

## “A Life Worthy of the Calling”

Ephesians 4:1-16

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I want to take a deep dive this morning into the passage that Greg read from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. This is one of several *incredibly rich* passages in the letter. There is a tremendous amount of meaning and significance to these words. I’m going to walk through the passage, a line at a time.

“I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called.” There are six chapters in the letter to the Ephesians; this is the beginning of chapter 4, the beginning of the second half. The first half is basically all *theology*; the second half is basically all *ethics*. The word “therefore” in this verse links the theology with the ethics. *Because* of all the great things about Jesus that Paul talked about in the first three chapters of the letter – portions of which we have read in worship over the past few weeks – *now* we get to the practical implications. Paul – who was in prison when he wrote this letter – is about to start *pleading* with the Christians in Ephesus.

Now, the Christians in Ephesus were, of course, *already Christians*. These people had already heard and accepted the gospel message. Basically, Paul is trying to get these people who are already Christians to actually *live* like Christians. He believes that they have a *calling*, a *destiny*, a special *place* in God’s creation and redemption; he believes that those of us who bear the name of Jesus have been *set apart* from the rest of humanity. That means, we don’t get to *live* like just anybody. We are called to live our lives in ways that are *worthy* of Jesus Christ. We do not have the luxury of just being able to do whatever we *feel* like doing whenever we feel like doing it. We have a *dignity*, a *holiness*, to maintain.

“...With all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” Here Paul names five specific qualities he believes Christians should cultivate. The first is *humility*, literally “humbleness of mind,” a kind of modesty, often translated “lowliness.” The second is *gentleness*, sometimes translated “meekness.” This has to do with having a mild disposition. Next comes ... wait for it ... *patience*. The old word was “longsuffering.” This has to do with *endurance*, the ability to withstand difficulties for a very long time (you know, like a certain pandemic), and with *forbearance*, the ability to put up with a lot of less-than-desirable behavior on the part of other people, and with *perseverance*, the ability to keep going in the face of obstacles. The fourth virtue is “bearing with one another in love.” This is about Christian community. Those of you who have been around a church for any length of time know that we don’t always agree about everything. Sometimes those disagreements get passionate. Also, sometimes there are people in the church who don’t have the best manners in the world or who are just aren’t much fun to be around. Paul tells us that we need to “bear with one another in love.” This means not only put up with one another, but also go to great efforts to *love* one another, even when we disagree, even when we’ve hurt one another, even when there are people we don’t particularly enjoy. The fifth

virtue is “making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” Paul reminds us that – no matter how strong our disagreements might be at times – we are all still *one* in Christ. In John’s gospel Jesus says that he is “the vine” and we are “the branches;” we are all part of the same tree. We all share the same *roots*, the same *foundation*. We are all on similar journeys towards God.

Now the model for these virtues is Jesus himself. Jesus modeled humility by giving up his place at God’s side to come down here, become one of us, and die for us. Jesus modeled gentleness in the manner in which he allowed himself to be led to the cross, like a sheep on its way to the slaughter. Jesus modeled patience in his dealings with the scribes and Pharisees. He modeled “bearing with one another in love” when he looked down at the people who were crucifying him and appealed to God to forgive them. And as for “making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” – well, he didn’t so much *model* that, as he *created* it. *He* is the bond that holds us all together.

“There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the 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 all.” Christianity, though it exists in a variety of different forms, is *one* faith. When we celebrate communion, we celebrate it not only with the people who are here in this sanctuary and in this congregation, but with *all* our sisters and brothers in the faith: Methodists, Catholics, Baptists, and all the rest; with Christians who are Black, Asian, and Hispanic, and so forth; with Christians of the present, the past, and the future. We are *all* part of the household of God, *all* baptized into the very same faith, “in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” We often use the word “church” as if there are all sorts of different churches; in truth, there is just *one* church, and millions of individual *congregations*.

