

The Church Walking in Love

Ephesians 4:1–3

We arrive in the second section of Ephesians today, Ch 4. Perhaps you took a college biology or physics class that had a lab attached to it. That's meant that there were classroom lectures where you learned the theory of and formulas of the science. Then you took a separate laboratory where you did experiments that showed you how the theory worked itself out. Hopefully you didn't blow up the place when you got part of the theory or formula wrong. The letter is written in Paul's classic form; the first half, Ch's 1, 2, & 3, lay down theological truths we are to believe and how we are to think— **indicatives**, we call them. The laboratory of living in the second half tells us how we are to live out and practice those truths— the **imperatives** we call them. So Ch 4 begins with what shouldn't surprise you, "**Therefore.**" **Therefore**, based on the electing grace of the Father, the redeeming grace of the Son, and the sealing and empowering of the Holy Spirit, in Ch 1; **Therefore**, in Ch 2, in light of our **spiritual condition** that we are autopsy-dead in trespasses and sins, our **practice** of walking as a rebel to God, following Satan, and loving our sin until God, by grace, produces faith in a new heart to believe in Christ, to trust him; And, **therefore**, in Ch 3, that the mystery of God's plan of salvation is now revealed in unified body of Christ, the church, being rooted and grounded in his love; **Therefore walk, live in the reality of all that has been described thus far.** Let's read our text.

Ephesians 4:1–3 — I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ²with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

PRAY

I've made a big deal out of **therefore**, but I'm going on about it a bit more so that we are not confused about what we see here. These commands are for believers in Christ whom he has given a new heart — those who have turned from their own efforts to improve themselves and now trust Christ. He has become their substitute sin-bearer, paying sin's death penalty on their behalf. This is not a check-list for improving your behavior; it is the way Christians are to live in God's supernatural power and love that is already at work in them. If the phrase **substitute sin bearer** sounds odd in your ears, it is tied to the very heart of our problem. God is holy. He made us to live with him in perfect communion for his glory. But our first parents rebelled against him, disobeying his command and every one of us since has defied and disobeyed God from the very heart of who we are. That rebellion against God is what the Bible calls sin; the wages of sin is death. We are dead in sin.

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You may be saying, “Well, I’m not dead.” I assure you on the authority of God’s Word that apart from Christ, you are spiritually dead, separated from God, and storing up his wrath. Your present spiritual death will ultimately be fully worked out in physical death and eternal separation from God under his eternal judgment on sinners. In light of that do you see why we need a substitute sin-bearer? Complying with a check list won’t fix that. We must be rescued from the wrath of God against sinful rebels or we will be consumed by his wrath.

Because God loved us, he sent a substitute to bear his wrath — he sent his Son to save us from our sins as a substitute. Jesus Christ did that by taking our sins on himself as he was crucified on a cross, shedding his blood to pay death’s penalty. All who turn to him in faith have their sin transferred onto his account. He who knew no sin became sin so that those who believe him have their sins blotted out and are credited with his righteousness and perfect obedience. Today is the day of salvation. Today is the day to move from unbelief and rebellion into belief and life-giving submission to the Lord Jesus. When you trust him, all the power, grace, and love we see here begins to transform your life.

All right, let’s go. **v 1 — I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called...**

Walk in a manner worthy. Walking is a metaphor for how we live. This is the second time in Ephesians he uses this metaphor. The first was describing how we walked prior to Christ intervening and saving us by grace. We walked in the rebellious, sinful way of the world — the world that is systematically working to defy the rule and reign of Jesus Christ. But having been saved by grace, we are to joyfully and progressively submit to the rule and reign of Jesus Christ so that we look like him. **We call this process sanctification** — He is transforming us in an ongoing way as we are swept along in his love, conformed to his image, and empowered His Spirit. We are not to look like, sound like, act like rebellious sinners who defy him, but increasingly look like, sound like, and act like the Lord Jesus. We are all at different places in our walk. Believers are at all levels of maturity and wisdom, but in Christ, all are to be moving progressively toward Christ-likeness.

