



Well today we come to Psalm 133, which is a Psalm that is short and beautiful.

The Psalm is about one thing: relational unity which should make this really relevant. Who doesn't want that? Relational unity is the holy grail of human relationships. We want unity in our friendships, work teams, marriages, families. That sounds amazing. But even though it's universally desired, nobody really knows how to get it and those who try almost always go about it the wrong way.

And I think a lot of times the false starts we experience in the pursuit of unity are a result of actually not really understanding what unity is and what we are really pursuing. It can be as much an intellectual problem as anything else. But like many other things, solving the intellectual problem will only reveal the spiritual problem which is far more difficult to fix.

Thankfully, Psalm 133 will help us in both these regards. And so let's begin here just by looking at the Psalm itself:

Here's a short Psalm, just three verses in length:

Psalm 133, Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity! 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! It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion! For there the LORD has commanded the blessing, life forevermore.

Let's just let that settle. What a beautiful simple expression of the blessing of Christian unity! I almost feel like doing too much explaining here will ruin the simplicity. But since it's my job to explain, let me go ahead and ruin it.

History of the Psalm

So explaining is necessary, I think because it's immediately evident from the images used here that we are removed quite some distance from the intended audience. So we owe it to ourselves to think about the original recipients here. There are two things worth noting:

1. Unity and Worship

First, this is another of the Songs of Ascent that we talked about last week. And you will remember that the Songs of Ascent were

preparatory Psalms in approaching the temple to worship. And so one might deduce from this that Christian unity is an integral part of worship. And indeed when we look through the rest of the Bible, we confirm this.

Matthew 5:23-24, So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. (ESV)

Unity is not a side issue to God. It's an essential pre-requisite for approaching God. God wanted the ancient Israelite to approach the temple, just like we approach the Lord's supper and ask, "Am I dwelling in unity with my brother?"

Why is that? Well, there is a spiritual issue at stake. It is hypocrisy of the highest order to not be able to forgive trivial offenses or even major offenses when we have been forgiven so much by Jesus Christ himself.

But that's not the emphasis of the Psalm. The Psalmist comes at it from the angle of wanting the full enjoyment that comes from being in a community. Do you hear the word unity in community, literally 'with unity'. It's great that we have streaming services to listen to

sermons and worship music by yourself when you can't be in church on Sunday. But, as the Psalmist says, "how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell, exist, worship in unity." This is where the blessing really comes and where worship is really possible.

Really what we are saying is, it's better with others. And this principle is a life principle. Think about what you like to do most. Maybe you like to ski or go shopping or play sports. But what would happen to your favorite thing if you removed all the people and replaced them with robots. Camping with robots would not be fun. Camping with friends is fun and the more closely you dwell in unity the more fun it is.

Worship is that principle on steroids. Have you not experienced that in this building or in other contexts where believers lift up their voices with praise? The energy of that is life-giving. Gathered in this room is incredible diversity, but we have unity around the Lord. So to the original readers, dwelling in unity was a preparatory act of worship.

The Interpretation

So imagine preparing yourself for worship in this way and then actually experiencing it. The throngs of people united in worship around YHWH. It's a wonderful experience!

