

United with Christ

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[0 : 00] Amen. Well, let me urge you to grab a Bible or get it on your phone or whatever it is you need to do to get God's Word open in front of you and come with me to Ephesians chapter 4.

So we are picking up where we left off back in the autumn in this wonderful letter of Paul's to the church in this city of Ephesus. Can't wait for us to get into this this morning and over the number of mornings ahead of us.

But let's just pray as we come to God's Word. Psalm 119 verse 89. Your Word, O Lord, is eternal. It stands firm in the heavens. And so, Lord, as we contemplate a world around about us, our own lives, our own hearts, what's going on in our world and in our nation, Father, that seems to change from day to day.

Father, we look to your eternal Word that never changes and that is a firm foundation for our times. So come, whoever we are here today, Lord, come and teach us, come and mold us, come and challenge us, help us to see the beauty of Jesus.

[1 : 09] And it's in his worthy and his precious name we pray. Amen. Folks, Ephesians chapter 4. You're turning there.

Here's something to chew on. Whoever you are here today, whatever you think about the God of the Bible, here's something for you to think about. What is the thing that you reckon most discredits Christianity in the eyes of the watching world?

Do you know the kind of thing? I mean, the thing that our friends and family, they look at from the outside, they look at the church, and they conclude this Christianity business that you lot are into, I think is absolute nonsense.

Lots of different ways we can answer that question. But here's one that I so often hear from people, right? And they kind of give it to me in joke form. And the joke goes something like this, right?

So there was once a man who found himself shipwrecked and stranded on a small desert island. And he goes about constructing not one, but two buildings.

[2 : 11] And a few weeks later, another man finds himself washed up on the shore on the same desert island. And he sees the first man over there. He's just delighted there's someone else on this island. And he shouts over to him.

He says, mate, what are those two buildings? And the first man replies and he says, well, actually, I don't know if you can see it, but actually they're right next to each other. And they're both church buildings.

And the second man, he's got a puzzled expression on his face. And he looks at the first man and he says, mate, do you mind me asking? Because he's British, right? Do you mind me asking? Why did you bother building two?

Well, says the first man, why I built two? Here's the reason. You see, that one over there, that's the church that I actually go to. And the one that's right next to it, that's just to let any passersby know that that's the church that I don't go to.

Okay, somewhat of a niche joke. And as you dwell on it, and maybe as you work it out, let me tell you the painful heart of what it's trying to communicate. People so often look in at the church and conclude that Christians are just a bunch of disunited people quarreling, falling out, just like so many others in the rest of the world.

[3 : 24] And so what they do is they kind of lump the church in with the long list of things in life that they've concluded simply cause divisions. And I guess as we think about this whole idea of Christian unity, and we're going to think about it at a local church level, which I think is where this passage leads us to think about it, at a local church level.

Friends, we have to start by holding our hands up and owning the fact that there have been occasions where we have played right into that joke. Okay, at times we've got this in our relationships with one another, we have got this terribly, terribly wrong.

And if you feel the sting, and maybe if you even feel the scars, and you feel the questions of that reputation, let me extend to you then the wonderful invitation.

And to come, and the invitation is to come and to take in everything that God is telling us in Ephesians chapter 4. Right? And it's to come and both savor the gospel of God's wonderful grace and buy into the beauty of a united and a growing church.

And Ephesians 1 verse 10, to come and see God's master plan of uniting all things in heaven and all things in earth in his son Jesus Christ.

[4 : 51] Right? It's kind of been what chapters 1 to 3 have been all about. I was thinking this week how to summarize this for us. What's going on in the first half of the letter, the theological nerve center, if you like?

What's going on? Well, three things. This God has transformed our past. Okay? Previously dead in our sin. Separated from God.

Deserving of his judgment. But now because of his grace, what he's done in Jesus, what is true of us now? Forgiven, loved, and adopted. This God has changed our past.

This God has changed our present. Previously, just following the flow of our flesh. Just giving in to our own desires. And previously, there were worldly barriers that separated us from other people in this world.

But now God, in Jesus, has decisively broken the power of sin in our lives. And now we live for the praise of his glory because the Holy Spirit lives inside of us.

[5 : 56] And God has made us one. He's transformed the present. And he's transformed the future. Whereas before we had no hope.

