

Sermon Notes

(A basic transcription with modifications for style and clarity)

UNITY – THE CHALLENGE

Marshall Stiver, March 20, 2021

I'd like to begin with a question this afternoon and that is, "Do you like to be personally challenged in your life?" Do you like a personal challenge? A knee-jerk reaction might be yes or it might be no, depending on what we've just gone through. But I know that we all know that challenges are good for us. They're very good for us. Coupled with faith, that's the thing that makes us grow – challenges.

We can look at challenges in our own lives, hopefully, that have been very good for us. For many of the guys among us, we can look back at Spokesman's Club and that first speech. Now, for some it was no big deal. For others it was a big deal. It was a real challenge.

Or here's another challenge we could have, having a mirror put in front of us, through a sermon we hear, an article we read, a conversation we have among ourselves, so that we actually come to see something about ourselves that we've never seen before, something that we realize we need to change. Challenges stretch us to grow into what our faith brings us to see because faithful people always are looking to see what they can find.

It's incredibly encouraging and stimulating to dig deep and meet one challenge and then meet another and then another. Sometimes we meet the same challenge several times. Sometimes many, many times. But we continually rise to meet the challenges. It changes who we are at our hearts. And as I said, overcomers meet challenges and that's who we are to be.

How would you like to have the challenge that is before our president right now trying to unify this country? He is presiding over a nation that has not been so divided since the Civil War. That was back in 1860. That's about 160 years ago. And if you really look at it from a spiritual perspective, we're far more divided now than we were then.

President Lincoln was dealing with two sides that had some commonality, to whatever degree, in terms of having some sort of belief in God. There were a lot of God-believing people in the country at the time. A reconciliation of sorts was possible, and the challenge was met to reunite the states in this union.

But today, the majority probably don't have that same commonality. I'm just stating that as it appears to me. Probably most do not have that same commonality, some sort of belief in God. Without that commonality, unity for this country is virtually "mission impossible". It's not going to happen. National repentance, in other words, is what it would take to have unity within this country again.

So again, how would you or I like to have the challenge that our president has before him? I think we can all be thankful that we don't have that challenge. Or do we? Do we have that challenge?

In principle, although we're not the president of the country, we do have a very similar challenge, don't we? How many times has it come up in conversations among ourselves? Many, many times. Questions like, "Do you think we'll ever come back together as God's people – His Church?" "Will we ever be unified again?" People wonder this all the time. With all of our differences, do you think it would happen or that it could happen? We hear these continuously and I think even more as time goes on.

I could just say this: based on the differences between our president's challenge and ours, namely having faith in God or not, the simple answer is absolutely yes! Absolutely yes, there will be unity. The answer is certain; the achieving of it may or may not be simple, however. That depends on each one of us individually, our response to the challenge.

So, we have this huge challenge staring us in the face as God's people today. If you like titles, I've titled this one "Unity – The Challenge". As we go through this today, it's going to put us into an examining state of mind, obviously. We're going to be challenged internally into our own thought process. Not into someone else's thought process, but into our own. It will be very good and very positive for us, because this time of year is tremendous for us in a spiritual sense.

Let's define unity. I'm going to give it to you from the very first internet source that I found because it was very simple and that's all I wanted. Unity is the state of being united or joined as a whole.

In human terms, not from a spiritual perspective, that meant all 36 states after the Civil War were able to come back together again under one government. Twelve of what would become states were territories at that time.

When we look back at God's Church during Mr. Armstrong's time, there were tens of thousands of members that comprised one organization, the Worldwide Church of God. Not hundreds of organizations as we see today. Today, we so much desire to see all of the present organizations come back together to be one. If only it could be like it used to be. We've all felt it a million times, I know we have. Let's go to John chapter 17. We're going to see here that this is God's intention for us, without question. Christ says:

John 17:11 Now I am no longer in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to You. Holy Father, keep through Your name those whom You have given Me, that they may be one as We are.

The plan was set in motion before the world was, and it required Christ's sacrifice to redeem us from sin and the death penalty, specifically so that we might be able to become one with Christ and the Father and with each other. This whole plan of salvation was designed for the purpose of oneness, to make us one just like the Father and the Son, that we could be one. Have oneness on God's own level, in other words.

That, in itself, should make it crystal clear in our minds that the oneness or unity among ourselves will take place. It must! The whole plan of salvation revolves around this concept. The God family is going to grow. It's one family. They think alike, they act alike, they do the same things. They exude love. It's inescapable.

20 "I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word;

Of course, this speaks to our time. So did verse 17. It applies to all of us at any time, but now He's making it specific down the road.

21 that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me.

