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Strategies for Unity (Part 2)



Strategies for Unity - Steve Gregg

In this installment of his series on Strategies for Unity, Steve Gregg discusses the importance of unity among Christians and the dangers of disunity. He emphasizes that every real Christian is a brother or sister, and that God hates those who sow discord among brethren. Gregg also notes that spiritual unity is more important than institutional church unity, and that humility is necessary in order to obtain unity. He encourages Christians to prioritize family concerns and loyalty, and to remember that love covers a multitude of sins.

Transcript

This is our second installment in a series of talks called Strategies for Unity. Strategies for Unity. And last time was the introductory lecture.

I covered the material that's on the front page of your notes. What we're going to cover tonight is on the other side of the notes, and I don't know that we'll get through all of that. We probably won't.

But we did cover the first two major points, which are on the front page of your notes, answering two questions. Why unity? And why strategies? After all, the series is called Strategies for Unity. I have to justify the title.

Why is unity important? We saw that unity is important for a number of reasons. First of all, disunity among Christians is living in denial. Because the church is one.

The family of God is one. There's one body. There's one Lord.

There's one faith. One baptism. One God and Father of all.

If we act like that isn't true, we are out of touch with reality. We're living in denial. We might as well get over that right away.

Because you can't really live properly in the world when you're not taking stock of reality. We are one with every other Christian on the planet. We are one body.

When one suffers, all suffer. When one is exalted, all rejoice. That's what the Bible declares.

It doesn't say all should rejoice or all should suffer. All do. Because we are organically one.

That's the reality. If you don't see that, it's because it's a spiritual reality. And spiritual things are spiritually discerned.

But fortunately, if we're dull enough that we don't discern it ourselves, we're told it outright in Scripture. So, we know that it's a fact that every Christian who's a real Christian is a brother or a sister to every other real Christian. And God expects his children to act like they are brothers and sisters.

And to fail to do so is to live in denial. It's also very infantile or juvenile to be disunified. It simply shows carnality.

Paul said, while you are saying, I'm of Paul, or I'm of Paul, sorry, I'm of Cephas, are you not acting carnally? Aren't you acting as babes in Christ? It is juvenile to divide from other Christians over petty things. Now, I actually think that some Christians aren't that juvenile, but they divide anyway over petty things because they think they're supposed to. Because we think we're supposed to be loyal to the particular strand of doctrine that we've been taught or that we've arrived at.

And anyone who disagrees with it is, you know, we might not dislike them, but we feel like we're supposed to be so loyal to this truth that we know. That any other Christian who doesn't share the knowledge of that truth, we're supposed to kind of punish them. We're supposed to at least not trust them.

Not fellowship with them without them making some concessions to our side. This is, it's just childish really. And it's something to get over.

It's also necessary that we invest in what God invests in. And God has invested in the unity of the body. He sent his son and through the cross he broke down the middle wall of partition between Jew and Gentile, made in himself one new man, that is one new body in Christ.

He invested his son. He paid the price of his son's death. That's a large payment he made into a particular fund that he must feel has value, worth his investment.

If you want to invest your life, you want to invest your resources in something, check out what God's invested in. He's in touch with what's going on. He knows what's valuable.

Invest what he invests in. Also, strife among brethren is an abomination in the sight of God. That could have been first on the list.

It's not the least, certainly. Whatever is an abomination before God means it stinks to God. It's abhorrent to God.

It says in Proverbs chapter 6 and verse 19, there's six things, actually verses 6 through 19, but there's six things the Lord hates, seven are abomination to him. And he gives the list, and at the end of the list is the man who sows discord among brethren. If somebody sows discord in the family of God, so that there's people who were at peace, and now they're divided because your influence has put a wedge between them.

God hates people like that. Now, I'm not going to apologize for the Bible saying God hates people. I actually believe God loves everybody.

In a sense, he loves everybody. He wants all to be saved. But that doesn't mean that in his emotions, he is not hateful or finds abominable certain behaviors that people do.

And you really don't want, especially if you're a Christian, you really don't want to be one of those people doing the kinds of things that God thinks are abomination to him. Because we will answer to God for our behavior. Even Christians will.

Peter said that in 1 Peter chapter 1, I think it's verse 17. He said, if you call God your father, who without partiality judges every man according to his works, pass the time of your sojourning here in fear. He's writing to Christians who call God their father.

You call God your father. Well, you should know your dad's going to judge everyone according to their works. He's doing impartially.

It means you're not going to get a break if you're doing bad works. He's not giving you a pass. He judges everyone impartially according to their works.

He says, therefore, if that's the case, pass the time of your sojourning here in the fear of God. Realize that if you are living in a way that is abomination to God, if you're doing things that God finds abominable, you don't get a pass for that. Now, are you going to go to hell for that? I'm not going to say that.

I don't know. I don't determine who goes to hell. God does.

All I know is when the Bible says God finds something an abomination, that's something I should be very frightened to be engaged in. Because I don't want God to look at me and say, are you on that list of things I hate? Because you might be, even if you're a Christian. Also, another reason to be concerned about unity is because unity is the harbinger of revival.

Before the very first outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the earth, on the day of Pentecost, we read in Acts 2.1 that all the disciples were in one place and perhaps more importantly, in one accord. And they were of one mind. They were unified in their

purpose.

And they were not divided. And they were all in one place when the Spirit came down upon them. And Psalm 133 says how good and how pleasant it is when brethren dwell together in unity.

It's like the oil that was poured over the head of Aaron, which went down through his beard and through the skirts of his garments. It's like the dew on the mountains of Hermon. He says that's where the Lord commands the blessing.

Even life forever. God sends blessing on his people when they are unified. So that's why unity.

And you know, there's other parts to that too. Of course, it's clearly the will of God. Jesus prayed for the church to be one.

And that comes up under our next heading. Why strategies? Quickly, because there's an adversary. There's a devil.

And because the devil has a lot to lose. He's already lost, as a matter of fact. He's lost his hegemony over the earth.

He's lost his authority over the earth. He does, in fact, still control those who are ignorant of his loss. In fact, the preaching of the gospel is simply the informing of those who are ignorant that there is, in fact, another king now.

A new king. One Jesus. That's the gospel.

That's the gospel of the kingdom of God. Lots of people don't know that. They still follow the devil by default, but he has no authority.

He's been defeated. He knows it. The demons know it.

But not everyone knows it. And the proclamation of the gospel is simply the proclamation of that very message. Jesus has defeated the former king, and he is now seated as king of kings and lord of lords with absolute authority, and he commands all men everywhere to repent and follow him.

That's the gospel message. It's good news. Good news that the old king is gone.

Well, he's not gone, but he's powerless. If we resist him, he'll flee from us. The demons know this.

The demons believe it and tremble. The demons are scared. They're intimidated.

But they don't have to be very much, because mostly we don't know it. They're just afraid that we'll find out. Because if we find out, we might tell somebody.

And if we tell people, then what are they going to do? Now, no problem. They don't have to worry about a thing, because no one listens to us anyway. And they don't because one of the main objections is because we don't get along with ourselves.

With each other, I mean, in the body of Christ. And Jesus prayed in John 17. Twice he said, Father, I pray that they may be one, that is, his disciples may be one, unified, as you and I, Father, are one, so that the world may know that you sent me.

He said that twice in John 17. It's in your notes. No wonder the devil doesn't want us to be one, because Jesus predicted that if the church was one, the world would know that God had sent Jesus.

The world would know that we have something to say that is valid. You see, our message is that God has come to bring us all together into his kingdom. And yet we don't get along enough to meet together, even in his kingdom here.

