

THE SOVEREIGN GOD AND THE MYSTERY OF HIS WILL: A STUDY OF EPHESIANS

(LESSON THIRTY-EIGHT)

“THE UNITY OF THE SPIRIT” (PART ONE)

EPHESIANS 4:1-6

1 I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called,

2 With all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love;

3 Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

4 There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling;

5 One Lord, one faith, one baptism,

6 One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.

In our previous **Lesson**, we started to look at the fourth chapter of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. We noted that chapter **4**, was an important dividing point in the letter. The first three chapters contain **doctrinal instruction**, the last three chapters contain **exhortation**, or an appeal by Paul, to the Ephesian believers, to live out the doctrinal truths which he had explained to them in chapters **1-3**.

In chapters **1-3**, Paul informed the Ephesian believers about what God had accomplished for them in Christ, and about all that they had become

in Christ, as a result. In chapters **4-6**, he exhorts them to conduct their lives in a manner which would demonstrate that they understood and appreciated all that God had done for them in Christ, and all that they had become in Christ. The position into which grace had lifted them was the dominant theme in the first 3 chapters. In the last 3 chapters the dominant theme is the practical outworking of that position. Their exalted position in Christ called for corresponding godly conduct.

In effect, in chapters **1-3**, God says to the believer, “I have made you a saint.” In chapters **4-6**, He says, “In light of the fact that I have made you a saint, live a saintly life.”

In verse **1** of chapter **4** Paul writes, “*I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called.*” The word “*therefore,*” reaches back to the exalted position of the believers “*in Christ,*” and to all the spiritual resources which have been made available to them, because of their exalted position. The word also reaches ahead to the responsibilities which their privileged position called them to. The word “*therefore*” indicates that Paul is basing his appeal on the doctrines taught in the first three chapters.

He says, “***I beseech you.***” He is literally saying, “*I beg of you, please.*” He might have used his apostolic authority, but, instead, he pleaded with them. Paul was aware of the fact that it was not possible for him to **compel** the believers in Ephesus to live lives which were worthy of their high calling. He understood that if they were not motivated to do so, out of a sense of appreciation for all that God had done for them, there was nothing else that could motivate them.

Thomas Obadiah Chisholm appears to have grasped this principle for he wrote,

*“The mercies of God! What a theme for my song,
Oh! I never could number them o’er;
They’re more than the stars in the heavenly dome,
Or the sands of the wave beaten shore.*”

*For mercies so great, what return can I make
For mercies so constant and sure?
I'll love Him, I'll serve Him with all that I have
As long as my life shall endure."*

Charles Austin Miles, seems also to have appreciated what Paul was trying to convey to the believers in Ephesus, for he he wrote,

*"I do not know the depths of Jesus' love
That brought Him down to earth from heaven above
Nor why He bore the cross up Calvary
And shed His precious blood so willingly*

*But this one thing I know
That when the crimson flow
Dropped to the earth below it fell on me
My eyes were opened wide
I saw Him crucified
And knew for me He died on Calvary*

*I do not know what I can do, or say
My debt of gratitude to Him to pay
But I at least may cry, 'O Christ Divine!
Had I a thousand lives they should be Thine.'"*

Paul is saying in effect to the believers in Ephesus, particularly to the Gentiles, "You have been blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ. You were once spiritually dead in your sins but now you are alive in Christ. You once were far off, but now you have been brought near by the blood of Christ. He your peace. He has broken down the enmity that existed between you, and placed you into one body. You are all reconciled to God and to each other. You are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are members of the family of God. You are a building of God, a holy Temple, a dwelling place of God. You are fellow heirs, fellow members of the body and fellow partakers of the promise. And besides all these spiritual blessings, I have prayed for you to be

enlightened to these truths and to be empowered by the Spirit. You have the truth and you have the power. Now, in view of all that you are and all that you have, I beg of you please, walk worthy of this high calling in Christ Jesus!”

The Apostle pleads with the believers in Ephesus to “**walk worthy.**” The word “*Walk*” is the translation of a Greek word which means “to conduct one’s self, to order one’s behavior.” It refers to one’s habitual way or direction of life, and so to their life-style. Paul is exhorting the Ephesian believers to see to it that their Christian experience weigh as much as their profession of Christianity. In other words, they are to practice what they preach.

