**April 23, 2023 John 17:21-23**

***One Call for Unity***

**Scripture: *John 17:20-26 NRSV***

*(20)"I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, (21)that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. (22)The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, (23)I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. (24)Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. (25)"Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. (26)I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."*

**Notes:**

1. We're discussing ***unity***, not uniformity.
   1. Unity needs effort, God's power, and unity is an ***outcome***.
   2. Scripture never tells us to ***pursue*** unity.
   3. Unity is a ***byproduct*** of other pursuits.
2. We Pursue ***Jesus***

*(9)And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, (10)to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment--to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ. "* *Ephesians 1:9-10 NIV*

* 1. Our mutual pursuit of ***Jesus*** will bring us closer.

*There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*" *Galatians 3:28 NIV*

* 1. You are more unified with the person who ***follows*** Jesus
  2. Ther is strength in the ***bond*** we have with believers.

1. We Pursue ***Serving***

*(11) It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, (12)to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up (13)until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Ephesians 4:11-13 NIV*

* 1. Unity is found by ***working*** ***together***.
  2. Build up the body to fulfill the ***Great*** ***Commission***.
  3. Push aside our personal ***agenda***.

1. We Pursue ***Virtue***

*(12) Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. (13)Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. (14)And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.*." *Colossians 3:12-14 NIV*

* 1. It's easier to be unified with someone who is not a***jerk***.
  2. The ***components*** of Christian character must be pursued.

1. Which virtues aren't associated with who ***you*** are?
   1. Pursue compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience because this is what ***Jesus*** is like.
   2. Put on ***love***; pursue ***love***.
   3. Love is the only thing that is able to hold each virtue in its perfect ***balance***.
2. When you pursue Jesus, pursue serving, pursue virtue; unity is the natural ***byproduct***.
   1. We don't unify so that we can do what we're ***called*** to do.
   2. But as we do the ***work***, we will find that we are unified.
   3. So do the work that will result in the ***evidence*** the world needs to believe in Jesus.

**Script:**

***I pledge allegiance to the Christian flag and to the Saviour for whose kingdom it stands; one brotherhood, uniting all mankind in service and in love.*** As a kid I learned this pledge. In Vacation Bible School, every meeting would begin with a pledge to the American flag, a pledge to the Bible, and a pledge to the Christian flag. I noticed that we here at Ryot in the ‘70s said it a little differently but it meant the exact same thing. We as individuals are pledging our loyalty to the church of Jesus Christ who the Christian flag represents. We profess to be united in the brotherhood of the church in service to our God, in service to our fellow man, and to demonstrate the love of Jesus to all we encounter. When I say these things I personally reflect upon these words and their meaning making sure I am not saying something I do not agree with.

It is very much the same thing when we stand and recite the Pledge to the American flag. If we truly mean what we say then we are pledging loyalty to our country and government even though we do not always agree with certain situations and policies. We promise to be loyal and united to the laws and ways of the country.

If you haven’t guessed it yet, today we are going to talk about unity. Most of the time, when someone says that we're going to talk about unity my first thought always is, "Who needs to get in line?" How many parents, coaches, even pastors have made a plea to a group they lead for that group to be unified, as a conflict seeks to split them apart? The discussion about unity rarely ever takes place when it needs to: outside the context of a conflict. No, typically unity comes up as a last grasp for peace when the issue at hand has completely overshadowed the quality of the relationship. So without massive conflict, and without a large group that needs to get in line, today we're going to look at the idea of unity.

***John 17:20-26 NRSV (20)"I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, (21)that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. (22)The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, (23)I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. (24)Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. (25)"Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. (26)I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.***

To clarify our pursuit, it's important to know that we're discussing unity, not uniformity. We seek oneness in spirit and mind, not sameness. Unity is more than willing to accept differences while uniformity seeks to eliminate them. We understand that we are made to be unique, so what is uniquely different between us must be celebrated with the understanding that we can still be unified within that uniqueness.