And so we don't have any credibility when we're divided, and that's why the devil wants us to be divided. You know, in the Old Testament, when God fought Israel's battles, there were times when Israel was just overwhelmed by enemies that were far more in number. In one case, they had a million soldiers coming against them from three different countries.

A confederacy of three enemies coming against them. And Jehoshaphat was the king in Judah, and he said, this is too much for us. He prayed, and God said, through a prophet, go out, send your singers, send your priests out there, the musicians, and so forth.

Don't send the soldiers out with weapons. Just send out the musicians with instruments. And have them sing and praise the beauty of God's holiness.

And so they did that. And this huge army that was coming against them, when these guys went out and they worshipped the Lord, instead of fighting their enemies, what happened was God turned the enemy against each other. God confused the enemy so they didn't know who their enemy was and who their friends were.

And they all killed each other off. Same thing happened in Gideon's day when there were 30,000 Midianites coming against Israel, and Gideon had only 300 soldiers. Fortunately, it was nighttime, and no one could see how many he had or didn't have.

But they surprised the enemy, and the enemy went into confusion, and God, the Bible says, put the enemy in confusion, and they killed each other off until there weren't any left. So this is one of God's strategies against the enemy in the Old Testament. Turn them against themselves.

Well, the devil isn't very original. He has to borrow his strategies from somewhere. He sees what God does, so the devil has used that strategy on us.

We're just not smart enough to recognize it. The devil says, yeah, why should I expend so much energy fighting these people? I can't even beat them, because if they resist me, I have to flee from them. I'll just turn them against each other, and they'll have nothing to worry about.

The devil, by keeping the body of Christ divided, keeps the body of Christ lacking in credibility, and makes our gospel message neutralized. When Jesus said, Father, I pray they'd be one, so the world will know. Well, the devil doesn't want the world to know, so he doesn't want us to be one.

And that's why we need strategies, because in warfare, you need strategy. You don't need sheer brute force merely, because although you're stronger than your enemy, if the enemy's smarter than you, they can beat you. It says in the book of Proverbs, The wise man scales the city of the mighty, and casts down the strength of the confidence of it.

That is, the wiser person can beat the stronger person. The wise man scales the city of the mighty one, and beats him. Not because he's more mighty, but because he's more wise.

Strategy in warfare is very important, and the devil doesn't have the power we have. We have God's power, and that's infinite. The devil's power is not infinite.

But if he's smarter than us, he can still neutralize us. He can still beat us in the short term. But he's not supposed to be smarter than us.

Jesus said, Be wise as serpents, disciples. Don't let the serpent be wiser than you. Be wise as serpents, and harmless as doves.

We need to have the strategies that God has equipped us with, because we can't see the enemy. He can see us. Isn't that kind of a disadvantage for us to be at? When you're fighting an invisible enemy, and you're not invisible to him, he can see you? Would you step into the ring against a fighter, and you had to fight him, but you had to be blindfolded, and he couldn't be? You'd say, No, that's unfair.

Unfair disadvantage here. Well, of course, it is unfair, but not in our case. There are more who are for us than who are against us.

The enemy that we're fighting is actually weaker than we are, but maybe more shrewd than we are sometimes. Jesus said in Luke chapter 16, the children of this world are actually shrewder than the children of light. That's not necessarily how it should be.

God has given us information. God has given us the truth. God has given us commands.

These translate into behaviors that we are required to do, and these behaviors become

our strategies for accomplishing what God wants, including the unification of his people as one body. Now, I want to clarify, as I tried to last time, too, when I talk about unification of the body, I'm not talking about unification of all the organized churches into one big church. First of all, this is impossible.

Secondly, it's probably undesirable. Unity is spiritual, not institutional. Because the church, the real church, is spiritual, not institutional.

You can have a hundred institutional churches, and still it's not a hundred churches. There's one church. Every person who is a true born-again Christian, who possesses the Spirit of Christ, and who is under the headship of Christ in their life, obeying him, is part of his true body, his true church.

And some of them are in this institutional church, some are in that institutional church, some are in another institutional church of different labels, different brand names. Some aren't even in any of them. Because the institutional church is not the same thing as the church.

When we're talking about unity among brethren, we're not talking about unifying into a big monster church. The world had a big monster church that was all unified throughout the Dark Ages, which is one reason they were so dark. A big institutional church can become a big corrupt institutional church.

But the true church is made up of people who aren't corrupt, made up of people who are obedient to Christ, who have his Spirit, who walk in his Spirit. That's what defines them. And they are a group of people that are globally dispersed, but in every place there's some of them, wherever the gospel's been preached, and some of them are in this church, some in that church, some in that church, and some are in many other churches.

And I'm not saying that all these people, all these churches need to come together and be one big church. We're talking here about spiritual unity, and spiritual unity is expressed by one thing primarily, and that is love. That's what Jesus said, it's how all men will know you're my disciples if you love one another.

And love is spiritual. Love is self-sacrificial. Love is something where you care more about the well-being of the other person than yourself.

That you're more pleased to make another person happy than that someone should make you happy. You're more pleased that someone else would be blessed than that you would be blessed. That's what love is.

It's spiritual. It's the mark of true Christianity, Jesus said. Now, true Christians are supposed to love everybody, but especially their brothers and sisters.

And the problem here is that Christians who are in fact true Christians in many cases

don't love their brothers and sisters of another viewpoint without some kind of qualification. Because that person doesn't have the same theological beliefs either. That person is associated with a denomination different than the group I go to.

Or that person is, God forbid, has different skin color, or something like that. They're different than me in some way that matters to me. And we have to understand that whatever matters to you in terms of what would make someone different than you doesn't matter to God.

If that person is a Christian. Obviously if they're not a Christian, the difference between you and them matters to God and should matter to you. It's a huge difference, being a Christian or not.

But those who have Christ are supposed to love one another. And what's that look like? It looks like helping each other out. Physically, financially, with encouragement, emotionally.

Praying for each other. Serving each other. And this can be done without reference to whatever church you're going to.

Because most of Christian life is not happening in a church meeting anyway. At least it's not supposed to be. Christianity is a community of Christ.

And a community interacts with certain kind of relationships in real life. And once in a while they get together in a building and sing some songs and listen to a lecture together or something. They do something in a building sometimes together.

That's the exception. In the early church, the Christians, they did meet together in meetings, but every day. They continued daily in the Apostles' teaching and in breaking bread and fellowship and prayer.

But more than that, they had a lifestyle that was all the time. No one considered that the things he owned was his own. Those who had extra stuff, sold it and brought it to give to the poor.

And there was none among them that had any need. This is real life commitment. This is real life love.

This is not getting together once a week and saying, I love you. Do you love me? Let's give each other a hug during the meeting. Greet time.

Good. I feel so loved now. Let's go home and do something without each other.

Real Christianity takes place mostly outside of the church meeting. Not that meetings are unimportant. They just aren't what you're doing most of the time.

And you're supposed to be a Christian 24-7. So learning to be unified with other brothers has to do with what kind of commitment I have to somebody in real life. If I hear of somebody who has a need that I can actually meet, and they go to a different church than I do, what does it matter to me what church they go to? Do they love the Lord? If I've got the way to help them out, I should be helping them out.

Of course, there's limits to how much you can help people out in terms of your time and your money, because you have limits on your time and your money. But the point is, when you have the opportunity to help somebody who's in need, it should not matter to you what church they go to. It should be that you say, that's my brother, that's my sister, if it's a Christian.

