

Unity in Our Direction

Romans 12:9-21

practice if we are to live in unity as the body of Christ.

From the simplest of toys found in a child's Happy Meal to the most complex machines like space shuttles many items come with a set of directions. Open up your glove box and your automobile has an operator's manual with directions from things like tire rotation to checking your fluid levels to driving on poor road conditions.

The toaster oven you purchased came with directions as did the bottle of detergent from Target. David's Lego sets have directions with both pictures and words because parents need them.

With Thanksgiving around the corner, your cookbook provides directions for your favorite stuffing, how long the turkey should be in the oven and how to make a delicious pumpkin crumb cake.

From time to time David likes to help me pump gas. The gas pump directs him on how to insert the card (mine) and how to get the gas from the holding tank to my car tank.

Our lives are filled with all kinds of directions. Some directions are well done and easy to follow. Others are poorly done and require a call to the helpline for assistance.

The church has been given a set of directions on how to live as a Christian and how to live with others – Christian or not – as God would direct. We need those directions because they guide us to unity. But like the time we tried to assemble that bookshelf without the use of directions, we often attempt to navigate life and relationships without the assistance of directions from the Bible. Both result in frustration and failure. We ignore God's directions to our peril.

Turn in your Bible to **Romans 12:9-21**. It is here that we consider unity in our direction. This passage gives us numerous attitudes and actions to

The direction of unity initiates with me.

The direction of unity includes others.

I. THE DIRECTION OF UNITY INITIATES WITH ME – v. 9-12

This passage gives us a number of things that we can practice to establish unity.

A. Practice Love

Verse 9a

"Let love be without hypocrisy." KJV

"Love must be sincere." NIV

"Don't just pretend that you love others." NLT

The love we are to have for others is to be the only kind of love that God has and God gives.

His love for us is never said to be *eros* or the word we get erotic, meaning something that is sensual.

Neither is His love for us *phileo* or brotherly love meaning a like for someone we get along with or

who shares similar hobbies or thrills. It's an affectionate love based on mutual friendship. We like hanging out together because we both like fishing or knitting or art or gardening or sports.

But the term Paul uses here that is to be our expression of love for others is *agape*. It is exactly how God loves us. His love for us and our love for others is to be unconditional, unlimited, unending. We are to love in spite of what someone else does to us or says about us.

God gave us an example when He demonstrated His *agape*/love for us while we were still His enemies Christ died for us.

Elsewhere we note that He has loved us with an everlasting love. It will never change or be restricted or rescinded. We will never hear Him say that He doesn't love us anymore or that He loves us any less.

It is that kind of love that Paul says we are to have for others. It is that very kind of love that demonstrates to the world that we are His disciples.

John 13:34-35 “A new commandment I give to you that you love one another as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this shall all men know that you are my disciples if you have love one to another.”

Writing again about love, John has this to say: **“My little children, let us not love in word neither in tongue, but in deed and in truth.” I John 3:18**

These verses flesh out what Paul is stating in Romans that our love must be without hypocrisy, it must be sincere, it must be genuine. This love is without pretense.

If he is stating that our love must be without hypocrisy or that it must be genuine then we can assume that it is possible for our love to be hypocritical, that it can be disingenuous.

It may be that someone does something to us whether intentional or unintentional, it doesn't matter which, but we put on a mask around them. We pretend to love them. We pretend that everything is okay and when we are around them we smile warmly but inside we seethe with resentment or when we see them we inwardly cringe and keep a record of the times they hurt us.

Love is insincere when we envy what they have. Love is insincere if the motive for that love is to get something in return.

“I'll love you if...”

“I'll love you when...”

This genuine love developed in us through the Holy Spirit expresses itself in a deep love toward the Giver and a practical love toward others. That is the love that helps to establish unity in the body of Christ, the direction that it should take us. **“Love must be sincere.”**

Verse 10a

“Be devoted to one another in brotherly love.”

“Love each other with genuine affection.”

This is the love that is exhibited between family members. There is a natural affection between you because of the family ties. That is the same kind of affection Paul says that Christians are to have for each other, there should be a family bond. You may say, “yea, Pastor, but you don't know my family. If you only knew my brother, or if you only knew my parents there isn't any family affection.” I didn't say it would be easy, but that is the kind of close affection we are to have for each other. It's a love that will do anything for the other. After all, we will spend eternity together – so let's get along.

