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HOT WHEELS THEOLOGY

John 17:20-26

Our son and daughter in law, Toby and Anna, have been married 11 years. They are now on their 4th, 5th and 6th dogs. They have 4 kids and 3 dogs in their house. If you look up the word chaos in the dictionary it will have a picture of their house. The most memorable of their many dogs was the very first one, whose name was Doc. He has now gone on to the great kennel in the sky. No one, and I mean no one, was sad when Doc left this mortal coil. It was close to cause for celebration, because, in Toby’s own words, Doc was the worst dog on the planet.

The poor dog was a mess right from the start. He was light years beyond annoying. He had some bizarre habits. One of the weirdest was he got upset when a human being took a shower. He would go absolutely bonkers when you stepped in the shower and turned on the water. He barked furiously and spun around in circles, jumped up and pawed the shower door as though he wanted to kill the shower. It was bizarre. He did this every time someone showered. Invariably. I just shook my head in dismay at that idiotic animal. He was clearly insane. I wonder if sometimes God doesn’t shake his head over the fuss we make over things that don’t matter. We do the equivalent of going ape over a shower. In fact, it is not uncommon for believers in Jesus to do something that is irrational if the Spirit of Jesus is in us. That something turns out to be a crucial tell, a give away that something is amiss, for it is the opposite of the mark of a person who is living in the Spirit of Jesus.

If I were to ask you what is the tell tale sign that a person is not walking in the Spirit of Christ, what would you say? There is such a sign, though Christians routinely overlook it. You can see it in 1 Corinthians 3. The church at Corinth was marked by an abundance of seemingly miraculous activities. You might think that was evidence of true spiritual maturity. But in verse 1 Paul wrote to them, “Brothers and sisters, I could not address you as people who live by the Spirit but as people who are still worldly, mere infants in Christ.” They were spiritual babies, despite their many gifts! In verse 3 he said, “You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly?” The sign that they were not living by the Holy Spirit is they didn’t get along with each other. Let’s look at what Jesus said about this in John 17:20-26.

THEME: JESUS PRAYED FOR UNITY

John 17 is the longest recorded prayer of Jesus. He began praying for himself in the first 5 verses. The rest of the chapter accounts Jesus’ prayer for his followers, including us. What do you think Jesus would pray for you? You don’t have to guess. We can know what was on his heart and in his prayers, because John tells us in this chapter. In the previous verses Jesus made two main requests. The first was that the Father would protect his followers from the schemes of the evil one. Jesus knew those first disciples followed later by millions of others would face constant harassment and opposition from our spiritual enemy. The second thing Jesus prayed was that the Father would sanctify his disciples. We saw that the word sanctify meant to set them apart for a special mission, a special purpose

In these verses Jesus spelled out a third request. The request is a little bit surprising. I expected that Jesus would have prayed for power and success for his disciples in their mission. I’d think he would pray for strength for them to carry out that monumental mission and that the Father would use them to do impressive things. But he didn’t pray that. He prayed in verse 21 “that they may be one.” He wanted them to have unity. He repeated that idea in verse 22, asking that they “May be one as we are one.” He wanted his believers to have divine unity. It is important to note this was not just for the 11 guys in that room that night. Jesus prayed the same thing for those who would believe through the message the apostles would proclaim.

Unity was not the natural state of his first disciples. The group included Matthew, who was a traitor working for the much despised Romans, and it included Simon, a zealot, an insurgent, dedicated to the overthrow of the Romans. To make matters worse, all of them often engaged in jockeying for position, arguing about which one of them was the greatest. That definitely did not make for harmonious relationships.

This is not the only place in the Bible where we see an emphasis on unity. One of the startling ones is in Ephesians 4:1 where Paul wrote, “As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.” All who are believers in Jesus have been given a calling. What does that mean? I receive callings all the time on my phone. Most of them come with the warning, “Scam likely.” I get calls from this scam person continually. I dearly wish he would leave me alone.

This is not that kind of call. Romans 1:7 Paul addressed his letter to, “all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be his holy people.” Back when I was in high school I tried out for a couple of sports. At the very beginning of my freshman year I tried out for basketball. In January of that year I tried out for baseball, which I continued to do for 6 years in high school and college. I went to a large public high school where many more boys tried out for teams than there was room for. Some, usually most, would not make the team. That meant that after several weeks of practice cut day would come. The coach would post a list of names on the bulletin board in the locker room. If your name was not on that list you had been cut from the team. Your services were no longer needed. But if your name was on the list you had been called to be on that team. You had been chosen for the squad. I learned I was not called to play basketball. However, I was called to play baseball, or so it seemed. Though my name was on the list for the baseball team I would play precious few innings during my high school years. Nevertheless, I was called to be on the baseball team.

