

Small Group Leaders Notes

Ephesians 4:1-3

Context

- **The relationship between chs1-3 and chs4-6**
 - In chapters 1-3 Paul has been telling us about God's great plan of salvation. "Through Jesus Christ, who died for sinners and was raised from death, God is creating something entirely new, not just a new life for individuals for a new society. Paul sees an alienated humanity being reconciled, a fractured humanity being united, even a new humanity being created. It is a magnificent vision." (Stott.)
 - Now in chapters 4-6 Paul "moves on from the new society to the new standards which are expected of it. So he turns from exposition to exhortation, from what God has done (in the indicative) to what we must be and do (in the imperative), from doctrine to duty, 'from the credenda ... to the agenda', from mind-stretching theology to its down-to-earth, concrete implications in everyday living." (Stott.)
 - Whilst there is a division between chapters 1-3 and chapters 4-6 it is important to recognise that the two halves are closely interconnected as we will see in 4:1-3.
- **"As a Prisoner for the Lord, then..."**
 - As Paul turns from exposition to exhortation he describes himself using the same terms that he used in 3:1. Paul could have appealed to his apostleship as the basis for what he was about to tell them to do but instead he appeals to his suffering as a Prisoner of Christ for their sake. The Jewish Paul has shown his commitment to unity by suffering for Gentiles, this is the basis for his appeal to unity in 4:1-3.
- **"Live a life..."**
 - 4:1-3 are not only connected with what has gone before in chs1-3 but also with what is to come in the rest of the letter.
 - Living (sometimes translated walking) has already occurred in ch2 in relation to our old way of life (2:1-3) and the new good deeds that God has prepared for us to walk in (2:10 - the ESV translation picks this up "*For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.*")
 - This theme of living/walking now runs through the rest of the letter (4:17, 5:2, 5:8, 5:15.) This helps us to see how "living a life worthy of the calling you have received" is the headline and summary of 4:1-6:24, everything else flows from this verse.
- **"The calling you have received..."**
 - Paul has spent chapters 1-3 unpacking this calling. O'Brien writes "*As believers they have already been called into the blessings of salvation (1:3-14) with its wonderful hope (1:18). They have been united with Christ in his resurrection and exaltation so that they now share in his rule over the new creation (1:20-22; 2:6). Both Jews and Gentiles have been reconciled to God by the death of Christ and called into the one new humanity (2:13-16). They have become members of God's household, the new temple in the Lord (2:15, 19, 21), and have freedom of access to the Father by one Spirit (2:18). As those who have been called into one body, the church (cf. Col. 3:15), they have a divinely ordained role in God's purposes for the cosmos (Eph. 3:10). But God's gracious calling not only bestows great privileges on them; it also carries with it solemn responsibilities.*"

- Stott summarises God’s calling for his new society as a call to be united and to be holy. With this in mind we can then see how Paul writes about the unity of the church in 4:1-16 and the holiness (set apartness) of the church in 4:17 onwards.
- **“Keep the unity...”**
 - Although we are just studying 4:1-3 in this first study it is worth noticing how these verses fit into the rest of chapter 4. As we have just seen the theme of unity runs through 4:1-16 and particularly 4:4-6 where Paul stresses the oneness of the church.
 - Unity has been a key theme in the letter right from 1:9-10 through 2:11-22 and it will continue to be a key theme in the rest of the letter.

