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While We Are Waiting: Let's Get Along

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TEXT: Romans 15:5-13 (ESV)

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. Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.

For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and 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 is said, "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people." And again, "Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples 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."

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.

Some siblings have a hard time getting along with each other. Parents who are going out sometimes will say to their kids who are always fighting, "We'll be back in a while, try to get along with each other and don't fight." I've even heard parents say, "Try not to kill each other before we get back. Get along."

That's the main appeal that the Apostle Paul is making in today's passage to a church congregation in Rome. He has earlier told them that, as believers in Jesus Christ, they are people in waiting, looking forward to Christ's second Coming, and that they should conduct themselves as citizens of God's kingdom. And now, in today's reading, he goes on to say that while we are waiting for his return, we as members of the Body of Christ, his church, are to commit ourselves to getting along with each other. We're brothers and

sisters in Christ. And perhaps you've noticed sometimes we have a hard time getting along with our brothers and sisters in the Christian church. Why do you suppose that is?

Well, one reason that comes to mind is that we are under attack by Satan. He loves to get us sniping at each other and take our focus off of our mission. In his first book [of the *Lord of the Rings* series], *Fellowship of the Ring*, J.R.R. Tolkien describes the camaraderie of a diverse group banded together by a common cause called "The Fellowship of the Ring." Their quest is to destroy the power of the dark Lord lodged in his ring. Though they differ in nearly every way, racially, physically, temperamentally, they are united in their opposition of the Dark Lord. At one point, a heated conflict breaks out among the crusaders. Axes are drawn, bows are bent, harsh words are spoken; disaster nearly strikes this small band. When peace at last prevails, a wise counselor observes, "Indeed, in nothing is the power of the Dark Lord more clearly shown than in the estrangement that divides all those who oppose him." Today, the "Dark Lord" Satan shows his power when there's discord among believers.

The book of Romans also gives us two other reasons. First, we're ungrateful, rebellious sinners against God's glory and grace, and we can be self-centered, prideful, and selfish, stepping on each other's toes. And there's a second reason as well. Sometimes people just disagree, over secondary non-essential matters. Listen to these insightful words of Christian writer Max Lucado. He writes:

In the church, there are matters of doctrine and there are matters of opinion. There are matters of truth and matters of preference. The issues at the core of the gospel revolve around the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. On those issues, there are no opinions. There is only one truth. But outside that is a plethora of opinions.

Of course, followers of Jesus need to be in total agreement on matters that cut to the heart of the Christian faith, such as doctrine and truth. But oftentimes disagreements will arise over nonbiblical secondary issues which stem from different perspectives and opinions on things like culture, politics, worship styles, worship where, how to best help the poor, and raise your kids. And if we're not careful in how we handle these differences, it can lead to conflict and contemptuously pronouncing judgments on each other over matters of opinion. We wind up with an angry, divided congregation bickering over secondary matters. Christian Pastor Matt Woodley describes what can happen. He says:

The way of judgment and contempt is very powerful. We're always sizing people up and with lightning speed forming judgments, usually hard and final. "Look at that guy dressed like a total hipster, phony, pretentious," or "she's a Democrat or a Republican." How could a thinking, sensitive person like me, for instance, take that stance? Or "Look at the young man with the hoodie, we all know what that means." Or "Look at that woman over there always raising her hands and worship. What a showoff." Or "Look at that guy. He just sits there and worship like a cold head of cabbage."

