

Unity and Diversity¹

Spilman Memorial Baptist Church, Kinston NC

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June 25, 2023

Text: Romans 14:1-12

Purpose: Paul is reminding the believers in Rome that within the church there are various opinions as to what a “proper” Christian should be involved in. Paul tells us that we are to genuinely accept one another, even over the issues that are not essential, but all through the Lordship of Jesus Christ in the individual believer’s life.

A little boy wanted to meet God. He knew it was a long trip to where God lived, so he packed his suitcase with Twinkies and a six-pack of Root Beer and he started his journey.



When he had gone about three blocks, he met an old man. He was sitting in the park just staring at some pigeons. The boy sat down next to him and opened his suitcase. He was about to take a drink from his root beer when he noticed that the old man looked hungry, so he offered him a Twinkie.

He gratefully accepted it and smiled at him. His smile was so pleasant that the boy wanted to see it again, so he offered him a root beer.



Again, he smiled at him. The boy was delighted! They sat there all afternoon eating and smiling, but they never said a word.

As it grew dark, the boy realized how tired he was and he got up to leave, but before he had gone more than a few steps, he turned around, ran back to the old man, and gave him a hug. He gave him his biggest smile ever.

When the boy opened the door to his own house a short time later, his mother was surprised by the look of joy on his face. She asked him, "What did you do today that made you so happy?" He replied, "I had lunch with God." But before his mother could respond, he added, "You know what? God's got the most beautiful smile I've ever seen!"²

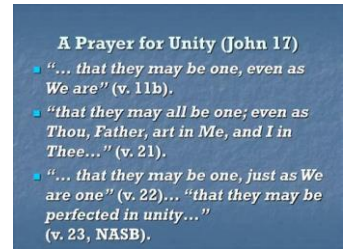
There is no doubt in God's word how important unity is among believers. R. Kent Hughes, in his commentary on the book of Romans, explores the topic of unity and diversity in the Body of Christ. He begins by pointing out a passage in Psalm 133 how important unity was even in the Old Testament.

*How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!
It is like precious oil poured on the head, running down on the beard,
Running down on Aaron's beard, down upon the collar of his robes.
It is as if the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion.
For there the Lord bestows His blessing, even life evermore.*

Jesus, in John 17:20-21, also echoed the importance of the unity of believers.



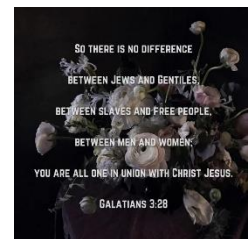
“My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in Me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in Me and I am in You. May they also be in Us so that the world may believe that You have sent Me.”



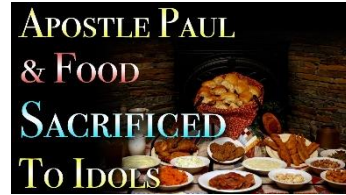
But sadly, the world does not see unity among Christian brothers and sisters. Our disagreements spill out into the communities and division and discord are ever present. The source of our disagreements can be numerous if we insist in making “our” way of Christianity to be the “only” proper way of understanding. Normally diversity makes unity very difficult.

In Romans chapter 12 we have talked about love and our service in the body of Christ using our spiritual gifts. In chapter 13 we saw that we are to be submissive one to another. In chapter 14 we will see that love must be patient and tolerant of other people's views.

Paul was addressing a problem that had emerged in the new church in Rome. The church in Rome was comprised of believers that were once practicing Jews that had now accepted Jesus as their Savior. Also in that church were Gentile Christians that had no Jewish background or history but had come out of paganism. Both groups had come from vastly different cultures and there was a growing division among them.



One of the issues of that day was the eating of meat that had been offered to idols. As a Jew this was unacceptable, so many of them decided that they would become vegetarians because they were unsure of how the meat had been handled prior to their purchasing it. Paul even calls these Law observing Jewish Christians “weak” and the liberal Gentle Christians “strong.”



You can picture the scene in Rome as a Jewish Christian meets a Gentile Christian walking down the street with an armload of meat he had recently purchased earlier.

“Grace and peace, to you, my friend!

What have you got there?”

“Oh, we are going to have a barbeque tonight so I have been to the market. There are great prices today – Rib-eyes are only 25 cents a pound, T-bones are 15 cents a pound, and pork is practically free! Why don’t you and your wife join us for dinner tonight?”

