

# Skyland Conference 1980-08 Christian Stewardship

by Stan Ford

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*The sermon emphasizes the importance of keeping the unity of the Spirit in the Christian church, and provides practical advice on how to do so, including walking worthily, walking differently, and exercising the gifts of Christ.*

**Duration:** 35:49

**Scripture:** John 7:19, Ephesians 4:1-4, Ephesians 4:17, Colossians 3:16

**Topics:** "Christian Unity", "Spiritual Growth"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the importance of unity among believers. He starts by mentioning that the book of Ephesians lifts us up to heavenly places in Christ Jesus, but also reminds us to keep our feet on the ground. The speaker then highlights the practicality of unity and how it affects our daily lives. He encourages believers to walk worthy of their calling, with humility, patience, and forbearance, in order to maintain the unity of the Spirit. The speaker concludes by reminding listeners that God provides the resources and strength necessary for believers to practice unity.

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## Transcript

It becomes very complicated, you know. All right, sir. It doesn't have electricity in it, does it? Just a little bit.

Oh, just a little. This morning we're going to consider together, as we continue our studies in Christian stewardship, we're going to consider the fact that we are stewards of the fellowship of the Spirit. Much of that which would be the background of the chapter I'm going to read, we were instructed in very ably yesterday by dear Mr. I've forgotten his name.

Ah, yes, Mr. Taylor. You know, you good folk over in America call everyone by their first names. I have to think for a moment for second names.

But I want us to turn again to the fourth chapter of Ephesians, please. Remembering we're looking at the stewardship of the fellowship of the Spirit. Our responsibility, each one as Christians, in seeking to promote the fellowship of the Spirit.

I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that you walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, with all holiness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love, endeavoring to

keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. May I read that last verse again? Endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. I think there is one thing that I need very much to emphasize this morning.

We are not exhorted to make the unity of the Spirit. That unity was made by Christ when on Calvary's cross He shed His blood for us. When we received Him as our Savior, we were brought into that mystical body of the Lord Jesus.

I know it always seems strange, but it does do us good to remember that the Word of God speaks of the body of Christ in three ways. It almost speaks as though He had three bodies. Oh no, I know that sounds almost as though I'm right off the mark.

But you will not forget that He had His material body. The body in which He moved amongst man. The body that they touched.

The body with which He touched people. There is His material body. There is, of course, His memorial body.

Yesterday we gathered around a table. Yesterday we took into our hands bread and we heard, as it were, the Word of the Lord Jesus. This is my body, broken for you.

But if there is His material body and there is His memorial body, never let us forget there is His mystical body. Not mythical body, please. Not mythical body, mystical body.

There is that great body of Christians. Look here, this jolly thing keeps getting caught up on that. That's better.

We didn't do too good a job. It always disappears. Oh, there we are.

His mystical body. And that we were made members of when we trusted Christ and it is all the work of the Lord that brought us into that body. There is a unity.

Not always recognized. But there is a unity of every believer. And many of us here today have visited maybe other places where we know no one.

And yet the moment we gather with God's people in that particular place, though sometimes we are unable to speak their language, we find a warmth that we have been drawn together, for already we are in the same body as they are. But it's a remarkable fact that while we have not to make the unity of the body, we are exhorted to keep it. And it is this, this morning, that I want to speak about.

Now occasionally I gather a crowd of people around me, young men around me in different assemblies, and we have a series of talks on preaching. Not that I know much about preaching, I just try to do it. But I do try sometimes in different assemblies to have a series of talks on preaching, on homiletics and so on.

And I always tell young men that whatever they do, they must always begin at the beginning and finish at the end. And that's rather important. That's rather important.

But you know, when I read the fourth chapter of Ephesians, it always seems to me it starts at the end and finishes at the beginning. There's one thing it does do. It makes you sit up and take notice.

You know, every now and then you see on these posters, big hoardings, don't you? You see, I noticed one in town the other day. It said something about the mountaineer's calf or something or the other. And they had written mountaineer in a most peculiar way.

I'm sure they don't do it like that in America, but it made me look at it three times. It was good advertising because it stuck out. Maybe this is why.

I know not. Maybe this is why the Spirit of God seems to start at the end and finish at the beginning. Anyway, I want to remind you first of the result.

