UNITY AND MATURITY

Ephesians 4:1–16

Key Verse: 4:13

“…until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.”

Church: what is it? For many people, church is not part of their lives. For many others, it brings up bad memories, such as getting hit with a ruler by nuns, or judged and condemned, or going through a painful split. Someone wrote a book called “Church—Why Bother?” Many would rather just meet in their homes at their own convenience and watch a great pastor online. Some ask why there are so many denominations, or why so many Christians never seem to get along. Some are turned off when churches are only interested in growing their numbers to enhance their own image, ignoring broken, hurting people.

Many places in the Bible talk about church, but Ephesians does it the most. And the view of the church in Ephesians is surprising. It’s not negative! In fact, in Ephesians the church is a very special place, the apple of God’s eye, the focus of his glory in the world. It’s not a place where people of the same culture or language or age group get together to enjoy themselves. In fact, it’s a really diverse place. But in spite of their vast differences, believers in Jesus still get together. In today’s passage we learn what our goal as a church should be: growing in unity and maturity in Christ. Apostle Paul tells us why unity and maturity are so important, and how we can grow in them. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his living word today.

Read verse 1. First we notice Paul says he’s “a prisoner for the Lord” (cf. 3:1). He’s writing this letter from prison. Why was he in prison? It was because he’d been working for unity between Gentile and Jewish Christians. People thought he was ruining Jewish purity and became violently hostile to him. Paul could have thought of his situation humanly, as if his human enemies had won. But here he says he’s really a prisoner “for the Lord.” It was part of his utmost commitment to Jesus. He was willing to suffer anything for the truth that is in Jesus. On the basis of his own commitment, he’s teaching fellow Christians.

The next thing we notice in verse 1 is that Paul mentions “the calling you have received.” What’s he talking about? He’s actually talking about being a church member. The Greek word for church, “*ekklesia,*” literally means a “called out” assembly or congregation. It’s not just personal; it’s a collective calling. We’re all called to follow Jesus, called as a group to represent Jesus to the world. In 1:18 Paul says that God by his grace has called us into the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people. It’s such a privileged calling. It’s both universal and specific. We’re called to belong to all God’s holy people, all over the world, all throughout history. But we’re also called to a local body of believers today. They may not be the people we would humanly prefer to be with, but they’re the people God calls us to. Church begins with God’s calling grace.

Paul’s point in verse 1 is that we should “live a life worthy of the calling we have received.” Actually, in the original Greek verses 1–3 are all one sentence. The ESV translates it: *“I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”* So, what’s the “worthy life”? It’s a life that keeps the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. When we’re proud, rude, impatient, or easily break off relationships, we’re not living a life worthy of our Christian calling. And what’s this “unity of the Spirit”? It’s not something *we* create; *God* already created it through Jesus. In chapter 2 Paul says that through his death on the cross Jesus made peace between God and us, and peace between all believers. Through Jesus we all have access to the Father by one Spirit (2:18). In Jesus we’re being built together to be a building in which God lives by his Spirit (2:22). So, to maintain our unity we need to cooperate with the Spirit. Our sinful nature breaks unity so easily. So Paul uses the words “make every effort” or “eager to,” to emphasize how important this unity should be to us.

The question is, how can we keep the unity of the Spirit practically? Paul says we can do it when we walk in a manner worthy of our calling *with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love…* (2, ESV). To keep the unity of the Spirit we all need to practice humility, gentleness, patience, and forbearance in love. We may notice that among these nice words, humility is first. Before Jesus came, people didn’t value humility; they thought it was for slaves. But Jesus changed our view of humility, especially through his own example. The night he was betrayed, his disciples were still self-centered and clueless. Jesus took the position of a servant and began to wash their feet, including the feet of Judas. Then he said, “Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you” (Jn13:14,15). Behind all division and conflict is pride. Most arguments that divide churches are not really about doctrine, but the result of pride. The words “…all humility…” mean to be humble about all things, not just some things, but all things, and not just one time, but all the time. How can we be humble about all things all the time? It seems impossible. But it’s possible when Christ dwells in us and we always strive to imitate his humility. Paul encouraged the Philippians to have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: “Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!” (Php2:6–8)

In Greek the word “gentleness” was used to refer to tamed animals. Though they were strong and wild, they learned to restrain their behavior and become obedient to their master. Gentleness isn’t weakness. The gentle are strong inwardly, but tender toward others, especially in their use of authority. When Moses was young he was hot-tempered. But God led him into the desert and trained him for forty years. Then he became a very gentle person who could embrace all kinds of disgruntled people. Gentleness is the character of Jesus, who said, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Mt11:28,29).

Patience is to endure others’ bad behavior in the hope they’ll get better. God is patient with us, enduring our wrongdoing without bringing immediate punishment, in the hope we’ll repent and change (Ro2:4). If we’re impatient and angry, we hurt people and ruin the unity of the church. In speaking about love, Paul said first of all, “Love is patient” (1Co13:4). We need to be patient, over and over again, until we die to ourselves. To bear with others is to endure without condemning. We can be this patient when we’re close to Christ.

