



Week Five: Differences

All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines.

1 Corinthians 12:11

Introduction

If you've ever tried to put together a garage sale or gone through items in your home to either pack up, put into storage, or pass along to someone else, you know that it can be daunting to sort through all your stuff and decide what to get rid of and what to keep. This process can lead to some hard choices. Is this worth holding onto? Will I someday regret getting rid of this? How do I decide what is most important and valuable and what isn't?

Whether we realize it or not, many of us tend to go through a similar process when it comes to dealing with conflicts with others. We subconsciously sort through the particular issues we're facing and decide which problems to pay attention to and which ones to ignore. Though some problems will simply go away over time, others will fester, escalate, or nag at us until we do something about them. And in some cases, there are certain problems that, if left unaddressed, can split a church.

This week we'll be looking at how we as fellow believers are to work through our differences and problems with one another. Which disagreements should we speak up and say something about, and which ones are less urgent or important in the grand scheme of things? How can we differentiate between what really matters and what doesn't without compromising on that which is essential? Where should we draw the lines?

This process of categorizing our disagreements can be incredibly complex. Part of it has to do with how personal and deeply ingrained certain things are to us, and part of it has to do with the simple fact that we all have very different opinions about things within the Body of Christ. And on top of that, we all have unique personalities and perspectives and possibly even painful histories that can make finding agreement even more difficult.

While we may not always see eye-to-eye on whether or not certain personal convictions or preferences are essential, what those of us within the Body of Christ will hopefully all agree is essential, is that we work through our differences in such a way that we honor the Lord, prioritize the message of the Gospel, and preserve *"the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace"* (Ephesians 4:3).

Group Video Discussion

Watch Video 5 For Unity in essentials, diversity in the rest

Your notes:

Key priorities when working through our differences:

1. Our common _____

2. Our common _____

3. Our common _____

4. Our common _____

Questions for Group Discussion

1. What does it mean to live in a manner worthy of the calling you have received? What are some ways in which we might act unworthy of this calling, particularly as it pertains to pursuing unity within the church?
2. Ephesians tells us to be humble, gentle, patient, forbearing, and loving. Which of these attitudes do you personally struggle with the most?
3. What role do these truths listed in Ephesians 4:4-6 play in helping us to maintain the unity of the Spirit?
4. "In essentials, unity. In non-essentials, liberty. In all things, charity." What does this mean to you, and how might this thought help you or other brothers and sisters in Christ deal with their differences in the future?
5. What is one area where you would like Christ-followers to be more unified? Take some time to pray about that matter.

Personal Daily Devotions

Day 29

Different by Divine Design

*But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body,
every one of them, just as he wanted them to be.*

1 Corinthians 12:18

“No two snowflakes are exactly alike.”

You’ve probably heard that before. And regardless of whether or not this concept of each and every snowflake being completely unique from one another is scientifically true, or even verifiable, it is nevertheless mind-boggling to even consider the possibility. Especially if you’ve ever stood outside as a seemingly infinite number of delicate snowflakes fell around you.

We often use the word *unique* when we want to describe someone or something that is “one-of-a-kind; distinct from others; unlike anything or anyone else.” We may or may not be able to say that about snowflakes, but we can definitely say that about each and every one of us!

Have you ever stopped to think about the fact that you are genuinely unique: one-of-a-kind, distinct, unlike anyone else, either before or since God spoke the universe into existence? You have unique value to God and to others, because you have unique talents and abilities, unique interests, unique features, unique strengths, a unique voice, unique quirks, a unique background, and unique experiences. And as 1 Corinthians 12 reminds us, each and every Christ-follower has also been supernaturally and uniquely empowered by God’s Holy Spirit with various spiritual gifts that He wants to use to help build up and strengthen His church. And guess what? The fact that you are so unique and different from everybody else is exactly how God intended for you to be!

Unfortunately, though, our divinely-created uniqueness is often the biggest obstacle when it comes to maintaining peace within the Body of Christ. It is sad but true that our differences are often the cause of our greatest divisions. When you’re bumping up against someone in your life who makes maintaining peace and unity challenging, it’s easy to just assume that if everybody else were just like you and shared your exact perspective and opinions, things wouldn’t have to be so difficult!