We have been called in Christ to be his holy people, to be in his kingdom. What a monumental privilege and gift this is. Looking back on it, I’m not sure why my coaches in high school called me for the team because they apparently had no intention of using me as a player. The message was I deserved to be on the team, but just barely. But we absolutely do not deserve to get God’s calling. We deserve to be cut. The fact that our names are on God’s list is nothing but 100% pure grace. It is God choosing us for his team when we absolutely do not deserve it.

This is huge because being on that team is the most powerful and important thing that could ever happen to us. It means we have been forgiven the fact that we are undeserving. We have been accepted and loved by God, and with that comes a whole new life, life the way it is supposed to be. It is a life brimming with meaning and purpose in every aspect of it. It comes with the certainty of eternal life in God’s kingdom, and his love and presence with us at all times. This is a calling of value that is beyond calculation.

This brings us back to Ephesians 4:1 where Paul urged that we live a life that is “worthy” of that calling. The Greek word that is translated “worthy” also means “weight.” It went back to the old days when they wanted to measure the weight of something. You probably have seen the old school scales that had a horizontal arm had trays hanging from each end of it. They would put whatever they wanted to weigh on the tray on one side. Then they would put known weights on the tray on the other side until the two trays balanced exactly. What was on the two trays was of equal weight. That’s the image of this word. When Paul tells us to live a life worthy of our calling, he is telling us to live in a way that is of equal weight, of equal value, to that calling.

But we have just seen that calling is immensely valuable. Its cost is beyond human calculation. How are we ever going to be able to live in a way that is equal to that value? We simply can’t. It would be like if Congress passed a bill that said Rick Myatt now has to pay off our $34 trillion national debt all by himself. How could I ever hope to do that? If I could pay a billion dollars a year it would take me 34,000 years to pay that off. There are 2 problems with that plan. I’m not going to live 34,000 years, and I can’t pay a billion dollars a year anyway.

It seems that God is telling us to do the impossible. What a burden to live with that hanging over us. It is hopeless. Except for one thing. Divine calculus is a very different kind of math. In Ephesians 4 Paul went on to explain what God considers to be of equal weight to the calling we have received from him, and it is very surprising. Verse 3 says, “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.” What is worthy of our incredible, unimaginably valuable and costly calling is not being the best, holiest people the world has ever seen. It is not being practically perfect in every way. It is not doing impressive good deeds and accomplishing great ministry tasks that change the world. It is not doing powerful spiritual miracles. Here is what God says is worthy of our calling. Do everything you can to keep unity among his followers. That’s it. God says unity is so important to him that this is what he wants us to pursue with all vigor.

Well that’s a bit unexpected, isn’t it? It causes me to ask why unity is such a big deal to God. Why is it so important?

UNITY HONORS GOD

Let’s go back to the mission that God has given us. Jesus said his mission was to make the Father known, to reveal him and his will and in so doing to seek and save the lost. We are called to become like Jesus, so we have been given that mission of making the character of the Father known. We are to do that by living like him, displaying his characteristics of patience, kindness, goodness, love, justice, grace and mercy. I mentioned recently that the late Ray Stedman said we are to become miniature models of God’s character. God wants people to look at us and get a glimpse of what he is like.

Our grandson, Wesley, is obsessed with toy cars and trucks. So he has, among others, a huge collection of Hot Wheels cars and Matchbox cars. These are little models of actual cars. In many cases they have amazing detail. They are not the real thing. They don’t have engines in them that can drive the car around and they certainly don’t have room to put people inside them. However, they are often true to life, and you can see from looking at them what the real thing looks like.

So it is with us and God. We are not God. We do not have his divine nature and qualities. He is omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient. We’re not omni anything. However, we are to be way scaled down depictions of his character. People should be able to look at us and say, “That must be what God is like.” And that is where we begin to see why unity is so important. When we bicker with one another, when we fight each other, when we gossip about each other, when we criticize each other, when we hold grudges against each other, when we try to get back at each other for what someone has done to us and when we totally break off relationships, we are telling the world that’s what God is like. We are saying the persons of the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, bicker, compete, fight, gossip about each other, criticize each other, hold grudges against each other and refuse to talk to each other. That is untrue and horrifying. To use an old fashioned word, it is blaspheming against God.

