

Scripture Reading for Sunday July 25th 2021

John 17:20-23 (NIV)

²⁰“My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message,
²¹that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so
that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²²I have given them the glory that you gave me, that
they may be one as we are one— ²³I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete
unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

Eph 4:1-7, 11-16; 25 - 5:2 (NIV)

⁴As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. ²Be
completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. ³Make every effort to
keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. ⁴There is one body and one Spirit, just as you
were called to one hope when you were called; ⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶one God and Father
of all, who is over all and through all and in all. ⁷But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ
apportioned it.

¹¹So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, ¹²to
equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up ¹³until we all reach
unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole
measure of the fullness of Christ. ¹⁴Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the
waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people
in their deceitful scheming. ¹⁵Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every
respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. ¹⁶From him the whole body, joined and
held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its
work.

²⁵Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all
members of one body. ²⁶“In your anger do not sin”: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry,
²⁷and do not give the devil a foothold. ²⁸Anyone who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must
work, doing something useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share with those
in need.

²⁹Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building
others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. ³⁰And do not grieve the Holy
Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. ³¹Get rid of all bitterness, rage
and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. ³²Be kind and compassionate to one
another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. ⁵ ¹Follow God’s example, therefore, as
dearly loved children ²and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as
a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Sermon: Ethics Matter!

If you are a news junkie like me, then you will be familiar with the word's "pivot" and "deflection," when a reporter asks one question and the politician evades a response and changes the topic to that of their own agenda. We can quickly become suspicious and cynical about politicians not wanting to answer the question. Sometimes it's because the reporter has asked a banana-skin of a query with the hope of the politician slipping up on it. At other times, the politician wants to avoid telling the truth. In this so-called "post-truth" era, we are used to truth-avoidance, half-truths, lies, and even deception or fake news.¹ The writer of Ephesians has words to say about truth-telling, as we will see later, but first, there is a significant shift in the tone of this letter in chapter 4, and it begins with a pivot. The writer says: "Therefore, I beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called."² These last two Sundays I have been speaking on God's gracious rescue plan and his loving purposes revealed in Jesus Christ.³ In religious language, we have *all* been "called"⁴ by God – not just clergy – but all of us, *called* into partnership with God for the good of the whole world. God is continuing to call into being his inclusive community,⁵ the church, to be a blessing to those inside and outside of it. The writer, having presented his inspirational vision of God's united family⁶ now switches to the practical implications of our new status as beloved children of God. He does that with stylized moral instruction along with a dash of exhortation!⁷ I say "stylized" because the author follows the typical pattern of Greek philosophers writing to their followers. Ancient moralists held that people should be *reminded* of what they already know so that they will continue to act accordingly. Consequently, the advice given need not reflect actual vices present in the congregation!⁸ For that reason it's best to see this section as an uplifting half-time team talk from the coach, rather than a series of guilt-inducing admonitions. So, what does the writer have to say?

He "appeals" or "begs" them to remember that they have been summoned and saved by God's grace and so live in light of that fact by developing *virtues*. Imagine that as you come out of the waters of baptism you are given a new white robe to wear. Building on that image, we are to similarly "put on" the clothes of humility, gentleness, kindness, and patience. Those virtues are essential if we are to "bear with one another in love as we make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of

¹ And even conspiracy theories.

² Eph 4:1. To walk "in a manner worthy of the calling to which we have been called" both looks forward and backward. The backward stance provides the foundation: God has summoned us – we have been saved by grace (Eph 2:5, 8-9) - new life has already been born within us and affirmed in our baptism and in the Spirit's presence. And now we are to walk forward – deliberately. (Oh that politicians – and other leaders - would live lives "worthy of their calling" and of the trust given them.)

³ See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Gods-Rescue-Plan-and-Purpose.pdf> .

⁴ This divine election or chosen-ness is a Jewish notion that is also present in Christianity. It is unwise to see this as deterministic predestination as that would be completely inconsistent with these exhortations.

⁵ The Gospel writers refer to this as the "kingdom" of God.

⁶ See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/In-Christ-and-Through-the-Church.pdf> .

⁷ The technical term is "paraenesis."

