

THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

November 4, 2012
No. 3644

Endeavoring to Keep the Unity
Rev. Wilbur Bruinsma

Dear radio friends,

To be a prisoner—that is the greatest shame. A prisoner is a man kept under close watch in a cell because he has been found guilty of committing a crime. He is no longer free. He is being punished.

The apostle Paul was in prison. He was locked away in a house that was being carefully guarded. Paul makes reference to this in Ephesians 4:1-3, the passage we consider today. We read in those verses:

I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Paul refers to himself as the prisoner of the Lord. This was literally true. He was a prisoner, unable to come and go as he pleased. His crime? He was a prisoner of the Lord Jesus Christ; he was tried and found guilty of belonging to the kingdom of Christ.

Paul does not see this as a shame, however. And neither do we. This was an honor. Paul refers to himself as a prisoner of Christ here in verse 1 as a title of honor. Paul was imprisoned for the sake of Christ because, in reality, Paul was a prisoner *to* Christ. He did not come and go according to his own will. Christ was his Lord, his Master. Christ had sent him to places that Paul himself had not known that he would go. Paul's will was subject to the will of Christ, his Ruler. This was why Paul was in prison. He served Christ unwaveringly. It is with his authority as prisoner to Christ that Paul now gives us the exhortation of this chapter before us.

The verses we consider today begin the second half of this letter Paul writes. This is typical of almost all of the letters that Paul wrote. The first half of the letter is devoted to instruction in the blessed truths of the gospel. It is called the didactic section of the letter. In the first half Paul lays the doctrinal foundation that undergirds everything he teaches in the second half of the epistle. We have learned in our broadcasts some beautiful truths about the church. We have learned of the election of the church. We learned that Christ is the Head of the church. We learned that the foundation of the church is Jesus Christ and the Word. We have learned that to be a true member of the church we need to be made alive from the dead. Then, finally, we learned of the mystery of the church, that in Christ the church, once limited to one nation, has now become universal in scope. All these truths form the basis for the exhortations and instruction we receive in the last three chapters of this letter.

That means that we begin the practical section of this letter. In the chapters to come we will receive all kinds of instruction and admonition in how we are to behave in the sphere of the church institute. The first admonition we receive is to endeavor to keep the unity of the church.

Unity. Blessed unity. Unity is oneness—oneness of thought, of aspirations and goals. It is to dwell with each other in agreement. The church is a unity. It is the body of Christ, after all.

Christ is the Head of that body. It is His will that the body performs. His life is in the body, and the various members of that body work together harmoniously in order to achieve what the Head tells them to do.

The body whose members do not work together harmoniously, because they do not listen to the head, is a dysfunctional body. It is a person who has MS.

The church of Jesus Christ is a unit. And its members are called by Christ their Head to live in unity with each other. This is an amazing reality, of course. Just as a body is made up of a diversity of members that are so different from each other, so is the church. The finger is so different from the ear, or the ear from the nose, or the nose from the knee, and so on. There is a huge diversity of members in the human body. Yet, they are a whole, a unit. The body with all its members is one.

Well, the church is made up of young and old, men and women, different races, different classes of people. The members have their own personalities, their own abilities, their own talents and gifts. There is a diversity of people in the church. And yet the church is a unit, it is one. It is a living organism.

This unity is worked in the church by the Spirit. It is a unity of the Spirit. The Spirit is the Spirit of Christ. It is that Spirit that provides the electrical impulse, so to speak, between the Head (who is Christ) and the members of His body, the church. A human brain sends electrical impulses to the various members of the human body in order that they might fulfill its commands. The Spirit is sent by Christ to dwell in each one of the members of the church. And as that Spirit lives and works in us, Christ dwells in us. So Christ, through His Spirit, directs the members of the church to live and dwell in unity with each other. This is why Paul speaks of the unity of the Spirit. Just as the members of the human body work in unity with each other, so also the members of the church. If the members do not live in agreement of thought, aspiration, and goals the church is dysfunctional, a diseased body. This, then, is what lies behind the exhortation of these first few verses of Ephesians 4.

This is also the idea of the bond of peace that Paul speaks of in verse 3. A bond unites two or more people together into one. And peace is that which creates the bond. Peace. Blessed, blessed peace! Unity and peace go hand-in-hand with each other. One cannot be had without the other. Unity produces peace and peace, unity. Peace is tranquility, harmony, good order. The bond of peace is the harmony and tranquility that bind the members of the church together with one another. When there is harmony and good order among the members of the church, then there is joy in the Lord. The church becomes a beautiful place in which to live and dwell, a desirable and happy place. Why? Because there is peace there and everyone likes to have peace. Who does not like to enjoy peace and tranquility in life? The church must be that. There must be a peace that binds together the members of the church into one in unity.

But we must understand that the apostle Paul here in these verses gives a command to the church *institute*, this church in Ephesus and its members. He commands them: Walk worthy of your calling. The saints and faithful, as they live together within the confines of the church institute, are given this command in order that by it they might endeavor to keep the unity of the Spirit and the bond of peace. But why does the church institute receive such a command if the church is a unit already? If all those who are in Christ are members of His body and fulfill the will of their Head, why must we endeavor to keep that unity?

Because, dear listener, such unity does not come naturally to the members of the church. You see, ever since the fall of man into sin, there is one vice, one particular evil that characterizes every member of the human race: pride. Man is inclined toward self-exaltation, self-centeredness, and self-pleasing. Such pride is the root cause of contention and strife. Pride produces in man all kinds of other sins and wickedness. The proud man thinks he knows it all, that he is the epitome of truth and right. The proud man is quick to speak evil of his neighbor to others. One who is proud is quick to feel sorry for himself when he thinks he is being wronged. A proud man is rough and merciless in his dealing with others. He is not patient with others, willing to give them the benefit of the doubt. Arrogance and haughtiness come out in his demeanor and dealings with others. He is not willing to live in peace and love when there are differences of opinion. He is standoffish and judgmental. He seeks himself and his own and is easily provoked. A proud man is quick to think evil of another and to shun him.

Pride is a horrible thing, my friends. And every man, by nature, is characterized by it. God's people are not immune to this sin simply by virtue of their salvation. I wish we were! There would then be no reason for the admonition of this verse.

The result of such pride in the church is division and strife. It interrupts the unity and peace of the congregation. Instead of there being unity amidst diversity, there is emulation and wrath and strife and divisions and even schism. Paul addresses these sins numerous times in every one of his letters. The church institute that is characterized by this to one degree or another is not a very pretty church. When members of a church are constantly criticizing one another, or the church itself, and when they in anger argue with each other, they do not display unity and peace. On the contrary, there is a certain negativism that infiltrates the whole church. The zeal and enthusiasm of the saints in the gospel wanes. The church loses its joy and harmony. It loses its blessed peace, where people desire to come out for a little while just to rest.

