
The Church in Prayer

Victory Life Sherman / Online

Sunday, September 13, 2020 — Psalm 133 - Unity's Witness

Introduction

Faith is not manipulative, nor is faith transactional. Faith is primarily covenant relationship and cooperative obedience. It's building a relationship with God built on trust in His character and His word, and obedient responses to His instructions. Prayer is one of the primary ways that we nurture our relationship with a God we are in covenant with, and one of the primary ways we learn cooperative obedience.

The primary purpose of prayer is not to get God to do what you think He should do. The primary purpose of prayer is relationship, and in that relationship we are transformed. Prayer must be primarily about being *with* God, not primarily about asking (or especially demanding) something *from* God. It is within the context of this relationship that our trust is built and our character transformed that we learn how to pray rightly and live rightly while enacting His will in cooperative obedience.

Psalm 133

Psalm 133:1-3 (ESV)

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.

Community

To be a Christian is to be in community. It is unavoidable. We are born into a family (John 1:12-13, Ephesians 2:19, 1 John 3:1,) and into a body (Ephesians 4:16, 1 Corinthians 12:12).

“No Christian is an only child.”¹ ~ Eugene Peterson

The question is not whether we *want* to be in a faith community or not, or if we *should* be in one or not. The question is *how well* do we live in a community of faith, as God has designed it?

Community is not something we as Christians are called to simply tolerate, like paying taxes as a citizen. Community is both necessary and desirable for our faith have a social dimension. Human to human relationships are necessary for our faith to come into maturity.

“The words of [Psalm 133] reminded the people that their family relationship was established not by blood, but by their mutual share in the community of God, a community that received blessing from its God.”² ~ Nancy deClaissé-Walford

Unity

What is the goal of God’s community and relationships as He designed them? Unity. This word means “togetherness,” or you could see it meaning “as one.” It’s a word describing when people are all together, living and functioning without strife, in harmony with a oneness.

“Strife demands more energy, whereas peaceful unity means the corporate body can reach common goals with less stress. If individuals cooperate, then their efforts are multiplied.”³ ~ Tremper Longman III

James 3:14-16 (NLT) *But if you are bitterly jealous and there is selfish ambition in your heart, don’t cover up the truth with boasting and lying. For **jealousy** and **selfishness** are not God’s kind of wisdom. Such things are earthly, unspiritual, and demonic. For wherever there is jealousy and selfish ambition, there you will find **disorder** and **evil** of every kind.*

Psalm 133:1 (ESV)

Behold, how **good** and **pleasant** it is
when brothers dwell in unity!

The community that lives and dwells in unity, the psalmist describes as “good.” This word “good” (Hebrew “*tov*”) harkens us back to Genesis 1, God describes the world He creates as “good,” with the seventh time saying its “very good.” But in Genesis 2, God describes something as “not good”: a human alone. God creates the woman and gives

¹ Eugene Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, p. 175

² Nancy deClaissé-Walford, *The New International Commentary on the OT — The Book of Psalms*, p. 939

³ Tremper Longman III, *Tyndall OT Commentaries — Psalms*, p. 439

the man relationship, two that become one. Humans together in unity within relationships God says is “good.” Humans living in isolation is “not good.” Pleasant also means “lovely, good, attractive, friendly, joyous.” It’s a beautiful goodness for brothers and sister to live together in unity as one.

Psalm 93:5 (ESV)

Your decrees are very trustworthy;
holiness befits your house,
O LORD, forevermore.

This unity is what the family of god is called to continually work for and strive for. But left to the inclination of our own hearts, history and scripture tells us, we will end up with endless squabbles that often lead toward angry arguments, divisive attitudes, and even murderous battles (Cain and Abel, Genesis 4).

Relationships are usually our most difficult tasks.

Children are ordinarily so full of their own needs and wants that they look at a brother or sister not as an ally but as a competitor (especially with parents’ attention and care). We often center our lives around “self.” We need more than ourselves, our own desires and efforts, we need help. Our Heavenly Father has infinite care and attention and blessing.

It is not our own efforts that enable us to be in relationships that bring unity. Our best efforts make things worse. We need help from above. Only through the Lord can we be in unity. Three times we get the picture of what is “descending”...

Psalm 133:2-3a (ESV)

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!

“True unity, like all good gifts, is from above; bestowed rather than contrived, a blessing far more than an achievement.”⁴ ~ Derek Kidner

2 Images

Two images are used as *descriptions* of a community in unity: the anointing oil of priests and the dew of Hermon.

⁴ Derek Kidner, *Kidner Classic Commentaries — Psalms 73-150*, p. 489

Oil, throughout Scripture, is a sign of God's presence, a symbol His Spirit. Oil was mixed with sweet smelling spices and used for hair and skin care. Pouring oil on the head of guests was an act of hospitality in Israel in ancient times. The sweet smelling fragrance of the precious oil could not be contained.

This oil used to anoint the head of a visitor to one's home and used to anoint the head of Aaron, the high priest, celebrates and is symbolic of the presence of God in the community of Israel. When you smelled the fragrant oil or saw the consecrated priests, it would remind you that God is present with you and working on your behalf.

