

Title: “Endure. Encourage. Love.”

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Romans 15:8-9

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Service Readings: Is. 11:1-10, Romans 15:4-13, Matt 3:1-12

What does it mean to live in harmony with one another, especially today? Paul provides a model in the life and death of Jesus and challenges us to live the same way.

Message:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

Life. It was meant to be lived. That was never a question. *How* it was meant to be lived... that was never supposed to be a question, either, but it became one; and it remains one to this day. *How are we to live life?* The answer has changed throughout time as cultures have changed and even today there is no global agreement about how life is meant to be lived. Some cultures view life in the context of community, where, for example children live with and care for their aging parents. And in this worldview the good of the whole is paramount to the good of the self. Other cultures take an opposite view where success for self triumphs over all. And in this worldview individualism is viewed as the means through which society as a whole might realize success. But the success of society always remains secondary to the success of the individual. And of course, there are countless variations in-between each of these extremes.

These kinds of variations have always existed in one form or another, but today we live in an era where the earth is extremely small: where cultures and societies are becoming intertwined in ways that have never been experienced before. Asian societies and their cultures, as just one example, are no longer disconnected from the cultures and societies of the United States; they are no longer only learned through cognitive knowledge gained from school text books. Instead, they are experienced personally, daily, by each one of us as we interact within the world. China, Japan, Korea.... These are not countries we just read about. These are countries whose citizens have become our friends, our neighbors, our coworkers. As just one simple illustration, Progressive Insurance holds corporate sponsored celebrations for Asian New Year, for Diwali, and for Christmas! Employees are intentionally and constantly exposed to these different cultures through celebrations of events that are important to each.

This is the world that we live in and it complicates *how* we are to live life. And even though our world has shrunk, even though we really no longer have clear separations between different cultures, there remains the need to understand *how* we are to live life. It was clear in the garden before the fall, but that clarity is long gone. We are now left to our own definitions. And even if we understand the *right way*, *God's way*, that idealism becomes juxtaposed to the reality of life, itself. We simply cannot live the *right way* because sin has influenced every culture, every society, and every person. We are left with an idealism that we know we can never fully achieve this side of heaven.

It is 2022. Paul wrote his letter to the church in Rome around 57 AD. That's almost 2000 years ago and his words still ring true today. Maybe even more so because of the intertwining of global cultures. He was writing to people who were experiencing the messiness of life, mostly because of sin but also because of the influence that these different cultures pressed against the teachings of Jesus. The motive for Paul's letter to this congregation is greater than this passage but an important part of that motivation was instruction on how these people from Rome should live against the influences of the day – the Roman empire, the Jewish community, the Samaritans, and all the others.

He writes:

⁴For 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. ⁵May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, ⁶that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁷Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. "Live in such harmony with one another, *in accord with Christ Jesus...*" How are Christians doing with that instruction? Or, more personally, how are *you* doing with that? The national elections were only a month ago so they remain fresh in our minds. What kind of harmony existed in your Facebook posts? What kind of harmony exists even now, *after* the elections? But that's almost too easy of a question to ask. He wasn't talking about simple differences like these. He was focused on cultural and societal differences – especially the ones that ran contrary to Jesus' teachings. In that vein, maybe a better question could be to ask about how you are doing with the same-sex couple in your neighborhood. What interactions do you have (or not have) with them? What about those people who support and even *encourage* this kind of view of relationships, of genders, and ultimately of God? Or what about those groups of people who support abortion? There are countless groups we could list, but the question remains the same: what thoughts rise in your mind when you think of them, when you see them, when they are near to you?

This is what Paul was writing about and his answer to these questions was Christ Jesus but not in the way you might initially think. He was not inviting us to view them through the judgement of God's Law but through the blood of Christ's sacrifice. You see, what Paul is reminding his readers is this: that God so loved the world that he sent his only son into his creation. And his son took on the form of man and lived in perfect obedience to his father. And that obedience drove Jesus straight to the cross where he became sin, and suffered for every sin ever committed throughout all time. Those sins included mine and they included yours. But they also included the sins of the Romans, even the ones that nailed him to the cross. And he suffered for the sins of the Hindus, and the Buddhists. And he suffered for the sins of those who would embrace lifestyles contrary to his teaching. And he suffered also for the sins of those who would continue to actively reject and turn away from him. He suffered for each and every person ever born. He placed no judgement upon us when he hung on the cross. The only judgment that was placed was that which *he received* from the father. But he received it willingly for all, each and every sinful person.

This is what Paul is teaching. He is reminding us that so often we judge based on the requirements of the Law of God but he challenges us with this: do we fail to *forgive* based on the Gospel of Christ? Jesus once asked this question to a woman who had been caught in adultery: "Where are your accusers? Didn't even one of them condemn you?" She replied "No, Lord." And then he said,

“Neither do I. Go and sin no more.” The blood of the very same Jesus who paid for our sins paid for hers as well. “Go and sin no more.” That is what he asked her in return.

And so where do we find justification in our thoughts and actions against those who sin, even actively sin? Are we not also to model Jesus? This is what Paul is driving at. He is *not* teaching us to “love the sinner but hate the sin,” whatever that means. So often that becomes little more than an excuse to exercise judgement over someone else. What he *is* teaching us is that we are to love the sinner, period. We are to *pray for them*, that the Holy Spirit would enter their hearts and invoke change. We are also to pray for the endurance and the encouragement that only God can provide *so that* we can love the sinner, for we are sinners, too. So the question that has probably moved to the forefront of your mind is this: how are we to live in harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus? And how do we do that in this messy, upside down world? And how do we do it in a way that is non-judgmental? Well, Paul answers that for us as well when he writes that with one voice we should glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and that we should welcome one another as Christ has welcomed us, all for the glory of God.

You see, the answer lies within those sentences for what it teaches is that we are to love. We are not to condone sinful practices, nor are we to encourage or accept them, but we are with one church voice glorify God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. We are to do this with a servant heart. We are to do this by finding areas of connectedness where we can intentionally build bridges into the hearts and minds of all people, especially those people who have a misunderstanding of the work of Christ. We are to find ways to live in harmony with them for one reason: *so that* through our relationships we can point them to Jesus. Our job is not to change them, that’s the job of the Holy Spirit. Our job is to love them *so that* we can introduce them to Jesus.

Paul continues in his letter when he writes:

⁸For 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, ⁹and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.

This is how we are to glorify God with one voice – by seeking and serving the lost. And why? Why are we to do this? Because Jesus first did this for us. We too were dead in our sins. They may not be the same sins as the neighbors down the street, but they are sins that are just as condemning. And Jesus sought us out and took all our sins to his cross where he served us by taking our place in the courtroom of God. He served us and so we are to serve others. We are to serve others by bringing the same message of God’s mercy that was brought to us. And we are to pray that the Holy Spirit will begin his work in them. But while we wait, we are to continue serving, continue loving, and continue pointing others to Jesus.

And may the God of endurance and encouragement continue to 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.

Please pray with me.

Lord,

Isaiah writes that “In that day the root of Jesse, who shall stand as a signal for the peoples—of him shall the nations inquire, and his resting place shall be glorious.” Let us be the light that points others to you. May we always be encouraged and motivated to not judge but instead love and point others to Christ.