

## Living in Harmony

Romans 15:5e

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

Probably most of here have dreamed the teenager's dream of Utopia: a state of existence where everything is perfect. And then some of us who think we are a little more persistent or persevering, years later still dream that dream of Utopia. A state of existence where everything is in absolute harmony. Now, I doubt if there's one of us here this morning, that has not at least once thought of that. And maybe more of us than care to admit, have lived our lives to bring that about. And we usually think of it in terms of the descriptions of the earth when Jesus returns and sets up the kingdom of God here. And you may remember there are several descriptions of that, one is in Isaiah 11:6, and you'll recognize the words and the whole spirit behind them. It's a description of the time when Jesus will return and set up the kingdom of God here on earth. "The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall feed; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The suckling child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea."

Now, we come to a startling paradox, because there isn't one of us here that will not tend inside our miserable, old, shrewd, sarcastic cynical minds to dismiss that as just idealistic dreams. There probably isn't one of us here who will not say, "That's madness, it's just idealism." And yet, the paradox is that every one of us here actually went into our marriages and carry on our relationships with our friends and with our roommates and with even our colleagues in business and at school with the hope that our relationship will be like that. And if you examine it you must admit, that's what you're really hoping for. Indeed all the thoughts you have about relationships with friends, or with relatives, or with marriage partners, all of them are colored by your belief that it should really be like that and so there's a strange paradox. On the one side we dismiss that picture as idealistic dreaming and on the other side all of us deep down have a secret hope and actually a very certain and solid expectation that our relationships with our partners, or relationships with our friends, our relationships with our colleagues are meant to be like that.

We have some relationships which I've been involved in particularly in business with east coast reps, sales representatives. And they are aggressive New Yorkers and yet one of the things that come through in all our conversations together over the phone is really everybody, everybody deep down really wants business to be a matter of relationships and not a matter of the dollar. And even though that gets very cynical at times, deep down, even the hardest business man really expects to get something more out of business than just enough dollars to carry on carrying on business. All of us are hoping that somehow in our relationships there'll be harmony and there'll be peace and that our relationships are made for that.

Why is that? Why have we on one side this cynical dismissal of these millennial descriptions of harmony as unrealistic -- and on the other side, deep down all our relationships have that hope at the center of them. Well, it's because of a truth that we've looked at before and it's Ecclesiastics 3:11, a verse that we've looked at quite often before together. This is the reason we all have less hope because, "He has made everything beautiful in its time; also he has put eternity

into man's mind." And that's why. God has put eternity into your mind and mine. We're made in God's image and we're made to operate in harmony and so we're always expecting harmony and we're always hoping for harmony. And deep down, that's what we really believe our marriages should be like, our friendship should be like, our business relationship should be like.

Why are they not then? Why do we so often not have harmony in our relationships with each other? Well, would you look at Romans 14:2? Which I think, begins to get us on the track towards an answer. Why do we have this harmony in our relationships? "One believes he may eat anything, while the weak man eats only vegetables." If we were all vegetarians we would be ok. No. One man believes one thing and another man believes another. Now you may say to me, "Well then, why do we have disharmony in our relationship? Is it because we have different opinions about things?" No. We have a thousand different backgrounds. We all come from different parental backgrounds, we all come from different economic backgrounds, some of us come from even different national backgrounds. We all have had various kinds of education. We've all sat under different teachers. We've all read different books. We're bound to have a thousand different opinions about everything under the sun. Man and wife is bound to have, father and mother, son and daughter, colleague and colleague, friend and friend, roommate and roommate, we are always bound to have a thousand different opinions about things. That's not what brings the disharmony.

What brings the disharmony is your attitude to the other person's opinion. That's it. It's not just that we have different opinions. It's your attitude to the other's opinion. See, in the next verse there, Romans 14:3, "Let not him who eats despise him who abstains, and let not him who abstains pass judgment on him who eats; for God has welcomed him." That's what brings disharmony. It's our attitude to the other person and to their opinion. Now you may say, "Well now, I don't despise the other person, when they express an opinion that is different from mine. I don't despise them. I don't look down upon them. I just think they're wrong." And you see, that's it. That's what God means when he says in the middle of verse 3, "Let not him who abstains pass judgment on him who eats." That's what it is. That's what brings disharmony.