As we wrap our minds around those concepts, we begin to wonder how we are going to achieve unity. Uniformity is far easier. Uniformity is merely a means of power, control, and coercion. Unity requires a change of heart, a transformation of the mind; oh, and in case you missed it, loving our enemies. No wonder that even people of faith default to uniformity instead of unity. No wonder we fall in line with strict rules and appearances. It is easier to be uniform than to be an individual following the will of God. To see the ways in which we could possibly be "one" in the midst of political divides, social divisions, family disputes, and national crises becomes almost impossible to figure out how we could possibly achieve unity.

But what if we weren't supposed to pursue unity? You may jeer at that statement and idea; you may even think that it's unscriptural. Even Jesus prayed in John 17 for all the believers in all future times, which would include us, an explicit prayer "that all of them may be one." He is praying for us. He is praying for the liberal churches we don’t see eye to eye with. And, he is definitely praying for us conservative denominations. Jesus definitely values unity and even prays to the Father that we would be one. But what if the thing that is off is not our desire for unity but the assumption that we were supposed to pursue unity. Well, let's take a look.

The word "unity" appears seven times in the NIV translation and six in the NRSV of Scripture; five of them appear in the New Testament and then another three times it appears as a heading for a section. Take a look at Psalm 133:1, once, unity is celebrated David writes, "*How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity!*" Three times we are asked to put forth effort to keep unity, once through our own effort, "*Make every effort to keep the unity*" (Ephesians 4:3), and twice through God's power, "Give them unity of mind to carry out what the king and his officials had ordered" (2 Chronicles 30: 12) and in John 17:22-23, "l have given them the glory that you gave me, . . . so that they may be brought to complete unity." Then another three times we are told that unity is an outcome. In Ephesians 1:9-10 Paul tells us God made known the mystery of Christ to bring "unity to all things" and then later in chapter 4 verses 12-13 he adds, "to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith." Last, in Colossians 3:14, we are commanded to "Put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity."

So if we could quickly recap the Bible's teaching on unity: once unity is celebrated, three times we are taught that unity needs effort. Two of those times it says we need God's power, and three times we are told that unity is an outcome.

So why, in the midst of that teaching, would we assume that unity is meant to be the goal? Not once are we told that unity is the goal, which should make sense to us because we are all aware that as soon as we talk about unity, we become acutely aware of all the ways in which we aren't unified! Scripture never tells us to pursue the goal of unity. Scripture teaches that unity is great, that it won't naturally happen, and that unity is a byproduct of other pursuits.

Have you ever tried really hard to not eat unhealthy food? You swear off desserts, unhealthy carbs—every last bit of it! You tell yourself that you're not going to eat any sugar and you are going to be the healthiest version of yourself possible! I have been working very hard at following my dietary instructions. Those who traveled with us to mission advance have seen for themselves the work I am putting into it. It's not easy by any means; there are moments you think I do not get to eat the food I have loved growing up. And, how often do you find yourself thinking of unhealthy food? Reese’s cups, snickers bars, pizza, ice cream; it's all I can think about when it is around. Maybe your tastes are different than mine, maybe you think about key lime pie, spicy sweet chili Doritos, and Blizzards from Dairy Queen. If you put your focus on avoiding bad things, not eating unhealthy food, you'll find it increasingly difficult to do. However, if you put your focus on good things, eating healthy food, on living healthy, on exercise and sunshine, you'll find avoiding what you don't want becomes much easier. Similarly, if we put our pursuit on unity, we'll find it elusive because unity was never meant to be the goal—it's a byproduct, it’s an outcome. So what must we pursue if we're going to be a people who are "one"?

We Pursue Jesus

In Ephesians 1:9-10 we are told, "*He made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ."* *As we pursue Christ, we are unified*.

