

Today, we come to the final message in our series *Praying with Paul*.

Known as the greatest Christian missionary ever, Paul authored about half the New Testament. And his biblical writings are permeated with prayers— prayers that are profoundly in tune with God’s heart, with God’s will in Christ.

Therefore, as followers of Christ, what if we were to let *Paul’s* prayers shape the way we pray? How might our praying change? How might our prayers better reflect God’s priorities? How might our praying become more effective?

Before we get to our main passage for today, I’d like to briefly revisit my last message, which was about prayer as it relates to spiritual warfare. In Ephesians 6, Paul makes it clear that as followers of Jesus, prayer is essential for winning the wrestling match we face against the spiritual forces of evil. In fact, Paul sums up his teaching on spiritual warfare by saying:

And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord’s people.¹

Because in prayer, we put on God’s amour, and this enables us to stand firm against the devil’s schemes.

Speaking of the devil’s schemes, two weeks ago on Easter weekend, Saturday night, the control panel used to raise and lower all the curtains and basketball hoops in this room stopped working. The main stage curtain was down at the time, meaning this entire stage area was blocked off— music equipment, baptism tank, centre screen—everything. We all knew if that if that curtain didn’t get raised, our plans for Easter Sunday services would be massively disrupted.

But as Pastor Kevin explained last Sunday, through a heroic team effort— including the help of an electrician and some really impressive “MacGyvering” by one of our worship volunteers— the stage curtain was raised just hours before this room would be packed with Easter Sunday worshippers. We breathed a huge sigh of relief, knowing that our celebration of Jesus’ resurrection— including 12 baptisms— could proceed as planned. And what a glorious celebration it was, amen?

That was not the end of the stage curtain situation, however. As the week after Easter unfolded, it seemed wise to keep that stage curtain in the up position— at least until a safe and reliable way to operate it could be found as we wait for the main control panel to be replaced.

But with the stage curtain up, certain recreation programs were temporarily put on hold. Balls flying through air the do not mix well with the delicate equipment that’s been painstakingly and semi-permanently set up on this stage. Our facilities staff did erect a makeshift stage barrier, but it could only provide so much protection.

¹ Ephesians 6:18 (NIV)

Various individuals and groups were affected by this whole situation. And as the week unfolded, to me it started to feel like one of those scenarios where misunderstandings and frustrations could easily arise between people. My sense was that the devil, that schemer, had been scheming against us in all of this:

Can't get them by keeping the stage curtain down for Easter? Fine. Let them have their glorious Easter services. I'll get them the week after, right on the heels of their busiest ministry weekend of the year, when everyone is tired, and a whole slate of rec programs is lined up. I'll exploit and confuse the situation, and do my darndest to stir up frustration and relational tension among God's people.

While some rec groups did miss a week of programming, which was hard, through it all, we were able to pray and communicate and check in with each other. God in his grace even used the occasion to enhance and strengthen relationships among us.

And I'm happy to report that God provided a temporary solution that allows the stage curtain and the two main basketball hoops to be reliably lowered and raised while we continue to wait for the main control panel to be replaced. All recreation programs are back up and running, and our on-stage equipment is fully protected. Thanks be to God!

Now, I'm well aware of the fact that this world has incomparably greater problems than the raising or lowering of stage curtains. But what we need to take notice of here is that the enemy is more than happy to work with a stage curtain situation— or any other seemingly mundane matter— if that allows him to unleash the main strategy that he has always used against God's people: ***Divide and conquer. Strike at their unity.***

This is why Jesus said these words to his disciples in the days leading up to his crucifixion:

A kingdom divided by civil war will collapse. Similarly, a family splintered by feuding will fall apart.²

And knowing this, Jesus prayed the following prayer for all who would ever become his disciples, including us:

... that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me... that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me...³

The apostle Paul would have known these words and prayers of Jesus well, and would come to emphasize in his own teachings and prayers that: **The unity of the church is mission-critical.**

The reason the devil's favourite strategy against the church is to divide and conquer— to strike at our unity— is because he knows all too well that the unity of the church is, in fact, mission-critical. He knows all too well that a church family splintered by feuding will fall apart, posing no threat to his dark agenda.