Years ago Laurie and I were on a plane heading out on vacation. We had one of those “it’s a small world” experiences when a man on the flight and I recognized each other. He had been a pastor in this area, but I had lost track of him. At one point in the flight we had an opportunity to talk and I learned what had gone on in his life. He was no longer serving as a pastor. He told me that some people in his church had gotten upset over a trivial matter and had made a big deal about it. They rallied some people to their cause and people in the church began taking sides. I don’t even remember what the issue was, except when he told me about it, I was incredulous. It was so trivial I thought he was kidding. Sadly, he was not. Eventually the matter turned into a war, and the whole church blew up. He ended up deciding he wanted to do something better with his life than deal with people fighting over trivia so he chose another career altogether. What does that say about God? Certainly nothing good.

When we love each other, when we treat each other with kindness and gentleness, when we encourage each other and forgive slights and perceived wrongs, when we give grace and affirm each other, when we humble ourselves before each other and serve each other, we are saying this is what our God is like, and that brings honor to him. Being unified in love honors God, fighting and dividing slanders his name.

UNITY MAKES A POWERFUL CASE

In verse 23 Jesus made an astounding statement. He prayed that we would be unified like he and the Father are unified. “I in them and you in me, so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you were with me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” He prayed in verse 21 that believers would be one “so that the world may believe that you sent me.”

Jesus said that the thing that would convince the world that he was the divine Son of God, sent by the Father to rescue the world, was that his followers would be unified! That is not what we typically think. Some people believe that what will convince others about the true identity of Jesus is evidence and solid arguments on his behalf. We need strong apologetics to make the case and win them over. Others say we need the power of God displayed in signs and wonders in order to convince people about Jesus. If they see the miracles of God, then they’ll believe.

We need to have evidence to base our faith on. We need to know reasons why it makes sense to believe. Miracles, real ones, not the pretend miracles that are so common among some believers, would be great. But if what Jesus said is true, then those are not what will change people’s hearts and minds. What will win people over is seeing believers in Jesus living in love, grace and unity with each other. Can this really be true?

Just ask if miracles are the thing that will make the difference. It sure seems like they would be convincing. But consider the evidence of the Bible record. Jesus performed many miracles, astounding ones. He gave blind people their sight, healed lepers of their disease, gave paralyzed people the ability to walk, he fed massive crowds of people with a handful of food, he brought a man back to life from his tomb. And the majority of people who witnessed those mind blowing acts, did not believe in him. When he, himself, rose up from his tomb, the majority of people refused to believe. Somehow, the miracles, the evidence of their own eyes, did not convince them.

Think back to the Old Testament and the example of Moses. God used him to bring about the plagues that finally got Israel released from slavery in Egypt. Then in that one monumental miracle he somehow divided the water of the Red Sea so the people could escape. Don’t you think that would be an unforgettable, world shaking event for that would change people forever? But what happened when Israel got out in the desert and ran low on food and water? They doubted Moses and they doubted God! It’s hard to believe, but somehow they forgot about the impossible miracles they saw. The miracles didn’t do it.

I have had personal experience with the fact that arguments and apologetics won’t convince people either. Twice in my life I have had occasions to have multiple conversations with men who said they didn’t believe because they had too many questions and doubts about Christ. In those conversations I answered all their questions. In both of those occasions the men came to the place where they said, “I’m convinced. I know what you believe is true. You are right and I have no doubt.” When I asked them if they were ready to put their faith in Christ both said no. When I said, “But you know this is true. Why don’t you want to believe?” both said the same thing. “Because I don’t want to.”

Jesus said the thing that would convince people is believers living in unity. Why would that be so powerful? It is powerful because we all long for people to actually be able to live in unity and love. We want it. There is a long list of what are known as buddy movies, going all the way back to the old Bing Crosby and Bob Hope “Road” movies. There have been classics like the *Lethal Weapon* movies, the *Men In Black* movies and who could forget *Dumb And Dumber*? I looked up a list of buddy movies and learned there have been 42 of them made just since 2020. Why is that such a common trope? Because we want people to live in unity.