You're passing judgment on the other person. You're passing judgment on your friend, you're passing judgment on your wife, you're passing judgment on your colleague. You're passing judgment. You're saying that they're wrong. And there's only one person in the whole universe who can say that and that's God. And deep down they're made in God's image and they sense that and they know you're putting yourself out of position. You're no longer behaving to them as a friend, or a partner, as a husband or a wife or a colleague, you're behaving towards them as a God and you're passing judgment on their opinion. And they know that and deep down they react against that, and that's what brings the disharmony and the spirit of disharmony.

Now you may say, "Now wait a minute, wait a minute. I mean, we're not talking here about our friends or our colleagues or our husbands or our wives. We're not talking about abstract issues here like the age of the universe or the future of western civilization, we're talking about big issues. We're talking about where we move the bookcase or we're talking about what we're going to have for supper. These are big issues that affect me, and that affect my liberty, and affect what I'm going to have to do for the next hour. Now, those things if I just let them away with their opinion, I'll just have to go with what they say." Loved ones, that's exactly the issues that God is talking about. Those are the issues that God is talking about. He's not talking about the big issues, the age of the universe or the future of western civilization. He's actually talking about moving the bookcase and what you're going to have for supper. He's talking about the things that adversely affect your own personal liberty. That actually affect what you're going to have to do

for the next hour. That's what he's talking about.

You'll see that if you look at Romans 14:13, "Then let us no more pass judgment on one another, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother. I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. If your brother is being injured by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. Do not let what you eat cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died. So do not let your good be spoken of as evil. For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit; he that serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding. Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make others fall by what he eats; it is right not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that makes your brother stumble." In other words, God isn't talking about those stupid verbal arguments that you get into that you wish that you had never got into and you knew it was a mistake because they don't matter to you anyway. He's talking about the issues that actually affect your life and affect your freedom. Now, if you say, "Well then do you mean you're just to repress your own convictions, for peace sake? Have you just to do what the other person wants you to do just to maintain peace?" Well no, God makes that clear in the rest of this Book. That no, you need to do without any hesitation what GOD has told you to do.

And maybe we should look at it just to be sure of that one, Acts 5:28-29. And you'd get the context of it if you go to verse 27. It was when the Apostles, you remember, were arrested. Acts 5:27, "And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest questioned them, saying, 'We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you intend to bring this man's blood upon us.' But Peter and the apostles answered, 'We must obey God rather than men.'" And the Bible teaches us no, you can't sin just to please everybody. You can't sin just to keep peace in the home. No, you have to obey God. Likewise, certain fathers are given authority over their children, they have to guide their children. Certain pastors, certain teachers are given authority, they have to guide.

What God is talking about here is not those things, he's talking about "adiaphora". You remember we mentioned it months ago in this chapter? "Adiaphora" is the Greek word for things that two people can honestly differ upon and yet walk in the light that God has given them each. But, they're honestly different. One thinks he should eat meat and the other thinks he shouldn't eat meat. And what God is saying is if you are with a weaker, more immature person, who perhaps thinks that life should be lived more strictly than maybe God has led you in later years, then he says, "No big deal. Go with the stricter line because it's more important to encourage them to be faithful to their conscience than to do what you think in your enlightened view is the right thing." So, what God is talking about is "adiaphora". That's what causes this harmony in our relationships.

Most of us in our relationships with the people in the office, most of us in relationships with our partners, with our relatives, with our roommates, are concerned with "adiaphora". We're normally not all worked up over the future of western civilization, we're not all worked up over what's going to happen to the nuclear bomb, we're not all worked up even over abortion. What we continually need and what we allow to bring this harmony into our relationships are "adiaphora".

I'll list some of them. I wrote them down so that I make sure – and we'll all know them so well but those are the ones you forget. What shall we have for supper tonight? What color of grapes should we buy? Should we get new drapes? Which car should we use? Whom will we invite to the barbeque?