⁸ This is particularly true of Ephesians, in contrast to – say – 1 Corinthians, where specific concerns are addressed.

peace.”⁹ Don’t expect these qualities to happen overnight! But they will not happen at all if we don’t value them or recognize their importance in living together within the Christian community. The team coach is fixated on unity, because he then reminds them the seven “ones”: one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all.¹⁰ Unity, however, does *not* mean uniformity.¹¹ We are not meant to be clones of Jesus; how boring would that be! We are all different; we have different gifts, skills, abilities, talents, and interests.¹² God loves variety, but wants us – by his Spirit – to work for unity, love, and peace. We *all* have a vital role to play. Borrowing from trinitarian language, we are to be unified in purpose, fellowship, and love – just as Godself is. The variety of gracious gifts given by God is to *equip* the church for the important work we are to do and to help us *mature* as a Christian family.¹³

The writer exhorts his readers: “Don’t be a baby; grow up!” In modern terms we could express like this: Don’t be naïve, the world is full of sharp people who are out to make a quick buck out of you, to catch you when you are emotionally fragile or excitable, or to recruit you to their own particular “truth.” Beware: fake news abounds and conspiracy theories flourish. Therefore, *value maturity*, seek wisdom and discernment so that you won’t be tossed around every time the wind changes direction.¹⁴ Christian maturity, like all character and personal development, takes time.¹⁵ The author, and I believe God, *doesn’t* want us to have a simple, child-like faith, rather for us to have a robust, mature faith. The writer warns that those without maturity are very vulnerable to all kinds of deception that can take them a long way from Christ’s ultimate goal.

Since unity and maturity are vital to the organic growth of the church, the body of Christ, then those things that help promote healthy growth and peace are to be encouraged. The writer therefore wants each part of the body to be working properly,¹⁶ working together and not pulling in opposite directions. In addition to those four virtues of “humility, gentleness, kindness, and patience,” we are encouraged “to speak the truth in love.”¹⁷ For that to happen, both truth *and* love are required; that means speaking the truth softly, authentically, and with gentleness and kindness – *not* being “brutally honest” or deceitful! Relationships within the family of God matter both before *and* after you have spoken the

⁹ Eph 4:2; see also Col 3:12. The stress on (*agape*) love is also found in Gal 5:14–15; 1 Cor 13. See also Gal 5:22–23; the fruits of the Spirit are the virtues of Jesus.

¹⁰ Eph 4:4–6, which concludes: “one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.” It has been said that if the church is not united it becomes more sociological and theological! We may confess unity in our Creeds, but we need to work to create it!

¹¹ But neither does it mean signing onto documents (“statements”) that are put together by those who wish to draw a red line that separates “us” from “them.” Sometimes “correctness” is confused with maturity.

¹² See Eph 4:11.

¹³ See Eph 4:12–13. The “until” (v13) reveals more of an eschatological or teleological character of this goal; it’s a journey.

¹⁴ Eph 4:14. Mature Christians are more concerned about unity than personal triumph or being “right.”

¹⁵ Maturity involves the community *as a whole*, and not merely particular individuals (say those in leadership). [Note too that the contrast between maturity and childishness is common place in ethical exhortation.]

¹⁶ Eph 4:16.

¹⁷ Eph 4:15.

“truth in love.” Yet it takes humility, patience, and maturity to recognize those important, and perhaps less obvious, truths.¹⁸

In a “post-truth” political culture, ethics no longer matter – only the ends justify the means, and the goal in mind is to gain and maintain power and influence at whatever the cost. In that context, “If you say something often enough, people will believe you”¹⁹ is a phrase I have heard recently. And repeating what is said happens exponentially and instantly through unfiltered social media these days. In our confused culture, it does not matter if what is said is factually accurate or not – if we want it to be true, it can become “true for us” – even if it is a lie. And that can have deadly consequences, as we have seen in [COVID] vaccine hesitancy, for example.

The writer of Ephesians earnestly sought the wellbeing of “the body.” We can extend this to a healthy *society*; not only does unity, love, and peace matter, but so does truth. That’s why he goes on to say “Stop telling lies. Let us tell our neighbors the truth, for we are all parts of the same body.”²⁰ And that’s not rocket science, because ultimately lies will destroy whereas the truth in love builds up. The writer then continues with his series of ethical “don’ts” counterbalanced by a series of “do’s.” Being angry is a normal human emotion, but don’t let your anger fester and result in bitterness and divisiveness.²¹ Don’t steal for there is no shame in honest hard work! Instead, do good and share with those in need.²² Don’t use foul or abusive language. Instead, let what you say be constructive and encouraging.²³ Get rid of all bitterness, rage, harsh words, slander, as well as all types of malice. Instead, be kind to each other, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you.²⁴ In short: avoid vices and cultivate virtues. Don’t let your actions grieve God’s Spirit, instead, live in love – just as Jesus loved us.²⁵ Now if we don’t like this list of exhortations, then we need to read again the Sermon on the Mount!²⁶ That sermon says that to be members of God’s kingdom, we are to do the kinds of things God does. We are to love, reconcile, and forgive. And we are to be faithful, persistent, honest,

¹⁸ People who make some sort of effort to avoid being taken in by false or misleading information, say advertising or via social media, can lose all critical sense when it comes to religious claims! They naively assume that anything someone from their religious tradition asserts will be sincere and truthful! We need to be careful and “test the spirits” (1 John 4:1).

