

Living in Unity

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[0 : 00] Well, the United States has been in the news a lot this week. And in 2001, a US sociologist called Robert Putnam wrote a book called *Bowling Alone*, in which he spoke about the disintegration of community life in the United States of America.

The full title of the book is *Bowling Alone, The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. And it is a bestseller and is often referenced as it looks at the life of those who live in the United States.

So Putnam, in his book, he describes a decline in voting, a decline in people attending religious services like the church, a decline in civic engagement, less participation in social organizations, and volunteering in all age categories going down, less people involved in community.

And of course, today we know that we live in the age of the smartphone. And that, of course, has only exacerbated all of these problems. Statistics tell us that today more people are lonely than ever before.

And basically, life, whether in the United States or here in the UK, Western society, or across the world, life has become less communal and more individualistic, where we're basically absorbed as people by our individual needs.

[1 : 30] And this is obvious in statements like, be true to yourself, or follow your heart, or you do you. This is called expressive individualism, and it basically says it's all about you, never mind anybody else.

And so we are conditioned to think and to act like individuals, not as members of any kind of community. But this isn't just out there in the world.

This is also in the church that we think and we act first and foremost as individuals, rather than as members of a community.

We're like consumers instead of contributors, where our needs are most important, what I like, what I want, what suits me.

And if our needs aren't met in one particular place, then we'll leave that place and we'll go somewhere else where our needs are met. But this individualism, whether out there in the world or in the church, is actually the opposite of how we were designed and created to live by God as human beings.

[2 : 42] So right now, in our church, we're looking at the vision of Christ Church Glasgow, and we're taking a Christ-centered approach to the book of Psalms as we consider this vision. And so today we're thinking about one aspect of loving each other, which is the second part of the circle.

And that aspect of loving each other is community. Because when we read the Bible, we see just how vital community actually is. God has wired us as people not to go through life alone, but to live in meaningful community with others.

Because when God's people live together in unity, in community, then it is a beautiful thing. And that's what Psalm 133 says to us.

Now this psalm is part of a group of psalms, from Psalm 120 to 134, called the Songs of Ascents, because they were sung by God's people as they made their way up to Jerusalem for the religious festivals.

And so the people would come together as pilgrims as they went to Jerusalem to celebrate all that God had done. And so David, the author of this psalm, says just how good it is to dwell in unity with God's people.

[4 : 00] He says that in verse 1. And so whatever the context of the psalm, and we don't know when it was written or why it was written, but it was written and David, when he wrote it, was saying how this unity is important for God's people.

Not just for God's people back then, of course, Israel, but it's important for God's people today, the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. As the Psalm 133 points to the community of God's people, the church gathered together in worship and in fellowship, the church coming and united in God's Son, Jesus Christ.

So we're going to think about community this afternoon, why we need it. So we're going to look at this psalm under three headings. First of all, the beauty of community in verse 1. Secondly, the picture of community, verse 2 and 3.

And then thirdly, the blessing of community. So first of all, the beauty of community there in verse 1. We read how good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity.

So as God's people fill Jerusalem to celebrate the festivals, David comments on just how great this is. He literally says, Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity.

[5 : 21] So behold, look, check it out. So he's not just talking in theory here, because everybody thinks unity is a good thing. Nobody thinks unity is a bad thing.

Everybody thinks it's great, but it's good in theory, but it's so much harder to put into practice, isn't it? So here he's talking about the experience of being united with God's people.

It is a good and pleasant community to belong to, as well as being a good and pleasant sight to behold. He's saying, look at all these people and how united they are.

And so their pilgrimage wasn't just an individual thing, which tends to be how people view any kind of religious experience these days, that it's between me and God.

And that's all that really matters. But this pilgrimage, this unity, happens as brothers and sisters come together, spiritual brothers and sisters.

[6 : 21] Because the psalm's not just referring to literal brothers, as in family members, but it's referring to all of Israel, to different tribes, as we'll see, but also to different people, to the rich and to the poor, even debtors and slaves and offenders were fellow Israelites, and they came together in community, united as one.

And that's the emphasis here. There's unity as God's people unite, not just in worship together, but in fellowship with one another.

And the psalm is highlighting just how highly valued this is. It is delightful. It is desirable. It's the beauty of community.

Because Israel, God's people, and the Old Testament point towards the church of Jesus Christ in the New Testament. In his book, *Love in Hard Places*, the theologian Don Carson writes, the church is made up of natural enemies.

