

## **Meant for More Than Just Me (Eph. 4:1-6)**

**Chris Altrock – January 31, 2010**

In 1937, a researcher at Harvard University began a study on what factors contribute to well-being.<sup>1</sup> The research team selected 268 well-adjusted male Harvard students. Researchers studied these individuals for 72 years to determine what affected their levels of health and happiness. The study tracked a number of factors, including physical exercise, cholesterol levels, marital status, use of alcohol, smoking, education levels, and weight. Over the period of 72 years, several directed the research. For the last four decades, the director has been George Vaillant. In 2008 someone asked Dr. Vaillant what he had learned about human health and happiness from these 268 men. Here's what the doctor revealed: "*The only thing that really matters in life are your relationships to other people.*" Perhaps the most significant thing they found by following 268 men for 72 years was this: the only thing that really matters are your relationships to other people.

This is our second week in a series which explores Eph. 4. Last Sunday we spent time in the first verse of chapter four. This morning, we are striving to hear from God in Eph. 4:1-6. It is a text in which Paul focuses on the importance of our relationships: *1I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, 2with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, 3eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. 4There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism, 6 one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.* (Eph. 4:1-6 ESV).

Listen to verse 1 again: *1I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called.* (Eph. 4:1 ESV). As we heard last Sunday, chapters 4-6 describe what it means to “walk [or live] in a manner worthy of the calling.” But it's in chapters 1-3 where we learn what the calling actually is. Paul summarizes those three chapters and his understanding of “calling” in Eph. 1:8-10: *in all wisdom and insight 9 making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ 10as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth* (Eph. 1:8-10ESV). God's administering a plan that is taking place over time. That plan is to restore things to the harmony they once had in Christ. Right now, many things in life do not “add up.” Many things in life seem broken. But God is working to make things “add up” in Christ. God is gathering the broken pieces of our lives, of the lives of others, and of the cosmos and putting them back together. Our “calling” is to join God in this cosmic restoration project.

But notice where we take our first step toward fulfilling this cosmic calling: *2with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, 3eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. 4There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism, 6 one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.* (Eph. 4:2-6 ESV). The key phrase is found in Eph. 4:2: “one another”: “bearing with one another in love...” The phrase “one another” refers to the relationships that exist within the church. It refers to the community that exists within a

congregation. Paul is saying that the first step we take toward living out our cosmic calling comes in the way we relate to "one another." *Above all, we live out our calling in Christian community.* The church, the Christian community, is a living lab. People should be able to look into the Christian community and see, in miniature, the cosmic plan of God being fulfilled. People should be able to peer inside the church and see what human relationships look like when they are restored to their original luster, sheen, and glory.

In their book Introducing the Missional Church Alan Roxburgh and Scott Boren write about what it's going to take for churches to fulfill God's calling in a post-Modern and post-Christian society.<sup>2</sup> One of the most critical elements they believe necessary is this: the church must become a "contrast society." The authors mean that the church must become a living model, a laboratory, in which people see and experience the opposite of what they see and experience in the world. If what people see and experience in the world is brokenness, in the church they should see and experience wholeness. If what people see and experience in the world is hostile relationships, hurting relationships, and shallow relationships, in the church they should see and experience just the opposite.

That's the point that Paul is making here. The first step toward fulfilling our cosmic calling is to ensure that the Christian community is a "contrast society." People should be able to peer inside the church and see what human relationships look like when they are restored to their original luster, sheen, and glory.

Seinfeld was a popular television comedy. In an episode entitled "The Fire," Jerry Seinfeld's friend, George Costanza attends a child's birthday party at the request of his girlfriend, Robin.<sup>3</sup> The episode illustrates how broken and marred relationships in the world can be. While a clown is providing entertainment for the kids, George stands alone in the room. Suddenly he says, "*What's that smell? Is that smoke?*" As he walks into the kitchen, he is startled. "*Everybody! I think I smell some smoke back here! Fire! Get out of here!*" George runs out of the kitchen in a panic, knocking over the clown, an old lady with a walker, and a couple of kids. "*Get out of my way!*" he yells, as he opens the front door of the apartment and runs away. In the next scene, George is receiving oxygen from a group of paramedics. "*It was an inferno in there!*" he tells them. Suddenly the clown runs over to George and says, "*There he is! That's him!*" Several angry children and Robin's mother gather round. "*That's the coward that left us to die!*" cries Robin's mother. The clown tries to hit George with an oversized shoe. George tries to explain: "*I was trying to lead the way. We needed a leader, someone to lead the way to safety.*" Robin objects: "*But you yelled, 'Get out of my way!'*" "*Because as the leader,*" George continues, "*if I die, then all hope is lost. Who would lead? The clown? Instead of castigating me, you should be thanking me. What kind of topsy-turvy world do we live in where heroes are cast as villains, and brave men as cowards?*" "*But I saw you push the women and children out of the way in a mad panic,*" someone yells out. "*I saw you knock them down. And when you ran out, you left everyone behind.*" "*Seemingly,*" George refutes. "*To the untrained eye, I can fully understand how you got that impression. What looked like pushy, what looked like knocking down, was a safety precaution. In a fire, you stay close to the ground. Am I right? And when I ran out that door, I was not leaving anyone behind. I risked my life making sure that exit was clear. Any other questions?*" The fireman offers just one more: "*How do you live with yourself?*" "*It's not easy,*" George replies.]