Unity means I don't see them through the glasses of, oh, they're a Presbyterian, or they're a Methodist, or they're a Pentecostal, or they're a Baptist, or they're Catholic, or they're Protestant, or whatever. You don't look at them through those lenses. Now, sure, when you're in fellowship with them, there's nothing wrong with discussing differences of opinion.

I'm not talking about ignoring the fact that people see things differently. I'm all about truth. I'm all about arguing for the truth.

I think if somebody and I are in fellowship together and we disagree, I think we should have an argument. But it shouldn't be an argument about defeating the other person. It should be a discussion where we hope that the truth comes out.

If you disagree with me, that means either you're right or I'm right, or we're both wrong. We can both be wrong, but we can't both be right if we disagree, right? So there's three possibilities. You're right and I'm wrong, or I'm right and you're wrong, or we're both wrong and someone else is right.

But all we know is we both think we're right, so what can we do? We can get together, we can accept each other, we can speak the truth in love. You can say, why do you see it the way you do? And you tell me. And then you say, okay, why do you see it the way I don't see it? I'll tell you.

And after the end, it's over, you might say, well, now I see it your way. Or we might say, neither of us see it any differently than when we showed up. But that's okay.

We communicated. We talked about the things of God. We're thinking now.

For the first time in decades, we've started thinking again. We're starting to think about things that challenge our thinking. We want to know if we're right or wrong.

But we don't want to know so that we can exclude those who aren't right. It's by staying in fellowship with each other, despite our differences, that there's the possibility that we

can all grow. Because you might change my mind, I might change your mind, or we might both change our minds to believe something neither of us saw before.

Because we're opening our Bibles together. We're comparing what the Bible says with each other. What do you see? Here's what I think I see.

What do you think you see? And this communication in unity, that is spiritual unity, allows for us to progress toward theological unity someday. Remember Paul said in Ephesians 4, verse 3, keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. And then verse 13, until we all come in the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God to a mature man.

Church has to grow up into maturity and it's going to be measured in unity. But he says, you don't have unity of faith at this point. Because you believe one thing and I believe something else on some issues.

That's okay. He says, eventually we'll come to the unity of faith. Until then, keep the unity of the Spirit.

You've got that because you all have the same Holy Spirit. You can't not have unity of the Spirit. You can just pretend like you don't have it.

You can just ignore it. You can just suppress it and say, I don't like that person enough to acknowledge that I'm in the same family as that person. But see, Paul says, no, you need to affirm and maintain and keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace until we come into the unity of the faith.

But that will only happen. The second will only happen if we do the first. If I say, well, okay, I don't, you're a Calvinist? I'm not a Calvinist.

So I think you should go over to that Calvinist church over there and I'll go over to this non-Calvinist church here. Then we'll be comfortable. Because you won't be challenging me and I won't be challenging you.

And neither of us will ever learn a thing. But we'll be happy and comfortable. Learning usually stretches your comfort zones a little bit.

And where we need to be stretched is where we fellowship with people who don't have an ax to grind. They just see it differently than we do. We need to listen to them.

Maybe they know something we don't know. Maybe they don't. But if they don't, it's not threatening to hear them, is it? We need to instead say, you go with people you believe and I'll go with people I believe.

There was once a group of people in the church I was attending who saw some issues differently than I do. They said, why don't you just go to a church that agrees with you?

They actually asked that. Why don't you go to this church over here? Because they think the way you do.

And I thought, it never occurred to me to go to a church that thinks the way I do. I don't know if I could stand them. Why should I go to a church that thinks the way I do? Then I won't learn anything and they won't learn anything.

It doesn't make sense. Unless we're going to define unity in terms of we agree about this, this, and this, and this. That's not what unity is based on.

Unity is based on Christ. I'm a follower of Christ. You're a follower of Christ.

Deal with it. We're brothers. We're going to have to get along.

And we can learn something together. We can help each other. We can grow up into him.

As we speak the truth in love, Paul says in Ephesians 4.15, Speaking the truth in love, we may grow up into him in all things who is the head. Christ. Now, back side of your page.

What are the strategies? If the enemy is trying to prevent unity, trying to resist unity, and we're trying to see unity of the proper kind come about. Not World Council of Churches kind of unity. We're not talking about this institutional thing.

We're talking about just brotherly and sisterly true spiritual unity. In the family of God. What do we need to do? There are several strategies that I've put on this page.

More could be identified. These are the major ones, I think, in Scripture. The first strategy for unity is to humble yourself.

It can be done. Many people pray, and I used to pray, God, humble me. Make me humble.

Then I found that the Bible doesn't really encourage you to pray that God will humble you. If God humbles you, it's not a good thing. It's that he found you unwilling to humble yourself, and he had to knock you down hard.

When God humbles someone, it's more like humiliates. God humbles proud people. But it's not a pretty thing.

Everywhere in Scripture, the Bible says, humble yourself. Humble yourself. What does humble mean? Humble means to be made low.

Make yourself lower. It's really quite easy. For example, Jesus said, when you go to a feast, instead of taking the prestigious seats, take the lowest, least prestigious seats.

You can do that. That's not hard. It's hard on your ego, but it's not hard to do.

Jesus said, if you take one of the highest seats, there were seats of honor in the Jewish society at a feast. If you take one of the high seats yourself, the host who invited you might have to come and say, oh, I'm so sorry, someone more honorable than you has come. They're getting that seat.

You move down to a lesser seat. And Jesus said, then you'll have to, with shame, lower yourself in front of everybody. He says, instead, take the lowest seat when you show up.

And then your host will say, oh, sir, come up higher. We've got a better seat for you. Then he says, you'll have praise in front of people.

Of course, Jesus is not saying you should be seeking praise. He's just making it very clear, if you humble yourself, you'll be exalted. If you exalt yourself, it'll be the other way.

But with reference to our main concern here, strategies for unity, humility is a key strategy for two reasons. For one thing, it's a prerequisite for resisting Satan. And since Satan is the one we're fighting against here, and he's the one trying to overthrow us, our unity, we need to be prepared to confront him.

And humility is absolutely necessary, as the Bible will tell us, as a prerequisite to confronting Satan and resisting him. Look at James 4. Verses 6 and 7, and then we're going to look at verse 10 also. James 4.6 says, but he gives more grace.

Therefore, he says, God resists the proud. Hey, if you're proud, you don't even need the devil to resist you. God will resist you.

You're not going to beat the devil when you've got a bigger enemy to fight, God. He's going to be the one resisting you if you're proud. God resists the proud, but he gives grace to the humble.

Therefore, submit to God, resist the devil, and he will flee from you. In verse 10, humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he will lift you up. Again, don't pray that God will humble you, just humble yourself.

Just adopt a more humble mindset. Don't think so highly of yourself. But to humble yourself in the sight of the Lord is part of this whole thing about submitting to God, not having God resist you because you're proud, and being able to resist the devil.

That resistance of the devil, and he'll flee from you, is in the context of you having all these attitudes that James is advocating, which includes humbling yourself. Peter says almost the same thing verbatim in 1 Peter 5. Verse 5 and 6, 1 Peter 5, verse 5 and 6, Peter says, likewise you younger people, submit yourselves to your elders. Yes, all of you be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility.

For God resists the proud, and gives grace to the humble. Both James and Peter quote this verse. It's from Proverbs.

God resists the proud and gives grace to the humble. They're both quoting from Proverbs. But it must be an important proverb because Peter and James both quote it.

