

The Beauty of Unity

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 12 November 2023

Preacher: Colin Dow

[0 : 00] We're going to read now in God's Word, in the first instance from Psalm 133.

Psalm 133. This is page number 487 in your Black Pew Bible. Psalm 133.

Behold how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity. It is like the precious oil on the head running down on the beard of Aaron, running down on the collar of his robes.

It is like the dew of Hermon which falls on the mountains of Zion. For there the Lord has commanded the blessing. Life forevermore.

And then, this isn't in the order of service, but a brief reading from John chapter 13. John chapter 13 and verse 31 onwards.

[1 : 09] John 13. Verse 31.

When he had gone out, Jesus said, Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him. If God is glorified in him, God also will glorify him in himself, and glorify him at once.

Little children, yet a little while I am with you. You will seek me, and just as I said to the Jews, so now I also say to you, for I am, you cannot come.

And you command, I give to you, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you are also to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

Amen. May God bless these readings of his word. Psalm 133. Behold how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity.

[2 : 21] For all that we may love and admire King David, when it came to his family, he cuts a rather tragic figure.

He came from a family where he wasn't just the youngest son of many brothers, but also the brother no one liked, the runt of the breed, the brood we might say.

When he himself became a father, his sons rebelled against him and against each other. David was a polygamist and an adulterer, and his adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband eventually led to the kingdom he had built being split apart.

So for him to talk about how good and pleasant a thing it is when brothers dwell in unity would seem rather ironic, to say the least.

But maybe King David's more like us than we would choose to admit. As I'm fond of saying, even the best of men are but men at best.

[3 : 31] Sometimes what we say and what we do are very different. Only the greatest king, David's grandson many times removed, Jesus Christ, is entirely consistent.

But let's be fair to King David. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and after a lifetime of meditation upon the mistakes that he made, he writes Psalm 133.

Perhaps it's just that he wishes his family life could have been a bit more pleasant in its unity and its oneness. This is a psalm of ascent.

It's one of those songs pilgrims would sing as they made their way up to Jerusalem to celebrate one of the central Jewish festivals of the year. So while we may talk about the nuclear family as being a good and pleasant thing, and it is, the wider application of this psalm is the unity, togetherness, and oneness of the whole people of God.

What we call in New Testament times the church. The unity of the church. And what he's saying is that when brothers, and by that he means brothers and sisters, you understand, live together in unity, it's a good and a pleasant thing.

[4 : 52] Unity in the church is a beautiful and a delightful thing. It is to be highly prized. What David says in Psalm 133, Jesus says in the Gospels, and Paul, John, say in their letters.

Unity in the church is a beautiful thing. But it's also a very fragile thing. As we've all seen to our own cost. The psalm begins with the word, behold.

Behold. It's David's way of calling us to pay attention. Jesus used to preface important saying with the words, truly, truly, I say unto you.

David prefaced important sayings with the word, behold. He's saying to us, sit up, take notice. What I'm about to say to you is of first importance.

Leave your speculations and your disagreements to one side. Focus on unity. There's an expression. The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing.

[6 : 04] It's as if he's saying to us, stop majoring on minors. Stop minoring on majors. Rather, by beginning the psalm with this word, behold.

He's telling us that unity in the church is a major thing. We can be right about many things. But if we're wrong about unity between Christians, we're wrong.

Full stop. And then he says how good and pleasant it is when brothers and sisters dwell together in unity.

Now that word good translates the Hebrew word tov, which is liberally sprinkled throughout the whole Old Testament. The range of the word stretches from morally good to aesthetically pleasing. A morally upright action can be described as tov, good. A work of art can be described as tov, good. God described the world he made as tov, good.

[7 : 08] And more than that, God describes himself as good. Infinitely pure and infinitely beautiful. Which means that our unity as a church, our oneness as brothers and sisters in Christ, is itself a reflection of the goodness of God.

