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## **“A Life Worthy”** **August 29, 2021**

*Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-16*  
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Ephesians makes a bold claim about the church: that we are God’s divine instrument to share the Gospel with the world. In fact, that is our entire purpose, the reason the church exists. God’s plan is for everyone, everywhere to know the depth of God’s love in Jesus Christ, that there is no length God will not go to be in relationship with every one of us. And the way God has chosen to make that love known is through us, the church.

That’s an exciting mission. God chose *us* to accomplish God’s plan. Us! But it’s also kind of intimidating. *We’re* God’s plan. There’s no plan B. If the people around us are going to experience the total and boundless love of God, we are the ones who have to make sure they get the message. God apparently thinks pretty highly of us.

My mind immediately jumps to action. I start making a list of the things we’ll need to get the message across if we don’t want to let God down. We’ll need demographic reports on the neighbors, an analysis of who they are and what they think and how they view the world. We’ll need an outreach strategy and a market-tested message we want to deliver. We’ll need a strong website and a carefully crafted social media presence to make sure the message gets out. We’ll need to host events or find opportunities to get in front of people so we have an audience for our message. I’m thinking about tools and budgets and guiding documents and analytics and graphics and workforce...and a whole lot of prayer to make all of it come together.

But before I leap into executing an action plan, I’m curious. If Ephesians so clearly tells us what we are supposed to do, does it provide any guidance on how to do it? Why, yes, it does. In fact, it offers us a guide, though perhaps not exactly in the way we might expect.

You see, the writer of Ephesians isn’t immediately concerned about strategy or tactics or metrics. That isn’t to say that those things are unnecessary. They’re simply not the highest priority. The primary concern is that we “live a life worthy of the calling” we have received. What exactly does that mean? How do we live “a life worthy?”

*with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love*

What about charisma, likeability, eloquence, or being assertive and confident? What about polishing the message so it’s interesting and compelling, clear and concise? Shouldn’t we do a SWOT analysis or have SMART goals or craft a seven-word mission statement? Our bold mission is to share the Gospel with the world, and we start with humility and gentleness? Yep.

Humility may seem like an unexpected characteristic for launching a global enterprise today, but it would have been even more unexpected for a first century audience in Asia Minor. In Hellenistic culture, humility was not considered a virtue but a sign of weakness and subordination. Yet it’s first on the list when it comes to living a life worthy of our calling.

We hold humility in higher regard today. We admire people who are humble and tend to mistrust people who are too self-confident. Yet we live in a celebrity culture that is obsessed with fame and fortune. And we all participate in that culture, whether consciously or not. Even if you’re a person who doesn’t care much for autographs or red carpets or entertainment news, it’s likely you can name a dozen or more famous people, from athletes to actors, musicians to influencers, people everyone would know. And hey, wouldn’t a celebrity endorsement go a long way in establishing brand recognition? There are some pretty famous Methodists: Beyoncé, George Lucas, Dodgers ace Clayton Kershaw, and interestingly both George W. Bush and Hillary Clinton. We could wield some serious star power to share God’s message of salvation and love. But Ephesians reminds us that our inspiration doesn’t come from popular acclaim, but from Christ himself, who “humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death” (Philippians 2:8) and who described himself as “gentle and humble in heart” (Matthew 11:29).

It’s almost as if who we are matters as much as the message we proclaim. Go figure.

We are to “(bear) with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” Unity has become kind of a buzzword in our society. But for all the talk about unity, there doesn’t seem to be a

lot of it. In a message I preached for the East Ohio Conference in 2019, I shared a University of Southern California study that showed Americans were more divided than at any point in our nation's history<sup>1</sup>. That was before the 2020 election, before the January 6 assault on the U.S. Capitol, and before COVID-19 and its debates over shutdowns, masks, and vaccines. So much for the pursuit of unity.

Maybe the problem isn't so much that we aren't trying, but a lack of clarity about what unity really means. Though they share the same root, *unity* isn't the same as *unanimity* or *uniformity*. If togetherness requires agreement, we're going to be frustrated more times than not. For all the talk about needing to come together, unity for its own sake isn't enough. Trying to force alignment merely to establish placid coexistence isn't a compelling reason. We're not likely to be in the same boat if we don't know why we need a boat in the first place.

