

ROMANS 15:1-13

THE SPIRIT OF UNITY: BUILDING

A pastor tells the story of another pastor, who complained to the Lord about the church. His prayer went something like this:

“They are a mess. They are uncommitted, mean and lazy. They don’t care what you say or even about you and your honor.

“They are a stiff-necked people, and they don’t deserve your love.”

The complaining pastor then “heard” Jesus “say” in response, “Be careful...she’s my wife!”

The church is the bride of Jesus Christ. Sometimes her beauty is hard for us to see, but she is still Jesus’ “wife.”

As we near the end of our year-long journey through Paul’s letter to the Romans, we are pondering a long section summed up in these words:

“May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

How will a group of people who are sometimes messy, uncommitted, mean, lazy and stiff-necked, demonstrate the spirit of unity that Jesus wants for his “wife”?

Two weeks ago, we learned that this spirit of unity begins with accepting. Because God has accepted us in Jesus, we accept each other, even when our consciences permit what others forbid, or forbid what others permit.

Last week, we learned that this spirit of unity continues with guarding. I do not want to distress or destroy my brother, because he is valuable to me. I will give up my freedom for a season, by not doing what I am fully convinced I am permitted to do, when I am in the presence of this brother I love. My resolve is to do nothing that would put a “stumbling block” in his way.

In doing this, we are not only guarding our brothers, but we are guarding the gospel. We think less of our freedom, and more of building righteousness, joy and peace in the Holy Spirit, in this community. We want our brothers to have this here, and we want unbelievers to see this here.

But Paul is not quite finished. After calling us to a community culture of accepting and guarding, he calls us to a culture of building. We read in verse 2, “Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up.”

Yet how does Paul “construct” his argument about building? Some of the verses we just read, do not seem to have anything to do with building.

Here is how it all fits together: Paul roots our building of each other, in what God is doing. In the last several verses, he describes God’s building of the “wife” of Jesus. This is why we must be building each other up.

We can sum it up this way: God is building. Are we building?

GOD IS BUILDING. That’s the point of all those Old Testament quotes in verses 8 to 13. Paul is tying our spirit of unity to God’s bigger purposes in “building” the “wife” of Jesus.

It’s kind of like this. When our family was in New York City this summer, our first stop was the Empire State Building. As we stood on the observation deck on the 86th floor, we could see the “big picture” of New York City in all directions.

* To the north, we could see the trees of Central Park.

* To the east, we could see the Chrysler Building, the East River, and some of the Bronx and Queens.

* To the west, we could see the Hudson River and some of New Jersey.

* To the south, we could see Wall Street, and off in the far distance, we could see the Statue of Liberty.

We gained a perspective on the entire city, and that was helpful when we returned to street level.

God is building. That is the big perspective we need, as we think about building up each other, “on the

street level.”

God is building, THROUGH JESUS.

Verse 8: “For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God’s truth, to confirm the promises made to the patriarchs.”

What promises is Paul writing about? He is probably thinking of the first promises to Abraham, from Genesis 12:

“I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you;

“I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.

“I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”

God promises to bless the Jewish people. They will become a great nation.

So how does God do this? How do we know that God has kept his promise to Abraham?

Jesus. He is the culmination of that blessing. He has become a “servant of the Jews” on behalf of God’s truth. He has come from heaven and lived as a Jew, perfectly fulfilling God’s law. Because of this, he is worthy to become the suffering servant, bearing upon his innocent body, the sins of sinners. By faith in Jesus, God and believing Jews become one again.

But is that all God is building? Is God just building a kingdom for the Jews, through Jesus?

No. That is a theme all through the book of Romans. The Jew cannot say, “God’s promises are just for me.”

God is building, through Jesus, TO ALL NATIONS.

Think again of the words of Genesis 12. God said to Abraham, “All nations will be blessed through you.”

Then think of the words Paul offers here from Deuteronomy, the Psalms, and Isaiah:

“Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles; I will sing hymns to your name...

“Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people...

“Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and sing praises to him, all you peoples...

“The Root of Jesse will spring up, one who will arise to rule over the nations; the Gentiles will hope in him.”

What’s the point? From the beginning, God’s plan was not simply for the Jews. God’s plan was for all nations to be blessed, through the Jews. God’s heart was for rebellious people of all nations, to turn to the Jew Jesus, and praise his name.

Now, you may be wondering, “What does this have to do with the spirit of unity?” It has everything to do with the spirit of unity, because as the Lord reveals these words to Paul, he is indeed giving us a glimpse of his heart.

Paul’s readers were probably a mixture of Jews and Gentiles. Like the rest of us, they tended to focus on what divided them.

“We, the Jews, are the ones who have received God’s promises. We have our special, important religious ceremonies!”

“We, the Gentiles, don’t care about your religious ceremonies!”

Paul’s point is that we get so hung up in these “disputable matters”, that we forget the big picture, which is that God is building a kingdom of people of all sorts, through Jesus Christ.

