

The Prayer for Unity Romans 15: 5-6

As we come to verses 5-6 this morning we come to the prayer of the apostle Paul. And I love the prayers that we have in Scripture for a couple of reasons. One is that they really teach us to pray. So often we wonder: how do I pray or what do I pray? I have been asked by numerous people at numerous times, could you teach me to pray? And prayer in and of itself is not difficult. It might seem strange if we are not used to praying. One thing we find in Scripture is that there is no uniform way to pray. It is us coming toward God as needy children to talk, to adore, and petition or ask of God. It is a spiritual activity that indicates that our salvation is not something that is informal, but intimate with our God. We really do have fellowship with him. He communicates to us through His Word, and we communicate through our prayers to him.

But many times when we are asking, "how do I pray," what we are asking is: "How do I get God to answer my prayers?" How do I get the things that I want? And so often we ask for things with the wrong motives. It is all about us and our pleasures. James talks about this in James 4:3, "**You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.**" The passions here are our inward and selfish desires. And as you listen to individual pray you would think that the great hope that Paul has just said that the Scriptures create in us is in the here and now. And this is the second reason why I love the prayers in Scripture - because they inform us what truly is important to God - from Paul's perspective here, and from God's perspective - this is what is important.

And think of it: Paul's prayer here is for unity in the church. But think of how important is unity in the church of Jesus Christ to you? How often do you pray for unity? Do you ever pray for unity? Often our prayers focus around ourselves and our little family unit with all the problems and difficulties of life. We concentrate on a carefree and problem free life as if this is our heaven and destination. And we said last time we were together that Christianity always creates a God-centred life that is other centred. We know that Christ is being formed in us when we forget self and concentrate on the spiritual welfare of others; we labour for peace and building up others. And it is amazing because through this whole section we have been commanded to love one another, think of others before ourselves, not use our liberty to cause others to stumble or question God's goodness, to walk in humility before others. For this we need a radical reorientation of our lives. We are unified around the gospel and God's mission he has given us.

And this prayer of Paul, in fact this whole section, should convince us of the need to be involved in the church. In order to carry out these commands - I need to know others and be involved with others. I cannot love and I cannot put others first if I do not know them and not involved in their lives. This is not a one hour a week project. This is not even if I come out to all the services. This is: I am going to get out of my comfort zone and enter into the lives of others for the glory of Christ. I can remember someone saying this: no one ever invites me into their homes. And the question posed back was: who do you invite? Remember, the way that we know Christ is being formed in us is when we are other-centred individuals - caring and loving others. We are not worrying about self and how many invitations I have received.

But we also need to be praying for others. We certainly need to be praying for their temporal needs and temporal struggles in their lives. But we need to be praying prayers for their spiritual well-being. And here is what I find: when we pray passionately that people might grow in Christ and might endure and find their greatest hope in Christ, that the tool that God uses to bring that prayer to pass is you. God begins to change you in the midst of praying for others. You are willing to befriend someone or have a bible study and sit down and have a coffee with that person. You enter into the messiness and struggles of others for the glory of God. And what it creates in the church is a glorious change and corporate unity that speak of his grace and power like nothing else can on planet earth. And that is worth spending your life on. That is worthy of you time, prayers and effort. God is worthy of worship. So there are two things I want us to see in this prayer. And these are two things we should all pray and labour for in one another, and that is unity, and what unity produces.

1. We need to pray for unity. V.5.

It is amazing that so often we trust in ourselves only to produce what only God can produce. And it is also incredible that God gives the necessary grace needed to do what he has commanded to do. 1 Corinthians 10:13 says and promises, **“No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.”** All our temptations, which we think are unique are common. Other believers have gone through similar struggles in the past. But the key here is God is faithful. He will not cause you to be put into a situation that is beyond your ability to obey and follow him. And the key in this verse is the way of escape. God makes a way of escape. This is his doing. But the way of escape is not running away, but enduring. Do you see that at the end of the verse? God causes endurance. God causes different people to come together in the church of Jesus Christ that do not see eye to eye on every issue. But God provides the necessary grace need to endure and even to love and minister to others we would never think that we could ever love or minister to.

