11-10-2019 United We Love

John 17: 20 – 23

*20 "I am praying not only for these disciples but also for all who will ever believe in Me through their message. 21 I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one as you are in Me, Father, and I am in You. And may they be in Us so that the world will believe You sent Me.*

*22 I have given them the glory You gave Me, so they may be one as we are one. 23 I am in them and You are in Me. May they experience such perfect unity that the world will know that You sent Me and that You love them as much as You love Me."*

Who of you have been involved with a team at some point in your life? Sports, research, military, wherever people are asked to work together as a group to accomplish a common purpose.

I am sure you have all experienced at least one of the many team building exercises out there in the business world, sports teams, or the military.

I’ve long believed that working with a team can give some great life-lessons. I have been part of teams that were called a team only because they wore the same color uniform. I learned that a team is not made by talent or time or name.

A team emerges as its members put their egos aside and commit to something bigger than themselves. Bigger than their wants. Bigger than their ideas. Bigger than their personal ambitions. Bigger than their own strengths and weaknesses!

Jesus’ great desire for His disciples was that they would become one. He wanted them unified as a powerful witness to the reality of God’s love.

The body of Christ, the church is one when you pray for other Christians, avoid gossip, build others up, work together in humility, sacrificially give time and resources, exalt Christ, and refuse to get sidetracked arguing over divisive matters.

Jesus prayed for unity among believers based on the believers’ unity with Him and the Father. Christians can only know unity among themselves if they are living in union with God.

For example, each branch living in union with the vine is united with all other branches doing the same.

Well, it’s hard to argue, actually, it’s impossible to argue that unity isn’t important to God. It’s vital. It’s essential. Without it, the church suffers, our witness in the world is impotent, and the members of the church languish in discouragement.

You’ve heard it said that Satan is content when believers are lukewarm apathetic in their faith. Well I’m telling you that he is even more pleased when a church is divided, at-odds with-one-another, when relationships are in disarray. Why? Why would Satan be so pleased when there’s discord in the church?

Because he knows that it undermines God’s will, God’s plans, God’s designs for working through the body of believers.

There is no possible way for the church to be and to do all that God plans, if we are not united.

Unity is a big deal! It would be hard to over-estimate the importance of unity. And it’s time the Church, the Body of Christ no matter the denomination woke up to this!

If you’ve ever been a part of a church that was divided, you know what I’m talking about! Today, I want to share some thoughts with you, let's say a recipe. It’s a recipe of Scriptural ingredients, that can lead to the beautiful experience of Unity.

Here are Scriptural ingredients to move toward unity in all our relationships as well as in the church.

**1. Unity Requires Submission**

The first ingredient in the recipe is: submission.

Don’t ya love that word: ‘submission’? For most people, when we hear this word, the hair on the back of our neck stands up; we feel the muscles across our shoulders tense up; our jaw clenches. Submit? Here we go again!

But, without submission, unity will not happen!

Do you remember the 1986 movie Hoosiers? It’s the story of a high school football coach who’s given one last chance, in a small town in Indiana farm country. The townsfolk are suspicious. They’re pessimistic. They think the new coach is off his rocker. Dissention. Back biting. Under-mining. The team is no team at all.

There’s no support in the school; no support from the movers and shakers in the town; and for quite a while, there’s no-support from the team members, themselves.

But something changes all that. And as the players begin to submit to coach's plan, and play his style, and buy into his way of doing things, that’s when beautiful things start to happen.

It’s not just that they start winning. But it’s that they become a team. Submission is the key to bringing the team together, so that they’re on the same page, and they work together.

Why in the world should we ‘submit’ to one another?

Well, actually, there’s no reason in the world to submit! But there’s every reason in the Kingdom of Heaven to submit! Let me give you two of those-reasons: First, Scripture tells us to, in Ephesians 5.21 *“Submit to one another out of reverence to Christ.”*

Every believer is a living temple for the Holy Spirit. When we accept Jesus as our personal Savior, we are not simply accepting a proposition, or a truth, or a statement of faith. We are accepting, receiving the living Spirit of God. Jesus comes to us, and He dwells within us.

