

October 17, 2021
Build each other up
Jude 1, Romans 14-15, 1 Thessalonians 4-5

Working summers for the Vancouver School Board back in my university days, we would spend a week in May demolishing interior walls in older schools. Interior walls were made of weak, terra cotta blocks, which, if there were an earthquake, would collapse and cause injuries or deaths. So, sledgehammers in hand, we would demolish the walls. In a couple of days, we could destroy the walls. Wheelbarrowing the debris out took a couple of weeks. Rebuilding the walls with rebar, 12-inch concrete blocks, pumping the walls full of concrete, replacing doors, drywall, whiteboards, cupboards, and all the other finishing, took months.

- It's easy – and rather fun – to tear things down. I thought students would pay to take sledgehammers to a school. They really didn't need to pay us good money to do it.
- It's hard work – slow, tough, meticulous time-consuming, tedious, and mentally challenging – to build up something. We earned our money on the rebuilding process.

The same is true in churches. It's easy to tear things down. It's easy to criticize. It's easy to fire off the snarky email. It's hard work – slow, tough, meticulous time-consuming, and challenging – to build up one another. This Fall, we've been looking at some of the "one another" passages in the New Testament. As Jesus' followers establish and build the church, they are called to love one another, forgive one another, share one another's burdens, serve one another, live in harmony with one another ... those things are hard work. But when we do them, we build up the church.

When we DON'T do this – when we DON'T love one another, DON'T forgive one another, DON'T share one another's burdens, DON'T serve one another, and DON'T live in harmony with one another – these things are easy NOT TO DO – we tear down the church.

Example #1: Divisive social issues (Romans 14-15). In the church in Rome, some people are arguing Christians should observe the Jewish Sabbath day (Saturday); others argue those Old Testament Laws no longer apply. We are saved by faith in Jesus, not those Laws. Other people (or perhaps the same people) insist Christians should not buy/eat meat that was offered to idols (when a cow, ox, or sheep was offered as a sacrifice at a pagan altar, the priests would sell the meat, so it wasn't be wasted); that meat, some insist, is tainted and evil. Others argue that, since the pagan gods aren't real gods, meat offered to them is perfectly fine; it's just meat. Arguments about these issues were causing anger, animosity, back-biting, and division. We have no divisive social issues, today, do we???

Paul says: *"Let's stop condemning each other. Decide instead to live in such a way that you will not cause another believer to stumble and fall. I know and am convinced on the authority of the Lord Jesus that no food, in and of itself, is wrong to eat. But if someone believes it is wrong, then for that person it is wrong. If another believer is distressed by what you eat, you are not acting in love if you eat it. Don't let your eating ruin someone for whom Christ died. Then you will not be criticized for doing something you believe is good."*

We need to keep perspective on what's important: *"The Kingdom of God is not a matter of what we eat or drink, but of living a life of goodness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. If you serve Christ with this attitude, you will please God, and others will approve of you, too. So then, let us aim for harmony in the church and try **to build each other up.**"*

*"We who are strong must be considerate of those who are sensitive about things like this. We must not just please ourselves. We should help others do what is right and **build them up** in the Lord ... May God, who gives this patience and encouragement, help you live in complete harmony with each other, as is fitting for followers of Christ Jesus. Then all of you can join together in unity with one voice, giving praise and glory to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, accept each other just as Christ has accepted you so that God will be given glory" (14:13-15:7).*

What is Paul saying? When you get into it on divisive cultural/theological issues ... like those we face, today ... Be kind. Be thoughtful. Be respectful. Be willing to live with differences of opinion. When it comes to perspectives on difficult social issues or political loyalties, unless it involves one of a (very few) core biblical doctrines – like salvation by faith through the death and resurrection of Jesus – let it go. Do what is best for the OTHER person. Live in harmony with one another. Encourage each other. Build each other up.

Example #2: Theological issues (1 Thessalonians 5). People in Thessalonica are anxious about Jesus' return. They are speculating when it will happen and what it will look like. Paul comments on this at the end of 1 Thessalonians 4 and into chapter 5.

Paul writes, *"Now concerning how and when all this will happen, dear brothers and sisters ... you know quite well that the day of the Lord's return will come unexpectedly, like a thief in the night ... But you aren't in the dark about these things, dear brothers and sisters, and you won't be surprised when the day of the Lord comes like a thief. For you are all children of the light and of the day; we don't belong to darkness and night. So be on your guard, not asleep like the others. Stay alert and be clearheaded ... let us who live in the light be clearheaded, protected by the armor of faith and love, and wearing as our helmet the confidence of our salvation."*

*"For God chose to save us through our Lord Jesus Christ, not to pour out his anger on us. Christ died for us so that, whether we are dead or alive when he returns, we can live with him forever. So encourage each other and **build each other up**, just as you are already doing" (1 Thessalonians 5:1-11).*

Paul's words could cause division. We can interpret these words in all sorts of ways. Are we in the end times right now? Some people would argue we are. Others would say we are not. Do we go "up" to heaven? Or does Jesus come "down" to us? People will argue both. But notice the last line: *"encourage each other and **build each other up.**"* Don't get caught up in speculation and controversy that causes division and disunity.

