**Walking in balance**

Text: Ephesians 4:1-6

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**Scriptures:** Romans 12:9-18; Psalm 133; Ephesians 4:1-6

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 145, 133b, 291, 475, 523

**Series:** Ephesians (#15)

**Occasion:** Fifth week of Alert Level 4 lockdown due to COVID-19

**Theme:** In light of the new creations that all God’s adopted children are, the Apostle Paul urges the Ephesian believers to live together in unity with the attitude of Christ, the goal of peace, reflecting the unity of the Lord and His call.

**Proposition:** Live a balanced life in Christ!

**Introduction**

In the first three chapters of the letter to the Ephesians, the Apostle Paul has been writing about the new humanity which has been created in Christ. He then then uses the word ‘therefore’ in the first verse of chapter four. In light of the new creations that all God’s adopted children are, he urges the Ephesian believers to ‘*walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which (they) have been called’.* “Walk” here does not refer to physical motion, but rather it describes an ongoing pattern of life. The word “worthy” has the root meaning of balancing the scales; what is on one side of the scale should be equal in weight to what is on the other side. This word came to be applied to anything that was expected to correspond to something else. A person worthy of his pay was one whose day’s work corresponded to his day’s wages.

At the start of Ephesians chapter 4 we are half-way through this letter. Three chapters behind us, and three chapters ahead. Imagine taking a traditional scale balance with two bowls suspended at equal distances from a pivot point or fulcrum. If you had six objects, each of the same weight you could put three in one bowl and three in the other and the scale would be balanced. The practical ‘living out the gospel’ second half of this letter is in balance with the gracious work of God through Christ in making people like us ‘live in Christ’.

The overall message of chapters four to six is to live a life which corresponds to the reality of being a new creation in Christ. Someone has summarised this with the phrase: “*Put on your new human*”. Live a life which is balanced; which matches the reality of who you are in Christ. The ‘call’ here is to be part of the living holy temple together with other members of the household of God (2:19-22): It is a call to walk in ‘gospel balance’ in the company of fellow new humans, members of the same body, the church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Being balanced is very important to be able to walk well physically. Without good balance, we struggle to follow the path we are on and there is a risk of falling over and suffering as a result. The same principle applies in the spiritual realm. Without good balance – a lifestyle which corresponds to the reality of who we are in Christ – we will not be able to closely follow the blessed pathway which the Lord lays before us and we are likely to stumble and fall, damaging ourselves and others as we do so. Today we are going to look at the Christian life, lived in balance as a walk of faith, following the Good Shepherd under three headings:

1. Walking with one character
2. Walking with one purpose
3. Walking with one body
4. **Walking with one character**

Physical walking involves putting one foot in front of the other with one foot always in contact with the ground. (If both feet are off the ground at any time then that is running, not walking). The basic motion of walking is the same for all of us, yet we walk with different gaits, strides, steps, pace and carriage. A person’s ‘gait’ describes is the way they move. You can often identify a person by the manner in which they walk.

The same principle applies to the spiritual equivalent of walking: the character a person displays as they live life. Who can you think of whose spiritual ‘gait’ is described by these words which Paul writes to the Ephesians in verse 2? “*with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love”.*

To answer this question, it helps to know what these four interrelated ‘walking characteristics’ mean, let’s look at humility, gentleness, patience and bearing with one another in love now:

1. **Humility** literally means to think or judge with lowliness and thus speaks of humiliation of mind, lowliness of mind, of a humble attitude. For the Romans and Greeks, the very concept of humility was so foreign and abhorrent to their way of thinking that they had no term to describe it. The Greco-Roman world considered humility to be grovelling and therefore held it in contempt. To them humility was a weakness deserving only of pity and certainly not of respect. However, the truth is that humility is the ultimate antidote to love of self. This is wisely expressed by Proverbs 11:2 “*When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with the humble is wisdom*”. The 18th century, American preacher and author, Jonathan Edwards wrote: "*True humility is not putting ourselves down but rather lifting up others. If we concentrate on lifting up others, putting down ourselves will take care of itself. As we go through life exalting Christ and others, then genuine humility will be inevitable. If we exalt ourselves then God will take care of our humiliation; for He promises to humble the proud. It is much less painful to do it the first way*”.
2. **Gentleness** is the quality of meek friendliness. It is strength that accommodates to another person's weakness. This gentleness is consideration for others, and restrained patience. Gentleness is the ability to bear reproaches and slights without bitterness and resentment. The gentle person provides a calming influence on someone who is in a state of anger, bitterness and resentment against life. The word translated ‘gentleness’ was used in secular Greek writings to describe a soothing wind, a healing medicine, and a colt that had been broken. If there too little gentleness power in the wind it becomes a storm, too much medicine can kill, and a horse can break loose. This ‘gentleness’ word describes power under control. It the Greek world, this ‘gentleness’ was described by the ancient philosophers (Aristotle and Plato) in this way: “*the meek person does not have to ‘fly off the handle’ because he or she has him or herself under control*”.
3. **Patience** means literally to be ‘long-tempered’ (as opposed to ‘short-tempered’). It refers specifically to ‘patience with people’. This word describes a state of emotional calm or quietness in the face of provocation, misfortune or unfavourable situations. To be patient is to have the capacity to be wronged and not to retaliate. It is the ability to accept the folly, the perversity, the blindness, the ingratitude of other people and still to remain gracious, and still to toil on. You can see this patience sometimes in the lives of domestic dogs. The puppy yaps at the big dog, worries him, bites him, and all the time the big dog, who could annihilate the puppy with one snap of his teeth, bears the puppy’s impertinence with a forbearing dignity. The most illuminating thing about this patience is that it is commonly used in the New Testament of the attitude of God towards mankind (e.g. [Rom 2:4](https://biblia.com/bible/nasb95/Rom%202.4); [Rom 9:22](https://biblia.com/bible/nasb95/Rom%209.22); [1 Tim 1:16](https://biblia.com/bible/nasb95/1%20Tim%201.16); [1 Pet 3:20](https://biblia.com/bible/nasb95/1%20Pet%203.20)).
4. ‘**Bearing with one another in love’** means to put up with without resentment, to tolerate, to forbear, to be patient with, to endure. We sometimes use the phrase in the English language “He or she does not suffer fools gladly”; which derives originally from 2 Corinthians 11:19. Being described as a person who does not suffer fools gladly is often thought of as something of admirable ‘badge of honour’. Such a person is seen as having a strong character in not being willing to put up with the follies, foibles and foolishness of others. There is a sense in which bearing with one another in love means that we are willing to ‘suffer fools gladly’.

Did you notice how similar these ‘walking traits’ are and how much overlap there is between them? They fit together to describe a recognisable ‘spiritual gait’. Let’s return to that earlier question: who can you think of whose spiritual gait, way of walking, is described by these words which Paul writes to the Ephesians in verse 2?: “*with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love”.* Or to frame the same question in terms of Galatians 5:22-23 Who displays the spiritual fruits of “*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control?*”.

You may well think of mature, godly, brothers and sisters in Christ whom you have known, but pre-eminently, this way of walking perfectly describes the life of Christ on this earth. Jesus says to his disciples “*follow me*”; “*Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls*” (Matt 11:29). Brothers and sisters, Jesus wants each one of us to walk with one character: His. We are also to walk with one purpose, which brings us to our second point:

1. **Walking with one purpose**

Over the past few weeks, when I’ve left my home to get some exercise, I see many people out walking. Like me, they have a reason to be doing so. Likely to ‘get some fresh air’, do a physical activity and spend time with others in their ‘bubble’ in a different, non-home, environment.

In verse 3, the Apostle Paul writes about the single purpose of living life with the humble, gentle, patient, fore-bearing character of Christ being: *“eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace”.* To be eager is todo one's best, to spare no effort, to work hard. The eager ‘give it all they’ve got’. They ‘go hard’ and they ‘go early’. The word ‘unity’ describes the state of being in harmony and accord with one another. This is how we were designed to live bearing the image of God, who Himself is One.

There is a perfect ‘oneness’ between the persons of the Godhead which Jesus refers to in His ‘high-priestly prayer’ in John 17: "*I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one*” (John 17:20-22).

There is a state of perfect peace, of untroubled, undisturbed wellbeing, which has always existed between the Divine Persons of the Godhead. This peace has only ever been broken once; at the cross when God, for our sake brothers and sisters, “*made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God*” (2 Cor 5:21). Christ was stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted (Isaiah 53:3). “*He was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed*” (53:5). Earlier in this letter, Paul has written about the peace which Christ has brought in Himself: **“***For he himself is our peace*” (Eph 2:14).

