

Life Together...



CALLED INTO
THE COMMUNITY
OF FAITH

The Pleasantness of Purity and Peace Psalm 133:1

Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together in unity!

The sermon this morning is the last in our series **Life Together** – *called into the community of faith*. We have seen that the Church, the visible manifestation of the body of Christ, is to be a community marked by mutual encouragement, sympathy, and service; by joyful worship and by a vibrant witness. This morning we will look at the atmosphere in which all of these things flourish. Of course, we know the atmosphere as the whole mass of air surrounding the earth. Atmosphere can also refer to a surrounding influence or environment. For example, there is a certain atmosphere in every home – either of diligence or sloth; either of contention or peace; of order or confusion; of respect or scorn. There is a certain atmosphere at a big football game between traditional rivals. My point this morning is this: God’s intention is that we live out our faith together in an atmosphere of purity and peace, to the glory of God and to the delight and refreshment of our own souls. It’s not like we have options in this regard. No alternatives exist.

We have solemnly obligated ourselves to the cultivation of such an atmosphere

of purity and peace. We are bound people. As your pastor I have bound myself to maintain the purity and peace of the church. On November 19, 1989 Q. #6 of the ordination vows was put to me: *Do you promise to be zealous and faithful in maintaining the truths of the Gospel and the **purity and peace** of the Church, whatever persecution or opposition may arise unto you on that account?* What this means is that the purity and peace of the church is one of the hills upon which I will die if need be. Your elders and deacons have bound themselves to maintain purity and peace. At his ordination each officer responded, "I do" to the question: *Do you promise to strive for the **purity, peace, unity and edification** of the church (Q. #6)?* As members of this church you have bound yourselves to promote purity and peace within this fellowship. Beloved, when you joined this church you said "Yes" to this question: *Do you submit yourselves to the government and discipline of the church, and promise to study its **purity and peace** (Q. #5)?*

Purity and peace are related. One precedes and makes possible the other. There can be no real peace without purity of doctrine, heart, and conduct. When we talk about purity we're talking about conformity to the truth of God's Word in what we believe and in how we live (SC, Q. 2).

In **Acts 2:42** we learn that believers in the early church were *continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching*. Apostolic teaching defined orthodoxy in the early Christian church. That teaching has come to us in the Scriptures. It is *the faith once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 3)*. From the very beginning there was this corporate love for and devotion to the instruction of the apostles. Later on in Ephesus, the church where Timothy was pastor, *certain men had wandered away from this and were teaching what Paul referred to as **strange doctrines** (I Tim. 1:3)*. The teachers there had corrupted the gospel. They had departed from apostolic teaching and, like lost hikers, had wandered into the wilderness of *myths and*

endless genealogies (1:4). The result was that the church was plagued with *speculation (1:4)* and *fruitless discussion (1:6)*; *disputes* and *idle talk*. So doctrinal corruption can disrupt and even destroy the vitality of the church. This sort of disruption has never been nor is there any indication that it will be a problem here in our own church. Such is a tender preserving mercy from our Lord for which we are grateful.

Indeed, the larger question for us is how is such a blessed state to be maintained? My answer is a simple one. The gospel of the saving grace of God in Christ must be taught as that which gives rise to true faith and that which sustains true faith. The preeminence of the gospel in every area of the life of the church must be upheld in the face of all opposition, criticism, and hardship. Paul instructed Timothy, *remain on at Ephesus*, that he might counter the assault on the gospel. Timothy wasn't being asked to stay in a pleasant situation. To remain on at Ephesus meant conflict and confrontation, correcting, contending. **Jude 3**, *I felt the necessity to write to you appealing that you contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints*. To remain on at Ephesus meant for Timothy all the stuff that the average pastor dreads; all the stuff that keeps him awake at night; all the stuff that causes his stomach to churn and his head to hurt. Timothy would stay but at no small cost. Sometimes it is the man who stays in one obscure place to continue the struggle for the peace and purity of the church who is paying the highest price. To remain when everything in him says leave. To endure when his body and emotions are crying for an escape. To confront when the flesh presents all sorts of arguments to just let it go. To address an issue when avoiding it is a real temptation. We must each take our place in the struggle to preserve the true gospel knowing that such corporate courage will surely yield the sweetest of benefits.

Maurice Roberts wrote an article in *Banner of Truth* entitled "Love of Truth and Its Opposite." I want to read one brief passage in closing. "Where Christians have this conviction of truth there will be unity and great strength. It is the mark of every great age of the church that believers have strong assurance of the truths of Scripture. They feel their vibrance and they are animated by their life. Men who have conviction of the truths of the Bible cannot help speaking often one with another about them. Love of truth generates passion, zeal for God and a readiness, often, to die for the faith." God's intention is that we live out our faith together in just such an atmosphere of purity and peace to the glory of God and to the delight and refreshment of our own souls.