And Peter says in verse 6, Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time, casting all your cares upon him for he cares for you. Be sober, be vigilant, because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Resist him, steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world.

Now, both James and Peter quote this verse about God resists the proud, gives grace to the humble, and then tell us to resist the devil. And to humble ourselves. Both of them say, humble yourself in the sight of the Lord.

And both of them in the same context say, resist the devil. James says, resist the devil and he'll flee from you. Peter says, the devil's like a roaring lion, you need to resist him, steadfast in the faith.

Obviously, humbling yourself comes first. Resisting the devil comes secondly. So, if we're in a warfare with the devil, we need to humble ourselves anyway.

We need to be humble. But also, humility is a precondition for unity. And that's what we're particularly seeking as our objective, is unity.

So, humility is necessary as a strategy against the enemy in order to obtain unity. Proverbs 13.10. This reads a little differently in the King James than in other versions. But it can go either way in the Hebrew, and both of them make sense.

The King James says, only by pride comes contention. Think about that. Only by pride comes contention.

The other versions say, by pride comes only contention. The question is where the only belongs. Is it that pride is the only source of contention? Or is it that contention is the only result you can expect from pride? In any case, the proverb is saying that pride creates contention.

Now, what is contention? That's fighting. That's strife. That's discord.

That's disunity. Contention. Now, pride is the cause of contention.

And you will see this, I believe. I think the King James rendering is good. Though most translations go against it.

I said it doesn't really matter that much. But the way it says it in the King James is, only

by pride comes contention. That means contention doesn't come any other way but by pride.

And that means wherever there's dishunity and contention, someone's proud. If both parties would humble themselves, there'd be no contention. Sometimes it only takes one to humble himself to end the striving.

Just humbling yourself. And saying, okay, you know, it's not that important that I'm the right one. It's not so important that I win the argument.

It's not so important that you agree with me. God never said you had to agree with me, so I can't require you to agree with me. Why don't we just get along and see how we can edify one another.

Humbling yourself means you're not giving yourself credit for being the most important thing. You see, all people who divide from other Christians do so because those Christians don't agree with them, themselves. It's all about self.

When you think about it. Now, they wouldn't say that. They would say, no, it's that they don't agree with the Bible.

That's my problem with them. They don't agree with the Bible, what it says. Well, who says they don't agree with the Bible? I say so.

It's what I see the Bible saying. Well, don't they read the Bible too? Yeah, but they see it differently. They see something else.

So they have to agree with what you think the Bible says. And they're not allowed to think what they think the Bible says. Suddenly, instead of giving them the liberty to follow the Scripture according to their conscience, they suddenly have to agree with your opinion about the Bible? Why? Who authorized that? Who gave that command? That someone has to agree with your opinion about it? If you humble yourself, say, wait a minute, why should anyone have to agree with me? I mean, I know why I agree with me.

I know why I think what I think. I've done my study. I have good reasons.

I know what I think and I know why. But that person doesn't know all the things that I've gone through and all the reasoning I've done and all the things that have influenced me. And they have their own studies that they've done and their own influences they're dealing with.

I have to credit them as being as important as I am. Dishunity comes up because of me thinking I'm right and the reason you don't agree with me is because there's something wrong with you because you agree with me. If I just humble myself and say, well, you know, why should anyone have to agree with me anyway? Suddenly, I'm at peace.

When you try to make everyone agree with you and they're not cooperating, then you're in strife. When you humble yourself and say, you know, they're as good a person as I am. They might even be a smarter person than I am.

They might even be more spiritual than I am. If I knew all the facts, they might pray more than I do. They might study harder than I do.

I don't know. All I'm judging by is the fact that they don't agree with me. But I don't know why they don't agree with me until I talk to them.

All I can say is, they don't have to agree with me. I'm not the most important thing on the planet. I'm not the standard by which everyone measures themselves and has to measure themselves and which God's going to measure people by.

We just, by nature, think that we are. That's carnality. That's our sinful nature.

If we humble ourselves, suddenly we find, you know, it doesn't bother me so much if they don't agree with me. Even when someone's done something offensive to me. You can get over it if you humble yourself.

Because the reason you get so offended is because you think they should have treated me better than that. I deserve better than that. I am a better person than to be treated that way.

You know, I got over that a long time ago when I just had to ask myself, what really do I deserve? Well, I deserve to go to hell, I suppose. Well, I'm not going there. Well, thank God, I'm not going there.

I guess nothing anyone can do to me can be any worse than what I deserve. Because I deserve worse than what I'm getting. I'm doing better than I deserve.

And I'll always have it better than I'll ever deserve. So, why should I get all ruffled? If I think I'm important, if I think I deserve better, I'm just thinking of myself too much. I'm putting myself at the center.

I need to lower myself in my own estimation. Romans 12 is the classic chapter in the Bible on relationships. On living peaceably with other people.

If you read the whole chapter, it's the relationship chapter. It's about living in love, living in unity, living as a Christian in relationship with other Christians. That's what the whole chapter is about.

And it starts out, of course, it starts out as saying, you know, present your bodies as a living sacrifice and be transformed by the renewal of your mind. But then, when he starts talking about the relationships, he starts this way in verse 3. For I say through the grace given me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he

ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith. Now, whatever I believe is a measure of faith that God has dealt to me.

Someone else believes different things. Apparently God hasn't shown them the same things he showed me. Or, worse to consider, maybe he hasn't shown me what he's shown them.

In any case, we don't have the unity of the faith. Each one has his own set of understanding. They're at a certain level.

Of course, we're all supposed to grow. We're all supposed to learn more. But at any given moment, everyone's at the stage they're at.

And they have that level. God has given them a certain measure of faith. And he says, Don't think more highly of yourself than you ought to think, but think soberly.

I like that juxtaposition. If you think highly of yourself, you're not sober. Don't think more highly of yourself than you ought to think, but think soberly instead.

Don't be so out of touch with reality. A drunk person's losing his grip on reality to the degree that he's under the influence. But a sober person, he can see things as they are.

He can function in real life because he's in touch with reality in a way that he loses touch when he's drugged up in some way. So think soberly. Be in touch with reality.

You're not that hot. You're not so wonderful. None of us are.

Verse 10, Romans 12.10 Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love in honor giving preference to one another. Honor the other person more than you honor yourself. If you ever get offended because your rights have been stepped on, it means that somebody has done something or taken something or taken a privilege from themselves that you thought it's in conflict with your desires and your privileges and your rights and so forth.

Well, why not honor them above yourself? Why not say, you know, I think they should have that privilege instead of me? That's humbling yourself. In honor, I want to prefer him over me. That's humbling yourself.

Flip in the opening verses of chapter 2. Paul says, Therefore, if there be any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. This is talking about unity, right? Be like-minded, love one another, have the same love to each other, be of one accord, one mind. This is talking about unity.

The next verse, Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind. That's humility. Let each esteem others better than himself.

Okay, there's a conflict here. Between me and you. And the problem is, we're looking at each other face to face.

And I'm saying, Get out of my way. I'm going through. I'm at your level.

We're trying to travel the same level. Going opposite directions. We don't agree.

What can I do? Easy, I'll take a lower level. I'll go on the lower road. As long as I'm not pressing my prerogatives and rights in your face, I can say, Well, listen, I can humble myself.

I can consider you higher than me. That's okay. That's what humility is.

He says, In lowliness of mind, let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. Once again, this is like what he said in Romans 12.10. In honor, preferring one another.

Consider yourself lower than the other. This is biblical instruction. This is the word of God commanding us to walk in humility because humility is a strategy for unity.

