



Keys to Happy Family Living

Christian Living Series

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Lesson 7 – Walking Together in Unity

*"...that their hearts may be encouraged, **having been knit together in love**, and attaining to all the wealth that comes from the full assurance of understanding, resulting in a true knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ Himself" (Colossians 2:2, NASB, emphasis added).*

"Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together in unity!" (Psalm 133:1). "Can two walk together, except they be agreed?" (Amos 3:3, NKJV).

A harmonious marriage is one of unity and agreement. Husband and wife, dedicated to the task of building a harmonious marriage, must have a clear definition of the meaning of these words.

Agree to disagree?

One idea of unity and agreement is expressed in the words:

I agree to disagree. This idea is based on placing a high value on individuality. In a democracy, you must respect the rights of the individual. This is understood by some to mean that you must accept each other just as you are. According to this philosophy, if the wife thinks differently from her husband in some areas, she has every right to go on doing so. The husband has a right to hold different views from his wife. Each must be gracious and understanding toward the other, but each should grant the other the right to be different.

To illustrate, one couple has differing views about money. Both of them are employed. She spends her money as she pleases. He spends his money as he pleases. Each pays a percentage of the bills to keep the household going.

Other points of difference that are frequently mentioned by marriage partners are the condition of the living room, whether hooks or hangers should be used in the closet, when dishes should be washed, where shoes should be taken off, the flavoring of the food, how often the grass should be cut, bedtime and discipline of the children, paint versus wallpaper, color schemes, entertainment, and so on.

Such minor differences often cause the relationship between husband and wife to be strained. Efforts at resolving them fail because to resolve them means giving up personal rights that are guaranteed in a democracy. To agree to disagree is generally a wishful thought that cannot be successfully and happily carried out.

Agree to agree

Another idea of unity and agreement is expressed by Paul:

"Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose." (Philippians 2: 1-2).

In other words, if both partners are in Christ, they will agree to agree. It is not enough to understand and appreciate the points of difference. The goal should be to resolve those differences, to find a basis for mutual agreement. As followers of Christ, "...we are members of His body. FOR THIS REASON A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER AND SHALL BE JOINED TO HIS WIFE, AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH." (Ephesians 5:30-31). Marriage, to be successful, is more than a fifty-fifty proposition. Each partner must be dedicated to the marriage one hundred per cent. If the goal is to maintain individuality within the marriage, then unity is virtually impossible to achieve. If the goal is to achieve unity and agreement, it can be done.

This does not mean a loss of individuality, or slavery, or imprisonment. It does mean a voluntary commitment on the part of husband and wife to exchange personal individuality for a mutual way of life. The first step toward unity is that of accepting the lifetime goal of becoming like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind.

Continual change

The next time you go into a store, go to the rack where they sell paperback books and scan the titles and covers. Each of these is designed to attract your attention. The first few chapters may be most interesting. You can hardly put the book aside. As you read on, however, you may come to a very dull, uninteresting chapter. The story may take a turn that is most distasteful to you. You may even be tempted to lay the book aside because the story does not have much relationship to the cover or the title, which attracted you to the book in the first place.

Some marriages work out like this. A man and woman meet, develop a happy friendship, pledge their troth, and plunge into the responsibilities of making a living, rearing a family, and getting along with each other for the rest of their lives. The title "Marriage" has a magical sound. The outside cover presents an attractive picture. "And they lived happily ever after" is its fairy-tale theme.

When we open the book however, and examine its details, we find many dull and even

tragic chapters mixed with happy ones. You may even come to the point of dissatisfaction in your married life when you would just as soon toss the book aside.

In the upper room, the Lord Jesus said to His disciples:

"Behold, an hour is coming, and has already come, for you to be scattered, each to his own home, and to leave Me alone; and yet I am not alone, because the Father is with Me. These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world." (John 16:32-33).

The disciples had no idea what Jesus was talking about, but very soon they were to experience the most unexpected event possible. This is true of life. There are unexpected, unplanned turns in the road. Some will be pleasant, some unpleasant. Regardless of the nature of future events, Jesus has promised us peace--a peace that comes from God, not from a stable, uneventful, consistent family life.

One of the dependable features of marriage is the certainty of uncertainty. One of the great tasks facing marriage partners is that of accepting the fact of change. In a marriage, there is a continual series of changing events which demand a constant adjustment of both husband and wife. Pregnancy, the arrival of each child, the absence of children, unexpected illnesses, death, job changes, promotions or demotions, moving, neighborhood changes, church responsibilities to assume or to give up, the shifting scene at school--these are some of the changes that come to each couple, with their corresponding adjustments.