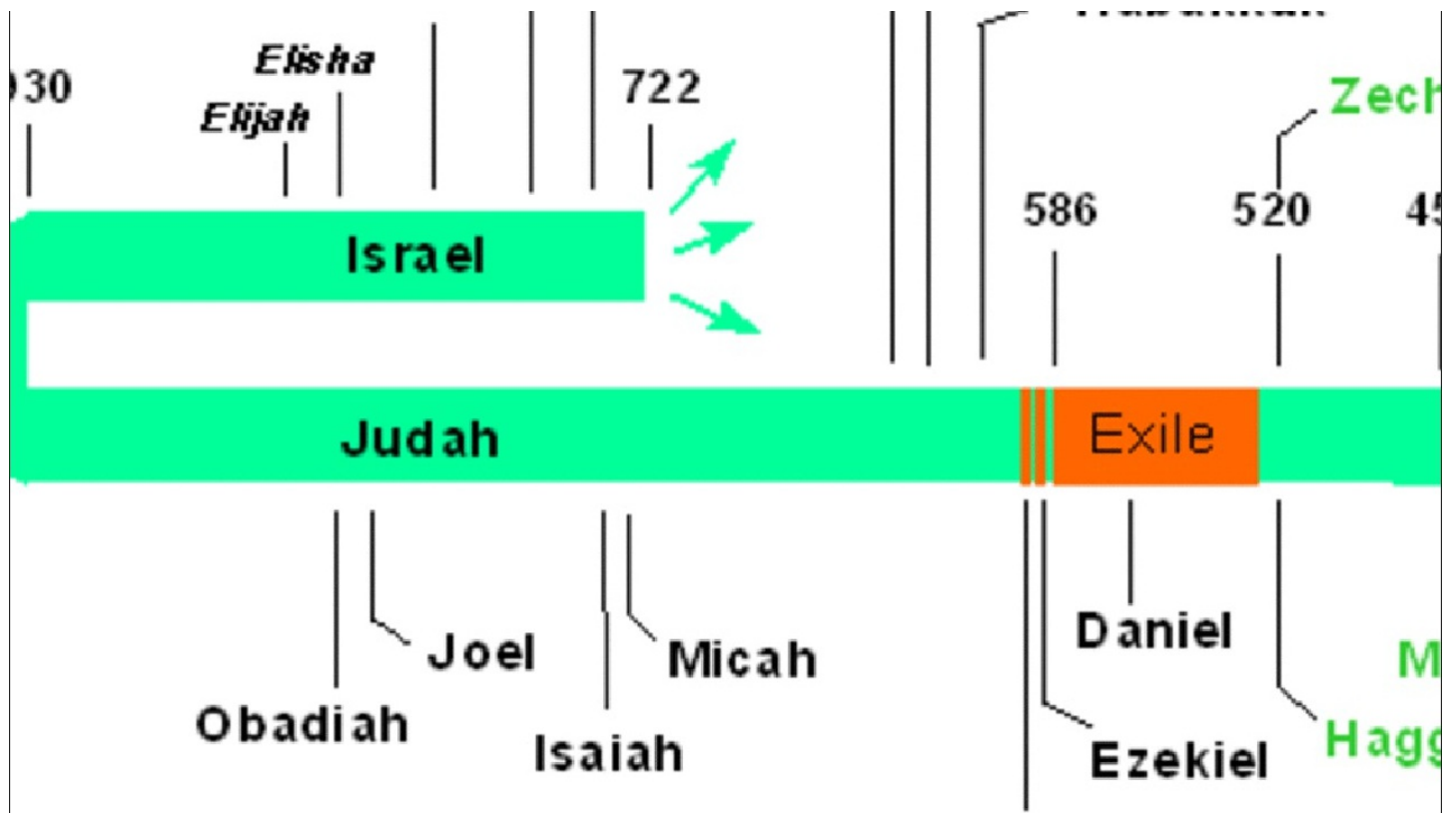
And the Psalmist uses two metaphors to describe the experience. These metaphors are a little foreign to us and could use a little discussion. He compares unity to precious oil on the beard of Aaron and dew on Hermon. Let's think about both these metaphors:

1. The Oil

The oil metaphor is pointing to the exhilaration of experiencing something that is both pleasurable and rare. According to Exodus 30, the holy anointing oil for the high priest was olive oil mixed with four of the best spices: Liquid Myrrh, Cinnamon, aromatic cane and cassia. It said that each of the spices had to be added in the amounts of 500 shekels a piece.

So we are talking about an oil that was insanely costly and rare. And when it was used it would have been a truly unprecedented experience. We have to think of something bizarre to even get a taste of this. Imagine swimming in an Olympic sized swimming pool filled with fresh pomegranate seeds or something like that. Has anyone ever even done that? Probably not because the cost and effort just prohibit it. But if that pool was there before you, you'd definitely have the sense that you're into something special. That's the idea. And true unity is sacred just like this. It is extremely rare. You feel, when you experience it, that you are in some sacred space where few have ever trod. You almost want to just pause time and soak it up. You're scared to move a muscle for fear that you would upset it. It's wonderful.

Now there is a reason, I think, this particular Psalm is dripping with passion about the rarity and beauty of Christian unity and it has to do with the fact that this is a post-exilic Psalm. Now what does that mean?



Well, you will remember in Israel's history that she was united under King Saul, King David, and Solomon. Then, Israel was divided. And we have that period of time we call the divided monarchy. Israel to the North and Judah to the South. Israel gets taken into captivity first in 722 B.C. then Judah in 586 B.C. along with the destruction of the temple. And then we have that period of history called the exile which lasts 70 years. So a POST-EXILIC writing would be something written after the decree of Cyrus which allowed Israel to return to her home land and rebuild the temple. So Ezra and Nehemiah would be an example of a post-exilic book.

