



Text: Romans 15:1-7¹

Series: Right Living – The Letter to the Romans

Title: Part 24 “The Church is like a choir...”

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“Live in harmony;” “in accord with Christ Jesus;” glorify God with “one voice;” that’s why it seems to me that “the church is like a choir...” What makes a choir so wonderful is the combination of different voices in common purpose.

Harmony, not just melody, is what makes choral music so rich and beautiful. A soloist can only do so much with a melody line – all they can do is sing one line of the possible musical options suggested by the melody. Even a duo or small group is limited by the number of voices. But a choir can bring life and colour to the song. Different harmonies, different timings, different intonations but all gathered around a common purpose – to enhance the melody.

In chapter 14, Paul talked about some of the “harmony” lines that different Christians had chosen to live. He referred to them as “opinions.” (14:1) His message to the Romans was that as long as they were united in common purpose around the melody of the Lordship of Jesus Christ (14:5-9), the believers in Rome could make good, spiritual, God-exalting music together even though they were different from one another.

But as I said last week, it takes work to make harmonious, God-exalting music together and here in Romans 15, Paul tells us how. Last week, we looked at some principles that will help us to “disagree without being disagreeable” in the church of Jesus Christ. This week, we’re going to move that agenda forward. Paul doesn’t want us to merely live in a state of truce with one another, he wants us to work together to bring glory to God in our lives and our witness as the church of Jesus Christ.

What was Paul thinking of when he challenged the Romans “to live in harmony with one another in accord with Christ Jesus”? There are at least three things that were in the forefront of his mind. Let’s begin, this morning, by getting a handle on the challenge of **what** it means to live harmoniously and then I’ll share some of Paul’s insights on **how** we can do it.

First of all, “**living in harmony with one another**” is a challenge to...

“Bear With” one another for the sake of Christ

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Paul wrote...

“We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves.” Romans 15:1

When I lead couples through their pre-marriage preparation studies we always come to a verse that sounds almost exactly like this one. Paul was concerned about developing harmony in all of the churches he started because he knew how easy it was for harmony to be broken. It happens all the time. He wrote to the believers in the city of Ephesus...

“I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” Ephesians 4:1-3

I ask the engaged couples I work with a simple question when we read this together and it's this: What do the words “bear with one another” imply? The answer is that they imply that **somebody has been a “bear” to deal with!** Someone has done something stupid, or selfish or unthinking. These are some of the most honest words about the nature of Christians that we'll find in the New Testament and Paul says them again and again in his letters. To the Colossians he wrote...

“Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.” Colossians 3:12-13

The reality that stands behind the challenge to “bear with” people is the reason for the famous Christian bumper sticker that reads...

PBPWMGNFWMY

Which being interpreted means...

Please Be Patient With Me, God’s Not Finished With Me Yet

Let me just say that in my pastoral experience it is the struggle to live this simple command that lies behind many, if not most, of the problem issues that come across my desk. The challenge to “bear with” the imperfections of spouses, of children, of fellow believers, of those we work with, of extended family, that challenge is the underlying source of much of the conflict we experience in our lives. But learning to “bear with” others is crucial to learning to live in harmony



with one another. It's tough work – how do we do it and keep at it year after year? Remember, I said we needed to scope out the challenge we face in living harmoniously and in a few moments I'll share some of Paul's insights about how we can do it.

Second, “living in harmony with one another” is a challenge to...

“Build Up” one another for the sake of Christ

Paul wrote...

“Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up.” Romans 15:2

You might read these words and mistakenly think that Paul is telling us to make people happy. First of all, you need to understand that Paul is using the word “neighbor” in a very limited sense. In Ephesians he uses it in the same sense when he wrote...

“let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another.” Ephesians 4:25

The “neighbor” to whom Paul is referring is not the person across the street, it's the person across the aisle! It's not the person who lives behind you on the other side of the alleyway; it's the person who is sitting in front of you on the other side of the pew. Paul is referring to other believers, not to neighbors in general. In Ephesians the phrase “members of one another” makes it clear that Paul is referring to Christian believers because that is an expression he would only use of fellow Christians.

