

“Be United to One Another”

One Sunday a minister was giving a children’s sermon to all the kids in church. A bright-eyed three-year-old girl was listening intently as he explained that God wanted them all to get along and to love one another. She was tracking with her pastor until he said, “God wants us all to be one.” To which the little girl replied, “But I don’t want to be one. I want to be four.”

This girl was on to something. Many of us don’t want to be one either. It’s much easier for us to splinter into four groups, or forty groups, or even four hundred different groups. While it’s difficult to get an exact count because the number keeps going up, there are thousands of denominations and religious groups in the United States alone. As we continue in our “GPS” series by looking at several of the “one another” statements from the New Testament, this morning we’re focusing on how we can be united with one another.

In his book called, “Gentle Thunder,” Max Lucado, tells the following story with wit and style, as only he can (pages 139-140): Some time ago I came upon a fellow on a trip who was carrying a Bible. “Are you a believer?” I asked him. “Yes,” he said excitedly. I’ve learned you can’t be too careful. “Virgin birth?” I asked. “I accept it,” he replied. “Deity of Jesus?” “No doubt.” “Death of Christ on the cross?” “He died for all people.” Could it be that I was face to face with a Christian? Perhaps. Nonetheless, I continued my checklist. “Status of man?” “Sinner in need of grace.” “Definition of grace?” “God doing for man what man can’t do.” “Return of Christ?” “Imminent.” “Bible?” “Inspired.” “The

Church?” “The Body of Christ.” I started getting excited. “Conservative or liberal?” He was getting interested too. “Conservative.” My heart began to beat faster. “Heritage?” “Southern Congregationalist Holy Son of God Dispensationalist Triune Convention.” That was mine! “Branch?” “Pre-millennial, post-trib, noncharismatic, King James, one-cup communion.” My eyes misted. I had only one other question. “Is your pulpit wooden or fiberglass?” “Fiberglass,” he responded. I withdrew my hand and stiffened my neck. “Heretic!” I said, and walked away.

Though humorous and extreme, Lucado identifies a common problem. Many of us are quick to divide over just about anything. As someone has said, “to live above with those we love, oh, how that will be glory. To live below with those we know, now that’s another story.” The Bible is filled with a focus on family togetherness. God’s people are designed to fit as pieces of a puzzle in order to form a united picture of divine love. When we are unified, we display the personality, purposes, and power of God. Here’s a brief survey of some Scripture passages that lift up the spiritual standard of a cohesive community of faith.

Judges 20:11: “So all the men of Israel got together and united as one man against the city.”

2 Chronicles 30:12: “...The hand of God was on the people to give them unity of mind to carry out what the king and his officials had ordered, following the word of the LORD.”

Psalm 133:1: “How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!”

Jeremiah 32:38-39: “They will be my people, and I will be their God. I will give them singleness of heart and action, so that they will always fear me for their own good and the

good of their children after them.”

Acts 4:32: “All the believers were one in heart and mind...”

Romans 15:5-6: “May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

1 Corinthians 1:10-11: “I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought.”

Left to ourselves, we don't automatically drift toward unity. In fact, our default setting is disunity. History is littered with a lack of harmony among humans. The good news is that we're not the first group of believers to display dissonance. Even the disciples, who spent three years with Jesus, demonstrated more discord than accord. James and John caused envy and jealousy when they wanted to sit at the right and left hand of Jesus in His coming kingdom. Matthew was a tax collector who had sold out to Rome and Simon the Zealot hated IRS agents. On the night before Jesus selflessly gave His life, an argument arose among those who should have known better.

But here we are in our scripture passage and Jesus is in His final moments before His arrest, Jesus could have prayed for His own strength. His prayer to the Father could have been filled with a desire to make the disciples better teachers or servants or givers or leaders or administrators. Instead, His prayer was dominated by a single thought the unity of his followers.

