

## Unity Through Humility

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Most of you, I am sure, have heard of Rush Limbaugh, the great conservator of the American Way. Yesterday he said (and I should say, the day before he said, and many other times he said), that "America was built on competition. Unless there had been competition this nation would never have become as great as it is, and was." And I really cannot disagree.

The competition among manufacturers and among businessmen helped us maintain a growing and vibrant economy because we were always trying to make what we did bigger and better. And what that does is, it produces a society that ends up being a throwaway society or a society that works towards obsolescence and it continually evolves, the products evolve and everything evolves to the point where you finally reach a society where we are today, where we are not manufacturing much of anything any longer. But now we are an information society, a society that works on technology.

In fact, as Americans, we have grown up in a culture awash in competition. We compete from our earliest times. (I know Courtney and Johnny compete, mostly from Courtney's end right now, for stupid things. For a toy, for my attention a lot of times.) But we compete with our brothers and sisters. As soon as we get in school, we start competing with our friends for the best grades, who could do the multiplication tables the fastest, etc.

We compete in athletics as we grow up. We compete in T-Ball and Peewee and Little League and Pony League and Colt League. And finally we get up into the big leagues and we are still competing. We compete for scholarships to go to college. We compete in just about every aspect of life and we do all this because finally one day we are going to have to grow up and compete in the marketplace.

That is how the American society runs. It is competition. It even goes to the extreme that, with the competition among inventors, now we have a toilet

tank drop-in that lasts 2,000 flushes as compared to the last one which maybe lasted 500 flushes or something. But this guy made one that now lasts for 2,000 flushes. You do not have to change it, but I do not know, who knows how often you have to change it.

But we are going to see, I think, by the time the sermonette that ends, that competition in the church among the members can spell disaster. Why is this? Because competition, the struggle to win an argument or dispute, or simply to beat the other guy to the punch, destroys unity, especially when we are talking about doctrinal unity and unity among brethren, the correct form of fellowship.

Let us start in James 4. We will see what James has to say about the subject of competition. What we see here is that competition, by its very nature, is a form of conflict or war. It pits one person against another person, maybe (usually) for the same prize.

**James 4:1-3** Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members? You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures.

Now verse 6, talking about God here.

**James 4:6** But He gives more grace. Therefore He says: "God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble."

James says that the conflicts that we have result from lust, coveting, or poor priorities. When he says, we ask amiss, that is a clue that we are asking for the wrong things and we have our priorities mixed up. And his solution, as he finally comes to it in verse 6 and later on in verses 7 through 10, is that we need to get rid of pride. And you know, the opposite of pride is humility. Saying the same thing: you get rid of pride or you put on humility. I would suggest doing both. They do not really go together very well in the same person.

Pride is our desire to be better than or over other people. It is our way, a human way of elevating ourselves, of thinking that we are better than someone else, that that is below me to do something like that. We have our pride. And what does it do over and over? It causes us to go to war with people because our pride is hurt or simply because we want to vaunt the self. And it does not necessarily even have to be something that we really think about. We just do it because it is a habit. And especially among us Americans where competition, beating the other guy, is such an ingrained part of our lives.

Whose pride caused him to go to war against God? The first sin that we are aware of that ever occurred was Satan, because his pride got the best of him, and he decided to make conflict, to compete, to go to war with God. When we compete, when we have these conflicts, we are doing the exact same thing but just on a smaller scale. In business, there is a proper way to market a product without obliterating the competitor. And we even call them competitors. The guy who runs a similar business down the street is called your competitor. That is just how we run things here. But the wrong form of government involves an attitude. It is an attitude aimed at the destruction or the demotion of another person or what he holds dear.

Now, there *is* a competition that is good. Good may not be the right word, but it is proper, let us say, which has at its roots a sincere effort to do one's best without taking away from the other person. When you play basketball, let us say in a Y.O.U. type of thing, there is a way to have a game together where you are competing against one another but without totally demolishing the other person, and you do that by trying to do your best. And you can take that and put it into other areas of life. But there is a big difference between a destructive type of competition where you are trying to tear the other person down or vaunt yourself, and one where you are just trying to do your best and really help everyone by your doing well.

So James says, get rid of pride.

Let us go to Philippians 2 now and see what Paul has to say. It is a very well known section talking about how unity is brought through humility.

**Philippians 2:1-4** Therefore if there is any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.

Like I said, Paul is talking about unity here, which is really, finally, when you come down to it, the subject of the sermonette. How does unity come about in a group? Well, we have seen that competition and pride destroy unity. That is a given. Paul's answer is included in James' answer: that of humility. He mostly sticks with the humility rather than talking about pride.

Now, he talks about the fellowship of the Spirit, being like-minded, being of one accord, and all these things have their basis in humility; that these things are made possible through humility, that we are not only looking out for our own interests, but we are also looking out for others' interests. We are not esteeming ourselves better than the other person. We are looking down upon ourselves, in a way, saying that that other person has a lot of strength maybe that we do not have. And these things help make unity possible.

And he says here that we need to root out selfish ambition and conceit. They are just other forms of pride. Selfish ambition, where we want to get for ourselves, let us say a position, and conceit, when we think that we deserve it, which we probably do not.

Let us go to Ephesians and see another thing that Paul had to say.