Look at verses 4–6. The word “one” appears here seven times. Three times it’s used in reference to God, and four times in reference to our Christian experience in him. Verse 4a says, “There is one body and one Spirit….” This one body is the church (1Co12:13). Verse 4b,5 say, “…just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism.…” The one hope, one faith and one baptism relate us to the one Lord, Jesus Christ. The one hope is the living hope in the kingdom of God (1Pe1:3). The one faith is faith in Jesus Christ our Lord who saves us and reigns over us. The one baptism is our common confession of this faith. Verse 6 says, “…one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.” God is the Father of every believer, and the Sovereign Ruler of all. When God our Father is over us and through us and in us, then we can have unity. Those who call on the same God and Father, the same Lord Jesus Christ, who confess the same hope, faith and baptism, should not be divided, but united.

The word “unity” can sound like “uniformity” and make us think we’ve all got to be the same. Yet verse 7 says, “But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.” The church is an interesting place because it has so many different kinds of people, not only in culture and character, but also in gifts of grace given by Christ. Some may think, “I don’t seem to have any gift.” But verse 7 says that to each one of us grace has been given. We each have a gift from God. We must find our gift, develop it and use it for the glory of God to build up his church. Our gift didn’t come from ourselves; it came from Christ, freely, only by his grace. So we shouldn’t boast or compare our gifts with others’.

In verses 8–10 Paul explains that these gifts of grace came through first Christ’s descending, meaning his humility, and then through his ascension. He’s again stressing that our gifts, no matter how great they may be, shouldn’t make us feel proud or superior to others, but even more humble. Verse 11 says, “So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers….” These seem to be the most gifted among God’s people. But they were given the greatest gifts not for their own glory, but for a special purpose.

Read verse 12. The purpose of Christ’s gifts is to serve God’s people so that the body of Christ may be built up. Some people use their gifts to show off. But God’s gifts should be used not for our own honor or ego, but to build up others. Others neglect using their gifts. It’s another form of pride. Someday they’ll be like the servant in Jesus’ parable who hid his talent in the ground and was severely punished (Mt25:14–30). Sometimes our goals in ministry are wrong. We want more Bible students, more committed disciples, more missionaries sent out, more vibrant relief work. These are all good. But the best goal is to use the gifts God gave us to build up his body, the local fellowship of believers we belong to. This goal gives us an absolute purpose in what we’re doing. Sometimes ministry can seem futile, especially when people leave us. But our goal should not be to build up our own ministry, but to build up the greater body of Christ. We should be teaching the Bible, sharing the gospel, praying, serving and loving to build people up in Christ, regardless of where we are or where people may go after they leave us. This is especially true in student ministry.

If this is true, then what really *is* a “built up” body of Christ? Read verse 13. It’s a fellowship of believers who share the same faith in Jesus, the same depth of knowledge of Jesus. When we have such faith and knowledge of Jesus, we’re “mature.” Paul says maturity isn’t just being humanly old; it’s “attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” Earlier, Paul said this fullness is to grasp “how wide and long and high and deep the love of Christ” (3:18,19). Ultimately, it means becoming Christ-like people. What a glorious goal in ministry, to raise Christ-like people! Some people when they become old become more childish. But when we strive to keep Christian unity, we grow in Christ-like character, even if we’re young. Paul described Christ-likeness earlier in verses 1–3: humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance, and love. If they have these qualities, young people can be more mature than old people.

In verses 14–16 Paul contrasts spiritual infants with the mature. It's to encourage us to grow in Christ. Spiritual infants don’t let the truth take root in their hearts, and they lack spiritual discernment (14). So they’re easily led astray by human ideas and false teachings. They’re vulnerable to deceivers who want to use them for their own benefit. On the other hand, the mature are those who speak the truth in love (15a). They’re deeply rooted in the truth, and, in love. So when they speak words of truth, those words also come out with love. If we speak the truth without love, we hurt and cause division. If we love without the truth, we spoil. But when we speak the truth in love, we grow to become in every aspect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ (15b). We need faith in Christ and courage to speak the truth in love to one another. Read verses 15,16. Here Paul explains how the body of Christ grows. Christ our head is the source of all the spiritual nutrition we need, and each member belongs to his body. When we depend on Christ as our head, and each member does his or her work, the whole body grows and builds itself up in love. When we really make Christ our head, a local church can become healthy and strong.

In today’s passage we learned the importance of unity in the body of Christ. As we work for unity with our unique gifts, we become mature like Jesus.

The words “in love” are repeated three times in this passage (2,15,16). The love of Christ is crucial in binding the body together to work well. So Paul said in Colossians 3:14, “And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.” Let’s ask God to help us humble ourselves, love one another, and pray for unity in our local body of Christ so that God may use us.