

The Dangers of Disunity

Let me start off with a question this morning. Of all the spiritual problems that we face today, which one do you think gets the most ink in the Bible? What is the sin that, based on Scriptural frequency, appears to concern God more than any other? Is it adultery? Is it murder? Is it lying?

In fact, though I admit I haven't gone through and counted, the number-one sin in the New Testament appears to be contentiousness and strife between brethren. It's the major theme of two New-Testament books—1 Corinthians and Philippians—and, as far as I can tell, it appears in nearly all the rest too.

Disunity is a dire spiritual problem, no doubt, and it's one that is particularly pressing in our day. In addition to more traditional sources of strife, like doctrinal disagreement and personality issues, our unity in Christ is continually threatened by our divided society. More and more, national controversies over politics and race are becoming, with the help of social media, controversies between brethren. Friends, we have got to take these problems seriously before they destroy us. To illustrate how seriously we need to take them, let's consider the dangers of disunity.

First of all, strife between brethren will lead to DEFILEMENT. Look here at Hebrews 12:14-15. I think the Hebrews writer's argument here is particularly interesting. First, he urges us to pursue peace and holiness so that we will obtain the grace of God. However, the opposite of this is a root of bitterness springing up that will lead to many being defiled.

This is not the first time that the phrase "root of bitterness" appears in Scripture. Instead, it originates in Deuteronomy 29, and there it refers to idolatry. The one who decides that he can practice idolatry secretly and not suffer consequences is the bitter root, and the others who are led astray by him into idolatry have eaten the poisonous fruit from the bitter tree.

Idolatry isn't the subject in Hebrews 12. The Hebrews writer is concerned not with idol worship, but with Jewish Christians reverting to Judaism. Instead, he is comparing the damage that conflict does under the new covenant to the damage that idolatry did under the old covenant. Strife in our hearts is the bitter root that will defile many with its poisonous fruit.

We must appreciate, then, both the devastating damage that contention does to our souls and how easy it is to spread that contentiousness to others. If we are at odds with our brother and we aren't working to heal the breach, we are defiled people. We aren't holy. We aren't pleasing to God.

What's more, the nature of our sin makes it likely that we will contaminate our brother too, along with everybody else we draw into it. When a church chooses sides over some personal disagreement that should have been worked out quietly,

that whole church has committed itself to Satan. This is a deadly spiritual danger for us, friends! We can be sitting there feeling so self-righteous, yet be as unrighteous as we possibly can be.

Because of this, contention leads to VAIN WORSHIP. Consider the Lord's words in Matthew 5:23-24. Of course, Jesus is speaking in Old Testament terms, but the point is clear. If you're a Jew, and you're coming to the altar with some sacrifice, but you're at odds with your brother, don't even bother offering the sacrifice until you've cleared things up with him first.

The same thing is true for us and all the spiritual sacrifices we offer. We come here to sing and pray, partake of the Lord's Supper, and give of our means because those things are good for us, but ultimately, our goal is to please God. Friends, if we've been stirring up trouble in the church and then come in and piously sing a hymn, God is not pleased. Our worship is hitting the ceiling and bouncing, because clearly we care more about ourselves than we do about God.

I think the same goes for our private devotions too. In 1 Peter 3, Peter makes the point that husbands need to treat their wives right, because if they don't, their prayers will be hindered. The same principle applies to our spiritual families. All those prayers that we're offering through the week, unless they say something like, "Lord, I'm sorry I caused a problem with my brother. Forgive me and help me to reconcile with him," unless they say something like that, they too are going to hit the ceiling and bounce. If we are stubborn, proud, and unrepentant about the strife we have stirred up or promoted, we can be certain that we have severed ourselves from Christ.

Third, disunity in the church leads to DEVoured BRETHREN. Paul warns about this in Galatians 5:13-15. If we love and serve one another, the church will prosper, but if we bite and devour one another, we will eat each other up. Turmoil in a church will nearly always cause souls to be lost among those associated with it.