For this reason, God's saints are called to endeavor to keep the unity. We are called to exert ourselves with all that is in us to keep peace in the church. There are ways, you know, that make for peace. There are avenues that we can walk that will guard carefully the unity of the church. Well, we are to give our diligence. Strive to attend to those ways that will make for unity.

Here is the gift God gives His people in Christ: peace. Here is the gift He gives His church: unity. These are wonderful gifts. These are precious gifts. But they are so fragile. So the command: take care of these gifts. Keep them. Guard the unity and peace of the church carefully. Do not let them slip away because of the sin and pride found in your sinful flesh. Watch your tongue. Guard your actions. Hold in check your thoughts. Keep the peace—even when there is controversy in the church, which there is going to be.

There is a way to keep the peace. But when there is difference of opinion or controversy, the worst comes out in us because pride is thin-skinned. It is so easily hurt and it is so quick to take offense. It is so sensitive. For that reason pride is so quick to retaliate: "What can I do to hurt the next guy? What can I do to show everyone that I have been hurt? Somehow, some way, I will justify myself and show that I'm not the one in the wrong here."

No! That is when we must strive the harder to maintain the peace of the church. That is when we must insist that the harmony of the church, the unity that belongs there, may not be hurt. We guard it and keep it. No matter what the cost. Even if that means that we let heresy win the day? Heresy and wickedness may never win the day in the church. But there is a way of

dealing even with these and still makes for peace in the church. And Paul says now: “Follow that way. Love the church and love the unity of the Spirit there.”

Paul prescribes for us also the manner in which we are to endeavor to keep the unity of the church in these verses. That is given us specifically in verse 2: “With all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love.” When the members of the church are characterized by the virtues mentioned in these verses, then the result will be unity and peace in the church. That means, of course, that all the vices and sins that stand contrary to these virtues must be shed from us each day, while we cloth ourselves with these virtues. The chief virtue that needs to be guarded and kept is that of humility.

Ah, the opposite of pride—humility. It requires a deep sense of one’s own littleness and unworthiness. Literally it is translated lowliness of mind. This virtue reveals itself to others only when we have a humble opinion of ourselves. One who is humble knows his own unworthiness and his own littleness in comparison to God. He, in faith, acknowledges how great is his Creator and how small a creature he is in comparison to God.

In faith, he understands, too, that he is not even worthy to stand in the sight of a holy God. So, humility is confessing with Paul that when I compare myself to my fellow believers, then I can say of myself that I am the chief of sinners. A humble man sees his need for the cross and the redeeming work of Jesus Christ. That is where humility begins. If we know ourselves to be the chief of sinners, then certainly we also confess that we are less than the least of all the saints. How dare I raise my eyes in pride over someone else in the church when I know who I am—the chief of sinners? How presumptuous I would be to think of myself more highly than another if I truly believe, like Paul, that I *am* the least of all saints.

With that virtue must be found her twin: meekness. Humility and meekness are the “peanut butter and jelly,” the “soup and sandwich” of virtues. One cannot be had without the other. When one is humble, then he is also meek. To be meek is to esteem our brother or sister more highly than ourselves. It is the willingness to put the name and the welfare of someone else above that of our own name. The result of meekness is gentleness and kindness. In other words, what characterizes us within shows itself to others in how we deal with them. Humility is an inner disposition of the heart. Meekness is the resultant action—the ability to speak kindly and gently to others. When we are meek we bolster another person. We are ready to encourage others rather than cutting them down. We suffer someone to hurt us without, in pride, retaliating. Such meekness Jesus exhibited when He was reviled on the cross and He reviled not again. This, too, we must endeavor to walk in if we are to keep the unity and keep the peace. No grudges, no vengeance, no anger.

These virtues of humility and meekness form the foundation for the next two virtues. We must be longsuffering and forbear one another in love. Every member must exercise himself or herself with longsuffering, first of all. This word means, as it looks, to suffer long when put to hurts and misfortunes. When there are insults and injuries aimed at you, then suffer them. Persevere patiently without retaliation. Do not become discouraged or lose heart. Longsuffering is a tough virtue to exercise. When we are hurt, the natural reaction is to hurt back, certainly not to suffer long with the sins and weaknesses of others.

Then there is the twin sister of longsuffering: forbearance. Without letting up, Paul gives us another double-dose. This literally means to hold oneself erect. The idea is that we stand up straight when others pour out upon us contempt and scorn. Because we love the church so much,

and because we love our fellow members in the church, we do what is best for the fellow saint. Even if that means sustaining or bearing the insult or injury he would aim at us.

Is anyone listening here today able to fulfill such virtues in our dealings with fellow saints in the church? Anyone here free of pride? Anyone here able to act in these ways to our fellow saints? There are a few, but they are rare exceptions who are characterized by these virtues. Blessed is that person who is. The point is, do we see how much we must love the church? Not only are we called to *join* the church, but we are to *love* the church. Do you see how much we ought even to sacrifice ourselves for the unity of the church of Jesus Christ in this world and for the peace of Zion? Are we willing to be defamed and hurt because we love the church? Are we willing to keep silence and positively defend our brothers and sisters in the Lord because we love the church? Not because we are such grand and noble people, but because we love the church. We love God's people. We have cast our lot with them in this world.

“For sake of friends and kindred dear, my heart's desire is Zion's peace; and for the house of God, the Lord, my loving care shall never cease” (Psalter 350). That is why we guard ourselves and seek to be characterized by the virtues here in this word of God before us.

In the first verse of this chapter we are given the incentive to do so. Paul beseeches the members of the church in Ephesus. That word “beseech” means simply that Paul entreats or encourages the members of the church in Ephesus to walk worthy of their calling. This is not a harsh rebuke. The members in the Ephesian church, we read, are characterized by their first love. So Paul entreats them: walk worthy of your calling. But in this command we find the incentive to endeavor to keep the unity of the church. True members of the church of Christ have been called by Christ. They are believers. They have been called out of the darkness of sin and into God's light. They have been called out of death and into life. That is the “vocation” that is referred to here. It is our spiritual call and the fervent effectual call by which we have been saved. In other words, the incentive to keep the peace of the church is the very salvation believers have received in Christ. They are not of this world anymore. We belong to Christ. We are living members of His body. What a privilege. We are called by God's grace. Well then, Paul says, walk worthy of that calling.

There it is. Walk in your place in the church and do so suitably, in a manner that is worthy of Christ. Grow and progress in grace and love. Do this as you walk with God's saints. This can be done only when there is peace and unity in the church.