Only fear of God's wrath. Now, a glorious heavenly inheritance. Deserving of hell. Now we have heaven. How has God done it?

That's the question. How has God done this? He's done it through the cross of Jesus Christ. As people around the world, down the ages, God draws unto himself.

Different people. Different backgrounds. Different races. Different interests. Different issues. Yet joined by this one central confession. That Jesus Christ is my savior.

Okay? His blood shed for my sin. It's the only way to God. God. And Jesus, my king. I willingly deny myself. Take up my cross.

[6 : 54] And I follow him as the way, the truth, and the life. And that confession, friends, if it's yours today, it renders all of us united to each other. Because we are united to Jesus Christ.

We ain't just mates. Right? We're family. Adopted into God's family. I don't know if you're a Radio 2 listener.

Steve Wright in the afternoon. Every time I go to pick up the girls from school, if it's raining, I'll take the car. And Radio 2 always comes on. And because of the type of day it is, it's always his show.

And the most loved part of his show is this section of it called factoids.

Right? It's been running for years. People love it. Factoids. Just interesting little facts. Right? Let me just give you a little factoid about the first half of Ephesians. Okay? 66 verses.

Three chapters. And I started counting the words in the original Greek this week. And I gave up. But here's the interesting fact. Here's the factoids. All of that. One imperative.

[7 : 59] One thing that they've got to do. Is that not interesting? All of this stuff. And there's one thing they've got to do. What's that thing? It's to remember. Okay?

If you've got it there. Chapter 2 verse 11. And then again chapter 2 verse 12. Straight after it. Paul writes, Remember that at that time you were separate from Christ.

So all he wants them to do, all he wants them to do, is just remember what they were. And here's the lesson then for us. See before this has anything to do with what we do for God.

Friends, this is about what he has done for us. Okay? It's the thing that makes Christianity stand apart from every other religion in the world.

Every other religion says you're defined by what you do. This heart of the gospel says you're defined by what God has done. What he's done. And so the question at this point in the sermon is, Friends, have you understood what he has done?

[9 : 01] Whoever you are here today, do you understand what he has done? And is it affecting your life? Right? One of the, my favorite investments for us as a family during the first lockdown back in March, right, was a bread maker.

Amazing what you find in the middle aisle in Aldi, isn't it? Bread maker. So it comes with this recipe book. And I've tried making all sorts of different types of bread, right?

With our kids made fluffy white. Made wholemeal. Made herb. The recipe book. Different quantities. Different ingredients go into these things. Do you know what?

Reading the recipe book, but there's one thing that holds them all in common. One thing that they all have in common. And it's yeast. Yeast. This organism that, little, but it permeates and works its way through the entirety of the dough.

And it causes it to grow. Right? Love yeast is what it does. Here's the call of the second half of this letter. Let the gospel yeast radically and holistically impact every single area of your life as you grow more like Jesus.

[10 : 21] Right? This is what it does. This is what the gospel does. This is what it means to be God's called out treasure possession. Transformed by grace. It's going to transform the way you speak.

The kind of friend that you are. The way that you interact with others. The kind of employee that you are. The way that you work. And the way that you parent. The kind of spouse that you are.

All these different areas of our life. Nothing is off bounds. As God forms and grows this word-shaped, spirit-filled, compelling community of diverse yet united disciples, which is the local church.

So with all that as background, the time we have remaining, we're just going to take in the first few verses of chapter 4. Okay? This is what Paul writes.

As a prisoner for the Lord then, I urge you. Hear the appeal in his voice. I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.

[11 : 26] 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. 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.

God will bless the reading of his word. This is what Paul is writing. So as we think about our unity this morning as a local church and the call to be a community whose life together testifies to the truth of the gospel and how it transforms every area of our lives.

Friends, I just want to ask us two questions as we think about the two angles of this unity that Paul gives the Ephesians here. Two questions I hope are really going to help us to stop and think about what God has done and the implications for our lives.

[12 : 32] So here's question number one, okay? When it comes to unity, friends, are we committed to the everyday details? Are we committed to the everyday details? Paul says, live a life worthy of the calling you have received.

Here's the thing, it would have been so easy for him to leave it there. Right? We would have loved that. Loved that. I would have uttered a deep and a hearty amen. But I take it that the truth is that we need help in these bodies where sin so easily entangles and where our desires still linger.

