

December 2, 2001 by Steve Brandon



Problems in the Church

Ephesians 4:1-3

- 1. Three Attitudes: humility, gentleness, and patience**
- 2. Two Efforts: showing forbearance and preserving the unity**
- 3. Some Practical Advice**

Listen to the words of a poem entitled, "The Perfect Church."

I think that I shall never see
A church that's all it ought to be:
A church whose members never stray
Beyond the Strait and Narrow Way:

A church that has no empty pews,
Whose Pastor never has the blues,
A church whose Deacons always "deak,"
And none is proud, and all are meek:

Where gossips never peddle lies,
Or make complaints or criticize;
Where all are always sweet and kind,
And all to other's faults are blind.

Church family, it is true, Rock Valley Bible Church is not now, nor will it ever be a "perfect church." In fact, there is no church in the world that is a "perfect church." It only makes sense, doesn't it? The church is filled with sinners, like you and me. All of us have our struggles (which, in fact, is why we are here this evening!!). Furthermore, these struggles are worked out within the context of the church. People see our struggles, know our struggles, pray for our struggles, and help us with our struggles. Our weaknesses and frailties and failures are manifested to each other on a frequent basis. It is obvious that we are not perfect.

I'm not under the delusion that you all are perfect. I trust that you are not under the delusion that I am perfect, either. We all have our problems; we all have our sin; we all have our difficulties. The church is filled with problems. The church is filled with problems because the church is filled with sinful people.

There is a saying, "You can bring a pig into the parlor but that doesn't change the pig -- though it certainly changes the parlor!" So is the church. Each time sinners come into the church, the dynamic of the church is changed. Each new sinner that comes into the church brings with him or her a new range of problems.

Churches are known for their problems. I remember passing out brochures inviting people to church in the neighborhood where we meet. At one house I greeted the people and had a little bit of a conversation with them. They said, "Oh, you rent the church building up the road? That church has had lots of problems."

The riddle is asked, "When you have fifty people, all of different opinions, what do you have?" The answer, "a church."

Another poem reads ...

To dwell above with saints we love,
Oh that will be glory.
But to live below, with saints we know;
Well, that's another story!"

Churches are known for their problems. This evening, I would like to address the issue of "Problems in the Church." That we will encounter problems here at Rock Valley Bible Church is a fact. Face it now. We won't escape it. However, if we live like God calls us to live and deal with these problems like the Bible instructs us, I believe that God's purposes for this church will be accomplished through the problems that encounter us.

The text we will look at this evening is found in Ephesians, chapter 4. We will look at the first three verses.

Yesterday, I received a call from a friend of mine from Seminary. We haven't spoken with each other for about 2 ½ years. He recently went through a very difficult time at his church and eventually left it. He began to tell me of some of his problems he faced. I said to him, "Your

[illegible]

blessing, upon blessing, ... This is why all of our songs this evening focussed upon the great treasures of our salvation.

If our salvation is all of Him, what can our attitude be? It can only be lowliness and humility before Him. This is precisely how Paul describes the worthy walk of our calling. Listen to how Paul describes the worthy walk in verse 2, "with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing forbearance to one another in love." In this verse, Paul gives us three attitudes, which must be present in a worthy walk: humility, gentleness, and patience.

1. Three Attitudes: humility, gentleness, and patience

Attitude #1: Humility

Literally, this word is "lowliness of mind." In other words, "not thinking highly of yourself." The proud person puffs himself up and thinks himself so great. The humble person, on the other hand, considers himself as lowly servant. This was Jesus' attitude when He washed the feet of His proud disciples.

With respect to the proud and the humble, the Bible simply declares, "God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (1 Peter 5:5). God calls us to a life of humility, which would seek his grace for living.

God doesn't call us to a false humility, which would make a show before everybody, "Oh, look how humble I am, I do the lowly work, I clean the bathrooms and change the babies in the nursery. Everybody, look at how humble I am." No, God calls us to a genuine humility, such as exhibited in William Grimshaw, a great pastor in Yorkshire, England (1742-1763). He said, "What have we to boast of? What have we that we have not received? Freely by grace we are saved. When I die I shall then have my greatest grief and my greatest joy, -- my greatest grief that I have done so little for Jesus, and my greatest joy that Jesus has done so much for me. My last words shall be, 'Here goes an unprofitable servant!'" (Quoted by J. C. Ryle, Christian Leaders of the 18th Century, p. 118).

