

Better Together

Part One: Unity

Nehemiah 5:1-13

1. Disobedience.

- Nehemiah 5:10; Deuteronomy 23:19-20; 1 Thessalonians 4:6

2. Disunity.

- Deuteronomy 15:4-5; Ephesians 4:3

3. Disrespect.

- Leviticus 19:18; 1 John 4:8; John 13:34-35

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West Valley Church
09/12/21
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Better Together Part One: Unity

Today we begin a two-part sermon series called, "Better Together," and here's why:

In two weeks, we will revisit "Here For Good" – we will be halfway through our three-year effort to raise money to pay off our debt, to move money from mortgage to ministry, and to renovate some of the major, key, older parts of our facility. We'll share with you some exciting updates, we'll hear some great testimonies, and share some *very* exciting news about what's ahead for us in the next year or so.

But in preparation for that, we need to take a couple of Sundays to remind ourselves how important it is for us to be in this together; we are better together.

Given where we've been in the last year and half with politics and the pandemic and all that's done to us, we need to remind ourselves about our priority of unity. Not only because of where we've been, but also, because of where we are right now: as a culture and as a community, there are so many divisions and diverse opinions and so much strain of what we are all going through, so as the Church we need to more firmly commit to our unity. This is critically important if we, as the church, are going to get where we need to go. I think you are going to be very, very excited about what we share with you beginning in two weeks, so let's make sure we are getting there together, because we're better that way.

I don't think any of us would disagree that unity is important in the church, and next week we will look at what makes up our unity. But for today, would you allow me to talk about some of the things that will keep us from being better together? There are some things we want to avoid so that we can remain united. We are better together, so we need to learn what *not* to do, as much as learn what *to* do. I need to warn you, though – the Scriptures have some pretty strong challenges and corrections for us.

We'll see this from the Old Testament book of Nehemiah – one of my favorites. In the adult class I teach at 9am on Sundays, we are going through the book of Ezra-Nehemiah from the Old Testament. Our modern Bibles have them listed as two books, but in the original Hebrew Bible, which makes up our Old Testament, they are one book – written on one scroll. Today we're going to see the unity blockers that nearly ended the building project that God's people were involved in. Let me quickly explain what was going on.

For centuries before the events of Nehemiah, God's people had been repeatedly warned by God through the prophets that their sin was going to lead to their downfall. The people were worshipping pretty much everything *except* God. They would go to Temple on the Sabbath, and they would offer their sacrifices (kind of like going to church every week), but the rest of the week they worshipped other things and other gods, they refused to help the poor and the immigrant and the outsider, and they relied on themselves and their politics

and government instead of relying on God. This was true from their kings all the way down to normal citizens.

Finally, what they were warned about happened: both the Northern and the Southern kingdoms were overthrown, and God's people were carried off into exile for 70 years – exactly as God had told them would happen. Their cities lay desolate, and the Temple was ransacked, looted, and destroyed.

But then, also just as God had promised, after 70 years, the Persian king allowed God's people, the Jews, to go back to Jerusalem and begin rebuilding. In Ezra, first we see some leaders being sent to rebuild the *Temple* as a place of worship, and then next, Ezra is sent to restore the *Torah*, or the law, as a rule of society, and then Nehemiah is sent to restore and rebuild *the community*, beginning with *the wall* around the city of Jerusalem as a boundary and cultural identifier. It's the book of Nehemiah that we'll look at today.

Nehemiah was the cupbearer to King Artaxerxes, the Persian King who held the Jews in exile by that time. Cupbearer meant that Nehemiah was the trusted confidante of the King. Nehemiah even ensured that the king's food and drink wasn't poisoned. He was like a counselor, confidante, advisor, and even personal security, at least when it came to the King's food. But serving in the king's palace meant that Nehemiah was over 750 miles away from Jerusalem. Through some incredible miracles and acts of leadership that we don't have time to go into, Nehemiah was able to get to Jerusalem with all the building supplies he needed to rebuild the wall. That wasn't going to be easy, either – the wall was over two miles long.

They had no skilled builders – just a handful of poor families, and they faced constant opposition from enemies. They were surrounded by four different enemies – Ashdodites to the west, Ammonites to the east, Arabs to the South, and Samaritans to the north.