Ephesians 4 is another chapter that's devoted, at least the first part, is very much devoted to the subject of unity. That's the chapter where early on Paul says, Keep the unity of the Spirit and the bond of peace. Later in the chapter he says, Until we all come in the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God to a perfect man.

This is where Paul, this chapter is about unity. Notice how he begins the chapter in Ephesians 4. I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, which means patience, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit and the bond of peace. How can I endeavor to keep the unity of the Spirit and the bond of peace? One of the things I have to do is to walk in all lowliness.

I have to lower myself. If someone does something that's offensive to me, it's really quite reasonable for me to say, Well, really, why should I expect any better treatment than that? Now, honestly, the person who treats me badly, they're going to have to answer to God for that, and they may indeed be very much in the wrong. God may have to deal with them about that.

But that's not my problem. They aren't my problem. I'm my problem.

My pride is my problem. If somebody does something that offends me, I'm too offendable. And because it goes against my ego, my pride, that's what makes me divide.

That's what causes rifts. That's what causes discord among brethren. And so I can beat it.

I can win that one. All I have to do is just humble myself more. You know, I have found that there's almost, there's almost no problem.

There's almost no aggravation that I've ever had in life with another person that could not be remedied very simply by simply me humbling myself more. But see, the problem is our resistance against humbling ourselves is because we're actually waiting for them to humble themselves. You ever had an argument with your spouse? Probably not.

I haven't either. But there are people who argue with their spouse. You probably don't believe this, but there are people who actually have strife in their home, in their marriage.

You know, Christians all are told that don't go to bed angry, don't let the sun go down on your wrath. And I remember I was in a previous marriage once where actually there were a few arguments. And I remember thinking there's strife in this situation and it's getting late, we're going to have to go to bed.

And I don't want to let the sun go down on my wrath. And I remember thinking, well, I hope she repents soon. She never did.

I don't even think she ever did it once. I don't think she ever admitted she was wrong once. I had to do it.

And I was the one who was right. At least I thought I was. And I remember many a time when we had some kind of disagreement that was not pleasant over something.

I knew I was right. And it was obvious that she was wrong. But she thought it was more obvious that I was wrong.

So somebody had to humble themselves and she wasn't going to do it. And I had to do it. There were many times I had to swallow my pride and say I'm so sorry about that argument.

Forgive me for arguing with you. And it was hard. It was hard to get me to do it.

It was hard for me to make myself do it. Because I'm so proud. But once it was done, it was all cool.

It was all good. Because I was waiting for her to humble herself and she was waiting for me to do it. And men, if your wife is waiting for you to humble yourself, do it as quickly as you can.

If you know it's good for you. And you wives, if you've got a stubborn husband, you humble yourself first. It's amazing how much you can control the unity situation by simply humbling yourself, no matter which side you're on.

And that's true in conflicts with people at work, people at church, whatever. If you humble yourself, there's almost nothing the devil can do. You just pull the rug out from what the devil's trying to do to bring division and strife.

Humility. Humble yourself. That's the first strategy.

Let's look at this next one. Once you've got that one down. Have you learned how to humble yourself yet? We might need a few months to work on that one alone.

But we're going to have to leave that to God and you to work that one out. The next thing that's a strategy for unity is to put the family, that is the family of God, first before other personal concerns or differences or whatever. That is, families sometimes do disagree among themselves.

But they stay family. I mean, unless they're really jerks. And there are probably people who are such jerks that they won't even talk.

I know there are. There are people who won't talk to their brothers or their sisters. I know of some cases like that.

Adult people who won't speak to their siblings. Or won't speak to their parents. Or the parents are so immature they won't speak to their kids.

It's hard to imagine. It's just that bad in some cases. But most people, most normal people, can absorb some differences of opinion and even some minor offenses between family members and kind of just go on with it.

Still get together for Thanksgiving. Still get together for Christmas. Still be civil to each other.

Still say, well, you know, we're family. We're not going to make this kind of a thing break us into pieces here. Now, I'm saying what I think is supposed to be true and what used to be true.

Actually, the truth is there are so many divorces now I'm not sure that what I'm saying is true anymore in families, per se. Because there are people who divorce over petty things that no one should even consider even keeping a grudge about. Much less divorce.

So what I'm saying may not be as true in our modern society as it used to be, but it was certainly true in biblical times and should be true at all times. In Genesis 13, there was a problem in the family of Abraham. His nephew Lot was a shepherd like he was.

They both had herds. And they were both prospering. The problem was they lived together and there weren't enough pastures for all their sheep.

So there was striving between the shepherds that were working for Lot and the

shepherds that were working for Abraham. And Abraham saw this going on and Abraham called Lot to himself and in verse 8 in Genesis 13, Abraham said to Lot, Please let there be no strife between you and me and between my herdsmen and your herdsmen, for we are brothers. Now they weren't actual siblings.

Abraham was his uncle. But brothers was in the larger sense of family. We're family.

Now if you weren't family and you or your herdsmen were fighting with my herdsmen, I might act differently. But we are family and that matters more than who gets the best pasture land. And you know what Abraham did? Abraham said, okay, look, we'll draw an imaginary line in front of us here.

There's the left and there's the right. You take whichever one you want. I'll take whatever's left.

You take your herds that way and I'll take my herds the other way because I'm going to give you the first choice at the best pasture land. And lo and behold, Lot took it. Lot took the best pasture land at the time.

It was lush like the garden of God over that way. That's over the way where Sodom and Gomorrah were. That place that was lush like the garden of God is like a nuclear crater today.

I mean it's the lowest spot on the planet and it's barren. It's just barren because God wiped it out. Not at that moment, later.

But Lot was still living to see it happen. Lot made the selfish choice, but Abraham made the unselfish choice. He said, listen, we're brothers.

We're family here. I'm not going to allow economics. I'm not going to let money.

I'm not going to let our business differences break up the family. So I'm going to just let you have whatever you want. I'll just take what's left over.

That's putting family concerns, family unity, first. Now, by the way, there's an interesting thing in the context of this because it says in the previous verse, well, in verse 7, yeah, verse 7, just the previous verse, it says, and there was strife between the herdsmen of Abraham's livestock and the herdsmen of Lot's livestock and the Canaanites and the Perizzites then dwelt in the land. Now, in other words, there's this strife in the family and there's this other reality out there that the strife is not taken into consideration.

The enemy's nearby. The Canaanites are there. They'd love to see our family destroyed and driven out of the land here.

They are hostile toward us. We're in hostile territory and we're fighting among ourselves? You can see how the devil did this to the Jews when they were besieged in

Jerusalem in AD 70 that Josephus tells about it, how the Romans had besieged the whole city and all the Jews that were surviving inside the city were protected by the walls of the city and they had food in there. They could last out a long siege.

Problem is, they fought each other for no reason. They divided inside the city. They divided into three warring camps and they killed each other off and destroyed the food supplies that one group had.

They burned them up and so forth and they could have survived if they'd been unified and facing the Romans on the outside of the wall, but instead they just killed each other off just like God had the Midianites do in the days of Gideon. The devil I think was a demonic invasion that was unleashed on them and they just went crazy and they killed each other off. Christians do that figuratively sometimes and they don't notice that we're hurting our family when the enemy is around.

We're in hostile territory. The world is a hostile place to Christianity. We don't have the luxury of fighting among ourselves.

We need to stand for the family of God. We need to stand for God's interest, which is His family. In Galatians chapter 6 and verse 10, Paul said as you have opportunity, do good to all people, especially those who are of the household of faith, especially the Christians, especially your family, the household of God.

