

Stewardship Lesson 3: Truth and Unity

Theme Verse for Series: Matthew 22:36-39

“Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”

Jesus replied: Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself.

Stewardship principles: Love God, love your neighbor, spread the Gospel.

Note to Teacher:

This lesson is 5 pages long. There’s probably more content in the lesson than can be covered during class time. The heart of the lesson begins on page 2, starting with the paragraph “The dissimilarities of equal members within a body . . .” and concluding on page 4, after the 5th point. Please note the five scenarios at the end of the lesson. These scenarios will allow class members to consider how to practice truth while living in unity with one another, and can be covered at the end of class, or sprinkled throughout the lesson. Other questions for consideration are in **bold** throughout the lesson.

Today’s lesson is about the stewardship of truth and of unity. Truth and unity are different but they work alongside each other. They are yoked like a husband and wife. Truth and unity support one another like corner pillars fashioned for a palace of love, the greatest commandment of all. Love is the gospel of Jesus Christ. He commanded us to love: to love the Lord our God, and our neighbor as ourselves. These overarching principles of love were set forth in Lessons One and Two as the foundation for biblical stewardship. Today, we will study the stewardship of truth and unity.

Truth and Unity

When you think of truth, what words come to mind? When you think of unity what words come up? Truth and unity support one another. You cannot have one without the other. They are vital and necessary for each other’s existence. They are like lungs in the body. When truth and unity are strong, the church breathes deeply. Yet, though lungs are vital (and the body can still function even if one lung is weaker than the other), neither can exist without the heart. The heart gives life to the lungs. Love is the heart of unity and truth. Communities cannot live without the heartbeat of love and the gospel, the death burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Unity and truth are daughters of love. *“How blessed it is for brothers to dwell together in unity.”* Psalm 133.

Throughout the Scriptures, siblings competed with one another. Brothers and sisters sometimes did not get along. Cain and Abel. Jacob and Esau. Joseph and the Eleven. Aaron-Miriam-Moses. Martha and Mary. In our own families we know the tension that often exists between family members. Such is the case between unity and truth. Though they are yoked together, tension

can arise between them. If the tension between unity and truth is not stewarded, a tear in the curtain may occur. A house divided will fall.

Truth and Unity in Community

All bodies of communities are comprised of dissimilar parts: Male/Female; Old/Young; Rich/Poor; Weak/Strong; Black/White, Hand/Foot. Just consider the differences between a community of two, like husband and wife or worshipper and worshipper; how much more are the differences in a congregation of 1000. The administration and stewarding of unity and truth is so important to a community. If a lie is conceived in a community, it will divide them; unity may be lost. This is what happened to Eve and Adam. The fruit of deception was eaten, and it was bitter. Had Adam and Eve held to the truth of the LORD and not eaten, the world would be a different place today. The very first community God created is recorded for our instruction and encouragement. **What can today's communities learn from the first community?**

1. *Truth can be abandoned for the sake of unity.* Adam believed a lie to maintain his connection with Eve.
2. *Unity may suffer when truth is asserted.* Consider this: What if just one had eaten the fruit and the other did not? A great dissimilarity would have arisen; their unity forever challenged and potentially changed. Before the bite it would have been "simply" man/woman; now it would have become Eater/NonEater. How do you come back from a division like that? Consider also Jesus spoke truth and many stopped following Him.

The dissimilarities of equal members within a body, whether it be a family, community, or church body, can be a source of tension, stress, and discomfort within that community. **What is a source of tension and stress among members within a community?** Disagreement on what is true. Many marital spats are started because spouses cannot agree on what is true. Not only do they disagree, but each wants his or her truth to be the final truth, the alpha and the omega truth (After all, who wants to be wrong?). A disagreement over what is true can also be a source of division in the Lord's church. Many times throughout the Gospels and Epistles division occurred (or potentially occurred) because two sides disagreed on what was true. One of the best illustrations of this is in 1 John. The apostle John is writing to believers who were remaining from those "*who went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out*" (1 John 2:19). John is addressing a division, a split among believers-those who remained and those who went out. Those who went out denied Father and Son, and the love of God was not in them.

Paul also addresses dissimilarity among equal members in his epistle to the Romans. **What was the dissimilarity among the Roman believers that was threatening unity?** Their beliefs about what was right or wrong were based on their different levels of faith. Paul describes some of the church members in Rome as weak in faith (14:1); other members in Rome were strong in faith (15:1). **These differences in faith between members were beginning to be a painful thorn in the side of unity of the church in Rome. Why?** Because the members were not stewarding truth and unity from the core principles of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the love of God and one another. Instead of seeing one another through the eyes of the gospel and the love of God, they were judging one another and regarding one another with contempt. The one who was

strong in faith “regarded with contempt” (14:3,10) the weaker brother. The word for contempt in Greek is *exouthenou* which means to “count as nothing, to treat with utter contempt, i.e., as zero.” The non-weak considered the weak as lacking any value. On the other hand, the weak members were passing judgment (14:3,10) on the non-weak members. Their judgment went beyond distinguishing, they were condemning in their judgment. Contempt and judgment are not ingredients for truth and unity.

How did Paul address this growing tension between the Roman believers? Did he pick sides? No. Did he urge the believers to compromise the faith they had? No. Did he suggest to the believers they try walking on eggshells and bending over backwards for one another? Again, no. What did he call the believers to do? He called them to see one another through the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, for *“that is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.”* Paul called the church in Rome to love, to love one another in the same way that Jesus loved His followers. For Paul, love was *“the fulfillment of the law”* (13:10) and the only *“debt to owe is to love one another”* (13:8).

Stewarding Truth and Unity in Love

In the Roman church strife and envy were taking a foothold due to the differences among the members. They were quarreling over what was right and true. In the church, one person was regarded one day above another whereas another regarded every day alike. Perhaps Paul was talking about Sabbath. Some members probably viewed the sabbath day in the context of the Law. It was a day above all others. Others in the church at Rome, probably Gentile believers, believed the Sabbath to be a day like every other day. The church began to judge one another. They were judging one another, or more precisely, believing their truth was the better truth. Due to this disagreement regarding the truth, the unity of the church was on shaky ground. Tremors of tension began to ripple throughout the church. This tension underscores the delicate balance between truth and unity. If truth and unity are not stewarded, a great loss will occur.

Paul was a steward of truth and unity. Jesus is a steward. Jesus is a shepherd. He is the good shepherd. The good shepherd keeps and guards the sheep. He protects the sheep with his life. Because of his dutiful service, none of the sheep are lost. Every sheep that was given to him by the owner is returned to the owner. Not one of the sheep is lost, zero. Jesus said, *“It is the will of Him who sent Me that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing”* and in John 17 He said, *“While I was with them, I was keeping them in Your name; and I guarded them and not one of them perished.”* The good shepherd returns everything that is not his back to the one whose it is. Paul was a steward of truth and unity in the church. How did Paul steward these two. With the rod of the gospel and the staff of love. When the flock at Rome began to wander, Paul brought them back with gospel and love. Let us now look at some of Paul’s teachings in Romans that guide us on how to simultaneously steward truth and unity using the rod and staff of love and gospel (The guiding principles set forth in Lessons One and Two).

