

## EPHESIANS #53 4:2-3 1-13-13

### *KEEPING THE PEACE*

(Ephesians 4) I have here in my hand an article from the Pittsburgh Tribune-Review. The headline says *Pastor sues to expel 2 church elders*. And here is what all of Pittsburgh got to read: *The pastor of a Penn Township church claims at least one of his board members didn't speak in tongues and wants to expel him and another elder from the church for being quarrelsome*. And the pastor took the matter to a civil court judge. It seems these two elders were voted out because they didn't speak in tongues, didn't come to church enough, and had bad attitudes, but they kept showing up at the elder meetings anyway. I can only imagine what a fun place that must be to, uh, fellowship. Perhaps our text for this morning will help us address and avoid problems like these. As I mentioned last time, this chapter, more than any other I know, gives us insight into the nature and functioning of the local church. Our text is **1-6** *Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called,* <sup>2</sup> *with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love,* <sup>3</sup> *being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism, 6 one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.* This morning we are going to consider the command in verse 3 to be diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. You have a thorough outline in your bulletin, as we look at three points today: the importance of a diligent preservation of spiritual unity, the need for a diligent preservation of spiritual unity, and the pathway to a diligent preservation of spiritual unity.

First then, the importance of spiritual unity. And it is important in the church because of four considerations. First, because of the value and joy of spiritual unity. Psalm 133:**1** *Behold how good and pleasant it is for brother to dwell together in unity.* This is a gift of God and a precious gift. A church that is unified, that is marked by peace and love and humility, is a sweet haven for the saints. It is a place of emotional rest from the turmoil of a wicked world. It is something to be cherished and therefore preserved with diligence.

Secondly, this subject is important because of the pain of disunity. Psalm 133:1 turned around could say, "Behold, how bad and yucky it is for brothers to dwell together in conflict." Some of you have been there haven't you? You've been in churches full of conflict and strife and suspicion. You know how unpleasant that can be. Most of us know this from personal experience in our

families as well. Division of united elements is a sad affair and is always escorted by misery. God's word says that Christians are united by God with a unity produced by His Spirit. Ours is the unity of the Spirit. And there is a universal law that says, *what God has joined together, let no man rend asunder*. That is true for marriages and it is also true for churches. Now, you can break that law, but know this - when you do, that law will break you and will crush your soul. Believer is bound to believer like the hand to the arm and to sever them means blood, pain, and a permanent handicap to the effectiveness of the body.

Thirdly, this matter of unity is important because of its effect on a church's witness. Think of it - we preach a message of grace, love, forgiveness, mercy and reconciliation. What does it communicate when those who preach those things can't get along with each other? Is it any wonder that our message goes unheard? We have deafened men to the gospel with the earplugs of quarrels and strife in the church. Furthermore, when our physical energies and our emotional energies are spent fighting with each other, we have little time and little strength left to do battle with the world and the devil. You know, conflict is a terrific emotional strain. It really is. And if we have it in the church we won't have it with the world where it belongs. Division in the church stifles and kills her ministry and her witness.

Point four is that unity is important because of its effect on a church's life. Listen, where there is any real vitality in a body of Christians the source of it is not in the pastor, but in the Spirit of God. Jesus said in John 6:**63a** *It is the Spirit who gives life*. Paul says it is the Spirit who gives unity as well. We are called to preserve the unity that is the creation of God's Spirit. So, when you tear that unity apart, what are you doing? Who are you opposing? Ephesians 4:**30a** *Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God*. I Thessalonians 5:**19** *Do not quench the Spirit*. I know of no better way to grieve and quench the Spirit than to nullify and subvert His work. And since the Holy Spirit is the life of the church there is no quicker way to kill a church than to quench its life. When Christians fight, they effectively run the Holy Spirit out the church door. I have a friend in Florida trying to resurrect a church that effectively died. He has about 100 people worshipping this morning in a sanctuary that can seat 1500. Can you believe it? In the 1970s God greatly blessed this church with revival. Many people were saved, the church was booming, but then there were quarrels and factions and gossiping and the life of the Holy Spirit was gone. A big, empty church sits there as a monument to human pride.

