

## **Striving for the Blessings of Unity**

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Culture of Grace: Practices & Habits of GracePoint Church / Psalm 133

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### **Introduction:**

Today, we are looking at another practice and habit we want to prioritize here at GracePoint Church, as part of our Culture of Grace series. We prioritize these practices because they are means of God's grace. Our consideration today is our pursuit of unity and community together in this local expression of God's church as a channel God uses to provide us with His grace. Have you ever thought our unity being a channel of grace? We may have heard Bible's calls to pursue unity, but I wonder if we understand why. The goal today is to have Psalm 133, and its 3 powerful verses, point our hearts to see the value of pursuing unity and community together. Then consider what Christian unity really is and how we can strive to maintain that unity. Before we dive in, I want to look at what the title tells us about this Psalm. By title, I mean the Hebrew title that says, "A Song of Ascents. Of David." If we were reading through the Psalms, we would discover that Psalm 120-134 all have the Hebrew title "A Song of Ascents," suggesting they are a collection of psalms for a particular purpose. The Hebrew term for "ascents" comes from a root word that means "to go up," causing many to believe these Psalms were either written around the return from Israel's exile in Babylonia, rebuilding of the temple by Nehemiah, or as songs Israel would sing while going up to Jerusalem for one of the annual feasts. Because of the consistent emphasis on Zion, the Holy City, especially in Psalms 128-134, I am persuaded they were written for when Israel would gather for one of the annual feasts. But each possibility points towards Israel coming together again for worship of God. See Psalm 133's relationship to the corporate gathering of God's people, whether from exile or for the annual feasts, helps us understand that the unity and blessings spoken of relate primarily to the gathering of God's people. This is why we want to prioritize striving for a unique unity and community here at GracePoint Church, because, as we will see, great blessings flow from God in that pursuit. This Psalm makes two primary points. The first is that,

### **IT IS JOYFUL AND GOOD FOR GOD'S PEOPLE TO LIVE IN UNITY**

The psalmist opens with a call for us to marvel at something with that goal of having it move our hearts toward desiring it. Notice the way it begins in verse 1, "Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!" Behold is a strong exhortation to understand what he is about to say. He says look and see something that is good and pleasant. Good is the same word used throughout Genesis 1 when we read of God seeing all creation "was good." The idea it is wonderful and right for its intended purpose. It is not only good, but pleasant, or brings "pleasurable joy" as one commentator puts it. And what is so good and pleasant? "When brothers dwell in unity!" The Hebrew for "brothers" is used to speak of both biological siblings and countrymen. The main idea is a close communal relationship. And he says they "dwell" there which carries the idea of remaining in place of dwelling. I love how one commentator puts the nuance in the word for dwell, saying it "has the nuance of long duration, rather than managing to survive a brief family reunion." (Daniel J. Estes, Psalms 73-150, ed. E. Ray. Clendenen, vol. 13, New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2019), 514.) Now, note what he is doing in this verse. It isn't a command to be unified. He isn't even giving a direct encouragement to gather with God's people. He is marveling at the joy and goodness found in that unity. When God's people gather for the unified purpose of seeking His face and worshipping His name, when their hearts are constantly communally unified, it is a perfectly right, good, and brings joy. I think about the joy and good-hearted fun that happens when people who love the same sports team get together to watch a game. Have you experienced that? When something good happens, the joy is contagious. Everyone is shouting and hugging. I will never forget a moment from my time living in Boston. The Bruins were in the Stanley Cup Finals and I went to dinner with a friend to watch the game. Mind you, I wasn't a hockey fan. I don't even think I had watched a game before. Yet, when the Bruins came back from behind right at the end to send it to overtime, the place was electric, and I was even shouting by that time because the joyful unity was palpable.

It just feels right for people to be that unified around something, doesn't it? That is the kind of good and pleasant unity the psalmist is marveling at. Only he is marveling at it being centered on the worship of God. What would it be like if our unified praise is greater than our cheers for our favorite team? Is that what you long for when you think about the church? That is what I long for, and that is what this Psalm calls for our hearts to long for. The remaining verses describe why it is so good and pleasant to dwell in unity showing that,

