due to the fallenness that persists until Christ returns.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Vv 1-6

1. Why do you think Paul names himself a prisoner of the Lord in v 1? What does it have to do with the rest of the passage?
2. When you hear Paul's encouragement to live worthy of the calling you have received, what specifics come to mind for living that out?
3. How/Why is unity part of our calling?
4. How do you define humility? Why is it necessary for unity?
5. How do you define gentleness? Why is it necessary for unity?
6. How do you define patience? Why is it necessary for unity?
7. What does it mean that we should bear with other Christians in love? Shouldn't we all just naturally get along?
8. What does it mean to be ready to maintain unity?
9. Where does Christian unity come from?
10. Why does Paul mention one body, one Spirit, one hope, etc.? How does it connect to previous verses?
11. Can unity always be maintained? Why or why not?
12. If unity fails, what is the way forward for Christ's people?

Sources Consulted:

Arnold, C. E. (2010). Ephesians. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Slater, T. B. (2012). Ephesians. (R. A. Culpepper, Ed.). Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc.

Wright, T. (2004). Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

Explore the Bible Curriculum

© Mike Smith 2019