Then I want to remind you of the reason. Then I want to remind you of the resources to keep the unity of the Spirit. Now, what is the result of a company of people who know something of the unity of the Spirit? It is extremely practical.

I tried to say yesterday, maybe not very well, but I tried to say yesterday that when we open the Word of God and we consider its wonderful truth, we know that the epistle to the Ephesians is that epistle that lifts us in heavenly places in Christ Jesus. And yet there is not an epistle that is more down to earth. It lifts us up there, but it reminds us our feet are on the ground.

And this is the whole truth. Any Christian experience that makes us feel that we know the presence of the Lord Jesus in a real way, is a Christian experience that keeps our feet on the ground. You will notice the result of keeping the unity of the Spirit.

First of all, there is a consistency of life, says verse 1. We walk worthy. Isn't that wonderful? We walk worthy. That ye walk worthy, says verse 1. How essential it is that we might realize that it is our walking, not the brother that is next to us, but our walking that counts.

And if we are going to keep the unity of the Spirit, we before God are going to say, I am going to walk worthy that no one will ever look at me. And judge the company of Christians by what they see in me in an unworthy way. All that we may walk worthy.

Would you notice we are not only called to walk worthily, but we are called to walk differently. Verse 17 of chapter 4. Why it dares to tell us this, wonderful words. This I say therefore, and testify in the Lord, that ye henceforth walk not as the Gentiles.

It isn't often we have addresses today about separation. When I was first converted, it seems to me, it was about the only thing the brethren could talk about. They were continually emphasizing the tremendous fact that our life should be a separated life.

I only know this, that I wish today we heard a little more of it. That as Christians we are exhorted not to walk as the Gentiles. And that does mean that it affects our living in a very special way.

I stepped out into what is termed, I hate the expression, but I stepped out into what is termed the work of the Lord. Very soon after I was converted. I hate the expression of course, because I don't think there is such a thing as the work of the Lord as a separate thing from Christian living.

I believe that all of us are in the work of the Lord. All of us. I remember this, that Peter went out one day fishing and made an absolute mess of it.

He came back and met the Lord Jesus. The Lord Jesus borrowed his boat, preached from it, then said, Peter, I'm going to pay you for it. Go and let down your nets for a draft.

Now who told him to go and let down his nets for the draft? The Lord told him. And when he went out fishing, he was doing what the Lord told him to do. So he was in the work of the Lord.

I don't know what you are. Are you a plumber? Never you forget, you should be a plumber for Jesus. I don't know what you are.

A housewife? You should be a housewife for Jesus. For your man as well, but for Jesus. I don't know what you are.

I only know that every one of us are called to the work of the Lord. And we are called to walk differently. Differently.

But when I first stepped out into what in general terms is called the work of the Lord, I was away from home preaching and returned home on a certain Wednesday night. It was our prayer meeting. We lived then nearer the assembly than we do now, the assembly building I mean.

And I used to pass my father-in-laws on the way to the meeting. On this particular evening I walked in and I popped in to see him before I went round to the meeting. He had the wireless on.

And he said to me, are you going to listen to the fight? I said, oh no dad, I'm going round to the prayer meeting. But the rascal had it on, with respect Mary, with respect. The rascal had it on.

And the problem was this. The heavyweight championship of Great Britain was being fought for. And my greatest friend was fighting for it.

And the man he was fighting, I'd fought. And all I can say is that I suddenly heard Barrington Dobbies say, we are here today to see the championship of Great Britain fought for. And I wasn't in the room.

I was there at Manister. I was there by the side of the ring. I could see everything that was happening.

It was my friends. And I sat and listened for 15 rounds. And I should have been speaking at the prayer meeting.

And I've asked God's forgiveness a thousand times. And suddenly I leaned back and I said, dad, that was a good fight. Of course it was.

My friend Freddie Mills had won the British championship. And I said, that was a good fight. And suddenly, ooh, I should have been at the prayer meeting.

Round the meeting I went. And they were coming out. And I had to ask the brethren's forgiveness.

Oh, they were so kind. Do you know what they said? Oh, one of them anyway. Do you know what he said? He said, oh, Sir, we thought you'd had such blessing you'd had to stay over.

And that made it worse than ever. And I learned a lesson. And do you know the lesson I learned? That there are some things which are good in themselves that there are better you don't have them.

