

The Bond of Peace

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on December 20, 2020.

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. 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” (Eph. 4:1–6).¹

When I say the phrase “the bond of peace,” what comes to mind? Bond conveys the idea of fastening. The Greek word may also be translated ligament, the body part that essentially holds us together. So then, what does “the bond of peace” mean? Could it be collectively striving for peace in a violent world? Is it the peaceful connections of vital human relationships? What about joining together not only for peace but through peace? Just simply saying the phrase, “the bond of peace,” likely makes you think of what you or I can do, should do, must do for peace. This is not what “the bond of peace” means, at least not as it is used in this passage of Scripture.

As Paul uses the phrase here, peace is not something we do but something we receive and enjoy. This peace is a state of reconciliation: By God’s grace through faith in Christ, we are at peace with God. And, as it is an act of God’s free grace, it is, as John Stott puts it, “as indestructible as God himself.”² Imagine an indestructible bond of peace! Therefore, as the church, we are neither creating nor building this bond of peace. Rather, we are maintaining the fruit that flows from its source, in the “unity of the Spirit.” How then do we maintain and enjoy this fruit? Consider our passage today.

Imprisoned “for the Lord” and writing from his prison cell, Paul gives the church clear direction regarding living in this bond of peace. We are to live as we truly are in Christ, being as called.

Being as Called

Imperatives of the Christian life are always preceded by *indicatives* of the Christian faith. We see this in the introduction to the Ten Commandments, where God tells Israel first of their redemption and then commands them how to live in light of it. We see this throughout the New Testament, as we do here. As Paul uses the metaphor of walking, we are to live our lives as Christians “in a manner worthy of the calling to which [we] have been called.” How we live is dictated by what God has done.

Much of the previous chapters in Ephesians in fact tells this truth. In Christ, we have been called into the richest of spiritual blessings (1:3-14) and therefore have hope (1:18). We have been raised up to reign (2:6), reconciled as one (2:13-16), and built into one temple (2:19-21). We

¹ Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

² John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Ephesians* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 152.

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now have access to our heavenly Father through the Holy Spirit (2:18), and all of this according to our calling by God's grace through faith in Christ.

By virtue of our calling, and of the blessings it entails, we live as God has worked in us. Or as Paul explains it, "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:8-10). We are to *be* as we are *called*, to *live* as God has *done*.

Therefore, we should shun the lie that somehow our sin reveals a humble authenticity, that somehow sinning shows that we are really human. Let us understand this clearly: We have no problem revealing the authenticity of our fallen human nature. It comes through without trying. Trust me, in your flesh you are authentically depraved, a real sinner.

No, what we need is *not* more authentic evidence of our depravity but a consistent reminder of the Good News of Jesus Christ, preaching the gospel to ourselves, daily dying to self, and walking in a manner worthy of our calling. Let us saturate our hearts and minds with this authentic truth: "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:20). This is what it means to be *real* for a Christian. And, in the church it may be seen by certain fruits, such as humility, gentleness, patience, bearing with one another in love.

Bearing in Love

In describing how the Christian life is lived, Paul could have listed the fruit of the Spirit here as he did in his letter to the Galatians, but he does not. His intent is more targeted, specifically life in the local church. What are the chief characteristics of the Christian life in the local church? Paul starts with "humility."

Interestingly, humility, literally "lowliness," is uniquely a Christian virtue. In Greek literature as well as first century Roman culture it was considered a fault, a weakness. Even in our own culture, who celebrates or admires the lowly? Who praises the poor over the powerful? Humility seems to be culturally out of vogue, but as we are not defined by this world or our culture, nor are our virtues. Scripture points us not to the boasting arrogant or prideful but to Jesus, who "humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:8). A Christian is to be Christ-like, to be humble.

Similarly, Paul adds "gentleness," or "meekness," a virtue chosen by Jesus to describe himself: "gentle and lowly in heart" (Matt. 11:29). Gentleness does not mean weakness but rather strength under control. A Christian is to be submissive to the Holy Spirit's control, to our Lord's commands. A perfect example of this word is in Peter's description of Jesus: "When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly" (1 Pet. 2:23). Jesus was gentle, in the true sense of the word. So, a Christian is to be Christ-like, to be gentle.

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The third virtue Paul lists, is “patience,” or “longsuffering.” In this context, patience may be defined as a “cautious endurance that does not abandon hope.”³ Figuratively, the Apostle James uses it to describe how a farmer awaits the harvest (James 5:7-11). Just as a crop looks different on the day of planting than the day of harvest, so the Lord’s sanctifying work in us looks different as we mature. This requires patience with ourselves and one another, as God is at work in us both. A Christian is to be Christ-like, to be patient.

