

Living in Unity

by Peter Maiden

We should accept and respect those who have different opinions than us, just as God has accepted them, and leave room for differences of opinion on non-essential matters.

Duration: 36:49

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, Acts 15:1, Romans 14:1-3, Romans 14:14-15, Romans 14:22-23, Galatians 5:1, Colossians 3:16

Topics: "Unity"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker focuses on how to live with people who may have different beliefs or opinions. He uses Romans chapter 14 as a basis for his teachings. The chapter discusses accepting those with weaker faith without passing judgment on disputable matters. It also addresses the differences in dietary choices and the importance of not causing others to stumble. The speaker emphasizes the need to live in harmony and not judge or look down on others, as we will all stand before God's judgment seat.

Transcript

Right, I'd like you to turn in your Bible to Romans chapter 14. I want to speak to you this evening on how to live with people you may not agree with. Because I would imagine that some of you have begun to realize that not everybody in your team or even in your house agrees with you doctrinally, temperamentally.

You found people who are of a different opinion than yourself. And I want us to think about how such people can live together. And to do that we're going to have a Bible study of the 14th chapter of Romans.

Accept him whose faith is weak without passing judgment on disputable matters. One man's faith allows him to eat everything, but another man whose faith is weak eats only vegetables. So you can see that all vegetarians are weak in faith.

According to that verse, that's a terrible exegesis, isn't it? The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not. And the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him. Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls, and he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

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. 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. For this very reason Christ died and returned to life, so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living.

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.

Therefore, let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way. As one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself.

But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean. If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by eating destroy your brother, for whom Christ died.

Do not allow what you consider good to be spoken of as evil. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. Because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men.

Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble.

It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall. So, whatever you believe about these things, keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the man who does not condemn himself by what he approves.

But the man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith, and everything that does not come from faith is sin. Father, we do thank you tonight for your holy word, and we realize our responsibility as we read your word. We are responsible to live in the light of it, in the light of our understanding of it.

So, Lord, open our eyes of understanding this evening that we might perceive and understand the truths contained in this chapter and have the grace to obey your word. In Jesus' name we pray. Paul wrote to the Galatians about freedom.

That's the great epistle, of course, of freedom. And in chapter 5 he makes this great statement, For freedom Christ has set us free. And then he exhorts the Galatians to stand firm in their freedom, and not to allow themselves to be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.

Now, those early Christians had, of course, been delivered in Christ from the most monumental legalism. Every day, for a good Pharisee, for example, there were 630-something, I can't remember if it was 637 or 638, 630-something laws and regulations that they had to comply with every day. Imagine waking up to that prospect, waking up every day to the prospect of having to comply with 630-something laws and

regulations.

And then Jesus came. He came with his message of freedom. If the Son shall set you free, you shall be free indeed.

You can imagine the enormous burden that was lifted from the shoulders of those Jewish Christians. They likened it to the yoke being lifted from the ox. You can imagine the ox going through the field with the tremendous yoke bearing down on its shoulder.

And then at the end of the day, the farmer comes and raises the yoke. And once again, the oxen is free to express itself, free to raise its head. It was like that for those Christians.

They'd entered into a whole new world. But they soon found that it was not a world without problems because some people had been very, very comfortable in the previous world. And there is great comfort, isn't there, in knowing exactly what you have to do every day.

There's great comfort in knowing what you can do and what you cannot do. It's very comfortable to live in that kind of monastic establishment. Freedom often leaves you with uncomfortable questions for which there just are no simple answers.

And of course, many people opposed the new freedoms of these Christians. Some men, Acts 15 verse 1, came down from Judea or really from Jerusalem, from the kind of senior church, and they were teaching the brothers, unless you are circumcised according to the custom, according to the tradition taught by Moses, you cannot be saved. And you often find Paul in his epistles warning the believers against returning to legalism.

I'm sure some of you have studied the remarkable third chapter of Colossians where Paul is dealing with this. Verse 16 of Colossians 3. Don't let anyone judge you, says Paul, by what you eat or by what you drink or with regard to a religious festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. You see what was happening? Some of these traditionalists were trying to regulate what the Christians could eat, what they couldn't eat, what days were special, holy, and what days were not.

