

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

(LESSON FORTY)

“THE UNITY OF THE SPIRIT” (PART THREE)

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 **Lesson 37**, we started to explore the first 3 verses of **Ephesians** chapter **4**. In these verses Paul exhorts the believers in Ephesus to practically live out the doctrines of grace that he had explained to them in the first 3 chapters. He says,

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.

In these verses, he emphasizes **The Grace of Unity**. In verse **1**, he begs the believers to “*walk worthy*” of the high calling with which they were called. In verse **2**, he tells them **how** they are to walk worthy of their high calling. They are to do so “*with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love.*” In verse **3**, he tells them **why** they are to walk worthy of their high calling. He says, “*Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*”

We observed that in verse **13** of the same chapter, Paul speaks of “*the unity of the faith.*” He writes, “*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.*”

We pointed out that in verse **3**, Paul urges the believers to “*keep the unity of the Spirit,*” while in verse **13**, he desires for them to “*come in the unity of the faith.*” In verse **3** he speaks of unity as a reality to be **maintained**. In verse **13**, he refers to it as a goal to be **attained**. Paul is not speaking about two different types of Christian unity. Rather, he is informing the believers that there is a sense in which Christian unity has already been accomplished, and yet, there is also a sense in which it has not yet been accomplished.

In His work of atonement and reconciliation, Jesus Christ has already made us one. It is our responsibility to **keep** or **preserve** or **maintain** the unity that He accomplished on the Cross. But in another sense, the unity that He purchased and guaranteed with His life’s 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**.

We noted that the theologian, **John Piper**, has summarized Christian unity in the light of **Ephesians chapters 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**.

The common **convictions**, **confidence** and **care** are all generated in the inner-heart lives of believers by the Holy Spirit. It is for this reason that Paul refers to the unity that he wants the believers to keep, or preserve, or maintain, as the “*unity of the Spirit*.”

In verse **3** Paul writes, “*Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*” The word “*endeavouring*” is the translation of a Greek word which means “to hasten, to exert oneself, to give diligence to.” The word conveys the idea of hastening to do something with intense effort and motivation. It suggests zealous concentration and diligent effort. It also suggests difficulty and a resolute determination to overcome the difficulty. Paul is desirous that the believers in Ephesus understand and appreciate that the preserving of the unity of the faith is something that requires considerable effort on their part.

Paul says, “*Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*” The word “*keep*” is the translation of a Greek word which means “to keep an eye on, to attend carefully, to watch over.” The word speaks of watching over something which is in one’s possession. It speaks to the guarding of something that one considers to be precious. In using the present tense Paul is urging the believers in Ephesus to continually watch over and guard the unity of the Spirit.

What is it that Paul exhorts the believers in Ephesus to watch over and guard? It is the “*unity of the Spirit*.” The Greek word translated “*unity*” describes a state of oneness or of being in harmony and accord. It does not describe an **external**, ecclesiastical unity, but an **internal**, spiritual unity. The Holy Spirit has already created a basic unity that nothing can destroy, as a result of Christ’s work of atonement and reconciliation. But

it is our responsibility to preserve this unity and actively and consistently experience and enjoy it.

Paul urges the Ephesian believers to make every effort to *“keep the unity of the Spirit.”*

The Holy Spirit is the Source or the Agent that produces the unity of the Spirit. Paul is describing the unity which is wrought by the Holy Spirit and by the Holy Spirit alone.

If we consider **Galatians 5:22-23**, where Paul deals with the *“fruit of the Spirit*, we may be able to appreciate how the Holy Spirit’s production of these super-natural graces in the life of each believer, makes it possible for them to keep, or preserve, or maintain the unity of which the Holy Spirit is the manufacturer. In this passage Paul writes the following: *“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, Meekness, temperance: against such there is no law.”*

Brothers and sisters, do you notice the similarity of this list of graces to the attitudes and actions in which Paul is imploring saints to continually walk in **Ephesians 4** verse **2**? He says, *“With all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love.”*

Now let us contrast the fruit of the Spirit with the *“works of the flesh”* mentioned in **Galatians 5:19-21**:

19 Now the works of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity, depravity,

20 idolatry, sorcery, hostilities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish rivalries, dissensions, factions,

21 envying, murder, drunkenness, carousing, and similar things. I am warning you, as I had warned you before: Those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God!

