

The Joy of True Christian Unity

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[0:00] Well, do keep that psalm open in front of you. Psalm 133, let me pray for us. Heavenly Father, we come to your word now and we ask for your Holy Spirit to speak into our hearts! And to change us, that we might be a community of believers who show this kind of unity that David speaks of here.

And we ask that, Lord, not just for our good, although it would be good, but for your great glory. In Jesus' name. Amen. Psalm 133, much shorter than the one we had last week.

And it begins like this, how good and how pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity. David's right, isn't he? He's right. Unity amongst the people of God is a good thing and a beautiful thing. If you've ever managed to travel to a cathedral or a Christian conference and you've been surrounded by hundreds, maybe even thousands of other Christians singing God's praises, united in faith, you'll know how good and how pleasant it is.

But although this is a psalm of a sense that it's meant to be sung as God's people were walking up to Jerusalem, maybe for a festival gathering, it's clear, I think, that David has in mind something far more than just one-off meetings.

He talks here about people living together in unity. We don't usually live in a cathedral service. This is an ongoing thing. So he's talking about shared lives and shared tables, shared needs, shared solutions.

[1:44] It's a unity that is spiritually good, deeply heartwarming and pleasant. It is a joy to see and wonderful to experience. But whilst this kind of unity amongst God's people is truly good, it is also, if we're honest, hard to maintain.

So after thinking about why that is so good, we'll also think about where that unity comes from, why it is hard to keep, and how we might live in a reality that is far away from this kind of experience of being in a church.

But we're going to start with the psalm and a few comments to help us see the goodness and beauty of Christian unity, because this psalm is full of joy. Lots of psalms have real positive parts and then some challenging parts to it.

This doesn't. This is all good. This is all joyful. Deep, lasting, strong Christian unity amongst those who have that united faith in God is wonderful. It doesn't just start in a wonderful manner. It carries on in that way. The blessings of life and growth are all positive ones. The images here are just beautiful, as David tries to describe what it's like to see this kind of unity amongst those who have that same faith.

[3:04] It's not quite the same, but if you've been a football fan and you've stood on the terrace, packed out with thousands of others cheering on the mighty hatters, or whatever other second-rate team you might support, you'll know something of that.

You're singing the same songs. You want the same things. You're there in the same location. We see that kind of unity in families, too. Lots of us now will have families that are scattered all over the place.

We don't see them from time to time, or for a lot of time. But on those occasions, maybe you've had one when your family is gathered together from all over the country, maybe different parts of the world, and you take a step back and you can look and see cousins and nephews and aunts and uncles and grandparents and grandchildren talking with each other.

And you look back and you go, this is my family. I'm part of that. That's a beautiful thing when it happens. Maybe you've had a reunion amongst colleagues or students that you were with, and you get that same kind of thing.

All those past bickerings have gone, and all that competitiveness, and maybe you've grown through some of that, and that unity is there. It's lovely. But that's not what David is talking about here.

[4 : 19] This is deeper than that. It's a deeper unity. Perhaps he had looked out on one occasion and seen these 12 disparate tribes who were often competing and arguing with each other and bickering with each other.

And here they were coming together as one. And he looked and went, oh, that's good. That's good. That's what it should be like all the time. Not just today. It should be like that always.

And he's right. I hope you get some sense of that when we gather together on a Sunday. In a couple of weeks' time, we'll be meeting together as five churches, meeting as one at St Barthes in Ogwell.

I hope there'll be something there that warms your heart too. So David looks out, and his heart is warmed by this beautiful vision of unity. And then we come to this extraordinary image of anointing oil being poured over Aaron's head and dripping down over his beard and clothes.

I almost thought about asking Peter if we could act that out this morning, just to see what that would be like for the oil to drip over his hair and then down that long beard and then onto his shirt.

[5 : 27] But I think that would have been rather unkind. But it's an image here of God's blessing. It's not just a little bit of oil marked on. This is being poured out. It's an image of abundant blessing.

It's no accident that David speaks three times of things coming down in this psalm. That's important. We'll see that later. True Christian unity is something that is God-given.

But unity is not just something good in itself. It brings all kinds of blessings with it. Unity of purpose as we work together. Mutual support as we care for each other. Close fellowship.

It's a clarity of witness as we share the same gospel. A lack of distractions. An ability to focus on God without worrying what other people think and whatever they might be up to.

You have that kind of unity in a church and it means that the focus can be on God and out on the lost world rather than on those internal struggles. And that deep, strong Christian unity carries with it the aroma of God's love and grace.

