

January 3, 2016
Sunday Evening Service
Series: Communion
Community Baptist Church
643 S. Suber Road
Greer, SC 29650
© 2016 David J. Whitcomb

A PRAYER THAT GOD'S PLAN FOR US WILL WORK **Romans 15:5-7**

How many different religions are there in the world? That is a difficult question to answer because the religious landscape is very fluid, always changing. About the time we think we have arrived at the final number, another religion begins, or a split from an existing religion occurs.

In light of these innumerable religions, how are we supposed to do as the silly bumper sticker suggests, "Coexist"? The foundational tenets of some religions are diametrically opposed to the foundational tenets of other religions. For example, I always smile when I see that bumper sticker because it suggests that the people represented by the star of David are supposed to get along with the people represented by the moon. When the leaders of Islam (the moon people) publicly declare that the people of the star of David (Jews) do not deserve to exist, it seems like coexistence is not even possible. Come to think of it, the moon people believe all the other religions must submit to them or be destroyed or taxed out of existence. They're not big on harmony with different kinds.

It's too bad the whole world can't be Protestants. If that were the case, there would finally be perfect religious harmony, right? Maybe not. Probably not. Of course not. Which Protestant branch is the right one? Lutherans, Presbyterians, Anglicans, Methodists, and Baptists have some pretty serious disagreement about things like how people are born again, who should be ordained, who should be baptized and how, and the details of how this age is going to culminate.

Maybe if everyone in the world was a Baptist we could finally have unity. Probably not. The theology of the Freewill Baptists stands in quite a bit of disagreement with the theology of the Reformed

Baptists. Okay, if everyone was an evangelical or independent Baptist we could get along. Nope. Alright, if everyone was just like me, then there would be religious unity! Hmmm. Does that mean just like me ten years ago, or today, or ten years from now?

It doesn't take much pondering to realize how difficult, yeah, impossible it is for everyone who professes to be religious to get along. We can't. Even people who profess to be followers of Christ will disagree. Therefore, over the years leaders have tried to get everyone on the same page organizationally. That was the downfall of the early church. By the time the church was 150 years old, it was thoroughly organized. There was only one church and either you were in or you were out. But if you were in, what were you in? In that age the church didn't look much like the truths Jesus taught and illustrated.

In more recent years, leaders have tried to force all professing believers to be like-minded through uniformity. They demanded that everyone who claims to be a Christian must wear the same clothes, have the same haircuts, sing the same songs, use the same translation of the Bible, and virtually live their lives just like the big name pastor says they should. Uniformity is not unity by any stretch of imagination.

The answer to this dilemma is not all that deep or elusive. In our text, God inspired Paul the Apostle to write that His plan is for us to be united harmoniously around Christ. With Christ at the center, it makes the plan quite easy to understand. The more people are like Christ, the more we should be alike. The less we are like Christ, the less alike we will be. So what is Christ like? God has already told us that. And He still desires for us to be like that.

God's Desire for Us (v.5).

Paul admonished us, *May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus (v.5)*. In the first part of the verse, we learn that God is the source of endurance and encouragement. What or where is that source obvious to us? God authored the Scripture by which He encourages us. If we look back one verse in the text we see, *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 (v.4)*.

Obvious from this statement is the fact that we need instructing. Indeed we do. We do not know God well intuitively. God is so different, so opposite of what we know by nature. Because we are born in sin, we do not know God or understand God. We are only concerned about ourselves and our desires. But God revealed His invisible attributes and eternal power by what He made. God wrote His law on our consciences.

And God also graciously wrote down all this instruction we call the Bible so that we know Him and we know how to live in a way that brings Him glory. The first question of the Westminster Catechism: “What is the chief end of man?” That is to ask, “What is the purpose of humanity?” “What is our reason for living?” “What is the point of this existence?” Those are the kinds of questions a lot of people ask. The answer according to the catechism is: “Man’s chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.” That is what the Bible teaches us. That is instruction from God.