At times, husbands or wives say of their partners, "This is not the person I married!" Of course not. Just as your children keep changing as they grow up, so do you. At the age of one, your children act one way; at two, another way; at three, still another way; at five, differently again. A married person certainly cannot complain about lack of variety. There is a continuous variety. We must remember, however, that a marriage sometimes will develop in one way when we want it to go in another way. At such times there may be periods of disorganization, when one solution is attempted, and then another, over a period of weeks or months. The chapters in a marriage are often unexpected and unpredictable. To expect an unchanging partner or unchanging circumstances, to expect to live "happily ever after" automatically as in the fairy tales, is not true for this life. To expect a permanent point of perfect adjustment and happiness is unrealistic. There is no family on earth that has had this experience. Continuous change is the normal experience in any marriage. This means that there must be continuous adjustment. This can be done with tenderness and compassion if you realize that the family is not a static organization. Marriage must be worked at. It just doesn't tick along in perpetual, unhindered motion. Satisfactory adjustment requires proper and free communication. It means sharing joys, giving praise, and taking admonition or correction. It means you must strive for complete understanding among all the members of the family. This is not an easy way. However, it is a workable way and leads to a peaceful, joyful life together. When the unexpected happens to you, just remember that this is no exception. This is normal. Your peace and happiness depend on your relationship to God; and His peace is available during uncertain, unexpected times as well as during certain, stable times. You are not alone. The Father is with you.

Unity and agreement must be maintained. Paul says to us: "Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." (Ephesians 4:1-3).

Dedication to this goal is only the beginning. A husband and wife have a lifelong task ahead of them. Any organization needs constant attention to keep it running smoothly. Any team must practice constantly together in order to win the game. A marriage, too, needs constant attention in order to preserve unity and agreement because changes occur inevitably in any marriage.

Unity between partners is planned

We are living in a democracy. This means to some that you need submit to no one. You are a law unto yourself.

Several years ago, the directors of a large industrial firm decided that some of their top-level leaders couldn't express themselves well enough; therefore, they hired a professional to give these leaders a speech course. The group came together once a week for twelve weeks. There they were in submission, although not one of them was below the level of general manager.

We must submit ourselves to any organization of which we are a part. There must be a head to any organization. Whenever you put two or more people together, and where there is more than one will involved, you must have some limits, some rules, and some regulations so that all individuals are considered. Each member of the organization has his place and conforms to the limits prescribed for him. As everyone does his part, the organization becomes a smooth-working team, and accomplishes the goal that has been set. In any organization of people, when a member fails to do his assignments or attempts to do someone else's, there is duplication of effort; tasks are left undone; and confusion follows.

A smoothly working marriage also requires teamwork. It is necessary that both the husband and the wife agree on what the place of the husband should be. It is necessary that both husband and wife agree on what the place of the wife should be. Marriage is more than a working agreement between two equal parties. It is rather a complementary union of two members, male and female, each of whom has a special responsibility. There should not be competition between husband and wife. Each has a definite, distinct place. The roles of husband and wife fit together like two interlocking pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.

The ideal relationship between people is expressed by Paul: " ... and be subject to one another in the fear of Christ" (Ephesians 5:21).

Verbal and mental unity

At this point you will find a review of Lesson 2 helpful. There we discussed the place of proper speech in achieving peace with yourself. Words are the means of revealing your innermost self to your partner. "Pleasant words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones" (Proverbs 16:24).

Differences that arise between two partners need not constitute a major crisis. Pleasant words, exchanged in the proper spirit between two people rightly related to each other, can easily bring a meeting of minds. Words can be misunderstood, however. Partners must be sure that misunderstandings do not develop or continue because of differences in the definition of words. Words like thrift, neat, polite, considerate can have a wide range of meaning. Each partner needs to be quick to acknowledge it if misunderstanding of words becomes evident. Your constant, continuing purpose should be to understand and to clarify rather than to justify or defend yourself.

Your goal should be that expressed by Paul in his prayer:

"Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus, so that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 15:5-6).

We are to think alike--to glorify God with "one mind and one mouth." This is one of the basic tasks of marriage partners.

The following example illustrates what can happen when two people differ in their thinking and speaking, even though they use the same words.

A young couple had discussed plans for their marriage very thoroughly. The agreement was that they would establish a home just as soon as they were married. The courtship was a pleasant one. They rented an apartment, purchased furniture, and set the date. She gave notice to her employer that she was terminating her work because she was getting married.

From the start it was an unhappy marriage. This was the husband's story: He said that he and his wife had agreed before their marriage that both would work hard at establishing a home. Instead, she quit working just as soon as they were married. "How can a home be established that way?!" he asked. He had meant that both would work, save their money for a down payment, and then purchase a house.