Now, please, I'm not sitting in any judgment on anyone. I'm only saying that there is a line that you and I have to walk. And that line is to walk with Jesus.

And other things in themselves may be right. But for me, I had to finish with it completely. We walk not only worthily, but we walk differently.

And we walk affectionately, says chapter 5, verses 1 and 2. Be followers of God as dear children and walk in love. Walk in love. Oh, I don't know why I'm going back.

It doesn't do good to go back. But you know, when I was first converted and went along to the gospel, of course, I thought there was only people in the world who were folk in the gospel. I never knew anything different.

You know, I almost thought that every church building was just like the gospel. I soon found out it was wrong. But I went along, you know, and I used to sit at the back and I used to squirm.

And do you know what used to make me squirm? There I was a man, sitting down listening to a preacher, talking to men about loving one another. It was the sloppiest nonsense I'd ever listened to. The people I'd always lived with didn't talk about loving one another.

That was a language that was so mysterious. And I think sometimes you Christian folk, please, you notice I'm talking to you. I think sometimes you Christian folk forget how the man of the world reacts and lives and talks.

And sometimes our language is such that you don't have to frighten any man off. But while this may be true, and I found it very difficult for the first few years, now I find myself talking just like that. And do you know why I find myself talking like that? Because that's the way the Bible talks.

And you can do nothing better than that. We are exhorted to walk in love. In love.

And I don't think that any one of us here today need a preacher to stand up and expand what that means. We know when we've been loving and kind and gentle. We know, and we know when we haven't.

Walk worthily. Walk differently. Walk affectionately.

Walk intelligently. Verse 8 of chapter 5. Walk as children of the light. Walk as children of the light.

Oh, this is what we're exhorted to do. There is a pathway and we take the Word of God and we read it day by day, and as we read it we say, Lord, please shed some light upon the pathway. We walk intelligently.

Walking by faith does not mean that we walk unintelligently. We will notice that we will walk circumspectly, says the 15th verse of the 5th chapter. See that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools.

Oh, how easy it is for us to be foolish. What does it mean, walk as fools? Oh, I don't think it means that we must never crack a joke. I don't think it, because if it did, then we couldn't have a Skyland conference.

Oh, we couldn't. I will not pass any comment about the other speaker who is here. Not me.

I wouldn't think of doing it. Well, not much. But nevertheless, nevertheless it doesn't mean that.

My Bible dares to tell me this, the fool hath said in his heart, And if I walk as a man who knows not God, then I am walking foolishly. He says, I want you to walk. This is the resort of keeping the unity of the Spirit.

You walk worthily. You walk differently. You walk affectionately.

You walk intelligently. You walk circumspectly. And you walk courageously.

But the 11th verse of the 6th chapter tells us, To put on the whole armor of God and go out into a conflict. To be a Christian means that you've got some backbone in you. Oh, my friend, my friend, this is what the Christian church is needing today.

It is needing that those of us that know the Savior will realize it's a manly business to trust Christ. A womanly business to live for the Lord. Would you notice that if this is the resort of keeping the unity, and therefore we must ask ourselves the question, Am I, is the fellowship with which I am connected, a fellowship of brethren and sisters who are walking worthily, and differently, and affectionately, and intelligently, and circumspectly, and courageously? If we are, then praise the Lord.

But let's watch, because the old evil one will do everything he can to stop us doing that. But let's seek, strive to keep the unity. But will you notice, please, if there is a resort, there is a reason.

The reason these things should be so is because there is one body. It is because there is one Spirit. It is because there is one hope of our calling.

It is because there is one Lord, and one faith, and one baptism, and one God and Father of all in you all. In other words, the unity of the Godhead, if I may use the expression, is a unity that should be seen in the Christian church. During the past week, we had some very wonderful Bible readings in the afternoon.

And by the way, I hope you are going to be here this afternoon. We had some lovely times. The opportunity of really exercising something of Christian gift in the afternoon.

And contribution was made, and our hearts were all cheered. I felt I was instructed during the course of the week. I only know this, that we had before us the evidence of one body.

