

Series on The Prayers of the Apostle Paul
Romans 15:5-6
Sermon #16
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A PRAYER FOR UNITY
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I am continuing, this morning, a series on "The Prayers of the Apostle Paul, and I would like for you to turn to Romans chapter 15. Two verses in this chapter give us one of his prayers.

I would like to point out, before I read, so you will see the purpose of the prayer, at the beginning of the chapter Paul points out, beginning with verse 1 that there are strong believers in the church at Rome and there are weak believers in the church at Rome. This is often the source of conflict and difficulty in the church.

Following the prayer which comes in verses 5 and 6, he gets into the problem of the difficulty that the early church faced between Jews and Gentiles, and he quotes a number of passages of Scripture which show that it has always been God's purpose to save Gentiles, as well as Jews, but this was a source of conflict also in the early church. This is the reason for his prayer that the people in the church be likeminded.

Beginning with verse 1 of Romans 15 and reading down through a second prayer in verse 13:
"We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let every one of us please his neighbor for his good to edification. For even Christ pleased not himself; but, as it is written, The reproaches of them that reproached thee fell on me. For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope."

Now here is the prayer:

"Now the God of patience and consolation grant you to be likeminded one toward another according to Christ Jesus: That ye may with one mind and one mouth glorify God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

"Wherefore receive ye one another, as Christ also received us to the glory of God. Now I say that Jesus Christ was a minister of the circumcision for the truth of God, to confirm the promises made unto the fathers: And that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy; as it is written, For this cause I will confess to thee among the Gentiles, and sing unto thy name. And again he saith, Rejoice, ye Gentiles, with his people. And again, Praise the Lord, all ye Gentiles; and laud him all ye people. And again, Esaias saith, There shall be a root of Jesse, and he that shall rise to reign over the Gentiles; in him shall the Gentiles trust."

"Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Ghost."

Alright. Please open your Bibles again to the Book of Romans and the fifteenth chapter.

The last time I had the privilege of speaking to you on Sunday morning we were in the eleventh chapter of Romans. As I mentioned earlier, we are going through Paul's epistles, as most of you know, looking especially at his prayers. We saw at the end of chapter 11, which actually marks the end of the doctrinal section of the Book of Romans, that Paul's heart was so overwhelmed with blessing and with the truth of salvation that his heart was lifted up in a doxology of praise. That is what we find in the last four verses of Romans 11.

As he moved on into chapter 12 and 13 and 14 and, 15 especially, chapter 16 is a little bit different because there he is mentioning various people he knows in Rome and various people who are with him. It is on the basis of that wonderful truth of salvation that Paul moved into the practical part of the epistle, applying to the Roman believers the truth of salvation which he had written out so fully under the direction of the Holy Spirit in the first eleven chapters of the epistle. You remember that chapter 12 begins with the exhortation that: On the basis of what Christ has done for our salvation we are to present our bodies as living sacrifices, holy, acceptable unto God, and not be conformed to the world, but be transformed by the renewing of our minds, that we may prove in life what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.

Paul did not go very far in the twelfth chapter before he began to point out to the Roman believers, and, of course, it is a book that has been preserved for us down to the present hour, that when we are saved, we are brought into a great fellowship of the people of God. While this is very, very wonderful, it also presents some problems sometimes, because of certain differences that exist among us. But as members of the body of Christ we are members of each other, just as in the case of our human bodies, the various parts of our bodies are members of the other parts of our body. A body has many different members, and the members do not have the same function, but in our relationship to Christ and to each other in the body of Christ, we have the basis for our oneness, our unity. Paul made statements like we have, for example, if you want to look back to the twelfth chapter and the tenth verse, speaking of our relationship with each other he says: "Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honour preferring one another." Then, in the same chapter and verse 16 he says, "Be of the same mind one toward another. Mind not high things, but condescend to men of low estate. Be not wise in your own conceits." And, generally speaking, that idea prevails throughout the practical section.