We live in a culture in which there is often little thought for anyone but “me.” We live in a world where relationships can become all about “me.” But one of the central ways we pursue our cosmic calling is to create an alternate community where “me” no longer figures into relationships. We begin living out our calling when we create a community where it’s not about “me,” but about “us.”

But not only do we live in a culture where relationships center on “me,” we also live in a culture where real relationships are few and far between. For example, a New York Times article tells of Hal Niedzviecki.<sup>4</sup> Soon after starting a Facebook account, Niedzviecki accumulated about 700 on-line “friends.” He was very proud of having hundreds of Facebook “friends.” But he wanted something deeper. So he decided to have a Facebook party to turn his virtual friends into actual friends. Niedzviecki invited all 700 of his Facebook “friends” to a party. People could respond to his emailed invitation with one of three options: “Attending,” “Maybe Attending” and “Not Attending.” Fifteen of his Facebook friends said they would attend, and sixty said they might attend. He guessed somewhere around 20 would show up. Niedzviecki writes about what happened next: *“On the evening in question, I took a shower. I shaved. I splashed on my tingly man perfume. I put on new pants and a favorite shirt. Brimming with optimism, I headed over to the neighborhood watering hole and waited. And waited. And waited. Eventually, one person showed up.”* Niedzviecki waited till midnight but no one else showed up.

We live in a culture where real relationships often don’t even materialize. And those that do are often centered only on “me.”

That’s why the first step toward fulfilling our calling is to create Christian community. Above all, we live out our calling by helping to create an alternative community where the first thought is for others not self, and where real connection does take place.

But before we get to the most practical part of Paul’s teaching, we need to explore the theology that undergirds it. In Eph. 4:3-6 Paul lists seven sources of community which make real and selfless relationships in the church possible: *3eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. 4There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism, 6 one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.* (Eph. 4:3-6 ESV). Paul lists seven ones: one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father. These seven “ones” make real and selfless relationships possible in the church. How? Notice that the heart of the seven sources of community is the Trinity: one Spirit (Eph. 4:4), one Lord (Eph. 4:5) and one Father (Eph. 4:6).<sup>5</sup> The *one Spirit* makes possible one body, since, as Paul writes earlier, every ethnic group (for example, Jew and Gentile) have access to God through the same Holy Spirit (Eph. 2:18). The *one Father* is above all of us, putting us all on common ground. And through our common faith and baptism, we enter into relationship with the *one Lord*, Jesus. Finally, through Jesus, we also share a common hope. Thus, we might say that Paul gives us these *seven sources of community: one Spirit who creates one body, one Lord to whom we respond in one faith and one baptism and with whom we engage in the one hope-filled calling, and one God and Father of all.*

The core of Paul's teaching seems to be this: God exists in the perfect community (Spirit, Son, and Father). That Trinity represents the ideal in relationships. In the Trinity God experiences deep and selfless relationship. This is what human relationships were intended to mirror. We were created to enjoy the kind of depth and selflessness exhibited by the Trinity. And part of living out our calling is to experience and live out that kind of Trinity relationship in the church.

Kevin Miller writes that best analogy for the Trinity is a time when you experienced a community of love.<sup>6</sup> Maybe a time in your family when it was at its most healthy. Maybe a time when you were on a sports team when people stopped worrying about their own egos and sacrificed for the team. Maybe a time in a support group where you felt cared for in spite of your brokenness. Kevin Miller thought back to his college days: *when I think of analogies of the Trinity, I think of Mike Yearley's apartment. When I came to Wheaton, I moved 700 miles from family. Back then, there was no email, no instant messages, no cell phone. My college roommate hung out by himself. My first winter, it snowed 90 inches. I felt like I was living in the Arctic. So I was lonely and, literally, out in the cold. Then a senior guy named Mike Yearley invited me to his apartment for dinner and a Bible study....His wife, Lin, was cooking a home-cooked meal—I could smell it as soon as I walked in the door...There were other people there, too—a guy named Dave, and another named Dan, who were upperclassmen and popular. They would never have spent time with me, or even known who I was, but because I'd been invited in to Mike's apartment, they talked with me... That apartment became my home and my sanity. Whenever I had a question or problem about dating, I would head to Mike's apartment. Whenever I had a question or problem about my spiritual life, I would head to Mike's apartment....What I found in Mike's apartment was this community of love.*" Miller concludes with these words: *The reason we can't find many good analogies for the Trinity is that we constantly live in such broken relationships that it's hard for us to imagine a Community in which there's constant joy and creativity and each Person pouring himself out for the others.* Yet that Trinity is now the basis of our relationships. We've been called out of a world of broken relationships and into a community where the Trinity is now the model for how we relate to others.

