



CANYON HILLS

COMMUNITY CHURCH

Series: Mark

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Essential Christian Unity **Dr. Steve Walker**

We pray that our worship has been a blessing to God and honored him. Now, we're going to jump straight into God's Word, so while you're participating in this part of our worship, I'm going to ask you also to get the Scriptures open to Mark, chapter 9. If you are new with us this morning, this is what we do. We go through books of the Bible verse by verse. Today, we're a little past halfway through this gospel, and so this is as good a time as any to begin with us.

The disciples in the gospel of Mark are still learning what it means to be a follower of Jesus. By now, if you've been with us any amount of Sundays, it's pretty clear that the disciples were kind of slow learners, weren't they? We've watched, now, for nine chapters, the twelve disciples taking one step forward in their faith only to see them take two steps backward in their faith not too long afterward.

I don't bring that to our attention to somehow diminish the twelve apostles by any means, but only because some of us, I think, myself included, can certainly relate to this journey of our Christian life. There are some seasons when we just feel like our faith is strong, we're close, and we trust, and then it seems like there are other seasons where we take two steps back and we're still trying to figure out what we do believe about God and his Son, Jesus Christ.

Today, we're reminded that there's grace for that as well. Jesus is going to teach these disciples another lesson because they're going to take another step back in their understanding of what it means to be his followers and to be in the kingdom of God. So, with your Bibles ready, let's stand for the reading of God's Word, as we always do.

I know you just sat down, but we always stand because we believe when we open God's Word and we read it, it is actually God's Word and he is speaking to us. So, out of a sense of awe, regard, respect, and fear of a holy God, we stand in his presence. Verse 38:

"John said to him, 'Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.' But Jesus said, 'Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me.

For the one who is not against us is for us. For truly, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will by no means lose his reward."

Heavenly Father, it is a great privilege and we are grateful that we can call you our Father and Jesus, your Son, our Savior and Lord. We praise you this morning because you have promised to seal us and secure us for all eternity through the presence of your Holy Spirit in us. So, God, we thank you that we could stand here today at peace, knowing heaven is our home.

God, as we open our hearts now, we pray you would prepare us, comfort us, encourage us, and purify our faith and our hearts even more as we prepare for that wonderful day to be with you forever. We pray this in Christ's name, amen.

This little passage is not that complicated. There's no need to overcook it. These guys see a man ministering in the name of Jesus, but he's not one of them. He's not one of the Twelve. He's not like them, and so their judgment is quick and severe. They basically say, "He needs to stop. He's not in our crowd. He's not in our group. He's not in our church. He's not in our denomination. He's not in our religion."

Jesus is just as quick to correct them, and he basically says, "Hey, you guys. If this guy isn't against us, he's for us." You see, they were conditioned to be exclusive. Judaism in the old covenant is a religion by natural birth into the nation of Israel, and you maintained your religion by the animal sacrifices for sins and by obedience to the laws of Moses.

All of that in the Old Testament was meant to point to Jesus, to God's promise of bringing redemption to all nations, all peoples, and all languages. Christianity is the new covenant. It's the new covenant religion entered into by a spiritual birth into the kingdom of God by faith in his Son, Jesus Christ.

You see, in the Old Testament you maintained your unity based on perfect adherence and obedience to the laws of Moses. In the New Testament, unity is maintained based on faith in Christ's perfect obedience. So, what we see here is the disciples heading for disunity, even before Jesus is crucified and risen from the dead. They're already dividing up.

In essence, they're asking Jesus, "What's important here? What's truly important?" I think this offers us the perfect opportunity as we take a peek at this very little moment in the journey of faith of the disciples. It allows us to talk about what's essential for us to have genuine, true unity amongst each other, our fellow followers of Jesus.

So, we're not going to exegete this passage word for word. There's no need to do that. It's not that complicated. What's going to happen in the next few minutes is going to feel a little bit nerdy and classroomy, if that's even a word. All you guys with pocket protectors and at least three electronic devices on you at all times are going to love what's about to happen. The rest of you might have to work just a little harder to just stay focused on the attention we're going to give to what is essential for Christian unity.