Here’s what we need to remember: As a Christ-follower, biblical unity does not mean dropping each and every single thing that makes you unique and different. Rather, it means focusing on the one thing that should matter most to us when it comes to thinking about church unity – namely, that as unique as you truly are, you have been graciously placed by God into the Body of Christ, of whom Jesus is the head. Though made up of many unique and individually distinct members, this Body is intended by God to function and to constantly remain unified as one, under the very lordship and leadership of Jesus Himself: “*And He [Jesus] is the head of the body, the church; He is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything He might have the supremacy*” (Colossians 1:18).

Your Personal Reflection and Application

Is it difficult for you to accept that you were uniquely created by God and therefore have unique value? Why or why not?

Think of a time when you have seen unique differences between two or more Christ-followers result in conflict. Why do you think these types of conflicts can be so commonplace within the church, and what do you think God wants for us in our relationships with other believers in regards to this topic?

Why do you think God chose to make each member of the Body of Christ so unique from one another?

How are you personally doing in your relationships with other believers when it comes to understanding, valuing, and validating their unique perspectives?

Day 30

Unity in Diversity

The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body – whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free – and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.

Now the body is not made up of one part but of many.

1 Corinthians 12:12-14

One of the things the Bible makes crystal-clear is that God loves diversity! We see this from the very beginning (Genesis 1), as God took great pleasure in the incredible variety displayed in all that He made. This variety was intended to reflect the unity (oneness) and diversity (three-ness) of the Triune God who has existed in three Persons (God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit) from eternity past. But we also see God's delight in diversity in the last book of the Bible too, where we learn that the ransomed and redeemed bride of Christ – the church – will be made up of those “from every tribe and language and people and nation” (Revelation 5:9) who will worship the Lord with one unified voice (Revelation 7:9-10).

1 Corinthians 12 affirms this single unified identity that all Christ-followers share as the Body of Christ. At the same time, though, the Body of Christ is made up of many different parts. It is therefore wrong to overemphasize the unity of the one Body but not acknowledge the diversity found within the Body. That's because God never intended for us to have unity *without* diversity. Our differences matter, and God wants those differences to be celebrated and incorporated into our Christian fellowship. That's why we have different ministries and spiritual gifts and roles in the Body of Christ.

On the other hand, however, it would also be wrong to go in the other direction and focus so much on our differences that we fail to see that we are to be unified as one Body. When we elevate diversity over unity, we unwittingly turn diversity into an idol and inevitably cause the Body to split into divisive cliques and factions that work against each other and make unbelievers want to have nothing to do with Christianity.

You see, the Bible holds unity and diversity together. When we put our faith in Christ for salvation, the result isn't that the things that distinguish us from one another magically disappear, but that we have unity within the Body of Christ *in the midst of* our diversity. That means that all believers have the same position in Christ regardless of their race, social class, or gender, and regardless of their preferences and opinions. We are united by the fact that we have been baptized into the Body of Christ and indwelt by the same Holy Spirit. The Spirit supernaturally and sovereignly places us together and gives us a common bond and a common purpose: to be made more into the likeness of Jesus (Romans 8:29).

God wants His people to have unity in diversity. And in order for that to happen, we need God to change our hearts so that we come to see one another the way God sees us. We need to love one another as He loves us. We need to identify and remove any barriers and inequalities that exist in the church. And we need to do more than simply affirm our differences, but also seek personal and corporate repentance and reconciliation where we have been guilty of bias, pride, or any other attitude that does not reflect His character and build the unity of the Body of Christ.

Will you join God in this process?

Your Personal Reflection and Application

How does today's devotional challenge you personally? Is there any attitude, action, or inaction on your part of which you need to repent?

Do you feel you struggle with either extreme as described in today's devotional (emphasizing unity without diversity or emphasizing diversity without unity in essentials)?

How does the message of the Gospel speak to how we should approach the subject of diversity within the Body of Christ?

What steps do you feel God would have you take to demonstrate your commitment and desire to be a more visible advocate for reconciliation and diversity?

