

Christian Unity

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[0 : 0 0] Psalm 133. This is the penultimate of the 15 Psalms that we're looking at together. It covers so much experience of not only Israel's history, but in many ways our own walk with God as we struggle at times to trust in Him as we become aware of our own sin. So we'll finish this next week, and then we'll begin something else the following week. Last week, Psalm was at the longest. This one is one of the shortest, and we are told that this was a song of a Psalm of David.

It's one that he has written. So let me read this to you, and then we'll stand, and we'll sing, and then we'll consider this together. Psalm 133, a song of a sense of David.

How good and pleasant it is when God's people 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 on the collar of his robe. It is as if the Jew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion, for there the Lord bestows his blessing, even life forevermore. A few words. It's quite a short psalm, and we'll try and make sense of this in a moment or two as we consider this together. So let's stand as we sing together.

Speak, O Lord. Let's remain. Psalm 133. Let's just ask for the Lord's help as we seek to understand this together.

Our loving Heavenly Father, we thank you for your Word to us. We thank you for the many times, Lord. You've spoken to us from it, Lord, down throughout our Christian life, whether from sermons in churches or through listening to sermons, Lord, and tapes or whatever. Father, we thank and praise you, Lord, for the way in which you speak to us from your Word. Lord, we've been looking at the topic of Christian unity and being one in mind and heart and spirit. Lord, this is a good topic, Lord. And as we come to this topic afresh again this evening, Father, we pray that you will give us that ability to concentrate. Perhaps we've heard a lot on this, and we could easily switch off. But Father, help us to reaffirm in our own hearts and minds how good and pleasant it is when people dwell together in unity. So, Father, cause us to embrace this topic, to embrace Christian unity for ourselves and as a church as we move forward. We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. As you know, this sermon, this passage, and even this sermon, was postponed from last week because last week we were looking at Christian unity, and then I said, well, we'll do something else, and we did something very different last Sunday. So, we were always going to do it this Sunday, but even this morning's sermon was also on Christian unity as we followed

[3 : 0 0] Consider Jesus' example. So, this is three sermons in a row. I think this is the last one on Christian unity, and I never planned it that way. I had no idea what was coming up. I knew I was doing Philippians, of course, and I knew I was doing this, but they've merged on the one topic at the same time at this time, and maybe the Lord is really wanting us to notice this as individuals and perhaps as a church. Unity is a great thing. It's a great thing in any walk of life, whether it's church life or on a football field or whatever, when a group of people, even just two people, a husband and wife, children and parents, are united in whatever decision they make, whatever they're going to do.

It really is quite something. And this psalm is about unity. It's—look at verse 1—how good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity. And it's such a nice thing. So, therefore, I don't make any apology for studying this again. We're studying a good topic. And it's—if we have this, it's a good thing. And I'm sure you know this yourself. So, I've called this sermon Christian unity. We're coming to the end of this series of 15 songs of ascent that God's people sang three times a year going up to Jerusalem. As I've said before, many times. It speaks of not only their experiences, as they recall history, as they reflect on their own walk with the Lord, and as David reflects on his own walk, it causes us to reflect on our own walk with the Lord.

And we've discovered many things in this, just the difficulties of this. Sometimes we struggle in sin out of the depths. I've cried to you. Times we struggle to trust in him. Times we know his leading and guiding. And that psalm, unless the Lord builds the house, we labor in vain. That's actually the

passage I'm going to preach on at my daughter's wedding for 10 minutes or so. Not that 40 minutes that you guys maybe got, but just the motto for Edinburgh, just that great truth. Unless the Lord builds our lives, we would labor in vain who build that. So, last time we looked at Psalm 132, and it was zeal for the Lord. Those times when we were zealous, and David was zealous, and he made an oath. He said he wouldn't sleep or whatever until he found a place for the ark. And then the Lord made an oath, whatever your zeal is, my zeal is greater. I'm going to do more than you ask. And we read

Psalm 2, an eternal king. We looked at Jesus this morning. He is a king of king and lord of lord. He rules forever. He is given the name which is above every name. No other earthly king, no other king in the Old Testament was described in those ways apart from Jesus. So, we looked at that last time. Now, we are looking at the importance of Christian unity, which we've been looking at over the past week or so.