But, impossible as it was, it was God's purpose for them, and amazingly, Nehemiah not only was released of his duty to go to Jerusalem, he did so with the king's blessing, the king's guard, and the king's supplies! And the people there caught the vision, trusted God, and finished the wall in 52 days! They did that in spite of constant threat from their enemies.

But it almost didn't happen – they almost didn't finish the work, and the mission was nearly derailed; not by external threats from their enemies, but by *themselves*. Because of their own sin, they were not unified and nearly lost all their work.

You see, while they were building the wall, they were also in the middle of a severe drought. Kind of like us with our Here For Good effort, in a pandemic. And with so much of their time and money being sacrificed to build the wall, because of the drought they had nothing left – not even for food. So they had to mortgage their homes and land to borrow money just to feed their families. But then they couldn't pay back their loans. Let's pick it up from there as I read it to us from the fifth chapter of Nehemiah. This passage has been God's Word for a very long time, preserved for us even till today, so would you help me give respect to God's Word by standing with me as I read it to us?

Now the men and their wives raised a great outcry against their fellow Jews. Some were saying, "We and our sons and daughters are numerous; in order for us to eat and stay alive, we must get grain."

Others were saying, “We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our homes to get grain during the famine.”

Still others were saying, “We have had to borrow money to pay the king’s tax on our fields and vineyards. Although we are of the same flesh and blood as our fellow Jews and though our children are as good as theirs, yet we have to subject our sons and daughters to slavery. Some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but we are powerless, because our fields and our vineyards belong to others.”

When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry. I pondered them in my mind and then accused the nobles and officials. I told them, “You are charging your own people interest!” So I called together a large meeting to deal with them and said: “As far as possible, we have bought back our fellow Jews who were sold to the Gentiles. Now you are selling your own people, only for them to be sold back to us!” They kept quiet, because they could find nothing to say.

So I continued, “What you are doing is not right. Shouldn’t you walk in the fear of our God to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies? I and my brothers and my men are also lending the people money and grain. But let us stop charging interest! Give back to them immediately their fields, vineyards, olive groves and houses, and also the interest you are charging them—one percent of the money, grain, new wine and olive oil.”

“We will give it back,” they said. “And we will not demand anything more from them. We will do as you say.”

Then I summoned the priests and made the nobles and officials take an oath to do what they had promised. I also shook out the folds of my robe and said, “In this way may God shake out of their house and possessions anyone who does not keep this promise. So may such a person be shaken out and emptied!”

At this the whole assembly said, “Amen,” and praised the Lord. And the people did as they had promised. (Nehemiah 5:1-13, niv)

Thank you for standing; please be seated.

I want you to see what happened: They were borrowing from each other, and when they couldn’t pay it back, they were selling each other into slavery to get their money.

As I read this you might have wondered, “This is weird. What’s the lesson in this for us? How can we apply this to our church?” If so, you are asking the right question – that’s always the right question to ask!

God has given our church a great trajectory – from our great past, to where we are now – at an incredible position on the precipice of greater things, as we’ve been able to pay off our million dollar mortgage in the last year. God has a great mission and purpose for West Valley Church. So let’s make sure we avoid what nearly derailed God’s people in their work.

There are three issues of disunity involved in this passage that if they hadn’t corrected themselves, nearly caused them to lose everything, and the first is...

1. *Disobedience.*

You might wonder what were they disobedient about? What was their sin? After all, they had committed to giving all they could to the building project, then they were hit with a drought. Without much money left, they had to borrow from their more wealthy fellow Jews. The disobedience was not that they borrowed money. It wasn't even that the rich people were loaning money. Nehemiah himself was loaning money and food to people (verse 10). The disobedience was that those who were loaning money were also charging interest. Now, you might think, "So what? That's a standard practice even today." The problem was that God told them specifically *not* to charge interest against each other. In Deuteronomy 23:19-20, God instructed them:

"Do not charge a fellow Israelite interest, whether on money or food or anything else that may earn interest. You may charge a foreigner interest, but not a fellow Israelite, so that the Lord your God may bless you in everything you put your hand to in the land you are entering to possess." (Deuteronomy 23:19-20, niv)

