

Date: April 24, 2022
 Series: *Building Inspection*
 Title: *Dissension*
 Text: Proverbs 6:16-19
 Preacher: Mark Adams

Proverbs 6:16-19

**16 – There are six things the LORD hates, seven that are detestable to Him:
 17 – haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood,
 18 – a heart that devises wicked schemes, feet that are quick to rush into evil,
 19 – a false witness who pours out lies and a man who stirs up dissension among brothers.**

Back in 2009 when we finished building the ROC---only one thing stood in the way of our using it---an occupancy permit. And that permit would only be granted once we passed a building inspection. It seemed like it took forever because our contractor had done so many things wrong---things that did NOT build up that building---things that would have made it unsafe to use.

For example, he didn't insulate the water pipes, he didn't put the structural steel in correctly, things like that. If it weren't for Hugh Faulconer stepping in as our volunteer contractor--I don't know what would have happened.

As you should remember, our vision this year is to BUILD UP this body of Christ. We believe God has called us to strengthen this body of believers after having gone through the pandemic.

And like physical buildings, there are things that we need to watch out for because they will keep our spiritual body from being built up--things that keep us from being and doing all that God has called us to be and do.

For the next few weeks, we're going to go through a "*building inspection*" of sorts by looking at some of those things---things that TEAR down the body of Christ. This is not a time for us to point the fingers at others---but rather to look at ourselves---as individual parts of this "building." It's a time for some self-inspection to see if there are attitudes and actions we are embracing that are destructive to our church.

And we begin with one of the biggies---something that can level a church---the sin of sowing dissension. Whenever I think of the "*wrecking-ball power*" of dissension, I think of one of Shakespeare's plays---OTHELLO. How many of you have read or perhaps even been fortunate enough to SEE Othello performed on stage? If you aren't familiar with this play, then listen and I'll give you a quick summary.

The story centers around a general in the army of Venice, named Othello. He's unique for that day and age, in that he's one half of an inter-racial marriage---himself a Moor and his wife, Desdemona---the daughter of a wealthy man from Venice named, Brabantio.

Now Othello is a guy who basically has it all.

- He's very respected as a military tactician. In fact, he's the first one called on by national leaders when the Turks threaten to invade the island of Crete.
- He's also apparently wealthy
- And he's a newlywed with a lovely bride who adores him.

So, in the beginning things are definitely looking up for Othello. But they don't stay that way because of course this is a TRAGEDY. Shakespeare's tragedies are a lot like country western music---in that the central character always loses something---his job, his wife, his dog or all three. And that's basically what happens to Othello. His world crumbles---like a building that failed its inspection---all because of the destructive machinations of an ensign in his command named IAGO, a junior officer who serves under Othello and acts like he loves him when in reality he hates Othello because he

passed him over for promotion to lieutenant. Iago spends the entire play working behind the scenes to get even for this slight---weaving a wicked and successful plot to destroy Othello---and all those he holds most dear.

Now, Iago's main tools in his plot are the same tools that sinful dissension-sowing people often employ---namely: GOSSIP and SLANDER.

- I mean, Iago spreads malicious lies to Othello's wife and friends.
- Then, he gossips behind Desdemona's back lying to her husband about her supposed affair with his loyal lieutenant, Cassio.

And in this way eventually Iago is able to destroy Othello's relationship with Cassio and his marriage to Desdemona as well. In fact, Iago is so good at developing factions and sowing deceitful thoughts that in the end Othello is driven to a fit of jealous rage and smothers Desdemona. When he realizes what he has done, before anyone can stop him Othello uses a knife he has hidden in his robe to take his own life as well.

So this play, Othello, is a testimony to the power of dissension. Shakespeare did a very thorough job of showing how destructive it can be. Dissension has the ability to destroy even the strongest of relationships---the kind of relationships that must stay healthy if a church body is to be built up---strong.

The unfortunate truth is that down through the years this particular sin has reeked DEADLY DESTRUCTION in churches all over the world. Christians who yielded to temptation and SOWED DISSENSION have destroyed friendships, marriages---and precious congregational harmony. I'm sad to say it but over the years from my perspective as pastor, I have seen our adversary move dozens of weak, immature Christians, about like pawns on a chessboard---prompting them to use the same tools Iago did---grumbling and complaining and gossiping---starting feuds that have wounded people so deeply---that entire churches have been rendered ineffective in the kingdom.

