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Harvest Christian Fellowship (<https://hcfellowship.com/>)
Sunday, October 30, 2022

Romans 12:10b, 16 “Living in Harmony with Other Christians”

Intro. This morning my message is entitled, “Living in Harmony with Other Christians.” It is very important that we Christians live together in harmony. For one thing, disharmony affects our witness to non-Christians. It is not a good witness for a group of Christians to be fussing and fighting with one another.

Years ago, there was a church that got into an argument over whether or not to have a piano in the church. That may surprise you but to this day there are churches that do not use instruments to sing by. Well, half wanted the piano, and half did not. One day, when the congregation showed up for church, they noticed that a piano had been placed in the church. Needless to say, the half that didn’t want it were all upset about it. The next Sunday, when the congregation showed up for church, they noticed that the piano was gone. Of course, the other half became upset then. They looked and couldn’t find the piano. Then, about 6 months later, quite by accident, someone found the piano. It was in the baptistry!¹

Do you see the moral of the story? Disunity hurts our witness, quenches the Spirit, and hinders people being saved. Indeed, whenever a church gets into problems with internal conflict, I can assure you that that church will see a decline in baptisms and growth. I have personally witnessed that reality in my ministry. But harmony in the church is a great witness to unbelievers. It seems that conflict is normal among unbelievers, but love and harmony among Christians is a testimony to the transforming power of God. Also, love and unity improves the overall health of the church. When a church is in harmony, every aspect of the ministry goes better.

Now last Sunday I shared with you one vital aspect of achieving and maintaining harmony in the church, and that is love. If we love each other sincerely, if we love each other like a family, and if we love each other by meeting each other’s needs, then that will go a long way toward preserving harmony in the church. But as I pointed out last week, though we must love each other, that does not mean that we look the other way when we know of unrepentant sin in someone’s life. We are to abhor evil, even while we love people. The Bible says that open rebuke is better than hidden love (Prov. 27:5). So we must not seek harmony in the church through compromise with evil or false doctrine. One of the most loving things you can do is to help someone overcome the sin that is hurting them and others.

Today I will share some other important commands that will promote harmony in the church. Now if we obey these commands, we will enjoy some heaven on earth right here in the fellowship of this church. These three commands have something in common: they all relate to being *other* centered rather than *self*-centered. You see, self-centeredness produces conflict and disunity, while putting others first promotes harmony and unity. What I will share today not only promotes harmony in the church but also in other groups of people. Do you want harmony in your family? Well listen up and apply these principles to your family as well. Now first of all, to have harmony among God’s people:

¹ Dr. David Jeremiah says this is a true story.

I. WE MUST HAVE AN HONORING ATTITUDE

Paul says in the last of v.10, “Outdo one another in showing honor.” That translation reflects the literal meaning of this sentence in Greek. We are to take the lead in *giving* honor and respect to others. If that is the meaning, then look for opportunities to bestow honor to others, and speak well of others. The word translated “honor” also means to value someone. Everyone is to be valued in this church. We are to bestow honor in the family. In 1 Pet. 3:7 Peter exhorts husbands to show honor to their wives “since they are heirs with you of the grace of life.” Children are to value and honor their parents (Ex. 20:12). On the other hand, this participial phrase can simply mean that we should “bestow high esteem to one another.”²

This is in contrast to opposite attitude of seeking honor and recognition for ourselves. Jesus rebuked the religious leaders of His day for seeking for themselves “the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts” (Mark 12:39; cf. Mt. 23:6; Luke 20:46). This exhortation is directed against the conceit by which we assert ourselves above others. Some people get very upset and envious when someone *else* is honored. But just the opposite should mark a believer. We should seek to honor others above ourselves.

In 1960, Tinseltown met for the 32nd annual Academy Awards Banquet. One of the most tightly-contested prizes was in the Best Actor category. Jimmy Stewart had turned in a stellar performance for *Anatomy of a Murder*, and Charlton Heston had been Stewart’s equal in *Ben Hur*. During the pre-event festivities, photographers had requested that the two clasp in a well-wishing, superficial hand-shake. Yet once inside, Stewart put his hand on Heston’s shoulder and sincerely remarked, “I hope you win, Chuck. I really do!” That was vintage Stewart. Even though Heston won that night, he remembers Stewart’s unselfishness as much as receiving the Oscar.³

So let us take the initiative in bestowing or wishing honor on others. Look for opportunities to speak well of another believer. Let us boost others rather than ourselves. If we do that, we will promote unity and harmony in the church.