How much are you and I striving to avoid pride, envy, and self-seeking? How humble are we? Have we cast in our all with the church? How do we view our lives in the church where we are members? God give us grace to keep the unity of the church and pray for the peace of Zion.

Let us pray.

O Lord our God and heavenly Father, we are thankful for Zion, Thy church. May we endeavor to put aside our own sin and to walk in unity and peace with our fellow saints. Where we have failed, Father, forgive us and give us the strength now to go forward and endeavor to keep the unity. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

November 11, 2012
No. 3645

The Gift of Pastors and Teachers
Rev. Wilbur Bruinsma

Dear Radio Friends,

Every age has seen its share of self-appointed, self-proclaimed teachers. There is no exception to that in the days in which we live. The cults today are based upon the teachings of men who claim special revelation. There are hundreds of para-church organizations all of which claim the support of a wide variety of churches but are under the authority of none. Many claim to be authoritative teachers of the Bible though they have received no authority from the church and therefore from Christ. Many are swept along by their teachings, too. People are no longer interested, it seems, in whether Christ's authority is represented by those who teach. People have itching ears, always desiring to hear something new and different. They heap unto themselves teachers who have little learning in God's Word, but who give them exactly what they desire to hear. The end result is that people are tossed about by every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men and cunning craftiness whereby they lie in wait to deceive.

The Word of God in the chapter before us warns the church against teachers and preachers who claim authority to themselves but have none. In today's broadcast, we consider Ephesians 4:11 and 12. These verses read:

And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.

Paul plainly points out to us in these verses those whom God ordains to teach His Word to God's people. We must therefore look to the church where we are members to instruct us in all that is necessary for faith and walk.

There is nothing in the church of Christ that destroys the blessed unity and the bond of peace more than when certain members rise up in pride and attempt to make themselves equals with the officebearers in the church. The unity of the church as institute is ruined when men or women in the church set themselves up as teachers and oppose the office Christ has ordained in the church for their welfare.

This is not to say that members of the church must blindly follow after what is taught them or not examine it against the rule of Scripture. But it is to say that even when opposing a heretic in the pulpit, a member may not make of himself something he was not called by the church to be. Let us consider the Word of God in this passage in this whole matter.

Before examining the lists of offices given us in Ephesians 4:11, we need to review the profound reality of the church. You see, the church is defined for us again here in verse 12 as the body of Christ. The church, as a whole, is one body—a blessed unity. However, as we well know, a body is made up of individual members. The same is true of the church. Those chosen in Christ and saved in His blood make up the individual members of that body. As such, they each have their own function. Paul writes in verse 7: "But unto every one of us is given grace

according to the measure of the gift of Christ.” Every believing member of the church has gifts and talents that are to be used on behalf of the body. As a result, the members of the church function in perfect harmony, in blessed unity with one another.

This is true of the members of the church because all of them share one thing in common: faith. They have one faith that has been worked in them by one Spirit, the Spirit of their one God and Father. Faith is itself that gift of God by which God, in His grace, grafts each of us into Jesus Christ, that as a result we become one body with Christ. It is that faith that not only unites us together with Christ, but also binds us in peace with one another. All believers share in a blessed unity with each other. And we express that unity as we live together and worship together as fellow saints in the church.

But in order to keep the unity of the church we ought to realize something more about that church. God has given certain members official functions in the body, functions they perform on behalf of the church by serving in particular offices to which they are chosen by the church. These functions we may not simply assume to ourselves. These duties are given by Christ to specific men called by the church. You see, Christ does everything decently and in good order in His church. Paul writes of that in I Corinthians 14:33. That is the point that Paul makes in Ephesians 4 too. Christ stands at the head of the church. He is ascended into highest glory to rule over His body, the church. From heaven, Christ gives grace to each member to perform his or her particular task in the church. To some men within the church Christ has given the task to teach and to lead His people. That is their particular calling. Christ bestows on certain men, as they are called by the church itself, His authority. Christ also equips them for that particular office in the church. Their function is to perfect the saints.

As believers in the body of Jesus Christ in this world, we must recognize the work of these men in our lives and in the church. We make use of them in order that we might be instructed and led in the ways of God. They are, after all, given to the church by Christ Himself, we are told in verse 11. Notice: “And [Christ] gave some.” The men listed here in this verse are a gift of Christ to His church. And as such, Christ expects us to use them in order that we might be perfected as saints.

Who are these men? Paul makes reference to apostles, prophets, evangelists, and, finally, to pastors and teachers—four offices of men who serve and have served in the church. All of these were and are called for one specific purpose: to teach the Word of God to God’s people. There is listed here, first of all, the apostles themselves. This is a specific reference to the twelve apostles, including Paul. These men were called by Jesus Christ Himself for the benefit of the church. However, their office and work was a temporary one. According to Ephesians 2:20, God used the apostles specifically to establish His Word and lay the foundation of the New Testament church. That was their particular function in the body of Christ. By means of preaching and teaching, by means of their letters (inspired by God), the apostles were used by Christ to establish the faith and unity of the church, the foundation of the church.

The next office of men to which our text refers is that of the prophets. This group of men does not refer to the Old Testament prophets, since Paul is speaking in our text here in Ephesians of the New Testament church. There were men called prophets in the early church. We learn of these men in Acts and Corinthians and in a few other passages of the New Testament Scriptures. These prophets served the church in a different capacity than the apostles. These men were members of the church, called by the church, because they were especially gifted by God to explain to the New Testament church the Old Testament Scriptures—especially as they now had

been fulfilled by Christ. There were also just a few men left out of the Old Testament church to whom God gave special revelations of future events. Otherwise this was no longer true of the New Testament prophets. They had the gift of explaining the fulfillment of Old Testament Scriptures. They knew the Old Testament Scriptures and, it seems, God endowed them with the special gift of being able to explain these Scriptures in New Testament terms. Obviously, this office was destined by God to disappear, too, just as the office of the apostles. Once the church of the New Testament understood the relationship between the Old and the New, then the pastors and teachers assumed this role of the prophets.

The third office referred to in verse 11 is that of the evangelist. An evangelist was closely allied to the office of the apostle, although, once again, they held an inferior rank to that of the apostles. The work that God appointed them was auxiliary to that of the apostles. These men were chosen by the apostles themselves to go out and preach the gospel in new places. They served almost in the same capacity as do our missionaries today. But they were authorized by the apostles to do so. Once again, their office was destined to end. When the apostles died, then there was no longer anyone who could authorize such an evangelist to preach. This office, too, therefore, was simply replaced by that of the pastor and teacher who carried on the work of preaching to those inside of the church and also, as an evangelist, to those outside of the church.

