

## **Introduction**

For those that have not met our little Bella, she is something else. She's a pointer dog. As a hunting dog she is totally fixated on chasing after things. Nothing, absolutely nothing gets in the way of this. Birds, leaves anything that moves, she hunts. She is never distracted – it's central to who she is.

For each one of us there will also be things that are central to our lives. I wonder if I ask you right now, what is the most central purpose of your life? If someone was to observe your life, what would they say you are focusing on, what would seem truly important to you, what would they see that you're committed to?

I wonder can we answer the same thing of God? What is God focused on? In Ephesians 3 God actually tells us what His grand purpose is, what His central focus is in this world. In verses 10-11 of Chapter 3 Paul says this “[God's] intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, <sup>11</sup> according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord”.

God's Word is telling us that the church is central to God's plans and purposes in this world; that all of creation itself exists, in one way or another, so that the church might display God's wisdom, nature and his love.

Many may think the church is irrelevant for today's society, but in God's plan the church is central to his purposes. And so if that is important to God, then as we gather as Church, as we join in service to him, then it has such a greater significance than maybe many of us take to heart. I wonder therefore as you considered what was central to your life, was the church on your list? As we begin today I want to emphasise that God's Church, this Church, must be central to your life. I don't just mean the attendance every week, I mean an active involvement in its mission.

## **Body**

And so as Paul now continues this letter into chapter 4, he deals with the 'so what', he deals with what the Christian life should look like. If God has known us before creation, then how are we to respond? And so where Paul begins in verse 1 of our reading is to say that we are “to live a life worthy of the calling you have received”. Paul is essentially saying the same thing he did in Philippians 1:27, where he said, “let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ”. Remember that Paul is a prisoner as he states these words. It shows exactly how he himself is walking and how much he's willing to give up for the sake of the gospel. It means that for all of us, a life that is worth of the gospel is a life that is marked by sacrificial obedience. Whilst it's an uncomfortable question to ask, I ask all of us, “what level of sacrifice have you made in your life for the sake of the Gospel”? It comes back to where your central focus is in life.

And now with that in mind, Paul describes in verse 2 a number of characteristics of how this is done. We do this with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love.

So humility. None of us will disagree that there is no greater example of true humility than Jesus himself. (remember that passage from Philippians 2 - who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; 7 rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. 8 And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself....'

For some of us, God doesn't want us up front playing the striker role. More than anything he wants us to be humble and keep our eyes on the overall purpose. You see the opposite of humility is arrogance or pride. As a Church we should never be thinking about what we can get out of something we do, or what is in it for me, or that we believe that without us things just won't happen. If as a Church we display respect to one another, because we recognise the other person's intrinsic God-given worth, then we'll be promoting harmony in the Church and ensuring that we all understand the importance of each part in the body. God wants us to be one body, working together, humbling ourselves in his purpose before him and before each other. That means the work of God is about togetherness – it's not about a staff team or a small group of leaders – it's about every single one of us.

Moving on to Gentleness. Gentleness isn't a very manly word is it. It almost comes across as being weak, and none of us want to be a walkover. But the greek word for gentleness was a word used for work animals around a farm. It had the idea of having strength under control. So it's the characteristic of a strong personality who doesn't let their strength control them, nor use it to control others.

Then there's patience & forbearance. I was trying to think about how you describe patience to someone over forbearance, and here's the best definition I found. Patience is a longsuffering attitude or peace that comes when waiting or dealing with a decision, while mutual forbearance is a sort of tolerance to live together in peace no matter the circumstances. In our unity of purpose as Church, we are called to be patient with one another, to recognise that it's in our differences with each other that we can be a far stronger witness to the community around us when we work hard at working together, being patient with each other's diversity and differences.

And then finally, Paul lists love, which is more of an overarching quality that takes in all the other four characteristics and I guess actually enables them to be expressed. If we don't start from a place of love for each other, then it is going to be very difficult to walk together in our differences within God's Church.

In verses 4-6 Paul summarizes our unity in the gospel by saying, "There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all." In summary this is all about togetherness. We walk together as one body. Unity is key.

You see as we consider living a life worth of the calling we have received, we are being made into one body, we are being called to walk this path together. And so let's look at three aspects of walking together as the body of Christ from our passage.

## **I. Walking Together does not mean the same**

Verse 7 tells us that we have each been given gifts according to the measure God gives it. So let's agree and thank the Lord that we are all different. In any congregation there's diversity. We might be tempted to consider our gathering this morning and label each other the way that society labels. We are men and women, old and young, rich and poor, married and single. But the truth is that we are each unique individuals, created by God. We each have something beautiful to contribute. Just like in the human body, all the parts are radically different from each other, but they are all equally important.

