

## **A New Community**

Eph 4:17–32

In our very first week in Ephesians, we heard that, “Ephesians is, above all, a hymn of unity.” Last week, Mike talked to us about what unity looks like. It doesn’t mean that we all fall in line and stick to the status quo, but rather, that we *as individuals* are called to life together in Christ and with the church. We grow together and in Christ as we build one another up. In the last half of chapter four, Paul continues his thought, asking, “*What is unity? What does it look like the break down barriers in the church—locally and globally?*”

In the first half of Ephesians, Paul was concerned about making sure that the church in Ephesus was built on the foundation of Jesus’ love and lordship as demonstrated in his death and resurrection. He wanted them to know that *all* people were brought to Christ, including those whom they once considered “outside” of God’s family. Paul explains that his purpose was to bring the good news of Jesus to *them*, the outsiders.

Now, having taught them their theology, he moves into their ethics—*how will you live in light of what you know?* One commentator says, “Throughout the New Testament, ethical imperatives are based on theological indicatives. Obedience is always a response to grace. God acts first, and humans respond.”<sup>1</sup>

In simple words, it means that our actions flow out of what we believe about God. If we believe that God is a God of grace and love, our actions will show reflect that. If we believe that he is a harsh judge, our actions will show that, too. Based on everything that Paul has told us about Jesus, we believe that God showed love and grace to *all of us*, welcoming every one of us into this family, bound up in the love of Jesus. *God acts first and we respond.*

So here, Paul invites us to *live into the reality of the new creation made possible by Jesus Christ in the present day.* Tim Mackie says, “Ephesians 4–6 describe what our everyday life would look like if the vision of the church in chapters 1–3 were true.”<sup>2</sup>

Hey, you, church of Lethbridge—you are the church of Jesus, and you are raised to be with Jesus in new life here on earth right now and for forever. If this is true, how will you live?

Remember the image of the body: we are all connected together in love, contributing to this body with our gifts and talents. We are united in love.

But then Paul makes an odd comment about the Gentiles—he says that the *church* must not live as the *Gentiles* do. He says that the Gentiles are futile in their thinking, darkened in

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<sup>1</sup> Snodgrass, 194.

<sup>2</sup> Tim Mackie, Ephesians.

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their understanding, and separated from God because of their hardened hearts. But hasn't Paul been talking about his God-given call to preach the gospel to the Gentiles? Isn't the Ephesian church mostly made up of Gentiles? He preached earlier about breaking down the wall of hostility between the Jews and the Gentiles, so it seems odd that he would be painting the Gentiles as a whole with such a dark brush.

Essentially, Paul uses the phrase, "the Gentiles" as a prototype for describing the state of broken humanity—those of us "[who] were dead in [our] transgressions and sins."<sup>3</sup> Paul isn't suddenly pitting Gentile against Jew. He's not recreating categories of "us" and "them" after having told the Ephesians that the wall of hostility between them has been knocked down by Jesus. Instead, he is using "the Gentiles" to describe the ways of the old humanity—the ways of life that are *not* the way of Christ. These are the things that have us stuck in old patterns, habits, and behaviours.

Instead, Paul tells the believers to put off their old self and put on a new self. This word, "self," literally means "human"—*take off the old human and put on the new one*. It implies more than just the individual, though. Whenever we talk about what it means to be human as God intended us to be, we must talk about ourselves in relation to others. We are not isolated silos; isolated humans tend to shrivel up and die. *To be human is to be in community*.

During my time at the Chinook Regional Hospital in acute care, I saw firsthand that the patients who had a supportive community were quicker to be discharged home, were more positive about their prognosis, and were more hopeful about making positive changes to their lifestyle. By contrast, those who were alone, who did not have friends, families, or caring neighbours to support them, took much longer to go home, were pessimistic about returning home (what did they have to return home to?), and were generally not as willing to make changes to their lives. And they more often returned to the hospital within a very short period of time for the same issue.

We are meant to be in community. Paul's vision is of an *entirely new humanity*, a new church that overflows into the created world to bring God's kingdom to earth as it is in heaven by the lordship of Christ and the power of the Spirit. This new, resurrected-in-Christ humanity bears the image of God to the world as we were originally created to do.<sup>4</sup> It reflects God in a way that is impossible to do alone.

But to be in this new community is to rub shoulders with those who are different from yourself. Someone smart somewhere once said, "To be in relationship is to be willing to

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<sup>3</sup> Eph 2:1

<sup>4</sup> Gen 1:27–28

change.”<sup>5</sup> We *cannot* stay the same if we are in community with one another. As we interact with those who are younger or older than ourselves, or have a different skin colour or educational background than ourselves, or grew up in a different country or work in a different economic bracket than ourselves. . . we open ourselves up to being changed by them, and in doing so, we bear the image of our incredibly diverse God.

