

The Goal is Love (Part 6)

Passages: 1 Timothy 5:1-16
Matthew 6:19-24

Fifty years, ago, Martin Luther King made the very painful observation that, throughout a typical week in America, *there is no hour that is more segregated than eleven o'clock Sunday on morning.*" In case you missed it, King was talking about racism in the church and how Christians foster this racism by staying in their mono-cultural church ghettos!

Of course, it's quite understandable why we do this! All human beings (Christian or non-Christian) naturally like to be with people who are like them; with a similar background, a similar social position and a similar story. That's why mono-ethnic churches tend to be quite comfortable; we can relax with people who share our experiences, our expectations, our traditions and values.

And here's the problem! You see, the moment we move to a multi-ethnic church, we can't be so relaxed...particularly if we are no longer in the ethnic majority. Surrounded by people un-like us, we have to make an effort to understand and be understood...to communicate *through* our cultural and linguistic differences. Indeed, the only way that multi-ethnic fellowships can succeed is when people are willing to be uncomfortable...willing to let go of their own agendas...willing to accept the differences by focusing on our common humanity in Christ.

This, of course, is the more difficult route to take! Being a member of a **multi-ethnic church will always involve certain multi-ethnic tensions!**

So, let me, then, ask you-- **Why would you ever join one?**

Paul's letter to the Ephesians gives us two very good reasons:

First, the multi-ethnic church is what God wants! According to Ephesians 2, God *has caused the dividing wall of hostility* between ethnic groups to be **broken down** in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Indeed, if you look at Revelation 7, you'll see that, one day, all of God's people (from every nation, race, tribe and tongue) will be gathered together in a multi-ethnic church, worshipping with one voice and one heart. Surely, if this is God's long-term plan and desire, then the power of Christ's death and resurrection is at work even now, bringing His church towards that goal!

Even now, Jesus is building His church as a centre of reconciliation, forgiveness, unity and peace!

This is why **the multi-ethnic church** is worth the effort. For although it's not easy, it's the only church that God wants!

The **second** reason why being part of a multi-ethnic church is worth the effort is because the multi-ethnic church is God's *prophetic voice* to a broken and divided world. The multi-ethnic church is a living declaration of God's cosmic plan to bring all things together under Christ! Moreover, it is a testimony to God's power as His church overcomes the devil and his schemes to divide humanity through race, colour and class. In Christ, God is re-creating the world by raising up a new humanity... a *reconciled community* of love.

Isn't this exactly what Paul told the multi-ethnic church in Ephesus? (Eph 3:10) ***“His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God might be displayed to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places, according to His eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.”***

The multi-ethnic church is nothing less than a public display of ***“the manifold wisdom of God... accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*** For this reason, it's worth being a part of it, even though it's not easy.

Now, of course, these two reasons for joining a multi-ethnic church are also the same reasons why the devil is trying to destroy the multi-ethnic church! After all, (1) whenever a church begins to align itself with the God's heart and reflect God's intentions and plans...and (2) whenever a church becomes a prophetic demonstration of God's manifold wisdom in the reconciliation of the world..., **that's when the devil will step in to distract and stir up division in our midst!** The devil hates to see unity! He hates to see reconciliation! He hates to see our ethnic and cultural barriers tumble!

It's no wonder why Paul concludes his letter to the Ephesians (a letter filled with encouragement for the multi-ethnic agenda) with these words: ***“Put on the full armour of God that you may stand firm against the devil's schemes!”*** After all, the devil has come 'to kill, to steal and to destroy'. He's an expert at using the world's ethnic and cultural diversity as a wedge to *divide* the human race! Indeed, when Satan sees us getting along as one family, he will do everything he can to incite false teachers to come in and use *fear tactics* to pit one group against the other.