Take a moment to thank God specifically for the diversity that is found within the Body of Christ. Thank Him for putting Christian brothers and sisters in your life who may not be like you but who nevertheless have tremendous value within the church.

Day 31

The Essential Things that Make us One

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance:

that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve.

1 Corinthians 15:3-5

All biblical matters related to our Christian walk are important, but not all are equally important. Some matters are primary or “*of first importance*,” while others are secondary, at best, like our opinions and personal preferences.

Problems and conflicts inevitably arise, however, when churches or individual believers disagree about what actually qualifies as a primary or essential priority. And if we are unable to find agreement around the most essential things, how can we expect to maintain unity in the faith and harmony within the Body of Christ?

Today’s Scripture reading indicates that what needs to be of first importance to all believers is not our personal preferences or opinions, but rather the facts of Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection. These are the essentials that make us one Body. They point us to the reality of our sinfulness and of our need for a Savior, to Jesus’ substitutionary sacrifice by which He took upon Himself the wrath of God for us and paid the penalty for our sins, and to the victory that Jesus achieved by overcoming the grave and rising from the dead so that all who follow and trust Him could have everlasting life.

These matters are essential, because without them, there is no good news and no salvation and no true church. They represent realities without which we cannot be saved. These essential beliefs are the things we need to stand firm in. They are the foundation that does not change or waver. They are the truths that make us one Body.

They are of first importance, because God works His power through the Gospel to take us from death to life, to make us into new people, and to build His body. They are primary, because they remind us that the Gospel is what changes us from the inside-out. It changes how we approach relationships and compels us to be people of peace and ambassadors of reconciliation who seek to sacrificially love others – even those who hurt us or with whom we disagree.

So, the next time you find yourself at odds with another believer, remember that they are your fellow brother or sister in Christ because of the Gospel. Even when you can’t seem to find any common ground or areas of agreement with that person, recognize that you actually have more in common with them than you may think. You are both sinners who are in need of God’s grace and forgiveness. You both have the same heavenly Father and the same Holy Spirit. And you have both been purchased and reconciled to God through the blood of Christ. What could be more unifying than that?

Your Personal Reflection and Application

Why do you think the apostle Paul made the claim that the Gospel message is “of first importance”? Do you personally agree with his assertion?

What are the essentials that all believers should agree on?

What do you think would happen if Christians focused more upon finding agreement on matters of first importance and then respectfully disagreeing on things of secondary importance?

How might remembering the essential message of the Gospel help you the next time you're in a conflict with another Christ-follower?

Day 32

Dealing with Opinions and Preferences

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.

Romans 14:13-14

Yesterday's devotional focused on essential matters about which every Christ-follower should agree. But what do we do with secondary matters that have more to do with differences of opinions or personal preferences? How can we keep those things from tearing at the fabric of unity in the church?

Biblical Opinions

The things that fit under this category are not essential core beliefs of each and every Christ-follower. They are also not requirements for being made right with God. Nevertheless, they represent those reasoned conclusions that shape your own conscience and that you have personally chosen to adhere to as an expression of your faith in Christ.

In Romans 14, Paul dealt with the subject of eating meat that had previously been offered to idols. Some in the Roman church felt that such eating was inappropriate, while others either felt the freedom in Christ to eat this meat or didn't have strong convictions on the matter. Notice that Paul didn't take a particular side or establish either view as a standard or an absolute. Instead, he made room for each person to follow their own heart and personal convictions, and he asked each side to respect and love each other enough to allow for different choices.

While it would be a sin for you personally to violate your own biblically informed opinions, believers must never judge other believers simply because they don't share the same opinions.

Preferences

These are subjective commitments a person might choose to make that have no moral consequence and don't have any direct biblical basis. Music styles, Bible versions, carpet color, preaching styles, and ministry models all fit under this category. Most of us simply want things to be the way we like them. Sadly, personal preferences are often the number-one source of conflicts within the Body of Christ.

While personal preferences are certainly not wrong, we often make the mistake of turning our own preferences into essentials or standards for the rest of the church community, and we tend to become dogmatic, demanding, or difficult for others to deal with if they don't agree with our preferences. The best approach to take is to remember Philippians 2:4: Each of you should look not only to your own interests (e.g., preferences), but also to the interests of others.

