

## **Better Together Part Two**

*Ephesians 4:1-7*

### **1. Pleading for unity.**

- The walk of unity.

- *John 13:35*

- The ways of unity.

- *Humble.*

- *Be gentle.*

- *Patience.*

- *Bear with one another in love.*

- The work of unity.

### **2. Power in unity.**

- *One Body.*

- *One Spirit.*

- *One Hope.*

- *One Lord.*

- *One Faith.*

- *One Baptism.*

- *One God and Father.*

### **3. Polity of unity.**

- *Ephesians 4:14-16*

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## Better Together, Part Two

Today we finish a two-part sermon series called, "Better Together," and here's why:

Starting next week we will revisit "Here For Good" – we are halfway through our three-year effort to raise money to pay off our debt, to move money from mortgage to ministry, and to renovate some of the major, key, older parts of our facility. We'll share with you some exciting updates, we'll hear some great testimonies, and share some *very* exciting news about what's ahead for us in the next year or so.

But in preparation for that, we needed to take a couple of Sundays to remind ourselves how important it is for us to be in this together; we are better together.

In fact, just to get us in the mood, I'd like to show us a fun video to remind us that we really are better together; we might be okay on our own, but we are best when we're together. Watch this video and you'll see what I mean:

We are better together! Seriously, though – given where we've been in the last year and half with politics and the pandemic and all that's done to us, we need to remind ourselves about our priority of unity. Not only because of where we've been, but also, because of where we are right now: as a culture and as a community, there are so many divisions and diverse opinions and so much strain of what we are all going through, so as the Church we must more firmly commit to our unity. This is critically important if we, as the church, are going to get where we need to go. I think you are going to be very excited about what we share with you starting next Sunday, so let's make sure we are getting there together, because we're better that way.

Just for review, last week we took a hard look at ourselves through a passage from the Old Testament book of Nehemiah – it was a warning for us. In that story, the people's disobedience, disunity, and lack of demonstrated love for each other nearly completely derailed the amazing things that God was doing and about to do in their midst. So too for us: God clearly has powerful things in mind for this church. Folks, we were able to pay off a \$1.1 million dollar debt in *one year, in a pandemic!!!* We should *not* be able to pay off a mortgage balance over a million dollars in one year, while still maintaining our ministries and paying our bills, in the midst of shutdowns and layoffs due to COVID. BUT WE DID! How could we do that if it weren't for God? And why would God do that in us if he didn't intend to free us up to do *more* powerful things in us and through us for his purposes and his glory?!

To step into what God has for us, we must fight to maintain our unity – it is the most critical issue we face. Our unity is vital in these times, because now more than ever the community around us needs to see that God is real and is with us.

In light of all that, I want to remind us of a message I shared over a year ago about unity, because I think it is important to remind ourselves of this urgent need for unity.

To understand what unity is, we are going to look at a passage from the Apostle Paul's letter to the Ephesian church.

The church in Ephesus started through Paul – you can read about it in Acts 19. Ephesus was not a Jewish city, so the church was made up of people of all kinds of ethnicities; kind of like us, our community is predominantly Anglo and Latino, among other ethnicities.

But years after the Ephesian church was started, Paul was imprisoned for preaching the Gospel, so he used the time to write this letter to them.

The letter is divided into two really clear halves. The first half, chapters 1-3, is all about the Gospel – how all history came to its climax in Jesus and the multi-ethnic community of his followers, called the church.

The second half of the letter, chapters 4-6, is linked to the first half by the word, “therefore.” And the second half is about how the gospel should impact every part of how we live our lives. So the first is the Good News of God's love saving us and making one church out of multiple ethnic groups (again, just like our church needs to be Anglo *and* Latino as well as any other ethnicities). And the second part is what it looks like for us to live it out – how we should behave toward each other as the church. It is out of that second part that we want to be instructed today.

The entire book is a powerful statement on what it means to be the church, so I would strongly encourage you to read all of it, because it will give you much greater insight into unity. By the way, you won't find anything in Ephesians about church carpet or pew colors or styles of worship music; but you *will* find things that are actually important to our unity. Unity is vital to the church. Disunity is the devil's playground. As soon as believers quit focusing on their unity in Christ and start focusing on themselves and their preferences or politics or pandemics or posts on social media, the devil is winning, and the church loses. Again, it is imperative that we understand and *practice* unity.