This is exactly what happened to the church in Ephesus! As we've seen in our studies of 1 Timothy, the devil was using certain powerful men to stir up ethnic tensions in the Ephesian church. Satan was exploiting people's fears of race and culture through these false teachers who were instructing their fellow Jewish Christians to stay away from the Gentile Christians; not to eat their food and certainly not to inter-marry with them! *"Stay with your own kind! Avoid the other races! You can't trust them! They're different to us!"*

In this way, the beautiful work of ethnic harmony that God was doing in Ephesus was quickly being undermined. The multi-ethnic church in Ephesus was starting to implode...to turn against itself... as one ethnic group (in fear) turned against the other. The devil was gaining an upper hand!

As I've been saying over the past 5 weeks, this is clearly at the root of Paul's concern and the reason why he writes this letter to Timothy. As Paul sends Timothy to Ephesus to be its new pastor, he writes this letter to advise him on how to tackle the problem of racism!

Now, as we come to chapter 5 of Paul's letter, Paul's key theme will be that of **family**.

Listen as I read **verses 1-2**. *"Do not rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him as if he were your father. Treat younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters, with absolute purity."*

The fundamental advice of this chapter that Paul gives to Timothy is simple: **treat everyone in the church**, regardless of their background, **as members of one family!** This is a sure cure for racism! *"The older men are to be regarded as your fathers. The older women are to be regarded as your mothers. The young men are to be seen as your brothers and the young women as your sisters."* In other words, Timothy (who is from a Jewish background) must not allow that background to bring a bias to his relationships. He must see that everyone (Jew and Greek) is related in Christ!

Now, if you think about it, this wouldn't have been an easy thing for Timothy! And, let me add that it's not any easier for us, today! When someone in your church doesn't look like you, or doesn't speak like you, or

doesn't behave like you do, or doesn't have the same manners as you....**it's very easy to dismiss them as the 'other'**. We can even think of them as less sophisticated than us! In fact, far too often, we won't *even* accept them until **they** do things the way **we** do.

Let me give you a simple example: When I got married to Kim, my American social habits were brought into question—they were seen to be a little *unsophisticated*...even barbaric! Of particular importance to Kim was the way I used my knife and fork at the dinner table. Why did it matter? Well, the way I held my knife and fork was not the way she (nor her family) did it! And so, if I was going to *really* be part of her family, the expectation was that I would change my habit... and use my fork and knife like she did. Basically, I had to change to be accepted...(even though I found it to be a useful way to eat!)

But in the family of God, we can't do that! We can't impose one family culture on everyone. Instead, we must allow all cultures to come to the table as one in Christ, bringing the good things of their culture as God's gifts for us to share. After all, we are a family!

Of course, that's one of the main reasons why it's not easy being a multi-ethnic church! We cannot judge. Rather, we must recognize each other as genuine, legitimate members of the one family!

And **even when** something from another culture is inappropriate to bring to the table ... some custom or tradition that does not agree with the life-giving ways of Christ...**even then**, according to Paul, we have no right to be harsh or unloving. If we have to rebuke, challenge or correct, we must always remember that the person we are speaking to is your father, your mother, your brother or your sister in Christ! They are your family and worthy of your respect!

Now, this fundamental idea of family leads us into **verses 3-16**...a very long section about widows. The connection between widows and family (I hope) is obvious, for widows are still part of the family, aren't they?

Well, you might think so, but throughout history (particularly in patriarchal societies) widows have easily been dismissed...neglected... as people without a family... people for whom we have no direct responsibility. "*She's not in my family so why should I have to help her?*"

Now, of course, Judaism was a great step forward in helping widows because it insisted that everyone in Israel was essentially part of **God's**

family. Hence, everyone in Israel had a family responsibility to look after widows (and orphans too!) No one could say, *“She’s not related to me!”* As a result, the plight of widows (like Ruth and Naomi) was enormously reduced in Israel through a whole range of laws legislated under Moses.

Of course, **when Jesus** came to Israel 1400 years later, He went one better! He extended the boundaries of God’s family to include people from beyond the borders of Israel. In that short scene from Matthew 12, where Jesus’ mother and brothers are at the door, Jesus makes this clear: ***“Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” Pointing to his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”*** In other words, Jesus was insisting that God’s family was no longer limited to the immediate family nor to your Hebrew genealogy. From now on, God’s family would only be limited by a person’s decision not to be part of the family! Eventually, Christ would die for all humankind, so that all people might be God’s sons and daughters.