Romans 12:16, mentions that we are to be of the same mind in the Lord. The mind has to do with what we believe, but it also has to do with what we think. A Christian has to learn the truth and he has to learn to think differently about God from what he did before he was saved, about life in general, about right and wrong, and about our relationships with each other, and about our relationships with people in the world. So Paul continues on in the chapter along this vein. You will notice many things, if you read through these chapters, that have to do with our behavior toward each other.

When we come to chapter 15, as I pointed out to you in the reading of the Scripture, Paul mentions a couple of reasons why our fellowship with each other is sometimes threatened. At the beginning of the chapter he mentions that when you look at the Lord's people--this does not

make any difference where those people are--you are always going to find that there are some who are strong in the faith and there are others who are weak in the faith, and there are different degrees of strength and there are different degrees of weakness. Often this difference is due to the length of time that people have been saved. A newborn babe in Christ obviously is like a newborn babe in physical life. Babies are not strong. Babies need to grow. They need to increase in strength. They need to learn to walk. They need to learn to talk. A Christian grows as his knowledge of God increases through the Word. So when he increases in his knowledge of God--when I say that, I mean all three persons of the Godhead: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. A Christian grows as he understand the truths of Scripture more perfectly. The evidence that a Christian is growing is seen in the fact that his life is being changed. He wants to please the Lord. He wants to be more holy. His whole life is being changed because it is God's purpose in salvation to make us more like the Lord Jesus Christ.

You see, the fact that we are at different stages in our spiritual growth is one of the main causes for divisions and difficulties that often exist among the people of God, and we need to be aware of this.

But there is a second reason, as I pointed out to you, why our fellowship is often threatened. Paul addressed this in the verses following the prayer. In the first century it was the fact that some Christians were Jews and others were Gentiles, and as the Gospel went more to the Gentiles, the problems increased. The Jews had a hard time believing that a Gentile could be saved unless he submitted to certain things under the Jewish Law. This included, of course, things like circumcision. Many had a hard time giving up the shadows of the Law, so there were many Jew-Gentile problems.

National problems, and that which is closely related to national problems, are racial problems. These imposed a threat to the fellowship of the people of God. That, perhaps, is one reason why Paul said in chapter 12 and verse 3: "For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith."

We face these things today, don't we? We are exhorted in Scripture, of course, to see that the Gospel goes to every creature. Yet, there is a natural tendency in our hearts to feel differently about people whose skin may be different, or who live in a different country, whose language is different. Yet we know that there is only one Gospel, only one way that people can be saved, and that is through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. We need to guard ourselves against anything that is going to make us feel that we are better than anybody else, or that we are more worthy of the Gospel than others are.

There are always going to be differences among us. We cannot do away with those. But the solution is not in legislation, as we know in our own country. The solution is in the hearts of people. When we are talking about the problems that can exist among the people of God, the solution is in our hearts, in our willingness to do the will of God.

It is going to be a wonderful day, isn't it, when people from all walks of society and from every

tongue and tribe and nation will lift up their voices together in praise to God Who has redeemed us all through faith alone in our Lord Jesus Christ. When we get to heaven we are going to understand the fullness and the true blessedness of Christian fellowship. What we enjoy here on earth is just a foretaste of that, but barriers need to be broken down now so that our lives and our voices can bring praise and thanksgiving to God for all of His blessings.

It is in the light of these potential problems that Paul prayed the prayer that we have in Romans 15:5-6. Let me read this prayer again for you, then we will consider it together.

"Now the God of patience and consolation grant you [or give you] to be likeminded one toward another according to Christ Jesus: That ye may with one mind and one mouth glorify God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

I do not think a person can be saved without having a desire in his heart to glorify God. The spirit of God puts that desire in each one of us when we come to know the Lord Jesus Christ as our Saviour. But these difficulties that can arise: The problem between the weak and the strong, between the Jew and the Gentile, social differences between the rich and the poor, and all of these things, can affect our fellowship. So it is important that this, among other things, be a part of our prayer life for ourselves and for each other and for the church of the Lord Jesus Christ generally, that we might with one mind and one mouth glorify God.