The love and the unity among God's people is to be so clearly visible to the world that they will know surely that Christ was sent here by God.

22 And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one:

23 I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me.

Christ says something very important there in verse 23. He says that we are being made perfect in one. In other words, it is a growth process, just like we heard in the sermonette. It's a maturing process. It doesn't happen all at once. There is a tremendous depth of understanding that goes into what Christ said here, this concept of being made perfect in one. We're going to get into that in the course of this message.

But the rest of Christ's point here is that, through the development of this love and unity among ourselves, it will become obvious to the world that God the Father has loved us just as He loved Christ. That is a profound statement. We're going to look like Christ. That's the oneness we can anticipate.

So again, we need to let this understanding be punctuated in our minds with some exclamation points! This is a guarantee! This is what is going to happen. The unity

challenge is going to be met by the willing, without question. It's not a matter of "if". It's a matter of when and how. Let's go to chapter 13 while we're here in John. We'll look at one more affirmation of God's clear intention for our love and our unity. Christ says:

John 13:34 A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another.

This was really just a new focus on an old commandment. The commandments are never old. They're timeless, but you understand what I'm saying. Obedience to the commandments produces the love that Christ had toward the disciples. We know the commandments are exceedingly broad and they encompass everything we do in life. Because those commandments lived in Him, He exuded this love toward the brethren.

The new focus was to comprehend, then, the source of Christ's love and to make that their focus in how they treated each other. We're looking at a formula here in a direction to where this unity comes from. Our love and our unity is to be an extension of Christ's who lives in us. This isn't something that's a maybe. Nothing about this is maybe. There will be disciples who will stand out in their mutual love for one another bringing honor to Christ and our Father, because we will typify them on this earth. Now, I say "we". We hope it's us. We hope it's God's people today.

Let's ask ourselves a question at this point. Knowing that unity is God's expectation and His plan for His called-out ones, is unity discernable when all organizations come together as one organization? Is that when unity is discernable? We can answer it with another question. Is unity discernable when all 50 states stay under the same government? Of course not! On a spiritual level, not even remotely. Just being together in one organization doesn't equal unity on the spiritual level.

And of course, we've talked about this many times in recent years because it's pertinent to our time, it's necessary. The Church of God isn't even an organization. It is a spiritual organism. It's a spiritual thing, a living thing, an eternal thing.

We were baptized into God's Church, those of us who have been baptized. We weren't baptized into any organization or denomination of this world. You can think back on it and you'll know it's true. We were baptized into the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit by and through the authority of Jesus Christ.

That means something, brethren. That means something really substantial. Through Christ there are no organizational lines. There are none in the spiritual organism. There are none!

Let's go to Colossians and review some of the facts that we've known for a long time even though our actions may not have been reflective of it all the time because we make mistakes.

Colossians 1:18 And He (referring to Christ) is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence.

19 For it pleased the Father that in Him all the fullness should dwell,

The fact is, and again we're looking at some of the basic facts, Christ is the Head of the body, the Church, and it is pleasing to our Father. He and He alone has made it so. No man has ever been made head of the Church of God – ever! This is Christ's place and there is no other – period. These are very simple things and who can argue with the truth? The truth is inarguable.

Under Christ's leadership as Head of the Church, how does He structure the Church? We might ask that. We know that the physical family which God designed has structure within it. And the spiritual family, which God is developing, obviously has structure as well. Let's go to Ephesians. And of course, we see it is indeed the Head, Christ who sets structure within His one Church, within this spiritual organism.

Ephesians 4:11 And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers,

That's wonderful! Christ did this. It's very clear. He sets them. He gives some to fill positions of service. So therefore, we can determine from this that Christ chooses perfect people for such responsibilities. He only chooses perfect people. (I appreciate your laughter, because it is so true!) Of course He doesn't choose perfect people! There aren't any perfect people. Wouldn't it be nice if there were? But I know, speaking for myself, and I'll let anyone else speak for themselves, I know it's not true.

Bring back to mind now what Christ said in John 17:23. He said, "I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one." There's a process. Christ gave and gives imperfect people leadership positions so that they can be made perfect by following Christ's example over time. It's a maturing process. And what is Christ's purpose for these imperfect people serving as they do?

12 for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ,

13 till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ;

As these individuals whom Christ has placed there learn and grow, they're going to teach others within the body of Christ the same lessons "until we all come to the unity of the faith" as Paul has said here. It's not just those in leadership positions. Anyone who's been ordained will tell you straight away, they've learned many, many things. Sometimes corrective things, sometimes just hard things from brethren who were not ordained.