And Paul is totally opposed to that. He says, don't let anyone judge you on such incidentals. You have been set free in Christ.

Later on in verse 21, he counsels them not to be drawn back into legalism by those people who say, don't handle this, don't taste that, don't touch the other. You can almost imagine those old traditionalists coming behind the new Christians who found freedom. You can't touch that.

You can't taste this. You can't go there. And Paul is saying, have nothing to do with it.

Stand firm in your freedom. Never allow yourself to be drawn back under that yoke of legalism. But that wasn't Paul's only message to the Galatians.

To those same believers, he wrote this just a few verses later. Yes, my brothers, you were called to freedom, but do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature. And just a couple of verses later, Paul actually writes in a remarkable phrase about destruction through freedom.

I want you to think about those three words. Destruction through freedom. People who were actually being destroyed by the abuse of Christian freedom.

So Christian freedom is not a free-for-all. It's not do your own thing and don't worry about anyone else. According to Galatians 5, Christian freedom has a limit.

And the limit of our freedom is that it must always be used to serve others. It must never be used for self-indulgence. That's a great principle of the New Testament.

The freedom we have in Jesus Christ is always to be used to serve others. It is never to be used to indulge our sinful nature. And that brings us to the 14th chapter of Romans.

Because as in every era of the church, there were certain issues in Paul's day for which there was no easy answer. Now in Paul's day, the issue was not whether a Christian could speak in tongues or not. That was just not an issue in Rome at the time.

It wasn't whether a woman could be an elder in a church or not. If you're reading present Christian periodicals, you'll know that's quite a live issue in many denominations, except mine. But those weren't the issues of Paul's day.

The issues were such as these. Should meat, which had been offered to an idol as an oblation, as a sacrifice to an idol, ever enter a Christian's mouth? It's a tremendous controversy, not just at Rome, but in many parts of the church. Could a sacrifice, a joint of meat, which had been offered to an idol, ever touch the lips of a Christian? And what about these holy days? That was the second great controversy in the church at this time.

Were there certain religious days which had to be given special significance, or could every day be treated as the same? The issues were different, but they were just as real, just as controversial, as the issues we face today. And I think we're going to find Paul's teaching just as relevant to our issues as they were to those issues. So I want you to look at one word with me in the chapter, and then at five principles.

The one word I want you to look at is the first word. The first word in the NIV is the word accept. Accept him whose faith is weak.

And I suggest to you that that first word sets the whole tone, the whole spirit of the chapter. Our attitude must never be hard and uncompromising. Now I'm a church elder.

In many ways it's much more exciting than being an OM leader. The issues you grapple with there are very, very different, sometimes more exciting. Let's see if he proves himself, someone said to me last week, before we accept him.

A fellow had come in from outside, he'd got converted, and he wasn't dressed as I am this evening, and his hair, well he had more than me to start with, but it wasn't of the style that mine is. And that was the attitude of one person in our church, tragically. Let's see if he proves himself before we accept him.

Let's see if that new method in the church works before we get involved. That kind of attitude must not be, says Paul, there must be in our hearts this readiness, this openness to accept. Our first thought must be, let me accept that.

Let me accept that brother. Let me accept that eccentricity in his life. That must be our first thought.

Our desire must be that. And you'll see why. Look at the next chapter, 15 verse 7. Paul still has the same subject in mind, and he gives this stunning challenge.

Accept one another, those who eat meat and those who don't. Those who consider certain days are holy and those who don't. Accept one another just as Christ accepted you in order to bring praise to God.

I wonder if we're ready for that in Operation Mobilization. I wonder if we're really ready for that in ICT. To accept one another with all our differences just as Christ accepted us.

I thank God that Christ didn't wait till I got it all together before He accepted me. I thank God that He didn't wait till I was all neat and tidy theologically before He accepted me. Am I ready to accept you? Are you ready to accept me? Just as Christ accepted us.