That is the point of Paul in Ephesians 1-3. How can we boast? God has given us everything. There is nothing that we have in our salvation that was ours. To boast in anything is to take glory away from God. "May it never be that I boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Gal. 6:14).

Paul said elsewhere, "Consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised, God has chosen, the things that are not, that He might nullify the things that are, that no man should boast before God" (1 Cor. 1:26-29).

Listen, those who genuinely understand God's great role in their conversion, will be humble people, who minimize the problems in the church. Many problems arise in the church, because of proud people thinking that their agenda is the best. Those who disagree will simply be viewed as obstacles in their way of obtaining their goal in the church. They say, "I'm leading. You're following. Or get out of the way!" Conflicts and problems will arise with these attitudes.

However, when the church is filled with humble people, who boast in nothing but the cross of Christ, problems are easily thwarted and conflicts are easily dealt with. "It is better to be of a humble spirit with the lowly, than to divide the spoil with the proud" (Proverbs 16:19).

Attitude #2: Gentleness

This word can also be translated, "meekness." It describes someone who is not looking out for his own interest. The gentle person understands his lowliness before God, which prohibits him from being defensive. As John Bunyan said, "He that is down need fear no fall" (quoted by D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, in Studies in the Sermon on the Mount, p. 69).

In very many ways, it is a synonym with "humility." Perhaps the subtle difference in these two words (gentleness and humility) is that this gentleness is often connected with your interaction with other people. The gentle person is the one who can come and confront somebody in error with great tenderness and care and affection.

The following scriptures demonstrate how the gentle person can deal with others in the midst of confrontation.

"Even if a man is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one **in a spirit of gentleness**" (Galatians 6:1). Paul told Timothy to correct "those who are in opposition ... **with gentleness**" (2 Timothy 2:25). "Be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, **yet with gentleness** and reverence" (1 Peter 3:15).

Think about this characteristic with respect to problems and conflicts in the church. If the church is filled with gentle people, conflicts will be easily resolved as people deal with each other with great tenderness and care and affection, looking out for the best interests of others. This doesn't mean "avoid conflict." Nor does this mean, "bend to everybody's else's wants and desires." (We all have convictions based upon the Scripture and we should be firm with them.) But, rather it means that within the conflict that we have, we are gentle with each other and genuinely concerned for the welfare of each other. Which is why Paul gave the next attitude, ...

Attitude #3: Patience

Literally, this means, "long passionate." This attitude describes you when you have passions that well up within you, due to conflict or trouble or difficulties with others, and you are able to keep them under control for a long time.

This is the picture God often gives of Himself. There are many Old Testament passages that call God, "compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness and truth" (Ex. 34:6; Neh. 9:17; Psalm 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2). "Do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God [in His longsuffering] leads you to repentance?" (Rom. 2:4).

This is the quality of enduring with people for long periods of time. This doesn't talk about passivity. This is speaking about actively choosing to slow down for others. Mothers, you know what this is about, don't you? Your children will constantly test your patience, because they cannot go as fast as you would like for them to go. You demonstrate your patience by slowing down and going at their speed. I know what this is about. With our three children, getting out the door with our children in the car is a slow process.

Patience is the hallmark of good teachers. Those who learn aren't very proficient at all, because they are learning. It takes practice and repetition. The patient teacher will slow down and help the students.

People take time to change. We need to be patient with each other. If there is some conflict, or problem you have with another, realize that, even if you are right, it will often take some time for the other person to see it, and then it will take some time for the other person to change. We are people, we take time. You need to be patient.

These are the three attitudes of a worthy walk: humility, gentleness, and patience. Paul next gives two efforts, which must be present in a worthy walk: showing forbearance and preserving the unity.

2. Two Efforts: showing forbearance and preserving the unity

Effort #1: showing forbearance (verse 2b)

This effort goes along with the previous attitudes. Essentially, all of these attitudes, focus upon a sacrifice of yourself, in care and love for one another.

- You are humble toward others, because you know your own sin.
- You are gentle with others, because you know your own frailty.
- You are patient with others, because you know your own slowness to change.

