The Cost of Unity

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[0:00] I'm David. I'm one of the pastors of the church. If you're new here this morning, it's great to have you with us. We've got church lunch after this. If you've got the time, it'd be great if you could stick around.

Will you pray with me as we come to God's word? Let's pray together. Father, I pray that you would help us to see your heart for your church and how sure it is of the unity of the church when Christ returns.
Lord, I pray that you would convict and encourage each one of us so that as a church family and across churches, we will be unified to the glory of Jesus' name.
So I pray for your help as I speak to be truthful and clear, and I pray for all of us that we would sit as learners under your word. In Jesus' name. Amen.
Well, there were differences in the ancient church that Paul's writing to, and there's differences in this room that run very, very deep and unlikely to see eye to eye on these issues in our lifetime.
[1:25] And yet, the night before Jesus died, one of the primary things he prays for his people is this, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and love them even as you loved me.

The display in the world of the love of God found only in Jesus depends on our unity. When we don't have it, we're not bringing glory to God.
It's a big deal for Jesus. Now, last week, we saw in the first 12 verses powerful motivations not to condemn each other, but to welcome, embrace each other.
Now, you know as well as I do, in workplaces and families and across nations, in our nation, there's a whole lot of despising and condemning going on. In Christ, we're given powerful motivations not to condemn, but to welcome.
I deserve to be condemned by God. And yet, I am welcomed into that inner circle of Father, Son and Holy Spirit loving me, loving you, a child of the Father, Christ united to us like a husband, the Holy Spirit making his home in us.
[2:53] We're given the motivation that Christ is Lord of each one of us. We have to do what we believe is pleasing to him, not even what I say.

You have to please him. He's your Lord. And at the end of our life, we will each stand before God and give an account. He is judge.
We must seek to please him. We must act in line with our conscience. And who are we to sit on his judgment seat? These are powerful motivations we've got to welcome each other, not cut each other off.
And yet, Paul doesn't stop there. We need more. We need more than that. That's a lot. But we need more to have true unity, true peace in this church and across churches in the Hunter.
What we're going to hear today is almost the exact opposite of what our culture is teaching our children as of primary importance.
[3:58] Frozen is filling our household at the moment from what Rory wears to, anyway, what we're listening to. She knows it.

Anyway, I won't. Sorry, I'm getting distracted. All right, Elsa moves from what our society just a few generations ago believed to what we believe today in one song.
And fortunately, we all know the song because we can't get away from it. Let it go. Be the good girl you always have to be. Conceal.
Don't feel. Don't let them know. Okay, that's how we used to think that's how you be a good person. Get on. But then she transforms her whole approach to life.

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It's time to see what I can do, to test the limits and break through. No right, no wrong, no rules for me. I'm free. And there's a costume change. And she flicks her hair. And she's free.
[5:00] I do it pretty well, don't I? It's a bit of a worry. Be authentic to your desires. Don't please others. But there's a cost.

A kingdom of isolation. It looks like I'm the queen. There is a cost. And I think we're feeling it in our culture today, that isolation.
We could easily misunderstand our passage today because explicitly we're told, chapter 15, verse 2, Let each of us please his neighbour.
Be a people pleaser. You don't want to be called a people pleaser, do you? We're being told, be a people pleaser. Now, it sounds like be spineless.
Be a doormat. Be a chameleon. Just whatever they're doing, you do. But we could misunderstand what Paul's saying. He can't be saying we need the approval of others to feel fulfilled.
[6:13] He's just said we need to please our Lord. We don't need someone else's approval because we're fulfilled by being welcomed by Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

He can't be saying that when he says please our neighbour. Our passage today is saying something our culture is saying the opposite.
It's saying that if we want unity, there is a cost we have to pay. And it's a cost our culture says not to pay. Here's where we're headed in the passage.
Verses 13 to 23, we're going to see what the cost is and what our motivation is. Then in chapter 15, we're going to see where we're going to get the power to pay that cost for the sake of unity.
We're going to see that Christ paid the true cost. And we're going to see the hope of the church one day unified. So have your Bibles open. Verses 13 to 23.
[7:22] Build up the church. Don't destroy it. Now to understand the cost we've got to pay for unity, we've got to do, Paul lays some groundwork.

