

If you were a first time visitor to London, what sights would you like to see? Most people would visit the Tower of London, Westminster Abbey, Windsor Castle, Wembley Stadium, and maybe buy a ticket to the London Eye. But no trip to London would be complete without paying a visit to Buckingham Palace, the Queen's residence. And while the likelihood of seeing the royal family is slim; most visitors want to see the palace and the people who guard it.

By a show of hands, how many of you have seen the Queen's Guard in person? And can anyone tell me what they're known for? They stand at attention, they don't bend, break, or lose concentration no matter what goofy things the tourists do. After all, the Queen's Guard has a duty to guard the Queen, her family, and her residence.

The Queen's Guard may look ceremonial but they are trained soldiers that take their calling seriously. If their post is under threat from a member of the public, they follow a protocol that begins with stamping (coming to attention sharply). The guard will also shout: "Stand back from the guard." If the threat continues, the soldier will point his rifle at the source of threat. They stand on guard, alert, focussed, looking for any sign of threat because what they protect is valuable and precious, not only to them, but to the entire nation.

We protect what is most precious to us. Some protect their family, their friendships, others protect their investments, their job, or their reputation. What do you treasure? What are you most likely to guard?

In speaking to his subjects, King Solomon once wrote, "*Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.*"¹ In speaking to the church in Ephesus, the apostle Paul wrote, "*Make every effort to guard the unity of the Spirit*". This morning we come to Ephesians 4 and to the theme of unity.

God loves diversity and He calls His church to share this love. He calls together young and old, male and female, rich and poor, and people from every nation and language. Groups like this don't naturally come together or stay together; there are too many forces keeping them apart: geography, ethnicity, language, values, beliefs, and preferences.

We are, as a human race, predisposed to mistrust, name-calling, division, and alienation. History has proven that humanity, left to itself, divides. But Jesus is the One who unites us—only Jesus can reconcile us to God and to one another—He died to make this unity possible. In Jesus we find level ground upon which all humanity can stand.

In Ephesians 4, Paul tells us that unity isn't something that we create, it's something we enter into—it's rooted in God. But while this unity is a gift from God, unity is also a behaviour—He calls us to treasure this precious gift, guarding it by the way we treat one another.

All week I've been pondering this brilliant text. All week I've been praying that the Spirit will lead us into an experience of unity. As I preach, open your heart and mind to the Scripture, to the Spirit, and to one another. Please turn with me in your Bible to Ephesians

¹ Proverbs 4:23.

4:1-10; if you are using the Bible in the seat rack in front of you, you can find our text on page 948.

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

The text Pastor Brendan preached last week functions as a hinge passage in the letter to the Ephesians. The first three chapters tell us about God, about His love for the world, about sending Jesus to rescue humanity from alienation, sin, and death—Jesus came to reconcile the world to God and to one another. The first three chapters are theology, that is, they offer a framework for what we believe about God, humanity, and the world.

From chapter 4 onwards, Paul makes the connection between what we believe and how we live. I entitled our Ephesians series *Becoming What We Believe* because our beliefs have the power to shape our identity—all of us become what we believe. And in the second half of Ephesians, Paul tells us how our new life in Jesus affects every part of life—our attitudes, our values, our relationships, the way we work, the way we deal with conflict, etc.

Before I work through our text, let me offer a brief outline. Verse 1 begins with an appeal to align belief and behaviour, verse 3 outlines the goal (to guard the unity of the Spirit), verses 4-6 point out the

source of unity (rooted in God), and verse 2 describes the behaviour that guards unity.

Let’s begin with verse 1, *“I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.”*

1. Mind The Gap (vs. 1).

illus: A few years ago, my extended family spent a few days vacationing in Hong Kong. In a myriad of ways, there has been a profound British influence on the city of Hong Kong.

While in Hong Kong, we used the rail system to make our way through the city—it was simple, economical, and convenient. And the British influence could be seen and heard in this rail system. At the edge of the track, and on every train, the following words were written: *“Mind the Gap”*. When a train pulled into the station and people began to file on and off, a recorded voice could be heard saying, *“Mind the Gap”*.

The phrase stuck with me and as I read Ephesians 4 this week the Spirit brought it to mind. None of us live up to the measure of our values and beliefs. In all of us, there is a gap between what we believe and how we behave.

illus: For example, you might meet someone who is passionate about the environment, legalistic about recycling, but who drives a Hummer. You might coach athletes and preach the importance of training but never exercise yourself. Some financial advisors don’t

take their own advise and wind up in personal financial crisis. You may want to be kind and loving but act in a cold, uncaring fashion.² Hypocrisy isn't a Christian problem, it's a human problem.

Listen to Paul's invitation in Ephesians 4 and 5:

- 4:1, "live a life worthy of the calling you have received."
- 4:17, "you must no longer live as the Gentiles do".
- 4:22, 24, "put off the old self...and put on the new self."
- 5:2, "Follow God's example...and walk in the way of love".
- 5:8, "Live as children of light".
- 5:15, "Be very careful...how you live—not as unwise but as wise".

