

Romans 15:1-13

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[0 : 0 0] And turn to Romans 15. Romans 15 and verses 1 to 13. And I particularly want us to look with me at verses 5 and 6.

Of living in harmony with one another.

Let me read you from verse 3. For Christ did not please himself. But as it is written, the reproaches of those who reproach you fell on me.

So whatever was written in former days for our instructions. That through endurance and through the encouragement of the scriptures. We might have hope. May the God of endurance and encouragement.

Grant to you to live in such harmony with one another. In accord with Christ Jesus. It's really relevant.

[1 : 1 8] It's a summary prayer. I think one of the big things behind the book of Romans. It's a great theological treatise. It has taught us, hasn't it?

Such deep things about the gospel. That behind the book of Romans. One theme that comes out again and again. Is this unity. That believers have in Christ with one another.

In harmony with one another. And what I want to do is. I want to think about that. In the context of our church family. And in church life. And so first of all. You've got threats to unity. There are threats to unity.

Think about it. Why does Paul need to pray for unity? Why doesn't it possible just take it for granted? And so all God's people are always united.

Always together. We are united in Christ, aren't we? That doesn't change whether you're having a good day or a bad day. So why do we need to pray that God's people would be united?

[2 : 2 1] Why does God need to give us unity? Well it's because we're under threat.

And he gives us in this passage just a couple of examples. He looks, doesn't he, at the reaction of the strong and the weak. We saw it a couple of weeks ago in chapter 14.

So I won't go into great length about it. But there are always those in every church that we will not agree with. We don't always agree with God's assessment.

Most of us sitting here will think, well I'm the strong one. And the other people, they're the weak ones. But there are in every church some who are strong and some who are weak.

And we get it here again, don't we, in verses 1 and 2. Look. So do you remember what we saw in Romans 14?

[3 : 2 6] That in secondary things of the Christian life, it is not our calling to bring everyone to our way of thinking. We're not trying to compel and force everyone to agree with us on every last detail.

Of course there needs to be agreement on the great things. The great truths. The great truths of the Bible. We have to be agreed on those. That's why we ask the new members to make those vows.

Affirming the great truths of Scripture. We've got to be agreed on those. There has to be harmony on those. But there's many areas of the Christian life where Christians disagree with each other.

And Paul has been saying, it's not your job to get everyone in line with yourself. He's teaching about people who differ from each other in the church. Not on big things, but on small things.

People who've got strongly held views. And who are potentially divisive. And probably both sides care about what they're doing. And they think they're pretty convinced that what they think is right.

[4 : 3 9] And often in church life, those groups can end up disagreeing and even fighting. And dividing the unity of the church. That is a threat to unity. He also refers to the Jew and the Gentile.

These are people who are naturally different from one another. They're racially different. They've got a different history. They've got a different heritage.

They're from different cultures. And those differences could cause many problems. And they did cause many problems.

And one of the wonders when people looked at the early church. They looked at the early church and they thought, how on earth do those people stay together? Because the Jew and Gentile, they didn't keep together.

In the rest of the world, they despised each other. They hated each other. But when they came to church, they saw that the Jew and the Gentile actually loved each other.

[5 : 44] And that they kept together. And so these were the threats to the unity that the church had to resist. Of course, Christian unity is still under threat today, isn't it?

Believers find it difficult to always be in agreement with each other. It's not our desire that we would be different from each other on the main truths.

On the solid teachings of the Bible. On the teachings of the confessions. We need to be together on those things. We need to be one on those things. But more than that, in minor matters of Christian practice, we don't see eye to eye with others in this room.

We see things in different ways. The strong and the weak. And there's also the Jewish-Gentile pattern in church life. I don't mean the racial divide.

The Jewish divide that there was in the New Testament church. I mean there's differences in terms of the length of background, aren't there? And so, if we went around here, there would be some people who were brought up in a covenant home.

[7 : 02] Their parents were Christians. Some people would be able to even talk about their grandparents being Christians. There may be a few that could talk about their great-grandparents.

And their great-great-grandparents. And as far as you go back in their family tree, there are believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. You've been brought up in a Christian family.

And sitting beside you, maybe, is somebody who became a Christian last year. And they know nothing about the Bible. And they've never really been taught anything about the Lord Jesus Christ and his gospel.