(New English Translation)

Consider in particular the sins grouped together in the middle of the passage, “*hostilities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish rivalries, dissensions, factions, envying.*” Any one of these can disrupt the unity of the Spirit

Paul does not speak of the “works” of the Spirit but the “*fruit*” of the Spirit. The choice of “fruit” here instead of “works” is due to the conception of the Christian experience as the product of a new and divine life implanted in the believer. The believer lives in the Spirit, that is, he or she derives his or her spiritual life from the indwelling Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the motivating force producing the fruit of the Spirit. The word “*fruit*” is singular, which clearly indicates that all of the elements of character spoken of in these verses are a unity, making for a well-rounded and complete Christian life.

Paul is exhorting the Galatian believers to conduct themselves under the guidance, impulses and energy of the divine life resident in their beings. It is for this very reason that the Holy Spirit has taken up residence in their hearts. It is the responsibility of every believer to desire to live a Christ-like life, to depend upon the Holy Spirit for the power to live that life, and to step out in faith and live that life. When he or she does this, all the infinite resources of grace will activate all the operations of the Holy Spirit in his or her behalf.

Brothers and sisters, since we have all been baptized into one Body according to **1Corinthians 12:13**, we are to make every effort to keep, or preserve, or maintain the unity which the Holy Spirit has engendered. **We** cannot create this unity. **We** cannot organize ourselves to bring about, or enforce this unity. Only the Holy Spirit can engender this unity, but it is our responsibility to maintain it. All true believers in Jesus Christ belong to one body, and we are therefore one in Him. This is a truth that we must understand, and seek to live out practically.

A sad example of failure to preserve the unity of the Spirit is seen in two

Congregations which were located only a few blocks from each other in a small community. The two congregations had decided to merge and thereby create one larger and more effective church instead of two small struggling churches. But the merger did not happen because they could not agree on how to begin the Lord's Prayer. One group insisted to pray "forgive us our **trespasses**," while the other group was determined to pray "forgive us our **debts**."

In his famous devotional classic "*The Pursuit of God*," **A. W. Tozer** wrote, "Has it ever occurred to you that one hundred pianos all tuned to the same fork are automatically tuned to each other? They are of one accord by being tuned, not to each other, but to another standard to which each one must individually bow. So one hundred worshipers [meeting] together, each one looking away to Christ, are in heart nearer to each other than they could possibly be, were they to become 'unity' conscious and turn their eyes away from God to strive for closer fellowship."

The "**Prince of Preachers**," **C. H. Spurgeon** made the following comments regarding the matter of unity: "It is not likely we should all see eye to eye. You cannot make a dozen watches all tick to the same time, much less make a dozen men all think the same thoughts. But still, if we should all bow our thoughts to that one written Word, and would own no authority but the Bible, the church could not be divided. It could not be cut in pieces as she now is. We come together when we come to the Word of God."

Brothers and sisters, church unity and church union are two very different things. Unity is not produced simply by union. Unity is **internal**; union is **external**. Unity is the result of spiritual and organic growth, brought about by the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer; union is the product of the organizing activity of human beings. The sad reality is that many organizations and assemblies, with the word "United" forming a part of their names, are anything but united in the real sense of the word. Unity cannot be produced by committees,

resolutions, catch phrases, Mission and Vision statements or uniformity. If you tie the tails of a dog and a cat together with a rope you will have a union, but you certainly will not have unity!

Unity can only be brought about by the effectual working of the Holy Spirit in the lives of genuinely converted men and women who are intentionally and consistently yielding to His influence.

Paul urges the Ephesians and the Holy Spirit urges us to “*keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*” The word “*bond*” is the translation of the Greek word **sundesmos: (soon’-des-mos)**, which means, “that which joins together.” The word speaks of an intimate union.

Sundesmos was used in Greek to describe a tendon or ligament of the bones by which the members of the human body are united together. It denotes that which keeps something together. It may be referred to as “the tie which binds together.”

Paul uses the word figuratively here to illustrate the binding together in the sense of the spiritual forces that unite believers. It is peace which brings believers into a unified relationship and it is peace which maintains them in that relationship of unity. Peace is the bond or “glue” which ensures that this God-given unity will not fall apart. Peace has a bonding effect and is the means by which the unity of the Spirit is maintained and manifested. When peace is disturbed the unity of the Spirit is disrupted.

In other words, peace is the binding factor which will preserve the unity which the Spirit has produced. The unity which the Holy Spirit produces among believers will be preserved if they all make peace the relation which they maintain one to another, or the bond in which they walk together.