In no greater way do we honor God than by living together as one body in Christ. Loving, forgiving, and caring for one another.

Remember what Jesus said in John 13, verse 35. By this all men will know that you're my disciples if you love one another.

Now the word pleasant has the same idea. It's beautiful. It's aesthetically pleasing. We may translate it as delightful.

Unity is a thing of delights. In the song of Solomon it's described, it's used to describe physical beauty. The beauty of the human form.

[8 : 13] It connotes something desirable, something magnetically attractive. It's used to describe a beautiful song. A beautiful speech.

A beautiful tree. A beautiful building. This thing, it's entrancing. One cannot look upon it without a sense of aesthetic wonder and awe.

The bridegroom watches his bride walking down the aisle to meet him on their wedding day. The audience are transfixed in wonder by the orchestra playing magnificent symphony.

We get the message, don't we? It's not just the intellectual quality of the mind. But unity goes deep into the heart and affections. It moves us.

It fills us with a sense of inner warmth and security and belonging. It's a deeply attractive quality. For all that a church may have great teaching, great worship, great programs, it's its unity which makes it a beautifully healthy church.

[9 : 22] The sounds it makes are heavenly. The words it speaks are love. The things it does are warm. To be in a church like this is no duty.

It's a delight. It's home. That's one of the reasons that we want to impress upon each other the richness of the truth.

That this church isn't a building we come to, but a family we belong to. It's not a building we come to. It's a family we belong to.

Here, brothers and sisters in Christ dwell together in unity. And that, in the words of King David, is this good and pleasant, delightfully, aesthetically pleasing thing.

In my younger years, I'm sure this is true for many of us here, we would sing Psalm 133 often at the end of a house fellowship.

[10 : 24] We'd had a time of sharing and hospitality where, in the best sense of the word, feelings had run high. We'd enjoyed an evening of togetherness. We'd been part of something special.

And so we sang about how good and pleasant it had been. But then David goes on to use two pictures of unity. He sketches how good and pleasant a thing it is for us to strive as Christians after unity in the church.

In verse 2, he pictures it as fragrant oil being poured out on the head of Aaron, the high priest. And then in verse 3, he pictures it as life-giving dew falling upon the mountain upon which Jerusalem was built.

He portrays unity as fragrant and life-giving. In the first instance in verse 2, he describes unity in the church as being like fragrant perfume.

Before Aaron, the high priest, would enter into the tabernacle of God to offer sacrifices, precious oil was poured out upon his head. This oil, translated by the Greeks as myrrh, would run down over Aaron's hair, over his beard, and over all the clothes he was wearing.

[11 : 49] He would carry with them the beautiful scent of expensive perfume. You could smell them before you could see them. And when he entered into that tabernacle and the inner sanctuary which contained the Ark of the Covenant, he would carry in with them that beautiful fragrance of the most precious and expensive of earthly perfumes.

Perhaps that perfume was poured out upon him partly to conceal the awful stench of rotting blood which came from the sacrifices. But for whatever reason, the smell of myrrh would pervade every corner and crevice of the tabernacle.

That's how good a thing it is for unity in the church. It's the sweetest of smells. That fragrance. You want to lift up your nose just to get a little bit more.

Suppose our church here smelled of dead squirrel. I guess none of us would want to come. So up there above that roof, a squirrel died somewhere.

It was peacefully rotting away. The stench of decomposing flesh would make us all want to stay away. But true unity found in the love of God, the self-giving of Christ, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, that's the opposite.

[13 : 18] It is dearly attractive. It renders our meetings together beautifully fragrant, such that when visitors come among us, they lift up their noses to get just a little more scent of that beautiful aroma of the goodness and the pleasantness of unity.

It draws us to join together because we want to smell that love and oneness again and again and again. Unity in the church is like a fragrant perfume.

But then in the second instance in verse 3, he describes unity in the church as being like a life-giving Jew. A life-giving Jew.