So, what did this mean for widows? It simply meant that the entire church was now obliged to see them as mothers (if they were old) or sisters (if they were still young); to see them as family. Everyone in the church, therefore, was obliged to shoulder equal responsibility for their welfare.

This is obviously why, in verse 3, Paul inserts this whole section about widows. In the midst of his teaching about family, Paul says to Timothy, ***“Give proper recognition to those widows who are really in need.”***

Of course, the question that Paul then goes on to address is, *“How do you know which widow is really in need and which one isn’t??”* To answer that, Paul offers the following advice:

Verse 4- In the first instance, if a widow has children, they should offer the primary support.

Verse 5- If, however, the widow is all alone and only has the church to be her family, then it’s the church’s responsibility to do just that!

Verses 11-14-- Paul’s gives one more piece of advice. If the widow is still young, he recommends that she remarry.

Of course, at times Paul can sound quite chauvinistic...even patronizing...to women... but let’s not lose sight of the big picture here—The widows in the church in Ephesus needed to be protected—After all, they were all part of the one family in Christ. This meant that both Jewish and Greek

members needed to avoid favouritism or jealousy by looking after the needs of the entire extended family, including the widows! No matter what background they came from, these widows needed to be treated with the respect of being a family member. Anything less than this might bring drastic repercussions (as it almost did in Acts 6) and cause a split in the church along racial lines.

There's one last section of chapter 5 that I want to highlight today. Verses 17 to 21 deal with the issues surrounding the church elders.

Now, it seems to me that Paul is bringing up this issue here because he sees it as another part of what it means to be God's family. As I said two weeks ago, the elders were (quite literally) senior members of the church who were considered to be wise in the Lord. They were, no doubt, drawn from amongst both the Jewish and Gentile Christians. In other words, both ethnic groups were represented in the eldership of the church.

Let me read **verse 17**— ***“The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching.”***

As I said, this group of elders would have consisted of both Greek and Jewish Christians. And because Paul raises the issue in the context of being God's family, it's clear that Paul is trying to make sure that no distinction is made between them. And so, he instructs Timothy to make sure that **all** of the elders are treated with respect for their position...and that those who do the preaching and teaching are given a fair wage to compensate them for their work... **all on behalf of the family!**

This same focus on family undergirds Paul's comment in **verse 19**—***“Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses.”***

When you have leaders in a church who come from different ethnic backgrounds, it's highly likely that people from one ethnic group will support the leader(s) who come from that ethnic group-- they will better relate to them and better understand them. That's only natural! However, what Paul wants to avoid here is any church member playing favourites (on one hand) or pitting one leader from one group against a leader from the other group.

As I've been saying, it's not easy being in a multi-ethnic church! Serious

cultural misunderstandings can cause someone from one cultural background to wrongly accuse a leader from the other ethnic group of intentional sin...when all along, it was a cultural misunderstanding.

Culture is tricky! I've seen that personally as I've worked with Stewart. Indeed, some serious rumours began because of a cultural misunderstanding between us! That's why, to avoid division in the church, the principle that Paul lays out for the sake of the church family is simple: ***“Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses.”***

We finally come to the last verse that I want to study today, verse 21. I think now we can read this verse with far more clarity. As a parting word of advice to Timothy, Paul writes: ***“I charge you, in the sight of God and Christ Jesus and the elect angels, to keep these instructions without partiality, and to do nothing out of favoritism.”*** As I said, Timothy was from a Jewish background. As such, he would have had certain prejudices and biases...some that he wasn't even aware of! Paul makes this important point: *Think twice before you rush in. Yes, you are the pastor...and yes, you have an authority from God to lead that church. But, do not jump in to situations without having reflected on your own heart. Own up to your prejudices. Admit your biases. Bring them to the cross...and then let me guide you without partiality and favouritism!*

Being a member of a **multi-ethnic church isn't easy!**

But, it's the best choice you can make! It's the best place you can be!

May God defend us from the evil one!

Let's pray.