Let me set the context. In chapter 13, Jesus washed the disciples' feet as a

demonstration of servanthood and then challenged them with a new command in verse 34: “...Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.” In chapter 14, He comforts the disciples by telling them that even though He’s about to leave, they can join Him in heaven if they put their faith in Him. In the meantime, Jesus is going to send the Holy Spirit so that they will not be orphaned. As He’s walking through a vineyard in chapter 15, He reminds them that apart from Him they can do nothing. In chapter 16, He teaches them more about the Holy Spirit and the peace that He will bring to their lives. Then, on the eve of His excruciating death, He utters an appeal for unity. John 17:1 begins, “After Jesus said this, He looked toward heaven and prayed...” By the way, this is the true “Lord’s Prayer.” The other prayer that we commonly refer to as the “Lord’s Prayer” is actually a model for us to follow, or we could call it the disciple’s prayer. This is the longest prayer of Jesus. This prayer is long in two ways its Jesus’ most protracted prayer recorded in Scripture and it’s the longest in the scope of time it covers because it extends all the way to today. Look at verse 20: “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message.” That’s you and me.

This prayer is filled with urgency. You can almost hear the agonized intensity as Jesus pleads with His Father to make His followers one. In fact, He asks for our unity four different times! This chapter has been called the “Holy of Holies” of the New Testament because we’re allowed a glimpse into what motivated the Master. This prayer was prayed aloud for the disciples’ benefit. His followers couldn’t help but be moved and convicted about their disregard for unity as they heard Jesus pour out His heart to the Father.

Because it was prayed out loud, the Apostle John was able to record it so that we can read it today.

Let's look first at verse 11 as Jesus prays for His disciples: "I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name-the name you gave me-so that they may be one as we are one." Jesus knows He is about to leave His believers behind in a very tough world. He can foresee the upcoming persecution and every temptation they are going to face. He knows how the Deceiver will work to divide His disciples and so He prays for their protection by appealing to the power of God's name.

I have seen how Satan works to sever relationships among Christians. His number one mission is to divide us because he knows that a "house divided cannot stand." I've watched as the Deceiver has destroyed disciples and attacked assemblies. I've prayed for protection and I've attempted to get Christians to reconcile with each other. Having said that, I've contributed to my share of conflict in churches and messed up ministry teams over the years as well. I've come to the conclusion that I must do whatever it takes to maintain unity within the church, and must make sure that I'm not the cause of unnecessary clashes between fellow Christ followers.

This protection that Jesus prays has a purpose in mind: "so that they may be one as we are one." In the original this is even more forceful. The meaning is this: "so that they may constantly be one..." Notice that He ties this request for oneness to the type of relationship that He has with the Father. Just as Jesus and His father are one in essence and purpose, so too, his disciples share the same fundamental nature as brothers and sisters of the same

Father. And we share a similar purpose with Jesus to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever. Using the relationship between the Father and the Son as an example, our union with one another is to be close, holy, and complete.

When I read this entire passage there are several things jump out at me in this passage. **First, the parameters of oneness include all believers.** He doesn't want us to just get along with a few people, or even with everyone in this church, but "that all of them may be one." His prayer is much deeper than "us four and no more." True believers in Christ are one, no matter what name is on the church sign. We're redeemed by the same blood and going to the same heaven. That means that we share a common unity or community, with believers in the past, in the present, and in the future.

Let me add three cautions at this point:

We should denounce extreme separatism. Some believers refuse to acknowledge that there are true Christians in other churches. Some groups criticize and label people just because they don't hold to the same outward standards as they do. I read a sermon just this week in which the pastor called Moody Bible Institute "liberal." That's amazing to me. Saying Moody is liberal is like saying that the Cubs were contenders for the World Series pennant this year.

We should also deny what I would call ecumenical sloppiness. The push for ecumenical uniformity among churches should also be avoided. There are doctrinal differences and biblical distinctions that must be maintained. Earlier in this same prayer, Jesus established that sanctification can only come about when it is based on the Word of God when He prayed, "Sanctify them by the truth; your Word is truth" (John 17:17). Truth alone must

determine our alignments. Frankly, we are not all headed in the same direction and we do not serve the same God. Only those who are born again are really our brothers and sisters in the faith. Sadly, many churches have pursued “ecumenical union” at the expense of biblical truth. You can tie two cats together by their tails and throw them over a clothesline and have union, but there certainly won’t be much unity.

We should be united but not necessarily uniform. It’s possible to be diverse and yet not divided. We’re all distinct pieces of the puzzle, and variety is valuable. We have different gifts, abilities, personalities, thoughts, and opinions. We’re not called to be the “same,” we’re called to be one. We can have harmony even though we’re not homogeneous. Don’t expect everyone to be exactly like you and to think the way you think. It’s impossible within a diverse church.