That brings us, then, to that final office that is mentioned here in these verses—that of pastor and teacher. These two are, quite obviously, not two separate offices. Paul lists these two under the same article and, therefore, they refer to the same office. The pastor and teacher is synonymous with the office of the minister of the gospel as we refer to it today. Or, perhaps, we might just simply call him the preacher.

This office of the church has continued until our present day and, probably, will keep on serving its function until Christ comes again. The reason for this is clear from Scripture. We learn in various places of Scripture that the pastor and teacher is one who is called and sent by the church. This was not true of the prophets or evangelists or, for sure, the apostles. Christ appointed the apostles. The apostles appointed the evangelists. The prophets were just members called by certain churches who were allowed to explain a prophecy to their congregation because of the gift that had been given them. But, as time passed, the functions of all of these were absorbed into the office of the pastor and teacher, since he was continually being trained and called and ordained by the church for that particular work. So it is that the pastor and teacher is the one office that has continued until present time.

And today, this Word of God is important to you and to me as regards this particular office. Christ has given to His church today pastors and teachers. These men Christ has called through His church. And they now function on behalf of the church as the God-ordained means by which we are instructed.

Then this brings us to the purpose Christ has given these men to the church. This is related to us in verse 12. The purpose is this: for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.

Christ gives to His church pastors and teachers for the perfecting of the saints. That is the particular function they serve in the church. You and I are saints. That is how Paul refers to us here. That means that we are those who are sanctified in the blood of Christ so that we are holy in Him; we are cleansed from the corruption of sin. Christ accomplished this work for you and for me on the cross. He killed sin and its power. He crushed the hold of Satan, and set us free

from the bondage of sin. Now, we who are believers are holy, the servants of righteousness. That work of Christ has made us saints. But that we are saints does not mean that we are no longer sinners. We are! We still have within us that old man of sin, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts. We are, therefore, far from perfect, far from complete as far as our holiness is concerned.

For that reason Christ has given you and me pastors and teachers, for the perfecting of the saints. So long as we are in this life, we are called to obey God, to grow in our life of sanctification or in our life of holiness. We have lots to learn, do we not, about being holy? And we also have setbacks along the way. We stumble, we stray from the way of sanctification. And for that reason Christ has called and ordained in the church certain men to lead us, admonish us, instruct us in the way of sanctification. We need a certain spiritual adjustment along the way. We need, oftentimes, to re-route our life in order to get back into that walk of holiness. And God has given pastors and teachers to His church in order to admonish and instruct us to do that. How do they perfect the saints? By being pastors and teachers.

Pastor means, literally, a shepherd. A minister of the gospel is a shepherd, and he functions this way in the church by going in and out among the sheep of Christ, counseling them, leading them with God's Word. He goes into their homes and brings them the Word of God in their particular weaknesses and needs. He comforts them when they are sick or dying. He instructs them when they walk down the wrong pathway. He admonishes them when they stubbornly walk in sin. And he does this always using the Word of God. He is a pastor. He loves his sheep as Christ loves His sheep. And it is his desire, above all else, to keep his sheep from straying into the wilds of sin, there to be devoured by the world. That is what you and I are to see in the pastors God has given to His church.

What is more, you must look to the minister of the gospel as the one called to serve not only as pastor but teacher. The pastor is also a teacher. He is called and ordained by Christ in the church to teach God's people God's Word. Because we are sinful saints, we need to be instructed in God's Word. We must learn the doctrines of salvation and we must learn how to apply them to our lives. God has ordained ministers of the gospel to serve that function in our lives, too. They thoroughly prepare themselves in school to be able rightly to divide the Word of truth. They devote their lives solely to reading and study of God's Word. They seek to understand the Scriptures. They mine the truths of God's Word. And they serve the function in the church to teach officially, on behalf of Christ, the Word of God to God's people. Neither may any usurp that office and deem himself more capable of doing that than the minister. Nor may the teacher in the church neglect the work of the ministry or the truth of the Scriptures in all of his teaching.

Now, when this perfecting of the saints is performed through the office of pastor and teacher, the result will be that the saints will serve one another. The next phrase of verse 12 is not parallel with the first one. This next phrase does not refer to the work of the pastor and teacher. It refers to the function of the members of the church. Christ, through the pastor, perfects the saints for the saints' work of ministry. Literally, this phrase means the work of service. When a person ministers to someone else, he is serving them. This is the idea expressed in this phrase in this passage, too. The preaching must perfect the saints for this end—that the saints may better serve one another in the church and serve Christ outside of the church by means of their witness. We are led by the pastor and taught by the teacher in order that we might learn better how to serve within the organism of the body of Christ.

When we learn to serve in that body, using the gifts Christ has given us, then the unity of the church and the bond of peace will prevail in the church. When this happens, then the proper edifying of the body of Christ will take place. That is what we learn in the last phrase of verse 12, where it speaks of edifying the body of Christ. That is, after all, the end or goal of the work of pastors and teachers, that through their labors the church will be edified, again, literally, built up. Christ sends forth men into His church to lead, direct, and teach the members of the church how to serve the church in this world.

As a result, that church grows in strength and in grace; God adds to the church by means of the witness of her members to others outside of the church; and the church becomes stronger in her faith and in her knowledge of God. The church becomes more mature, able to withstand the wiles of the devil and to fight the warfare of faith. When this work is performed in the church institute (the preaching of the Word, to saints who are willing to hear that word and live that word), then those saints will grow spiritually stronger and will be bold to stand together for the cause of Christ in this world. The church will grow stronger in the unity of the body of Christ and the bond of peace.

All this has some very practical applications for our lives, too, that we want to touch on just for a moment. This is the way Christ has chosen to strengthen His church—by means of these offices. These are the men we are to use to be led and taught in matters that pertain to our spiritual lives. And we, as sheep, ought not be led astray by others who would usurp the authority of a pastor and teacher to themselves. Notice that a pastor is a shepherd. That means that he is the under-shepherd of Christ, who is the Chief Shepherd. The under-shepherd who leads us into God's Word loves us as Christ loves us. And he is concerned for our souls more than any other. We as sheep must not think that the grass is greener on the other side of the fence. We need not follow after many teachers or assume to ourselves the role of a teacher in things spiritual when Christ chooses to teach us by means of teachers He has ordained and sent.

And that comes as a warning to pastors and teachers, too. They had better feed the church of Jesus Christ. They had better feed it on the Word of God, and nothing else.

Believing member of the church, do you hear God's Word being taught in truth from week to week? Is God's Word being rightly divided? Then in your church you must seek spiritual advice. In the church you must learn of the Scriptures and how they apply to your everyday life. Do not despise what Christ gives His church. Take heed to the preaching. It is the gospel unto salvation. Then we will be fit for holy service in the church. Then the whole body, fitly framed together, makes increase of the body to the edifying of itself in love. In that we find the unity of the church.