So we've got to understand a few things. Verse 17. We've got to understand the nature of Christ's rule over our lives. What is the kingdom of God about?
Verse 17. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.
The nature of Christ's rule isn't... I'm not quite sure how to capture this. It's not on the earthly plane of do's and don'ts. This is very different from the major world religions.
If you convert to those religions, you have to convert your culture as well. There's a very clear list of do's and don'ts. Our natural thinking can think God through the Bible shines this unambiguous light on eat this, don't eat that, wear this, not that.
[8:35] You can't dance. You must not listen to punk rock music. You've got to tune your radio to Rima if you're a Christian. You must not watch certain shows.

Maybe you shouldn't even have a TV at all. We can think that Christ's rule over his people operates at that earthly do's and don'ts level.
And this misunderstanding is a problem for the early church. For the church back then, there is a dispute going on.
They all believe in Jesus, but some came from a Jewish background with the Old Testament rituals and ceremonial laws. They had rules, daily rules.
You can eat this, you can't eat that. You can only wear clothes of a single fabric. You can't mix clothing, even the clothes you're wearing. How you operate, morning, noon and night.
[9:40] What you do as a family, your house. It's just everywhere. You need to be clean. You need to be clean if you're going to have a relationship with God.

Now, we too must be clean today. But all those who are preparing for Jesus who makes us clean, and that's why those rules don't apply today. We are clean by Jesus.
They all believed in Jesus, but some came from that background, and their traditions and their understanding wasn't fully developed of what believing in Jesus means today.
But then others in the church came from pagan backgrounds, worshipping false gods. And they were likely struggling to just let go of the lingering suspicion that when in the marketplace people would offer the meat to idols, that the idols still existed to some degree.
They were struggling to let go of that. The strong in faith knew Christ has fulfilled the Mosaic law, those idols are nothing.

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[10:52] They're like, I'll eat. There's freedom to eat. Now, Christ's rule in a believer's life isn't on the level of these superficial things.

Now, that's why Paul, as an apostle, is persuaded in verse 14, nothing is unclean in itself. Paul isn't saying that there isn't such a thing as unclean.
There are unclean things like the love of money or covetousness, adultery, stealing. These are unclean. But he's talking about created things, things God has created good, like meat, like wine. He's created good in and of themselves. The principal at my Bible college that I went to, SMBC, he kept urging us, because he knew us students, we were passionate about the church.
And there's a danger in that, in that you think only what you do at church and church-related activities is good.
[12:17] And he kept pushing us, go lie in the grass and make angels in the grass and stare up at the sky until you realise the goodness of creation.

He was just trying to expose just a gap in our understanding. The monasteries in church history where the churches have tried to separate ourselves from the world as if eating and drinking and all those earthly things are wrong.
The kingdom of God isn't about that. Creation is good. God created it. The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof. It's good. A Christian is blessed and can know God's approval if you've got a clear conscience and enjoys anything God has created good.
Enjoy it to the worship of God. Christ's rule isn't about do this or don't do that at that level. Enjoy it.
So verse 17, if that's not what the rule of Christ is about, what is it about? What is the kingdom of God about? How is he to rule us?
[13:32] It's about righteousness. Each of us, and as a church, we are to seek to do what we believe is right in the sight of God, informed by the Bible, discerning his will.

We want to honour him in everything. It is about righteousness. The rule of Christ is about seeking peace, and that peace is horizontal peace, peace in the church, harmony and mutual support.
If you're seeking those things, that's Christ's rule. He wants you to seek those things. When the church is seeking to do what is right and seeking peace with each other, there's joy.
We will be characterised by joy, and all this comes in the Holy Spirit, the power of the Holy Spirit. That's what Christ's rule is about.
And this helps us understand why some in that church back then thought that eating food offered to pagan gods was not right, not righteous.
[14:49] The food in and of itself, God says, is clean, but for them, their conscience before God is convicted it's wrong. For them, it becomes sin.

Verse 23 is the principle. The last bit. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.
Even a small, insignificant act can become sinful if a person is going against their faith in God and their conscience before God. We must seek what we believe is righteous.
I know of a man who struggles with lust and he's made a commitment before God not to go to the beach. There's too much temptation there.
Now, there's nothing inherently wrong with the beach. It is a good gift from God. Now, God's word says lots about dressing modestly, okay, but the beach is good, is it not?
[16:03] It's his creation. It's good. We can enjoy it with thanksgiving to our creator and saviour. But for that man to even go to the beach, something as simple as that, it would be violating his conscience.