¹⁹ Donald Trump famously said it.

²⁰ Eph 4:25, NLT; see also Zech 8:16.

²¹ Eph 4:26-27.

²² Eph 4:28. There is no shame in hard, manual work. In those days, some philosophers were wealthy aristocrats, or had a benefactor, and so thought that manual work was beneath their dignity. Paul stressed his financial independence as a tent maker (Acts 18:3; 1 Cor 4:12; 2 Thess 3:6-11). Furthermore, in our Western society, our identity as persons is often bound up in what we create in working – in what we *do*. On the other hand, social and economic systems can generate structures of injustice and inhuman working conditions that destroy human persons. As Christians we need to continually examine the intersection between work and the ethical values. (Don’t abuse your privileges!)

²³ Eph 4:29

²⁴ Eph 4:31-32. See also Matt 6:14.

²⁵ Eph 4:30; 5:1-2.

²⁶ See Matt 5-7.

generous, trusting, and discerning—for those are God’s traits. The writer of Ephesians summarizes it in the same way: “become *imitators* of God.”²⁷

Some on hearing that exhortation may be tempted just to throw up their hands and protest against the impossibility of that goal and walk away. Please don’t! As I said earlier, see this message as the coach’s half-time team talk to motivate and encourage the team for the remainder of the game. The writer personally knows all about the struggles and hardships of life. He begins, “as a prisoner for serving the Lord . . .”²⁸ indicating that he is fully acquainted with suffering when he gives this advice. I suggest that it’s especially *in* the storms of life that we need to find our guiding North star to lead us forward on the journey. This exhortation is to both look forward with hope and confidence because of God’s ongoing involvement in history - his Spirit’s gracious gifts are being given so that all of us mature in the faith, and it reminds us all to not lose sight of the fact that these virtues and goals really matter for the wellbeing of our community – and, indeed, for society as a whole. If lies, theft – including tax evasion, mean-spiritedness, abusive behavior, rage, and malice thrive unchecked, the community is doomed. The same can be said about the end of an empire or civilization. There’s thought-provoking wisdom in these words to consider – and not merely dismiss because it’s hard to put into practice. In the final analysis, says the writer: *ethics matter*. The qualities he encourages are things that won’t just happen unless we *choose* them. That means choosing truth over lies, love over hate, unity over polarization, peace over conflict. Of course, it is hard to be consistent in this; that’s why it is a pilgrimage.²⁹ And it’s also why *community itself matters*, because we have the potential and opportunity to help each other, which is a huge weakness for go-it-alone individualism.

Let me try and summarize and conclude:

Faith and practice are to go together. Freedom in Christ doesn’t mean we can do what we want ethically! Our freedom is so we can, with the Spirit’s continual help and gifting, build up rather than be trapped in destructive tendencies. The writer is not calling for the Christians to *feel warmly* towards one another, or be *nice* to one another, but to act according to their calling.³⁰ We are to *love by serving* one another. The church is called to be a new community based not on divisions inherent in the existing social order but on what it means to be truly human, as revealed in Jesus Christ. Conventional social hierarchy has been replaced by the body of Christ. All the members are essential and all are connected; authentic love is the glue of the community. Relationships matter. However, communal life is fragile; relationships are easily damaged, which is why maturity matters. And that’s true for every generation.

²⁷ Eph 5:1.

²⁸ Eph 4:1; if Paul was the author as tradition states, this is one of his prison letters. If not, the context of this letter is still from one fully acquainted with suffering.

²⁹ “Spiritual” conversion may take a moment, but “ethical” conversion (a sign of the former) is a life-long journey! (Consider, for example, lifestyle changes due to exercise or diet; transitions take time and discipline. Some people make changes that are not enough to make any difference and then prematurely announce – “It isn’t working.” Spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical welfare benefit arise in the long-haul, not the quick fix.)

³⁰ Or their new identity “in Christ.”

The carpenter from Nazareth seeks joiners; God is looking for active partners. The more people who buy-in to this vision, the better the world will be. That's what motivated the writer of Ephesians. Are we inspired by this team talk?³¹ Will we be active participants? Amen, let us pray.

³¹ See also: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/New-Year%E2%80%99s-Resolutions.pdf> .