

Unity: Our Witness
John 15:1-2

As I began to study this chapter and write out this sermon, it was amazing to see the fractures that were happening in our society. There was a huge truck rally headed to Ottawa to fight the vaccine mandates for truckers. The rhetoric online was heated to say the least where some were calling on the truckers to ram the parliament buildings with their trucks. I read an online blog where someone said that they will not talk to other family members ever again, and the reason why was their vaccination status. There were people in a frenzy and angry at inflation rates. There was the threat of war in the Ukraine that came to pass. And if I could describe our society it would not be difficult. Two words that I would use is hate and division. You do not have to look too far to see the depravity of man. People try to maintain that humanity is in an upward trend but the human heart has not changed.

And then we come to the church of Jesus Christ. And we are to be a lighthouse in this dark world. We are sent into this world to make and mature disciples for the glory of Jesus Christ. And there is no way of truly accomplishing our mission if our actions and attitudes are like the world around us. Where hatred, pride and division exist in the church of Christ, people look at the church as having nothing new or nothing necessary to offer. They do not see the need of Christ. That is why individuals often change the focus of the church to draw others to the fold. They make it about politics or some social issue but they are so angry and frustrated just like the society around them. And if they speak loud enough and angry enough they draw a crowd.

But for us as believers, our mission is different. We are consumed with the mission that God has given us. Last time we were together I quoted Ephesians 4:11-13, “ **And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.**” I do not think there is any passage that gives such a clear view of the purpose of ministry and the church. God gives gifted individuals to the church. Why? Paul says, “**to equip the saints for the work of ministry.**” That is what goes on every time we hear the Word preached - we are being equipped to do the work of ministry. Not the pastor or professional but us. Then he says what we are to do in ministry, “**for the building up the body of Christ.**” We are to be involved in the construction of believers, helping conform them into the image of Christ. Well, how long do we do that? Look at verse 13, “**until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.**” Until the work is done in the hearts and lives of believers.

And think of the unity and oneness and love that this purpose creates. We are not all seeking our own agenda or own way, but that all in Christ might have the full image of Christ formed in him. This should create in us a unity in purpose, and a unity in being so that this work would continue on. Unity and peace in the church speaks of the work of God in our hearts and lives. It is evidence of his salvation and work in our lives. In that famous Old Testament passage where Jeremiah talks about the New Birth

or the New Covenant God says in Jeremiah 32:38-39, **“And they shall be my people, and I will be their God. I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear me forever, for their own good and the good of their children after them.”** Notice the one heart and one way. We evidence this to the world through the harmony and the unity and peace we have in this divisive and hate filled world. Jesus will one day establish his kingdom that will be characterized by peace and unity. The church is to be a reflection of that order in the here and now. We cannot reflect the glory of Christ without unity. We are commanded over and over throughout the New Testament to maintain or seek unity. For example, to the divisive Corinthian church, Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 1:10, **“I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment.”**

So you think this would be something that should captivate all our hearts, and should be something that we should strive for constantly in the church. But when was the last time you thought about the importance of unity? Here is the problem: we live in the church with so many different people that are so different than you are. They have the same faith and Lord, but their backgrounds, upbringing or culture, and maturity level are all different. What happens to be important to you might not be to them and vice versa. And in our sinful hearts, so I often we want to fight, rather than let love cover a multitude of sins and weaknesses. The greatest war that we will ever fight is never around us but in us. God wants us to be so taken up with who he is that we his purposes become our purposes, that we who are naturally war-makers become peacemakers. Are you a peacemaker? And with that in mind, I want us to see two things this morning that are absolutely critical if we are going to live in unity and reflect his great work in us, and seek to help others be conformed to the full stature of Christ.