Which movie should we see? (These are biggies!) Should we go on vacation or not? Should we put the stereo on or just stay quiet? Which of us will put the garbage out? Who will make the lunch? Who will vacuum? Which cereal should we buy? It's ridiculous, but those are the "adiaphora" that spoil the harmony in most of our relationships. There are things that we differ on that actually either of us could be right on, but we just differ on them. And we get into trouble because we follow the world's pattern, the world has one of those bright little "saws" we used to call them in Old English; bright little proverbs or principles that are supposed to guide you peacefully through life, except that they create war.

Here it is, Fifty-Fifty. That's the deal, Fifty-Fifty. 50 percent of the time your roommate gets their way, 50 percent of the time you get your way. 50 percent of the time your colleague in the office gets their way, 50 percent of the time you get your way. 50 percent of the time your partner gets her way, 50 percent of the time you get your way. Except that miserable colleague of yours, that rigid roommate of yours, that miserable partner of yours always wants their 50 percent when you want your 50 percent and you just never get around to working out the Fifty-Fifty rule. And actually it doesn't work, it just doesn't work. Fifty-Fifty doesn't work because you always feel deep down that their 50 is bigger than your 50. I remember with my brother I always said, "Mom, he's got the bigger half." Well, there isn't a bigger half. It's their half — that's it. But we always think their 50 percent is bigger than our 50 percent, or their getting it more often than we're getting ours.

In other words, that is "the solution". But it's no solution to this problem of disharmony in our relationships. There is one solution, it's in Philippians 2:5, "Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross." That's it. You say, "You mean give in? Give in?" No; eat of the right tree, eat of the right tree. The whole problem in our relationships is where we're still eating the wrong tree, we're eating of the fruit of the wrong tree.

At the beginning of creation, there were two trees. I will show you where it is, it's in Genesis 2 and it always gets back to this loved ones, so boring -- it's silly and stupid. Satan just has to laugh at us because we trip over this, day-after-day in our lives. It's Genesis 2:9, "And out of the ground the LORD God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil." There were two trees, the tree of life and tree of knowledge of good and evil."

One thing will happen every time you eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil; every time you are preoccupied with whether that opinion of yours is good or that opinion of yours is evil. My opinion is good, yours is evil. Yours is wrong, mine is right. Every time you get preoccupied with its right to move the bookcase there, its wrong to move it there. Its right to have this for supper, its wrong to have that—every time we boring, miserable, simple creatures get involved in that kind of an argument we're eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. We are, we are. You may say, "No, no brother. I'm not talking about moral good and moral evil, it isn't." The Bible is just saying every time you act the God part and say, "You are wrong," even if you just think it in your thought, even if you just have it in your attitude, even if you just have it silently in your attitude, "Well, I know that's wrong. She's soon going to find that out, that color doesn't go with that. Boy, will they find that out." Every time with that attitude, that's what causes it. Doesn't matter, it's not the color at all, it's not the color, it's your attitude.

Actually, it's not the color that eventually is the problem. Often you could believe them through the bad consequences that would otherwise, normally follow their actions, if you had a good attitude to them. Often you cause the consequences by yourself fulfilled prophecy that they're going to find out how wrong they were and that's what God says. See Genesis 2:16, "And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, 'You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.'" That's what happens. Every day we eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, we die. Every time you disagree with your partner because you think they're wrong and you're right, because you think what they said was evil and what you said good, every time you do that, there is death. You know it, I don't need to tell you. You with one voice would say, "That's right. Death comes into our relationship. That's right. Disharmony comes in. That's right. All the life comes out of it. Actually, even if I get my way, the life has gone out of it anyway. You're right." Whereas if you eat of the tree of life, if you do what Jesus said and you humble yourself and you become as a servant and you allow his spirit of humility and love and desire for the best in the other person to come in and fill you, that brings life into the relationship. It brings life.

In other words, those things aren't worth it. Those things aren't worth it. It finally doesn't matter which car you use, you'll forget about it tomorrow. It doesn't matter what you have for supper, it would probably do you the world of good to discipline yourself and go with what somebody else likes. It probably would do you the world of good to eat something that you hate. You'd probably get far more out of it than indulging yourself yet again in what you like. In other words, every time you go down in the dirt and it's hardly going down in the dirt, moving the bookcase where they want it to be moved, or having the drapes that they want to have, or moving the typewriter where they want to move it. But every time you do that, this spirit of Jesus comes into you and through you and fills the relationship with harmony. If you say, "They'll annihilate me. They'll annihilate me. If I do that, they'll walk over the top of me. In the office they'll walk over the top of me, at school they will walk over the top of me. My roommate will steamroller me, my partner will crush me to death. I'll become a nothing. I'll become a nonentity."