1. **We are the Lord's** (14:8). We do not belong to ourselves; we belong to the Lord. He bought us, He purchased us with His blood. He paid a great price for us. The price He paid for us was His life. Christ died for us while we were lost. We are the Lord's.
2. **Because we are the Lord's and all things are from Him and through Him and to Him, we are to present our bodies as a living and holy sacrifice** (11:36). Jesus presented His own body as a living sacrifice. He sacrificed His body for the sake of the sheep. While we were lost in our sin, Christ died for us. This is the greatest truth. This truth is the lamp that guides us in our lives with others. We each sacrifice our life for the sake of the other. *"Let no one seek his own good, but that of his neighbor."* 1 Cor 10:24. Jesus says, *"Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends."* What Jesus is talking about is a daily, moment-by-moment mindset.
3. **A sacrificial life is marked by humility.** Christ Jesus was humble. We are to have the attitude of Christ Jesus, who did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but emptied Himself. Humility of mind regards the other as more important. This is not to downplay or minimize my importance. It just recognizes the extreme importance of the other person. Do not think less of self but think of self less. The mind set of humility is what Paul was meaning when he wrote the Romans, *"Do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation."* (12:16). To humble oneself is to set aside all advantages and privileges, *"to count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ"* (Phil 3:8)
4. **God's love through Jesus Christ is more important than a truth held by a believer with weak faith or strong faith.** Furthermore, it is much more important for me to assert the love of God than to assert my truth. Paul told the Romans, *"Love does no wrong to a neighbor."* (13:10). *"Do no wrong"* could be a summary statement for Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Do no wrong by loving your enemy. Do no wrong by removing the beam in your eye. Do no wrong by forgiving men of their trespasses. Do no wrong by not letting your left hand know what your right hand is doing.
5. **Be transformed by the renewing of your mind.** Transformation and renewal are processes. They take time. Transformation and growth do not occur over night. When discerning how to speak the truth in love to one another, it helps to remember that I myself am still not fully transformed, that I was once weak, and that I am not as strong as I will be. The understanding of an 18 year-old is different than the understanding of an 80 year-old. This mind set about the growth process and God's timing and possession will help us to bestow more grace and mercy upon our neighbor, and ourselves.

Below are five scenarios. The scenarios are written to help the class think about how each person in each scenario might approach the tension from the core principles of gospel and love. Listen closely to the answers from the class. Help steer and guide them away from solutions that are based on "what is right". Nudge the class towards love, towards humility, towards

doing no wrong. The best solutions to each scenario are rooted in the core principles of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and love of God and one another.

- 1) Dan's faith is stronger. David's faith is weaker. One believes it is okay to drink alcohol. The other believes it is not okay for a believer to drink alcohol. Their disagreement is becoming increasingly tense. How might each begin to respond to the other in a way that promotes greater unity between them?
- 2) Joe and Jerri are married. Jerri likes a clean house. So does Joe, but differently than Jerri. Jerri likes to vacuum. Joe doesn't like Jerri vacuuming when he is home. He has asked Jerri not to vacuum when he is home. She agreed not to but continues to vacuum when he is home, just more quietly and not as often. Every time Jerri vacuums Joe feels anger well up within him. Now, he is snarky when she vacuums. She doesn't like his snarkiness and she gets defensive and angry. He doesn't know she doesn't like to be told not to vacuum. The rug has a lump. What do they change?
- 3) Becky and Sue attend the same church. They talk to each other almost every Sunday. Recently, during a bible class discussion, Becky said something that Sue strongly disagrees with. Later, Becky began to sense something changed between she and Sue, but didn't know what. Sue was indeed pulling away from Becky. For Sue, what Becky said was a "salvation issue". Sue didn't know how they could be friends anymore. She was beginning to see Becky differently, and so was Becky. What can Sue do?
- 4) Steve lives near a university campus. His home is surrounded by rentals occupied by college students. Wafts of cannabis come from the house next door. Steve also wonders if drug deals are being made right in front of his eyes. Steve is angry and afraid; he has children. His neighbors are not at all like him. What does Steve do?
- 5) Amy and Susan are mother and daughter. Hard feelings are building between them. Susan believes her mother Amy doesn't spend much time with her three young children, Amy's grandchildren. It was one of the reasons why Susan moved so close to her mother, so she could spend more time with the kids. Amy feels that whenever she wants to spend time with the grandkids they're always busy. She has stepped back from asking Susan to see them. What do they do?