

Creating Unity in Community

Presented by Lisa Bishop

Air Dates: January 13 – 17, 2025

Day One

Are you self-righteous? What an opening question, isn't it? I would venture to say there are times in our lives when we have been self-righteous, and self-righteous behavior can jeopardize relationships and destroy community. As followers of Jesus, you and I are called to be a community that loves one another. But how do we do that well?

We're looking at what the Bible says about our dispositions, mindsets, and attitudes and how we are to behave in a way that fosters unity.

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus (Romans 3:23-24).

All have sinned and fallen short. That includes you and me. This biblical truth should keep us humble. But when we focus on the shortcomings of others and forget to look in the mirror, self-righteousness can rear its ugly head and wreak havoc on community. Self-righteousness often sneaks into our lives when we start comparing ourselves and our actions to others instead of measuring ourselves against God's perfect standard.

We can fall into the self-righteousness trap when we are critical and judgmental of others and become overly confident in ourselves and our own moral superiority.

We might think, "I'm more faithful than that person," or "At least I don't act that way or struggle with that sin."

Jesus gave us a powerful warning about self-righteousness in Luke 18, when he told this parable.

Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'

But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'

I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted (Luke 18:10-14).

The irony of self-righteousness is it not only blinds us to our sin, but it also prevents us from loving others as Jesus commands. When you and I remember that we fall short of God's perfect standard, we will be less inclined to point the finger when people around us do too.

How might you be acting in hyper-critical, superior, or fault-finding ways toward others? Rather than being self-righteous, let's remember we all fall short and live in light of the righteousness that is ours because of our faith in Christ. When we live this way, we display unity and draw others to Jesus.

Day Two

Unity is a powerful force, isn't it? It strengthens relationships, enables us to accomplish more together, and most importantly, reflects the love and nature of God to the world around us. But unity is not something that just happens automatically. It requires intentional effort, humility, and a focus on our common purpose in Christ.

I don't know about you but when I think about the idea of unity, I automatically think it means agreement. But the truth is we will not always see eye to eye, think exactly alike, or have the same opinions. Yet, we can still be a community that puts the love of Jesus on display and lives in unity even when we disagree. And it's not if we will disagree, it's when. Ultimately, what matters is how we show up in the midst of our conflicts.

Unity is an attitude of heart and is possible even when we see things from opposing perspectives. We need to be reminded as believers we are all united in Christ which unites us with one another. How we act towards each other matters. It's critical to our witness as followers of Jesus. If we are backbiting, dissing, or speaking in disparaging ways toward others, especially fellow followers of Christ, we are giving the world a terrible representation of the gospel. As God's image bearers we must, by the power of the Holy Spirit, show the world a higher and better way and point them to Christ by the way we act toward one another.

Ephesians 4:29-32 gives us sound instruction on attitudes and behaviors to get rid of and pursue to work toward unity:

Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you (Ephesians 4:29-32).

If you were to take inventory of your words this past week, did they benefit those who heard them, or were they, as Paul says, unwholesome—meaning useless, rotten, or unfit for use? Do our words sow discord or harmony? It can be so easy, especially these days, to get riled up and let our flesh draw us into bitterness, rage, anger, brawling, and slander. But we must realize and resist the schemes of the enemy and instead be overpowered by the Holy Spirit. In order to be overpowered by the Spirit we need to be in tune with the Spirit, and we can only do that when we regularly spend time in God's Word and meditate on scripture, which grows our ability to sense God's presence, hear his voice, and follow his ways.

And finally, let's remember we grieve the Holy Spirit when we fail to maintain peace and harmony in the body of Christ so let's instead follow Paul's words and choose to act in ways that create unity.

Day Three

I'm glad you have joined me today. This week we're looking at attitudes and behaviors that foster unity in community. Community matters to God, and how we act toward one another is essential, as we carry out our calling as ambassadors of Jesus.

So today, let's look at what 1 Peter 3:8-9 has to teach us about living out our oneness in Christ.

Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble. Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing (1 Peter 3:8-9).

When Peter says to be of one mind, he is not saying that we will agree on everything. He is implying a unity of aim and purpose. When we seek to live in unity with one another, it is a mindset and a heart set on honoring and glorifying Jesus with the way we conduct ourselves. We know our aim on this earth is to love and follow Jesus and to live out the great command to make disciples of all nations—to draw people to a saving relationship with Christ. And we cannot do that well if we do not love each other well.

We need to love one another, guard against a prideful attitude, and demonstrate humility; be compassionate toward one another and mindful to guard against all unnecessary contention. And perhaps Peter gives one of the most difficult challenges when he tells us to not repay evil for evil. It can be so easy to fight back when we feel offended or mistreated. Paybacks can feel good and justified in the moment, but revenge is an act of the flesh. It takes a lot of self-control and a working of the Holy Spirit to instead pay back with a blessing. And it's not the southern expression, "Oh bless your heart" type of blessing that Peter is talking about, which is really no blessing at all. It's instead truly wishing good for that person. I can say is not always my first inclination to heap blessings on people especially when I feel wronged, but when we genuinely bless people, it is a demonstration to the power of Christ working in us. We are no longer controlled by our earthly nature that wants to get even or counterattack.