You should be good to everybody. You should do good to everybody. You see a poor person, you should be concerned to help them.

It doesn't matter if he's a Christian or not, but make sure your priority is to help the brothers. It says in Proverbs a brother is born for adversity, which means God gives you brothers so that when you're in adversity, you'll have them to stand with you. The family, when they feel like they're family, when they know they're family, they realize that God has put brothers in your life for the day of adversity to help you, to stand with you.

God gives people families so that they won't be alone against the world. God has given us a Christian family, the body of Christ, the brothers and sisters, because we're in a hostile world and the Canaanite and the Parasite are in the land, and so are we. And we can't have fighting in the family.

We've got to put the interests of the family of God first. Do good to everyone, yes, but especially those of the household of God. They're your first priority.

Put the family first. Now, in Matthew 25, we see Jesus' total commitment to this concept. In Matthew 25, verse 40, you all know this verse, but you might not have thought of it in terms of the point we're making here.

This is the story of the sheep and the goats, and everyone can quote this verse, I'm sure.

Jesus said, The king will answer and say to them, Assuredly, I say to you, in as much as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me. You do it to my brother.

You've done that to me. Now, that's Jesus talking. You do something to my brother, you've done that to me, because he's my brother.

And I stand with my brother. In fact, I feel his pain. If you insult my brother, you've insulted me, because he's my brother.

We're family. Jesus is saying, My brother was hungry, and you didn't feed him? My brother's naked, and you didn't clothe him? My brother was sick, and you didn't visit him? Well, then you didn't do that to me either. And I'm going to take that personally.

In other words, Jesus says, My family is me. The interests of my brothers is my interests. Now, we're the brothers and sisters of Jesus.

How we treat each other, he takes it as treating him, because it's family. You need to understand that God has in this world a family. And he cherishes that family, and he makes a huge distinction between that family and everybody else.

Remember when Israel was in Egypt, and God was sending the plagues? God told Moses, I'm going to send darkness on the Egyptians, but there won't be any darkness in the houses of the Israelites, because I want to show that the Lord makes a distinction between Israel and the Egyptians. God makes a distinction between his family and the devil's family. And he wants us to have that commitment and that loyalty to the family, because he's got it, and frankly, he counts it as a personal slight, anything that is done against his people.

It says in the Old Testament, in Zechariah, God says, Whoever touches you, he's speaking to Israel in that case, whoever touches you touches the apple of my eye. What's that mean? Now, we use the term apple of my eye sort of in poetry and song to speak of someone that we're in love with, we have fondness for, whatever, but actually the apple of the eye is a Hebrew idiom. The apple of the eye is what they called the pupil.

They called the pupil the apple of the eye. Jesus said, if you touch one of my people, you've poked me in the eye. You've touched the apple of my eye.

That's a sensitive spot. You might get a reaction out of me for that. Better be careful what you do to my people.

You touch them, you're poking me in the eye, and I don't take kindly to that. When you do something to God's people, you're doing it to him, and he stands for them. Now, you are one of his people, of course, but if you're the one who's disloyal to the family, if

you're the one who is withholding love and withholding fellowship from another member of the family, you're the one that God's got the issues with in that situation.

And you need to make sure you're keeping God's priorities your priorities. Now, who's the family? Now, this is a big issue, because last time I taught on Strategies for Unity, actually, I taught on it in Santa Cruz, just the first lecture of this series, just last weekend. And after, there's a guy, he's of a particular denomination that I know him.

He calls my show a lot. He's got a big issue about Sabbath. And I know, because he's called me a lot and talked about it, and keeping the Law of Moses and things like that.

And so he came up to me after the lecture and said, how do we know who we can fellowship with? I knew what he was thinking. He's thinking he can fellowship with people who keep the Saturday and Sabbath, but he's not so sure about those other people out there who don't, the other Christians. And almost every time I've talked about this subject, someone comes up and says, but you can't expect us to fellowship with the Catholics, because the Catholics, you know, the Catholics, they worship idols, you know? They pray to Mary.

Now by the way, I don't know if there's any Catholics in here, but some of my dear friends attend the Catholic Church. I disagree with their Catholic doctrine. Frankly, I think they do too, in some points.

But the thing is here, there are Christians who go to the Catholic Church. There are even Christians who believe those Catholic doctrines. You know, I saw a movie some years ago, I loved it.

It's about Mother Teresa's documentary. There's been many documentaries made about her, but one of them is really excellent. Maybe the others are too, I don't know.

But this one, you just love Mother Teresa when you watch her activities and so forth. But then you hear her talk about she's going to pray to the Holy Mother to send, you know, there's the bombing of Lebanon going on in 1982 or whenever it was, and there are some orphans in there she wanted to get out, and the authorities were saying, you can't go in there, it's a war zone, it's a hot war going on. She says, well, I'll just pray to the Holy Mother that she'll send peace so I can go in there.

And the next day there's a ceasefire. And I think, oh, that ruins an awful lot for me, you know? She's so cool, she's so good, she's so commendable, and she's praying to the Holy Mother? Well, that's all she knew. She loved Jesus, that's a fact.

You know, we've got to really realize that if someone loves Jesus, they're a brother or a sister. But what if they pray to Mary? Well, I think they're wrong. I wonder how many things I do wrong.

I'll find out someday. When I see God, or maybe even before that if I hang out with enough people who disagree with me, they'll show me I'm wrong about something. You never know.

But the fact is we find that it's hard to call certain people brothers and sisters because there's certain issues that we just, it's just an issue with us. I've taken a stand for this issue as a Christian, and that person doesn't stand on the right side of that issue with me. Is that really a brother or a sister? Do I really have to consider them family? Well, what is the family? Who's in the family? What defines who's in the family? Now God's going to have to be the one who defines that.

And let's look at some scriptures together and see if we can get any ideas who God considers in the family. Because they're the ones that we have to be in unity with. You don't have to be in unity with the devil's family, but you do have to be in unity with God's family and you need to make that a priority in your life.

You don't have to agree with everyone in God's family, but you have to be in unity with them at a different level, in the heart level of love. In Matthew 12, verse 48, and I don't think there's any verse I can show you that you don't already know, but these are answering the questions we're raising here. Verse 48, Jesus said to the one who told him that his mother and brothers were waiting to see him.

He said, Who is my mother? Who are my brothers? Hey, that's just the question we're asking, isn't it? Who's the family? Who's in the family? Who am I supposed to love as the family of God? Jesus asked that very question. Who is my mother and my brother anyway? Then he stretched out his hand toward his disciples and said, Here are my mother and my brothers, for whoever does the will of my Father in Heaven is my brother and sister and mother. Whoever does the will of... Whoever does? I thought they had to believe like I do.

No, whoever does the will of God. Well, what is the will of God? Well, I was naked and you clothed me. I was hungry and you fed me.

There's people who love God's people. People who do it because they love Christ. People who actually are living the Christian life regardless of how many doctrines they may be mistaken about.

You know there's 44,000 denominations. That means there's 44,000 ways to be wrong. Actually, there's 44,999 ways to be wrong.

Someone's probably right. But everyone else has got to be wrong about something. Now, what do we have to agree about? We have to agree about doing the will of God.

Whoever does the will of my Father, that's my mother, my brother, my sister. You better treat them like that, Jesus says. That last part I added, but he said that elsewhere.

He identifies for us who the family of God is and it's not based on a strict theological agreement on a lot of things. Look at chapter 23. Matthew 23 and verse 8. Jesus said, But you do not be called rabbi, for one is your teacher, the Christ, and you are all brothers.