Psalm Philippians 2, make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and one in mind. If it would thrill Paul, how it must thrill the Lord when God's people are in unity. So, I'm going to go through this fairly quickly because a lot of this you've already heard as I said. This is a sermon which isn't due to be preached alongside these other two. So, there's a massive overlap. So, I'm going to go through this fairly quickly without saying the same thing again. I'm going to begin negatively by disunity, as I began probably in the other sermon as well. It's good because, I don't know, but sometimes you don't appreciate something until you look at it negatively. If unity is good and pleasant, disunity is not good and disunity is unpleasant. If you've ever experienced this at a personal level, falling out with somebody, disagreeing, it is very unpleasant. You will lose sleepless nights if you are disunited.

[7 : 15] This psalm is by David. And David was a leader who aspired to unity. He wanted unity. He knew the importance of unity amongst his people. But even he didn't always achieve this. The latter years of his reign were marked by division and even civil war. And so, he desired this. He knew it was pleasant, and he wanted this above all else. It's not easy to attain. Somebody has said it's easier to attain ecumenical unity. You know, when churches stand up and say we're all one together, there's a kind of frothiness about that, where they don't have to work with each other so much. They just smile at each other and have a hug fest. But in a single church, it can be hard. When you have to work together, it's been my experience, whenever a church is mobilized and they start to work, then comes the trouble when you start to work. So, okay, if you don't do anything, you just come, you sit, you sing, and you leave. But the minute you start to work together, and you start to plan and organize, and you disagree, then that the problems can sometimes come. And it's worth fighting for unity at all times. And churches can, as I mentioned in one of the sermons, they don't often explode from outside, they implode from inside. And that is why it's important. Now, what is disunity? It's a disagreement or conflict within a group. It can be within individuals, maybe just two, or it can be a wider group.

Agreeing or disagreeing on almost anything. It can be people, plans, procedures, scripture, politics, or whatever things that we like, things that we dislike. Even your wife will go out to this restaurant, no, I'd rather go to that. We always go to yours, no, we're going to this. It can be absolutely anything. What color you're going to paint the bathroom. You can disagree, and you can be disunited. And as a result, conflict arises. Gossip arises. I must confess, I've never, this is the sixth church I've been involved in as a pastor, and only in one church have I known conflict personally. I've known churches that fight with each other inside it, but it's never come my way.

I must confess, except in one church, it was unpleasant. If you've been on the receiving end of conflict or division, it is very unpleasant. You're singled out or whatever, and you can have conflict, you get gossip. People suffer physically. Sometimes you just don't sleep. Your sleep pattern goes mentally, emotionally. You're hurt, you're bruised, you're crushed. Spiritually, you can suffer. You find it hard in your walk with the Lord. Lord, I'm just so down. I'm down because the pressure has been so great, and work suffers. Our witness sometimes suffers, because if unity is impressive, disunity is not impressive. And the work of the church, our witness suffers. The message of the gospel suffers, and it contradicts the gospel, isn't it? If we fall out and we're unforgiving, and we harbor hurt, and so forth. Whereas the gospel, we preach love, and grace, and forgiveness, and forgiving 70 times 7. Whereas if we have hurt, we are negating what we preach. We're preaching one thing and living another. And perhaps more importantly in all of this, the Lord isn't glorified.

He does not get glory in this. So it's very unpleasant. It's certainly not good. And it's caused by many things. It can be caused by misunderstandings. It's amazing. It really is quite sad when a conflict comes through misunderstanding. Maybe you've done that yourself. You've judged somebody, and you thought it was this. Well, they've never done it. It's probably because of this, and you're worrying away. And only when you speak to them, you realize that they had a perfectly good excuse. There was a good reason for doing this. Or you think the elders or somebody else is thinking of this, and you disagree, and then you discover when it's all presented to you, actually, it's not so bad. I didn't realize that. And misunderstandings. We jump to conclusions. And that's very sad, because that's avoidable if we just chat and we talk. We can disagree on an issue. But it's made worse when you refuse to talk to somebody. When you just, there's no point in seeing them. I'm just not going to talk. I'm just going to murmur in dark corners. I'm going to talk to others. I'm going to gossip, and so forth. And it just gets worse. This unity can be caused by personalities. You might be a quiet sort. Somebody stands up. They love the sound of their own voice, and you just go, there they go again.

