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Friends I want to be completely honest here and admit to you right now that I am no longer the tallest member of the Taylor family nor the second tallest member. Now I have been the tallest in my birth family ever since I was about 18 & the tallest in my own family since Day 1. But I can't live in denial anymore. Sam is definitely taller than me & now so is Josh is also. I am not the tallest, I am actually stuck right in the very middle of the height stakes.

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And it wasn't that Kaylene and I put our boys on the rack when they were younger. We didn't force feed them chicken with lots of hormones in it. It just happened. They grew taller and taller. Actually we knew this was going to happen right from the beginning. When we started entering their height and weight in those growth charts you get given when you have children, those charts predicted that my two boys would grow really, really tall. Because children grow, that's what they were created to do.

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But it doesn't work the same way with Christians or with Churches for that matter. Growth is not just automatic. If you build it they won't just come. If you open the doors, they won't just come in. And if we just come to Church, we don't just grow in our faith. In the same way that some people never grow up, some Christians and some Christian Churches never become mature. So how can we grow as a Christian in our faith? And how can we as a Church grow in faithfulness and in numbers? Paul turns to that topic in Ephesians chapter 4.

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He has just spent three amazing chapters praising God for all that he has done for us in Christ. We were dead and now alive, imprisoned and now free, condemned and now declared innocent and not only has God done that to us, he has done that to people throughout the world so that the walls that have divided us in the past have come down in such a way as he is making a new people in his own image. That's the first half of the book

But now that we have found our way to Ephesians 4:1 we get to the second half of the book. We leave the exposition and get to the exhortation, we move past what God has done to what we must do. From doctrine to duty, from mind stretching theology to concrete examples of everyday living.

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So Pauls begins "*As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received*". **I urge you** Paul says in verse 1, **be completely humble** in verse 2, **make every effort** in verse 3 and to conclude this section in verse 16 he says this calling will lead to growth, when "*as each part does its work*". Friend's growth doesn't just happen. It requires hard work, dedication, effort. And that hard work starts with humility.

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1. Humility (verse 2)

2" Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love". If as I have already told you God chose you before the creation of the world, Paul says, then that should make you respond in humility because it is nothing that you have said or done that

has given you such a favoured status. If God has predestined you to be adopted as his sons and daughters that means that we are all in this together, as part of God's family. If Christ forgave you through his death on the cross, then you should be gentle, patient and forgiving with one another.

The very salvation that God has given you should drive you to have a different attitude towards others. We should be *completely* humble and gentle. Not half humble and two thirds gentle depending on the circumstances. But completely. We should be patient bearing *with one another* in love. Not just when it is easy but when it's hard, even when it seems impossible.

Now that is the sort of thing all of us will struggle with. Because we have been brought up in a self promoting, opinionated, aggressive & ambitious culture that doesn't have a high opinion of humility for that seems like weakness, gentleness for that means we will just be walked all over, and patience why wait when you can just buy what you need on credit right now.

This means though that because of what God has done for us we should be different, we should stand out from the crowd in how we do things in God's kingdom. Rather than stir up trouble we will want to show love and peace. Rather than gossip, we will want to encourage, rather than do all the talking we will want to listen humbly to each other, speak gently to each other, forgive consistently when we have been let down by each other.

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So how are you going with that? Would others call you humble, gentle, patient, loving? In what situations do you fail in these things? What work can you do to reverse that? For that is what God is calling us to be. To show humility for that leads to

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2. Unity (verses 3-6)

³"Make every effort to **keep the unity** of the Spirit through the bond of peace. ⁴There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called;⁵ one Lord one faith, one baptism; ⁶one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all".

Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit. To keep it, not to create it. God has already given us a unity because there is just one body (the Church) and one Spirit. Christians have so much in common. We are part of the one body, we have the one Spirit, the one Lord, the Lord Jesus Christ, one hope, one faith, on Baptism and one Father.

Thus all Christians no matter their age, sex, job, wealth, tribe or status are part of the one body. The Jew & the Gentile are one. All one in Christ Jesus. We may not show an outward unity to our world with our fights, our denominations, our divisions. But that doesn't mean we are still not one. For God is over all, in all and through all.

You see the true Church is one because God is one. Thus in our unity we need to *recognise God's oneness*. Just as God is a Trinity, three persons yet one substance, so the Church is a unity, many millions of people, one body. One body because the father creates the one family. One body because the Son creates one faith, hope and baptism. One body b/c the Spirit is within us all. How exciting to realise that our Church community reflects its Creator!

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We are one. So what Paul is urging us to do is to make every effort to ensure we maintain this oneness in a physical way. The Church is not divided in heaven, so neither should it be divided on earth. We are to demonstrate to the world that the unity which Paul says exists indestructibly is not the rather sick joke that it sounds like but a true and glorious reality.

