

Spring is finally here, and I am sure that we are all ready to leave our winter problems behind us and not think about cold weather, bundling up, harsh wind and shoveling our driveways anymore. But if you've ever owned or rented a home, you've probably had issues that might still be haunting you that stem from this pesky thing we call winter.

I became a homeowner two winters ago, and this past January was my first run in with a furnace. I learned the real purpose of a furnace on one cold January night - furnaces were made to keep heat running in our homes. But on this day, I woke up at 2 a.m. freezing. So, I did what any smart twenty-something does: I Googled what to do.

I flipped the breaker (nothing), went outside and dug snow away from the pipes, again nothing. Then stuck my hand into the exhaust pipe and realized it was packed with snow and ice, definitely not nothing. I grabbed a kitchen spatula and cleared out the pipe, and within an hour my cozy home was restored. But then the same thing happened the next night, and the next. Every night at about 2 am, I was out there with my spatula putting in effort to make this furnace work like it was designed to.

By night four, after another 2 a.m. snow-clearing session, I was over putting in effort to make this thing work, so I called Mr. Furnace. By 7 a.m the technician had found a crack in the exhaust pipe and said I'd need a new furnace. Boooo – any home owners least favourite words. For now, though, he said he would seal the crack with foil tape. Since that moment in January to this day (knock on wood), my furnace has been working perfectly — no new furnace needed. It just took some effort to get it back into working condition – to its designed purpose.

It is interesting to me how quickly every professional brought into our homes jumps to the conclusion that we need to replace things with something new. This isn't just in our homes but with our clothes, a small tare – buy a new pair, a suitcase with a squeaky wheel – trade it in, that trendy pair of pants that is now off trend – replace it, what about our phones, they are on two-year plans to be upgraded to the latest and greatest gadget.

We are continually told that when something is broken (or not absolutely perfect), we need new. We need to trade it in, we need to upgrade, we then begin to see everything as disposable. Even if it would only take a small amount of effort to keep what we have and bring it back to working condition,.

These days, when it comes to our relationships, how many of us do the very same thing? How many of our relationships become disposable? When there is an ounce of conflict, discomfort, pain or miscommunication, we trade in for new. Not willing to put in effort, or put a little bit of foil tape on it, to bring that relationship back to its designed purpose.

What about in our churches? Do we just leave anytime someone says something that doesn't sit right with us, or a decision gets made that rubs us the wrong way, or we have an interaction that doesn't feel exactly right? How many of us are tempted to just trade in our church relationships and church experiences for new ones, when all it may take to restore things is a 10-cent piece of foil tape, a little bit of effort and a conversation?

Obviously, these are bold statements, but I wonder if sometimes we are disillusioned in our relationships, and our actions can sometimes begin to look just like the professional furnace man saw my furnace.

In relationships, we ghost people when we don't want to deal with conflict, we avoid people in the grocery store when we feel uncomfortable because of previous interactions, we don't attend family gatherings because we don't want to deal with the pain from our pasts. Or we go church shopping when there's things we don't like or disagree with, or we leave the church all together without a conversation because the would be awkward or hard.

Why have we become so accustomed to giving up on people? Giving up on each other, giving up on our families, our friends, ourselves and our churches. In my own life I find myself giving up on others when the uncomfortable feelings of conflict, guilt, shame, fear and anxiety bubble inside of me. Why do we do that? Because we think it is easier. And of course, on one level it is easier. No pain – no awkward conversation, no tears, no sharing our hearts. No effort is needed when we give up. But is this better?

We hear from Paul in the book of Ephesians about this exact experience. For the first 3 chapters of Ephesians, Paul has talked about truths of the Christian faith and the function of the church. Then in chapter 4 he changes his focus slightly, and he begins talking about the role of each member of the church. He gets much more granular. Ephesians 4:1-3 says this

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. ² Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. ³ Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

When trying to break down this verse, we have to look at some of the verbs that are used, to help us understand what Paul is getting at. The first verb that helps us, is **“bear with”**. To bear with someone is to have tolerance, and beyond that, have patience, gentleness, and humility – all the characteristics that Paul describes in the previous sentence. Here Paul assumes that imperfect people will require some “bearing with.”