Paul gives us another command that will promote unity in the church:

II. WE SHOULD HAVE A HARMONIOUS ATTITUDE

Paul says in v.16, “Live in harmony with one another.” That is an interpretive translation for it is more literally translated, “Think the same towards one another.” Exhortations to unity of mind and spirit in the Lord are frequent in Paul’s letters. Paul asked God in Romans 15:5 that He might “grant you to live in such harmony with one another,⁴ in accord with Christ Jesus.” He said in 2 Cor. 13:11, “agree with one another, live in peace....” Philippians 2:2 says, “complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind” (cf. 3:16; 4:2). So the Scriptures are very clear. We should prayerfully seek to be of the same mind. We also need to be cautious about interjecting words or actions that lead to division.

² *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, accessed through *Online Bible*. This verb is only found here in the New Testament and may be similar to the thought of Php. 2:3, “in humility count others more significant than yourselves.” That is stated in a context of an exhortation to be “in full accord and of one mind” (v.2). Also, whereas Paul uses ἡγήσομαι in that verse for “count,” in Rom. 12:10 he uses προηγήσομαι. Could that mean that we are to take forethought in bestowing honor or high regard for others?

³ Crossroads Spring 2000 Weekly Reflections © CROSS—P.O. Box 1600, Oakwood, GA 30566.

⁴ Literally “to think the same among each other.”

There are two ways to interpret this command to “think the same towards one another.” First, we should be of the same mind:

A. In Terms of Belief and Doctrine – In Phil. 1:27 Paul made appeal to the church asking, “that you stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel.” 1 Cor. 1:10 says, “I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment.” Many churches and denominations lose harmony over differences in doctrine and practice, even the fundamentals of the faith. They are certainly not of the same mind. While some differences of opinion about theology and doctrine are unavoidable, we should nevertheless strive to be of the same mind, and not create conflict over lesser doctrines, practices, and personal convictions. So how can we have the same mind?

1. Through a Common Life in Jesus Christ – The starting place of Christian unity is sharing a common experience of Christian conversion. Fellowship and unity are not to be based primarily on the amount of creedal knowledge that various people have in their heads, but in the life of Christ which they have in their hearts. In Php. 4:2 Paul said, “I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree⁵ in the Lord.” Their unity of mind is based on their common relationship with the Lord. So this is a unity that is divinely produced. When church people quarrel, it *may* partly be due to unsaved members in the church. The tie that binds the hearts of true believers is indeed a blessed thing.

Next, we can have the same mind:

2. Through the Authority of God’s Word – We need to submit our personal opinions and ideas to the authority of the Word of God. After all, God said in Isaiah, “My thoughts are not your thoughts, and your ways, my ways” (55:8 NKJV). In Mark 8:33 Jesus “rebuked Peter and said, ‘Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.’” Likewise, in Php. 3:19 Paul rebuked false teachers who have their “minds set on earthly things.” In order to agree and live in harmony, we must line up our thoughts with the way God thinks. We need to experience v.2, the renewing of our minds. Differences of opinion among men of good will can be settled rather quickly by producing a standard of truth, an authority on a subject.

Could I have 2 volunteers. I want you two to stand on opposite sides of the platform, and use your hands to show us how long a yard is. We all know that’s the same as 3 feet, or 36”. Now who’s right? I will settle this difference of opinion by producing a tape measure. Let’s see who is closest to being right. Hold your hands still while I measure. [Illus.#C-1928].

So I believe we need to be diligent to learn the Word of God, that we may be of the same mind doctrinally. Read the Bible on your own. Attend Bible study and church services where the Word of God is faithfully expounded. Be careful about the preachers you listen to on radio, TV and the Internet. Quite a few will lead you down the path of false doctrine, especially if they are not expounding a Scripture text. One of the greatest sources of disunity in a church is when some people listen primarily to teachers outside the church who are teaching differently from those inside the church.

Yet Paul may not be talking about being of the same mind in terms of our doctrine here in this verse. While we *should* be of the same mind doctrinally, yet based on the context, Paul may be saying that we need to maintain harmony:

⁵ The same words τὸ αὐτὸ φρονεῖν are used here as in Rom. 12:16, Τὸ αὐτὸ ... φρονοῦντες.

