

A Call to a Distinctive Life

Ephesians 4:1-3

“I...urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called...”

Introduction: History is unfolding before our eyes. It’s one thing to read about the lead up to great wars like WWII in the 1930’s, it’s quite another to watch events take place in real time on social media and news outlets. War has broken out in Europe unlike has ever taken place in my lifetime. As I was sitting down to write this, I was talking with a man who came over to fix my oven who was from the Ukraine before the breakup of the Soviet Union, who stopped to take a call from his brother living in Kiev. As he left, I said, “I hope your brother is going to be ok”, to which he responded with a despondent headshake and said, “He won’t.”

But none of this should surprise us. And I’m not talking about the geopolitical signs leading up to this invasion, global economic factors or national leadership issues that contributed to this crises, though these all exist. The Bible makes it clear that these things will happen, and will happen until the end, because we are living in a world that is corrupt from sin and awaiting redemption. When the disciples asked Jesus when the end will come and what signs they could expect, Jesus stated, “and you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are **not alarmed**, for this must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise up against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are but the beginning of birth pains” (Matt. 24:6-9). This is all part of the unfolding plan of God, as tribulation and persecution will come, with false prophets leading people astray, with the love of many growing cold. But, the counsel is always the same: **don’t be alarmed, endure, be sober, and continue to proclaim the gospel.**

The church and believers are built to thrive in all times. What has struck during these last few days has been the response of the church in Ukraine. Most of us have some connection with someone or some church in this country. I’ve marked a few videos, one of a family singing “He Will Hold me Fast” together in their house and the other of Christians worshipping in a metro station right before the war started, singing of forgiveness, salvation, mercy, joy, peace, and the people of Ukraine. In an article posted by The Gospel Coalition, Pastor Vasyl Ostryi has decided to stay in Kyiv with his family in order to help give aid to war victims. His reasoning: *“While the church may not fight like the nations, we still believe we have a role to play in this struggle....if the church is not relevant at a time of crisis, then it is not relevant in a time of peace...we have decided to stay, both as a family and as a church. When this is over, the citizens of Kyiv will remember how Christians have responded in their time of need.”*¹

How would we respond in similar circumstances, as individuals, families, and church? What is so instructive about our brothers and sisters in Ukraine right now is this: when everything is stripped away, all the trappings of culture, all the material gains, comfort driven substitutes, what is left is our faith in Christ and clinging to Him. Is that enough? Is that what holds us fast now? Is He who we live for, in both plenty and want? Is our life about Him or Christ added on? Inspirational teaching and meeting of felt needs go out the window when it all hits the fan. This is why we need clear, full, and unapologetic teaching from God’s Word and a commitment to live out the truth and principles God gives us. This morning we will begin our second half of Ephesians, moving from position to practice, and how we live out the realities of God’s choosing, love, mercy, grace, kindness, and forgiveness that He gives us in Christ. Our lives SHOULD be different, common people living because of an uncommon Savior, united in

¹Thegospelcoalition.org, “To stay and serve: Why we didn’t flee Ukraine” by Vasyl Ostryi, Feb. 24, 2022

purpose and love. This requires an entire yielding to Christ, a wholehearted devotion to Him, and a complete willingness to live for Him alone.

A Challenge to Be Distinctive (v. 1)

I, therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called...

Source of the Challenge

The gospel was not token for Paul, but was both counter-intuitive and counter-cultural. He knew that at once the gospel of Jesus makes us acceptable to God and at odds with the world. The world, by nature, will not understand nor trust those who follow a God they don't like and a Christ who they think is foolish. Paul knew that following Jesus was not partial but full, and that Christ was both worth living and dying for, since he was willing to go to prison for the sake of Christ and the gospel.

In using the phrase, "**a prisoner of the Lord**" Paul was emphasizing a couple of things. Remember in ch. 3:1 we looked at the fact that Paul was a prisoner BECAUSE of the message of the gospel he proclaimed, arrested and waiting trial for saying that Gentiles and Jews could come to Christ the same way, without Gentiles having to convert to Judaism first. This set Paul on a course to being in prisoner for 5 years, losing freedom, and being under the watchful eye of guards every hour of the day. It should be clear that the gospel for Paul was not only about action and not mere words, but it also carried with it CONSEQUENCES that he was willing to endure. The reason? He had learned the secret of contentment in Christ, being satisfied in Him, so he could endure being brought low or having abundance, since he could do all things through Christ who strengthened him (Phil. 4:11-13). When we no longer try to preserve our life in this world, we can truly embrace whatever obedience to God brings, not shying away or fearing the consequence of a life lived for Christ alone.