Brothers and sisters, our walk should weigh as much as our talk. Our calling and our conduct should be in balance. Our lives should measure up to our position in Christ. Paul’s point is that it is not enough to know the truth, we must live out the truth that we know. In **Romans 2:13** Paul writes, “*For not the hearers of the law are just before God, but the doers of the law shall be justified.*” And in **James 1:22** we read, “*But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves.*”

What are we to walk worthy of? We are to walk worthy of “***the vocation wherewith ye are called.***” The words, “*the vocation wherewith ye are called,*” are literally, “the calling with which you were called.” This does not mean that we should try to deserve our place in God’s favour. It means that we should recognize how much our place in God’s favour deserves from us. The focus is not on **our** worth but on the worth **of our calling**. Paul’s thought is that sinners were called into salvation and made saints. They are to be obedient to that heavenly calling and live lives that weigh as much as their calling.

Brothers and sisters, the **wealth** of a believer should be manifest in his or her **walk**. The revelation of divine truth which we have received becomes fruitful only as it is lived out in our lives. What we know must be applied, or it will not profit us. The more illumination we receive, the greater is our responsibility to live it out. Our Head knowledge must

become our heart and life experience. Consistency in our daily walk should be the vital concern of every one of us.

Ephesians 1-3 tells us about how God sees us in Christ **in the heavenlies**; **Ephesians 4-6** tells us about how men and women should see **Christ in us on the earth**.

In the first 3 verses of chapter **4**, Paul emphasizes **The Grace of Unity**. Unity is not uniformity. Unity comes from within and is a **spiritual** grace, while uniformity is the result of pressure from outside. Each part of the body is different from the other parts, yet all make up one body and work together.

If we are going to preserve the *“unity of the Spirit,”* we must possess the necessary Christian graces that will enable us to do so. In verse **2**, Paul speaks of the graces that should characterize the life of the believer who desires to walk worthy of the calling with which he or she is called. He says, *“With all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love.”*

“Lowliness” as it is used in the New Testament may be defined as “the lowliness of mind which springs from a true estimate of oneself. It is a deep sense of our own moral littleness and unworthiness.” Lowliness is the opposite of pride. lowliness promotes unity while pride promotes disunity.

Lowliness is not putting ourselves down but rather it is lifting others up. As we concentrate on exalting Jesus Christ and our brothers and sisters in Christ, we will inevitably become genuinely humble. If we exalt ourselves then God will humble us for He has promised to humble the proud.

The word *“meekness”* describes the quality of not being overly impressed by a sense of one’s self-importance. *“Meekness”* is not “weakness.” Rather it is strength that accommodates itself to another’s

weakness. It is real strength, but it does not have to display itself or show off how strong it is.

The word speaks of restrained patience, and patient trust in the midst of difficult circumstances. It speaks of having one's emotions under control and is the opposite of self-assertion, rudeness, and harshness.

The truly meek individual is one who submits to God's dealings without rebellion, and who submits to the unkindness of human beings without retaliation. He or she is willing to set aside his or her rights for a good cause. He or she is willing to suffer loss for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Allied with meekness is "*longsuffering*." The Greek word translated "*longsuffering*" speaks of a patient holding out under trial; a patient restraint of the soul from yielding to passion, especially the passion of anger. It is bearing patiently with the faults and weaknesses of others.

The word "*forbearing*" is the translation of a Greek word which literally means, "to hold one's self upright or firm against a person or thing, to put up with, to bear with, to tolerate." It pictures restraint under provocation and includes a liberal allowance for the faults and failures of others. Paul encourages the saints to make allowance for the faults and failures of their fellow believers. Forbearance is not a question of maintaining a façade of courtesy while inwardly seething with resentment, but is a Holy Spirit empowered positive love to those who irritate, disturb, or embarrass us.

Paul says that we are to bear with one another "*in love*." The Greek word translated "*love*" is **agapé** which speaks of a love which is called out of one's heart by a sense of value in an object which causes one to prize it. It springs from an appreciation of the preciousness of an object. It is a love of esteem and approval.

Agapé is in its essence a self-sacrificial love, a love that puts self aside in an effort to help and bless others. It is a love that goes to the point of

suffering if that is necessary in order to bless others. This is the love which God is and which He provides through the operation of the Holy Spirit as the believer depends upon His ministry. This is the love which Paul says in **Romans 12:9**, should be without dissimulation, or hypocrisy.