Let us pray.

Father in heaven, again we come before Thee to thank Thee for Thy Word, a Word that Thou hast given into the hands of pastors and teachers to preach to us. May we be happy that we can be fed by Jesus Christ our Shepherd. Forgive us of our sins of this day. Guide us according to that Word that we hear and that we can study for ourselves. For Jesus' sake we pray, Amen.

THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

November 18, 2012 Every Creature Received with Thanks
No. 3646 Rev. Wilbur Bruinsma

Dear Radio Friends,

Another Thanksgiving Day is upon us. There are those who live for holidays of this sort. They do not really care about the reason for the holiday; they just enjoy spending time seeking earthly pleasure and relaxation. And the same is true with Thanksgiving Day. For all the hype of the season, there are precious few who use this holiday for the intent that it originally was established. It was established as a day that we give God thanks for the harvest of food that He once again has provided for us in the season, gone by.

But then, the unbeliever really has none truly to whom he can give thanks. He does not believe in God. So he may thank some people. He may have this feeling that he calls thankfulness. But that is as far as it goes. For the most part, thankfulness is not a part of the season with the unbelieving world. It is just another time to get off work and have a good time.

For believers, on the other hand, this is a special time of year. Thanksgiving is a necessary part of the life of the child of God. We are a thankful people. It was for that end that God chose and saved us—to be a people of thanks—and that, through our thanks, God might glorify His own name. That thanks we must bring to God every day in our prayers. That thanks we must bring before God as families in our family worship. That thanks we now have opportunity to bring on a special day of the year.

For that reason this is a special time for us. The passage we chose to speak on in today's broadcast teaches us how we are to view this creation. We read in I Timothy 4:4, 5:

For every creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving: for it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer.

This Word of God teaches us about the creatures of God's hands and our use of them. It does so in contradiction to the attitude of those who believe this creation is inherently evil. At the same time, we are taught of the relationship of this creation also to our giving of thanks. We wish to examine, therefore, how we are to view this creation and how we must sanctify what we are given out of it by means of our thanksgiving.

Paul states a simple truth in these verses of I Timothy 4. "Every creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused." It is over this simple statement, however, that there seems to be much confusion. For example, because God gives good things to the wicked man, it is thought that God's attitude is that of favor toward that wicked man. Who can deny that the wicked, unbelieving man in this past season of the year received rain and sunshine and, in many cases anyway, good crops from the hand of God, and that these creatures of God's hands are good? Who can deny that the unbeliever as well as the believer receives an abundance of harvest year after year in our land? This harvest of plenty is a good gift of God because all creatures of God's hands *are* good.

But people then confuse these good gifts of God's hand with God's grace, or His attitude of favor. That ought not to be the case, however. God does not love the wicked and never smiles

upon him in His favor. The provision wicked man receives is given him only in God's general care over His creation. And since wicked man uses these good gifts to serve himself and not God, the good things of this creation serve only to condemn him, not to bless him.

But the fact does remain, that every creature is a creature of God and is good and is nothing to be refused. Bounties of the field we will eat on Thanksgiving Day in celebration of the harvest this year are good. The harvest of this year again has been good. But then, every creature is good, not just our food. For example, the transportation we are given by God is good; the houses we are given by Him to own are good. Even the riches and comforts of this world are good. Everything man has made is good and nothing, therefore, to be refused.

But there were those in Paul's day, and still are in our day, who believed either that everything earthly and material was inherently evil, or that there were certain foods and certain institutions that were evil in themselves. It is obvious from verses 1-3 of I Timothy 4 that there were those who believed that way. We notice "in the latter times some shall depart from the faith...speaking lies in hypocrisy;...forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats, which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth." These heretics in the church taught God's people that such institutions as marriage, though perhaps necessary, were inherently evil. They taught that there were certain meats that were in themselves sinful meats, so that to eat these meats involved a person in sin. Those who went to an extreme were those who believed that earthly matter, or anything physical, was evil. The child of God must, therefore, seek in every way possible to flee the things of this present life and devote his life entirely to the spiritual. One could not enjoy this earthly creation at all because to do so was sin and was not being spiritually minded.

Such a view of this creation is oftentimes heard yet today. For example, there are those who teach that the fourth petition of the Lord's Prayer, "Give us this day our daily bread," does not refer to earthly bread. To pray for earthly bread is sin. We may not ask God for earthly things. We may only ask God for heavenly and spiritual things. Bread in this petition, such people teach, means Christ: "Give us Christ each day, because He is the bread of life." That is a denial of what Paul teaches Timothy here in the passage we consider.

The Amish also hold to a form of this error. Perhaps they might not say that the good gifts of God's creation are evil. But they would argue that the inventions of man, that is, what man has invented out of the good gifts of creation, are sinful. A tractor with tires is a sin. Electricity generated by the power company is sin. To drive an automobile is sin, and so on. The Amish believe that sin is found in these inventions themselves.

Over against this error of many today, as well as in Paul's day, stands the Word of God before us: "Every creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused." Why is this true of the earthly and physical realm of which we are a part? Because God created it. And God beheld everything that He made and, behold, it was very good. This is a good creation—the plants, the animals, the sun and moon and stars, and the earth in which we live are all created by the hands of Almighty God and, therefore, good. God has made this earthly realm in order to work out His eternal purpose for all things. Though it is true that the heavenly is our home, though it is true that the child of God longs for that day, nevertheless, to say that life in this world must be one of misery for us because it is nothing but sin, that is wrong. God gives to you and me the good creatures of this creation to enjoy. We may live here. And we may use these earthly gifts for our enjoyment. We may set earthly goals and strive to achieve them. God commands man to discover the laws of nature and develop this creation in the service of His name. The creation is

good and to be used, developed, and enjoyed. If this were not true, there would be no reason for thanksgiving this time of the year. This is a beautiful and a wonderful creation.

But that does bring up another matter, does it not? Has not the present creation fallen under the curse of sin? Does not the fall of man into sin result in the ruin of this present earthly creation so that, though God made everything good, nevertheless, now, after the fall, it is evil? That is a legitimate question. It forces us to take a close look at that word “good” used here by Paul.

You see, the term “good” can express two different ideas. In the first place, it can refer to good in the moral sense of the word. It is used in this way only when it refers to God’s rational, moral creatures—those to whom God gave a mind, will, and desires. For example, angels can be good or evil, and men can be good or evil. That is because the creatures of God’s hands were created to stand in a certain relationship with their Creator. Man either serves God, and then he is good, or he does not serve God, and that is evil as opposed to the good.