All of these attitudes require an enduring quality. Jesus faced it. When he came down from the mount of transfiguration, His disciples couldn't cast the demon out of the lunatic. Jesus replied to them, "O unbelieving and perverted generation, how long shall I put up with you?" (Matthew 17:17).

With the people of the church, Paul calls us to endurance. In other words, you don't have one difficulty with somebody and dismiss them as obstinate and your enemy. No, you endure with them and be patient with them.

I remember working with somebody who said often, "I have no patience. I have no patience. I have no patience." It ought not to be this way in the church of Jesus Christ. Rather, we all ought to be saying, "I'll endure. I'll endure. I'll endure."

The key to this is found in the next two words, "in love." We know that "Love is patient, love is kind, ... [love] bears all things, [love] believes all things, [love] hopes all things, [love] endures all things" (1 Cor. 13:4,7). Humility, gentleness, and patience toward another is simply an expression of your love toward another.

Turn over to Colossians 3:12-14. In this parallel passage, Paul highlights the importance of love. "And so, as those who have been chosen of God [parallel to the phrase, "you have been called" in Ephesians 4:1], holy and beloved, **put on** a heart of compassion, kindness, **humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another** [exactly the same terminology used in Ephesians 4:2], and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. And **beyond all these things [put on] love**, which is the perfect bond of unity." Love is elevated to the highest position of all of the other virtues. Love is more important than compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Love is to go "beyond all these things."

Additionally, look at the verb Paul uses, he says, "put on" (first written in verse 12 and assumed to carry through to verse 14). The picture is that of clothing. Paul says that you should wear these virtues like a shirt or a jacket or a pair of pants. Let it encircle you and help you and guard you. When somebody looks at you, what do they see? As I stand up here, how much of me do you see? You see my hands and my face, that's all. Everything else you see is my clothing. So likewise, when people look at you they should see ...a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, and, **most importantly, love**.

Notice that Paul used reasons the same way in both Ephesians 4:1-3 and Colossians 3:12-14. He reasons thus: think about your salvation

... How God has bestowed upon you many, many blessings, ...
... How God has been so utterly gracious with you, ...
... How you have become a child of God. ...
... How undeserving you are ...

... and then live appropriately.

This phrase, "the perfect bond of unity," is really the key to understanding the context Paul's exhortations here. In fact, the reason for his exhortations here is precisely because of his concern for a united church. When the members of a church are walking in a manner worthy of their calling, a unified church will result. Turn back to Ephesians 4 and look at verse 3.

Effort #2: preserving the unity (verse 3)

Paul writes in verse 3, "being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." His desire was that the church at Ephesus would express itself in a unified manner. Jews and Gentiles both together, worshiping the Lord and glorying in the cross of Christ. This is the church of Jesus Christ: where different ethnic groups can live in harmony with one another; where genuine unity exists (not superficial unity, that is smiles on the outside, but genuine unity within each of us).

I know that I have made this comment before, but those in Ephesus had more difficulties in obtaining unity than we will ever face. Their ethnic differences were great.

- On the one hand, you had those who were saved out of Jewish homes, where strict regulations of eating and dress and other religious practices were tightly held -- for generations.
- On the other hand, you had those who were saved out of idol worship, who lived for years in the full freedom of the lust of their flesh, where anything goes.

You put these two groups together, and Paul says, "be diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." God had placed these two groups together. Listen to Ephesians 2:14-16: "He Himself [i.e. Christ Jesus] is our peace, who made both groups into one, and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances, that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace, and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross."

There is only one body. There is one God, to whom we all have access. This is the point of the next three verses: "[There is] one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all" (Eph. 4:4-6).

These are three attitudes and two efforts needed for the worthy walk. We can practice these **now!**

One of my job responsibilities at Kishwaukee Community Hospital was to monitor the status of the disk space on our various servers on our computer network. We kept track of how much disk space we had and how much we were using on a weekly basis, so that we could anticipate the problems we might encounter down the road. Periodically, I would bring to my boss a chart of disk space usage over time to show him how much time we have left until we run out. The free space on our disks gradually reduced themselves. Some would decrease slowly. Some would decrease rapidly.