Brothers and sisters, we must not counterfeit this love by seeming to love a brother or sister and yet not be willing to put that love into action. It is in the sphere of love that we are to be patient with each other as misunderstandings arise, as cutting words are said, as unkind actions are done. The love shown at Calvary was a forgiving love. Ours should be the same.

If we do not have a love which is genuine, the trouble is with our adjustment to the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who provides us with that love. We cannot generate it by an effort of our will. The truly Spirit-filled believer does not have to play the hypocrite in the matter of love, for love will flow out of his or her life, refreshing the dry parched lives around him or her and making a desert-heart blossom like a rose.

In verse **1** of chapter **4**, Paul begs the believers in Ephesus to “*walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called.*” In verse **2**, he tells them **how** they are to walk worthy. He says “*with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love.*” In verse **3**, he tells them **why** they should walk worthy with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love. He says, “*Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*”

What exactly is the unity of the Spirit spoken of here by Paul? In verses **11-13**, he again mentions this concept:

11 And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers;

12 For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ:

13 Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.

In this passage Paul explains that Christ has given to the church apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers, for the perfecting or equipping of the saints for the work of the ministry, for the edifying or building up of the body of Christ, until we all attain to the “*unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God.*”

In verse **3**, Paul urges the believers to “*keep the unity of the Spirit.*” In verse **13** he desires for them to “*come in the unity of the faith.*” In verse **3** unity is a reality to be **maintained**. In verse **13** it is a goal to be **attained**. It is important for us to understand that Paul is not speaking of two different varieties of Christian unity. He is informing the believers that there is a sense in which Christian unity has already been accomplished and a sense in which it has not yet been accomplished.

In **Ephesians 2:13-16**, Paul writes the following:

13 But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ.

14 For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us;

15 Having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in himself of twain one new man, so making peace;

16 And that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby.

This passage clearly indicates that, in His work of atonement and reconciliation, Christ has already made us one. It is our responsibility to **maintain** the unity that He accomplished at Calvary. But in another sense the unity that He purchased and guaranteed with His blood must

now be lived out and brought to full expression in the life of the Church. In this sense it is a goal that the members of the Body of Christ must strive to **attain**.

John Piper founder and lead teacher of **desiringGod.org** and chancellor of **Bethlehem College & Seminary**, has identified three components of Christian unity that believers should have in common. He speaks of a “unity of the knowledge of the Son of God.” (**Ephesians 4:13**), This has to do with our **common convictions** about Jesus Christ. That same verse also speaks of a “unity of faith.” This is our **common confidence** in Christ. **Ephesians 2:14**, speaks of the end of hostility. When hostility is replaced with love, we have a **common care** for each other.

Piper summarizes Christian unity from **Ephesians 2–4** as having **common convictions** about Christ, **common confidence** in Christ, and **common care** for each other. It is these three components of Christian unity that Paul refers to as the “unity of the Spirit” in **Ephesians 4:3**.

Brothers and sisters, all these 3 components of Christian unity are produced in our hearts by the ministry of the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit alone who can deliver us from the carnality resident in the mind of the “natural man” thereby enabling us to have true **convictions** about Christ. In **1 Corinthians 2:14-16**, Paul confirms this. He writes,

14 But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.

15 But he that is spiritual judgeth all things, yet he himself is judged of no man.

16 For who hath known the mind of the Lord, that he may instruct him? but we have the mind of Christ.

In **Romans 8:15-17**, Paul informs us that it is the Holy Spirit who enables us to have **confidence** that we are the children and heirs of God, and joint heirs with Christ:

15 For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father.

16 The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God:

17 And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together.

It is the Holy Spirit who bears the fruit of love in our lives and gives us a **common care** for each other, according to **Galatians 5:22-23**: “*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, Meekness, temperance: against such there is no law.*”

Our common **convictions** and **confidence** and **care** are all generated by the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit alone who can generate them. Therefore, in **Ephesians 4:3**, Paul refers to the unity that he wants the believers to preserve as the “*unity of the Spirit.*”

How is this “*unity of the Spirit*” to be maintained? Verse **2** gives us the answer: “*With all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love.*” None of these graces is natural to our human nature. They are all the result of the ministry of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

It is very important for us to bear in mind that Paul’s plea for unity in chapter **4**, must be considered in the context of his prayer in verses **16-19** of chapter **3**. In this prayer, he makes four requests of God on behalf of the believers. He prays,

