

Don't Interrupt the Unity

Colossians 3:8-11 *But now you yourselves are to put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth. ⁹ Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds, ¹⁰ and have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him, ¹¹ where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all and in all.*

If you have ever played the game “Jenga” you will know the object of the game is to keep adding little pegs of wood to a tower you are building without it toppling over. Once you have successfully added another peg, it is up to the other team to add another one without it toppling. Whoever adds a peg and causes it to topple, loses the game. The higher the tower gets, the more you want to avoid making it fall. You don't want to be the one who adds the peg that brings everything down.

Church unity is bit like that. We come into a church and, in a sense, the tower is already built. Our life and actions in the church are supposed to add more to the tower, not topple it over. The kind of carefulness we have when placing a peg on that tower pictures the kind of carefulness we ought to have with our words and deeds with one another in the church. In fact, God explicitly tells us that when we enter the church, we find a tower already present.

Ephesians 4:1-6 *I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, ² with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, ³ endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ⁴ There is one body and one Spirit, just as 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 above all, and through all, and in you all.*

Notice God states in vv4-6 that this unity is a fact. It is there in Christ. As much as there is one God, Lord and Spirit – there is one body, one baptism, one faith. When you are saved, you join this unity. But then notice the action God wants us to take. God does not say – make the unity, create the unity; He says – maintain it – keep it. Unity is not something we have to arrange, or try to produce out of nothing. From a positional standpoint, there is unity.

From a practical standpoint, we can join that unity, foster it, encourage it, or we can interrupt it. It is like the flow of a river that drives the turbines of a generator. You can encourage the flow, clear out things that are blocking it and strengthen it. Or you can build little dams, divert streams off the river; establish little islands in the middle of it. The current is there. You join it and encourage it, or you oppose it.

In the Scriptures dealing with unity, God tells us how not to interrupt the unity, and then He tells us how to foster and encourage the unity. Firstly, negatively speaking, we are told what not to do – those things that act like a blockage in a pipe. Then we are told what to do – the things that acts like drain cleaner.

We saw last in the recent sermon entitled ‘The Unity of the Body’, our unity comes from tuning our minds to a common thing – the Word of God. When we together submit our individual minds and wills and opinions to Scripture, we end up with a one-mindedness that overflows into unselfish loyalty to Christ and one another.

So what is it that blocks our unity, our one-mindedness? Simple, it is I-trouble. The threat to unity is Self, with a capital S. In other words, what is the biggest threat to unity? You are. You have the potential to interrupt, and destroy what God has bought with His own blood. So long as you are human with a selfish nature, you have the potential to give in to that flesh and interrupt the unity. But, in fact, you are also the means of maintaining unity, and the means by which it succeeds.

Let's walk through this passage briefly, and get the gist of it. In verses 8 and 9, we are told to put away anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language and lying. Notice the basis for doing this. *“Since” you have put off the old man with his deeds, (v10) – and have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created Him.* Notice the practice is again rooted in a position. Since you put off that old man when you were saved, and since you have put on the new man when you were saved; put off these practices of verse 8 and 9, and put on these practices of verses 12-14.

Why is it that putting off the old man and putting on the new man should result in unity?

Well, first, who is this old man? He is that old sinful nature that wants nothing more than to rule itself. Its motto is “I Am”. It is interested in self-glory. The first and greatest commandment of the old man is “Thou shalt love me, with all thine heart, all thy soul and all thy might.” What do you think such a one will do to unity? He will destroy it. He cannot live in unity with anyone, because his universe has himself squarely at the centre, and all must orbit him.

At salvation, we die to this old man with Christ. He is put off like a garment that doesn't fit. That doesn't mean we lose his influence in us, but he no longer controls us. He is not you. He is the old you. Dead, in Christ, his remaining influence felt only because you still have the flesh.

Then we put on the new man. Who is this new man? He is a new creation in Christ (**2 Cor 5:17**). Look closely at what the Bible says about the new man. It says he is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created Him.

Who created this new man? Christ.