**Ephesians 4:1-3** I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to have a walk worthy of the calling with which you were called [this is directed right at us], with all lowliness [and we see that lowliness again] and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

This is what we are aiming for, keeping the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Paul adds here a few more elements into the mix about competition and pride, and how they destroy unity. Again, he mentions lowliness, that is, humility, esteeming others better than ourselves. But he adds here something that a lot of us have problems with: longsuffering. We have a hardest time sometimes waiting for somebody else to overcome a problem. We do not bear with them in their problem. We would rather turn ourselves off from them because they are not doing it on our time.

How many divisive situations among brethren could have been diffused or solved if one or maybe even both of the parties would just have been patient? They would not have turned their back on the problem or whatever it was that was causing them to be at war with each other, but had waited for something to break in it, waited for the other person to maybe see where he had gone wrong or even waited until you saw where *you* had gone wrong.

In love, it says here at the end of verse 2, we need to bear with the faults of others to give them a little time and space to overcome them. And only this way will we have unity of the Spirit and keep peace among ourselves.

Let us go to I John. A lot of people talk about this in the Bible because it is a problem in the church all the time. It has been, probably, since the beginning because it is a basic form of human nature that comes out.

**I John 4:20-21** If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also.

It made me think: how many people in the church have thought if they could just convince a brother of a truth that he would save them? That if there was just this one piece of "truth". . . I put the word truth in quotes because it may not be a real truth, it may be a twig, some matter that is far out on the edges of maybe what we might call doctrine that has nothing to do with salvation. Maybe it is something in prophecy that you really cannot prove at all, that

you can just see from the Bible that there may be indications, but it does not have to do with one's salvation. But they think that if they drive that point home hard enough that they are going to help save the other person.

Instead, maybe what happens is, because of the conflict that erupts when two people of a different mind on that one area, butt heads together trying to hold their turf over an issue that is maybe not worth a hill of beans, the two brothers are driven apart with hard words and hard feelings. They are at war! They are having conflict. Where is the love of God in that? Nowhere! That is Satan at work. He is getting in there and he is allowing his attitude of pride and competition to get the best of two brothers who should be trying to work it out in peace and longsuffering, esteeming the other better than himself, and waiting patiently for the muddied waters to clear.

But even in doctrinal matters that are absolutely vital to salvation, there is a right and a wrong way to approach a brother who does not share the same belief. Or maybe it is just a difference of perspective. Do you think God, who wants us to be doctrinally pure and blameless, wants us to be offensive and merciless to others in how we tell them what we believe? I do not think so. He is a God of love.

We need to remember also how He did not beat us over the head with the truth to get us to believe it. He was very patient—longsuffering. He waited until we finally changed our minds. He did not change it for us. He did not take the nugget of the truth and beat us over the head with it. He let us come in our own time to the knowledge of the truth.

It says in many places that we are to win over others by our conduct, by our example, by the fruit of our lives over the long term. Things like that take time for people to recognize. If you have the truth and you are living it, people will notice. But once again, it takes time.

Another thing we seem to want to do, we want to stick our finger in every pie. Whereas it is God's pie. We need to let God work with those people. We need to give them a chance to overcome and grow, give them a chance, maybe, just to study the matter, to pray over it, to fast, to meditate. These things take time and they take study. On a matter that is of great importance we cannot jump to hasty conclusions. Sometimes we need to hold our turf

until we get the chance to study these things and make sure what we are hearing from the other person is right. But those things can be done in peace with each other among brethren.

I have here in my notes, God did not put a knife to our throats and say, "Believe the truth, or else!" Maybe in a way we are at that point now because we have come to a knowledge of the truth. But when we first heard it, His calling was very gentle and He gave us time and space to make up our minds about it. But like I said, even in disagreement, there is a way that these things, these troubles, these disagreements can be smoothed over in peace.

Let us conclude in Philippians 2, something we did not look at, and I think sometimes we do not go this far when we read these scriptures. But Paul reaches a very practical conclusion when he talks to the Philippian church about these matters.

**Philippians 2:12** Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; . . .

Notice that he says work out your *own* salvation. This is hearkening back to what I said before where we are trying to save someone else. Paul says, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. And we probably have enough of our own problems that we need to overcome to worry about somebody else's.

**Philippians 2:13** . . . for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.

And it is God who is working in those other people as well. So let Him work, do not get in the way. Oftentimes that puts a stumbling block in the process that God is trying to work out.

**Philippians 2:14** Do all things without murmuring and disputing, . . .

Here he comes to that competition among brethren, the disputing. He says, quit complaining about and disputing with others in the flock. Not only does it do no good, it has great potential for harm. And another point that we might want to make here is, looking at it from somebody who is not among the flock but somebody from the outside, what sort of witness do we make for God when we are constantly at each other's throats over maybe silly things that to them would not make a hill of beans?

**Philippians 2:15** . . . that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, . . .

God wants us to be blameless and harmless, or innocent, in this world of intense competition and strife. And we have got to be the example for this world because we are the only ones that are going to do it. Everybody else has been caught up in it.

**Philippians 2:16** . . . holding fast the word of life, so that I may rejoice in the day of Christ that I have not run in vain or labored in vain.

Paul says, you do your best to hold fast to the truth that you already have. If I might make a little illustration here, if you are trying desperately to hold on to a prized possession that you have, you are too busy to beat somebody over the head with it. If you are clutching it with both hands, you cannot hurt somebody else with it. So maybe we have got to just try to be holding fast to what we already have.

In fact, in Revelation 3, talking to the Philadelphia church, that is what He says we need to be doing. "Hold fast," He says. So instead of competing with each other over God's truth, let us instead cooperate, sharing what we know and what we have experienced for the benefit of everybody.