

## What No One Knows About Unity

### Purple Part 2

Sermon Date: June 30th, 2024

*20*“My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, *21*that all of them may be one, 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. *22*I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one— *23*I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

*John 17:20-23*

### **Introduction**

I don't know about you but when someone says that we're going to talk about unity my first thought always is, “who needs to get in line?” How many parents, coaches, even pastors have made a plea to a group they lead for that group to be unified because a conflict seeks to split them apart. The discussion about unity rarely ever takes place when it needs to: which is outside the context of a conflict. No, typically unity comes up as a last grasp for peace when the issue at hand has completely overshadowed the quality of the relationship. So without massive conflict, without a large group that needs to get in line, today we're going to look at the idea of unity.

To clarify our pursuit it's important to know that we're discussing unity, not uniformity. We seek oneness in spirit and mind, not sameness. Unity is more than willing to accept differences while uniformity seeks to eliminate them because it views differences as a threat.

We understand that we are made unique, so what is uniquely different between us must be celebrated with the understanding that we can still be unified within our uniqueness.

As we wrap our minds around those concepts, we begin to wonder how we are going to achieve unity. Uniformity is far easier. Uniformity is merely a means of power, control, and coercion. Unity requires a heart change, a transformation of the mind, and a love that is extended to those around us. No wonder that even people of faith default to uniformity instead of unity. To see the ways in which we could possibly be “one” in the midst of political divides, social divisions, family disputes, and national crises becomes almost impossible to figure out how we could achieve unity.

This is why many of the people who promise unity are met with concern, hesitation, and even fear at times. When all we’ve experienced is “get in line”, even the terminology of unity should make us concerned. It should concern us because we don’t know how unity works. We understand its importance for peace; we cannot have peace without some sense of unity. We understand its importance for impact; we cannot do something significant unless we do it together. We understand the significance of unity to Jesus; whose literal prayer for us is that we would have “complete unity”. Think of the significance of that: Jesus prays for his followers that were right before him and then he prays for all of those who would believe in his message through them, which is us. Jesus prayed for you. And his prayer is that you and the fellow followers of Jesus around you would be unified. We know it’s significant, but we have no idea how unity happens.

So as we walk through this political season, we know how divided we are, aware of the need for unity, but with no clue how to actually gain unity. What we’re told is the importance of compromise. We will be told the need to work together, and reach across the aisle, because compromise is how unity occurs. This is not true. Compromise is important, but it is not the pathway to unity. Neither is stubbornness, to be clear. Today, I want to walk you

through what Scripture teaches about unity. I want you to be able to see that unity is not just the responsibility of leadership, because it takes the actions of all of us for unity to take place. I want you to see the game plan Jesus uses to tie together this incredibly diverse group of people from every part of the world for the last 2,000 years, how you can utilize it, and how you're called to participate in it. But first, let's look at the unity Jesus was able to create.

## **The Disciples Unity**

One of the aspects of Jesus' time on Earth that continuously gets overlooked is the make-up of the disciples. This is not a group that should have achieved unity. If you're attempting to create unity, you're looking for similar interests and similar pursuits, maybe even an easy-going personality type that promotes peace. This is not what the disciples looked like. In this group were both Simon the Zealot and Matthew the tax collector. Zealots were a group of believers who viewed the Romans as unlawful occupiers of their territory. Zealots continuously waged war against the Romans in the area and urged other Jewish people to join in. Matthew, the tax collector, was a Jewish person who took a job in the Roman government to collect taxes on their behalf. The way he made his money was by charging more than was asked for and then pocketing the difference. You literally have a traitor and a revolutionary in the same group. That's enough right there, but add in to that group: Peter, who always speaks and acts before he thinks; Judas, who would betray all of them; the Sons of Thunder, who were nicknamed for their boisterous personalities; and you can begin to understand how ridiculous of a task unity was. So how on Earth did Jesus achieve unity? Outside of Judas, they would band together and give their lives to the faith. Yes, there was further disagreement, yes Peter and Paul argued and needed James to settle it, but there was a bond that connected them that superseded all of the other differences.

## Overview of Unity

The answer lies in the fact that we are not called to achieve unity, but to pursue unity. Let me be more clear: unity is not a goal; unity is a byproduct. When unity is pursued, the typical result is either dysfunction or uniformity. When other God-honoring pursuits are the focus, unity is the outcome. In John 17 where Jesus' prayer for all future believers is recorded, he prays clearly "that all of them may be one". He cares about unity greatly, but in the rest of the Bible, he teaches us how it can actually happen.