Don't think that it only works one way. God works through all of us as a family. I want you to take note that Paul talks about the unity of the faith in verse 13. The unity that we so much desire doesn't have anything to do with an organization. So often I've heard people say from different groups or wherever, or within our own group, "Oh, if I could just find the right organization that thinks just like me, everything would just be great. That would just be wonderful."

That isn't what the Apostle Paul has just said. He said it is the faith that unites, coupled with the knowledge of the Son of God. What is that? That's the mind of Christ. Faith and the mind of Christ. That's what unifies us. That's where unity comes from.

Concerning faith, we know a lot about faith. Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. In other words, we believe we have full assurance that what God's word says is true. We don't have to wonder, when we open the Bible, is that true? I wonder if that's true? We don't have to wonder. We know it's true.

By faith we know that He is our Creator. And that all that exists in the heavens and on the earth was created by Him out of something that wasn't there, from something that was not seen. It's a miraculous creation. By faith we know these things.

We believe that it is God who defines what is good and what is evil, what is sin or what is righteousness. We believe we must overcome the sins in our lives and that Christ gave His life for us personally to save us from sin's penalty. We believe that how Christ lived His physical life is just how we should live our own lives.

We believe that He is our Head and not an organization. Our unity then, brethren, is based in the belief, in the faith and in the mind of Jesus Christ that we share. That is where our unity is. And it is expressed in loving each other just as Christ loves us, regardless of whatever organization we attend with.

Most of us do attend with an organization. There are some who tune in with us from time to time who don't attend with an organization. But those who are with an organization know that most of the organizations have incorporated for tax reasons and for legal reasons to stay within the law. So please don't think, and I'm not saying it at all, that organizations are evil. I'm not saying that at all. We just need to see the organizations for what they are. That's what we need to see and understand. They allow us to operate in this world in a legal sort of a sense. But that's all they are. They are not the spiritual organism!

Now, let's consider some facts that stand alone. In your mind you might say all facts stand alone. That's very true. So what I'm really saying is let's look at some facts without any adulteration, and I'll explain that adulteration in just a little bit. We're going to start at the grassroots level. David writes:

Psalm 100:3 Know that the LORD, He is God; It is He who has made us, and not we ourselves; We are His people and the sheep of His pasture.

God is our Maker. We are what He produced. Not one of us was standing outside there at creation time and observing to see what God was doing. None of us could stand to the side and say, “Don’t you need another tendon or two in the wrist over there?” Or, “Should we not have one of those ribs?” – or whatever the case. We didn’t know anything about it. We were being produced, made. We had no thoughts of any kind prior to our creation.

He compares us to sheep. I’ll grant you that’s not something to be really, really proud of. It’s not because of our looks. We don’t look like sheep. And in general, we don’t tend to smell like sheep. He calls us sheep because of the level of work it takes to get us to really develop and thrive on a spiritual level. It takes a lot of work.

Sheep are labor-intensive animals. We are labor-intensive people, people of God’s creation. Sheep are defenseless on their own and they’re prone to making bad choices. Having raised them, I know it’s all true. It’s not flattering. When we look at this we understand God calls us His sheep, but it’s very illuminating. It teaches us, helps us to gain an understanding of ourselves. With this understanding David says:

4 Enter into His gates with thanksgiving, and into His courts with praise. Be thankful to Him, and bless His name.

Understanding as we can, if we will, should cause us to be so thankful that God created us, let us have His image as our form and that He directs and guides us, that He’s called us, that He’s given us His laws and all these things so we can live a successful life.

So you see, when we don’t adulterate the facts, we are pointed humbly and confidently to our Creator, who turns out to be our Head, Jesus Christ. We’ll look at another fact in 1 Corinthians. These are just basic facts that all add up to what we’re talking about today.

1 Corinthians 6:19 Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit which is in you, which you have from God, and you are not your own?

Paul is not referring to mankind in general because mankind in general does not yet have the Holy Spirit. But He’s referring to those whom Christ was praying for in John 17, to those whom the Father would call and would eventually receive the Holy Spirit. And those who would eventually become one with each other. As we see, at baptism we ceased being our own.

20 For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s.

Again, basic, basic facts. We were bought, just like you would go out and buy a sheep if you wanted to own one. You'd have to purchase it. We weren't bought with money. We weren't bought with silver or gold, which are garbage by comparison.

Christ's blood is really the only priceless thing that's ever come up out of this earth. The only thing. That in turn makes the life of each one of us that has been purchased by His blood incredibly special. We are very unique.

This fact, unaltered, puts tremendous impetus on each one of us to glorify God in body and in spirit. In other words, it should fill us with a deep desire to become just like Christ in every way. And that's what we're talking about today. In terms of unity, we must become like Christ.

Let's go to chapter 12 and look at some more facts that are not arguable.

