

Ephesians 4:1

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[0 : 00] We shall turn now to the Epistle of Paul to Ephesians, and the fourth chapter, reading at verse 1.

Ephesians chapter 4 and verse 1. I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you, that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, with all lowliness and meekness, with long-suffering, forbearing one another in love, endeavoring to keep the spirit in the bond of peace. Now the Epistle to the Ephesians, as all of us are aware, is, I suppose, the sublimest document in the whole of the New Testament.

Its key theme is the theme of union with Christ. We find time and again the phrase, in Christ. We are told that in Christ we are elected, in Christ redeemed, in Christ adopted, in Christ sealed with the Spirit of God.

[1 : 39] Even that in Christ we sit, even here and now, in what Paul calls, the heavenly places. So we scale all those great heights, predestination, redemption, the Holy Spirit sealing.

we see this great vision of our potential, as very ordinary believers. Our potential because we are in Christ.

Our potential because we sit already in Him, in those heavenly places. And as Paul expounds those great themes, there are many moments when one's heart and mind are filled with awe.

And we see, as Paul says in Romans at one point, all the depths. We stand before the abyss of evangelical profundity.

And feel almost dizzy. We look up at those great theological mountains, and say to ourselves, who can possibly scale the heights of that kind?

[3 : 05] But there are two features of Paul's treatment, of those great themes, which are surely quite fascinating. One of them is the fact that Paul is writing to men and women of very ordinary mental capability.

He is not writing to academics, or to theologians, but to a congregation of very ordinary human beings.

There are husbands and wives, there are parents, and there are children, there are masters, and there are slaves. And yet the apostle expects that each one of those will find this teaching relevant. That each one will make the necessary effort to understand it. That each one can manage it and can apply it in his own daily life and in his own relationships.

And I would suggest to you that we are far too easily intimidated by those great themes. We should wrestle with them, even though, as one man said, even though they throw us.

[4 : 28] We should wrestle with God's revelation. Because the Bible is not a book for specialists. It's a book for the Lord's people.

And for us, as the most ordinary of God's people. Many of those who first heard this epistle were illiterate.

They couldn't read. They could only hear it. And yet Paul gives them this great undiluted exposition of the heights and depths of the Christian gospel.

And that's why I think at last I must say that I become increasingly impatient with reluctance of the church of Christ and of our own church today to face the labor involved in the mastery of those great doctrines.

Paul expected that the church would hear and the church would listen and the church would reason and discuss and the church would wrestle in order to understand.

[5 : 51] And I have the same right to expect that the church of today which is vastly superior in its attainment education that is going to be the necessary effort to wrestle with those great themes.

The second thing I find intriguing is this. The way that Paul keeps the doctrine and the ethics in absolutely indissoluble connection.

He never loses sight of the practical relevance of the Christian gospel. He never allows the church to think for a single moment that what we have here is theory or a speculation or some kind of remote philosophy.

He remains constantly conscious that these people are to live and they have to suffer. They have to live the truth.

They have to suffer sustained by the truth. He remains constantly aware of the need to see the truth in its practical and its day-to-day bearings.

[7 : 20] And in fact, the precise point where our text lies in the epistle is the point where Paul effects a transition from the doctrine to the ethics.

And you will see how marvelous the balance is. There are three great chapters of sustained and massive theology.

and these are followed by three magnificent chapters of detailed ethical application.

They are from the same man, they are to the same community, and they are both equally imperative and equally integral to authentic Christian discipleship.

In fact, to take an overview for the moment, Paul is going to lay down in the second half of the epistle three great principles.

[8 : 30] First, that we should walk worthy of our calling. Secondly, that we should be imitators of God as dear children.

Third, that we should be filled with the spirit. And then, having given us that, he will go on to work out in detail what it all means for husbands and wives, for parents and children, for masters and servants.

And he will then conclude with this great plea that we should all every day put on the whole armor of God.

Let's this morning for a moment look at the first of Paul's great ethical principles. I beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called.

It is Paul's concern for the way that we walk. the great theology. He wants our thinking to be right. He wants us to hold the right doctrines.