A couple months back I came across a story about some unsettling behavior on the part of the people to dress up like popular cartoon characters and Superheroes in Times Square. You know how it works. People dress up as Spider-Man, Elmo, Cookie Monster, Mickey and Minnie Mouse, or a whole host of popular movie and TV characters. Then they compete to get pictures with and payments from tourists. Usually, it's a cool thing. Kids love seeing their favorite heroes come to life and parents are happy to give a dollar or two for a pic.

But not too long ago there was a rash of unseemly incidents with these street characters. One of Times Square's Spider-Man performers punched an NYPD officer after resisting arrest for harassing a tourist. According to another report, *"Cookie Monster stands accused of shoving a 2-year-old. Super Mario was charged with groping a woman. And Elmo was booked for berating tourists with anti-Semitic slurs."* In short, these popular characters weren't living up to their image---and their work in Times Square suffered as a result.

Sadly, this is an accurate illustration of far too many congregations---churches whose members do not live up to their image---the image of Christ. They didn't DO a *"building inspection"* so they didn't realize how dissension-ridden they were---and their church came crashing down because of fighting and other inappropriate behavior.

Now I am so THANKFUL for the sweet, sweet Spirit we have enjoyed down through the years here at Redland. Our unity has given birth to amazing friendships---relationships that are precious to me---relationships that have continued even after church member has moved across the country.

And you know what I mean.

In tough times---those friendships with fellow believers are a source of strength and wisdom and encouragement. We are all built up---when we enjoy friendships that build up our church.

So, it is vitally important that we inspect ourselves and see if we are embracing dissension. You see, even though church harmony is a powerful thing---a source of strength---it is also a fragile thing---and as such it must be protected and guarded.

This is what Paul is saying in Ephesians 4:2-3.

- We must ***“...be completely humble and gentle;”***
- We must, ***“be patient, bearing with one another in love...”***
- We must, ***“Make EVERY EFFORT to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.”***

I'm EMPHASIZING the word ***“MUST”*** to help you realize that it is IMPERATIVE that we UNDERSTAND this principle. No church can remain healthy---built up---if Christians within it sow dissension.

One thing we can and must do to prevent this ***“building destroyer”*** is understand what it is that MOTIVATES us to sow dissension. There are several---but I will mention only two of the biggies.

A. The first, and one of the main motivators is SELFISHNESS.

Too many of us come into a church expecting the congregation to feed us---to entertain us---to meet our needs. And when a church doesn't meet our needs or suit our tastes---we complain and gossip and slander---and selfishly wreak havoc in a congregation.

Philip Yancey once illustrated the destructive effects of self-centeredness in his description of the behavior of sea gulls. He writes,

“It's easy to see why people like the seagull. I've sat overlooking a craggy harbor and watched one. He exults in his freedom. He thrusts his wings backward with powerful strokes---climbing higher and higher until he's above all the other gulls, then he coasts downward in majestic loops and circles. He constantly performs, as if he knows a movie camera is trained on him, recording. In a FLOCK, though, the seagull is a different bird. His majesty and dignity melt into a sordid mass of in-fighting and cruelty. Watch that same gull as he dive-bombs into a group of gulls, provoking a flurry of scattered feathers and angry squawks to steal a tiny morsel of meat. The concepts of sharing and manners do not exist among gulls. They are so fiercely competitive and jealous that if you tie a red ribbon around the leg of one gull, making him stand out, you sentence him to execution. The others in the flock will furiously attack him with claws and beaks, hammering through feathers and flesh to draw blood. They'll continue until he lies flattened in a bloody heap.”

Unfortunately, this is an accurate picture of too many believers in too many churches---whose selfishness has led to infighting so fierce that the church eventually becomes lifeless. For a church to be healthy---strong---built-up---relationships must be the other way around---not self-centered but OTHER-CENTERED. As Paul Powell writes, *“The purpose of the church is not just mutual enjoyment, but also mutual enrichment for spiritual development.”*

In a biological family we work to help each other grow to emotional and physical maturity. In a healthy family that is our focus---helping each other. And the same is true in a healthy CHURCH family. It's a place where we work to help not ourselves---but each other. It's a place we come not to BE served but TO serve. It's a place we feel God leading us to join---a place where He calls us to use our spiritual gifts for the benefit of others in that congregation.