Oh, Dear friends, that could happen here. God forbid that we should let it. The Lord has made it clear to us how important our unity is to Him. He has pronounced a blessing on those who preserve

it. Mathew 5:8 *Blessed are the peacemakers*. God has also pronounced a curse on those who divide. Proverbs 6:19 says God hates those who spread strife among brothers. He hates. Pay attention this morning; this isn't just preacher-talk. This is important to God and should be to us because of the value and joy of unity, the pain of disunity, the effect of either on a church's witness and on its life.

We move then to a look at why church unity requires a diligence of preservation. Not every valuable thing requires this but spiritual unity sure does. It comes with a label that says, "refrigerate immediately" and in a box that says, "FRAGILE, handle with care." It is a delicate and perishable item because the laws of nature tend toward disunity and disintegration. Spiritual unity is hard to maintain because men, even Christian men, are sinners and tend toward disharmony. Christians are like porcupines in a snowstorm. We have a need to stay close but sometimes we stab and wound each other in the process. Why? Because we are sinners. This fact caused someone to write that "To dwell above with the saints we love, oh that will be glory. But to dwell below with the saints we know, well, that's another story." Yes it is and the Bible does not try to hide the difficulty of preserving unity, nor the reality of the offenses which occur. Verse two of our text says that preserving unity requires humility. Nothing is so opposed to our Adamic nature as humility. It means a denial of self. Everything in me wants to express myself. God says that preserving unity means I deny myself. Some of us by nature can be pretty gruff or harsh. God says we need to be gentle. I say, "Lord, that's not me, that's not the way I am." God says, "then I'll help you change." Unity calls for gentleness. You ever had to pack crystal glassware? What a pain! You have to wrap it up with newspaper inside and out. You have to protect those sensitive edges. It takes a lot of effort but you do it because you value the crystal. This valuable unity requires the same care. Verse 2 goes on to say it requires patience and forbearance and the very meaning of those words implies that you will have something or someone to be patient with and to forbear. Sin and offense in the church is assumed. We meet people all the time who have left their church, or left our church and we find out it was because someone did something offensive. So and so didn't treat my child right; the pastor didn't say *thank-you* for something I did. These kind of things make me want to say, "Yeah?" Those situations are just opportunities to apply Ephesians 4:2. Listen, nobody said this business of maintaining unity would be easy. Verse 3 says it requires what? Diligence. The NIV says you must make every effort. This means a lot more than just not causing division. Too often we feel our whole obligation to preserve unity is found in not causing division. "If I just do what is right and not create trouble then I'm okay." But the Scriptures call us to much more. I discovered this in the context of my marriage. My first year of married life was difficult. I went into marriage

with this crazy notion that I could make my happy wife happier and it didn't happen. In fact, we had a whole lot of conflict in those days which I couldn't figure out because it was never my fault. What I mean is that I was always on the right side of the arguments. I griped a little to God. How could someone as right as me have so much discord in my marriage? And God began to teach me that there is a whole lot more to being righteous than being right ®. You know what that means? When there is disagreement we all think we're on the right side, but God calls us to go beyond that and to be righteous. Maintaining unity means we humble ourselves, admit we may be wrong, forbear with the flaws and the differences. That's not easy. Sometimes you feel like you are dying. And, well, you are - dying to self. We do it in our marriages because we value that relationship. We do it in the church for the same reason. Unity is a precious gift that deserves a diligent preservation.