This man is renewed, literally, as he grows in knowledge of his Creator. Just like baby animals watch and copy their mothers, the new man grows to the degree he sees and grows in knowledge of Jesus. The image of Jesus in the Word of God imprints itself on the mind of the new man, like an image is imprinted on a photo-negative. When developed, that negative produces a picture like the original.

The new man is like a flower to the sun. The sun causes flower petals to open. The knowledge of Christ, who He is, shapes and renews this new man. If you expose the old man to Christ, nothing happens. Rocks don't do anything with the sun, except crack. But flowers have a different nature - expose them to the sun and they grow. As your new nature is exposed to the Person of Christ in the Word, it is renewed. It blossoms. It is transformed.

And here is where it comes back to unity. The character and Person of Christ is the opposite of that selfish, self-centred old man. In Christ, instead of it being about me, me, me – look at what happens.

In Christ – there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision. Christ is bigger than our cultural differences. In the ancient world, it was unthinkable that Jews and Greeks would sit down to a meal together. Jews would not buy food from Gentiles; they would shake off the dust from their shoes when leaving Gentile territories. The Gentiles returned the favour. The differences in culture and ethnicity were so great, that it would take a near miracle to bring them together. But Ephesians says that this is what Christ did: **“Ephesians 2:14** For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition *between us*; :” In Christ, cultural differences do not disappear. We have different languages, customs, foods, flags. They just become insignificant compared to the fact that Christ is all to us, and He is in all of us.

In Christ – there is neither barbarian nor Scythian. Christ is bigger than our educational differences. Barbarian is the term that the ancient Greeks gave to the uneducated. The Scythians were a savage people, conquering people and acting in murderous, inhumane ways. The idea of a gentle, humane,

educated man enjoying fellowship with a Scythian or an illiterate barbarian seemed absurd. But in Christ, these differences become like a speed bump compared to a mountain. Christ is all to us, and in all of us, our educational advantages or disadvantages fade into the background. Whether you have a doctorate, or if you cannot read, whether you have only standard eight or if you are a quantum physicist, in Christ our native intelligence and education fades.

In Christ – there is neither slave nor free. Christ is bigger than our social status. Slaves and freemen did not enjoy social fellowship. In fact, one of the people mentioned at the end of Colossians – Onesimus, was a slave to one of the other Christians in Colosse – Philemon. Though they had a social relationship of master and slave, yet in Christ they were one. It does not matter if you arrived here in a Mercedes Benz or a taxi. It does not matter if you are a high-ranking politician, or a receptionist, a professor or a rubbish collector. In Christ, our social status fades – because Christ is our all, and in us all.

This is the new man you have put on – where the marks and badges of pride we used to where to exalt ourselves over our fellow men fade into nothingness. In Christ, there is spiritual equality. Jesus occupies us, there is no space to quibble over our differences.

In light of that kind of position, what must you and I practise? In light of having been joined to such unity, what is your responsibility?

Let's examine the negative commands today – the commands to not interrupt the unity in verses 8 and 9.

You can really place these into two categories. Sins of attitude, and sins of the tongue. We interrupt the unity when we go back to the old man, and allow selfish attitudes, and selfish speech to enter our lives, and our relationship with one another.

I. Sins of Attitude

There are three sins of attitude mentioned here: anger, malice and wrath.

Anger. The word here in the original refers to a kind of settled anger. Not settled in that it has been resolved, but settled in the sense that it has settled down to reside, to stay. This is anger which chooses not to explode, but to enter into a long, slow burn.

This is when you have been wronged, or think you have, and nothing was resolved – or not to your satisfaction. Now the anger turns inward, and it becomes bitterness. It becomes resentment. It becomes indifference. It becomes coldness.

Anger does not have to be an outburst. Some people remain angry at others for years, maybe even a lifetime. And their anger is seen not in throwing things, but in giving the cold shoulder. Or in speaking to them in a cold and cool manner. Or in generally avoiding them. Or in speaking of them unkindly. Or in thinking evil of them when their name is mentioned. Or in criticising them in your heart. This is anger that you have made peace with. You have given this anger a room in your heart to say in, and there it lodges, filling the home with the voice of its dark malcontent.