We did this so that we could plan when we needed increased disk capacity. Increasing the storage capacity was sometimes a painful experience for the users because the computers would be down for a period of time. As we planned, we often would schedule when to take the computers down. We often did this during the evening and night hours, when there was less computer activity. In these efforts, we were seeking to be proactive in solving the difficulties that would come our way.

Likewise, within the church, we need to be proactive in our problem solving as well. These attitudes and efforts are the proactive means through which we can see unity in the midst of difficulties in the church. These are things that you can practice now in an effort to prevent the problems which so easily arise in the church, which are often disastrous. This week, I found out of two pastors, who left the ministry due to congregations failing to practice these attitudes and efforts.

Another job responsibility that I had at Kishwaukee Community Hospital was that of problem solving during a crisis. Though not often, but still too often, there were times on our computer network when many people, for no apparent reason, couldn't use their computers anymore. They locked up and couldn't get to the network resources that they needed to do their work. During those times, the phones in our department would ring and ring with people calling with their problems.

All of our efforts to be proactive so as not to encounter these problems had not worked. During those times, we entered a crisis mode and sought to do everything that we could to get the computers back up and going. I remember on one occasion spending the night solving some

problems we had with our mail server. I remember on several occasions being at work until 11pm solving such problems. These times weren't fun times, but they were necessary for the operation of the computers throughout the hospital.

So likewise with the church. Try as we might to thwart problems in the church, they still come up and we need to deal with them appropriately.

Notice that this passage assumes that we will have problems in the church. There isn't one married couple on the planet who doesn't get on each others nerves. When two sinners live so closely together, the question in a marriage isn't whether you will have problems, but how you will approach them.

So when you have difficulty with somebody in the church, realize that it is a good sign, because you are living close enough to somebody else to rub with their sinfulness. This demonstrates the closeness of the church community. Think about it. How many times do you have difficulties and problems with those you barely know? Additionally, it allows you to apply these attitudes and efforts within the context of a crisis mode.

Let me finish this evening with some practical advice concerning responding with difficult people in the church.

3. Some Practical Advice

When you have difficulty with another person, ...

1. First, resolve the matter in your own heart.

Jesus presented a parable to His disciples in Matthew 18, in which He described a man who had been forgiven a great debt of one of his slaves. It was a debt so large that he had no chance in the world to ever repay it. He was in danger of being sold, along with his wife and children as slaves. Yet, he was forgiven. Then, that same man went out and refused to forgive a small debt from another person, who was even willing to work to pay it off.

Jesus said that the master, who had forgiven him called him a "wicked slave." He said, "I forgave you all that debt because you entreated me. Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, even as I had mercy on you?" (Matt. 18:32-33).

You need to realize that any manner of offence against you is small and trifling, when compared with the overwhelming forgiveness, which the Father has granted to you. Any sin against an infinitely holy God is an infinite offense, far greater than any sin against another sinful being. You can tolerate a drop of brown dye in black paint, but you cannot tolerate a drop of brown dye in white paint. In the first case, you cannot even tell that anything happened. In the second case, you have ruined the entire can of white paint.

The Biblical standard is that you "be kind to one another, tender-hearted, **forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you**" (Eph. 4:32). So, solve the problem in your own heart as a first priority. Resolve to forgive and forget the transgression.

In Jesus' parable, when the unforgiving heart of the slave was made apparent, the slave was handed over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him (Matt. 18:34). Listen to these most searching words carefully, "So shall My heavenly Father also do to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother **from your heart**" (Matt. 18:35).

It is great importance that you solve the matter in your own heart first. Your salvation is on the line. If you demonstrate within yourself an unforgiving spirit, you demonstrate, that you don't understand the forgiveness of the Father. Jesus said elsewhere, "If you forgive men for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions" (Matt. 6:14-15).

2. Deal with the problems rationally, not emotionally.

Often, it is the petty things that affect the church. People get their emotions involved in things and things are blown way out of proportion. If they would think rationally about it, the problems would minimize. In my limited years as a pastor, I have dealt with some small things, when you think about it.

I remember someone being concerned with how Kishwaukee Bible Church would be called KBC (i.e. the letters), and he didn't like it, because he was tired of all of the acronyms we have today. I remember someone being concerned about candy being given to children in Sunday School class, because the children would grow up to be pudgy and other children would make fun of our pudgy church kids.

