

Oneness

Have you ever been involved in a church split? It can be a pretty ugly thing as church members take sides against each other over some matter. Often it is not a matter of essential doctrine, such as the inerrancy of the Word of God or salvation through Jesus Christ, but it is a lesser matter, such as like or dislike of the pastor, or over policies of some sort. Yet the fighting can get very bitter. It can cause people to leave the church and never to go to another one. It causes outsiders to say things like, “*That’s why I don’t go to church. They can never get along among themselves.*” Finally the group divides into two congregations and they go on, but the history of the split and the bitterness surrounding it is never totally forgotten, at least by some individuals.

Or perhaps you have heard people of one denomination criticize and condemn members of another denomination over differences in minor doctrines or differences in worship styles. Non-Christians observe this kind of contention and intolerance and ask where the so-called love is among Christians. And you have to acknowledge that they have a point. Maybe you and I feel uncomfortable in a congregation where the style is very different from ours, but that does not make the other style right and ours wrong, or vice versa. It merely means, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12:5:

There are different kinds of service in the church, but it is the same Lord we are serving.

As we continue our study in the book of Romans we will discover Paul’s take on that kind of behavior as well as his remedy for it.

Today we begin chapter 15 in our study of the epistle of Romans. This morning we’ll be looking at verses 1-7. Let’s begin by reading those verses and then taking a closer look at how we can make them come alive in the church. And let’s back up a few verses and include Romans 14:19-23, because they provide the lead in to chapter 15. Romans 14:19-15:7:

19 So then, let us aim for harmony in the church and try to build each other up.

20 Don’t tear apart the work of God over what you eat. Remember, there is nothing wrong with these things in themselves. But it is wrong to eat anything if it makes another person stumble.

21 Don’t eat meat or drink wine or do anything else if it might cause another Christian to stumble.

22 You may have the faith to believe that there is nothing wrong with what you are doing, but keep it between yourself and God. Blessed are those who do not condemn themselves by doing something they know is all right.

23 But if people have doubts about whether they should eat something, they shouldn’t eat it. They would be condemned for not acting in faith before God. If you do anything you believe is not right, you are sinning.

1 We may know that these things make no difference, but we cannot just go ahead and do them to please ourselves. We must be considerate of the doubts and fears of those who think these things are wrong.

2 We should please others. If we do what helps them, we will build them up in the Lord.

3 For even Christ didn't please himself. As the Scriptures say, "Those who insult you are also insulting me."

4 Such things were written in the Scriptures long ago to teach us. They give us hope and encouragement as we wait patiently for God's promises.

5 May God, who gives this patience and encouragement, help you live in complete harmony with each other—each with the attitude of Christ Jesus toward the other.

6 Then all of you can join together with one voice, giving praise and glory to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

7 So accept each other just as Christ has accepted you; then God will be glorified.

We've already learned that loving harmony and unity in the church are of grave concern to God. David wrote about this in Psalm 133:1

1 How wonderful it is, how pleasant, when brothers live together in harmony!

To God, unity is a beautiful thing. Let's also look at Jeremiah 32:39:

39 I will give them one heart and mind to worship Me forever, for their own good and for the good of all their descendants.

Just one more Old Testament text I would like us to read regarding this subject is in Ezekiel 37. If you have read Ezekiel you may remember that chapter 37 begins with the vision of the valley of dry bones, a picture of the nation of Israel being restored by God in final salvation in the end times. As God looks ahead to the future glory of a redeemed Israel, the Word of the Lord comes to the prophet and says this, Ezekiel 37:16,17:

16 "Son of man, take a stick and carve on it these words: 'This stick represents Judah and its allied tribes.' Then take another stick and carve these words on it: 'This stick represents the northern tribes of Israel.'

17 Now hold them together in your hand as one stick.

Ezekiel carried out a lot of object lessons in his ministry and this is a very unique one. God says to take one stick and identify it as Judah, the southern kingdom. Then take another stick and identify it as Israel, the northern kingdom, also called Ephraim for the son of Joseph who became the leader of the nations in the northern kingdom. Those two sticks represent the divided kingdom which was divided under Jeroboam. God tells Ezekiel to take these two sticks and make them one stick in his hand because that's the way it will be one day. Some day God is going to take the divided kingdom of His people

Israel and join them back together in final glory. God is also looking forward to the salvation of His nation Israel in Zephaniah 3:9 (NRSV):

9 At that time I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech, that all of them may call on the name of the Lord and serve him with one accord.

