

## Pursuing Biblical Unity, Part 1

A Topical Lesson

David Adams – Date: 1/14/24

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### I. Introduction

- a. Before going to the cross, Jesus prays for us (those who will believe in Him)
  - i. Read **John 17:20-23**
- b. Jesus' prayer:
  - i. that we may be one, as the Father and Jesus are one
  - ii. that the glory that the Father gave to Jesus would be in us
  - iii. that the love with which the Father loved Jesus would be in us
  - iv. that this unity (and glory and love) would bring nonbelievers to faith in Him
- c. Our unity is a big deal! Yet, Christian unity is really, really hard. Both within a church (among Christians) and among Christian churches.
- d. Jesus' teachings on unity are timely for us.
  - i. Unity is always something we have to work on!
  - ii. Also, as we grow from one to multiple house churches in a short time, unity becomes more challenging. More people coming in with different ideas, backgrounds, strengths, weaknesses, etc.
  - iii. When we began the church with ten people or so, we were very serious about unity.
    1. After 3 months or so, the honeymoon was over! Here we were: all the good and all our weaknesses together. This is when you really start growing and loving.
    2. "Situation Room," working things out one-on-one.
    3. Working things out as a group in the living room.
    4. COVID experience (from online to in-person).
  - iv. As the church grows, we must maintain and continue growing in Christian unity. To be honest, there have been challenges to our unity over the past months. There is a reason I'm teaching this lesson today!

e. **Question: What does Biblical unity look like?**

- i. Many of us have experienced unity of various types: family, team, organization, citizenship, ethnicity (food, culture, etc.).
- ii. There is unity in these things that can produce a sense of belonging, purpose, closeness, joy. I believe God created us this way: to find joy and meaning by being part of and unified with something bigger than ourselves. Unity can be quite powerful. **But unity based on these things falls short of what God intends.**
- iii. The story of Babel in **Genesis 11:1-9**.
- iv. The tower of Babel. One language, one city, a tower “whose top will reach heaven”.
- v. God saw the power of man-made unity. Yet, this unity promoted self/man, over God (who wanted people to spread out throughout the earth to accomplish His purposes).
  1. Examples of unity that falls short of God’s unity:
    - a. a street gang (murder, selling illicit drugs),
    - b. college sports team (hazing, drinking),
    - c. a high-tech start-up (may not be bad, but may involve working inordinate hours, neglecting family, pursuit of money, etc.),
    - d. armed forces (killing others).
- vi. The unity we strive for is different: the unity that Jesus had with the Father.
  1. **If each of us is growing closer to God, following His teachings and the faith handed down by the apostles, then we will become more and more united with one another as God intends!** Whether inside our church or with other churches.
  2. **Our leader (Jesus) and our team (the Kingdom of God) are eternal.**
  3. And, as Jesus prayed, our unity will be characterized by the Father’s glory and love.
- f. Bad news: this type of unity is really difficult! The things we are going to discuss are hard. The most valuable things in life require great effort.

- i. **Question: Why is Biblical Unity so difficult?**
- g. Reason #1: We all sin, which messes up our unity.
  - i. “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” (1 John 1:8)
  - ii. The daily prayer: “Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.”
  - iii. It takes effort and the power of the Holy Spirit to overcome our sinful nature and live righteous lives as God intended.
- h. Reason #2: Satan is seeking to destroy our unity/divide God’s people.
  - i. “For we do not wrestle against **flesh and blood**, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.” (Ephesians 6:12)
  - ii. Jesus talks about Satan all the time. He is a personality. Real. He also has his army of angels. Our battle is not against one another but against these spiritual powers of evil.
  - iii. Satan uses predictable tactics in his attempt to destroy the church. He will seek to destroy our unity, which Jesus prayed for, to make a mockery of the church: from love and glory to divisions, quarrels, and mistrust.
  - iv. Satan has many names: liar, deceiver, destroyer, murderer. These all characterize him. None are good for unity!
  - v. “If you aren’t sure what God’s will is, ask yourself, ‘What would Satan want me to do in this situation?’ Then do the opposite.” (Chuck Pike)
- i. Reason #3: Christians have not been taught what the Bible teaches about Biblical unity, including Jesus’ practical teaching on maintaining this unity.
  - i. We all come from different backgrounds and cultures and grew up with various thinking and practices as to dealing with conflict.
  - ii. Even if we have read or heard teaching on Biblical unity/conflict resolution, some have not seen it lived out!
- j. As I began working on this lesson, I realized that there was a significant amount of material that I felt we needed to discuss and address for our congregation.
  - i. This will be a two-part lesson.