Having given us the Scripture then, God expects endurance from us. Notice the last part of the fourth verse that says, *Through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.* God expects people who claim to love Him to endure. Primarily that endurance is in the conflicts with sin. Fighting the battle with sin requires endurance. At times it seems like the whole world is against our desire to please God. At times it seems like even our own flesh has mutinied and sided with the world against us. It has indeed. At times it seems like we are all alone in the battle.

That is why God has given us the encouragement of the Scripture. It informs us that this battle will rage. Paul warned us, *For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places (Ephesians 6:12).* In light of the certain battle, the same Bible encourages us to be fully equipped for the battle. *Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm (Ephesians 6:13).* And ultimately the same instruction from God promises us victory. *For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace (Romans 6:14).*

And it is in Scripture that we learn the importance of other people engaged in working alongside us for the victory. That great text about how church work takes place is in Paul’s letter to the Christians in

Ephesus. *And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. 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 4:11-16).* From this we learn that God’s plan is for His people to work together to help each other become more and more like Christ. That requires harmony.

How do we get harmony to work? God gives us the ability to be like-minded with one another. The God who expects us to endure, and who encourages us with instruction (the Bible) also *grant you to live in such harmony with one another (v.5b).* God’s goal for us is harmony with each other. The word for harmony means to think like someone else. The word translated **think** (*froneo*) is found ten times in Romans. It means to set your mind on something.

The challenge is for us to set our mind on the same thing our brothers and sisters set their minds on. So in this letter to the Roman Christians Paul warned, don’t think about the fleshly desires (8:5). Don’t think too highly of yourself (12:3). Don’t think haughtily, but associate with the lowly (12:16). We know from experience how difficult this is. We think the way we want to think. We have generally been taught that our way (our family’s way) is the right way and everyone else is wrong. We truly believe our church does it right and everyone else is mediocre at best or wrong at worst.

All of this is thinking the wrong way—it is being haughty. Okay then, how should we think? We should think the way God causes us to think. Our text teaches that God Himself grants this harmony. He who gave us all the instruction we need in the Bible. He who gave us Christ to reveal to us the very character of God. He who grants to us the Holy Spirit to teach us. Actually God has already granted to us all the instruction and help we need in order to live in harmony with others.

The problem is when and why we need to change. For example, here is a brother who thinks differently than we do. Do we change or do we expect him to change? Or do we just spend life agreeing to disagree? Sometimes that has to be the choice. But not all the time. If change really is necessary (and generally we all need to change at times), what measuring stick do we use in order to decide who needs to change to make harmony work? Or should we naturally expect that in any disagreement both parties should compromise a little. That, after all, is the politically correct thing to do. If everyone would be willing to give up something, we could all live in perfect harmony. Nope! That doesn't work with humans. We need a better standard. Is there perchance a perfect one?

God desires for us to be like-minded with Christ. That fact is obvious when Paul wrote at the end of verse five that our thinking must be *in accord with Christ Jesus (v.5c)*. Harmony with others will have to be based on harmony with Christ. This is exactly what Jesus prayed in the Lord's Prayer, or as some call it, the Lord's high priestly prayer.

God the Son prayed to God the Father, *"I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything that you have given me is from you. For I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours"* (John 17:6-9).

He acknowledged that God the Father gives people out of the world to the Son (v.6a). He affirmed that these people keep the Bible truths (v.6b). He said that these people understand God's work (v.7). He admitted that these people have received the Bible and base their beliefs on it (v.8). But notice very importantly that Jesus did not include the world in this prayer (v.9). That is because the world is different from the "these" He was praying for. It always will be.

Because of that difference, God's people cannot live in harmony with unregenerate people of the world. Jesus warned the disciples, and therefore us, *These things I command you, so that you will love one another. If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world,*

therefore the world hates you (John 15:17-19). John warned in his first letter *Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world – the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions – is not from the Father but is from the world (1 John 2:15-16)*. We really cannot live in harmony with people who live like that. James concluded the same truth. *You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God (James 4:4)*.

Jesus' prayer was about redeemed people living in harmony. He continued to pray, *"I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, 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, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me"* (John 17:20-23).