If we turn to Zechariah 14:9, we read:

9 And the Lord will be king over all the earth. On that day there will be one Lord—his name alone will be worshiped.

All the inhabitants of the earth will worship the one true God. In these prophecies we see that God has intended through the new covenant and ultimately through His design for the nation of Israel to bring them together as one people. It's the same for the church. Just as in the future of the nation of Israel, all the rebels will be purged out and there will be a wonderful oneness among those redeemed peoples, so it is in the church. John 10:14-17:

14 I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own.

15 As the Father knows Me, even so I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep.

16 And other sheep I have which are not of this fold (that is they are not Jews but Gentiles who were also saved)¹; them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice; and there will be one flock and one shepherd.

17 "The Father loves me because I lay down my life."

In other words it was God's purpose that Christ lay down His life to redeem Jew and Gentile and make them one people. God's purpose is to make all believers one people.

Just looking over these Scriptures briefly we know that the desire of God, whether they be His chosen people the Jews or the New Covenant people of believers in the Church, it is God's desire that His people be one people with one heart and one voice and one acknowledgment to the true God. We are reminded of this in Revelation 21 about a new Heaven and a new earth. Revelation 21:1-4:

1 Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea.

2 Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

3 And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God.

4 And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no

¹ Parentheses added.

more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.”

There in that eternal glory all people are brought together under the kingship of God for ever and ever. We know that at any given point in redemptive history it is God’s desire that His people be one.

The unity of the church is not only the desire of God, but is also the desire of God the Son. John 17:11:

11 Now I am no longer in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to You. Holy Father, keep through Your name those whom You have given Me, that they may be one as We are.

Now go over to verses 20-23:

*20 “I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word;
21 that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me.
22 And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one:*

It is clear here that the concern of God the Father that we be one and it is the concern of God the Son that we be one, and it is the concern of God the Holy Spirit that we be one. The unity of the church is the concern of the Holy Spirit. Where you have the filling of the Holy Spirit you have the response of oneness, one mindedness, one heart.

In reading over these verses several times something jumped out at me from verse 21. Not only does God want unity in His church and that all believers live as one, but we’re told here that believers can also be one with the Trinity of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. We aren’t little gods, but we are clothed with the Trinity. We live in God and God lives in us and we have all the power of God available to us because we are one. If that doesn’t knock you right out of your shoes, I don’t know what will.

It is the desire of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit that we be one. Not only one in terms of union with the living God, that is in terms of a redeemed nature, but the obvious implication that we be one in life, and one in sharing whatever fellowship allows us to share. To see this clearly, turn to Ephesians 4:1-3:

*1 Therefore I, a prisoner for serving the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of your calling, for you have been called by God.
2 Be humble and gentle. Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other’s faults because of your love.
3 Always keep yourselves united in the Holy Spirit, and bind yourselves*

together with peace.

One of the tasks of the church is to maintain unity. That unity is reinforced by the Trinity. Verses 4-6:

*4 We are all one body, we have the same Spirit, and we have all been called to the same glorious future.
5 There is only one Lord, one faith, one baptism,
6 and there is only one God and Father, who is over us all and in us all and living through us all.*

In other words, since there is one God, and there is one Lord, and there is one Spirit, and the desire of all of them is that we maintain the unity of the Spirit, we ought to do just that. This is the will of God. We find this a constant emphasis in the New Testament. 1 Corinthians 1:10:

*10 Now, dear brothers and sisters, I appeal to you by the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ to stop arguing among yourselves. Let there be real harmony so there won't be divisions in the church. I plead with you to **be of one mind, united** in thought and purpose.*

1 Corinthians 3:1-3:

*1 Dear brothers and sisters, when I was with you I couldn't talk to you as I would to mature Christians. I had to talk as though you belonged to this world or as though you were infants in the Christian life.
2 I had to feed you with milk and not with solid food, because you couldn't handle anything stronger. And you still aren't ready,
3 for you are still controlled by your own sinful desires. You are jealous of one another and quarrel with each other. Doesn't that prove you are controlled by your own desires? You are acting like people who don't belong to the Lord.*

Paul's concern was unity rather than disunity. 1 Corinthians 12:12,13:

*12 The human body has many parts, but the many parts make up only one body. So it is with the body of Christ.
13 Some of us are Jews, some are Gentiles, some are slaves, and some are free. But we have all been baptized into Christ's body by one Spirit, and we have all received the same Spirit.*

Again the emphasis is on the unity of God's redeemed people. In Galatians 3:26-28:

*26 So you are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus.
27 And all who have been united with Christ in baptism have been made*

like him.

28 There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female. For you are all Christians—you are one in Christ Jesus.