The apostle Paul calls us beyond belief in Jesus to a faith that marked by complete, undivided allegiance to Jesus.³ If it sounds impossible, you're quite right. None of us can live up to this call. But just as we invite Jesus to bridge the gap between us and God, we ask Him to bridge the gap—to close the gap—between what we believe and how we behave.

illus: On August 27th, 1996, three weeks before his unexpected death, Henri Nouwen wrote the following in his journal: "*We who offer spiritual leadership often find ourselves not living what we are teaching or preaching. It is not easy to avoid hypocrisy completely because we find ourselves saying things larger than ourselves. I often call people to a life I am not fully able to live. I am learning that the*

best cure for hypocrisy is community. Hypocrisy is not so much the result of not living what I preach but much more of not confessing my inability to fully live up to my own words."

By the grace of God, in the power of the Holy Spirit, with the help of a loving community, our thoughts, our desires, our words, and our action can be transformed. As we cooperate with the Holy Spirit, as we listen to Him and keep in step with Him, our belief and behaviour can become congruent.

If vs. 1 outlines the call, then vs. 3 specifies the goal.

2. The Goal (vs. 3): Paul writes, "*Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.*"

Paul is really saying two things. First, he's saying, "*make unity a priority.*" And second, he's saying, "*unity is something that needs to be treasured, kept, and guarded.*" The unity of the Spirit is both precious and fragile. If it weren't so precious and fragile, we wouldn't need to make every effort to keep it.

Most division begins with a disagreement—you see things one way and I another. But disagreement often leads to disruption in a relationship. I might say to myself, "*You are different from me. This makes me suspicious, and it might mean you are dangerous.*"

² Ben C. Fletcher, Psychology Today, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/do-something-different/201203/are-you-living-lie>

³ N.T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters*, 43.

Disagreement frequently leads to disruption, disruption leads to distance, and distance leads to distortion. When we distance ourselves from one another, it becomes easier to craft a one-sided, distorted, version of the disagreement. In the absence of conversation, a husband creates a story about why his wife doesn't respect him, and wife creates a story about why her husband does love her the way she needs.

We move from “what” actually happened to thinking we see clearly enough to determine the “why.” By the time we have judged the internal attitudes and motivations of the other person, full-blown division has taken place. Like a small crack on a windshield, once division begins, it spreads in every direction.

In every church I've ever pastored, I have seen disagreement, disruption, distance, distortion, and division—it isn't a uniquely Christian problem, it's a human problem. But division needs more than a human solution. Unity isn't something that just happens, but neither is it something we create—it's something we are invited to enter into; unity is rooted in God. Let's turn our attention to vs. 4-6.

3. Unity Is Rooted In God (Father, Son, and Spirit)—vs. 4-6.

*“3 Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. 4 There is **one** body and **one** Spirit, just as you were called to **one** hope when you were called; 5 **one** Lord, **one** faith, **one** baptism; 6 **one** God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”*

In Paul's letter to the Ephesians, he addresses the question, “*Who is God?*” From beginning to end, Paul insists that God has revealed Himself as Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

In fact, the basis for the church's unity in diversity, is found in God Himself. Verse 3 tells us that we enter into, and participate in, the unity of the Spirit. And this unity is the unity that exists between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

When you look at vs. 4-6, which word is repeated seven times? **One**. Notice the triadic patterning: one Spirit, one Lord Jesus Christ, one God and Father of all. God is three and yet one; caught up in God's very being is unity in diversity. The internal life of God is intended to be the pattern for our life together.

Not only is there one Spirit, one Lord, and one Father, there is only one body. Throughout the New Testament, the church is metaphorically described as the body of Jesus—we are His hands to serve, His feet to walk with people, His mouth to speak of God's love for the world. Jesus only has one body—there may be many different churches, in many different locations, but together they form one body.

God is not divided—there is only one Spirit, one Lord Jesus Christ, and one Father. North Shore Alliance church doesn't have the corner on God, neither does Westside, or Cap Church, or West Van Baptist; God is large enough to love us all.

There is only one hope, one baptism, one faith, and one common future that awaits everyone who puts their trust in Jesus. We've been rescued by the same Person, we've been adopted into the same family, and we're being prepared for the same eternal destiny.

Unity is the direct result of God's initiative and grace—it's a gift—it came about because of His faithfulness. Thankfully God doesn't give

us a vote as to who's in, if He had I have no doubt there would be people who would vote me out. No one is worthy of His grace, each of us are equally undeserving of rescue, but because of His great love, He chose us to belong to Him and to one another.

Unity is rooted in God, it's a gift, but unity is also a behaviour—let's turn our attention to vs. 2.