In each of these cases, the concern was real, but was being dealt with emotionally, rather than rationally. In the first instance above, I have come to see my irrationality in the concern and regret my foolishness in making acronyms a big issue.

3. Do not speak evil of the offending person.

Paul says in Titus 3:2, "speak evil of no man" (KJV). This command is as straightforward as is "do not murder."

John Wesley gets to the point when he asks, "But who, even among Christians, regards this command? Yea, how few are there that so much as understand it? What is evil-speaking? It is not, as some suppose, the same with lying or slandering. All a man says may be as true as the Bible; and yet the saying of it is evil-speaking. For evil-speaking is neither more nor less than speaking evil of an absent person; relating something evil, which was really done or said by one that is not present when it is related" (Sermon 49, "The Cure of Evil-Speaking," from Matt. 18:15-17).

When you are humble, gentle, and patient, such words will not come from your mouth. When you show forbearance, and diligence to preserve the unity, such words will not come from your mouth. As Paul said later in Ephesians, "Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification" (Eph. 4:26). This is the standard. I place it before you and call you to humble repentance.

How often we fail in this. I think that I am guilty of this sin daily. How often do we have difficulties with other people, and simply talk about it with others, "speaking evil" of them. This causes immense problems in the church. May God have mercy to deliver us from such evil speech!

4. Go to the offending person and talk it through.

Don't talk to other people about that person. Go to that person and talk about it.

In Matthew 18:15, Jesus says, "If your brother sins, go and reprove him in private; if he listens to you, you have won a brother." Though this speaks of confronting a brother in sin (which may lead to discipline from the entire church, if the brother remains unrepentant), the principle still applies beyond any particular transgression.

If you are having difficulty with any individual in the church, go to that person, and straighten it out. This ought to be an everyday occurrence. Especially within our marriages, where we are constantly working through problems as they arise. Remember what Paul said in Galatians 6:1, "You who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness." This requires that you actually go and speak with the offending person.

A useful piece of advice on how to do this was told me this week. When you are having difficulties with another individual, you might ask them, "I'm confused here. Help me understand ..." This doesn't put you in the right and the other in the wrong. This simply opens up an avenue for discussion.

Yet, how we fail in this area! Again, I confess that I consider myself the chief offender in this. I want this to change in my life. Within the life of Rock Valley Bible Church, may God be gracious to allow us all to speak first with those who have offended us and solve any problems we have with gentleness before one another.

5. Realize that the unity of the church requires constant work.

These two efforts (enduring one another and being diligent to preserve unity) are present participles, which means that the unity of Rock Valley Bible Church is a work in progress. We will never "arrive" at unity. We need to constantly work at it.

Ladies, you might compare this to the cleanliness of your house. You don't ever come to the point where you say, "Well, now, my house is all clean. I never have to clean again!" Every week, it is constant maintenance, constant cleaning.

I was told recently of a man and his wife, who spent a day on a yacht in the Caribbean. This yacht was entirely made of wood. The husband asked the owner, "How do you keep this boat in such good shape? The sun must beat down on it daily. The salt-water can't be too good for it either." The owner replied, "With constant maintenance. Constant sanding. Constant painting. Constant care." Problems in the church need to be dealt with in exactly the same manner. Our relationships with one another need constant maintenance and care.

The church won't ever impact the world until the members of the church relate properly to one another, which stems from our relationship with God. Jesus demonstrated His love, by humbling himself and taking the apron of a slave and washing the feet of His feeble followers. Jesus said, "by this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another (John 13:35).

May the LORD be gracious to preserve the unity of Rock Valley Bible Church.

I opened with a poem, let me close with it again, only let me finish it.

I think that I shall never see
A church that's all it ought to be:
A church whose members never stray

Beyond the Strait and Narrow Way:

A church that has no empty pews,
Whose Pastor never has the blues,
A church whose Deacons always "deak,"
And none is proud, and all are meek:

Where gossips never peddle lies,
Or make complaints or criticize;
Where all are always sweet and kind,
And all to other's faults are blind.

Such perfect churches there may be,
But none of them are known to me.
But still, we'll work, and pray and plan,
To make our own the best we can.

This working and praying, and planning is all part of "walking the worthy walk." Will you pledge, right now, to live in a manner worthy of your calling? May God strengthen us to do His will.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on December 2, 2001 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.