B. Practice Holiness

“Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.” NIV

“Abhor that which is evil; cling to that which is good.” KJV

“Hate what is wrong. Stand on the right side of the good.” NLT

I like the KJV rendering here – **“to abhor.”** Think of the most repulsive thing imaginable, something that really nauseates you. That feeling is the word used by Paul to describe how we are to hate evil. It's more than just a strong dislike for something; it is an intense feeling that is so repulsive we want to run away as fast as we can in the opposite direction. It horrifies us. It disgusts us. It is detestable. That is how God wants us to view evil. The word evil is in opposition to the good. It's evil in character, something that is base. Such a hatred for sin is to be a unifying factor for the church. That should be a defining character trait of the church, but unfortunately too many churches are like the Corinthian church and have tolerated evil rather than be repulsed by it.

Our culture has become desensitized to sin. When we hear of an armed robbery on the news that

resulted in the victim's death we shrug our shoulders and comment that it's just another day in that city and we continue on with our crossword puzzle.

When a woman is attacked in a local shopping center and an employee bravely steps in to intervene there's more concern about adhering to company policy than the safety of the victim.

When the conversation at work turns to things that are sordid it's easier to engage in the conversation than to exit the room.

God wants us to be holy— H-O-L-Y in our character, not holey — H-O-L-E-Y in character because we tolerate evil either in our own lives or in the church.

I Peter 1:15-16 “But, as He who hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of life, because it is written, ‘Be holy for I am holy.’”

If we are to follow the direction of unity, we must hate evil and pursue what is good, right, moral, holy. Paul had to write to the Corinthians about a number of things they were allowing in the church because they tolerated sin. Hating sin and clinging to what is good should be instinctual for the God-fearing believer who seeks unity. Adhere to what is good.

Psalms 97:10 “You who love the Lord, hate evil.”

C. Practice Humility

“Honor one another above yourselves.” NIV
“Take delight in honoring each other.” NLT

We are commanded here to put others ahead of our own selves. It is shameful what some people will do to get their own way in a matter or who always want to be first or who want to bring attention to themselves.

Philippians 2:3-5 “Don't be selfish; don't live to make a good impression on others. Be humble,

thinking of others as better than yourself. Don't think only about your own affairs, but be interested in others, too, and what they are doing. Your attitude should be the same that Christ Jesus had.”

I Peter 5:5-6 tells us that God will humble the proud person and will exalt the humble person.

One day an expert in the law came to Jesus and asked how he could have eternal life. Jesus asked Him a question in return – what does the Law say, how do you interpret it? The man responded with a summary of the 10 Commandments from **Deuteronomy 6:5 “love the Lord with all your heart, soul, strength and mind and love your neighbor as yourself.”** Jesus said the man had summed it up well and if he did that he would have eternal life. Now Jesus didn't mean that by following the Law you could be saved but that a person had to be perfect because we know that the Law does not justify, but rather it shows that man has fallen short of it in one way or another. No one is perfect.

The man, thinking he had perfectly kept the law, wanted clarification to justify his actions and attitudes. So he asked Jesus, who is my neighbor?

From that question Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan. A man whom we can only assume was Jewish had just left Jerusalem traveling on his way to Jericho. We don't know anything else about the man to this point because it's not important. He was traveling alone having just come from Jerusalem. It could be he had just been there to worship at the Temple or he could have just closed up shop in the market after selling his wares. Jesus says that as he was traveling robbers ambushed him, stripped him of his clothes, beat him and tossed him in the ditch half dead.

This man was in the ditch probably moaning from the pain of his beating. Two religious men happen

to be traveling along the same road independent of each other but both have the same response. They kept on going. They can't be bothered with the likes of someone in such a condition. It would inconvenience them or worse yet defile them. They had more important religious matters to attend to. So they left him in the ditch.

A third man happened by the same spot, heard the moaning, saw the plight of the suffering man and stopped what he was doing and where he was going to assist the man by caring for him and taking him to a place where he could recover from his beating. He didn't just tell the man to be warmed and filled; he bandaged him up and paid for any expenses that may be incurred during his recovery. That to me is an example of humility – putting the needs of others before our own.

If there is to be unity there must be humility.

D. Practice Zeal

“Never be lacking in zeal but keep your spiritual fervor” NIV

Zeal means diligence, to be excited, to have intense enthusiasm as in working for a cause.

Before his conversion Paul was zealous in ridding the world of the church. After his conversion he was zealous for Christ. Next to knowing Christ, it was his overarching passion.

