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Fall Kick-Off
Message: People Committed to Unity

Transcribed Message
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Ephesians 4:1-6; 2:11-13

To say that we live in a divided world is an obvious understatement. We are facing some of those same things in the church. When I just think about that and that statement and what that might mean, if we are an incredibly divided country and if some of that division and disharmony is coming into the church, then my immediate thought is we need a time of repentance. We need a time of personal soul-searching. What's happening out there should never be being imported into here if it's divisive and harmful. What's happening in here should in fact be what is being imported out there for the greatest impact of the gospel. The list of what is dividing not just our citizenry, not just our country, but even more particularly this morning for our thoughts, what is dividing Christians? The list is growing. Mask mandates. Vaccine passports. Critical race theory. Social justice. Global warming. Systemic racism. Homosexuality. Politics. Evolution. Women's role in the church. We could go on. Things that just to bring up in a discussion, bring to light some very strong and very emotional feelings. Someone might very well say the evil genius behind all of it is social media.

Every year at this time, we step out of our series and because this is our kickoff Sunday for fall ministry, we just focus on a subject a little bit different than what we were working on in our series. That's what we're going to do this year. Back in 2017 we did "People of the Book". In 2018 "People of the Spirit". 2019 we were "People on a Mission". In 2020 we were "People in Community". Now here in '21, we're "People Committed to Unity". Here's what I want to see this morning. When differences become barriers, we harm the very unity that Christ has died to provide for us. There are a lot of passages in the New Testament that we could turn to if we wanted to focus on this matter of unity. John 17, which we'll read from in just a little bit. 1 Corinthians. Romans 14 is an excellent passage. But a key part of what Paul does in his letter to the church

at Ephesus deals with this matter of unity. That is where we're going to step this morning for this one Sunday together in the book of Ephesians.

The background to this book, you might remember if you think in terms of the occasion in which it was written, Paul is in prison. He is writing to the church at Ephesus. At that same period of time he wrote the book of Philippians, and he wrote the book of Colossians, and he wrote Philemon, and he writes to the church in Ephesus. That's why they are called prison epistles. Do you know where he was being held during this time? He was imprisoned and under house arrest in Rome. So we still have a connection with our study in Rome.

The purpose of the book of Ephesians is a general emphasis on just encouraging these people to grow in their walk with God. It's not like some of the other letters that Paul wrote that there was a very specific problem like in 1 Corinthians. That church was just a mess. There were all kinds of things that he was having to take on and deal with. When he wrote 2 Corinthians, he was dealing with the fact that his apostleship was under attack. When he writes Galatians, it's the gospel that's being attacked. When he writes Colossians, it's the person and work of Christ that is under attack. But when you come to Ephesians, it is nothing like that. He's writing primarily to say to these people this is what I want for you. I want you to understand more of the greatness of the grace of God in your life. I want you to understand more of who you are in Christ. That's why the first three chapters we have this wonderful doctrinal section and then in chapters 4 to 6, it's like Paul says in light of all of that, live this out. What he wants us to live out is the fact that we are united as one by the grace of God. We're united by one as the grace of God.

The very first thing he launches into is the nature of this walk. The nature of the believer's walk. He begins in that first verse Ephesians chapter 4 with an appeal. His appeal sounds like this: "I therefore, a prisoner of the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called." Right at the beginning of the verse, our Bible study ears perk up because we see the word "therefore". Every time we see a "therefore", we know there's something that the author is wanting us to pay attention to because he's most likely in some kind of a transition. He is wanting us to look back at something he just said. In this case it is obviously chapters 1 through 3.

And then he's saying I'm going to something else; therefore, with these things in mind here's what I want you to do based on everything that I've said to this point. Paul's going to do the same thing when we get to Romans 12. I beseech you therefore brethren by the mercies of God. In light of 11 chapters. That was Paul's often repeated style. He would make these transitional comments. It's just a good reminder to us that the Christian life is based on knowledge. That is what he is doing. He is pointing us back to everything he just said.

He said therefore on the basis of all that you've heard, on all that I've given you instruction about the Christian life, is based on knowledge. The Christian life is not simply based on some experience that we might have. It's not based on emotion. It's not simply based on feelings. Those things are all valid and all have their place, but they're not the basis by which we live out the Christian life. We live the Christian life based on the revelation of the truth of God. This is how we behave. We behave because we are informed by the Word of God. The Spirit of God works through the Word of God. We have said many times that right living begins with right-thinking, and right-thinking begins with thinking right about God and about who we are and about what He has revealed to us and what He has made known to us. It just impresses on us again that this is what Paul has in mind.