[9 : 46] He wants us to know the inspiration and consolation of those doctrines. He wants us to know the doxology, that overwhelming sense of mystery and adoration, of inexpressible gratitude to God that those great doctrines constrain us to.

That's why the theology ends in that doxology of verse 20 of chapter 3. That is where all theology ends.

Now unto him that is able to do unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus. The theology has brought him to that magnificent point.

But then having gone through the doctrines, having gone to the doxology, Paul in this magnificent way comes to the anticlimax almost of the way we are to walk.

The doctrine is in order to walk. The doxology is the basis of the way that we walk.

[11 : 00] We have to walk the Christian life. After all, it is a way. That was its first great designation.

It was called the way. Because it wasn't only for the mind. It wasn't only for doxology. It was about life, about living, relationships, pain, stress, conduct, about the way that we bade ourselves in all the strengths and all the opportunities of our own daily existence.

Paul wants doctrine. Paul wants doxology. But Paul also wants walk. He wants the thing lived.

He wants it registered. in all the glorious contours of consistent Christian living. But what kind of walk is it?

It is, it says, in general, a walk that is worthy of the calling with which we have been called. It must be worthy of the calling with which we have been called.

[12 : 17] have you ever pondered the epithets that the New Testament applies to a Christian calling? For example, it is defined by Paul in Philippians as a high calling.

We must walk worthy of our high calling. Surely that's saying to us, in other words, that we have to walk in an elevated way.

There must be elevation in the life of a Christian. It cannot be ordinary. It certainly cannot fall below the ethical level of the ordinary.

It can't be average. It can't be sub average. It can't be common place. It can't be sub common place. It must be elevated. It must be high.

You remember that our lives cannot rise higher than our source. And if our lives are rooted in the old Adam, if our lives are rooted in the world, if we have no spring but the springs of our own human ordinariness, then yes, we shall be content with our walks that is ordinary.

[13 : 46] But where is our life? Where is the source of our life? We are seated with Christ in the heavenlies.

It is not a promise that one day we shall sit with them. But at this present moment we are united by faith and by God's spirit with a risen savior.

I would even dare say that in some great sense that I cannot fathom we are united today to the resurrection body of Christ.

And I am saying that that risen savior that resurrection body is the source of our lives. Our life is hid with Christ in God.

We are rooted in him. We are participators in and sharers in an eternal life that flows out of the throne of God and of the Lamb.

[15 : 01] Now that means that it is absolutely impossible for a Christian to be ordinary. His life has an extraordinary source, a source of extraordinary elevation.

And it is a painful travesty of our discipleship when this sometimes happens. Our Christian lives sink to a standard below that of ordinary human attainment.

It happened in the New Testament that the Lord's Supper in Corinth there was conduct that would have disgraced a pagan assembly.

Time and again the church of God collectively and individually has behaved in a way that would disgrace any ordinary gathering.

That cannot be if we are going to live worthy of elevated calling. We cannot be sub-average. We cannot even be average.

[16 : 19] We have to transcend the ordinary level of human attainment. There has to be a love, a tolerance, a patience, a kindness, commitment, self-denial, an endurance that carries us far above the ordinary level.

There must be elevatedness. There must be nobility. dignity. There must be dignity. There must always be this element of surpassing this in the life of a child of God because our calling is a high calling.

And I put it to you again in the bluntest possible terms that sometimes we have the orthodox and sometimes we have the formal correspondence with the standards of respectability and sometimes we have the words of doxology and yet we do not have the moral and spiritual elevation that is the great hallmark of Christianity.

Walk worthy of your elevated calling. Again we are told this we are called to be saints. Walk worthy of your calling to be saints.

Saints separated cut off saints essentially different. The whole problem of the Christian difference the same basic idea as we have in that of elevation.

[18 : 12] church there is a discontinuity between the life of a believer and the life of an unbeliever between the life of the Christian church and the life of society outside.

There is an absolutely inevitable separation. We find in the Sermon on the Mount for example that the Lord says to us that we must excel the scribes and Pharisees.

That great sermon is not there simply to drive us to despair. It's not there only to fill us with some sense of sin.

It is there to be lived. It is there as a great register of the Christian difference. It is there as a great definition of the Christian counter culture.

The way we treat our enemies. The way we relate to economic stress. Our whole attitude to worldly goods.