Division and disagreement over secondary issues like that is the focus of our passage for today. The Apostle Paul had heard of some division and conflict brewing in this congregation in Rome. It was between Jews and Gentiles over the over the matter of following Jewish dietary restrictions and special days. Many Jewish Christians held on to the Old Testament dietary laws and traditions around special days and thought everyone else should too, regardless of their background. So, they were horrified and shocked to see non-Jewish Christians buying and eating meat from the market, which had been used in sacrifices to idols. Even some of their Jewish brothers were now doing this. There was some judging going on towards these new things. And the Gentiles reason "What's the big deal? Didn't Jesus release us from dietary laws through a sacrifice on the cross? There's no harm in this. I refuse to get hung up on Old Testament stuff and give up my steaks." Paul knew their reasoning was correct, but because this had become such a divisive issue, he reasoned with the sacrificial meat eaters: "How about being a little more understanding and compassionate guys?" Being a follower of Jesus is not about just pleasing yourself and demanding your rights. It's about being considerate, sensitive, sacrificially loving towards those who Paul refers to as weaker in faith. Instead of thumbing your noses at them, how about doing whatever it takes to show some love, some sensitivity? All of you are to be looking out for each other's spiritual welfare in your church, not fighting with each other. This congregation had not yet had the benefit of hearing this wise old saying for the church to abide by: "In essentials: unity. In non-essentials: diversity. In all things: charity."

So, Paul gently instructs them on God's intentions and vision for his church while we wait for Christ's return. First, we are to live in unity, he says, harmony with one another. Our first loyalty is to Jesus Christ. What draws us together is faith in Him, the Son of God who lived, died and rose again to save us – that He is the way of salvation. Christ alone, faith alone, word alone. These are essentials to always agree upon. But we

don't need to agree on every single detail, tradition, or personal preference each of us might carry into the church fellowship from our differing backgrounds. God wants us to live unified, accepting each other's differences, united around the essentials of the faith. We seek to get along and love each other, even though we may not see eye to eye on secondary things and personal preferences.

And why is that important? Paul tells us. It glorifies God. He says, "So that with one heart and mouth, you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." Be unified to glorify. That's our main purpose as his people in his church. We exist to glorify God. To honor, exalt, magnify, and praise him. And that happens when we, as believers in Christ, obediently strive to get along with one another in spite of our differing opinions and preferences. It's our act of worship that delights our God who saved us through Jesus. That's his vision for the church, a community of people loving God and loving and serving and encouraging one another along the way.

There's a wonderful story about Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the Russian writer who spent years in a Siberian prison. At one point, he had become completely discouraged and decided to give up and die. His plan was to stop working out in the field, to lean on his shovel and wait for the guards to come and beat him to death. However, when he stopped, another prisoner reached over with his shovel and quickly drew a cross at his feet, then erased it before a guard could see it. Solzhenitsyn later said that his entire being was energized by that little reminder of the hope and courage we have in Christ. He found the strength to continue because a fellow believer cared enough to remind him of our hope.

"Therefore," Paul says, "accept one another, just as Christ has accepted you in order to bring praise to God." How did Christ accept us? Well, we were sinners, but Jesus welcomed us into a relationship with Him through repentance and believing in Him for salvation. In fact, while we were still sinners, enemies of God, he reconciled us to Him through the death of his son, Jesus. Believers have been accepted as his own and cleansed from sin because of that act of love at the cross where he atoned for our sinfulness. Trusting in Christ, a person is accepted – not on the basis of personal merit – but because of God's grace. So, when Paul writes "Accept one another as Christ has accepted you," he is saying, act with grace and exercise sacrificial love. Jesus-type love toward the people in your congregation. See them as Christ sees them and value them as Christ values them and treat them as Jesus would treat them. Reason and motivation

behind this kind of acceptance Paul is calling for is this: in order to bring praise to God. Not only our own praise, but the praise of those outside of Christ who see us loving each other in Christ's name. This is what Jesus prayed for in the night before his death. "Father, I pray that they can be one as you are in me, and I am in you, I pray they can be one in us. Then the world will believe that you sent me." He also told his disciples, "You are the light of the world. Let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to your father in Heaven."