[12:17] They've only cleared their throat, and already you're down their throat. Regardless of what they're going to say, they could stand up and say, I like to think this person's great, but you've already judged them because there they go again, and so forth. And immediately you get disunity before anything's even said. You're just, your personality clashes with their personality. It doesn't take much. And behind all of this is often sin, selfishness and pride and lack of the fruit of the spirit. Another reason is the devil will seek to discourage us in many ways. I was in a church once, and it used to drive me nutty, I must confess. Almost every form of disunity they blamed on the devil, though. Well, it's the devil. And I'm thinking, well, God can create out of nothing. The devil needs something to work with, and you're just giving them stuff to work with. We were in, I was in one church in Derbyshire, and right next to our church there was a football ground, and they were trying to raise money. It was a proper football ground, stadium, floodlights and everything, and they thought, we'll raise money, we'll go for sponsorship. And so they put, all the businesses could chuck money in a hat, and once a year they would draw out the name of the hat, and the name of that business would be the name of the stadium. And the first time they did it, the name that was drawn out of the hat was the local tattoo studio, which went by the grand name of The Devil Made Me Do It. And that was the name of the stadium, and we had to go to church every time The Devil Made Me Do It. If nothing else, it made us realize you can't keep blaming the devil for things that we do. But he is often behind us. He will fuel, and if we give him the fuel, he will certainly use this. So, you know, I know, whether it's at church level or family or work level, this unity is not good, and there are many causes of it as there is life. So, secondly, let's look at the positive aspect, because this psalm is really just looking at the positive. It's all, it's extolling the virtue of unity. So, he says, David says, how good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity. The ESV says, behold how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity. I don't think it can be limited to just the male of the species, but I think what is behind this is because in certain cultures, families often live together.

Brothers would sometimes live together. I've got a brother, we might be married and bring our family to live with my mom and my dad, and that must bring tension. You've got two brothers coming with their families, trying to live together in one household, and therefore, how good and pleasant it is when brothers, even in that potential hot pot of two brothers living with their families in one house, that's just a recipe for disaster. And in some ways, that's the picture you have here. But the picture's a very pleasant one. It's how pleasant it is when God's people, or when anybody lives together in unity. Here is like a, it's almost like a Christian convention or a big gathering. They're up at Jerusalem, there's loads. I've mentioned this before, if you're ever in Keswick or whatever, that is just so good. The very first, if you're at the first singing event, the first major big tent meeting, and you stand up and there's 2,000 folk or whatever, just ready to sing.

That, and it lifts the roof off, and you think, we're all Christians together. You almost feel at that point, everybody's a Christian. There's so many of you, and just singing, it's just, it's just great. And we sing well here. It really is quite something. So, what does he say that's good about this? Look at verse 2. He tries to describe it, and he describes unity, or the pleasantness of unity, in two ways. He calls it precious oil, and he calls it dew. He uses these two pictures. So, let's try and make sense of this. He says it's like precious oil poured on the head. In that culture, it was common. Oil was used for various things, and oil was often used to welcome a guest to your house.

Oil was used. Psalm 23, that great Psalm, verse 5, you prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil. It's something that you perhaps did for a guest. We don't do it in this culture, but it's a very pleasant picture of love, of kindness, of blessing towards one another.

[17:19] I really enjoyed when I lived in London. I knew so many different cultures, and if you went to Brazilians, or you went to some of the African brothers and sisters, they just had a different way of offering hospitality. They would do things differently. We would go in and say, there's your iron brew and your shortbread. They'd be different. It's just great fun. And it's a way of appreciating the guests that you have, and you go out of your way. And so, you feel special.

You imagine if you have unity in the church, and whatever you say, whatever you do is precious to that person. It might not be physical oil. But you've done something that your friendship is special. It's very real. But it goes on. I'm just picking out things here that the commentators have mentioned as well. It's precious oil running down on the beard. And one of the commentators mentioned about the extravagant spread of the soil. It's not just here. It runs down onto his collar. I remember years ago when I first read that. I thought, I don't know if I want oil in my collar. How do you get oil off your collar? It just seemed awkward. But that's not the point of it. It's the whole extravagance of this oil, this blessing, this act of kindness that's just spreading out. And it's very good.

Here is like social pleasantness, not just between two people. But I love in a friendship that's spreading out. There's oneness that others notice. It's quite something. This social pleasantness, running down on the beard of it. It's just extravagant, spreading out. But notice it also says running down on Aaron's beard, down on the collar of his robe. This is speaking of consecration.