² Mark 3:24-25 (NLT)

³ John 17:21, 23 (NIV)

He knows all too well that when the church is united, his own kingdom will recede, and God's kingdom will advance.

Some of you will remember that when this church family was on the long journey of buying this property and building this building, Pastor Andrew would repeatedly remind us that while having a building is wonderful, it's far better to have unity with no building than to have a building with no unity. Why? Because a building like this is a tool that helps us carry out God's mission, but it's not mission-critical. Unity, however, is critical for the church's mission to the wider world: "Father, may they be brought to complete unity," prayed Jesus, "so that the world will know you sent me."

God has brought Cornerstone so far from our humble beginnings many years ago. And now we are seeking God for what's next: What are the next major moves God would have us make when it comes to carrying out the mission he has entrusted to us as a local church? We trust God to show us the way. But especially as Cornerstone stands on the cusp of mission advance, we must never forget that unity was, is and always will be mission-critical.

With that in mind, today we're going to focus on a unity-building prayer found in chapter 15 of Paul's letter to the Romans. There, Paul prays the following blessing upon the Romans Christians, and by extension, upon us:

May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. ⁴

This prayer occurs at the end of a major block of Paul's letter to the Romans which started back in chapter 14. That chapter describes a dispute that broke out between two groups of Christians in the church of Rome: those who (to use Paul's words) were "strong" in matters of conscience concerning Jewish food regulations, and those who were "weak."

Some background on that: In the Old Testament, especially in Leviticus and Deuteronomy, you'll find lists of so-called "clean" foods that the people of Israel were allowed to eat, alongside lists of so-called "unclean" foods that were prohibited. These food laws existed to give the people of Israel a distinct sense of national identity as a minority people surrounded by pagan nations, as well as to remind them that coming into the presence of a holy God required cleansing.

But in the New Testament, Jesus, the Messiah, abolishes these dietary regulations, declaring all foods clean. ⁵ Followers of Jesus were now free to eat any foods.

⁴ Romans 15:5-7 (NIV)

⁵ Mark 7:18-19

In the church of Rome, some Christians of Jewish background struggled to eat formerly forbidden foods with a clear conscience. For them, it wasn't so simple as, "Hey, did you hear? Jesus declared all foods clean. Alright! Time to go fry up some bacon!"

Stepping away from centuries of religious and cultural tradition comes more easily for some than it does for others. Although himself a Jew, Paul's conscience allowed him to eat any kind of food with gratitude to God.

And then there were Gentile Christians— non-Jewish Christians from a variety of ethnic backgrounds— pagan backgrounds. They hadn't grown up with Jewish food regulations, and so they didn't tend to struggle with questions of conscience along these lines.

So, to use Paul's terminology, in the church of Rome there were the "strong" whose conscience allowed them to eat freely, and there were the "weak" whose conscience did not allow them to eat freely. In Romans 14-15, Paul is addressing divisions that had sprung up between these two groups— divisions that fell largely along ethnic lines.

That is the background to Paul's prayer for unity in Romans 15 that we read a couple minutes ago. And in that prayer, or blessing, Paul reveals **four keys for building church unity**. In the time that remains, I'll touch on each of them briefly.

The first key for building church unity is to:

1. Recognize that unity is the gift of God in Christ.

Yes, you and I must be active participants in maintaining and strengthening church unity through prayer and authentic relational engagement with each other. But ultimately, *we* don't create church unity— *God* does. Through the cross of Christ, God has reconciled believers from all kinds of backgrounds to himself, and by extension to each other, uniting us all into the one family of God. ⁶ Our calling is to live into this unity, this oneness, that God has already established in Christ.