Who are all brothers? Those who have the teacher. Those who have one teacher, Christ. Everyone who is a disciple of Jesus, that means they're learning from Jesus.

Jesus, remember, said in another place in Matthew 11, If a person has taken Christ's yoke upon them, that means they have submitted to his lordship. He's the master. They're the servant.

That's what wearing a yoke means. I have come under Christ's leadership. I have come under his yoke.

And I am learning from him. He's my teacher. I and everybody else who's done the same thing, we're all brethren.

You have one teacher, Christ, and you're all brethren, all of you who have that one teacher. Now you might say, This person can't have one teacher, Christ, because they don't see things the way I do. And God showed me that I'm right.

So they're wrong. They must not have Jesus as their teacher. Maybe that's not been in the curriculum for them yet.

There's a lot of things that haven't been on your curriculum yet. There's a lot of things you don't know yet. God knows how many things there are you need to learn.

And he knows which ones he wanted to get to first in your life. He's gotten to other things first in other people's lives. And some of the things you've learned, they haven't learned yet.

Some things they've already learned, you haven't learned yet. None of us has learned everything yet. The question is, am I learning? Not have I learned, but am I learning? Am I following Jesus? Am I saying, Lord, whatever you say, speak, Lord, your servant hears.

Is that where my heart's at? Then I'm a brother of yours, if that's where your heart's at. In fact, it is entirely a matter of where the heart's at. As you can see in 2 Timothy 2.22. 2 Timothy 2.22. Paul said, Flee also youthful lusts, but pursue righteousness, faith, love, peace, with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart.

You're supposed to be pursuing the Christian goals with the others who are pursuing them. Who are they? The ones who are calling on the Lord out of a pure heart. How in the world do I know if someone has a pure heart or not? Well, I guess I could need to give them the benefit of the doubt if I don't know otherwise.

If they're calling on the Lord, I have no right to judge that they don't have a pure heart unless there's some evidence. There can be evidence of it sometimes. Sometimes people can be faking, and sometimes it comes out that they are.

But really, there's an awful lot of people that I don't know to have any impure motives. I know they don't have the right doctrines on some issues. At least, if I'm the standard of what right doctrine is, they don't.

But, so what? The question is, do they love the Lord with their heart? Are they calling on the Lord with their heart? Are they submitted to Christ? Is He their Lord? Are they seeking to do the will of God? Do they have the same teacher I have? The same rabbi? Christ? Is their heart into discipleship? That makes up for a lot of failures in the head. Lots of things people don't understand can be covered by what's in the heart. Love covers a multitude of sins.

And if someone loves the Lord with a pure heart, I've got a feeling I'm supposed to do what Paul said and pursue righteousness and all those things with them. They're the brothers. They're the family I'm supposed to be doing this with.

In Romans 14, and we'll just say a couple more verses and then we're going to quit here. In Romans 14, verses 1 through 8, this is about handling differences of opinion in the family. And Paul says, Receive one who is weak in the faith, but not to disputes over doubtful things.

For one believes he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats only vegetables. Let not him who eats despise who does not eat. Let not him who does not eat judge him who eats, for God has received him.

Who are you to judge another's servant? He's not your servant. To his own master he stands or falls. Indeed, he will be made to stand, for God is able to make him stand.

Now we're going to read further. Let me just comment here. This is talking about where Christians have actually different convictions.

Some Christians actually to this day still think you should keep a kosher diet. There are actually some Christians who think it's wrong to eat meat. Now I think they don't have a scripture at all in their favor, but there are some of those convictions.

I've met them. They think Jesus wouldn't eat meat. They haven't read the scripture.

He ate fish and he ate lamb at Passover. He did eat meat, but they're ignorant of that fact. People can be ignorant about some things and still be Christians.

There are Christians who think they should only eat vegetables or they should only eat kosher diet or whatever. And there's other Christians, like myself, who think you can eat

just about anything you want in terms of conscience. Some things I wouldn't eat because I wouldn't like them or I wouldn't think they're healthy, but nonetheless, my conscience would not condemn me eating anything.

Now I'm different. I have convictions differently than those persons. Can we live together? Can we praise God together? Can I consider them my brothers so that I need to help them out when they're in distress? And consider I'm keeping it in the family that way? My brother Paul says, listen, these people are all Christians we're talking about here.

They have different convictions. Paul could have said, now I'll tell you who's right about this. Let's bring all of you over to my way of seeing it.

I think it's okay to eat everything, I think Paul would have said. But he doesn't solve the disputed question. He could have with a single sentence.

He doesn't bother, he just says, listen, why don't you just stop judging each other? Stop despising each other. That person who doesn't do it the way you do, he's not your servant. He's God's servant.

He's Christ's servant. He's going to answer to his master. He doesn't answer to you.

Now it's interesting because Paul assumed that obviously one of those two convictions isn't right because they're opposite convictions. Someone was right and I think I know who was right, but Paul didn't say who was right. It wasn't his desire to settle that particular difference.

It was his desire to address the heart of each person on both sides of the aisle. Say, listen, here's a test case to see if you can act like Christians. Now this was a small matter.

It would have been so easy for Paul to settle it, but I think he realized there would be more and more and more things people differ about. Let's see if they can settle this one the right way without having to come to an immediate agreement about who's right and who's wrong. Can you not judge? Can you not despise? Can you recognize that that person who is wrong as far as you're concerned and one side certainly is wrong, they are nonetheless servants of Christ, not you.

That is, they're not your servants and therefore Christ can take care of his own household. Christ can take care of his own servants. Love each other and let Christ do the judging on these matters.

And then he goes on in verse 5. One person esteems one day above another. Another esteems every day alike. Again, the Sabbath issue.

Some people think you should keep Sabbath. Some say it's not necessary in the new covenant. I'm in the second group.

I meet a lot of people who are in the first group. Paul says, let everyone be fully convinced in his own mind. Again, Paul could have said, this side is right, this side is wrong.

And I believe Paul would have had no trouble identifying which side he was on. And it would have been so easy for him to just kind of clear that up. And so he says, I see this as an opportunity for you guys to grow up.

I could just tell you whether you should keep one day or not. And by not doing so, he kind of answered that question. Because if he thought everyone should keep a holy day, he'd be remiss in not telling them so.

Because, obviously, it's not wrong to keep every day alike, but unless if we're required to keep the Sabbath, Paul shouldn't have been tolerant of those who weren't. This was an issue that was, I think, Paul saw it the way that you can keep every day alike, but if someone wants to keep a Sabbath, let them. It doesn't hurt.

He says, let everyone be fully persuaded in his own mind. In other words, could you guys just learn to get it on? Could you just extend liberty of conscience to another person who doesn't see it the way you do? What's up with you? Why do they have to answer to you? Why do they have to act like, why do you think they should be like your servant? They're not your servant. They're God's servant.

Let him fix it. He can do that, and he will, eventually. Everyone's going to be right someday.

We'll all see it together the same way. He goes on quickly. He says, um, verse 6, He who observes the day observes it to the Lord.

He who does not observe the day, to the Lord he does not observe it. He who eats, eats to the Lord. He means the people who eat meat, as opposed to those who don't.

For he gives God thanks. He who does not eat it, to the Lord he does not eat it, and he gives God thanks. For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself, but if we live, we live to the Lord.

If we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we're the Lord's. The point he's making here is, you know the person who disagrees with you on this, they're doing it out of their conscience toward God.

