E PLURI BUS UNUM

How Can It Get Better?

Text: Romans 12

Making Sense of the Madness (Part 4)

I want to close out this brief series on the culture of conflict in which we’re living by posing one question: “How Can It Get Better?” How can we model a more creative and truly Christian kind of discourse on controversial matters that might help to change the conversation in the spheres we influence? The short answer is by living out the vision God gives us through the Apostle Paul’s words in Romans chapter 12. There is far too much in here to do justice to today, but let me try to lift out just a few of the bits of wisdom here and encourage us to put them into more frequent practice.

Be Sincere in Expressing Your Convictions

The first recommendation is simply this. As you talk with other people, be sincere in expressing your convictions. Paul puts it this way: “Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good… Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord” (Rom 12:9,11). Wow. Hate… Cling… Zeal… Fervor… those are strong terms.

Some of you may have construed what I have been saying in this series as an invitation to passivity, silence, or wishy-washiness about moral values. If you’ve read my teaching as effectively saying: “Hey, we see things differently or care about different values, so we should all just hold our tongues and retreat to our quiet, private faith,” then I need to be clearer. On the contrary, Jesus repeatedly challenges his followers to be highly active agents in their societies.

“You are the salt of the earth” (Mat 5:13). I want you to be a seasoning, preserving presence in your culture. Some of you will remember those old TV ads for Accent™ food seasoning, whose ditty involved a trumpet sounding and the challenge to “Wake up food!” In the book of Revelation, Jesus sounds a much greater trumpet: “Wake up [Christians]! Strengthen what remains and is about to die” (Rev 3:2).

There are too many sacred values that are growing weak or dying off in the decay of our time. We need Christians who are like Daniel was in Babylon or Esther was in Persia or Wilberforce was in Britain or Martin Luther King was in America. Be sincere in expressing the moral values and convictions God’s Word upholds. Hate the evil God names there. Cling to the good God describes there. Never lack in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor (Romans 12). Your earnest voice, vote, and activism are needed as a seasoning and preserving influence in this world.
Demonstrate Sober Humility As You Serve

But demonstrate sober humility as you serve in the public square. The Apostle puts it this way: “By the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment” (Rom 12:3).

Much of the political discourse today is tinged with an inappropriate self-righteousness. Pursuing righteousness in any area of life is a good thing, but doing so with a prideful blindness to one’s own lack of righteousness in other areas is an issue that needs sober re-thinking. Let me take myself as an example. I decry government wastefulness; yet I blithely play my part in a generation that consumes more food and natural resources and throws away more things than any other people in history. I condemn the practice in which millions of children are being aborted; yet I somehow accept a world in which millions of equally innocent kids will die before their tenth birthday of malnutrition or preventable disease.

I am a complicated and inconsistent person and my politics are the same way. Maybe yours are too. Can you honestly imagine Jesus walking up to you and saying: “Wow. You have a very impressive life. You’re living out the totality of my kingdom vision.” Can you imagine God reading either the Democratic or Republican party platform statements and saying: “Yep, you got it. This is what biblical righteousness looks like. This is everything I have in mind for this world. Those other people have it all wrong.”

We should hate what is evil and cling to what is good, but never think of ourselves more highly than we ought, but rather with sober judgment. “Do not be proud… Do not be conceited” (Rom 12:16), says the Apostle Paul, once a Pharisee himself. Because one day all of us -- from every party -- will stand before Perfection. And he who really is Righteousness will see the complications and the inconsistencies in our character and behavior and reveal them fully to us (1 Cor 13:12). We’ll be very humbly thankful for Grace then. Don’t you think it only appropriate, then, that in our pursuit of righteousness we show some humility and grace now?

Honor What the Other Side Brings

If we can get that, maybe we can eventually move on to the third step in making the political climate better. Perhaps we can start to honor what the other side brings.

