

Unity

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[0 : 00] I'd like us to read together in the Old Testament, the Psalms. We're looking at different Psalms in our Sunday evening. I worship over the summer, Psalms for a summer evening. And we're going to read Psalm 133, a short Psalm.

It's called The Song of a Sense of David. How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity. It is like precious oil poured on the head, running down on the beard, running down on Aaron's beard, down upon the collar of his robes.

It is as if the Jew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion. For there the Lord bestows his blessing, even life forevermore.

So you may have guessed that the theme for the sermon this evening is the unity, Christian unity. And I do think that some of us regard that, or the church has in many instances, regard that as a bit of a Cinderella doctrine, and one that isn't that important.

But we've already seen it grounded in the Trinity, grounded in the unity between the Father and the Son, the Holy Spirit being the basis of our unity. And we see it being based in the gospel message itself and in the power of the gospel message.

[1 : 21] And as an evidence for the power of the gospel message, there's unity. That's what people notice in terms of the gospel.

That's one of the characteristics that people notice, that the gospel is real and significant. And one of the things that make people doubt the gospel is disunity, is fighting and divisiveness and gossip and lovelessness and all that is mixed in with disunity within the church community.

So it's a really powerful and important and significant unity that we are considering. Now this, as far as I can make out, people don't really know when it was written, or on what occasion it was written for.

It is attributed to David, it's a song of a sense, which means that it would have been sung as one of the festive Psalms, the Psalms that were sung up to the various festivals that went on in Jerusalem, and an appropriate one it was.

If you're going up with believers from different parts of the country, you're going up to Jerusalem to worship and be in festival together, then it's a significant and obviously a good Psalm to be singing.

[2 : 33] And there may have been different occasions that could have inspired David under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to write this, maybe his own coming to power, not just as King of Judah, but as King over the 12 tribes of Judah and Israel also.

But it's such a generic truth that it's one that we can apply, could have been applied at the time, would have been applied forward thinking as the gospel and the unity of Jews and Gentiles was considered, and also can be applied at a local level for ourselves in our own Christian lives, in our own Christian church as well.

But David was well aware of times of unity among the people of God that he was King over. David was well aware that these were times when they were focused on the worship of God, when they were distanced from idolatry, and when they were focused on being the covenant people of God. And he recognized the value and the blessing of that unity. How good and pleasant it is when brothers, when brothers and sisters, when the people of God live together in unity.

And that was the bold and courageous statement that is made here. It's also, of course, you know, if you asked for a theme that you would be keen for Jesus to pray for you about, I wonder what you would choose?

[4 : 17] Would Jesus Himself choose His unity in the prayer that we read in John chapter 17? And we wanted the future people of God to be a people who'd be united, a great mark of the presence of the Spirit of God and the reality of God's prayer.

And we saw that in a reading in Ephesians, and we saw the opposite of that in the problem in the Corinthian church, which was disunited and was full of factions and cliques and little groupings, and all kinds of issues and problems because they didn't recognize their identity in Christ, they didn't recognize the significance of that, and how that bonded them together with all kinds of different people, different races, different backgrounds, different religious affiliations in the past were brought together, different social stratas of people brought together under the power of the gospel.

That's the basic and intrinsic reality that should be ours of the church. You know, is Christ divided? We come together in Christ's name tonight, is Christ divided? No, He's not.

And so there's this fundamental unity that is significant and important and valued in the church. Behold how good a thing it is and how we're coming well together, such as Brethrenar and Unity to dwell in the 1650 version of the Psalms it takes in that word.

Behold, Luke Gaze, and that's an important and significant word that is there at the very beginning of the Psalm. Look at this. Look on this. Think about it. Consider it for yourselves.

[5 : 55] This great reality of what is the Christian church. And recognize that when that unity is not present, it is usually because there's a heart problem in our lives as Christians, or we're not Christians at all.

We may profess some kind of belief, but if we have no unity with our fellow believers, then it may be we're not Christians, or that there's something fundamental wrong in our hearts.

We're focusing on the wrong thing. We're trusting in the wrong thing. Our identity is placed in the wrong areas. There may be pride. There may be impurity.

There may be issues that need to be ironed out as we consider being disunited from our people, from the people of God.

It's a good, he says, and a pleasant thing. It's good. How good and pleasant it is. It's delightful. It's sweet. It's superior.