At that moment, the Jewish Christian is shocked and says nothing because he is judging the Gentile Christian. In an instant, the Gentile Christian realized he is being judged. Both walk away hurt and the division between the two is widened.

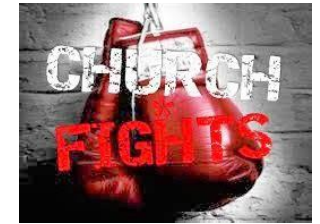
The easy solution would be to create two churches –

“The Carnivores” and “The First Church of the Vegetarians.” But that is not what we need to do. Paul has given us guidelines if we are to maintain “Unity and Diversity” in the same church.



There is no doubt judging one another is a favorite indoor sport of Christians. Leslie Flynn writes in his book, “*Great Church Fights*,” the following observation:

“Wide disagreement exists today in our churches over certain practices. A Christian in the south may be repelled by a swimming party that included both men and women, then offend his Northern brother by lighting up a cigarette. At an international conclave for missionaries, a woman from the Orient could not wear sandals with a clear conscience. A Christian from western Canada thought it worldly for a Christian acquaintance to wear a wedding ring, and a woman from Europe thought it almost immoral for a wife not to wear a wedding ring that signaled her status. A man from Denmark was pained to even watch British Bible school students play football, while the British students shrank from his pipe smoking.”

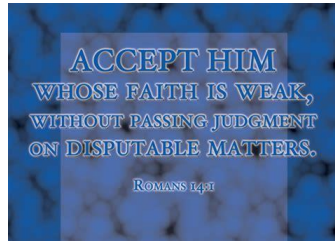


Churches are being ripped apart from a lack of unity among the diversity that exists in a body of believers. Denominations are being divided because of different expressions of faith communities. There is a little poem that says it best.

Believe as I believe, no more, no less;
 That I am right, and no one else, confess;
 Feel as I feel, think only as I think;
 Eat what I eat, and drink but what I drink;
 Look as I look, do always as I do;
 Then and only then, will I fellowship with you.

I don’t think that is the attitude we are to exhibit.

I. Genuine Acceptance of One Another is the Only Option (v. 1-3)



Paul is admonishing us in verse one to “Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters.” The one that is “weak” is not weak in basic Christian faith; instead, it is weak in assurance that his faith allows him to do certain things. We are to genuinely accept others not on the pretense of straightening them out, but in genuine love and acceptance.

As we see during Paul’s day one of the issues was whether they were permitted to eat meats offered to idols. Today we have guidelines for the handling of meat products and the locations where they are processed and inspected. I am not aware of any meat products sold today in America being offered to idols. But during Paul’s day, some meat was offered as a sacrifice to an idol and then later sold in the market place.

Our issues today may not center around meat offered to idols, but we do have topics that divide the community of faith. Those topics include:

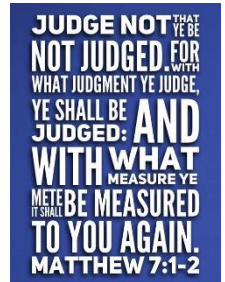
1. Theater – ungodly dramas vs. good entertainment
2. Cosmetics – improper for a woman vs. nothing harmful
3. Alcohol – abstain vs. freedom
4. Tobacco – harming the body vs. hurting no one
5. Card playing – harmless fun vs. gambling
6. Dancing – fun vs. flirting with the flesh
7. Clothing fashions – the length of your dress – long good, short bad

8. Bible Translation Used – KJV or other more modern translations
9. Sports – violent activity vs. character building
10. Music – “Satan’s” music vs. God’s music
11. Material Wealth – judging the way others spend their money

Most Recently in our denominational Dis-Unity

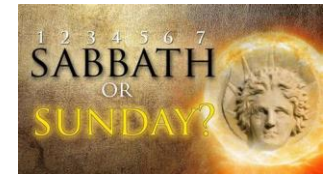
12. SBC – Women Preachers – unscriptural or acceptable to the Lord

According to Romans 14, wherever you stand on these issues, you are to accept a brother or sister in Christ. Whether you are abstaining from drinking or not, you are not to judge the other person. This does not mean we are to accept everything that others are doing as acceptable. No! We are not talking about basic doctrines of the faith such as sin, the Deity of Christ, salvation by faith, or clear scriptural commandments against adultery or lying. We are talking about the non-essentials.