Some believers in their workplace want to build relationships with their colleagues.
They feel free to partake of the $2 sweepstake of just to build relationships with their colleagues. Whereas another believer will go, even $2 will be convicted that that's gambling.
For them to partake, even of $2, for them it would be unrighteous before God. We each must be persuaded from God's word what is righteous to do or not.
We must seek to do everything in faith and not go against conscience. Now, our conscience can be wrong. Our conscience can be wrong.
[17:19] Our conscience isn't the final authority. The weak in the church back then didn't fully understand the implications of the gospel. We can seek to persuade each other from God's word over time from the Bible.

But until you have reason from the Bible to be convinced, persuaded, we must act according to faith. Because the kingdom of God is about righteousness.

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We've got to act according to what we think is right. All right. That is all context so that we understand now what the cost is to have unity.
The strong believers back then who understood their freedom to enjoy God's good creation, they were insisting on exercising those freedoms.
We might say today being authentic to their desires. But they're doing so at the expense of spiritual harm to brothers and sisters and at the expense of peace and unity in the church.
[18:33] If you were having a recovered alcoholic over for dinner, they've come out of therapy.

Like, would you put wine on the table? It would be foolish, right? It would be unloving. Because we know. We know the physical and social and family damage and economic damage, the destruction if that alcoholic relapsed.
Paul uses strong language here to wake us up to the spiritual damage we could cause. Your brother or sister is running the race of faith towards glory. Why would you intentionally put a stumbling block right where they're going to step so that they stumble and lose their footing and maybe even fall entirely?
Why would we do that? Verse 15. If your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love.
By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died. Now, missionaries have to be careful all the time, cross-culturally, what certain behaviours mean and don't mean.
[20:00] I want to pick a small example for us just to drive this point home. Like, is it a small thing to encourage a believer to watch something they believe would be wrong for them to watch?

Is that a small thing? Like, it's just a movie. It's just a show. Well, they will immediately have guilt in their walk with God.
What if I'm encouraging that sort of attitude?
That sort of thinking could, over time, lead a person to make shipwreck of their faith. If they make a habit of just disregarding what God says and just for the sake of pleasure, social acceptance, ignore my conscience, they might make shipwreck of their faith and we go, how did they get there?
I helped them there. For what? A movie? Even a small thing? C.S. Lewis captures the impact we can have on each other when we contemplate the eternal destiny we're headed towards.
[21:37] He says, It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses. Just the glory we're going to have in the new creation. To remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you'd be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare.

All day long we are in some degree helping each other to one or other of these destinations. Our words and our behaviour really do have an effect on each other.
So not only will love not entice a sister to do what they believe is wrong to do, but love won't encourage a sister to stop doing what they are convicted is right to do.
I'm hoping this application is fair. You can be the judge of that. But I think in our circles we can talk a lot about we don't need to go to church to be saved because we want to be really careful that it's not by our doing that we're saved.
It's by faith alone. But what effect is all this talk and our choices of exercising freedom in this having on those younger in the faith?
[23:08] Should we be surprised if one day everything else takes higher priority than gathering together to be nourished in the people of God?

If they were convicted, it is right for me to go to church and we're saying, oh, we're free in that. I just wonder what effect we could have.
Why put a stumbling block? We don't want our brother or sister to do what they're convicted is wrong.
We don't want them to stop doing what they're convicted is right. Instead of tearing down Christ's people in his church, verse 19, so then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.
The elders have been so encouraged in recent years. We've had some big decisions as a church and some have held strongly biblically informed disagreements with what the elders are proposing.
[24:20] Now, it takes a lot of wisdom to know when to keep advocating for what you're convinced God's word says and when to let it go. But I think it's amazing the affection in this room still, given some of the decisions we've made in recent years.

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The full engagement. And the reason is because those people understand the nature of the kingdom of God. That peace, peace is precious to God and his church.
And I think the result of that is joy in this church family. So there is a cost to unity.
There's a cost to personal freedoms. There's a cost even for convictions on secondary matters to build up the faith of others and to build up the peace and unity of the church.
So that's the cost we're called to make for each other, for the glory of God. Where do we get the power to gladly pay this cost? Not begrudgingly, but happily pay this cost.
[25:38] Let's go to chapter 15, verses 1 to 3. We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves.