Hermon's a mountain in the north of Israel proper, upon which in the early morning there falls a heavy Jew upon the ground. It allows for growth and fruitfulness such that Hermon's not parched like the plains, but green and verdant.

And that Jew gives life to the dry and arid soil of Mount Hermon. In the same way, good and pleasant unity in the church gives life to the dry and arid soil of the Christian heart.

[14 : 35] We've all had busy and challenging weeks, and we all will. We've had to face our own issues and anxieties. We've started the week with great intentions, but most of the goals of last week remain unattained.

We've disappointed ourselves with how little time we've devoted to God. We've got dry and thirsty hearts, and we're longing for the reviving and refreshing waters of Christ and his gospel to drench us in his gracious flood.

We so desperately need that water of the gospel because it's life to us. It is the difference between famine and fruitfulness, between life and death.

King David tells us that's how good a thing unity in the church is. It gives life to the Christian soul and creates the perfect conditions for fruitfulness in the Christian life.

So, unity is a good and pleasant thing. I hope we all agree. The ultimate source of unity, however, does not come from us.

[15 : 53] The history of the human race, as we see today, is one of tribalism, conflict, and war. Unity does not come natural to us as human beings. If we read this psalm carefully, we learn where true unity comes from in the church.

Between verses 2 and 3, the word coming down, translated as running down in verse 2 and falling in verse 3, is used three times.

In James 1 verse 17, we read these words, Every good and perfect gift is from above. In other words, unity is God's heavenly gift.

It is something possible only by divine grace. What makes us brothers and sisters, what unites us together as one church, is not an earthly commonality.

We are not of one ethnic grouping. We are not of one social class or one language type. We have different political persuasions. We have various interests.

[17 : 04] It is not incidental, however, that David points to Aaron, the high priest. What unites us together as Christians is the priesthood of a greater than Aaron, the man Christ Jesus.

What joins us together as a kingship greater than that of David, the Savior Christ Jesus. The Nicene Creed reminds us that for us and for our salvation, the Son of Man came down from heaven and was incarnate, became human and was born of the Virgin Mary.

What came down from heaven to create our unity wasn't a what, but a who. Jesus Christ, the Son of God. He, our great high priest, our Savior King, was made man.

And as a man, he suffered and died on the cross to take all our sins away, to make us new people and give us eternal life. Through faith in him, we become people of love and grace, forgiveness, forbearance and compassion.

He fills us with his Holy Spirit, who becomes for us the sweet fragrance and the life-giving source of our unity. He, Jesus Christ, is the heart of our oneness.

[18 : 30] He who came down joins us together as one. And what God has joined together, let no man separate. Our unity is of grace from beginning to end.

No Christ, no unity. The beginning and end of our oneness. He it is who makes us brothers and sisters in the family of God. Unity is God's heavenly gift of grace through Christ by his Spirit, centered on the cross and headed for the throne of God in heaven, before which we shall all, as one, sing the song of the redeemed.

But then before we move on to some practical applications of the psalm, notice the rewards of unity. Notice the rewards.

The blessing of God and life forevermore. The blessing of God and life forevermore. How shall we expect any blessing from God unless we are one in him?

The church at peace with itself can expect God's power in evangelism, God's comfort in grief, and God's presence in prayer.

[19 : 46] We long for days of spiritual refreshment, renewal, and revival. And these too shall come as we strive toward and enjoy the goodness and pleasantness of unity.

They shall say of us, they truly are a blessed church when they see our oneness in Christ, our love for each other, and our fellow sympathy.

And then even as we strive toward the unity of the gospel, here and now in the church, in heaven we'll enjoy a deeper unity, not just among ourselves, but with every Christian who has ever lived, or who ever will live.

It will be a life forevermore, of which the goodness and pleasantness of unity today is but a foretaste. What exists in shadow shall exist then in reality in the sight and presence of Christ itself. And it shall add to our experience of the beauty of heaven. That fragrance that we found so appealing here is going to fill heaven with its divine scent.