In Philippians 2:2:

2 Then make me truly happy by agreeing wholeheartedly with each other, loving one another, and working together with one heart and purpose.

Paul says you are to be likeminded, having the same love, and being of one mind. In Colossians 3:11-15, Paul writes:

11 In this new life, it doesn't matter if you are a Jew or a Gentile, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbaric, uncivilized, slave, or free. Christ is all that matters, and He lives in all of us.

12 Since God chose you to be the holy people whom he loves, you must clothe yourselves with tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.

13 You must make allowance for each other's faults and forgive the person who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others.

14 And the most important piece of clothing you must wear is love. Love is what binds us all together in perfect harmony.

15 And let the peace that comes from Christ rule in your hearts. For as members of one body you are all called to live in peace. And always be thankful.

Paul and the other apostles were united in teaching this theme. Peter makes the same emphasis in 1 Peter 3:8:

8 Finally, all of you should be of one mind, full of sympathy toward each other, loving one another with tender hearts and humble minds.

So also does John in 3 John:2-4:

2 Dear friend, I am praying that all is well with you and that your body is as healthy as I know your soul is.

3 Some of the brothers recently returned and made me very happy by telling me about your faithfulness and that you are living in the truth.

4 I could have no greater joy than to hear that my children live in the truth.

What John wants to hear is that there is unity in the church, that there is common love and unity. He wants us walking together in the truth. We've listed all these passages so that you will understand the need for unity in the church. So understanding that, let us go back to Romans 15. Paul realizes that one of the great dangers to unity in the church is the potential for disagreement between strong and weak Christians. This is of

considerable concern to Paul because unity is of such concern to him. Now we should understand why. It is the passionate desire of the heart of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit that there be unity in the church. And since this unity is so essential to God, Paul finds it essential to teach the matter of unity as well. That is why Paul devotes Romans 14:1-15:13 to the subject of strong and weak Christians.

The first seven verses of Romans 15 speak of the importance to please one another with Christ as our example. It's necessary in the church to be concerned about pleasing others and not ourselves in order to make this unity a reality. If everyone is designing their life, attitudes, actions, and responses only to please themselves there will be no unity. So it is necessary for the strong believer to adjust to the weak believer so that he or she will please him or her.

Now it is important here to make a distinction between what Paul is asking of strong Christians and the kind of people-pleasing that is a hallmark of that syndrome referred to as "codependency." There is a huge difference between the two although on the surface they may look similar. Sometimes important Christian doctrines and practices have been misunderstood and twisted so that they contribute to psychological pathology. This matter of people-pleasing is one of those times. Again I will say, there is a huge difference between what Scripture teaches about pleasing others and what is codependent. The codependent gives in to everyone else and is always trying to please them for several unhealthy reasons: one is to feel some degree of self esteem, another is to make people love them; for underneath this drive to please others is the sense that one is very unlovable and that the only way to achieve love is to do everything everyone else wants. The codependent then loses himself/herself in the process. The codependent is insecure in their own identity. The codependent has not fully embraced the love Christ has for them and is not aware of their identity in Christ or of their spiritual gifts. The codependent therefore pleases other people out of a drive, out of a sense that they have to do that in order to be loved or to be considered a good person. And there is the essential difference between codependency and healthy spirituality. The mature, the strong Christian knows they have a right to do what they want; they have the freedom to do so. Yet, even though they have that freedom, they make a free choice to set aside that freedom and do what will please someone else in order that it might benefit that other person. So you see there are huge differences between the motives and the sense of choice. The codependent feels he/she has no choice and pleases others for what he or she hopes he/she will ultimately gain—love or acceptance. The strong, mature Christian makes a free choice because of love for Christ and love for the other person. It is the mature Christian that Paul is talking about in Romans 14 and 15.

Living in order to please others instead of ourselves requires very high spiritual motives. See if you have these. If you don't, you won't be able to succeed at this. And if you don't succeed at this you will very likely be one of the reasons that God's desire for unity in His church is not fulfilled. With these motives there will be unity between the strong and the weak:

1) Consideration of others

Seek to serve others with love rather than attacking them with criticism. This is something that seems very obvious, and it is. It is not something we don't know, but it's something we don't always apply. Let's look at Romans 15:1:

*1 But we ought, we that are strong, to **bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves.***

This statement is being directed at those who are strong. Paul sums up in this verse everything that he said in chapter 14. We need to be patient with weak believers until they are able to climb the rungs of the spiritual ladder and better understand their freedom in Christ. This is the attitude of consideration for others and it is the first attitude we must have if we are going to please someone else. We choose to consider them before ourselves. When someone struggles with something you're doing that you feel is right and they think it is wrong, unless they are wrong in a biblical sense and need direct instruction, be patient with them that they may grow and not be offended. Listen to what Paul said in 1 Corinthians 9:19-22:

19 I have become a servant of everyone so that I can bring them to Christ.

20 When I am with the Jews, I become one of them so that I can bring them to Christ. When I am with those who follow the Jewish laws, I do the same, even though I am not subject to the law, so that I can bring them to Christ.

