

There is an old story about a Quaker man and his stubborn mule travelling across the early American frontier. The old Quaker was travelling down the road when the mule suddenly stopped in its tracks. None of Quaker's cajoling could get the old mule going again. He pushed. He pulled. He begged. He reasoned, but the mule was as stubborn as could be.

Finally, in frustration the old Quaker said, "Mule thou knowest that because of my religion that I cannot strike thee, that I cannot curse thee, and that I cannot abuse thee in any way, but mule, what thou knowest not is that I can sell thee to a Methodist."

Division and disunity have become so common in the church that it has become fodder for folklore and old stories. And it would be quite humorous, if the consequences weren't so disastrous and grave.

When we first moved to Grove 15 years ago. There was a church across town that was the largest in town. We'll call it Big Church. They had the biggest building. They had the biggest programs. They brought in the biggest names. During my years in Grove, Big Church suffered multiple splits. They ended up trading their building plus a million and some change to a growing Baptist church.

Driving into town last week for our early Thanksgiving with Teresa's family, I noticed a new church along the main drag. This is not surprising. Grove has 3 churches for every 2 residents. That way you can go do a different church, if you're mad at yourself for some reason. I asked Teresa's dad about it, and he explained it was yet another split off Big Church and that Big Church was now Tiny Church. I couldn't help wonder what sort of message this sent to everyone else in town.

Sadly, there is nothing unusual about this story. Churches have split up over the color of carpet, or whether or not the new building should have chairs or pews. People leave churches because the Bible study group didn't meet at their house, or they didn't get the lead in the Christmas Cantata. This year it's because people are wearing masks or not wearing masks. People get on the phone and spread lies about their pastor, or spread unfounded rumors on Facebook. The bottom line is that we are divided because we don't get our way.

Sadly, if you've ever been through a church split, if you've ever felt you had to leave a church to protect yourself or heal your own wounds, or you've ached as your dearest friends left a church hurt or hurting themselves, you know the deep, soul wrenching pain this can cause. It's the pain of a divorce. It's the brokenness of a family divided.

This is, most definitely, not what Jesus wanted for His church.

Our Core Verses this week are a call to unity. More accurately, they are the basis for unity. The call to unity comes in the 3 verses preceding our Core Verses. Paul starts off chapter 4 of Ephesians urging us to keep unity.

*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.*

Let me paraphrase this. I've given you unity, now do your best to keep it.

### **I. We're All On the Same Journey**

The first point is that we are all on the same journey. Paul urges us to *walk in the manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called*. We talked about this metaphor of walking last week. This is what you do step by step, decision by decision, day by day. We're all walking toward the call we all have in Christ. We have all received this same call. We're all walking this road together. We're all walking toward the same goal.

We may be in different places in this journey, but it's the same journey. Whether you've been following Jesus for 50 years or for 5 minutes you are walking down the same road. We shouldn't judge someone else on the journey because they aren't as far along down the road as we are. We shouldn't attack someone because they've made it further than we have.

Should I question someone who is trying to cross a river I crossed 20 years ago, or do I hold out my hand and say, "Grab on, brother, I'll help you across." When they finally get across, do I fold my arms and say, "What took you so long?" or do I open my arms and give them a welcoming embrace.

We are all on the same journey. Let's make the journey together. Let's help each other along. You are my brother. You are my sister.

### **II. How We Travel Together in This Journey Matters**

You see, it's not just that you are on the journey that matters. How we travel together in this journey matters.

My sister was a star cross country athlete. She competed for wins at state. I remember going with my parents to her cross-country meets and it felt like we ran as far as she did. We'd cheer for her at the start, then we'd run over here to cheer her as she passed that spot. Then we'd run over there, and there and there, and finally back to the start finish line.

One thing I noticed is that you had all these runners on the same course, running the same race, but they were each on their own journey. They didn't care how the other girls finished as long as it was behind them. They were competitors not companions in the journey.

**We are companions in the journey; not competitors.** We are teammates running on the same team. When one of us finds a burst of speed, the others fall in behind to let them cut through the wind. We take a turn out front to let others catch their breath behind us. When someone stumbles, we help them up. When one falls behind, we encourage.

Verse 2 describes how we are to walk in this journey together, *“with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love.”* Does that sound like most churches? Does that sound like Son-Rise? Does that sound like you? This needs to be our biography. This should describe how we are with one another.

Are we humble when someone else experiences a great victory? Are we gentle when someone else is wounded? Are we patient when someone else can't get with the program? Do we bear them in love when they can't carry their own load?

Funny story, when I was typing this sermon on Wednesday, my spell and grammar check in Microsoft word gave me a little squiggly underline under the word “bear” in the previous sentence. I read it again, “Do we bear them in love when they can't carry their own load?” What's wrong with that I wondered? So, I right clicked on the supposed error, and here's what it suggested instead, “Do we beat them in love when they can't carry their own load?” Maybe that's how churches usually act, but it needs to be different.

