

Ephesians 4:1-16

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.

7 But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. 8 This is why it says:

*'When he ascended on high,
he took many captives
and gave gifts to his people.'*

9 (What does 'he ascended' mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions[c]? 10 He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.) 11 So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, 12 to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up 13 until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

14 Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. 15 Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. 16 From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

"Family" is one of these words that can mean so many different things. We have a big picture, that normally hangs in the corner of the building, that has the heading "The Church Family". The big picture is made up of lots of small pictures of individual people, you, me, over 100 of us altogether. We put it together about 10 years ago, so it is now sadly out of date, and we might need to find something else to take its place. It is also showing the ravages of time; the frame itself is falling apart. We've spent a lot of time trying to cultivate the notion of the Church as "family" rather than simply a random collection of individuals: we belong together; we have a responsibility for one another; we even have a commitment to the family as a whole and to the family's well-being rather than just our own. We are family because Jesus has done the same thing in all of us and we share that common bond.

Paul has been writing in Ephesians about the new family that God is creating. God is making one new family out of people who have come from all sorts of places and backgrounds. The Bible talks about two groups, the Jews and the Gentiles, but really the Gentiles is not one group; "the Gentiles" is everybody else apart from the Jews. The Gentiles is made up of people from every other people group, every other nation, people speaking every other language known in the world at that time. Every member of this new family who believes in Jesus, whether Jew or Gentile, belongs within this new family of God. Everyone shares the same promises of God; everyone has access to God in the same way for faith and in prayer. This is the one new family that God is making; this is the church.

Now, Paul is telling the Christians in Ephesus how this new family needs to behave. He will spend the rest of this letter telling them "This is what God's family needs to be" and here, in part one, he tells them about a spirit of unity and togetherness. God has one family. Look at the Church today and you can laugh at that sentence; the church hardly seems to be one, united, together; there are all sorts of divisions and have been all sorts of fallings out over the piece; but the deepest reality is that God has

one family and we are all part of that family. Paul's challenge for us today is how we live out that spirit of unity and togetherness – this is what family life looks like!

The banner headline is “The unity of the church” – that is the big theme. That big theme has seven ways in which we are one: *“There is one body and one Spirit – just as you were called to one hope when you were called – one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”* (verses 4-6) Tom Wright suggests that Paul might be repeating something given to new Christians as part of their introduction to the Christian faith; they would know this already and he is jogging their memory! This is still the deep unity that Christians share: every Christian can sign up to these seven elements; wherever we meet Christians, they will have faith in Jesus, they will call Jesus “lord”, the Spirit will be living in them, they will belong to the church – just as we do.

What makes that family life work? According to Paul, there are four qualities: *“Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.”* (verse 2) In my travels through the life of the church, I have met some very gifted people who were extremely arrogant; they wanted their own way all of the time. I have also met some very gifted people who thought that they had nothing to offer because they had been squashed by other arrogant people! That arrogance and pride and the desire to get their own way, doesn't create family life. Being humble, gentle, patient and full of love speak about a sense of responsibility for other people and for the family as a whole. We care for one another; we care what others need; we want others to grow and flourish beside us. All the gifts and talents that God has given us, when we use them in church, are for the good of the whole family, to support and help everybody. Even the headline gifts – being an apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor, teacher – even these gifts are *“to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body may be built up...”* (verse 12)

We're all wise enough in the ways of the world to know that families are not always perfect. Many of us have been around church long enough to know that no church is perfect. There are times when families fight and fall apart; there are times when Churches fight amongst themselves, and the sense of “family” falls apart. Far too simple to say that churches fall apart because people forget to be humble, gentle, patient, and full of love, but that will always be part of the story. We're all different as individuals; churches are different from one another even if they look the same on the outside; we need to work at being family and the place to start is with being humble, gentle, patient and full of love. These qualities are at the heart of every good relationship: with our families, our friends, in church, and we need to work at these qualities, so that they grow in us.

Every church in Scotland is having a tough time just now. Covid is creating a great deal of uncertainty for us – what will church life look like in the next few months, or even in the next year? Will we be able to pick up some of the good things we did before, or will it all be changed? Who will be part of our church family? Who will be missing? Will there be new people come to join us? So much is uncertain! Then in the Church of Scotland we are subject to a huge reshaping exercise, cutting costs and cutting the number of ministers; there is a moratorium on large amounts of money being spent on buildings and the plan for the future has not been published yet, so there is a great deal more uncertainty from that. Churches in Scotland are under pressure like never before; the future is uncertain, and life is hard.

More than anything, we need a sense of family. We are God's family; we belong to Him; Jesus creates that belonging for us when He died and was raised; the Spirit creates that sense of belonging in us by faith in Jesus. We are God's family; we belong to Him and He loves us. We are family together; we

belong together and we need to have a sense of responsibility for one another and for the whole church family in Juniper Green Church, or whatever church family you're part of. We come back to these four qualities: be humble, gentle, patient and full of love. Relationships fall apart when we gossip, when we always want our own way, when we are constantly critical of other people and grumbling; churches are no different. Be humble, gentle, patient and full of love in the church family and in every relationship you have. That's not always easy: other people are not always easy to love and be patient with, but that's the challenge for us – be humble, gentle, patient and full of love.

This is what life in God's new family needs to look like. We should have a sense of oneness and togetherness; Jesus has done the same thing in all of us, He saves us; the challenge for us is to foster that sense of oneness together – be humble, gentle, patient and full of love. So the whole Church family will grow and prosper and shine like light in the world.