But that is not the way the word “good” is used here in the verse that we consider. When referring to a creature of God’s hand, an inanimate object, food, or even the inventions of man, we can call these good. We do so because, from a natural point of view, they are beneficial. They are of earthly value to us because we can use them for our life here below. They are advantageous to us, praiseworthy, reliable, pleasant. We speak of many things as good in this sense of the word. Every creature of God’s hands is good. Every creature is of value to man. Every creature can be beneficial. But this has nothing to do with moral-ethical goodness. There is no sin in a thing. There is no moral evil in nature itself. Inanimate objects are in this sense always good. There is no sin in that turkey that we are going to eat on Thanksgiving Day. There is no sin in a car or in a house. There is no sin in a television set or a DVD player. These are all inanimate objects containing no moral good or evil in themselves. Even the wicked and unbelieving man is fearfully and wonderfully made from a physical point of view. There is no fault in the creatureliness of any man.

It is on the basis that every creature of God is good and nothing to be refused that this particular command can come to us. We need not refuse any creature. Now, it is true, of course, that there are certain creatures that are not good for us physically. We would not keep a lion as a pet. We would not eat some poisonous mushroom or berry. We try our best to keep weeds out of our yards, usually. We would say that these are bad and not good creatures because they are not beneficial to us and are of no value to us. But these creatures, too, are not sinful. They are not morally evil, even though we might characterize them as bad things. But if there could be found some good use for these things, then they, too, are not to be refused us. We may use them. And all these things have a part in this creation of God.

But here is the point, friends: these things ought not to be refused *if they be received with thanksgiving*. Now we come to the important matter of this verse. All creatures are good, and we may use every creature, on condition that we give God proper thanksgiving for them.

Thanksgiving. There is that word by which this day is known: giving of thanks. What is that? It means that we express our gratitude *to God* because He is the Creator and He has given us all these things. We must express our deep appreciation to God for everything that we use in the creation. It means that in our hearts and on our lips there are expressions of praise and humble acknowledgment that God has given us all things. That is thanksgiving. And that thanksgiving must be there if we are to use the good creatures of this creation. This is true

because thanksgiving will determine how we use the good creation God gave us. That will determine how we view Thanksgiving Day. If we do not live in conscious knowledge of our Creator and the need to serve Him, then we will not and cannot use the creation aright. Neither will we determine to give God thanks each day of our lives as well as in this season of the year.

If we are not thankful to God, we will not use the good creatures in the service of His name, but we will use them only to satisfy ourselves. And then our use of these creatures becomes sin. When we are mindful that these good things are given us to serve God, then none of them need to be refused. So the sin does not lie in the things themselves. The sin lies in the way we use these things. And if we show God proper thanksgiving in our personal lives—in our homes, and in the church—then God says, “Here is My creation. Take it, use it, enjoy it. You need refuse nothing.”

That makes what Paul tells us at the very end of verse 3 true as well. God has created these things to be received with thanksgiving “of them which believe and know the truth.” Ah, yes. God has created these things to be used by believers, because it is only the believer who gives proper thanks to God for these things. Oh yes, we hear everyone say, “I’m so thankful for this and for that.” But they are not thankful to God. Even many who do say, “I thank God,” do not reveal that thankfulness at all by their confession and walk. True thankfulness flows out of a true faith. Only those who believe, Paul says, and know the truth, therefore, are truly thankful. And for that reason, only those who believe actually use the creatures of God’s hand in the right way. All others use it for their own pleasure and their own earthly enjoyment without viewing these things as a means to another end.

God’s people truly are the only ones who enjoy these earthly blessings, because we acknowledge who gave them to us and we praise and extol our God for these things. But how does merely giving God thanks make us use His creation to serve Him? Well, this giving of thanks consists in what we are told in verse 5 of the passage we consider. Thanking God is done by means of His Word and prayer. Those who truly give God thanks know the truth. They know God’s Word because they spend time in that Word. They know, therefore, what God’s Word teaches them about the proper use of the good creation God gives them. His Word teaches, for example, that we may not be drunkards, that we may not abuse alcohol, and that we may not be gluttonous, that we abuse food. His Word teaches us that a frivolous lifestyle or a life that is caught up in the pleasures and treasures of this world is wrong. God’s Word guides the child of God into a proper understanding of the use of these creatures that God gives us and, therefore, a proper way of dealing with these things. A thankful person is one who spends time with God’s Word and oftentimes thanks God by means of those passages that speak of thanksgiving. Knowing the truth is essential to giving proper thanks to God for all things.

There is also, then, that spiritual activity of prayer. We show proper thanks only by means of prayer. We enter into God’s presence and actually lay out before Him our thanks. We praise Him. We extol Him for our salvation and for the benefits of our salvation in Christ. But we also thank God for giving us all things for Christ’s sake. We thank God for our health and our strength, for our talents and our abilities, for our daily bread and our clothing and shelter. We thank Him for all the extras—the luxuries, the comforts of this life. And we sincerely request of God that He not allow us to place our affections on the things below. We ask Him to keep our eyes heavenward so that we might put all of these earthly blessings in proper perspective. In that way we thank God.

We do that in our private prayers especially. We do that in the prayers of our families. But we do that together, too, as God's saints in the worship of the church. We stand at the end of another plentiful year. We may not forget that what we have again received has come from God's almighty hand.

So we give thanks, sincere and proper thanks to God in worship and in prayer, thanking Him also for His Word to guide us.

But how will this guide us into the proper use of the possessions that God has given us? When I give thanks to God in prayer, knowing what His Word teaches me, then the food and the drink I use will be sanctified. That is to say, I will consecrate them to God. Then, when I turn on my TV set or pop a DVD into the player I will consecrate what I watch and enjoy to the service of God. And if I cannot do that, I will turn off the television set. It is not an easy thing for a child of God, having just watched a movie filled with the sins of this world, to thank God for that movie, is it? I do not think a child of God would be able to thank God for that lounge or bar where he sits listening to ungodly music, drinking with those who blaspheme God's name, and overindulging in strong drink.

Nothing is to be refused, if it is sanctified with thanksgiving. Thanksgiving will determine the sanctified use of the creatures of God's hands. Are we truly a thankful people? Does God's Word and our prayers of thanks determine our use of God's creation? In everything, in *everything*, give thanks. Let that thanksgiving determine how we use God's good gifts that He has given us in this life.

Then God's name will truly be praised. Not just today, but every day among us.

Let us pray.

Our gracious heavenly God and our Father in heaven, we thank Thee for all things that Thou hast given us in Christ Jesus. And we are thankful that in this time of the year we have a time to lift up our voices in praise and thanksgiving unto Thee. Make us more and more a thankful people. And may that thanks determine how we live in this life, too, that certainly we might be a people that praise Thy great and glorious name. For Jesus' sake we pray these things, Amen.

