

The effects of God's grace displayed in the church

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Ephesians

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Bible Text: Ephesians 4:1-3
Preached on: Thursday, May 27, 2004

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Ephesians 4, verses 1 to 3,

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.

Amen. Thus far we read the word of God. And our theme is "The effects of God's grace displayed in the church." The effect of God's grace displayed in the church.

The apostle, under the inspiration of the Spirit, has shown the church's place in the plan of God. In chapter 1 he's shown that the reason the church exists is because God, from all eternity, chose in Christ a people out of fallen mankind that they should in due time be called into the fellowship of Christ. They should be forgiven their sins and adopted as his children. The reason there is a church is because of the sovereign decree of God in predestination. That's why the church exists.

And then the apostle has shown the outworking of that in chapter 2, individuals previously among the Israelites but now in the New Testament, among the Gentiles as well, being quickened, made alive, brought to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. This again, stresses God's initiative, that it's God in the outworking of his sovereign purpose of election, of his choosing the heirs of salvation who in due time quickens them, makes them alive, who were dead in trespasses and in sins. And so in that chapter, in chapter 2 in verse 8, we read, "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God." So that even the faith is the gift of God because it's God who by the Holy Spirit renews the hearts of sinners and puts life in them and causes them to be willing to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ as he is freely offered in the gospel.

And then in chapter 3, or rather the second half of chapter 2, in chapter 3 we have the bigger picture as far as the outworking of the plan is concerned, that God has purposed that in the New Testament his church should comprise Jew and Gentile on an equal

footing as the gospel is preached among the nations. And then the great aim of it all in verse 10, "To the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God, According to the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord." So the intent is, the intention of God according to his eternal purpose, this isn't some last minute or some plan of a fallback nature as if other things were tried and then God decided to do this. This is his eternal purpose, according to his eternal purpose from all eternity that in the church by Christ Jesus through the church, he should display to the principalities and powers to the angelic world that his manifold wisdom, that he should show his glory, display his glory to the angels in the church, that his grace, his mercy his wisdom, his righteousness, his holiness should all be displayed in the church.

And then the apostle gives his prayer in verse 14 of chapter 3, "For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." He prays for the Ephesian church and for all parts of the church of God that they would display God's glory in their lives and in their manner of living in this world. And as a means too, as that which causes that, that they would know the love of Christ. It's Christians who most know the love of Christ, who live godly in Christ. So then we have the doxology at the end of the chapter 3 verse 20, "Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen."

So we now come to chapter 4 and there's obviously a distinct stage here. Chapter 4, verse 1, "I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called." This is obviously the application and there must be application. None of the doctrines of the word of God are merely theoretical. None of them. They all have a bearing on how we should think, how we should live, and that's true even of the doctrines of election, predestination, effectual calling, adoption, redemption through the blood of Christ, all these things should govern how we live. There should be no doctrine of the word of God, to use the older term, that we do not reduce to practice. And the doctrine of predestination, for example, might seem to have no practical bearing but of course it does. It should bring us low to think that God could have left us to go on in unbelief and darkness to eternal damnation, but he didn't. What gratitude, what humility and what confidence in his government of all things. If he predestinates the heirs of salvation, he governs everything else.

Everything in the word of God has an application and there can be no application without doctrine. that's why some of the profoundest doctrinal parts of the scriptures have very basic application. The obvious example is Philippians 2, the incarnation, "He being in the form of God thought it not wrong to be equal with God," and so on. "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus." There can be no application if there is nothing to apply. That's why a mere moral teaching is no use, it's ineffectual. We have wicked hearts, we need grace, we need the truth. God uses the truth by which he changes the hearts of men and women and makes them real Christians. That's why liberalism is utterly futile, it's useless. Liberal Christianity destroys real good churches and Christian institutions and then it has nothing, nothing to offer, nothing that does anything to

anybody of any good. It's powerless. Mere moralism is not the gospel and it doesn't change lives so there must be the doctrines and the application.

Now from these verses, first of all, God's providence in a hostile world. God's providence in a hostile world, "I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy." I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord." The prisoner of the Lord or the margin says "in the Lord." It makes little difference as far as the meaning is concerned. Why does he call himself the prisoner of the Lord or the prisoner in the Lord? Well, first of all, of course, he was a prisoner for Christ's sake. He was sent for the defense of the gospel and on that account and because that gospel was held forth by him in a hostile and wicked world set against God and against his truth by nature, he was now a prisoner. And that's why, one reason why he calls himself a prisoner of the Lord, that it was on account of the Lord's own truth that he was now a prisoner. And he was a prisoner in the Lord in that he was a prisoner, yes, but united to the Lord and of the Lord in the sense of belonging to the Lord. So though he was a prisoner, he was as united to Christ as a prisoner as he was before he ever was a prisoner. When he walked free, he was united to Christ. As a prisoner, he's united to Christ. And whatever our circumstances, we are in the Lord and we remain in the Lord, nothing separates us from the love of Christ, nothing broke his union with Christ. When he was arrested, when the the uproar, when he spoke on the steps of the castle and so on, he was united to the Lord. He belonged to the Lord. When he was apprehended, he was still united to the Lord and safe in him.