[7 : 06] It's morally, it's a good thing. Now, we don't in any way want to be moralistic in the church, and we don't preach moralism. But I'm going to begin shortly, and I had the privilege of reading several books on Job, the book of Job and the Old Testament on holiday, because we're going to start a series on that.

And I'm going to throw a wee taster in here. The book of Job is really great because it speaks of someone who was completely full of integrity.

He was blameless. Now, that doesn't mean he was sinless, but he was morally and ethically and biblically in his life without fault.

In other words, he kept a short account with his God. He took his sins before God and he confessed to him. He wasn't living in any way which was hypocritical or divisive.

It's not preaching moralism, but we're preaching this upright living that is motivated and inspired by the Holy Spirit of God.

[8 : 15] And that is the goodness that's spoken of here. It's a morally good thing for us as a people to be united. It might not be quite so fascinating and interesting to hear all about people's failings and faults and glory in them and glory in being divided from them and associating ourselves with a particular tribe within the church, a particular group we want to belong to that we want to think is significant or important.

That is obviously in many ways much more attractive to us in our lives, but it is morally good and it is a pleasant, God says a pleasant thing, superior thing, harmonious thing to be united.

It's the kind of word for pleasant in the Hebrew, the Hebrew scholar, is that harmony of music is the same kind of word that comes out, that pleasantness that comes from the harmony between musical instruments, between voices that come together.

It's harmonious mixing in with the sweetness and the loveliness of the taste of, for example, honey. And I do believe that morally pure and pleasant and delightful unity is something you should and I should be striving for in our Christian lives with one another.

[9 : 47] It's really easy to be disunited. Any mug, any fool can work at disunity, but it takes someone who is dependent on Jesus Christ and working at their Christian lives and will go on to see to grow and develop that unity.

I think, I believe the world is straining on a leash to experience the kind of unity that is offered to us in Christ and through the gospel because we live in, what do we often speak about the world here?

We speak of the world as a broken world, disunited world, a world where people are fragile and lack their identity and lack their security and are insecure in everything about their lives and they long for this sense of belonging and this sense of unity.

Now several people have spoken about, you know, we often say this, don't we, in St. Columbus when people come to see a baptism like they did this morning, who don't normally go to church or maybe not Christians or maybe have been occasionally in the past, they sense what we have here as a community.

It's not a cold, ritualistic service to come along to you. Now I'm not bigging us up in that way at all because it's of God and it's of the spirit and that we work it and continue to work at that, but that's what people look for.

[11 : 13] That's what people see and it is attractive, it is delightful, it is pleasant and it is good. You know, you can be absolutely orthodox in every word and sentence and be hugely unpleasant and kind of bad.

But in Christ and knowing Christ and serving Christ and being filled with the spirit of Christ allows us to be good and pleasant and united in Him.

And the Psalm then goes on to give illustrations of that unity and the significance of that unity.

We're going to look at that for a minute. And there's two illustrations. They kind of merge in together, there's the idea of the oil of anointing that was poured on Aaron's head, which ran down his beard and down his collar and his robes, and then it speaks of the Jew of Herman.

As if the Jew of Herman were falling on Mount Zion, different ends of the country. So these two illustrations of what this unity looks like and the illustrative of how this unity can be achieved.

Now can you just turn with me just to keep you awake. This evening at Exodus chapter 30, and I just want to read a little bit about this oil that was used in the religious worship, the Old Testament church, in verse 22.

[12 : 44] It's great, it's a great little passage from Exodus, it's on page 89, verse 22. Then the Lord said to Moses, take the following fine spices, 500 shekels of liquid myrrh, half as much as 250 shekels of fragrant cinnamon, 250 shekels of fragrant cane, 500 shekels of cassia, all according to the sanctuary shekel and a hint of olive oil.

Make these into a sacred anointing oil, a fragrant blend, the work of a perfume. And it will be the sacred anointing oil, then use it to anoint the tent of meeting, the Ark of the Testimony, the Table and all its articles, the lampstand and its accessories, the altar of incense, the altar of burnt offering, and all its utensils and the basin with its stand.

Use of consecrate them so that they will be most holy and whatever touches them will be holy.

Anoint Aaron and his sons and consecrate them so that they may serve me as priests, say to the Israelites, this is to be my sacred anointing oil for the generations to come, and so on.