1. The unity of believers requires an other-centredness. V.1.

Sin, in and of itself is very self centred. It is not God oriented or other centred. The reason why individuals sin is because they want to. The fact that it is against God or that it might hurt others is secondary to self. And we live in a world that is obsessed with pleasure and wanting what I want right now. And you can imagine what the church would look like if you have everyone looking out for self and living for self. The unity that speaks of our salvation and that truly wants others to be built up for the glory of Christ can only be accomplished if we are other centred. And if you are not other-centred the problem is not horizontal. It is not if certain people were not here or if others would just see my point of view then we could be unified and I would not be so divisive. No the problem is vertical. You want to be king. The problem is that I do not love God enough, and see his immense love for me that it causes us to love others. I am not seeing and savouring his unmerited and undeserved love that causes us to love others even in their weaknesses and foibles. You do not have a horizontal problem but a vertical problem. A lack of vertical love to God leads to self-centredness.

Now look at what Paul says here in verse 1, **“We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves.”** Now let me give you an overview of this passage so we can see how it all fits together. We have the call to unity and to be other centred in verses 1-2. Then in verse 3-4 he gives

us the example of Jesus Christ and the Psalmist, and then in verses 5-6 he prays for unity among the believers in Rome that ultimately Christ might be magnified. This is the first of five prayers in these last two chapters.

Now Paul addresses the strong in this verse, and gives instructions. The strong here includes Paul himself. And the word is used to describe the powerful or the influential or the mature. And we he says that the strong have an "obligation." And the word is "debt." It is amazing term because we never think of someone who is weaker or not as mature as us being indebted to them. But we were in that state at one time. I think in my own life some of the mixed up thoughts that I had, and how my life was up and down in my spiritual development. Sometimes God was so real and near, and sometimes he seemed so far and distant. And I can remember how patient many were to me. God had sent them into my life to have that whole process of Ephesians 4 going on to build up my soul. And there is a debt, not to pay off my salvation, but the investment of others that God used in my life. So often in times of trial and even failure God will send someone into our lives, just as this verse says, "**to bear with the failings of the weak.**" They will gently and lovingly show us the light of God's Word, his great salvation and how it interacts with our lives. We will come to see God and know God like we never have before. We have sin overcome and our lives changed. Have you had people like that in your life?

But here is what we need to see: the truth of God given to you by others is not just for your sanctification but as we grow and are changed and develop more into the stature of Christ we intentionally enter into the lives of others. Those truths give are not just for us, but have been given to us to share and help others. Right? God gives us teachers that we might do the work of ministry. We are in debt to others who are struggling and weak to enter their lives just as others entered our lives.

Here the struggles are the way that the weak think about meat or certain calendar days. Bear with it means live with it. Don't make it a big deal. Don't demand instant maturity. But also even if someone has a failing in a struggle with sin. We come alongside and help and minister. It is not demanding your own way or living for self, but loving people enough to enter into their messy lives. Listen to Paul's instruction in 2 Timothy 2:24-25, "**And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth.**" Listen to these words, even when correction has to come: not be quarrelsome, but be patient, and gentle. Do any of those words describe you?

Because there is another warning here to those who are mature. God has made you a person of influence. And because you are a person of influence you can and will have an influence on the weak. We have influence over our children, friends, extended family and church. The only question is what kind of influence? Does your life result in others loving the Lord and living in unity in his church? When we are given influence and maturity much more is required of us before the Lord. James 3:1, "**Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.**" More is required of the strong. God has blessed you with maturity. His purpose is other centred unity, patience and Christ like love shown to those who are weak. Is that what is coming out of your life?

2. In order to have unity in the church there has to be a self-forgetfulness. V.1b-2.

Self-forgetfulness is difficult. It is hard. If you think of all the things that you get angry with or the things that you even dream of, it usually has you at the centre. Most of our anger and raging against others is because of what others have done against us or how they have made us feel or how it impacts us. To forget about self, and focus on others is a difficult and learned discipline. It does not happen in a flash, but it happens through one small decision after another, to mentally and willfully when our thinking is taking us places where we ought not to go to take and put that thinking on others. Self-forgetfulness is impossible unless there is someone so extraordinary and bigger and grander and more worthy to be remembered than self. And when it is a delight and becomes a desire to think on him, and that of course is Christ. But self-forgetfulness when the emphasis is on God causes us to use the same emotional and physical energy that we used to spend on self and causes us to focus it on others. Let me ask you: does your love for God cause self-forgetfulness so much so that you can have a single-minded devotion to others?