Secondly, you need to understand that there is a big difference between “pleasing” people in Christ, and catering to people in the flesh. You might mistakenly think that Paul is encouraging us to do whatever “Joe & Jill Kranky Pants in Pew Five” want us to do for them. But notice that Paul tells us to “please” our neighbor, “to build him up.” Paul uses the expression “build up” to describe our growth into the likeness of Jesus. Building up people in Christ is not the same thing as doing things or saying things to make people feel better about themselves. That would be what Paul calls “men-pleasing” and that is something he roundly condemns (see 1 Thess. 2:4). Again, in Ephesians we get clarity about what it means to “build up” someone. We don't “build up” our neighbors in Christ by telling them what they want to hear or doing what they want us to do. Paul wrote...

“Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working



**properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.”
Ephesians 4:15-16**

Let me show you an example of a church that “pleased” its neighbors. In the church in Jerusalem there was an linguistic division between Jews from Jerusalem who spoke Hebrew and Jews from the Mediterranean world who spoke Greek. In the Jerusalem church there converts from both of these groups. The Greek-speaking Jews, however, felt neglected by the Hebrew Jews. There were some Greek-speaking widows in that church who were being overlooked in the distribution of food by the church and a complaint came to the apostles. They came up with a plan to solve the problem. They presented a proposal to the church which recommended that seven Greek-speaking believers be chosen to look after the needs of the Greek-speaking widows. And this is what the Book of Acts tells us...

“And what they said pleased the whole gathering....” Acts 6:5

The seven men were appointed, the plan was implemented and then it says...

“And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.” Acts 6:7

That is the kind of “pleasing” that builds up believers into mature, Christian life and witness. Paul is challenging us to respond to the legitimate needs of fellow believers so that the body of Christ will be built up as each believer is built up in their faith in the Lord. And it takes work! There’s listening to one another; there’s bringing forward concerns in a helpful manner so that they can be addressed; there’s formulating a plan and working it through with those who are in need – there’s a lot of work needed to “build up” our brothers and sisters in Christ. How do we keep at it? How do we keep motivated and directed? We’ll get to that in a minute but let’s finish sketching out what “living in harmony” looks like.

Third, “living in harmony with one another” is a challenge to...

“Draw In” one another for the sake of Christ

Paul wrote...

“Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.” Romans 15:7

The word translated as “welcome” literally means “to take in addition.” It’s more than “smile nicely and shake hands at the door on Sunday morning.” It means to add someone to your circle, to accept them as part of your life.



There's a beautiful little story in the Book of Acts that illustrates this word in action. A guest preacher came to the church in Ephesus. His name was Apollos. He was a very gifted speaker and knew the Old Testament prophecies about the coming of the Messiah and could demonstrate very powerfully how Jesus fulfilled those prophecies. But there was a problem. He had did understand the nature of Christian baptism and he was probably ignorant of the fact that the Holy Spirit had been given to believers at Pentecost. In other words, his message was accurate, but incomplete.

I love what happened next. Instead of rejecting him or humiliating him, two believers in the Ephesians church took him aside privately and explained the Gospel to him more fully. This is what is says...

“but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him and explained to him the way of God more accurately.” Acts 18:26

Apollos went on to have a tremendous ministry, now fully equipped with the complete message, all because a husband and wife team had taken time to talk with him and share with him what they knew about Christ.

The phrase “took him” translates the same word that is translated as “welcome” in Romans. But I like the translation that both the KJV and the NIV give to it. The KJV tells us that Priscilla and Aquila...

“took him unto them, and expounded unto him the way of God more perfectly.” Acts 18:26 (KJV)

And the NIV translates it as...

“they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately.” Acts 18:26 (NIV)

“Took him unto them” or “invited him to their home” – either way, you get the sense of what Paul means when he tells us to “welcome one another.” One of the best ways to be welcomed in this or any church, is to get involved in a small group, whether it's a home fellowship group or a Bible study group here at the church or even a ministry team where you serve Christ together with others. Being “welcomed” is about being “draw in” and connected with other believers.

It takes work to draw people in. That's why we spend so much time on encouraging and supporting small groups and ministry groups in the church. We want people to be “drawn in” for the sake of Christ.

Living in harmony with one another is about bearing with, building up and drawing in one another for the sake of Christ. Harmonious Christian living doesn't just “happen.” What is called for is a dedicated determination to seek the



interests of others ahead of ourselves and this isn't an easy perspective to maintain. Adjusting ourselves and directing our efforts to address the needs of others is demanding work.