That should affect how we respond to one another. When we are called to submit to one another, we are actually submitting to the living Christ who dwells in our brother, and our sister!

I don’t know about you, but that changes everything! It changes how I look at you. It changes how I feel about submitting to you. It changes my attitude toward this whole thing because it’s not you and your DNA and your quirkiness and your strangeness that I’m submitting to; it’s the blessed Lord God who dwells within you, who has redeemed you, who calls you His beloved child just like He calls me His beloved child!

Wait a minute, did I hear someone thinking to themselves: “Submit!?! But, how can I trust them?”

You can trust them because you trust God. And you trust that God is working in them. And you trust that the good work that He has begun in them and us, He is bringing to perfect completion. And even if they haven’t handled our heart well in the past, well, they’re not the same person that they used to be. Besides, we’re all trying to learn to put into practice what Jesus taught all His disciples:

AS in, Matthew 20: 25 – 28 *25 But Jesus called them together and said, “You know that the rulers in this world lord it over their people, and officials flaunt their authority over those under them. 26 But among you it will be different. Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant,*

*27 and whoever wants to be first among you must become your slave. 28 For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many.”*

The defining picture of how church family is to relate to one another is not the sword, scepter, whip, or judge’s gavel! The defining picture of how church family is to relate to one another is the basin and the towel!

Submit. Wash one another’s feet. Put your ego, your will, your ‘self’ on the back burner. We submit to one another out of reverence to Christ, the living Christ who dwells in our brothers and sisters!

The second reason we submit to one another is because each-believer has been gifted by the Heavenly Father. No one is exempt. No one is left out. No one is gift less.

1 Corinthians 12: 4 – 6 *“There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men.”*

What this means is that no one has everything it takes to do the work of the Kingdom of God. We need each other, way more than we even realize. Our submission is not because anyone is somehow superior to the other; but because they have been gifted differently by God and **we are interdependent**.

Not everyone can step into a room filled with rowdy teenagers and turn the tide of energy toward the things of God. But, some can!

Not everyone is gifted with organizational and administrative skills to coordinate volunteers and resources for the purpose of a program or project.

But some can!

Unity requires submission. And we submit because others have tools and gifts that we don’t have. No one can be top dog on everything! In all probability, you may not be top dog on anything but, that’s o.k. because God has made us and gifted us in unique ways.

You are just as indispensable as someone else with a different gift. He who has called you is faithful to equip you; but we must also submit to the others that God has called and equipped to fill other roles and perform other tasks.

Submission is an act of confession and an act of faith: It is confession, because we confess our own limitations; and an act of faith because we trust that God is dwelling in and working through others in such a way that we need to cooperate with them so that the purposes of God are realized!

Moving on our next ingredient is:

**2. Unity Requires Sacrifice**

When you hear the word, ‘submit’, …you might think of that passage in Scripture that tells wives to submit to their husbands. But what we don’t give as much attention to is what that passage says to husbands: it tells them to die for their wives!

Which brings us to the second ingredient in the recipe to unity: not only are we to submit to one another out of reverence to Christ (who dwells in those that we submit to), but we are also to sacrifice for one another. Unity in the church family requires sacrifice.

Marriage is a microcosm for the church in this: that even as the husband and wife submit to one another, and as the marriage partners make huge personal sacrifices for their spouse, in the same way, the members of the church are to submit to one another, and live sacrificially in relationship to one another.

I am always amazed at how so much of life is woven together by common themes. Unity is one of those themes. In the Old Testament, the central confession for ancient Israel was this, found in Deuteronomy 6: 4

*“Hear O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is One.”*

In the New Testament, Jesus affirms that He and the Father are One.

The Bible also talks about marriage using the same terminology. A marriage is a union of two individuals as in Genesis 2: 24 *“A man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh."*

Unity is a common theme throughout Scripture. Is it any wonder that one of the essential ingredients in the recipe for unity is sacrifice?

