

Today is the first lesson in a series that will likely take me several years to complete. Not because it will be that long, but because I normally only fill in once or twice a year.

This all stems from a conversation Anna and I were having about how much we love this church, and all the great things that are happening. And that prompted Anna to comment that we need to be on our guard. I didn't get this at first but she explained by saying that Satan doesn't target churches that aren't doing anything: he targets those who are a threat.

And we agreed that University is definitely a threat.

So that prompted this series that I'm calling *Don't Get Devoured*, because I want to reveal to us the places where Satan is going to try and get us as a church. The title is taken from 1 Peter 5.8 where we're told:

Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.

Over the next several years, we'll talk about places where the Devil will try and get us, both personally and as a church. But if we can keep our heads up and our radar on, we can avoid becoming dinner.

I want to start with a topic that I'm passionate about because I've seen what it's like when it's done well, and I've experienced first-hand the devastation that can be caused when it's not done at all.

That topic is Unity. The weapon Satan uses to destroy our unity is conflict. Conflict comes when we realize that there are those around us who are different from us. Different beliefs, different behaviors, preferences, you name it: conflict exists because we're not all the same. Understand: our conversation today has to do with this body of believers—the people in these four walls. Not because I'm trying to call anyone out, but because applying these thoughts about unity to the larger body of people who call themselves Christians creates some questions that I don't have good answers to, and I don't really feel like this is the venue to have that conversation. It's much bigger than one sermon and my simple thoughts.

But how do we respond to those differences? What is our reaction when we recognize this conflict? Typically, I see one of five things happen:

1. No change. Whatever the difference is, we don't see it as significant enough to care about. I like broccoli. You don't. We can still be friends.
2. Avoidance. Rather than address it, we just don't talk about. At least not with the person we disagree with—we'll gossip with others about how we disagree with you. But we'll be nice to your face.
3. Neglect. We neglect the relationship, avoid the person at church. Basically pretend they aren't there.
4. Break fellowship. The point of conflict is too great for us to do any of the other three, and we can't resolve it, so we split. Maybe this is the whole church. Maybe just individuals. Each side believes they are right, and the wrong is too wrong to associate with.

We've never seen this happen, have we?

We've got stupid reasons—like splitting over the color of carpets, how many angels can dance on the head of a pin, and what song book is in the pews.

And we've got scriptural reasons—like Christ being the son of God

But how do we know when it's a *sufficient* reason? Because there are lots of issues that pop up inbetween those two extremes—things the apostle Paul referred to as 'disputable matters'—and we weren't called to be divided, we were called to unity.

Ephesians 4.1-7:

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. 2 Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. 3 Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. 4 There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism; 6 one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

7 But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.

In this verse, we are given the command to *keep* the unity. We don't need to create it—it's already there. Earlier in Ephesians 2, we're told that it was through Christ's body that we were brought together—his death paved way for us to be reconciled to God and brought into unity with each other.

All too often, I fear we believe we can only have unity with those who believe, act, and look just like us. And I don't think that Jesus would agree. Look at Luke 9.49-50:

“Master,” said John, “we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we tried to stop him, because he is not one of us.”

50 “Do not stop him,” Jesus said, “for whoever is not against you is for you.”

Pretty straightforward, eh? Jesus doesn't ask about his theology. We get more detail in Mark's account in 9.38-41:

38 “Teacher,” said John, “we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us.”

39 “Do not stop him,” Jesus said. “For no one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, 40 for whoever is not against us is for us. 41 Truly I tell you, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to the Messiah will certainly not lose their reward.

Jesus sets the threshold for unity pretty low.

Who are we to raise that bar?

Because if we start saying we can't have unity with those who hold 'incorrect' beliefs...well, I got news for you: everyone in this room believes something that's incorrect. Myself included.

Obviously, none of us know what that is, or we wouldn't hold that belief. We won't knowingly believe something that's false. But the reality is this: we are imperfect, finite creatures, incapable of perfectly knowing the infinite mind of a perfect creator.

That's why we need to be saved by grace—because we can't live flawlessly by the book. And if we need grace to cover our shortcomings, who are we to say God's grace is insufficient to cover someone else's just because they may be wrong about different things than us?

So then, what's the threshold for a sufficient cause to break our unity?

Thankfully, we have an example in scripture that I believe sheds some light on this.

Here's the setup: first century church. One side believes the other side ought to be doing something they aren't doing. They believe it's a salvation issue. They press it so much, that it goes to the apostles and elders of the church in Jerusalem. Let's read more in Acts 15.

Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved." ²This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question. ³The church sent them on their way, and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the believers very glad. ⁴When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them.

⁵Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses."

⁶The apostles and elders met to consider this question. ⁷After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: "Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. ⁸God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. ⁹He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. ¹⁰Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? ¹¹No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are."

¹²The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them. ¹³When they finished, James spoke up. "Brothers," he said, "listen to me. ¹⁴Simon^ἰ has described to us how God first intervened to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles. ¹⁵The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written:

¹⁶ “After this I will return
and rebuild David’s fallen tent.
Its ruins I will rebuild,
and I will restore it,
¹⁷ that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord,
even all the Gentiles who bear my name,
says the Lord, who does these things’^[b]—
¹⁸ things known from long ago.^[c]

¹⁹ “It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. ²⁰ Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. ²¹ For the law of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath.”

The Council’s Letter to Gentile Believers

²² Then the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to choose some of their own men and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They chose Judas (called Barsabbas) and Silas, men who were leaders among the believers. ²³ With them they sent the following letter:

The apostles and elders, your brothers,

To the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia:

Greetings.

²⁴ We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said. ²⁵ So we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul— ²⁶ men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁷ Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing. ²⁸ It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements:²⁹ You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things.

Farewell.

They pick 4 things. Out of all the Law of Moses, all the rules and traditions that existed, they boiled it down to 4 things:

1. Avoid food polluted by idols
2. Abstain from sexual immorality
3. Avoid meat from strangled animals
4. Avoid blood

About Idols: Paul makes it clear in 1 Cor. 8 that eating meat sacrificed to idols is no big deal spiritually. But culturally, for Jews, this is so ingrained in them that it would cause them serious issues. Their conscience couldn't handle it.

About Sexual Immorality: This was obviously a bad thing, and was also associated with pagan religious festivals. This would also bring up 'unclean' issues for Jewish Christians who would still have this hangup.

About Strangled Animals and Blood: Way back in Genesis 9 God forbids this, and it's a big deal. Pagan cults would often consume blood because they thought it would add the 'life' of the animal to their own.

So what are all these aimed at? Jewish law had over 600 rules, and this list is pretty short. There's no deep theology here.

Peter even says: Let's not burden them with something even WE couldn't do! We've all been saved by grace.

As I look at the list, it seems to me that the focus isn't on the right doctrine, or the right theology, but on relationship.

All of these activities would make the gentiles repugnant to Jewish Christians and their deeply-rooted cultural values. That idea of being unclean would have been deeply ingrained in them.

The restrictions given by the apostles and the elders are to allow Jewish and Gentile Christians to sit down and share a meal together without hindrance—not to make sure there is a uniformity of belief and practice.

They were concerned not about uniformity—all being the same—but about unity: all being together. Working for the same goal. They sought to preserve the relationship.

Clearly there is truth we must stand firm on: If you refuse to acknowledge the deity of Christ, we've got issues. And while I can't tell you where to draw your line, I know where mine is.

If Christ was willing to die to create our unity, I feel I must be willing to do no less to protect it.

So the question I ask myself when I'm at odds with a brother is this:

Would I be willing to die to be right about this?

Because in my insistence to be right, I may destroy the faith of another, leaving them spiritually dead. I may destroy the unity Christ died to create. Is that worth it? Obviously, if it's an issue that may result in them being separated from God, then yes, it is. Galatians 6.1 tells us we should correct those who are caught in sin. But if it's not?

It wasn't worth it to the elders and apostles. They probably could have justified circumcision, or large parts of the Mosaic law. But they understood that, in doing so, they ran the risk of crushing the faith of the Gentiles under a burden even they couldn't carry, and that wasn't worth it to them.

They kept the bar low, and chose to protect the relationship. They chose unity. Even Paul understood that you sometimes have to keep it simple. Look at what he says in 1 Corinthians 2.1-2:

When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

Paul chose not to weigh them down with a bunch of teaching outside the basics: the story of Christ. I can make this my standard: the story of Christ. I can find unity with probably everyone in this room on that issue. Or I can make it more. Paul could have done more. He had the knowledge. He had the authority. But he kept it simple. Jesus kept it simple. Maybe I should, too.

So for me, I think this: If someone put a gun to my head on whatever the issue is, would I stick to my beliefs? Would it be important enough to me to die for.

Jesus as the son of God? Yes. His resurrection from the dead? Yes. Angels dancing on pins, kitchens in churches, and songbook editions?

Not worth dying over, and not worth destroying the faith of another. Certainly not worth destroying unity over.