B. In Terms of Attitude toward Others – When Paul says in v.16, “Live in harmony with one another,” some translations say, “Be of the same mind toward one another” (NKJV). Yet Paul is not simply encouraging “group-think.” When he says, “Think the same towards one another,” this *could* mean that we are to treat everyone the same. This interpretation fits the context of the rest of the verse better, which uses the exact same participle for thinking (φρονουντες), which is totally lost in the ESV.⁶ In other words, if Paul is saying we should not set our mind on exalted people, he is saying don’t be a respecter of persons. When Paul said in Phil. 2:2, “fulfill my joy by being of the same mind,” it was in a context of avoiding high-mindedness and practicing humility. So don’t play up to certain kinds of people based on their social or economic standing, or based on their position. Rather, treat everyone equally and there will be harmony.

In James 2:1-9 we are told the story of a rich man and poor man entering the assembly of believers [summarize]. We are not to respect a person’s position for improper motives. Rather, we are to love everyone the same.

So let us have the same mind toward one another in terms of our attitude toward them. Let us not give a lot of attention to some people in the church, while slighting others in the church.

Finally, this exhortation really spills over into my next main point. To have unity in the church:

III. WE MUST HAVE A HUMBLE ATTITUDE

Pride is a major source of contention among people and a great obstacle to unity. Twice in the Gospel of Luke we read that a dispute arose among the apostles as to who would be the greatest among them (9:46; 22:24). Peter thought he would be the greatest, for he was the leader among the apostles. John probably thought he was the greatest for he was the disciple that Jesus loved. Matthew was likely the most wealthy of the disciples and so he could of thought that he was the greatest. As a result, their pride and ambition led to a dispute. But humility promotes unity and harmony. So Paul says in the last of v.16, “Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be conceited.” These clauses are directed against the high-mindedness of vain ambition. He had already said in v.3 that a Christian is “not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think ...”⁷ Humility is one distinctive mark of a true Christian. So to promote unity, we need to:

A. Reject Selfish Ambition – Again, Paul says, “Do not be haughty,” or literally “Do not set your mind on high things.” This means that we are to avoid prideful thoughts and aspirations. Though always ready to honor others, we are not to be the type person who grasps for position and honor. There is a very good reason for this. When many different people in the church are seeking honor and high position *for themselves*,⁸ there will be conflict for sure. Man is incurably addicted to thinking of himself as worthy to be praised for what he is and does. This also means that the true believer should not seek to associate or hobnob with worldly people who are in high position, or wealthy. He will not be impressed by the position or wealth of those whose company

⁶ Literally, Paul says, “not setting your mind on the high things” (such as honor, preeminence).

⁷ Also, Paul said in 11:25, “Lest you be wise in your own conceits....”

⁸ In fact, Paul says in 1 Cor. 13:5 that love “does not seek its own” (NKJV).

he seeks. He does not think of selfish advantages for himself that may accrue through such associations.

There is only one other place that the word translated “haughty” is not used literally, and that is Luke 16:15, where Jesus said, “For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God.” Why is such self-seeking for an exalted position an abomination before God? It is because God is the only One who is to be exalted in our eyes. Yet certain leaders are exalted with position and titles. The leader in the Masonsonic lodge is called “Grand Master” or even “Most Worshipful Grand Master.” In the Roman Catholic Church the Pope was given the title, “Pontifex Maximus.” This was in spite of the fact that such a title was used well before 254 B.C. for the highest position within the Roman Republic's PAGAN religion!

So instead of seeking to be exalted, or seeking to associate with those in high places for personal benefit, we are to “associate with the lowly.” The word “associate” literally means “to be carried away with.” For example, when a woman is overwhelmed by a man’s attentions and gestures of love, we say, “She is carried away with him.”⁹ The lowly ought to have for the Christian a force of attraction. Instead of actively pursuing high positions for ourselves and those in positions of influence, we should be more active in seeking out those who are *not* highly esteemed in the eyes of the world. What a contrast to Greek and Roman culture, where even to be seen with people of much lower rank could be fatal to one’s ambitions.