What binds us together is not common education, common race, common income levels, common politics, common nationality, common accents, common jobs, or anything else of that sort.

[7 : 37] Christians come together because they have all been saved by Jesus Christ and owe him a common allegiance. They are a band of natural enemies who love one another for Jesus' sake.

So basically, he's saying when a bunch of randoms come together, like us, I'm looking at you, you're looking at one another, we are random people, but when we come together, behold, how good and pleasant it is that a bunch of different people can come together and be united as one.

Because there is nothing else the whole world over that is quite like the church. Have you ever noticed that? There is no other group of such diverse and different people who can come together and be united like the church of Jesus Christ.

Nothing is as beautiful, nothing is as desirable as God's people living together in unity. It's basically a picture of how life is meant to be.

Even if fostering that kind of unity is often quite challenging. But it is the kind of unity that God calls us to.

[8 : 49] Now, if you're about my age and older, so quite young really, but if you're about my age and older, you'll have memories of when you were sick as a kid and your mother would give you some medicine.

And the medicine back then in the olden days isn't like the medicine you get these days, which is sweet and sickly and sugary and fruity. And it's good to taste.

I tasted Kalpel the other day when one of our children had it and I thought, medicine never tasted so good. But in the olden days, of course, it was horrible, wasn't it? But if your mother was anything like mine, she would stick the spoon in your mouth and she would say to you, take it.

It'll do you good. And so we need to get that unity in community is a good gift of God. Tasting it, taking it will do us good.

Even if it doesn't seem nice at the time, it is actually for our benefit. Unity in the church is God's medicine for lonely hearts.

[9 : 57] It is what our poor, sick souls need to take. It's what we need to live with because we were created to belong to the family of God's people and to live together in unity, in community, as brothers and sisters in Christ.

And so that's the first thing we see in the psalm. It's the beauty of community. Secondly, let's look at the picture of community in verse 2 and 3. You notice that David uses two images here to illustrate unity.

So verse 2. It is like precious oil poured on the head, running down on the beard, running down on Aaron's beard, down on the collar of his robe.

And then verse 3. It is as if the Jew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion. Okay, it's a picture that comes in two parts.

And both parts of the picture are pretty alien to us. So it does take a bit of unpacking for us to get what is being said here. So the first image has got to do with precious oil running down from the head onto the beard.

[11 : 08] Now this wasn't regular olive oil. This was precious, special oil, like perfumed oil. A bit like rich perfume that would make somebody fragrant if this oil was poured on them.

And the oil was used for anointing. And so it's worth pointing out that anointing in the Bible or oil in the Bible basically symbolizes being anointed by the Holy Spirit.

So the focus is not just here on the anointing of any head, you'll notice, or any beard, but specifically the anointing of the head of Aaron.

Now who was Aaron? Aaron was Moses' brother. But more importantly and more significantly, he was the first high priest of God's people. And so the significance here is on Aaron's anointing as high priest.

He was being consecrated for special service to God. And the image is of the oil being poured out extravagantly because it saturates his hair and then it runs down onto the beard and then runs down onto the robes.

[12 : 20] So it couldn't be confined to his head and the smell couldn't be contained. It would just waft, fragrant, beautiful smelling oil.

And it symbolized Aaron's total consecration to God, head and body. So Aaron was the first in a long line of high priests who would give people access to God through sacrifice.

And of course, there would be a distinctive ceremony as high priests were anointed with oil for their office. And the ceremony would basically signify God's presence and power by the Holy Spirit on this one man.

But there was also a distinctive set of clothes that the high priest would wear. He would have a designer robe. Not like designer jacket, Canada goose, like you might get today, but a really ornate and precious robe would be worn by the high priest.

And so it would have a precious stone on each shoulder of this robe, which was engraved with the names of the sons of Israel. So six names on each stone.

[13 : 32] And then the robe would have this breastplate that would come down over the front. And on the breastplate, there would be twelve precious stones. And each stone was engraved with the name of one of the twelve tribes of Israel.

And so the picture is showing how this precious oil runs down on the beard. And then you notice it says it runs down on the collar of the robes.

And this fragrant oil would come down, cover the precious jewels, cover the tribes of Israel, symbolically uniting them all together in the body of the high priest and his robes.

But there's more since his anointing was associating him with the people. The high priest would carry the people on his shoulders and he would wear them close to his heart.

