

An Inwardly Loving Community Part 2: A Building-Up Love

Together in Christ amid Divisive Times Sermon 7

Ephesians 4:7-16

November 1, 2020

7 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.) **11** 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, **13** 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. (Ephesians 4:7-16, ESV)

Do you have a plan for your friend's life? A goal which you aspire them to attain? Or are you simply there to listen to the myriad things they wrestle with, and to offer your well wishes along the way? In our passage for today, Scripture teaches us that the love we are to have for one another inside the Church compels us to aim at a clear, concrete, and profound goal for our friends. Paul puts it this way in Ephesians 4: You should hope and labor to build each other up "to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13). Paul says you should want them to be mature, mature in Christ.

Our fall series has been exploring the uniqueness of the Christian community, and how it maintains unity amid divisive times. We have turned to the subject of love, noting that love is integral to the unity of our community. Last week we considered the disposition of this love, it is a *humble love*. This week, we turn to its expression, what it's like in action: *it is a building-up love*. The message of our passage and sermon today is this: **Love builds the other up to be like Christ and to be at rest with God.**

Let me walk through the flow of our passage so you can see how this theme develops. Unity, or oneness, is the theme running throughout Ephesians 4: 1-16, with terms like "unity" or "one" or "oneness" used over ten times. In verses 7-16, Paul shows us that this unity is maintained by a shared effort, on the part of all members, to build one another up in love.

Verses 7-16 separate into two sections. Verses 7-10 tell us that Christ gives gifts to each member of the church. “Grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ’s gifts” (4:7).

Verses 11-16 further explain the types of gifts, how they work, and what they aim at.

The gifts include the giving of specific individuals to lead in specific ways: “Christ gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers” (4:11). The gifts also include talents and empowerment given to each member of the church: Recall in verse 7, “grace was given to **each one of us** according to Christ’s gift” (4:7). We see the universality of the gifts given again in verse 16, where Paul tells us that the whole body is joined and held together “by **every joint** with which it is equipped” (4:16). The specific office holders—apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds, and teachers—are given, verse 12, “To equip the saints for the work of ministry, for the **building up of the body of Christ**” (4:12).

Here we need to notice three things, all very important:

1. The Work of the Ministry is Teamwork

The so-called “office holders” don’t do the work of the ministry. Rather, they equip the saints (all members of the church), and together they do the work of the ministry. Some people think you hire the pastors so they can do the work of ministry while congregants watch; that’s not what this passage says.

Decades ago, it wasn’t uncommon for NBA teams to have “player-coaches”. A player on the team was simultaneously also a coach. This is a good analogy for what Paul’s talking about. The pastor is a player coach, and the members of the church are the team. We all make up the team. You are not spectators who *watch* the pastors do the ministry. Rather, the pastors you ordain and hire are specifically called to help equip all of us to play the game together—the work of the ministry. We can only do it together.¹

2. The Priority is Building Up the Body

Second, we need to notice how this verse defines the work of ministry. If I asked you what the ministry of the church is, what might you say? Some might say evangelism, global missions, outreach, and neighborly love (all important). However, that’s not how this passage defines the work of ministry. It reads, “the work of ministry, for the building up of the body of Christ” (4:12).

If the church is not healthy, both its witness and work are undermined. It takes a healthy church to display the beauty of the Gospel and a healthy church to engage the needs of the world, both spiritual and physical needs, with long-term endurance and fruitfulness.

3. It Builds up by Love

Third, how this building up happens is defined at the end of verses 15-16.

...speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, 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.** (Ephesians 4:15-16)

Gifts of grace and ability are given to each of us so that we can build up the church, and we are to do so in love. I want to spend the rest of this sermon unpacking what *building-up love* entails—because this is the work we are called to do together, and it is the work that will keep us united and strong. First, we'll consider what *building-up love* means, second, we'll consider how we do it.

I. Building-Up in Love: What It Means

1. Love is Local

First, the fact that Paul explains love as the outworking of building up other people within a local church community, tells us that love is local. It is either local, or it remains dangerously abstract. Simply talking about causes we love, simply signaling on social media things we are passionate about, or simply putting signs in our yards, is not in and of itself love. Not in the biblical sense. Biblically, love gets expressed concretely, in contact with real persons, and in real time.

