

Sermon Growth Guide

May 25, 2025 One in the Spirit



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He is Able - Ephesians 4:1-16

Key Verse: Ephesians 4:3-4 "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called."

Big Idea: Prayer is about relationship: we are made one with God and with one another as we pray in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Foundations

The book of Ephesians continues to teach us about how we are called to not just practice prayer, but to live in a spirit of prayer. So far, Paul has written about the Holy Spirit's power at work in us; the blessings and purpose God has for us in Christ; and the grace that allows us to ask the Lord for His intervention. Paul doesn't just give instructions; he also includes prayers.

A majority of the Ephesian church would have consisted of Gentiles who knew they were not originally "God's chosen people." So, he addresses Jews and Gentiles alike, people from different backgrounds who are now, mysteriously, members of the same family. What could go wrong? Well, numerous misunderstandings, challenges and divisions had emerged.

Chapter 4 focuses on themes of unity, maturity, and humility. Paul also writes about spiritual gifts and the fruits of the Spirit. He implores believers to shift how they live so that their actions will reflect God's love and the new life they have in Christ. Perhaps most evident in this passage is Paul's emphasis on being one (7x). Living, working, and serving in unity: what a witness to the world!

Understanding God's Word

Read Ephesians 3:7-11 and Psalm 68.

Verses 7-10 are often glossed over because they seem more like a sidenote or digression. But they speak to God's extravagant grace! Here, Paul writes about the cosmos-unifying power of Christ's incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension. By quoting Psalm 68:18 and shifting the focus from "receiving" to "giving," he emphasizes the Old Testament prophecy of God's victory and the New Testament understanding of Christ's work. What, according to Paul, is the result of Christ's victory and ascension? Why is that important to how we understand the purpose of our gifts? How does unity emerge?

Applying God's Word

Paul encourages us to be united around Christ's generous gift of grace, love, and peace. How w does Paul describe Christ followers who are not making the efforts to grow? What things do we (personally or corporately) need to confess, let go of, or talk about in order for unity to be a priority?

Witnessing God's Word

The church has a clear opportunity to demonstrate who Jesus is through our unity in how we live and serve. What divisions are getting in the way of us being one in the Spirit? How can we work to be one, united voice in prayer and in practice?

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Right now, you may be saying, now wait a minute, that's not Ellen Dawson. You're right. Our Missions Pastor, Rev. Ellen Dawson, was on tap to preach this Sunday, but her stepmother passed away last week and the services were yesterday. She is with family today. But I'm not exactly a substitute. You know me. In fact, this week I am officially marking nine years as the Lead Pastor of our church. But actually, it's not our church. It's not my church. It's not your church. Whose church is it? "Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work." (Ephesians 4:15-16) It's probably His church. Christ is the Head; we are privileged to be counted as part of the body.

We are in a series called In A Spirit of Prayer. We are connected to God in prayer, plugged in to that great power that created us, redeemed us, and sustains us by His Spirit. We have, each of us, deep within us an inner sanctum where Christ dwells, if we have opened our lives to Him and named Him Savior and Lord. In prayer we are united to God. Last week we talked about knowing the fullness of the love of God within us, knowing something that surpasses knowledge, the love of God. It is only possible because God dwells in us by the Holy Spirit and from within our very souls draws us up into the full love of God, the same love shared between the Holy Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Prayer is going into that inner place and knowing that love. Now we see, that same act of prayer, that same gift of prayer, it is not just an individual thing. This is not a solo sport. It is the activity of a community of believers, the Body of Christ, and it not only unites us with God but also unites us with one another. As we pray, we are One in the Spirit.

The church demonstrates to the world the reality of a supernatural unity. The world thinks the church is divisive. It is actually the most uniting force on the face of the planet. If you are in Christ, you are brothers and sisters with one another. We are united right around the globe. Just in this room sits men and women, young children and old... not children, people who have great means and have known great success and others who are scraping it together or rebuilding after failed endeavors. We walk into the same room. Racial divisions evaporate; national divisions; political divisions. I hope you see it. I'm sure you still feel some differences. That's natural. But do you feel the power that unites the Body under Jesus Christ its Head? We are fairly well divided out there. There are many forces seeking to keep us divided and incensed at one another. A former Pastor, Jim Singleton, used to say, the Devil is a divider! The Spirit of Christ unites. The more we lean into that unity, the more the world will see there is a God in heaven who sent His Son Jesus to save us, and He has the power to unite His church. God creates unity in His church. You and I, we have to ask ourselves will we cooperate or violate when it comes to the unity of the Holy Spirit?

"As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received." (Ephesians 4:1) Prisoner? I thought Jesus set me free. True freedom is in serving Jesus; sometimes that means giving up your personal preferences for the wellbeing of His Body, His Bride, the church. Martin Luther said, "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject of all, subject to all." Will you freely serve the unity of the Body of Christ? Will you cooperate or violate? How do I cooperate? "Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace." (Ephesians 4:2-3) Be completely humble and gentle.