And here, we were thinking of it in the course of the week. Isn't it wonderful to know that just as the Father, and the Son, and the Spirit, one God over all, blessed forever, working in unity, and yet we saw something of the difference of their work. We saw that the work of the Spirit was not the work of the Son, and the work of the Son was not the work of the Father, and yet there was complete unity in it all.

And in the Christian church, there is one body. It doesn't mean to say that everyone is the same in the body. I am not the same as you, and I expect you are very pleased.

And do you know, well, I am not the same as you, and you are not the same as me. Isn't it wonderful when we can walk together? Walk together. This is the reason that God has brought us into this unity, and it is the unity of one body, and one Spirit, and one hope of our calling, and one Lord, etc.

But, if there is the result, and there is the reason, never let us forget that there are resources for us to practice this. God never tells a believer to do something without giving him the ability to do it. There is nothing God asks us to do without giving us the ability, the strength, making available for us the resources to do it.

And isn't it wonderful that in the church of God, there are resources available to every one of us. Verse 7 of chapter 4 says this, But unto every one of us, not just to a few, but to every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ. When we think of the fact that the Lord died on Calvary's cross to bring us into that body, He ascended into heaven, and we are told, He that ascended into heaven is the one that gave gifts unto man.

He made the unity by His death on the cross, but praise God, He is making available day by day, all the resources for our unity. How wonderful that is! You see, when I think of a Christ who is living in heaven, I remember what was said the other day, it is not only wonderful to talk about the finished work of Christ, it's wonderful to talk about the unfinished work of Christ. And part of the unfinished work of Christ is to minister to the church as it is now.

Now, He did not give gifts in the day of the Apostle Paul, and forgets to give gifts today. The church in the day of the Apostle Paul is not the church today, not the local church. They are all dead.

But hallelujah, you are not dead, you are alive. And the risen Christ is still ministering to you today, giving gifts unto men. And what gifts? He gave some to be apostles, He gave some to be prophets, and some evangelists, and some pastors, and some teachers, and oh, the wonder of it.

By the way, would you notice please, that these are titles that are given to gifts. Now, as we were reminded, these gifts are men. But the title is the title of the gift, not of the man.

I say with absolute love towards the whole church of God, please, I am not trying to make debating points, or trying to be critical. But I look in vain in my Bible for Pastor Paul, or Pastor Stephen, or Pastor Barnabas. I look in vain for Evangelist Timothy.

These are not names of people, they are names of gifts. And isn't it wonderful that they are not found in one man? Cool if they were all found in one man, he'd burst, wouldn't he? He'd burst. I mean, you imagine that God gave to one man the gift of an apostle, and the gift of a prophet, and the gift of an evangelist, and the gift of a pastor, and the gift of a teacher.

In one man? Oh, I am glad. Please. I am glad.

I thank God that I gather with the company of people I gather with, where there is an opportunity of the exercise of all gifts, not in one person, but in the whole body of Christ. I thank God for that. I might have told this story before.

If I haven't, forgive me, I should have. And if I have, I'm going to do it again. But some years ago, I was over in your country when my dear friend John Phillips was leading the correspondence school in Moody Bible College.

Because I'd known him ever since he was a little boy. I think that's the only reason, Mark here. I think that's the only reason.

He made arrangements for me to go and give a few talks on Nehemiah in Moody. And so along I went. Did the best I could.

That's all. But I was very thrilled as I went around and I listened while I was there to some of these great divines from Moody. Boy, they were thrilling.

Wonderful. I went back home. Away in the West Country, where I come from, you know, where we speak bespoke as it should be spoke.

By the way, let me make something very clear. Mary and myself are the only people here without an accent. You understand that? But I went down into the West Country again.

And in the county of Devon, where in just one little county there are about 120 assemblies, you know, where almost every little village has a gathering of God's people. But there's a little place called The Lamb. It's a pub, the Gospel Hall, and a garage, and that's all.

So you'll understand right in the heart of the country it's farming folk that come into the meeting, and it's only a small meeting. This Lord's Day morning, there were about 13 of us. We gathered around the table.

And I did something that I hardly ever do. I expect I could count on the fingers of my hands the number of times I've done it. But before the breaking of bread, I got up and ministered.

You know, I was brought up in a fellowship where you were taught you were a holy priest before the breaking of bread, and world priest after. I'll go no further. You know what I mean.