But, Paul also wrote this phrase in with a *possessive genitive*, meaning that he was **Christ's prisoner**, a stress on his union with Christ. The reality of everyone in this world, as we have seen, is that we are a captive to someone. For an unbeliever, they are captive to the course of this world and led by the Prince of the power of the air (Eph. 2:1-3), claiming to be free yet doing what everyone else is around them. As believers, the greatest freedom is our slavery to Christ!

*"But now that you have been set free from sin and **have become slaves of God**, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life."*

Paul knew his life was not his own but had been bought with a price, and embraced all the implications of slavery to Christ, including joy, glory, and satisfaction.

Notice how Paul calls the church to action. The English translation is "urge", which is accurate but hard to capture the entirety of the word used. *Parakaleo* is the word in Greek, which carries different forces depending on the context. It could mean *comfort, appeal, urge, or exhort*. It definitely carries the force of an exhortation (meaning it was not optional) but he did not use a demanding tone. It was a brotherly appeal, a friendly urging, a fatherly comfort. It's the tone of a good leader who has demonstrated his willingness to do the same thing, and simply needs to ask rather than demand from those following him. The key here is that the request was NOT OPTIONAL, but the expectation of every believer in Ephesus and beyond.

Goal of the Challenge

The call of his challenge was to “WALK” and to do so in a manner “WORTHY of the CALLING of their CALLING”. Walk is a favorite term for Paul in this epistle, as we will see it here and again in 4:17 to walk in holiness, 5:2 to walk in love, 5:8 to walk in the light, and 5:15 to walk in wisdom. Walk simply means to “conduct our life or lifestyle”, and carries with it the understanding of movement and growth. Walking is not sedentary but requires action. Notice also that starting in 4:1, our life in Christ completely reverses the curse of 2:1-2, where we once walked **according to the course of the world...where we once lived in the passions of our flesh and carrying out the desires of the body and the mind**. Beginning in 4:1, we see that a transformed life should be CATEGORICALLY different from our life before and that which is still bound to the flesh of this world.

The descriptive word is WORTHY, which meant bringing up to equilibrium or bringing up the other beam on the scales. This means we cannot simply live however, we want or however we deem right, but how God desires and calls. In **Philippians 1:27** we are called to live a life worthy of the gospel, and in **Colossians 1:10** we are called to walk worthy of the Lord. Here, Paul emphasizes conduct that is in balance or equal to our CALLING. We have been given a great privilege and with that comes great responsibility.

What was the calling to which we have been called? Remember, every ethical imperative that we’ve been given to live FOR Christ is grounded in the indicative of God’s saving work IN Christ. We were CALLED and CHOSEN in Christ to be holy and blameless as adopted sons and daughters (Eph. 1:4-5). This calling means that we not only have INDIVIDUAL responsibilities, but CORPORATE ones. We are linked with every other believer in the church and how we walk matters, not only for our relationship with God but with each other. This is the emphasis of chapter 4, and particularly the next section of verses.

Characteristics Necessary to Be Distinctive (2)

“With all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love”

Paul then answers the question as to what is needed to walk worthy of our calling. **Four main characteristics** are imperative, each finding the strength and ability in “walking by the Spirit” (Gal. 5:22-23) in which HE produces these in us and we act on them. Each of these is POSSIBLE because of new life in Christ, take CONSCIOUS EFFORT, and are NECESSARY for the maintenance of unity in the church.

ALL HUMILITY – In every commentary covering this verse, each had the same statement, that in the Graeco-Roman world, the prospect of humility was NOT a virtue to be sought after since it seemed to entail WEAKNESS. In our culture, it may not have such a negative connotation, but it seems like humility is something we like to see in someone ELSE, and we tend to reward the proud and the ones who are full of themselves (i.e. see anyone in Hollywood, entertainment, sports, etc).

Gentleness – This is not a word that gets thrown around a lot, mostly because it is misunderstood. But gentleness is produced by the Spirit Himself, so is inherently valuable and important. It is the opposite of roughness, and embodies *meekness*, which is power under control. Again, this is NOT weakness, but a willingness to waive our rights for the sake of others. William Barclay explained it this way, *“Gentleness is always angry at the right time and never angry at the wrong time.”* It is a conscious exercise of self-control, a choice NOT to exercise power for the purpose of retaliation against those that you can overcome. Moses is a great illustration of the balance of power and meekness, as he was

known as the meekest man in the world (Num. 12:3) yet demonstrated wrath at the sight of ugly sin (Exodus 32). To walk worthy means we walk gently together, treating each other, as we should our own mothers, sisters, and daughters. It means that *how* we communicate and treat each other is important, not seeking to “win” arguments but demonstrating a willingness to listen, ask questions, and take genuine interest in others. It means not overreacting to misunderstandings, little slights, or the unintentional wrongs against us.