Think of what Paul wrote early in his letter to the Ephesians: God’s plan, even before creation, was “to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.”

That grand plan is at the heart of his heart. That enormous purpose is why he does, all that he does.

We quibble and fuss about disputable matters. We trample upon each other’s consciences, because we think it’s so important that people become what we want them to be, and do what we want them to do.

No! God’s big picture is building his kingdom! Jesus is all! His glory is everything! It is for all sorts of people. That’s the big picture.

In the early years of the Reformation, Martin Luther's mentor, the man who had guided him in his early years as a monk, asked him this:

"Luther, what happens if all this works, if you have your Reformation?"

"What happens to the devotions, and to the pilgrimages, and to the relics, and to all the wonderful things of the Church; and to the marvelous, majestic liturgy, with all of its pomp and ceremony; all these things that we've grown up with and that we love so dearly and that are so close to our hearts? What will be left when you're through?"

Luther answered, "Jesus."

God's heart, is for Jesus to be Lord of the nations. His call, is for us to keep this big picture always before us, here on the street level of this rather small part of his big kingdom.

Is God's heart, your heart?

I think of what we call "missions." Our "spirit of unity" must extend beyond these walls, even to the end of the earth.

We are called to share in this work, as we pray, as we give, as we encourage, and even as God may call some of us to go for a season or a lifetime. God wants his people to show a passion for this big picture of missions.

Yet I also think of what we call "witness". Last week, as Roger Golden prayed for the Bakers and their plans to go to Ireland, he prayed for all of us, that we might have a passion to see God use us, in bringing people back to himself, through Jesus.

When you wake up in the morning, and when you walk through your day, is your heart stirred to show Jesus to others, through the life you live and the words you speak?

Is your heart, God's heart? Just as the images from atop the Empire State building have stayed in my mind, does this "big picture" remain in your heart?

If so...if God's building program is in your heart, you will have a passion for building on the street level. God is building. ARE WE BUILDING?

Here is what should happen. As we get a vision of God's building, this moves us, back on the ground, to a right passion for the people in our lives. This includes nonbelievers, but now Paul wants us to think of this body.

Listen to verse 2 again: "Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up." As God builds his kingdom, we are called to "build" godliness in our brothers and sisters.

So how do we do this? How do we know we are doing this? Paul's words drive us to three questions, behind this question.

First, ARE WE HELPING?

Paul writes in verse 1, "We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak..."

We read that, and we might think Paul is just telling us to tolerate each other. You know: hang in there. They're dumb, but you can suck this up and stick this out!

Not quite. The word translated "bear with" means to "support." It's not just tolerating that brother. It's helping that brother.

He or she has a heavy conscience. We are tempted to just keep a stiff upper lip, or to use our lips to tell them to loosen up!

Instead, we are to help them walk through life. We may not agree with all the convictions of their consciences. But we help them bear their burdens.

How? How do we help?

Through encouragement. As we learned a couple of weeks ago, the "weak" brother does not understand all of what it means to be one with Jesus. The "strong" one can remind him of this: you are righteous in Jesus. You are not righteous because of what you do or do not do. You cannot get righteousness through your deeds. Only Jesus makes you righteous.

What a burden-lifting word to a brother! Maybe he has acted against his conscience. Maybe he is

wounded in his conscience. Maybe even the heart of his faith is shaken, because of what he has done.

Encourage him. Don't look down on him. Remind him that Jesus' blood and righteousness is all he needs. Remind him of his hope in Jesus. Remind him of this, so that as Paul writes in verse 13, the God of all hope will fill him with all joy and peace, so that he may overflow with hope by the power of the Spirit.

Help through encouragement. Help through embracing.

Do you know when my children best know that I love them? It is when they have sinned, and by the grace of God, my anger melts, and I speak a word of forgiveness, and I pull them to my heart, with an embrace.

Do you know when the gospel shines most brightly? It is in that difficult season in our relationships, when we have differed, and maybe even sinned in our discussion of our differences, and we embrace one another.

Maybe this is a literal embrace, or maybe it is an embrace that says, "I want you to know that our differences are real, but they are not constructing a barrier between us. I still embrace you as a brother or sister."

You have not chosen, as I would have chosen, regarding school for your children. But I embrace you as my brother or sister.

You do not choose, as I would choose, to observe the Sabbath. But I embrace you as my brother or sister.

You hold that position on this unclear theological question, and I don't hold that position. But I embrace you as my brother or sister.

Maybe you use words, or maybe all you need to use is the attitude you demonstrate toward that person.

Are we helping? Weak or strong, are we helping each other, as we encourage and embrace each other, in a spirit of unity?

ARE WE PLEASING?

Verses 1 and 2: "We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up."

Why? Verse 3: "For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: 'The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.'"