[6 : 31] That oil that is poured out was highly fragrant, special mix of spices that could only be used for the anointing of priests. And so as the oil was poured on, so the aroma went out.

And everyone around it would have gone, oh yeah, that's good. That's lovely. It's the aroma of deep affection, of shared faith, of shared lives, of godly love and it is wonderfully attractive, the kind of thing that draws people in to Christ.

A little further down there's that image of the two mountains. Mount Hermon in the north of Israel and Mount Zion, the mountain in the south on which Jerusalem is built. And it's an image about life and growth.

See, Hermon has about 60 inches of rain fall a year. Can you remember what that is? You remember what one inch of rain is like? Not for a very long time, but Hermon has a lot of rain.

And a lot of it comes in this thick, heavy dew that as you walk through it, you just get soaked as this kind of misty cloud comes down. Zion, on the other hand, Mount Zion is dry.

[7 : 40] So the psalmist is imagining, well, imagine all that goodness there, all that moisture falling down over this dry mountain. What's going to change? Well, there's going to be life. There's going to be growth.

It's going to be beautiful. We're back with that previous point, aren't we? Jesus said that unbelievers would know that we belong to him by our love for one another.

That's what this is pointing at here. When unbelievers see Christians who have many differences in all kinds of backgrounds and all sorts of ways, united together in him, there is a sense that they look and they go, ah, there is something there.

I don't see that unity out in the world. But I find it in church. And they want to know the reason.

And that reason, of course, is Jesus. We'll come back to that shortly. And then right at the end, we get pointed forward towards eternity. Jesus' prayer in John 17 was that his disciples and all those who came after would be one as he and the Father are one.

[8 : 48] That will one day be the case. By the way, when the kingdom of Jesus comes in all its fullness and we stand looking with our eyes on Christ, all those things that separate believers here on earth will pale into insignificance.

They will be washed away. Won't matter what our language or nationality, what our A-level results were or how much money we have in the bank. It won't matter whether we're weak or strong,

educated, uneducated.

Our gender won't matter. Our age won't matter. Our criminal record or our glowing list of honours won't matter. Neither will those things that split the church so often.

Music, tradition, style, clergy, clothes, what hymn book to use, what version of the Bible to use. All those disagreements and denominations washed away when we see Jesus.

When we are made perfect in his presence, we will be finally united. And that's what the church is meant to point to now. So have that image of Aaron in your head this morning, standing, turban on, robes on, someone pouring out a huge pot of fragrant oil all over his head as God's blessing flows down and that aroma of unity and love flows out.

[10:17] That's David's picture of the beauty, the joy, the witness, the generosity, the attractiveness, the life and promise that true Christian unity holds. No wonder David said that it was good and pleasant.

That seems like a bit of an understatement. He could have used better language than that. It's wonderful when we see it. No wonder Jesus prayed for the church to have it. No wonder so many people try so hard to find it, to cherish it and then, as we're encouraged to do in the scripture, to hold on to that unity of the spirit.

So where does it come from? Where does it come from? Is it just a social unity? You know, we're all from the same types of backgrounds. Is that where it comes from?

Is it organisational? We've all got our names on the electoral roll. If you haven't, come and talk to Lorna afterwards. She'll sign you up. Is that where our unity comes from? Is it geographical?

We're the St Paul's congregation. We meet here. We're not united if we go anywhere else, but here. That's where it comes from. Is it liturgical? We're the church that worships in this way with these words.

[11:29] Is it historical? I don't know why I came, but I've been here a really long time. Is that what it is? Is it sartorial? We all dress in the same kind of way.

I don't think so. Not looking out this morning. We might tick some of those, or maybe many of those things. But whilst they have some influence, and they maybe help in some kind of ways, sometimes, they cannot be the basis for true unity between God's people.

As the psalm made clear, this unity is like oil flowing down, or dew settling down, because it is the blessing that God bestows on those who believe. A few minutes, we'll sing a version of the Nicene Creed.

And creedal unity is vital. We need to believe the same things. But we're not just united because we believe the same things, or say the same things. The ancient words summarise core Christian doctrines, and it's certainly true that without unity on those, that any unity is just skin deep.

But there is a deeper unity still. A deeper unity still. A unity that comes only from Christ. See, we can only be united to one another, truly, if we are first individually united to Christ.

[12:53] It's only when we're connected to Jesus that I can truly be connected to you in a deep way, in an eternal way. So, we individually need to know that Jesus is our elder brother, that God is our heavenly father, that God's spirit is our spirit.