Patience – This is the idea of long-suffering, playing the long game with each other. It means that we tolerate and overlook difference and seek to prefer one another in love (Rom. 12:7). It is quick to be kind and tender hearted, always looking to **forgive one another as God in Christ forgave us** (Eph. 4:32). **1 Thessalonians 5:14** sums it up well, reminding that we must treat each other appropriately as fits the moment and situation, “*And we urge (parakaleo) you, brothers, admonish the idle (unruly), encourage the faint hearted, help the weak, but BE PATIENT WITH THEM ALL*”. In the church, we will deal with all kinds of people and situations, from outright sin, to the discouraged, and those simply weak in faith. There are good responses to each, since the discouraged don’t need a heavy hand and the unruly don’t need help, they need a strong hand! But, everyone needs patience. We are all in process, often learn slowly, and resist change at times. That is why we must have realistic expectations for all, and commit to walking with each other in the long term. It is also why we must bear with one another.

Bear with one another in love – This means conscious endurance that does not abandon hope, an endurance often of grief. It entails dealing with someone else’s sin, which is messy, and necessitates that deal with our own. “*Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should RESTORE him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.*” (Gal. 6:1-2). This is intertwined with patience, as we view others the way a good farmer looks at his crop. The farmer does not flip out when the plant hasn’t yet produced the full crop, but is willing to patiently tend, wait, and know that in time fruitfulness will come. It is viewing others through the lens of a mother and father (1 Thess. 2:7, 12). We don’t expect a 3 year old to act like an 18 year old (although sometimes a 15 year old will act like a 6 year old). As a parent, we are willing to put up with failure, disappointment, and slow development because we see the greater fruitfulness coming. All of these are covered, showered, and lavished with **love, love that is selfless, sacrificial, and points others to Christ.**

What does walking a worthy, distinctive life look like and take? It takes us denying self and following Christ with all we are. It means yielding to the Holy Spirit and the Word, so that we can live in counter-cultural ways. This is why discipleship, investing in purposeful relationships, is so essential to our growth and worship. Each of these characteristics involves deep and meaningful relationship with those that we love but are so different from us. We point each other to Christ, to live up to who we are, to endure, to press on, and to fulfill our mission. And all of this results in something far greater than any one of us individually.

Consequence of Being Distinctive (3)

*“Eager to maintain the **unity** of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”*

We were never called to be individuals alone, to live lives of solitude or isolation. We were called to fit perfectly in one Body called the church, each part fulfilling its purpose and role, moving together in harmony that creates a glorious song of praise to God. The church is at her best when we are committed to Christ and each other, loving Him with all our heart, mind, and soul and loving each other, so that we can make disciples of all nations. God takes all of these seeming disparate pieces and places

them together so that we all ARE different but seek to accomplish the same thing, reaching a diverse range of people that make up the nations.

So, Paul builds on the characteristics of distinctiveness, and now calls the church to “eagerly, hastily, or urgently” maintaining unity among themselves, ***making every effort to do so***. This means that this unity must be maintained VISIBLY, not pursuing a false unity that just keeps away from people or stays in cloisters. Unity is maintained when we pursue each other as we pursue Christ, humbly, gently, patiently, and lovingly working through our differences and hard interactions. The bond that keep us together is PEACE, which is given to us by God in Christ. Christ purchased our freedom from sin and peace with God on the cross, so our unity already exists, and though we cannot create it, we surely can destroy it by seeking our own agendas, by focusing on what we want, and pursuing our own comfort.

We have this massive opportunity as a church to glorify God, to worship Him together in unity, to face discouragement and pain together, to lift each other up, to deal with our sin, to love patiently and fully, to disciple and be disciplined, to work together to reach the nations, and to do all of this in a way that the world looks on with strange disdain but equal attraction. To do all of this means we have to understand our deep calling by God, our great salvation given by Jesus, and our continual growth through the Spirit so we will live up to all that God has called us to. Let’s not wait for wars or rumors of war, famine or earthquake to do this. All of this starts now for us, privatizing these things above other good things that vie for our time and affection.