“But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ’s gift.” Paul is about to talk about the different spiritual gifts, the idea that every Christian has been given a particular set of talents that are to be used for building up the church, like music, or evangelism, or administration. He begins this discussion with a quotation from Psalm 68: “When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive; he gave gifts to his people.” That’s just a reminder that Christ’s gift-giving to us was foretold in the Old Testament. Then Paul digresses onto a little tangent, which the NRSV conveniently puts in parentheses: “(When it says, ‘He ascended,’ what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.)” Here Paul is referring to Christ’s ascension into heaven, following his resurrection from the dead; and also Christ’s descent – either his descent from heaven to earth at his birth, or from earth to the realm of the dead at his death; the text can be interpreted either way.

But back to Paul’s main point: “The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers.” He lists here five of the different spiritual gifts that are bestowed upon Christians. This is not an exhaustive list; if you combine this list with a few other passages, you come up with about *thirty* different spiritual gifts. Every Christian has *some* of these gifts; no Christian has them *all*. Here, Paul focuses on the gifts that have to do with leadership in the church, with shepherding the people of God: “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.” The leaders in the church have two primary responsibilities: first, to “equip the saints for the work of ministry,” that is, to teach and exhort all the people of God to take up their calling as servants of Jesus Christ, each of them – each of *you* – with your own particular way of serving in the church of Jesus Christ, based on the gifts that the Holy

Spirit has given to you; and second, to “build up the body of Christ,” which basically boils down to fostering *unity* in the church through promoting an ever-increasing understanding of Jesus, and helping each individual believer come to a greater degree of *maturity* in Christ, of *growth* in God.

“We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people’s trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming.” There are, unfortunately, some people who will deliberately try to trick us; people who will craftily try to deceive us. The sheer volume and intensity of all the lies and conspiracy theories give ample testimony to that reality. This was a problem in the first century as much as it is in the twenty-first, although back then they didn’t have the internet and social media to complicate everything – the ability to *instantly* spread falsehood to millions of people. In a general sense, we need to make sure we are getting our information from reliable sources; and, in the church, we need to make sure we have a strong enough foundation in the Bible and theology to not fall prey to the various aberrations of the gospel that are out there. Those people who say, for example, that confession isn’t necessary – that’s not Christianity. Of course, different branches of the Christian church see some things differently. We need to make sure we understand what *our particular tradition* teaches. That’s one of the reasons why I’ve resumed including paragraphs from our Presbyterian *Book of Confessions* in our worship service, as affirmations of faith; some of the things we do here – like viewing women as equal partners in ministry, and ordaining women to every office in the church – are different from what you will find in many of the more evangelical or fundamentalist churches. In cases like that, it’s not that the other churches are intentionally being *deceitful*; they just interpret the Bible differently than we do. The point is, *you need to know what the church stands for*.

“But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love.” We need to develop the ability to *speak the truth in love* to our fellow believers – even when, or perhaps especially when, we disagree with them. That is particularly true when there are uncomfortable truths that *must* be said. We Christians often shy away from that, because we’re afraid of conflict, or afraid of hurting someone’s feelings, or afraid of losing someone from our fellowship. But there are times when an uncomfortable truth simply *must* be told. And it must be told *in love*. Jesus did that *all the time*.

We also need to “grow up in every way” into Christ, who is the head of the church. We are not called to simply *stay put*, to *remain the same* in our spiritual lives. With each new year we should *sense* that we have learned and grown in the past year. We should be able to name some things we understand about the faith that we did not understand before. We should *feel* a stronger relationship with God through Christ than we did at earlier times in our life. And if the church is working well – if it is working as it *should* – if each person in the church is doing *their* part, using the gifts that God has given *them*, to build up the church, then that should happen pretty naturally. The church is like a beautiful, complicated *machine*, with many working parts, and if each part is doing its job, the machine will *hum* beautifully, and will be highly effective at doing what it is called to do: seeking and saving the lost, standing up to injustice, proclaiming the Word of God with boldness and conviction, making a *tangible difference* in the life of this world, through the ongoing power of the Holy Spirit working through us.

There’s more that could be said about this passage – I could have gone even deeper than I did! – but hopefully this gives you a deeper appreciation of this rich passage. Hopefully I’ve done ... my *job*.

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