And that comes through a new birth and an adoption into God's family. Because it's only when we're united to Jesus that we can be united to one another. Maybe have that image in your head of a wheel, a bicycle wheel with a hub in the middle with spokes going out.

Those spokes are useless on their own. But when they're united to Christ, they're united to the hub, then actually there is a way for them all to be united together.

That's the kind of unity David is pointing to, something that comes from a spiritual rebirth, not by liturgy, location, or loyalty. unity. And so that means that our true unity isn't something that needs to be created, it's something that is there, it's a given, not by us, but by God.

So if you're a Christian here this morning, by virtue of you being born again as a member of God's family, then however it might feel, whether or not you ever meet these people, however far away other believers might be, however different they are in culture or colour or background, then they are your brothers and sisters, and you are theirs.

[14:19] And we are united because we are first united to Jesus. So that means we can walk into a church in Kingston-upon-Hull or Kingston-Jamaica and go, you know what, I'm at home because my family's here.

It means that person you bump into on a bus or a railway station or as you're waiting to jump on a plane and you notice they're reading the Bible and you get chatting and you go, you know what, we're related. We've got the same dad, you and I.

not because you're on the same flight or the same bus but because you are united to Jesus to start with. And that means that those, that God-given unity means that those connections will then lead to prayer and if possible practical concern and when we worship together as one congregated in one place it means that there is not just a spiritual unity but then that moves and changes into a unity of love of shared lives and shared tables and shared resources where we share our needs and help to meet those needs and when life gets hard or when persecution comes it's that kind of unity that holds God's people together with cords that will not break.

I think that helps us maybe see as well why striving for a kind of a lesser quality of unity is so hard because sometimes in local churches we can try to unite people who whilst they maybe have many things in common don't have the main thing in common.

No Jesus no true unity it's just not possible but if I'm already united to Jesus then I'm already united to everyone else who is united to him.

[16:01] That gives me a solid base on which to build a relationship that is there already doesn't mean that it doesn't take hard work gosh it does sometimes. We'll think about that might be in a moment or two.

But we're family we have the same father, the same spirit, the same hope. We share the same faith, the same destiny. We're members of the one holy and catholic small c meaning universal church. It's a beautiful picture. And a unity that flows from Christ. So if that is the case if it is that good if it is a God-given unity why is it so hard?

Why is it so hard to find? Why is it so hard to maintain? Because it is isn't it? Across our town our nation across the world the church of Jesus is divided let alone the rest of society which seems to be more divided than ever.

Jesus' church is divided. and whilst sometimes churches do sadly split over the colour of coffee mugs or whether some new bit of carpet can be put down or whether you can dare to introduce guitars into a church or something dreadful like that very often churches split over history because those disagreements are important and they run very very deep and we need to be honest about that.

[17:33] Christians do disagree on some big and important issues on how salvation works what happens when we share bread and wine how churches should be governed what will happen at the end of time when Jesus comes again the role of scripture versus tradition the role of Mary and the saints the way we read and understand the Bible and these are not small issues these are big important issues and some of them I would want to say the gospel is at stake if we move here so we can't just say they don't matter and then of course we also live in a world governed by history don't we maybe you've been in churches where there have been divisions in a church over time and another church has been set up because of a disagreement and some people will either remember that disagreement or they'll have heard it from their parents or grandparents and they'll say well I can't go to that church because back in 1873 they did this and so we stay apart the way those divisions have been handled across the centuries the hurt they have caused continues to echo and we need to be honest about that too and even if we do find a will to sit down with

Christians who might have a different understanding than us and say okay well let's try and work this out often the problem is that we won't agree on the very basis for those discussions because Roman Catholics will point to the Pope and the magisterium and say well this is what the Catholic church has said we need to hold to that you speak to someone from an orthodox tradition and they'll point to the councils and patriarchs Protestants like us generally want to look at scripture alone as our ultimate authority and there'll be others who will say well that's okay but we've got to just use our reason we've got to think things through and see where we are today without an agreed reference point a solid ground on which to have those discussions to work out how we might work things through we don't find ourselves getting anywhere when we get stuck in separate denominations and churches rather than finding a way to live with one another and serve alongside one another and since these things are important we're right not to give them up without serious thoughts but over time that has often led to