[21 : 02] That life-giving dew which so refreshed us here shall fully quench our thirst in the new heavens and the new earth. How good and pleasant a thing unity is.

Well, as we close, let me suggest three brief applications of this truth, recognizing it's going to require a future sermon and that at the end of the month to detail those areas in which we need to work to promote unity here and now.

the first is this. Consider the evil and ugliness of this unity. If unity is good and pleasant, consider the ugliness and evil of this unity.

If unity is a good and pleasant thing, fragrant and life-giving, disunity is an evil and ugly thing, nauseating and spiritually fatal. There are two missing generations in the Free Church of Scotland. My generation and the generation which came immediately before me. We were in our 20s and our 30s in the 1990s when the Free Church went through a period of deep disunity resulting in the split of 2000.

[22 : 21] Many of you here remember it. How many hundreds of my contemporaries and those just a little bit older than me were so disgusted and spiritually poisoned by the infighting, name-calling and backroom politics that they didn't just leave the Free Church but they left their faith altogether.

Before we should ever enter days like that again, let's consider how evil and ugly a thing disunity in the Church of Jesus Christ really is. The second application is this.

Consider the value of community. Consider the value of community. David talks about brothers and sisters who dwell together in unity.

Who dwell together in unity. Dwell is a word of engagement and community. For some, the Church consists in slipping into Church unnoticed and then leaving unnoticed with no involvement, no commitment and no engagement.

That is not the unity David envisages here. It is a deep unity of commitment and community when our lives are so mixed up with each other it's rather like that tangle of string that I took this morning scrambled together.

[23 : 44] My pain becomes your pain and your joy becomes my joy my children are your children and your parents are mine. We cannot have the goodness and pleasantness of unity without first paying the price of costly commitment to each other.

That's going to be difficult. There will be times of disagreement and hurt as there is in every family but a shared life of love is our goal and the place in which God commands his blessing.

And then the last application is this. Consider the source of unity. Consider the source of unity. We saw this earlier it comes from heaven.

It comes from heaven. Hot springs are heated by underwater fissures in the earth's crust. The church's unity descends from divine grace in the heavenly throne.

As we'll see in our next sermon there are patterns of character and speech which tend toward unity and we'll focus on these but in this last place we want to remind each other that unity is such a fragile thing and from heaven it is something for which we must earnestly pray.

[25 : 11] It is something for which we must earnestly pray. Prayer is the channel through which God pours out his blessings of unity upon us. The very act of praying together as one is a mark of unity.

The church that prays together stays together. When Christians pray for unity and the will of God is unity he will answer by sending his Holy Spirit to work in us the grace of forgiveness love and care among and between us.

The tragedy of this unity in the church is there for all to see and believe me the world sees it more acutely than we do. Let's ask ourselves each one of us the question what am I doing to promote the good and pleasant unity of this church?

What am I doing to promote the good and pleasant unity of this church? We all have our part to play in the pursuit of this fragrant and life-giving oneness which we have in the Jesus who gave himself on the cross for us not just for one of us but for all of us to make us one in him.

What am I doing to add to the aroma and the fruitfulness of this church? By grace whatever else may be said of us let this be true we did what we could as men and women of God who unlike David left a legacy of family unity in the church.

[26 : 57] Let us pray. Our God and Father we have often sung this hymn we have often sung that psalm rather and it's been at times of joy when we've enjoyed fellowship sweet fellowship with other Christians and we've enjoyed their community and we've enjoyed being bound up with them we ask oh Lord that as we enjoyed those times we may enjoy times of fellowship with each other as well so that our fellowship together here in Crow Road Free Church may be a good and pleasant thing may be a thing of aesthetic beauty a great masterpiece of symphonic praise a delightfully wonderful human form a magnificent poem dedicated to you a fragrant scent which permeates beyond the doors of this building reaching out into the community beyond for as your own son said by this all men shall know that you are my disciples if you love one another in Jesus name

Amen Hmm