1. Part 1:

- a. Look at an excellent example for us to learn from, a conflict in Israel that was resolved in a wonderful way.
- b. Look at ways our speech can destroy unity.
- c. Look at ways our speech can build unity.

2. Part 2:

- a. Discuss Jesus' teachings on resolving conflict with one another. *Both the process and the spirit/heart we are to bring to Biblical conflict resolution/peace-making.*
- ii. My goals:
  1. Recognize and pursue the Biblical unity Jesus prayed for.
  2. Equip you to follow Jesus' teaching on conflict resolution.

## II. Conflict in Israel – an Example We Can Learn From

a. Read **Joshua 21:47-49**

- i. Tremendous accomplishment: Israel receives the Promised Land.
- ii. Backstory:
  1. Jordan River runs north-south from the Sea of Galilee to the Dead Sea. Divides the promised land.
  2. Reuben, Gad, and the half tribe of Manasseh had been given the land east of the Jordan River but first crossed over the river to fight with their brothers to take the Promised Land west of the river.
  3. Their brothers, on the west side of the river, had the tabernacle, the ark, and the altar, where they would bring their sacrifices.

b. Read **Joshua 22:1-6**

- i. They had been faithful to their brothers and are now returning to their new home, east of the river.
- ii. Other tribes remain on the west side of the Jordan with the tabernacle and altar of sacrifice.

- iii. Joshua reminds/charges them to love God and keep all His commands.
- iv. All good so far!

c. Read **Joshua 22:9-20**

- i. When the tribes cross the river, they immediately set up a great altar.
- ii. The other tribes hear about it and are alarmed given the serious sin of idolatry.
- iii. The tribes to the west of the Jordan develop a two-pronged plan:
  - 1. Prepare an army to go to war.
  - 2. Send a delegation led by Phineas and ten leading men to address the sin of their brothers and call them to repentance.

d. Read **Joshua 22:21-34**

- i. We are not sinning against God! We have actually built this out of reverence to the Lord.
- ii. We are afraid that you will forget us and say we are not part of God's people – this is a witness to you that we are God's people too.
- iii. All the people are pleased, and "... they spoke no more about going up against them in battle in order to utterly destroy the land..."

e. **Lessons for us from this story:**

- i. Expect conflict!
  - 1. God's people are about to go to war against themselves, even after this great, spiritual victory!
  - 2. Satan is always at work to divide and destroy.
  - 3. After Jesus was baptized, He was led into the desert to be tempted.
    - a. "Now when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from Him until an opportune time." (**Luke 4:13**)
    - b. God allows such temptations, to strengthen us, take us to the next level.
  - 4. After a spiritual victory, I have learned to be on my guard. This is a predictable time Satan will start laying a trap or attack.

5. When we see conflict in the church, let's not freak out. Instead, it should build our faith!
  - a. God can use conflict to bring about great victories if we respond to it wisely.
- ii. Willing to go across the river to address the sin of their brothers.
  1. Courageous and loving, did not look the other way. They don't want to see their brothers depart from God!
  2. Many of us are conflict-avoiders. We are prone to put our heads in the sand and pretend there is no problem. We can't do this!
  3. **Question:** What are our rivers? (time, distance, busyness, indifference, fear, etc.)
    - a. We need to prioritize unity in the church and righteousness. If we see (or think we see) someone struggling with sin, we need to address this.
- iii. Before waging war, sent a delegation. They expressed their concerns directly before destroying them!
  1. Perhaps we don't have the whole story.
  2. Giving our brother the benefit of the doubt.
- iv. Were sacrificial
  1. "Take some of our own land. Just be righteous."
- v. Compelling appeal to their brothers:
  1. Sin at Peor, where Israel was led into idolatry and sexual immorality by the Moabite women. God sends a plague to destroy 24,000 people.
  2. Sin of Achan, who took spoils that God had forbidden in the victory of Jericho; brings wrath against all of Israel and the death of Achan (and his family).
- vi. Sometimes, conflict can arise out of misunderstanding/fear.
  1. East of Jordan brothers: feared being cut off. This led them to do something (build an altar) that caused great concern for the West of Jordan brothers.