And yet, they're both Christians. And they're different. One of them has had the immense privilege of a covenant home. And have been taught the truth of the gospel from the time they were tiny.

And the other person hasn't had such a privilege. And it's all fresh and brand new. Different. Very, very different. Like the Jews and the Greeks in the New Testament.

[8 : 06] It's a valuable difference though, isn't it? So the person sitting next to you who's been a Christian for a long time. They can tell the new Christians so many valuable lessons about God's faithfulness.

They can speak about how God has kept them. And how God has blessed them. And watched over them. And how God has proved himself faithful. And the person sitting next to you who's been a Christian just for a year.

They can speak to you of the wonder of mercy. The wonder of rescue and the grace of God. And what a difference it makes when God breaks into your life. And how changed they are.

Because they've come to God and now they know him. And they were far off but now they've been brought near. They lived their life in the dark but now they're in the light. They were not part of the people and now they are part of the people of God.

And they benefit from each other and they help each other. And they learn from each other. And God doesn't look down and say well that's the good group. And that's the not so much. No, no.

[9 : 13] We are all one in Christ Jesus. I'm aware that things in church life can produce strains and bubble away underneath the surface.

And so let me say that one of the things I am most thankful for. And I'm very thankful that God has blessed this congregation with a remarkable degree of unity. There's all sorts of people, all sorts of different backgrounds, different nationalities, different cultures, different personalities.

And we love it. We appreciate that. But we cannot take that for granted. We can't assume it will always be like that.

The devil is always trying to disrupt the minor differences between us. To turn the minor into a major.

And the unity of the church is always, always, always under threat. Secondly, we've got the source of unity.

[10 : 29] So where does the unity that Paul is praying for come from? Look at what he says in verse 5. Can you see that? Verse 5. May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another in accord with Christ Jesus.

That together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. So can you see, who does he go to for this unity? Verse 5. May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you.

And so real unity does not come about by human planning or human activity or morale boosting events.

Real harmony is a gift that is granted by God. And it is to be sought from God. And so if there are people in our church and we find it difficult to be close to them, the person that we go to about that is God.

And we ask God to help us, to enable us, to reach us. We just sang Psalm 133. That unity is like the precious oil running down the head and beard of Aaron.

[11 : 48] It's a weird picture for us, isn't it? The oily beard. It was a symbol in the Old Testament of joy and happiness. But most of all of God's peace. And we need to look to God consistently and earnestly for the unity of the church.

One of the things that we're constantly asking and praying for. And so we need to live close with God. Because the closer that we live to God, the closer we are with Christ, the closer we are able to reach one another.

Doing nothing to grieve his Holy Spirit. You will know, as I know, that wars start in churches. And battles can start in churches.

And people are proud. And people want to be in charge. And people can be very, very critical. And that damages the unity of the church.

And so it is right, isn't it? That we go to God and we pray for his blessing. Can you see, I love the way he's described here. Can you see how, in the context he's described, look what it says.

[13 : 06] May the God of endurance. It's hard to put up with some people, isn't it? I'm not looking at anyone, alright? It's hard to put up with me, isn't it?

Do I have an amen? We need ability, don't we? We need that gift. We're not obviously all perfect people who are absolutely wonderful.

And to look at us anytime is not to be filled with kind of complete praise. Isn't it wonderful that person is in my church?

We don't feel like that all the time, do we? We do feel like that sometimes. And so we have to go to God. The God of endurance. And the God of encouragement.

I don't know whether you can see it here. It's really an aside, isn't it? But can you see the reason why God gave the Bible? The same words occur in the previous verse.

[14 : 18] He's the God of endurance and the God of encouragement. And look what it says there about the Bible in verse 4. For whatever was written in formidate was written for our instructions, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures, we might have hope.

One of the reasons God gave the Bible is so that you would endure and so that you would be encouraged. And so we need to do this for our fellow Christians.

We need to consider our fellow believers highly and with love and with mercy. And with pity and with patience and with grace. That we're not to be ungodly to them and we're not to criticize them.

And so as we pray and as we soak ourselves, verse 4, in the word of God, we are putting ourselves in the way of blessing. The source of unity himself is God.