Every church will be faced with challenging relational moments from time to time, so it is crucial that we understand these important distinctions so that we can better pursue and preserve greater unity in Christ.

Your Personal Reflection and Application

What are some secondary matters within the Church that you have seen Christians elevate to a primary level?

What are some personal opinions or preferences you have that could potentially be divisive within the Body of Christ? Have you ever been guilty of demanding that your preferences become absolutes or higher priorities for others or for the church? How can you keep these things from damaging the unity of the church?

What are some biblical obligations you have toward believers who differ from you in terms of their opinions or preferences?

If you have ever seen a church split, was it over essential issues or secondary issues? Could the split have been avoided?

Day 33

Do What Leads to Peace and Edification

For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.

Romans 14:17, 19

If you haven't figured it out yet from this 40-day study, individual believers and churches sure do argue and disagree a lot! We argue about big things and small things, important matters and petty matters, essentials and non-essentials. We debate values and goals and programs and methods and motives. We are quick to make assumptions and jump to conclusions without knowing all of the facts, but slow to forgive, to give others the benefit of the doubt, or to make room for our God-given differences.

Conflict and disagreements are realities that confront every congregation at some level, regardless of how loving and caring the people in the church are. The question is not so much whether or not we will disagree, but rather how we choose to respond to and resolve our disagreements and differences.

Today's exhortation is to "*make every effort to do what leads to peace.*" The apostle Paul is saying that we need to take intentional action and be persistent when it comes to pursuing peace in our relationships with other believers. We can't afford to be laid back or careless about this.

This might mean swallowing your pride and having a challenging conversation with someone with whom you disagree. Or it might mean being inconvenienced and moving your schedule around in order to make time to sit down with the other person to work through your differences. The point is that your aim should be to take whatever steps are necessary to pursue godly relationships and to live at peace with others in the Body of Christ.

Notice also that we are to be similarly deliberate when it comes to doing what leads to "*mutual edification.*" This means that instead of tearing others down and contributing to further discord, we are to strive to build up, to solidify, and to strengthen the Body of Christ. Rather than seeking revenge, asserting your rights, or being self-righteous, we are to make every effort to edify others with our words – both what we say and what we *don't* say – and with our actions – both what we do and *don't* do.

And why should we make such efforts? Because the Kingdom of God is not a matter of externals (such as what we eat or drink) or other secondary matters (like programs and personal preferences), but rather it's about the condition of our hearts and the internal transformation that God has graciously brought about in our relationship with Him and in our relationships with others.

Because we are new creations (2 Corinthians 5:17) and have been made righteous through the atoning work of Christ, God wants us to practice righteousness and to walk "*as those who have been brought from death to life*" (Romans 6:13). Because we have peace with God, we should pursue peace with others. And because we have received the joy of our salvation, we should choose to share that joy with our fellow members in God's family. After all, we will spend all eternity with our brothers and sisters in Christ, so it makes sense for us to urgently and deliberately pursue unity and mutual edification with one another.

Your Personal Reflection and Application

Are you intentional about doing whatever is necessary to pursue peace with other believers? How about when it comes to building up or deferring to those with whom you disagree? What changes do you need to make?

What does it mean that the Kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking? If that is not what is most important, then what is, according to Romans 14:17?

What opinions or preferences are important to you that don't seem to be as important to others? How do you handle that?

How should the fact that you are a citizen of the Kingdom of God necessarily affect your relationships with other believers?

Day 34

Please One Another

We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: "The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me."

Romans 15:1-3

If you stop to think about it, it's amazing how many of our relational problems all start from the same place: just plain old selfishness. We want our own individual wills to be done and to have others recognize our rights, and when that doesn't happen, watch out!

If at the heart of all the friction that exists between us and other believers is selfishness, then something must change. That's why Paul gives us today's verse: "*We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves.*"

This is certainly not how the world thinks. The world, by and large, values the notion that those who are strong ought to take advantage of the vulnerable and the weak. This verse, however, turns that thinking inside-out. Paul is telling Christ-followers that those who are strong actually have an *obligation* to those who are weak.