But purity of doctrine is not all that contributes to the pleasantness of this environment. We are to pursue peace among fellow-believers. As Christians we are a family of faith. **Ephesians 2:19** in the Living Bible paraphrase says, *you are a member of God's very own family ... and you belong in God's household with every other Christian.* It is God's will that we live and serve together in peace and harmony. In **Mark 9:50**, Jesus said, *"be at peace with one another."* In **Thessalonians 5:13**, *Live in peace with one another.* Paul wrote to the **Philippians** in **2:2**, *make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose.*

God has been pleased to bless our church with a great measure of harmony over the years. There has been no church split or even a hint of such a thing. No charges that would have fractured the ministry have ever been leveled against a pastor or elder. No doctrinal issue has arisen that would divide the fellowship. Indeed, over the years we have only experienced what I call "pockets" of discord. Let me try to explain what I mean. Have you ever been flying along in

a perfectly clear blue sky and then suddenly the plane started bouncing around and after a minute or two it was smooth sailing again? I called a pilot friend of mine and asked him about this. There is such a thing as “clear air turbulence.” A pilot may be able to see a big thunderstorm ahead and change course or altitude as necessary. But you can’t see these clear air things. They are common. They can be as mild as to only rattle your coffee cup. They can be as intense as to knock out a plane’s entire navigational system or precipitate a crash. The point is that they are “pockets” of instability in an otherwise calm and clear ocean of air.

I reflected upon my nearly fifteen years among you and four factors that contribute to these isolated and temporary disturbances - these pockets of discord - came to mind. **First** is unguarded conversation – talking to others about others with little regard for the consequences and implications for the larger church family. These folks are conduits for private and often inaccurate information. Beloved, we are often no more circumspect in what we say than those who are total strangers to the grace of God. The **second** is criticism without ownership or knowledge. I call these folks “snipers.” Normally, they have neither responsibility nor accountability in the ministry and yet feel free to take shots at those who do. The **third** is complaining over matters of preference. **Fourth** is simply a contentious disposition. I’m sorry to say that controversy and misunderstanding follow some folks like the cloud of dust follows Pig Pen.

From just a skimming of Scripture we can build a long and depressing list of things which characterize the atmosphere and corporate life of the contentious church. There is discord (**Prov. 6:19b**), *factions* (**I Cor.11:19**), *strife, backbiting, jealousy, angry tempers, disputes, slander, gossip, arrogance, and confusion* (**II Cor. 12:20**). There is *malice and bitterness* (**Eph. 4:31**). There are *quarrels* and *conflicts*

(James 4:1). The church at Corinth was a notorious example. A note in the *Geneva Study Bible* uses almost humorous restraint in saying, [The church at Corinth had] “developed a remarkable number of serious problems” (p.1797). In fact, Corinth was a ministry mess. The folks in this church were quarreling with one another **(1:11)**. The church had splintered into little competing groups or factions **(1:12)**. Paul’s authority was being questioned **(4:3)**. There was a case of immorality in the church. Some guy was having an immoral sexual relationship with his father’s mother **(5:1)**. The church was lax to exercise any sort of discipline **(5:2)**. Believers were taking each other to court **(6:1-8)**. There were questions concerning marriage **(7:1-40)**. There were disputes over food sacrificed to idols **(8:1-13)**. There were abuses of the Lord’s Supper **(11:18-22)**. They debated over the doctrine of the resurrection **(15:1-58)**. Let’s consider a few of the grievous results when the peace of the church is disrupted; when relationships are strained; when miscommunication abounds; when resentment and grudges are nursed by the saints.

First, such discord grieves the Spirit of God **(Eph. 4:30-32)**. Hendriksen says, “... the Spirit dwells within the hearts of God’s children, making them his temple, his sanctuary **(2:22; I Cor. 3:16, 17; 6:19)**. By means of every evil imagination ... or motivation that indwelling and sanctifying Spirit is ... as it were, cut to the heart” (*Ephesians*, p.222).

Second, contention is an evidence of spiritual immaturity.

I Corinthians 3:3 ... *For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like mere men?* In other words engagement in divisive and disruptive activities exposes a believer as a spiritual baby, being swayed more by his own sinful passions than by the Spirit of God **(James 4:1-3)**.

Third, contention is evidence of spiritual pride (**Eph. 4:2**). Matthew Henry writes, “Now without these things unity cannot be preserved. The first step towards unity is humility; without this there will be no meekness, no patience, or forbearance; and without these no unity. Pride and passion break the peace, and make all the mischief. Humility and meekness restore the peace, and keep it. Only by pride comes contention; only by humility comes love” (*Ephesians*, p.701-02).

Fourth, strife is inconsistent with our calling (**Eph. 4:4**). God called us to be part of a body. We are to function in cooperation with all the other parts.