1 Corinthians 12:12 For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ.

13 For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—whether Jews or Greeks (in other words, anything else in between), whether slaves or free—and have all been made to drink into one Spirit.

14 For in fact the body is not one member but many.

We were all baptized into one body, which is the spiritual organism. What we can see here from what Paul has written and what we know from our time today, there is great diversity among the people that God calls into His Church. God's people come from many countries, different races, different religious backgrounds. Having come from extreme differences, we all "drink into one Spirit". It's a very unique thing that God is doing.

That tells us one thing for sure brethren, about the Holy Spirit. It is a miracle working Spirit to have so much diversity come into one body and expect that it can come to complete harmony, complete unity. That's miraculous! There is a lot of changing taking place within the body because of all the differences that we start out with. We need to bear that in mind as we go along through this.

As I said, we're just reading this straight up. We're just looking at the facts. We're not trying to read anything into it to point to this organization or that organization or someone is better or not right. That's not what we're doing. We're just pointing straight at the truth.

15 If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I am not of the body," is it therefore not of the body?

16 And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I am not of the body," is it therefore not of the body?

17 If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where would be the smelling?

18 But now God has set the members, (And again, these are diverse members, very, very different.) **each one of them, in the body just as He pleased.**

19 And if they were all one member, where would the body be?

20 But now indeed there are many members, yet one body.

21 And the eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you”; nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.”

If an eye or a hand were arrogant, they could say that. But then there wouldn't be any unity within the body, would there?

22 No, much rather, those members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary.

23 And those members of the body which we think to be less honorable, on these we bestow greater honor; and our unpresentable parts have greater modesty,

24 but our presentable parts have no need. But God composed the body, having given greater honor to that part which lacks it,

Paul's reasoning here (and it's inspired by God) is very clear. He's coming up with potential things that could come to the minds of God's people as they're called, because very divergent people come into Christ's one body. All this illustrates the concept of being made perfect that Christ directed our attention to earlier. This is a whole process that we go through.

If we fail to grow in the understanding of how very interdependent we are on each other (as different as we are) within Christ's one body, we can suffer dysfunction within the body. We need to understand that. And so again, God's reasoning is brilliant. How could the body smoothly function if every single part didn't contribute what it was placed there to do. And again, think about the Church of God today, the spiritual organism and how fractured we are, how much we need to do what is written here.

25 that there should be no schism in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another.

God gives us every single thing we need individually. He gives us different parts, body parts, so that no strife or divisions should develop. None. Except that we allow it. Of course, we're not perfect people. We are imperfect people and so we have to deal with it, don't we?

Everything we've looked at, starting in John 17 to the present, we've looked at it just straight. It's humbling, it's true, it's straight, it's unarguable. And we don't adulterate

God's words with an inflated view of ourselves. That's how we adulterate God's word. It's when we read it with an inflated view of ourselves, read it out of pride, seeing only the problems with other people instead of focusing on ourselves.

The challenge of unity within God's Church, the spiritual organism, is not "mission impossible" to a humble mind. It is very doable. Unity can be an ever-present, comforting, growing reality because it will be a growing thing.

But we all know and realize that spiritual unity within God's Church is not as it should be. You could ask yourself, by our love (whether it's evident or not) for one another, will all people be able to know we certainly must be Christ's disciples? Will they? What do they see; what do our actions say about us?

It's evident from what Paul was inspired to write here that some could potentially see themselves as useless to the body, unworthy. Maybe they felt inferior or indifferent. Maybe they were struggling, whatever the case may be.

Or, on the other hand, knowing human nature as we do because we've all fought it our whole lives, some might see themselves as superior to others that are in the same body because, after all, "I'm a part of the brain" or "I'm a part of..." – whatever they think is the most important part. That is adulterating God's word, when we look at scripture from an inflated view of ourselves. That's what wrecks unity within the body.

Of course, disunity is not a new thing at all. It's not something of our time. It's been in God's Church probably from the very beginning because Paul had to address it:

1 Corinthians 3:1 And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ.

Paul couldn't even connect with various of the baptized members on a spiritual level. That's not an indicator of good things to come. It's not a good omen. Not a good sign for the Church. There was this breakdown, in other words, between Paul and some of the brethren there.

I'm going to give you a modern-day analogy of something like this, this kind of a breakdown. It would be like being called into a meeting with an official at your local bank where you do your banking and you're taken off to the side and they say to you, "I'm sorry, but you no longer have any money in your account."

You say, "Oh no. That's not possible because we keep our account balanced. We always do the math."

Your loan officer then explains, "Mathematics is now viewed as a bigoted discipline. One plus one no longer equals two".