Isn't that a good thing? Shouldn't they follow their conscience toward God? Now I think people can eat meat. I don't think you have to eat kosher. I don't think you have to eat

vegetarian.

But if you want to eat vegetarian because that's where your conscience is, I should congratulate you that you're following your conscience before God. Too few people do that. Too few people in the church do that.

There's a lot of Christians live with a defiled conscience and just kind of ignore it. They do things daily. They know are wrong.

They're not living there by their conscience. They're living against their conscience. If somebody says, I don't think I should eat meat, so I'm not going to, congratulations! I don't agree with you, but I appreciate somebody who's got convictions and lives by them before God.

You know, one of my favorite movies is Chariots of Fire and you know, I'm so inspired. There's times I get all choked up and tears come to my eyes in that movie sometimes. When I see Eric Liddell, you know, taking a stand for something I don't even agree with him about.

He thought he couldn't run on Sunday because he thought Sunday was the Sabbath and you can't run on the Sabbath. Well, first of all, Sunday is not the Sabbath and I don't think there's any problem with God if you run on the Sabbath. But he thought there was.

And he was willing to give up the gold medal that he knew he could win because the heats for the race he was trained for were on a Sunday and he wouldn't run on a Sunday because he had the conviction that's Sabbath and he wouldn't break the Sabbath. I just get so moved when I see people making sacrifices for their convictions, even if they disagree with their convictions. Another movie I really like is The Mission.

Ever see The Mission? Now that movie ends with two missionaries, Jesuits, who I disagree with theologically tremendously, but they are facing a situation of war and they're trying to decide should we fight to save these Indians in the jungle from the oppressors or should we just be pacifist about it? One priest takes one view, one takes the other view. Obviously one of them is wrong because one of them feels like she should be a total pacifist. The other feels I need to fight to defend these people.

They can't both be right, can they? Well, they can both be right in their heart. Someone's probably not seeing things as clearly as they need to, but both of them are following their convictions before God to their death. That always moves me.

I don't care whether I agree with their convictions or not. If someone wants to live by their conscience toward God, good on them. If their conscience is mistaken, we can work on that.

I'll be glad to talk to them about that. If they don't see it my way, that's okay, too. Maybe

we can fix it over time.

If not, they're in a good place. To their own Lord, to their own master, they stand or fall. He that eats the meat does it to the Lord and gives the Lord thanks.

He that doesn't eat it, to the Lord he doesn't do it. They're living their life to the Lord. Let them do what their conscience tells them to do.

That's true in unity, in the body of Christ. Your brothers and your sisters, the family, they don't all think exactly the same way. Get over the idea that they have to.

Follow after righteousness and peace and love with those who call God out of a pure heart. If someone's keeping their heart clean by following their conscience before God, and they have different convictions than you, what's that to you? Let God deal with his own servants. Congratulate them for being obedient to what they believe God wants them to do.

Unless, of course, what they're doing is a sin. That's another story, obviously. That's not what we're thinking of.

Acts 10.15 Peter was on the rooftop in Joppa, and God wanted him to go to Caesarea to evangelize a pagan, a Gentile. Now, there's a problem with that, because Peter was a Jew, and the Jews had long ingrained convictions that they should not go near a Gentile, they shouldn't ever go into the house of a Gentile. No devout Jew would go into the house of a Gentile.

Now, that's a bit of a problem, because this Gentile lived in a house, and God wanted Peter, a Jew, to go into that house and evangelize everyone who was there, which was quite a crowd that had gathered to hear what he had to say. Peter didn't know this yet, but we know it, because we read the first part of the chapter. We read about Cornelius, and God sends an angel to Cornelius, sends him some messengers to get this guy named Peter.

Meanwhile, over in Joppa, the scene shifts over. It's Joppa where Peter's praying on a housetop. He doesn't know what's coming.

He doesn't know he's going to be asked to go to the house of a Gentile. But if he were asked, he would not be open to it. He's a Jew, and he's a good Jew.

And he'll even object if Jesus tells him to violate it, as we'll see. And what happens here is, while Peter's on the rooftop, he has a vision. And in the vision, a bunch of unclean animals are lowered down on something that looks like a sheep, held by four corners down to him.

Now, these are animals a Jew would not eat, and Peter was a Jew. They were unclean.

And the Lord shows him this vision of unclean animals, and verse 13 says, A voice came to him and said, Arise, Peter, kill, and eat.

He says, Eat these animals. But these are animals that no Jew would ever want to eat. He's avoided this kind of food all his life, out of conviction.

But Peter said, Not so, Lord, for I've never eaten anything common or unclean. He's even arguing with Jesus about this. Jesus says, Eat these unclean animals.

Peter says, Lord, I think you're wrong about this. I mean, I know this is the wrong thing for me to eat. These are unclean animals.

And the voice spoke to him again the second time, What God has cleansed, you must not call unclean or common. Now, this lesson was for Peter to get him to not call Gentiles unclean. God made it an object lesson.

There's certain animals that the Jews thought were unclean. There's also certain people that the Jews thought were unclean. Pork was an unclean animal.

A pig. A Gentile is an unclean person. So, God gives him this object lesson.

Here's a bunch of animals that you call unclean. Don't call them unclean. God has made them clean.

God has declared them clean. Don't you disagree with God about this. And then when it was over, the voice said, Listen, there's some men coming here to tell you to go to the house of a Gentile.

Go to his house. And Peter put it together. Especially when he went into Cornelius' house, he said, Oh, God has shown me not to call any man unclean.

There are people that we might call unclean. And we might offend God by calling unclean someone that he doesn't see as unclean. He has called us clean.

If somebody has come to Christ and submitted to him and put their trust in him, they are cleansed by the blood of Christ. A Christian is a clean person. And that's true if they believe Presbyterian doctrines or Catholic doctrines or Pentecostal doctrines or Baptist doctrines.

It's not what they believe about those distinct things different denominations believe. It's are they, is their heart clean? Does God see them as clean? Don't you call those people unclean. Don't you separate yourself from people that God isn't separating himself from.

Romans 15.7 Paul said, Therefore receive one another, just as Christ also received us, to the glory of God. It's all about the glory of God, of course. But the point here is, as Christ has received us, we receive each other.

Well, how has Christ received me? Is it because I have the right view of predestination? Is it because I have the right view of the rapture? Is it because I have the right view of baptism? Is that why Christ receives me? Because I have the right opinions about those things? No, Christ receives me because I have surrendered my life to his Lordship. Because I confess with my mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in my heart that God raised him from the dead. I am saved.

I'm received. And everyone who has sincerely called Christ Lord, and that has changed the direction of their life because of his Lordship. And everyone who believes in their heart that God raised from the dead, they're clean.

They're not perfect. And we can work on that. But we can only do so with the humility to realize we're not perfect either.

And maybe when we think we're working on them, God's really working on us. It's hard to say. The main thing is we need to put God's family first above our petty differences, our petty grievances even.

Because it's not just differences that divide people, it's grievances. He did something to me that wasn't very nice, you know. That's a grievance.

Now we need to put those kind of things away and say, listen, let there be no strife between us because we're brethren. And that's what Abraham demonstrated because the Canaanite and the Perizzite were in line. We are God's family in a hostile world surrounded by the devil's family.

Now, no fear. Those that are with us are greater than those who are with them. But that does define our relationships with each other in a certain way.

It means we're in this together. We are one with all those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart. And we need to act like it or else it's not really what we believe.

Now we'll stop there, having only covered a couple out of six of the strategies. So obviously there will be an additional lecture or two on this series. But we'll stop it at this point.