

Harmony in the Church

Romans 15:1-7

Someone once said, "The more I get to know the human race, the more I love my dog." Many of our canine friends are loyal, dependable, eager to please, and quick to forgive. Don't you wish people were more like that?

Yet our world often sees these characteristics as signs of weaknesses instead of strengths. Our world views strength as exercising power and authority. Strength is seen as success, the ability to go after what you want and obtain it. Some say knowledge is power. Science teaches about the survival of the fittest, implying that the weak are either unnecessary or even a hindrance to progress. Self fulfillment seems to be the goal which strength accomplishes.

Strength for a Christian is so much different from the world's idea. Scripture teaches that the evidence of strength in a Christian's life is self-denial and the willingness to bear up the weaknesses of other Christians for their good and for the glory of God.

Jesus taught that self-denial is the path to true joy. He said to His disciples (Matt. 16:24-25), **"If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it."** The way to true and lasting joy is for Jesus' sake to deny yourself for others.

In Mark 10:42-45 Jesus described the difference between the world's ways and His kingdom ways, saying, **"You know that those who are considered rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. 43 Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant. 44 And whoever of you desires to be first shall be slave of all. 45 For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many"**

Christian strength is demonstrated by service to others for the glory of God. This kind of strength follows the example of Christ and promotes unity and harmony in the church.

I want you to remember that the topic of this section of Romans, (Romans 14:1–15:13) is love and Christian liberty. Paul is addressing the conflict which differing convictions have brought into the church. He is discussing the potentially divisive issue of how the stronger and weaker believers in Rome should learn to accept one another and build up one another. The stronger believers were probably mostly Gentile converts who understood that in Christ, we have been freed from observing the Mosaic Law. They did not have scruples regarding kosher meat or Sabbath laws. But the weaker believers (probably mostly Jewish Christians) could not shake off these things with a clear conscience. And so a potential split could have divided the church.

The strong might tend to look down on the weak, and the weak tended to condemn the strong because of their liberty. We saw in Romans 14:1-12 that

Paul forbids all such judging, whether by the strong or the weak. He insists that we must accept one another without condemning or despising each other.

Then in Romans 14:13-23, Paul urges the strong not to become a stumbling block to the weak by exercising liberties which might cause the weak to stumble. If they are walking in love, the strong will gladly surrender the exercise of their liberties in order not to harm the weak.

So in chapter 14 Paul has dealt with this problem by emphasizing what we should *not* do: we must not judge or despise one another, and we must not do anything to make a brother stumble. In chapter 15, Paul now instructs us what we *should* do and why.

Listen to the scripture for today, Romans 15:1-7:

Romans 15:1-7

- 1 We then who are strong ought to bear with the scruples of the weak, and not to please ourselves.**
- 2 Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, leading to edification.**
- 3 For even Christ did not please Himself; but as it is written, "The reproaches of those who reproached You fell on Me."**
- 4 For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope.**
- 5 Now may the God of patience and comfort grant you to be like-minded toward one another, according to Christ Jesus,**
- 6 that you may with one mind and one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.**
- 7 Therefore receive one another, just as Christ also received us, to the glory of God.**

True Christian strength is found in love that is not selfish, but seeks the benefit and building up of others. It is even willing to carry weaker Christians in order to help them along in their spiritual development. We do not just endure them. We encourage them to grow. This is the great example Jesus Christ and scripture has left for us to follow. And ultimately this attitude will bring harmony. It will unite us for the glory of God.

Harmony in the Church:

- I. Is Strengthening Others Rather Than Pleasing Ourselves, (Rom. 14:1-3).
- II. Has Its Source in God and the Scriptures, 4-5.
- III. Is for the Glory of God (Rom. 14:6-7)

I. Is Strengthening Others Rather Than Pleasing Ourselves, (Rom. 14:1-3).

Verse 1 relays the responsibility strong Christians have to support the weaknesses of others in the church. **"We then who are strong ought to bear with the scruples of the weak, and not to please ourselves."**

The unity of the church is not to be broken for unessential matters. We have no right to establish conditions for Christian communion over non-essentials. If a man is a true Christian, he should be recognized and treated as such. If God has received him or her, we should receive him or her.

