

SPIRITUAL PHYSIOLOGY

SERIES: EPHESIANS: THE MYSTERY OF CHRIST



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Ephesians 4:1-16
Seventh Message
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Ephesians 4:1-16

This morning, we are going to be in Ephesians 4:1-16. This is a fantastic passage, and it is a passage that has played a very important role in the life and history of our church.

One of our core values as a church is something that we call the “Ministry of the Saints.” In short, the Ministry of the Saints means that ministry is not the job of only the pastors and elders of the church. Rather, ministry is the job of everyone in the church. That idea is a core value here at PBC, and it finds its theological foundations in Ephesians 4.

Before we jump into the text, let me take you back to when I was in eighth grade. It was spring, and spring was my favorite time of the year because it was the tennis season. I loved playing tennis. I very clearly remember sitting in my afternoon English class, not paying attention to my teacher’s lecture on Jane Eyre as I stared outside with longing and anticipation at the thought of getting out on the courts. One day after a match that spring, I noticed that my arm was a bit sore. I didn’t think much of it, but by the time I got to practice the next day, I could barely swing a racket.

I went to see our trainer. The trainer asked me questions and had me try to different movements, eventually diagnosing the problem as a strained coracobrachialis. What is the coracobrachialis, you ask? Good question. I had never heard of it. But, thankfully, my trainer had. You see, my trainer was trained as an exercise physiologist. An exercise physiologist is someone who understands how the human body works. When you get an injury, an exercise physiologist can look at your body, move it this way and that, ask you questions, and tell you what is wrong. Then they can give you some exercises and stretches or wraps and ice packs or whatever is needed to help your body heal. They can help because they know how the body works.

The coracobrachialis is responsible for the motion of you lifting your arm, which is important in tennis. Because I hadn’t properly warmed up or stretched

mine, I strained it. My trainer was able to tell me what to do to help it heal. With his guidance, I was back to daydreaming about tennis in English class within a couple of weeks.

We are not here this morning to talk about exercise physiology. Rather, we are here to talk about spiritual physiology. In Ephesians 4, we have an image of the church as a body, the body of Christ. For a good reason, this is the most common metaphor for the people of God in the New Testament, and we will see why as we explore this metaphor together.

We don’t always understand how this body is supposed to work. What is our function? Our purpose? How do we grow? How do we stay healthy? What do we do when we get sick? These questions don’t always have obvious answers, or at least not intuitive ones.

Ephesians 4 helps us answer these questions. It gives us a brief course in spiritual physiology.

Maintain unity

Ephesians 4:1-3:

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, 2 with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, 3 eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Here, at the beginning of Ephesians 4, we find ourselves at the major seam in the book of Ephesians. In Ephesians 1-3, Paul has given us a lot of theology, but now he is moving to application. He has given us a lot of theory, but now we are called to put that theory into practice. That is why the “therefore” in v. 1 is there. In light of everything I have just told you—in light of all of that truth—Paul says, this is how you ought to live. “Walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called.”

This statement reminds us that faith is not supposed to live in our heads. Faith is not just a set of beliefs or a certain mindset. Faith is a way of life. Faith is action-oriented. And the first action that Paul gives us is one of the most challenging ones.

Paul begins with a call to unity. This is not a theoretical unity but an intensely practical one. Notice how he says, “maintain the unity.” The unity has already been created. Paul said this in chapter 2. On the cross, not only did Jesus reconcile each of us individually to himself, but he also destroyed the dividing wall of hostility—that is, those barriers that keep different groups of people apart. Those racial, cultural, and socioeconomic differences cause us to surround ourselves with people who look like us, talk like us, and think like us. In Christ, those walls that separate us have been destroyed, and we have been united together as one new humanity. There is no black church or white church, or Asian church. There is no rich church or poor church. There is no tech church or artist church, or surfer church. We, the Church with a capital “C,” are one. That’s the truth. That’s what Jesus accomplished on the cross.