Well, this Psalm is also, very likely, post-exilic.

Now why is that significant? For hundreds of years Israel has been marinating in the juices of infighting, division, war, strife, hate, an unforgiving spirit and bitterness. Israel understood discord, dissension and strife. The taste of it was bitter in her mouth.

So this idea of dwelling in unity is an experience Israel hasn't had for

500 years. As she opens up this new chapter of her history, they are actually dwelling together in unity corporately as a nation. United around YHWH, ready to obey him corporately, ready to build the temple despite the opposition they felt something real and beautiful, true unity.

And I think what that produces in this Psalm is some passion behind how rare and valuable it is. It's not a given; it's like a rare flower that blooms that has extremely powerful medicinal value. What if you had this absolutely beautiful rare flower that bloomed once every 500 years and it cured cancer. You'd do everything you could to foster it's growth. That absence of unity for such a long period of time adds urgency.

And I'm guessing this rings true in your experience. Maybe you look at your family life and you are so frustrated. Everyone is always fighting. Everything is mine, mine, me, I. Nobody is considering others as more important than themselves. But every once in a while the clouds part for a split second and you experience that ray of unity. Everyone is laughing and truly enjoying one another's company. And you just want to press pause and soak it in. It's so wonderful.

Or maybe it's your marriage. Maybe there is strife and discord and division but every once in a while it's just wonderful. It's just beautiful. It's like the gates of heaven opened up and you are so happy just being with your beloved.

So the first metaphor seems to point to the exhilaration of experiencing something that is both pleasurable and rare.

2. The Dew

The second metaphor is similar but points in a slightly different direction. The dew metaphor points more to the refreshment of experiencing something that is wholly and entirely life-giving. Unity is like running across dew soaked meadows in a climate that never sees an ounce of rain. Palestine never gets rain in the summer. But high up in the mountains, the dew waters the landscape and it stays green. When you live in a dusty, dry climate, Green is so welcoming. Try living in the barren wasteland between here and mountain home for a few years and then see how your heart leaps when you drop down into the treasure valley (and you'll know why it's called that). It's so refreshing and life-giving. This place has cool water that when it touches living things, they soak it up and spring to life. Unity is like that. We were made for it. It's life giving to us! It's such a breath of fresh air in a world that is constantly fighting, attacking, defensive, hating, at war with one another. Unity is like a large drink of lemonade after a hot days work; it's like a wonderful nights rest after an exhausting days work. Unity gives life.

So we are given two metaphors that describe how wonderful unity is and then we are given an explanation of why it's wonderful. What gives unity such life giving power? We are told. And it's unexpected and quite shocking: because God is obligated to bless those brothers and sisters that dwell in unity.

3. The Divine Obligation

Now at first that sounds way too strong and actually wrong. To say that God is obligated to do anything is putting yourself on treacherously thin ice. Who are we to say that God is obligated to do anything? Is God bound to man in such a way that he owes us anything? Of course not. So while it is absolutely the case that God is not bound to man in any way, God can bind himself and we are

told here in this passage that he God does exactly that. He obligates himself. There's a divine prerogative that he sets up such that if the conditions of unity exist, he obligates himself to then bless those brothers and sisters that are living in unity. It's one of those beautiful verses in the Bible that promises you a way to experience blessing. Is that not motivating?

To say it in reverse, if you know of discord or strife in your life. If you know of a relationship that is not right, and you can do something about it but have not, you are refusing the blessing that God promises.

"For there (in unity) the LORD has commanded the blessing, life forevermore.

I love the way that is articulated. It's a form of personification where blessing is being described as a servant that can be commanded. If the conditions of unity exists, he turns to this servant and says, "Go, bless them."

Don't you want God to say that about you? Wouldn't you love to hear those words spoken of you? Look at him, he's dwelling in unity. Go bless that guy!

Let that inspire you. Who are those believers that you have a hard time appreciating. You are different in every way. It seems like you value simplicity, they value complexity. You value quiet, they value noise. You value saving money, they value spending money. But you have Christ in common. Let him bind you together.

God will bless that.

The Nature of Biblical Life

Now let's look very carefully at what the blessing is. The blessing is life forevermore. What could be better than life, forevermore. But what does that mean?