So with that challenge, which I find quite stunning from the pen of Paul, let's move on from the one word to the five principles which might help us to be more accepting of each other. Very quickly and very simply, five principles from the chapter. Number one, the first three verses, certain matters are disputable.

Certain matters in the Christian faith, in the Christian life, in Christian experience are disputable. Now I think we can understand from that that there are certain issues which convinced, genuine believers will have differences of opinion upon. Now they will not be essential issues.

They will not be central to the gospel of Jesus Christ. In other scriptures, particularly in that epistle I've already referred to, the epistle of Galatians, Paul said if there's a man who's preaching another gospel, if he's doing something which is destroying the gospel, then you don't accept him. You give him the anathema.

There's no stronger word than that in the whole of the New Testament. But on issues which are not central to the gospel, we will find differences among equally committed believers who are equally committed to the Bible. And on such occasions, Paul says, we must not pass judgment upon the one who differs from us.

Now I want you to look at verse 3 for a moment because you see two attitudes here which can be extremely destructive in a Christian fellowship, whether that's a church or a team. Look at the two attitudes. First, you've got the man who eats everything.

He doesn't mind at all if meat has been offered to idols. He's not bothered about it. The idols are not real gods.

So what's the problem? So here's the liberal. He doesn't mind what he eats. It's a good joint of beef.

I don't mind if it's been offered to ten gods. There's only one God. There's only one real God.

What are you bothered about? Get it eaten. He's the liberal. Now a person with such an attitude, says Paul, has to be very careful.

And what he has to be careful about is this. Look very carefully at it because I find it so interesting. The liberal must not look down.

That's his problem. He mustn't look down on him who does not eat. Don't you see that so often in the church? Those who feel that they are the liberated ones, they are... Well, I was at an assembly on Sunday.

It's far enough away from here for me to tell you this story. But I wasn't only asked to go and preach, I was asked to go and negotiate. This is one of my great tasks in life.

I get invited many times to churches to negotiate. Now this brethren assembly was dividing, was in the process of dividing, as many brethren assemblies are today. There were the liberals, the younger end normally.

They were past bothering about whether a woman should wear a hat or not. They were past bothering about whether a woman could take part in the church or not. They were past bothering whether a person could raise his hands in worship or not.

Very interesting to watch the attitude of that liberal, in inverted commas, section. They definitely tended to look down on the old traditionalists who were still in the dark ages, in their opinion. Definite tendency to look down.

And Paul says, don't do it. And then he turns to the apparent traditionalists, because they too can have a very destructive attitude. Read on in verse 3. The man who does not eat everything, he must not condemn.

Now his problem is not looking down. His problem is this tendency to condemn the man who does eat. And again I find the tendency so common.

Those who feel they are standing for the truth, they are standing for the original principles, they read the authorized version of the discipleship manual. Not the revised standard version or the NIV or the summer campaign manual. They read the original.

Very easy for such people who are apparent traditionalists to condemn the apparent liberal. To think that they don't really believe what they say. They're just trying to destroy the church.

They're just trying to destroy the team by their liberal attitudes. Two tendencies which can be so destructive in any Christian fellowship. Paul says, don't do either.

And then he gives us two powerful reasons why we must accept rather than condemn the person who differs from us on non-essential issues. Look at the reasons. First is in the end of verse 3. God has accepted him.

Oh dear. No more needs to be said, does it? What an argument. Are you and I going to be more scrupulous than God? What a terrifying thought that I might reject someone whom my holy God has accepted.

I've got to be so careful, haven't I? But I become so scrupulous that I'm more careful than God. I will not accept those whom God has gladly accepted. There's his first argument.

You must accept the brother you don't agree with on non-essential issues because God has accepted him. Second argument, verse 4. Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. Look also at verse 10.

You then, why do you judge your brother? Why do you look down on your brother? See the same two attitudes again? The attitude of judging, the attitude of looking down. We will all stand before God's judgment seat. Ultimately, we are responsible in our service to our master.

We are responsible to the risen Christ. Now I hope you sense some responsibility with Operation Mobilization. I feel that's right and that's good.