[19 : 30] Our whole attitude to those who don't love us. These are essentially different from those who are outside the Christian faith.

And I do wonder to what extent we see our Christian life and walk as a counter culture. Or if I may say so as an alternative lifestyle.

Because we are called to be saints, called to be separate, called to be different in our social preferences, called to be different in our aspirations, called to be different in our ethics and in our

standards, called to be different in our emotional life, called to a new contentment and to a new joy, called to be quit of neurosis of anxiety and depression and cowardice called to be saints, walk differently.

Let me make that a positive. Saintliness is about dedication, it's about consecration. We have been called to self-dedication, called to self-consecration.

we all know the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, one of the fundamental affirmations of the reformation.

[21 : 13] But we must bear in mind that priesthood always presupposes a sacrifice. And the question is, if there is a priesthood of all believers, then what is the sacrifice of all believers?

The terrible answer is that we ourselves are not only the priests of our own priesthood, we are also the victims of our own priesthood.

We are the sacrifices. You present your bodies living sacrifices in reasonable service. you cannot distinguish between your own time and the Lord's time, between your own resources and God's resources, between your own talents and God's talents, because we are as Christians dedicated and yielded to God.

We are holocausts. We are burnt offerings. We are dedicated, surrendered, consecrated. Aren't we? that is the whole logic of this that we are called to be saints.

We are set apart from a common to a holy use. We are actually on the altar of the will of God. We are called to yield our members instruments of righteousness and to holiness.

[22 : 46] And it is all terribly fiscal and terribly concrete. We are to walk for God and see for God and hear for God and use our physical powers to give our priesthood, to give it confirmation and actuality in time and space to make it real and touchable.

That's why Paul says yield your bodies. It's so desperately tangible just as the incarnation was tangible.

It's not about intentions. or ideas or aspirations or emotions or lovely thoughts or lovely states of feeling. It's about registering your dedication in concrete physical personal and to be for God.

We are called to be saints, to be separate, called to be saints, called to be yielded, to be totally surrendered to God. God.

And far too often we have the problem that we are saying to God thus far and no further there are areas and compartments of our lives which are God proof.

[24 : 04] We have slammed the doors in his face and said I want this area Lord for myself. This area I will not discuss. this area is not up for negotiation.

This area is mine. Not if we have holocausts. The holocaust is a whole bird offering. It is the will of God allowed access to every part of our hearts and every part of our lives.

We are to walk worthy of our calling to be saints. Let me if I dare go beyond it and not this. we are called says Peter in 2 Peter 1 we are called to glory and virtue.

Called to virtue. Virtue is one of the great words of Greek philosophy. One of the great key words of Socratic and Platonic teaching.

A word that means excellence. It means the realization of the ideal. A thing is virtuous or excellent if it corresponds exactly to the ideal.

[25 : 19] We are called to virtue. We are called to excellence. We are called to the ideal. Walk worthy of your calling to excellence.

Walk worthy of your calling to the ideal. and of course that ideal has found for us concrete embodiment in the man Christ Jesus.

Let your lives correspond to the highest standard of human excellence. Let your lives correspond to the highest expression of the human ideal and that is Christ.

one of the glories of biblical theology is that Christ is the definition and explication of God.

The other glory of it is that Christ is the definition and explication of manhood. And when we say that we are to walk worthy of the ideal then I say Christ is the ideal.

[26 : 33] And we have been called to that standard. Don't you for a moment think that that is exaggeration and don't look for an escape route.

We have been predestinated to be conformed to the image of his son. That is God's determination. That is the whole meaning of God's election, the whole meaning of God's calling.

That we should walk worthy of the ideal given to us in Jesus Christ. That's the ideal statement given by God of what a human being should be.

If I want to be a man, then a real man, a real man's man, use all those marvelous epithets if we care. Then we're thinking of Christ.

Walk worthy of your calling to excellence. I can't develop this, but if I can just give you two clues to what that's going to mean for us in practice. One is to take that great idea that we have in Philippians 2 where Christ is the form of God.

[27 : 45] And then that Christ who is in God's form takes the form of a servant. What is Christ's form? What shapes?

