

STUDY ON THE BOOK OF EPHESIANS

UNITY IN THE ONE BODY OF CHRIST!

Read Ephesians 4:1-10

Introduction

Paul spent the first three chapters of his letter to the church in Ephesus spelling out in glorious detail all that God did for us, freely by His grace. The second half of his letter focuses on practical applications. Now he brings a call to live rightly. Paul has also worked to develop the theme of unity in Ephesians 1-3. Now he explains how that unity can be achieved. The passage we're about to study offers:

- Three Commands
- The Seven Bonds
- Spiritual Giftings

The Foundation for all Exhortation

“I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called...” (v1)

Paul exhorts us that we should walk worthy of the “calling” which you were called. At the basic level, all believers calling is to live our lives as saints of God. When we really understand how much God did for us as Paul has spent the first three chapters explaining, we will naturally want to serve and obey Him out of gratitude.

The idea in this letter is clear. We don’t walk worthy so that God will love us, but because He does love us. It is motivated out of gratitude, not out of a desire to earn merit.

The Three Commands

“I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” (vv1-3)

1. First Command: "Live a life worthy of the calling which you have received" (Ephesians 4:1)

As the theme of Ephesians focuses on unity among believers, it is safe to look at the calling here as a call to a life that unifies the local church of Jesus Christ as one. As regards unity, the Master who prayed that we all might be one (John 17:11), expects us to act out that truth in our Christian community. We are called by our Master to be one; let us live a life worthy of that calling.

As Christians, our calling is a general calling to be disciples (saints), followers of Jesus. This is our "vocation" towards God. The way we "walk" (KJV, ESV), "live a life" (NIV), "lead a life" (NRSV) must be "worthy" of the One who has called us to follow him. Jesus took the principle of unity as important with His disciples and through Paul, He is emphasising the same point to us. Unless we take this teaching of “unity” seriously, we are just playing at Christianity.

2. Second Command: "Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love." (Ephesians 4:2)

Jesus himself established humility and gentleness as virtues. He treated people with gentleness while He healed them with God's power. His humility attracted people. Jesus said:

“Come to Me, all you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” (Matthew 11:28-29)

At the Last Supper the disciples were arguing about which of them would be considered greatest. Jesus told them:

“Now there was also a dispute among them, as to which of them should be considered the greatest. And He said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those who exercise authority over them are called ‘benefactors.’ But not so among you; on the contrary, he who is greatest among you, let him be as the younger, and he who governs as he who serves.” (Luke 22:24-26)

A worthy walk before God will be marked by lowliness and gentleness, not a pushy desire to defend our own rights and advance our own agenda. Before Christianity, the word lowliness always had a bad association to it. In the minds of many it still does; but it is a glorious Christian virtue (Philippians 2:1-10). It means that we can be happy and content when we are not in control or steering things our way.

The next two-character traits are just as important: *"with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love"* (verse 2b). We need this so that the inevitable wrongs that occur between people in God's family will not work against God's purpose of bringing all things together in Jesus – illustrated through His current work in the church.

We are quick to dispense with annoyances, but Paul says that patience with each other is essential to unity. So is "bearing with one another in love." The verb "bearing" (ESV, NIV, NRSV), "forbearing" (KJV) means "to regard with tolerance, endure, bear with, put up with."

Why do I have to put up with this? we might ask. Because God calls us to it.

3. Third Command: "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3)

This humble, forgiving attitude towards each other naturally fulfils this gift of the unity of the Spirit. We must endeavour to keep this unity – we do not create it. God never commands us to create unity among believers. He has created it by His Spirit; our duty is to recognize it and keep it.

This doesn't mean that preserving unity is at all easy. We need to be faithful to the truth, to guard the teachings delivered to us from the apostles to pass on to the next generation. We need to contend for the faith once delivered to the saints (Jude 3). But we must keep the unity of the Spirit, and we must do it in love. We must! It is a command.

The Seven Bonds

“There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.” (vv4-6)

Seven elements unite us, says Paul:

1. One body
2. One Spirit
3. One hope
4. One Lord
5. One faith
6. One baptism
7. One God and Father

He urges us to look at the things that unite us, rather than the things that divide us. We have unity because of what we share in common. In Jesus, we share one body, one Spirit, one hope of our calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one Father. Each of these common areas is greater than any potential difference.

Sometimes we view the early church through rose-colored glasses. Those were the days! The church was perfect, the saints were wonderful! I just wish I could recreate the New Testament Church! Right. You don't even have to read very carefully to see division:

- In Corinth, one group was touting the preacher Apollos over the Apostle Paul (1 Corinthians 3:4).
- In Galatia, there was conflict between the Christians who wanted to bring along their legalistic Judaism and those who asserted their freedom in Christ (Galatians 3:1-3).
- In Rome, one group preached while Paul was in prison just to aggravate him (Philippians 1:17).
- Paul and Barnabas disagreed over bringing John Mark on the Second Missionary Journey (Acts 15:37-40).
- In Philippi, Euodia and Syntyche couldn't get along with each other (Philippians 4:2).

The early church didn't lack conflict, but they worked hard -- with the apostles' urging -- to preserve, guard, and maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, focusing on the things they did have in common.

What are examples of biblical doctrines that divides the church?

Which ones can we ignore for the sake of unity?

Spiritual Giftings

“But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ’s gift. Therefore, He says: “When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive, and gave gifts to men.” (Now this, “He ascended”—what does it mean but that He also first descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is also the One who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things.)” (vv7-10)

We all have grace given to us according to the measure of Jesus’ gift. How big or how large is the measure of Jesus’ gift? This is basis for God’s distribution of spiritual gifts through His church: grace, the free, unmerited giving of God. No one deserves or has earned spiritual gifts.

This giving happened (as described prophetically in Psalm 68:18) when Jesus ascended to heaven. This was evidence of His triumph over every foe (the leading of captivity captive). As Jesus said, *it is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you (John 16:7).*

Paul begins his discussion of spiritual gifts in verse 8 by using the figure of a military victory procession where the conquering general leads the prisoners of war through the streets of the capital and distributes gifts to his subjects from the booty.

If we were to carry through the analogy (and Paul doesn't), the conquering general is the victorious Christ, the captives are perhaps the vanquished spirits of the evil one (Colossians 2:15), and the gifts are spiritual empowerment to build up and perfect his Body, the church.

Verses 9 and 10 are a parenthesis that interprets the word "ascended" in the quotation from Psalm 68:19. Paul sees the ascension as the resurrected Christ's ascension into God's presence in glory, as opposed to his descent from heaven onto the earth in human form to redeem humanity.

