Studies on the Holy Spirit, Lesson 11

THE HOLY SPIRIT GIVES US UNITY

Ephesians 4:1–16

Key Verses: 4:2–3

“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.”

This is the last of our eleven studies on the Holy Spirit. We’ve learned that the Holy Spirit is not an “it,” a force; he’s God the Spirit, one of the three Persons of the Trinity. The Holy Spirit is in every way essential in our Christian lives. He gives us new birth, he satisfies our souls, he’s our Encourager, he helps us know the truth, he leads us to live by faith, he teaches us how to walk by his guidance, help and power, he fills us with life and peace, he governs our minds, he helps us pray, he helps us build a community full of God’s hope, he reveals God’s wisdom to us, and he gives us spiritual gifts. We need the Holy Spirit in every way, more than we know. There’s more to learn about the Holy Spirit in the New Testament, especially in Acts. But we’ll bring our study series to a close with Ephesians 4.

In this last lesson we see how the Holy Spirit gives us unity with one another. It’s not a unity we have to create; our unity already exists through the presence of the Holy Spirit. This unity is God's gift. Paul calls it “the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.” Our problem is, we don’t recognize our unity. So in today’s passage we learn what we need to do to keep our unity and contribute to our unity. May God speak to us through his living words today.

The Book of Ephesians was a letter written by Apostle Paul to the church in Ephesus. Ephesus was the second largest city in the Roman Empire, but the Ephesian church wasn't a big city church; it consisted mostly of smaller household churches. Through their active ministry the word of God was spreading to all of Asia Minor. Paul himself had started the ministry in Ephesus and had lived there for several years. He wrote this letter a few years later, when he was under house arrest in Rome. There was no big problem in the church, which Paul was trying to fix. He just wanted the growing and new believers in Ephesus to know God more deeply and to live in unity, despite their differences.

The Book of Ephesians has six chapters, and the first three are mostly theological. Paul mainly taught about what Christ has done. He has reconciled all things to God and to himself, and he brings all kinds of people into unity with himself and with one another (1:10; 2:14–16). This reconciliation and unity became possible through Christ’s death on the cross and resurrection. The last three chapters of Ephesians teach, based on what Christ has done, how we should live. It's more than mere moralistic teachings; it shows us how to live out our lives in Christ practically. The first part of this second half of Ephesians, 4:1–16, teaches us to live in unity. In a sense we have unity with all believers everywhere on earth, at all times. But we also need to be aware of our unity with a specific body of flesh-and-blood believers, despite our weaknesses and faults. And we need to be contributing members to this unity. In Ephesians Christian life isn’t isolated and individualistic; it takes place in the context of community.

Being such a large metropolis, Ephesus was multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-generational. The city’s roots were in Greek culture and civilization. But the Romans came in and brought their culture and civilization. Then there were the old cultures of Asia Minor. And there was a Jewish community there as well. There were older people, and many young people who had come to live and work in Ephesus. When Paul shared the gospel, he didn’t focus on any one ethnicity or culture, because the gospel of Jesus is for all kinds of people. But these people naturally had many hostilities toward each other, and invisible walls divided them. To be together was way out of their comfort zones. So Paul explained in 3:10 that bringing such different people together was actually God’s “manifold” or “multicolored” wisdom. In 3:21 he also explained that when such disparate people come together in genuine spiritual unity, God is glorified.

Look at 4:1. The fact that Paul was writing “as a prisoner for the Lord” gave extra weight to his teachings. Here, the “calling” is the Holy Spirit’s prompting that causes us to believe. Paul urges us to “live a life worthy of the calling you have received.” In Greek it literally says to “walk worthily of the calling to which you were called.” We are called to follow Jesus and live as God’s children. In modern terms verse 1 means, “Don’t just talk the talk; walk the walk.”

Then what is “the walk”? Read verse 2. The “walk” is essentially related to how we treat others. Are we just putting on a show? Underneath, are we proud, harsh and impatient? Are we angry? Indifferent? Here, the words “humble, gentle, patient, forbearing and in love” are all fruits of the Holy Spirit, and they remind us of the character of Jesus our Lord (Gal5:22–23; Mt11:29). These qualities are essential in maintaining unity. The Holy Spirit gives us these qualities so that we can walk like Jesus and live in real unity with one another.

Some people have their own idea. They think fighting and struggling is good. They’re not at all committed to a community of spiritual unity; they’re committed to their own agenda. They may even quote Bible verses that support their viewpoint, like when Jesus said, “I did not come to bring peace, but a sword” (Mt10:34), or, when Paul said, “No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God’s approval” (1Co11:19). Making use of Scripture, people justify their power struggles and divisions in the name of “theological differences.” Some have lived in Christian community for years and still don’t know, and frankly, don’t really care to know, each other.

Even if we accept that as followers of Jesus we need to live in community, most of us struggle about being completely humble, gentle, patient and bearing with others in love. We think, “I’ve tried, and it’s just not possible. It’s not my character.” Some think the Holy Spirit should come and change us instantly into completely humble, gentle, patient, loving persons. But it doesn’t happen like that. Paul doesn’t say in verse 2, “Wait for the Holy Spirit, and he’ll make you completely humble, gentle and patient.” He says, “Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.” We feel we can't, but if it’s not something we can do, why would he tell us to do it? It can be confusing.