Now the danger here is to think biologically or even worse hedonistically.

When we talk about life forevermore:

- we aren't talking merely about biological life, meaning your heart is pumping, your brain works. You are alive.
- And we definitely are not talking merely about hedonistic pleasure. What is the good life? Playing games, eating, eating drinking and being merry.

God isn't commanding that believers who dwell in unity get to enjoy poolside BBQ's and long years in retirement homes? Way to simplistic and worldly. So what kind of life are we talking about?

God thinks of life and health very differently than most of us. We think symptomatically; God thinks causally. We look at the leaf; God looks at the root.

For example, if you were to cut a rose, it would almost immediately begin to wilt. But you could restore it's vitality by placing it in a vase of water with a little packet of that food. For a moment, it's glory would return. It would perk up, but of course it's destined to die. It's already dead it. There is no possibility of it ever living again. The die has been cast. It's days are done, it just doesn't know it yet.

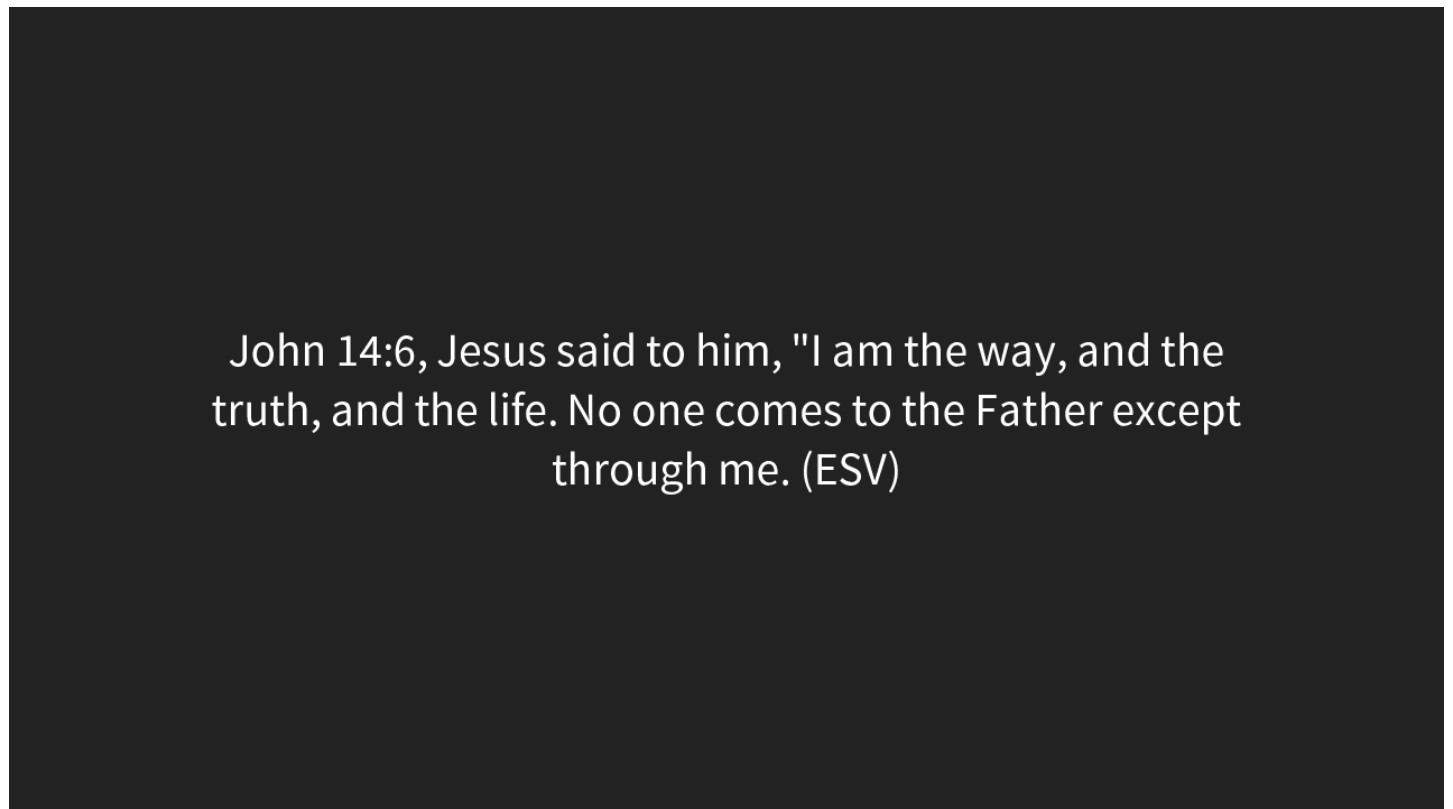
That's how a lot of us look at life. We are assessing health and

quality of life based on leaf color and ignoring the fact that death is a foregone conclusion because we are not connected to the vine.