Love attracts, you see. In a world of broken relationships and divisions, hungering for real love and acceptance, Jesus-type love draws people like flakes of metal to a magnet. Jesus commanded us, "Love one another as I've loved you. By this all people will know that you are my disciples." So, our purpose is to glorify God, and we cannot effectively bring glory to God before others while fighting among ourselves. Disunity distracts the believer, and it also discourages the seeker. It wrecks the credibility of the Gospel. Who wants to connect themselves to a fighting congregation? Not me. But when we live in harmony with united hearts and voices and accept one another as Jesus accepts us, we render effective, credible witness which brings praise to God from others who need to know Him.

Finally, Paul says, in the church, we are meant to respect one another as God's beloved ones. Paul says it like this. He says, "For I tell you," and he's talking to the Gentiles, Christ came into this world as a Jew. He performed his ministry in a Jewish context. You've been saved by a Jewish messiah who came first to save the lost sheep of Israel, to fulfill God's promises to Abraham, to be a blessing to the nations of the world, so that non-Jewish people like you might also glorify God for His mercy and be saved. So, show them a little respect.

Paul then quotes for Old Testament passages to the Jewish Christians to point out that Christ became a servant for the Jews, not just for their benefit, but also for the benefit of non-Jews, Gentiles. The verses remind them that the salvation of the Gentiles has always been on God's mind from the very beginning, that they're important to God, that Israel was His instrument to bring non-Jews into a saving relationship with him. So, show them a little respect as people for whom Christ died and rose again because they matter greatly to God.

What the Apostle Paul is describing in these verses. Sounds like a wonderful church to be a part of, doesn't it? People living in harmony, unified, accepting, loving, welcoming,

showing respect for one another. Sounds like Heaven. Sounds like what Jesus spoke of and prayed for: people loving God, loving one another.

So how do we make that happen, have a unified, loving home church? It sounds hard. Impossible. I know, because I know my own sinful inclinations to insist on my way and what makes me happy. I'm a saint in Christ, but I'm still a selfish, prideful sinner. So are you. Ultimately, we learn from Paul that this only happens with God's help. He's the God who gives endurance, he says, patience and discipline and encouragement with his precious promises. This kind of unity and harmony Paul is describing is supernatural, so it needs a supernatural power. When Paul writes, "May God grant you to live in such harmony," he's saying that only God can make this kind of thing happen in the church. This statement of Paul's, by the way, is actually a prayer for them. That's what he's praying for them for. So that means we too, must constantly pray that God grant us grace and power to be a loving and accepting congregation that glorifies God. Each one of us must pray for God to help us to be loving and accepting people. A community of one who loves like Jesus. Each of us needs God's spirit, working in us to look past ourselves to the needs of others.

Many years ago, I read a book by Reverend Sam Shoemaker entitled *Revive Thy Church, Beginning with Me*. That's the kind of praying the church today needs. And let's be praying for one another as well, that God would be at work at each other's lives, blessing each other, using them to his glory and praise. And by the way, I find it difficult to write off and contemptuously judge those in my church family when I'm praying for them like that. It's interesting that Paul ends his appeal for keeping unity in the church by pronouncing this encouraging benediction upon them. He says, "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace and believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit, you may abound in hope." This is an encouraging truth being communicated to those of us in his church. It reminds us that God is here and with us along the way as we carry out his good will. He's our hope. He can help us to be a united, effective church as he feels believers with his joy and peace. And he's promised to empower us to carry out his vision of a unified church through the working of his Holy Spirit, who shapes us into loving, joyful, peaceful, patient, kind, gentle, and self-controlled people who look and act and think like Jesus glorifying God.

So, during this advent, as we, the church, look forward to the end of the redemption story, Christ's return, let us commit ourselves to getting along with one another and

living in unity. Let's start each day now, praying for God's help to grow in love for one another in our church so that we can bring him glory and praise. In fact, let's do it right now. Let's pray. God of hope, while we are waiting for Christ's return, we ask you to help us as members of your church, to love one another as you have loved us, so that you may be glorified by us and through us and those who observe your kingdom power at work in our midst, they may be moved to faith in you. Amen.