That's what happened to Jesus, isn't it? I see. That's what happened to Jesus. That's why we split history into AD and BC because he's become such a nonentity. Well, look loved ones, look at it yourselves, see what happened to him. Philippians 2:8, "And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore," -- see therefore, it follows from that because he humbled himself -- "Therefore, God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." That's what God does.

He has built certain life into the universe that operates that way. No, you won't be annihilated. No, you won't be steamrollered. No, in fact, God will exalt you. In fact, harmony will come into the relationship and you'll find that God has given you a place that is far more precious and far more solid than you could have won with all your insistence that you were right and the other person was wrong. You may say, "Well, I haven't got what it takes." Well, that's right. God, knows that, God knows you haven't got what it takes and that's why he made that promise that he gave us there in Romans 15:5. Because it does take superhuman grace to do that. "May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus." You're right, it does take steadfastness and the Greek word is "patience" -- "hupomone". It takes

patience to stay under it. That's what it means. "Hupo" means "under" in Greek and "meno", you remember our English word "remain". It means to "remain under a thing" -- and that's right, you're right -- with your colleague at work, with your roommate, with your partner, you will have to remain under it for a long time. You'll put a lot of silly looking, colored drapes up. You're going to eat a lot of stuff that you don't want to eat. You're going to take a lot of cars that you will think was the wrong car to take. You're going to do a lot of things that you don't think were right.

But every time you commit that over to the Father and say, "Lord, I have no right to declare whether this is right or this is wrong. You freed me from good and evil. You freed me from right and wrong. Accept what is your will and your spirit's guidance to me. Lord, I commit this to you." Every time you do that, God is going to begin to infuse you with his patience, with his super human patience so that you will be able to remain under that and with his encouragement, with his ability to encourage the other person by your love for them and by your readiness to let them do what they want to do. And then one day, one day they'll turn around to you and they'll make you almost fall over backwards when they say, "What would you like to do?" And then, you'll know it's not you've won, there's been a victory in that relationship that comes from above. And that relationship begins to move on to the harmony that Jesus himself brought between us and our Father.

I don't know about all of you, but if you have some repenting to do on this issue, I think we should just do it now. And we should commit ourselves to a whole new approach to each other, a whole new attitude. A whole repentance from passing judgment on each other. A whole repentance from thinking this is right or this is wrong. And a whole new attitude that is willing "to give and give, and give again, what God hath given thee; to spend thy self nor count the cost, to serve right gloriously the God of all the worlds that are, and all that are to be."

Let's pray. Father, we want to apologize, but if that's too light a word Lord, we want to repent right here in dust and ashes. Bow ourselves down before you and repent of our taking over your job in the universe by taking it over in our relationships. Father, we want to repent of this habit of mind that we have got of pronouncing judgment on each other. Pronouncing judgment on this person's opinion or that person's opinion. Pronouncing whether this person is right or this person is wrong and insisting that our way is the right way and we have the knowledge of what is good. Lord, we see what a weight that is to carry. We see what weariness it brings to us. We see in the past what endless arguments were introduced into our relationships. And Lord, both at work and in the office and at school in the classroom and then in our homes with the people that we live with, roommates, friends, marriage partners. We now repent of this our Father and we commit ourselves to the way of the one man that has been exalted above all others, the way of Jesus. And we commit ourselves to emptying ourselves and becoming as a servant and humbling ourselves even unto death and allowing you to bring the spirit of patience and encouragement into us and into our relationships to transform them and bring them into the harmony that you want not only in the kingdom that is to come, but here on earth, here in our present relationships together.

Father, we bow before you now and we ask that your way will be the way that is followed in all our friendships and we hereby give up our right to our way and what we think is best. We trust you our Father to govern the other person, to overrule them when need be and we ask you to prosper them and make their way always the right way so that they'll be encouraged in you and built up. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.