And not only does this indicate that he was a prisoner for the Lord's sake and in union with the Lord, but also in the Lord's providence he was a prisoner. The reason he was a prisoner, yes, it was the hostility of men but the first cause, the ultimate cause was the plan and purpose of God, for we know that all things work together for good to them that love God and who are called according to his purpose. How do we become Christians? Well, we're called effectually. And who has planned that call? Well, God has. We are called according to his purpose. And the God who has purposed that we should be called into fellowship with Christ and brought to faith in Christ, that we should become Christians, that God governs everything else in the interests of his people, his church.

So why was Paul a prisoner? Well, because the Jews hated what he preached and because the Romans arrested him and took him a prisoner, and because men made false accusation against him. Yes, all of that is true but the ultimate cause was the plan and purpose of God, and in that sense he was the prisoner not of Rome but of the Lord. And so the apostle was arrested in the plan of God. He was imprisoned in the plan of God and this first imprisonment would come to an end in the plan of God. There would be another imprisonment and he wouldn't be released, he would be put to death in the plan of God. God would deliver him from every evil work and bring him to his everlasting kingdom. All comes about in the hand of God. What a blessed encouragement to contentment and against frustration, the Apostle Paul a prisoner, in this imprisonment a fairly mild one. We have the beginning of it at the end of Acts. He could have been full of frustration, full of resentment. It was so unfair. He was a prisoner, what had he done wrong? So frustrating, so much to do and here he was a prisoner. How did he learn in whatsoever state therewith to be content? Surely the doctrine of God's providence. Yes, the contentment of knowing Christ was his and the assurance that that Christ, the government

was upon his shoulders and he governs all according to the Father's purpose in the interests of his people, and so he didn't need to be frustrated. He was hemmed in, physically speaking, but for no longer than the plan of God determined.

Is this part of our problem? We wring our hands in frustration at so many things as if they were governed by chance, or by some malign fate rather than our great God and Savior. This is our sin, it's our unbelief. All our sins have the sin of unbelief in them, we've noticed that many times, and there we have it in the day to day things of life, far smaller things than being a prisoner as the apostle was. Our frustrations, our irrational rages, where does it all come from? From unbelief. "Thou art good and thou doest good." If we could lay that to heart and believe it always, then we would be free of these things. But then secondly, love for God's people in a hostile world. Love for God's people in a hostile world. "I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called." I beseech you. As an apostle he had the right to command them but he beseeches them, and his being a prisoner adds weight not in the sense of looking for some sympathy or just a vague sympathy, but as showing how the honor of Christ was paramount for him. And so he was willing to suffer for the name of Christ and therefore they should walk worthy, that Savior for whose name he was suffering was worthy of their walking worthily of the vocation wherewith they are called, and therefore they should seek the unity of the church. They should follow his example. He cared about that unity in his trouble. They should care about it too. They must sacrifice their own supposed rights for the honor of Christ.

He was doing that, that's why he was a prisoner. They must do it even among themselves. But see in his affliction how he cares for the church of Christ. It shows his love for Christ and also for his people. Even yet he's not preoccupied with his own troubles. You'd think as a prisoner his main concern would be his situation, how to get out of here, but we don't find that. Much less do we find him regretting that faithfulness to Christ had brought him into this situation. He doesn't regret following Christ. He doesn't say, "Now let me tell you, you Christians in Ephesus, it's only professing to be a Christian and going so far, but be careful or you could end up like me." He doesn't say that at all. He's saying, "I'm the prisoner of the Lord, but you too must honor Christ. You must make sacrifices, even within the church."

So he still cares about the people of God even in his affliction, but then thirdly, our calling and our walk. Our calling and our walk. "I beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called." Walk worthy of the vocation or the calling wherewith ye are called. The people of God have been called into God's family, back in chapter 1 and verse 5, "having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself according to the good pleasure of his will." They've been adopted in the outworking of God's eternal decree and plan. They've become the children of God and as part of the church they are to show forth his glory as we saw in chapter 3, verse 10, the manifold wisdom of God.