Perhaps you've heard me refer to this example from *Brothers Karamazov* before, but it perfectly captures what I mean when I say the love is local, or it remains dangerously abstract. The wise old Monk is teaching about what he calls "active love", and he illustrates:

There was a doctor who said "I love mankind...but I am amazed at myself: the more I love mankind in general, the less I love people in particular, that is, individually, as separate persons. In my dreams...I often went so far as to think passionately of serving mankind...even going to the cross for people...and yet I am incapable of living in the same room with anyone even for two days...In twenty-four hours, I can begin to hate

even the best of men: one because he takes too long eating his dinner, another because he has a cold and keeps blowing his nose. I become the enemy of people the moment they touch me.”²

It is within the context of a long-term, concrete commitment in the local church, that love is realized.

2. Love Takes a Decided Aim

Second, love does not seek merely to keep the other person comfortable where they are at, to never offend, to always affirm. Rather, love is doggedly committed to seeing a particular type of growth in the other. This is explained as verse 12 flows into verses 13-14: Love seeks to build up, so that,

...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, 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. (Ephesians 4:13-14)

We are here told what love aims to build a person toward in terms of what it is like, and then what it is not like. What is it like, this goal you labor in love for on behalf of your brother or sister at church? In a word, it is *Christlikeness*. The goal of being built up is explained as “mature manhood, the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.” Now, if you’re a woman, don’t get sidetracked by the masculine metaphor, manhood. In the next chapter, he will liken the church to a bride, a feminine metaphor.

Paul has in mind the maturity and stability of Jesus Christ: that he understood who he was before God, what his purpose was to serve God and where his ultimate hope and power lie. That is what the goal is like, verse 14 tells us what this person is then not like: They are no longer vulnerable and susceptible to the wiles of the world: They are, verse 14, “not like a child, tossed to and fro by waves and carried about by winds of doctrine, human cunning, craftiness and schemes.” To be mature in Christ is to be sturdy in the face of the particular waves and winds of a present culture.

Do you have this aim for your friends in the church? Could you name one or two people in this church for whom you are praying and working so that they grow into this image: the full stature of Christ, less and less vulnerable to the lies and deceits of the times?

That’s what building-up love means—it is a local love, situated among real people in real-time; and it aims at a concrete goal, building up Christlikeness.

Having noted some of what it means, let's now ask how it is practiced. *How do we love others towards Christlikeness?* I'll suggest two things.

II. Building-Up in Love: How It's Practiced

1. Covenant Commitment

The first way it is practiced is through commitment. Without commitment love is selfish sentimentality. Commitment is expressed through membership in a local church; through active, sacrificial, preserving life with a specific group of Christians. The Apostle John says, "If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen." (1 John 4:20)

Our love within the local church displays the reality of our love for God. Therefore, this love should reflect the type of profound commitment God has made for us. I call this *covenant commitment*. "Covenant" because that word captures the biblical depth of this community, which God has made a covenant of fidelity with by the blood of His son. The local church is that concrete expression of the people whom God has promised will be together forever. Your brothers and sisters in Christ will be your brothers and sisters in 150 years; not all of your biological family will be, not all of your political party, not all of your school or alma mater; but every Christian you are connected with here will be.

Great Expectations by Charles Dickens is one of my favorite stories. The main character is Pip, and early in the story Pip falls in love with the beautiful but icy Estella. The two meet in youth, and Pip suffers rejection by Estella, and the two exist in tension throughout the story. But in the end, on the final page of the novel, they are reunited after several chapters of hard life have gone by. The final scene finds the two hand in hand, and Pip sees in this future "no shadow of another parting from her." They end up together. Now when you read the story a second time, you see her coldness toward Pip and their ups and downs through a different light—because you know they end up together. You want to shout at them, you guys will end up married, so just act like it now.

It is the covenant community, because it is built not based on convenience, comfort, or consumerism, but based on the calling of God. This is why, in verse 4:3, Paul says "maintain the unity of the Spirit", not the unity of mood, convenience, shared opinion; but the unity of the Spirit. "We commit to other believers in the local church simply because it's part of God's calling us into his family."³ The commitment is covenantal because it is sacrificial. How can we be a loving community if we don't

sacrifice for one another? Again, John says, “By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers” (1 John 3:11).⁴

Are you committed to a group of Christians? Have you made this commitment known? Is it a commitment based mainly in comfort, convenience, or consumerism? Or is it a covenantal commitment, a commitment of love that reflects the reality of the Gospel?

It is simply the case that love—the type of love the Bible is after—cannot be expressed without the context of real commitment.

2. Gospel Communion

The second way involves how we speak and listen to each other. Having said that we are not to be tossed about and duped by false teaching and lies in verse 14, Paul says in verse 15, “Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ” (Ephesians 4:15).