But what is true in theory doesn’t always play out in reality. That’s why churches split. That’s why Middlefield Road is home to a black church, a Latino church, an Asian church, our church, and more, all within a few blocks of each other. Just because it is true that Jesus removed the dividing wall of hostility and has formed us—the Church—into one new humanity does not mean that unity just happens.

This is true along social and racial lines, but it is also true along personal and individual lines. Think about marriage. When a couple gets married, their lives are united together. The two become one. This is the new reality, and it is something that God does. Just because the two have become one doesn’t mean that the two always feel like one. If they did, they wouldn’t disagree on things like the correct temperature to keep the thermostat at, but I hear that isn’t always the case. I’ve never experienced it myself, but I hear some couples have.

In marriage, when two become one, they don’t become the same. They don’t see eye to eye on everything. How much more, then, when we all come together as one united people of God should we expect that we will run into some challenges. Maintaining unity is hard work.

That is why Paul urges us to “bear with one another.” I love that. Literally, this could be translated as “put up with each other.” The same word is actually

used elsewhere in the New Testament for enduring persecution! Maintaining unity is hard work. Sometimes it feels like enduring persecution. Maintaining unity requires humility, gentleness, and patience. It requires us to put up with one another in love because even though unity is hard work, it is important work.

As the body of Christ, we must maintain unity. We must fight to maintain unity. In an increasingly divided world, in an increasingly polarized church, we must fight to maintain unity.

Where in your world do you see the church fracturing? Where do you see division and dissension brewing? Who are the people in your life towards whom you feel yourself growing bitter and resentful? In those situations, fight to maintain the unity of the Spirit. Seek peace and reconciliation. Put up with them in love. When that happens, this body—the body of Christ—will be healthy.

Unity is not optional in the church. It’s necessary. Paul explains why in the following verses.

Ephesians 4:4-6:

There 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.

The unity we share with each other is based on the fact that we all follow one and the same God. There is one body (the church) because there is one Spirit. There is only one faith because there is only one Lord. There is one God, and we are all seeking after him.

Paul also says there is one baptism. Baptism is the ritual given to the church that symbolizes the cleansing of our sin as we are washed with water and the new life that we have in Christ as we are raised up out of the water.

Let me encourage you—to exhort you—to get baptized if you haven’t yet. Baptism is not a mark of a certain level of maturity in the Christian life. Rather, it is a powerful, tangible picture of the gospel meant to be experienced by every follower of Jesus.

There is one body, One Spirit. One baptism. One faith. As one body who follows one God, we need to fight to maintain unity. That is the foundation of spiritual physiology.

Serve in diversity

One way that unity goes wrong is when we confuse being united with being the same. Unity and uniformity are not the same. We are all quite different. Look around for a moment and notice what you see. Each one of us is different and unique. This is where Paul brings our attention next, but his focus here is not on our ethnic or cultural or social differences but rather on the different gifts that we have been given.

Ephesians 4:7-10:

But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. 8 Therefore it says,

**“When he ascended on high he led a host of captives,
and he gave gifts to men.”**

9 (In saying, “He ascended,” what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? 10 He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.)

Paul is introducing the idea of gifts within the body of Christ. This passage is one of three passages in the New Testament that talk about God giving gifts to the church. The gifts also appear in Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12, where they are described as “spiritual gifts,” and we often use that language in the church today. What exactly are these spiritual gifts?

First, notice that the gifts are given by Jesus to *each one of us*. That is, every single member of the body of Christ has been given a gift. I have been given a gift. You have been given a gift. There are no exceptions.

These gifts are given to us by Jesus. Paul makes this point by quoting part of Psalm 68, a psalm in which God is praised for working through the king to bring victory to the people of God. Paul wants us to see that Jesus, the true and ultimate King, who left heaven and descended to the earth in the incarnation, has led us in the true and ultimate victory over Satan, sin, and death. Now that he has ascended back to heaven, he has given gifts—spiritual gifts to each of us.

We begin to understand what these gifts are as the passage continues. Let's look at the next two verses.