If I were to take the time to read from the Old Testament and from the New Testament the passages that deal with likemindedness or unity, I could easily fill up the rest of the time this morning just reading those verses. I am not going to do that. I could turn especially to John 17, and you can see that this was really a burden that was upon the heart of the Lord Jesus when he prayed that wonderful prayer. I will leave that for you to do, and perhaps you could check some cross-references in your Bible, but this is a tremendously important subject. I will refer to some of these passages as we go along, but let me point out to you from this prayer that the burden of Paul's prayer is given to us in verse 5: That God would grant us "to be likeminded one toward another according to Christ Jesus." Then, the purpose of likemindedness is expressed in verse 6: In order "that ye may with one mind and with one mouth glorify God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Sometimes we glorify God in our singing, as we have been doing this morning, but Paul had in mind even that which is beyond our singing. Sometimes our singing is not really a true reflection of what is going on in our hearts, so he is thinking of our lives, that with one purpose, one understanding, it would be our intent that our mouths and everything about us would reflect the glory of God, and that our very existence would be for His glory.

Now, let's look at the burden first of all. Remember that this is a prayer which is an indication, as Matthew Henry points out so well in his commentary, that likemindedness, or unity, is a gift from God. Whenever you find believers living together, manifesting the likemindedness that the Apostle Paul was talking about here, you can be sure that God is the One Who has been working in the hearts of the people.

I am thankful for what the Lord has done in our fellowship in preserving us this way.

If God does not make us likeminded, then we will not be likeminded. It is just that simple. That is the reason Paul prayed. If we realize how important it is for us to be likeminded, and that only God can do this for us, then we certainly spend more time praying about it. As I have been trying to emphasize with you as we have gone through these prayers of Paul, my purpose, and I think the purpose of the Spirit of God also, in looking at these prayers is not only that we would understand what Paul prayed about, but that we ourselves would pick up the burden and pray about the same things and make his prayers, which are obviously directed by the Spirit of God our prayers.

So, what does it mean to be likeminded?

The New International Version translates this verse to indicate that Paul was asking God to give the believers in the church at Rome a spirit of unity. The Greek verb which, with the words that are used with it in this verse, means "to think alike, to agree together." It means to hold the same views. It is not true, as many Christians would have us believe, that the Bible can lead us to different views as far as major subjects are concerned. As I mentioned earlier, it would be helpful to read all the passages where this verb "to be likeminded" is used in Scripture, but we know from Paul's teaching when he talks about thinking alike and agreeing together and holding the same views, he did not mean what many are interpreting it to mean today. Churches that we now recognize to be in the liberal camp of protestantism began to turn in that direction by saying, "Well, the important thing is for us to have unity, but there are certain things that we disagree about. So if we are going to have unity, then we just cannot talk about those things that we disagree on." The problem was that they disagreed about the inspiration of Scripture. Many felt that there were certain sections of the Bible that were not really the Word of God. They differed about Jesus Christ, whether He was the Son of God or not the Son of God. They disagreed about what salvation was. We have been able to see in our lifetime that when you approach the Scriptures from this point of view, you gradually forget this doctrine and that doctrine and the other doctrine, and finally you do not have anything left.

Paul was not talking about that. There are those who are trying to get protestants and catholics together today, and they are willing to compromise the truth in order to do so, and let people believe things, even, that are not in the Scriptures just for the sake of getting together. The same is true of the Promise Keepers who are making such an impact in many places today. They really have no solid doctrinal standard which is according to the Word of God. If they did, then they would not accept some of the groups that they are accepting as a part of their movement.

