

Working Together to Grow

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[0 : 00] I enjoyed playing soccer when I was much younger. I was even part of a church team and we made it to the finals. We had a good team. We had one guy who was a great goalie. We had some good defenders and obviously some good people up front.

In fact, one guy was so good up front, he scored 80% of our goals and that was not me. In fact, I was the only one on the team who hadn't scored a goal all season.

Okay, okay. All two seasons. So much so that the boys felt sorry for me and during one of our last games when we were winning by a lot, they all yelled out, give the ball to Pricey! And they did.

And so with the ball at my feet, I took off towards the goal. There was a defender who was coming out towards me and so I lined up the ball and kicked it to bend it like Beckett.

I took him around the defender into the goal, but I bent it like a beginner and went off to the side. Luckily, there was a teammate there who got the ball, dribbled it in and scored a goal.

[1 : 09] After the match, this teammate even came up to me and said, Pricey, you're such a team player, passing the ball when you could have scored a goal. I was trying to score a goal. It's just not one of my gifts.

You see, to quote an old Qantas ad, We are one, but we are many. One team made up of different players and our team scored goals and won matches when we worked together as one, using our different gifts, playing our different parts.

I'll tell you my gift later. But my old soccer team isn't a bad picture of what Paul is talking about in our passage today. Because Paul is talking about one church made up of diverse people with different gifts, working together not to score goals, but to grow or build the body of Christ, both in number and maturity.

But before we get to that, Paul kicks off, pardon the pun, with a general appeal. So point one, verse one, he writes, As a prisoner for the Lord, then I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.

Paul urges them to live a life worthy of the calling that they have received. Sometimes people say of their jobs, it's their calling in life.

[2 : 42] You know, I've been called to be a teacher. I've been called to be a doctor. I've been called to be a food critic. I mean, that's a pretty great calling, isn't it? I get paid to taste food.

But we have an even greater calling. We have been called to be in Christ. And that comes with every spiritual blessing, as we've seen election, adoption, redemption, revelation, inclusion, assurance.

Thank you to those who emailed me with all these suggestions about how to change assurance into a shun word. But being in Christ also comes with a great hope, a hope of perfect bodies in a perfect creation with a perfect character.

It means being God's treasured inheritance, who have been spiritually made alive in Christ, as spiritually seated with him in the heavenly realms, such that we already have one foot in the world to come.

And being in Christ means we have peace with God and one another, united together as one church, one body of Christ. And so remember, we Gentiles who were once no hopers are now family members, fellow citizens with the saints, God's first people, the Jews.

[4 : 03] And it means we, the church, are actually the goal of God's grand plan, as we heard last week. God's plan is to unite all things together in Christ.

That's church. In fact, we are God's masterpiece that shows off his wisdom to the spiritual rulers and authorities, both good and bad, the angels and the devil and so on.

This is who we are in Christ. This is our high calling. A friend of mine was called up to be on the TV show, Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?

They couldn't believe they got the call. They were so excited. They didn't then get the million dollars, unfortunately. But even if they did, our calling in Christ is even greater.

Of course, it's sometimes hard to see just how privileged a position it is to be in Christ, isn't it? Which is why I'm spending so much time reminding you of it.

[5 : 02] And why Paul spent the first three chapters lifting our eyes to see it. To see our spiritual reality in Christ and to pray that we might know it.

Not just know it in our heads, but know it in our hearts, remember. To know our calling in Christ and the deep love of Christ that made it all possible.

And so as you sit there in your PJs or your Sunday lockdown vest, you may not feel like you have a very privileged place in this world, but we do in Christ.

But now to misquote Spider-Man, with great privilege comes great responsibility. For now in chapter 4 verse 1, Paul urges them to live a life worthy of that high calling.

And this is the turning point in the letter. The word live is literally walk. It's popped up before in chapter 2 where our response to God's grace is to walk in good works.

[6 : 10] And now in the next three chapters, Paul will unpack some of those good works and repeat this word walk like a thread throughout the rest of the letter.