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So how are we going with our unity? For we should be unified here in this Church as a body of believers. Going in the one direction. Looking toward the one savior. Enjoying the fruits of the one Spirit. How are we going with that? Are we aiming to maintain the unity that God has called us to or does that seem a bridge too far? For in our church there are three congregations, one Church. Young and old, one Church. Different backgrounds, theologies, experiences, ages ranges, but one Church.

And how are we going expressing our unity with our brothers and sisters worldwide? With those persecuted in the developing world? With those indigenous brothers and sisters in the red centre? With those who have different beliefs to us but still trust in Jesus?

You see God has placed us in local churches for a reason. To make you and I holy. He doesn't get out his Bunsen burner and add a couple of chemicals here and few solutions there and whammo we become more humble, more holy. No God uses the laboratory of his Church to make us holy. He uses one another, to get rid of our rough points, to work on our weaknesses. So as we live together, we help each other grow in faith, and we show to a watching world the power that God gives us through our common relationship with Jesus.

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3. Humility, unity, centrality (verses 7-12)

You see that unity must be a round something. And it is! It is around the centrality of Jesus Christ. ⁷ *But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it*". Christ has given us all grace. Now when did he give us that grace?

⁸ *This is why it says: "When he ascended on high, he took many captives and gave gifts to his people."* ⁹ *(What does "he ascended" mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? ¹⁰ He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.)*

When Jesus rose from the dead and ascended to heaven, he gave gifts to his people. He gave them the gift of the Holy Spirit which will help produce the fruits of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control). And he gave them spiritual gifts.

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Now he didn't give them the exact same gift, there is a diversity of gifts. There is a unity of faith but a diversity of faithfulness. And so in other places in the New Testament Paul and Peter give a number of lists of gifts that Christ has left his church and funny enough they are all different!

Romans 12 talks about prophecy, serving, teaching, encouraging, giving, leadership and mercy. 1 Corinthians 12 talks about the gift of wisdom, the message of knowledge, faith, miraculous powers, prophecy, tongues, interpretation of tongues and gift of discernment.

And Peter adds even more gifts in 1 Peter 4. We are all different and we are all given spiritual gifts by Jesus. But here Paul gives us another list of gifts.

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11 "So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers." Apostles and prophets are those we have already seen that laid the foundation for the New Testament Church. That foundation has now been set. But in every generation Jesus continues to send evangelists those who will preach the gospel to those who are lost and pastor teachers, those who will preach the Bible to help people grow in discipleship.

What Paul is highlighting in this list of four gifts (apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor/teachers) is the centrality of God's word in the growth and unity of his people. All them are preaching and teaching God's word. All of them are sharing the good news of Jesus to people who need to be connected to him and grow up in him. What is desperately needed if the church is going to show its unity, if the church is going to be a group of people who express their humility is the centrality of the word of Christ.

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As John Stott says, "*Nothing is more necessary for the building up of God's Church in every age than an ample supply of God-gifted teachers of the Word of God*". Impossible to maintain a unity amongst the people of God? If they are all listening to the word of God they should be all heading in the same direction! Impossible to be humble, gentle & patient when inside of you is anger, revenge and turmoil? It is the power of the word of God that cut us to the heart that changes us from the inside out that prepares us for works of service.

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11 "So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastor/teachers *12* to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up". Not only is Christ's grace central to this work, not only are Christ's gifts indispensable but it is as we hear the word of God and put it into practise that we will grow as a Church and spiritually as an individual.

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The model for a growing Church is that the pastor teacher will build on the work of the apostles, prophets and evangelists so as to teach God's word in such a way that he and the people who come under it will use their gifts and ability in service of one another. The pastor teacher is not there to give us head knowledge, to just understand the doctrines of Scripture but to apply those wonderful truths to our everyday life. For in the same way that Paul now has moved from theology to the practicality so our teachers are not the ones who talk about the works of service or even do the works of service on our behalf but will equip us all to do those works of service.

The model of the Church is not then that of a bus, with the minister doing the driving and taking people to where they want to go. It's not a pyramid with the elders on top and the rest down below. It is of a body where each has a part to play and each is missed if that part is not used properly. Only then do we all grow into maturity.

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Friends what you and I then need is not a Bible believing Church, we need a Bible obeying Church. The mark of a Church that you want to be a part of is not that the word of God is taught faithfully each Sunday from the pulpit, it is that the this preaching then leads to faithful service throughout the week at Church, at home, at work and at school. Too often

we evaluate the church by the work of the leader but we should be evaluating the church by seeing how much every member ministry is going on.