You know your Bible. This is consecration of Aaron, his high priest. Exodus 29, take the anointing oil and anoint him by pouring it on his head. David knew that's what he did. That's what his picture is in his mind. And Exodus 30, anoint Aaron and his sons and consecrate them so that they may serve as priests. This oil had to be a fragrant oil. Take the following fine spices. You've got liquid myrrh. You've got fragrant cinnamon. You've got calamus. You've got cassia and so forth.

[19:56] And a hin of olive oil. Make these into a sacred anointing oil. A fragrant blend. The work of a perfumer, it will be the sacred anointing oil. And this was used for the consecration, set apart for the work of the Lord. This fragrant oil. It must have been great just to see that happening, and just to smell if it was such a pungent smell, but it was a lovely smell. Something wonderful is happening. Something attractive. There's something nice about this. And in many ways, that's what it should be. Spiritual oneness. This would mean nothing to people today. Sacred blessing. Pouring oil and consecrating a priest. But if you're a Christian, you are interested in spiritual things. And you want the gospel to flourish. God's name to be praised. And here is this picture of something spiritual happening and rejoicing in this. I'm the pastor of the church here, but I don't get anointed with oil.

Usually, there's an induction service and various things happen. But as Christians, we believe in the priesthood of all believers. We're all priests. We don't all get anointed with oil. You get baptized, but you don't get anointed with oil. But there should be this unity and joy and fragrant thing amongst God's people when we all serve as priests. The priesthood of all believers. Using the gifts the Lord has given us to serve. If it was a joy for God's people to see this oil being poured on the high priest and they could smell it. And it was a good thing that was happening. It wasn't unpleasant. It was nice.

Here is somebody set apart for the work of the Lord and it smelled great. So it should be with us. The Lord has called us, chosen us, equipped us. And when another Christian comes in and they join the church and they bring their gifts, that's a pleasant thing. And it's pleasant when we all work together. The odor of this unity is very unpleasant. When Christians who should be working together in the service of the Lord, and we are not living as we should. If the high priest did this, it would be unpleasant, regardless of the fragrance of the oil. So it's very symbolic of spiritual oneness. And it's a great thing. Let's look at the second then picture. I've only just touched on these very briefly.

But the Jew of Hermon. It is as if the Jew of Hermon. So David's likened it to the fragrant oil, something pleasant, something good, something spiritual, something spreading. Now he turns to another illustration that comes to his mind. Jew. The Jew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion. Now Hermon is the highest mountain in Israel. It's about several hundred miles north of Jerusalem. So it's a good bit out of Jerusalem. It's known for its moisture. A bit like Scotland. We're known for our moisture. And for two-thirds of the year, it's covered in snow. And it receives, I was surprised at

this figure, sixty inches of rain a year. Five foot of rain. It's known for its precipitation. It's the main source of the supply for the River Jordan. And it's proverbial for the Jew that fell on its lofty peaks. And it's quite something. And David sees this refreshing nature of the Jew. And it's that aspect that perhaps he's latching on to. It's not a fragrance now. It's refreshing to all. It's a blessing. And you know yourself, if a church is united or people are united, it is very refreshing. It's a breath of fresh air.

If people come in and just see us working together, loving together, worshiping together, that's a breath of fresh air. Because you don't get that outside. People fight and squabble about loads of things. So unity amongst people is very refreshing. It's very different. Whereas disunity is very wearying. It's very tiring. As I said, I've had this in one church. And for a whole year, there was disunity a whole year, every single day. I went to bed feeling it. I woke up feeling it.

[24 : 34] It was so, so draining. Because instead of focusing on other things like the gospel and fellowship, we were always just constantly aware that there was this tension. And that occupied our thoughts.

I know there's a church meeting coming up on Wednesday. And I know for the past week or two, that's been in our thoughts. And on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, it'll be in our thoughts. Because we wonder how it might go, what will be decided, and so forth. When you're worried about disunity, that drains you. It really drains you of all energy. And whereas unity is also so refreshing.

But also the moisture of Hermon, it speaks of productivity. There is water there. Things can grow. The water comes. The dew, this five foot of rain a year, would come down. And it's very productive. Unity is productive. We can achieve things when we're united. But a disunited church is always a distracted church. And it achieves very little. I remember in one of the churches I was in as elders, we used the first part for firefighting. That was what we called it. Let's deal with the fires and we fires that were appearing in the church. So, yeah, you were dousing them just so and then you could go on with how we would develop the work. And if unity is refreshing and just reinvigorating, it's also productive, doesn't distract us. The disagreements don't become the focal point.