What keeps us going? What motivates us? What resources do we have to draw on to help us in what is a very challenging task? Paul tells us that **we have powerful resources from God that make harmonious living possible** – if we will employ them.

First of all, Paul points us to...

The compelling example of Jesus' selflessness

Paul wrote...

“For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, ‘The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me.’ [Psalm 69:9]” Romans 15:3

Paul provides us with other resources with which we can develop the other-mindedness we need to nurture the harmony of the church but he could have stopped right here. He points us to Jesus and what more need be said. If we're struggling with the challenge of caring for the needs of others, all we need to do is remember what Jesus did for our spiritual good. Just meditating on what Jesus did for us should move us out of ourselves and motivate us to care for the spiritual good of others.

The Old Testament quotation that Paul applies to Jesus is beautifully appropriate for his purpose in writing to the Romans. Paul is quoting from Psalm 69. In the early church it was one of the most frequently quoted psalms because of its connection with the sufferings of Jesus. Psalm 69 was understood as a prophecy of Jesus' suffering on the cross because, among other things, it said,

“They gave me poison for food, and for my thirst they gave me sour wine to drink.” Psalm 69:21

Matthew tells us that as Jesus hung on the cross, the Roman soldiers first “offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall” which Jesus refused (Matthew 27:34). Gall was a poison and stupefying drug that we mixed with diluted wine and given to the crucified to dull their pain. Later, when Jesus cried out from the cross that he was thirsty, the Romans soaked a sponge with “sour wine” and held up to Jesus on a stick for him to drink (Matthew 27:48; John 19:29-30). Psalm 69 brought Paul's readers literally to the foot of the cross of Christ and that's exactly where he wanted them.

The verse that Paul quotes, verse 9, depicts someone suffering because he is bearing the insults that people have directed towards God. Paul wanted his



readers to understand that the “you” was God and the “me” was Jesus. Jesus bore insult in his service to God and Paul is telling the “strong” in Rome to do the same. In the Roman church there had been plenty of insults flying around. He told them...

“Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him.” Romans 14:3

There had been plenty of despicable and judgmental words to go around! But now Paul tells the strong to follow Jesus’ example and move past the insults that had come their way and get on with their service to God. Why? Because Jesus had done that for them!

If you are in Christian leadership for very long, you will have harsh words directed at you, sometimes with justice, often without. That experience is not – I repeat, not – a reason for throwing in the towel of Christian service. The fact is that it goes with the territory – it happened to Jesus, it will happen to you. Get your eyes on Jesus and get on with your service, even to those who have insulted you.

Second, Paul points us to...

The endurance, encouragement and hope inspired by the Scriptures

He wrote...

“For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.” Romans 15:4

Living in harmony will take endurance – it won’t come easily, it’s a battle that is hard fought and must be relentlessly fought by those who want to win it.

Living in harmony will take encouragement. There are days we will need a word that will lift us up and get us moving again.

Living in harmony needs hope, hope that in the end all the effort will be worth it because it will bring glory to God.

The Bible is full of inspiring stories **endurance**. Hebrews chapter 11 is chock full of stories of people who endured by faith in God. There’s Abraham, who left his home on God’s say-so without knowing where he was going, or how he would get there, but simply trusting in God to guide him. There’s Moses, who chose to be an instrument in God’s hands to bring deliverance to God’s people. The writer of Hebrews tells us that...



“By faith [Moses] left Egypt, not being afraid of the anger of the king, for he endured as seeing him who is invisible.” Hebrews 11:27

And there are the stories of heroic endurance that the writer of Hebrews leaves unnamed...

“Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated—of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.” Hebrews 11:35-38

You can't help but be inspired to faithful endurance when you read these stories of God's people.

And the Bible contains great stories of **encouragement**, too. One of the most encouraging truths of God's Word is the recurring theme of God's patience with his erring people. We follow the Old Testament people of God from the hills of Palestine into slavery in Egypt; we're with them as God leads them out of Egypt and through their 40 years of stumbling, bumbling half-hearted faith in the desert. We watch as God graciously provides his Law and opens up the Land of Promise for them. We're there as one prophet after another calls the people back to God and one king after another leads them away. For centuries, God is patient with his people, teaching and disciplining them but never, never, never forsaking them.