Paul helps us recognize that as a member of the church we are to be in relationship because at its very essence, bearing with indicates others are involved in our journey of faith. Dr. Robert Mulholland describes faith in a similar vein, by writing that our spiritual formation is **“a process of being formed into the image of Christ for the sake of others”**. We aren’t called to just bear with ourselves in silos because then spiritual formation can become what John Mark Comer calls **“private, therapeutic self-help spirituality that is honestly, just a Christianised version of radical individualism... not (forming) us to love like Jesus.”** Love includes another. To bear with and to grow in loving others like Christ is to not give up on one another when there is conflict, when there is awkwardness or pain, in these moments we are to bear with - to tolerate with humility, gentleness and patience, each other’s imperfections and brokenness.

We are to bear with one another because we are to - “keep the unity of the spirit”. It says in verse 3, **“Make every effort to keep the unity of the spirit”**. Paul here is recognizing and pointing out that the purpose of our bearing with is that that is actually our designed purpose. When you are keeping something, you already have it, you aren’t creating or cultivating a unity that doesn’t exist yet, we are designed to have unity.

One commentary noted the significance behind Paul’s language here, Paul isn’t just describing doing something to keep unity, like an action or a good deed that would unite people. But he is actually calling us to “a mode of being”, a heart of unity that bears with to our core. Part of our heart and our soul; our deepest longing and desire should be to be unified because it is our designed purpose through Jesus’ work.

There is one other action word that we must note before we jump to conclusions that we will just become people who bear with and keep unity magically, automatically or artificially.

Verse 3 again says **“Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit”**. Make every effort. Paul recognizes that this is going to take work, this is going to take effort, it isn’t going to happen without sacrifice or pain or cost. It is going to take effort. It’s going to be awkward; it’s going to take hard conversations to bear with one another. It is going to cost us more than a little bit of foil tape to keep our relationships running at the rate of their designed purpose.

Paul is asking us to give up giving up on each other. He is calling church members to stop treating relationships with one another like professionals treat our household appliances or how we treat our last generation phones, where rather than making the effort, we trade in for new, for comfortable, for easy. To stop seeing relationships as disposable.

During this last Sunday of lent, in a series where we have been talking about giving things up to help us put on characteristics of Jesus, I wonder if we could recognize that because of Jesus love and willingness to give His whole life for us – that we need to give up giving up on one another, or taking away the double negative, stop giving up on each other knowing that we are designed (because of Christ’s spiritual unifying work) to be in relationship with each other, while recognizing that it is going to take effort. Every effort!

Now, to be clear, the combination of “bearing with”, “keeping unity” and “making every effort” doesn’t mean that every relationship needs to continue. It’s not about being dishonest about the pain someone has caused and it doesn’t mean friendships can’t or shouldn’t evolve in time. What it does mean is that when we feel the need to ghost, abandon, write off or simply give up without effort, we need to filter that through the lens of Christ to make every effort to bear with, in order to keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.

This lens would not allow us to stay in a relationship that was harmful and it wouldn't force us to have monthly meet ups with every friend we have ever had. Friendships mold and change, Paul here is talking about close relationships that have had relational breakdowns that are impacting your ability to love, impacting unity.

With that, I want to use some quotes from Charles Spurgeon, a 19th century preacher who wrote a lot about Ephesians to help us understand what these verses are not saying. Spurgeon said that the unity Paul is writing about here is not **“endeavor(ing) to maintain the unity of evil, the unity of superstition, or the unity of spiritual tyranny”**. Meaning Paul isn't trying to get us to be united around things of evil or abuse or control. Spurgeon also says unity is not **“Endeavoring to keep up your ecclesiastical arrangements for centralization”** meaning unity is not trying to protect a church system in order to maintain power and control, to keep power at the centre. Unity is not **“endeavoring to keep uniformity of the spirit”** meaning we aren't putting in effort to keep everyone exactly the same in the name of God. Spurgeon says that true unity is found in Jesus. He wrote a true and honest but also eye opening and at least for me a very convicting statement saying **“Divisions in Churches never begin with those full of love to the Saviour.”**

So how do we become full of love to the Saviour? How do we put on a heart posture that doesn't end in division and seeing relationships as disposable?