Luke records for us in Acts 18 that Apollos taught about Jesus with great fervor. He was passionate.

We cannot be half-hearted about our work for the Lord, or about our pursuit of unity. Be zealous.

E. Practice Serving

“serving the Lord.”

Psalms 100:2 tells us just how we are to serve the Lord. **“Serve the Lord with gladness.”**

Everything we do should be as if we were serving the Lord. And in no matter what circumstances we find ourselves, our service is to be with gladness.

Warren Wiersbe says “Worship leads to service and true service leads to worship.”

When our worship is right our work is right.

Everything about the believer who seeks unity in the body is in effort of serving Christ and he does so gladly. Service is never a burden or a duty but rather a delight and is to be done with diligence. Service is about a willing heart that looks for opportunities to serve Christ by serving others.

Think for a moment about all the sufferings of the Apostle Paul – his beatings, his shipwrecks, his imprisonments, his times of hunger and cold, his near death experiences at the hands of rioters yet he continued to serve the Lord with gladness. Beaten and cast into the inner cell of a damp dungeon, his feet and hands in stocks and we find him with his friend and co-worker Silas singing hymns. It wasn't to pass the time or with the hope that it would somehow ease the pain or take their minds off their dire circumstances. They were truly joyful in serving the Lord.

If there is to be unity in the body, then we must serve the Lord by serving others and we must serve the Lord with gladness.

F. Practice Joyful Hope

All around us every day we see evidence of those who have lost hope. The difference in countenance between someone who waits patiently in hope on the Lord and the person who does not know the Lord is striking. The person who hopes in the Lord and believes that His Lord knows his every need

remains joyful, while the person without such a hope lives in despair. His daunting circumstances lead him to desperate measures sometimes measures with no return because he has no hope and no joy.

We have hope for today and we have hope for tomorrow and in that hope we can encourage one another. We have a hope in the future because we know the end. We do not know when that end will come, but we know and believe the promises of God and in that we hope and that hope makes us joyful. The body that joyfully hopes in the Lord for today and tomorrow is a body that is in unity. Together we are able to bolster the hope of someone whose hope lags or falters a bit.

Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 “Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up!”

Where there is unity the broken spirit is lifted up.
Where there is unity the faint heart is encouraged.
Where there is unity feeble legs and arms are strengthened.
Unity breeds joyful hope.

G. Practice Patience in Affliction

Where there is hope there is the ability to stand up in affliction. Where there is unity there is strength in numbers.

Romans 5:2-5

Why could Paul wait patiently in the middle of suffering? It was because he knew that the church was praying for him.

Why could four Hebrew boys stand strong against a ruthless king like Nebuchadnezzar? It was because they stood as one in the position of their faith and in the practice of that faith.

We can all probably look around us and see those whose faith has crashed and burned. Maybe they didn't have any faith to begin with and when the storms of life came flooding in they were easily swept away because they weren't anchored to the one who is our Rock. Or maybe their faith was as weak as an old thread. Or maybe they weren't patient enough, if they had only held on a little longer.

Job comes to mind as the epitome of being patient in affliction. How much easier it would have been if only his wife had come alongside him or if even one of his friends had rallied to his side. Near the end of his affliction he said that even though the Lord should slay him, he would still trust in Him. How is that for patient endurance?

In Philippians 3 Paul encouraged the believers there to join him in the journey of faith so that together they could endure any suffering or tribulation that might come along. Unity helps us stand in trials.

H. Practice Faithful Prayer

Prayer for one another is essential to build unity in the body. It is inconceivable to think that we can pray fervently as we should for one another and then not be in unity. The KJV says to be **“diligent in prayer.”** Faithful or diligent prayer is a persistent talking to God – at all times, for all things and in various ways.

Our prayer should also take on the same kind of tone that Jesus had when He prayed for our unity as a body of Jesus followers.

The direction of unity is initiated by us. We can't wait for someone else to take the initiative. These are some of the attitudes and actions essential to bringing unity in the body. It begins with us. Unity isn't unity if it doesn't include others. That's the tone of the remainder of the chapter.

II. THE DIRECTION OF UNITY INCLUDES OTHERS – v. 13-21

A. Practice Benevolence

“Share with God’s people in need.”

We have a social responsibility to others, and according to **Galatians 6:10** especially to those who are of the household of faith. That’s what happened in the early church and it resulted in unity. We read about in it Acts 2.

They were devoted to teaching.

They were devoted to fellowship.