Verse 1 begins, **"We then who are strong."** Paul is addressing those with strong faith and includes himself as one of them. We often think that a person's spiritual maturity is shown by his knowledge. But Paul says in 1 Corinthians 8:1, **"Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies."** A person's true spiritual maturity is revealed by his loving discernment. He is willing to give up his rights that others might be helped. He does this, not as a burden but as a blessing. Just as loving parents make sacrifices for their children, so the mature believer sacrifices to help younger Christians grow in the faith. What then ought the strong to do? What is their Christian responsibility toward the weak?

First, the strong ought to bear the weakness of those without strength (1a). The word ought means "owing a debt or having a strong obligation." We have an obligation to bear the scruples, the weaknesses, the infirmities of those weaker brethren. The strong are indebted to help the weak because in the past those who are strong now were weak and someone helped them. That's just the way that families work, including the family of God.

"Bear" does not mean "bear with," in the sense of "put up with," while you roll your eyes and think demeaning things about the weaker person. Rather, it means to carry or support, much as an older brother might pick up his younger brother who is too tired to walk any farther. Paul uses the word in Galatians 6:2, **"Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ."**

To be self-centered and self-seeking is the way of the natural man or the fallen nature. But we ought not use our strength to serve our own advantage (1b). Strong people are tempted to wield their strength in order to discard or crush the weak. Paul says they ought to use their strength bear them up instead. The world says crush the weak man. Christ says carry him.

The second responsibility stated here is, **"we who are strong ought... not to please ourselves"** (1b). The right use of Christian liberty, which the strong believer understands and appreciates, often involves self-sacrifice. This will mean forfeiting certain liberties and attitudes which when exercised would harm a weaker brother or sister.

Again, to be self-centered and self-seeking is natural to our fallen human nature. But we ought not use our Christian strength to please our self or for our own advantage. As Paul has been arguing, Christians with strong convictions and conscience must not trample on the convictions and consciences of the weak.

Verse 2 tells us how this works itself out and what the goal of it is. "**Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, leading to edification.**" Neighbor-pleasing, which Scripture commands, must not be confused with 'men-pleasing.' In Galatians 1:10 Paul condemns trying to be a people pleaser:

For do I now persuade men, or God? Or do I seek to please men? For if I still pleased men, I would not be a bondservant of Christ.
(Galatians 1:10).

And again in 1 Thessalonians 2:4 he writes,

But as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, even so we speak, not as pleasing men, but God who tests our hearts (1 Thess. 2:4).

When is it right to please our neighbor and when is it wrong to please men? When we must choose between pleasing others or pleasing ourselves, it is right to please others. But when the choice is between pleasing others and pleasing God, pleasing others is wrong. Here, Paul instructs us to please others and not ourselves.

We can see then that Paul's instruction to please others needs clarification. Our text provides that clarification as Paul defines what pleasing others means by setting down three qualifications in verses 2 and 3. We please others by

- (1) ... working toward the good of others
- (2) ... working toward the edification of others
- (3) ... pleasing others as Christ Himself pleased men.

By pleasing our neighbor, Paul does not mean pleasing them at any cost. He doesn't mean avoiding or watering down the truth, because it might offend the other person. He doesn't mean avoiding confrontation that might upset your neighbor. Instead he says for each of us to "**please his neighbor for his good ... to edification.**" We are to set aside willfulness and self-pleasing actions for the sake of building our neighbors up. Our Christian convictions must not be a disguise for cold hearted treatment of our brothers and sisters. Instead of causing to stumble (14:13, 20,21), tearing down (14:20) or damaging (14:15) our neighbor, we are to build him up.

It may be for your neighbor's good and edification to let him suffer the consequences of his sin. It may be for his good to let him fail even when you could bail him out, so that he learns to be responsible for his actions. It may be for his good to confront him with his sin and to show him from God's Word that his sin will lead him to judgment if he does not repent.

But you should never do this out of a desire to get even or "make him pay." Rather, your sincere motive should always be for him to get saved and to grow in his relationship with Jesus Christ. Love sincerely seeks the highest good of the one loved, which is that he be conformed to Christ.

When we seek to please men, we must do so as our Lord did. We must begin by giving up any effort to please ourselves. We must further seek to do that which will lead to the salvation and building up of believers in Christ. But in so doing, let us not fool ourselves by thinking that most men will be pleased by our efforts to please them.

