

**The precious Gift of Unity!**  
**Romans 16:17-27**  
**7th June 2026**  
**Preacher: Pastor Roy Summers**

**A surprising end!**

This morning we come to the end of Paul's letter to the Romans, the 36th sermon from this most significant book of the Bible. And there is something surprising about the way Paul signs off.

The greetings he sends are not surprising - Paul is a polite Christian Gentleman. From Timothy, his fellow worker, from Lucius, Jason and Sospater his fellow Jews, from Tertius his scribe, from Gaius, in whose house the church at Corinth met, from Erastus the city's director of public works and from Quartus.

The "mystery that God has saved the Gentiles" benediction is not surprising either. No, what's surprising is the strong warning against division in verses 17-20:

*"I urge you, brothers and sisters, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them."*

What is so unexpected about this warning is that there is no hint of division in the church at Rome!

Yes, Paul has mentioned "disputable matters", back in chapters 14 and 15, some Christians ate meat some didn't, some regarded one day more sacred than another, others didn't. But there was no indication that disputable matters had become sources of contention.

In fact every indication is that the Christians at Rome were getting on with each other very well, "your faith is being reported all over the world." (1:8) "I myself am convinced my brothers that you yourselves are full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to instruct one another." (15:14)

So why does Paul issue a strong warning about division to a united church? Because the way we protect unity is to warn against division!

It's a principle that runs throughout life:

- The way you protect a driver against a looming dangerous bend in the road is to warn them in advance
- The way you protect a person against future disease is to inoculate them today.

And the way we protect the precious unity of any church is to warn that church against division, in advance. Constant vigilance is the price we must pay for the precious blessing of unity in the bond of peace. Three questions....

- What is divisive behaviour?
- Where does divisive behaviour come from?
- How are we to respond to divisive individuals?

The aim of this morning's sermon is to protect the precious unity we presently enjoy at MPC & MHC.

## 1. What is divisive behaviour?

Let's begin by asking what divisive behaviour is:

*"I urge you brothers and sisters to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned.."*

There is a *general* sort of divisive behaviour "watch out for those who cause divisions" and then there is a *specific* divisive behaviour that comes about through false teachers who throw obstacles in the path of some believers and divide them from the rest of the church.

Let's begin with *general divisive* behaviour: any action which deliberately divides one person from another. We should say here that it is possible for a believer to act in a divisive way *unwittingly*, which is why Paul says in Titus 23:10, "warn a divisive person once, then warn them a second time..." "I didn't realise I was being divisive, I won't do that again!" What kinds of divisive behaviour do we all need to watch out for?

- **Making a big deal about a disputable matter.** Disagreeing with each other over secondary issues, or disputable matters, isn't in itself divisive. It becomes divisive if I think that everyone in my home group and everyone in my church should know what I believe about every disputable matter! "Whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God." (14:22).
- **Gossip** "a gossip separates close friends." (Proverbs 16:28). Has this happened to you? You were very close to someone and then all of a sudden they broke off their friendship, why? Someone told them a lie about you. The church must be a gossip-free zone, if someone comes to you with a juicy morsel of gossip, send them away with a flea in their ear.
- **Party spirit,** "one says 'I follow Paul', and another 'I follow Apollos'" (1 Cor 3:4). "I think this brother should be a leader", "I think that person should be a leader?" Before long, little factions, little groups appear, the Paul-ists over here, the Appolos-ists over there. If you sense anyone is trying to draw you into a group, party or faction, walk away.
- **Personal fallouts.** The fourth kind of general division we find in the Bible is when two people fall out with each other in the church. In the church at Philippi, two sisters Euodia & Syntyche fell out. Euodia tells everyone her side of the story and Syntyche tells her side of the story and before long, you have the Euodiates and the Syntychites! "I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord." (Philippians 4:2) If you fall out with someone in the church don't tell anyone else about it but go in person to your brother or sister in the manner laid out in Matthew 18. I remember a church pastor telling me how he dealt with a fall out between two people in his church—at the end of morning worship, he took one by the hand and then the other, into a separate room and got them make up. He knew that division spreads and was determined to put an end to it quickly.

Are you with me brothers and sisters? "Watch out for those who cause divisions". While it is the specific task of under shepherds, elders, to guard the flock, Paul calls every believer to be on guard.

The other kind of division, Paul mentions is *specific division*, caused by false teachers, who "put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned."

(v.17) In other words they add something or other to NT teaching, which then causes believers to stumble and fall.

In the NT there were three kinds of false teaching, I mention them this morning to prepare us all. To the best of my knowledge there are no false teachers at MPC or MHC at the moment, but someone might either come in from the outside or arise from among us.