It seems to mean that the Holy Spirit can give us these Christ-like qualities, but we’re responsible for exercising them in our relationships. For example, when we struggle to relate to a difficult person, instead of getting upset we can pray and ask the Holy Spirit to help us, and he’ll help us be completely humble like Jesus. When we try to help a wounded person and find ourselves running out of patience, we can pray and ask the Holy Spirit to help us, and he’ll give us Jesus’ gentleness and patience. When we grow tired of tolerating a certain person’s chronically obnoxious behavior, we can pray and ask the Holy Spirit to help us, and he’ll give us Jesus’ amazing love for that person. Read verse 2 again. Instead of making excuses and justifying ourselves for giving up on people, may God help us to really accept verse 2 and ask the Holy Spirit to help us live by it.

Of course we need the qualities in verse 2 toward all people, in our families, at school, at work, wherever we go. But Paul gave this verse especially in the context of our relationships with other believers. Read verse 3. Here, “peace” is another fruit of the Holy Spirit. Paul says that there already is “the unity of the Spirit” among Christians. In 1 Corinthians 12:13 he explains it: “For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.” Because all believers have received the Spirit, even if we don’t know them, we already have the unity of the Spirit with them, whether we realize it or not. But in verse 3 Paul says we have to “keep” the unity of the Spirit. Here the word “keep” in Greek literally means, “to take care of” or “to guard.” We should be vigilant about protecting and developing the unity God gives us. In this context we can understand the phrase: “Make every effort.” Literally this phrase means to hasten, to exert oneself or to be diligent. We shouldn't let problems in Christian relationships linger and fester, but do our best to resolve them as quickly as possible, doing our very best.

Frankly, we live in an individualistic culture, so making every effort to keep unity can sound kind of alien. We might actually be relieved if a contentious brother or sister leaves our community. It might bring some immediate peace, anyway. How do we make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit? Some other Scripture passages can help us understand. In his famous Sermon on the Mount Jesus taught us how to live in Christian community. He warned us that being angry with a brother or sister is tantamount to murder (Mt5:21–22). Then he said, “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” (Mt5:23–24). Jesus was saying that we can’t really worship God if we have broken relationships with Christian brothers and sisters. And he was saying not that *we* are upset with our brother or sister, but that *they* have something against us. We would tend to think, “Well, that’s their problem, not mine.” But Jesus doesn’t put it that way. He says that when others have a problem with us, it’s our responsibility to know about it and to do something about it as a top priority.

There are more Bible teachings on how to “keep” or “guard” the unity of the Spirit we have: “Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves…Share with the Lord’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality… Rejoice with those who rejoice. Mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited” (Ro12:10–16). Sometimes, even Christian brothers and sisters can act like enemies. If they do, we shouldn’t seek revenge; we need to still love them with Jesus’ love (Ro12:17a,19–21). The New Testament repeatedly urges us to live in peace with each other (Ro14:17–19; 1Co1:10; 2Co13:11; Col3:13–15; 1Th5:13; Heb12:14a; Jas3:17–18). Sometimes, though, it just so happens that the other party won’t accept our apology or our gesture to reconcile. So Apostle Paul wrote in Romans 12:18, “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.”

Honestly, sometimes we think it’s too much of a struggle to keep trying to relate to other Christians who seem unlikely to change. We need to have a clear reason to do it. Why should we make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit? Read verses 4–6. According to these verses, though there are many kinds of Christians, there is much more that unites us than that which divides us. According to verse 4b, we all share the same hope. This hope is another gift of the Holy Spirit (Ro15:13). It’s our hope of eternal life, our hope to see Jesus, our hope in God’s kingdom. According to verse 5, we all have the same Lord, the same faith and we’re all baptized into Christ’s death and resurrection. According to verse 6, we all have the same God and Father; he’s over all and through all and in all. Because our God and Father is in each and every believer, we have an absolute reason to do our utmost to be united.

In verses 7–10 Paul talks about Christ who descended, then ascended. It was to help us to learn how we can make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit. Like Christ, we need to descend to the lowest place, to be completely humble, to reach out to our Christian brothers and sisters, for Jesus’ sake. And instead of focusing on our differences or competing, we need to acknowledge that it’s Christ our Lord who gives gifts to each person, and he does it so that we can build one another up to Christian maturity. We’re all vulnerable and easily influenced. So according to verse 15, to build up our unity we need to speak the truth to one another in love. Since the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth, as well as the Spirit of love, he can help us do this. Verse 30 tells us that we can grieve the Holy Spirit of God, perhaps most of all when we break our unity.

In this passage we’ve learned that the Holy Spirit gives us unity, and that we need to make every effort to keep this unity. May God help us to cry out to him and ask his help, so that we can be completely humble, gentle and patient, and bear with one another in love so that we can keep the unity of the Spirit among us that can lead us all to Christ-like maturity.