

# On Unity

## *Critical Words of Jesus:*

John 17:20-23

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Bethany Church

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David, the greatest king of Israel wrote:

*How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity! It is like precious oil poured on the head, running down on the beard, running down on Aaron's beard, down upon the collar of his robes. It is as if the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion. For there the LORD bestows his blessing, even life forevermore.* (Psalm 133:1-3, NIV)

David said that it is both good and pleasant. It is good and it feels good when we walk together in unity. He compared it to the anointing of Aaron with oil for God's service. When anointing oil was put upon Aaron, God's priest, he could do things, holy things, he couldn't do before. In unity we, God's children, are empowered to do holy things we couldn't do before. The oil, a sign of God's favor and presence, made Aaron ready to bring his nation to God. Unity is a sign of God's favor and presence, and it makes us ready to bring others to God.

John Praetorius is pastor of Grace United Methodist Church in St. Cloud. When he arrived 14 years ago, the church was dying. He led it to relocate and grow. He sat down with me a few weeks ago, and said that in those 14 years, there have been only three periods of rapid growth. Each time they occurred when the church experienced unity. He said that when they were in turmoil, fighting over this issue or that, they'd have few visitors and many more leaving than coming. He said, "I think God was protecting people." He observed that Grace Church did not come on people's radar to visit, until it was in unity.

Like anointing oil on Aaron, unity qualified Grace Church to reach people in their community. Like the dew of Mount Hermon visiting the dry place of Mount Zion, people found refreshment and renewal in united fellowship. John's church experienced the Lord's blessings just as David wrote in Psalm 133. That is the effect of unity. When you live in it, not just hold hands for a moment or a day, not just covenant together in marriage or membership, when you live in unity, it is good and it is pleasant. It is the place where God gives blessing.

Who of us doesn't want that? Even terrorists pursue unity in their own twisted way. We all have thoughts about what conditions are necessary for peace and unity. That is probably why unity is so elusive. Our thoughts and conditions won't achieve it. That is why Jesus prayed for our unity. When we talk about the most critical words of Jesus, we have to consider the words he uttered in prayer for us. In John 17 we find them.

Jesus asked three things from his Father for us. He asked:

***Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name—the name you gave me — so that they may be one as we are one.*** (John 17:11, NIV)

He asked:

***Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.*** (John 17:17, NIV)

He asked:

***May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.*** (John 17:23, NIV)

Jesus prayed for our protection. He prayed for our sanctification, and he prayed for our completion. All three things focused on us living in unity, walking as one.

First, he prayed for our protection. In verse 11, Jesus asks his Father to protect us by the power of the name that God gave Jesus. Did you know that we are a target in Iraq because we carry the name American? Did you know that we are shielded in other places because of that

name? Many governments fear what might happen if we are mistreated. Similarly, the name of Jesus makes us a target in some ways, but it also carries a power to protect. Jesus prayed for our protection through the power of his name so that we might be one just as the Father and Jesus are one. Names are about identity and belonging. There is a power in Jesus' name that keeps our identity and our association when the wiles of the devil would scatter us. The difficulty in living in unity is that we are attacked and scattered by evil powers often through the mouths and actions of those we know and love. The name of Jesus protects us from scattering because it defines our identity and association. It does not allow us to form camps or divisions. We belong only to Jesus. We are named only in Jesus: not Lutheran or Catholic, not Pentecostal or Evangelical, not white or black, not spirit-filled or worldly, not early or late service. We carry Jesus' name.

Second, Jesus prayed for our sanctification. That is a big word. It carries a ton of meaning. When Jesus prayed, "***Sanctify them by the truth,***" he was "saying set them apart, purify them, make them holy." In that prayer Jesus equated the truth with his Father's word: "***Your word is truth.***" Jesus prayed that God would deliver us from the deception of sin by coaching us with his word. It is the nature of sin to separate us from God and one another. The truth of God's word is the only antidote. So even as we are to be protected by the name of Jesus, we are to emulate Jesus in attending fully and only to God's word. Jesus claimed that he only spoke and did what he heard and saw his Father doing. That is sanctification. Jesus declared, "***I sanctify myself, that they may be truly sanctified***" (John 17:19). You are being confronted with words of Scripture in response to what Jesus did and prayed for us: "Sanctify them by your truth." Will the words of Scripture form your life?

Third, Jesus prayed for our completion or perfection in unity. Jesus prayed that God would complete or perfect us as one. We are to be one with Jesus, one with our Father and one

with each other. If we are one with Jesus and the Father, we can only be divided if God is divided. Since God is not divided, the only way we divide or disassociate from one another is to distance ourselves from God. That is why Jesus prays for our protection through his name, and for our sanctification through God's word.

However, when Jesus prays for our completion as one, he is calling for the activity of God's Spirit. Jesus said:

***Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.*** (John 17:21, NIV)

How was Jesus in the Father? Through the Spirit! How was the Father in Jesus? Through the Spirit! How is Jesus in us? Through the Spirit! How are we in Jesus? Through the Spirit! None of us can be in Jesus through the body. He would have to be our pregnant mother. Based on the complaints of pregnant mothers when their children kick and move, I'm not sure that is oneness. We can only be in Jesus through the Spirit. Indeed, Jesus said:

***I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one.*** (John 17:22, NIV)

The glory God gave Jesus to be one with the Father is the Spirit. The glory, with which Jesus blessed his disciples, is the Spirit he gave them for service. Later he would fill them with the Spirit, so that their hearts burn with God's passion like his.

God's Spirit is testifying to you and me; and God's Spirit is tugging at our heart strings. Each of us feel the pull. If we yield, we'll be drawn together. If we yield, our hearts will glow with mercy and love. If we yield, we'll be one.

However, to walk as one resisting the enemy, who pulls us apart, requires choices. The Spirit of Jesus coaches as Paul wrote:

***Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.***  
(Ephesians 4:2-3, NIV)

The Holy Spirit is coaching us how to be one when we are being torn apart. First, we humble ourselves. We don't know it all. Second, we act gently. We speak and act with tenderness. Third, we patiently allow love to set the time of endurance in conflict. Fourth, committed to the peace and welfare of another, we explore every way to preserve oneness in the Spirit and resolve our issues.

In Colossians 3, Paul expresses the same counsel adding forgiveness and emphasizing that love is the perfect bond of unity. When we truly love our neighbors as ourselves, we are as apt to separate from them as we are from ourselves. How much more so with those who embrace the name of Jesus! With them disassociation is impossible. You carry the same name.

Still our love and association must not separate us from the truth. Love does not welcome the harm of sin, nor does it join in the harm of sin. In Ephesians 4, the Bible teaches that we are to speak the truth in love. We are to work together until we reach the unity that expresses Jesus completely.

Every difference, every challenge, every situation is an opportunity to live exactly like Jesus, with him expressing himself through us. When Jesus lived in the body, he did not join his people in their destructive acts; yet he did not separate himself from them. With them he worked for a living. He paid taxes, attended worship and listened to the authorities. He ate with sinners, gave witness to God's word, endured rejection and sacrificed himself for their salvation.

Living in Jesus, what else would we do? We are being led to live in unity. We are protected by Jesus' name, sanctified by God's truth and shepherded by God's Spirit into perfect unity. That is the place of blessing, where we realize our potential and fulfill our purpose.