It's a sacred formula that was poured in there. Now who would agree about that? It's not a tiny little bit of expensive oil that's moulded together and dripped on Aaron's head.

It's poured over everything to do with the temple. It's on the altars and it's poured over Aaron and his sons and it's effusely poured over everything. And yet it's sacred and it's special and it's important.

[14 : 19] And it's symbolic in many ways throughout the scripture, the oil of anointing is symbolic of the anointing of the Holy Spirit on our life's sacred.

Something is called holy, it means it's just set apart. The Holy Spirit sets us apart for service to God. We saw that this morning set apart from sin, set apart to God.

And there's this great sense in which what is spoken of here, the anointing of oil, is the anointing of God on our lives, the anointing of this Holy Spirit on our lives. And we saw again, interestingly, the link this morning between baptism being washing of water and yet it symbolises a greater baptism in the Holy Spirit.

And that really is what is also being symbolised, this great outpouring of the Holy Spirit, not just on the individual but on the people of God together. So the unity that Jesus speaks of in John 17 is a unity in the Holy Spirit, a unity that comes from the anointing of God, the baptism in the Holy Spirit, the sacred being set apart.

So we see in that illustration that the unity that's spoken of is the gift of the Holy Spirit, you know? It is impossible, in other words.

[15 : 35] You sit here and say, I can't stand some people in the church. I can't stand what goes on sometimes. I can't stand what people say about me. I can't possibly be united to that person. They

are complete freaks.

But that's right, because it's not a human unity and because it requires us to fall in our knees and ask for the Holy Spirit to enable us to love people instead of hate them, to speak well of them rather than gossip about them, and to love and wash their feet symbolically rather than run away from them and care only about our own consideration.

So unity is a gift of the Holy Spirit. It's a mark of regeneration. If we sit and judgment on all of the other Christians around us, it's a fairly sure sign we're not regenerate.

That's a pretty strong thing to say, isn't it? But it's hard to be proud and to be a believer. And it's hard to be judgmental about everyone around us and understand our own hearts and the darkness and the sin of our own hearts.

So it is from day one, what has happened? From day one, Satan has come in and said, you don't believe God, surely. And surely it wasn't, you know, I didn't do anything wrong, it was Eve. Eve, who you gave me, she's the one to me.

[17:03] The devil has come in and created this unity. That's what he does. That's his work. It's the great mark. And it's through pride and through idolatry and through a misunderstanding of our position in life that he does this.

And so the devil separates Christ has come to bring peace. We sing about peace at Christmas time and it's all very fluffy and nice and warm. And everyone likes the idea of peace. But you know, when it's peace next to the person in the pew, that's a sometimes a different story, isn't it?

When it's tangible, black and white, ABC piece that we are asked to deal with and to deal with being wronged and to deal with the messiness and the ugliness of being part of a community, then that is where we require the Holy Spirit.

And that's where we carry the power of Christ and where we require prayer in our lives. Because what is clear from this Psalm is that this precious oil that's poured on the head is exactly that. It's precious.

It's expensive. The reading we did in Exodus there makes clear that the amounts that were used and the spices that were used in this anoint were expensive.

[18:14] And it was to be a mark of cost to be set apart in this way. And such unity we know is expensive. It's expensive because we know ultimately it costs Jesus Christ. We saw that again so clearly this morning.

It was easy for God to create, wasn't it? Not a problem. You just spoke in the words of it. But it wasn't so easy for Him to redeem. Redemption was costly for Him. And we recognise that unity in Christ and being under in one body with Christ's head is inexpensive because tension remains in our lives but it's moved.

Tension is moved at least in theory. It ought to be moved from one another internally because the Holy Spirit creates a tension against sin in our own hearts and we need to deal with that.

And as we deal with that we recognise and we know and we experience the battleground of remaining united in Christ. Easy for us to be Christians who get on our high horse, who take offence, who find fault.

It's harder for us to be Christians who are united in grace and in submission and recognising our imperfections in life.

[19:54] So that unity is costly and obviously we know it's unique because it's the gift of the Holy Spirit as it was a precious oil set apart for the work of the temple in the Old Testament.