The church is the vehicle of the supreme display of God's glory through Christ Jesus, and he's saying walk worthy of this calling. Walk, the idea of the walk is of the whole course of our lives as we walk through this world, as it were. The whole of our lives are to be

lived in a manner worthy of those who have been called into fellowship with Christ and to be part of his true church. The whole of our lives. That's why it uses the word walk. The whole of our lives must be dominated by devotion to Christ, not just on the Lord's Day the Lord's Day has its distinctive activities, distinct from the rest of the week, the Lord's Day, the Sabbath Day is when we rest from normal labor and give ourselves to the worship of God. So there is a difference of activity on the Sabbath Day from the six other days and that distinction of activity should not be blurred, but it is true that every day is to be lived to the glory of God. That doesn't obliterate the distinctiveness of the Sabbath. On the Sabbath we are to live to the glory of God in worship and in works of necessity and mercy, in the six days the bulk of the time is given to labor and that is to be done to the glory of God. So there is a difference of function for the Sabbath over the other days, but every day whether in worship or in labor is to be used to the glory of God, to the honor of the Lord Jesus Christ. And that's true in the home, it's true in the workplace. That's why in chapter 6 of this, chapters 5 and 6 of this epistle, as the apostle goes on to show what this worthy walking as befits our calling, as he goes on to show what it means, he deals with husbands and wives, parents, children, masters, servants, to show what this means in concrete terms.

So there is no Christianity as a hobby or a spare time activity or even a part-time activity. The whole of life is to be under Christ all the time. We are to live worthy of the vocation wherewith we are called. Every thought is to be brought captive to the obedience of Christ. So we are to honor Christ on the Sabbath day, yes, in our worship, and we are to honor Christ in our homes, and we are to honor Christ in our work, in everything Christ is to be glorified. But then fourthly, our calling and the unity of the church. Our calling and the unity of the church. Verses 2 and 3 deal with the unity of the church, and in dealing with that he is saying this is how your calling must show itself within the church of Christ.

Now when he teaches here unity as an expression of the call of God, as the outworking of God's gracious call, he is talking about a unity among those who really belong to the church of God. He's talking about a duty within the body of people that we have grounds to regard as Christians and as the church of God, those who show that in their profession and life that they are indeed adopted as his children, that they have been quickened together with Christ and saved by his grace and brought to faith in him. In other words, this exaltation to unity does not imply seeking unity with everyone who calls himself a Christian or with every body that calls itself a church. Sometimes these kind of verses are taken, "Endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace," and they're simply applied in blanket fashion as if that obliges us to a unity with those who give no evidence that they are born of the Spirit at all. The apostle is not enjoining unity with those who in doctrine or practice deny the gospel.

In Galatians chapter 1 and verse 6 he says, "I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel: Which is not another; but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ. But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. As we said before, so say I now again, If any

man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed." And in chapter 5 in verse 12 he says, "I would they were even cut off which trouble you."

Now he's speaking about people who would have said they were Christians but he doesn't recognize them as Christians because they preached another gospel, and likewise elsewhere, those who lived ungodly lives and lived immoral lives even though they claimed to be Christians under some pretext of Christian liberty, they threw themselves into wickedness, he doesn't acknowledge them as Christians. He doesn't tell the faithful to seek to be in unity with these people. So this unity of which he speaks is not with everyone who claims the name of Christian or everybody that calls itself a church. It is with those we have grounds for regarding as the people of God. And then also, it is not a unity that entails sinful compromise of principle. Sin is never right and we are never called to go against God's word even for the sake of unity. Now where there are differences among real Christians, that does hinder fellowship but it doesn't mean that we shouldn't seek fellowship as far as it can be expressed without compromise of what we believe to be biblical.

This unity is an expression of a unity that is already established by God's grace. It's among those who are called, those who are indwelt by the Spirit. They are united. They are joint heirs by the grace of God. They've been enlivened, quickened with Christ by the Spirit. They belong to the same body. They are united to the same Christ and what he's saying is you belong to the same Christ, you're indwelt by the same Spirit, you're part of the same body, and that must be expressed in practice. And so that brings us, fifthly, unity as the effect of grace. Unity as the effect of grace, verse 2, "With all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

With all lowliness and meekness. Lowliness is a low self-estimate, and the godly have a low view of themselves. This springs from a sense of sin of their unworthiness of anything but damnation, and their utter dependence upon Jesus Christ for salvation, that their salvation is all of God's grace, that they deserve nothing good, they didn't deserve to hear the gospel, they didn't deserve to be born of the Spirit and made willing to trust Christ. They deserve nothing but the wrath of God forever, and when people really believe that, it shows. When people really believe that salvation is all of grace, it shows. It shows in a lack of self-assertion and insistence upon supposed rights. It shows itself in recognition that God alone is truly great. And it shows itself, therefore, in not seeking high place and to be highly thought of by others.