And so that's the first image of unity. And it's painted in broad brushstrokes, but it's deep and rich in color. And then there's the second picture of the Jew on Mount Zion.

[14 : 40] So verse 3a says it was, it is as if the Jew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion. So the unity of God's people is also like the Jew of Hermon falling on Mount Zion.

And again, it takes a bit of unpacking to get the image of what is happening here. So Hermon was a high mountain in the northern part of Israel in the far north in the highlands and as such it had heavy and abundant dew.

And so its appearance in the morning, it was so wet it would be as if it had been raining all night. And in a parched land where it didn't typically rain, the dew was wonderful because it provided moisture to refresh and to invigorate the crops.

But the psalm describes this enriching dew falling on Mount Zion. And the geography of Mount Zion is very different from the geography of Mount Hermon because the air would be too dry to produce dew.

Mount Zion was outside and is outside Jerusalem in the urban south as opposed to the northern highlands of Mount Hermon. And so the picture here is of Hermon's dew falling on Zion bringing these two opposites together in a remarkable way where this same refreshing life-giving dew falls from above on all.

[16:13] And it's basically another image of unity. And so both of these images come together to illustrate the beauty of God's people living together.

different things, diverse things coming together as one. And the psalm is basically giving us a fantastic picture of the church and the remarkable way that God unites diverse and different people and brings them together.

And that's why we get this repetition of running down three times in this short psalm. So it's stated and then it's repeated in verse two, running down and then running down and then it's repeated again in verse three, translated as falling.

It's the same verb that's being used each time. So this running down, this falling, this coming from above is saying that God is the one who brings unity to his people.

God is the one who brings refreshment and enrichment to his people as they come together.

because when we're united together as different people from different places, then we experience the rich, the sweet, the refreshing, the fragrant presence of God with us.

[17:33] And it's how our lives are revitalized and renewed. It's like getting away from the stinky smog of Annie's Land in Glasgow and going up to the highlands and breathing in some pure mountain air from Ben Nevis.

That's what this picture of the fragrant oil on Aaron's head and the invigorating dew on Mount Zion is supposed to illustrate. And of course it only happens, doesn't it?

Unity only comes in and through the Lord Jesus Christ. And so the psalm is pointing us to him. Because when you read the Bible, you realize that Aaron is a type of Christ.

And all the high priests in the Old Testament prepare the way for Jesus as our great high priest.

And so when Jesus began his ministry, he was anointed with the Holy Spirit at his baptism.

And then on the cross, Jesus took our sin on his shoulders and wore us close to his heart as he sacrificed himself for us.

[18:45] So that we could have access to God and be united to God and be united with one another. And so that now the Holy Spirit is poured out on the church, uniting every believer in Christ.

And that's why we read Ephesians chapter four, which says, make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.

So Jesus alone brings us into a community where we are united as one. Human nature doesn't bind us together in such a strong and powerful way as Jesus does.

It's God's doing. It comes from above. God is the one who makes us into a beautiful community, a bride to be presented to the bridegroom, Jesus, at the end of time.

And in this beautiful community, people we would normally, naturally avoid become fragrant and attractive to us, just like that oil, precious oil pouring down Aaron's head and his beard.

[20:14] And because Jesus unites such different people together, he makes our times together refreshing to us, refreshing in a way that nothing else in this world can ever refresh us, like being with the people of God can.

And so that's the picture of community. So first, there's the beauty of community, second, the picture of community, and then third, there's the blessing of community. Just at the end, final

sentence, for there the Lord bestows his blessing, even life forevermore.

So there, where is there? There describes the place where unity is found. And so harmonious unity is found in Zion, the place of God's blessing.

Because Zion is the place, Jerusalem, Mount Zion, just outside, where the pilgrims of Israel would gather together for worship, for the festivals, and for fellowship with one another.

But of course, the psalm is not just talking in a geographical sense here, but it's talking about a spiritual reality. Because the blessing of the Lord, the blessing the Lord has commanded, is life forever more.

[21 : 28] life. So it's the blessing of eternal life, which we know when we read our Bibles, comes in and through Jesus Christ. So in Christ, we are God's people, we are his adopted children, we are brothers and sisters in Christ.

We form one body where Jesus Christ is the head. And so that's why Ephesians 4 tells us to make every effort to maintain unity now.

Because the unity now is in anticipation of everything that God has promised in the future. Because this reference to Zion points to the time when all things in heaven and on earth will be united under Jesus Christ.