So let me read to you the passage that we are going to look at this morning. It is Ephesians 4:1-7. Would you help me honor God's Word by standing with me as I read it to us? Paul writes:

“As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. 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. But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.” (Ephesians 4:1-7, niv)

Let's make sure we understand from this passage the challenge and command to us to prioritize unity in our church (and in any church). The Bible is very, very clear; if we don't have unity, we don't have a church. So let's make sure we don't miss the point here. Because if we – West Valley Church – can learn and practice what it really means to maintain this unity, then there won't be anything we *can't* do for Christ – Christ will be able to do everything he wants to through us – so that others in our community will be introduced to him and come to faith in him.

So first, Paul *BEGS* us to have unity; he starts out...

### 1. ***Pleading*** for unity.

Paul *pleads* – begs – the church to live in true unity and to be one. He urges them to live a life worthy of the calling they've received from Christ himself. Here's what he means by that: Christ paid the highest price he could pay to save you – he gave up his life to save you. He did that so you could have God's Holy Spirit within you, making you holy – making you like Jesus, so you could live like Him. If Jesus gave his very life for you and did all that for you, then, Paul says, unity will be a primary priority for us. The *least* you and I can do is maintain our unity in and under Christ. In fact, it's the *most* we can do, too: it is one of the greatest things.

Then Paul reminds the readers that he is in prison, pointing out how privileged he feels to be in prison for preaching the Gospel. And Paul says that should show how very important and serious our unity in Christ is; Paul is willing to be imprisoned for their sake. That's the level of love and commitment *we* need to have for each other.

Then Paul gets even more practical, pointing out some important things to us. First, in his plea for unity, Paul talks about...

#### **the *walk* of unity.**

What he means by this is that we must *demonstrate* our unity by the way we live our lives toward each other. If Christ is our priority, like we say he is, then our lives will demonstrate that primarily *in the ways we treat each other*. Your primary calling in life comes from being a follower of Christ. That means that the Christian life is about who you live it for and *who* you are living it with; it's about living for Christ and each other. Following Jesus in this life takes priority over everything else, and then commitment to your church and the unity of your church is the direct result. Listen – others who are not Christians will determine whether or not *they* will follow Jesus by two things in our lives: the consistency with which *we* live for Jesus, and by the quality of our unity with each other.

“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”  
(John 13:35)

This is what it means to walk in unity. *Others will decide if they are going to follow Jesus by the consistency with which we live for Jesus and by the quality of our unity with each other.* Those are our priorities. Then, in Paul's plea for us to walk in unity, he gives us...

#### **the *ways* of unity.**

If you and I are going to walk the walk of unity, then Paul says these four character qualities are the essential ways to maintaining unity, and the first is that we would be...

##### ***humble.***

The meaning of this word is actually, “a thankful sense of dependence upon God.” In other words, humility means that we recognize that we all depend on God for everything. The moment we begin depending on ourselves, we begin to isolate and dislocate ourselves from

the church. When I isolate myself by relying on myself instead of God, I think I no longer need God or you. When we think we are self-reliant, we no longer need each other. So if you don't think you need the other believers in your church and you don't love them or listen to them or treat them with the love and respect that Jesus says they deserve, then you are *not* living in the way of unity. Be humble.

Next, Paul says that the practice of those in unity is to...

***be gentle.***

The word Paul uses for "gentle" means "an unresisting, uncomplaining disposition of mind that enables us to bear – without irritation – the faults of others." I'm going to be honest with you: I don't agree with people who are anti-mask and anti-vax. I just don't agree. I understand their reasons, but I don't think those reasons are more important than our unity, or the safety of people around us. But, that doesn't mean I can't have unity with those that I disagree with. I am committed to practicing this kind of gentleness with them, and I hope they will practice it with me. I also pray they don't get themselves or others ill.