Anger is not something that you are supposed to live with.

Some people sniff salt water to clear out their sinuses. Anger, rightly used, demands a change from sin to righteousness. But the person who is sniffing salt water all the time will severely damage their internal nasal passages. The person who learns to live with anger harms himself, and soon becomes very destructive to those around him.

Put this away. Do not allow yourself to be angry at another believer, and just let it sit. The fact that you are not quarreling openly does not mean you are not angry. It may be that you are becoming so hardened in heart, that you are comfortable with anger.

Wrath. This is the word which refers to outbursts. This means rage, fury. This is the anger that blows up. It is something that boils up and over. Again, when self feels it has not got what it wants,

it rises up and lashes out. It might be the sharp and sarcastic word. It might be the parting shot we give. It might be the nasty phone call we make to that person, to vent our fury. It might even come to physically harming another person. Sad to say, fist-fights have not been unknown amongst people professing to be Christians.

Put this away – this belongs to the old man, the new man has no part in this.

The next word is **Malice**. This carries the idea of ill-will towards another. There is a desire to injure, a desire to harm, a vicious nature bent on inflicting damage to another. You have seen and felt that in your own heart before, haven't you? You have felt pleasure at the thought of humiliating that person, ruining their reputation in front of others, exposing that person's past or their inconsistencies, belittling them, emphasising their weaknesses, making them squirm or blush before others, spreading a rumour they can't possibly erase from their name, making life hard for them – one way or another – punishing them. All you need to do is watch children play, and you will see malice in the human heart, in those supposedly 'innocent ones' Watch how they find the weak or shy one and exploit him. Watch how the strong ones realise they can bully the weak ones. Watch how they will gang up to tease another child to tears. No reason, except that malice is in the human heart. Put it away, it belongs to the old man. It has no part amongst God's people.

Someone who is working hard to maintain the unity found in Christ will not allow anger, wrath or malice to have any resting place in your life.

The next three sins are sins of the tongue. And there is nothing like the tongue to interrupt and upset the unity

II. Sins of Speech

Blasphemy. The word is a direct translation from the Greek *blasphemia* but this word is sometimes used to refer to something other than blaspheming God's name. It is often used to mean evil-speakings. In fact, it's used in Jude to refer to Michael not bringing an accusation against the devil. Given the context being about how we treat one another, the idea seems to be that of slander. To say of others what is destructive to their reputation. To speak about someone in a way which places a question mark around their name or reputation. To say something that deliberately destroys. It comes when we say something true or untrue about someone for no other reason than to smear their name, and by comparison to make ourselves look better.

Sometimes we do it by telling others of an incident. We all like stories. To hear about a situation, seems more like we are just relating current events to one another. But often, the story is just decoration around getting to the tasty morsel of another person's reputation.

Sometimes we do it by just dropping an innuendo. “You know Bob seems to spend a lot of time talking to Jill, these days.” “Fred hasn't always been very good with money.” “Jim and Sandy have had problems and still do.” Now it's one thing when sharing these things in counselling, or in confidentiality to someone who is a part of the problem or a part of the solution. But why would we just discuss destructive bits of information about others for no apparent reason?

The Bible tells us why in Proverbs: “**Proverbs 18:8** The words of a talebearer are like tasty trifles, And they go down into the inmost body. “ The old man has an appetite for such things, that's why. It glorifies self. Put it away. It has no place amongst the new creatures in Christ.

Proverbs 11:13 A talebearer reveals secrets, But he who is of a faithful spirit conceals a matter.

Gossip stops with you. Be the broken telephone. Refuse to transmit the disease of slander to another cell in Christ's Body.

