

A Mind For Unity: Love (1st Corinthians 13:1-8)

Focusing on Others, Not Self. In previous lessons, we have seen that certain men who cry out for *unity* do not actually want the kind of *unity* for which Jesus prayed; we have seen that the denominational concept of the church *prolongs* division and even *thrives* on it; we have also seen that the selfishness of men will be a hindrance to true *unity*, and the factionalism that arises from time to time [and which now exists among brethren] is often nothing more than brethren who are self-seeking and, as such, cannot ever bring about true *unity*. As a contrast to all of these things that either hinder or even directly oppose the *unity* for which Jesus prayed, though, we have **love**. Now, we must take a look at some of the attributes of love and how this will help us attain and maintain true *unity*:

Selflessness. (v. 5) Love, according to the divinely-inspired description written by the apostle Paul, “*does not seek its own*”; that is, it seeks the good of others and not just what will personally benefit; it seeks to do the will of others [Christ and fellow believers] and not its own; and it seeks peace rather than insisting on unreasonable demands that bring conflict and/or divisions. This attribute of love is the foundation of *unity* and, without it, *unity* will not exist. It was for that reason that Paul would give the Corinthian brethren a command to “*Let all that you do be done with love*” (1st Cor. 14:16). It was a **lack** of love [and spiritual maturity, of course] that led to the many problems there, and love **had** to be present if there were to be any effective changes. When the church is composed of brethren who are *selfless*, rather than *selfish*, there will be no occasions when one clashes with another over trivial matters, but all will consider the opinions and suggestions of others, and will work together for the good of the body.

Longsuffering. (v. 4) *Longsuffering* is another way of saying *patience*, but it is also more than that. *Longsuffering* is bearing with another and being willing to work with others in times when we do not see eye-to-eye on everything. We will have patience with others and have **realistic** expectations of new converts and even mature Christians. We will not expect everyone to immediately change to fit our thinking, but will give them time to seriously consider the differences and whether or not they are in error. We will spend time with the new convert and help him along instead of criticizing and berating him for his lack of maturity. If we are trying to attain to *unity* or to maintain it, we will not give up when things do not move as quickly as we had planned. While we are waiting on others to come to see things as we do, we will also be considering the real possibility it is **we** who are on the wrong side of the issue.

Trust. (v. 7; “*believes all things*”) When a relationship is built on love, *trust* is an **absolute necessity**. As this text has revealed, love trusts, but let us understand that without *trust*, it is not love at all! And if we are seeking to join in union with another or others, there must first be a reason to *trust* one another before the plans proceed. As long as there is reason to **dis**trust, no one will likely make a move to join with the other and we come to an *impasse*. But those who seek for true *unity* and have this love for all others involved will make a concerted effort to give the others a reason to trust **them**, while striving to find out if the others involved are trustworthy. We should be striving diligently to get to the point where we would not hesitate to put our lives in their hands and, as Aquila and Priscilla, lay our necks on the line for our brethren.

Never Giving Up. (vv. 7, 8) When there are differences among brethren — especially regarding the more serious matters — then if true *unity* is to be restored and if it is to be maintained, then all members involved have to demonstrate a strong will and life committed to practicing and teaching truth. Love will not allow us to simply make one attempt and, if that fails, quit trying to lead others to know Him and his responsibilities. When we truly love one another, we will be doing everything we could possibly do in an effort to achieve true *unity* and to maintain the *unity* for as long as time exists. While others may bail out of difficult situations, love for the souls of all men will keep us striving for the goal of true *unity* and of heaven; while others may give up on us and when we are tempted

to take the easy path, let us not forget the example of our Lord and Savior who kept doing the things that led to His final act of obedience. Let us also have the love that refuses to give up!

True love will help us lead others to Christ, but we should also know that it helps us to attain to true *unity* and maintain that union for "as long as we both shall live." Let us then learn to show others they are more significant than self; let us demonstrate longsuffering to show others we may be able to work together in actual harmony **after** the union has been initiated; let us learn to trust one another and prove ourselves trustworthy to them; and let us learn to never give up when the *unity* is not immediate. When we do this, we have proven ourselves as ones seeking true *unity* while maintaining our desire to follow through without compromise.

One last note: if we are to have true *unity*, then we must have true love, and true *love* does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in truth (v. 6). Any union that is not founded on truth cannot be pleasing to God and is not worthy of our efforts.

Questions and Application.

