

UNITY (One Church)
Ephesians 4:1-6 on August 29, 2021
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Please read Ephesians 4:1-6 before going further in this transcript.

Today is Unity Sunday. As 1 church, with 2 different services, today we're making a concerted effort to celebrate church unity, as a something pleasing to God. E-Free Bemidji is "One Church!" We've intentionally chosen the same songs for both of our services today, led by the same musicians, using the same instrumentation, in order to blend our services and celebrate our common ground. Obviously, we don't have to wait for an official "Unity Sunday" to visit the other church service. Each and every Sunday, there's an open invitation to worship and fellowship with the "rest" of the church, either by attending the other service, or by visiting between services in our Connection Café. Being unified doesn't mean that we don't have a diversity of perspectives or backgrounds. The fact is, there are MANY differences of opinion that can make Church UNITY challenging:

For example, we have...

- ...different political views: Republican/Democrat/Independent/uninterested.
- ...different opinions about the oil pipeline: For it, against it, not sure.
- ...different opinions about COVID-19: facemasks, vaccines, and so on.
- ...different opinions about church paint colors. Like it/hate it/"we painted?"
- ...different opinions about our church's current budget shortfall:
increase giving, decrease spending, just wait and see.

Being unified as a church doesn't mean that we will always agree on everything. In fact, the true power and beauty of God-honoring unity, is the very fact that we CAN disagree about SO many secondary things, and yet STILL have genuine unity in Christ. The genuineness of God-honoring unity is perhaps best demonstrated on the occasions when we willingly set aside our INDIVIDUAL preferences, for the sake of our CORPORATE unity. For example, in today's services, we've tried to find common ground and share a more blended style of music. We probably haven't done that perfectly, but we have tried to do it carefully and lovingly, as an intentional step toward celebrating the unity of our church.

Please open or click in your Bible to Ephesians 4:3. Ephesians 4:3 urges us to "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace." The fact is, unity does take a LOT of EFFORT. However, let's be

clear, the effort isn't to PROVIDE the unity, the effort is to KEEP the unity. This phrase in verse 3, "Make every effort to KEEP" (NIV), can also be translated be "eager to MAINTAIN" (ESV) or "being diligent to PRESERVE" (NASB) Therefore, KEEP, MAINTAIN, and PRESERVE are all telling us the same thing: the unity we need already exists, even before Scripture exhorts us to keep it.¹ The unity of the Spirit has already been provided through the cross of Christ. Unity in the church is built entirely upon what Christ has done on the cross.² This is great news! We don't have to be intimidated, by the humanly impossible task, of creating unity in our church, because it's already been provided for us, through Christ! So our job is to KEEP the unity, to maintain/preserve the unity that's already there. Now admittedly, this is still quite a challenge for us, but it's certainly much easier than trying to provide it from our own resources.

Clearly unity does not automatically keep itself. Even as Paul was writing to these Christ-followers in Ephesus, there was no naïve assumption that, as long as all of us "love Jesus," then it will be so easy to get along. But exactly HOW do we "keep" the unity of the Spirit? If we don't need to apply our efforts on providing the unity, then how should we apply our efforts? Well, Paul already told us how, in the previous verse, back in verse 2. So we need to back up, and slow down, and carefully consider 3 simple things: Humility, Gentleness, and Patience.

Humility, Gentleness, and Patience. These are the three particular attitudes/behaviors that will help us "KEEP the unity of the Spirit." Ephesians 4:2 begins, "Be completely humble and gentle...." Humility and gentleness are linked. Both are immediately upgraded to the level of "completely," meaning not partly humble, not sort of gentle, but rather completely! Being humble carries with it the idea of lowliness.³ Unfortunately, in our culture, we often tend to view humility in a derogatory way; as though humbling ourselves invites others to disrespect us, by treating us like some kind of a doormat. However, all throughout Scripture, humility is regarded as a characteristic of godly STRENGTH, something PLEASING to the Lord. In Matthew 23:11-12 Jesus teaches us, "The greatest among you will be your

¹ Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1999, p. 279, footnote #31.

² Read Ephesians 2:14-22. See *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2405 footnote on Ephesians 4:1.

³ Ταπεινοφροσύνη = "humble attitude, humility, without arrogance... I did my work as the Lord's servant." (Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains* (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 747). New York: United Bible Societies.)

servant. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” As each one of us in the church, chooses to humble ourselves and serve one another, we protect and cherish the very unity that God intends. As each one of us makes an intentional effort, not to think too highly of ourselves, we guard against the sin of arrogance.⁴ Arrogance is the opposite of humility; it’s what causes so much of the hurt and damage within relationships.^{5 6} Now we already talked about how humility and gentleness are linked in Ephesians 4:2, but that doesn’t mean that they are the same thing:

Humility is about how we think of ourselves.