You self-consciously reach for your wallet or your purse and you wonder what on earth did I just hear? Did I really hear that? That's what Paul was dealing with here.

There was no connection. But it's so much worse on a spiritual level because sound mindedness comes from the Holy Spirit. We should always be able to connect with God's people. How can we not connect? It's a major part of what should be the unity of the faith.

So, what Paul is dealing with here had to be super disappointing to him, just as it disappoints us today as we look at the state of the Church. He says in verse 2:

2 I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able;

3 for you are still carnal. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men?

Paul is dealing with some extreme spiritual immaturity. After the initial response to God's call of faith, repentance, baptism and receiving the Holy Spirit, they were failing to grow in the grace and the knowledge of Christ. It's a very serious matter when we do not grow.

When a person can't receive spiritual meat they become incapable of going deeper in their lives. They can only be on a shallow level. Christ holds out much deeper things, many deeper levels, to us continually as we go through life. If we lack that maturity, if we are in that immature state as we see there in 1 Corinthians, we realize that comes from the playground mentality that one would expect among little, carnal children at school. "I'm better than you" and blah, blah, blah. You've heard those things. We all did those things.

4 For when one says, "I am of Paul," and another, "I am of Apollos," are you not carnal?

Carnal means like unconverted. Are you not "almost unconverted"? When we read this, we have to wonder about those unadulterated facts that we just went through. The facts that we touched on were humbling, they were true, they were straight, they were unarguable and they were not mixed with an inflated view of ourselves. Those things that we talked about, the spiritual organism, there is no inflation in that. None.

Today there are three to four hundred (and the number is totally irrelevant) splinter groups that once comprised the Worldwide Church of God. And the Worldwide Church of God itself was just an organization that happened to have a large portion of the spiritual organism within it. That's my perception of it. I wouldn't state that as an absolute fact. That's my perception. It probably is our shared perception.

But there was a much greater sense of unity among God's imperfect people, who were in the process of being made perfect in one, at that point in time. It was lot easier for those in the world to see that there really was something different about these people. There really was and we heard it, especially when Feast time would roll

around. We would hear about the differences that people could see. In other words, I'm saying we weren't perfect, but we were different.

Brethren, that's not entirely gone today. Not by any means. It wasn't perfect in Mr. Armstrong's time. Far from it, but it's not gone. There are some bright spots today. There certainly are. As a matter of fact, I think there is a growing trend within the organism now. Without even asking you I'm sure that we've probably all talked with brethren in other organizations who are thinking the same way. They so much yearn to be together, to have something more unified. We're thinking about it. We're yearning for it.

It is something that our Father and Christ fully expect to see us urgently develop in. This is the time of year (we should be thinking about this all the time) – but now is the time to really focus in on it. For us to grow in unity requires a deeper understanding of God's mind.

Do any of us, in our wildest imagination, see Christ, who is our Head, brooding, envious, anxious for His next photo-op? In other words, His next opportunity to present Himself as superior, let's say to His Father? It's not even a thought in our minds. It's an impossibility.

But this is attitude that Paul was addressing within the Church. The fact is, there is no place in God's mind for competition. It's never an "us versus them" or "me versus you" kind of a thought process. That is not in God's mind. That's the attitude that ultimately ends in war and destruction such as is coming on the earth even now. There is only a place in God's government for the completion of perfection. That's what there's a place for as we learn to become one.

The Apostle Paul said in Hebrews 6 that we are to leave behind the elementary principles of Christ and to go on to perfection. It's not that the foundation of repentance, faith, baptism and the laying on of hands, the resurrection and eternal judgment aren't good – these are amazing, wonderful facts! But that's just our foundation. We have to grow. We have to build on that. We have to go on to perfection.

And perfection, among other things, is being one with each other. That's perfection. If we can truly be one with each other that means the mind of Christ dwells in us richly.

So again we might ask, what is Christ's mind like? We're supposed to have it in us.

John 5:30 I can of Myself do nothing. As I hear, I judge; and My judgment is righteous, because I do not seek My own will but the will of the Father who sent Me.

If you were to look at the surrounding context of this verse, you would see that some of the Jews wanted to kill Christ because they were trying desperately to get rid of Him, because they saw Him as competition. They were competing against Him. They

wanted preeminence. They wanted to be the most enviable group, so to speak, out there. There were the healings that Christ did and the miracles that drew people to Him. Unity was the furthest thing from the minds of these individuals who wanted to compete.

Christ, in the course of this conversation surrounding this verse, even goes so far as to identify Himself as God's Son. Then, right on top of having said that to these individuals, He says this. "I can of Myself do nothing." "I'm God's Son, but I can't do anything of myself." Christ, at this point, was human. So, we can very easily relate to His attitude here.