The source of our Christian community and relationship is the Trinity. But what exactly does that look like? How do we nurture relationships that look like the Trinity? How do we form a "contrast society" in which people from the outside can see relationships restored to what they were originally intended to be? Paul answers these questions in [Eph. 4:2](#) where he lists five qualities we are to pursue in our relationships with each other: *2with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, 3eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph. 4:2-3 TNIV).* We might think of these as the "five practices of community": *humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance, and love.* Let's briefly explore them.

- First, the quality of "humility" was despised in the ancient world. Rarely was it described in a positive way or as a quality worthy of pursuit. The word Paul uses refers to the humble recognition of the value of others. It's the difference between treating people with respect and treating others like dirt.<sup>7</sup> It literally means "low minded" in contrast to high minded.<sup>8</sup>

- Second, the quality of “gentleness” or meekness could describe domesticated animals—beasts whose strength has been brought under control. It can refer to our refusal to aggressively assert our rights in relationships.<sup>9</sup> It refers to being courteous and considerate.<sup>10</sup>
- Third and fourth, “patience” and “forbearance.” These two words have similar meanings. One difference might be that “patience” can refer to the longsuffering we demonstrate toward difficult people, whereas “forbearance” may refer more generally to our longsuffering toward all people.<sup>11</sup> Both words refer to a willingness to not react negatively toward others.<sup>12</sup> “Patience” literally refers to having a “long temper” in contrast to a short temper.<sup>13</sup> “Forbearance” or “bearing with” ultimately means fully accepting people even in their uniqueness, their weaknesses, and their faults.<sup>14</sup>
- Fifth, as the last item in the list, “love” is the crowning virtue. It summarizes all others.<sup>15</sup> Above all, the community to which we belong is now characterized by love.

How do we demonstrate to the world the way in which God can pick up the pieces of human relationships and put them back together? How do we illustrate for the world what God can do with human relationships? How do we mirror in our relationships the Trinity? By simply doing this: treating each other with humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance, and love. By creating a “contrast society” where everyone is valued, where all people are treated with respect, where we are courteous and considerate, where we do not react negatively to others but accept others even in their uniqueness and weakness.

And where does all this play out? It plays out in the way you respond or don’t respond to that guest who visits this service or your Sunday School class. It plays out in the attempts you make in your Reach Group or Huddle to minister to a group member in need. It plays out in the way you listen to prayer requests in your Sunday School class and what you do then with those requests. It plays out in the way you treat each person in your Sunday School class or Huddle. It plays out in what you do when you hear about or learn of anyone in this congregation who has needs.

But ultimately, it also plays out in the kind of people we welcome into this community. Mark Buchanan writes about attending a prayer meeting at the Brooklyn Tabernacle, led by Jim Cymbala.<sup>16</sup> *Afterward, my friend and I went out to dinner with the Cymbalas. In the course of the meal, Jim turned to me and said, “Mark, do you know what the number one sin of the church in America is?” I wasn’t sure, and the question was rhetorical anyhow. “It’s not the plague of internet pornography that is consuming our men. It’s not that the divorce rate in the church is roughly the same as society at large.” Jim named two or three other candidates for the worst sin, all of which he dismissed. “The number one sin of the church in America,” he said, “is that its pastors and leaders are not on their knees crying out to God, ‘Bring us the drug-addicted, bring us the prostitutes, bring us the destitute, bring us the gang leaders, bring us those with AIDS, bring us the people nobody else wants, whom only you can heal, and let us love them in your name until they are whole.’”* That may be the ultimate application of Paul’s words in this text. We take our greatest step toward our cosmic calling when we cry out for God to send us those nobody wants, when we create a community for those nobody wants, when we

become the people willing to love those no one else will. People should be able to peer inside this church and see what human relationships look like when they are restored to their original luster, sheen, and glory.

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<sup>1</sup> Joshua Wolf Shenk, "What Makes Us Happy?" The Atlantic (June 2009): 36–53.

<sup>2</sup> Alan Roxburgh and M. Scott Boren, Introducing the Missional Church: What It Is, Why It Matters, How to Become One (Allelon Missional Series) (Baker Books, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> DVD, Season 5, Disc 4 ("The Fire"); 00:09:50–00:13:15; Seinfeld (Season Five) (NBC, 2005), directed by Tom Cherones.

<sup>4</sup> Hal Niedzviecki, "Facebook in a Crowd," The New York Times (10/26/08).

<sup>5</sup> Stott, 150.

<sup>6</sup> Kevin Miller, in the sermon "Getting to Know Your God" (PreachingToday.com).

<sup>7</sup> John R. W. Stott, The Message of Ephesians The Bible Speaks Today (IVP, 1979); 148-149.

<sup>8</sup> Andrew T. Lincoln, Ephesians Word Biblical Commentary (Word, 1990): 235.

<sup>9</sup> Stott, 149.

<sup>10</sup> Lincoln, 236.

<sup>11</sup> Stott, 149.

<sup>12</sup> Walter L. Liefeld, Ephesians The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (IVP, 1997): 97.

<sup>13</sup> Lincoln, 236.

<sup>14</sup> Lincoln, 237.

<sup>15</sup> Stott, 149.

<sup>16</sup> Mark Buchanan, "Messy, Costly, Dirty Ministry," Leadershipjournal.net (5/15/09).