So why was this important? Well, for every one of God's laws there is a principle. So the better question is, what is the principle, or the reason for that particular law? It wasn't even the interest or the percentage. It's simply this: God did not want his people taking advantage of each other. They were not just a nation – they were God's people, and because they were God's people, they were a family. And *God wants that family relationship that they have with each other to be a greater priority than the money they might make off of each other.* And that's not just an Old Testament law that applied to the Jews; it was also a principle the New Testament church is expected to live by today:

"In this matter no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister. The Lord will punish all those who commit such sins, as we told you and warned you before." (1 Thessalonians 4:6, niv)

We're family, and so we don't take advantage of each other, neither do we neglect each other or ignore each other's needs. The principle is about *each other.*

Listen: God has reasons for what he tells us to do, and it is rarely just about you. It always has others in mind, too. So in all things, we must obey God, because disobedience can derail our ability to work together and accomplish what God has for us. Whatever we do, we must do it for the greater good of each other and the church, even if it is not convenient, or possibly even costly, for ourselves.

But as bad as their disobedience was, beneath the disobedience there was a deeper issue at stake. That issue was...

2. *Disunity.*

The reason that God wanted them to obey the command we read earlier was to avoid disunity. Their commitment to each other was the higher priority – doing what was best for others even if it was costly to themselves. So in the case in Nehemiah, if the rich took advantage of the poor and charged interest, then the distance between the rich and the

poor would get larger and larger – and any distance like that is disunity. That’s why God said in Deuteronomy 15:

“However, there need be no poor people among you, for in the land the Lord your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you, if only you fully obey the Lord your God and are careful to follow all these commands I am giving you today.” (Deuteronomy 15:4-5, niv)

God wasn’t saying he’d make everyone rich; he was saying if they obeyed him, they’d take care of each other and there would be enough for them to help each other so that no one was poor. The commands were about how to treat each other and take care of each other as God’s people. Anything that brought disunity would derail and destroy their ability to enjoy all that God wanted them to have and all that he wanted them to be. Listen: When God’s people sin it stops them from unity and stops them from his best for them, it grieves his Spirit.

I’ve been involved in many funerals over the years, as you might imagine. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve seen a family begin fighting over money and material possessions, even before the body is buried. Money can be dangerous for dividing people, even families, and God knows that. And God DETESTS disunity in his family. The principle is not just money, although God knows that’s a big one. The principle is about *anything* that divides us. Nothing stops us in pursuit of God’s purposes faster than divisions and disunity. It is the enemy’s greatest tool against the church. This is why the Bible says in Ephesians 4:3...

“Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.”
(Ephesians 4:3, niv)

We’ll talk about this in greater depth next Sunday, but notice the capital “S” on “Spirit.” Whose unity is it according to that verse? *The Holy Spirit’s*. When we aren’t unified, it’s not just that believers might be in disagreement with each other. We can disagree with each other; that’s okay. It is *disunity* that grieves the very Spirit of God Himself. God himself is our unity as we remain at peace with each other.

That’s why I am at a loss these days to understand some people who choose their right to NOT wear a mask, their right NOT to be vaccinated, their right to support Trump or Biden or Inslee or whoever – I am at a total and utter loss to understand how someone can call themselves a Christian and let *those things* become more important than their unity in the Spirit with the people in their own church family. I’ll tell you, this last year and a half has been hard on all of us, but especially us pastors. I’ve had people that I thought were my friends, that were fellow believers, who have chewed me out, said horrible things to me and about me, and have left the church. Do you know why? Because your leaders – your elected church board and pastors – have agreed to follow the safety protocols that our health experts have told us. Because of that, there are people who have verbally attacked me and my character, and turned their back on their church – because their politics were more important to them than unity, more important than the safety of our children and senior adults.

I simply do not understand it. And I will tell you, the Holy Spirit is grieving. For Christ’s sake – for the sake of Christ and his church – knock it off! Put your fellow believers FIRST. Put the unity of the body first. What the government does or doesn’t do has never had any

bearing on whether or not we are the church. The government does not destroy the church – the very gates of hell will not prevail against the church. What destroys the church is *you* – when you sin and cause disunity. I’m not saying we have to agree. If you have a different opinion about cultural issues, and you act out in anger at that brother or sister in your church who disagrees with you, you are bringing disunity, you are sinning. You are disobedient. I’m just saying if you are causing disunity, you need to shut up. Make. Every. Effort. To maintain the unity of God’s Spirit through the bond of peace.