When you get into conversations on difficult theological issues ... don't let theology divide

you. In Paul's example, everyone believed Jesus would return and all would be well: they differed over how and when. Paul's advice – you agree on the essentials. Jesus will return. Let Him worry about all the details. In the meantime, don't let your differences divide you. Paul's advice today? If you prefer premillennial dispensationalism, postmillennialism, amillennialism, young earth creationism, evolutionary creationism, Calvinism, Arminianism – throw in any theological term you want ... don't let your differences on non-essential things divide you. Live in harmony with one another. Encourage each other. Build each other up.

Example #3: Moral issues (Jude). We don't often read the letter of Jude. It is a short letter, warning about false teachers who are threatening to destroy the church. The issue? *"Some ungodly people have wormed their way into your churches, saying that God's marvelous grace allows us to live immoral lives" (1:4). "These people are grumblers and complainers, living only to satisfy their desires. They brag loudly about themselves, and they flatter others to get what they want. (They are) scoffers whose purpose in life is to satisfy their ungodly desires. These people are the ones who are creating divisions among you. They follow their natural instincts because they do not have God's Spirit in them" (1:16-19).*

Obviously, if people are living immoral lives, grumbling, complaining, living only to satisfy their own desires, bragging about themselves, doing whatever they can to get what they want ... that will create divisions within a church. It tears a church apart. It is easy to become that kind of person. Hopefully not too many of us live "immoral lives." But do we grumble? Complain? Focus on our own desires? Try to get our own way? I find it very easy to grumble, complain, ask what church can do for me and not what I can do for the church. I get annoyed when I don't get my own way.

When we become people who snipe at the sermon, who bellyache about the band, who pick apart the pastor, who gripe about our group, who troll the internet for websites to "prove" we're right and others are wrong, who send spiteful emails ... we create division within God's church. We tear down Jesus' church. It is SO easy to become that person.

*"But you, dear friends, must **build each other up** in your most holy faith, pray in the power of the Holy Spirit, and await the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will bring you eternal life. In this way, you will keep yourselves safe in God's love. And you must show mercy to those whose faith is wavering. Rescue others by snatching them from the flames of judgment. Show mercy to still others, but do so with great caution, hating the sins that contaminate their lives." (1:21-23)*

Building each other up is hard – slow, tough, meticulous time-consuming, and mentally challenging. Discerning what is right and good – and what is not right and good (sin) – is hard. Praying is hard. Showing mercy is hard. Sharing our faith in love is hard.

When we get into hard moral issues, we have to do the hard work. Never compromise your biblical principles (Jude never recommends that); sin is real; biblical ethics are real. But also never compromise relationships (Jude never recommends that either); godly love is real, too. Try to have the hard conversations: speak the **truth**. And do the hard work of conversing in such a way that you keep in relationship with one another: speak the truth **in love**.

Here's Paul's advice ...

*"I beg you to lead a life worthy of your calling, for you have been called by God. Always be humble and gentle. Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other's faults because of your love. Make every effort to keep yourselves **united** in the Spirit, binding yourselves together with peace. For there is one body and one Spirit, just as you have been called to one glorious hope for the future. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all, in all, and living through all ...*

*"Now these are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers. Their responsibility is to equip God's people to do his work and **build up the church**, the body of Christ. This will continue until we all come to such **unity** in our faith and knowledge of God's Son that we will be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ.*

*"Then we will no longer be immature like children. We won't be tossed and blown about by every wind of new teaching. We will not be influenced when people try to trick us with lies so clever they sound like the truth. Instead, we will speak the **truth in love**, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church. He makes the whole body fit together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so the whole body is healthy and growing and full of **love**" (Ephesians 4:1-11).*

Do you notice Paul's priorities?

1. Hold onto the **truth** – that's good, but not good enough ...
2. Hold onto the truth in **LOVE** – that's good, but not good enough ...
3. Hold the truth in love AND be **humble, gentle, patient, make allowance** for one another's faults – that's good, but not good enough ...
4. Be **united** in the Spirit. **Unity** is key – that's good, but not good enough ...
5. **Build up the church**. So the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love

The image of the church Paul uses in Ephesians is the "body of Christ." Think about that image. The goal, for Paul, is that, when the world sees us (His church), they see Jesus. The church lives, acts, speaks, and loves and Jesus would live, act, speak, and love if He were here. When the world looks at us, is that what they see? Do they see Jesus in us?

Yes, our world needs God's truth. Our world also needs God's love. Our world needs Jesus' humility, gentleness, patience, and forbearance. Our world needs unity. Our world needs the church to be the church. When we – the body of Christ – are healthy, growing, and full of love – when we are building each other up – the world sees Jesus in us. It is HARD work. It is easier tearing others down. But building one another up is good work. The best work.

- In what ONE way can I act/speak/love more like Jesus this week?
- In what ONE way can I build up one other person in the Lord, this week?