

# Eight Bonds of Unity

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## Introduction.

- A. At times, it seems that the world around us is growing increasingly discordant and increasingly less civil. It may well be true that no man is an island, but increasingly, modern Americans choose to believe that they ARE islands. Increasingly, the success of the group has become unimportant, and the success of the individual all-important. This is evident in any number of arenas. In the workplace world, employees often spend as much time on office politics as they do on actual work. Stories abound in professional sports of highly-paid players who take plays off in order to sabotage a head coach whom they dislike. This trend applies with equal force within the domestic sphere as well. Today, the sacred bonds of marriage and family are straining under an assault of selfishness. For many spouses and parents, those relationships are no longer an opportunity to give to others; instead, they have become merely another means of pleasing the self.
- B. This poisonous and ungodly worldview of selfishness can easily penetrate into every aspect of our lives, particularly into our relationships as a church. Just like a good marriage isn't something that just happens, a healthy, growing church isn't something that just happens. If we want this church to stay united and strong, all of us have to work at it, and as a part of this labor of unity, we have to surrender our wants, our desires, and submit our wills to the will of Christ, that we may become instruments of His purpose.
- C. Paul describes this impulse toward servanthood in Colossians 3:14, where he tells us to "Put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity," and his counsel here makes perfect sense. Only when we are devoted to living for one another can we truly become one as a congregation. But what does this mean? How do we do it? Learning all the manifestations of love is the labor of a lifetime, but Paul gives us some insight into this question in Romans 12:14-19. These principles are generally applicable, but they are particularly relevant in the context of the church. Let's consider this context then, to learn how to form these eight bonds of unity.

## I. Romans 12:14-16.

- A. The first bond of unity mentioned in this section is to **BLESS THOSE WHO PERSECUTE YOU**. This is what Paul says in Romans 12:14, and this is something we should apply to any enemy of ours, whether he be within the church or outside it. Jesus further fleshes out this concept in the Sermon on the Mount, when He tells us that this blessing should come through prayer, that we should pray for our enemies. This is so far away from the way the world thinks that most people would think it's crazy, but it's what we must do as disciples.
- B. Look, for example, at what Stephen does in Acts 7:59-60. Stephen here is in the midst of being murdered. He's being murdered by a mob of evil men who would rather kill him than hear the truth. Indeed, Stephen is being stoned. These evil men are using large rocks to crush him to death, and it is a horrible way to die. But what is Stephen doing as he is being murdered in this agonizing way? He's praying for the souls of the men who are murdering him. He's not worried about himself; he's worried about them.
- C. Friends, we need to be the same way. We need to pray for our enemies. Whenever someone wrongs us, whenever someone insults us, whenever someone offends us, we need to sit down and pray, deeply and sincerely, for their welfare and the welfare of their souls, and the madder we are at them, the more we need to pray. Do you know why? Because once we pray enough for someone who has offended us, we can't see him as an enemy anymore. Now, I certainly believe that those prayers are valuable for those who have angered me, but they're even more valuable for me. They teach me to think and live like Christ. Let's remember, then, to do this. Let's pray for our enemies until we learn to love them as we do our friends.
- D. In addition, we should also learn to **REJOICE WITH THOSE WHO REJOICE**, as Paul says in the first half of Romans 12:15. As with the previous point, this is important generally, but it is particularly important within the church, because within the church, this rejoicing is a natural expression of the spirit of *agape*. We see this spirit expressed by John the Baptist in John 3:29. John's situation here is an interesting one. He knows that his prominence as a prophet is only going to last until the Messiah appears on the scene, and he probably even knows that he is going to die for some of the things he has taught. And yet, he's happy, not sad, to see the end of his teaching appear. He compares his situation to a friend of the bridegroom at a wedding. To go with the metaphor, John's not the one who's getting married. He's not going to be involved in the union of Christ and His church. But he's happy now, because he knows that both God and His people are going to be happy.
- E. We should have that same kind of rejoicing in the rejoicing of everyone with whom we worship. There is no room even for indifference in the kingdom of God, let alone for envy. We should be so emotionally connected with everyone here that their joy becomes our own. When they rejoice, we should rejoice with them.
- F. Similarly, we should learn to **WEEP WITH THOSE WHO WEEP**, which is the second half of Romans 12:15. This is the logical counter to rejoicing with those who rejoice, and it comes from the same source. We weep with those who weep only when we care so much about them that their grief is our grief. We see Jesus

weeping in this way in John 11:33-35. In just this three-verse segment, we learn so much about our Master. Jesus isn't weeping here because Lazarus is dead. Jesus knows that He Himself is going to raise Lazarus from the dead in about five minutes. Instead, He weeps because He is moved by the grief of those He loves. Now, the Bible is filled with reasons to love Jesus, but this is one of mine. I love Him because I know that whenever I grieve, He cares enough about me to grieve with me. It proves that I matter to Him. We say the same thing whenever we grieve with a brother or sister dealing with tragedy. It proves that they matter to us.