Knowing that unity is the gift of God, Paul *prays*— he looks to *God*— to give the Roman Christians the endurance, encouragement and mindset they need to live in alignment with the fact that they are already one in Christ, regardless of their differences:

May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁷

If church unity is the gift of God in Christ, then we must join Paul in actively praying for the unity of the church, and the unity of Cornerstone in particular, because this is the local church in which God has placed us, together. Remember, unity is mission-critical. While on our part, we must "make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" as Paul puts in Ephesians, church unity is not

⁶ Ephesians 2:14-16

⁷ Romans 15:5-6 (NIV)

something we can build our own. And so, we must *pray* for God's grace to live into the oneness that he has already established for us in Christ.⁸

Knowing this, how will you make it a priority to pray for church unity?

The second key for building church unity is to:

2. Adopt the self-denying mindset of Christ.

In our text, Paul prays:

May... God... give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had.⁹

Another way of phrasing this is that as followers of Jesus, we are to "think in the same way". In context, that could sound strange at first, because all along Paul's point has been about to encourage Christians who do *not* think the same way on certain matters to live in harmony with each other. But what Paul means with this verse is that even and perhaps especially when we hold differing views on certain matters, we all need to adopt the same self-denying, Christlike mindset in the way we relate to each other.

Earlier in this same chapter, Paul wrote:

For even Christ didn't live to please himself.¹⁰

New Testament scholar N.T. Wright explains that "the self-humiliation, the renouncing of rights, which formed the path Jesus had to tread to complete his messianic work, is also the path that Christians must tread" when it comes to maintaining church unity.¹¹ This fits closely with appeals that Paul makes elsewhere in his writings, such as Philippians chapter 2, where he urges believers to:

... make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;
rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.

⁸ Ephesians 4:3

⁹ Romans 15:7 (NIV)

¹⁰ Romans 15:3a (NLT)

¹¹ N.T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: Romans*, Vol. 2, p. 113.

And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross! ¹²

Paul's appeal for the Philippians to have the same mindset as Jesus is the very same thing he prays for the Romans. Even Christ didn't please himself, says Paul, and in the context of the Roman church, neither should the so-called "strong"—those whose consciences allowed them to eat all foods freely. Paul might have said to some Roman Christians back then, "Guys, just because you enjoy the freedom in Christ to eat a pork belly taco, it doesn't give you a licence to chow down on one in front of a fellow believer whose has a guilty conscience about eating such things." Instead, as Paul put it earlier in Romans 15:

We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please our neighbors for their good, to build them up. For even Christ did not please himself... ¹³

Obviously, food regulations aren't an issue in today's church. But the principle of adopting the self-denying mindset of Christ—where we don't seek to please ourselves, but bear with each other in order to build each other up—is as relevant now as it ever has been.

The verb "bear with" doesn't simply mean to tolerate or overlook our differences. It means to carry another's burdens. And to carry another's burdens, you have to be in relationship with that person. You have to get close enough to enter into their story and understand how they have come to hold the views and values that they hold.

Is there a situation in your life right now in which is calling you to adopt the self-denying mindset of Christ?

Let's move on to the third key for building church unity, which is to:

3. Join together in the unifying power of praise to Christ.

Paul doesn't pray for the unity of the church simply so that we can "all just get along." He prays that we might have a Christlike mindset toward each other *so that* we might share a common life of praise and worship. Let's go back to Paul's prayer and see how he puts it:

May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. ¹⁴

¹² Philippians 2:2-8 (NIV)

¹³ Romans 15:1-3a (NIV)

¹⁴ Romans 15:5-6 (NIV)

One of the most fundamental ways to strengthen our unity is to join together regularly in Jesus-focused praise. According to Paul, when we— people from many different backgrounds— come together for worship each Sunday, we unite in both mind and voice by focusing our praises on our Lord Jesus.

But we live in an era when regular church attendance is down considerably, even among those who describe themselves as committed Christians. I exhort you to make consistent Sunday worship attendance a given in your life. We live in a world where we are inundated with messages that serve to accentuate our differences and disagreements, message that serve to divide instead of unite us. Our need to come together weekly for worship like this is as critical now as it's ever been.