So, let's look now at how to go about this. How shall we preserve this unity in the bond of peace? This is the pathway to our goal. I offer today seven applications, seven guidelines for maintaining peace and unity in the body of Christ. And, by the way, these work in the home and the office as well. #1 is that we must approach church-life to minister, that is to give, not just to get. Ask not what your church can do for you, but what you can do for your church. That's a good line, huh? Now, what you can give to your church cannot be your only concern. You need to see that your family is in a place of spiritual life and nurture but honestly, we are living in the me-first generation. It's the age of consumerism in the church, with the result that our churches are full of sponges, soaking up whatever nice programs are being offered without any sense of personal obligation. And the same, me-first consumer mentality is behind the discord and conflict that often shows up. James 4:1-2 *What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members? 2 You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. You are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel.* It's the big "I" getting in the way of brotherly concord. That's why verse 2 calls us to humility. That's putting others first. Philippians 2:2 *make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose.* How can we do that? 3-4 *Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; 4 do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.* After all, we are Christians, followers of the Supreme example of this virtue. Nothing leads to disunity like self-seeking. Nothing leads to unity like a love that gives.

Application #2 is to be gentle. This can take many forms, but it simply involves an appreciation of and sensitivity to feelings of another. Thanking others is a form of this. Not being pushy or stern especially with certain personality types. Some are more fragile than others. A hug or a pat on the back can sometimes do wonders in the way of promoting unity. Be gentle.

Application #3 is to remember God's patience and forbearance with you. ☺ God is our model of forbearance. In several weeks we will be in Ephesians 4:**32-5:1** *Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you. 1- Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. Colossian 3:13 bear with one another, and forgive each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. Just as the Lord forgave you. How has the Lord forgiven you? How often? How much? His forgiveness is our standard. The offenders contrition is not the measure of our forgiveness. We imitate the Lord. And I'll tell you, no thought is so useful for me, when it comes to controlling my anger and developing patience. Whether it's my wife or my neighbor or an elder in the church - I know that God has endured infinitely more from me than I have from them. Last week we talked about walking worthy of our calling. We have a calling that is entirely gracious. How dare we not extend grace to others! When you think about it there is nothing more tacky than an unforgiving spirit in a man that is saved by grace. Jesus had a parable to show us just how tacky this is. You can read it in Matthew 18. It's about a servant who owed his master a million dollars. The big boss, knowing the servant could never pay, forgave the debt completely. But this sorry servant then goes out, finds a fellow servant who owes him \$50 and starts to get tough with him. Jesus says that this guy is in big trouble because he received great grace and refused to extend little grace. That is what we do when we hold grudges and cling to bitterness against our offenders. Drop all that stuff and remember to model the patience, the mercy of God.*

Application #4 is to repair hurts and tears as soon as possible. Ephesians 4:**26-27** *BE ANGRY, AND yet DO NOT SIN; do not let the sun go down on your anger, 27 and do not give the devil an opportunity.* You understand what that means? The devil is looking for opportunities to divide the body of Christ. He knows that when we are united we are strong, so he is ever on the hunt for openings in the ranks that he can exploit. The Scripture says that when you harbor bitterness, when you let yourself stay angry, you are giving the devil opportunity to destroy you and your relationships. Again, we are like those cold porcupines. We need each other, but we are the kind of creatures who wound those we need and even those we love. Offenses will occur, both real and imagined and we have to learn not only preventive tactics but reparative ones as well. If you are the

offending party, Jesus says to forget about trying to worship until you seek to make the relationship right. You are the one who is to take the initiative, go to your sister and seek her pardon. Again this requires humility.

So, what do you do when the sin is someone else's? Maybe someone sins against you, and hurts you - what do you do then? Look with me at Matthew 18. It says that if your brother sins against you, get on the phone and tell some of your friends, go tell it to his pastor, contact your lawyer. No, it says **15** *If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother.* To win your brother is to restore the relationship. That's what our goal should be. We aren't out looking to make the person pay, or make sure they get humbled. The goal here is peace and purity in the family of God. This passage goes on to speak of what happens if the brother won't repent, as it may come before the elders in the way of church discipline. But the responsibility of the offended party is clear. Whether it's in you or in others you just don't allow bitterness to build. You nip it in the bud. (Barney F) You repair hurts and tears as soon as possible.