We think, "Oh that person is full of life. Look at them. They are eating all great, organic foods, they work out regularly. Their muscles are toned. They are making lots of money." That's some abundant life.

Man is so prone to looking on the outward condition. But it's all a ruse. Without being connected to the source of life, they are just a cut rose in a vase waiting to die. How many of you are caught up in this kind of life?

Jesus defined true life for us in John 14.



John 14:6, Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. (ESV)

Life is defined here as being through Jesus. Then in John 15 he gives us a metaphor.

John 15:4-6, Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. (ESV)

So what is life according to Jesus? Being connected to the source of life! As we are unified as believers, we receive life from the source of life.

And so we must see it that way. We are always either dying or living. We are either declining in health or gaining and health and being restored. And it's all a function of how completely we are attached to the source of life, the vine. That is how Christians should always define life and health. We are alive if we are attached to the source of life. As each branch is individually connected we both extract life from the source of life and find unity.

So let's do it. We all want this blessing, so let's unite and get blessed!

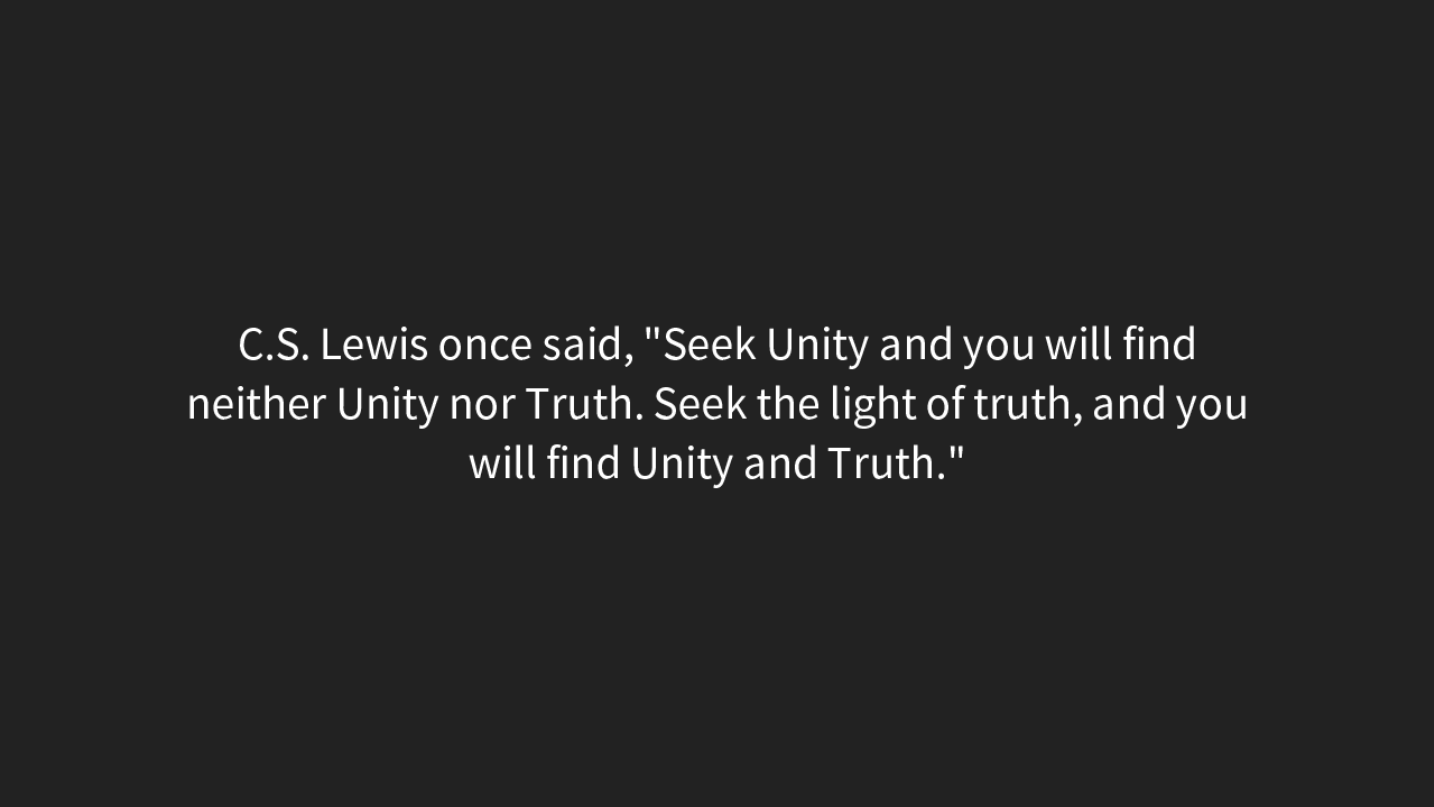
Unity is a Byproduct and Cannot be Pursued