Gentleness is about how we treat one another.

Scripture calls us to gentleness; again not “sort of” gentle, but COMPLETELY gentle. Gentleness can be understood as being mild in dealing with one another rather than harsh.⁷ Unfortunately, much like humility, gentleness often gets a bad rap. People who are gentle are sometimes perceived as being weak, as though they are some kind of a softy, who doesn’t know how to be tough on people when they need it. However, there is great strength and wisdom in gentleness. For example, Proverbs 15:1 says, “A GENTLE answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.”⁸ And Galatians 6:1 teaches us, “Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person GENTLY.” Gentleness is about how we treat one another; not harshly, but gently. This gentle tone fits very well with this word “restore.” Restore is “used elsewhere in the NT for mending nets and bringing factions together.”⁹ Don’t get me wrong, we do need to be firm and uncompromising about sin, but we need to be gentle in the WAY we deal with one another.¹⁰ Scripture leaves us no room for harsh, meanspirited, or unkind attitudes and actions within the church. Gentleness protects us from unnecessary hurt and divisions, by teaching us the right tone of voice. Gentleness shows us

⁴ See Proverbs 16:5, 18-19 and Mark 7:20-23, especially the end of verse 22.

⁵ See Romans 12:3

⁶ In some languages humility is expressed indirectly by [the] phrase..., ‘to live without strutting.’ I imagine many of us are picturing a rooster right now; you get the idea.

⁷ Πραΰτης = “gentleness of attitude and behavior, in contrast with harshness in one’s dealings with others—‘gentleness, meekness, mildness.’” Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 748). New York: United Bible Societies.

⁸ Proverbs 25:15 says, “...a gentle tongue can break a bone.”

⁹ *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, 2011, note on Galatians 6:1, p. 1979.

¹⁰ Later on, in this same chapter, Ephesians 4:15 urges Christ-followers toward an atmosphere where we “speak the truth in love.” This nicely summarizes how Christ-followers should pursue unity in a loving way, while at the same time being truthful and straightforward about sin.

how to treat one another so that we can move toward unity and harmony with one another.

Ephesians 4:2 continues with a 3rd way to KEEP unity, "...be patient, bearing with one another in love." As if the first half of verse 2 hasn't already been challenging enough, the second half just seems to "turn up the heat." Humility and gentleness are both very challenging. I don't know about you, but God works on these parts of my life daily. But patience? This one might be the most difficult of the three. I sometimes kid with people that I "never pray for patience." I say this "tongue in cheek," but it seems to me that if I really wanted to pray for patience, I'd just be inviting God to test me. Like I'd be asking Him to send someone my way, who will test my patience and help it grow. Being patient with each other is much more challenging than something like waiting in line at the DMV. Patience is loooooong-suffering; it's making allowances for the shortcomings of others. Patience chooses to endure all of the hassles and frustrations and disappointments of being in community with other people, rather than just flying off the handle and giving voice to our unfiltered thoughts.¹¹ Any path that successfully leads us toward dwelling together in unity,¹² will require patience as a vital and necessary attribute.

Patience is further defined in verse 2 by the phrase, "...bearing with one another in love." Bearing with means "to regard with tolerance, endure, ...put up with"¹³ Let's make sure not to skip over, perhaps the two most important words in this entire passage, "one another." It's so easy for me, for us, to assume that WE are always the one doing the "bearing with." However, we should keep in mind, that there have been many, many times, when the other Christians around you, have had to "bear with" YOU. In other words, "one another" includes you! We've been putting up with you for years! Now, we've done this, because we love you. We value you. We deeply care about you. But it's probably best for you to realize, that sometimes... you are kind of a pain to be around! So let's not sugar coat this today. To put it plainly, being a Christ-follower means that we are called to put up with one other.

¹¹ Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1999, p. 278.

¹² See Psalm 133:1.

¹³ Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed., p. 78). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Tell someone from our church, “the Bible says I have to put up with YOU!” Now tell them, “And YOU have to put up with me!” And now, smile ;) All kidding aside, ask yourself a serious question: Is there ANYONE @ E-Free Bemidji that I’m unwilling to say that to? In other words, is there anyone who I’m not willing to put up with? Whoever that person may be, whatever we may be struggling to put up with, we are called to “bear with one another in love.” In fact, asking God to help you, to get along with that particular person, is the key to our entire church experiencing unity. To put it another way: Refusing to be bear with that particular person, will hinder our entire church, from being the unified body that God intends us to be. In other words, it will KEEP us, from KEEPING the unity of the Spirit.