But Ephesians makes the case that followers of Christ are to make "every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." Why? Because

<sup>4</sup>There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, <sup>5</sup>one Lord, one faith, one baptism, <sup>6</sup>one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

We may disagree on any number of issues – and we do. We're not the first Christ followers to experience disagreements, many of them serious disagreements about significant issues. But we are, first and foremost, disciples of Jesus Christ, called together in *one* hope by *one* grace in the power of the *one* Spirit. We share in *one* Lord, *one* faith, *one* baptism. We were brought to life and commissioned for the sake of the Gospel by *one* God. In other words, our *identity* and *purpose* are what bring us unity, not our opinions or even our deeply held convictions. We must remain steadfast in our commitment to our calling, not susceptible to the kind of divisiveness endemic in our world today. Here's how the Letter to the Ephesians put it: Don't be "tossed and blown around by every wind that comes from teaching with deceitful scheming and the tricks people play to deliberately mislead others" (verse 14, CEB). The Ephesians didn't even have social media!

The unity the Letter to the Ephesians calls us to is not for the sake of appearances or to avoid disagreement, but so that we may live a life worthy of our calling as *God's chosen instrument to share the Gospel*. Think about it: if people look at us and see a group of people who fight all the time along the same lines as the political and social world, why would they be drawn to the message of the Gospel? What's so wonderful about being a part of a faith community that just rehashes the same tired liberal-conservative battle lines? Alternatively, if we're a church where everyone thinks alike or pretends to for the sake of keeping the peace, who wants to be a part of that? Is the Gospel a muzzle or an indoctrination that forces us all to think exactly alike? I hope not. We lose our effectiveness if we waste our energy arguing over petty differences or if we gloss over pain and injustice to avoid conflict. Instead, we are taught to speak the truth to one another, guided by love, which allows us to grow in Christ's likeness.

How do we do that? Working together in the midst of major differences runs counter to the way our society functions. It might even be counter-intuitive to do so, especially now. I maintain that, on our own, we cannot. Ephesians doesn't suggest that we can, either. Any hope of unity can only be found in the Spirit. Remember, our identity is in Christ. Christ is our peace. And, with Christ at the center, we *can* hold different views and argue passionately about them while being the church. In fact, we *need* to do that, to speak the truth in love. If our eyes and our hearts are focused on Christ, we can accomplish so much more than on our own. Admittedly, it's hard. Sometimes, it's even painful. But this is a major part of what it means to live a life worthy of our calling. Ephesians says we must "grow up in every way into Christ."

As in Paul's letters to the Corinthians and Romans, Ephesians likens the followers of Jesus to the parts of the body, each with its own function and role, working together to form one cohesive unit. We all have different gifts; some are called to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers. We don't all have the same role, but we all share in the *responsibility* to live into our calling as the church. We are individual parts of one body. That body grows through 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."

As God's chosen instrument, we prepare ourselves to live into our calling. We celebrate the gifts God has abundantly given us. We nurture those gifts and grow in our capacity so we can live into the full potential God has

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<sup>1</sup> "Political polarization at its worst since the Civil War" by Laura Paisley. USC News, November 8, 2016. Online: <https://news.usc.edu/110124/political-polarization-at-its-worst-since-the-civil-war-2/> (accessed March 27, 2019).

planted in us. We huddle and plan and cast the vision of how we can have the greatest impact for Christ. Rest assured, we have all the resources I named earlier: demographic reports that help us better understand the people who make up our communities, which help us develop strategies and messages for reaching diverse people. We have a good website that we're constantly working to improve and an active social media presence. And we're prioritizing ministries that help us connect with new people in new ways. But Ephesians reminds us that living into our calling starts here – in our hearts.

Maybe that sounds too cliché, too idealistic, too far-fetched to actually work in practice. But I've seen it, and you have, too. Several years ago, I worked on a Habitat build with a former congregation. We ended up sharing that project with a church that leaned very close to fundamentalism. Now, if we had tried to hold a Bible Study or a worship service together, it never would have worked. And we weren't naïve about those differences when we got together. But do you know what we did? We had a job to do – a really important one, and we shut up and did it. And it was awesome.

As important as building a new house for a family climbing out of poverty into home ownership is, we have an even bigger and more important job to do. The church is God's chosen instrument to share the Gospel. We should employ the full range of resources God has entrusted to us in pursuit of that calling. But let's remember that who we are matters as much as what we do. Let's recommit ourselves to being the kind of faith community Ephesians describes. Let's conduct ourselves with all humility, gentleness, and patience. Let's accept each other with love, even when we don't understand each other and when we drive each other nuts, and make every effort to preserve the unity of the Spirit – not because our differences don't matter or because we're such good people, but because *in Christ* we share a deeper identity and a higher calling. In him, we can find the peace and the strength we need to live up to the enormous calling God has placed on us. Thanks be to God. Amen.