Look at what Paul says here, **“and not to please ourselves.”** Any meaningful relationship that we have, especially in a leadership position or if we are maturer than others, will require sacrifice and giving up certain joys and pleasure that we could legitimately have so that we could love and serve the other person. Christ-like love that husbands are called to is a love that gives up for the welfare of his wife. It could be simply giving up a movie that you want to watch or just not willing to make a big deal about something. So often the trouble is: I just do not want to. We realize that when you raise children there is always effort. Many want to pay others to train their children and educate their children in the faith. And the church is to facilitate the labour and ministry going on in the home. But so often you look at neglected and struggling children and the attitude of the parent is: I just do not want to. In church, people have invested in you and have disciplined you so that you will go out and disciple others, but our attitude often is: “I just do not want to.” In other words, the chief pleasure is not the pleasure of God but the pleasure of self. This whole section beginning in chapter 14 calls us away from the consumer mentality to maturing disciples for the glory of God. If you refuse to do this; if you are looking for a church that will just please and serve you, you cannot carry out what God calls you to be and do in this passage.

Now look at what Paul says next because it is so easy to make the excuse that the instructions just given are for the strong. I am not strong, I am still in infancy and weakness in my spiritual life, and people should be pouring their lives into me. In other words, a me-centred Christianity. But look at what Paul says here, **“Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up.”** With the word “let” we realize that this is a command, calling us instead of self-focus and pleasure-centred to be other-centred. Now here is the question: who is this command directed to? Look at who it is directed to: “each one of us.” He has been talking to both the strong and weak throughout this passage, but here he addresses each and everyone, whether you are strong or weak. Whether you are a new Christian or old, whether you come with a checkered past or not. All believers are to be active in the process of maturing others for the glory of Jesus Christ. Again, notice the construction term at the end, “build up” or edify. The meaning is the formation of Christ in one another.

Let me therefore end with a couple challenges. One is that it is so easy to be a taker. It is so easy never to seek to be a blessing in someone's life. It is so easy to come out to church and drink and eat and sup. It is so easy to think Christianity is just about my personal walk with Jesus, and the church is just there to help me with my personal walk and growth and enjoyment of Christ, and there is never a public life or ministry to others. And it does not have to be teaching a Sunday School class or preaching a sermon. I realize that is not for everyone. But are you intentionally building redemptive relationships for the glory of God in the church of Jesus Christ? Are we putting ourselves in a place where if someone did have struggles and failures in their lives that he or she could come to you for help? There is no way that you can foster those kind of redemptive relationships coming out an hour a week. Let's get in and get out. God says don't live for your own pleasure but for the benefit and edification of others. Are you building relationships where you can have that kind of ministry in others?

The other thing is that we are also to build relationships that not only can we have an impact in other believers' lives but that they might have an impact in our lives. We look at verse 19 the last couple weeks, **"So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding."** We live in mutual peace in the closest of relationships in Christ, and notice what it produces: **"mutual upbuilding."** Not only are we building others but others are building us. Some people go to the opposite extreme and that is they are always have to be giving. They can never be accepting ministry from others. There would never go and say, "hey, I am struggling in this area. Can you help?" What would others think? Hopefully if we have built redemptive relationships they would think of what redemptive relationship teach us. None of us have reach full stature. None of us are beyond the reach of help and need of God's daily grace, and one of his great graces are his people that he uses to build us up.

Yes, all of us are weak in certain areas in our lives. All of us have struggles. And all of us need others to speak truth into our lives. The question is: are we building such relationships where I know that I could go to someone else and get helped? They know me. They would not be shocked because I have not acted like I have arrived.

But none of this ministry can go on if we are fighting and bickering and not living in unity with one another. The reason why we deny that fight or that unnecessary battle is so that this ministry can go on. Ministry to others involves self-forgetfulness. It calls us away from the safety of self to really invest in others. This is God's calling in your life. Step out of your comfort zone and personal pleasures and invest in others. Remember, it is about Him and not you. Seek to glorify Christ through the process of maturing others who will go on and mature others.