Worthy manner, as he describes it, points us to the objective reality revealed in the church: Jew and Gentile are made one, adopted into Christ; we are his body. We are to declare and display God’s glorious redemption plan. Unity in love and truth, and Evangelism to everyone, every entity,

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everywhere are the tasks we are to be about. This is the worthy high calling we are to set our GPS to. Don't think this is a call to make yourself worthy to Christ, as though you could earn some approval points. He alone is worthy. Christians are right now are accepted in the Beloved, and positionally holy in Christ. To think "I must make myself worthy" is to grievously miss the point and distract from God's unmerited grace, bringing attention to you rather than glorifying Christ, whose love is unmerited. Don't do that! Our focus is to be on Christ; we are to point everyone to Christ. If somehow you end up center-stage, you are doing it wrong. Look away from yourself. Glorify Christ by walking in the resurrection power of the Holy Spirit working in you!

Now, the context of this passage — and the rest of the letter — is the local church. We are to be advancing in unity, in love, and Gospel proclamation first in the local church. Certainly the universal church is in view, but this letter is to a particular church in Ephesus. The people I am to be patient with, to bear with in love — they are sitting in the chairs next to me, doing set up with me, studying the Scriptures with me, taking turns making meals for someone in a difficult season; they sharpen me as iron sharpens iron, they pray with me in life's decisions and challenges and about lost loved ones; They may not be as far down the road as I am in knowledge of the Bible — or perhaps they are further; people who don't look like me or like the kind of music I like because I'm a Jew and they are Gentiles. People who are richer or poorer than I, better educated or not educated at all. CEOs and sanitation workers. These are the people that I am to be unified with, the ones with whom I am to make progress in godliness while we are doing the good works that God has prepared beforehand.

When Christ places all of those different people at different levels of maturity into one body, the Church works perfectly and is conflict-free, right? Is that your experience? What is going to be necessary to walk in the unity of the Spirit? Humility, gentleness, patience, and God-sized love.

v 2 — I am to **walk with all humility**. What does this all-consuming humility look like? One of our favorite passages is Philippians 2. Your bible may just fall open there at this point. Let's see our reference point for humility. **Philippians 2:3–4** — ³Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. ⁴Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.

The first mark of humility is that it is to consider others more significant than yourself. This strikes a death blow to pride, doesn't it? Pride by definition is considering me more significant than you. I want

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what I want when I want it and I deserve it. Our pride pits us against one another dividing the church along personal preferences rather than uniting it in God's assignment. If we are to walk in unity the first thing that has to die is what brings disunity. How is it that I am to put pride to death? Remember, this is the practical application of the letter, and he gives some very practical direction. Rather than thinking of myself as more significant, I am to consider you more significant. I am to create space to look after your interests as well as mine. My concern is not just me and mine, but yours and ours.

He also tells us how we get there. v 5 in Philippians 2 — Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. When Christ gave us a new heart, he also overcame the darkness of a depraved mind. We are to look at Christ and see how he thought. He was God, but he understood our need and became our servant. He ultimately humbled himself to redeem us by becoming obedient to the Father, Creator giving himself in exchange for the created, even to death on a cross.

He did not consider equality to God as something that superseded the Father's will. Humility will require us to disregard positions and prerogatives in order to serve his body as he did and as he commands. He emptied himself. It's interesting that we use the opposite phrase with each other: you are full of yourself. But Christ emptied himself. Perhaps in a heated argument someone said, "You are full of yourself." Has anyone ever said, "You have emptied yourself in order to serve others!" Modern therapeutic counseling promotes assertiveness. Require people to consider you! Doing so walks according to the course of the world. Walking in humility is 180° from that.

Walk with all humility and gentleness. Gentleness involves having rough edges removed, abruptness, and sharpness sanded down. I think back to my healthcare days in dealing with injuries. A broken arm needs to be repositioned in order to heal. Gentleness and moving that arm may still be painful, but it doesn't add further injury in the process. Suppose someone is dealing with something that has already been injurious to a relationship or a soul. It is possible to damage things even more through sharp responses and cutting remarks. Gentleness will come as we set our minds on the Spirit and walk in the power of the spirit — because, along with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness — gentleness is fruit of the Spirit. Do not quench his work; walk in gentleness.