Why should we please our neighbor and not ourselves? The reason God can require us to please others instead of our self is seen in verse 3a. "**For even Christ did not please Himself.**" This simple statement is a summation of the meaning of the incarnation and the character of Christ's earthly life. He pleased the Father and others and not Himself.

Paul quotes Psalm 69, this verse that says "**The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on Me.**" Psalm 69 is one of the great messianic Psalms. Seven of its thirty-six verses are cited in the New Testament. It's a psalm about the suffering of Christ. It's a psalm about the self-denial of Christ. It's a psalm about Jesus becoming our sin bearer and substitute. It's a psalm that recalls how Jesus was marked, ridiculed, spat upon, how He was denied and slandered by His enemies, estranged by his brothers, criticized by the rulers and drunkards sang obscene songs about Him.

What does all of that show about Jesus? That He did not please Himself. That He did not lead His life 'as me first.' No, He lived for others. He lived for you and He lived for His people. He lived for those for whom He had come to die and shed His blood for and provide atonement and reconciliation. He thought it not robbery to be equal with God, and He made Himself of no reputation. He humbled Himself, and He became obedient unto death, even death on the cross. That's our Savior. That is our blessed Lord who denied Himself again and again and again and again.

The application is: In light of what Jesus was willing to bear for your salvation, shouldn't you be willing to give up your rights to help your weaker brother or sister? Isn't it worth denying your selfishness to help others grow in their walk with Christ?

Harmony in the church is strengthening our brothers not pleasing ourselves.

II. Has Its Source in God and the Scriptures, 4-5.

Now Paul shares two sources of spiritual power from which we must draw if we are going to be able to have a life that ministers to the needs of others instead of self-promotion: the Word of God (v4), and Prayer (v5-6).

Verse 4 states the church and individual believers need Scriptures that we might have perseverance, encouragement, and hope. "**For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope.**"

Whatever was written before obviously refers to the divinely-revealed truths we now call the Old Testament. They were written for the times in which they were recorded but also for our instruction, for God's people in the present age. Though

we are not bound to obey all of the commands of the Old Covenant and not everything is of equal spiritual benefit, it still had value for Christians of Paul's day and it is for our benefit as well.

All of us have heard of PEYTON MANNING because he's been quarterback of the University of Tennessee, Indianapolis Colts, and the Denver Broncos. He been the NFL's Most Valuable Player and won the Super bowl. But there is something else that Peyton Manning does that you may not know. For many years, when certain competitors Manning admired were retiring from the NFL, he took time to hand write a note to them, congratulating them on their careers and their character.

Each recipient who was interviewed by ESPN expressed deep appreciation that one of the greatest players of all time would do that. It was a great reminder of the power of the written word.

While a written note from a respected athlete such as Peyton Manning has value for those who receive it, no human's words can compare with the written Word we have from God in Scripture. In the life-changing wisdom of the Bible, we have a personal message that tells us who God is and what He desires for us. He has given us His written Word so we "**might have hope**" as we face the issues of life. Out of gratitude, let's read God's written message-and watch it change our lives. For God speaks through His Word to those who listen with their heart.

We must each confess that sometimes we get impatient with immature Christians just as parents become impatient with their children. The Word of God can bring us the "**patience and comfort**" that we need. Patience means endurance, perseverance. It is continuing surrender, faithfulness, and obedience to the Lord through all the circumstances of life.

God also gives us comfort, encouragement to persevere through the Scriptures. God's Word and promises will sustain us and direct us so that we may live in hope (Ps. 119; 116, 49, 130:5).

The more we know about what God has done in years past, the greater the confidence we have about what He will do in the days ahead. We should read our Bible diligently to increase our trust that God's will is our best hope for our best future. God will speak words of love, faith and hope to your heart and mind through the living voice of Scripture.

Sometimes it's hard to find a good word from others. The world can be so discouraging. But we always find encouragement in the presence of the Lord and His Word. For through the encouragement of the Scriptures, we have hope.