Christians in the same village sometimes let alone the same town sitting in their own churches rarely working or worshipping together and sometimes refusing to acknowledge that the people who

worship in that church in that way are not actually really Christians and of course in our own denomination the church of England we're as divided on some things as anyone Christian unity is a wonderful thing it is a powerful thing it's a beautiful thing David's psalm reflects that and it is a God-given thing but by golly it's hard to keep going with it's hard to maintain so how do we do that how might we grow and develop our God-given Christ-centred unity so that the world might see more of Christ's love in us and through us we're coming to the end let me wrap that up with four quick suggestions here's the first one this is probably the most important stay close to Jesus grow in your faith you see the closer we are to

Jesus the more we know of and obey his teaching the more we delight in his work on the cross the more his Holy Spirit works in us to make us more like him the more we will both understand what that unity is all about and be able to be agents of it without that any unity we find in our churches will only be skin deep it will always be about liturgy or location when those things don't last they won't be very good or particularly pleasant unity flows from Jesus if we want to grow in unity we individually need to grow closer to him here's the second thing we need to know the right hills to die on you heard that phrase find the right hills to die on don't think that every battle needs to be fought with the same intensity you see not every disagreement is as important as others some will be on core Christian truths that cannot be compromised without diluting the Christian faith you just stand firm on those some disagreements might not challenge core doctrine it might be nothing that's listed down in the

Nicene Creed but they will have some serious implications others will be utterly vacuous really doesn't matter what sort of coffee we serve afterwards I'd like it to taste good sure you would too but it doesn't really matter does it of course it doesn't and if we're to be united with people who may hold very different views on various different issues we need to know where we can bend and say that's okay I can sit with you on this I can worship with you on this I can partner with you on this and where we have to say actually this is too much I love you like a brother and a sister but there is this gulf between us and we need to acknowledge those things thirdly in those disagreements our attitude is key humility gentleness bearing with one another in love absolutely vital there are lots of disagreements in the early church at one point

[23:25] Paul appeals to two women who have worked along with him been real partners in Christian ministry and they have fallen out we don't know what it was maybe it was about the colour sort of coffee they were serving or maybe it was something far more important but these two godly women are not talking to each other anymore so Paul appeals to Timothy to it's almost would you knock their heads together would you help them to recognise their unity in Christ the things that truly matter see often the biggest danger to unity isn't differing views it's the manner in which those views are expressed if we are rude and arrogant if we've got a sense of superiority well those things can easily break any sense of unity even between real solid passionate Christians and sometimes they can do damage that keeps believers apart for years but Jesus wasn't like that he was firm of course he was he stood on the truth but he was never arrogant he was humble in spirit gentle with those who struggled when his disciples doubted or got things wrong or came up with stupid ideas come on the disciples did that what was

Jesus responsible he taught them he rebuked them and he loved them they didn't say you got it wrong out never talking to you again we might feel that it's only our opponents if I can use that word who get things wrong but actually none of us can claim perfect understanding 39 articles of the church of England actually make that plain it says that councils can err church gatherings just as popes and archbishops and bishops and clergy can get things wrong so we need to say actually I might be wrong on this as well we need to hold those things lightly knowing that we can possibly be wrong we need to be humble but we need to stand on that firm ground of the scripture rightly understood humility and gentleness can draw and hold people together even when we disagree and we will disagree so let's be humble here's the last one whilst we stand firm we need to leave the final judgment up to

Christ it's right that we stand firm on what our scripture guided prayerfully considered consciences tell us because we shouldn't go against that but we need to remember that we are not the final judge God is a few weeks ago working through Matthew's gospel we heard Jesus tell the parable of the wheat and the tares which made it clear that with any Christian community there are those people who look like Christians but who aren't and we don't know who those people are we don't know who are really connected to Jesus by faith and those who are just acting it out out of wanting

to be connected to a friendly group of people and we won't know only God can see what's in someone else's heart only God can know who their heart truly belongs to so we need to leave that final judgment to Christ it doesn't take the need to be clear on what truth is or to dilute the need to speak graciously and gently when we feel someone has fallen into error we need to do those things but it also means that we need to live with a certain amount of discomfort and disagreement church will be like that until we meet

Jesus and are made perfect we need to leave the final verdict up to God which of those four things do you need to take to heart most this morning which of those as a church do we need to pay more attention to see the goal in all this isn't to force some kind of fake unity it is to be who we are the body of Christ on earth a body that's already united to Christ our head a body that's been designed to reveal the glorious gospel of Christ to the world so that others will come and see and believe and be joined to Jesus too that's why Christian unity is so good and so pleasant so powerful and so difficult may God help us so may he draw us together in Christ and for the glory of Christ Amen