Or that Paul needs to help spell this out for this local church. What does this mean? Friends, feel the beauty of these three words. Do you get them when we read it together?

In all humility and in gentleness and patience. Just stop there and savor the sweetness of those three words.

I think about what has gone on in our world over the last year. And in my notes I'd written last year, and then I changed it to even what's happened in the last few days. Into our world of presidential debates.

[13 : 47] Into our world of political sparks. Into our world of angry protests. And just remember that Ephesus is a city that knows all about these things. Knows all about a riot.

Okay? You can read about that in Acts 19. These people know. In our world of social media, trial by social media. In our world, into our world of cancel culture. That a journalist writing in The Spectator this week I was reading called, The Unhappiest Religion in the World.

Something to chew on. How sweet are these three words into our world? Right? Humility. Humility. Love that word. Want more of it in my life.

How often I go on Facebook, I post something, and Facebook says to me, Do you want to boost this post? Do you get that all the time? Do you want to boost this post? And we live in a world, don't we, that says, Do you want to boost yourself?

You want to put yourself forward? We PR program. Personal PR program. Humility is a soul that says, No, it's others before me. Humility is a heart that's open to correction.

[14 : 48] Humility is a mind that's set on service. Humility and gentleness. I just love gentle people.

The kindness that you show to people. The tenderness that you have for people. Communicated through your words and your manner. Gentleness and patience.

Quite literally the word there just means long suffering. Right? Long suffering. In a world where everything is instant. Isn't it? Instant mortgage application decisions.

Instant coffee. I mean, my Amazon Prime order doesn't come the next day. I'm raging. Right? Like I've been denied some kind of human right. We do not live in a world where patience is promoted. We live in a world of instant.

Instant. And yet, Paul is saying, In your life's together, be patient. Go the long haul with each other. Right? Particularly when it comes to each other. Go the long haul.

[15 : 48] Long haul. Friends, this is Christ-likeness. This is Jesus. And this is the fruit of the Spirit as he works in our lives through the word of God.

And we should begin to see more of these things in our lives. I long to see more of these things in my life. The words of John Newton, You know, I take it we need this exhortation because the opposite of these things.

Right? Pride, bitterness, and impatience. I know my own heart to know that these are the things that come naturally to us. And as Paul is writing, there's a realist here, isn't he?

There's no head in the cloud theologian. He's a realist. He knows. What does he write? Bearing with one another. Feel the urge of that word. The verb. Bearing with one another. Making every effort.

Which is Paul's way of saying, This ain't going to be easy. If it was, he wouldn't need to write it. Friends, let me ask you. Are you making every effort? You know, writer John Wesley used to talk about how the church is like an orchestra and how the beautiful harmony of what God is doing is so often ruined by one jarring note.

[17 : 18] You saw the image, isn't it? You know, let me just ask you a few heart-level questions, soul-searching questions that this passage asked of me this week. Just as we seek to put this into practice, friends, let me just ask you.

Here they come, right? When was the last time you found yourself saying sorry? And I'm not talking like a sulky child, right? Sorry! When was the last time your heart was grieved at the thought of not being right with your fellow brother or sister?

You know, even if it was potentially nothing, knowing your own propensity to get it wrong, knowing the times in which we live, that you went out your way to make sure things were good with them.

Friends, when did you last own a mistake? When did you last go out of your way to forgive somebody? When was the last time that you encouraged somebody, right?

You're in the habit of doing that, loving somebody by telling them how you're praying for them and in word and deed loving them, communicating to them that you see them, you're thinking of them.

[18 : 31] Friends, when was the last time that you and I really went out our way to listen well? Love somebody by listening well. You know, I heard somebody say recently in our fast-paced world that love is spelled T-I-M-E.

I think there's a lot of truth in that. You know, what's your tone like in social media? And not just what's your tone as you post, but as your heart reacts to some of the stuff that's going on and what you see other people doing.

Friends, what's your heart like? You know, I love the words of Don Carson on this and I felt the urge of what he's saying. He said, all of us would be wiser if we would resolve never to put people down except on our prayer list.

And I take all of these things and many, many more are wrapped up in this idea of making every effort. Let me just say, we need to work extra hard at this at the minute as a local church. Just firstly because of the season of life that we're in.