The word unity appears seven times in the NIV translation of Scripture. Five of those occurrences appear in the New Testament, and two in the Old Testament. There are an additional three times we see the word unity as a heading for a section, but we're not going to put our focus on those today because the headings were added later. Here's how unity is used: Once, unity is celebrated as in Psalm 133:1, "How pleasant it is to live in unity." Three times, we are asked to put forth effort to keep unity: once through our effort "Make every effort to keep the unity" (Ephesians 4:3), twice through God's power, "Give them unity to carry out what was ordered" (2 Chronicles 30:12), and also in John 17:22-23, "I have given them the glory that you gave me...so that they may be brought to complete unity." Three times we are told that unity takes place when a specific pursuit takes place. In Ephesians 1:10, Paul tells us that "God made known the mystery of Christ to bring unity to all things", and then later in Ephesians 4:12-13 he adds, "to equip his people for works of service so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith." Last in Colossians 3:14 we are commanded to "Put on love which binds the virtues together in perfect unity."

If we could quickly recap the Bible's teaching on unity: once unity is celebrated, three times we are taught that unity needs effort: two of those occurrences proclaiming we need

God's power, and three times we are told that unity is an outcome of specific pursuits and actions. So why, in the midst of that teaching, would we assume that unity is meant to be the goal? Not once are we told that unity is the goal. This should make sense to us because we are all aware that as soon as we talk about unity, we become acutely aware of all the ways in which we aren't unified! Scripture never tells us to pursue the goal of unity, Scripture teaches that unity is great, that it won't naturally happen, and that unity is a byproduct of other pursuits when the Spirit of God is involved.

Have you ever tried really hard not to eat unhealthy food? You swore off desserts, unhealthy carbs, every last bit of it! You told yourself that you're not going to eat any sugar and you are going to be the healthiest version of yourself possible! Now, how often do you find yourself thinking of unhealthy food? Key Lime Pie, Spicy Sweet Chili Doritos, Blizzards from Dairy Queen - they're all I can think of! If you put your focus on *not* eating unhealthy food, you'll find it increasingly difficult to do. However, if you put your focus on eating healthy food, on living healthy, on exercise and sunshine, you'll find avoiding what you don't want becomes *much* easier. Similarly, if we put our focus that we need to work through our differences, we'll find unity elusive. Unity was never meant to be the goal; it's a byproduct, an outcome. So, what must we pursue if we're going to be a people who are "one"?

### **We Pursue Jesus**

In Ephesians 1:9-10, we are told that "he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment - to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ." As we pursue Christ, we are unified.

This should make the most sense of all these ideas. If all of us are pursuing Jesus in the areas that are of eternal significance (you could hear that as “most important”), we will grow in our similarity. What we value will begin to look more like what Jesus valued. What we love will begin to look more like what Jesus loved: people. Our mutual pursuit of Jesus will bring us closer together to each other.

The pursuit of Jesus will also be the great revealer of whether we are becoming more unified or if we are only seeking uniformity. Galatians 3:28 tell us that “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all *one* in Christ Jesus.” These distinctions do not go away. They just no longer matter in comparison to our identity in Christ and our intimacy with him becomes so significant.

What this teaches is that you have more in common with the person who follows Jesus than anyone who doesn’t believe in him. Your fellow believer may be of a different generation, a different tax bracket, a different political party; they may even like the New York Yankees! You will be more unified with the person who follows Jesus who *seems* completely different than you, than anyone who has all the same surface similarities and yet is distant from their Savior. This is not meant to be a call to break off ties with those who don’t know Jesus; it is to understand the strength of the bond we have with the believers around us.

The passage does not mean, “go to Church”. Church is absolutely a vital part of your pursuit of Jesus and Jesus himself says that if you love him you will love his Church. However, we all know people who go to Church but are not in pursuit of Jesus. I call this up because I don’t want you to think “I went to Church” so I’m clearly in pursuit of Jesus and I’ve got that box checked. That is not the case; your life must be in pursuit of Jesus.

**We Pursue Serving**

In Ephesians 4:11-13, we are told “So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God...”. In this passage we find unity within the works of service that are the “good works which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Ephesians 2:10).

Unity isn't found in thinking about it, talking about it, even from desiring it. Unity is found by working together toward the common things that God has created us to do. The point of the work is to build up the body to fulfill the Great Commission. This is the actual goal Jesus told us that we should pursue. When we push aside our personal agenda to give ourselves in service of his work, some powerful things happen:

1. We gain an appreciation for the gifting of others. It's easy in our world today to begin to assume that we do not need the people around us. The value of the individual has been lost as we continue to believe we're fine on our own. But as we pursue what God has called us to, we realize we cannot accomplish it on our own. We need the gifting of those around us in order to do it. And as we gain an appreciation for the gifting of others...
2. We gain an appreciation for others. Seeing that we are created to need their gifting allows us to see the value of the individual as well. Valuing others is also the prerequisite for knowing others. So, when we value those around us...
3. We grow closer in community to those around us. Serving is the context for the most intimate community. Relationships form easily and closely when we work together toward a common goal.