They were devoted to breaking bread.

They were devoted to prayer.

Verse 44 says that **“All the believers were together.”** That means they were of one mind, there was a singleness of purpose and desire. They saw a need and someone met it. There was another need and someone else met that. They lived in a spirit of unity. Look around and consider how you can meet the needs of others in our church or community.

Several ladies from the church have gotten together and devised a plan to be benevolent to other ladies in the community. They are calling it AMEN – A Mother’s Escape Night. They want to show benevolence in a tangible way to mothers of children especially single mothers to allow them a night out and this group of ladies will watch the kids for free.

When we look at the model of Acts 2 we see the principle that when the church has unity they observe and meet the tangible needs of others as they are able.

Acts 6 shows us what can happen when the church is out of unity. Dissension and disruption occur. Finger pointing and name calling and sides are chosen and needs go unmet.

A church that has unity is benevolent.

B. Practice Hospitality

This literally means the love of strangers. From its root we get words like hospital and hospice. They are places that care for others. A church that exists in unity will practice hospitality.

It means when a new neighbor moves in next door we in some demonstrate friendship toward them. It means that when a visitor comes to our church we welcome them with glad hearts and open arms and invite them to join us in worship. It means that when we see someone struggling in a parking lot with their groceries we assist them. It means that when there is a new kid at school we help them get around so they know where they are going or don’t feel alone. It means that when someone’s house burns down we pitch in to provide in some tangible way.

C. Practice Kindness – v. 14

“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.”

Isn’t that what Jesus taught on the Sermon on the Mount? **(Matthew 5:44) “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”**

Isn’t that how He loved us when we were still His enemies?

Seek to bless them. Kindness builds unity.

D. Practice Compassion – v. 15

“Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.”

This means to show compassion or empathy. Empathize with others when whether they experience joy or sorrow.

A pastor once shared with me something he encountered that illustrates this very principle. He had to go to the hospital to visit two couples on the same day. The first couple he met with had just welcomed their very first child and he came in to rejoice with them. After that visit he went one floor up to visit the second couple. They had tried and tried and tried to have children but could not and on that day she had to have a hysterectomy. The pastor wept with them in their sorrow.

Too often we want to shy away from those going through painful times. It's more fun to be happy and rejoice. It's uplifting. The other is so emotionally draining and besides we don't know what to say or we're afraid we might say the wrong thing. Who says you have to say anything? Sometimes the best thing is to say nothing. For one week Job's friends sat with him in silence and then they opened their mouths. Practicing compassion builds unity in the body.

E. Practice Harmony – v. 15

This is the essence of what we are talking about in our series. James puts a different spin on it by saying that we shouldn't show partiality (James 2:1-4, 9). Again the idea of humility comes out here adding the thought that we should be willing to include anyone in our circle. Not doing so is a sign of arrogance, snobbery, conceit.

Unity in the body is devoid of partiality.

F. Practice Forgiveness – v. 17-21

Our natural inclination is to want to take up revenge against someone who has wronged us. We want justice served and we'd rather do it ourselves because then we know it will get done and done to our satisfaction. People have such short fuses. We see displayed in road rage or in brawls on the ball diamond. Instead, Paul's advice is to give it over to the Lord, after all He was patient with us in coming

to salvation, perhaps this other person will repent. By showing kindness to the other person instead of retaliation it says we heap coals on his head. In those days there was a common practice that was a sign of remorse. If the person who had been wronged demonstrated kindness to someone who had wronged him and that person realized he had done something wrong, in a show of remorse they would carry a jar of hot coals on their head.

Harmony may not always be possible, but as far as it depends on you seek peace, seek unity. Paul's conclusion is that instead of being overcome by evil or doing something wrong in response, instead do what is right. This is beautifully illustrated for us in the Old Testament when on several occasions David refused to take the life of Saul even though Saul was bent on killing him. Evil for evil only brings more evil. That's easy to do and so is doing good to someone who does good to us. But doing something good for someone who has just done something evil to you is not only a challenge it is not also commendable and may bring repentance by the person who wronged you. If no repentance comes, just remember that God's retribution is still coming.

Forgiveness brings unity.

Scripture gives many directions along the path toward unity. It begins with us and is exhibited in our actions and attitudes towards others.

If Jesus prayed for it, we ought to pursue it. For us to be a testimony to the world of the change that has taken place in us because of Christ's death and resurrection, then we must seek unity in our direction. **Which directions are you following?**