So look at what Paul says here, **“May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you.”** Now this is the first of five prayers that Paul makes at the end of this epistle. And notice that this prayer of course is directed to God. But look at how Paul describes God. He describes him as the God of endurance and encouragement. Certainly God is patient - eternally patient with us. We would have given up on us, and he stays with us and never leaves us, even though we would have left people like us a long time ago. And encouragement. Imagine knowing that your will could never be thwarted and that your will - will always be accomplished how much joy that would cause a heart. God is the most joyous being in the universe. His will is always accomplished. His purposes always come to pass. Part of our frustrations is our will and plans do not. Paul has just said that the reason we need to be in the scriptures is to cause us to endure and be encourage with the great hope we have in Jesus Christ. The Scriptures change our mind and thinking. But the scriptures are inactive in our lives without God. God is the one who takes it and makes it active and alive and effective. When the gospel is preached to us through the Scriptures we read

in 2 Corinthians 4:6, **“For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”** He shines the light of his word into our hearts. He makes it active and effective. Therefore if we are going to have biblical endurance and encouragement that leads to biblical hope it can only come from the source of endurance and encouragement and that is God, thus the need to petition him to grant to us and give to us something that we could never have unless we come to him and rely on him to give.

Well, how do we know that God is giving us endurance and encouragement? And the way that we know is that this is not just for us. All of us want to endure and grow in trusting Christ. All of us want to be encourage and walk in the joy of our salvation. But these qualities or characteristics are absolutely essential to live in the household of faith. Look at the verse again, **“May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus.”** Look at the words that are used here: “harmony,” “one another” and “one accord.” These words speak of oneness and unity. But what kind of unity is this verse talking about.

We realize that as the people of God we need doctrinal unity. It is vital. This is not calling for a unity outside of the clear perimeters of the Scriptures and scriptural truth concerning our salvation. We might differ what is the best translation to use or when the Lord is coming back, but we are united in Gospel truth. There can be no unity among the people of God without knowing the gospel, standing on the gospel and a willingness to defend the gospel. Galatians 1:8-9, **“But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.”** There can be no unity without the gospel. We are united together as God’s people around our the gospel. This is what binds and knits our hearts together.

And I think that we all understand that. But I do not think that is what Paul is talking about here. He has explained the gospel in the opening 11 chapters and it is taken for granted that there is a unity around the gospel of Jesus Christ. That is why they are in the church and identifying with other believers and even receive this letter from the apostle Paul. The unity that he is discussing here is the unity needed around many of the secondary issues that these believers do not see eye to eye on. It is when meat and holy days start to become primary that unity becomes such a struggle in the church. Everyone has to believe the same as me about this issue or that issue. I remember talking to a friend from another church who said, “we’ve got to get the message out.” And he was passionate. But what he was passionate about was not the gospel but a political message - a message where many believers did not see eye to eye, and even unbelievers. The secondary had become primary. And it creates enemies out of people who should be so close to us that I think of them as my brothers and sisters and sons and daughters. This is the whole argument through this section. It is the strong and the weak not to have a spirit of judgmentalism about these things. It is the strong to defer to the weak. Why? So the most important work that could ever go on - goes on - the making and maturing of disciples for the eternal glory of Jesus

Christ. We usually demonize people who hold a different view and even misrepresent that view. We drive wedges rather than seeking that strong corporate witness.

And let me say - that is something worth praying for. That is something worthy of our passion. Let me ask you if unity in the body of Christ is a goal in your life? And you might say yes but only of everyone sees the way I see this or that, and you miss the whole point. Do you pray for your brothers and sisters? It is amazing that through the pandemic people changed the way they viewed people who disagreed with them. As long as they are seeking to glorify God and giving a biblical answer. Then it came to condemning and attacking. It came that God is going to judge you. It is even wondering if certain people were even saved. And in our red faces and grinding of teeth the world looked on in disgust to the church, and said they have nothing to offer. What was the problem? Secondary things became primary. Don't you dare judge me because I got vaccinated. Don't you dare judge me because I did not get vaccinated but I am going to judge you. Did we pray and work for unity? Did we ever say to ourselves that there is going to be a day and age that we will come through the pandemic either because it will end or the Lord comes back and will I have endured in loving and caring for those who are my brothers and sisters in Christ?