This is why we have built our entire culture around serving together. There's issues and struggles to this, for sure. Most Churches want you to find community within your similarity, so you will be grouped together with people who are in a similar stage of life and similar

background. We believe the beauty and power of the Church is in its differences. When we connect through serving, we are put in teams by our mutual gifting, not our similar stage of life. The result is that you begin to know people who look nothing like you; your only initial connection is your common commitment to God and his mission. Unity is a natural byproduct of a culture that is committed to serving together in the work God has called us to. And the last thing we must pursue for unity to be the outcome is when...

### **We Pursue Virtue**

Colossians 3:12-14 reads, "Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity."

I don't know how to say this any other way: it's easier to be unified with someone who is not a jerk. While our character should be reformed and refined through our relationship with Jesus and our commitment to be servants in his Kingdom, I still believe it is essential for us to be aware that the components of Christian character must be pursued. The listing of virtues in Colossians was not meant to be exhaustive, but it does give us some key categories for evaluating our own character.

In light of that, we may be helped by a few questions from this passage: Are there any virtues that aren't associated with who you are? Because if that's the case, it's harder for people to be unified with you because you look less like Jesus. Are there any virtues you need to grow in? Then ask God for them and begin to deliberately cultivate them in your life. So please pursue compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Don't do it simply



because these are good things, even though they are; do this because this is what Jesus is like. Most of all, put on love; pursue love. Love is the only thing that can hold each virtue in its perfect balance. Love knows when to hold someone accountable and when to extend mercy. Love knows when to teach and when to forgive. Love knows when to help someone up and when to “bear with one another” by sitting with them in their struggle. When we pursue the character of Christ unity is a byproduct.

## **Implications**

Here’s what I need you to see: unity is a byproduct of other pursuits. So, when these things aren’t pursued, disunity and dysfunction are the natural result. You can proactively work toward unity by pursuing what Scripture outlines we should pursue. So let me make it real simple. Here is your unity checklist: 1.) Worship passionately. Be in Church, but don’t just be in the room; pursue your Savior. Thank him, honor him, glorify him. One of the things we miss is that our first calling is not to minister to the world; it’s to minister to Jesus and thank him that he is the one who is seated on the throne. So pursue Jesus first in everything you do. 2.) Serve sacrificially. Give your life to the mission that God has given the Church. Alan Hirsch says, “The Church doesn’t have a mission, the mission has a Church.” You are called to be on mission. Scripture doesn’t have context for the follower of Jesus who is not actively engaged in his work. As you serve, you’ll connect, you’ll feel the need for community and naturally begin to create that community. 3.) Have time with Jesus. Be in prayer. Let him point out the areas in which you have to grow through all the small nudges and things the Spirit will call to your mind. Let yourself be convicted over past failures because there’s only grace and no condemnation. Get alone with Jesus in his word and let your virtue develop there. Virtue is never found in isolation; virtue passes from one person to another through osmosis. You’ve got to get around

someone in order to receive it. It's caught, not taught. The best way to acquire virtue and to acquire character is being around Jesus and being intentional in time with him.

What I believe you'll find is that when you pursue Jesus, when you pursue serving, and when you pursue virtue, unity is the natural byproduct. Unity doesn't come from a focus on unity; unity comes as the outcome when we pursue Jesus, his mission, and his character. Unity is not the prerequisite for this work; unity is the outcome. We don't unify so that we can do what we're called to do. It is *as we do the work* that we are unified. If you believe unity matters, and Jesus does, then do the work now - proactively, and in advance.

What I want you to begin to see is how significant this is. In a world that is divided we need a Church that is united. Not uniformity, unity. When you pursue Jesus, when you work towards his kingdom, when you pursue his character you are actively contributing to the unity of his bride, the local Church. And this is a big deal to Jesus. His prayer for "all those who believe in me" still is "that all of them may be one, 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 17:20-22). So do the work that will result in what Jesus tells us will be the evidence the world needs to believe in him. Please do not sit around thinking about how hard unity will be to achieve when we are so diverse, and often times so divided; pursue Jesus, pursue his mission, pursue his character - and on the other side of that pursuit, we might just find the "oneness" that Jesus spoke about.

I thought about starting off this series with this message, because it unifies. I felt led that we needed the clear call that we serve the kingdom that is above. We need to see the importance of this. Pursuing unity within crisis is too late. Pursuing unity when we are at each other's throats requires significant reconciliation just to get to the table together. So the time to commit to unity is now. So this is what I want to call you to: Be in Church weekly, but pursue Jesus daily. Serve, no one is too busy or too exceptional or too ungifted or too unaware to

contribute somewhere. Make time to be with God. You acknowledge that you're not perfect, but if you're unaware of your imperfections you functionally live as if you are perfect. Be aware of where Christ needs to grow you and develop you so you would be more like him. A divided world needs a United Church, Jesus prayed for you that this would happen, and he showed you how it actually occurs. We are Americans best when we are not Americans first. We are not red, and we are not blue; we are purple. Not the color between, the kingdom above. The color of majesty, of royalty, of our King who is still seated on the throne and is returning again.