4. The Behaviour of Unity—vs. 2. *“Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.”*

The Apostle Paul was writing to a church comprised of young and old, male and female, rich and poor, slave and free, Jew, Greek, Roman, and African.

Paul wasn't blind to the differences in language, culture, gender, or economics but his attention was fixed elsewhere. The church is the masterpiece of God's grace—the collection of people who have been rescued, reconciled, and restored regardless of what divides us. These former distinctions must all be filtered through the cross of Jesus Christ.

Through the death and resurrection of Jesus, we have been united to God and to one another. And so, while there will always be differences in age, gender, culture, and preference, our new identity as the one people of God trumps every former distinction. What unites us is Christ, what we enter into is the oneness that exists in God—this is what has captured Paul's attention.

I said earlier the unity of the Spirit is both precious and fragile. If it weren't so precious, Paul wouldn't tell us to make every effort to

keep it. And if it weren't so fragile, it wouldn't require us to be transformed. Unity is rooted in God, it's a gift, and it's a behaviour to be cultivated. We make every effort to keep this unity when we invite the Holy Spirit to cultivate within us four essential character qualities: humility, gentleness, patience, and love. The question is, *what might this look like in our community?*

We cultivate *humility* by renouncing self-centredness. When we find ourselves in disagreement with another person, humility seeks to understand before distance, distortion, and division occur. The Holy Spirit is the One cultivates this humility as we keep in step with Him. As humility grows in us as a church, we will seek to prioritize the needs and desires of others by serving, praying, and giving. Jesus is our example—though He was God, He didn't use power for His own advantage.

We cultivate *gentleness* by renouncing harshness and oppression. Proverbs 15:1 says, *“A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.”* Being gentle doesn't mean spineless or weak, but it does mean dealing mercifully with those who criticize or disagree with us—it does mean defending the reputation of others and letting God defend our own reputation.

The bible does not teach unity at all costs. There is a time for disagreement, and, there are rare occasions where faithfulness to Jesus leads to division. Next week we will spend some time talking about speaking the truth in love.

And finally, we cultivate *patience* and *love* by renouncing judgement and entitlement.⁴

illus: I want you paint a word picture for you this morning, and if it helps, I want to encourage you to close your eyes and turn on your imagination. I want you to imagine sitting alone on a sandy beach by the ocean. The sun is shining, the wind is blowing, and you become aware of the power of the waves. These towering waves represent the sin that you can see in your own life.

As the waves crash, you hear their power, you taste the salt spray on your lips, you feel the pounding, you see the waves crashing, eroding, dragging the sand back into the ocean. If you were to step foot in the waves, you would be overcome, you would be powerless to resist their mighty pull.

But just then something causes you to look up. Your gaze lifts from the sand, from the crashing waves, and you see a vast ocean. The danger is greater than you thought, the ocean is larger than you thought—these waves are being driven by winds and undercurrents that you cannot see. If the waves repent our sin, then the ocean represents our flesh—our will, our desires that stand in opposition to God.

Go ahead and open your eyes. My point is that in order to transform us, God has to attend to much more than our eyes can see. When we misunderstand the cost of our sin, when we fail to see how desperately we need grace, we have so little patience and love for the people around us.

In Luke 7, the story is told of Jesus having dinner in the home of a religious leader. There was a woman in town with a shady reputation, she was living a sinful life, and everyone knew it. When she heard that Jesus was at this leader's house, she showed up desperate for mercy.

Luke tells us that she wept, wetting his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them. The religious leader was indignant—how could Jesus allow this sinner approach him in this way? And Jesus, knowing what was in this man's heart turned to him and said, "*Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred days pay, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?*" Simon replied, "*I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven.*" "*You have judged correctly,*" Jesus said.

Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. 47 Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little."

Division begins with a judgment that the person standing in front of me is simply unbearable. Let me ask, *what have we decided is simply unbearable about the person, the group, the church in front of us?*

⁴ Klyne Snodgrass, *The NIV Application Commentary: Ephesians*, 218-219.

The call to unity is a call to journey with people who think differently than we do, and to bear with them in love. Of course, we are only passing on to others what we need, what we have received from Jesus—a patient, persevering love that gives others room to “fail, learn, and develop.”⁵ We cannot withhold this love and claim to understand grace. We need the Spirit to close the gap between what we believe and how we behave.

As I think about the North Shore, as I talk with other pastors on the North Shore, as I think about the history of our church, it strikes me that division is one of our core sins. Division keeps us from experiencing and extending the gracious love of Jesus. Division keeps us from the vision Jesus has given us. Division overshadows the message that Jesus died to reconcile the world to God and to one another. My dear people, God has more in store for us.

Humility, gentleness, and patient, persevering, love. The Holy Spirit seeks to cultivate these character qualities in every disciple of Jesus, and, in every church—where these qualities abound, we guard the unity of the Spirit, and the mission of the church advances.

Prayer

Worship

Benediction

⁵ Snodgrass, 219.