

Unity

Text: Psalm 133:1-3
Series: The Psalms [#26]
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Theme: **Unity Is Love's Crowning Jewel.**

Introduction

Psalm 133 is one of the shortest Psalms with its three verses and 60-plus words in our English versions. The shortest is Psalm 117, followed by 134 and then 131. So, as short as it is, being in the fourth spot, Psalm 133 doesn't claim a medal in the shortest Psalm category. By the way, I don't want to disappoint anyone, but just because this Psalm is short does not mean this sermon will be short. If we followed that guideline, when Pastor Tyler preaches on the longest Psalm in a few weeks, Psalm 119 with its 176 verses, we would have to be here all day! So we will dispense with that guideline.

Psalm 133 is beautiful and its truth is critical. It speaks to us about unity, the unity that God creates for us, and which we should enjoy. Unity can be confusing. It may seem to be only an unreachable, utopian ideal. After all, the nations and peoples of the world are fragmented, not united. The United Nations, while accomplishing some good things, is neither united itself nor able to bring unity in the world. The organized church is not united.

So, there are questions: "What is this unity in the Bible about?" "Why is it important?" "How can we experience it as we should?" This brief Psalm does not address all the questions. However, it does give us some statements and pictures of key aspects of unity. It gives us a base for understanding Christian unity. While we enjoy good unity, even so, this is important truth for us.

Biblical Christian Unity is important—it is a reality that God expects us to evidence and to enjoy. It also is a product of a process. The motivating and energizing force is God's love. God's love in us, controlling and directing us. As the Apostle Paul gave instructions on spiritual gifts and service in 1 Corinthians 13, he stressed the importance of God's love controlling and directing us,

"If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love; I am nothing. And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing." (1-3)

In the next chapter Paul tells us to "pursue love" (14:1). God's love in us is inseparably linked to our unity. In fact, *unity is love's crowning jewel*. This is the central truth I want us

to see this morning, to remember and then to live. *Unity is love's crowning jewel.* We need to start with...

Some Clarifications.

First, we should clarify what unity is not. Unity is not the same thing as *unanimity*, or having full, total agreement. A unanimous vote is 100% of the voters voting the same way. At the APD Conference of our Evangelical Free churches yesterday, each of the positions being elected had only one nominee. So the chair asked for and the delegates cast a unanimous ballot. God's unity among His people does not require that we all agree on everything.

Nor is this unity the same thing as *uniformity*, or having the same form or manner. Uniformity does come from the word *uniform*. One use of *uniform* refers to the specified, same clothing or *uniforms* worn in the military, police and in some schools. Christian unity does not mean that we all have to do things the same way, nor have the same structures. There are thousands of different organized groups, or *denominations*, of Christians in the world. In 2001 one researcher reported that there were 33,820 denominations in the world. While that number is skewed because he defined a denomination as an organized Christian group *within a specific country*,¹ so you might be in the same organization but in a different country and that would count as two denominations. Nonetheless, there are thousands of denominations. The different denominations can be very confusing, but the existence of different organized Christian groups is not in and of itself a contradiction to Christian unity.

Christian unity does *not* mean that all Christians should be part of the same organized church or denomination. It does not mean all Christians have to agree on every fine point of doctrine. At the same time, it does not mean that basic fundamentals of the faith should be compromised for the sake of what some people refer to as *unity*. It does not mean that all Christians should have strict conformity in practice, ministry or methods. It does not mean all Christians in a local church should see everything exactly the same way. *Unity is not uniformity.*

So what is Christian unity? In general terms unity refers to being joined together so as to be one, or to be combined. There is oneness of interest, purpose, direction and action. There is a *togetherness* which, at the same time, allows variety. Canada is *union* of provinces, regions, cultural and ethnic groups which, while *diverse*, share the *oneness* of being *Canadian*.

In Biblical terms unity is a God-made and God-given oneness. True Christian unity has never been and never will be created or brought about by people—it is *God-made* and *God-given*. We see this pictured and emphasized in a phrase used 3 times by King David in this Psalm, although it may not be easy to see because some of our English versions do not translate this phrase the same way each time—the phrase is “*coming down.*” Notice,

“Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for bothers to dwell together in unity! It is like precious oil upon the head, *coming*

down upon the beard, even Aaron's beard, coming down upon the edge of his robes. It is like the dew of Hermon coming down upon the mountains of Zion; for there the LORD commanded the blessing—life forever.”

Spiritual unity *comes down* from God. This reality is directly stated in Ephesians 4:3 in the phrase “*unity of the Spirit.*” It is unity *from* and *of* the Holy Spirit.

A second feature is that it is a living, organic union with Christ, with God. 1 Corinthians 6:17 tells us, “... the one who joins himself to the Lord is one spirit with Him.” Jesus said, “I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.”²

A third feature is that it also is a living, organic union with all true believers. Jesus, speaking to Jewish followers in John 10 said,

“I have other sheep, which are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will hear my voice; and they will become *one flock with one shepherd.*” (16)

The apostle Paul wrote,

“For He Himself [*Christ*] is our peace, who made both groups [i.e. Jews and Gentiles] into one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall ... you are fellow citizens with the saints.”³

Again,

“There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.”⁴

A fourth and summary feature is that unity *is* the crowning jewel of Christian love in action. We look again to Jesus' words, this time in John 13,

“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (34-35)

And so, we can sum up what Christian unity is. *It is God's gift of restoring us to the living oneness, togetherness with Himself and other people which we were designed to have. This unity is love's crowning jewel.*

Let's move on to ...

