

## Encouraged and Equipped

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, at the Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on August 3, 2003.  
Scripture: Ephesians 4:1-16

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

“My husband and I have a good marriage” writes a wife, “and we’re actively involved in parenting our three children. Yet, it seems that hardly a day goes by where the kids aren’t bickering or where my husband and I don’t have an argument.” Most of us can identify with her. We experience bickering and arguments, not only in the family, but at work, and in the church and wider community. Furthermore, nations are constantly bickering, posturing, and threatening – threatening the peace and security of the world.

*Families*

God’s purpose is to unite the world. Jesus came to tear down the wall that divides peoples and nations. That’s the message of Ephesians. God wants to create a new society through the church. Of course, I’m not referring to the church as a building but as people who’ve been called by God to bring about a transformation of society.

In the first four chapters of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians he has told us what God has done. For example, God has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing.<sup>1</sup> God has destined us for adoption as his children.<sup>2</sup> God loved us even when we were dead through our sins.<sup>3</sup> Gentile believers “who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.”<sup>4</sup> God has abolished the law with its commandment that he might create in himself one new humanity.<sup>5</sup> God has saved us by grace.<sup>6</sup> We now have access to God through faith in him.<sup>7</sup> Over and over Paul tells us about what God has done. This is good news.

But in chapter 4 Paul talks about our human response to the Good News. Live a life worthy of the calling to which we have been called.<sup>8</sup> Note well that *God doesn’t tell us to live a worthy life in order to earn God’s love and forgiveness.* Maxie Dunham writes, “Our ethic is *not a demand* laid upon us the performance of which makes us acceptable to God.”<sup>9</sup> We don’t

*Good Command  
Good Church  
Good Neighbor*

earn God's love. God's love is what enables us to respond to him. Because God has done all these things for us, we are to live a life worthy of the calling to which we have been called.

In the sixteen verses read this morning, Paul says that *we walk worthy of our calling* when we seek unity. Christian unity depends on our loving conduct.<sup>10</sup> Paul writes, "I beg you to *lead your life with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love.*"

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Paul mentions four virtues that lead to unity: humility, gentleness, patience, and bearing with one another in love. Let's take a brief look at each one of these. *Jesus exemplified all four*

Humility was despised in the ancient world. Nobody wanted humility. That's why the disciples once argued among themselves about who was greatest? Nobody wanted humility, they wanted greatness. But Jesus told them the greatest people were those who were humble. Jesus set a child in their midst and said, "Whoever wants to be great, must become like this little child."<sup>11</sup> Jesus himself models humility for all of us because we're told in the letter to the Philippian Christians, "though he was in the form of God, (he) did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross."<sup>12</sup> God purpose is to unite us all through the exercise of humility.

Gentleness is also required to achieve the unity of God's New Society. Gentleness, according to Aristotle, is showing moderation in all things. For example, a gentle person may get angry but doesn't become destructively angry. Again, the life of Jesus exemplifies gentleness. Remember when some unscrupulous men brought to Jesus a woman they'd caught committing adultery. I'm sure Jesus was angry at the hypocrisy of the men. But he expressed his anger gently. He said, "Whoever is without sin cast the first stone", then he bent down and

started writing in the sand. One by one, the shamed men walked away. Then Jesus gently looked at the woman and said to her, "Neither do I condemn you, go and sin no more."<sup>13</sup> John Calvin wrote of Jesus, "Thou hast the true and perfect gentleness, no harshness hast thou and no bitterness; O grant to us the grace we find in Thee; That we may dwell in perfect unity."<sup>14</sup> As we develop the virtue of gentleness the New Humanity God has planned for the world will come into being.

Paul next mentions, "patience and forbearance." He writes, "lead life with patience, bearing with one another in love." Unity can't be achieved without patience and forbearance. *Forbearance* means putting up with the irritable habits of our loved ones. Most of us have irritating habits. They aren't sins. They don't need to be forgiven. But those around us need to be patient and forbearing – when we don't turn our dirty socks inside out, when we compulsively flip through the channels every 15 seconds, and when your spouse habitually makes you late. The unity God desires requires us to exercise the virtues of patience and forbearance.