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So how are we going on that? Is the centrality of what we speak about here at Church what Jesus has done for us, about his grace and his gifts to us? And do each of us look for opportunities to use those gifts on a regular basis? Has that word of God given us a softer nature and gentler spirit? Is that word of God helping us to maintain a sense of unity in a crazy and mixed up world? Is that word of God showing us that not only are we greatly gifted but we are God's gifts to the wider Church?

In some Churches, the people who come are consumers filling their spiritual shopping baskets as they come to give themselves spiritual sustenance in a dry and difficult world. But if we are to grow in our faith, grow in our maturity then we can't be consumers we must be contributors. We can't be takers we must be givers. Actually we need to be both.

None of us have all the spiritual gifts so God arranges us to be part of his body, the Church. We then grow as we open ourselves up to the spiritual gifts of others **and** when we use our own spiritual gifts to encourage and build up our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. Thus to grow we need a Church that has the work and word of Christ at the centre of all that we do & we need to rub shoulders with a diversity of Christian people who are expressing their unity in Christ. By being humble, gentle, patient, loving and using their gifts in a way that will express their interdependence on each other and their utter dependence upon Christ.

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4. Humility, Unity, Centrality and Maturity (verses 13-16)

"So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors & teachers, ¹² to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up Slide 20 ¹³ until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God & become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ".

That's when we will all reach unity in the faith. You see we reach maturity together. Not alone. Not in front of the computer screen reading a sermon from a great preacher overseas. Not when I do my own little thing far removed from everyone else. You reach maturity at around the same time as we reach unity. We reach maturity as the fullness of Christ takes root in our everyday lives. We reach maturity when the unity of the one Holy Spirit gives us the fruits of the spirit of patience, gentleness, love with each other. Maturity for the Christian then takes place at the same time that maturity for the church takes hold.

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And if we don't achieve that, what happens to us? ¹⁴ *"Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming".* If we don't do that we are still babes in Christ. We are still learning to eat and to walk and to run. We will follow whatever new fad is sweeping the Christian church at the time. And the winds of those fads will take us far, far away from our desired destination.

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But a sign of maturity is when ¹⁵ *"Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. ¹⁶ From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself*

up in love, as each part does its work". A sign of maturity is speaking the truth in love.

Knowing the truth of Christ. Loving the truth of God's word. Living out the truth of God's gospel but also being filled with love. Truth can become hard if not softened by love. Love can become soft if not strengthened by the truth. Paul calls us to hold the two together. Speak the truth in love. And that can only be achieved if we are Spirit filled believers. Because God's Holy Spirit is the spirit of truth and the first of the fruits of the Spirit is love. So it is the work of the Spirit pointing to Jesus that brings us humility, unity and maturity.

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This passage is saying that spiritual growth is like going up a set of stairs. Humility takes us toward unity. Unity around Christ and his word. And it is the teaching of this word that helps us to become mature. Now every step of this is hard for us. For so often we walk in pride and that is the best way to break our unity because I am right and you are wrong. So often we want to be individuals and keep ourselves away from others and that means we distance ourselves from not just Bible believing Churches but Bible obeying Churches. So often we want to put the Church or me or safety or riches in the central part of our lives and leave Christ and his word on the sidelines and that makes us childish and immature in the faith. It is only when we put it all together we find that humility and unity and the centrality of Christ leads to maturity in ourselves and the people around us.

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So how are we going with this? Where are we as a Church in the maturity stakes? Are we like a new born wanting our own way on everything, and screaming and crying when we don't get it? Is this Church like a teenager, yes we are growing, but we are being tempted to test the boundaries, are we flirting with ways and means that are not very helpful? Or are we responsible adults? Caring for others, serving others, loving others in a way that shows everyone that we know what we are on about and they respect us for that?

Well where you thought we were as a Church is probably a reflection of where you are as a Christian. Because you are the Church. You determine what we do and what we don't do. Your commitment to love and to serve, to share peace and to work hard affects us all. So if you are growing, it most likely means the Church is growing and if you are going nowhere, then maybe we are going nowhere as well. And if we are going nowhere, then of course no one will want to join us!

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The picture I love of the church is the one provided by British preacher Richard Coekin. He says the Church is like a soccer club let's call it Christchurch United FC. The players on the pitch are the congregation. Their bible teachers are player coaches training them to play the game of loving God, loving each other and loving their community, working as a team against the world, the flesh and the devil. And we are doing it all before the spectators of a watching world, of unbelieving friends, family, work colleagues and local community.

Well friends the half time break is just about over. We have heard our captain coach Jesus urge us in the break toward humility, unity and maturity. But now we go back out on the field of life together, as a team. Dependent upon Jesus, with the help of the Holy Spirit. With the world watching. Will they see a mature group of Christians or a bunch of immature kids? That is up whether we have believed what the bible has said to today and whether we intend to obey it.

Unity and Maturity in the Body of Christ

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