Some Benefits.

Unity is *good*. Verse 1, "Behold, how *good* ... it is for brothers to dwell together in unity!" When God's people relate to each other with this living oneness, it is *good*. This word *good* is a broad term with a range of meanings. For example, we read repeatedly in the Bible that God is *good*.⁵ His moral character is good. Then, in the Genesis creation account, God reviewed His work and called it *good*.⁶ This word is also used to describe things that fulfill their function or expectations. Genesis 2 tells us the trees God caused to grow in Eden were "*good* for food."⁷ In the same section, the gold of Havilah is described as *good*, or of high quality.⁸ Then the prophet Micah wrote, "He [the LORD] has told you, O man, what is *good*; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (6:8)

Here in Psalm 133 the word seems to stress the factual, objective quality of unity. It is good. It squares with God's design for us. It's quality pleases God and benefits us. There are then, important implications for us. This unity is part of our obedience to God, and so it pleases Him. It keeps the way clear for fellowship and growth with God, as well as with people. It keeps the doors open to service, witness, blessing and, yes, to rewards from God. All of this, and more, because unity is *good*.

Then as well, unity is *pleasant*. Verse 1 again, "Behold, how good and how *pleasant* it is for brothers to dwell together in unity!" This word pictures things that are pleasant, or sweet, delightful, beautiful and pleasurable. In Psalm 16:11 we read that in God's "presence is fullness of joy; in [His] right hand there are *pleasures* [there's the same word] forever." In Psalm 81:2 the writer calls us to "Raise a song, strike the timbrel, the *sweet sounding* lyre [there's our word *pleasant*]." If you at Psalm 133 turn ahead from our text to Psalm 135 where in verse 3 the Psalmist says "Sing praises to [God's] name, for it is *lovely* [our word *pleasant* again]."

Unity has the benefit of being pleasant and pleasurable to us. It is not just good *for* me, it is also good *to* me. All of us can think of times and relationships with great unity, and it has been very pleasant.

But before we get on that path, David quickly gives us some examples, some pictures of how unity is good and pleasant. The first picture is in verse 2,

"It [unity] is like the precious oil upon the head, coming down upon the beard, even Aaron's beard, coming down upon the edge of his robes."

Honestly now, is the meaning of this picture clear? Did you instantly see and get the point, not just the picture King David was making? I think most of us would say not as clear as we would want. After all, what's so great about a man standing, dripping, if not drenched in oil? Let's look at the picture. First, it is "*precious oil*." *Precious* is the same word translated

“good” in verse 1. Here it has the sense of quality and being valuable or expensive. Aaron, and other priests, were anointed with oil as they were consecrated for serving God. The oil was expertly prepared, mixed with other ingredients. It was of the highest quality and very expensive.

So ... the point of the picture? First, the oil “coming down” reminds us that this unity *comes down* as a good and precious gift from God. James 1:17, “Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow.” This picture points out the spiritual nature and even the holiness of Christian unity. It pictures the importance and solemnity of unity, even as the priests were solemnly consecrated. The consecration of the priests pictures unity as entering into deeper fellowship with and service for God.

“It [unity] is like the dew of Hermon *coming down* upon the mountains of Zion; for there the LORD commanded the blessing—life forever.”

This mountain, or series of mountain peaks stands nearly 10,000' above sea level. Rain, snow and heavy dew are prevalent, even in the hot, dry summer months of May to October. While the lowlands become dry and turn brown, the mountain areas can remain lush and green. Two of the three annual festivals for which the people traveled to Jerusalem singing this and the other *Psalms of Ascents* were in the hot, dry summer months.

The picture is that unity from God comes to us bringing freshness and vitality to life. It brings true growth. Further, it stands in stark contrast to the *dry, parched relationships* and *individual souls* where unity is not experienced. Yes, with these benefits, we can see that *unity is love's crowning jewel*. So then, how do we experience and enjoy the reality of day to day unity and its benefits? Let's look at some essentials.

Some Essentials.

First there is our responsibility. Yes, unity is God-created and God-given. At the same time we have some responsibilities for the state of our unity. Jesus' prayer for His followers in John 17, “... that they all may be one,” and “that they may be perfected in unity...” has been ignored and misused as much as, if not more than it has been understood and evidenced. We do not have the option to ignore this calling to unity, nor coopt it for our own purposes. There *is responsibility*.

This responsibility begins with and within each of us. The apostle Paul wrote in Colossians 3,

“Beyond all these things, put on *love*, which is the *perfect bond of unity*. Let the *peace* of God rule in your hearts, *to which you were called in one body*” (14). He goes on, “Let the *peace* of Christ rule in your hearts, *to which indeed you were called in one body...*” (15).