Jesus is the best example of this kind of gentleness. If anyone has a reason to be irritated with us, Jesus does. Think about it – we can be so selfish and so sinful. But instead of being irritated with us, Jesus is gentle with us. And so he expects us to be to each other like he is to us.

The next practice of unity in Paul's plea is for...

***patience.***

Patience in relationships is an enduring attitude that outlasts any pain we might cause each other. Saint Augustine is credited as saying, "In essentials, unity. In non-essentials, liberty. In all things: charity." Let's be unified in the essentials, let's grant one another freedom in the non-essentials (like politics and pandemics), and let's *at all times continue to love each other*.

The last way of unity that Paul says we must practice is that we would...

***bear with one another in love.***

Another word for this is "longsuffering." This means that we keep loving and respecting each other, despite each other's faults and weaknesses and differences. This also means that when there's conflict with each other, we work to make it right. If one person in our church attacks or offends another, the person offended forgives, and the person who attacked must humbly apologize and seek forgiveness. There is no room for grudges or unresolved division in the church.

The last part of Paul's plea for unity is that we would do...

***the work of unity.***

We have a responsibility to be unity-keepers. We are told to *make every effort* to maintain the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. That means *it is work*. Every ounce of your energy and effort should be toward the number one priority of carrying out the unity of West Valley Church. To sow disunity, or to nurse a grudge or disunity in your heart, grieves the Holy Spirit, and folks, grieving the Holy Spirit is as close to the unforgivable sin

as you can get. Unity does not mean we will always agree, but we *will* always love each other and respect each other and seek the best for each other instead of ourselves. So let me give you permission to do something. If you are in a conversation with someone else in our church, and they start talking about the issues of masks and vaccines in a way that offends you, you have permission to put your hand up and say: “Out of love for you and for my church, I will not have this conversation with you.” And if someone does that to you, you have to respect that and stop. Okay? *Your commitment to unity in the church comes before any disagreement.* (Keep in mind, Jesus never once spoke about individual rights, nor did he ever defend his personal rights. He *gave up* his rights for others.) Sometimes that takes hard work, but *those other issues are not important* compared to our unity – *we are commanded to do the work to maintain unity.*

If we worked as hard at this as God commands us to in Scripture, West Valley Church would be unstoppable. That’s because second, there is...

## 2. **Power** in unity.

The unity that should characterize us powerfully permeates all that we have, all that we are, and all that we do. Because of the powerful presence of God’s Holy Spirit, we have ALL the important things in common, and Paul tells us what those powerful common denominators are; he gives us the “seven ones” – seven things that, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we have as a church and that make us powerful for his Kingdom. We have:

- ***One Body.*** This is the church. In the rest of Ephesians, Paul uses several examples to show this, and the most vivid illustration he gives is in chapter four – that all of us together make up one body connected to the head, which is Christ. With Christ as our head, that means we always do what HE tells us to do. *Always.*
- We have ***one Spirit*** – this is, of course, the Holy Spirit – God’s very own righteous presence in our lives and in our unity. We have had the Spirit of God breathed into us by God, so our life and unity is in Him.
- ***One Hope:*** this is the sure and certain future that God has promised us. He promises to do great things through the unity of our church in *this* life, and he promises us life together in eternity. We all share in and work toward that unified hope.
- ***One Lord:*** This is Jesus; we all share in him, and he shares all things with us. Together with Him as the head, we have life. Without him we are each dying cells. My mom has been placed on hospice now, because the cancer tumors in her head are growing, crowding out her brain function. It is interrupting her neural pathways and her ability to tell her body what to do. Do you know what is happening as a result? The body isn’t able to do what it is supposed to do. Without the head, her body is dying. Without our unity in being connected together with Christ as the head, we will die. What’s amazing to me is that some people, in focusing on themselves and what they want, or in focusing on their individual rights, people are actually severing themselves from the Head. Because Christ gave up his rights. So in exercising their “freedom,” they are dying, getting cut off from the head. That’s what self-focus does. That’s what sin does. It at least causes a stroke in the body, if not

amputation from the body. Our common commitment and allegiance is to Jesus and each other. Period, or we die.