**Humility and gentleness go together.** They refer to the same attitudes focused in two different directions. Humility is selflessness applied to our view of ourselves. It is not to think bad of yourself. It's not to have a low self-esteem, but it is to have a realistic view of yourself– I'm a sinner just like anyone else. I'm just as dependent on the grace of God as you.

Gentleness is the attitude of selflessness applied to others. In gentleness, I'm willing to consider the needs of others as well as my own. In our humility we know that we are not better than others, and in our gentleness we don't act like we're better than anyone else.

In the world there is always a ranking of people. In any group there is a pecking order. Society has its social status and economic classes. The business world has its corporate ladders. Academia has its degrees and honors. Hunters compare how many points, how big the spread. Maybe you get on Facebook and you find someone you used to know from highschool, you know that kid that was really popular, and you start scrolling through all their pictures, comparing your life to theirs, judging how they've done.

In the body of Christ, though, there are only two levels: Jesus, the head of the church, and then us, the body. For instance, the world ranks an airline pilot far above a janitor. The pilot is paid more and is esteemed highly, while the janitor is all but ignored. I realize that in the world much of this has to do with the ease of replacement.

But no such ranking can take place in the body, whether physical or spiritual. Consider white blood cells, livers, and kidneys. They are essential to the life of the body. They are irreplaceable and thus very valuable. They are the human body's janitors. Ask anyone who has any sort of deficiency with any one of these, and see where they rank the janitors. The point is in the body all parts are equally important.

Humility and gentleness means there is no room in the church for personal pedestals. When we try to stand in the limelight or posture for the pat on the back we are taking for ourselves what belongs to God alone. Me, mine, and I must be replaced by his hers, yours, and ours.

Leonard Bernstein, the famous orchestra conductor, was once asked, “What is the hardest instrument to play?” Without hesitations, he replied, “Second fiddle. I can always get plenty of first violinists. But to find one who plays second violin with as much enthusiasm or second French horn, or second flute, now that’s a problem? And yet if no one plays second, we have no harmony.

Paul also urges another attitude that maintains unity, and that is **patience— Paul defines that as bearing with one another in love.** This is the idea of endurance or perseverance in our relationships with each other. The old English word that was often used for this was longsuffering— being willing to suffer long and still love. Patience is a quality we much admire in others, but it is so hard to practice ourselves. We’re like Veruca Salt in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, we want it and we want it now.

Christian patience is a unifying response to two things: circumstances and people. As long as circumstances and people go our way, that patience doesn’t seem too important. But how often do circumstances cooperate with you? How often are people completely agreeable?

Here’s the problem, most circumstances and people are beyond our control. Here’s where division and disunity creep in. It is because people won’t put up with circumstances and people they don’t like. They are not patient with them. They are not long-suffering.

“I don’t have to take this,” people say. “I deserve better.” So, we try to change circumstances or change people to get more of what we want.

Patience refuses to let bad circumstances get the best of us. Patience knows that God is in control, therefore, it is confident that can and will work the best out of them.

People, though, can be much more difficult than circumstances, because, unlike circumstances, people can intentionally hurt us. People can hurt you and not care.

A couple was driving down the road when they got into a heated argument over something stupid. It got louder and louder, until, suddenly, it got quiet. Real quiet. After some miles, the husband sees a donkey in the field, and says to his wife, “Relative of yours?” She shot back sardonically, “Yes, by marriage.”

This is where bearing in love comes in. Think about it. It’s one thing to put up with a difficult person. It’s something else to hold them in love.

As Christians we practice a sort of pseudo patience. We’ll put up with an irritating person, but we make sure that everyone knows just how much we have to put up with. We’ll advertise our burden. It’s an attitude that says, “It fortunate for you that I’m so patient, no one else would

put up with it.” This doesn’t keep unity. Rather, it breeds resentment and fosters bitterness, which are roots of disunity.

The idea with bearing in love is that we are willing to hold each other up. We don’t just put up with each other like that annoying cousin you have, but we support and encourage each other. We don’t just endure each other’s shortcomings; we seek each other’s betterment and enrichment regardless of shortcomings.

In verse 3, when Paul says we need to be *eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit*, this is how we do that. We can travel the road together by being humble and gentle, by being patient and bearing with one another in love.

### III. Journeying on the Right Road Makes All the Difference

We’re on a journey, and we’re on this journey together, but it’s essential that your journey is on the right road. It doesn’t matter if your making great time, if you’re on the wrong road. Journeying on the right road makes all the difference. Our Core Verses come in verses 4-7,

*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. But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift.*

This is one of the great declarations in the Bible, and I don’t want you to miss how it directly ties in with verse 3. Verse 3 urges us to be *eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace*. Period. End of sentence, and then verse 4 begins a new sentence. However, in the Greek, there is no period or end of sentence, and there are no words for “There is” in verse 4.