Now why is unity so important? And that brings us to our next point.

2. We pray for unity because of what unity produces. V. 6.

Think about what Paul is saying here. If you devote all your energy on what someone else is doing, and your angry about this issue or that issue, if you are consumed with that then not only is church unity affected but also the fruit of unity, which is heart-felt praise to God. We exist to enjoy God and praise him forever. If all I am worried about is my liberty and freedom then the united voice of God's children cannot exist. So this passage is not calling for uniformity. We take it for granted that we believe in the gospel, that our other members believe there is one way of salvation through Christ alone. But unity among the diversity of gifts and talents and backgrounds and cultures and various maturity levels in the church of Jesus Christ.

This is what the writer of Hebrews has in mind when he writes in Hebrews 13:17, **“Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.”** Again, it is not a blind loyalty. He has already said to follow their example so this command assumes that these are not perfect leaders but godly leaders. But he says to follow them, and that certainly leads to unity. Let them lead with joy rather than groaning and then he says the reason, **“for that would be of no advantage to you.”** Why is it of no advantage? The reason why is because peace and mutual edification cannot be accomplished. And if the mission of God is not being accomplished then the corporate glory of praise brought by God's people to him will not be going on. And it is amazing how often individuals cause unnecessary division in the church and even stand against godly leadership, and judgmentalism enters in, and all in the name of Christ, and somehow think it is a mark of Christian maturity. I see things so clearly. There are individuals that have lived in one area all of their lives and have gone to one church after another. Controversy has followed, and when you hear their story and the problem is not a lack of humility in them but everyone else.

As we think and ponder that our God is worthy of worship and how he is glorified is through the making and maturing of disciples for the glory of Christ. People who used to curse him now praise him, and those who used to look like the world are now being progressively changed into the image of Christ from one degree of glory to another. How can that not glorify Christ, and again, how can that not be the passion of our hearts?

So look at what Paul says here in verse 6, **“that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”** This is called a “hina” clause in the Greek. In other words a purpose clause. This is why we want humble hearts and give up legitimate pleasures or just not cause trouble where no trouble needs to exist in the church. And look at the word “together.” It does not matter who we are as believers, young and old, rich or poor, male or female, bond or free, what nationality. The call is that whatever our views on this or that, whether we are mature or feel that we are right, you may have one voice. One voice is one message and it has the meaning of praise and adoration and celebration. It is almost as one hundred thousand are gathered to watch a football team, and all the politics and everything is put aside, and the home team wins, and there is such celebration. People are jumping up and down and hugging complete strangers. They have the same joy and the same passion and the same team. How much more intimate and joyous our unity should be?

You exist for a reason, and that reason is to glorify God. you are not the centre of your being. And everything in our culture that finds its way into the church goes against this very reason why the church exists. And the problem is not horizontal. We live so often for our own glory. We want easy relationships. People to do your will, and God to do our will. We live for the pleasure of self. But it is not that the goal in and of itself is wrong. it is just too low. To see the glory of God takes our breath away. To see who we are and who we are, creates a holy awe - an awesome shudder in us that is meant to control us, so much so that our delights change. Our delight becomes Jesus Christ - him not making much of us, but us making much of him. Our delight is in God and in His Son. And as we delight in him our joy is not that others use the same translation as us or that they agree on our view of hats or our that there is a certain music genre that glorifies Christ or that a certain political power is in power or whatever. Our delight is in Christ - who he is and what he has done.

Remember how Paul ends the first 11 chapters? Romans 11:33-36 says, **“Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! ‘For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?’ ‘Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?’ For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.”** To him be glory! How long? Forever!

And when this sense of awe and wonder and bewilderment and glory is created in us through seeing and savouring all that God is for us in Christ - it creates a desire and delight to be like Christ. Not to demand our ways or even that I am heard.

So what must we do? We must pray - pray for ourselves and for others. Pray that the gospel might take root that God and his glory capture our hearts and thoughts. And then work to fulfill those prayers through the grace of God. Seek to live a humble life of sacrifice and help Jesus Christ, our blessed Lord be formed in others.