What does Paul mean when he says we are "*not to please ourselves?*" He means that we should not put our own rights and needs above those of others. He is saying to not do anything to needlessly offend other Christian brothers and sisters. Instead of avoiding or rejecting those whose convictions differ from our own, we are to actively look for ways to serve them. We are to "*bear with*" others – not in the sense of "putting up with them" while rolling our eyes and thinking demeaning thoughts about them, but in the sense of coming alongside others to carry or to support them, much as what someone would do for a loved one who is carrying burdens that are beyond their ability to carry on their own.

More specifically, then, how can we more actively seek to please one another?

- By working for the good of others (v. 2a)
- By seeking to build others up in the faith (v. 2b)
- By following Jesus' example of seeking to please others instead of Himself (v. 3)

That last bullet point doesn't mean that Jesus was more interested in pleasing others than He was in pleasing His Heavenly Father. It does mean, however, that He surrendered His will to the Father, sacrificing Himself and laying down His rights in order to carry our griefs and our sorrows and to ultimately bring about our eternal good.

Your Personal Reflection and Application

What specific examples from Jesus' life can you think of in which He sought to please others (as Paul defines it in Romans 15:1-3), rather than seeking to please Himself?

Is there an area in your life where you are so intent on getting your own way that it is hurting others in the church?

In what areas right now do you believe God would want you to sacrifice your own preferences and desires for the sake of others, or to bear the burdens of those around you who are weak?

Are there some non-essential things in your life related to the church that you have been clinging onto, because they are what you personally want? What could you do that would help you release those things to God for the sake of unity within the Body of Christ?

Day 35

Accept one another

*Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you,
in order to bring praise to God.*

Romans 15:7

From the moment of our birth, we long to be accepted by others. Initially, the people from whom we primarily desire care and acceptance are our parents, our caretakers, or whomever happens to be in the immediate vicinity at any given moment. But then our circle of acceptance gradually widens to include people like siblings, peers, teachers, boyfriends or girlfriends, spouses, employers, or any number of others from whom we hope to receive affirmation and approval. Let's face it, it's a great feeling to know that you are accepted by someone else!

To "*accept one another*," though – at least in the way that the apostle Paul intended when he wrote Romans 15:7 – means much more than simply caring for people whom you are already naturally inclined to like. It also means more than to merely tolerate one another. It really means to warmly welcome others, especially those who are *different* than you, into the fellowship of the Body of Christ.

In other words, to truly accept one another means to not simply surround yourself with other believers who look and act and think and believe and worship and react to sin just like you do. It means to respect God's decision to design each person in the way He so chooses. It means to accept others even if you don't agree with them. It means to avoid judging or looking down on others because of their external appearance. It means to actually *celebrate* your differences with other Christian brothers and sisters and to welcome them as you would someone with whom you share a great deal in common.

Why should we accept one another? What is the motivation for doing so? Paul tells us in the second half of verse 7. We are to accept one another for two key reasons:

1. Because Christ accepted *you*. In other words, Christ accepted you when you didn't deserve to be accepted. He died for you while you were still His enemy (Romans 5:8, 10). Jesus' acceptance of you had absolutely nothing to do with your worthiness. It had absolutely everything to do with His divine choice to welcome you by grace into His family. Knowing this, how can we choose to withhold love from others when God has not withheld His love from us?
2. Because it brings praise to God. Meaning, it's important to accept one another – in spite of our differences – not simply so that we can get along and have peace, but so that God will get the credit and the glory. Since accepting and warmly welcoming other believers in spite of our differences goes completely against the grain of our natural human instincts, doing so can send a strong message to the world that God is big enough and capable enough to change anyone's heart through the transforming power of the good news of the Gospel.

Your Personal Reflection and Application

Who are some people in your life whose acceptance of you is especially meaningful?

How difficult is it for you to accept someone else with whom you disagree or share significant differences?

What are some current examples of non-essential cultural or practical differences that tend to divide churches or individual Christ-followers? How can we overcome these?

How might it be helpful for you to keep Jesus' acceptance of you and God's glory in mind whenever you're dealing with challenging relationships within the Body of Christ?