I use extreme examples because it's easy to see how ridiculous they are. It's not always so easy to see that with other things. And I know that we will one day have to stand before God and give an account for things we quarreled and divided over that weren't more important than unity.

Make no mistake: Satan will try and get our church. Too much good is happening here for him to ignore us. He's going to try and get us to fight with each other over things that don't matter. He'll get us to fight each other instead of unifying to fight *him*.

We need to be aware, and we need to be ready when he tries to turn us against ourselves. We need to be willing to fight—not to be right, but fight to keep the unity Christ died to give us, and not to throw it away just because we don't all agree about everything. Unity is not uniformity.

I want to end by offering something practical—something tangible. I want to end by giving us some pointers we can follow to help navigate these times of conflict. If you remember I started out by saying there are 5 things that can happen when we come into conflict, and I only gave you 4. That's because those 4 things don't really help us obey the command in Ephesians to keep the unity of the family. The 5th thing does: Conflict Resolution.

When we come into conflict with one another, we need to know how to resolve it in a way that abides by the truth of God's word, and also preserves unity. Sadly, I feel it is often times not the issue at hand, but the way we choose to handle it destroys the unity. So let me close by sharing some pointers for how we can do this.

Pray, Study, and then Pray some more before you ever open your mouth.

Typically our first response when we hear something we disagree with is to immediately spout off all the verses that prove our point. Sometimes that's because we've extensively studied the issue. But most times it's because that's what we've heard or been taught, and not what we've studied for ourselves. So before we engage

with our brother or sister, let's make sure we've studied the scriptures for ourselves—not to justify our position, but to discern what it really says. And we've got to be in a lot of prayer, asking that God guides us and not our pride.

Open with a dialog, not a diatribe.

What I'm doing right now is a lecture: it's a one way street. You really don't have an opportunity to exchange ideas with me, you just have to listen. Unfortunately, this can happen we come into conflict with a brother or sister: we don't really go to listen and exchange ideas, we go to lecture. To lay out in perfect logic how scripture supports our view, and how illogical and unscriptural their viewpoint is.

Let me ask you this: how many of us enjoy being told we're wrong? And enjoy being lectured to about how we're wrong? Exactly. What's the difference between these two approaches:

What you believe is wrong, and scripture tells you as much. You're going to go to Hell.

Versus: We have a different understanding of this and I'd love to study this with you. This seems like a pretty serious issue; maybe we can come to a better understanding of it together.

One will get better results than the other. And one is opening up a two-way street: one where we can learn from each other. I may learn that I was wrong. Or I may learn this is one of those disputable matters that we don't have to agree on to maintain our unity, and that we'll just have to trust that grace will cover whichever one of us doesn't have it quite right.

Remember the Relationship

Truth must be defended, but if all I care about is being right, unity can quickly become a casualty in my own personal holy war. In contrast, if my concern is about the relationship, if my desire is to do everything I can to protect and maintain the unity here at University—unity with the truth, with God, with each other—then I will find a way to present the truth in a way that can be heard. If I have no relationship with you, odds are you're not going to listen to what I have to say anyway. But if I'm thinking 'I need to preserve the unity of the church, but I also need to present this truth' I'll find a way to do one without destroying the other. In Matthew 18 where Jesus talks about correcting someone in sin, he clearly makes maintaining the relationship a priority.

These three ideas are easlily summarized in three words:

DISCERN: Through prayer and study, determine if this is an issue that matters, and what God's will really is.

DISCUSS: Come to the table with an open mind and an open heart, and let God guide both of you to the answer together.

DEFEND: When conflicts arise, remember that our charge was not to be right, but to be unified. If we focus on maintaining the unity through the bond of peace, we can create a safe space to disagree and seek truth together without allowing Satan to divide us.

I encourage you to read Romans 14 where Paul discusses 'disputable' matters and how we respond to them. Specifically, though, I want to leave you with two thoughts from that passage. The first is in verse 13 where he says:

Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister.

The second is from verse 19:

Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.

Here's a matter that isn't in dispute: Christ loves you, and he was determined to remove the stumbling blocks that kept us from God. He was willing to make every effort to bring peace back to the relationship between us and God. Let us learn from his example in the way we interact with each other in this church. Don't let Satan turn us on ourselves and destroy our unity. I may not have the answers for what unity looks like outside of these 4 walls, but if we can live it out here, it will go a long way to accomplishing it out there.

And if you aren't in unity with Christ this morning, if you haven't been baptized and brought in to the family of God...well there's no better time than now.