THE REFORMED WITNESS HOUR

November 25, 2012
No. 3647

Proper Behavior in the Church
Rev. Wilbur Bruinsma

Dear Radio Friends,

With chapter 3 of the epistle to the Ephesians, Paul concludes his development of the doctrine of the church. The instructional part of his letter is completed. But this does not mean that Paul has nothing more to say about the church. Beginning with chapter 4, Paul begins the section of this letter dealing with the application of the truth concerning the church. We receive a series of exhortations here in Ephesians on how we, as members of the church of Jesus Christ, must behave toward one another in the church.

All of this is based upon what we have learned up to this point in this letter of Paul. The mystery of the church is now known. The Gentiles are fellow heirs and of the same body and partakers of God's promise in Christ together with the church of the Old Testament. That church, chosen from eternity, is built upon the foundation of the prophets and apostles. Christ has established the proper offices in the church of the new dispensation in order that through the preaching of the gospel we might grow together as a body of Christ. Now the church is no more a child but has come to the stature of a full-grown man. Believers therefore need not be tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine that comes along.

On the basis of all these truths and more, we are now enjoined in the next several chapters how to behave as members of the body of Christ in this world. We must put away lying and speak the truth to one another. We must never let the sun go down upon our anger toward another. We must not give place to the devil. We must not steal but labor in order to buy the things that we need. No corrupt communication ought to come from our mouths, but only that which will edify the neighbor. We may not grieve the Holy Spirit by means of filthy or unkind talk.

That last of these admonitions given here in chapter 4 of Ephesians is found in verses 31 and 32. And these are the two verses that we intend to consider in our broadcast today. They read:

Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice: and be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you.

This admonition teaches us how we are to behave towards one another as fellow members in the body of Christ. If we are members one of another, endeavoring to keep the unity, then this is how we are to do it.

One cannot help but notice to whom the instruction of these verses is addressed. Paul does not write to people who call themselves believers but who will not have anything to do with the church institute. Paul admonishes people who *are* a part of and members in that church that was organized in the city of Ephesus. This letter is not written to a person who sits in his house refusing to join himself to a church yet reads this letter as if he is able and as if he may apply this to himself without being a part of the church. Paul speaks here to people who together are

members in a church institute and, therefore, stand in a close relationship to each other. In these verses and the surrounding ones Paul admonishes how we are to behave together within the realm of that church.

The admonition that he gives has two sides to it: negative and positive. One is the flipside of the other.

What we have in verse 31 is the negative side, that is, what must not characterize us. We read there: “Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice.” There are five terms used here: bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking. What is not evident in the translation is that these words work toward a climax. It becomes clearer when we translate these words as such: bitterness, agitation, anger, yelling, and blasphemy.

Bitterness is the first because bitterness is rooted in the heart. When something is bitter to the taste it is not merely distasteful but intensely so. When Paul speaks of bitterness, he speaks of bitterness that arises in a person’s heart and soul. One who has turned bitter inside is filled with intense animosity toward another. One is filled with reproach. He is filled with ill-will or even hostility toward another. God’s Word says that this is a vice; this is a sin that ought never to characterize us in our relationship with others in the church. This bitterness is the root of many a problem in the church.

We come from different backgrounds and express oftentimes different opinions. Not everyone in the church has the sweetest personality. Each of us has his own peculiar quirks. Each of us has his own likes and dislikes. What is worse, each of us has his own pet sins—the sins of personality that reveal themselves oftentimes in our words and actions. What happens in the church is that the various members of the church can become hurt or even offended at times with the words or actions of another. Rather than simply shrugging it off, they allow themselves to become bitter toward another. They begin to harbor ill feelings or even hostility toward another.

When such sin is conceived in us it develops into agitation. The King James here uses the word “wrath,” but agitated is more accurate. We become exasperated by what another is saying or doing. To put it in down-to-earth terms, our blood begins to boil. We get ticked off at that fellow member in the church. Mind you, this is still below the level of outward actions. This agitation is going on in our minds. We are not thinking very sweet thoughts about another person.

If this agitation is not controlled, however, it will then break loose into outward action. We will become angry (there’s the third word) at another person. In other words, we will now show this member that we are agitated by saying something that was better off left unsaid. All the hostile and bitter thoughts we have of that person will reveal themselves in an open show of anger.

And if this anger is not held in check, then it will reveal itself in clamor or, better, in yelling at the person (there is the fourth word Paul uses). How often that has happened in the church, too. Two members are not only angry and show their hostility toward one another, but it results in a quarrel between the two. Two saints who are of the same household of faith, who are both members of Christ, actually, sad to say, start yelling at each other. And both go home deeply hurt and offended, so much so that it is almost impossible for them to come to the table of the

Lord and partake of communion with each other. Such behavior in the church among fellow saints is forbidden. And it is so because it is sin.

The last step is that of evil-speaking. Actually the word used here in the Greek is “blasphemy.” When yelling begins, a person can be given over to foul language or, worse, cursing and swearing. So when bitterness is conceived it produces agitation, which in turn produces anger, thus resulting in yelling and then blasphemy—all expressions, mind you, of our sinful flesh, our sinful nature.

The command of Scripture here is this: Put all of these, together with all malice, away. Those two simple words, “put away,” are rather telling in the original language. They mean to “lift up for the purpose of casting away.” And the idea expressed is that these vices are not so easy, really, to cast off from us. They are a part of our sinful flesh. They cling to us oftentimes as a part of our own particular nature. They are who we are, sad to say. So the Word of God says here: lift them up (as heavy as they might be) and throw them away! As difficult as they might be to cast off, do it! Put them away. And that, together will all malice, that is, with all the baseness of our character. That is what malice refers to here—all morally inferior or base behavior. Take the base corrupt vices of your sinful flesh and put them away, throw them away from you. That is our calling from a negative point of view.

From a positive point of view and, therefore, the antidote for the negative, Paul instructs us how we are to behave properly in the church. This is found in verse 32: “And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you.”

Ah, yes, kindness. That is the exact opposite of bitterness. It basically means mild-mannered or pleasant. We must be pleasant and kind in our attitude toward our fellow saints, easy to get along with, approachable, friendly. Not just to one member or a few members, but to all members of the church. There are those in the church, of course, that are willing to show this to some of the other members since they like or prefer them over others. But when it comes to those whom they do not particularly care for, they are harsh and impatient and at times even snobbish. The command here is that we must be kind to everyone in the church. It must show in our demeanor. It must be carried through in our actions.