A church is not something you join to meet YOUR needs---it's a place God calls you help and even starting ministries to meet the needs of OTHERS.

The first church where Sue and I served once I finished seminary was the First Baptist Church of Damascus. The building where they meet is 13 miles up the road. About a year after we came to Damascus a family that had been active members here at Redland joined---the Luther Family. They had a farm nearby and the commute to RBC was becoming too hard for them.

Now FBC Damascus was a small church. We didn't have things like a men's softball team. Our choir was tiny---about a dozen singers---and we had no children's choir program.

These things were important to the Luthers. Lonnie loved to play softball and had seen the wonderful way that game builds fellowship. They had children whom they wanted to enjoy graded choirs---for they had seen the blessing of that ministry. They had both of those things when they were members here.

Seeing what our church lacked---they could have moved on visiting other bigger churches. But they didn't do that---because they felt God CALLING them to our little church. I still remember Lonnie saying with tears on his face that God had led them to our congregation. I mean, they loved being here---but they had had a "Damascus Road" experience---God was calling them to our church. And they took that calling seriously.

- With their help our adult choir grew.
- Mina started a children's choir.
- And Lonnie started a men's softball team.

All this helped our little church grow. God used these selfless people to BUILD UP THE BODY OF CHRIST at FBC, Damascus. They were mature Christ-followers who understood that God intends the church to be a SELF-LESS place.

The more church members who understand that---the more a church is built up. But when church members don't---when they are SELF-CENTRED---so often dissension is the result.

B. A second motivator of dissension-spreading is unrealistic EXPECTATIONS.

I remember when Sue and I married---and headed off to Louisville with our U-Haul full of our possessions---our parents who had helped us LOAD the truck---asked who would help us UNLOAD when we arrived. I said, *"Don't worry---we are moving to seminary housing. Only mature Christians go to seminary---so we'll have no trouble finding people to help!"*

Well, I that's not the way things turned out. When we pulled up after our two-day journey, a couple dozen seminarians were playing flag football in the big field in front of our apartment building. They saw our truck---they saw us lugging boxes and furniture, but they never stopped playing to come to our aid. Thankfully one couple in the apartment building next to ours saw and helped---but I had to admit to myself that I had unrealistic expectations about the body of believers who lived in Seminary housing.

Many of us feel the same way about a church. We expect it to be full of people who are perfectly Christlike---people who are easy to be with and fun to fellowship with---people with whom we always agree about everything. And when that doesn't happen, we do one of two things. Either we leave and continue our foolish search for the perfect church---or we attack the imperfection we find in others with gossip or slander or grumbling and complaining until OTHERS leave our church.

Listen, it is UNREALISTIC to expect a church to be perfect---because by its very nature a church and a seminary will be full of imperfect people---people who can be hard to get along with.

- If you are a Calvinist---there will be Armenians there---and vice versa.
- If you are a Republican---there will be Democrats and vice versa.
- If you're an optimist---you will find pessimists---and vice versa.
- If you love the quiet old hymns---you will find people who prefer the LOUD PRAISE BAND music of our day---and vice versa.

I could go on---but you get the idea. Churches are made up of people you may not enjoy being with. I love how Henri Nouwen once put it, *"Community is the place where the person you least want to live with---always lives."*

Back when our moms where alive---pretty much every week on my day off Sue and I would head to Delaware to check on them. We'd cross the Bay Bridge---and then the Kent Island bridge---and then just above the place where Rt 301 and Rt 50 split we'd often stop at the outlets---especially the Vanity Fair outlet. You see, they sell Lee and Docker brands at half-price or less. In fact, they have LESS than half-price deals on their "as is" rack---but if you shop there you need to

know that the inventory on this rack is always “slightly irregular.” You have to shop carefully on this rack because it’s expected that you’ll find flaws:

- a stain that won’t come out
- a zipper that won’t zip
- a button that won’t but
- a tear in one leg that has been sloppily repaired.