In Paul’s description of the creation of the Body of Christ in **Ephesians** chapter **2**, we see that peace is an essential element of this new creation. In verses **13-17** of chapter **2**, he writes,

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:

17 And came and preached peace to you which were afar off, and to them that were nigh.

Brothers and sisters, the Jews and the Gentiles had for centuries been alienated and separate. The Jews regarded the Gentiles with hatred, and the Gentiles regarded the Jews with scorn. But now, because of Christ's atoning work they were at peace. They both worshiped the same God; they both had the same Saviour; they both depended on the same atonement. They both had the same hope; they both belonged to the same redeemed family. They had not only been reconciled to God but to each other also. The work of atonement not only produces peace with God, but peace with persons who were hostile, bitter human beings.

Now, when a Jew was converted to Christianity he or she lost his or her national identity "in Christ." Likewise, when a Gentile received salvation he or she was no longer a Gentile. He or she was is "in Christ." In other words, believing Jews and believing Gentiles, once divided by enmity, were now both one in Christ. Their union with Christ necessarily united them with one another.

Brothers and sisters, peace is never going to be a reality until Jesus Christ is in an individual's life. Until a person has received the grace of God, he

or she will never experience the peace of God. Grace always precedes peace. It is always “Grace and peace.” It is never “Peace and grace.”

On the Cross of Calvary, Jesus Christ spanned the mightiest gulf which has ever existed between human beings. He spanned the gulf between the Jews and the Gentiles. If there is any person who doubts that this gulf is the mightiest of all, consider for a moment why it is that the Arab-Israeli conflict in the Middle East has proved so difficult to settle. The greatest political minds have tried and failed to come up with a solution. It can only be solved by and in Jesus Christ, the “Prince of Peace.”

With the death of Jesus Christ on the Cross, God started to deal with humanity on a different basis than He had in the past. He stopped working with and through the Jews and the religious system of Judaism primarily, and instead He began dealing with Jews and Gentiles on the same basis—the basis of their faith in His Son. Those who have been brought to faith in the Son of God have been reconciled to God and are therefore at peace with Him. As a consequence of being at peace with Him, they are also at peace with every other person who has similarly been brought to faith in Jesus Christ. Every believer has the awesome privilege and responsibility to reflect this reality in the way that they treat each other.

The American theologian **William MacDonald** explained that...
“Peace is the ligament which binds the members of the Body together in spite of their wide natural differences. A common reaction when differences arise is to divide and start another party. The spiritual reaction is this: **‘In essentials, unity. In doubtful questions, liberty. In all things, charity.’** There is enough of the flesh in every one of us to wreck any local church or any other work of God. Therefore, we must submerge our own petty, personal whims and attitudes, and work together in peace for the glory of God and for common blessing.”

A.W. Tozer, whom we quoted earlier, made the following remarks:
“For the very reason that the church is one body, anything that tends to introduce division is an evil, however harmless, or even useful, it may appear to be. Yet the average evangelical church is divided into

fragments which live and work separate from, and sometimes in opposition to, each other. In some churches there is simply no time or place for the worship and service of all members unitedly. These churches are organized to make such unity impossible.”

Brothers and sisters, do you see why it is so critical for those of us who are connected with **The Grace Workshop Ministries**, to make every effort to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace?

In **James** chapter **3** verses **13** to chapter **4** verse **10**, we have one of the most graphic illustrations of war and peace in the entire New Testament. We will consider the rendering of the **New Living Translation**:

13 If you are wise and understand God’s ways, prove it by living an honorable life, doing good works with the humility that comes from wisdom.

14 But if you are bitterly jealous and there is selfish ambition in your heart, don’t cover up the truth with boasting and lying.

15 For jealousy and selfishness are not God’s kind of wisdom. Such things are earthly, unspiritual, and demonic.

16 For wherever there is jealousy and selfish ambition, there you will find disorder and evil of every kind.

17 But the wisdom from above is first of all pure. It is also peace loving, gentle at all times, and willing to yield to others. It is full of mercy and the fruit of good deeds. It shows no favoritism and is always sincere.

18 And those who are peacemakers will plant seeds of peace and reap a harvest of righteousness.

1 What is causing the quarrels and fights among you? Don’t they come from the evil desires at war within you?

2 You want what you don't have, so you scheme and kill to get it. You are jealous of what others have, but you can't get it, so you fight and wage war to take it away from them. Yet you don't have what you want because you don't ask God for it.