That's what Ephesians 1 verse 10 tells us. And when God's people will dwell, not only dwell together, but dwell forever with God himself in his presence.

So Revelation chapters 21 and 22 tell us. And so when we get this, I think we actually underestimate the importance of community.

[22 : 41] Because it has a far greater significance than simply showing up at church once a week. Maybe even joining some kind of other extra thing through the week.

It's far more than that. There's more to community than simply getting along with the people in your church or having a wee chat every now and then.

There is a far greater and much better story being told about community in the Bible, isn't there? And it's a cosmic story where in the fullness of time, God intends to unite all things in heaven and on earth under one head, Jesus Christ.

And so our community life together here at CCG is actually part of God's eternal purposes. And that's why our unity is to be lived out in community with one another right now.

Because we right now belong to a community that lasts forever. forever. The end of the psalm, life forever more. And so Christ's church in harmonious unity is the only place of blessing in this world.

[24 : 04] And if so, well, that's why our relationships within the church family always matter. So as hard as building strong community is in our culture, we have got to make it happen in our church.

And of course, there's always going to be challenges as we balance life and work and church in a place like Glasgow. But there's no alternative if our ultimate destiny is going to be dwelling together forever with God.

In his book, Life Together, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor in the Second World War, he opens his book with Psalm 133 and he says that when Christians live in visible community, it is a gracious anticipation of the end time.

A gracious anticipation of the end time. Community is what God designed us for. And that's why we emphasize community groups so much at Christ Church Glasgow.

Because it's an obvious way to create the healthy gospel community that the Bible speaks of. It's the best way to be known and loved and cared for in this church.

[25 : 28] So while our culture is individualistic and relationships are shallow like swiping or liking, what we want to do is live out the gospel in our lives together.

Because the gospel should and does create real deep lasting community. Because God has designed us to be engaged in significant and ongoing and meaningful relationships with one another.

In fact, when you read the New Testament, the most commonly found phrase that punctuates the gospels and the letters is this phrase, one another, one another.

It comes from a Greek word and occurs about a hundred times in the New Testament where most of these are specific commands for how Christian believers in the church should relate to one another.

For example, be devoted to one another. In love, bear one another's burdens. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other.

[26 : 38] encourage one another. Spur one another on towards love and good deeds. And there's about another 90 of these similar commands.

And so how do we obey these commands? Well, there is no better way to obey them than through deep relationships that are formed in community together.

together. So just like the single most formative experience is being part of a human family, children are formed into responsible adults in the family, then so the main way that we are shaped into what we should be as Christian people is through our relationships in God's family, the church.

Because it's when we commit ourselves to this one anothering that's there in the New Testament that we grow and we mature as followers of Jesus Christ.

And so it says the gospel of Jesus Christ sinks deeper into our hearts that we become more committed to community. How could we not be committed to community?

[27 : 51] Because when you think about it, the gospel of Jesus Christ points us to the one who died for his enemies, which means we can give of ourselves to others rather than be absorbed by ourselves.

It's the gospel that removes all fear and all pride, which means we can love those who aren't like me. The gospel calls us to holiness and to growth and to maturity, which means we need to be mutually accountable to one another, to spur one another on towards love and good deeds.

The gospel creates a new community that is unlike everything else in this world. And indeed, it becomes an attractive witness to this world because people should be able to look on at the church and see the beauty of the relationships of the people in the church with one another and say, wow, how can that be?

What is it that unites such different and distinct and diverse people as those? And the answer is Jesus. He's the one who unites us.

Jesus said, by this, everyone will know that you are my disciples if you love one another. So as we close, what's the summary of the message?

[29 : 19] Well, it is invest in community here in Christ Church Glasgow. Of course, we're already united in Christ. That's what Ephesians chapter 4 tells us.

But we maintain this unity through fragrant and refreshing community. And so be part of our community group structure.

Or if you're already in a community group, then be there as often as you can. And again, I've been saying this throughout this series. The application, I'm not saying this for my benefit.

I'm saying it for yours, because I want you to experience the blessing of community. Because we're on a trajectory from community now, living together, dwelling together, to a community in the new creation, where we will perfectly dwell with one another.

And with the God who made us. That is where we are going and so now is the time to get ready and to practice now what will be in the future.

[30 : 32] Because we want to be able to say with David, don't we, how good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity. Let's pray.

Thank you.