What like is he? What is he essentially? Well, I say Christ essentially is the man who did not look on his own things, but on the things of others and therefore took the form of a servant.

The definition of his glory, the expression of his form, the expression of the human ideal is that Christ became a servant.

We are called to walk worthy of his tremendous statement of the human ideal which is Christ in the form of a servant. He did not come to be ministered to, but to minister and give his life a ransom for many.

Very curious thing that at last what is being told to us there is that to become a servant to make himself of no reputation. Literally Paul says that he emptied himself.

[28 : 55] in essence Paul is saying Christ made himself nothing. What is the highest standard of human excellence? It is the willingness to be nothing.

Walk worthy of your calling. That is not that I'm going to say walk worthy of your calling to be nothing, but walk worthy of your calling to be willing to be nothing.

And that will of course resurface in Paul's detailed analysis of what he means to be the succeeding birth. Christ is the embodiment of virtue.

Christ is the statement of human excellence. And in that Christ is a servant who is willing to be nothing. If I had time I'd go back to another great theme.

Christ is the image of God. God is love. To conform to the ideal which is Christ is to conform to love as the essence of what God himself is.

[30 : 08] Walk worthy of your calling to be Christ like to be a servant. Your calling to be willing to be nothing. Your calling to embody the great teaching of God's word on love as itself the very essence of what God is.

Walk worthy of your calling to an elevated lifestyle. Walk worthy of your calling to a saintly lifestyle. Walk worthy of your calling to a lifestyle in which you embody the highest ideals of human excellence and human virtue.

In other words, you would call him to be Christ like as a servant willing to be nothing as a living embodiment of the love of almighty God and please.

I'm not stating possibilities. I'm not defining options. I am laying down God's categorical imperative. God's imperious statement of what I today am supposed to be and if I reject it, if I fall short of it, if I do so deliberately, I'm rejecting and reputed God's own will for my life.

I therefore beseech thee, I who am the prisoner of the Lord. I lay down categorically that you are to walk. I am concerned about your walk.

[31 : 40] There are so many, many jokes, so many desperate and appalling jokes about the tension and the disparity between the three-church doctrine and the three-church ethic.

It makes me blush. It makes me blush because sometimes there is too much truth in it. But I want us back to this walk. I love the doctrines.

I love the doxology in which those doctrines are registered. But for the moment it's the walk. That is the occupation. The way we live.

The standards, the norms, the conduct, the behavior. I want us to walk worthy of this calling, this high calling, this calling to be saints, this calling to virtue.

Let us walk worthy of that. And then Paul expounds it in four or five great details which again are magnificent key words of the New Testament ethic and definitive of the New Testament standard of behavior.

[32 : 43] With all lowliness. With all humility. You remember Augustine's great comment as he pondered his own past life.

What is the first thing he said in rhetoric and he said delivery? What is the second thing in rhetoric and again he said delivery? What is the third thing in rhetoric and again he said delivery?

And he said what is the first thing in the Christian life? Humility. What is the second thing in the Christian life?

Humility. What is the third thing in the Christian life? Humility. it wasn't a virtue to a pagan it was a vice there is no extant classical concept of humility as a virtue to be humble was to be despicable but I spoke of this counterculture of this alternative lifestyle in which pagan values are stood on their heads and in which the first virtue of the Christian life becomes that which was the primary baseness of the pagan concept we begin with humility now humility is not self-appreciation humility doesn't mean that we disparage ourselves or dismiss ourselves or refuse to accept responsibility thrust upon us lawfully because we deem ourselves totally unfit but we're asked to do there is a marvelous place where Paul elsewhere says let no man think of himself more highly than he ought to think but let him think he says sober judgment that's a very interesting antithesis he doesn't say that a man think of himself more highly than he ought but let him think of himself more lowly than he ought he just pleads for realism let him think of himself let him think of himself let him think of himself let him think sober judgment it is the truth about ourselves that's humbling not exantuated distortions of the truth

I know within limits what I can do I know what I can do better than most men can do but I must also know my own sin my own guilt my own depravity my own corruption I know what God has hidden I know the terrible antithesis of my image and the reality I don't need to exaggerate it is there it's real but I get to a point with Paul where he says I judge not my own self why should I waste time trying to decide where I stand on the scale and what kitchen hole I fit into and what category I am whether A1 or B2 or C3 or whatever in the long last analysis humility means that I abdicate from any pretended right to assess myself