Being changed is a scary thought! Interacting with those who are different from us can be intimidating. However, Paul tells us that we are to be made new—no more of this staying stuck in our safe corners with only our safe people, no! Jesus Christ died and was resurrected so that we could be made new in *all of our ways of being*, including the ways in which we interact with others. That means that we need to behave differently than we once did.

In the last half of Ephesians 4, Paul contrasts the old ways of doing things and the new way that God calls the church to in eight contrasting statements. We’ve already talked about how, in the old ways of being human, we live as “the Gentiles” do—in darkness, brokenness, and selfish hardheartedness. We are isolated and we insist that we know best, even when it harms ourselves and others. We stay with our people to the detriment of others, and we build up barriers between ourselves and those who live differently than we do. But, in the new way of being human, we live the way that we learned from Christ—to love others as we love ourselves, to love God above all else, and to hunger and thirst for justice, mercy, and grace, just to name a few.

Our new self is a return to the garden. It fully accepts our identity and purpose as God’s reflection, which means that we are no longer dragged down by shame or fear. No, we live as people who have been set free from shame. Because right now you reflect God’s image. In your body, you reflect God’s image—yes, in every scar and aching bone, in every imperfection and flaw, you reflect God’s image. And when we put all of our unique selves together. . . this is the image of God; this is being made new in Christ.

And so, Paul identifies four main behaviours that need to be transformed in order for the church to live as a new community in Christ: lying, anger, theft, and any kind of harmful speech. Let’s look at these pairs a little more closely.

Firstly, lying—the New Living Translation puts it like this: “Stop telling lies. Let us tell our neighbours the truth, for we are all parts of the same body.”<sup>6</sup> Why does Paul address lying? What’s so bad about it? How does lying or untruth affect our relationships with God, others, ourselves, and creation? If you’ve ever been lied to, you know that it breaks trust. You

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<sup>5</sup> Unknown

<sup>6</sup> Eph 4:25, NLT

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thought you could trust that person's word, but it has been revealed as false, and now you don't know if you can ever trust a word that comes out of their mouth again. Or, when *you've* lied to someone, why did you do it? Usually, it is to protect yourself in some way—your reputation, image, boundaries, or maybe your loved ones.

Paul encourages the church to tell the truth instead. The person who has been made new in Christ is not afraid to speak truthfully, because they are *secure* in the love of Christ. We no longer have to protect ourselves, because we have trusted our reputation, image, and loved ones to the rule of Jesus Christ. When we proclaim Jesus as Lord, we profess that he is sovereign over every part of our lives, including the parts that we thought we had to protect from others. Telling the truth *builds up trust* because it says that we value the other person enough to be honest with them. Honesty requires vulnerability.

But telling the truth must always be hand in hand with love. After all, Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, and *he is love*. This means that our truth must *always* be loving, and our love must *always* be truthful. Both are necessary; if truth is not loving, it is not truth; if love is not truthful, it is not love. So we can't justify our blunt words as "telling the truth" if it harms someone else. This is not truth.

The second behaviour that Paul addresses is anger. The old humanity sins in anger—notice, it's not a sin to *be angry*, but to *sin in our anger*. Anger is an in-built flag system. It tells us when something is not right in our world. But if we act out of that anger toward another person or any part of God's creation, we have sinned. Anger that harms someone or something—even yourself—is not okay. Instead, Paul encourages the believers in Ephesus (and us) to keep our anger from enduring beyond its expiration date. In other words, acknowledge the anger. Deal with the source of the anger—carefully and patiently—and then, let it go.

Don't hold grudges. Don't refuse to forgive. Don't let that anger settle into bitterness and resentment. Doing so will only transform you back into the old human instead of living as the new person that Christ has made you to be. The goal of the new community is that when we are angry, we still aim to work toward unity rather than disunity. This means that you can disagree with someone and still work together. You can believe in differences in theology or politics and still encourage one another in your walk with Jesus.

This does *not* mean that you will get along with everyone or that every conflict in the church will be smoothed over effortlessly. I have seen Christians harm one another in anger; I have also seen churches that refuse to deal with problems because they don't want to stir things up. Paul says elsewhere, "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with

everyone.”<sup>7</sup> You have a responsibility to others, even when you are angry, and that responsibility is to *encourage and build up the church*, not tear it down.

The third behaviour that Paul talks about is stealing. The old human steals—it takes what is not yours, whether it is a physical item or money, or more likely, stealing someone’s dignity by demeaning them, gossiping about them, or tarnishing their reputation. Plagiarism is a real problem in academia and business. And it’s no secret that the use of AI for brainstorming, writing, coding, graphic design, videography, and just about every other area of creativity steals our human capacity for imagination. It robs those who make their living from deep, creative work. Never mind that AI chats like ChatGPT are replacing human contact as users prefer to simply chat with the chatbot rather than with a human person.<sup>8</sup>

Stealing, in any form, only tears down. The new community, on the other hand, works honestly to help others. It makes itself useful in society, pulling its own weight rather than riding on the successes of others. It takes ownership of this life that we have been given and *does something good with it*. It is useful, not stagnant or stuck. And, I hate to break it to the introverts and socially anxious in the room, because I am one of you—we need human contact to be healthy, thriving humans. God made us this way. Searching for fulfillment outside of healthy relationships robs us of our humanity.