And thirdly, the path of unity. The path of unity. Can you see it there? It says in the phrase, in accord with Jesus Christ. In accord with Jesus Christ.

[15 : 26] Verse 5. We're to live in harmony and one another if we are in accord with Jesus Christ. If we are in accord with him.

We will be united. If you think of a triangle, isn't it? So I often give this illustration with couples when I'm speaking about marriage. You've got the husband and wife here. You've got the husband here. You've got the wife there. And you've got the Lord Jesus Christ there.

And the way that you get closer to each other is by getting closer to the Lord Jesus Christ. That is a Christian marriage. The Christian marriage is this. As you've got problems in your marriage.

Actually, you probably haven't got a problem in your marriage. You've got a problem with your relationship with Jesus Christ. And it's the same with the church family, isn't it? That as we get

closer to the Lord Jesus Christ, we will be closer to one another, united with one another. And so the best way to achieve unity is to travel in one direction. We understand that, don't we? So I was on the tube. The tube's getting busy again, isn't it?

[16:31] This week. And I kind of got out. And it was one of those stations where you can go basically at any angle to get to your next destination or the exit. And there's these awkward people standing in front of the door.

And you get out and everybody just goes in all sorts of directions, don't they? All sorts of ways. People milling about, some pushing past each other, some waiting patiently. But if our eyes are on the Lord Jesus Christ, we will all be going in the same direction. And we will walk in his steps. And we will not collide with one another.

Can you just see three aspects of Christ's example? Can you see this? Look at verse three. It is a remarkable thing. Christ's example, number one, Christ did not please himself.

Isn't that incredible? Christ did not please himself. If there was anybody who was ever qualified to please himself, but he didn't.

[17:34] He didn't and neither was we. And so selfishness is a denial of Christian discipleship. I'm sorry to say that many professing Christians are too selfish.

It spoils their Christian living in many ways. So Christ set us free, wonderfully, for self-sacrifice. Not self-assertion.

And we have a duty towards our brothers and sisters. We have a duty towards weaker Christians. We have a duty towards Christians who haven't got all the answers, who don't do all things well, who make mistakes, who are awkward, who are often wrong, and we have a duty to them.

Well, like a chain, a church fellowship is only as strong as the weakest link in that chain. So let's imagine a chain.

Your car is broken down, and I'm going to pull it with a chain, which you might think is a bit odd, but anyway, go with me on the illustration. We're going to pull it with this chain, and you say to me, what's the chain like?

[18:45] And I say, well, the chain is absolutely great, really strong, it's just got one link in it that's rusty and weak and a bit broken. But apart from that, it's absolutely terrific.

Every link is strong, except that one. Well, actually, the whole chain becomes weak, doesn't it? And each of us is not to aim first at pleasing ourselves, and to please God, and to please Christ, and to please my brothers and sisters.

Christ did not please himself. Then secondly, look at verse 7. Here's the verse for us treating our new members this morning. Therefore, welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you for the glory of God.

It's a great verse for welcomers, isn't it? A great verse for all of us. We covered chapter 14, so I won't go back over that, but to disown a fellow believer is to disown Christ, our Master and our God. And worse, to abuse his saving grace. And so God has accepted him, and God has accepted her. And if God has accepted them, you and I should.

[20:08] You and I must. Well, you see, they're hard work. And they've got lots of faults. Well, God knows that, doesn't he?

And he accepted them, and he gave them his Holy Spirit, and he loves them, and he is working with them every day. And he is one day going to make them perfect, and we are called to follow his example.

And then in verses 8 and 9, Paul says there, he says, Here's two groups.

They're opposites to each other. They're opposed to each other, and Paul now shows that they are related to each other from the very beginning. And he proves it.

In verses 9 to 12, he gives a list of Old Testament quotations. He says, Let's go to the Psalms. Let's go to Deuteronomy. Let's go to Isaiah. And he says, Back then, hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of years ago, God wasn't only just talking about the Jews.

[21:21] He was talking about the Gentiles, the non-Jews. It's not a new thing. God didn't get to Malachi and think, Well, this is some new idea. We're going to get the Gentiles in, into the church.