There are centuries of experience and truth to discover in the Word of God that supports the encouragement we can draw from what God said to Moses...

“It is the Lord who goes before you. He will be with you; he will not leave you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed.” Deuteronomy 31:8

And the story in the Bible that inspires our endurance and encourages our hearts is the story of Jesus...

“the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.” Hebrews 12:2-3

Paul points us to a **third** resource we need for harmonious living. It's...



The enabling grace of God accessed by prayer

Paul records his prayer for the church in Rome. He wrote...

**“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.”
Romans 15:5-6**

Paul’s prayer is the same prayer that Jesus prayed for His church. Jesus prayer for the church was...

“that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one....” John 17:21-22

I want you to notice that what Paul is calling on the Roman believers to do, he is asking God to supply. That’s always the way it is in our life with God. Whenever God asks something of us, he always supplies what is needed.

Prayer is the way we access what God wants to supply. When we humbly come and acknowledge that we need His help, God is always pleased to provide his grace for our need.

As I led in prayer on Thursday night at our congregational meeting I asked the question: *what is our prayer for this church?* Let me invite you to join with me in making Paul’s prayer for the church in Rome our prayer for the church in Olds. In your personal times of prayer, in your small group prayer time, in our prayer together as a church, let’s not stop asking God to grant us harmony in Christ so that we can, with one voice, bring glory to God.

Finally, the **fourth** resource that Paul points us toward for harmonious living is...

The challenge of our own experience of God’s mercy

Paul wrote...

“Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.” Romans 15:7

Let’s remember, you and I, that we were “welcomed” by Christ when we were powerless and ungodly...

**“For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.”
Romans 5:6**



We were “welcomed” by Christ when we were sinners...

“but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Romans 5:8

We were “welcomed” by Christ when we were his enemies...

“For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.” Romans 15:10

I love the “as Christ has so you should” passages in the Bible!

“as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.” Colossians 3:13

“Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.” Ephesians 4:32

When we personalize God’s grace to us, how can we possibly withhold mercy from someone else?

Let’s just stop and just take stock of what we have been given by God to encourage harmony in our relationships with other believers.

We have the example of Jesus’ selflessness – he suffered insult for us, can we not endure a little insult from others?

We have the stories of endurance and encouragement from God’s Word, especially the story of Jesus’ endurance. How can we lose heart when we think of what he did for us?

We have the grace of God available to us through prayer. Whatever God asks of us, he will supply. Do we believe that to be true and will we live it?

We have our own experience of God’s mercy and acceptance. If God was willing to accept us even though we were his enemies, how can we withhold mercy and acceptance from our brothers and sisters?

When you consider all the resources available to us to live in harmony with one another, it’s pretty clear who’s at fault when harmony breaks down – it’s me and you.

You’d think that with all these resources at hand and with the personal encouragement of Paul, the church in Rome would be set up for success. But



Bible scholars and church historians tell a different story. Kent Hughes, in his study on Romans, quotes the work of several scholars who suggest...

that some of the early Christian martyrs (including Peter and Paul) were killed because of jealous strife among the members of the church in Rome! Rivalry was so bitter, they say, that some brethren turned in the names of their Christian opponents, naming them as traitors against the Empire. If this is true, envy among Christians helped feed saints to the lions in the Colosseum and light fires under Christians who burned in Nero's gardens.¹ But the fact is, Hughes wrote, if we do not take God's Word to heart, we will terribly fail too.²

So let me ask again: Will we make Paul's prayer our prayer? Will we keep asking for God's grace so that we can...

- Bear with one another,
- Build up one another,
- And draw in one another for the sake of Christ and for the glory of God?

Let's pray...

Father, we join our hearts with the heart of Paul and with the heart of Jesus and we ask that you, the God of endurance and encouragement, will grant to us to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together we may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. We ask this so that Jesus Christ might receive glory in his church now and forevermore. In Jesus' name we ask it, Amen.

- **Invitation to prayer ministry:** (ask ministry team to come forward)
- **Final Song:** I Will Glory In My Redeemer
- **Benediction:** Ephesians 3:21

“Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.” Ephesians 3:21

¹ Oscar Cullmann, *Peter, Disciple-Apostle-Martyr* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1953), pp. 106, 107.

²Hughes, R. K. (1991). *Romans : Righteousness from heaven*. Preaching the Word (278). Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books.