Ephesians 4:11-12:

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, 12 to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ,

Notice here that Jesus is again said to give something to someone. This time, however, he is not giving gifts to people. Instead, *he is giving gifted people to the church*. All of the people he mentions here are leaders in the church. Apostles are church-planters, those with a drive to start something new and see the gospel expand into new places. Prophets are those who speak the word of God in order to lead and guide the people of God into the life of God. Evangelists proclaim the gospel so that more people might come to know Jesus and experience that life. Shepherds and teachers—which are grammatically linked in a way that shows that they are referring to one thing rather than two—shepherd/teachers are those who lead and care for local congregations and teach the word of God to them.

These leaders, whom God has gifted, are then given to the church as a gift. And what is the role of these leaders? To “equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.” This is beautiful. Paul is saying my role as a pastor/teacher—our role as a group of pastors and elders—is not to bear the sole responsibility for doing the work of ministry in the church. Instead, our role is to equip you all to do the work of ministry. Ministry is not the job of trained professionals, hired staff, or appointed leaders. Ministry is the job of each and every one of us. This is what we mean by the Ministry of the Saints.

Each of us has been given a gift, and we are meant to use that gift to build up the body of Christ. To edify the body. To help it grow. To help it flourish. We help the body flourish by using our gifts to serve the church—to contribute to the ministry.

Serve in diversity. Each of you has been given unique and specific gifts so that you might use those gifts to serve the body. In the body of Christ, there is no such thing as a passive member—someone who only shows up because of what they can receive rather than what they can give. That would be called a leech.

Have you ever had a leech stuck to you before? I have. It was attached to my foot. It was just a little guy. In some ways, it's hard to distinguish between a leech and a toe. Both are connected to the foot, in my case, at

least. Both are rather ugly looking appendages. Both will become disconnected from your body with enough force or a sharp enough blade. But here is the thing: a leech is a parasite. It connects itself to the body only because of what it can take from it without any thought of what it can give to the body. A toe, on the other hand, as small and insignificant as it seems, is a part of the body. It helps you balance. It enables you to run and walk. It contributes something important. Don't be a leech. Be a toe. Contribute to the body. Serve the body. Use your gifts to build up the body.

How do I do that, you might be asking. How do I use my gifts to build up the body? How do I even know my gifts?

Often, we think of spiritual gifts as special, even supernatural, abilities that God gives us. This idea is not all wrong, but it is definitely not all right either.

Before coming to PBC, I was doing high school ministry. As a part of our leadership training for our student leaders, we would give them a "spiritual gifts inventory." Maybe some of you have taken something similar. It was a series of questions related to a wide variety of different spiritual gifts. Depending on how you answered these questions, it would tell you your top three spiritual gifts. I did this with 3-4 different groups of students. Every time we did this, I was amazed that nearly every student in the group had the gift of hospitality. It was amazing! But then again, if you look at the questions being asked in this inventory, the hospitality questions were something like this: Do you enjoy having friends over to your house? Do you like sharing meals with friends? Do you enjoy spending time with your friends at the weekend? They may as well have just asked, Are you in high school? Then you have the gift of hospitality!

Some of you high schoolers are thinking, Hey, I really do enjoy those things! I know you do! And hospitality truly is a spiritual gift. It doesn't show up in any of the three lists of spiritual gifts in the New Testament, but it seems as though these lists are meant to be a representative sample of spiritual gifts, not an exhaustive list. So I think hospitality is definitely a spiritual gift. But, *spiritual gifts are less about supernatural abilities and more about ministry opportunities*. Let me say that again: Spiritual gifts are less about supernatural abilities and more about ministry opportunities.

Take hospitality as an example. If you have a heart for welcoming new people, for inviting people into your

home, for filling your dinner table with friends and strangers and creating community, you may be good at hospitality. You have a gift of hospitality. Is this a spiritual gift? Is it a supernatural ability? Maybe so, but maybe not. Perhaps you are just naturally a hospitable person. But then you show to church this morning, and you meet someone new. They don't typically go to church, but they wanted to check out PBC and see what it was all about. Now, you have an *opportunity to build up the body* by using your *ability* as a hospitable person. So you engage them in conversation. You start to get to know them. You make them feel welcome. You invite them to lunch after church. Now you have used your spiritual gift. You have used your ability to step into an opportunity to engage in ministry.