[36 : 19] I'm not able I'm not fit it's a terrible irrelevance where I stand humility means that we accept responsibilities and the obligations that God thrusts upon us we accept them because they are thrust on us we accept them not for reward we accept them not because we have striven for them in competition with others whom we have defeated and on whose dead bodies we stand as we grasp the prize but we do what the people of God led by the spirit of God say we should do I judge not my own self we can't so easily paralyze ourselves in that self depreciation that is the classical symptom of clinical depression we can spend our lives trying to work out our metier and trying to find out our level instead we just realistically say with Paul

Lord have mercy on me the sinner that's where I stand and I must have the humility which accepts that despite my knowledge of where I am yet God is almost irrationally giving me a responsibility that I don't deserve and for which at last I am not fit who is sufficient for these things well Paul knew Paul knew he didn't deserve to be a preacher Paul also knew he wasn't fit to be a preacher Paul knew that he had a very unimpressive presence and Paul knew that he had a speech problem and Paul knew that he was far from prepossessing he knew all that but he doesn't say he doesn't whine and say I'm not going to do it it is thrust upon him and at last it is no business of his where he stands in the scale let no man think of himself more highly than he ought let no man disparage himself beyond where he ought let a man think sober judgment let a man accept what God thrusts upon him as a husband as a father as a master as a servant as a preacher as a member of the church of God and very often we find a refuge simply letting other men take the decisions the collective wisdom of the church of Christ there is this self-efficientness and this self-forgettingness it is much more self-forgettingness than self-depreciation and very often it means that one must have the humility to do what one knows one does badly but one also knows that unless one does it oneself nobody else will do it and one looks a fool there are many times when humility means the willingness to be made to look foolish for the sake of Christ so this walk in its detail begins with humility with lowliness meekness meekness which at its very heart is softness let's be soft Christians are soft now before anyone makes any qualification that means of such enormous importance because so many Christians are so hard and so prickly and so bristly there are some men and some women and they are just theological battleships they are hard they are tough now before I qualify in any way let's get this absolutely straight there is a softness about Christians a gentleness as there was about Christ it is not softness at the point of conviction or softness at the point of durability it's not softness in that they lack spiritual stamina it's not softness when it comes to running the race set before us or engaging in the warfare of God's spirit when we have on the whole armor of God it's not that softness but there is a softness in the face of human misery we shouldn't be blind to the misery we're soft we cry we weep behold the city and weep over it softness

as we contemplate some of the lapses within the Christian church there is a man a Christian man a professing Christian man and he stumbles to something scandalous and immediately all the law and order syndrome in the church starts flashing warning signals and so often we close in collectively like a pack of wolves on the unfortunate and there is no softness how marvelous is Paul's teaching

Galatians 6 if a man be overtaken in a fault you that are spiritual restore such a one in the spirit of meekness softness considering yourself that you also can be tempted the man has been overtaken in a fault and there is not the least diviety about it he has done something scandalous but what do you want to do destroy him gobble him up hide him in case the media discover him you restore him and you do it in a spirit of meekness softness and where does such a meekness and softness come from it comes he says from the most obvious border considering thyself you know yourself how much there is and you how much

God has said so you meet we are soft when we face misery we are soft when we face lapses we are soft when our own interest our own comfort our own name reputation when these are appellated it's a very difficult distinction but there are times when a great deal is said and done which is personally injurious but which does not affect the truth and so long as the insults or the jibes or the cruelty affect only one's person they are to be ignored but when the jibes and the insults affect the reputation of God's church or the interests of truth then they are not to be ignored it was said of

[44 : 15] William Cunningham the greatest and the most neglected of all the disruption fathers second only to charmers and possibly not second even to him that he was a lion in defending the truth and a lamb in defending himself now we don't also have the wisdom to know where the one begins on the other ends but a meek a soft Christian will never use his resources his polemical or dialectical or whatever other resources in self defense because the self doesn't matter it really doesn't matter not one little bit we commend ourselves to God who judges righteously so in this walk we are humble in this walk we are meek or soft in this walk we are long suffering now long suffering if I can put it briefly this way it's the way we react to adversities in God's providence long suffering for the moment here is very much