Jesus did not live to please himself. If he had lived to please himself, he would have not come from heaven to live in this sin-rotted, death-filled place. If he had lived to please himself, he would not have obeyed his Father, in all situations. If he had lived to please himself, he would not have died for the sins of sinners.

But he came and lived and died, and he received insult all along the way. He is our example. He is the shining example of One who did not live so that he might please himself, but so he could bless others...forever.

People-pleasing. That's a phrase in our culture, and like lots of other phrases, we mess it up. We people-please in all the wrong ways.

We must not people-please, in a way that is selfish. So often I want to please people, so they will help me.

We must not people-please, in a way that is idolatrous. So often I want to please people, more than I want to please God.

This is a godly, righteous, holy form of people-pleasing. This is when I want to please you, for your good. I want to build you up in faith. I want your godliness to grow. Because I love Jesus, I want to see more of Jesus living in you.

So I am sensitive to you. I think of you, and your feelings, and your conscience. I do not want to do anything that would give you distress or maybe even lead to your destruction.

I will give up my freedom for a season, when I am with you, and I will do it even with joy, because I want to please you in this godly way.

Yes, I do want your good, so maybe I will speak about how I am fully convinced about this or that. But I will do it not to build up my "position." Nor will I do it to buttress my ego. I will speak, only for your good.

Once again, this is a heart that is centered on the other person, though not in a dependent or unhealthy way. I love Jesus, so I love you, and if I can please you in a way that is for your good, I will do it.

We are consumers. We are told each day, "Please yourself. Take care of yourself. Provide for yourself. Look out for yourself."

The radical call of Jesus, overturns this!

If you are not pleased, I will not watch this with you.

If you are not pleased, I will not drink this in front of you.

If you are not pleased, I will respond with humility, as I explain my conviction to you.

Are we helping? Are we pleasing? ARE WE FOLLOWING?

About a week ago, I attended the monthly meeting of the Richmond Area Ministerial Association. We spoke of Ted Haggard, and his recent fall from a popular, growing, evangelical ministry, to disgrace.

The pastor who gave the devotion, Reuben Dunckel from the Alliance Bible Church, planned for his phone to ring during his devotion. It was a friend who talks with him each week, and asks him important questions about his life and ministry, in the hope that Reuben will not fall as Ted Haggard fell.

So right in front of us, Reuben's friend started asking him questions. He led Reuben to admit a specific sin. Then he asked more questions, and finally he asked this: are you walking in the dust of Jesus?

Verse 5: "May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus..."

This is about Jesus. This is about Jesus as Lord of the nations, as God builds his church, and this about Jesus as Lord of our lives, as we build each other up.

This is about following Jesus. This is about walking in his dust, as we follow him in a spirit of unity.

It's not about us. It's not about our freedom. It's not about our desires. It's not about our pride.

It's not about how smart we are, and how it would be great if everybody else was as smart as me, so they would know to live as I live.

This is about a Jesus-centered, Jesus-filled, Jesus-impassioned, Jesus-dusted ministry to each other, blessing each other, and showing to each other, and to our world...Jesus.

What do I want to be? What do we want to be? What do we want this place to be?

Do we want this to be a place, where we dispute over disputable matters, to the point that we do not accept each other, or guard each other, or build each other up? Do we want this to be a place where we turn our backs away from each other, and turn our hearts away from each other, because we are so fully convinced that we are always right, and that our way is the best way, and that others are simply fools to be suffered?

Or do we want this to be a place where people see Jesus? Do we want this to be a place where yes, we stand for clear biblical mandate, but when matters are disputable, we create a culture of accepting, guarding, building?

As we come down from seeing the big picture at the top of God's building, and as we walk in the streets again, will we live in a spirit of unity?

What about you? What about me? Are we building, by helping others, pleasing others, and following Jesus?

This is so...challenging! How I have failed to accept and guard and build! How I have so often failed in my heart, and too often failed with my words!

I must return to Jesus.

I must run back to him for forgiveness. I need him to say, "Not guilty."

I must run back to him for holiness. I need his Holy Spirit to make me into one who walks in the dust of Jesus.

So do you. So do we. We all need the grace of Jesus, to have the spirit of unity that God calls us to have.

Pastor John Sartelle recently wrote of visiting the church where he grew up. It is almost 175 years old. He wrote of wishing that when that span of time has passed again, a descendant of his family will sit in the

sanctuary of the church he now serves, and be able to reflect upon its faithfulness. Then he wrote,

“Such a church, like a godly family, doesn’t just happen. It is born, formed, and built through the Holy Spirit, through the preaching of God’s Word, through constant prayer, through love that conquers disagreements, through hard fought battles with a relentless world, through wise and bold leadership, through God-given challenges that cannot be accomplished in our own strength.”

Love that conquers disagreements. A place born, formed and built by the Holy Spirit - a Spirit given to building Jesus’ church in all nations, and a Spirit given to building up God’s people, as they live in a spirit of unity.

May it be so, in this place.