You know, if ever there was a likelihood that tensions between us might arise or relationships might be strained simply because you're just looking at somebody on a screen rather than in face.

[19 : 38] Right? Or sometimes you've made your way to the 17th Zoom call of the day and you're feeling the tiredness and so often words can bounce off your tongue and you just don't even think. If ever there was a time to go the long haul, to be willing to forgive, to be willing to go out of our way to make sure that we're right, friends, it's now.

Isn't it? And particularly as we react as individuals in the church to different things that are going on in our world and as we come under, we have to do different things where the government say we have to, we'll react differently to this stuff.

But friends, let's go out of our way to make sure that this stuff doesn't divide. First reason because of the times that we live. Second reason because of surely the fact that we're growing in numbers numerically.

Right? What's the easiest thing to do when that happens is just to avoid. Right? Just get lost in the crowd. Avoid. Because we need to be in each other's lives. We need each other for this.

Right? Those tensions and bumps in the road that come up between us with one another, they are the God-ordained way that we will grow in grace as disciples of Jesus. As our hearts are exposed and as we practice these things, friends, we will grow more like Jesus.

[20 : 49] We need one another. You know, I've got a friend in the city who's a pastor of another church. He deliberately records his sermons and puts them up online for the church to view. He puts them in black and white. And he does it because he wants to almost subliminally help each other think about the fact that this is not the color version.

When we get back together, we'll be the color version. We need each other, friends. We need, we shouldn't be getting content with life apart. We need each other to grow. Bring that first point to a close, friends.

Are we committed to the everyday details? Are we committed to the everyday details? And second question, verses four to six, are we mindful of the bigger picture? Okay, here's another factoid for you.

I've got carried away with these this week. Apparently, this is the place in the Bible where the word one comes up most often. You see it? One body, one spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God, and Father of all.

Some commentators point to the fact that there's seven of them, seven, the perfect number. Not sure if that's entirely true or not, but you see the point. You can't miss Paul's point. We are one.

[22 : 03] We are one. You know, I remember that back in 2014, that PR campaign that the Scottish Rugby Union put forward to try and get us back interested in supporting the Scotland rugby team because we were going through such an awful patch of losing.

Right? There's only so much heartache a person can take. What was the hashtag? We saw it on the buses. We saw it everywhere around the city. What were they trying to do? They promoted the slogan, as one. Right?

Trying to say that we're all on the same page here. This is Paul's point. But do you see how he's not drumming up support for the church? He's outlining a spiritual reality of what God has done. This is true.

It's what God has done. We're all one in Christ Jesus. Many of you will know that that's the strapline of the annual Keswick Bible Convention, right? Since it began in 1875.

People from all over the UK, all over the world coming together. Hearing, singing together, hearing from God's words, knowing that we're one in Christ Jesus.

[23 : 06] Friends, there's tons of things we can say about this, but let me just pick out one. Notice the Trinitarian emphasis. Okay? One Lord, Jesus Christ. One God, God the Father.

One Spirit, the Holy Spirit. Here's the logic of it. The God of the Bible is triune. Okay? One God, three distinct persons, who has existed as a loving community for all eternity.

And so, in other words, the God of the Bible is the perfect definition of unity in diversity. And we were made in his image.

We were made to reflect something of that beauty to the world. And that image has been marred by sin. But it's almost as if when God saves us, puts his spirit in us, by his word, he's saying, almost as if, I am molding you so that you can come increasingly to bear that image once again as my son and daughter.

As you image me to the world. Which means the way that we as a local church can best image this God to the world, friends, is by living out loving unity and diversity.

[24 : 26] Friends, what if you consider the context of Ephesians 4? What a witness this would be in a city like Ephesus. Right? A hugely influential, divided and diverse city.

This church then, made up of former pagan worshippers, check this out, Acts 18-19, people caught up in the occult, people chasing money and fame, people living however they wanted without restraints and encouraged to do so.

this group of people called out of those former ways of life into this one life together where they live for the glory and the worship of Jesus Christ.

Friends, are we committed then as we close? Are we committed to the everyday details? And are we mindful of the bigger picture? Friends, let me just say then, if our longing in our hearts is yes to both of those questions, that's what we want, right?