When our Father first called us, for the most part this was just how we felt. "Of myself I can do nothing." We saw ourselves as nothing and in need of help. It was in this frame of mind that Christ was one with His Father. Christ didn't need help in overcoming sin, He was sinless. But He needed help, as a man, to endure the things that He was going to have to endure in His lifetime. He was going to have to give His life, ultimately. He was going to have to teach people many, many things.

Let's go to Colossians chapter 1, verses 18 and 19. We were going to contrast John 5:30 with these two verses that we read earlier.

Colossians 1:18 And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence.

19 For it pleased the Father that in Him all the fullness should dwell,

On the one hand Christ's humble attitude was this thing of, "Of myself I can do nothing." In the absence of pride, He had no separate interests. There were no advantages in His mind for Him to pursue. Nothing of the sort. In the absence of pride, His mind was set on exactly what His Father's mind was set on, which was the plan of salvation unfolding and a family being developed and coming to love as one.

The world could look at a humble attitude such as Christ had and they could say (not all the world, but I'm saying many in the world), they could say, "What a failure, what a wimp. Haven't you been taught that you're number one? That you have to look out for yourself?" That's the attitude of the world.

But because He had that humble and therefore loving attitude God made Him Head of the Church, "that in all things, He might have preeminence". Humility is blessed by God. Christ was elevated to preeminence and the fullness of the Father. But our Father didn't elevate Christ to such a place for some twisted kind of self-glory such as we would see in the world today. Christ was elevated for a purpose, to become the perfect example to those sheep that would be called and then purchased through His blood.

His unity with our Father is our example to follow. It pleases God that in Christ all the fullness should dwell, in His humble mind, in His humble Being.

We see concerning this thing of the fullness of God, that it's Christ's intention for each one of us as members of Christ's body. Interesting isn't it?

Ephesians 3:14 For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,

15 from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named,

Take note of the mood that he's creating with what he's writing, his mental focus. He says, "bowing before". It's a humble thing that we do often in prayer, but it's obviously a mental posture as well. That's what attitude Paul was in. He acknowledges our Father, for whom the whole spiritual family is named. It's just one family. The entire family was named for our Father. That family, those on this earth and those who've received the Holy Spirit, that One Spirit.

16 that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man,

That's what He did for Christ. Christ said He could do nothing of Himself as a physical man. He couldn't. But He could be strengthened to do anything through the power of the Holy Spirit.

17 that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love,

Christ, whom our Father gave to be our Head, can and will dwell in us in the very same way through the Holy Spirit. And how does that one Spirit strengthen the one family – the spiritual organism? That we:

18 may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height—

19 to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

It's the very same thing that God our Father gave to Christ. That's what we're being offered. It grants us understanding and depth so that we can come to know the love of Christ. And the purpose of all of this is that we may be filled with the fullness of God.

So you see brethren, this is what happens to the humble. This is what happened to Jesus Christ, who is our example. This is what happens to the humble. They all get filled, all of those who follow Christ's lead will be filled with the fullness of God. They'll be filled with deeper understanding.

You know, when we look at God's plain and simple truth without an inflated view of self, the organism takes on a whole new life. It's an amazing concept of what can and

should be. For instance, now, for this kneecap that I am, (let's say that I am a kneecap) that has focused on some shin bone unfavorably in another organization or within the same one, understanding should be flooding in.

After we've gone over these facts that we have, we should be understanding something here. Ego and pride is what's destroying unity. If we want God to bless us with understanding, with the fullness of God in us, with oneness, we have to be humble-minded. Because we understand that we're a part of each other and we need to be connected. That's by God's design.

We know how the physical body works. We don't want to lose a toe or an ear or anything. But on a spiritual level we have to be together. If we can't connect, the organism is going to hobble along and there will be dysfunction, which is symbolic of the division that Paul spoke about. It's the carnal playground mentality of I Corinthians 3. That's what we're living in today and that's what we're going to come out of today. It's a guarantee.

The understanding between me and them is that – yes, we are indeed different, each providing a special function that we can't mutually do without and one that all the other members need as well. Is that how we see every member of the body of Christ? We know some of the members because of the organization we're in. But we can't do without any of the members of the body of Christ.

I know we know it, but for the sake of clarity, let's ask the question, "Are we just to ignore any real differences then that exist, because obviously there are some big differences that exist." That is a question we must answer. We can answer that with another question. On a personal level, are we to ignore any personal spiritual abnormalities within ourselves?

Of course not, that's unthinkable because we are each a part of the body of Christ. We've been bought and paid for by Christ's blood. We are part of one another, we are part of the organism. That's why it's so important that we examine ourselves.