And this, Paul says, must be coupled with tenderheartedness. We must be tenderhearted. A synonym of this word is “compassionate.” We must be able to feel sympathy or empathy for others in their need or when someone is hurting. Again, it is easy to be cold and callous when it comes to the feelings of others. We can say things without thinking of what the effect might have on others and what they think. The Scriptures here enjoin us to put ourselves in the shoes of other people. We can have bad days. And this can often affect us in our own outlook on life from one day to the next. Well, others can have a bad day, too. And we must be sensitive to the feelings, the hurts, the hardships that others bear and be ready to build them up and encourage them. Life in this old world is not easy, after all. God’s saints must be there to help each other through with compassion toward each other.

Then, finally, and this is the tough one, we must always be ready and willing to forgive one another. Yes, even if they do not ask us to forgive them.

Now, I am not trying to soft-soap sin here. When a person is openly and rebelliously walking in the way of sin against us and God, then forgiveness is given by way of repentance. After all, we are enjoined here to forgive as God forgives. And God forgives those whom He does according to strictest justice.

We are not talking about these heinous sins into which some can fall in the church. We are talking about the everyday nitty-gritty life within the church of Jesus Christ. We are all sinners. We all have, as I mentioned, our quirks, our oddities, our weaknesses of nature, and even our own sins. There are those in the church with strong-willed natures who do hurt us and who always seem to be carrying a grudge. There are those who, without much thought, can make a sharp remark that offends us or makes us angry. And the easiest thing to do is to let bitterness build up inside of us. It is easy to carry a grudge back again.

The idea of this passage of God's Word is this: We know who that fellow saint is. We know his or her character. Love him or her for who he or she is. Be ready to forgive him when he says something that might sting a little bit. Do not be so quickly offended or thin-skinned and then think we have to set them straight. Let the matter slide and simply forget about it. Be ready to forgive. That covers a multitude of sins. And it makes for peace in the church.

The principle that undergirds this entire passage is this: Even as God for Christ's sake has forgiven you. I realize, of course, that Paul writes this in connection with the last phrase of verse 32: forgiving one another even as God for Christ's sake has forgiven you. But think about it, fellow believers. This is the very principle that should dictate all of our behavior toward others in the church. Take a close look at what God has done for us. Who were we? What was our attitude toward God when we were lost in sin?

Paul writes of this in Romans 5: we were ungodly, we were sinners, we were enemies of God. And then think of what we did to offend God. He commanded you and me to be holy as He is holy. He commanded us to keep His commandments and to walk in His statutes. He said to you and me, "Love Me and love your neighbor." And what did we do? When we were lost in sin, what was our attitude toward God? We despised Him. And we did what we wanted to do. We walked in the way that seemed right in our own eyes. And how often we still do that, thinking that we know better than God what is right and good for ourselves. I mean, we know the commandments of God. The preaching even reminds us of those commandments (or it should). We even study them in our homes and families. But have we ever sat with those commandments and picked out that one commandment that we are so completely lousy at keeping correctly? We ignore it. We do not like to study that one. We set it aside as if God does not really mean that commandment to be numbered among the ten for us personally.

The point is, look at our attitude toward God and what we do even now. Do we understand that we deserve nothing from God but vengeance and wrath? We deserve to be the objects of God's bitterness and anger.

But God is rich in His mercy towards us. He is a God of compassion. He is merciful and tenderhearted toward His people in Christ. He understands their sin and He pities them in their misery. Listen to Psalm 103:8-14:

The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy. He will not always chide: neither will he keep his anger for ever. He hath not dealt with us after our sins; nor rewarded us according to our iniquities. For as the heaven is high above the earth, so great is his mercy toward them that fear him. As far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our transgressions from us. Like as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear him. For he knoweth our frame; he remembereth that we are dust.

There is God's attitude towards His chosen people who are saved in Christ. He is ready and He is willing to forgive us. Shameful, is it not, when we are not willing to forgive our fellow saints as our heavenly Father forgives us?

So, that really is the principle behind our behavior toward our fellow believers within the body of believers in the church of Christ. God has forgiven us. He sent His only begotten Son into this world in order to merit by His death our forgiveness. God, in His great love, has sent our Savior to fulfill all righteousness according to strictest justice. Now, when we fall upon our faces in sorrow and repentance, God does not retaliate with anger or bitterness or revenge. He is quick to forgive us and to cast our sins far from Him—as far as the east is from the west in distance.

Oh yes, this forgiveness we receive comes by way of confession. But we are forgiven. And so also must we forgive. Why? Out of thankfulness to God for the salvation *we* have received. The very power behind our being able to be kind and tenderhearted is the power of the cross. Christ has sanctified us. He has cleansed us. We are those who now live out of the principle of thankfulness before God. Put away bitterness, agitation, anger, yelling, and blasphemy. Why? Out of thankfulness to God for what He has done for us. Be kind and ready to forgive. Why? Out of gratitude for what Christ has accomplished for us on the cross. It is true that all of this takes a sanctified heart. Our sinful flesh is so strong to pull us in the other direction. But by means of the salvation earned for us, we can put aside (and maybe it will take some effort but we can put aside) the vices mentioned here by Paul. And we put on the beauty that is ours when we are compassionate, merciful, and kind.

There is a reason why we are commanded as we are in these couple of verses that we consider yet today. There is a reason for the admonitions found in all of the verses surrounding this passage. When we follow in these ways, the result will be unity. Yes, the church must be guarded against false doctrine and ungodly living. These are not to be tolerated in the church. But of extreme importance, even in maintaining the truth in confession and walk, is the unity of the church of Christ. We are reminded of how this chapter started. In verse 3 we are told that we must endeavor to keep the unity. By walking in the prescribed way of this Word of God before us, the unity of the church of Christ is maintained. No, not merely the unity of the body of Christ in general, but the unity of the church institute to which we belong. We are a community of believers, called to live together in the bond of faith. We are members one of another. And we strive with all that is in us to keep the unity of the church to which we belong by means of putting away all bitterness and being kind to one another.

When this is done, then the result is unity. Blessed unity. And when unity is found, then there is also peace. And that is the ultimate result. No benefit of keeping the command we receive in these verses is better than that. There is nothing more beautiful than the peace of Zion. We pray for her peace. In those same prayers we ask for the grace to behave properly toward one another. What a beautiful Word of God we receive here.

Fellow brothers and sisters in the Lord who are listening, how good and pleasant is the sight when brethren make it their delight to dwell in blest accord.

Let us pray together.

Most merciful God and heavenly Father, we are thankful for the church of Jesus Christ and that Thou hast called us into this world and placed us into that body of the church so that we

might join together with other believers in worship and in praise of Thy name. We know we are called upon to dwell together in peace and unity. Grant to us Thy grace and Thy Spirit that we might indeed love one another and show kindness and tenderheartedness toward one another. And where we have failed (and we all do), Father, forgive us of those sins. Go with us in this day. For Christ's sake alone do we pray, Amen.