

Life in the Spirit, The Unity of the Spirit, Ephesians 4:1-6, 7/14/24

Ephesians 4:1-6 *As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. ² Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.*

³ *Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. ⁴ There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called;*

⁵ *one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.*

[Title Slide] Pray. One of my favorite works by C.S. Lewis is *The Great Divorce*. It's an allegory about the afterlife. When we meet the residents of Heaven, you are struck by how their lives are so occupied by the love of God and one another, they have a healthy sense of self-forgetfulness, they are eager serve one another. The residents of Gray Town (Hell) on the other hand, are just the opposite. Their every thought, every inclination so occupied by themselves. Their own happiness, comfort, their own preferences and desires...And so the residents of Gray Town are constantly fighting with each other, judging, and resenting each other, protecting themselves from each other. Ironically, Gray Town isn't a town at all, it's abandoned because every new bus load of residents who are dropped off in Gray Town immediately begin to bicker and fight with each other, divide into smaller and smaller factions, they move further toward the outskirts of town, even these factions end up in conflict, dissolve and move further away from each other, this pattern repeats, in fact, the residents of Gray Town who have been there the longest have moved lightyears away from any other soul in complete isolation. It's a haunting portrait of what unrestrained self-centeredness can do to us. And it's a cautionary tale about our great propensity as a sinful human race toward conflict, division, factions and in the end, self-isolation. Ironically, in a time when technology has made relational connection everywhere possible, many experts would argue we are living in one of the most divided and isolated times on earth.

We live in an era when the presiding powers harnessing the toxicity of society media seem hell bent on dividing us up along every possible line- politics, economics, age, race, gender, even vaxers vs. antivaxers...exploiting our differences, stirring with resentment, rage, alienation... And this social division results in increasing isolation. The Surgeon General of the US, Vivek Murthy recently issued an urgent advisory to the social epidemic of loneliness.¹ Recent surveys have found that approximately half of U.S. adults report experiencing profound loneliness, with some of the highest rates among young adults. In the last 20 years, the number of people who die from loneliness related causes has skyrocketed and the average number of close friends Americans have has dropped from around 3 to less than 1.8, and it's even worse for middle-aged men and older. In other words, from C.S. Lewis' perspective, we are increasingly creating Gray Town on earth.

¹ <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>

And Christians aren't immune to division and isolation. Chances are if I were to ask you to raise your hands if you have experienced a conflict that caused strife in your family or friend group where people stopped talking to each other, or a season when you stopped going to church because of conflict with someone else and you didn't want to run into them, or maybe a division that happened in a church you were part of that caused a split, my guess is many of you would raise your hands.

All of this division and isolation comes to a head on collision with our text today in Ephesians 4 and with one of the important ministries of the Holy Spirit [Slide]. What we are going to talk about today is one of the most counter-culture ways to bring God's will in heaven to be done on earth: Unity. What if the church was so united that it made the culture noticed. "Wow. There must be something real and powerful about Christianity." Well that's exactly what the Spirit did at the birth of the church at Pentecost Acts 2, and it's what the Spirit of God desires to do today. Three Questions: How Do we Get it? How do we Lose It? How do to Keep it?

How Do we Get it? ³ *Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.* Notice, Paul does not say, "Make every effort to create unity." "Work really hard to produce unity." It's keep, or the word is preserve or guard it, that's our role. But we don't create it, in fact none of us...no matter how hard we could try, can create the kind of unity of the Spirit that Paul is talking about in the church because this unity is supernaturally created by the Spirit, through the Gospel of Jesus. Just two chapters early, Paul says-

Ephesians 2 ¹³ *But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility,*

¹⁵ *by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace,*

¹⁶ *and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.* In the Gospel, Jesus has done the opposite of the culture of Gray Town and of culture today- he's taken all of us who are far away because our sin alienates us from God and each other, and brought us near through his work on the cross, paying for our sin.

[Blank Slide] What Jesus did on the cross was the ultimate equalizer for humanity. There's a lot of emphasis on diversity, equity and inclusion these days. But do you know in Christianity, we don't have manufactured, agenda-driven DEI, we have supernatural, love-driven DEI... Christianity is the most diverse faith on the planet, its equality is unparalleled because it's not based on how hard we work, what family we've been born into, or what's in our past. And it's the most inclusive faith in the world- Jesus says "Come to me, all who are weary and I will give you rest." All are welcome- No exclusions- the only requirement, is that you admit you can't make peace with God and others yourself and that Jesus did it for you.

And when we are brought close to God, we are brought close to each other. Paul says, His goal was to make “two groups one”, “one new humanity”, “one body.” And immediately in Acts 2 we get a portrait of counter-cultural, supernatural unity, of this incredibly diverse group of Jews, Gentiles, men, women, slaves and free-people, outsiders and insiders- began eating together, praying together, financially supporting one another, serving each other, even washing each other’s feet...bringing the unity of the kingdom of heaven to earth, turning Grace Town into Grace Town.

Now it was not just intellectual assent to a set of facts and events about Jesus that united them. That alone won’t create the kind of explosion of unity that happened in the early church and today around the world. This is supernatural- and Paul calls this *the unity of the Spirit*. It’s supernaturally performed by and empowered by the Holy Spirit who renovates and transforms our very nature, who comes to live in us, and when he does, he creates this supernatural force of unity among us. If you have the Gospel, you have the Spirit, and if you have the Spirit you have the unity of the Spirit pulsing through you, drawing you in toward the heart of God and one another. So that’s how we get it, But...Paul says we must make every effort to guard it...that means that while we can’t create it, we can lose it...we can actively work against the Spirit.