So unity for us is not spineless, it's not sloppy, it's not a Cinderella doctrine, it is based on our confession, it's based on our submission, it's based on our obedience to Christ, it's based on our vision of the gospel and our understanding of the gospel.

So we cannot deviate from that truth and from that reality in our lives. And unity therefore is wider than the local church, as again we saw this morning, sorry I'm being very repetitive, but it also includes the local church.

It's not just that we value and we appreciate and we work at being united with our fellow Christians in the city here in Edinburgh at a kind of more corporate level as it were, but we work at unity within the fellowship, hugely significant.

We see that that unity is a gift of the Spirit and we've seen that that unity also is extravagant, running down the beard, running down on Aaron's beard, down upon the collar of his robes down to his skirts.

[21 : 27] And there's a sense in which the work of God is to see the unity of the church spread and develop, it's to be something that is a part of every believer and every believer's life under Christ and in the Holy Spirit, it's to be for all of God's people together.

You don't have a get out this evening, you don't have a get out because of your background, because of your specific set of circumstances, because of what you're going through in life, because of your lack of knowledge or your expert knowledge, however it might be that you regard yourself in life.

There is no exception to this, unity of the gospel is to be copious for us all. It's not just unity with people we get on well with, not just unity with people on a similar academic platform as us or of a social background, it's unity that is extravagant.

And again, it's what will set apart the church today very much so, because it's a generous unity that is based on the Holy Spirit.

It's not selective, it is something that leaves people gobsmacked, because you are not a natural ally or a friend to that person, you don't naturally associate with them and it's too easy for us in our lives to hide behind social equalities and getting on with people.

[23 : 10] And that's the kind of people we associate with. And can I say it's a real danger in St. Columbus, because as we grow, the hard thing to do is to come out of your comfort zone and go and speak to the people that are maybe new in the church or have arrived here or have been brought by other people or who have settled in the area.

And you think, oh, they're only going to be here for a year, I'm just going to speak to my mates, it's much easier. And that's miserable, isn't it? That's miserable and godless, because I can go down to the pub and do that.

I can go to the bowling green and do that. But in the church, we say, well, no, that's not the kind of unity that I know and aspire to. I'm not just here to have my back rubbed. I'm not just here to meet my friends in this friends culture. Hey, we're all friends.

But it's only one or two friends we have, isn't it? That we're really close with. It is that we recognize those who are burdened, those who are new, those who are old, those who look uncomfortable, those who have never been in a church before.

And we make our way and we invite them to our homes. We tried ourselves in our hospitality. It's a hugely significant and costly and extravagant thing to do to open our homes today.

[24 : 27] Well, that happens to be my castle. I can't do that. I can't be involved in that. That's fine. But we can open our hearts and we can open our pockets in the coffee shops. And we can befriend and we can be united with new Christians and old Christians, young Christians and old Christians that we can learn from one another because it's extravagant.

And you meet with people from different social strata, different backgrounds, different academic standings, different levels of intelligence. My, that's radical. That's not really. And unity, while being extravagant, also sets us apart for special use.

Christodio was setting Aaron apart for his task and his sons for the task that they were to be engaged in. And as we also seek that unity and seek the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives, we come to the place where he bestows his blessing, even life forevermore. And the reality of life for us in this short time we're here.

We're open ourselves to God's blessing as we are united. And all that that entails under the Holy Spirit, you know, much broader than what I've been giving examples of, but all that it entails, the growth, the fullness, the usefulness, the fruitfulness, the sense of God's presence, all of that is powerfully blessed by God.

Again, we're not looking for quid pro quo. We're not saying if I do this, then God will do that. And God will have to do that. And I'll earn it. We're not saying that. But we're finding this is the place where he blesses. This is where the oil is poured out and as we are united together and breaking down the sins that separate us, then naturally from that flows blessing.

[26 : 29] You know that that's the case, don't you? We know that that's the case when we deal with, you know, that was the problem in Corinth, wasn't it? They were sitting at the Lord's table, but they were disunited. They were slugging one another. The rich people were getting drunk.

And because they had lots of time and lots of wine and they were getting drunk and those who were servants were arriving and there was no food left and there was no unity to participate in the Lord's supper. And so there was division and there wasn't blessing. And there is a corollary there in our

lives and there's a corollary there in our church as we consider that.