Fifth, contention hinders spiritual growth.

Romans 14:19 ... *So then let us pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another. Believers in the church, just like kids in the home, grow (thrive) in the context of peace and mutual love.*

Sixth malice, bitterness, and arrogance are contrary to the attitude and practice of Christ.

Philippians 2:3, 5 ... *Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself... Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus.*

Seventh, backbiting and jealousy open the door for the devil to work havoc in the fellowship.

Ephesians 4:27 ... *And do not give the devil an opportunity.*

Eighth, internal turmoil diverts the energy of the church from its mission. You simply will not see a contentious church effective in evangelism, aggressive in missions, generous in benevolence, and consistent in discipleship. The members of that church exhaust all their emotional and spiritual energy battling one another.

Ninth, contention is sinful. Be sure that a contentious church is a disobedient church (**Rom. 12:10, 16; 13:8; 15:5; Gal. 5:13; Eph. 4:2, 32; 5:21; Col. 3:13; I Thess. 3:12; 4:9; 5:11; I Pet.2:22; 5:5; I John 3:11, 23; 4:7**).

Tenth, discord compromises the witness of the church.

John 13:35 ... *“By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”*

As with purity, the gospel is the ultimate “keeper” of the peace. The gospel brings joy. Joy is the predominate atmosphere of worship. Joy is the overarching attitude of life in the Spirit. Joy is the basic disposition of the redeemed soul. Christian joy is unique in that it is *in the Lord* (**Phil. 3:1, 4:4**). To rejoice in the Lord is to delight in His person, to prefer His precept, and to rest in His promises and providence. If there is no such joy or satisfaction *in* Christ there will be little submission *to* Christ. And it follows, if there is little submission to Christ there will be even less submission to the brethren. **Ephesians 5:21** tells us *to be subject to one another in the fear of* (or out of reverence for) *Christ*. So all hinges upon one’s disposition of heart. The key to harmonious body life in the church is mutual love for and delight in the Head of the body, Jesus Christ, and for what He has done for guilty sinners (the gospel).

And it is only as we are overtaken and overruled by this sense of God's mercy to us in the gospel that we will gladly pursue the Biblical injunction to maintain a good conscience. In **Acts 24:16** Paul said, *I also do my best to maintain always a blameless conscience both before God and before men.* The RSV translates Paul as saying *I always take pains.* The Phillips translation is *I do my utmost.* It takes much work and reflection to consider your relationships with specific individuals, to determine if there are issues between you, and then to take the initiative to set things right; to work to be patient with that annoying personality; to overlook a fault; to keep your mouth shut; to defer to another's preference.

And it is only as we are overtaken and overruled by this sense of God's mercy to us in the gospel that we will gladly pursue the Biblical injunction to *live in peace* (**I Cor. 14:33, 16:11**); to pursue and enjoy harmonious relationships with each other. Philip Edgcumbe Hughes has a great paragraph on this term. "Living in peace is, in fact, an outward consequence of the inward state of being of the same mind. The factions, envies, litigation, and disorders in public worship by which ... the Corinthian church had been disfigured ... were outward symptoms of inward disunity. Yet it is Christ's followers who, above all other people, should be both inwardly and visibly at one with each in love and fellowship."

Such harmony as Paul has in mind here cannot be artificially manufactured. Peace and harmony come as a gift from God. **Romans 15:5**, *Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus.* So the church does not earn harmony any more than it earns salvation. Having been entrusted with such a blessing, the church must not neglect the gift, take it for granted, or disparage it. We must pray for it.

We must protect it. We must be grateful for it. We must cherish it. We must pursue it; promote it.

Then we will know the extraordinary pleasantness of the promise, *and the God of love and peace shall be with you*. Nothing less than His presence is what may we expect when we are prayerfully pursuing these things. What is the atmosphere when the good hand of God is upon the church and its work? **First**, there is the calm assurance that God is pleased. God, our heavenly Father, has determined that an atmosphere of purity and peace should prevail in His household. And to the degree that His children maintain this atmosphere the Father is pleased and honored. **Second**, like beautiful flowers planted in rich soil, the saints prosper in this atmosphere. **Third**, the gospel is preserved, proclaimed, and advanced in a world and culture permeated with strife and uncleanness. **Fourth**, the church becomes an oasis of rest rather than a battlefield. It is a place of delight for souls hungering and thirsting for God. **Fifth**, the saints in such an atmosphere know ease of conscience (**Acts 24:16**). **Sixth**, there is a vibrant gladness in corporate worship (**Ps. 122:1**). **Seventh**, unbelievers are attracted to the community of faith (**Acts 2:47**). **Eight**, the church gains a good reputation. **Ninth**, believers genuinely enjoy the company of one another (**Acts 2:46**). Beloved, God's intention is that we live out our faith together in an atmosphere of peace to the glory of God and to the delight and refreshment of our own souls.