This is how unity is described: when brothers and sister dwell together in unity as one, it is a sweet smelling fragrance of God being present with us. Seeing the family of God work as one is a way of seeing God at work, for only God, not ideology, will unite God's people.

The dew of Hermon, the highest mountain in the eastern Mediterranean (125 miles north of Jerusalem), was known for its abundance, and was life-giving in the dry land of Israel. Without the nightly accumulation of dew, the land would be parched and dry for many months out of the year.

Here in this psalm the dew of Hermon is transferred to the much lower mountain of Zion, the spiritual center of the world, the place where God's throne and worship was centered, from which the kingdom of God was extended. As the dew soothes and refreshes the dry land, so the unity of God's people is refreshing to the dry, spiritual land.

Divine Activity

It is upon this unified community of brothers and sisters living in harmony with one another that there is uniquely divine activity: commanding the blessing, life forevermore.

Psalm 133:3b (ESV)

For there the Lord has commanded the blessing,
life forevermore.

It is upon the community of brothers and sisters living in unity that there is a commanded blessing from God; but not just a blessing, *the* blessing. This connects our minds back to the original blessing God bestows upon Abraham in Genesis 12:3.

Genesis 12:3 (ESV) "I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you **all the families of the earth shall be blessed.**"

In Psalm 133, the way in which the family of God fulfills the blessing of being a blessing to the whole world is God commanding it upon unity. Unity within the family of God is how the blessing is fulfilled.

The last line of the psalm adds “life evermore.” This kind of eternal life is only God’s to give. The quality of life in eternal is tasted amongst a community of faith in unity. The quality of heaven is foreshadowed on earth within the people of God in unity.

The only way this becomes possible is in Jesus.

Jesus

In the same prayer that Jesus gives us the only place in Scripture where eternal life is defined (John 17:3), where it is defined as “knowing” God (Psalm 46:10):

John 17:3 (ESV) And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.

Jesus also prays for His followers to build on that intimate knowledge of Him by extending that life and relationship to one another. Eternal life in relationship with God becomes an open invitation for others to join in on that relationship.

John 17:20-23 (ESV) “I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that **they may all be one**, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, **so that the world may believe** that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may **become perfectly one**, so that **the world may know** that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.”

How do we cultivate this kind of fragrant and refreshing unity?

Just as the two images are used both as *descriptions* of a community in unity, they are also *prescriptions* of how we bring unity within the community:

The precious oil poured on the head is not just any head, but Aaron’s head, a priestly ceremonial act. The priests were anointed by oil for the priestly duty (Exodus 29:7, 30:22-30; Leviticus 8:12) of bringing the people before God and communicating God to His people. This oil poured on the head of the priest represented the gift of God’s Spirit that would enable the important officials to exercise their responsibilities effectively.

In the same way that Aaron and the priests were anointed with precious oil, so we have been ransomed by the precious blood of Christ (1 Peter 1:18-19) and have the Spirit of God dwelling in us (1 Corinthians 6:11, 19). Because of this, we are now described as priests:

1 Peter 2:9 (ESV) But you are a chosen race, **a royal priesthood**, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

This means that you and I have been anointed to be priests for one another. We are each other's priest. Unity is cultivated and developed by recognizing that God's Spirit has anointed our brothers and sisters to be priests for one another, set apart for service to one another: bringing one another before God and bringing God's word and His love to one another.

John 13:34-35 (ESV) "A new commandment I give to you, that you **love one another**: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this **all people will know** that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

When we begin to see each other as priests in our lives, our relationships are profoundly impacted. Unity is cultivated when we do a priestly duty well for one another, loving and serving sacrificially.

The dew of Hermon that soothes and refreshes the dry land, so the unity of God's people is refreshing to the dry spiritual land. This morning dew communicates a sense of freshness, it evokes the feeling of fruitfulness (the land is watered by the dew), and builds an anticipation for growth.

Unity is cultivated in a community that has the same expectation for the Holy Spirit working in our brothers and sisters. There is a fresh expectation to see dry lives watered by the the Spirit. There is a desire to activate the Holy Spirit's work in each other to bring fruitfulness (Galatians 5:22-23).

As a priest for each other, we sow the Word of God into each other's hearts and lives. But we also look for the Holy Spirit working like fresh dew every morning with an unpredictable freshness in each person's unique lives and circumstances.

It is upon Zion, the church that walks in unity, that God commands *the* blessing.

Genesis 12:3 (ESV) "I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you **all the families of the earth shall be blessed.**"

John 17:23 (ESV) "I in them and you in me, that they may **become perfectly one**, so that **the world may know** that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me."

Unity is the Church's strongest witness of the power and presence of God in a world of violence, hate, and division. Unity within the Body of Christ is how God blesses the world through us, His people, as anointed priests.

Ephesians 4:3 (ESV) eager to maintain **the unity of the Spirit** in the bond of peace.

Conclusion

Unity in the Church, our community of faith, cultivated through healthy relationships is worth working for, it's worth sacrificing for. It is how we witness to our world and extend the kingship of Christ into the world.

Philippians 2:1-11 (ESV) So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, **being in full accord and of one mind**. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.