As I was preparing this sermon I read something by Catherine Hastings of the Samaritan Counseling center that tied in well with God's desire for unity. She's talking about marriage but what she says is applicable, as well, to the church, community and nation. She says, "happy marriages are based on a deep friendship – a mutual respect and enjoyment of each other's company. Indeed", she continues, "*most happy couples have problems they will never resolve.*" She quotes a marriage study asserting that 60 percent of what couples in good marriages argue about is unresolvable. Think about that! *Sixty percent* of the things we argue about, not only in marriage, but also in the church are irresolvable. But, Hastings goes on to say, "as long as couples maintain a 5 to 1 ratio, that is, there being five positive things to every one negative in the relationship, they can thrive." Families, churches, communities and nations don't have to

agree on everything as long as we have enough in common to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace – and, surely, we do.

~~On the other hand~~ In the new article.

Four qualities that lead to unity – humility, gentleness, patience, and forbearance.

Developing and using these four virtues, Paul says, we're to make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.<sup>15</sup> These four building stones can unite people who are radically diverse. But we have to develop these virtues through hard work and by using all our many God given gifts<sup>16</sup>.

It's a matter of maturation. The unity we seek and desire will be achieved as we mature as Christians. Paul writes, "We must no longer be children.... but speaking the truth in love, we must grow up."<sup>17</sup> I think of some of the immature stunts I've pulled in my family, some so immature that if I told you, you'd laugh in unbelief. Examine *your* lives – how often do you act immaturely even as adults?

The syndicated columnist, Sydney Harris once wrote, "Life has many disasters and reversals but only one true tragedy: to pass from infancy to senility without ever reaching maturity." "The one tragedy of life," Harris says, "is to go from being a baby to being an elderly person without ever maturing as a human being and realizing your full potential."

This observation by a secular columnist has a message for us as Christians. It's tragic that there are many people who are truly Christians, baptized, confirmed -- made a profession of faith -- but who remain as spiritual infants for the rest of their earthly live -- never to progress, never to mature in their faith.<sup>18</sup>

The Christian life requires maturation. A baby has to be cuddled and cared for as a baby, but as the child grows older and then becomes an adult he or she no longer wants to be cuddled.

As the child exercises and uses all the gifts given to her she grows up and becomes a mature adult who is secure enough to exercise humility, gentleness, patience, and forbearance. Amen.

Eternal God, your Son, Jesus Christ, now exalted as Lord of all, pours out his gifts on the church. Grant us that unity which your Spirit gives, keep us in the bond of peace, and bring all creation to worship before your throne; through Jesus Christ our Redeemer, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Ephesians 1:3

<sup>2</sup> Ephesians 1:5

<sup>3</sup> Ephesians 1:2:4, 5

<sup>4</sup> Ephesians 2:13

<sup>5</sup> Ephesians 2:15

<sup>6</sup> Ephesians 2:8-9.

<sup>7</sup> Ephesians 3:12

<sup>8</sup> Ephesians 4:1

<sup>9</sup> Maxie Dunham, The Communicator's Commentary: Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon, page 195-6

<sup>10</sup> Ephesians 4:2.

<sup>11</sup> Mark 9:33-37.

<sup>12</sup> Philippians 2:6-11.

<sup>13</sup> John 7:53-8:11.

<sup>14</sup> John Calvin in his hymn, "I Greet Thee Whom I Sure Redeemer Art" in The Presbyterian Hymnal, Hymn number 457.

<sup>15</sup> Ephesians 4:3.

<sup>16</sup> Ephesians 4:7-13.

<sup>17</sup> Ephesians 4:14-15.

<sup>18</sup> As quoted in a sermon by the Rev. James T. Stout, First Presbyterian Church, North Palm Beach, FL.