2. Our own perspectives/backgrounds/fears can shape how we view others, leaders, situations, etc.
3. **Observation:** our prior church experiences (good and bad) shape how we view, hear, and respond to situations. We all have a lens through which we “see” what is happening around us; sometimes that lens is clear, sometimes not!
  - a. Israel narrowly avoided disaster.
  - b. Might have been good if the brothers on the east side of the Jordan had expressed their concern about being forgotten in the future!
  - c. Why did the brothers on the East side of the river assume that this was an altar to a false God?
  - d. Let’s address concerns, reserving judgment until we fully understand what is happening.
  - e. Also, you may be able to bring wisdom and address things that need to be addressed!
  - f. This all requires much wisdom.
- f. God turns a potentially terrible situation into victory!

### III. Division of the Church Caused by the Tongue

- a. Read **James 1:26-27**
  - i. True religion = visiting orphans/widows and keeping oneself unspotted from the world.
  - ii. False religion = being people who do not bridle their tongues.
    1. If you do not, you are deceived. Your religion is useless.
- b. Read **James 3:1-12**
  - i. If you use your tongue to teach (the faith), you will be judged more strictly than others.
  - ii. The perfect man is the one who does not stumble in his speech.
  - iii. The tongue is like a fire, sets nature on fire.
  - iv. Although the animals, birds, reptiles and fish in the sea can be tamed, the tongue cannot!
  - v. The tongue is full of deadly poison.

- vi. From the tongue we bless and curse. This cannot be!
- vii. **Encouragement:**
  - 1. The tongue is like a horse bit and a small rudder (can turn a powerful horse and a large ship). If you control the tongue, you control the whole body.
  - 2. Picture: from the tongue should flow fresh water, not salt water.
- viii. The tongue can be a tremendous source of disunity. Let's dig in deeper.
- c. Do not gossip.
  - i. Read **Wisdom of Sirach 19:4-17**
    - 1. This book was removed from most Bibles in the late 1800s.
  - ii. "He who trusts quickly is unwise in heart...."
  - iii. Don't repeat a word with a friend or an enemy.
    - 1. "Unless it is sin, do not reveal it."
    - 2. "Have you heard a word, let it die with you. Take courage; it will not burst you."
    - 3. The fool is like a woman in labor. The fool's words must come out like a baby inside its mother or like an arrow stuck in the flesh.
  - iv. Hear something about someone?
    - 1. Talk to your friend; perhaps he did not do it.
    - 2. Perhaps he will not do it again. (Had a bad day or learned his lesson.)
    - 3. Perhaps he did not say it.
    - 4. Perhaps he will not say it again.
    - 5. He did not intend to say what he said.
- d. Don't quarrel. Don't give in to anger.
  - i. Read **Wisdom of Sirach 28:8-12**
  - ii. Quarreling comes from a hot-tempered man/sin/anger/wrath

- iii. **Picture:** a spark that can be kindled or put out.
  1. My son Timothy, starting a fire with flint: spark to a roaring fire.
  2. We have a choice to put out the spark. (stop the conversation, and change the subject, that is not a helpful conversation)
- e. Do not slander
  - i. Read **Wisdom of Sirach 28:13-26**
  - ii. Slander is really destructive. It can bring great harm. It will harm you who slander!
  - iii. **Picture:** the tongue is like a yoke of iron, a chain of bronze (vs 20)
    1. It enslaves, burdens, holds us in bondage.
    2. Hades is preferable to it.
  - iv. **Pictures:** Guard your words!
    1. Put up a thorn wall to protect your possessions
    2. Lock up your silver and gold
    3. Bar the bolt of the door of your mouth!
    4. "Make balances and scales for your words"
  - v. If you slip with your tongue, you may fall victim to one who wants to harm you (vs. 26)
    1. Evil doers will pounce on our slips of the tongue.
    2. Control your tongue. Be very, very careful.
  - vi. Slander divides, destroys the unity God desires.
- f. Do not reveal a friend's secrets.
  - i. Read **Wisdom of Sirach 27:16-21**
  - ii. Let's be trustworthy friends. Carry each other burdens, trials, challenges, confessions.
- g. Do not complain.
  - i. **1 Corinthians 10**