I've seen the tragic results of this over and over again, both personally and professionally. It did harm to the Lord's work in my parents' time, and the same thing has happened in my own experience. For instance, after the eldership at Joliet dissolved, some brethren with institutional views tried to force their views on the rest of us. It was completely unnecessary. After all, nobody believes that the Bible requires churches to support colleges and so on, so it's entirely possible for somebody with institutional beliefs to worship with a non-institutional church.

Let me say in passing that I appreciate those with such beliefs who are here this morning. You have chosen to set aside what you see as your liberty for the sake of peace and unity with the rest of us, and that is a Christlike spirit. Thank you!

Regardless, even though these brethren back in Joliet could have remained at peace, they didn't. They fumed and fussed, and eventually they left. A number of others

left at the same time, not to go anywhere, but to go nowhere. Some were alienated by the controversy. Others simply fell through the cracks because the rest of us were focused on the contention.

This is something that we must bear in mind every time we are contemplating an action that might stir up trouble. Every time trouble arises, we're running the risk of people leaving this church, and we're running the risk of people leaving the Lord. Furthermore, even though we can all start trouble, it's much more difficult to stop trouble. Something we begin can easily spread out of control, and the more strife rages through a church unchecked, the more likely we are to see a disastrous outcome.

Fourth, disunity leads to a FAILURE TO SHINE. Look at Paul's exhortation to the Philippians in Philippians 2:14-15. Despite what some have claimed, it isn't only churches of Christ that have problems with conflict. Those problems abound in the denominational world too, and they may well be even more frequent in the secular world. People are constantly striving against each other to get their own way.

We don't stand out from the world when our interactions with one another are also filled with conflict. Instead, we stand out when they aren't. When we do all things without grumbling and disputing, we shine like lights in the world because harmony is so different from the way that the world does things. When we are able to set aside our differences and serve God as one, we show that we are animated by the spirit of Christ rather than the spirit of the evil one. Unity is a powerful witness that we are the disciples we claim to be.

However, if we can't get along, guess what? All that goes out the window. One of our young people hears us go on and on about the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, but he sees us engaged in gossip, backbiting, and factionalism. What's he going to conclude? Similarly, how about that visitor or new Christian who comes here seeking a refuge from the world but finds that the way we treat one another is no less worldly? Is he going to say that he has found true followers of Jesus here? Or is he going to decide that he hasn't?

Ever since I've been here, this church has emphasized the importance of evangelism. I think that's wonderful. It's one of my favorite things about it, in fact. However, we must be aware that if we can't get along, we might as well not even bother with trying to reach the lost.

Finally, when we are not one, it spells DEFEAT FOR CHRIST'S PURPOSE. Let's ponder our Lord's words in John 17:20-23. This, of course, is part of the great high priestly prayer that Jesus prays on the night of His betrayal. I don't think there's anywhere else in Scripture that so clearly reveals His desire for His people. Since before the foundation of the world, the Father and the Son have been perfectly united, perfectly one. The gospel is the invitation of Christ to share in that perfect

unity, so that we will become one with God and one with each other. This is the beautiful vision that Jesus shed His blood to accomplish.

However, if we can't be united in the truth of God, Jesus' desire for us will never be realized. The world will never believe that God sent Jesus if our unity does not proclaim that truth. That's not merely a problem. That's a fundamental problem. We are undermining the very purpose for which we exist.

This is a call for all of us to re-evaluate our spiritual priorities. We tend to have our list of the Really Bad Sins, the sins we don't struggle with, and then our list of the Acceptable OK sins, the sins we do struggle with. Because church conflict is so common, we tend to treat it as something that's acceptable. In reality, it is anything but.

I know all of this makes for something of a downer sermon, but our study of the topic isn't going to stop there. Next Sunday morning, Shawn is going to preach on four keys to unity. I hope that all of you will be here for that lesson and consider it with the seriousness which this topic deserves.

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