Secondly, the pattern for oneness is linked to the unity within the Trinity. In verse 11, Jesus prays that his disciples would experience the oneness that exists in His relationship with the Father. In verse 21, He prays, “May they also be in us...” And, in verse 22: “...that they may be one as we are one.” The unity that Christ wants us to have is so intimate, so personal, and so vital that it is patterned after, and based on, the relations that exist in the Godhead. It is a oneness not only of faith, hope and love but of life itself. Ephesians 4:4-6 captures how this truth is tied to the Trinity: “There is one body and one Spirit-- just as you were called to one hope when you were called--one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”

Third, the purpose of oneness is to accelerate evangelism. Look at the last part of verse 21: “...so that the world may believe...” Notice that we’re not just to enjoy unity for

our own sakes. Sure, it's fun to be on the same page with those around you, but oneness is the best witness there is to the world. Why do you think that is? It's because everyone knows how difficult it is to get along with others. God's redemptive plan is that the world may believe and the way this is accomplished today is through the unified oneness of the body of Christ. When unity is fractured within a church the bridge between believers and the world is effectively blown up. A disunited Christian community denies by its behavior the message that it proclaims.

One who is seeking truth is attracted to the oneness and harmony that should be evident in churches. When that unity is absent, they can smell it and will be turned off. I'm convinced that dissension and disunity have hindered more revivals than we can even imagine. Lost people are not looking to be part of another organization that is battling over irrelevant issues. When a pre-Christian looks at believers who are throwing verbal bombs at each other, she may say, "If they can't even agree on the truth among themselves, how could they possibly teach me the truth?"

Fourth, the practice of oneness puts God's reputation on display to the world.

Verse 22 says that we have been given the glory that was given to Christ. The word "glory" represents the visible manifestation of all of God's attributes. It's what we see when we look at God. Friends, when we are united, the world will stand up and take notice of God because they will see Him glorified in us. Matthew 5:16: "In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven." Oneness gives credence to our claims. When I violate true Christian unity, I am

hindering the gospel and ruining God's reputation. The whisper of what we say gets lost in shout of what we are doing.

Let me very quickly give you some practical steps to unity. But before I list some action steps that you and I can take to foster unity, let me remind you that unity is received, not achieved. We don't have to earn it because it's been earned for us on the Cross. You and I don't have to create it because Jesus already did that when He prayed for us. He attained unity; you and I must maintain it.

1. Be a grower. Some say that absence makes the heart grow fonder. While that might be true in human relationships, in our relationship with God, absence makes the heart wander. And when we wander we often go to war with others. Are you growing in your walk with Christ? If you find yourself out of sync with someone, ask yourself some honest questions: "Am I walking with Christ? Am I fully surrendered to Him right now?"

2. Be a unifier. Instead of judging, gossiping, or slandering others, search for specific ways that you can be a unifier. Proverbs 6:19 says that the Lord finds detestable "a man who stirs up dissension among brothers." Stop being abrasive and cut others some slack. It's like the Chinese proverb that says, "Do not remove a fly from your friend's forehead with a hatchet." Watch your words. And when you hear someone skewering another believer, speak the truth in love and send him or her to that person instead.

3. Be a forgiver. So many are filled with bitterness because they have refused to forgive someone for something that has been done or said to them. Be like the young child who was overheard reciting the prayer given to the disciples: "And forgive us our trash passes, as we forgive those who have passed trash against us." Are you passing trash around this

morning? Get rid of it before it starts to stink.

4. Be a worker. Are you willing to live out the truth of Ephesians 4:3? This verse doesn't allow us to be nonchalant about unity: "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace." What one thing can you do this week to keep the unity of the Spirit? In that relationship you're thinking about right now, have you made every effort, or have you just sort of tried? Are we willing to be an answer to Jesus' prayer today?

The Navigators, a Christ-centered ministry devoted to discipleship, has developed a relational covenant that they use with all their staff members. I'd like to close today by reading this covenant to you. When I'm finished, I'm going to ask you to stand if you are ready to make it your own.

We personally and corporately agree and commit to: Pursue reconciliation and, when possible, resolution in all interpersonal conflicts. Talk directly to those with whom we experience conflict rather than talking about them to others. We want to "talk to people, not about people." Be edifying in our discussions about others. Hold each other accountable when we violate this commitment. If you're willing to be an answer to Jesus' prayer, will you please stand right now?