When you look at the 12th verse in the same chapter, Paul makes this kind of overarching statement about why he's writing this. To equip the saints for the work of ministry for building up the body of Christ. This is what he wants to do. He wants them to be equipped for the work of ministry. That's what we're doing this morning. This morning, this hour, and the hour to follow in every other time we meet together in a small group setting around the Word of God, we're basically saying we want to be equipped by this Word to live life effectively, to be equipped for the calling that God has placed on our life, to know God, to love others, to live out, to share the gospel, to be making disciples who make disciples. That's the whole thrust of what Paul is doing for us here.

The second thing that he does in verse 2 is he brings before us the attitude that we are going to have to have. The attitude that's necessary. Verse 2. "...with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love." Here are four

characteristics then that are to mark our lives. Just look at those four. There's humility. There's gentleness. There's patience. There's a bearing with one another. Think about what we're doing this morning. People who are committed to unity. Realizing that whatever is happening in the body life or within our own personal life, if we're out of harmony and out of step with the Word of God, then we're not going to be realizing what it is that God wants to do and achieve in our life. Paul says here are the attitudes that you have to have to realize this kind of unity.

Not surprisingly, he starts with humility. He starts with humility which is simply to say do you have a proper and correct understanding of yourself? Do you know what it is that you need to know about your own self? An attitude of humility. It takes us to the other letter Paul wrote while he was in prison to the church at Philippi. Second chapter verse 5. "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus", who being in the form of God did not think it was robbery to be made like God, to humble Himself ultimately to come to this earth to experience the incarnation. That is humility. To take the towel in the Gospel of John at the Last Supper and wash the feet of the disciples. Humility is where it begins. Gentleness, which is strength under control. It is the idea of meekness. Patience. We have a nonretaliatory posture towards each other. And then bearing with one another. The grace to overlook an offense. Look at those four. You look at those four and it's pretty obvious that these are not necessarily natural traits. This certainly is not natural personality. This isn't what just flows out of us by our very nature. No, not at all. We look at that and we go these are the very evidences of the fruit of the Spirit being produced in our life. What a key to understanding how it is that we're going to relate to each other in harmony, and how we going to step into difficult and hard things and still maintain unity. We're going to do it because we're people of humility, because we're people characterized by gentleness, by patience, by a forbearing spirit.

Then he gives to us the aim of all of this in verse 3. Eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. That's the goal. There is the aim. And what is it? It is unity. It's unity that he has in mind. You notice that we are to be eager to maintain this unity. It is a verb that is in the present tense. It is a continual striving after and working toward something. It takes effort, in other words. It takes diligence. It is not one of these one and done things. It's something that we are to be continually attentive to. Be eager

to pursue unity. When you're wronged, when you're offended, when someone says something to you that you have an immediate visceral disagreement with, you have a strongly held conviction or feeling, you immediately have one of two choices. There maybe more but at least one of two choices. Those circumstances unfold in our life every day. We have a choice. We can strike back in kind. We can respond in kind. We can make our point and we can make it loudly. We can let them know in no uncertain terms that we disagree with them and they've got it wrong and here's why they have it wrong. Or, we can seek to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. What does that require? What he just laid out. It requires that we are walking in the power of the Spirit. When the Spirit is producing within us the fruit of the Spirit, there is humility. There is gentleness. There is patience. There is forbearance.

You notice that it is a preserving of the unity. Be eager to maintain, to preserve this unity. That's our responsibility. This is God's charge to us. Your job is to keep it. Your job is to maintain it. You're not to create it. We don't have the capacity to create it. God has created it. You and I can destroy it. We can harm it. We can damage the unity of the body of Christ. But we can't create it. It has been created by what Christ did. Sinful attitudes, sinful words, sinful acts create divisions. Self-interest always leads to disharmony.

Here's my question. What am I doing to preserve the unity of the Spirit and the bond of peace? That is the command that has been given to every one of us. What am I doing to preserve the unity of the Spirit and the bond of peace? I would think the application of that question might look something like this. We can first of all take it out there. We can take it out there – to the places where we work, places where we play, into our neighborhood, into our school, into our family, into our marriage. All of those opportunities to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace are before us every day. We're making choices every day. We're either going to be responding in kind or we're going to be clothed in humility, gentleness, patience, and forbearance.

But then there's also the opportunities that are in here. I don't mean just simply in these four walls, but I mean in here in the sense of body life, family life within the Covenant family. Let me ask you a couple more questions. What's your reputation? What do you think your reputation is? For being one of these people who's maintaining

the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. What do you think your reputation is within the body of Christ? What do you think your reputation is within the context of the life of this family? What are you known for? Are you known as an encourager? Are you known, as Paul says in verse 12, as an equipper? Are you known as a divider? Are you known as a critic? I think in this present hour we could use a lot of peacemakers and a lot of peacekeepers. The mess that is out there to the extent that it comes in here calls on us as the people of God to break down in repentance and sorrow and lament before God that we are acting in so many ways just like the world is. Just think of what happens every moment of every day on social media. I for the life of me cannot figure out why Christians step into that arena unless they are deliberately clothed in humility, gentleness, patience, and forbearance. And then it's gone in about three seconds. But if you're going to open up that social media avenue, then you probably need to prayerfully consider what your intention is here because what is out there can't be exported into here. What's in here God intends to have exported out there. That's the question that Paul presses on us. To encourage us in our efforts.