Scripture also can bring about like mindedness which we find in verse 5. "**Now may the God of patience and comfort grant you to be like-minded toward one another, according to Christ Jesus.**"

Paul closes this section praying for his readers, that they might experience the spiritual unity that only God can give. The implication is that the local church must major in the Word of God and prayer. The first real danger to unity of the

First Church of Christianity, the Jerusalem Church, came because the apostles were so busy they could not adequately minister the Word and pray (Acts 6:1-7). When they found others to share their burden, they returned to their proper ministry, and the church experienced harmony and growth.

Paul's prayer is that God, through the Scriptures, might give them perseverance, encouragement and unity of purpose. What God demands of them in verse four He gives to them by the working of His grace through the Word and prayer in verse five. God gives the perseverance and encouragement He requires.

When Scripture is well received the Holy Spirit brings forth His mind in the life of the believer and then in the life of the local church. This unity of mind is unity in Christ. As we agree with Jesus about the purpose He has for our lives and church we will more and more agree with one another. God will supply His harmony as we let the Spirit of Jesus apply it to our life. There will be unity with the will and purpose of Jesus and then unity or harmony with each other. This unity will be demonstrated in our corporate worship, **"one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."**

Even in areas where the Bible is silent, there can be unity. Disagreement about nonessential issues will come about but it should not cause conflict between believers. Paul calls on believers, despite their differing views, to be in loving, spiritual and brotherly harmony with one another according to the common purpose of their calling.

God loves harmony in interpersonal relationships. When Christians live in harmony, it is music to the ears of the Lord. When husbands and wives are loving each other, looking out for each other, and serving each other, it is like a symphony for the angels. If you are musically inclined, you know that harmony is not achieved without effort. You have to work at it and practice until you get it right. Interpersonal harmony is no different. In today's passage, we are not simply directed to live in harmony. We are encouraged by the fact that God "gives endurance and encouragement" to our efforts. He is not just commanding harmony; He is also empowering us by His own Spirit.

Inter-personal harmony is not the fake patching over of disagreement. It is not living a shallow life to avoid conflict. It is not avoiding all discord. On the contrary, it is doing the hard work it takes to live in peace and understanding. The honest and respectful working out of disagreements is akin to practicing music together until it starts to sound really good. The fact that it takes time and energy to get it doesn't mean it isn't worth it. So don't avoid healthy conflict. Work out those interpersonal issues with grace and patience. The end result will be a beautiful song that delights you, your loved ones, and the God who is empowering you to make beautiful harmony.

III. Is for the Glory of God (Rom. 14:6-7)

Verse 6 is a purpose statement (hina, clause) that states what will occur if we will allow Christ to harmonize us through His Word, His Spirit, and prayer. We will

give glory to God in corporate worship. **"that you may with one mind and one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."**

The result of this singleness of purpose is to glorify God, not to please other believers. Disunity and disagreement with each person going their own way does not glorify God. A refusal to unify and agree in Christ keeps the worship experience from glorifying God.

Abraham's words to Lot are applicable to today; "Let there be no strife, I pray thee, between me and thee....for we are brethren" (Gen. 13:8). The neighbors were watching! Abraham wanted them to see that Lot and he were different from them because they worshiped the true God. In His prayer in John 17, Jesus prayed for the unity of the church to the glory of God (John 17:20-25).

Thus, the one mind is expressed through one heart and voice. Without the unity of mind and heart that Jesus brings, worship is impossible.

CONCLUSION

During World War II, a missionary who served in Calcutta was profoundly influenced by a communion service she attended. The leader was a Swedish minister. Among those present were a Chinese pastor, a Japanese teacher, a German doctor, several English citizens, and a small group of Indian believers. The missionary recalled that as she looked at that diverse company she felt a closeness to each person, especially when they partook of the bread and the cup. That bond of Christian fellowship was real, even though some of those people were from countries that were enemies in that brutal war ("Our Daily Bread," Winter, 1980-81).

True Christian harmony transcends differences in race, culture, age, gender, and background. It transcends differences over secondary doctrines or practices. True Christian unity comes from God, is based on the scriptures and the Lordship of Christ Jesus, and results in glory to God. May we all grow in our understanding and practice of true Christian unity to God's glory!

So, do you have a problem accepting others just like they are? When they are different from you, you have an obligation to love them and to reach out to them with a Christlike love and compassion. May God help us as a church to realize that glorifying God, getting men to Jesus and growing my brother in Christ is the most important activity that I can engage in as a believer. Nothing is more honoring to the Lord than these things.