1. Describe the ways in which love helps us attain and maintain true *unity*. _____

2. Considering the opposite of *love* is *hate*, how likely is it that we can achieve true *unity* when one harbors hatred in his heart towards one with whom he is attempting to unite? _____

3. How does our trust of one another affect our love for brethren? _____

4. Does true love involved and include discipline? If so, how can we maintain true *unity* when [or, **if**] discipline is necessary? _____

Achieving Unity When Division Exists (Acts 15)

The Right Way to Resolve Differences. When it comes to situations where division already exists, we must take a different approach to the situation. Now, we must make sure some things happen that will lead to true *unity* and make sure some things **don't** happen that will prolong the division.

The Proper Attitude. (v. 2) We are not told the motives behind the men from Jerusalem who were teaching that circumcision was necessary, but we do know that when the dispute arose, they were among the ones who agreed to send to Jerusalem to find out what the truth of the matter was. Even the ones who were wrong on this matter agreed to send Paul and Barnabas and others to Jerusalem to obtain an answer. Would we be as willing? The sad fact is, some are not really seeking truth or true *unity*, and any and all efforts are basically a waste of time; others are just seeking a means to justify themselves; some are only trying to maintain their positions of power and/or influence (cf. **John 11:47ff**); and some are merely seeking the approval of other men. We should never **assume** this is the case, though; actions will prove us correct or not, but give them an opportunity. At the very least, though, we must appeal to the right source of authority — the word of God. If we do not agree it is our standard, or if one side or another brings a **different** standard, we are not likely going to attain true *unity*.

The Need To Hear Both Sides. (vv. 4, 5) In this dispute, the men went up to Jerusalem and both sides presented their arguments clearly and in such a way that others could distinguish the real differences. Those who taught circumcision was necessary clearly stated, *"It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses."* Paul and Barnabas simply told of all things God has done with them — among the Gentiles. But, let us recognize that the differences were clear; there was no confusion and there was certainly not a misunderstanding about what one side or the other taught and believed. This is important to know because some disputes today are made purposefully ambiguous and, as long as they continue to offer such confusing messages and defenses for their positions, no true *unity* will ever be achieved.

When we make our arguments on the issues that divide us, they must also be presented in such a way as to convict the observers of the truth. Without evidence strong enough to convict, the dispute will never be resolved and there will always remain a "shadow of a doubt." Too often, in the midst of disputes, the arguments presented are neither sound nor reasonable, but emotional pleas based on traditional beliefs and practices, or an effort to justify practices, doctrines, or situations already existing. When the dispute arose at Antioch and when the arguments were presented at Jerusalem, emotional arguments and traditional practices were absent from the hearing. Let us determine that when disputes arise, we will offer up only sound and reasonable arguments, evidence that will convict beyond a reasonable doubt, and a sincere appeal to the Scriptures so that others may clearly understand the truth. Emotion and tradition may sway others, but it will not convict them of truth. What is our goal?

A Conclusion Was Reached. After all the arguments were presented, the evidence shown, and the Scriptures cited, a decision was made — based on those things alone. The apostles did not take time to poll the brethren as to what they thought they should do, did not consider the prevailing winds of societal mores, and they did not consult the religious leaders of the day. They also did not put it off until another day so one side could 'rally others to their side' and lobby for their view. James stood up and said, *"Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God"* (v. 19). The letter they would send declared those who taught the necessity of circumcision had *"troubled"* them by so doing (v. 24). As the ones chosen particularly by Jesus and given the responsibility of teaching His express will, the answer was that they had given no such commandment. In other words: Do not demand circumcision.

The Answer Was Accepted. (v. 31) I'm sure some of us would like to think there was some more discussion about the matter with the letter was read, but the record tells us only, *"When they read it, they rejoiced over its*

encouragement.” The simple fact is, when the issue was presented, the arguments offered, the evidence shown, and the conclusion reached, the answer was accepted without further ado. Oh, that we would learn to respond to the word of God as these men did!

Questions and Application.

1. What was the source of division at Antioch, and how far apart were the sides from an agreement? _____

2. How important was it that both sides agreed to seek a solution by the same means or source of authority? _____

3. Why is it important that, when division exists and *unity* is sought, both sides present a sound, reasonable argument devoid of emotional pleas? _____

4. How did this situation use commands, divinely-approved examples, and necessary inference to establish the truth of the issue at hand? How important are each of these means of establishing truth in issues today? _____