How do we lose it? Why do churches split and Christians stop talking to each other, and people drop out of church and isolate themselves altogether? But let me share with you two ways I have seen it happen in churches.

Drifting Toward Man-made Unity

When a church slowly drifts away from the unity created for us in the Gospel of Jesus by the Holy Spirit (One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism Unity), and attempts to find unity in anything else, listen...even good things...inevitably it will erode the true unity of the Spirit. This is man-made unity. If a church attempts to build their unity around a particular leader or pastor like the church in Corinth did (I follow Paul, I follow Apollos) they will divide and make an idol out of a flawed human. If a church attempts to build unity on political influence and getting certain leaders elected not only might they fracture into small sub-parties, but could be co-opted and corrupted by power. If we attempt to build it around one specific ministry of the church to the exclusion of other ministries... if we attempted to build our unity on just one age or stage of life, if we attempted to build on race, culture, socioeconomics or any other identity marker. There is only one bond of peace, only one foundation strong enough to hold us altogether, it’s the spiritual unity produced by the Holy Spirit in us. And that’s enough to hold us together no matter what is thrown our way.

Drifting toward Consumerism

Consumerism has infiltrated every aspect of our society. And without blinking, we bring our consumerism to church with us, don’t we? Because we have an iPhone and an iPad, we think we need an iChurch... built all around our own needs and preferences. Does it have all the ministries I like? Is the music I like? Is it modern enough or traditional enough? Does it have the preaching I like? Does the preacher dress up enough so I can take him seriously, or dress down enough so I know he’s not stuffy? Does it have the people I like? Are these people too old or too

young for me? That's not what Paul is saying the church is at all! We might come in as consumers, but we can't stay there, not if we are Christians and have the Holy Spirit in us. You aren't an audience! You are a body. You aren't a consumer; you are a contributor. So the Holy Spirit creates our unity, we can actively work to lose it, but we also must actively work to keep it.

How do we Keep it?

What will keep us from the spirit of Gray Town is so common today that divides and insulates? Even in the church? Paul says we must ³ *Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace*. There are powerful bonds that the Spirit works through to help us preserve and maintain our unity. Bucket of Water- Illustration. When we do our part to maintain these, the Spirit creates the powerful bond. What are these peaceful bonds that the Spirit works in and through us to preserve?

Spirit-uniting Attitudes - ² *Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.* ³² *Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.*

Paul will call these same attitudes the "fruit of the Spirit" in Galatians 5 which we will also be studying this summer. It is the Holy Spirit who produces this fruit, these attitude adjustments from the inside out. Let's face it, our sinful flesh wants the opposite of each of these- pride, self-centeredness, impatient with people, spiteful, extending no grace and holding grudges. After giving my life to Christ, this was one of the first areas the Holy Spirit began renovating in my character. I grew up in the church as a pastor's kid- and we went through some very painful experiences that caused me to resent the church. I had hardened my heart out of self-justification and self-protection against ever letting the church hurt me. The one thing I knew for certain is I would NEVER be a pastor like me dad...ha! God has a sense of humor. But as I learned to walk in the Spirit, obeying his Word, he began replacing resentment with compassion, guardedness with authenticity and openness. That's what he wants to do in us. Are you making every effort to pursue Spirit-uniting attitudes?

Spirit-uniting Gifts of Service- Paul in chapter 4 introduces spiritual gifts, and in particular leadership gifts which are meant ¹² *to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up* ¹³ *until we all reach unity in the faith*

We will be looking at the gifts of the Spirit at the end of the summer, but let me make a couple comments- the Bible says the Holy Spirit empowers every believer with at least one spiritual gift. Now we typically think of gifts as things we get- to make us happy, or for us to use for ourselves. But these gifts we receive are meant to give away- they are for the sole purpose of building up the body in unity of faith. Leadership and speaking gifts, behind the scenes gifts, people serving gifts, gifts designed to protect the body, outreach gifts to bring more people into the body. Are you making every effort to use your Spirit-unity gifts to serve others?

Spirit-uniting Speech- ¹⁵ *Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow...*

Paul tells us there are two flesh tendencies that will erode our unity- on one hand it's all love no truth. Flattery, making people feel good by either withholding what is true or telling them something that is untrue out of fear of backlash or hurting their feelings. But Paul says ²⁵ *Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body.* You cannot love your brother or sister without telling them the truth.

On the other hand, there are those of us who are all truth and no love. We tell it like it is, bluntly, whether they like it or not. Unfiltered and all at once. But Paul says to this ²⁹ *Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.* One of the ways we know the Holy Spirit is working in us and growing us is helping balance our love with truth and our truth with love. Are you making every effort to pursue Spirit-uniting words with one another?

Look around at each other in this room. We are very different from each other. Do you know how quickly and easily we could divide this room if our focus was on all our differences? If our focus was on our preferences? And not just divide in half, divide into a 50 or more little micro-factions until we look just like C.S. Lewis' Gray Town.

However, the Holy Spirit's ministry in the church is to create and help us guard the unity in the body of Christ, to bring the kingdom of heaven to Gray Town on earth. When we allow the Spirit to work through us in our attitudes, service and speech- we grow in unity and maturity together.

Here's the challenge- **What's one way the Holy Spirit is drawing you toward unity?**

Come to Faith
 Come back into in-person fellowship
 Join the church
 Join a small group
 Start serving
 Resolve a conflict- forgiving, grace...or lovingly confronting
 Taking inventory of your attitudes

Use your connection card.