

Grace, the Power of Unity and Gathering

by John Nelson Darby

The sermon explores how grace, as the embodiment of love, serves as the essential power for unity and gathering among believers in the church.

Scripture: Ephesians 1:3

Topics: "Unity in Christ", "Grace"

Description

John Nelson Darby emphasizes that grace is the fundamental power behind unity and gathering among believers. He argues that while separation from evil is necessary, it is ultimately love and grace that draw individuals together in fellowship. Darby highlights that true holiness involves not just separation from evil but also a positive separation to God, which is made possible through the revelation of Christ. He stresses that the church's unity is rooted in the love of God, which is revealed through Jesus, and that this love actively gathers believers into one body. The sermon concludes with the assertion that grace is essential for both truth and holiness, enabling believers to come together in the presence of God.

Transcript

Grace the Power of Unity and Gathering

I have had the desire on my mind to make a few remarks on a point I believe to have importance at the present moment; and in doing so, I carry in my mind a tract to which the circumstances drew attention, and practically review it. And I do so, the rather, because I think I read a paper some time back in "The Present Testimony", which, if my memory serves me, placed the subject on a ground which I did not think quite just: that is, it saw only one side of the matter, as it seemed to me. What I think important to be understood is, that the active power that gathers is always grace - love. Separation from evil may be called for. In particular states of the church, when evil is come in, it may characterise very much the path of the saints.

It may be, that through many acting under the same convictions at the same time, this may form a nucleus. But this in itself is never a gathering power. Holiness may attract when a soul is in movement of itself. But power to gather, is in grace, in love working; if you please, faith working by love.

Look at all the history of the church of God in all ages, and you will find this to be the case. Grace is the formative power of unity, where it does not exist. I take for granted here that Christ is owned as the centre.

If evil exist, it may gather out of that evil, but the gathering power is love. The paper which I would pass under review is a tract, which, from circumstances, is not unknown: Separation from Evil, God's Principle of Unity.

I trust I should have grace to acknowledge error where I thought there was such, and I am sure I owe it to the Lord to do so; but my object here is somewhat larger. That tract refers to the state of the church of God at large, and not any particular member of it; but as one part of truth corrects an evil, so another, by its operation on the soul, may enlarge the sphere, and strengthen the energy of good.

There are two great principles in God's nature, owned of all saints - holiness and love. One is, I may be bold to say, the necessity of His nature, imperative, in virtue of that nature, on all that approach Him; the other, its energy. One characterises; the other is, and is the spring of activity of, His nature.

God is holy - He is not loving, but love. He is it in the essential fountain of His being; we make Him a judge by sin, for He is holy and has authority; but He is love, and none has made Him such. If there be love anywhere else, it is of God, for God is love. This is the blessed active energy of His being.

In the exercise of this He gathers to Himself for the eternal blessedness of those who are gathered, its display in Christ, and Christ Himself, being the great power and centre of it.

His counsels as to this are the glory of His grace, His applying them to sinners and the means He employs for it, the riches of His grace. And in the ages to come He will shew how exceeding great these were in His kindness to us, in Christ Jesus. Allow me, in passing, before entering on the examination of the point which is now directly my object, to say a word on the sweet passage I have referred to, because it opens out God's full thoughts in bringing into the unity of which that epistle speaks.

We are blessed in Christ, and God Himself is the centre of the blessing, and in two characters, His nature and His relationship; in both He is related to Christ Himself, viewed as Man before Him, though the beloved Son. The verses I refer to, are Ephesians 1: 3-7. He is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. As the Lord, when ascending up on high, said, "I go to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God"; only in Ephesians He goes on to their unity in Christ. There Christ speaks of them as His brethren.

In this double character then, in which God stands to Christ Himself, He has blessed us with all spiritual blessings, none left out, in heavenly places, the best and highest sphere of blessing, where He dwells; not merely sent down to earth, but we ourselves taken up there, and in the best and highest way, in Christ Jesus, save His divine title to sit on the Father's throne.

Wonderful portion, sweet and blessed grace, which becomes simple to us in the measure in which we are accustomed to dwell in the perfect goodness of God, to whom it is natural to be all that He is, who could be no other. In verse 4, we have "The God of our Lord Jesus Christ", according to the glory of the divine nature, introducing into His own presence in Christ that which shall be the reflex of itself, according to its eternal purpose.

For the church in the thoughts of God - and, I may add, in its life in the Word - is before the world in which it is displayed. Here, it is His nature. We are chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love. God is holy, God is love, and in His ways, when He acts, blameless. Then there is relationship in Christ, and His is that of Son. Hence in Him we are

predestinated to adoption (sonship) to God Himself, according to His good pleasure, the delight and goodness of His will.

This is relationship. He is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, as well as God. This is the glory of His grace; His own thoughts and purposes, to the praise of which we are. He has shewn us grace in the Beloved.

But in fact He finds us sinners. He has to put sinners in this place. What a thought! Here His grace shines out in another way. In this same blessed one, Christ the Son, we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, what we need, in order to enter into the place where we shall be to the praise of the glory of His grace; and this is according to the riches of His grace; for God is displayed in the glory of His grace, and need is met by the riches of grace. Thus we are before God. What follows in the chapter is the inheritance which belongs to us through this same grace - what is under us. Into this I do not enter; only remarking, as I have elsewhere, that the Holy Ghost is the earnest of the inheritance, but not of God's love. This is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost, which is given to us.

These two relationships, of God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, will be found to unfold much blessing. They are of frequent occurrence in Scripture. But interesting as that subject is, I turn now to the one before me. I have read over the tract I have referred to. ["Separation from evil, etc."]

I confess, it seems to me that one who would deny the abstract principles of that tract is not on christian ground at all. I cannot conceive anything more indisputably true, as far as human statement of truth can go. Still there is something more than truth to be considered, and that is, the use of truth.

God's imputing no sin to the church, through grace and redemption, is always blessedly and eternally true. To a careless conscience, I may have to address other truth. Now, I repeat, that on reading that tract I do not see how a person resisting the principles stated, is on christian ground at all. Is not holiness the principle on which christian fellowship is based? And the tract is really and simply that.

But two other points I believe it important to bring out along with that - one, in relation to man; the other, to the blessed God. The first is this: human nature we all own, and in a measure know, is a treacherous thing. Now separation from evil, when right, which I now assume, still distinguishes him who separates from him from whom he does so.

This tends to make one's position important, and so it is; but with such hearts as we have, one's position mixes itself up with self - not in a gross way but in a treacherous one; it is my position, and not only so, but the mind being occupied with what has been important - justly so in its place - to itself, tends to make, in a measure, separation from evil a gathering power, as well as a principle on which gathering takes place. This - save as holiness attracts souls who are spiritual by a moving principle in them - it is not. There is another danger: a Christian separates from evil, I still suppose, in a case in which he is bound to do so. Say, he leaves the corruptest system in existence; on this principle, it is the evil acting on the conscience of the new man, and known to be offensive to God, which drives him out. Hence he is occupied with the evil. This is a dangerous position. He attaches it, perhaps anxiously, to those he has left, to give a clear ground why he has done so. They conceal, cover over, gloss, explain. It is always so where the evil is maintained.

He seeks to prove it, to make his ground clear; he is occupied with evil, with proving evil, and proving evil against others. This is slippery ground for the heart, to say nothing of danger to love. The mind becomes

occupied with evil as an object before it. This is not holiness, nor separation from evil, in practical internal power. It harasses the mind, and cannot free the soul. Some are almost in danger of acquiescing in the evil through the weariness of thinking about it. At all events power is not found here. God separates us surely from evil, but He does not fill the mind when it continues to be occupied with it; for He is not in the evil.

It is quite true that the mind may say, Let us think of the Lord and drop it, and get a measure of quiet and comfort; but in this case the general standard and tone of spiritual life will be infallibly lowered. Of this I have not a shadow of doubt. The positive evil will not be actually acquiesced in; but God's horror of it is lost in the mind, and the measure of divine power and communion just proportionately lost, and the general path shews this. The testimony fails and is lowered.

This is the widest evil - where there is conflict with evil not maintained in spiritual power - and creates the most serious difficulties to extended unity; but God is above all. The new nature, when in lively exercise, because it is holy and divine, revolts from evil when it comes before it. The conscience, too, will then be in exercise as responsible to God.

But this is not all, even as to holiness. There is another, which in many - I may say, at bottom, in all - cases distinguishes real holiness from natural conscience, or conventional rejection of evil. Holiness is not merely separation from evil, but separation to God from evil. The new nature has not merely a nature or intrinsic character as being of God.

It has an object, for it cannot live on itself - a positive object, and that is God. Now this changes everything; because it separates from evil - which it abhors, therefore, when it sees it - because it is filled with good. This does not enfeeble its separation. It makes its abhorrence of it lively when it has to be occupied with it, but it gives another tone to that which is abhorrent to it, the possession of good sufficient, when it is not forced to think of evil, to put it quite out of mind and sight. Hence it is holy, calm, and has a substantive character of its own, apart from evil, as well as abhorrent of it. With us this can only be in having an object, because we are and ought to be dependent, only so far as we are positively filled with God in Christ. We are occupied with good, and hence holy, for that is holiness; and, therefore, easily and discerningly abhorrent of evil, without occupying ourselves with it.

It is God's own nature; He is essentially good; delights in it in Himself: and therefore He is abhorrent, in virtue of His goodness, of evil; His nature is the good, and hence in His very nature He rejects the evil.

He will do so authoritatively, no doubt, in judgment; but we now speak of nature. Hence you will find, that when it is in power, love precedes and makes holy, whether it be mutual or the enjoyment of it in the revelation of God.

"And the Lord make you to increase and abound in love one toward another, and toward all men, even as we do toward you: to the end he may establish your hearts unblameable in holiness before God, even our Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints", 1 Thessalonians 3: 12-13.

So in 1 John 1, "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life - for the life was manifested, and we have seen it and bear witness, and shew unto you that eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us - that which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ. And these things write we unto you, that your joy may be full. This then is the message which we

have heard of him, and declare unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth". Now here the separation from evil, walking in the light, in God's revealed character in Christ, in the practical knowledge of God as revealed in Christ, in the truth as it is in Jesus, in whom the life was the light of men, is fully insisted on with lines as clear and strong as the Holy Ghost alone knows how to make them.

He who pretends to fellowship, and does not walk in the knowledge of God, according to that knowledge, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But what makes the fellowship? This keeps it pure - but what makes it? The revelation of the blessed object, and centre of it, in Christ. John was speaking of One who had won his own heart - who was the gathering power into fellowship with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. He knew by the Holy Ghost, and enjoyed what the Saviour had said, "He that hath seen me, hath seen the Father".

This was love, infinite, divine; and, through the Holy Ghost, the witness of it had communion with it and told it out, that others might have fellowship with him; and truly, his was such. They joined in it. Now that, I apprehend, was gathering power. The object gathered to, necessarily involved what follows. So, indeed, he closes the epistle. "We know that the Son of God is come, and hath given us an understanding to know him that is true, and we are in him that is true; that is, in his Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life. Little children, keep your-selves from idols".

That is, the gathering power of good comes before the warning. This is the more remarkable in this epistle, because it is, in a certain sense, occupied with evil, is written concerning those that seduced them. Holiness, then, is separation to God, if it be real, as well as from evil; for thus alone we are in the light, for God is light.

This is true, in our first sanctifying - we are brought to know God, brought to God. If we come to ourselves it is, "I will arise and go to my father". If it is restoration, "If thou wilt return, return unto me".

Indeed a soul is never restored really till it does; for it is not in the light so as to purge flesh, even if the fruits of flesh have been confessed; nor is sin seen as it is in God's sight.

Hence love comes in, in all true conversion and restoration, however dimly seen, or through however dark workings of conscience.

We want to get back to God; there is forgiveness with Him that He may be feared; otherwise, it is despair which drives us farther away. Indeed, what would or could restoration be if it were not to God? But, in the full sense of gathering, that is, to common fellowship, it is clearly the blessed object which reveals that in which we are to have the fellowship, which so gathers.

We are to have fellowship in something, that is, with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. This, then, must draw hearts to itself, that in their common delight in it their fellowship may exist. The principle of the tract is this, that in doing this it must separate from evil. It is the "this-then-is-the-message" part of the statement. So Christ says, "I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me". Now here was perfect love, entire separation from all sin and condemnation of it. "In that he died, he died unto sin once" - separation from the world, and deliverance from the whole power of the enemy and the scene of it. It is perfect love drawing from everything to itself; showing all was evil, absorbing the soul into what was good, in a saving way from it. But when we follow Him into life, all is gone from which He separated. "In that he liveth, he liveth unto God"; that is His whole being, so to speak.

Now He is, in this life, made higher than the heavens - the divine glory I do not here enter into, but the life. It is a heavenly place He takes, and our gathering through the cross is to Him there, in the good where evil cannot come.

There is our communion - entering into the Father's house in spirit. And this, I apprehend, is the true character of the assembly, of the church, for worship in its full sense. It remembers the cross, it worships, the world left out, and all known in heaven before God. He gave Himself that He might gather into one.

But here I anticipate a little, for I am speaking as yet of the object, not of the active power. I apprehend that what separates the saint from evil, what makes him holy, is the revelation of an object - I mean of course, through the Holy Ghost working - which draws his soul to that as good, and thereby reveals evil to him, and makes him judge it in spirit and soul: his knowledge of good and evil is, then, not a mere uneasy conscience, but sanctification; that is, sanctification is resting, by the enlightening of the Holy Ghost, on an object, which, by its nature, purifies the affections by being their object - creates them through the power of grace. Even under law it had this form, "Be ye holy for I am holy"; though, I admit, it there partook necessarily of the character of the dispensation. In the cross we have these two great principles perfectly brought out. Love is clearly shewn, the blessed object which draws the heart; yet the most solemn judgment of and separation from all evil; such is God's perfectness - the foolishness and weakness of God. Divine attraction in love, evil in all its horror and forms, perfectly abhorred by him who is attracted and attaches himself to that.

The soul goes with sin, as sin, to Love; goes because love thus displayed has shown him that it is sin, in Christ being made sin for us. This is the power objectively that separates from evil, and ends all connection with it; for I die then to all the nature I lived to. Evil ceases to be, through faith, as I live hereforth in blessed activity in love. But I have, perhaps, dwelt long enough on what objectively gathers and gives fellowship; and surely, our fellowship, communion, is in that which is good - and as heavenly by no evil being there. Imperfectly realised no doubt here, but so far as it is not, fellowship is destroyed, for the flesh has none. Hence it is said: "If we walk in the light as God is in the light, we have fellowship one with another".

But we cannot walk out of darkness but by walking in the light, that is, with God: and God is love, and were He not, we could not walk there. But we have other privileges; God's love in Christ is not only an object which gathers - it is an activity which does so. Love is relative; it acts and shews itself. Hence God has acted.

It is not the silent depths of self-consciousness which heathenism made of God, as mere intellect, though erroneously supposing matter equally eternal, receiving merely form from God; though it then became active in generating thoughts - and, delighted with them objectively, became active in creation to produce them according to truth. In this scheme they justly made primeval darkness the mother of all things. But such is not our God. These, save in benefits sensibly known in creation, knew not love in God.

Jesus has revealed Him, and we thus know Him to be love, and light, too. Blessed knowledge! It is, as given to us in the word, eternal life; and this life is occupied with it, as we have seen, with the Father and the Son. But we can equally say that we know this sweet and blessed truth: "My Father worketh hitherto and I work".

It is the activity of love which is the power of gathering. "He gave himself that he might gather into one the children of God, which were scattered abroad". Even in Israel: "How often would I have gathered thy

children together as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!"

Here we have not only the attractive, sanctifying object bringing into fellowship, but the activity of love, which acts, gives itself, in order to gather; in this we are allowed to have a part.

It is this, while sanctifying and maintaining His holiness, making us partakers of it, reveals God and gathers weary souls. Now this alone is the proper principle and power of gathering: I do not say on which souls are gathered; for that is clearly holiness - separation from evil in which alone communion is maintained - or darkness would have fellowship with light. But love gathers; and this is as evident to the Christian as that it gathers to holiness, and on the principle of it.

For when would the mind of man separate from and leave the evil in which it lives, which is its nature, alas! as to its actual desires, and the sphere in which it lives? Never! Alas! its will and lusts are there - it is enmity against God. This is what the presenting of grace in Jesus has so solemnly proved.

Law was never given to gather; it was the rule of a people already with God - or a convict of sin. Sin does not gather to God, nor law; and one or other is all man's state unless grace acts.