And finally, Paul talks about different kinds of harmful speech—“unwholesome speech,” as Paul puts it. This word, “unwholesome,” is the same word that Jesus uses when he talks about a tree bearing *bad fruit*. Unwholesome talk is bad fruit. Now, does this mean that we can never joke around or say nonsensical things? No! It means that our words are meant for the purpose of *building others up*, not tearing them down. Our words can be used in fun to encourage others and build the community of God, or they can gossip, slander, or otherwise hurt others.

Lying, actions done in anger, and stealing in all its forms tear down trust between people; truth, forgiveness, and grace build up trust between people. All of your actions and words will either build up the church. . . or tear it down. *You* have the power to rip someone to shreds with your words and actions; you also have the power to help someone flourish like a beautiful tree.

Paul wraps up this section with two final contrasts: first, he says that the old human ways grieve the Holy Spirit. This is an interesting phrase that, in the Old Testament, is used usually to describe God’s grief over his rebellious people. Paul is saying, “Don’t be like Israel, who rebelled against God over and over again.” Don’t insist on pursuing the old

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<sup>7</sup> Rom 12:18, NIV

<sup>8</sup> <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7605294/>

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humanity which breaks relationship with God. God is grieved when his people insist on rebellion.

Instead, the new community of God is sealed with the Holy Spirit for the day of redemption—it is marked with God’s stamp of approval as the type of people that God intended us to be. We are kingdom people, each marked by the Spirit of God and intended to bring God’s hope and light to our world.

Then, Paul finishes by saying, “Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander, as well as all types of evil behavior.”<sup>9</sup> This is what the unredeemed, stuck, sinful human looks like. This is what a destructive society without God looks like, and what a church that has lost sight of Jesus looks like. *Get rid of it.* Be ruthless toward it. Let it die along with Jesus, and let a new person and a new community be raised up with Jesus’ resurrection, one that is “kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you.”<sup>10</sup>

We are the church, Christ’s body, the place where the Spirit of God lives on the earth. This new community starts here, with us, with the new life that the Spirit has given us in Christ. We can’t do life alone; we need each other. Do your words and actions build up trust or tear it down? Remember that obedience is always a response to grace. God acts first, and humans respond.

We will end our service with the practice of communion. This is an ancient ritual where Christians gather together around bread and wine—for us today, we have rice crackers and juice to make sure that the gluten-free and alcohol-intolerant can join us freely. In this ritual, we remember what God has done for us in becoming human so that we could be set free from our stuckness and be released to thrive as God’s image-bearing humans in our world. In taking the bread and cup, we confess that Jesus is our Lord over every part of our lives. We confess that we have messed up time and again, and we receive God’s forgiveness and grace. We remember that God acts, and that we have a responsibility to respond.

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<sup>9</sup> Eph 4:31, NLT

<sup>10</sup> Eph 4:32, NLT

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As we take the bread, the worship team will lead us in song, and I invite you to spend this time reflecting on the “old ways” that we have talked about today that have had you stuck. Which of these old ways are ones that you personally struggle with? Can you confess it freely to Jesus? Be honest with him about it. Let’s pray.

*Lord Jesus, we confess the places where we have been dead in our transgressions and sins. We admit that we have so often tried to live life on our own terms, but we acknowledge that these things have not set us free. Lord, forgive us. Have mercy on us. With this bread, we receive your grace. Amen.*

This is Christ’s body given for you. [Take bread.]

As we pass the cup, I invite you to consider the ways in which Jesus’ love for you has set you free from your old ways. Give thanks for the places where you see transformation. Where is God inviting you to follow him in a new way? New ways don’t happen automatically; they require practice and grace, because we will fail at it the first, second, and tenth times we try. Reflect on the “new ways” that we have discussed today—which one can you intentionally practice this week? Let’s pray.

*Lord God, you love us so deeply. We ask for your grace to follow you. We know that we will mess up. We will fail. But you give more grace. With this cup, we receive your love for us. May the power of the Spirit fill us so that we can look more and more like you. Amen. [Pass cup]*

This is Christ’s blood given for you. [Take cup.]

At the bottom line, “The concern in this section of Ephesians, as in much of the New Testament ethical teaching, is to reject what destroys community and promote what builds community.”<sup>11</sup> Does it tear down this community? Give it up. Does it build up this community? Keep at it, and trust that the Spirit will fill you with power to continue.

The kids will lead us in a final song. Please stand if you are able.

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<sup>11</sup> Snodgrass, 247.