What Paul describes is not unrealistic characteristics of a theoretical church, but Spirit-given fruit so essentially to living together in the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Patience is not needed in a church of perfect people. Humility and gentleness are required only among the arrogant and aggressive. Through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Paul knows the church well. It will take all kinds of humility and gentleness and certainly patience to bear with one another. But he who calls us also gives us the grace of humility, gentleness, and patience to bear with one another in the crown of Christian virtues, “in love.”

In love we bear with one another, the good, the bad, and the ugly. Will there be tension or conflict in the church? Will our weaknesses and failures be amplified in the church? Anything is possible when a group of born-again sinners assemble as a local church. And yet, if we are to live out our faith, it starts in the local church, “with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love,” a love rooted in God’s love for us in Christ.

Such love in the church should then lead us to be “eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” We are to maintain what God gives us, which he gives through his Spirit. Just as God has united people from every tribe, tongue, and nation, reconciling us both to God through the cross (Eph. 2:16), so we are united in Christ through the Holy Spirit as one. And, this has practical implication on how we live life as the church. Peter O’Brien writes, “Since the church has been designed by God to be the masterpiece of his goodness and the pattern on which the reconciled universe of the future will be modeled...believers are expected to live in a manner consistent with this divine purpose.”⁴ In practical application of this truth in the local church, Paul instructs us simply to “be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you” (Eph. 5:32). It sounds like instruction from the nursery playground doesn’t it? Sin complicates things; the Spirit clarifies them: be kind, be tenderhearted, forgive. Why? Because God in Christ forgave you! And it is this forgiveness, this peace with God, that unites us in the bond of peace, which in the local church is depicted through baptism.

Baptized as One

As used in Scripture, baptism signifies at least four main truths of the Christian life: cleansing from sin, the Holy Spirit’s presence, union with Christ, and union with the body of Christ.⁵

³ Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 508.

⁴ Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), 280.

⁵ Guy M. Richard, *Baptism: Answers to Common Questions* (Sanford, FL: Reformation Trust Publishing, 2019), 23.

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Consider these truths then in light of unity in the church in the bond of peace. By the grace of God the Father through faith in God the Son by the work of God the Spirit, we are cleansed of our sin, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, united with Christ and his body. Rightly is baptism administered “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19). And it is this “one baptism” administered in the local church that is an outward and ordinary means of grace, directing us, as the Larger Catechism puts it, “to walk in brotherly love, as being baptized by the same Spirit into one body” (Q. 167).

As we are baptized in the Triune name of God, we are baptized into “one body,” the universal church which is manifested in the local church. To be clear, the local church is not a *part* of the universal church but a *manifestation* of it. If we are to see unity in the church catholic, we are to live out our faith in it locally.

Just as we are one body unified in “one Spirit”, we have “one Lord”, our Redeemer Jesus Christ. He has accomplished our redemption, given us hope, and is head of his church. And it is through faith in him that we have peace with God, who we now know as “one God and Father of all” in the church. As he is our God and Father, we may trust in the fact that he is “over all and through all and in all.”

Consider what this means for the church. First, as our Father is “over all,” he is sovereign over every one of us in whom his Spirit dwells. As one commentator puts it, “If believers take God’s sovereignty seriously, the result is unity and contentment and joy for believers, even in the midst of trials. The believer will trust God in his wisdom and care for all things that transpire in life.”⁶ What and how you think of God really does matter in the church.

Second, as our Father is “through all,” he is actively involved in our lives. Theologically, we refer to this as God’s immanence. As we are God’s “workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand,” we really are instruments in our Redeemer’s hands.

Third, as our Father is “in all,” we are indwelt by his Spirit, which may be referred to as the essence of Christian salvation: We “are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him” (Rom. 8:9). God is not only over us and through us, but he resides in us.

It is no wonder then that Paul tells us to be “eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” We do not bind ourselves together for a cause, like the world. We are fastened together by God in Christ through the Spirit. In other words, maintaining peace in the local church is not a cause to fight for but an act of worshipful service to our Triune God. As we live out our faith in Christ in the local church “with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love,” the “unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” is revealed. In fact, it shines forth. Therefore, in the local church we live in the bond of peace, from God the Father in Christ the Son through God the Spirit: “For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen” (Rom. 11:36).

⁶ Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 520.