Carissa and Michael just celebrated their 11th wedding anniversary. I saw something the day they got married that is evidence of this desire for unity. They got married at the Hotel Del. Prior to the wedding at one point the photographer took Carissa to several different spots for photos, and Laurie and I accompanied her. Every where she went in her wedding gown strangers happily smiled and greeted her, giving her congratulations and best wishes. They loved the idea of marriage, of love and unity. The classic example of that happened following the wedding. They got married on the beach, and after the ceremony when they walked back to the hotel they went by a swimming pool. The people at the pool, people who had never met them, strangers who didn’t know them from Adam and Eve, clapped and cheered for them as they walked by. Why? Because we long for love and unity.

The killer is, we long for it, but don’t have it. Unity is absent pretty much everywhere there are human beings. Maybe you saw the story in the newspaper about the Commission on Human Relations in San Diego. The county government set up this committee 4 years ago to foster more community, more unity, better relationships between groups of people in the area. The article said that the committee has ceased to function for all intents and purposes because it is so torn apart by dissension, division and in fighting. Welcome to the human race.

Our world tries to make it happen. We will see it later this year when the Olympics take place in Paris. The opening ceremonies will be a celebration of how sport brings us together. People will think it is so beautiful how we are all unified. But what is the reality? It is a sham. Those people who appear to unified will shortly be doing everything they can to undercut and defeat each other. There will be maneuvering and manipulating galore. And the truth is that even as the games go on there will be multiple wars continuing in the world. The point is, the human race longs for unity, but can’t make it happen. For people to live in unity will take a miracle. Exactly. Jesus wanted his people to display what only God can do, bring oneness that will be powerful and appealing to the human soul.

I had a friend named Lance years ago whose experience bore out what Jesus prayed. He was a college student, but also a veteran. After high school he went into the army and saw combat in Vietnam. He said that experience was horrifying, except for one thing. He talked about being on a front line base where they were often under siege. He went through fierce combat. He said he experienced something there that he could not have imagined. The fire of combat forged bonds between the guys in his unit that were stronger than anything he had ever experienced or even dreamed of. Stephen Ambrose’s book about World War II later would capsulize what he found with the title *Band Of Brothers*. The men he fought alongside were from all different races, cultures and social standing, but none of that mattered. He said they were bonded together to the extent that he knew any man in his unit would die for him and he would die for them. There was closeness and love he had never experienced before. When he got out of the army he missed the camaraderie and the oneness of that experience. He had no desire to go back to combat, but he longed for that brotherhood, but he couldn’t find it anywhere. Then he encountered a group of believers in Jesus, and as he spent time with them he saw something like the oneness that he had seen in Vietnam. He became a follower of Jesus because of the unity that he saw in those Christians.

APPLICATION

This all sounds great. But there is one ugly fly in the ointment. Look at the history of the church and at the state of the church across the world today. It does not shout “unity” to anybody. In fact, it is badly divided. I’ve preached this message for more than 4 decades, and sadly have to admit that it feels like no one is listening. Years ago when Laurie and I were on vacation from our former church we were on Maui. Our stay there overlapped the vacation of another pastor from our staff. We agreed to get together for dinner. We had a very nice dinner, but at one point my friend said, “Rick, I need to give you a heads up about something that happened before I left because you’re going to have to deal with it.” He proceeded to tell me about an elder meeting that had taken place while I was gone. He said that an elder and a staff member had gotten into an argument that turned really ugly. He said they were yelling each other and were so emotional he feared they were going to start trading blows. Fortunately it didn’t go that far, but my friend told me I was going to have to deal with it when I got back because it had done a lot of damage and it was definitely not resolved. I told him I wasn’t going to have to deal with it because I wasn’t planning on going back. Here were two men who were supposed to be examples to the church, and they were on the verge of coming to blows. Yeah, that’s real unity. Sadly I have other stories of believers trampling all over each other and being so divided they could not even be in the same room. I read about a church in Colorado that split because one faction believed Christians should say “alleluia” and the other faction believed the word is “hallelujah.” Yeah, that seems momentous enough to divide over, doesn’t it? This has been discouraging to me and has made me wonder at times if there’s a lot fewer genuine believers in Jesus than people who think they are, but aren’t. One thing I do know is there are fewer people who are living in the Spirit of Christ than who think they are. If that were not the case there would be a lot less division and dissension.