Before we jump all the way in, I want to give some credit to Dr. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones. That's a name that probably doesn't mean much to many of you. Doctor Lloyd-Jones died in 1981, and he was 81 years old. He was both a medical doctor and a preacher, a pastor. He pastored the Westminster Chapel in London for about 30 years. He was a brilliant theologian and doctrinarian, an amazing thinker.

About 46 years ago, he gave three addresses which were later published as a little book called *What is an Evangelical?* I've had it on my shelf for the past 20-30 years. Toward the back of that book, in just a few pages, he discusses what is essential and necessary for us to have true unity. A little past that, he talks about the things that are not quite so essential, and we're not going to have time to cover those, but I wanted to give credit where credit is due and just admit to you that not every single thought I'm going to share with you is original with me. That's for certain.

Let's get started. If we're going to have real Christian unity, then it requires that...

1. *We have to graciously be doctrinally dogmatic.* Try to say that three times really fast. Now, if I were to reword that (and I probably should have), I'm saying here that we need to agree that doctrine matters. I say *graciously* because too often when we see the word *dogmatic* we automatically have thoughts or definitions of being harsh or arrogant, and it doesn't need to be. I believe Jesus was absolutely graciously dogmatic.

Now, so we're all on the same page, let's define the term *dogmatic*. It means to insist that the essential doctrines of the Christian faith are unquestionably true. If you care to write that down, I would encourage you to underline the words *essential* and *unquestionably*, because the Achilles' heel of our church today is not doctrinal dogmatism. Our Achilles' heel is doctrinal indifference.

If anything's going to wreck the church and destroy our testimony in the power of the gospel, it's not going to be that we're dogmatic. It's going to be that we're just *laissez-faire* when it comes to doctrine. You see, doctrinal indifference is really the faulty foundation of what is known as *ecumenicalism*.

The ecumenical crowd in religious circles attempts to create religious unity by locking arms with every denomination and every religion for the purpose of keeping peace amongst each other. The ecumenical crowd in religious circles wants to show the world that we are all-inclusive. "We all get along, so come be a part of us and we can all get along together."

Yet in order to do that, you have to ignore some very serious conflicting and contradictory doctrines. You see, to be in the ecumenical camp, all you have to do is hold hands for the group picture, and then you just have to place the membership bumper sticker on your car and you're in. You're in the ecumenical group and you're willing to say, "We all get along happily" to the world.

You've seen the bumper sticker with the word *coexist* especially a lot in this part of the world we live in. We see it everywhere, don't we? You see, when you join this movement, you get to ignore the fact that you're sometimes joining hands with religions or denominations who deny,

hate, mock, and mythologize Jesus Christ. You get to ignore some of the darkest, most hopeless, dehumanizing countries on the planet who are locked in helpless captivity to some of these horrific belief systems.

But if you want to be in the ecumenical club, you unite for the purpose of creating a smokescreen of false unity. You need to hear me say this to you as your pastor. You must not fall prey to this heresy. You cannot. We cannot unite with any belief, religion, or denomination that contradicts the life-giving, death-defeating, sin-removing, hope-giving, peace-producing gospel of Jesus Christ. If it contradicts that, we have no unity. Are you clear on that?

Some of you are thinking, "Why such a strong exhortation?" or, "Why so negative, preacher? Are you in a bad mood?" No! I'm not, but we have to be strong on this because even among our so-called fellow evangelical Christians today especially, we're seeing a doctrinal meltdown that is causing mass confusion amongst believers, and the ultimate consequence of that is a gospel that is neutered of any saving power.

The question is, what doctrine really matters? What doctrine is essential? What's important for us to have true unity amongst each other? The truth is not every single doctrine falls into the category of essential for our unity. Some doctrines, while still very, very important, are not essential for us to maintain fellowship and unity with each other.

For instance, the doctrine of prophecy or end-times eschatology. Within that doctrine, there are many thoughts that Jesus is going to return pre-tribulation, mid-tribulation, or post-tribulation, and then you have the amillennialists who believe different than all three. It's not necessary that we agree on the *when* Jesus is going to return because Scripture keeps that concealed.