Filthy Language Out of Your Mouth. This word appears only here in Colossians. It means obscene talk, dirty words. This would include using God's name in vain. It would include swear-words. It would include the substitute swear-words that Christians think they are getting away with. It would include speaking about what is lewd or obscene – like dirty jokes, filthy-minded comments. Now why would someone's dirty mouth affect the unity of the church? Because of what James says, “**James 3:8-10** But no man can tame the tongue. *It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.*”⁹

With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. ¹⁰ Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so."

Can we with one mouth sing "Holy, Holy, Holy" and then tell dirty jokes to each other? Can we with one accord pray and then profane His name in front of each other?

This belongs to the old man. Put it away. It interrupts the unity.

Lying to One Another

Now it obvious that if the human body were to lie to itself, it would have huge problems. If the fingers touched a hot stove, and the nerves sent the pain signals back to the brain, and the brain lied, and said to the fingers - "It's not hot", what would happen to the fingers? Or if an infection had entered the ear, and the ear decided to conceal it from the rest of the body – what would happen to its function – and to the balance of the whole body? We could list endless examples. The complexity of the body and its interdependence mean that the parts must be open and truthful with one another, or everything will suffer.

So we are told, to avoid interrupting the unity – don't lie to one another.

I think this really comes into play when we start asking each other about our spiritual wellbeing. Lying doesn't really come into play when we engage in small talk. But what if a fellow brother says to you - "How are you really doing in the Lord?" Or of they ask, "How is your prayer life?" At that point, we are very tempted to selfishly make ourselves look better than we really are.

We can tell an outright lie. "Fine," we say.

Or maybe we lie by evading the truth "Great, how about you?"

Or maybe we hide behind being vague, like "Well, you know, ups and downs'.

Or we can lie by exaggerating our true condition - "Oh pretty good, you know"

Maybe we lie by pretending when we are around one another – pretending to understand, pretending to enjoy singing, pretending we are well, when we are actually the spiritual equivalent of a coma. We need help, and we need is desperately, but rather than tell the fellow members of our body, we continue to act as if all is well. This disturbs the unity. You are maintaining a facade, at the expense of others, of whom you are a part,. If you are struggling spiritually, others must know about it, for their sake and yours. To lie to each other is not maintaining unity.

Sins of attitude and sins of the tongue. They both come from a selfish heart which wants the preeminence.

People working in fireworks factories take special precautions to avoid static electricity. What we are used to in every day life – the little zaps you get when you touch something iron, or even another person – cannot be tolerated in a fireworks factory. One spark and the whole factory could explode. So they wear special clothes, they go over certain discharge materials. In the same way, God's people cannot walk around something as precious as God's church, discharging all kinds of selfishness, and expect nothing to happen. A church, of all places, has people who are dwelling together in close partnership. And the closer you get, the more potential for friction. The more we are together, the more our personalities have to interact and mingle. Like rubbing a balloon on your hair, there is great potential for selfishness to rear its head.

If we make no attempt to truly be one minded, to be of one accord – we will have no problem. If we make this a preaching centre where all these individuals come, tank up and head out, there is little potential for disunity, because we're not really trying to love one another. But that option has not been left open to us. We must dwell together. But like those workers in the fireworks factories, we must make very sure that we do not allow the selfishness of the old man even a spark. Not the slightest discharge of selfishness can be tolerated, for it has the capacity to interrupt and harm the unity.

Now, next week, we will see how we are to wet the gunpowder. We are to pour on the gunpowder the water of mercy, kindness, meekness, humility, longsuffering, forbearance, forgiveness. So that if

there should be the spark of someone's selfishness, the longsuffering, meekness, forgiveness will not allow it to ignite into conflict. God comes at it both ways. Don't allow the sparks of selfishness. Make sure the water of love is poured on thick, so there is nothing dry to burn.

Now the application here is personal. The selfishness God's wants you to deal with is you own. He has other commands for dealing with other people's selfishness – we'll see those next week. Today, the call is to you. Have you allowed self to reign in your heart, where attitudes of settled anger, rage or malice are developing. Have you allowed your tongue to fall into gossip or slander, filthy language or lies? You have died to those things. You are part of a body where Christ is all and in all. Put them off.