21 When I am with the Gentiles who do not have the Jewish law, I fit in with them as much as I can. In this way, I gain their confidence and bring them to Christ. But I do not discard the law of God; I obey the law of Christ.

22 When I am with those who are oppressed, I share their oppression so that I might bring them to Christ. Yes, I TRY TO FIND COMMON GROUND WITH EVERYONE SO THAT I MIGHT BRING THEM TO CHRIST.

It's kind of like Romans 13:8, **the debt of love is never paid.** The second motive we need to have is,

2) Disregard for Self

The last part of verse 1 tells us we are "*not to please ourselves.*" We don't just do exactly as we want to do.

The bottom line in Christian liberty is not to seek your own liberty.

You don't seek to please yourself if it causes a brother or sister to be offended. Romans 15:2 says:

*2 We should please others. If we do what helps them, **we will build them up in the Lord.***

3) Conformity to Christ

This involves one seeking to be like Christ rather than seeking others to be like you. Romans 15:3 says:

*3 For even **Christ didn't please himself**. As the Scriptures say, "Those who insult you are also insulting me."*

Christ didn't please Himself and He is our example. If He wanted to please Himself He would have stayed in Heaven and never shown up down here. But Christ came to do as God bid Him to do (John 4:34; 5:30; 6:38). The last part of verse 3 comes from Psalm 69:9. In pleasing the Father, Christ receives slander and insults. Because people hated God, they hated the one who revealed God. Christ was willing to bear all of these things for the sake of doing God's will. We are to follow Jesus' example. We are not to do what pleases us, we are to do what pleases others. If you claim to be a Christian you ought to have the same attitude Christ had (Philippians 2:5).

4) Submission to Scripture

Romans 15:4:

4 Such things were written in the Scriptures long ago (a reference to the Old Testament)² to teach us. They give us hope and encouragement as we wait patiently for God's promises.

We are to seek our fulfillment in the Word of God rather than in our personal desires. We are to get our behavior in line with what the Word of God teaches. Paul says here that **whatever was written in the Old Testament was written for our learning**. Old Testament scripture was written for New Testament people. 1 Corinthians 10:6 and 11 tell us that the things in the Old Testament are to provide examples for us. It teaches us that through endurance and encouragement in the scriptures we might have hope. The goal of the scripture is to give hope for the future, hope for eternal life, hope for forgiveness of sin, and to give meaning to life (Jeremiah 14:8; Psalm 119; Psalm 130:5; Ephesians 4). Scripture tells us we can make it through any trial (James 5:7-11; 1 Corinthians 10:13). Scripture tells us we're secure and have the power to endure, and it tells us why we are to endure. We are to endure in order to be strengthened and develop patience, so that patience as James 1:4 and Romans 5:3-5 say, can have a perfecting work which will allow us to be more useful to God and more effective in winning others. **The point here is simply that we need to learn from the scriptures.**

5) Dependence on Divine Power

Romans 15:5:

5 May God, who gives this patience and encouragement, help you live in complete harmony with each other—each with the attitude of Christ Jesus toward the other.

² Parentheses added.

Paul's asking that God would grant them this because they can't do it on their own. **We must seek the strength of God through prayer rather than depending on human resources. We are to be concerned about one another and this will bring unity.** When did you last pray for the unity of the church?

6) Glory to God

We should be controlled by a consuming desire that **God be glorified**; to seek the glory of God rather than self-glory. Romans 15:6:

6 Then all of you can join together with one voice, giving praise and glory to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

God is the God who is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and that is to say that God and Christ are one. The only true God is the God who is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and that is to say that no person comes to God except by Jesus. Summing it all up in Romans 15:7, Paul writes:

7 So accept each other just as Christ has accepted you; then God will be glorified.

Why did Christ redeem Me? Because He knew when He did so it would be to the glory of God. And just as He received us, we are to receive one another for the glory of God. So if the strong and the weak are to please each other, what are the necessary attitudes that must be developed? Consideration of others, disregard for self, conformity to Christ, submission to scripture, dependence on divine power, and a consuming desire to glorify God and not myself. Go forward from here and look for opportunities to practice these things this coming week.