Here’s how it would read literally, “*eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace— one body and one Spirit...One Lord, one faith, one baptism, etc.*”

In other words, all of these ones we have in verses 4 through 7, they are the bond of peace. These are the fundamental beliefs that tie us all together. This is the common ground that we stand upon. There is no real unity without these essential truths we believe in.

Paul says that true unity comes from being united on the truth. These verses are structured around three groupings. The first contains one body, one Spirit and one hope. The second grouping contains one Lord, one faith, and one baptism. The third is One God and father of all.

Notice how each grouping focuses on a different person of the trinity. The first centers on the Holy Spirit. The second is all about Jesus as Lord, and the third focuses on the God the Father.

### The Unifying Truth of the Holy Spirit

Our unity depends on the Spirit who empowers us and inhabits us as a church. The Spirit is the one who is transforming each one of us from who we once were into who we will one day be.

Every time you look at another believer in church, and you don't think they measure up, Remember, the Spirit isn't finished with them yet.

That's why one of the key words here is hope. We are looking forward to what will one day be. Our unity isn't based on the incomplete and imperfect reality of right now, but our hope in the Spirit's finished product.

None of us are a finished product. We're all at different stages of beta testing. One of the things that will keep us united is trusting that the Holy Spirit will continue to do his thing in the church. It's not your job to fix everything that's broken in the church. That's the Holy Spirit's job. Your job is to let the Spirit do His thing in you.

### **The Unifying Truth of Jesus**

The second group is about the unifying truth of Jesus. He is our "one Lord" as Paul says here. The reason Jesus can be our Savior is that Jesus is our Lord.

The earliest known Christian creed, or doctrinal statement was simply, "Jesus is Lord." We even find this in the New Testament. Romans 10:9, *"If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."*

When the earliest Christians were baptized into Christ, converts made a personal profession of this creed at their baptism. Jesus is our one and only Lord who saves us. It is in him that we place our faith, it is to his death and resurrection we are joined in the waters of baptism.

Everyone in the church, no matter our differences of personality, no matter our differences of opinion, no matter our different annoying habits, we all believe in the same Jesus. We all serve the same Lord. We were all buried in the same baptism, and we were all raised to the same new life in Jesus. That matters. That's a big deal, and it had better make a difference in how we treat each other. –Amen–

### **The Unifying Truth of God**

The third unifying truth is all about God the Father. It's simply a reminder that ultimately everything comes back to God. He is God of everything. Paul throws in a bunch of prepositions to make sure we don't miss the point. He is *over all and through all and in all*.

But Paul's primary point here is not that God is god of everything. He is. That's true, but that's not what Paul is saying. When he says "of all," "over all," "through all," and "in all." He's not using "all" as a universal for everything. Let me explain. The context here is the church, the body, us. Grammatically speaking, when he says "all," he means "all of us."

That's why he doesn't just say "God of all." He says, "God and Father of all." This is personal. This is relational. God is god of everything, but he isn't Father of everything.

Let me read the verse that way, and I want you to feel its unifying power. *“There is one God and Father of all of us, who is over all of us, and through all of us, and in all of us.”* The same God who loves you, who saved you, who is working in you, who is working through you, who has a plan for you, who has a destiny for you, is doing all the same things for the person sitting in the next section over, and for the person sitting in front of you, or in the car beside you, or in the row behind you, even for the guy on the stage.

Now this doesn't answer all our theological questions. It doesn't solve the debates about the millennium, or speaking in tongues, or what kind of music God likes most, but it does remind us of what matters most. We can disagree on some of that other stuff, as long as we remember what matters most, and stay united on that.

Years ago, a lady was travelling on board a ship across Lake Michigan. As she looked out into the foggy night, she saw sharp, jagged rocks jutting up from the surface of the water. Some of them seemed frightfully close to the ship. Worriedly, she asked the captain if he knew where all the rocks were.

The captain replied matter-of-factly, “No.”

The woman couldn't disguise the look of terror on her face.

A thin smile creased his lips, “But I do know the safe course.”

This is the safe course. I invite you this morning to take the safe course. I invite you this morning to take the journey together. No one is in this alone. Don't do it by yourself. If you're in a struggle this morning. If you've got a fight on your hands. If you've been knocked, set back or pushed aside don't do it alone. We are in this journey together.

If you need someone to listen, you can come this morning and share. We will listen. If you need a shoulder to cry on. We have shoulders available. If you need someone to pray with you, we will pray. If you haven't begun your journey, it can begin right now, right here, and we will journey with you.