And so this verse, chapter 4 verse 1, is like a topic sentence that summarizes the big thing for the next three chapters and Paul urges them to do it. He even ups the ante and reminds them that he is a prisoner.

This is what walking in a manner worthy of his calling has cost him. And it's likely to cost them less so they have no excuse to make every effort.

And so how do we walk in a manner worthy of our calling? You know, is it by skipping or drudging? Of course not. It's firstly by keeping our unity.

I point to verse 2. 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.

[7 : 20] You see, we had to walk with complete humility, gentleness, patience and forbearance. This is how we're to exercise our bond of peace and so keep our unity.

A couple of weeks ago, I suggested this meant when we meet on Zoom and they forget to unmute themselves yet again, we don't get exasperated but we patiently bear with them. Or if we're calling other people but they're not calling us, we patiently bear with them.

Or for families, if people in your house are annoying you because you're all cooped up, we patiently bear with them. Or if they express a different view about vaccination, we patiently bear with them.

And can I say there are different views in our church when it comes to vaccination. In fact, I've written a paper on this which I'm hoping to email out to you later today and I suspect I'll need to write another paper addressing vaccine passports and coming to church depending on what the Premier might announce this morning.

But more important than vaccines is actually how we treat one another. We are to walk worthily with all humility and so keep our unity.

[8 : 39] Now I realise this is sometimes easier said than done isn't it? When our kids were young we'd often listen to Bible verses put to kids songs in the car and one of the songs was about the fruit of the Spirit.

You know, joy, love, peace, patience. But one of our kids sang love, joy, peace and painfulness. I think it was a mistake and she wasn't talking about her sister but it is sometimes easier said than done and so why are we to make every effort?

Well, because we are one in Christ. I look at verses four to six and as I read notice what word is repeated. Verse four 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.

We are to keep our unity because we are one. I realize the word all is also repeated but I highlighted the one I wanted you to notice one. You see, we are to walk worthily by keeping our unity our oneness because we are one.

Now, it doesn't mean we all have to think the same on issues where the Bible is silent like, you know, which footy team is the best? Clearly, it's Carlton. Nor do we have to like the same things in life because some people like cauliflower.

[10 : 06] I don't know why. Nor do we have to have the same gifts and opportunities in life because we have different ones, don't we? But we're not to let our differences destroy our unity.

Rather, we're to use our differences to build the body. Point three, verse seven. But to each one of us, grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.

You see, Paul moves from unity with words like one and all to diversity with words like each and apportioned.

And what he's saying here is that Christ's grace not only saved us, but has also given us different gifts to help grow the church.

Whether these gifts are abilities or opportunities or resources or time. And notice each one of us has been given this grace.

[11 : 11] Each one of us has gifts. gifts which in turn make us a gift to the church to help it grow.

And so each one of us has an important part to play. I know for many who can no longer do what they used to do, you might not feel you have all that important part to play.

But phoning someone to ask after them and encourage them is a terrific part to play. Praying for people and for the church is a terrific part to play.

Don't underestimate the importance of these gifts. Especially during lockdown. Know you are all important.

I mentioned before that my gift in soccer was not scoring goals. And you know what my gift was? Being the substitute.

[12 : 13] Now you might think that's a dud gift. But let me tell you, it's still an important part to play. Our good players needed a rest and I could give them a rest when they needed it.

And then sub them back onto the field and me off when our team needed them. Even the substitute you see has an important part to play. And speaking and praying to people in the church are way more important than even a substitute.

But when did Christ give us this grace? Well, when he ascended on high, which Paul sees as a fulfillment of Psalm 68, our first reading.

But he changed it a little bit. So verse 8, Paul writes, this is why it says, when he ascended on high, he took many captives and gave gifts to his people.

Now, in Psalm 68, there's a picture of God ascending in victory up to his temple in Jerusalem, leading captives behind him.

[13 : 19] But notice, it says that he received gifts from people, from the rebellious and from other kings. but any good king would then give those gifts from the nations to his people.

And that's how Paul sees Christ fulfilling this Psalm. When Christ descended in victory over death and the devil, he then gave gifts to his people. That seems to be Paul's point in changing the Psalm in verse 8.

