

Ephesians 4

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Proverbs 4⁷⁻¹³/

Let's begin by reminding ourselves of where we've come to with the Ephesians. We began by remarking of the way Paul emphasises the graciousness of the Gospel – the fact that we bring nothing to the table when it comes to salvation except our very needy selves. The Good News is that despite our position of debt this is all God wants. Christ has achieved what we couldn't and with Him we discover the Way back to God. We were lost. Christ has found us. We were far from God. Christ brings us close again. We were living in spiritual darkness, Christ has brought light into our lives. And despite being a competent and industrious people, indeed, almost because they are industrious and competent, the Ephesians need to hear again the basics of this Gospel lest they begin to replace the work of Christ with their own talent, their own righteousness and their own light. As Andrew reminded us God speaks His 'never-the-less' to us. Our task is to live in the hope of that nevertheless. Paul now in Chapter 4 begins to ask the question what does this mean for us?

When I was only about 6 or 7 my cousin came with his family to live in Waitati. It was great going out to visit and stay with him since he lived then in a fairly rural environment which we had fun exploring together. One day my uncle, who was great with boys, took us to a neighbouring farm and while we were there my cousin and I were given some old metal buckets and told to collect the eggs from the henhouse. We were warned however not to touch the fence since it was an electric fence. Now I had never heard of an electric fence and being of rather suspicious mind doubted greatly the word of the adults. So as we approached the fence I began to swing my bucket. My cousin was horrified and warned me again but again I doubted and so I swung the bucket into the fence. Now let me tell you that electric fences in those days weren't the namby-pamby battery powered tinglers we have today. No, this was joined, in some jury-rigged way, directly to the mains. This had real juice in it so that it would leave whoever touched with a lasting reminder of the event. So the moment I touch that fence with the bucket I lost consciousness and woke up second later some 6 to 10 feet away from it sprawled across several large cow pats with my cousin splitting his sides with laughter. From that moment I have treated every electric fence with the utmost respect but the real point is this. In life actions mean a great deal and in faith they remain incredibly important. God doesn't save us **to do nothing**. Christ didn't die so that we'd live unchanged lives. The Kingdom of God calls forth from us certain behaviours and attitudes and it does so not because God wants to control our lives but because He understands what is good for us.

God's love and grace is a constant that no action will change. The Bible is convinced that God loved us **before** we'd done anything to deserve that love and **while** we were yet sinners. No **action** of ours can ever change that. But be sure of this, **our actions count. They count for an enormous amount in this life and... they count for God.** What we say, what we do, what we think and even what we dream all have tremendous influence on the outworking of faith. We cannot ignore the need to act wisely, to act in accordance with God's advice and profit from that ignorance. What we do is incredibly important. The Gospel calls us to action and this is where we come to in Ephesians today.

Ephesians 4 takes all that Christ has done for us and won for us and then asks the question 'What then shall we do?' How shall we respond to this wonderful gift? What does this work of Christ imply for our lives? Why should we live in a certain way at all? If Christ has done this, what is left to do?

Two issues seem upper most in Paul's mind. 1. The issue of unity and 2. The issue of understanding and knowledge or as Paul puts it **light**. Perhaps no two issues go to the heart of a healthy and productive church more completely than these. A church may be large, it may reach out into its community effectively, it may provide great small groups and even great preaching but if there's significant division in the ranks all of that great organisation and activity will not save it. Likewise, light is essential for life. Every second of every 24 hours the sun burns 4 million tons of hydrogen at its heart turning it into unimaginable quantities of light and heat. Without that light and heat life would not be sustained. Light provides the basis for life and the light of God is no different. As the proverb says

⁷Wisdom is supreme; therefore get wisdom. Though it cost all you have, get understanding. (Prov 4)

Get light. Thirst for light in your live. Seek God's light and you will truly live. God loves us. We have ample proof of this in the life of Christ. And that love comes to us as an offer, not a condition. Having established this Paul now says to us...

¹I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, (Eph 4)

He begs us to live in a manner that utilises the grace we have become heir to, the grace we have received now that we've asked Jesus into our lives. Two issues will define our response. The first is how well we live **together...**

Paul provides the baseline approach to our relationships with these words... We are to treat each other,

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

Now I don't know about you but when I read those words I can't help but think that whoever wrote them was expecting not the best but the worst. What a fascinating vision of the church!

No words about passion or love or joy but a kind of anticipation of difficulty – ‘**bearing with one another...**’ Does this sound like something we might enjoy? No it sounds like work to me. Why does Paul seem to suggest that unity should be so difficult?

Well the simple answer is that Paul understands something about human nature. He understands that we usually do OK when love is flowing and people are at their best. But what counts, especially for unity, is how we deal with each other **when we’re at our worst!** What counts is how we do when people around us are not easy. How often have I heard people proclaim themselves to be generally loving and reasonable and yet in response to unreasonableness all of that melts away and out come the claws. And the Church is no different in this respect to the rest of society. If we want unity we’re going to have to deal with difficult people. Why? Because we’re all difficult! We all have our weak points. We all struggle at times.

Paul then goes on to talk about another central issue in regard to unity which is the fact that we must learn to deal with difference. So often the simple fact that I am different to you creates tension. Difference creates difficulties with communication, with coordination, even with belief because we tend to emphasise different aspects of our faith. Paul sees this, however, as something uniquely God given. He speaks of difference in terms of gifting. We are different, at least in part, because we are differently gifted and the Church **relies** on this difference to make it work. We need a **variety** of different people operating with different gifts to make the church work. And even these differences can often be hard to live with. The key, as Paul reminds us, is humility, gentleness and love. This is what anchors unity in the Church and these are things we need to focus on in our own lives.