This was her story: She and her husband had agreed before their marriage that they would work hard to establish a home. She meant that she would quit her job, cook his breakfast, see him off to work, do her housework each day, have a piping-hot meal ready for him when he got home, and be there to greet him when he arrived. They agreed on the words, but meant very different things by those words. Each felt deceived by the other. Both the husband and his wife were sincere enough, but they misunderstood each other. They were not of the same mind. Each was amazed to realize that their unhappiness with each other was the result of a misunderstanding

over the meaning of their agreement. They used the same words, but they were not thinking the same thoughts. Such a problem need never arise if both partners seek both verbal and mental unity.

Unity in feelings and emotions

This is the area of attraction or repulsion. There are many unhappy marriages among partners who have the ability to express themselves clearly and who have brilliant minds, but who are unable to find within themselves a congenial spirit toward each other. A clear understanding of the thinking behind the actions of your partner will not necessarily produce wholesome feeling and emotion. Why? Because love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control are the fruit of the Spirit of God (Galatians 5:22-23). Partners will find emotional unity only as they submit to a power outside of themselves--the power of God through Christ. Then they can attain to the standard by Paul: "Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor" (Romans 12:10). Such a relationship cannot be developed by understanding, or training, or insight. Being cordial, helpful and tolerant is not the same as being affectionate.

To illustrate, a wife explained that she was unable to find a congenial relationship with her husband. They were both well educated and cultured. They understood each other perfectly. There were no arguments. He was a good provider. He took her wherever she wanted to go. He helped around the house. But he kept himself aloof, maintaining a cold silence most of the time. When they did speak, he was cordial and polite, but said as little as possible.

The husband explained that his wife insisted on having her own way. Whenever he differed with her, there was an argument. His only solution was to keep quiet. He did what needed to be done to satisfy her demands. She could never see his side of anything; nor did she consider his needs. He despised her, but for the children's sake he held his peace. "When the children marry," he said, "I plan to leave her." Meanwhile, he was making every effort to keep peace in the family. His idea of peace was silence. He and his wife were "miles apart" in their inward reactions. As the psalmist said, "His speech was smoother than butter, but his heart was war; his words were softer than oil, yet they were drawn swords" (Psalm 55:21). The solution to such a relationship lies in the acceptance by each partner of the fact that both lack the congenial spirit that will enable them to live together in peace. To achieve such unity is to turn to the source--God, who enables us to bear the fruit of the Spirit. (Review the steps studied in Lesson 4.)

Effect of unity on the family

When there are children in the family, unity is the foundation stone for happy family living. When there is disagreement between partners, what happens to the child? Which way will he go? When there is a difference in outlook between a mother and a father, the child is caught in the middle. He can't win. He can please mother, or father, but he can't please both. Here is the crux of much of the strain and tension in modern

adolescents who do not know which way to turn. They must learn to play a game that placates both mother and father. This is one of the reasons Paul said, "Be of the same mind one toward one another" (Romans 12:16). This can be done, but it will be done only in the lives of those people who are willing to submit one to the other and to the Lord.

Study Assignment-Review Questions on Lesson 7

1. What does it mean to agree to disagree, and how does it work out in a marriage partnership?
2. What does it mean to agree to agree, and how does this work out in a marriage partnership?
3. How do you adjust to changes in your marriage situation?
4. Compare marriage to a business organization. What principles for "getting along" are common to both?
5. What is meant by verbal and mental unity and by unity in feelings and emotions?
6. How does disunity affect family life?
7. Study illustrations of marriages described in the Bible. What can you learn from these illustrations that will strengthen your marriage?

Self-Check Test 7

Check your progress.

In the space provided, mark the following statements, "True" or "False."

- _____ 1. The principle "agree to disagree" is one which causes the husband-wife relationship to work more smoothly.
- _____ 2. Marriage partners should voluntarily put down individual ways of life and take up a mutual way of life.
- _____ 3. Continuous changes in husband, wife and children require continuous adjustments.

- _____ 4. A marriage needs less and less conscious effort to preserve unity as years go by.
- _____ 5. A constant purpose in marriage should be that of understanding rather than self-justification.
- _____ 6. Two people can use the same words but mean different things.
- _____ 7. Wholesome feelings and emotions are always produced by a clear understanding of the thinking behind the others person's actions.
- _____ 8. Selfishness on the part of one partner can cause disunity and upset emotions in the other.
- _____ 9. Differing opinions of mother and father will give children a broader and more satisfactory outlook on life.
- _____ 10. It is reasonable to expect a permanent point of perfect adjustment and happiness in marriage.

Visit <http://biblicalcounselinginsights.com/keys-to-happy-family-living-series/answers/> for the answers to these questions.

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