We do agree that he is going to return, and so we could disagree on the other parts of that and still have unity. Are you with me? It's not essential for us to have unity there. This is the lesson Jesus is teaching the disciples in Mark 9.

I want to cover some things we have to agree on in order to fellowship in genuine community and unity. In order to do this, we have to insist that we can't separate our faith in Jesus from the irrefutable truths of biblical doctrine. This is the purpose of this first point. Doctrine matters. The word *doctrine* simply means teaching.

Certain truths, certain teachings in the Christian faith are unquestionable. To compromise these doctrines is to break ranks with biblical Christianity. In fact, at these points of unquestionable truths, we have to be courageous enough to declare that we're anti-ecumenical when it comes to compromising the essential Christian doctrines of the faith.

2. *The Bible is our authority.* That may be no surprise to the majority of you here. Scripture is our authority on all matters of faith and conduct, but I need to break this down into smaller bites because I think it's absolutely necessary that when we say, "The Bible is our authority," we are actually saying,

A. *The Bible is our only authority.* This is necessary to emphasize because some of you will gladly say you believe in the Scriptures, but you will also embrace other schools of religious thought, placing their teaching right alongside your Bible. Knowingly or unknowingly, you're giving it equal status to the Scriptures, including all of that religion's teachings that are blatantly contradictory to the gospel which saves us.

Others of you will say you believe in the Scriptures, but you also hold to and believe in certain religious traditions. Now, I'm not saying all religious traditions are unbiblical and that we can't fellowship and have unity with them, but I'm talking about the religious traditions that are obviously in contradiction to the Scriptures. For instance, some religions have the traditional belief that all roads of sincere faith and sincere thought lead to heaven. There are handfuls of whole religions that espouse that teaching.

There are some religions that espouse praying to dead saints for wisdom and protection. Another religion says we are to pray to Mary, even for forgiveness. Some religions have the tradition of baptizing the dead. If your dead relative or friend died before they got baptized, you could actually get baptized for them, and you getting baptized counts for them. None of these are in the Bible. None of these traditions have any place in our Christian lives and worship. The Bible has to be our only authority.

B. *The Bible has to also be our complete authority.* This is necessary to insist on because there are those who confidently proclaim belief in the authority of the Scripture, but they also, knowingly or unknowingly, believe in what is known as *progressive revelation*.

Now, progressive revelation is simply the heresy that says that with time and greater enlightenment, we are free to reinterpret the Scriptures and insist on a new and more relevant or more modern meaning. In other words, progressive revelation is the heresy that says the meaning of Scripture changes with time. Church, this stems from an obvious confusion regarding the inspiration of Scripture.

Remember the apostle Peter, in 2 Peter 1:21. He says, "**For no prophecy [no part of God's Word] was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.**" Paul said it differently. He said, "**All Scripture is breathed out by God...**" That little phrase, *breathed out*, in the original language simply means to be inspired. It originated by God. "**...and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness...**"

Here's the point. You must remember. You have to get this clear in your head, okay? While the Bible was written by men, it was not inspired by men, and there is a drastic difference. Yes, the Bible is written by men. All of our critics who would say, "Oh, the Bible was just written by a bunch of men," are absolutely right, but they did not inspire the Bible. The very breath of God, his Holy Spirit, inspired the men to write what God wanted us to know.

That means advanced learning, cultural evolution, or whatever is happening in our world cannot improve on or correct the Holy Spirit's original inspiration. Our Bible is complete. It's not

missing one syllable of God's message to you and me. It's unchanging, and this is where our unity must begin.

C. Our trust has to be in the whole Bible. We have to insist on this dogmatically because I'm hearing a lot of this coming from Christians today. They'll say something like, "I take the Scriptures very seriously when it comes to my faith and religious matters, but when it comes to history or science, the Bible is no longer relevant. It's out of date."

Listen. I want you to hear me say you either believe in the whole Bible or you don't believe in any of it. It's all of it or none of it, because if you start taking away and removing from the Bible things like creation, the worldwide flood, the Red Sea, or anything like that that the skeptics like to put into the category of bad science, you end up diminishing the cross and the resurrection to the category of a random fanatical religion blown out of proportion by deceived, misled, or worse, gullible believers.