What else do you do during a given week that allows you the chance to unite your minds and your voices with diverse sisters and brothers in Christ in harmonious praise and worship to God? Can you honestly find a more important or significant way to spend your Sunday morning than that? As Dr. Martin Luther King once said, the worship hour should be the best picture of unity-in-diversity that the church has to offer the world. Let's all be a part of it consistently, amen?

The fourth key for building church unity is to:

4. Reach across difference to accept each other in Christ.

After his prayer, Paul continues with the theme of praise, adding these words:

Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. ¹⁵

Our acceptance of each other across difference brings praise to God. Why? Because through his cross, Jesus unites diverse people together into God's family— both Jews who follow Jesus as well as Gentiles from many nations. And as a result, Paul goes on to say that people from every nation can now "glorify God for his mercy," joining God's people in a great chorus of praise and worship. ¹⁶

Because through the cross, *all* who follow Jesus have been reconciled to God, and also to each other. In Christ, the dividing walls that once separated us— ethnic walls, cultural walls, gender walls, generational walls, social walls, political walls— have been torn down. ¹⁷ As followers of Jesus, it is now our job to *live into* this unity that he bled and died to make possible. How can we do so?

By reaching across our differences and distinctions and accepting each other as God has first accepted us in Christ.

What's one thing you can do— one step you can take— to reach across difference or unfamiliarity to show acceptance to someone else in this church family? Maybe instead of always sticking with the group you're most comfortable with, make an effort to meet someone who comes from a different background from you. Or maybe reach out to someone who's new to the church, or simply someone

¹⁵ Romans 15:7 (NIV)

¹⁶ Romans 15:9-12

¹⁷ Ephesians 2:11-22

you haven't had the chance to meet before. In a church this size, it's easy to find someone you haven't met before.

In fact, I'm going to give you a moment right now to do just that. My apologies to every introvert in the house whose heart just sank. But sometimes we need to break out of our comfort zones. So I'm going to pause this message, and my challenge to everyone here is to find one person you haven't met before, and take turns responding to these simple questions that you see on the screen.

Find one person you haven't met before, and take turns briefly responding to these questions:

- 1. What's your name?**
- 2. How long have you been at Cornerstone?**
- 3. Where do you live?**
- 4. What's one fun or interesting fact about yourself?**

You have 2 minutes. GO!

Today, we've look at Paul's unity-building prayer, or blessing, in Romans 15. Knowing that the unity of the church is mission-critical, we've considered:

Four Keys for Building Church Unity (Romans 15:5-7)

1. Recognize that unity is the gift of God in Christ.
2. Adopt the self-denying mindset of Christ.
3. Join together in the unifying power of praise to Christ.
4. Reach across difference to accept each other in Christ.

To conclude this message, and this series, let me give you one more challenge. (Don't worry, you don't have to get out of your seat for this one.)

It's one thing to sit through a series of sermons about prayer, but it's quite another to let biblical prayers— like the prayers of Paul— actually shape the way we pray.

To help you let Paul's prayers shape your own praying, we're offering a free resource today. It's the *Praying with Paul* prayer guide.

This booklet offers a 7-day cycle of reflections and prayer points based on a selection of Paul's New Testament prayers. It also includes family prayer activities for families with younger children.

To get a digital copy, just scan the QR code on the screen. Print copies will be available in the lobby after service.

My challenge to all of you is to use this prayer guide daily throughout the month of May. Once you've gone through one 7-day prayer cycle, just go back to the beginning of the guide and start a new cycle. In

addition to prayer points based on Paul's prayers, each day will include a prompt to pray for the Prayer & Re-Envisioning process as we get moved toward the Prayer & Re-Envisioning event on May 24.

And if you haven't signed up for the Prayer & Re-Envisioning event yet, please make sure to do so. Just scan the QR code on the back of your Save the Date card, and it will take you to the event landing page with a signup link.

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