Now here's the part that's counterintuitive - unity cannot be pursued. Unity is primarily a byproduct of something else. It operates

according to the same backward principle of biblical joy. We've talked about this often. You can't seek joy primarily. It's elusive. If you try to get it as an end in itself, it makes itself wings like an eagle and flies away. Every time you think you have it, it evades your grasp.

You can want joy - this byproduct, and you can even be commanded to get the byproduct, but by definition, you can't pursue it. You have to pursue something else.

Unity is similar. If you make unity the main thing, the only thing, the primary thing, you'll never achieve it. So what's it a byproduct of? It's a byproduct of seeking truth.



C.S. Lewis once said, "Seek Unity and you will find neither Unity nor Truth. Seek the light of truth, and you will find Unity and Truth."

You see unity is a function of many people loving the same thing. Dwelling in unity is not something that can be directly pursued, rather, it is an evidence you are connected to the vine. A branch that exerts all its energy to cling to the vine will look up and discover that he is harmoniously in unity with all the other branches that are doing

the same thing. He's being fed from the same source. He's being given the same life.

This approach to unity is very different from the one taken by the world. I think those coexist bumper stickers are probably the target of every preacher in the U.S. So here's my take. I actually love the idea of coexisting. I can get behind the idea that we should not be killing each other or throwing hate at one another. A Christian should be able to coexist with ANYONE and should be a pleasant aroma of Christ in that mix. But there will never be unity. There will never be unity without truth.

We Are Legos

Here's the way I think of it. If you look at all the people of all cultures of all time, you see quite a bit of diversity. It's kind of like pouring out a box of legos. Each of those lego pieces is quite different. But that diversity does not mean there can't be unity. What unifies them? What makes all those things come together? If you want to see unity and meaning in all that diversity you have assemble them according to the design. There really is only one design that uses all of them. You might get creative and build some interesting items that use some of the pieces or even most of the pieces, but there is probably only one design that uses them all perfectly.

And the question humankind has been asking since the dawn of time, what is the unifying principle in the universe. What unites all the diversity. What makes sense of it all. Unity is that thing that allows for diversity but unites it together. Unity is most definitely not the same thing as sameness.

Biblical unity is not trying to make all the lego pieces square bricks.

That is what regimes do. Hitler was trying to make all lego pieces square. If you were not square, if you were not Arian or if you were handicapped, you were eliminated. When we read rise and fall of the third Reich in our book club, I thought it was very interesting that the government was very concerned about regulating comedians. Why? Because they can't tolerate that sort of individuality. They don't fit into mold. That kind of regulation is a canary in a coal mine that oppression is imminent.

One of the greatest evidences of the truth of Christianity is that it works in all cultures of all time in all places. It can take root in any cultural soil. It unites and unifies 100 percent of the pieces. It provides a purpose for all the diversity. Every lego piece has a spot, even the most unique and unlikely. All can fit together for the glory of God. It unites them together where each piece can be understood as part of the grand design.

If Christianity cannot unite the entire world, then the world has a right to reject us. The world has a right to say, "There's nothing special about you." There a million special interest groups out there. You are just another one of those niche cliques that unites a few quirky birds but doesn't have relevance for me.

But Christianity is that unifying principle that allows and even encourages the diversity and yet can unify it all, all of it.

- It provides meaning and purpose for the deaf and blind.
- It explains savants and suffering.
- It gives a future and hope for victims.