II. The Acceptance of Non-Essentials (v. 5-6)

We are called to accept one another. In verses five and six. Paul tells us:



One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord. He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God.

This controversy that Paul is addressing probably centers around what day of the week was the day of worship. Paul wasn't declaring Saturday or Sunday was the proper day of worship. He was saying, as each person is fully convinced in their heart that is what they should do.

Paul was saying that people with opposing viewpoints may both be right in the eyes of God. If you are convinced drinking any alcohol is wrong, then you should not drink any. If you are convinced that a glass of wine on occasion is acceptable, then that decision is between you and the Lord. The scripture is clear about drunkenness being sin. If drinking may be an issue for you, for whatever reason, my recommendation is not to begin at all.

If you think card playing, dancing, sports, or tobacco use is acceptable, then those that are against those things should not judge the other. Rupertus Meldenius taught his church, "We are to accept unity in the things that are essential and in non-essentials we are to exercise liberty. But in all things, we are to demonstrate love and charity."

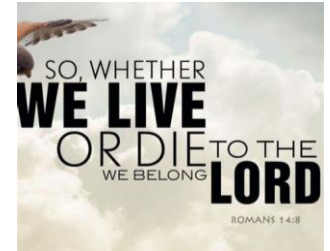
**ESSENTIAL
VS
NON-ESSENTIAL**

If the Lord convicts you that something is wrong in your life, you need to stop doing it, even if others are doing it. Later we will see in Romans 14, Paul advises Christians to be sensitive to those weak around you. If your liberty in one area would cause a break in fellowship with another person, or lead others away from Christ, then you should deny yourself in that area for the sake of your weaker brother or sister.

III. The Acceptance of the Lordship of Christ (v. 7-12)

Paul reminds us that all of us should live our lives under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. We are not autonomous. We may live that way, but that is not the way it should be.

"For none of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone. If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord." (v. 7-8)



Christ is Lord and we need to recognize that in our lives. We don't need to get into the business of judging others.

"You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. It is written: "'As surely as I live,'" says the Lord, "Every knee will bow before me; every tongue will confess to God." So then each of us will give an account of himself to God."

Each of us are responsible for our own selves. I will not stand in judgment for you, and you will not stand before God on my behalf. Each of us need to realize we are only accountable unto God.

**I AM
RESPONSIBLE
FOR MY OWN
ACTIONS**

There are some things that the bible is clear about. We should speak to one another when they are blatantly sinning and headed in the wrong way. But there are some things that the Bible is silent about. Each of us needs to listen to God's voice and guidance in those matters.

There is room in the Body of Christ for diversity. We all do not need to wear the same clothes, drive the same kind of car, or attend the same social organizations. But we do need to walk in love for one another exhibiting forbearance and acceptance.



R. Kent Hughes tells the story of a father and son that had a major falling out one time. The conflict was so intense that the two agreed to part. In the middle of the night, the son had trouble sleeping, so he went downstairs to the kitchen to make himself a sandwich. There in the kitchen was his father, who was having difficulty sleeping as well.

After they fixed their sandwiches, they begin to talk about their past – about they years in Little League, their hunting trips, swimming together, and fishing trips.

As some needed healing began to take place, the son said, “Dad, do you remember the time we were out in the lake in the green boat?”

His father said, “The boat was blue.”

The son said, “No, it was green.”



The father said, “you are mistaken it was blue.”

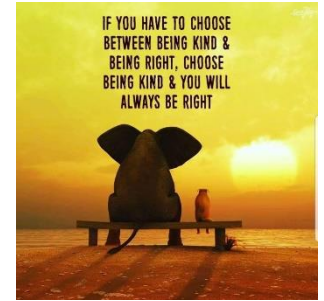
“Green.” “Blue.”

“Green.” “Blue.”

And his son departed, never to return.

Some things just don’t matter. May we allow God to give us the wisdom to see what is essential in our life and in our Christian walk and what is not.

LET US PRAY



Notes:

¹ Romans, Righteousness from Heaven, R. Kent Hughes, pages 257-265.

² Mikey’s Funnies, A Meeting Funny, June 2, 2023