Once you start taking that stuff out of your Bible, you no longer have unity as Christians. You have to believe the whole Bible, because from beginning to end, from Genesis 1 to the last word in Revelation, the common theme, the common thread is the revelation of the glory of our holy and loving creator God, redeeming his creation that was destroyed by sin. Every single thing in the Bible connects that thread. It has to be our only authority, our complete authority, every single word of it.

3. Creation, not evolution. For some of you, this might be a little bit of a surprise. I hope not, but listen. As we sit here, we do not consider the theories of evolution as disproving creation. We consider the theories of evolution as anti-creation. Evolution is not proof against biblical creation, not at all. True unity insists that we accept Genesis 1-3 as real history, not as a parable, symbolism, or mysticism. So, regarding this essential, here's how we have to break it down.

A. We must believe in a universe created by the Word of God. In Genesis 1, it says, "**And God said, 'Let there be light...'**" The very spoken Word of God contains the divine power to create something out of nothing. For us to doubt or question that immediately impacts the deity and power of Jesus. Hear that again. For us to doubt the Genesis 1 creation immediately impacts the deity and power of Jesus.

Do you remember Paul speaking about Jesus in Colossians, chapter 1? "**For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible...all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.**" The very deity and power of Jesus is linked to Genesis 1, and when we ignore or remove creation from our essential doctrine, we cast a long shadow over the true identity and purpose of Jesus. They are eternally connected.

B. We must believe in a humanity created from Adam and Eve. According to Genesis, there were no pre-Adam human beings. Jesus recognizes Adam and Eve in reference to the very first human marriage in Matthew, chapter 19. Adam is referred to as the first man in Romans, chapter 5, and whose sin brought the curse of death to all mankind, in 1 Corinthians, chapter 15, not just

mankind after Adam. Jesus and the apostles clearly accept the history of the whole human race as revealed in Genesis.

Now, as a sidenote, I was amused this week by Dr. Lloyd-Jones' specific comments regarding the evolution of man. It was something I had never thought of, on my own at least, until this week. I want you to hear what he says. Just listen to this. He says,

"...if you do not accept this history [of Genesis 1-3], and prefer to believe that man's body developed as the result of an evolutionary process, and that God then took one of these humanoid persons, or whatever you may call them, and did something to him and turned him into a man, you are still left with the question of how to explain Eve, for the Bible is very particular as to the origin of Eve. All who accept in any form the theory of evolution in the development of man completely fail to account for the being, origin, and existence of Eve."

I read that and it was like the first time that thought had ever entered my mind. It was amazing in my heart as I recall studying science and math in college for years, the science always telling us that it probably took hundreds of millions or billions of years for man to finally form out of the primordial ooze of the universe at the time and slither out as some pond scum, grow legs, a brain, a heart, and body parts, and stand up as a man.

When did Eve come along? Where did she come into the picture? Did she just pop up right behind him and say, "Hey, scoot over. My turn"? I'm reading this going, "Wow! Why have I never thought of this before?" No, they would have to say it took another couple of hundred billions of years for the woman to evolve. Why have we never discovered any remains of half-man, half-woman humanoids in the process?

That's all. I just wanted you to think about that. I'm still thinking about it. I'm 56 years old. I have a doctorate degree. I had never thought about that. I'm embarrassed to admit that but I'm excited that I pulled that old book off the shelf! To bring creation into doubt is to bring the deity of Jesus into doubt. You need to know that. There's no such thing as a Christian evolutionist, by the way.

4. *The existence of evil and the fall of man.* In our Western world, millions of people claim belief in some form of higher power or deity while at the same time confidently denying the existence of evil, of the Devil and his evil spirits. To do this virtually eliminates the whole gospel. If you eliminate the fall of mankind and the existence of evil, you declare the cross of Jesus as unnecessary.

A. *We have to unquestionably believe Satan and demons are very real.* This is because the whole Bible is a record of the conflict between the forces of God and the forces of evil. In 2 Corinthians, chapter 11, verse 3, Paul writes, "**...the serpent deceived Eve...**" In John, chapter 8, Jesus references the Devil as the father of all lies. Every single lie in the universe was birthed by the Devil.