Let each of us please his neighbour for his good to build him up. For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, the reproaches of those who reproach you fell on me.
It'd be easy for us in our culture, if you have a clear conscience, to say, I'll do what I have every right to do. I think it's right. I can do it. Why should my desires and my convictions be restrained by your conscience?
But that's not the way of Christ. That's not the attitude. That's not love talking. To bear with the failings of the weak, that is saying more than just tolerate each other, just bear with it.
It's more like Galatians 6, where it's get underneath and help carry the burden. Help bear the load.
[26:55] Your sister, your brother, feels burdened by their conscience to do this or not do that. Get underneath and help them carry that. You don't have to, but for love's sake, bear each other's burdens.

We can only do this if we keep remembering, Christ did not please himself for my sake.
That's where the power comes from to do this. The reproaches of those who reproaches you fell on me. As the Sanhedrin spat in his face, slapped him and said, prophesy, Christ, who struck you?
Was Christ pleasing himself? As the Roman guards thrust a crown of thorns on his head and the crowd were crying out, crucify him, was Christ insisting on his rights and his freedoms as the son of God?
As the chief priests taunt him, he's on the cross and he trusts in God.
[28:15] Let God deliver him now if he desires him. For he said, I am the son of God. Why didn't Christ please himself? Because he got underneath my burdens, my failings, and carried it for me.

Now, what's that got to do with us forfeiting some freedoms that we've got for love's sake?
Very little. And I think that's the point. Christ didn't please himself to the extent of bearing all the hatred of the world against God, all my failings, so that I would be welcomed in.
He paid the true cost. He paid the true cost to welcome us and unify us as God's people. When we see how much he paid, those smaller costs, it'll seem like a small price to pay if it builds your faith, if it keeps peace and harmony in the church.
Isn't it worth it? We get power to pay this cost if we keep looking at Jesus. He's the one who paid the true cost.
[29:37] And the other way we get power is looking to hope. It's a bit surprising. Verse 4, when you first read it, he suddenly just introduces this concept of hope.

Why do we need hope to do this? In the end of verse 13, may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace and believing so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.
The church struggled to main unity back then and we still struggle today. Perhaps this morning you're disillusioned by disunity you see in this church between people or from another church or between churches.
To keep gladly paying the cost of unity, lately I've got to keep filling my head with hope. When the dispute in Rome back then seemed too big to overcome, it's like Paul is going, okay, here's your situation.
Put that in light of where history is headed. The church will be united. It will be. When Christ returns, the church will be filled with sharing the love of Christ and worshipping him.
[31:05] He's paid the price and every nation of the world will be unified. There's deep differences between the nations but we will be standing shoulder to shoulder. When Jesus returns, a conservative, reformed Baptist will stand shoulder to shoulder with a charismatic who receives words from the Lord.

We will be so united. united. We can't envision now. On that day, someone who voted One Nation will be standing shoulder to shoulder with someone who voted Greens.

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And they'll be so united on that day. That person you've got a conflict with now, you can barely look them in the eye over morning tea.
you're going to be so united to that person deeper than the closest friendship or the closest marriage that has ever existed in human history. You're going to be so united to them.
If we keep filling our minds with hope, it helps us keep engaging and willingly pay the cost because Christ died for it.
[32:25] It will happen. We get power to gladly pay the cost of unity when we see that Jesus paid the true cost and we're filled with hope the church will be united.

We're going to eat the Lord's Supper soon. Can I encourage us that when the bread is crushed under our teeth and you taste as a bit of a tang to the juice to remember his blood, let's be united in remembering Christ did not please himself.
That will unify us as a church family. May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another in accord with Christ Jesus that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.
Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you for the glory of God. Will you pray with me to pray. Father forgive us for so many times that we just put our own desires and preference and freedoms ahead of the good of others and the good of your church.
Forgive us for that. Lord fill us with just your heart for the church. I thank you that to welcome us you gladly went to the cross to have us to welcome us in.
[34:24] Lord I thank you that the unity of the church although you call us to pay this cost gladly I thank you that ultimately it rests on you that you're you're the God of hope you're the God of encouragement I thank you that one day we will be united please to a greater degree help this church family live in light of that to the glory of your name so that others living in the world will just see a unity here in the church that they just can't find in the world and they may be saved Lord we pray this for your glory and our good Amen

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