We are responsible to one another. We are responsible to our leaders. I trust you sense some responsibility in your local church as well.

But ultimately, our responsibility is to our master. It's to the risen Christ. His servant, says Paul, and he will judge us.

He will reward us. And it's a presumption to judge someone else's servant. Paul says when it comes to these non-essential matters, don't go around judging each other.

Leave that issue to the master of that person. Don't be presumptuous. Leave it to the risen Christ.

He will judge and he will reward. Now Paul certainly practiced this principle in his own life. Let me read just two verses from 1 Corinthians 4. Very revealing of the attitude of Paul.

He was being criticized. And he says, I care very little if I'm judged by you or by any human court. Indeed, I don't even judge myself.

My conscience is clear, but that doesn't make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore, judge nothing before the appointed time.

Wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. I find that so helpful.

You know, I sometimes find myself judging a person whom I don't really understand. I don't really understand his motives. I don't really understand his heart.

And there's another very good reason for leaving such judgments to the judgment seat of Christ. Because then that person will be fully known. He will be fully revealed and will be able to make a proper, accurate judgment rather than the limited attempt we might wrongfully make today.

So that's my first proposition, my first principle from Romans chapter 14. We must accept one another because certain matters in the faith are disputable issues. There are no easy solutions to them.

My second proposition or principle is this. Christians that can therefore genuinely hold differing views. Christians can therefore genuinely hold differing views on non-essential matters.

Let's look at that point being made three times in the chapter. Verse 2. One man's faith allows him to eat everything. Another man's faith is weak and he eats only vegetables.

Verse 14. I'm fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean then for him it is unclean.

Now that's an extremely important verse. Paul shows what the truth of the controversy is. He says he's fully convinced here's the truth.

No food is unclean in itself. Actually a Christian could eat what he wanted to eat. It didn't matter whether it had been offered to idols or not.

No food is unclean in itself. But does that make all food clean for everyone? Does that make all food clean for everyone? Paul's answer is no, it doesn't. Because if anyone regards something as unclean then it is unclean.

A man's conscience, a man's conviction must be taken into account. If he's acting against his conviction the food becomes unclean. Now there's exactly the same argument in 1 Corinthians 8. So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols we know that an idol is nothing at all in the world.

That's true, that's the truth. These idols are nothing. And there is no God but one.

But listen to verse 7. Not everyone knows this. Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat such food they think of it as being sacrificed to an idol. And since their conscience is weak it is defiled.

The argument is summed up perfectly in the last verse of our chapter, Romans 14. So, the man who has doubts is condemned if he eats. Because his eating is not from faith and everything that does not come from faith is sin.

So how do you live a victorious Christian life? You live a victorious Christian life by living according to your conscience. According to your conviction. According to your understanding of Scripture.

On non-essentials, that's how you're going to be judged on the day of judgment. That people can have genuinely differing opinions on non-essentials. And it's their responsibility not to live to my conscience but to live to their conscience.

And I must honor them for so doing. Now some of you are going to find this totally extreme. It's completely out of your world.

But on Sunday at this little discussion in this assembly there were a number of men who earnestly, honestly believed that women should be hatted at all times covered, you know and should be silent at all times. Now, you're going to tell me off afterwards particularly this good brother on the back but, you know, my whole being you know, cries out against that. Thank you, Ray.

I just had to check where he's at. My whole being cries out against that and yet I had to look at these men and see that they were good and godly men. And they had been looking at Scripture and they had become persuaded in a completely different way than I am persuaded.

I have no right to condemn them. If they are living according to their conscience the Bible says then they must be honored for so doing. I can go away and pray for them but I cannot condemn them.

Now here's the third great principle. Love is the only true freedom. Love is the only true freedom.

Again, Paul makes the point three times in the chapter. Look at verse 15. If your brother is distressed because of what you eat you are no longer acting in love.

And then we have the same prospect as we saw in Galatians 5. Destruction through freedom. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died. The same point is made in verse 20 and again in verse 21.