God has often reminded me that it is these sorts of attitudes which we should use as real indicators of maturity. Gift, prophecy, preaching, knowledge – these things are not bad but they tend to puff us up. What we need, however, to be mature Christians are the basic attitudes of humility, gentleness and love. Without these difference, even good difference, can become an irritant. Let’s face it. We struggle to really live well together. Humans were made for community but so often we do it badly. We are proud, we are rough with each other and we end up hating each other. Jesus calls us to **put on** these attitudes, to work at them, to change our behaviour.

A second issue which Paul raises now in regard to a correct response to Jesus is that of ‘light’ or perhaps ‘revelation.’

¹⁷Now this I affirm and insist on in the Lord: you must no longer live as the Gentiles live, in the futility of their minds. ¹⁸They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of their ignorance and hardness of heart. ¹⁹They have lost all sensitivity and have abandoned themselves to licentiousness, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. (Eph 4¹⁷⁻¹⁹)

The gift of grace implies a new light, a new understanding. Some things are good for us and some are not. Some things are healthy and some are unhealthy. Some ways of living promote

life and some promote death and our calling requires that we become both cognisant of this and obedient. **What we do... counts!**

It is just too easy as a Christian to rest on the laurels of what Jesus has won for us. Grace is wonderful. It's an amazing thing but I find so often that where grace calls us forward into a life of gracious living we find it all too easy to retreat into selfishness. Jesus gave His all that we might enter into a new relationship with God. How much are we giving back to God? Jesus died that we might live. How are we 'living for Christ' today, yesterday, tomorrow? Does the hope we have speak through our lives or are we living simply as the rest of the world does? Who do we think will live for Jesus if not us?

A large group of European pastors came to one of D. L. Moody's Northfield Bible Conferences in Massachusetts in the late 1800s. Following the European custom of the time, each guest put his shoes outside his room to be cleaned by the hall servants overnight. But of course this was America and there were no hall servants. Walking the dormitory halls that night, Moody saw the shoes and determined not to embarrass his brothers. He mentioned the need to some ministerial students who were there, but met with only silence or pious excuses. Moody returned to the dorm, gathered up the shoes, and, alone in his room, the world's only famous evangelist began to clean and polish the shoes. Only the unexpected arrival of a friend in the midst of the work revealed the secret. When the foreign visitors opened their doors the next morning, their shoes were shined. They never know by whom. Moody told no one, but his friend told a few people, and during the rest of the conference, different men volunteered to shine the shoes in secret. Perhaps the episode is a vital insight into why God used D. L. Moody as He did. He was a man with a servant's heart and that was the basis of his true greatness.

Living with God, in unity, implies certain concrete things. It means living a certain way, with certain limitations and from certain principles or values. We see this in most issues of life. A person who wants to get fit must engage their body in regular physical exercise – there is no getting away from this. A person who wants to pass an exam must commit to memory certain matters which can be recalled come exam time. A person who wants to befriend someone else must learn to do things that are friendly! Paul divides the issues that appear to be central for the Ephesian Church into 6 specifics. Note that each of these behaviours represents a certain kind of ignorance and its opposite brings revelation.

1. Living out of lust (sensuality) 'I simply do what I feel like doing. Lust is capitulation to our feelings. It's the placing of feelings into the driving seat of our lives. Now there's nothing wrong with feelings until we put them in charge of our life. This is at the heart of addiction problems, temper problems, sexual problems and probably many more. Paul says – don't do it! Live out of the new things I put into your minds. Don't ignore your feelings but also don't become a servant to those feelings. Don't allow them to be your light! The prophet Kahlil Gibran once said this of the *lust* for comfort but it can be applied to the whole thing. **'It is a stealthy thing that enters the house a guest, and then becomes a host, and then a master.'**

2. Living out of the Truth (v25ff) – Paul encourages honesty in human relationships. I suspect we don't have to read anything more into this verse than 'don't tell lies.' Stop exaggerating. Don't pretend. Let your yes be yes and your no be no. When we cling to small truths large truths become easier to understand. When we're prepared to own up to the truth about, for example, a bad habit of say eating poorly or not exercising or being wasteful, larger truths will become accessible to us. Origen, one of the Early Church Fathers, once wrote this of the truth... 'Now the true soldiers of Christ must always be prepared to do battle for the truth, and must never, so far as lies with them, allow false convictions to creep in.'
3. Living with anger under control. This one is perhaps much harder for us. Let's remind ourselves that Paul doesn't say 'Don't be angry.' Rather he says, 'be Lord of your anger' make sure it's in your control and don't allow it to hang around you. If you are still living with anger over something that happened yesterday or years ago – get some help with it. We shouldn't live this way. Robert Green Ingersoll writes '*Anger* is a wind which blows out the lamp of the mind.'
4. Living productively (v28) Christians are called to live as productively as possible – not to waste our lives in either useless pursuits or in things that do not serve others. Even if we work without pay – work is good for us and it is usually good for others too. A habit of productivity will keep our mind active.
5. Controlling our mouths and listening. Use your mouth constructively. Use it to build up and not to pull down. As the old saying goes – if you can't say anything positive – don't say anything at all. Where the mouth goes the mind follows...
6. Living with sensitivity to the Spirit – loving others (down to end of 4) The Spirit will lead us to live our lives well if we are in touch with it. Are we making time to hear the still small voice of the Spirit. I often contrast scientific endeavour with the 'still small voice of the Spirit.' Science struggles mainly to become sensitive to our environment. This is perhaps the key to experimentation because as we become still before Creation we begin to hear what it is telling us and with that comes understanding. A classic example comes with Astronomy where we've been able to develop more and more sensitive equipment that can register fainter and fainter sources of light and so expose more and more of what is going on in the universe.