Look at what he does. He moves us secondly to the nature of the believers' unity. He wants us to see the kind of unity that we have. In verses 4 through 6, he says: "There is one body and one Spirit just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call. One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all." Here's what I want us to understand first. This matter of unity that he's talking about. What is it not? It's not just some organizational unity. It's not an organizational unity that we dress up and present to somebody or to people to make some kind of a statement about the fact that we're united. It's not organizational that he has in view here.

It is not uniformity. He doesn't have in mind uniformity. He is not talking about the fact that within us we all like to have people be like us, to look like us, to act like us, to believe like us. I'm not talking about essentials of the faith. I'm talking about just in general to believe the way we believe. To vote the way we vote. Whatever it is. That's what I want very often. No doubt that's what you often want as well. We want to be uniformly looking alike. And yet we step back and we look at the New Testament and it is abundantly clear that if there is anything that God is speaking about in regard to His

church is that there is this great diversity that is to exist within the church. The goal of the church is not that we all look alike and act alike and talk alike and sound alike and believe alike and vote alike. Everything being the same is kind of boring. He intends for there to be diversity in Galatians 3.

Paul says in Christ you are all children of God. What is he talking about? He is talking about something spiritual here. Notice secondly, this unity that he is talking about is spiritual in nature. In John 17 in that amazing prayer of our Lord that we looked at a few years ago, Jesus says in verse 21 His prayer to the Father for us on our behalf. This is Jesus praying for us. "That they may all be one just as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us so that the world may believe that You have sent Me. The glory that You have given Me I have given to them that they may be one even as We are one, I in them and You in Me that they may become perfectly one so that the world may know that You sent Me and loved them even as You loved Me." Ours, in other words, is a spiritual unity. That is the whole point of Jesus's prayer. This isn't some kind of organizational unity. This isn't uniformity. It is truly a spiritual reality of what Jesus has done for us pictured in the relationship between the Father and the Son. Imagine that. This is a perfect unity. Perfect harmony between the Father and Son. Jesus says I want that for them. I want them to experience that kind of unity, that kind of harmony.

Then to be sure that we don't misunderstand, look at the description that Paul steps into in verses 4 through 6. In these verses, we have what is truly the unity of the body of Christ and it revolves around the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Let's look through these seven very quickly. The first one he says that there is the fact that we are in one body. He is talking about the universal church. He's talking about the invisible church. All around the world there are believers. That is why our heart breaks. That is why we pray constantly for the believers of Afghanistan. Why? Because we're one with them. We're in a spiritual unity with them. When one part of the body hurts, the other part of the body hurts. That's what he's saying to us here. we are one in that sense. We come to faith in Christ. We step into this new family, this new relationship. It transcends every other relationship that you have. All the sudden you're a part of something new

and different that you've never experienced before. Now you are one in the body of Christ.

There is one Spirit, he says. That is of course a reference to the Holy Spirit. The one who does this convicting work, the one who calls us, the one who regenerates us, the one who baptizes us into the body of Christ, the one who sanctifies us. It is the Holy Spirit who is the common denominator between all of us so that when you meet somebody that you have not known before and you're in a conversation with them, what is it that so often causes you to realize this person has got something in common with you. As you step further into that conversation, it is clear that they are a believer. It is Romans 8:9. But if you do not have the Spirit of God, you do not belong to Him. But you have the Spirit in you. You are a part of this spiritual union. There is something special about that.

There's one hope. We all began in the same place. We all began in the same place. We all began without God, without Christ, without hope in this world. Ephesians 2. That's how we started. Every one of us started without God, without hope, without Christ. We believe and Christ in you the hope of glory. You step into this new hope, this new destiny. Now your destiny is to be with Christ. Your destiny is more than that. Romans 8. It is to be like Christ. So we have this great hope within us.

There is one Lord. In Acts 4:12, when Peter said there is no other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved, he is talking about the fact that there is one Lord. The early church believers were martyred for their faith because they refused to say Caesar is Lord. They wouldn't say that. They would only say Jesus is Lord. I'm sure that there are believers who are going to be martyred in Afghanistan because they will not say Mohammed is Lord. They will only say Jesus is Lord. That's what he saying to us here.

Christ is the head of the church. Christ is the head of this church. We owe all of our allegiance to Him. If there is conflict in the body that causes division, then somebody is out of step with their Lord. It's that simple.