And walk with patience. As gentleness is fruit of the Spirit, patience comes from being transformed by God's love. Love is patient; 1 Corinthians 13:4. Our patience grows as our understanding of the breadth, length, height, and depth of God's love grows. It seems that if I have a patience problem, I need to grow in understanding the love of God — specifically with an eye to God's long-suffering steadfast love toward me. My progress in holiness is painfully slow — seemingly non-existent at times. If God were to treat me as my repeated sinful failures deserve, he would have vaporized me. As I grasp God's patience toward me, I am to become a patient conduit of love and grace to others.

And the outworking of these three Christ-like qualities: **we are to bear with one another in love.**

These all run together here, don't they? As Christ loved us in spite of our sin, so we are to bear with each other in the way that reflects his love. The word bear implies it's going to cost us something. The love and patience that we were to show to each other can be described as long-suffering. We don't ignore the fact that there may be genuine suffering. In the first church that I served full-time, I wounded a number I've seen your adult ladies, who were simply trying to be kind to me. I did it in ignorance. I was a young man focused on several things that had to be accomplished on any given Sunday morning. I taught a Sunday school class and rushed from there to a Choir Rehearsal — one end of the building to the other. As I moved from one place to another, I walked with my head down thinking about what I needed to do to get everyone ready for the service. I passed by the senior adult ladies Sunday school class every week as they were dismissing and hoping that their associate pastor would look up and smile at them. I didn't. At least until someone gently corrected me.

Consider some of these scenarios: It's fun to be in a community group with people who are as sharp as you are, as insightful and brilliant as you are — but what if you are in a group with someone who is not quite as brilliant and insightful as you are. They don't know anything about the church fathers, they don't know John Owen's position on this or that. Maybe all your friends are in the gifted and talented group, but you were put in the short bus group? Can you bear with one another in love — and love the people in front of you as they are rather than wishing they were someone else and you were somewhere else? Perhaps someone's immaturity, or even outright sin has wounded your heart. We are to bear with one another in love.

This is to be accomplished as we are rooted and grounded in the fullness of the breadth, length, height and depth of the immeasurable love of God that fills us to overflowing — which comes just a few verses before this! That's really the only way we will be able to obey this command, isn't it?

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When offense comes — when irritated, or slighted; when you need to consider others more significant than yourself, look away from yourself to the Lord Jesus, who, in love, humbled himself to drag us out of death's domain.

And more than overlooking an offensive we are to be eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Eager! Desiring to do it! Not like me. “I’ll do it if you make me.” Remember that the unity the Spirit is putting in the church reveals the mystery of God’s plan of salvation. It’s a non-negotiable. We reference this eager onus in our church covenant: We are to eagerly seek to maintain the unity of peace in the Lord’s body.

A quick final point. Unity and peace are not at any cost! “When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face!” So yelled Paul in Galatians 2 when Peter was adding legalistic works to the Gospel. There are doctrinal issues that we must robustly defend without deviance. The Gospel is at the top of that list. But not even all doctrine matters should divide. Eschatology is a doctrinal matter. Among our elders different end times views are held. I bear with the other elders in love until they come around to the correct view. While churches occasionally experience conflict fired by significant doctrinal disagreements, most conflict comes from pride and preference, petty irritation, or demands for others to grow up in an area where, by God’s grace, I’ve gained some ground. But don’t push me to grow.

When RGC members covenant to walk with each other in obedience to Jesus Christ, to walk the road of sanctification together — It’s a major challenge on every level. Learning to walk arm-in-arm in holiness and obedience at its core requires smashing my preferred idols and slaughtering my cherished darlings — preferred darlings that may ensnare me in sin outright, or at least beset me, or weigh me down. I’m happy to smash your idols, but smashing mine is another story. Our varied preferences create lots of opportunity for conflict. Bearing with one another in love means releasing expectations for things to move on your agenda, in your way, in accord with your preferences, and being filled to overflowing with all the fullness of God, swept along and serving in the breadth, length, height, and depth of the love of Christ. Such bearing with one another in love will not be realized if we do not first know the fullness of his love lavishly poured out on every believer by God himself.

PRAY