Let’s make sure we don’t skip past those last two words in verse 2: “in love.” This “bearing with one another” is only made possible “in love.” God has demonstrated His own love for US, and He has also shown US how to demonstrate that love toward “one another.”¹⁴ To put it another way, God’s love for us and our love for one another are inextricably linked. 1 John 4:19-21 states this directly, “We love because he first loved us. Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.” So, God’s love is what makes our Christian LOVE possible, and God’s love is what makes our Christian UNITY possible!¹⁵

Now, it’s human nature for people to prefer their own little cliques or affinity groups. As Christians, we often do the same. We break off into our own little, small group of friends. And to some degree, this is unavoidable. (It’s just a normal part of sociology and human behavior.) In fact, it’s healthy to be part of a small group: a Life Group, a Bible study, or some kind of a serving team. However, where it becomes Unhealthy, is when it becomes a faction that pulls away from the unity of the larger group. At times, often without even realizing it, without even meaning to, we become a faction that stands apart in arrogant pride, scoffing at the larger community around us.¹⁶ But these kinds of factions, work against keeping the unity of the Spirit. If we are not pursuing unity with the body as a whole, then we are in danger of

¹⁴ See Romans 5:8.

¹⁵ Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1999, p. 278.

¹⁶ Consider all the other things listed alongside “factions” in Galatians 5:19-21. Factions are an act of the sinful flesh.

divisiveness and sin. This would be the exact opposite of Ephesians 4:1 and our call to “live a life worthy of the calling that we have received.” This is why it’s good for a church like ours, that has two different services each week, to celebrate Unity Sunday from time to time. To intentionally recognize that we are one church, one body, and one fellowship of believers.

Ephesians 4:4-6 reminds us, “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.” One body even though we are made up of many different parts. One Spirit who indwells all of us and empowers us for unity. One hope in the salvation and new life, that we share in Christ. One Lord to whom we all submit. One faith which we all believe and learn together. One baptism uniting our identification with Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection. One God and Father of all, who unites us into one Church Family. Ok Paul, I think we get it! You repeated the word “ONE” 7 times in a row! Oneness is a BIG deal! Jesus died to make us one in Him. This oneness is the foundation for our unity as a church.¹⁷

So let’s celebrate our unity today! But even as we celebrate the work of Christ, in making us into one body, we must also recognize, that unity between people takes a lot of ONGOING hard work! Let’s take one final look at Ephesians 4:3: “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.” So, unity is not a “one time, got it done, and now we’re good” kind of thing; it takes ongoing effort to “keep the unity of the Spirit.” One author notes, that in Ephesians 4:3, “Paul’s appeal is urgent and cannot be easily translated into English. The verb he uses [“make every effort”] has an element of haste, urgency, or even a sense of crisis to it, and has been rendered by [some] as, ‘Yours is the initiative! Do it NOW!’”^{18 19} This means we shouldn’t be passive about unity; we shouldn’t have a “wait-and-see attitude.”²⁰ Rather, we should “make every effort,” we should take intentional strides toward it. Brother or sister in Christ, what intentional step

¹⁷ See discussion in *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2405 footnote on Ephesians 4:4.

¹⁸ “Make every effort” (σπουδαζω), Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1999, p. 279 and footnote #27.

¹⁹ In Matthew 5:23-24 Jesus says, “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.” Really? Shouldn’t I put my relationship with God 1st, and THEN take care of my relationships with people? The fact is, it’s unwise to separate the two.

²⁰ Citing Barth, Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1999, p. 279.

toward unity is God compelling YOU to take today? Is there a fellow brother or sister in Christ with whom you need to reconcile? Then don't wait; do it TODAY! Take the initiative and make every effort to keep unity!²¹

Now even though it requires effort to keep our unity with one another, let's keep in mind that this unity is "OF the Spirit," so it's not dependent on our human ability. The Spirit is the One who enables us and empowers us to keep the unity we need. God's Spirit is the source we must desperately depend on.²² So even as we make strong and urgent efforts to be Humble, Gentle, and Patient, we are desperately dependent on help from the Holy Spirit. With that in mind, ***why not pray right now and ask God to help you keep unity with whoever you're struggling with?***

²¹ Now, you may be thinking, "But Pastor Jerry, even if I make every effort, I can't FORCE the other person to be in unity with me!" That's true, we can't force anyone else. All we can do, is what WE can do. Romans 12:18 says it this way, "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." All we can do, is what WE can do. But, we are not allowed to do LESS than we can do! So we need to be completely humble, gentle, and patient with one another. We need to bear with one another in love. THIS is how we "make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace."

²² See Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1999, p. 279 note #30.