- ii. "... nor complain, as some of them also complained, and were destroyed by the destroyer...."
- iii. Israel complained about everything: food, lack of water, leaders, environment, enemies, etc. Complaining spreads. Is unfaithful. Is very disunifying. It angers God!
- iv. "Now these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come." (vs. 11)
- v. Lessons for us:
  1. Don't grumble and complain to others. Period.
  2. If there is a problem, raise it with the appropriate person.
  3. Approach problems/issues with a faithful spirit.
  4. Maybe something needs to be addressed, or a problem needs to be solved. Engage and help to address.

#### IV. Forging Unity with Our Tongues

- a. Many of us were taught as a child: "If you don't have anything good to say, then don't say anything at all."
  - i. Truth to this. We should be using our speech to build one another up, not to tear each other down.
  - ii. However, we are to use our tongues to address problems and issues in the church in a righteous way. **This will require some uncomfortable conversations.**
  - iii. Peace making vs. peace faking.
- b. We all need to be speaking the truth with kindness and love.
  - i. Satan is a liar and accuser.
    1. We can be deceived, and really need God's truth spoken to us.
    2. We can be accused/feel (falsely) guilty, and we need God's truth, kindness, and love spoken to us.
  - ii. Read **Ephesians 4:25-32**
  - iii. We don't put our heads in the sand and ignore problems. We speak truthfully to each other.

- iv. We don't speak corrupt words, but words "good for necessary edification."
  - 1. Encourage, instruct, correct, and rebuke. For the purpose of helping one another.
  - 2. We don't speak in bitterness, wrath, anger.
  - 3. We speak with tenderness, kindness, and mercy.

c. Practicals:

- i. **Question:** "Will what I am about to say edify my brother/sister?"
  - 1. Picture in James: out of the mouth comes fresh spring water.
- ii. **Question:** "What do my words say about my heart?"
  - 1. Read **Matthew 12:33-36**
  - 2. Let's acknowledge that the problem is what is in our hearts: anger, bitterness, lack of mercy, foolishness.
  - 3. Jesus came to save us from our sins. Offers us forgiveness from the evil in our hearts.
  - 4. Bitter, angry? Confess, ask forgiveness, go and reconcile with your brother.
  - 5. Let's deal with the sin in our hearts, turning to God for His mercy and by the power of the Holy Spirit, to be transformed.
- iii. Comfort and edify one another (with our words) as we await Christ's return.
  - 1. Read **1 Thessalonians 5:1-11**
  - 2. We are just passing through, going through challenges, trials, darkness, temptations.
  - 3. Those who walk in the light are to put on the breastplate of faith and love, the helmet of salvation, **and comfort and encourage one** another until Christ returns at an unexpected time (like a thief in the night).
  - 4. Whether we wake or sleep (are alive or dead when He returns), we will live together with Him!
- iv. Jesus was "the Word of God"

1. “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as the only begotten of the Father, **full of grace and truth.**” (John 1:14)
2. Jesus literally revealed God’s words.
3. These words were full of grace (favor) and truth. May we imitate Him with our own words as we pursue the unity Jesus prayed for us to have.

d. Conclusion

- i. Jesus prayed for our unity, that it would embody the glory He had with the Father and the love that the Father had for Him. This unity is available to us!
- ii. Satan is working to destroy that unity. His tactics are predictable: lying, accusing, destroying. Let’s not give in to the sins of the tongue, which feed into his tactics to divide the church. Don’t gossip, slander, or complain.
- iii. Let’s be courageous and not conflict-avoiders/cowards. We need to speak truth to one another to encourage each other and to address sin in our lives. Let’s do this with kindness and love.
- iv. **Homework:** Is there anyone with whom you have unresolved conflict? If so, pray about that situation and for that person this week. That’s it. In the next lesson, we will cover Jesus’ teachings on resolving conflict.