The Christian community is built up by Truth. This does not merely mean that we don’t lie but speak honestly—although it does mean that. More specifically, it means that we are a community where the truth of the Gospel uniquely shapes how we listen and talk and deal with each other.⁵

What is the Gospel? It’s the news that God is the most important fact; and it’s the good news that God has made a way, despite all failures and darkness with you, to bring you back to himself—and he does this through sending His own Son, Jesus Christ, to die for your sins on the cross. This truth, the Gospel, is the light by which we see and understand all things.

What does it mean to “speak this truth, the Gospel in love”?

3. Sympathetic Listening

In order to speak to one another, we need to listen long enough and carefully enough to know when and how to articulate the Gospel. In our present environment, we are taught by our culture to listen for the sole purposes of responding and rebuffing: “yeah, yeah, blah, blah, let me tell you why I disagree.” Here, by not ever really listening, we treat the other person’s opinion as though it doesn’t matter and is founded on their stupidity and lack of character. To listen is the first act of *love* in the process of communication, whereby we “speak the truth in love.” Christian author David Augsburger has noted that “being heard is so close to being loved that for the average person, they are almost

indistinguishable.” To speak the Gospel-truth in love, means we first get close enough to a brother or sister in Christ to really listen to them. Listen long enough to articulate accurately your brother or sister’s actual views; and listen deeply enough to see the issue beneath the issue—what their heart is really after.

4. Speaking Gospel-Words

After listening we then speak, but we speak Gospel truths, not platitudes. We prayerfully ask God to show us what he wants to say to this brother or sister in Christ. What words or messages do you typically speak (or share) with your friends? Do you send articles supporting your political opinions? Do you send news about someone’s public failures? Do you send encouragement basically rooted in luck or your well-wishes?

To speak Gospel-Words is to speak things that will align your friend with what is most ultimately true—about themselves and God in Jesus Christ. And it is to speak words that will warm their connection to Jesus.

Over the summer I asked a seasoned pastor in the area if he’d offer me some mentoring—he’d been in his pastorate 25 plus years. Since our first lunch, he has texted me every single morning. Each time he speaks the truth in love. Here are some examples of his texts:

“Praying that today you will know more and more what it means to be known by God.”

“Praying that you will be able to tell what is truly honorable today.”

“Praying that you will see more today how good God is.”

“I prayed that you would be undivided in your devotion to the Lord today.”

“Praying God protects you from would-be idols today.”

“Prayed that God would give us the humility to know, mourn over, and repent of our sins.”

“God did not choose us because of any of our strengths (1 Cor. 1:26-2:6).”

“Because everything is under Christ’s control, He can help with anything.”

“When is Christ not with us? Never. (Matt 28:20)”

I get a lot of messages from people. These early morning Gospel Words are my favorite.

How Building-Up Love Fosters Community

One final question as we conclude. Our driving aim this fall is unity—that we would “maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” How does “building up love” foster unity? Paul clearly thinks it does because he locates this idea of love in a section dominated by unity. It’s hard to hate a person for whom you are laboring in love to make more like Christ. That effort, that goal, that love to build them up in Christ is the magnetic force stronger than any of our temporal differences.

...speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, 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.** (Ephesians 4:15-16)

Endnotes

1. E.g., “Pastor Stuart Briscoe once told about an incident that happened the first week that he was pastor of Elmbrook Church. A woman came up after the service and asked him if he would find the answer to a technical question that she had about a particular Bible text. Briscoe replied, “No, I will not.” The woman got a shocked look on her face as if she didn’t hear him correctly. “What?” she exclaimed. “No,” Briscoe repeated, “I will not find the answer to your question.” She looked at him as if to say, “Well what are we paying you for?” He continued, “But here’s what I will do. I’ll show you how to find the answer for yourself.” And, he proceeded to do that for her.” <https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-28-growing-mature-church-ephesians-411-13> Accessed Oct. 31, 2020.
2. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 57.
3. Mark Dever and Jamie Dunlop, *Compelling Community: Where God’s Power Makes a Church Attractive*, (Crossway, 2015), 53, 54.
4. Tim Keller, in his great book on marriage, writes something very applicable here: “When the Bible speaks of love, it measures primarily not by how much you want to receive but by how much you are willing to give of yourselves to someone” (Keller, *Meaning of Marriage*, 78)
5. Truth here = the Gospel, as Ephesians 1:13 attests, “In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit.”