I’m not sure you could put together two more different people than my wife Amy and me. She’s female and I’m not. She’s right-handed and I’m a south-paw. She’s blonde and I used to be brown. She tans, I burn. She’s private, I’m public. She’s from California, I’m from New York. She does numbers, I do words. She likes British movies
about refined women who glow, and I like American movies about men who bleed. I could keep going. Some of you understand.

There are times when our relationship has felt like a boxing match. We go at each other, mad as H-E-Double Hockey Sticks, each certain that we are entirely right and the other entirely wrong. There are differences between us that will never go away. There are things the other cares about that we’ll never be able to fully feel the way the other does. But being in relationship with one another has made us better people not worse and our home a better place for our kids. Again, I imagine some of you get this.

What if Red and Blue are like that? What if it’s not an accident that conservatives and liberals are living in the same national house? What if God actually designed it that way, because he knew that we were like the right-hand and the left-hand, two hemispheres of a brain, two halves of a whole heart? What if his intention was not this War of the Roses divorce we’ve got but a rediscovered marriage that changes America for good?

“Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others... Be devoted to one another... Honor one another” (Rom 12:4-5,10).

I’ve rarely seen my marriage improve by simply hammering more on my rights, my needs, my point of view, or on her faults, her failings, her limited vision. The marriage gets better, we both begin to change when one of us has the maturity of character to say: “I can see why you might feel that way. I get what you need or fear. Even if I don’t agree with everything here, I honor who you are and want to find a way together.”

What if Red and Blue are a little like this? What if thousands of us found someone on the other side of the house and honored what they bring to the American family? I’m reminded of the wisdom of Abraham Lincoln, who once said: “If you would win a man to your cause, first convince him that he is your sincere friend.”

Refuse to Do Wrong to Those Who Do You Wrong

I’m not naïve about how difficult what I’m suggesting is. A little bit of niceness is not going to get everybody in Congress or our other boxing rings suddenly holding hands and singing Kum Ba Yah. There are tough issues and big differences to be worked out. But somebody has to drop the glove and extend a hand first. Somebody has to be willing to keep showing good faith and good intent even when the other swings at them out of habit or takes a momentary advantage from their dropped guard.

But this is where Christians and mere pretenders separate company. Are we going to put our ultimate hope in the Ethic of Expedience or the Ethic of Jesus? Do we think the
world will change for the better through the power of Caesar or the power of the Cross? If Caesar is your hope, then keep swinging at those who swing at you. If Jesus is your hope, then refuse to do wrong to those who do you wrong. The Apostle Paul puts it more eloquently: *“Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good”* (Rom 12:17-18,21).

**Show Yourself Willing to Sacrifice**

Let me suggest one further measure before letting you go -- and let me warn you, this is the most politically incorrect and controversial thing I will have said anywhere in this series: If you want our politics and culture to get better than it is, then show yourself willing to sacrifice.

Paul puts it this way at the start of Romans 12: *“Therefore, I urge you... in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God... Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind”* (Rom 12:1-2).

The *“pattern of this world”* today is to fight for our turf, to take what we can get, to claim our due, to protect all our rights. But we need a renewing of our minds about this. We’re not getting out of this mess by demanding more. Our best prospects lie down the path of sacrificing more. This is the spirit that has marked the Church of Jesus at its best and the character of our nation’s greatest generations. We need millions of people to shift their thinking from reward to responsibility, from entitlement to contribution, from “How will I survive on my own?” to “How can we thrive together?”

**Pray for God’s Spirit to Do What No Other Government Can**

No politician or government has the power to compel this kind of transformation in the mind of a people. Some new blend of reform, entitlement, tax or spending policies may provide us a way of sharing the sacrifice. But nothing imposed upon a people can itself accomplish the fundamental renewal of spirit now needed among us. Millions of us must come to desire and pray to see the vision imprinted upon our currency become reality again. *E Pluribus Unum* “Out of many, one.”

Only the Triune God can accomplish this. Only he who once brought forth from many members one Body of Christ, and from many peoples one nation under God, can bring about the revival in us that is desperately needed to make us what we yet can be. Join me in praying for God’s Spirit to do in me and you and the people of America what no government can.