But, when did Christ give these gifts? Well, as I said, when he ascended victoriously to rule, and that's what Paul goes on to say.

Verse 9, what does he ascended mean except that he also descended to the lower earthly regions? He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens in order to fill the whole universe.

Christ is the one who ascended like God in the Psalm, and to fill the universe with his victorious rule, and then give gifts to his people.

[14 : 34] But it's tricky to know what Paul means by descending. In verse 9, is Paul saying that Christ also first descended to the earth as a man to die?

That's what we're more familiar with and might naturally think. But given the context is about giving gifts, I wonder if Paul is saying Christ also then descended back down to give gifts via the Spirit.

So think day of Pentecost, where the Spirit descended and gifted his people to speak his word. Either way, Paul's point is that it's this ascended Christ who gives gifts to his church.

And so verse 11, so Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.

Here, Paul seems to focus on the early church and how the readers grew as the body of Christ, because he speaks of how Christ gave at past tense.

[15 : 48] And he mentions particular gifts like the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists and the pastor teachers. We don't have apostles today. You see, Paul's focus is back then and he says Christ gave these leaders who all notice speak God's word to equip the early church so that they can do the work of ministry and build the body.

Your English Bible might say to equip the early church or the saints for the works of service, but it's literally the work, singular, of ministry.

And what is the one work of ministry that builds the body, both in number and maturity? Well, it's the gospel, isn't it? The gospel is what builds the body.

And so Christ gave these leaders for equipping the early church to speak the gospel and build the body. That's how these readers became Christians and were built into the church as they heard the gospel.

And it's how they're built up in maturity as they've grown in understanding the gospel until they reach a level of maturity where they're no longer infants but can themselves keep growing the body.

[17 : 08] So verse 13, this equipping of the saints to do the work of ministry is to keep happening until we all attain the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ so that we may no longer be infants tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by the craftiness and deceitful skinning.

But speaking the truth in love, we might grow up in every way into him who is the head, Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love as each one part does its work.

You see, God is into bodybuilding. Not this bodybuilding, what a pastor you St. John's folks have, but this bodybuilding.

You won't find yourself there. I had to purchase a random picture because of privacy issues, but you get the point, don't you? God's into church bodybuilding and the way it worked for these first readers was, this is the flow of the verses on your screens, Christ gave the apostles and prophets and so on to equip the saints, the early church, for the work of gospel-speaking ministry, for the building up of the body, both in maturity and number, until we all reach a level of maturity in terms that Paul's used earlier in the letter, so that we're no longer infants, but can ourselves speak the truth and play our part to keep building and growing more like Christ.

That's the flow of the passage. Of course, for us today, those first leaders who spoke God's word are gone, but we have the word they spoke in the Bible, don't we?

[19 : 12] And so, as Paul said earlier, we are still built on the foundation of those early leaders, the apostles and the prophets, with Jesus as the cornerstone. Christ still gives present tents, evangelists like some I know in our church, and pastor teachers like me and Mark and Vijay, for equipping you as the new group of saints to do the work of ministry, sharing the gospel, whether through our outreach programs or to your neighbors and so on, to keep building the body up more in both number and maturity.

And as you do this through those outreach programs or in those conversations, people become Christians, and they have even during COVID.

And as we keep sharing the gospel with them, these young Christians might grow to be more mature Christians so that they might no longer be infants, but know enough to speak the truth in love themselves and mature enough to use their gifts to play their part, to keep building the body, keep growing more like Christ.

You see, even if we are no longer infants tossed around by every wind of doctrine that comes across our desk, we've still got more growing to do, don't we?

We've not yet, at verse 15, grown up in every way into Christ who is our head. It's like those bobble head dolls, you know, the ones with the small body and the big head, that people put on their dashboards, or like this one that you see in American parades.

[20 : 55] Well, the church is the small body and Christ is the head, and we've still got growing up to do, to fit our head, or more accurately, to reflect our head, Jesus, in every way.

To use Paul's other picture, we've still got more body building work to do. Not by going to the gym, but by doing two things. At first, by speaking the truth in love.