We strongly heed the instruction of Galatians 5:16-17.

Walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh (Galatians 5:16-17).

We bestow blessing because it is an act of obedience, it is what God has called us to do. And we know whenever God calls you and I to do something, he also equips and empowers us to carry it out. That is the power of the gospel at work in our lives. When we are so easily triggered and reactive, we fail to recognize that we can in fact instead be controlled by the Holy Spirit and allow him to help us with our actions and reactions. But it requires surrender. When you find yourself tempted to be reactionary and retaliate with your words when you feel wronged, take time to pause. Confess your feelings to the Lord and ask the Holy Spirit to take control. When the fruit of the Spirit is evident in our lives, we show the world a better way and live out our purpose to point people to Jesus.

Day Four

We've been examining ways we can foster unity in community. When the Bible calls us to be of one mind, unified in Christ, it does not mean we will always see eye to eye. But there are attitudes and behaviors we are called to display as we work toward a spirit of unity. Yesterday we talked about how to respond when we feel wronged. Rather than retaliate, pay people back with a blessing. That behavior in and of itself will show the world around us a better way and put the glory of God on display. Today I want to dive in a little deeper and talk about another essential aspect of seeking unity in community, and that is forgiveness.

In any community, especially one as diverse as the body of Christ, conflicts will arise. Differences in opinions, misunderstandings, and hurts will inevitably occur. But forgiveness is the glue that keeps unity intact.

Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you (Colossians 3:13).

Forgiveness is at the very heart of the gospel.

Think about it—our sin against God is far greater than any offense we might face from another person. And yet, God, in his infinite mercy, sent his son, Jesus, to die for us while we were still his enemies.

The forgiveness we offer is not based on whether others deserve it, but solely because Christ has forgiven us, even though we didn't deserve it. When we forgive others, we mirror the heart of God, we release others from the debt we feel they owe us, extend the grace God has shown us, and we open the door for reconciliation and restoration.

Forgiveness is the means by which we break down walls of division and build bridges of peace. As a follower of Jesus, forgiveness is not an option, it is to be a regular practice in our lives.

Are there people with whom you were once in community but perhaps you experienced a riff and the falling out caused you to fall away from the friendship? If there is anyone in your life you may be harboring unforgiveness toward, can I encourage you to take the first step in making amends?

You know forgiveness is God's idea, and it is a very big deal to him. If you are harboring any hurt or resentment, give it to God and ask him to help you get your heart in a posture of forgiveness. Extend the proverbial olive branch and do your part to clear up any division in your relationships. The enemy loves discord but as believers, we can't afford to have divisions among us. We need each other.

Remember, the body of Christ is not made up of perfect people; it is made up of redeemed sinners like you and me who are bound together by the love of Jesus. And when we forgive one another, we strengthen that bond.

Day Five

I want to examine something essential for our spiritual lives and for fostering unity in our Christian community, and that's abiding in Jesus.

Jesus himself gave us a key to unity in the body of Christ when he invited us to abide in him.

Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me (John 15:4).

When we abide in Jesus we remain, we dwell, we stay connected to him. It's not just about having a fleeting connection with Jesus. It's about staying deeply rooted in him—having a continual, ongoing relationship where his presence and love permeate every part of our lives.

Unity in the community of believers flows from our connection to Jesus. In John 15:5, Jesus declares,

I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing (John 15:5).

When we are rooted in Jesus, we are drawn together in a shared experience of his love, grace, and truth.

Think about it. If every individual Christian is abiding in Jesus, then we are all being shaped and transformed by him. We are being aligned with his heart, his will, and his purpose. This is the foundation of unity. When we stay close to Jesus, we're not just growing individually; we're growing together as one body in him.

When we abide in Jesus, we are spiritually nourished and empowered to live lives that reflect his character—lives marked by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).

As you and I bear spiritual fruit, we contribute to the overall health and unity of the body of Christ that reflects the power of God.

In any community, there inevitably will be challenges and differences. But when we abide in Jesus, he gives us the grace to overcome division. His love and his truth unite us even in conflict. Unity in the body of Christ is not something we can manufacture on our own. It's not about our efforts to get along with or to work things out in our own strength. True unity comes when we, as individuals and as a community, abide in him.

How are you abiding in Jesus? Spending time in God's word and prayer are ways we stay connected and grow. And remember that prayer is a dialogue, not a monologue. Create space for God to speak into your circumstances and relationships and to transform your life. When we take time to simply be still, practice gratitude, and praise him for who he is, we develop a stronger connection and sense of his presence. When we abide in Jesus, we not only benefit but his love binds us together in perfect unity.