### **GOD GRANTS GREAT BLESSINGS WHEN GOD'S PEOPLE LIVE IN UNITY**

I see verses 2-3 serving two purposes for the psalmist. They describe how this unity is good and pleasant, and they describe the main blessings that come from God through it. Pay attention to the flow of thought as we go through it. Starting with the imagery presented in verse 2, "It is like the precious oil on the head, running down on the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down on the collar of his robes!" This imagery is linked to being anointed with oil, which was a practice for setting apart priests, kings, and prophets to their office. Each occasion marked moments of great joy in Israel's history. The focus is on the anointing of priest, as he speaks of Aaron, the head of the Levitical priests. This draws out both the anointing for a holy office and the sweet fragrance of the oil described in Exodus 29. And notice how he speaks of it in abundance, it is "running down on the beard...running down on the collar of his robes!" The corporate unity of God's people is like the joyful and sweet-smelling anointing of the priests. The second imagery is in the first half of verse 3, "It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion!" This points to an act of creation with significance for the Jewish people, as dew was important for agriculture in ancient Israel. It watered the dry ground and helped plants to grow. Mount Herman was a large snowcapped mountain where dew was plentiful. The mountains of Zion were more like hills in Jerusalem with significantly less precipitation. The good of our unity is like the abundance of dew in Mount Herman falling, or running down, to refresh the mountains of Zion. The idea is how it is just as life-giving and nourishing. And look at the end of verse 3, "For there the Lord has commanded the blessing, life forevermore." The reason this unity is so good and pleasant is because God has commanded a blessing in it. This is saying God initiates blessings through the consistent communal unity of His people. That blessing is ultimately true life forevermore but notice how that blessing is also the ways he describes it being good. It's harder to see in our translations, but he uses the same Hebrew verb 3 times translated "running down... running down" and "falls." Each of these things descend on God's people. The holy joyful anointing, in the imagery of the precious oil, and nourishment, in the imagery the dew, are gifts of grace, blessings of joy and nourishment in our lives that come from unity. Not only that, but the very unity we pursue is the blessing God gives. He commands these things, and they descend to His people from His gracious hand. Are you marveling with the psalmist at how good and pleasant it is for God's people to live in unity? I hope your desire for it has. Now, this causes a couple of questions to answer. First,

### **WHAT DOES CHRISTIAN UNITY LOOK LIKE?**

When we speak of pursuing unity, it is important to have a clear definition what we mean. If we don't have a clear definition, we don't know what we are really pursuing, and we can be distracted by misunderstandings of Christian unity. Consider Paul's prayer for the church in Rome, in Romans 15:5-6, as a helpful way to define it. He says, "May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." Christian unity is a harmony to live according to the example we see in Christ with the shared purpose of glorifying God together in everything we do. Our unity is firmly anchored to Jesus Christ and His glory, meaning at least two things. First, it cannot come apart from saving faith in Jesus Christ. For us to have true unity with others and experience God's blessings in it, we must be believing and trusting in Christ sacrificial atoning work on the cross, and His resurrection as our only hope of salvation. He died for our sins to redeem us and make us into one people to the praise of His glory.

That is our common faith. Without that, this kind of unity is unattainable, but with that common faith, there are great blessings. It also means that our unity is not found in holding to the same political leanings, having the same hobbies, or being of the same life stage. It is something supernatural that comes through our connection to Christ and puts His glory above all else. Let me give two ways the scriptures show what this looks like. First, it looks like

### **1) EVERYONE GROWING TOGETHER IN THEIR KNOWLEDGE OF CHRIST**

In Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus, he speaks first of their common salvation and the great gifts of grace they have received in Christ, in Ephesians 1-3, grace that has broken down the hostility that existed between Jews and Gentiles. He then calls for their pursuit of unity at the beginning of chapter 4, and shares how Christ gave gifted leaders to equip each person for ministry to each other. Then he gives this end goal in Ephesians 4:12-13, "for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ." Notice it is "the Unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God." As we grow in our knowledge of Christ, we become more unified, because we become more mature and more like Christ. Christian unity looks like everyone growing together in their knowledge of Christ. Secondly what it looks like is

### **2) EVERYONE STRIVING TOGETHER FOR THE GOSPEL**

In Paul's letter to the church in Philippi, he focuses heavily on unity as well. Notice what he says in Philippians 1:27, "Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel." Paul wants them to be fully unified as they strive together for the gospel, being in "one spirit" and "one mind," and he says this is what it looks like to live a life "worthy of the gospel." Standing firm means we are deeply grounded in the gospel. Growing in our understanding of it together. Joyfully worshipping God for it. "Striving side by side for the faith of the gospel" means striving to believe and spread the gospel together. Reminding each other of the gospel, learning how to share it together, and encouraging one another to spread it. Christian unity looks like everyone striving together for the gospel. Which leads to our next question.