My point is on this rack you expect to find problems. Every once-in-a-while you get lucky and find some great un-flawed deals but there’s a fundamental rule when it comes to purchasing the ultra-low-priced items on this rack. There are no returns---no refunds---no exchanges. If you’re looking for perfection, get MORE money and shop elsewhere. If you purchase clothes from this rack you take them “as is.”

It’s the same when you deal with other Christians---members of our Lord’s church. As someone once put it:
“When you deal with human beings---even Christians---you have come to the ‘as is corner of the universe’ because all of us are ‘slightly irregular.’ There are flaws in all of us---a streak of deception, a cruel tongue, a passive spirit, an out-of-control temper. The flaws are always there. So, when you find them-and you WILL find them---don’t be surprised. Remember, if you want to enter into a relationship with a fellow human being---even a Christian---there’s only one way to do so, ‘as is.’”

Think of it this way---if we enter churches looking for perfection, we’re shopping on the wrong rack. We’ve entered the wrong aisle---because the church, like this fallen world of ours, is full of imperfect people. As Romans 3:23 says, **“All have sinned and fallen short of God’s glory.”** I love Rick Warren’s admonition: *“We must passionately love the church in spite of its imperfections. Longing for the IDEAL while criticizing the REAL is evidence of immaturity.”*

Do you remember the movie *As Good as It Gets*? Helen Hunt plays the part of a waitress in a restaurant where there is a regular “irregular” customer, played by Jack Nicholson. He’s definitely---obviously---flawed. And at first, she so frustrated with Nicholson’s character. On the one hand, he is kind and generous to her and her sick son, but he is also agoraphobic, obsessive-compulsive, and terminally offensive. In fact, if rudeness were measured in square miles, he’d be Texas.

Well, believe it or not, Hunt and Nicholson’s character begin to date. After they go out a couple times, there is a scene where, in desperation, Hunt cries to her mother: *“I just want a NORMAL boyfriend.”* Her mother says, *“Everybody wants one of those. But there’s no such thing, dear.”*

Wise mom---wouldn’t you agree?

All of us are flawed. That’s NORMAL. It’s to be expected. And---one of the marks of our being BUILT up in to the image of Christ-- is when we GROW up enough to accept this fact that everybody comes, “as is” even in---ESPECIALLY in---a church.

Sadly, too many of us have never reached that level of maturity---and so when we come to a church expecting perfection---we sow dissension. It’s like we think a church that doesn’t meet our needs---needs us to tear it down and then rebuild it according to our liking.

In his book *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer refers to this sad mindset when he says, *“Those who love the DREAM of a Christian community more than the Christian community itself become destroyers of that Christian community---even though their personal intentions may be ever so honest, earnest, and sacrificial.”*

Okay, let’s stop and summarize what we’ve talked about so far. The two of the main motivations behind sowing dissension are SELF-CENTEREDNESS and UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS.

Now, let's flip things around so that we can examine this destructive sin from the opposite perspective by seeking an answer to this question:

"What is our motivation to STEER CLEAR of dissension? What is it that should compel us to PRESERVE church unity and harmony so that our church will be BUILT UP?"

Here's the first motivator:

1.) God COMMANDS it.

Our Lord COMMANDS us to work to build and nurture HEALTHY community. And---that should be all the motivation we need---right? The fact that God commands it should do it---which He does! Remember? Jesus said that all of God's laws boil down to two: ***"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all our soul and with all your mind---and love your neighbor as yourself."*** (Matthew 22:37-40) In other words, it is God's will that we embrace a healthy relationship with Him and with our fellow man.

The fact is these TWO relational commands are really ONE. They are linked---in that you can't fully obey one without fully obeying the other. As 1st John 4:19 says, ***"If we say we love God but don't obey Him by loving our neighbor---we are a liar. The truth is not in us."***

We can't love God and not love each other. We can't love God and at the same time do things that damage the fellowship we all need in order for this church to be BUILT UP. So---to be motivated to steer clear of dissension, we need to understand the PRIORITY God gives this command. Healthy relationships in His church are VERY important to our Heavenly Father. All you have to do to see is read God's book. In fact, the New Testament gives more attention to UNITY of believers than it does to either Heaven or Hell.