When you pursue the person of Jesus Christ, you insert yourself into that master plan. You are like that obedient lego that snaps into

place, and in so doing, as you are directed according to the master, you put yourself into that position where unity is possible, you simultaneously and without any conscious thought of it also, create the conditions for life to flourish. God's blessing of life becomes yours

- Engineers can design for the glory of God and they experience life in doing it.
- Artists can paint and sculpt for the glory of God.
- Laborers can sweat for the glory of God.
- Intellectuals can write for the glory of God.
- Children can play for the glory of God.
- Comedians can joke and use their sarcasm for the glory of God.
- Men and women can suffer for the glory of God
- We can be blessed for the glory of God.

One person can give it all up and go on mission and honor Christ. Another can enjoy the blessing and redirect the praise back to Christ and it is all beautiful because it all points to Christ.

Do you see the beauty of it? Do you see the importance of it? Unity is so much bigger than just getting along, lack of conflict, living in such a way that you are not at odds. All that that is creating enough distance between polar opposites such that it doesn't create friction. You leave me alone, I leave you alone.

Unity is actually snapping them together in a way that the differences combine to create something beautiful. The NT talks about this.

Paul's Lego Analogy

I actually have this theory that if Paul had legos in his day, he would

have used that analogy in his epistle. But since he didn't, he used the image of building a house with lots of different stones that are all different sizes, basically just larger legos.

But how Paul uses it is astounding. Paul has this amazing picture. Paul is addressing the problem of Jew and Gentile in the Roman world. This was an enormous issue.

You see the Jew was this lego piece that just didn't fit in the Hellenized Roman world. The Romans were constantly pulling their hair out and frustrated beyond belief. Why can't you just fit in. They tried to sand off that quirky edge of that lego piece and couldn't do it. Why? Because as good as the Roman system was, there was no room in it for the Jew. But then along comes the gospel

Ephesians 2:13-14, But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility (ESV)

Now look, the two groups have become one. The wall is broken down. And what is the unifying principle. The person of Jesus Christ.

Then he uses the lego analogy.

Ephesians 2:19-21, So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. (ESV)

When all the stones submit to the grand design you have this amazing structure that can serve this purpose.

What's the purpose of a temple. It has all sorts of purposes.

- It is supposed to keep out the weather.
- To make a statement to a city.
- To have a place where we can worship together.

But in order to have a temple, all those stones have to agree to do their part in the temple. What does a single brick do? Nothing. It's worthless.

Next time a thunderstorm strikes, try hiding beneath a single cinder block and see how things go for you. If we bought a piece of dirt, and through a pile of bricks out there, and said, okay, here's our church, that would be pretty disappointing.

It becomes useful when they are fit together according to the plan.

The person of Jesus Christ becomes this aligning force in the life of believers. Without that unity is impossible.

Final Practical Exhortation.

Let's say you are experiencing strife in a relationship. Maybe it's your own marriage. Maybe it's a relationship with a believer or unbeliever. What do you do?

There are thousand things to say here, but heres the big idea. Connect yourself vigorously to the vine. That is the answer. And here's why. That is where blessing comes from.

Lisa and I have done that often in our marriage. We sit their frustrated at one another. And if we look at the issue in front of us it seems like we are at a stale-mate. We are at an impasse. But all it takes is some realignment to get perspective. We are both pursuing Christ. See him. See his plan for us. See how beautiful he is. And suddenly we find ourselves leaving the issue behind us and seeing how similar we are instead of how different we are. Sure you are annoyed at me for a thousand good reasons. And I have my own set of annoyances. But they are trivial because we can agree that Jesus Christ is everything. We are connected to the vine.

Listen, Christianity works because it's true. The reason it creates unity is because you begin to operate according to your design. It's not some hack. It's not some relational trick. That's an important thing to realize. As one writer said, "the reason you urge people to become Christians is not because Christianity is exciting (though it is), not because Christianity will really help you (though it will), not

because Christianity is up to date (though, of course, it is), not because Christianity will meet your needs (though, of course, it will), but because Christianity is true. The best they hope for is that it's useful. The idea of truth doesn't even come in.

As you are fit together according to God's master design you begin to have peace like you've never experienced, joy like you could not imagine, unity that enraptures. Why? Because you are playing the part God designed you to play. You experience incredible satisfaction because as part of the grand design you love what he designed you to love.

So pursue him. Pursue the source of truth and you will find both unity and truth!