Sometimes, we are faced with a ministry opportunity that does not at all align with our abilities. If we think about spiritual gifts primarily as abilities, we will pass up on these opportunities.

From the time I was 16 years old, I felt called into pastoral ministry. I always understood that call as a call to preach and teach specifically to adults. This always made sense to me. I always felt like my skills, abilities, and personality lent themselves better to adult ministry than youth ministry. When I started seminary, I had some friends doing high school ministry at our church, and they invited me to join as a leader. My first thought was no, that's not my gift. I don't think that's what I am good at. I'll let someone else do that. But my friends continued to press me, and eventually, I decided to give it a try. That was the start of an incredible four years of high school ministry. I had the chance to disciple students, share the gospel with students, see students give their lives to Christ and grow in him. Do you know what's crazy about that? I don't think I was ever very good at high school ministry. It wasn't a perfect match for my abilities. But it was a divinely appointed opportunity to build up the body of Christ. It didn't matter that relating to high school students wasn't a strength of mine, but when we are weak, he is strong. For that season, high school ministry was my spiritual gift.

So what is your spiritual gift? Do not get hung up on analyzing your strengths and figuring out your special abilities as you ask that question. Rather, ask, God, where are you calling me to serve? What opportunities for ministry are you opening up for me? If those opportunities correspond to your abilities, great! If not, where you are weak, he is strong.

Strive for Maturity

Serving in ministry is never meant to be done just for the sake of serving. There is something larger at play.

Ephesians 4:13-16:

...until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, 14 so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. 15 Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, 16 from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

Using our gifts for ministry is about helping the body grow to the point of maturity. When we become Christians, we are spiritual infants. Spiritual babies. Now, having three kids under five, I know something about infants. Here is what I know: they are cute. They are snuggly. They are precious. And they can't do anything on their own.

We are like this when we first give our lives to Jesus and are born again and filled with the Spirit. We are infants. Cute and snuggly, yes. But helpless and not good for much. This is now where we are supposed to stay, but sometimes we are content with that. Sometimes we place so much emphasis on the point of conversion that we start to think that our life with Christ is complete after that. But that is just the start! God wants to take us on a journey from spiritual infancy to spiritual maturity. He wants us to strive for maturity.

There are a few ways that we do that. The first has to do with our character. As followers of Jesus, we are to be developing the character of Christ. Character is not the same thing as our actions. Instead, our character is the base, the foundation, out of which our actions more or less naturally flow. We want to become the kind of people who naturally act like Jesus, not by a force of will, but out of a character that looks like Jesus.

Another aspect of maturity has to do with doctrine. Doctrine is just a theological word for what you believe—what you believe about God, about the Bible, about salvation, humans, about sin, about the world, about the future, etc. As we seek after maturity in Christ, we need to mature our doctrine. In other words, we don't just want to act like Christ; we also want to develop the mind of Christ. We want to believe what Jesus believes, which is what is really true. Maturity in Christ is about our doctrine.

The last aspect of maturity mentioned in this passage has to do with connection. We are to "grow up in every way into him who is the head that is Christ." The body metaphor is not just about utility—how you can serve the body. It is also about connection—connection with the other parts of the body and connection with Jesus, who is our head. Connection is about relationship. So we, as members of the body, must seek to cultivate and deepen our relationships with each other and, most importantly, our relationship with Jesus. This is what maturity looks like.

Conclusion

In eighth grade, I pulled my coracobrachialis, which kept me from doing something I loved for a few weeks. Whenever any of us is sitting on the sideline instead of engaged in ministry, it keeps the body from functioning as it is supposed to and experiencing the joy that is meant to be ours in Christ.

My prayer for us as a church is that we can fight to maintain the unity that Jesus has created for us and serve the body through our unique ministry opportunities so that we might achieve true maturity in Christ.