This should make the most sense of all of these ideas. If all of us are pursuing Jesus in the areas that are of eternal significance (you could hear that as "most important"), we will grow in our similarity. What we value will begin to look more like what Jesus valued. What we love will begin to look more like what Jesus loved: people. Our mutual pursuit of Jesus will bring us closer together to each other.

The pursuit of Jesus will also be the great revealer of whether we are becoming more unified or if we're only seeking uniformity. Galatians 3:28 tells us, "*There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus*." These distinctions do not go away; they just no longer matter because our identity in Christ and our intimacy with him become so significant.

What this teaches is that you have more in common with the person who follows Jesus than anyone who doesn't believe in him. Your fellow believers may be of a different generation, a different tax bracket, a different political party, they may even like the New York Yankees! You are more unified with the person who follows Jesus and seems completely different than yourself, than anyone who has all the same surface similarities and yet is distant from their Savior. This is not meant to be a call to break off ties with those who don't know Jesus; it is to understand the strength of the bond we have with the believers around us.

We Pursue Serving

In Ephesians 4:11-13 we are told, "*So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God."* In this passage we find unity within the works of service that are the *"good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do*" (Ephesians 2:10).

Unity isn't found in thinking about it, talking about it, even from desiring it. Unity is found by working together in the common things that God has created us to do. The point of the work is to build up the body to fulfill the Great Commission. This is the actual goal Jesus told us that we should pursue. When we push aside our personal agenda to give ourselves in service of this work, some powerful things happen:

1. We gain an appreciation of the gifting of others. It's easy in our world today to assume that we do not need the people around us. The value of the individual has been lost as we continue to believe we're fine on our own. But as we pursue what God has called us to, we realize we cannot accomplish it on our own. We need the gifting of those around us in order to do it. And as we gain an appreciation for the gifting of others . . .
2. We gain an appreciation for others. Realizing that we are created to need the gifting of others allows us to see the value of the individual as well. Valuing others is also the prerequisite for knowing others. So when we value those around us . . .
3. We grow closer in community to those around us. Serving is the context for the most intimate community. Relationships form easily and relationships form closer when we work together toward a common goal.

Because of these things, unity is a natural byproduct of a culture that is committed to serving together in the work God has called us to. And the last thing we must pursue for unity to be the outcome is when . . .

We Pursue Virtue

Colossians 3:12-14 reads, "*Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity*."

I don't know how to say this any other way: it's easier to be unified with someone who is not ajerk. While our character should be reformed and refined through our relationship with Jesus and our commitment to be servants in his kingdom, I still believe it is helpful for us to be aware that the components of Christian character must be pursued. The listing of virtues in Colossians was not meant to be exhaustive, but it does give us some key categories for evaluating our own character.

We don't need to attempt to be exhaustive here, but a helpful question may suffice. Are there any of the virtues that aren't associated with who you are? Because if that's the case, it's harder for people to be unified with you because you look less like Jesus. So please pursue compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Don't do it simply because these are good things, even though they are. Do this because this is what Jesus is like. Most of all, put on love; pursue love. Love is the only thing that is able to hold each virtue in its perfect balance. Love knows when to hold someone accountable and when to extend mercy. Love knows when to teach and when to forgive. Love knows when to help someone up and when to "bear with . . . one another."

What I believe you'll find when you pursue Jesus, when you pursue serving, and when you pursue virtue is that unity is the natural byproduct. Unity doesn't come from a focus on unity; it comes as the outcome when we pursue Jesus, his mission, and his character. Unity is not the prerequisite for this work; unity is the outcome. We don't unify so that we can do what we're called to do. It is as we do the work that we are unified.

And this is a big deal to Jesus. His prayer for all "those who will believe in me" still is "that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (John 17:20-21). So do the work that will result in what Jesus tells us will be the evidence the world needs to believe in him. Please do not sit around thinking about how hard unity will be to achieve when we are so diverse, and oftentimes so divided. Pursue Jesus, pursue his mission, pursue his character—and on the other side of that pursuit, we might just find the "oneness" that Jesus spoke about.