Back to Ephesians verse 1 and 2

“As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. ² Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.”

Our souls are to reflect the fruit of the spirit. How do we “put on” humility, gentleness and patience so that we can change not only our actions, but our way of being, and stop giving up on others?

John Mark Comer in his book *Practicing the Way* says that when following Jesus, we often quote Scripture and hope it will change us, and as preachers we sometimes hope for the same, I wish it worked that way. I wish we could read things like “Do not be anxious... trust in the Lord” and think, Man, *yes, I want that!* And then it happens. But wanting it isn’t enough.

John Mark compares this to running a marathon. Someone who has never run a race before wouldn’t decide today to run 42.2 km tomorrow and expect to succeed. Running a marathon takes training. In the same way, hearing a sermon about humility and bearing with one another doesn’t instantly make us humble or patient- it takes practice. But if you ran 1 km today and added 1 km each day, in about 42 days you’d be ready to run a marathon. Spiritual formation works the same way: small, consistent practices shape our hearts over time.

It takes practice to become more like Jesus and as we continue to become more like Jesus, that heart posture will lead us to stop giving up on people, stop giving up on the church, because the church is really just the people.

Verse 2 of this Ephesians passage reminds us what we need to practice. The first is humility, in our first week of this Lent series, Carrie talked about humility or lowliness, which she described as a mutual consensual submission to those around us. In practice this is being content with not being in control, being right, or getting our way. Easier said than done, but with practice – with effort, can be done.

Scholars say that humility is not actually a Greek word, it is a Christian Greek word. It was a word that was created by the church because it was so counter cultural to the surrounding day and age that it was only Jesus followers that would see humility as a virtue. Is that true again these days do you think? Has humility gone out of fashion, with control and power beginning to rule our stories, our relationships and our churches? I wonder if we need to reclaim that word like the early Christians did – humility as a countercultural, Jesus centred way of being in relationship with others. Knowing it will take practice and effort to bear with and keep the unity of the spirit.

Verse 2 also calls us to practice gentleness, or in other translations: meekness. To not be provoked and not provoke others, to have a gentle spirit. Another word that is similar to this is longsuffering – which literally means to choose to bear with one another when we have the power or the ability to otherwise take revenge or to ghost, or walk away or avoid. And instead, to decide not to – to decide to forgive generously. To be gentle, meek and longsuffering. Again, a countercultural way of living that encourages us to bear with and continue loving each other through our own brokenness and through the brokenness of others.

John Mark Comer says that it is when we repeatedly choose to be formed into the likeness of Christ, through practice, that we can start to experience any degree of change.

In my own life, there is one relationship in particular that I can think of, that feels like giving up is the current under tone. Someone I was extremely close with, shared a home with for a period of time, shared meals with, deep conversations, emotional weight and due to circumstance, we stopped bearing with one another. We stopped choosing humility and gentleness and we just stopped replying to each other.

Stopped making an effort, and that pain feels heavy. What would it look like for me to put in effort with this person even two years after a relational break down? I don't think Paul is calling me to go back to having weekly coffee catch ups and daily texts with this person like I once did. But he is trying to have us recognize that peace and unity should be the core to our relationships especially within the church.

In our relationships we need to recognize and move away from consumerism. It is so easy to begin seeing relationships, and our churches, as a place or people to consume, and when people aren't serving us exactly how we want, or there is conflict, tension, or pain instead of leaning in, we run. For some of us our relationships feel so out of sorts we have tried to trade them in for new. And yes, our relationships are dynamic and complicated and sometimes power is involved, but as Charles Spurgeon wrote, power is not the central theme of unity, it is the humility represented in the life of Christ that should be at the centre. And that means putting in effort to put on humility, gentleness and patience, to bear with one another in order to keep the unity of the spirit.

What would it take for us to be the unified family that Jesus' death and resurrection made us to be? I think it would take the choice to give up giving up on one another. Now, and always.