We want to be committed to the everyday details. We want to be more mindful of the bigger picture. If our answer in our hearts to those questions is yes, then let me just say we will be in for a spiritual battle. You know, what was that quote from The Usual Suspects?

[25 : 39] Remember the film? I'm sure it was someone else that said it, but I can't remember at the minute. The Usual Suspects, the greatest trick the devil ever played was convincing the world that he didn't exist.

Friends, when we consider what God has done, when we consider the beauty of our unity in diversity, we do well to remember that he does exist. And he'll do anything and everything to disrupt this and discredit us in the eyes of the watching world.

Why? Well, we're back at our man in the desert island with the two church buildings, aren't we?

What is the one thing that most discredits Christianity in the eyes of the watching world?

Surely it's got to be this, disunity. So let me just finish then by flipping it around and saying, as we close, what is the thing that most compels Christianity to the world, offers Christianity to the world, shows the beauty of what God has done to the world?

Well, as we close, let me tell you about a story I read recently from a man called Jonathan Lamb. He's a church leader who travels the world just kind of meeting different people, speaking at different events.

[26 : 55] He's written a wonderful book on this whole subject of unity and he's actually coming Lord willing in May to be our speaker at our weekend when we're going to think about this precise topic.

He tells a story in the book about a time where he witnessed one of the most powerful scenes that he's ever witnessed. And it came when he attended a conference in the Balkans during the Yugoslav wars.

And so at this conference were tons of different people but lots of different people from all these different warring countries. And during one of the sessions there was a call to prayer and three men stepped forward with tears in their eyes.

One man from Croatia, one man from Serbia and one man from Albania. And the three of them came forward and the three of them linked arms and in their own language they each sang the words of the song Bind us together Lord Bind us together with cords that cannot be broken Bind us together Lord Bind us together Bind us together in love.

So here is Paul's point there is one body there's one body and there's one God there's one church. You know and Brunfield is as a local church friends we're just this in microcosm of what God has done here.

[28 : 22] But we're just going to spend just a short while now just praying for the unity and the beauty of what God has done as we think about his church around the world but as we think about the church here in Scotland and at Brunfield as well that we would shine his lights at a time like this.

So why don't we just wherever you are just maybe invite you to close your eyes and let's just spend a couple of minutes praying for this as we respond to God's word this morning. So Paul would write in Philippians chapter 1 whatever happens conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ then whether I come and see you or hear about you in my absence I will know that you stand firm in one spirit striving together as one for the faith of the gospel.

And so Lord we thank you so much help us appreciate something more of what you have done for us in your son Jesus Christ. Father we pray for your people around the world today those who know

you those disciples of Jesus wherever they find themselves Lord at a time like this that you would help us to shine like stars and glorify you to the watching world.

Father we maybe think of a few particular places today we would think of the church your people in America Lord recognising everything that's gone on there not just this week past but over the last season of life and we pray Father for your people up and down that land in that nation Lord we pray that you would protect their unity we pray Father for tensions and struggles and differences Lord that the good news of Jesus and what he has done the gospel would unite them Father we pray for protection Lord in that land we pray for a peace and for an end to the hostility we pray for those families Lord who perhaps have lost loved ones this week those who are feeling just hurt and betrayed by everything that's happened Lord we pray for peace in that nation Father we think of our own nation here of Scotland as well Father we pray for your people up and down this land Father we pray as well that you would just help us Lord to be able to love our neighbour

Lord in word and deed Father help us to be able to serve and know how we can best serve Lord our local communities Father help us to seize opportunities to speak the good news of Jesus as well and Father we think of our own family here at Brunsfield Lord we pray that you would help us to display something of who you are to a watching world Lord we think of particularly maybe of our brothers and sisters who are struggling at this time Lord we think of those who are unwell we think of Finley Lord we think of Irene we think of Fiona and Ruth Ponton Lord we think of David Many continuing to recover from his surgery Father help us to be able to love one another well Father we pray that you would just continue to protect our unity as we move forward as a church as well so Lord I just pray that you would come and help us Lord grasp something more of what Jesus has done for us Lord may something of his character

[31 : 49] Lord who he is would you continue to transform us by your spirit into his likeness Father thank you for your great love for us Lord thank you that we can approach you in prayer knowing that you hear us and we pray these things in Jesus is worthy and in his precious name Amen