We've never had the Gentiles in before. God didn't like the Gentiles. God had nothing to do with the Gentiles in the past. No, no, he quotes, does he? Look at verse 9. In order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy, as it is written, Therefore, I will praise you among the Gentiles and sing to your name.

And again, it said, Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people. And again, praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the people extol him. And again, Isaiah says, The root of Jesse will come, Even he who arises to rule the Gentiles, in him will the Gentiles hope.

That's hundreds of years before Jesus. God loves Gentiles. God is planning to save the Gentiles. And the world was always to be a part of God's people. People from every tribe and tongue and nation. And neither group was second class.

[22 : 24] Neither group is an afterthought in God's plan. There was never a time when God's heart was only sight on one of them. And so no church of Jesus Christ is for those who were just born in the church and brought up in the church.

This is our church. You know, that's not the biblical pattern. To follow Christ means becoming a servant to bring other people to faith.

To sell our own preferences and our own interests to one side for the sake of the greater goal. It is a unifying force, all devoted to one great enterprise.

How can we bring the nations to Jesus Christ? And then the last thing is the purpose of unity. Can you see it? The purpose of unity.

And so unity is not to be sought for its own sake. I've sat in church leaders meetings where it felt like a little bit like we're all holding hands in the dark.

[23 : 29] That we've got nothing in common. But we just, it's nice to be united. Unity is not to be sought just so that we can be happy in church. Although that's a vitally important thing.

Unity is that for which everything and everyone exists. Look at verse 6. Can you see it? That together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Unity together with one voice that you may glorify God. So we've done it this morning, haven't we? Worshipping God as we sing, as we call on his name is glorifying God.

And God says to us, it must be sincere, it must be heartfelt. We're distracted and divided from one another. We should be one. Christian unity in the context of worship. But verse 5 speaks of worship living in such harmony with one another.

And so I thank God for this church. And this church is not perfect. And its minister is not perfect. It's far from perfect. But Paul's point is that we together with one voice may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

[24 : 47] And unity is not just what we do as we worship God on a Sunday morning and a Sunday evening, but it is our existence, our common life.

And so the church is to be a miracle in the world, isn't it? The church is to be something of which there is nothing else of. It is to be an incarnation of the living God, of the love of God.

The church is to be a group of people that are different from each other, so different that only something supernatural could keep them close. And so I want to say to our young people, in the church I grew up in, there was a time when I was just a little bit humiliated by the types of people that came to church.

There were lots of kind of embarrassing dads around. We haven't got that problem in this church. But it would just be, my friends came to youth group and met certain people in the youth group.

I'd just be a bit embarrassed. You know, if you see them on the street, you're saying, oh, please don't talk to me in front of my friends. That's the church. A thoughtful person might look on a Sunday morning at the people coming into this church and think, what have they got in common?

[26 : 05] A person might come in together and say, well, do they get on with each other? They're really different in many ways. But they love each other. In John 13, 35, Jesus says this, by this all people will know that you are my disciples if you love one another.

Francis Schaeffer, who kind of founded our denomination, said, love is the great apologetic, the final defense of the church. So this has been our experience, hasn't it?

As we sit here this morning, we look back, some of us, and we remember what so-and-so did and what so-and-so said and how they've helped us. There are people who are now in heaven.

They loved us. They were patient with us. And they cared for us. And the day is coming when we will all be together again. Forever.

And may God continue to make us a community of heaven because that is what the church is.

People living on earth as they shall be in heaven.

[27 : 24] That should be the vow of each one of us this morning, living amongst these people as we will be in heaven. And that's how I want to live and that's how I want to treat them. And united

with the aim of bringing God glory, verse five, and so may the God of endurance and encouragement grant to you to live in such harmony with one another in accord with Jesus Christ that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore, welcome each other. Welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you for the glory of God. Think of the times you've had to go to the Lord Jesus this week, this month, and you've gone to him guilty and ashamed.

And you've gone having done wrong and knowing that you've done wrong and knowing that you've sinned against him. Knowing that you've neglected him and what does Jesus do?

When we ask for forgiveness, what does Jesus do? He forgives us and he welcomes us and he puts his arm around us and that is the sort of people we are to be for each other.

For behold, how good and how pleasant it is when brothers and sisters dwell in unity. For there the Lord has commanded the blessing of life forevermore.

[28 : 48] Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray.