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Strategies for Unity (Part 4)



Strategies for Unity - Steve Gregg

In this segment, Steve Gregg discusses strategies for promoting unity within the Christian community. He emphasizes the need to humble oneself and avoid taking offense unnecessarily, as well as to give others their rights for the sake of unity. Gregg also encourages the practice of forgiveness and surrendering one's own interests for the benefit of others, while cautioning against gossip and promoting peace-making. Overall, his message highlights the importance of promoting positive relationships and seeking to build bridges rather than create divisions.

Transcript

This is the fourth and the last installment of our series that's been entitled Strategies for Unity. And the reason we need strategies for unity is because we're at war. Strategies are for wartime.

And the war is against the unity of the body of Christ. The devil really does not want the body of Christ to be unified, and God really does. The Bible, in many places, indicates that unity is a high-ranking priority with God.

How good and how pleasant it is, it says in Psalm 133, for brethren to dwell together in unity. And God hates, the Bible says in Proverbs 6, those who sow discord among brethren. So if God hates those who divide brethren, and finds it very good and pleasant for brethren to be together in unity, then we're not surprised when we find in the New Testament Jesus praying that his people will be one.

He says, Father, I pray that they may be one, even as you and I are one, so that the world may know that you sent me. So Jesus seemed to think that if the Christians were one in the manner that he intended for them to be, and the way that they were initially in the early days of the church, then the world would be impressed. And lo and behold, as you read the book of Acts in the early chapters, they were one, and the world was impressed.

They had great favor with all the people, and the Lord added to the church daily. Such as were being saved, it says in Acts chapter 2, right after it talks about how they were all of

one accord, and they were all of one heart, and so forth. So the unity that Jesus prayed for, with the mind that it would convince the world that he was real, has been under attack from the enemy, because the enemy doesn't want the world to know that Jesus is real, and certainly the devil has been around at his business a lot longer than we have as individuals.

And therefore we're easily tricked into those attitudes and those reactions to other Christians that cause us to perpetrate disunity. You do not find denominations joining each other, or churches joining each other, as often as you find churches splitting and starting new groups and denominations. As time goes by, there's less visible unity in the body of Christ.

Although I sometimes think that among the true Christians, I'm seeing improvement in terms of attitudes of unity, but by saying that I have to eliminate certain large numbers of people from what I call true Christians, because some people I thought were true Christians seem to have more of an attitude of disunity toward the brethren than makes sense for Christians to do. I actually ran into a fellow at the post office this week, or last week. He leads a Bible study in town, and I met him at his Bible study once or twice, or a few times in the past.

I don't go to his study anymore, but we only had a few minutes conversation at the post office out on the steps, and he said, did you hear about so-and-so, a Christian leader? He says, you know, he's talking about unity all the time. He was talking about a world-renowned Christian leader, not someone local. He says, yeah, he's talking about unity.

He even said he thought the Catholics were Christians. And I was thinking, this man I'm talking to teaches Bible studies, and he thinks unity is a bad word. And this is really a matter of concern, when the reference to Christian unity is something that brings up bad connotations in people's minds.

When Jesus prayed that all his people would be unified, and Paul said we must keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace until we all come into the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God unto a mature man. Paul said as long as the church was saying, I'm of Paul, and I'm of Cephas, and I'm of Apollos, he says, aren't you not carnal? Aren't you babes? It's a mark of spiritual immaturity that Christians divide from one another over petty things. And, of course, no one thinks they're dividing over petty things.

It's always something very important. But that's another mark of immaturity, is that things that are in fact petty are thought to be very important. And so this is how the devil confuses us.

He's been confusing the church for many, well, for a couple of millennia now in this way, getting Christians to divide against each other. I'm not even just thinking in terms of

denominational splits. I made reference to that.

That's only sort of a visible mark of how Christians don't get along is they keep starting more denominations. I'm not really thinking of unity in terms of elimination of denominations necessarily or joining denominations. I'm thinking of something more organic, something more spiritual, not institutional.

I don't really believe that God has any interest in the church becoming one big institutional church. I think for the most part God wants his community to be less defined by institutional connections and more defined simply by the fact that we love our brethren. That we'd laid our lives for the brethren.

That we would treat our brethren as we want to be treated ourselves. And that we embrace all those who love Christ, even if they're different from us in many other ways. When I say embrace them, I just mean accept them, receive them as brothers and sisters without barriers that we throw up.

We put these barriers up based on loyalties to groups, loyalties to certain teachers, loyalties to certain theological systems. Notice what I left out. Loyalty to Jesus.

Loyalty to Jesus is what makes Christians one. And yet Jesus is sort of in the background and all these other issues are in the foreground when Christians are dividing from each other. Very few Presbyterians would say that Methodists aren't Christians.

They agree that Methodists worship the same Jesus they do as Presbyterians, but their theology is so different from each other, it's hard to imagine the two groups ever really getting together. And that's okay too. People don't always have to meet in the same building.

But the point is they have to recognize who's a brother and who's not. And if somebody is a brother, they say, ah, he's a brother, but I don't feel comfortable with him because he doesn't agree with me. That's the immaturity we're talking about.

To grow up into Christ is going to require resisting the devil's devices. And God has devices of his own. God has strategies too that he's laid out.

And we've talked about some of them in the earlier lectures. The first strategy is to humble yourself because only by pride comes contention. Humbling yourself so that you don't think yourself better than another person.

Another is to recognize who your family is and place the family relation first. All people who are children of God are your brothers and sisters. And dividing the family is something that God is opposed to.

Also, and this is related to it, the third thing was everyone say the same thing. It says in

1 Corinthians 1, Paul says, I want you all to say the same thing. But what does that mean? What thing? Well, in the context, he said, some are saying I'm of Paul.

Some are saying I'm of Apollos. Some are saying I'm of Cephas. And some are saying I'm of Christ.

They're not all saying the same thing. They're saying four different things. But they're all supposed to say the same thing.

Which thing do you suppose? Is the one thing they should all be saying. I'm of Christ. As long as I'm of Christ and you're of Christ, we're saying the same thing.

And that's how we define ourselves. We recognize that we are one in Christ regardless how many ways we are not the same. Uniformity is not the same thing as unity.

Uniformity often is artificial. It's often cultic. The cults are practically defined by their uniformity within their groups.

Because everybody has to stop thinking for themselves and start thinking the way the leader or the organization that leads it tells them to think. And uniformity is not spiritual. Being able to be united with people who are not uniform.

That is the eye to be able to say I am not a foot but I am of the same body as the foot. The hand can say to the head I have need of you. We're different.

The hand is different. The eye is different. The foot is different.

But they recognize they don't have to be the same. God made people different from each other. God made parts of the body different from each other.

But they're all the same body and they're all to be cooperating for the same purpose. Which is the purpose of Christ. To promote the kingdom of God.

We talked last time about offenses. Because one of the great strategies for unity the Bible lays out is to refuse to be offended. That is to not allow yourself to be offended unnecessarily.

And in most cases it's unnecessary to be offended. Because when people say things that are offensive to us, we don't have to take offense. We can be above that.

We can say, well, sorry. Sorry for you. It must have sucked to be you.

You don't say that to them. But the point is that you recognize that if you love them and they don't love you, that's their problem. You're not the one with the problem.

If you're not offended by them, and if they're trying to offend you, well, you don't have to let them be in control of you. And you can maintain unity. The truth is that most offenses

are accidental.

Most people offend others without realizing they did so. They said something they didn't know would irritate the other person. They neglected to do something they didn't know the other person was expecting them to do.

You've let somebody down, but you didn't know you let them down, and so you've offended them. Or they've offended you. The thing is, if you're mature enough to rise above that and to not take offense, then divisions don't occur.

You don't get divided. You recognize that the person... Who knows how many people I've offended without knowing it? To my knowledge, I haven't offended anyone on purpose because I don't want to offend people. And I'm assuming the best of the brethren, too.

If they offend me, they're probably not trying to. And if they're not trying to, then I can be mature. I don't have to be offended.

I can refuse to be offended. Alright, so those are the points we've covered in the past. Now we're on the final points on the back side of your notes.

Surrender your rights and be a peacemaker. Those are the final two of our strategies for unity. Now, surrender your rights is a very important one.

And it's connected really to earlier ones we've talked about, especially the humble yourself part. Humbling yourself is the first necessary thing to have unity in the body of Christ. If everyone humbled themselves, there'd never be any strife.

Only pride causes contention, the Bible says. So if you don't have pride, you don't have contention. Wherever there's contention, somebody's being proud.

And humility manifests in the willingness to give up your rights. Now, that's not something that's an American attitude for the most part. We exist as a country because we fought for our rights.

We had a Revolutionary War because we felt like our rights were being trampled on by King George or whatever. And so we're a society that has its roots going well back into a Bill of Rights, a declaration of what we recognize to be our rights that we're willing to fight and even kill for. That's where our nation began as, and that's pretty much the heritage of now Western civilization.

Since America's pioneered that way of thinking, now most of Europe and Australia and the Western world in general have gone that way. So it's very strange in our culture to talk about the need to give up your rights. And yet that's extremely biblical.

You see, you have to realize that American and Christian are not the same thing exactly. Jesus is different than any nation, than any human society, than any culture. Jesus is a

unique king, and he calls his people to do things that they wouldn't do ordinarily.

One of which is to habitually let your rights go by the wayside for the benefit of someone else. Here we need to understand what justice is and what mercy is. Justice and mercy are two of the chief virtues that God requires Christians to walk in, to walk in justice and in mercy.

When Jesus said to the Pharisees in Matthew 23, 23, you hypocrites, you pay your tithes of mint and anise and cumin, but you neglect the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faithfulness, he said. Justice and mercy and faithfulness. In Micah 6, 8, the prophet said to the people of Israel, God has shown you, O man, what is good and what the Lord requires of you, that you do justice and that you love mercy and you walk humbly with your God.

Now justice and mercy, what are these traits? I've heard a lot of Christians say, I don't want justice, I just want mercy. And by that they think justice means getting punished for the things you did wrong. Well, if you are punished for the things you did wrong, that would be just, certainly.

But justice is more like a principled way of living, which is basically defined as this, recognizing other people's rights and refusing to trample upon them, refusing to violate them. To be a just person means you won't steal for somebody because that violates the right to their property. You won't murder them, that violates the right to their life.

You won't sleep with their wife because that violates their right to the sanctity of their marriage. You won't bear false witness against them because that violates their right to the reputation that their behaviors earn. You don't dishonor your parents because you owe them.

It's an injustice to dishonor them when they're old, when they have invested in you so much when you were young and helpless. Everything in the Ten Commandments that isn't on the first tablet of the law is about justice because God is passionate about justice. He wants people to do just things.

What that means is we recognize that some people have, I mean God has given everybody certain rights. The rights to their life, their property, their good name, if they've been good, their, you know, the inviolability of their marriage and so forth. These are rights that people have.

Now, I said a moment ago we have to give up our rights sometimes, so we're going to get to that. But just because we may have to give up our rights doesn't mean we require others to give up their rights for us. Notice, I'm not going to walk into your house and raid your refrigerator without your permission because I recognize your right to your stuff.

A just person recognizes other people have rights and I'm not going to trample their rights. I'm not going to kill, I'm not going to steal, I'm not going to bear false witness, I'm not going to commit adultery, I'm not going to covet what is theirs, I'm not going to dishonor my parents, I'm not going to do anything that violates what somebody else has the right to expect for themselves, that God has given them rights to these things. Now, you might say, well, has God given people rights? Is that really a correct way to talk? Of course it is.

Of course God has given people the right to their life or else there'd be no command you should not commit murder. Of course God has given people the right to their property or else there'd be no command you should not steal. If no one had any property rights, stealing would be a non-issue.

If I didn't have the right to my car, then for you to go take it and drive it whenever you want to and get it in a wreck and never pay me for it, you might as well, it's as much yours as it is mine. There's no property rights. But that's not true.

When the Bible says you should not steal, it establishes there are property rights. God recognizes property rights and you're supposed to recognize them too. Okay, so being a just person means you recognize what other people's rights are and you will not violate them.

What's mercy then? Mercy is going further even than that. It doesn't cancel it out because you need to be just and merciful. You need to do justly and love mercy.

But by being just, it simply means you don't wrong somebody. By being merciful, you allow yourself to be wronged. That is, you allow your rights to be violated.

If that will benefit somebody else out of love for them, you say, okay, for example, if you give money to the poor, in the Bible, the Bible calls that showing mercy. Mercy is helping the poor, among other things. Well, the poor person doesn't have a right to your money.

You earned it. You have property rights. That's money that God has given you the right to dispose of as you see fit.

It's your property. But when you say, okay, this man doesn't have any money, so I'm going to take some of mine and give that to him. He's got no innate claim on it.

He just has a need. And so I'm saying this money I could use for myself, I'm going to give you to use for yourself. I'm going to take away my own rights to that money and give you the rights to that particular money.

That's giving away my rights to somebody else. He didn't have them, but I'm giving them to him. Another form of mercy in the Bible is forgiving people when they do wrong to you.

That's mercy also. Because if somebody strikes you on one cheek, by all rights, you can strike them on one cheek. An eye for an eye, tooth for tooth, that's justice.

But if you turn the other cheek, what you're doing is you're giving up your right to retaliate, and you're giving them the right to be unpunished for the wrong they've done. Now, it's not always a wise thing to do. That is to say, criminals ought to be punished.

And turning the other cheek is not instruction that Jesus gave to governments and law enforcement and so forth. The government is ordained by God, Paul said, to bear the sword and to punish evildoers. But we are not.

As citizens, we're not supposed to avenge ourselves. We're supposed to show mercy. We're supposed to give up our right to retaliate.

And so, there's quite a lot in the Bible about the need to give up your rights. Let's begin with Philippians 2. Philippians 2, verses 2 and 3, Paul said, Fulfill my joy by being like-minded. Okay, there's unity, right? 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, that's humility. Let each esteem others better than himself. Let's read the next verse.

Let each of you look out not for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. Now, here Paul is talking about unity. He's talking about strategies for unity, isn't he? He's talking about being of one mind, of one accord.

That's unity. How do you do that? Well, first of all, you start thinking about other people's interests, not just your own. Now, if I have, you know, a certain amount of money, yes, I have the right before God to dispose of it according to my interests.

But if I see someone who can't generate money, and they're legitimately poor, I say, well, I'm going to look out for his interests. I'm going to give him some of that. Let him take care of his bills and his needs, his family, and so forth.

That's looking out for somebody else's interests. It's giving up my rights in that one matter. I'm not talking about permanent forfeiture of rights.

I'm talking about case by case. I'm not saying that Christians walk around saying, I don't have any rights. Of course you have rights.

But on a case by case basis, giving up your right is conducive of Christian oneness and unity, especially when you do it for the brethren. And he says, of course, very famously in verse 5, Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God. That's not the best translation for the Greek, but we'll not worry about that right now.

But made himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men, being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Now, we know that God raised him up and exalted him because of that, but the point here that Paul's making is the attitude, the mind we're supposed to have in us is like Jesus. He had all the rights.

He was God. He gave up his rights. He gave up his dignity to become a little baby.

He gave up his right to live by dying. He gave up his rights for us, and that's the attitude that was in him that we're told to have in us as well. In James chapter 3, which is also a passage about unity, and there's actually several verses in this chapter that come up in the course of this series, including a couple of them will come up tonight, but in James chapter 3, James said, verse 13, Who is wise in understanding among you? Let him show by good conduct that his works are done with meekness and wisdom.

But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, that's disunity. Do not boast and lie against the truth. This wisdom does not descend from above.

It's not God's wisdom. It's earthly, it's sensual, it's demonic. It's of the world, the flesh, and the devil.

For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there, but the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield. This statement, willing to yield, what does yielding mean? Yielding means you, in a particular case, you give up your rights so someone else can go ahead. You don't take your options so that somebody else can have their way.

It's giving up your rights at that moment. I remember some people in YWAM that I knew, two people, two girls, who went into YWAM, and after they came back from YWAM, they also lived in a Christian community house in Santa Cruz, and they shared a room, and they were good friends, but one of them insisted on sleeping with the window open at night, and the other insisted on sleeping with the window closed at night, and neither of them would yield to the other. Now, arguably, each of them had equal rights.

It was equally both of their rooms in the house. The one who wanted to sleep with the window open had the right to sleep in a room with the window open. The one who wanted the window closed had the right to sleep in a room with the window closed.

No one had a right that trumped the other. But unity never came about. These two separated and were on bad terms, and it was over this silly thing.

Now, what could have possibly created unity? Well, one of them could have given up their rights. Actually, both of them could have. But if one had, it would have created unity.

Now, if the one who wanted the window open said, okay, we're going to sleep with the window closed, since it matters so much to you, we'll sleep with the window closed. I'd prefer it open, but I'll give up my preference about this. I'll look not to my own interest, but the interest of others.

Well, that would have solved the problem. There'd be unity, as long as they did it with a graciousness that's really from love and from the grace of God, not some kind of a grudging kind of a concession. When you give up your rights graciously, like Jesus did, it leaves very little there for strife to continue to hang on to and to be generated from.

James said, a wise person will be one who's willing to yield to other people. And frankly, this is where marriages come into trouble. This is where friendships break up.

This is where churches break up. This is where, you know, all kinds of relationships are hurt. People who share lodging, people who work together in the same offices.

It's when somebody says, I want it this way, and the other says, I want it that way. And someone says, well, I have as much right as you have to have it my way. And the other says, well, that may be true, but I have as much right as you have.

Well, they both may be right. Maybe they equally have the right to have it their way, but they won't have peace unless someone gives up their rights. And that's the Christ-like thing to do, to say, I'll yield to you.

It matters more to you than it should matter to me. It probably matters more to you than it should matter to you too, but I'm not going to make your decisions for you. I can't control your decisions.

I can control mine. I'm not willing to have strife between us. I'm going to yield here.

Jesus said in Matthew 7, 12, and everyone knows this verse, As you would that men would do to you, do likewise unto them also. Okay, so if you would like people to defer to you when you have certain rights and privileges, well, they'd like you to do that to them. What are you supposed to do? But you said, well, what would you like them to do to you? Do that to them.

You'd like them to defer to you. They may not be doing it, but you can do that to them. You can defer to them.

That's what Christian love is. That's what Christ-likeness is. It's giving up your preferences, your rights for someone else.

We've mentioned in an earlier lecture the strife that arose between Abraham and Lot because they both had large flocks and they were kind of bumping heads over rivalry over the best pasture land in a certain valley. And it was causing a problem between the

shepherds that were watching Abraham's flocks and the shepherds that were watching Lot's. And Abraham called Lot to him.

He was his nephew, of course. He was Abraham's nephew. And in Genesis 13, 9, he said, Let there be no strife, I pray, between you and me and between your herdsmen and my herdsmen, for we are brothers.

And then Abraham said, All the land is before you. If you go to the right, I'll go to the left. If you go to the left, I'll go to the right.

You just take whatever land you want. And the Bible says that Lot saw the land over towards Sodom and Gomorrah before it was destroyed, very lush, like the garden of God. So he chose selfishly the greenest land for his flocks.

And Abraham just quietly went the other direction. Now, Abraham was certainly giving up his rights because Lot didn't have any rights in this situation. God had given all the land to Abraham.

It was all Abraham's by divine decree. Abraham had brought Lot along just out of the goodness of his heart because Lot was an orphan. And no doubt, Lot got his first few sheep as a gift from his uncle, Abraham, and he had built up a big flock.

And now he's causing a problem to his uncle. Abraham could easily have unjustly said, You know, Lot, you know, I love you as a nephew, but it's just not working out here anymore. You're going back to Haran.

This is my land here. God gave me this land. Obviously, land's not big enough for both of our flocks.

So you're going to have to go. Abraham could have been very gracious that way, very kind and very just. But instead he said, I'll tell you what, Lot, let's have no friction between us.

You take whatever portion of the land you want. I'll just take whatever you leave. And he made himself vulnerable to having Lot take the better land, which Lot did do.

The irony for Lot is that Lot eventually lost it all. The land he took got incinerated by fire and brimstone shortly thereafter. And it wasn't very green anymore, but all the land was given to Abraham anyway.

Ultimately, Lot's family didn't get any of it. And Abraham's did. They inherited it all.

But that's another story. God vindicated Abraham because he didn't stand up for himself. He laid down his rights for the sake of peace.

That's a divinely appointed strategy for unity. Abraham, who was an example to us,

according to scripture, not in all points, but certainly in this one, was an example of being Christ-like and basically giving up his rights so that there would not be strife. Lot should have been the one who did that.

Lot should have given up his claim. He should have said, Uncle, I'm causing trouble for you here. This is your property, not mine.

So I'm going to go and take my sheep and go. But Lot wasn't mature enough to do that. And a lot of times it's the more mature person who's got to do that because it takes maturity.

It takes maturity to give up your right. The immature person is always the one who's going to be mindful of how he's not getting what he deserves in a good way. He's not getting what he wants.

The more mature Christian is the one who says, I can give in. I can go your way. We don't have to fight about this.

We have a lot of this in Paul. In 1 Corinthians 6, Paul's shocked that Christians are going to court against other Christians. In fact, he says it should never be.

And he says in 1 Corinthians 6, in verse 1, he says, Dare any of you having a matter against another, go to law before the unrighteous and not before the saints. Paul's basically saying, if you've got a dispute that you can't settle between yourselves, don't go to pagan courts and let pagans decide the matter. What do they know about righteousness? Go before a mature, godly Christian to arbitrate between you.

That's what he says a little further on down. He says in verse 5, I say this to your shame. Is it so that there's not a wise man among you, not even one who will be able to judge between his brethren? In the church, there should be someone who's just and wise and mature who can arbitrate if you can't settle it between yourselves.

But then he says this in verse 7, Now therefore, there's already an utter failure for you that go to law against one another. Why do you not rather accept the wrong done to you? Why do you not rather let yourself be cheated? Now, he's not assuming who's right or wrong in the case. Apparently, both parties are in the church and both of them are being exhorted in the same way.

Paul could be saying, I don't know which of you is right or wrong. I haven't even heard the case. All I know is that if you're going to be Christ-like, why not just let yourself be cheated? Whoever's being wronged here, give up your rights.

Let yourself be cheated. And this is, again, the Christ-like response. When people are going to court, they're definitely not united.

They're definitely at odds with each other. And Paul says there's a real easy solution to this. If one of you can be mature enough, just let yourself be cheated.

Just let it go. Remember, Jesus talked about lending and expecting nothing in return. Well, if you lend, you have the right to be paid back.

And surely, the one who borrows should pay you back. But if they don't, let it go. Let yourself be cheated.

It's only money. It doesn't matter as much as people do. It doesn't matter as much as the unity of the body of Christ does.

It's only money. Let it go. Give up your rights to it for the sake of unity with your brethren.

Chapter 9 of 1 Corinthians is pretty much all about giving up your rights. And it's in the context of 1 Corinthians. It's chapter 8 through 10.

But in chapter 8 through 10, Paul's talking about the issue that the Corinthians had raised in a letter they wrote to him, asking about whether they have the liberty to eat meat sacrificed to idols or not. And in particular, some of them even wanted to go into the public feasts in the temple of the idols and eat the food there. Now, Paul said technically, there's no law against that.

All things are lawful. But not all things are edified. Not all things are productive and conducive to the right and desirable results.

But he did basically argue that you may have the right in your conscience and the freedom to do that, but your brother often will not. If you do that, you're going to stumble your brother. And therefore, give up your rights.

You may have the freedom to do it, but give it up for your brother's sake. And in chapter 9, which is in the middle of this discussion and the middle of this kind of advice he's giving, he says, just to take a portion of this chapter, the whole chapter is pretty much making this point, to tell you the truth. But in verses 3 and following, Paul said, My defense to those who examine me this, do we have no right to eat and drink? Now, what Paul's saying is, I don't eat and drink if it's done with my brother, but we have the right to.

That's a right I give up, he's saying. Don't we have the right to eat and drink? Do we not have the right to take along a believing wife, as do also the other apostles and the brothers of our Lord and Cephas? Paul wasn't married. He and Barnabas didn't get married.

He said, What, we don't have the right to do this? We give up these rights because we

have higher objectives than just claiming what we have the right to. Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working? What he's talking about here is the other apostles lived off the support of the church as they traveled and preached, but Paul and Barnabas worked. They wouldn't take support from the church when they could work.

Paul himself actually worked not only for his own support on the mission field, but he actually worked to support his whole team. He says that in Acts chapter 20. He says, these hands of mine have earned all that I need and my brethren who are working with me here.

Paul would rather than be paid for the ministry, he'd rather work. He had the right not to work and to be paid for the ministry, but he wouldn't, he gave up that right. This is the point he's making.

I have the right to eat whatever I want. I have the right to be married and take a wife with me. I have the right not to work and be supportive of the church, but I'm not doing any of those things.

I'm giving up all of those rights. And of course he's doing this to give an example. He's saying, you know, this is, I'm asking you to give up your right to eat meat sacrificed to idols if it's going to be hurting somebody.

You may have the right to give it up. That's what Christians do. I'm giving up all kinds of rights here, he says.

He says, whoever goes to war at his own expense, who plants a vineyard and does not eat of its fruit? Who tends a flock and does not drink of the milk of the flock? Now there he's talking about the, his unusual position of not taking money for the ministries. He's like a shepherd who's tending a flock, but he's not drinking the milk from the flock. He's like, you know, a guy going to war, but he's not taking, you know, any money for it.

He says, who does that? He's making it clear that he has the right to be paid if he wants to be paid, but he doesn't want to be paid because he thinks that would hinder the gospel. He thinks it's better to give up that right. And he talks more about that, but then he says further on down in verse 12, if others are partakers of this right over you, are not even we more, that is, we have the right to be paid if the others are, nevertheless, we have not used this right.

That is, we've given up this right in your case, but endure all things lest we hinder the gospel of Christ. Now, see what he's saying in verse 15. He says, I have used none of these things, these rights, nor have I written these things that it should be done to me now, for I'd rather, it'd be better for me to die than anyone should make my boasting void.

What he's saying here is that I'm stubborn about this. I know that if I claimed all the rights that I could claim, no one could fault me, but some probably would. And I want to be so spotless, so faultless, so above reproach, I don't want to hinder the gospel by anything.

I'll give up any rights I need to in order to promote the gospel. And of course, he would also give up any rights that he had to promote unity, which is another part of God's agenda is unity. So giving up rights that you have, Paul admits he had rights.

I have the right to be paid, but I don't use that right. I give up that right because I believe the gospel would be hindered if I took that right he said. Another right that you give up, if you want to promote unity, is your right to have the last word in an argument.

Oh, this is a very important one. Because unless you give up your right to have the last word, because everyone has the right to the last word, it's just that if neither party gives up that right, the last word will never be spoken. It'll be spoken, but it won't be the last, because the next person will have his word too, and the argument will go on endlessly, and there'll never be any resolution.

In Proverbs 20, in verse 3, it says, it is honorable for a man to stop striving, since any fool can start a quarrel. Anyone can start a fight, but it takes an honorable person to just stop it. Just stop quarreling, just stop striving.

Now, you're not going to be able to stop striving if you're waiting for the other person to stop striving. If you say, I'll stop striving as long as I have the last word. Well, the other party may not be so eager to let you have the last word, because in every argument, and I've found this because I've been in many arguments, in many debates, there really is no last word.

It's just that someone has to decide to let that be the last word. And they've got to let it be the other guy who has the last word, because otherwise you can always say something back. You can also make another argument of some kind, or criticize somebody's argument.

If you want peace, as soon as you see an argument's beginning, you can always just say, oh, you know, I see it differently, but it's not important enough to fight about. I'm not going to continue striving over this. If you get good at this, you'll recognize it before it really gets far enough to be unpleasant.

Sometimes you don't recognize it until you've been arguing for 15 minutes or longer, and you realize, how did we get into this unpleasant thing, and how do we get out of it? Of course, the way out of it is simply say, okay, you win. And that's humbling. Because as long as you're not humble, you don't want them to think they won the argument.

But if you let them have the last word, and you bite your tongue instead of giving the

last word back, they may think they won. When in fact, you're the big one. You're the mature one.

You're the one who's doing the generous thing. You're the one showing superiority, but they won't see it that way. They'll just think they got you that time.

Their argument got you. And you might think, that's the stupidest argument I've ever heard. I could just shoot it right down, but is it worth it? Is it worth shooting that argument down and then having him come back and having it go back and forth and back and forth? It takes some humility to say, I'm going to let that person think they won, even though, in my opinion, they didn't win.

I'm going to walk away. I'm going to let this drop, and they're going to think they finally got me because I didn't have anything else I could say back. When in fact, I do have something I could say back, I'm just choosing not to.

I'm going to humble myself, give up my right to have the last word, and let the strife stop right there. A mature Christian will adopt that as a strategy in relationships, especially relationships that tend to be volatile, where arguments often occur. That's sort of related to giving up your right to retaliate when someone's done a wrong to you.

We've talked a little about that. If someone has wronged you, you say, going to court, why not just let yourself be cheated? But there's quite a few places where, of course, the Bible insists upon us forgiving people, and forgiving is simply giving up your right to punish somebody for something they did to you. That's what forgiveness is.

Like I said, mercy is giving up your rights to someone else. Justice is that you will not violate their rights. Mercy is that you'll actually surrender some of yours for their benefit.

But one of your rights you give up is the right to retaliate. That's what forgiveness is. Forgiveness is one aspect of mercy.

Generosity is another. But so many times, the New Testament especially, but even the Old Testament too, talks about the duty of Christians to forgive. And if we forgive, then we can maintain peace considerably more.

In Matthew 6, in the well-known Lord's Prayer, in verses 12 and 13, in the middle of that prayer, we're to be saying, forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors, and do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. You see, the forgiveness is related to deliverance from the evil one. It's the strategies of the devil to undermine us spiritually, both as individuals and corporately, as a body.

We need to be delivered. We need to defeat him. We need to not fall into that temptation.

And prior to the request that we be delivered is the statement, I forgive. God, I want you to forgive me just as I forgive others. Now, what does it mean to forgive? It just means, first of all, it means you were wrong, or at least you think you were.

Forgiveness is never in the picture unless you either were wronged or think you were wronged. What else is there to forgive if there's no wrong done? You don't forgive somebody for doing the right thing, only for doing the wrong thing. So it can only happen when somebody has done you wrong and you have the option of retaliating, but you say, I won't.

I forgive. I give up my right to have this redress. That's what forgiveness is.

And it's a very important Christian concept. After Jesus told us to pray this prayer, he said in verse 14, For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Jesus taught in another place, in Matthew 18, that nothing anyone does to you can measure up to what you've done against God. And that God has forgiven you. You can never forgive anyone as much as God has forgiven you because no one has ever done as much wrong to you as you've done to God.

And so, if you expect God to forgive you, you'd better forgive other people. By asking God's forgiveness, you're suggesting that forgiveness is a desirable thing. Why else would you ask for it? Well, if it's a desirable thing, aren't you supposed to do to others what you'd want done to you? Isn't it desirable that you forgive them also? It's a very hard thing to do because of the, again, the ego and the pride because you have to humble yourself to give up your right, especially your right to retaliate.

In Luke 17, Jesus gives a little more detail on how to go about this forgiveness thing. It's not necessarily always a real simple automatic thing. He said in Luke 17 3, take heed to yourselves.

If your brother sins against you, rebuke him. That just means confront him about it and tell him that you believe he sinned against you. If he repents, forgive him.

If he sins against you seven times in a day and seven times in a day returns to you saying, I repent, you shall forgive him. Give up your right. Forgive.

Now, of course, this assumes that when you confront your brother, he says, I repent. What if you confront your brother and he doesn't repent? What if he says, no, I'm not, I didn't do anything wrong. You're the one in the wrong.

What then? How do you solve that one? Well, especially if you aren't in the wrong. And in fact, let's just say the person clearly is in the wrong. They're just denying it.

Well, Jesus talks about that situation in Matthew 18. If your brother sins against you, verse 15 says, go to him alone, between you and him. If you can win him over, that's great.

That's the end of that conflict. If it isn't, if you don't win him over, then you bring two witnesses. And if he doesn't hear them, take it to the church.

Eventually, if he insists that he never did anything wrong and the whole church is bearing witness that he did do something wrong, they just say, okay, you can't be part of the church for now. Jesus said, let him be to you like a tax collector or like a heathen, obviously, until he repents. The point here, though, is that you take forgiveness seriously.

You take breaches in the relationship as serious matters that need to be resolved. And you have to be prepared to be the one who will lay down your right to have your way. And there are times when you really should require the person to repent because what they're doing is something that's systemic in their life and their relationships.

If it's just something where they borrowed money from you and didn't pay it back, for you to forgive them the debt is, you know, that's just being kind. If they're going around ripping people off throughout the whole church, then there's something that needs to be addressed there. It doesn't matter for church discipline if it doesn't get fixed.

There's times you have to decide. This thing that they've done against me, is this something that I can forgive and no one else will be harmed? If so, then I should just forgive. If I'm the only one who absorbs the injury, I can do that.

By the grace of God, I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. I can absorb that injury and that's going to be the end of the problem. If the person, however, has a way of life of doing this to people, he's done it to me and he's done it to several other people, then it's time to really address it for his own sake and for the sake of the church.

But that's going into a different realm. We're talking here about personal relationships. Being willing to forgive and to give up your right to retaliate is very, very important.

Paul has a section on this in Romans chapter 12 at the end of that chapter. It's a great passage. It begins in verse 17.

Paul says, Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of all men. If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men.

The assumption here is it may not always be possible because you are for peace and they're not. You may be being peaceable. You may be doing the right thing and they may just want to be obnoxious to you.

There's a statement in the Psalms that says, I have dwelt too long with him who hateth peace. I am for peace, but when I speak, they are for war, the Psalmist says. Sometimes you can't help it.

You do the peaceable thing and they don't. You can't always have good relationships, but you can make sure that for your part, you've neglected nothing that would make the relationship what it should be. If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men.

Beloved, do not avenge yourselves. That is, don't retaliate when someone's done you wrong. But rather, give place to wrath.

What's that mean? Give God's wrath room. Don't get your wrath in the middle of things. Someone's done you wrong and you want to get them back? Stand back and let God do it.

Leave it to God. Give place. Give room to God's wrath because God has said, vengeance is mine.

I will repay, says the Lord. That is, God has promised. He'll take care of it.

You don't mess with it. Paul says, therefore, and here he quotes from the Proverbs, if your enemy is hungry, feed him. Your enemy.

If he's hungry, feed him. If he's thirsty, give him drink. In so doing, you'll heap coals of fire on his head.

That is, he's your enemy. Presumably that means he's done things to you that a person ought not to do and wouldn't do to a friend. But instead of retaliating, you feed him when he's hungry.

You give him drink when he's thirsty. You're heaping coals of fire on his head in the sense that God is now in the position to let his vengeance take care of the situation. You don't avenge yourself.

You give place to God's wrath. You do good to your enemy and stand back. Give place to God's wrath because God is going to take that matter up himself because you've allowed it to be his concern and not your own.

So the surrendering of rights in all these different areas is a major biblical teaching and it's definitely a major strategy for unity in the church. And when people divide, when people have grudges unresolved, it's because somebody's depending on their right. They're demanding their rights to be, you know, to have it their way, to have everyone, you know, come over to their side.

And you just gotta be humble and give up your rights to that. They don't have to do that.

Maybe I think they should, but they don't have to.

I can give up that. I can let that go. And if I do, I'll be at peace with most people except for the ones who are really determined to be at war.

And there are some of that type. But because there are some of that type who are war makers, the world needs a lot more people who are peacemakers. And that's our last strategy, being a peacemaker.

There are certain people that the Psalms talk about and Paul quotes the Psalms on it, "...of whom it is said the way of peace they have not known." Paul quotes it over in Romans chapter 3. He's quoting from several passages from the Old Testament about people's sinfulness. And he says in verse 10, there's none righteous, no, not one. There's none who understands.

There's none who seeks after God. They've all turned aside. They've all together become unprofitable.

There's none who does good. No, not one. Their throat's an open tomb.

With their tongues they have practiced deceit, poison of asps under their lips. Their mouth is full of cursing. Their feet are swift to shed blood.

Destruction and misery in their ways. And the way of peace they have not known." The way of peace. The way of peace they have not known.

There's a lot of Christians who have not yet learned the way of peace. They still stir up strife. They stir.

They cause discord between brethren. They are far from walking in the way of peace. And a peacemaker therefore has got to be someone who knows the way of peace and applies it, not only in his own relationships but with reconciling other people in their broken relationships.

See, a peacemaker is not someone who merely, like Paul said, as much as possible be at peace with all people. Obviously a peacemaker is going to try to create peace in all the relationships between him or herself and other people. But a peacemaker should also be able to go into a situation where other people are at strife with each other but not with that person.

And he or she can go in there and counsel and be a peacemaker and bring reconciliation, be a repairer of the breach in the relationship. And both kinds of peacemaking are mentioned in Scripture. Of course, Jesus said in Matthew 5, 9, Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God.

Now, why would peacemakers be called the children of God? Well, the simple reason is

because children are assumed to have some of the traits of their parents. You can tell if a child looks a great deal like his father whose child he is. There have been many people, I'm sure you've met, who are the children of someone you know and say, oh, I know who your dad is.

Because they look so much like him. The assumption is God's children look like him. Not so much in their appearance but in their behavior and their attitudes and so forth.

A peacemaker is God-like because God's a peacemaker. God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. It says in 2 Corinthians 5. But it also says in Ephesians that there were groups that were adverse to each other, like the Jews and the Gentiles.

And God took the two and broke down the middle wall of partition between them, made of the two one new man, so making peace. It says in Ephesians 4. God is a peacemaker. He reconciled the world that was against him to himself.

He also, external to himself, took groups that were at war with each other and made them at peace in himself. So making peace. God is a peacemaker.

And those who are peacemakers exhibit their father's traits. Those that are war makers, those who so discord among brethren show their father's traits. Who is the devil, apparently.

And so to be like Christ, to be like God, actually, is to be one who promotes peace, who loves peace. Who not only would rather suffer wrong than interject strife into a relationship between themselves and someone else, but also when they see others that are at odds with each other, they want to step in if possible. Not too much meddling, but I mean, if they're in a position to speak into the lives of both people, or both sides, they want to use whatever influence they have to bring resolution and reconciliation.

That's a peacemaker's way. Look at James chapter 3 in verse 18. Now, we looked at James chapter 3 and the verse just before that, earlier in this evening, talked about how, you know, he's talking about how to be basically promoting unity.

Not to have envy and self-seeking, but to have that wisdom which is above, which is, remember we saw, willing to yield. That's our giving up our rights. That's our previous one.

Well, here's our present one, verse 18. Now, the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace. Peacemakers.

What's he saying? Well, this is in contrast to something he said back in chapter 1. And if you don't recall that, then it's important to put these two verses in juxtaposition. Because he said in chapter 1, verse 19 and 20, So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath, for the wrath of man does not

produce the righteousness of God. Getting angry isn't going to promote the righteousness of God.

It does not produce it. But, chapter 3, verse 18, says the fruit of righteousness is produced by those who sow peace. By peacemakers.

You want to have a crop of righteousness? It's not produced by getting angry. It's produced by those who sow the seeds of peace. People who are peacemakers, the fruit of righteousness is produced from that, not from the other.

You can get angry, or you can become committed to reconciliation. And God is obviously committed to reconciliation, so we must also be. There's a couple of sub-points under this in your notes.

One of them says, listen first, judge after. This is a very important part of peacemaking. That you don't jump to conclusions.

You know, if you're trying to, let's say you're counseling someone who's in a hard marriage. Husband and wife are striving with each other, and they both come to you for counsel, maybe separately from each other, or maybe together. Well, the easiest thing to do is to take sides with the person you can relate to the most, or perhaps the first person who came to you with their complaints.

When the wife comes and says, oh, you can't believe what an ogre I'm married to, and all the horrible things he does, and so forth, it's hard not to be sympathetic toward her. Then if you get a chance to talk to the husband, and he starts talking about her, you think, is this the same marriage we're talking about here? The marriage I was hearing about, you know, the husband was an ogre, and now it sounds like the wife is the witch. The shrew.

You know? And yet, a peacemaker has to hear both sides before he makes a judgment. Too often we jump to conclusions, and this, of course, leads us to take sides, perhaps unrighteously, because we form an opinion prematurely. Now, in a lot of our studies, we've talked about Proverbs chapter 18.

These verses have become probably very familiar to those who come to my teachings a lot, because I bring them a lot. But in Proverbs 18, verse 13, it says, he who answers a matter before he hears it, it's a folly and a shame to him. And in the same chapter, verse 17, it says, the first one to plead his cause seems right until his neighbor comes and examines him.

Clearly, this is saying that you need to make sure you don't jump to conclusions in deciding who to side with, even, frankly, even with yourself. Because if somebody does something wrong to you, the kind of thing that might irk you, the kind of thing that might cause strife between you and that person, you need to be careful that you don't take on

an offense because you have not heard that person out or have not become aware of where that person's at or why they're doing what they're doing. They may be doing a wrong thing.

Sometimes you probably do wrong things, too, in all likelihood. Everyone I know has done wrong things. So, the fact that someone does a wrong thing isn't a very good excuse for me to be angry at them since I do wrong things, too.

What I need to find out is what's that person going through that has caused them to do something that's so ill-advised and so wrong? Are they just a bad person? Maybe so. Maybe they're just a really bad person. They're just choosing to be bad.

Or maybe it's something else. Maybe they're having a really bad day. Maybe they've just had some crisis that you don't know about.

Maybe there was a trigger that you didn't discern in some relation between you and them that set them off and you don't know why that trigger's there. You didn't even know it was there. You don't even know what made them do that.

Before you take up an offense against someone, you have to ask yourself, I wonder what's making them be that way? Because it doesn't seem like they're being very rational or good. And unless I'm going to assume that they want to be bad people, and I think relatively few people really want to be bad people, even bad people usually like to think of themselves as good people at some level. Until you hear them out, until you discover, before you investigate, don't make a judgment.

Don't assume the worst. Even if they have done something that is clearly wrong, don't make a judgment of their intentions until you know something more about the situation. And certainly when you hear of someone telling their side of a conflict between them and somebody else, believe me, they're going to tell you the part that makes them look good.

They're not going to tell you the other part, usually. And it's going to be so easy to just say, yeah, I can see you're right there, that person's really in the wrong. But you haven't heard the other side yet.

Until you hear both sides, it's too early to make a judgment. And if you make a judgment too soon, you'll be taking the risk of being on the wrong side of the matter and not able to make peace in a just and responsible way. Jesus said something about this in John 7. Everybody knows Matthew 7. 1. It has become the best-known verse among non-Christians in the world.

It used to be that John 3.16 was the best-known verse in the Bible. I think the best-known verse now is Matthew 7.1. Judge not that you be not judged. It's the unbeliever's favorite verse.

Don't judge. Jesus said don't judge. He said judge not.

Well, He did say that. There was a context for it that they usually have never looked at or considered. We won't worry about that too much now, but I'll just show you another place where Jesus said judge not.

And that's in John 7.24. John 7.24 Jesus said, Judge not according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment. Ah, so I'm not supposed to judge a certain way, but I'm supposed to judge another way. Do not judge by appearances, but judge better.

Judge a righteous judgment. There is just as much a command to judge from Jesus as there is a command not to. There's different ways of judging.

There's unrighteous judging and there's righteous judging. By the way, in Matthew 7.1 where Jesus said, Judge not that you be not judged, He goes on to make it very clear what He's talking about. If you have a beam in your eye, don't go trying to judge a person about the little speck in their eye.

But He did say get the beam out of your eye and then you can see clearly to deal with their speck. In other words, there is a time that you can righteously judge a person, but not when you've got a beam hanging out of your own eye. You've got to get that out first, then you can be qualified.

There's a right way to judge and a wrong way to judge. And the wrong way to judge is snap judgment. Jumping to conclusions before you've heard it out.

And in the same chapter of John, a little later, Jesus had a meek supporter in Nicodemus. He was a Pharisee. His fellow Pharisees didn't know that he was so much sympathetic toward Jesus, but they found out.

I think they shut him up too, because he was pretty, not very courageous. But he did make a good point. It says in verse 48 of this same chapter, John 7.48, Have any of the rulers of the Pharisees believed in him? Say the Pharisees.

And they are implying there couldn't be any. Certainly none of the Pharisees have. But surprisingly one of them had, and it was Nicodemus.

And verse 50 says, Nicodemus, he who came to Jesus by night, being one of them, said to them, verse 51, Does our law judge a man before it hears him and knows what he's doing? Now that's a very good question. They snapped at him and got angry at him for even raising that point. But I mean, who could object to this? Does our law judge a man before it hears him out and researches and finds out what's really going on? Do we make judgments without investigation, without testimony, without research? Unfortunately, many times people do, including many Christians.

They'll hear something, but they won't hear the other side. We just heard in the news just last week about how the Rolling Stone magazine had gotten a report from a woman that she had been gang-raped by a bunch of students at a certain college fraternity, and Rolling Stone ran with the story. Well, more recently they had to write a retraction, an apology, said, you know, we have second thoughts about having run the story, having only talked to the girl and not having talked to any of the men who were accused.

And they said, now it's starting to look like her story has some contradictions in it. Now they've decided the event never happened. It was a total lie.

But they ran a story, you know, and they hadn't even talked to any of the accused. This is journalism? Well, it's obviously a kind of journalism that isn't interested in the truth. Christians are interested in the truth.

And before we repeat or make a judgment about something we've heard, we've got to make sure we've heard the other side, too. Listen first, judge after. In James 1.19, we just read it a moment ago, James 1.19, he says, Let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath, quick to hear, slow to talk.

Don't answer until you've heard it out. Make sure you've heard as much as you need to hear before you can make a righteous judgment. You can't be a peacemaker if you're going to take sides with one side before you know enough to make a righteous judgment in the matter.

And the other way, another way to be a peacemaker, there are actually many other ways, but we're going to end with this, is to, as I put it, cut off the tail of the tailbearer. My friend Danny Layman is the one who introduced that term to me. I don't know where he got it.

He probably heard it from someone else. But tailbearer is a term that Solomon uses in Proverbs for a gossip. Now gossip is a very familiar practice to us all.

In fact, it happens so frequently we often are not aware we're doing it. And sometimes the line between gossip and not gossip is so vague that even after we've done it we look back and think, was that gossip or was that not gossip? Because gossip is when you say something disparaging against somebody to somebody and the somebody who you're speaking about and against is not there. I don't think it's ever really called gossip if you criticize somebody while they're there to somebody else.

It might be unfair, it might be ill-advised, but I don't think it's technically gossip. Gossip is when you're talking behind somebody's back about them, something that is that makes them look bad. I don't think gossip is considered gossip if you're saying something that makes them look good behind their back.

But it's strictly speaking when you're undermining their character and their reputation

when they're not there to hear it or to answer it. Now gossip can be true. In fact, as far as I know, most gossips think that they are telling the truth and they might well be.

Some gossip is not true and in that case it's slander or libel, but telling the truth in the wrong setting to the wrong ears. A negative truth about somebody who's not there is even if it's true, it's often wrong to do. It's a sin.

The Book of Proverbs speaks a great deal about tail bearing, which is gossiping. And like I said, my friend used the expression, cut off the tail of the tail bearer. That means when you hear gossip, you need to make sure it doesn't go any further.

And you might even have to do so by rebuking the person who's gossiping. In Proverbs 11, and by the way, of course, it goes without saying you have to make sure you're not the one gossiping, but in Proverbs 11.13 it says, A tail bearer reveals secrets, but he who is of a faithful spirit conceals a matter. If someone tells you something that's about themselves, that's a confession, doesn't make them look good, they're letting you in on a little secret that they hope doesn't become public, if you have a faithful spirit, if you're a faithful friend, you'll keep it to yourself, Proverbs says.

If you're a gossip though, you'll just say, wow, I've got a great tidbit to share with people who would love to know about this. Now, by the way, people love to hear gossip. I'm not sure why they do, but I suspect, I don't know, because I'm not trained in psychology, and I'm not sure being trained in psychology would help, but I don't know why it is, but I think it may be that we feel better about ourselves when we hear bad things about somebody else, somebody that we didn't think there was anything bad to hear about, or maybe we did, the worse somebody else looks, seemingly, the better we look, by contrast.

I don't know if that's why people like gossip, but there's got to be something in human nature that loves gossip, because we do listen to it. People make a fortune selling it, in the tabloids. And not just those tabloids, but those fancy slick magazines like Us and People, and, you know, they're just gossip.

They're just gossip rags. They're fancy looking magazines, but they're making a fortune by just gossiping about people, people that you don't need to know about. You don't need to know that stuff.

And it's not usually good stuff. There might be a few positive things about people in those things, but very often it's stuff that's really the latest hot gossip. And somehow there's a lot of people who want to spend money to hear it, or read it.

In Proverbs 16, 28, it says, A perverse man sows strife. So if someone's sowing strife, it tells you what kind of person he is. He's perverse.

And a whisperer, that is someone who's gossiping behind your back, separates the best of friends. Well, that certainly goes against the idea of promoting unity, doesn't it? I

mean, if you want to have unity, you want to help people who aren't friends become reconciled. You don't want to make people who are friends become separated.

That's what a perverse person does. A person who's working against God's purposes, trying to put wedges between people who are currently friends and try to make them not be. In chapter 26 of Proverbs in verse 17, it says, He who passes by and meddles in a quarrel not his own is like one who takes a dog by the ears.

Now, if you've listened to somebody else's quarrel and you've gotten involved in it, it's none of your business. And you're now, you know, involved in something that's not yours to be involved with. You're like a person who's taken a dog by the ears.

I've never known for sure exactly what Solomon had in mind when he talked about someone taking a dog by the ears. But I could just picture, if you grabbed a dog and was holding it by its ears, it would probably be angry. But how are you going to get rid of it now? You let its ears go, and it can bite you.

You hold on to its ears, it won't be able to bite you, but you won't be able to go anywhere either, you know? I mean, you make the dog mad at you, you've got it by the ears. How are you getting out of that situation? You get involved in someone else's mess that you weren't in. Now, how are you going to get out of that clean? How are you going to get out of that alive? Probably not.

You know, a lot of times people will gossip about things to you about someone else, you don't need to hear it. In fact, I actually think that is the proper definition of gossip, is when you're speaking about somebody who's not there, to somebody who doesn't need to know. They're not a part of the problem, and they're not a part of the solution.

So why do they need to know it? That's what I think gossip is. Now, if you're talking bad about somebody behind their back to someone who is a part of the problem, let's say someone who's also involved in the wrongdoing with the other person, that's not gossip, I don't think. That's trying to fix the problem.

Or if you're talking to somebody who's a part of the solution. In other words, there's times when it's appropriate and necessary to say bad things about someone who's not there for the sake of reconciling the problem, but most of the time you don't, and when you don't have to do that, then that's what I think is gossip, frankly. Now, in chapter 26, verses 20 through 22, Proverbs 26, 20 through 22, says, Where there's no wood, the fire goes out.

Where there's no tailbearer, strife ceases. You want to end divisions? You want to end strife? In the church, and between brethren, and in a family, and so forth? Get the gossip out of there. Get rid of the gossip.

The gossip generates strife, and it keeps it going. Just like wood keeps the fire going.

When the fire's gone, I should say, when the wood is gone, there's no fuel, the fire goes out.

When the gossip is gone, the strife can come to an end, but not while the gossip's still going on. The words of a tailbearer, verse 22 says, are like tasty trifles. People like to hear them.

They go down to the inmost body. Fervent lips with a wicked heart. I'm sorry, I jumped over something by accident.

Verse 21, As charcoal is to burning coals, and wood to fire, so is a contentious man to kindle strife. Again, kindling strife. If you have two people who like to share gossip about someone who's not there, that's like two coals keeping each other hot.

A coal off by itself will go cold, but you bank the coals together at night in your fireplace, they'll still be hot. Some of them will still be hot in the morning because they keep each other hot. So also people who like to gossip and sow strife, they keep it going on.

They keep the fire burning. It's a fire that shouldn't be burning, though. Finally, in chapter 25 of Proverbs, verse 23, says, The north wind brings forth rain, and a backbiting tongue, and angry countenance.

Now this proverb has been translated a variety of different ways. It talks about how rain is driven away by a strong wind, or is brought in from another location to a new location by a strong north wind. He says, A backbiting tongue similarly blows in an angry countenance, or makes people angry, in other words.

You create anger, not peace, by being a backbiter, by being a tail-bearer, by being a gossip. Now this is an area where Christians really, really need to watch themselves. Because in almost every situation when you're with another person, you talk about, not just the two of you, but someone else, or people who aren't there.

That's not always wrong. It can be quite innocent. It can even be a necessary conversation about someone who's not there.

That's the problem. Sometimes you cannot really avoid, because you need to talk about something or a situation with somebody, but how to not cross the line from a legitimate and necessary conversation into what becomes just gossip, that sows ill feelings toward that person who's not even present, is the hard thing to avoid. I know my wife will want me to share these stories, because I've shared these stories about gossip before, and if you've you know, it's possible I just, I won't apologize for giving these stories again if you've heard them before, but a friend of mine said that many years ago, he and I were at a restaurant.

I say he said it, because I don't remember it. But I believe it happened, as he said. He

said that he and I and some other friends, guys, were at a coffee shop, and one of the guys there began to say some bad things about another man, the man's name was Steve Norman, and he wasn't present.

I didn't know Steve Norman very well. I'd met him a few times, had a few conversations, but he wasn't there, and this one man at the table started to say some very malicious things. He actually just started to share some complaints he had about Steve Norman.

They were probably true. I didn't wait long enough to hear what they were, and my friend Jim tells me that this man had not begun to say very much before I spoke up, and I said, well, I just want you to know I count Steve Norman to be a friend of mine, and he's not here right now to hear what you're saying about him. So I just assumed not really hear anything against him unless he's around to be able to answer for himself.

Now, that stopped the tail bearer. That cut the tail off the tail bearer. The guy didn't say anything more.

In fact, I think he was a little ashamed. And I was the good guy in that conversation, though I have to say I don't remember it. My friend Jim remembers it.

He said it made an impact on him. But I always need to balance it out by telling a story similar to where I was not the good guy, where I and some friends went to hear a Christian musician who had sort of a worldly way of performing. It was a Christian show, but he was kind of a showman, and a lot of us had a bad taste in our mouth after his concert.

We were gathered together for some coffee afterwards, and virtually all of us Christian friends at the table were saying something usually negative about him, about the guy, how carnal he seemed, how worldly. And one of the girls that was there at the tables, after she'd been silent for a long time and listened to a lot of it, she said, well, I wonder how you guys talk about me when I'm not here. And I was one of the ones who had been saying bad things about the guy, so I don't know how everyone else felt, but I felt convicted.

I felt like, wow, you know, that's kind of a sharp rebuke there, although it's a very sensible thing for her to say. If we would talk about him behind his back this way, maybe we'd talk about her behind her back that way. It was actually a very good observation on her part, but it certainly cut off the tail of the tailbearer in that case.

It ended the gossip. The thing is that peacemakers have to be prepared to end the gossip. They may not, it's not enough that they just don't gossip.

They need to make sure that they end the gossip when somebody else is promoting it. And you can do so by just showing your disapproval. See, people gossip.

Let's face it, people gossip because they think you're going to like hearing this. This is something you really are going to enjoy hearing. People gossip because people like to hear gossip.

And as soon as someone says, I don't like to hear that, I think that's inappropriate. I don't think this is the right thing to be saying in this situation right here. That person's not here.

I think if I were him, I'd want to be present to hear this kind of thing said about him. And as soon as you point out that there's something inappropriate with the gossip, the gossip usually will stop because they realize they're not getting your approval. And you can put it into, in fact, they might think twice before they do it with someone else when you're not even there.

They might get that same slap in the face from someone else. They never thought they would. And if somebody comes to you and says, you know, what so and so did to me, the best thing you can do is say, well, we should go talk to that person right now together.

Let's go. Let's go find that person right now and we'll go talk to them. In most cases, that won't materialize.

Usually the person who is talking behind the back is not prepared to talk in front of the face of the person they're accusing. And some of us in this room know of a case like that that happened about a year ago where there's some gossip going on and the gossips simply were told, why don't you talk to him? And they wouldn't. Instead they left the church.

It's kind of a radical step to take instead of doing the natural Christian thing and saying, well, why don't we just go confront the person with the problem? But you see, people would rather talk about somebody else behind their back than actually resolve the relationship problem. And that's not being a peacemaker. A peacemaker wants the relationship fixed.

Doesn't want to just perpetuate strife by allowing continual negative talk against a person. If the negative talk is true, then it should be that the person about whom it is true is confronted with it. Does our law judge a man before it hears him and knows what he does? Nicodemus said.

And while Nicodemus isn't the strongest witness in Scripture, the strongest loyalist to Christ, he certainly was seeing things clearly in that situation. He was cutting off the tail of the tailbearer, too. Because everyone's talking about Jesus in an egg way.

He says, hey, wait. Has anyone listened to him to find out what he says? Are we going to judge him right here and now? Without him being here to tell us what he means and what he's saying? And that's exactly what a peacemaker is to do. Nicodemus was not

successful because those who he was talking to wanted war, not peace.

But in many cases, Christians do want peace. They just are blinded to the negative effects of what they're saying or what they're doing and the negative impact it has on the kingdom of God and the way in which they are themselves playing into the hands of Satan's devices to divide the body of Christ. God wants Christians to be more brotherly toward each other, more accepting, more receiving of each other.

Yes, we have to correct each other. We have to rebuke each other when we go astray. That's part of being brotherly.

That's part of being loving. The assumption is you don't want to go astray. So if you're going astray, you probably want me to tell you something.

I'd want you to tell me if I was. So, what I would have done to me, I'll do to you. That's not unloving.

That's not... When you correct somebody who's going the wrong way, that is not promoting disunity. But, there are many ways in which we can deal with differences that do promote disunity. And fewer ways that promote unity.

And a lot of times we just need to lay down our rights and you know, be a peacemaker in the situation. And in so doing, show ourselves to be like Jesus, the Prince of Peace, the Son of God. The peacemakers will be called the Sons of God.

And so, in promoting unity, we need to be adept at peacemaking. We need to study it. We need to contemplate it.

We need to ask, where do I see problems in relationships between me and someone else, or between two other people that I know who are friends of mine, but not doing well with each other. To become a skilled peacemaker is something that is our assignment. And it's necessary if we're going to overcome the devil's attempts to maintain a divided and powerless and witness-less church.

The church is not going to have the witness that God wants it to have, as long as it is not walking in unity and love among the brethren. So, Father, we thank you that you do give us in your word all that we need for life and godliness. And we do know that there's an invisible enemy, an invisible battle working against us.

And we often can see how as we look back, we've played into his hands, perhaps. That we've been his instruments in promoting disunity in the past. And we want to repent of that and stop doing that.

And I pray that you give us the insight and the godly wisdom that's from above to be peaceable, willing to yield, and capable of sowing peace. And the fruit of righteousness is

sown in peace of those that make peace. I pray that we could be peacemakers who sow peace and yield the fruit of righteousness.

That's what we need in the world. The world has too little righteousness, has too little justice, too little virtue, and too little of the knowledge of you. And I pray, Father, we would become not just as individuals, but corporately your people, the church, the whole church, would become a glowing witness of the glory of Jesus to the world.

And that they will see that Jesus is indeed sent from you to the world. I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.