One faith. A reference to the revealed faith of the Word of God. That is why Jude said contend earnestly for the faith. Because we have one faith, there is the revealed

Word of God. Colossians 2:7 tells us that we are rooted and built up and established in the faith. It is talking about the revealed Scriptures, the Word of God.

Next there's one baptism. We'll skip that one in the interest of unity. No, the baptism here is the baptism of the Spirit. It's not the baptism that divides so often the church of who should get baptized, when they should get baptized, how they should be baptized. This is the baptism of the Holy Spirit that everybody experiences at the moment of faith. We're brought into this family. Water baptism is how we publicly express this internal faith that we have.

Then finally, there is one God and Father. We end where we started by affirming that this unity is a Trinitarian unity. It's a unity that is wrapped up in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Think with me again. It's okay for there to be differences. That's just the way it is. But when we allow our differences to become actually barriers between each other, then we are in fact guilty of harming the very unity that Christ said He died to provide and create for us. I would suggest to you that is a very serious thing to consider. Let's get practical in these closing minutes. I want to share just three thoughts with you. The first one is simply to say when we say "we", when we say "us", it's because a radical change has taken place. When we talk about being in the body of Christ, we talk about the relationship that we have. When we step into a personal relationship with God, it's not a private relationship. It is a personal relationship but it's not a private relationship. We're brought into a new community. We're brought into a new family. The old has passed away. Behold, all things are become new. Whatever defined us before, whatever unity we felt that we had with another group— maybe it was nationality, maybe it was ethnicity, maybe it was in some way gender, maybe it was politics, whatever it was that you thought united you in some special way to another group of people – God says it's all transcended when you become a part of the "we" and a part of the "us". You are now a new creation. Ephesians 2 verse 11. "Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh called the uncircumcision by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands. Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the

covenants of promise having no hope and without God in the world, but now in Christ Jesus you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.”

Do you think that struggles within the church are somehow new in 2021? Of course not. They had serious struggles in the 1st century. The Jews and the Gentiles did not like each other. There was literally hatred towards each other. Yet what we just read. They were brought into this family and a radical change took place. It took the equipping work of the Spirit and the Word to help them to bridge those differences and bring down those barriers to where there was that harmony that God intended for there to be.

Secondly, how we treat one another is what ultimately will set us apart. How we treat one another will ultimately set us apart. If I'm guided now as a child of God, filled with and controlled by the Spirit, if I'm now a person of humility and gentleness and patience and forbearance, I can disagree with you but not have to demonize you. Why can't we disagree with each other but not demonize each other? Why can't we disagree with each other without stepping on to some higher level of self-righteousness and virtue signaling and saying to you as we look down on each other, I just wish you were as smart as I am and understood these issues as clearly as I do. You're never there if you start off with humility. How we treat each other requires us, if we're going to honor Christ, to lay aside the fleshly responses that so naturally are part of how we want to react and instead walk by the Spirit. These people in this room are your spiritual family by the design of the sovereign Lord of the universe. He intends for you to get along with them. He intends for you to love them and they to love you.

Then finally, Jesus has to be at the center of it all. Jesus has to be at the center. The gospel has to be the focus. There's nothing in that initial list that we looked at the beginning that should be of greater occupation to us and greater attention getting than the gospel and Jesus. If you find yourself talking about all the things that are going on out there in the world more than you're ever talking about the gospel and about your walk with God and your relationship to Christ, then I would suggest something is very disproportionate in your experience. Those things are of this world. We're just passing through. It's Jesus at the center of our conversation that guides us. It's the gospel that brings change. To the extent that we don't center on Jesus and the Gospel, to that

extent we harm the church. We are called to spur one another on to love and good deeds. We do that, my friend, by stepping into the gospel ourselves.

If you've never put your faith and trust in Jesus as your personal Savior, that's the first thing we would love for you to experience. We want you to experience the forgiveness of sin. We want you to know that the gap that exists between all of us and God has ultimately been bridged by Jesus Christ. It is simply by a response of faith and trust in what Jesus did and what He did alone that God imparts to us and He gives to us the gift of eternal life. We want that for all of us.

Let's pray. Gracious Father, how thankful we are for the church, the body of Christ. Father, how thankful I am for this expression of that body called Covenant Community Church. Lord, I'm thankful that within this body Your Spirit is at work and Your Word is equipping us. Father God, I pray to the extent that we need to repent that we need to turn from sinful attitudes and sinful expressions and words and actions. Father, I pray to that extent Your Spirit would cause us to confess and turn from those sins and to know the forgiveness and joy of what it is to walk in harmony with You and with each other. I pray that we would be eager, that we would be aggressive pursuers of peace, and that it would be the name of Jesus that is lifted up in this place and that glorious gospel would be exported to the world that You have placed us in. For we pray in Jesus's name, amen.