In order to consider our effectiveness, we must recognise that we all come from different places and bring different gifts, but what unites us is that we follow Jesus and seek to be the presence of God's love in our community. (And can I say that if you don't follow Jesus then please consider coming to our Alpha course in September, because brother and sister your life really does depend upon knowing him).

So we are all different. Here's the truth - a body that is rich in diversity is more likely to be robust and healthy than one in which everyone is exactly the same. But in that diversity, we all must understand that we play a part in God's overall plan as his Church. Folks, if we don't and some decide it's not for them, then we never achieve what God has planned for his church, and frankly we walk in disobedience of his purpose. So if we recognise our diversity then it means that **everyone** of you must contribute to the overall purpose of the church.

Here's a second aspect of walking together, picking up on my last point.

## **I. Walking Together means everyone contributes.**

Let's look at verses 11 and 12,

"The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip his people for the work of service, for building up the body of Christ,"

Many times, when people think about the church, and the work of the church they think that it is the pastor's job to run the church. Whilst that is partly correct, it's not the entire answer. I was clearing up on Thursday after one of our weddings and I was lifting the bollards off the road at Christ Church. A gentleman spoke to me and said "It's good to see you working for your money". We then had a brief conversation about what he expected a minister to do, and in his mind it was absolutely everything. For today's churches I believe there is a huge mistake in relying on paid staff if we are not actually growing everyone for the work and mission of God. We distort the true picture of God's Church. And therefore that's my priority now – to build all of you so that all of you contribute. The model of the Church is not about attendance – it's about involvement.

First of all, there is not just one leader, there are many leaders with many different gifts; apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. More importantly, the job of the leader is not to rule from on high, but to be half buried in the mud, equipping God's people to do the work of the ministry.

Can I help with one example - there has been nothing more special in recent months than to see Adrian Taylor and Neil Smyth leading the teenagers as they then lead us in worship during our Family Services in St John's. That is togetherness in action. And how did that come about? Well I believe it started when Tim Burns came forward offering to lead the teens on a leadership programme for 10 weeks. So these young people were trained, but now we get to walk beside them and cheer them on as they lead this important music ministry.

So here's the point – everyone, not some, everyone in the church has something valuable to contribute—in time, talent, and treasure—no matter how big or how small. Hopefully already this morning you will see the leaflets on the pews. I'd ask every adult and every teen to complete this. The purpose is to understand more about where you are in your life, and to see how I as your pastor can encourage and help you grow in this next season. It's also available as an online form via our website if that's easier. But I would ask all of you to complete it, even if all you decide is to put your name on the sheet. The form can then be deposited in the box at the back, and only I will read these to see how I can encourage and support you as we walk together. But the purpose of it is that we all are involved in the work of the Kingdom in this place and growing together.

So walking together doesn't mean we are all the same, it means we all contribute, and then finally :

## **2. Walking Together means there will be growing pains.**

The passage drives God's people to reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of Jesus and to become mature. Our faith must be active. We are all growing.

Our Josh is entering his last week of school before he begins his A Levels. And we have been seeing his school photos with other students. It is truly unbelievable that we have moved so quickly through 18 years from a small bundle that we brought home from Coleraine hospital, to now have a man in our home who is far bigger than his dad. It has been fantastic, but I would be lying if I said there was not challenges along the way. Growth always brings challenges and pain.

Anytime a group of diverse people get together and seek to actually do something productive, to grow in maturity, you can be guaranteed that there will be pain and conflict along the way. That is why, back in verse 2 Paul begins this whole section with these words: with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace

But I think that middle phrase is really important here, "bearing with one another." The New Living Translation puts it beautifully, "making allowance for each other's faults". In other words, a huge part of walking worthy of our calling is to learn how to put up with each other when we disagree.

But the truth is that conflict within the church is a healthy part of the church's ability to learn, adapt and survive. We've got to be willing and able to engage in debate and conflict. Without it I don't believe we are learning. Healthy, growing churches full of wonderfully diverse and gifted people are going to have conflict. That is inevitable. The question is not whether if they fight, but how they fight as to whether they walk worthy of the calling.

## Conclusion

So folks, we are God's Church. God has placed his entire purpose on us. His intent is that his manifold wisdom should be made known **through us**. So none of us can sit around and spectate.

If we would be serious about following Jesus we must be serious about the church. We must make the church's corporate gatherings, worship and study a priority in our lives, and we must open our lives up to the church and live in genuine community together. Not only must we make Sunday a priority, we must make Monday through Saturday a priority, seeking the good of the body, using our gifts, our talents, our time, our finances, our lives to help the body mature in Christ.

There are many good things in our lives that we need to give time and attention to, but if we really love Jesus, if we really care about following Christ, then the church must play a central role in our lives. It is central to God's purposes. How can we take lightly what God takes so seriously? As the late John Stott stated, "How dare we push to the perimeter what God has placed at the centre". In this new post- COVID season, I pray that we all commit to giving your lives to truly following Jesus.