We are a family. We are all on the same side. You are not the enemy. I am not the enemy. We *have* an enemy, but our enemy is not a single person you lock eyes with in this room. When we’re divided, our enemy wins, we are defeated, and the Holy Spirit grieves because we’ll never get where God wants and dreams for us as a church.

National Geographic included a feature article once about the arctic wolf. Author L. David Mech described how a seven-member wolf pack had targeted several musk-oxen calves who were guarded by eleven adults.

He said, as the wolves approached their prey, the musk-oxen bunched in an impenetrable semi-circle, their deadly rear hooves facing out, and the calves remained safe during a long standoff with their enemy.

But then a single ox broke rank, and the herd scattered into nervous little groups. A skirmish followed, and the adults finally fled in panic, leaving the calves to the mercy of the predators. Not a single calf survived.

The Apostle Paul warned the Ephesian elders in Acts 20 that after his departure wolves would come, not sparing the flock. Wolves continue to attack the church today but cannot penetrate and destroy when our unity is maintained. When we divide, though, we provide the enemy with easy prey – our own, most vulnerable family.

So disobedience was an issue because it brought on disunity. But that led to the deepest issue of all, which was about to happen next in the story of Nehemiah...

3. ***Disrespect.***

What I mean is not respecting each other, which really means most importantly, they were not loving each other. I would have said “Dislove,” but that’s not a word. A lack of love. God intends for his family to love each other:

“Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD.” (Leviticus 19:18, niv)

Do you see what he’s saying? “I AM the LORD.” Whenever you see “lord” in all caps, that means in the original language the holy name “YHWH” is used – the I AM. He’s saying “Love each other because I AM.” He is saying, “If you’re going to be mine, you are going to love each other, because that’s what I AM – I AM love.” 1 John 4:8 says:

“Whoever does not love does not know God, because *God is love.*” (1 John 4:8, niv)

If we don’t love each other, we are not His! If we are his, we will love each other!

That’s why Jesus said:

“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.” (John 13:34-35, niv)

This was the real and deepest threat to their ability to accomplish God’s purposes in a world that desperately needed God’s purposes – a world nearly as desperate as ours is.

Their disobedience led to disunity and was about to become a lack of love. And it will be for us too if we forget that we are a unified family – we are in this together and we are better together. We need to love each other more than politics or pandemics or anything else.

Dr. Ron Bryce is a physician and is also a writer, and he wrote something amazing in his book, “The Fingerprints of God.” He wrote: “One day, as I assisted a surgeon, he had me reach into the patient's chest and turn his heart so he could work on it from a better angle. As I gingerly swiveled it, he asked, "How does it feel to hold a man's beating heart in your hand?" In spite of our manipulations, the man's heart kept thumping as billions of tiny heart cells communicated and coordinated their activities.

The cells in your heart rhythmically contract in unity, acting together to produce a heartbeat. If these living cells are separated from the heart in a test tube, they will instinctively continue beating, but not in coordination with each other. If the cells are brought back in contact with one another, the instant they touch, their contractions again become synchronized.

That is the nature of heart cells. Individual heart cells cannot accomplish their God-given function alone. They were designed to be one of many cells in one heart. While they serve a unique function in the body, they are not useful if they don't communicate and coordinate their efforts. If the members of an entire body don't communicate, life is not possible. A single heart cell working alone cannot pump blood to the body, no matter how hard it tries. It needs the other cells to fulfill its purpose.

This is a consistent pattern found in all living bodies. The only way a body can survive is through its many members working together. All living bodies have communication among the members.¹ The same is true of the body of Christ.

Folks, I really don’t care how strongly you feel for or against cultural issues: Christ comes first. Your brother or sister in Christ comes first. I don’t care what your opinion is of the mask mandate. Your brother or sister in Christ comes first. I don’t care about your opinion of who is or is not in the White House. Your brother or sister in Christ comes first. I don’t care about your feelings about the proven efficacy of the vaccine. Your brother or sister in Christ comes first. Love each other, and that will drive everything you do. Do not allow disobedience, disunity, and dis-love to divide your church. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

Prayer: repent from distraction by the things going on around us. Repent of disobedience, disunity, and dis-love. Commit to obedience, unity, and love.

¹ Ron Bryce, *The Fingerprint of God* (Brown Christian Press, 2018), Pages 55-56

“May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.” (Romans 15:5-7, niv)