- G. The last of these first four bonds of unity occurs when we choose to **BE OF THE SAME MIND** toward one another. We do this whenever we consider all of our brethren in the same way, regardless of who or what they are. Sadly, there is a well-defined pecking order in all too many churches. They have a well defined core of Christians who have been friends with each other for 20 years, and then a shifting periphery of Christians that the core ignores. Friends, we can't be like that. There's nothing wrong with being friends with another Christian for 20 years, but there is something wrong when that friendship leads us to ignore others. Every Christian is valuable, every Christian is important, and every Christian should have the chance to share his life with us. Look at the way the church in Jerusalem is described in Acts 2:46-47. These brethren didn't care who was who. They were all united in fellowship and friendship with each other and God. Let's do the same.

## II. Romans 12:16-19.

- A. Also in Romans 12:16, Paul says, "**DO NOT BE WISE IN YOUR OWN ESTIMATION.**" Now, this is a tough one, especially in the setting of the church. The unique thing about the Lord's church is that we don't have preachers or priests who tell the ignorant masses what to do. Instead, our beliefs are founded on an individual study of God's word. However, because we're responsible for figuring things out, there's a terrible temptation to believe that we already have figured out EVERYTHING, and that everyone who disagrees with us is wrong.
- B. That's not true. There are certainly things in the Bible that are easy to understand—God's plan of salvation, for one. On the other hand, though, there are things that are NOT easy to understand. Things can get even trickier when we have to take a Scriptural principle and make application from it. The point is, perfect Biblical understanding is an aspiration, not a destination. We never get to the point where we don't have to learn any more, so we can't ever fall into the trap of believing that we've reached that point. Look at what Hezekiah says in Proverbs 26:12. If we ever think we've got it all figured out, there's more hope for a fool than for us.
- C. In addition to this, we need to learn to **NEVER RETURN EVIL FOR EVIL**. This is Paul's word to us in Romans 12:17. This one can be a hard one to avoid sometimes. It reminds me of something that happened to me one year at singing school. This was back when I was still single, so they put me and some of the other single members of the hymnwriting class on a dorm floor with about 50 teenagers, who spent all night long—the whole week—standing outside our doors, talking loudly, and laughing even louder. None of us got any sleep. One day toward the end of the week, they and I were sitting around plotting. With some degree of seriousness, we were talking about waking up about 5:30 in the morning and charging up and down the hall shouting, to see how THEY liked being awakened by loud, obnoxious people. One of the older hymnists in the class stopped to listen to us for a second, and then asked, "But wouldn't that be returning evil for evil?"
- D. The point is, sometimes returning evil for evil can be very satisfying, but it's never right because it's never loving. By contrast, look at the attitude expressed in 1 Peter 3:8-9. We can't be people who let the way others treat us influence the way we treat them. Instead, we have to be people of unconquerable goodwill, so that even if someone else treats us badly, we can still be the blessing Christ wants us to be.
- E. Similarly, we also need to **BE AT PEACE WITH ALL MEN**. Paul tells us so in Romans 12:18. Now, from the verse itself, we see that this does have a limitation. There are people out there who are determined to be our enemies no matter what we do, and we're not responsible for them. However, whenever it is within our capacity—and it almost always is—we are to be peacemakers, not quarrelmakers.
- F. This is particularly true in the church context. The first-century church in Corinth was wracked with all kinds of problems, and Paul diagnoses the source of these problems in 1 Corinthians 3:2-3. The problem that the Corinthians had was that even though they had supposedly come out of the world to become part of the kingdom of God, they'd brought the world's mindset with them. They were still concerned with proving that they were better than other people, even other Christians, and this attitude inevitably caused strife. Sadly, this me-first, my-way-or-the-highway worldview still creates trouble in the church of today. So much conflict arises in the brotherhood simply because people would rather have their way in some non-doctrinal issue than be at peace. We need to remember that our way is just not that important. Peace is. Let's be peacemakers.
- G. Finally, we must remember **NEVER TO TAKE OUR OWN REVENGE**. Paul brings this to our attention in Romans 12:19. We need to remember that justice is in God's hands, not in our hands. We may be able to be vengeful, but we can never be just. We don't have the authority or the wisdom to say who deserves to be punished. God, on the other hand, possesses both, and the day will come when He will exercise them. Look at Paul's words in 2 Thessalonians 1:6-7. The day will come when anyone who has troubled God's people will be fully recompensed for his deeds, and we can be assured of that. Let's seek love, not revenge.

**Conclusion.** If you are worried that God's justice may fall upon you, you can come to Him today.