To speak the truth refers to speaking the gospel. That's how Paul refers to the word of truth earlier, the gospel. In a sense, it's the same as the work of ministry back in verse 12.

To speak the gospel, not just to non-Christians, but to fellow Christians. Because speaking the gospel to one another still encourages us, doesn't it? I mean, remembering Jesus died for you with all the blessings that come with it is encouraging.

To keep remembering, isn't it? And remembering that he rose as Lord, even of lockdown, such that he can even use COVID to build his church, is encouraging, isn't it?

[22 : 11] Or to put differently, God's love in the gospel spurs us to grow in love for one another. God's generosity in the gospel spurs us on to grow in generosity towards one another.

You see, speaking the truth of the gospel still builds one another up. And we're to do this though in love, which means the way we speak is to be loving, gentleness and respect.

And the actions that accompany our speech are to be loving too. We can't speak the gospel in a gentle way to someone and then act in an unloving way towards them.

That's hypocrisy. No, we're to speak the truth of the gospel in a loving manner with loving action. This is the first way to build the body.

body. And the second is by each one part doing its work. Remember back in verse 7, each one of us has given grace, gifts that we can use to build the body.

[23 : 20] Whether those gifts are abilities or opportunities or resources or time, doing the flowers or serving in the service on Sundays, bodies.

And we're to use our gifts to play our part in building the body. Even if it's the gift of being a substitute on a soccer team. Now I realise all this is made harder in lockdown.

For some it's harder to use their gift of reading the Bible using technology rather than in the room here. Technology has mucked up even this morning. We're going to have someone else reading the Bible this morning but the technology failed.

And it's certainly harder to use gifts of serving morning tea in lockdown than being in the room here. It's even more effort to make phone calls to speak the truth in love to others than simply seeing them to speak to here.

It's one of the many reasons why in-person church is so important for it helps us to build the body. But even despite lockdown we can still build the body.

[24 : 30] In fact lockdown has created new opportunities to build the body. In God's timing COVID came at a point in history where we do have this technology to reach people even from interstate or internationally.

If you're tuning in from elsewhere this morning we're so glad you have and we do hope you are encouraged and built up. prayer. And we can still all make phone calls or send cards and messages where we speak the truth in love.

We can still all use the opportunity of less activities to pray more. more. I know it takes more effort to think about it because we're out of routine and we're all mentally fatigued.

But part of walking worthily is not only keeping our unity but also using our diversity to build the body in whatever way we can.

let me give you a couple examples to finish with. One of our members is stuck in aged care. He cannot leave nor can he have many visitors but he has a TV and a chapel that gives him the opportunity to see our service not right now but tomorrow morning when there are more staff to set it up for him.

[25 : 55] But he doesn't just watch it himself. He takes this opportunity to walk around his floor and to encourage others to join him. Isn't that brilliant?

That's body building during lockdown. Or someone in my Bible group last week told us about her sister overseas who contracted COVID but a Christian doctor visited her each day of her quarantine to give her medical treatment and the doctor's children sent her prayer messages to encourage her to build her up.

These kids used the gifts they had to speak God's truth in love to build her up. That's body building during lockdown. It's great isn't it?

And if a person stuck in aged care and kids with limited resources can both do that then we can still too can't we? during lockdown when people couldn't go to the gym but were buying up toilet paper there were all these pictures on the internet about people trying to do bodybuilding like this guy using toilet paper and a broomstick as a dumbbell.

I'm not sure he'll build his body like that. But by speaking the truth in love and using whatever gifts we have with whatever opportunities we're able we are doing bodybuilding without even going to the gym.

[27 : 26] This is how we're to work together to grow Christ to grow in Christ. Well to wrap up know your high calling in Christ so that you may walk worthily of it by keeping our unity and by using our diversity to build the body.

Let's pray we would. Let's pray. Our gracious heavenly father we do thank you for the high calling we have in Christ. Help us to walk worthily of it by keeping our unity and by using our diversity that together we may keep building the body into Christ our head.

In his name we pray. Amen.