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"Can that work? I thought I needed to be pushy and aggressive to make it in this world." Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit, the bond of peace. "Now that's right out. The only way to make a church change is to entrench myself in my discontent with others of like mind." Hmmm.

We are a big church. There are many pockets of interest in this church, lots of opportunities to entrench ourselves, defend our interests and increase division. What does it mean, "make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit"? Well, each of us, we can either cooperate, or violate that unity. But the unity is the reality, the division is the deception. It doesn't say, "so then you will be," it says because you are, in truth, by the power of the very blood of Jesus Christ, you are one body: "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all." (Ephesians 4:4-6)

When I first arrived in 2016. I found a church in distress. This was mostly among the Staff. I figured it was due to prior leadership and would easily heal. But it was deeper. The staff was divided into two teams, systematically. The Staff and Session were distant. Staff were scared of Elders; Elders didn't know how to approach Staff. But it didn't end there. We could see a dividing wall between Staff and congregation. Pastors, Elders, Staff, Members. "If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other." (Galatians 5:15) We tried to unify, but ultimately it would take a full reorganization, accompanied by a steady intolerance of divisive behaviors. It is getting so much better now. Easter was the most joyful experience of harmonious partnership I have felt on this team.

The point is, this is not an irrelevant text. All churches struggle to live into

the unity Christ has won. I could tell you stories that would curl your nose hairs! Honestly, First Pres, our stories would be the G-rated version. But they are real. Will we violate or cooperate with the unity the Spirit is building? We are turning the corner to gain a new preferred future. What will that look like? One team. One body with many gifts. "But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. This is why it says: 'When he ascended on high, he took many captives and gave gifts to his people." (Ephesians 4:7-8) When we are tempted to diminish one another, to prefer division, to entrench, we will remember this. We will remember how we are one Body under one Head, and, "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I don't need you!' And the head cannot say to the feet, 'I don't need you!" (1 Corinthians 12:22) One body. One Lord. One team. Because whose church is it? Not mine. Not yours. It's His. Make every effort to cooperate not violate the unity. Craig Groeschel said, "I would argue with all my heart that one of our spiritual enemy's greatest schemes is to divide the body of Christ. Why? Because if we are united, we are unstoppable in what we can do for the glory of God on earth. But if we are divided. we are deluded and we are weak and ineffective in the way that God would want to use us." But that's just within our own beautiful Christian community and it is a beautiful Christian community. What about division between churches, between families, between nations?

When we are in a Spirit of prayer, we are united, we are one. When we put our own preferences aside for the sake of unity, we grow. It is a chance to become mature. Not old. Old and mature are two different things. Mature Christian disciples. "Until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and

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craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ." (Ephesians 4:13-15) When that happens, the world takes notice. God is at work.

Tomorrow is Memorial Day. It is a day we remember the sacrifices made for our freedom and unity. We have a strong military community in this town, but this isn't a weekend to honor service members. If it was, I would ask you to stand up. This is a day to remember those who gave it all. Though all gave some, some gave all. World War 2, 405,399 American Soldiers killed. Korea, 36,574, Vietnam, 58,220, Iraq and Afghanistan, over 7500. That matters to us as citizens and residents of this nation. We are grateful and sad. As Christians we lament all lost life. Last week I was at my son Peter's graduation party. I realized the four dads in his friend group are me and another former reservist, an Air Force Colonel who was the Pilot for Air Force 2, and a Marine Corps Colonel, Commander of a Combat Logistics Regiment. Stories were shared. There is a powerful unity that comes from wearing the uniform. Words like camaraderie are used. There is a profound friendship, brotherhood, sisterhood, among those who relied on one another for survival in warfare. those who put on the same uniform and swore the same oath.

How about us, church? Do we have a uniform? Paul wrote to the Colossians, "Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience." (Colossians 3:12) Peter wrote to the church, "All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, 'God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble." (1 Peter 5:5) "Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love." (Ephesians 4:2) We have a uniform. We swear an oath. Defend the unity of the Spirit. Cooperate,

don't violate. How do we do that? This feels like a really moralistic sermon. Be good. Do better. How am I supposed to accomplish this? Well, we are only following the challenge of the passage, "make every effort." But our efforts are not the end of the matter. The unity doesn't depend on us. We can only clothe ourselves with humility because Jesus took the unliness of our pride on Himself. He clothed himself with our filthy rags of petulance and selfishness and division, so we could be clothed in righteousness, peace, and unity. "For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, 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, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility." (Ephesians 2:14-16) Christ is our unity. Humble yourself before Him.

During this series we don't just want to talk about prayer, but practice prayer. So let's pray together for unity. Another little practice of prayer is the interior/ exterior pattern of prayer. Pray first in the interior. What is inside of me? What inside of me is cooperating with God, and what is violating God's work? Then what is outside of me? What outside of me is cooperating with God, and what is violating God's work? If God is inside you, what do you have to fear from the outside? Let's pray.