So, the idea of being likeminded, or being one, does not mean that we neglect anything that is in the Word of God, but this prayer in itself, and this exhortation that we find throughout the Word of God is an encouragement for all of us to get well acquainted with the Word of God, and more acquainted with the God Who is revealed in this Scripture, and that our oneness is going to be based upon the truth of the Word of God, and that we are going to be growing day by day in our understanding of the truth. The unity, the likemindedness that Paul was talking about was unity in the truth of the Word of God, not unity at the expense of the truth of the Word of God. One thing that truth of Scripture does for us is to make us loving and patient toward those who may not have had the same opportunities to become acquainted with the Scriptures that we have had.

I think, you know, in Ephesians 4 when Paul devoted almost a whole chapter to this subject, he said something which we really need to keep in mind. That is: We need to speak the truth, but as he said in Ephesians 4:14, We need "to speak the truth in love." Truth is not to be argued about. Paul told Timothy that the servant of the Lord must not strive. We are all learners. We are all on our way to glory. We may be at different stages in our understanding of the truth, but the point that Paul is seeking to make here is that God's purpose that we be one in the faith and one in our understanding of the truth ought to be an encouragement to us to seek the Scriptures more fully.

When, in that same fourth chapter of Ephesians, Paul was talking about unity in the church, remember, he said that we need to endeavor "to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." Then he said that the Lord has given certain men as gifts to the church. You remember that he mentioned apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. Then he said this: "For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ: That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ: From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love" (Ephesians 4:12-16).

This likemindedness that Paul was concerned about is likemindedness in the Word of God. If there is not likemindedness in the Word of God, then there can be no true unity among the people of God. Just because people are catholics, or because they are protestants, or because they attend Trinity Bible Church, does not mean that they are Christians. Paul was not talking about unity among the religions of the world. The Bible does not know anything about that. He was speaking about unity in the truth of the Word of God among those who are true believers in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now. Notice how Paul addressed, spoke of God in this: "The God of patience and consolation." May "the God of patience and consolation grant you to be likeminded..."

I see two things in this. One is that God is the God of patience and consolation is the One Who exercises great patience in His dealing with us and offers great encouragement to us as we struggle with the problems that keep us apart. One of the big hindrances to unity is pride in our hearts. A strong Christian can be proud that he knows so much. The weak Christian that he is not going to let anybody else tell him what he should believe. How thankful we all should be that God is so patient with us and that He perseveres in working in all of our hearts and that He continues to give us encouragement day by day as we seek to do His will and as we seek to be faithful to His Word. If God were not the God He is, then things would be vastly different as far as we are concerned.

The second point in this title is that He is the source of patience for us and He is the source of

encouragement in our dealings with each other so that when we may be about to despair that there could ever be true unity among the people of God, the Lord supplies all the resources that we need of patience and encouragement to be and to do what pleases Him. So Paul was addressing God. This was something that God needed to do.

I do not find, as I read through Paul's epistle to the church at Rome, that there was any great problem there. Maybe there was more than he mentioned. But whether there was a problem or not, we need to be concerned about this and pray about this: That God in His wonderful grace and according to His truth will preserve us in the oneness that brings glory to God.

One other thing about his burden.

Notice that he concludes that fifth verse by saying, "According to Christ Jesus." "According to Christ Jesus."

Our unity is in Christ Jesus. Any unity, or any attempt at unity that ignores Him, or denies what the Scriptures teach about Him, or which is not based upon Him or patterned after Him, is not true Biblical unity.

I recently heard a man speaking about the Gospel, a preacher. All through his message he spoke only of coming to God, turning your life over to God. Salvation, to him, meant coming to God, coming to God as our Father, as though he believed that God was the Father of all people, and we just have to realize that and come to Him.