- **One Faith:** This means the faith we have in Jesus; faith to believe who he is, that he did what he said he would do for us, and that together in unity he will do what he tells WVC to do.
- **One Baptism:** This is interesting; it's understood in three different ways, but all are important: first is water baptism; meaning that we've obeyed Jesus' command to be baptized in water into the unified church to show the world what Jesus has done for us (I hope you've been baptized, Christian). Second is that we are baptized into Jesus' suffering; that we are willing to practice self-denial, to love each other and even our enemies, and to even be persecuted, just like Jesus did. Third, "one baptism" refers to being baptized in the Holy Spirit; that we are completely surrendered to, and allowing ourselves to be completely filled with, the Holy Spirit who is our unity. We immerse ourselves completely in God – he fills us to the full and makes us righteous by the Holy Spirit, so we can be one body and we obey Jesus – loving God and loving others – in all things.
- Lastly, we have **one God and Father**. God is sovereign and supreme, his power permeates the true church, and his Spirit lives in his people. We have the entire Trinity of God among us!

One body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father. When we are committed to these seven "ones" we have true, biblical unity. That's where our power is. Nothing else is as important as these. There is power in our unity, our commitment to oneness in Christ.

And then last, Paul explains the...

### 3. **Polity of unity.**

"Polity" means the practices of an organization or community that enables it to function effectively and in healthy ways. Paul points out how God wants this done among us, writing about how God has given each of us different spiritual gifts. Spiritual gifts are supernatural abilities that we use *in service to others*. God gives certain spiritual gifts or abilities to every believer. Spiritual gifts are not for ourselves or our own benefit; they are given to us for the benefit of others. In fact, they are given to us specifically to grow the church; they are given to each of us either to introduce people to Jesus, or to build up other believers. That's it; only those two things. (Our Core classes help you figure out what yours might be.) We are unified by each of us putting our gifts into practice, and the church grows through more people coming to faith in Christ and by each of us serving each other. Our common unity is found in our diversity of spiritual gifts; as we each use them, our entire church grows and is healthy. I use mine for you, you use yours for me, and we all use them to introduce others to Jesus. We live in service to others.

A major problem in churches today is that people's commitment to their church is infected with a selfish, consumer-driven loyalty that has produced an army of spiritual hitch-hikers. Here's what I mean by that: you've seen hitchhikers, right? The hitchhiker's attitude is this: "You buy the car, you pay for repairs and upkeep and insurance, you buy the gas, and I

*will* ride with you. But if you play a radio station I don't like, or talk too much or get too personal, or don't drive the way or the route I want, then I'm out; you are on your own and I'm leaving the car, and I'll stick my thumb out and find another ride."

It's the same way that many so-called Christians act today: "*You* pray and get involved. You go to the meetings and serve on the committees or Leadership Team. You clean the church, you work with the kids, you volunteer to take care of the building, you give the money and you pay the bills and pay for the ministries. You do the work of unity. *I will* come along for the ride. But if you do something I don't like – you don't sing the music I like, you don't have the ministries I want, you wear masks when I don't want to – if things don't suit me, I'll complain and then I'll bail out – my thumb will be up for a ride with another church who does things the way *I* want. *That*, my friends, is *not* unity. That, according to the Bible, is called *sin*.

Listen folks, unity means we are in this ride together. Our unity is when each of us does our part in the way each of us can do it, putting into practice the gifts we've been given for the betterment of each other.

Unity is who we are. Paul *pleads* with us for this unity, reminds us of the *power* of our unity, and points out that the *polity* of our unity is when each of us uses what God has given us to serve each other and those who don't know Jesus yet.

If you want a great church, don't complain about it or anyone in it. Don't be self-focused or self-reliant. I plead with you: be unified to your church. Allow the power of our unity and practice the polity of our unity so that we will grow – whether you are in this room or with us online.

That's why Paul said something really important about what will happen among us when we are unified. It's in the next section of that passage. Would you stand again while I read it?

"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. 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. 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."  
(Ephesians 4:14-16, niv)

If you want to grow in Christ, then with Paul I *plead* with you: live in the power of unity with West Valley Church and practice the polity of unity. It is the only way you will grow, according to the Bible.

*Prayer*

"Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen." (Ephesians 3:20-21, niv)