As we walk through the Christian life, we are called to walk in balance by working hard at keeping the precious peace which Christ has brought to us. When nations are in conflict with one another, a ceasefire and a truce may bring an end to hostilities through careful negotiation and diplomacy. This is **peace-making**. However, in order to maintain the state of peace, **peacekeeping** forces may need to be deployed. Internationally, this is a role which the United Nations Peacekeeping forces have had since 1948.

Brothers and sisters, Christ is the Peacemaker. We are called to be peacekeepers, maintaining a ‘oneness’ amongst ourselves whereby there is a state of untroubled, undisturbed wellbeing. When we do this; bringing forth peace, a fruit of the Spirit, we are bound together as a whole. How does this come about? When each one of us walks with the ‘spiritual gait’ of Christ; interacting with one another with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love.

We know that living confined at home for long periods can be a huge challenge for many. There has been a rise in domestic violence across New Zealand over the past four weeks of lockdown with counsellors at Victim Support being told of stress, panic, anger and aggression in families. For us, brothers and sisters (If your Alert Level 4 ‘bubble’ has a population of more than one), this lockdown (and Alert Level 3!) presents us with an opportunity to practice walking in balance at home. This is excellent spiritual exercise. Go hard and go early at maintaining peace!

Remember the words of Romans 12 which we heard earlier: “*Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honour*” (v10). “*Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord*” (v11). “*Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer*” (v12). “*Live in harmony with one another*” (v16). “*If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all*” (v18). Be *“eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace”.* The word ‘bond’ in verse 3 was used of the tendons and ligaments of the human body which connect the different parts together, which leads us to our 3rd point:

1. **Walking with one body**

In the physical realm, when we walk, we do so with one body – our own! Many different parts of our body are necessary for walking. Perambulating (another word for walking or travelling) on two legs requires a tremendous feat of balance and is often described as ‘controlled falling’. If we do not successfully put one foot in front of the other, we will stumble and may well crash to the ground! For elegant and efficient walking, each of our bodies ‘systems’ – especially those of sight, balance, and sensation - must be communicating in harmony. This requires the coordination abilities of the brain and nervous system. We use the whole body to walk. Our pelvis and legs are assisted by the trunk and the arms. The entire body helps with balance.

Paul writes, not about the physical body, but about the spiritual body of Christ in verse four “*There is one body and one Spirit”.* The church universal, in every place down through history, is the body of Christ, as Paul has explained earlier in this letter: “*And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all*” (Eph 1:22-23). He has described Gentiles as ‘*members of the same body*’ (Eph 3:6). In 1 Cor 12:12-26 he describes the different members of the church as being like body parts: for example: feet, hands, eyes, and ears. Local congregations, like the one at Corinth, are also ‘the body of Christ’ as Paul confirms in 1 Corinthians 12:27 when he writes: “*Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it*”.

Brothers and sisters, we share together, as the congregation of the Reformed Church of Christchurch and as members of the universal church: one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and father of all. {Verses four to six are thought to have been an early Christian confession of faith – a creed}. Just as many different physical body parts are necessary for us to walk, so the church as a whole walks in balance together.

We now live in a time of almost unprecedented isolation. We are ‘socially distant’ from one another. Our borders are closed, preventing us from travelling to other parts of the world where we have family: brothers and sisters in Christ. Our ‘bubbles’ are very small, and we can feel very alone and vulnerable. Yet what connects us most deeply as followers of Christ is not physical proximity, but spiritual unity in the Lord. We deeply and rightly miss the assembling together as we have been used to doing regularly and we very much look forward to the time when we shall be able to come together again. However, separate physically though we are now, we remain one body. We confess together one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and father of all. We can and we do still walk together.

Brothers and sisters, let’s resolve afresh today to walk in balance. In a manner worthy of our calling. With all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Are you someone today who is feeling really unsteady and alone? Perhaps you’ve come to realise, even over the past few weeks in isolation, or just in the past 25 minutes, that your character is proud, harsh, impatient and that you do not suffer fools gladly if at all. You wish you were different, but you don’t know how to change. Here is the pathway to follow: Come to the Lord Jesus with all your mess and failure and trust in Him. Believe that He died in your place for all your sins and accept His authority in your life. Then you can begin to live the balanced life we have been understanding in this sermon, together with all God’s family who early strive to walk this way. Then you will not be isolated, vulnerable or alone, but you will be part of Christ’s one body, the church. Then you will be able to keep walking and never stop.

One day, in the New Heavens and New Earth, you’ll walk in perfect balance with the One who called you to follow Him. We long for that day and say, “Come Lord Jesus!”.

AMEN