The Bible says that we cannot actually come to God unless we come to Christ, come through Christ. When you listen to religious people, or religious teachers, listen carefully to what they have to say about the Lord Jesus Christ and beware of any organization or any person that does not make Christ the very foundation of our unity in the foundation of our fellowship with God. It is just not the living Christ as our example, but the Christ of the Cross, the Christ Who suffered and died to redeem sinners from their sins and to save them from the wrath of God.

You see, when Paul is talking about unity, he does not ignore the Lord Jesus Christ, he says, "Our unity, our likemindedness in the truth of the Word has to be according to Christ Jesus." Then, as he discusses his purpose, he says, "All of this, the object of this, is that with one mind and one mouth we may glorify God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

We cannot do what is said in verse 6 unless God does for us what is mentioned in verse 5. These two verses are inseparably linked together. So he is addressing God to give them, to make this possible, that we would be likeminded one toward another, making the Lord Jesus Christ the very center of our unity.

When you talk about glorifying God, what does this mean?

We use this expression. We have been singing this in some of our hymns this morning. The Greek verb means to render God glorious in the eyes and to the hearts of men.

Disunity in any degree among us as the Lord's people usually turns people away from the Lord. Likemindedness, we can see from this passage of Scripture, when there is real harmony and there is real oneness among the people of God, real fellowship in the Lord Jesus Christ, real devotion to the Word of God: This is what draws people to the Lord. It is likemindedness that enables us to glorify God. Likemindedness makes it easy for us to speak together about the Lord Jesus. We glorify God by praising Him and by worshiping Him and by speaking lovingly to others about Him. But, you notice here in this verse he says, "With one mind and one mouth we may glorify God." So, "with one mind" is really the equivalent of saying, "With one heart, or with one understanding." It emphasizes again the fact that our oneness is a oneness of understanding the truth of the Word of God. It is a oneness that we have in the Lord Jesus Christ. Oneness in our minds and in our hearts, oneness that God brings about in the depths of our souls, is that which makes it possible for us to glorify Him with our mouths. With one mind and with one mouth we glorify God. With our understanding of the truth, whatever that may be, we come to bring our glory and honor and praise to His Name.

Did you notice, in looking at this prayer, that he mentions the Lord Jesus again at the end of verse 6?

Paul never hesitated to speak about the Lord Jesus Christ. He says that we glorify God as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Again, in many places of worship you will find many people saying a great deal about God, but practically nothing about the Lord Jesus Christ. One of the greatest ways to dishonor God, and perhaps even borders on blasphemy, is the idea that we could ever glorify God without recognizing that He is the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. What does that mean? Well, with any Jew, as you can see from John 5, for example, when the Lord Jesus claimed that God was His Father, in their minds it immediately meant what He intended for it to mean, that He was making Himself equal with the Father. He was claiming deity with the Father. He was claiming this intimate relationship with the Father, so that anything that could be said about the God and the character of God and honoring God could also be said about the Lord Jesus Christ. So our purpose is not to glorify God apart from Christ, but to glorify God as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, in glorify God we are glorifying the Lord Jesus Christ. If a person does not believe that Jesus Christ is uniquely and eternally the Son of the Father, then there is no way that he can possibly glorify God. There is no way that he can know God. We might have very well-worded prayers and rituals, but God looks into our hearts to see what we believe about the Lord Jesus Christ and whether or not we are trusting Him as our Saviour. If so, then our praise is acceptable to Him; and, if not, then our praise really becomes blasphemy.

Do you see how important to God is our relationship to each other, and how important it is to God for us to recognize that the only access that we have to Him, and the only way that we can possibly have a living relationship with Him, is through our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Bible has a lot to say, as I mentioned, about likemindedness. When Paul wrote to the church at Philippi, he exhorted two ladies, Euodias and Syntyche, that they be of the same mind in the Lord. This did not mean that Euodias was supposed to convince Syntyche that she was right, or that Syntyche was to convince Euodias that she was right, but it meant that these two ladies were

together to seek the Word of God, and from their understanding of the truth of the Word of God, together they were to come to agreement as far as the truth was concerned.