It is not hopeless, though at times I have wondered. I have experienced long stretches of unity in ministries I have been involved in over the years, and though I superstitiously hesitate to say it, we have had great unity in the Anchor. So it does happen. However, the bottom line is that if being unified were easy, everyone would do it. But it is hard. We humans, all of us, can be prickly and often difficult to get along with. So what can we do to pursue unity?

PRAY

We can do what Jesus did. We know it is God’s will that his people be unified. When we pray that they would be we are asking something that is already in his will. If Jesus thought praying for unity was important, surely it should be for us as well. Jesus’ prayer for unity reminds us that it is not something we will be able to manufacture on our own or control. If people could, they would. It is going to take a work of God to bring it about, so we must ask him to do a miracle to make it happen.

MAKE EVERY EFFORT

Paul wrote that we should make every effort to preserve the unity of the Spirit. As you will see shortly, the unity of the Spirit is real. God has created a bond between his people. We need to preserve that bond. We must choose to protect it. To make every effort means to make it a priority. It should take precedence over other things. Our garage is a source of some frustration for Laurie and me. On one hand, we are ahead of most of our neighbors because we can park our car in the garage. Most of them can’t do that. Our car is in the garage, so that’s a win. But the rest of the garage is a big fat loss. We have way too much stuff in it. There’s so much stuff we can’t get to what’s there to use it. So I made a New Year’s Resolution. Get some of the stuff out of the garage before the end of January. Guess how that went. We made zero progress. Some of that was not our fault. But the real truth is, we have not made every effort to tackle the problem. There are steps we could have taken to make a dent in the task, but we haven’t. Making every effort means doing everything you can to accomplish something, and we haven’t done that. There are some baby steps we could have taken, but we haven’t.

When it comes to preserving the peace we are to make every effort. That means make it a priority. Do everything you can to be at peace with your brothers and sisters in Christ. That means we need to value the peace we have with others more than we value some agenda we might have, more than getting our way, more than our hurt feelings or wounded pride. In the incident I mentioned earlier involving two leaders in our previous church, each of them had an agenda, and that agenda was more important than being at peace with a brother. We got through that crisis, but those two never really resolved the problem. They did not bury the hatchet, and in the end they both left that church.

Something that has helped Laurie and me in our relationship with each other is we always ask ourselves, what is more important than us being one and my spouse feeling loved and valued by me? The answer to that, which is almost nothing, makes any disagreement we have pretty mellow. In Ephesians 4:2 Paul said being one involved being completely humble and gentle, being patient and bearing with one another in love. Making every effort means doing those things, humbling ourselves, being patient, gentle, kind and loving. It means forgiving and applying large doses of grace to every relationship.

KEEP THE MAIN THING THE MAIN THING

Years ago we were on vacation in Honolulu and we noticed a group of men putting up a platform on the beach we were walking along. We were on our way to a restaurant for dinner. After dinner when we walked back we saw group of men had finished the platform and they were standing in a circle with their heads down. It looked like they were praying. They finished just as we were walking by, so we asked them if they had, indeed, been praying. They were, and very quickly we learned they were part of a Christian group that was putting on a surf contest the next day. They were immediately warm and welcoming to us, and we had a wonderful time visiting with them. We had an instant connection with them. There were maybe a dozen of them. There were several Pacific islanders in the group, several African Americans, along with a few Caucasians. What I noticed was they were unified. They were from different races, different cultures, different churches and none of that mattered. They welcomed us, complete strangers, as though we were long lost family members. All that mattered to them and to us was we were brothers and sisters in Christ. There was oneness, unity in Christ that far outweighed whatever differences there might have been.

We walked on from that encounter heading back to our hotel, but another block or so down the street we came across a group of college age students sitting on the beach singing, led by a couple of guys with guitars. We recognized the songs they were singing. They were familiar worship songs. We stopped to listen for a bit, and pretty soon two of the students got up and came over to talk to us. It turned out they were Christian students that were from all over the country who were there for a summer missions project. Once again, there was an instant connection. Our ages and backgrounds were different, and that didn’t matter even a little. We were brothers and sisters in Christ.

We all know that there is an instant bond when we encounter another follower of Jesus. The point of all this is, we have a powerful bond brought about by the Spirit of Christ between us and other believers in Jesus. What is so important that it is worth damaging or severing that bond of peace? We need to keep the main thing the main thing, and the main thing is that we are brothers and sisters in Christ. We have the same Holy Spirit in us, and we need to protect that, nurture it and never damage it for some lesser supposed good.