Notice that Jesus prayed for us (v.20). He prayed that we would be one (unity, harmony) (v.21a). He stated that harmony is God the Son being in accord with God the Father, God the Father being in accord with God the Son, and us being in accord with both of Them (v.21b). Christ confirmed that He has given us the resources we need for this (v.22). And the whole reason is so that we can glorify God and enjoy Him forever.

In light of these truths, we must conclude that harmony is on graduated levels. Picture an equilateral triangle. God is at the apex. Individuals are at the opposing angles. The closer the individuals rise to the apex (God), the more closely they live in harmony. Because the unregenerated person does not trust God, does not believe God, and does not love God, we cannot live in harmony with them. If a Christian brother is growing quickly and deeply in the knowledge of Christ, and I am not, our harmony will be strained. If a professing Christian is really not a believer, our harmony will be impossible. The more a professing Christian is in tune with his or her flesh, the less likely harmony will be with a Christian who is more and more in accord with Christ.

God has established the potential for perfect harmony. All that is necessary for harmony is available. The problem is that sin and the flesh keep messing up like-mindedness.

God's Intent Regarding His Desire (v.6).

In the next verse, we learn *that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (v.6)*. God plans for us to have a unified voice of praise. A single voice requires agreement. One voice glorifying God would be powerful and hard to deny. But in order for there to be full agreement in what we say, there must be full agreement in what we believe. Full agreement in belief will always be evidenced by full agreement in lifestyle. Why is this so important?

The unified voice is able to assess God's character. To glorify is to attribute proper value to God. The more we learn from His instruction and the more we learn about Him, the more accurately we will shout out His worth. That is what the angels and cherubim and seraphim are doing in heaven right now. That is what heaven will be like for us.

God plans for our unified voice to glorify Himself. That with one voice we might *glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (v.6b)*. God delights in His glory. Is it not arrogant or haughty of God to delight in His own glory? No, it is impossible for God to be arrogant or selfish or commit any other kind of sins. God's glory is His perfection. Because God is holy, He is perfect and therefore delights in perfect sinlessness. God's glory encompasses the perfection of all His work from creation to redemption.

God's glory is most obvious in our Lord Jesus Christ. Christ's obedient sacrifice for sin is the only means for God to redeem the fallen creation. Because Christ's work is the means for bringing all things and all redeemed people back into conformity with God's perfection, it is His crowning glory. Therefore, God's love for His creation is the expression of His conscience decision to make all things perfect like Himself. The Body of Christ living in unity and harmony has one voice focused on that astonishing glory of God. And that is why harmony with professing Christians who glorify mere humans always is strained at best. If we are focused on God because of the instruction He has given us in His Word, we will enjoy harmony with others who do the same.

God's Will Regarding Our Actions (v.7).

Because God has given us His instruction so that we can live in harmony, *Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God (v.7)*. The simple requirement is that we welcome each other. That seems simple enough until we remember that sometimes "another" is different. Maybe that other person doesn't talk like us, or she doesn't look like us, or he doesn't know the kind of basic stuff we know. Those folks might not dress like us if they are from a different culture. They may not have the privilege of the same experiences we have had.

All of that is okay if they have a mind set on Christ. If the "new" person does not have a mind set on Christ, harmony won't work. But if we tell them about Christ and show them the way to the Savior, He can save them and they will have a mind set on Christ.

Like-mindedness welcomes differences. We grow in Christ by learning from differences. We grow in Christ by accepting differences. The beauty of differences is that it reminds us of how narrow we are and how broad God is.

When we are depending on Christ, we will welcome each other like Christ welcomes us (v.7b). Christ has given us a good standard to follow. When I confessed my sin, repented of sin, and embraced Christ by faith because God's grace moved me toward Him, He embraced me with open arms. We must do the same with brothers and sisters in Christ because their mind is set on Christ like ours is.

This is simply the outworking of the greatest Command according to Christ. Love for the neighbor welcomes the neighbor. To do so is to reflect God's glory (v.7c). We are not gracious for our own sake. If we welcome others so that it will make us look good, we are hypocrites. We do not embrace differences so that we can appear to be tolerant or politically correct. But it is our grace toward others that reveals God's glory. When we are gracious to others, we are simply living out God's grace to us. God's grace to us is evidence of His glory. Our graciousness to others reflects that same glory.