Notes

- **“I urge you”** - Paul was an apostle so he could have commanded them to do these things. Instead he chooses to urge them as a prisoner for the Lord. To urge has the sense of exhorting even begging them to do what Paul says. We must not see Paul’s applications in ch4-6 as mere advice. He is begging us to live a life worthy of the calling we have received.
- **A call to imitate Christ** - Each of the virtues that Paul urges the Ephesians to display can be found elsewhere in the New Testament and they are seen most clearly in the Lord Jesus. Paul is therefore encouraging the church to imitate Christ which is hardly surprising when we consider that the church is the body of Christ (3:6.)
- **Humble** - Humility was not something that Greek society celebrated. If someone was described as humble they were usually being insulted. In contrast the New Testament celebrates the humility of Christ (re-read Philippians 2:1-11). As Coekin says *“Being humble is not being shy. It means restraining our sense of entitlement to be the focus of other people’s care and attention, by submitting ourselves to others with respect, in order to promote their best interests.”* Similarly Lewis said, *“Humility is not thinking less of yourself; it is thinking of yourself less.”*
- **Gentle** - Gentle or meek was one of the ways that Jesus described himself (Matthew 11:29). He is the King who came and established his kingdom without force but with meekness (Matthew 21:5.) Again Coekin helpfully reminds us that *“Being gentle is not being weak. It means dealing with other people with kindness rather than roughness, with empathetic compassion rather than demanding force, and with soft encouragement rather than hard bullying.”*
- **Patient, Bearing in Love** - *“Patience’ is that long-suffering which makes allowance for others’ shortcomings and endures wrong rather than flying into a rage or desiring vengeance”* (O’Brien.) Bearing with one another is the practical expression of patience. As we loving bear with each others faults we are imitating the loving patience and forbearance of Christ who was incredibly patient with everyone he met and has been incredibly patient with each of us!
- **“Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit...”** - Paul is not urging the Ephesians to create unity but instead to maintain the unity that the Spirit has already established. Paul devoted much of chapter 2 to show us how God has Jews and Gentiles together through the death of Christ (2:11-22) and in 4:4-6 he will remind us of all that unites us.

- There is also an important connection between v2 and v3. Humility, gentleness, patience and forbearance are all key virtues if we are to maintain our visible unity that the Spirit has established.

Big Idea - Imitate Jesus as you live out your Spirit-given unity together

Application

- The applications of this passage are self-evident. The key is to tease out what humility, gentleness and patiently bearing with one another in love will look like in our local church.
- Similarly we need to think practically about what it will look like to maintain our unity when we can be as many as 200 on a Sunday morning? How do we do this in practice?
- There will be specific applications that are highlighted in the sermon which you may want to pick up and discuss further.

Bible Study

Starter Question - Unity is vital in any organisation. Why is unity so important? What are some of the different ways that people try to foster and maintain unity?

Unity is obviously a key theme in these verses. This question is designed to get us thinking about unity. Encourage people to think about their experiences at work or as part of a team. Perhaps people have had some particularly interesting team building experiences that they might like to share.

1. Paul urges us ‘to live a life worthy of the calling you have received,’ but what is our calling? Re-read 2:11-22. What were we? What are we now?

You could survey the whole of chapters 1-3 to see what our calling is but this could take quite a long time. My suggestion is to focus on 2:11-22 because the key ideas of unity and holiness come through clearly. There are lots of details in these verses but the key things to see are our previous alienation from God and his people and how we have now been reconciled to God, united to one another as God’s holy temple.

The big aim is for us to see that as Christians we have a great calling which we are to live up to.

2. In what ways is Jesus “completely humble and gentle, patient and bearing in love?”

It may be that your group can immediately think of examples of how Jesus displayed these qualities. You might want them to consider passages such as Matthew 21:1-5, Philippians 2:1-11, Mark 10:45, Matthew 18:23-35. This is not an exhaustive list and you will no doubt be able to think of other examples. The big aim is not to look at every possible passage

but to help the group to see that v2 is not a random list of virtues but instead a picture of Jesus.

3. Take each of these virtues in turn and discuss;

1. what they will look like in practice in church life?

2. When we find it hard display these virtues around church? In what situations do we find it hardest to imitate Jesus?

The sermon on Sunday may have begun to address some of these questions and may provide you with a launch pad to application. It is important to remember that Paul is speaking in the context of the local church so try and encourage application with regard to the church rather than family or work (as important as these things are.) These questions will be really profitable if we talk specifically about our local church rather than just church in general. Try and avoid letting the discussion turn into a collective moan but at the same time try and encourage the group to be honest about struggles.

4. BEC can be a large and diverse group of people on a Sunday morning. What practical things can we do to maintain and display our unity together? Are there things that we do that undermine our unity?

Again Sunday's sermon may provide you with a launchpad for application. Try and be as practical and specific to BEC as possible. Encourage the group to consider both corporate and personal applications. What can BEC as a whole do better? What can we as individuals do better? Why not try and set each other a challenge of putting into practice on Sunday what you have discussed as a group.

These studies in Ephesians 4 may well be quite short and application focused due to the length of the passages each week. This is no bad thing because it encourages us to spend lots of time applying God's word and lots of time praying in these applications.