We have been called to actively allow the reign of God and His peace within and the reign of His love and unity with others. Jesus tells us, “Love your neighbor as yourself.”⁹ “Love one another even as I have loved you.”¹⁰ *Without* the reign of God’s peace and love the practical, day-to-day *experience of our unity will dry up and wither. With* the reign of God’s peace and love, the practical, day-to-day *experience of our unity will bloom brilliantly ... and it will do so in any, in all circumstances.*

Paul wrote in Ephesians 4,

“Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another *in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.* There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.” (1-6)

Here God implores us to act, to pick up our responsibility, to step out and start living worthy of our calling, and tells us the *how to* as well. First, “be diligent”—make every effort possible, stretch and strain to do this, relying on God’s power. Second, “*preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*” Not create, but *preserve* within the tie and rule of God’s peace in our hearts and minds.

So, how do we live out this responsibility practically? One the one hand, we need the church, all of us to be *disunity busters*. This starts with ourselves—not accepting, not making excuses for distance, exclusion, pride. Asking God to *point out* and help us to *stomp out* any and every trace of disunity within. Then, help *each other ...* in gentleness and love. The church at Corinth ignored their disunity and ended up being fractured and fragmented into fighting factions. Each one of us needs to be a *disunity buster*.

Lately I’ve listened to accounts of differences between some believers—not in our church or even in our area. It has been suggested that what is needed is to change some of the responsibilities and structure of the relationships. But that will not, cannot solve the problem of troubled or fractured relationships. There *must be* a commitment to resolve the differences, to restore the relationship by all involved. Yes, each one needs to be a *disunity buster*.

On the other hand, all of us need to be *unity builders*. Stretching and straining to allow God to keep on building the character of Christ within us. Not being side-tracked. Stretching and straining to accept, to know, encourage and build up each other. After the opening verses in Ephesians 4, Paul goes on to lay out the process and product of a *mature and united church*—many members in one body. Many gifts with one purpose; all working together and, as a result, God gives growth in maturity and unity (7-16). Yes, *unity is love’s crowning jewel*. We have serious responsibilities which are also great opportunities.

There is one more *essential*, in a word ... Enjoy! Sometimes our self-imposed barriers to enjoying unity are very high. A pastor-friend of mine, from a different tradition, told me that as he was leading a Bible study with some of his people one member, after some time said, “Now I can see that people from other denominations may actually be Christians.” That’s a start!

Sometimes any accommodation for differing distinctives or practices is seen as “compromising essentials,” and the *walls of disunity* are reinforced, while we wall out enjoying, and being enriched by diversity. Sometimes different priorities, preferences, opinions, hurts and disappointments within a group of God’s people are allowed to *divide people* rather than *draw them together*. Our differences, like the different parts of our physical bodies, are meant to *draw us together*, not to *divide us*.

So *Enjoy!* “Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together in unity!” As look back to an early use of this Psalm, I can picture the travelers to Jerusalem who would sing this Psalm. They had a long and difficult trip, but they could also envision Jerusalem jam-packed, wall-to-wall, and spilling over with their huge *extended family of faith*. They were excited as they looked back to past celebrations and looked forward to the coming days together. They were ready to *celebrate* and *enjoy* their *unity*.

Today, this Psalms says to *Enjoy!* Enjoy your unity in Christ. Enjoy *unity, love’s crowning jewel*.

Conclusion

Differing perspectives, feelings and even disagreements among Christians should neither surprise nor derail us. Another key to being *disunity buster* and a *unity builder* is realizing that we have only two options in dealing with issues and conflict in a healthy way. The first option is to *let it go*. Evaluate, make a conscious decision to open your hand and release the issue, memory or hurt completely, permanently. Or, *deal with it*. Search within yourself. Make every effort to understand, resolve and settle. Often we try some middle ground—let go, *sort of*; deal with, *just a bit*. Any and all of those attempts wall out peace from our own hearts and unity with others.

In your time of personal reflection and response this morning, begin by thanking God that He creates and gives His perfect unity—and He gives it to us, to all of His people, to you. Examine yourself—only yourself, no one else—for any traces of pride, prejudice, hurts, anger, desire for control or comfort. Confess to God all that is not as it should be. Determine to start thinking about and relating to some people differently in order to preserve the unity Christ died to provide for you.

¹ David B. Barrett, George T. Kurian, Todd M. Johnson. *World Christian Encyclopedia, Vol. I.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2001, page 10.

See also:

<<http://www.philvaz.com/aplogetics/106htm>>, accessed 20 October, 2010.

<<http://christianity.about.com/od/denominations/p/christianitytoday.htm>>, accessed 20 October, 2010.

<<http://www.bible.ca/global-religion-statistics-world-christian-encyclopedia.htm>>, accessed 20 October 2010.

² John 15:5.

³ Ephesians 2:14, 19.

⁴ Ephesians 4:4-6.

⁵ e.g., Psalm 86:5; 1005, etc.

⁶ Genesis 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31.

⁷ Genesis 2:9.

⁸ Genesis 2:11-12.

⁹ Mark 12:31.

¹⁰ John 13:34.

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