When we really see ourselves as we are according to God, we fully understand that what we do affects every single one of us in the body right now among all the organizations. If it's an organization that keeps the commandments of God. I'm not talking about someone who's off in left field. If we don't ignore the sin within ourselves personally, we can't ignore it within the body either. You simply cannot.

In Revelation, if we follow our Elder Brother, our Head, if we follow Christ's example, in Revelation 2 and 3 we see what Christ's expectations are of us as we view the body. He praises those in Ephesus who couldn't bear those who are evil. He saw their good. They tested those who pretended to be apostles and found them to be liars. Christ expected that of them. That was expected. They found something and they had to act on it. He also reminded them of their own personal shortcomings, that they had lost

their first love. It was expected of the membership that they must take action. Everyone was personally accountable in Christ's eyes.

There were some major doctrinal errors in Pergamos, the doctrine of Balaam and the doctrine of the Nicolaitans. Christ told them to repent quickly or He would fight against them with the sword of His mouth. He's giving them a space of time to repent and to overcome. That's all a part of God's mind as well. That's all a part of God coming to righteous conclusions. We have to give people space from time to time.

Christ had expected those in Thyatira not to put up with a Jezebel of sorts who was beguiling some to commit sexual immorality. We could go on, but this is highly sufficient for us to see that we do need to keep a pulse on our own spiritual condition as well as a pulse on the organism, because we are a part of it. It all fits together. Christ saw problems in some of the leadership and He saw problems in some of the brethren. And actually there would have been problems among every single individual, because none of us are perfect.

So, with Christ as our example, we cannot ignore any real differences that exist. Truly corrupt individuals should be avoided. No question about that. A little leaven leavens the whole lump. The wrong spirit unresisted, in other words willfully sinning, has no place in Christ's body. Has no place at all.

But the overarching theme that runs through Christ's messages to these seven Churches is His loving concern for them. He was very concerned. His candor, He was – I wouldn't say blunt, but yeah, He just spoke the truth. He was very candid about it, and He didn't desire that anyone should fail.

Overcoming is the major theme of the Book of Revelation, chapters 2 and 3. Overcoming – the conquering of self. The thing that separates us from God, separates us from Christ, from each other, and weakens the body.

What this all points to is that overcoming the carnal self, becoming literally like Christ, lies at the heart of becoming one with each other, with Christ, and with our Father.

This way of life has nothing to do with "us versus them" or "me versus you". It's about becoming small enough in our own eyes to be one together. To just play our part within the body, each of us functioning as a part of one another so that the fullness of God can dwell in us collectively. That's what God the Father and Christ desired when they laid out the plan of salvation, for us to become like them where there could be no corruption.

You see, if we're not one together we'll end up being one alone. That is not what Christ died for. This world is full of people who are one alone. They want their own will. They want their own whatever apart from God. Being one alone is being self-centered

and that is one of the reasons why Christ has to return the second time to stop human annihilation.

All of this is really a very simple truth to understand. But what may or may not be simple is how we interact among ourselves as we go through the process of being made perfect in one. Because it is a process, just like within a family. There are dynamics that go on continuously. We're a spiritual family.

The simplest and only way is to walk among ourselves with the same attitude that Christ had toward our Father. His attitude was, "Of Myself I can do nothing, but what I hear from My Father, that's what I do." That's how we should be. As we live within the body of Christ we're saying to ourselves, "What would my Father, my Head, have me do here?" Christ would do exactly what the Father did.

What we hear from God and Christ through scripture is truly very simple if we don't adulterate it with our own ego. Look at some simple truths, basically kind of a recap here:

Ephesians 4:4 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. (But now let's go back up to verse 1:)

1 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...

Now, in some translations lowliness would be translated humility and gentleness would be translated meekness, just to bear that in mind as we go.

2 ... with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love,

3 endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

The chief means by which we attain unity in Christ's body is through His humble attitude which allows us to utilize the power of the Holy Spirit. That is what gives us strength. Christ, our head, can live powerfully in a humble mind. Humility enables us to see ourselves as we really are. Yes, it's a challenge. But it's such a doable thing to a humble mind.

The proud Pharisees and others were competitors with Christ, competitors against Christ, because He wouldn't compete with them. He was not a competitor. Christ is a completer, not a competitor. That's the question for us, brethren, as we prepare for Passover. Which are we, a completer or a competitor? Christ wasn't and isn't one in

Himself. He was One with His Father. That's why our Father gave Him preeminence, that the fullness should dwell in Him.