Ephesians, chapter 6, verse 12 reminds us that our struggle to live the Christian life in this world is not a struggle against unbelievers. Ephesians 6 reminds that it is a struggle against the spiritual

forces of evil in the heavenly realms. In 2 Corinthians 4, we see the forces of evil arranged against the gospel of Jesus, blinding the minds of unbelievers so they cannot see the truth of God's love, holiness, and salvation through Jesus.

In Revelation, chapter 20, the Scriptures graphically declare that this battle between good and evil will end with the final destruction of the Devil and all of his forces. It is critical and essential to believe evil is for real, or else we once again call into doubt man's need for salvation. If there's no evil, no Devil, then there's no need to be saved.

B. *We have to unquestionably believe the fall of mankind was eternally tragic.* In Romans 5:12-21, Paul builds his whole case for the doctrine of salvation on the sinful fall of one man, Adam. In 1 Corinthians 15, we see the eternal consequence of the fall being the physical and spiritual death of all humankind, making the whole human race, in essence, children of wrath, separated from God by sin. That's Ephesians, chapter 2.

In Romans, chapter 3, we're told that without Christ and the cross, we are all born spiritually dead in our trespasses and sin. We're not just born defective. We're completely incapable of desiring or making peace with God.

Now, here's the good news. If we don't compromise the doctrine of the fall, then we do not eliminate the hope of the cross and the promise of salvation and redemption found all the way back in Genesis, chapter 3. Do you know the gospel comes to light in Genesis, chapter 3, at the fall?

God speaks to Satan, right there in the garden, "**I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.**" I want you to look at those words. This is the first prophecy concerning the virgin birth of Jesus. Notice God says, "**...her offspring...**" The offspring of the woman, not the seed of man, because Jesus would not be born by man. His birth would be a virgin birth through the offspring of the woman.

This is also the first glimpse of the cross, which says the Devil will "**...bruise his heel.**" *His* heel, the woman's son, Jesus. The Devil will think he killed the Son, but he will merely bruise him. This is the first evidence of the resurrection. God says to the Serpent that the Son will "**...bruise your head...**" Jesus will die, but he will rise, destroying and conquering the Devil's last and only lie, death.

So, you have the virgin birth, the death of Jesus, and the resurrection of Jesus in Genesis 3:15. Do you see the essential doctrine of the fall as drawing a straight line all the way from the garden to the cross and our hope of salvation? Do you see that? That's why it's essential.

By now, all the nerds in the room are out of their minds excited. You are taking so many notes right now, you can't write fast enough. You have a grin on your face. "Give me more! Give me more!" The rest of you, hang in here. This is where I need you to just sit up a little straighter. Kind of just get your shoulders back a little bit. Get your head up. I want you to stick with us.

This is where it really matters. Not that it didn't matter before this point, but it really, really matters now.

5. *The atonement of Jesus is necessary for salvation.* That word, *atonement*, is important. It means to make amends for, restitution, or to pay for a wrong or injury caused. That's what *atonement* means. In Christian theology, the atonement is God's forgiveness for our sin through the payment of Jesus Christ.

You see, a lot of you will confidently say to me, "Steve, I'm not a theologian. All I know is that Jesus' death on the cross puts me right with God." You would be exactly right, but you need to hear me say that's not enough. It's not enough for you to just confidently say, "I'm not a theologian. I know what Jesus did on the cross made me right with God."

You need to know *why* his death on the cross makes you right with God, because if you don't understand why his death on the cross makes you right with God, then your faith in Jesus will never graduate. It will never get to be more than just casual appreciation. "Absolutely, I believe in Jesus. I believe he died for me. Thanks, Jesus. I needed that. Whew! That was cool. I didn't want to go to hell. We're cool, right? All right. I believe. Okay. Let's move on."

It's going to be hard to get past that unless you know why, so let me give you two doctrinal components of our salvation that are irrefutable by any doubt.