- **Secret knowledge** —“I have secret knowledge that no-one else has, that gives me access to God, gives me understanding that you don’t have.” (Colossians). Very much alive today in many versions.
- **Anti-law**—some people argued that since they were under grace they didn't have to obey God's law anymore (Romans 6)
- **Gospel –plus.** Many false teachers from a Jewish background tried to add all sorts of rituals and requirements to the pure Gospel and corrupt it with Gospel-plus. Jesus isn’t enough, you must have circumcision or celebrate the Passover, or whatever plus they fancy. I’ve heard of churches in the UK celebrating the Passover, which has been fulfilled by Christ! The Gospel obeys a strange mathematics, whenever you add *anything* to it, you subtract from it.

False teachers worm their way into the church, begin setting up secret meetings, or these days secret WhatsApp groups, dividing from the flock.

In the Asian Fellowship my father founded, a little group arose from within the church, who thought they were more in touch with the Spirit than everyone else (a modern day form of Gnosticism) and began meeting in secret. Before long they caused division, left to form their own church, which soon fizzled out because God never blesses division! I've seen this stuff happen before my very eyes.

## (2) Where does divisive behaviour come from?

Paul tells us in verse 20, “The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.” Why does Paul put that triumphant promise here? Because Satan, who is the source of all divisive behaviour will one day be crushed.

What was the very first division in the universe? Isaiah 14:

“How you have fallen from heaven,  
morning star, son of the dawn!  
You have been cast down to the earth,  
you who once laid low the nations!  
13 You said in your heart,  
“I will ascend to the heavens;  
I will raise my throne  
above the stars of God;  
I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly,  
on the utmost heights of Mount Zaphon.  
14 I will ascend above the tops of the clouds;  
I will make myself like the Most High.”

When Satan was cast out of heaven, he took with him a great band of now-fallen angels, demons. Before this moment, which CS Lewis calls “The great Divorce” there was perfect unity in the cosmos, every creature was One, but from that proud moment onwards the cosmos was split into God and everything and everyone good, and Satan and everything and everyone evil. Satanic pride is the source of all division, “I will ascend to the heavens; I will raise my throne above the stars of God... I will make myself like the Most High.” Proud people always cause division, know that?

*“where there is strife, there is pride”(Proverbs 13:10)*

Whether it is in a marriage, work place, or church, the ultimate, deep cause of all division is satanic pride.

If you are the kind of person always surrounded by a cloud of strife, ask the Lord to show you your pride, humble yourself, repent of your pride.

We must cultivate humility because humility fosters unity. That’s why before Paul exhorts his friends at Ephesus to be united, he exhorts them to be humble.

*“Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. 3 Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. 4 There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you*

*were called; 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism; 6 one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.” (Ephesians 4:2-6)*

### **(3) How should we respond to divisive people?**

How should we respond to divisive people? Paul is clear:

#### **1) Understand their motives**

“Such people are not serving the Lord Christ but their own appetites.” (18). They are only interested in themselves, power, influence, in the case of false teachers, money, they’re not interested in you.

#### **2) Know their tactics**

They use smooth talk and flattery and make a bee line for naïve people. They wouldn’t come to me or one of the elders, instead they find weak and vulnerable people in the church and use smooth talk and flattery “You are such a wonderful Christian, so full of the Holy Spirit, so knowledgeable.”

#### **3) Act: Watch out, keep away from them.**

Every member is called to act here:

- **watch out for them**, says Paul. Paul is not advocating a paranoid attitude towards one another, he’s encouraging vigilance
- Have **nothing to do with them**. If we come across a genuinely divisive person, we are to send them to Coventry, cold-shoulder them, cancel them, ignore them. “Paul that isn’t very Christian!” It is, for it demonstrates how precious unity is.

Pastor have you ever heard of this happening? Yes, I have had to do this on more than one occasion. I have personally ignored divisive individuals, avoided looking at them, crossing the street to avoid them, even shunned them. They soon got the message and left the church—which is exactly what this command is intended to accomplish. Can you imagine if everyone in the church cold-shouldered a divisive person every Sunday? They’d soon get the message!

These are very strong words, brothers and sisters, but they show us how precious and divine unity is. The most united churches in the world need regular warning against division.

## Conclusion

Let me close by reminding you of this: unity is at the very heart of the Good News, the Gospel. We were once separated from God by our sin, but through the cross, God reconciled, united us, to himself.

Jews and Gentiles were once enemies, but through the Lord Jesus they are brought into the same family.

Gospel and Unity go hand and hand. And so does unity with God's blessing.

“How good and pleasant it is  
when God’s people live together in unity!

.....

For there the Lord bestows his blessing,  
even life forevermore.” (Psalm 133)

We thank the Lord for the large measure of Gospel, Holy Spirit unity we enjoy. But let no-one forget that the cost of that blessing going forward, is constant vigilance today.

*“I urge you, brothers and sisters, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them.”*

Amen.