But I don't see it quite like that now, but it stuck. It stuck. And I would never minister normally before the breaking of bread, but I felt strangely moved to do so.

And I rose and we opened the Gospel of John, and we mentioned the seven miles and the 19th of John. You know, my, my, my, my. And I sat down.

And I sat down and immediately a dear brother got up, a dear farming brother. And he was as broad as a Devonshire man could be. Put his H's where no dictionary placed them.

Took them off where no dictionary took them off. And up he got and he said, I wonder if us could turn to the epistles of the Colossians. And he read his mind, his purpose, his will.

And do you know, he lifted us to heaven. He lifted us to heaven. And I came out of that morning meeting walking as you folks say over here on a cloud.

I'm not quite sure what it means, but it sounds good. I came out of that morning meeting and we walked down the little village lane and I turned to the brother that I was with and I said, brother, isn't it wonderful we were the group of Christians where that could happen? I've just come back from Moody and I've listened to some of the greatest divines in the world. And there wasn't one of them touch me like that brother touched me.

Afterwards I said to him, tell me brother, tell me, do you preach a little? What he said to me, they never asked me to preach. But he could share what Christ meant to him. And I thank God that there that day as a holy priest he ministered to our need and ministered to God Himself.

Oh my brother, my sister, whoever you may be, remember this, that every one of us are stewards and we are stewards of the unity. God grant that we may be able to see the resources that are available and accept them. You know, too many of us go.

And I say to myself, say to myself, do you know the worst listeners are preachers? Did you know that? And there are some few preachers here today. But they're the worst listeners. I have a dear friend in

Carlisle who said to me, Stan, what's an address? Well, I said, it's where you live.

He said, I'm not talking about that an address. He said, I'm talking about an address a preacher gives. I said, what's an address? You tell me.

He said an address is something that a preacher would go around the world to preach and not cross the road to listen to. There's something in that, you know. There's something in that.

And the difficulty is, most of us go to listen to preachers. And we ought to go to listen to the Lord. We ought to be going, not just to see how well He does it, but going saying, Lord, what have You got to say to me? And that's the way to keep the unity.

That's the way to go along to listen to what God has to say to us. And let's remember this, that He's called us not only to be preachers, teachers, prophets, but He's called us to be pastors. Plural, please.

Not one in a church. Not one. Plural.

Let's remember that each one of us can do that. And I've got a strong feeling you won't tell the brethren, will you sisters? Don't tell the brethren. You know, because they'd never ask me back again.

But I've got a strong feeling that lots of the pastoral work in an assembly is done by sisters. And done well. And done well.

Oh, what a wonder it is. Do you know the greatest advantage, at least the greatest thing, for a pastor to remember? And I've had to learn this. I'm not a pastor, please, but I have to do the work sometimes.

But do you know the greatest difficulty for a pastor to learn? It's to learn to listen. I found that so hard. I'd go and I'd listen to a lot of old nonsense that was being said.

You felt you could shake them. Plenty getting upset about that. But generally I found as you listened and listened and listened, some brokenheartedness would come out.

And many a time, to sit and listen for half an hour, the hardest thing for any preacher to do is the finest thing. And maybe that's why some of you sisters make good pastors, because you're used to listening to your children. Well, let's remember, these are the resources.

And he goes further, and he dares to say this, that these gifts have been given for the enrichment of believers, for the endowment of the minister, and hallelujah, for the enlightenment of the church. Oh, that each one of us today may say, Lord, we have been made stewards. We have been made stewards of the fellowship of the Spirit.

You brought us into this wonderful thing called the church. We're going to do our best, each one, to see that men and women say there's one thing about those Christians there. They're together.

Of course, please God, they don't say they're frozen together, but that there may be a warmth about our fellowship in the Lord. Shall we pray? Oh, God and Father, we long that there may be results seen in all of our lives as the result this week of our ministering one to another in so many different ways. Lord, that we might realize it isn't just from the platform, it's from the pew that the power of God is felt.

That each one of us may seek so to live out our lives that at the end of the journey we'll be able to say, I have done the best I can as a steward of the fellowship of the unity of the Spirit. For His name's sake. Amen.

Don't take the folder. Oh, I was going to walk this way. Number 295 in the red book and number 281 in the green book.

He leadeth me, oh bless us all. The first and the last stanza, please.

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