### **HOW DO WE STRIVE TO MAINTAIN UNITY?**

First, as we saw Paul model for us in Romans 15:4-5, we need to pray fervently for God to grant this unity to us. It is a blessing that comes from Him. Yet, as we have seen, we are also called to work towards this unity. Here are 3 things we can do to strive to maintain this kind of unity. First, we can

#### **1) BEAR WITH ONE ANOTHER IN LOVE**

We saw earlier that gifted people are given to equip the saints to build up the church to attain unity of the faith and the knowledge Christ. Listen to Paul's exhortation right before that in Ephesians 4:1-3, saying "I ... urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." We should be eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit, and the way to do that is by bearing with one another in love, through humility, gentleness, and patience. Think about a disagreement you have been in with someone at church. Maybe you hurt them, or they hurt you. What if you had paused in the moment of disagreement to see whether we are responding that simply because our pride was hurt and humbled yourself before responding? What if you had considered your words more carefully and spoken more gently? What if you had been more patient in that situation? That is an example of what it might look like to bear with one another in love and maintain unity. Second, we can

#### **2) PURPOSEFULLY GUARD OUR HEARTS AND TONGUES**

After calling for unity and showing how unity is anchored to knowledge of Jesus Christ, the apostle Paul gets very practical towards the end of Ephesians 4 on ways to maintain that unity.

Look with me at what he says in Ephesians 4:29-31, “Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice.” There are two challenging parts to this. First, is to only speak things that give grace to those who hear. Don’t let your tongue hurt others, but always try to build them up instead. Second, is to put away all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and slander. Don’t let your heart hold onto things that will cause you to be bitter, angry, grumble to others, or slander anyone. Maybe you get together with some friends from church, and a situation or person from church is brought up that is painful for you. Striving to maintain unity would mean holding your tongue, refusing to engage in speculation or slander, and guarding your heart from bitterness. Maybe you aren’t the one hurt, but your friend is, and they start venting. Striving to maintain unity would mean refusing to participate and encouraging your friend, in gentleness and love, to guard their heart and tongue in the moment. Do you purposefully guard your heart and tongue for the sake of unity? Finally, we can

### **3) PRIORITIZE GATHERING TOGETHER FOR MUTUAL ENCOURAGEMENT**

In Hebrews 10:19-25, the author of Hebrews reminds us of how the blood of Christ has secured a great confidence to enter into the holy places, into the very presence of God. Then, in response to this, we are called to do 3 things. Draw near to God in full assurance of faith. Hold fast to our confession of hope without wavering. And look at the third thing in Hebrews 10:24-25, “And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.” The final call involves prioritizing meeting, or assembling together to encourage and stir one another up to love and good works. This is put right alongside drawing near to God in full assurance of faith and holding to our confession of hope. Consider the weight that places on the call to gather together for mutual encouragement. It goes hand in hand with drawing near to God and keeping hope in His promises. This was profound realization for me years ago. As we have seen, God commands particular blessings when we gather for unified communal worship, and he commands us not to neglect it. I think Tony Merida beautifully sums up why in his commentary on Psalms 133, saying, “While it’s true that the church has its flaws, when the church gathers in worship—under the Word, before the Table, with one another in prayer and praise—it most definitely is good for people. The sweetest times in this short life involve gathering in worship with God’s people with a united desire to exalt the Son.” (Daniel L. Akin, Johnny M. Hunt, and Tony Merida, *Exalting Jesus in Psalms 101–150*, ed. David Platt, Daniel L. Akin, and Tony Merida, Christ-Centered Exposition (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2021), 241–242.) I will never stop strongly encouraging you to prioritize these gatherings because I have seen from God’s word the blessings promised, commands for it, and I have experienced over and over again the truth of this in my own life. Striving to maintain unity in this way may mean you need to reevaluate your calendar and make church a greater priority. Or you need to work harder to be fully present and seeking to encourage others when you come to church. Maybe you should show up earlier or hang around longer after. Maybe you even choose your seats differently.

#### **Conclusion:**

These are just a few ways the scriptures call for us to strive to maintain unity. Let’s press into this more church, so we can receive the blessings God promises through it. As the worship team is coming to help us receive God’s grace as we respond to His word today, how is God encouraging or challenging your heart? Do you need to reflect on these truths and believe that the pursuit of unity is worth it?

Do you need to bear more with someone or guard your heart and tongue better? Maybe you need to press into church life more. Maybe God is calling you to see the joy of the community of Christians and turn to trust in Christ's salvation for your own life. Whatever it may be, our encouragement is to press into His grace as you respond. Come and kneel in prayer if needed, or pray where you are at. Pray for yourself and our church to be more unified. Sing for the mutual encouragement of your heart and others. Or come receive prayer from the team of people we have ready to pray for you. You can find them on the front row of pews worshipping or at the bottom of the stairs in the back. Lean into God's grace for you and let's see how God pours out His blessing on us.

Will you pray with me as we press into His grace?