

Ephesians 4:1-3

The Christian Virtues

From Truths Known to True Selves

- ◆ In the first three chapters, Paul dealt with the great and eternal truths of the Christian faith, and with the function of the Church.
- ◆ Now, in chapters 4 - 6, he turns to what each member of the Church must be if the Church is to carry out its part in that plan.

Unity Through Christ

- ◆ The central thought of Ephesians is that Jesus has brought to a disunited world the way to unity.
- ◆ Unity through faith in Christ, and it is the Church's task to proclaim this message to all the world.
- ◆ And now Paul turns to the character that Christians must have if the Church is to fulfill the great task of being Christ's instruments of universal reconciliation between individuals, and between those same individuals and God within the world.

4¹ So then, I, the prisoner in the Lord, urge you to behave yourselves in a way that is worthy of the calling with which you are called. ²I urge you to behave with all humility, and gentleness, and patience. I urge you to bear with one another in love. ³I urge you eagerly to preserve that unity which the Holy Spirit can bring by binding things together in peace.

– Ephesians 4:1-3 Authorized King James Version 1769

“When we enter into any society, we take upon ourselves the obligation to live a certain kind of life; and if we fail in that obligation, we hinder the aims of our society and bring discredit on its name. Here, Paul paints the picture of the kind of life that people must live when they enter the fellowship of the Christian Church.

The first three verses shine like jewels. Here we have five of the great basic words of the Christian faith.”

—William Barclay, The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians, 1954, p. 148

The Christian Virtues

- ◆ Humility
- ◆ Gentleness or Meekness
- ◆ Patience or Long-Suffering
- ◆ Agape Love
- ◆ Peace in Fellowship (Implied)

Humility

- ◆ The Greek word is **tapeinphrosune** - “lowliness” of human pride (self-government); that quality of mindset of “having a humble opinion of oneself, i.e. a deep sense of one’s (moral) littleness — i.e. lowliness of mind” - (J. Thayer)
- ◆ This is a word which the Christian faith coined. In Greek, there is no word for humility which does NOT have some suggestion of meanness attached to it.
- ◆ Before Christianity, humility was not considered a virtue at all. The ancient world looked on humility as a thing to be despised.

Christian Humility

- ◆ In the days before Jesus, humility was looked on as a cowering, cringing, servile, and ignoble quality.
- ◆ Christian humility comes from self-knowledge. True humility comes when we face ourselves and see our weakness, our selfishness, our failure in working and personal relationships or achievements.
- ◆ Christian humility comes from setting our life beside the life of Christ and in light of the demands of God.

Meekness - In Complete Control

- ◆ The second of the great Christian virtues is gentleness or meekness. The Greek noun is **praotes**, and the adjective is **praus**.
- ◆ My favorite example of meekness is a warhorse in the midst of battle standing resolute despite the battle raging around it, and its rider; so well trained and disciplined that it will do whatever it is called upon to do.
- ◆ Aristotle defines it as the mid-point between being too angry and never being angry at all.
- ◆ Put another way, the person who is **praus** is the one who is stirred by indignation at the wrongs and sufferings of others, but is never moved to anger by any personal wrongs or insults.

Long-Suffering Patience

- ◆ The Greek word is **makrothumia** - Christian patience is the spirit which never admits defeat, which will not be broken by any misfortune or suffering, by any disappointment or discouragement, but which persists to the end.
- ◆ It also has the more characteristic meaning for patience with others. It is the spirit which bears insult and injury without bitterness and without complaint.
- ◆ It is the spirit which can suffer unpleasant people with graciousness and fools without irritation.

Christian Love

- ◆ This is where I first came to understand the limits of the English language! Our one word for love makes it very difficult to divine what is meant and is very context dependent.
- ◆ Greek, on the other hand, has four words for love:
 - ◆ **eros** (sexual love and passion);
 - ◆ **philia** (deep friendship or brotherly love);
 - ◆ **storge** (familial affection and love);
 - ◆ **agape** (the highest form of love; selfless, sacrificial, and unconditional).

Agape

- ◆ Was the Greek word **agape** widely used before the Christian era?
 - ◆ No.
- ◆ The Pre-Christian History of **agape**:
 - ◆ Classical Greek Literature
 - ◆ Broad, non-passionate affection or contentment
 - ◆ It was considered a linguistically “neutral word” without deep theological weight.
 - ◆ Septuagint Expansion
 - ◆ When Jewish scholars translated the Hebrew Torah into Greek, they’d used **agape** and **agapao** to translate various Hebrew words for love — including **chesed** (God’s loyal, covenant love)

New Testament

- ◆ The New Testament elevated **agape** to the supreme virtue.
- ◆ Rather than a love based on the worth of the object, **agape** became defined as a love originating entirely from the character of the giver.
- ◆ The ultimate definition shifted from a contract or covenant to an act of ultimate sacrifice.
- ◆ The apostle John famously summarized this transformation by writing, “**God is agape**” (1 John 4:8)
- ◆ Paul dedicated an entire chapter (1 Corinthians 13) to defining its patient, selfless nature.

Peace or Sacred Oneness

- ◆ These four great virtues of the Christian life — humility, gentleness, patience, love — lead to a fifth, peace.
- ◆ It is Paul's urgent request that the people to whom he is writing should eagerly preserve the 'sacred oneness' which should characterize the true Church.

“Peace may be defined as right relationships one with another. This oneness, this peace and these right relationships can be preserved in one way. Everyone of the four great Christian virtues depends on the obliteration of self. As long as self is at the center of things, this oneness can never fully exist. In a society where self predominates, people cannot form anything but a disintegrated collection of individuals and warring units. But when self dies and Christ springs to life within our hearts, then comes the peace, the oneness, which is the great hallmark of the true Church.”

—William Barclay, The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians, 1954, p. 153

Conclusions

- ◆ Of the four Greek words for Christian virtues, **two** are uniquely Christian: **tapeinphrosune** and **agape** (humility and selfless love).
- ◆ Along with the other two, **praus** and **makrothumia** (meekness and gracious long-suffering), these virtues mold us into our “true selves” as we are transformed by our study of scriptural truth to humble self-knowledge leading to bringing our excesses under control and having concern for others.
- ◆ It is Paul’s urgent request that the people to whom he is writing should eagerly preserve the ‘sacred oneness’ which should characterize the true Church.