Besides, grace alone fully reveals God; and hence without grace that to which we are to be gathered is not manifested.

Grace alone reaches the heart so as to bring it - all short of this is responsibility merely, and failure. It is Christ gathers, and hereby know we love, because He laid down His life for us. Indeed, truth itself is never known till grace comes. The law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ.

The law told man what he ought to be. It did not tell him what he was. It told him of life if he obeyed, of a curse if he disobeyed; but it did not tell him that God was love; it spoke of responsibility; it said, Do this and live.

All this was perfect in its place, but it told neither what man was nor what God was; that remained concealed; but that is the truth. The truth is not what ought to be, but what is - the reality of all relationships as they are, and the revelation of Him who, if there are any, must be the centre of them. Now that could not be told without grace, for man was a ruined sinner, and God is love.

And how tell, moreover, that all relationship was gone (morally, I mean, for we are, of course, creatures still) - for judgment is not a relationship, but the consequence of the breach of one - as the truth of any existing one, but in the revelation of that grace which formed one on this very ground by divine power?

Hence we read "of his own will begat he us by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of first-fruits of his creatures"; that incorruptible seed of the word. Law begat nothing in me; it supposed man was, and that he belonged to God, and prescribed a way for him.

Hence Christ is the truth. For sin, grace, God Himself, the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, even, are revealed as they are; what man is in perfection, in relationship with God; what man's alienation from God; what obedience, what disobedience, what holiness, what sin, what God, what man, what heaven, what earth; nothing but finds itself placed where it is in reference to God, and with the fullest revelation of Himself, while His counsels even are brought out, and of which Christ is the centre.

Hence grace is the acting power in, and alone capable of, revealing truth; for Christ's being here is grace; His working effectual grace. Now, the very existence of such an object and such a power would prove a gathering power, gathering into unity, for it must, being divine, gather to itself; yet, we are not left to abstract consequences, however practically familiar to every renewed soul who does and must know, that all such are drawn together to Christ.

The Word of God is plain: He gave Himself to gather together into one the children of God which are scattered abroad. I speak of these things as characterising the power which gathers. Christ, though the truth itself, yet, while here, was lonely truth: no new relationship was established on a divine basis for other men. Hence presented grace was rejected grace; the corn of wheat abode alone; but, dying, redemption was accomplished and atonement made. He was no longer "straitened"; the grace and truth shut up, so to speak, into His own heart, could now flow freely forth.

The highest love was shown; and sin in man, instead of hindering its application and barring relationship, was its object, at least that as to which it was displayed; and thus, therefore, He gathers.

Divine righteousness supplants - what, indeed, never existed, though it was called for - human righteousness; divine life, mere human life; and God finds His glory in salvation. Grace reigns through righteousness.

Now, this it is, by uniting souls in the power of the Holy Ghost to Jesus, which gathers by the cross, whence the truth is told to us as we are here, to Christ in heaven, who tells our true place to faith there - saving always, of course, His personal divine title. Now this, I apprehend, is what Ephesians shows, only that as it begins with the divine glory, the true source of all, that epistle begins with the purpose of love as to us in heaven in glory; and brings in redemption itself as a second thing, needed to bring us there.

But this clearly does not alter the love which is, and is acting to bring us into this blessed and heavenly unity, and which is thus heavenly, and, in connection with God's glory, is holy according to the holiness of His presence.

Christ's path on earth is the pattern of it below - in its full measure on the cross. Hence heaven and the cross are correlative. When the blood went into the holiest the body was burnt without the camp - outside; yea, denying all relationship of God with man as he was. Then gathering into one began. He slew the enmity - as between Jew and Gentile - and reconciled both in one body to God; and so we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father. Ordinances always separate according to human holiness; grace unites according to divine. I believe I have said enough to make what is in my mind plain; and I am more anxious to state than to insist on it.

In the full divine sense, without grace, there is neither truth nor holiness - out of God, of course, I mean, save as holiness may be applied to the elect angels - nor can be; because it is impossible that a sinner can be with God but on the ground and by the power and activity of grace.

The power of unity is grace; and, as man is a sinner and departed from God, the power of gathering is grace - grace manifested in Jesus on the cross, and bringing us to God in heaven, and bringing us in Him who is gone there. This is holiness: certainly the cross was not acquiescence in evil.

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