We have been set free in Christ to serve. Previously we were slaves to our own selfish desires but now in Christ it's no longer me, me, me. It's my brother.

It's my sister. I've been delivered from that slavery so that I can put my brother's needs my brother's interests my brother's concerns before mine. So if my freedom is destroying my brother and I can't stop I'm a slave.

If my freedom is destroying my brother and I can't stop I'm in fact not free. I'm a slave. Now I'm in a church be very careful where this tape goes but I'm in a church which is moving forward I hope it's forward that's the direction I perceive it's going in I have to be very, very careful that I don't move that church forward or in the direction it's going so quickly that certain brothers and sisters in the church are destroyed by it.

It's a very real possibility. If we go too fast even though we may be right if we go too quick we'll destroy our brother and in fact we are the true slave. He's not the slave we are the slave because we're using our freedom to indulge ourselves and not to serve our brother and our sister.

Love is the only true freedom. The fourth principle is something we've recognized in passing but I just want to make the point plainly and that is that not all matters in connection with our faith are of equal importance. Not all matters in connection with our faith are of equal importance.

Look at verse 17. The kingdom of God, concludes Paul is not a matter of eating and drinking. That's not what it's all about.

What it's all about is righteousness, peace, joy in the Holy Spirit. It's possible for us to be doctrinally perfect and morally repugnant to God. It's possible to have all our convictions on the non-essentials worked out to the last letter and yet forget the doctrine of love.

Certain things in the Christian faith are not worth fighting over. They're certainly not worth dividing over. We need to be clear concerning what matters are essential in the kingdom of God and what are not.

And on those that are not essential we must be prepared for great flexibility and utmost charity. Our doctrinal position in OM is based on this principle. We say in OM there are certain things we are going to be quiet about.

Certain doctrines. They may mean much to us personally but we're not going to make a fuss of them within OM because there are certain things which are disputable and they are not worth fighting over. There are bigger issues out there and the church has been fighting over such disputable non-essentials for too long.

And this chapter says to me not all matters are of equal importance in the kingdom of God. And we must know what are the essential and on the non-essential there must be great flexibility and utmost charity. And so to the fifth and final principle and I would call that the wisdom of silence.

The wisdom of silence. Look at verse 22. Whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God.

Isn't that an interesting verse? Paul says shut up. Don't go around arguing about these things. You can see the controversy.

You can see the difficulty it's causing. So keep these things between yourself and God. Blessed is the man who does not oh listen to this who does not condemn himself by what he approves.

Can you get a hold of that? Can you imagine this great liberal charging around Rome saying I can eat everything! I can eat everything! He approves the meat. He approves the great freedom he has but what's he doing? His brother's being tripped up so he's condemning himself. He's going around shouting about all the things that are approved.

He's going about boasting about his new freedom and his new liberality and in the very act of doing that he's destroying his brother and he's condemning himself. There is a time for silence. There's a time for silence even when you're in the right.

Even when you've got the truth. There's a time for silence. If by stating the right and the true way you may actually destroy your brother you might find yourself bringing condemnation upon yourself by declaring the truth.

Ever thought about that? You might bring condemnation on yourself by declaring the truth because you're doing it in a self-indulgent way and you're not thinking about your brother. Romans 14 is a difficult balance, isn't it? In practice. To live this out in practice it's a knife edge.

It's a very difficult balance. But I tell you if we commit ourselves to such principles in our local churches and in our teams we will keep the devil at bay. I honestly don't think the devil can get through this.

If we put on this armour we are willing to accept these principles of Romans 14. I believe that we will be able to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace even when we're drawn together from different backgrounds and with different convictions. We can continue to live together in a way which will glorify God.

Let's pray. Father, we thank you that the Holy Spirit longs to see the oneness of the body of Christ. We remember the final prayer the high priestly prayer of the Lord Jesus.

Father, I would that they might be one as thou, Father, art in me and I am in thee that they might be one in us that the world might believe that thou hast sent me. Grant us the grace of being able to live out these principles in our daily lives on our teams, in our churches, in our families.

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