The focal point becomes the gospel, becomes reaching out to others. It is quite something. So, it's refreshing and it causes us to work well. But notice also it talks about Mount Zion.

[26 : 28] Verse 3, Mount Zion is smaller than Hebron. It's eclipsed by Hermon. But it was God's place. It's a place that God chose for His blessing. Although it was smaller, it was the place. And David pictures this refreshing water, this dew coming down, falling on Mount Zion. It speaks of God's blessing on His people. In Israel, the return of the Jews, whether it's those three years or however that may unfold, it speaks of the Lord's blessing on His people. For us, we look at the church and we ultimately look at the new Jerusalem, which mentions here in verse 3, which speaks of life forevermore. That's what a blessing that is that comes from God. Let me remind you of Hebrews 12 as this relates to us.

But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly. I want to try to get joyful assembly with 30, never mind thousands upon thousands. To the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You've come to God, the judge of all the spirits of the righteous made perfect. To Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. And then Hebrews 13, for here, here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for a city that is to come. That is our Mount Zion. That is the city that we long for, the blessing that will be poured out upon us one day there. That is such a positive thing. It's good. It's pleasant. Not only we can have a taste of heaven here, but a taste of this new Jerusalem and the churches where God's people know the blessing of God. It is really quite something special. And that's what we should strive for. That is what we should seek. So, let's finally look at the remedy. How do we achieve and retain unity? It's not natural. The unity among sinners is a supernatural thing. It requires the Holy Spirit.

We, we left to ourselves, we, we would just, uh, fail. Look at verse 3. It says, As if the Jew of Hermon were falling, falling, there the Lord bestows his blessing. There's this whole, in this psalm, you, you look at, there's a coming down in this whole psalm. Mentioned many times. Look at verse 2.

Running down, running down again, down on his collar, uh, the Jew falling, for there the Lord bestows his blessing. You can't help but notice this, this vertical way in which this unity comes, comes from God, comes down. And really, it takes the Lord to bring blessing to you and to me.

He delights to bless a, a, a united church, and yet we need to work at this. Do not quench the Spirit, Paul says. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. There's something we have to do. Let us live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. Romans 8. For if you live according to the flesh, you will die. But if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live. The Holy Spirit is essential in our life. If we can't create unity in, in, in a, in a godly church, then there is no help for the world. And the Holy Spirit helps us see ourselves as we are. Helps us esteem others better than ourselves. Helps us see the log in their own eye.

As I said, I was in a church that was quite disunited for a year. Never experienced it in 30 years, but in one year it was so unpleasant. I would never want to go back to that. But one verse that, that, that, that, that people just seem to disregard was Ephesians 4. And we're told to get rid, get rid of bitterness, all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander and every form of malice.

[30 : 56] Anger, slander, malice, three things that will destroy unity at any time. Being angry, being annoyed, lashing out at someone, unity goes. Being, slandering someone, showing somebody in a bad light, and malice. Going out of your way to, to wish somebody harm, malicious, almost rejoicing when they fall. It's a dreadful thing. Really, really dreadful. And Christians can be so guilty of this.

No wonder Paul says, get rid of it. Pick it up, throw it as far away as you can. Have it nothing to do with it? And so, and that is down to us through the power of the Holy Spirit. So, here are practical things I've mentioned. If you're disagreeing with somebody, go and talk to them. Just between the two of you, and if you don't have much success, this is Matthew 18, take somebody else along, and then finally tell it to the church so that there will be unity. Go with the Word of God. Always go with the Scriptures. You'll never win them. You're right. It's not your word against theirs. It's the Word of God. It's all, it's all you can bring is the Word of God, and seek arbitration. But it's worth fighting for. But not at all costs. Sometimes we do have to disagree. Love does not rejoice in error, but rejoices in the truth. Biblical things are important. Paul and Barnabas disagreed, and in departed company as well. But we always part amicably in gentleness and love in a way that's gracious. But unity is worth fighting for. So, what we said, this unity is not good. It's not pleasant.

It's unpleasant. It results in conflict. Ministry is affected. The glory of God is affected. But unity is good. It is pleasant. There is something nice about it. It's refreshing. It's productive. It causes us to grow in gospel ministry. And it's a taste of heaven. The remedy is seeking the help of God and the Holy Spirit. It needs to be worked at through humility and obedience. And from our part, we seek to keep short accounts, not only with God, but with one another. It is worth striving for. It's worth fighting for. Let's stand and we'll sing our closing song. I think, keep me right, but...