A. *Our salvation is a substitutionary atonement.* This means Jesus had to die *for* me. He died in my place. He died my death because I am absolutely helpless to pay for my own sins. This means he stood between me and God's fury and wrath that is being poured out upon the sins of mankind. This means Jesus jumped between you and the oncoming train of God's judgment. This means Jesus willingly placed himself between you and the fatal bullet of God's condemnation and damnation of your spiritually dead heart, caused by your sin.

Listen. Embrace this. Jesus willingly, knowingly, and gladly substituted himself in our place by taking our penalty and our punishment upon himself. Here's one of these moments in the sermon that you need to get. His death on that bloodied cross wasn't just some random act of martyrdom determined by the Jewish religious leaders that happened according to some convenient Roman crucifixion. Jesus' death on the cross didn't just somehow kind of happen within the realm of religious history.

"There he was, we found out about it, it just kind of happened, and we might as well believe it." No! His death on the cross was determined by God. God determined that the innocent would take the place of the guilty. Romans 5:6 says, "**For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.**"

His death on that cross was a pouring out of all of God's wrath and fury upon every one of our sins. His death on the cross was also the pouring out of all of God's grace and mercy on every soul who would believe. The first component is that our salvation is a substitutionary atonement. We do not make our own atonement for our sin.

B. *Our justification is by faith alone.* Being *justified* means by faith in his substitutionary death, our sins are not only pardoned by his blood, but God declares us righteous in his sight, just as if we had never sinned. This is the hope. This is the good news of the gospel. The old is gone; the new has come. When we put our faith in the substitutionary death of Jesus for us, our sins are removed. They're not just removed, but they're replaced with the sinless righteousness of Jesus Christ. It's the ultimate exchange: our sin for his righteousness.

Romans 4, verse 5 may very well be one of the most important verses in the whole New Testament. It says, "**And to the one who does not work...**" In other words, to the one who does not continually try to earn his way into heaven or pay for his own sins. For the one who doesn't do that "**...but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness...**" We're reconciled to God by faith alone.

We play no part in it. No religious work or sacrament produces our righteousness before God, none. Not our baptism, christening, confirmation, marriage by the church, lighting candles, or any pious act imaginable. God requires faith, because it is impossible to please God without faith.

So, what is important here? The disciples in Mark 9 are essentially saying, "Jesus, what matters?" We need to be dogmatic and clear that all of us are lost, damned, hopeless, and helpless. Nothing can save us but the grace of God in Jesus Christ and him alone crucified, being the punishment for our sins, dying, rising again, and ascending into heaven, conquering death.

Only when we repent of our unbelief and trust Jesus are we truly forgiven, made righteous, and given eternal life. It's to these essentials that we stand together in true unity. We stand together to safeguard the gospel. Whatever the cost, rejection, ridicule, or suffering we may endure, we are unified on the essential truths of the Christian faith so that the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, the name that is above every name, may be lifted up and magnified for the joy of all peoples, ultimately, in salvation.

It's okay for us to be graciously dogmatic with the essential doctrines of the Christian faith. We have to be, because bumper stickers, group hugs, and church signs that say, "We are all-inclusive," have no power to save your soul, but you shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free. Jesus said, "I am the truth," and so we love the truth. We teach the truth. We defend the truth. We worship the truth. We proclaim the truth because Jesus said, "I am the truth." I'm going to ask you to bow your heads now.

Heavenly Father, I pray that every believer in this room would leave here now with courageous faith, graciously comforted, filled with joy in the power of the truth. I pray, God, that we would be strong. I pray, God, that the roots of our belief would take hold and that we would leave here filled with the happiness of knowing that you have saved us. Give us courage, God, not to cower in the face of the cynicism and skepticism of even fellow Christians who deny these truths. Help us, God, to lovingly defend them and to hold tight to them. In Jesus' name, amen.

Some of you sitting here right now have never surrendered your heart and life to Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins and for eternal life. I pray that you don't walk out of this room before doing that. We have some people standing up here right now who would love to help you take that next step of faith.

All you need to do before you walk out is come up here and say, "Listen, I believe. I believe in Jesus. What do I do now?" and they will help you take that step, give you something to go home with, and get you started on a journey of real faith in a real Savior.

God bless you. We'll look forward to seeing you next Sunday.