God word sometimes if I may be so bold as to say it Christians get very short with God we blow off views with God we protest why if we walk worthy of our high calling to be Christ like then we endure God's providence with long suffering as a point again in Psalm 39 where the psalmist says this to us dumb was I opening not my mouth because this stroke was thine the Lord gave and the Lord has given away there is no parit should and very often it's not easy but it's what's meant in this great virtue of long suffering and then forbearing one another and here what is in use the opposite perspective sometimes human beings are very trying and sometimes what is worse Christians are very trying Christians at all levels are very trying how realistic Paul is forbearing one another it's a word that means restraining yourself restraining yourselves in the presence of one another sometimes we have to make a very deliberate effort to keep our mouths closed and to stifle the instinctive retort that comes to your lips we have to be forbearing in love restrain don't say the fervor thing that comes into your head please for God's sake forbear one another in love be patient with God and be patient with one another and then one final thing which breaks up in Paul's hands into a great and rich new theme and it's in many ways an astonishing development endeavor to keep the spirit's unity in a bond of peace what's this walk about well this walk is about humility this walk is about softness this walk is about long suffering this walk is about forbearance and this walk is about being concerned for the unity of the people of God in other words concern for unity is a primary

Christian virtue it intrigues me endlessly the way the word ecumenical has come to be used as a dismissive and derogatory epithet I've heard someone this week repeatedly speak in terms like this he's an ecumenical in other words he's a no good he's a ecumenical and how have we got from the new testament to that passes my comprehension now what's being said here is that this unity of God's people is something of paramount importance and it is really part of the holiness of a child of God it's about the way he walks a real Christian is very very concerned about ecumenicity he is very concerned about the unity of

God's church a real believer is an ecumenical now one could say many things I haven't time today to go through it is the unity of God's spirit the one that he creates and it is the one that exists it is there there is one body there is one spirit there is one hope there is one Lord there is one faith there

is one baptism there is one God and one father that unity is a reality we are called upon to keep it that means that we do nothing we do nothing to imperil it and nothing to impair it we don't introduce false doctrines because they divide the church we don't form cliques and factions in our homes or elsewhere that divide the church we don't miscall each other and thereby divide the church we don't adopt lifestyles that will divide

[50 : 27] God's people in that they will be forced to make a decision and stand either on my side or on the opposing side and every Christian in the exercise of his freedom and in the exercise of his own leadership must always wait up if I do this how will it affect the unity of God's church now sadly there are situations where something higher than unity is going to override my concern for unity truth is more important than unity and holiness is more important than unity but nothing else is and I'm saying let's put it on our horizons as something of tremendous importance before we start to innovate doctrinally before we start having separate meetings before we start excluding certain people from our gatherings before we begin to adopt what looks like deviant lifestyles let us begin to ponder the implications for the church's unity but all that's negative we have to be promoters of unity endeavor agonize make a real effort to maintain to enrich to promote the unity of

God's people by the bond of peace make peace in other words God wants in this church today people who bring people together who hold people together who mold the church into a unity who get people talking people sharing people loving people forgiving that's what Paul wants let's endeavor let us make an effort now our unity is under threat the pressure in evangelical churches of the charismatic movement and all its terrible divisiveness we have to say that let's endeavor let us make a strenuous positive effort not to disunite not to pull God's people apart but let's make a positive effort creatively to bring God's people closer together in real love in real brotherhood walk worthy of your calling be elevated be saintly conform to the highest standards of human excellence in Christ walk with humility walk with meekness walk with long suffering walk with forbearance and walk making a conscious effort to maintain the unity with which

God has blessed his own people let us pray amen oh lord look down upon us we pray thee in love and bless thy word to us that it may give some guidance and some stimulus to us and some comfort and inspiration unite us in thy spirit for thy glory sake amen our closing praise psalm 133 the tune is Newington behold how good a thing it is and how becoming well we shall sing the whole psalm to god's praise praise psalm to god's psalm psalm psalm psalm psalm psalm psalm Amen. Amen.