3 And even when you ask, you don't get it because your motives are all wrong—you want only what will give you pleasure.

4 You adulterers! Don't you realize that friendship with the world makes you an enemy of God? I say it again: If you want to be a friend of the world, you make yourself an enemy of God.

5 Do you think the Scriptures have no meaning? They say that God is passionate that the spirit he has placed within us should be faithful to him.

6 And he gives grace generously. As the Scriptures say, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."

7 So humble yourselves before God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.

8 Come close to God, and God will come close to you. Wash your hands, you sinners; purify your hearts, for your loyalty is divided between God and the world.

9 Let there be tears for what you have done. Let there be sorrow and deep grief. Let there be sadness instead of laughter, and gloom instead of joy.

10 Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up in honor.

This passage clearly indicates that the reason for war on the outside is war on the inside. If a believer is not at peace with God, he or she cannot be at peace with other believers.

In **Colossians 3:15** Paul writes, “*And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to the which also ye are called in one body; and be ye thankful.*” The word “*peace*” is the translation of the Greek word **eirene (i-ray’-nay)**, which means, “to join together as a whole.” The word literally pictures the binding or joining together again of that which had been separated or divided. Peace is a state of concord and harmony, the opposite of division or dissension.

The peace which Jesus Christ gives is not only a peace which we experience when there is no conflict, but it is the presence of an assurance even in the midst of conflict. All believers share this peace.

The word “*rule*” is the translation of a Greek word which literally means “to award the prize.” The original idea is that of an umpire deciding the outcome of an athletic contest and distributing the prize to the winner. In the context of this verse, the word is used figuratively to picture the peace of Christ ruling in situations where the carnal passions of believers might threaten to disrupt the peace in the Body of Christ. Wherever there is a conflict of any sort in the Body, the peace of Christ must rule as an umpire, deciding how it should be handled. When differences threaten the unity of the body, the peace of Christ must be accepted as the arbitrator.

The peace of Christ should act as our umpire whenever “*hostilities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish rivalries, dissensions, factions, envying,*” and other such passions arise in our hearts. It is Christ’s rule of peace which pulls believers together in unity.

Paul’s point is that if we all have the peace of God in our hearts, we will certainly be more likely to experience peace in the church. If we are not experiencing peace individually, we are more likely to contribute to discord and disharmony in the church.

No heart is right with God where the peace of Christ does not rule in that heart. The continual presence of the peace of Christ is a proof that the

heart is right with God. When a person loses his or her peace, it indicates that he or she has lost something else. It indicates that he or she has allowed self to prevail and thus the Holy Spirit has been grieved.

Brothers and sisters, we have been called by the effectual call of God into the enjoyment of this peace. But it is important for us to understand that it is as members of the Body of Christ that we participate in and enjoy this peace. This peace not only refers to individual tranquility of heart, but extends to peace among the members of the Body in their relations to one another. It is only in the “bond of peace” that the “unity of the Spirit” can be fully realized. Division in the Body is incompatible with the peace of the individual members.

In other words, it is when the “peace of God” rules in our hearts, that we can really know true unity.

In 1981, **Gloria Gaither**, the wife of **Bill Gaither** wrote the words of the Hymn “*I Then Shall Live.*” The following is an excerpt of her account of the hymn’s composition: “I wrote quickly what I felt the Spirit was dictating to my soul. When the words were on the page, I read them and had to admit that these were words easier to write than to faithfully live out in all areas of my life on a daily basis....If we could all begin to believe that each of us is “where the buck stops” if the world is ever to be changed by the beautiful message of redemption – not just in what we say, but in who we truly are – I believe something amazing could happen.”

We will end this **Lesson** with the words of the hymn.

*I then shall live as one who's been forgiven.
I'll walk with joy to know my debts are paid.
I know my name is clear before my Father;
I am His child and I am not afraid.
So, greatly pardoned, I'll forgive my brother;
The law of love I gladly will obey.*

*I then shall live as one who's learned compassion.
I've been so loved, that I'll risk loving too.
I know how fear builds walls instead of bridges;
I'll dare to see another's point of view.
And when relationships demand commitment,
Then I'll be there to care and follow through.*

*Your Kingdom come around and through and in me;
Your power and glory, let them shine through me.
Your Hallowed Name, O may I bear with honor,
And may Your living Kingdom come in me.
The Bread of Life, O may I share with honor,
And may You feed a hungry world through me.*