16 That he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man;

17 That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love,

18 May be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height;

19 And to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God.

The four requests are for **strength, stability, apprehension, and fullness**. They are not to be considered as four isolated petitions, but as four parts of a whole, which directly relate to each other. One request leads into the next one, and so on. He prays that their “*inner man*” might receive spiritual strength, which will, in turn, lead to a deeper experience with Christ. This deeper experience will enable them to “*comprehend*” God’s great love for them, which will result in their being “*filled with all the fullness of God.*”

The **presence** of the Holy Spirit in the life of a believer is the **evidence** of his or her salvation. But it is the **power** of the Holy Spirit that will enable him or her to receive the **strength, stability, apprehension, and fullness** that Paul prayed for them to receive.

This power of the Holy Spirit becomes operative, in the lives of believers when they intentionally and consistently yield to the promptings of the Spirit. It is the responsibility of the believer to yield to the Holy Spirit.

Our receiving of **strength, stability, apprehension, and fullness** is determined by the degree to which we have surrendered to the Holy Spirit. The more we yield ourselves to Him, the more He is able to strengthen us with might in the inner man; the more we are strengthened with might in the inner man, the more comfortable the Lord Jesus Christ will feel in our hearts; the more comfortable the Lord Jesus Christ feels in our hearts, the more we will be rooted and grounded in love; the more we are rooted and grounded in love, the more we will lay hold on the

greatness of the love of God for us; the more we lay hold on the greatness of God's love for us, the more we will be filled with all the fulness of God.

Thus, the secret of our being strengthened with might in the inner man, having Christ to dwell in your hearts by faith, being rooted and grounded in love, laying hold on the greatness of the love of God for us, and being filled with all His fulness, is found in surrender to the Holy Spirit.

Before we were saved, our wills were enslaved to the totally depraved human nature which we inherited from Adam, who was our federal head and representative. When we were saved by the grace of God, the compelling power that this totally depraved human nature exerted over our wills was broken. If we obey our depraved human nature now, it is not because we have to do so, but it is because we choose to do so.

The Holy Spirit has given us a new nature, the divine nature. And the sweet and powerful influences of that divine nature are constantly permeating the activities of our wills as we yield to the Holy Spirit. In this way, the Spirit keeps on suppressing the activities of the depraved human nature and any control which it might attempt to exert over us.

The Holy Spirit does that for us when we intentionally put ourselves under His control. The Holy Spirit is not a perpetual motion machine which operates automatically in our lives, grinding out holiness in our lives no matter what we do. He is a divine Person who is waiting on us to depend upon Him for His ministry. Thus, the choice lies with us as to whether we are going to yield to the Holy Spirit or obey the depraved human nature.

The **strength, stability, apprehension** and **fulness** which the Holy Spirit supplies as we intentionally and consistently yield ourselves to Him, generates within us the graces of lowliness, meekness, longsuffering and forbearance, without which the maintaining of the unity of the Spirit is not possible.

In 1900, **Lelia N. Morris**, the American Methodist hymnwriter, wrote the words and music of the hymn, “*Sweet Will of God.*”

*My stubborn will at last hath yielded;
I would be Thine, and Thine alone;
And this the prayer my lips are bringing,
Lord, let in me Thy will be done.*

*Sweet will of God, still fold me closer;
Till I am wholly lost in Thee;
Sweet will of God, still fold me closer,
Till I am wholly lost in Thee.*

*I'm tired of sin, footsore and weary,
The darksome path hath dreary grown,
But now a light has ris'n to cheer me;
I find in Thee my star, my sun.*

*Thy precious will, O conquering Savior,
Doth now embrace and compass me;
All discords hushed, my peace a river,
My soul, a prisoned bird, set free.*

*Shut in with Thee, O Lord, forever,
My wayward feet no more to roam;
What power from Thee my soul can sever?
The center of God's will my home.*

*Sweet will of God, still fold me closer;
Till I am wholly lost in Thee;
Sweet will of God, still fold me closer,
Till I am wholly lost in Thee.*

Brothers and sisters, are we really interested in maintaining the unity of the Spirit? Are we really desirous of the Holy Spirit having His own sweet, blessed way in our lives? Will we endeavour then to sincerely and

earnestly seek the face of God and ask Him to help us to yield our stubborn wills to Him, so that His sweet will may be able to fold us closer until we are wholly lost in Him?