We need to ask ourselves, "Am I a competitor? Am I a Pharisee in sheep's clothing that desires preeminence within the spiritual organism, within whatever organization I attend with or from an organizational point of view as well? Am I a Pharisee, competitor?" Humility allows us to ask that question of ourselves and to be willing to see the answer. If we can see the answer we can grow, we can overcome, we can meet the challenge.

With meekness, as Paul was talking about, we can clearly see the good gifts and talents of some other members of the body and not envy them in the least. We can be incredibly happy and grateful for what that member brings to the body. That's how we function in one. With humility and meekness we can walk together and we can be of one mind.

But because perfection is a process, it doesn't happen all at once. We're all in different stages of development. Sometimes, often (and I would say probably very often) we need to have patience extended to us. Could be a bad attitude that we have, differences of opinion over some matter; could even be a physical matter or a spiritual matter.

We can look back in our own lives and marvel at how long it took us, in some cases, to gain some really important understanding that would change how we treat other people. I can see it in my life. I'm sure you can see it in yours. Maybe it's about how long it took us to overcome something.

Without patience on God's part toward us, where would we be? All those years when we were thinking, when we were looking at the facts through an adulterated, egotistical mind – adulterating the facts and Christ was patient with us. That's because He's involved and committed to our being perfected in one. You see, that's the very way we are to deal with each other.

Without faith, in other words, without doing it God's way, this is "mission impossible". But by faith we know beyond the shadow of any doubt that we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us.

Additionally, as per Paul's instruction here, we bear with one another in love. What does that mean? That means it involves forgiving one another and putting up with one another in patience. There are things that perhaps irritate us about one another. We can put up with them in patience and get beyond them. We can get beyond those things as we hope for the very best outcome.

That doesn't involve ignoring sin that is teetering on willfulness. We can't ignore that. None of us, having little children, would encourage our little children to go ahead

and play out there in the street with the fast cars going by. We wouldn't do that. We wouldn't even dream of it. We would show them the better way. Sometimes that's what we have to do as well.

You know the disunity that the Apostle Paul saw within the Church in some places in his time is no different than what we see in the Church today. Very similar in some cases.

Philippians 1:15 Some indeed preach Christ even from envy and strife, and some also from goodwill:

Some preach Christ out of envy and strife as competitors and, as we saw in 1st Corinthians chapter 3, some brethren competitively aligned themselves behind various preachers – whether the preachers were being competitive or not, they aligned themselves. James said:

James 3:14 But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth.

15 This wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic.

16 For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there.

The only oneness that you'll find here is the oneness of self, in other words, Pharisee-style oneness. In other words, only disunity and confusion will be there.

Brethren, we've been called to the oneness of God and empowered to achieve it through a different spirit. Not a demonic spirit, but from a different spirit, the Spirit of God. A huge difference, we understand that.

But who among us has not been envious of someone within our group or some other group? Who among us has not been self-seeking in some way, if we're humble enough to be honest with ourselves?

A Pharisee, apart from conversion, will only see the deficiencies in others and the superiority of self. Because we've all been in that boat at one time or another, or perhaps even right now, we know how easy it is to submit to the wrong spirit from time to time.

But we also know how patiently Christ has endured with us and how He works to bring us to perfection in oneness. And so must we with our "yet imperfect" selves. We must be this way among ourselves.

The spiritual organism is a diverse group of people, people that are at differing stages of development. James was speaking to the Church here, so we know that demonic wisdom can and does rear its head within the Church. He was speaking to the Church.

Let's go to Matthew 5 to conclude and we'll see how Christ describes that we should deal with this. What Christ is describing here is what someone who's being perfected looks like through humility.

Matthew 5:38 "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'

39 But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also.

If someone who happens to be a brother or a sister in Christ is in a bad spiritual state, but hasn't obviously, willfully rejected God, bear with them. Turn the other cheek. Go to them according to Christ's instruction in Matthew 18 to try to solve it. Or, in Luke chapter 6 and verse 36, Christ also said, "Be you therefore merciful, as your Father is merciful." It's the God family way. Coming to righteous conclusions about how to help bring perfection and oneness to the body of Christ.

40 If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have your cloak also.

41 And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two.

42 Give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away.

As Christ did for us, and as He does for us continually, we need to go above and beyond within the organism to be kind, to be loving. And sometimes to be loving enough to be honest, just as Christ was, so we can help our brother or sister.

You see, love and unity that we all yearn for isn't about someone else's attitude. It doesn't have anything to do with that. It is about ours. Unity lies beyond the carnal self. It's found by humbly filling our place in Christ's body, happily. It's found by completing, and not competing, regardless of how we're treated. Sometimes we're treated poorly.

Essentially, it is found by allowing the unadulterated mind of Christ to dwell in us richly. As for unity, we can be sure that the challenge will be met by the willing. ◇