For example, Ephesians 4:29 says, ***"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."*** Do you remember how we paraphrase this verse? ***"Build up or---SHUT UP!"*** In short, if what you are saying doesn't build up relationships in the church---don't say it.

The next verse says that when we ignore this command---when we damage congregational health with our words and actions we, ***"grieve the Holy Spirit of God."*** Like any earthly parent, our Heavenly Father grieves when His kids fight among themselves. As Dallas Willard says, ***"God's aim in human history is the creation of an inclusive community of loving persons, with Himself included as its primary Sustainer and most glorious Inhabitant."*** Think of it this way. Relational health in the church---UNITY in a local body of believers---is the SOUL of its fellowship. Destroy it with dissension and you rip the HEART out of Christ's body.

Now, don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that God wants unity at all costs. He doesn't want us to ignore disputes over the essential beliefs of our faith if that's what it takes to make everyone happy. No---of course not! Genuine unity would not be possible under those conditions. What I AM saying is this---whenever we act UNLOVING---whenever we gossip or slander or complain and grumble about non-essential things---whenever we carelessly, selfishly, damage congregational unity and health---we are working contrary to the will---and the nature of God.

Whenever we act like old Iago and sow dissension we are working for the enemy. Knowing that should motivate us to steer clear of dissension.

Here's a second motivation.

2.) We all NEED it.

We're not designed to work alone. We need deep, genuine fellowship with other believers. Jane Howard says, ***"Call it a clan, call it a tribe, call it a network, call it a family. Whatever you call it, whoever you are, you need one."*** Dallas Willard writes, ***"The NATURAL condition of life for human beings is RECIPROCAL ROOTEDNESS in others."***

Let's face it---we need fellowship! I love this quote: *"As frustrating as people can be, it's hard to find a good substitute."*

A man from northern Michigan was once traveling in the deep south. He stopped to eat breakfast at a diner and saw GRITS on the menu. He'd never eaten---or even SEEN grits before so he asked the waitress, *"What exactly is a grit?"* Her response was classic, *"Honey, grits don't come by themselves."*

And as anyone who loves grits knows---that waitress was right. Grits don't exist in isolation. No grit is an island, entire unto itself. Every grit is a part of the whole. The same is true of Christians. They don't come by themselves. When we acknowledge God as our Father, every other Christian instantly becomes our brother or sister. And that's one of the wonderful things about our faith. It meets our inborn need for deep fellowship with others. As Bonhoeffer said, *"Whoever cannot stand being IN COMMUNITY should beware of BEING ALONE."* He's right because we were created to draw life and nourishment from one another the same way roots of an oak tree draw life from the soil. So two things that compel us to protect church fellowship are: first, the fact that God COMMANDS that we do so and second that we NEED to do so---and then a final motivation for us to avoid dissension should be this:

3.) Non-believers are ATTRACTED to it.

You see, because of every human's inborn need for community, non-believers are naturally drawn to healthy relationships. A church with a Sweet, Sweet Spirit draws people like a campfire on a cold night. People naturally want to be around Christians who act loving to one another.

Sue and I love the television show *Heartland*. We are happily watching season 15 these days. The show is about a family in southern Canada that live on a ranch. They raise cattle and care for abused horses. There's the grandad Jack Bartlett and his son-in-law Tim Fleming and his granddaughters Amy and Lou. They are a great family. They love each other through thick and thin.

Well in the first season there's this little blonde girl named Mallory. She's about 8 or 9 years old. And she is always hanging around. I mean, as we watched we began to wonder, where is this kid's family? We learned that Mallory's mom and dad were having marital problems---and little Mallory didn't like being in her home because of that. She was drawn to the Bartlett ranch because there she could "adopt" a family that was loving to each other.

It works the same way in a church family. As Rick Warren says, *"When people find a church where members genuinely love and are for each other, you have to lock the doors to keep them away."* So---unity fosters belief---and remember the opposite is also true. Disunity---a church that is being torn apart by dissension---fosters UNBELIEF. In a few minutes we are about to enjoy a church-wide dinner on the grounds---and I love that God has blessed us with such a beautiful day---because people who drive by---will SEE us enjoying being together. And that---will draw them to us---and to Jesus.

LET US PRAY