Many troubles in churches are nothing to do with real matters of doctrine or principle; sometimes they're covered up as if they are but very often they're not. It's to do with someone being niggled and increasingly niggled that they're not receiving the recognition that they think is due to them, and Satan works away until the resentment builds up and then it bursts in some particular situation that has nothing to do with great principle at all. "Seekest thou great things for thyself. Seek them not."

The absence of a sense of sin and of brokenness on account of sin, and of a true glorying in the grace of Christ, this is a major factor in the turbulence that troubles churches today.

If the message is superficial it will result in superficial profession of Christianity, a superficial unity which is easily disturbed. But where there is true brokenness of heart for sin and devotion and a high esteem of the Lord Jesus Christ, this results in that love to him and to others which would lay down its life for the brethren. That's why it goes on to speak of meekness, gentleness, easily entreatedness. Not unprincipled. Not without backbone when the truth of God is at stake, but at the same time not pretentious, not preoccupied with his own rights. And then long-suffering, with long-suffering patience. You see, patience means not just holding in resentment, that's not real patience, long-suffering. The person who is long-suffering is not hypersensitive about their own rights in the first place. If we are preoccupied with ourselves, we'll find it hard to be long-suffering because the moment there is a real or imaginary slight, it's there, whereas those who are taken up with the greatness of Christ, it scarcely gets a thought. And this word long-suffering is a word that's used of God, of God's long-suffering. "Despise thou the riches of his goodness and long-suffering and forbearance." The long-suffering of God. If God hadn't been long-suffering with us, where would we be? And God was long-suffering in the full knowledge of how rotten we really are. There's nothing to gloss it over or camouflage it.

And then the text speaks of the unity of the Spirit, the endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. The expression of that unity that there is among those who are born of the Spirit, they are united with other Christians. We are united. If we're Christians we're united with one another and with others of God's people. And we will be so in heaven. And we must express the fact that we are so on earth. Real Christian unity is simply the expression of what God's grace has made true. When Christians are born of the same Spirit, this is really going on to the next few verses but they are one and they must express that in their practice.

The unity of the Spirit, that unity which the Spirit has brought about in renewing our hearts in the bond of peace, the unity which the Spirit has formed must come to expression in the external bond or the bond of peace which stems from the unity that the Spirit of God has already created. It must come to expression in the actual practice of peaceableness which consciously unites the people of God who are already in essence united by their being born again of the same Spirit. And so there should be peace among the people of God.

Let us therefore, first of all, seek as far as legitimately possible to express fellowship with those who love the Savior. We don't compromise any principle of the word of God but within that framework we seek to express unity with all those who call upon the name of the Lord Jesus, both theirs and ours. And then beware of Satan stirring up self-importance in us. That little resentment must be mortified otherwise Satan will work away at it until it consumes us and it comes out in disturbance of the unity of the body of Christ. And the greatest antidote of all is to be so taken up with God's grace to us in looking upon us and sending his Son to be our Redeemer, and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ who though he was rich for our sakes became poor, that we through his poverty might be made rich, that is the great antidote, the great defense against this pride and this resentment. That's why the apostle says "this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus," and so on. The more we think of Christ, of our unworthiness, of his grace to us, the more we will lie low

before God and the more we will bear injuries and forgive those who sin against us, and especially among the people of God, we will be easily entreated. We will be those who seek peace. We will be those who in love cover a multitude of sins. And we will be endeavoring to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

And we must seek to honor Christ in the world but also in the church. Within the church. We are used to the idea of bearing with the sins of the world and yet we are so disappointed in the church sometimes. But the scriptures tell us that there is still a lot of sin among God's people. That's why we have to forbear one another in love. That's how we have to be patient. If there were no sins in the church, there wouldn't be any forbearance needed. The scriptures are realistic. This exaltation to forbearance within the church presupposes the imperfection of the members of the church.

So we must seek to honor Christ in the world but also in the church and that not only in the great principles of how the church should be governed, how it should be worshiped, what should be preached and so on, but also in our dealings in a somewhat more mundane level with one another. We must honor Christ by forbearing one another in love. And if we are preoccupied with the excellency of Christ, our petty hurts and little annoyances will be kept in their proper place. After all, what significance will they be in the great day of God? But to dishonor the Savior by allowing them to fester and to make us bitter and even disruptive of God's people, to dishonor Christ, that should be our great grief. Not whether people slighted us but the thought of dishonoring Christ even within his church should be abhorrent to us who have been the recipients of such grace at his hand.