In order for the body of Christ, for a church family to be unified, we must practice sacrifice. Just as a marriage will not be healthy without sacrifices on both members’ parts, so churches must practice sacrifice, to be healthy, to be unified, to be the dynamic living witness that God intends for us to be! Sacrifice is essential.

Does this seem like a difficult pill to swallow? Sacrifice leads to unity when we place our personal preferences, our personal dreams, sometimes our preferred way of doing things on the altar of sacrifice.

Unity will not be realized until we are willing to make personal sacrifices. To make sacrifices is a sign that we recognize: **“it’s not about me!” It is all about God and His plans for this church-family!**

When I think about the sacrifices Jesus made for me even to death on a cross, how can I not do the same for others!

He laid down the crown of glory in order to pick up a crown of thorns. Jesus was all about sacrifice; His entire life was sacrifice incarnate. Why wouldn’t the body of Christ , the church, the family of God see that in order for us to be unified, we must make sacrifices?

Our third ingredient is purpose.

**3. Unity Requires Purpose**

In the study "Experiencing God" we discovered that ‘purpose’ was one of the key marks of the church.

God is always at work in the world drawing people to Himself. The church is to be purposeful. And, our purpose is rooted in the will and plans of God. That’s why we should be constantly asking: “What is God up to? Because that helps us discover what we should be up to!

Purpose. Mission. God’s plans. If we aren’t centered on God’s purposes, then we will not be unified.

We will be divided. Fractured. Split by competing interests and conflicting dreams.

Maybe this’s why Jesus taught us to pray, in the Lord’s Prayer: Matthew 6: 10 *“Thy will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven!”*

Unity requires purpose. We have a unifying purpose in the will and heart of God! If our unity is based on our own dreams and our own goals even if those things are arrived at through the process of community collaboration, we still won’t have the kind of unity that God intends for His people.

We can be united by all kinds of goals and aims. United by a desire for fun. United by a fear of outsiders. United by common hobbies. United by some charismatic personality. United by some huge project: like building a tower that will reach the heavens, or, united by a plan to have the biggest and the best church building in town!

But, man-made, earthly purposes will never unite us in the way that God wants His people to be united.

Our reason for being, our reason for existing is founded in the heart and will of God the Father. It is not something that we contrive, make up, or vote on.

It’s all about seeking the will of God, discerning the will of God, and doing the will of God.

Jesus taught us to pray *“Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven”* for a reason.

The reason is: this is our purpose! As the body of Christ, it is our purpose to do the will of God. If we have some other purpose, then we are mis-guided!

If we have some other aim, then we are missing the mark! If we have some other goal, then we will be working at cross purposes to God Almighty! And that’s not a good place to be!

Unity requires purpose, but that purpose must be rooted in, and derived from the purposes and plans of God. *“Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven!”*

We can be unified in seeking God’s will, but our unity will not be healthy if we’re not submissive and sacrificial toward one another as we seek the purposes of God.

Unity is a big deal. But, it’s gotta have each of these three ingredients! One of the three, even two of the three will not lead to the kind of unity that makes a profound impact on the world.

But, if we get it right, by the help of God, if we seek to establish and build a unity among us that incorporates these three ingredients: submission, sacrifice, and Godly purpose, then the world will sit up and take notice!

Unity does not happen willy nilly. It doesn’t happen magically. It doesn’t happen as the result of some brainchild who knows just how to mix the right persons and personalities!

Rather, unity happens when we the body of Christ submit to one another out of reverence for Jesus, when we sacrifice for the benefit of the Body, and when we commit our will to the will and purposes of God!

Colossians 4: 12 – 14 *12 Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. 13 Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. 14 And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.*

O God, we are one with you. You have made us one with you. You have taught us that if we are open to one another, you dwell in us.

Help us to preserve this openness and to fight for it with all our hearts.

O God, in accepting one another wholeheartedly, fully, completely, we accept you, and thank you and adore you; love you with our whole being, because our being is in your being, our spirit is rooted in your Spirit.

Fill us with love and let us be bound together with love as we go our diverse ways, united in this one Spirit which makes you present to the world, and which makes you witness to the ultimate reality that is love. Love has overcome. Love is victorious!

AMEN