A unity around the spirit, around the prayer, the house of prayer around the reality of that. And I think that flows into the second illustration, which is the Jew of Hermon, which was, I don't know a lot about it, but it seems to have been a valued Jew, D.E.W. of Hermon.

And that was that morning Jew, which was renowned for being copious and for allowing fruitfulness and refreshment and the invigoration of new life that came from that Jew.

And it's a picture that it wasn't only on Mount Hermon, but it moved up to Mount Zion, from the north to the south of the land of Israel. And that refreshing power and influence of the spirit was going to be wide ranging and real and significant.

[28 : 01] And so that illustration is similar and kind of just slightly changes direction from the oil to the invigorating, refreshing, life giving Jew of God's life in our own lives and our own hearts, the refreshing power of the Holy Spirit.

And we look for that as we seek the unity of being under God and under grace.

So our responsibility, I think, as we close is to work at a local level, can I speak about that for a moment, to work at not allowing disunity to creep into our church.

And sometimes you can get proud, we can get proud of our knowledge, we can get proud of our church, we can think God must be blessing us because we are different and better than other people.

We can do lots of things that can be the beginnings of disunity, all too easy, all too justifiable. We can be worldly in our Christianity and when we do, it will lead to drought and spiritual, a lack of spiritual growth and we will not be blessed.

[29 : 32] I can say that can be a problem when a church grows, it can be a problem when we are involved in, for example, the physical work of the congregation we are speaking about and we will meet at the end of the month about proposals to change the internal area of the church.

And it will mean we might possibly be out of the building or we might have to do things differently and things might be a mess for a while, potentially for disunity, grumbling, moaning, complaining. I'm not silencing anyone. Everyone has a right and must speak about these things but there's a way to do these things in love and in grace and respectfully.

So we need to work at not allowing disunity to creep into our congregational life and we must work at unity. We really need to work at that. Each of us need to do that. We need to do it personally. We need to be involved in that.

You mustn't regard yourself as someone who just is an individual only who happens to come along to worship here. You belong, you're part of this family and family is significant and matters and important and you need to work at your relationship with Jesus Christ and you need to work and I need to work at rooting out the seeds of discontent that are there.

[31 : 08] And you need to be spiritually sensitive to when the devil is crouching at your heart, the door of your heart and is seeking to pounce. You need to know these things and you need to be honest with your heart and honest with your life and you need to use scripture as a mirror into your soul and you need to allow the grace of Christ and the cleansing of Christ and the washing and renewal of the Holy Spirit into your life.

Now sometimes that can be unpleasant. It can be much easier to leave undone certain sins and certain choices and certain ways of living because we've maybe been living that way for a long time and I'm not sure if we can face the cleansing.

Quite like being dirty but there's just nothing like the cleansing of Jesus Christ and there's nothing like the empowerment that comes from that and the washing, allowing His light into the darkness of our heart and allowing His unity to be evident in our relationships with other people.

It's not love which comes and goes but love which dwells. It's not the spirit which separates and secludes but that which dwells together.

It's not that mind which is all for debate and difference but that which dwells together in unity. I'll leave these words as a spurgeon on this passage, reminding us of what is important and what is significant.

[32 : 53] Let's put our heads in prayer. Father God we ask and pray that you would help us in our lives to live for you, that we wouldn't simply look for fine theological truths that may inspire our intellect.

However significant that is but we would look for fine theological truth that moves our wills and changes our ego, our heart, our very being.

To being one that is Christ centred and has that servant heart and that power of the spirit and that glorious self-deprecation that is yet hugely secure because of our security in Jesus.

We pray that you bless us as we come into August and September, time of change in the church, a time when we hope and pray that new people will consider coming and worshipping with us.

We pray for our friends to come along to hear about absolutely brilliant truth from the Book of Job in the Old Testament, fundamental to life, where we pray for people to be converted and new people to be brought in through that.

[34 : 37] May we not be selfish or tired to the point of not caring, may we not retreat into our own small groups of people that we are happy with or feel content with whom we can easily socialise with.

May the Lord help us to enjoy that fellowship and friendship with one another and be open-hearted to invite others into that.

May that be a blessing and something that renews us and revives us and may we live on that impossible edge of grace where we know we cannot do what we are asked to do in Christ unless it is by your grace and by your power and by your spirit.

May it take us to new places and new ways to live for the glory of Jesus Christ. Amen.