Application #5 is to complain only to those who can change things ®. Complaints engender a sour, negative attitude and they serve no purpose if they are not made to the proper parties. Sometimes we are in a situation that calls for some complaining, or at least a little constructive criticism, but these complaints are to be shared with great discretion and specificity. You offer complaints like a nurse with an eye-dropper, not like a wet dog that's drying off. You don't wet down the world with your negativity, instead you approach the key person who can correct the problem. There are proper outlets for criticism, but your small group isn't one of them.

Application #6 is to beware of the tongue. Beware of the destructiveness of loose speech. James **3:5-10** *So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things. See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire! 6 And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell. 7 For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by the human race. 8 But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison. 9 With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God; 10 from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way. With the tongue we gossip, passing on evil reports about others without regard for their truthfulness. Sometimes we know it's a lie and we call that "slander." Proverbs has a great deal to say on this type of sin. 11:**13** *He who goes about as a talebearer reveals secrets, But he who is trustworthy**

*conceals a matter. 16:27,28 A worthless man digs up evil, While his words are like scorching fire. 28 A perverse man spreads strife, And a slanderer separates intimate friends.17:9 He who conceals a transgression seeks love, But he who repeats a matter separates intimate friends.* My mother had an old saying that isn't too far off the truth. She said constantly, "if you can't say something nice..." Did your mother say the same thing? If you can't say something nice don't say anything at all. But, oh, how we love to gossip!

Do you know why? What is so tempting about gossip? Several things could motivate us to do this. Maybe we are bitter, and gossip is a way to get our vengeance. Maybe we are envious and therefore we attack the one who has the office or the respect we wish were ours. Maybe we are proud. We like how gossip exalts us over others. I know part of me enjoys gossip for that reason. It saddens me to say it, but hearing about the demise of others can make me feel better about me. It's pitiful but true. Sometimes too we just like how our gossip shows others that we are people in the know. Or, maybe it's just a desire to be liked. We participate in the school gossip, job gossip, church gossip to get along with others who do it. Whatever the reason, train yourself to hate this sin and run from it. Be slow to speak, weigh your motives, and remember Ephesians 4:29 *Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear.*

Application #7 is "don't listen to evil reports." ® Proverbs 17: 4 *An evildoer listens to wicked lips; A liar pays attention to a destructive tongue.* When someone comes to you with something juicy on someone else don't you become a co-gossip. Don't you be an accomplice to this crime that divides intimate friends. This means you don't encourage the gossip by taking an interest. A facial expression or silence may do the trick. Maybe you need to go a step further and rebuke the reporter. Oh, you can do this subtly. You could say, "Boy, I wouldn't want to spread that around even if it were true." Or ask the gossip this question: "Just what do you feel I can do about this?" Usually there is nothing you can do and the question exposes that. I like this one, "May I quote you on this?" You see, you have to realize that when you come telling me about another person's alleged sin, you have put a burden on me. Now, I have thoughts and suspicions that either need to be acted upon or forgotten. If you tell me that Joe Christian is cheating on his wife I have an obligation to find out if its so, but I can't just go to him and say, "someone said." I need freedom to name my sources.

Here's another good response: "What did Joe say when you confronted him with this?" Here we remind the gossip of his obligation to go first, in private, to the brother. Listen, you respond this

way and you will limit the amount of sinful gossip that comes your way and you will discourage the whisperer from passing on the news. It only takes a spark to get a fire going. And soon all those around may burn up in its glowing. If you love the woods you put out forest fires; if you love the church you put out gossip fires. Proverbs26:20 *For lack of wood the fire goes out, And where there is no whisperer, contention quiets down.*

Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words --- words can do a lot more damage than that can't they? We have seen today the importance of, the need for, the pathway to a diligent preservation of spiritual unity. I thank God, that He has maintained the unity of this body of believers, with just a ruffle here or there, for thirty years. The responsibility now is ours. The stakes are so very high. May God find us faithful, humble, gentle, patient, diligent to preserve the gift of unity that He has given. Will you join me in committing yourself to following the Lord's guidelines for preserving the unity of the Spirit in this body of believers?