Even our testimony to the world is affected by this. Paul said in Philippians also, "Only Let your conversation be as it becometh the Gospel of Christ: that whether I come and see you, or else be absent, I may hear of your affairs, that ye stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the Gospel" (Ephesians 1:27).

So, as you look at this prayer and you see how our fellowship, our individual lives, is all involved in this when we pray for one another that the God of patience and consolation would grant us to be likeminded one toward another according to Christ Jesus, you can see when God is answering his prayer that our hearts will be drawn to the Word of God, our hearts will be drawn to the Lord Jesus Christ. This is not contention and argument and all of this that so often goes on when people come to the Word of God, or come to discuss the problems that face them, but this is an exhortation for us by the grace of God to come to the Word of God and to find from the Word what the truth is, that together we may grow in our understanding of the Word and in our likemindedness.

One example of the need for unity is to be seen way back in the beginning of the Old Testament. And with this I close my message today.

We read in the thirteenth chapter of Genesis that when Abraham and Lot came out of Egypt there was strife between their herdsmen. They had so much cattle that the land was not able to take care of them. "And Abram said unto Lot, Let there be no strife, I pray thee, between me and thee, and between my herdmen and thy herdmen; for we be brethren." I think that most of the time when you hear that verse explained, "we be brethren" is interpreted as meaning, I am your uncle and you are my nephew, and because we are blood relatives we should not be having this trouble. I do not think that is what Abraham was saying. I think Abraham was saying, "We are brethren in the Lord." Peter makes it clear that though Lot did not really live for the Lord most of his life, yet he is called "just Lot." He did know the Lord. Abraham says that it is inconsistent for us as brothers in the Lord to have trouble with each other. So, when you look at these two men, who is the one who had the greatest rights between the two? Who is the one who knew God the best? Who is the one who was most like the Lord Jesus Christ? Because, you know, the Lord Jesus Himself said that Abraham saw My day and he rejoiced to see My day. We take from that that, though the Lord Jesus Christ had not come, Abraham knew a great deal about the Lord Jesus Christ. Abraham was the one who had the greatest rights. Abraham was the one who knew God best. Abraham was the one who had the authority to say, "Now Lot, it is going to be this way, and if you do not like it, it is too bad." Instead of that, what did he do? He said, "Is not the whole land before thee? If you take the left hand, then I will take the right. If you depart to the right hand, then I will go to the left." With this the problem was resolved. After they were separated, God took Abraham up on a mountains and said, "I want you to look North, South, and East and West, because all the land that you see, I am going to give it to you." Here was a man who without compromising the truth in any way was concerned about likemindedness.

You know, though the Bible does not tell us this, I think that there must have been many, many

days that Lot, living in Sodom, thought of the example that his uncle had given to him of what it means to live in peace and harmony with each other. Abraham had every right to say how it was going to be, but he relinquished those rights, trusting God to work in their situation in order that there might be peace.

I hope we will pray this prayer for ourselves. The Lord has, as I mentioned, wonderfully preserved us from trouble. The devil would like to stir up difficulty. Let's not only pray this for ourselves, let's pray this for the Lord's people throughout the world, that we will be awakened to see that we need to search the Scriptures more and more so that on the basis of the Word of God we can experience this God-given likemindedness, this wonderful fellowship which is a foretaste of what heaven is going to be, so that in our lives, in our singing, in our conversation, with one mind and with one mouth we might bring true glory to God Whom, you remember, is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, our precious Saviour.

Shall we pray.

Thank You, Father, for what You have enabled us to see in Your Word this morning. We pray that each one of us may take this to heart for ourselves, but we pray also that this might be the burden that we have for the church today, that there might be greater spiritual likemindedness, not at the sacrifice of any truth of Scripture, but a unity, a likemindedness, that is based upon what we find in the Word of God. We ask this in the precious Name of our Saviour. Amen.