Let’s suppose that two people enter a room. The first is president of the local bank. The second person is a 15-year-old member of our youth group. Which one are you going to set your mind upon? Which one will get your attention? Which one will you seek to talk to? Which one will you want to have your picture made with? Human nature is drawn to the bank president. You think you have far more to gain if you curry the favor of the bank president. But Paul says in v.16, “Do not be haughty [or high minded], but associate with the lowly.” If you obey this Scripture, you will set your mind on the young person just as much or more as the bank president. So don’t pursue people in positions that are highly esteemed in the world’s eye. When a local church decides it will seek after only a certain “higher class” of people, it departs from the Christian pattern for ministry. That doesn’t mean we ignore those who are in high positions; it’s just that we shouldn’t seek them out more than others. We should regard and treat everyone the same.

The words translated “the lowly” can actually refer to either things or persons. It is more likely that the former is correct because of what it is contrasted with. The thought would be that we are also to be content with a lowly estate and with humble tasks, and not shun so-called “menial work.” Our feelings and attitudes are to be so much in line with lowly things that we shall be perfectly at home with these circumstances. If “the lowly” refer to persons, then the thought is that we are to be at home with humble folk. The practical import would include both lines of thought, for the one would imply the others. Lowly people, lowly pursuits; the follower of the Lord Jesus Christ will indeed find himself carried away with these. Our Lord ministered to the common people, and they heard Him gladly (Mark 12:37). Though He was the Son of God, He did not consider Himself to be too good for the lowest tasks. In fact, in John 13 we see that He girded himself with a towel and washed the disciples’ feet (vv.4-5). That was the job normally assigned to a slave. Thus, the believer is not to think himself too good for any job in the church or any person in the church. Jesus said, “Whoever would be great among you must be your servant” (Mark 10:43 NKJV). There is to be no aristocracy in the church, no cliques of the

⁹ The same word is used in Galatians 2:13, “And the rest of the Jews also played the hypocrite with him, so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy.”

wealthy over against the poor. There should be no pedestals of unapproachable dignity for those on the higher social and economic state or for those who are in “high” office in the church. Peter said that church leaders are not to be “lords over those entrusted to you” (1 Peter 5:3). This kind of attitude is distinctively Christian.

Jesus spoke of this in a very practical sense. In Luke 14:12 He said, “When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid.” You know how it is: You plan a big meal at your house. Of course, you have limited seating. Who do you put at the top of your invitation list? Normally we give priority family and close friends, but also to people of influence and wealth. We invite those who can return the favor, which could prove advantageous for us. But Jesus gives a better suggestion in vv.13-14, “But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. You will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.” It is the Lord who will pay you back. So whom do you want reward from – rich people, or God, who is the richest of all?

So when you invite a group over for a meal or get together, consider including someone like the widow who has few opportunities for such fellowship, and who may not have the means to return the favor. Or help our group host a meal at Liberation Veteran Services. It is not likely that anyone you serve will be able to return the favor. Then, the Lord will reward you with *eternal* reward.

Furthermore, Paul gives one more command related to humility:

B. Do Not Overestimate Your Wisdom and Intelligence – Paul says in the last of v.16, “Never be conceited.” This is a quotation of Proverbs 3:7, “Be not wise in your own eyes.”¹⁰ Literally it is, “Stop becoming wise along side yourselves.”¹¹ Do you see the picture here? You have individuals in the church, all lining up next to each other, each claiming to be the smartest, and most worthy to be listened to. It can also picture someone who thinks of himself as highborn, high-ranking or high-class, distinctions that expect corresponding treatment.

Argumentation: There are several problems with this attitude. First of all, if you think you are so wise, then you will not tend to seek the wisdom that comes from God. Secondly, you will probably not listen to others. Paul’s words here strike at the opinionated person who has no regard for anyone else’s judgment. Thirdly, such an attitude leads to conflict and disunity in the church. Conflicting opinions from people who are wise in their own eyes are not resolved easily.

So don’t act as if you know everything. You don’t! “Never be conceited.” Have enough humility to acknowledge that you could be wrong, and the other person could be right. That will lessen our arguments among one another and preserve our unity.

Conclusion: I want you to visualize a church living in harmony with one another. King David said, “Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!” (Psalms 133:1). Surely, we all profess a desire to have such unity. How do we achieve it? Such harmony is possible if we are more eager to give honor rather than receive honor. We can dwell together in unity if we strive to have the same mind toward one another, and treat each other equally well, regardless of our social standing, race, or income. Finally, we can experience the joy of Christian unity if we have a humble attitude. Crucify vain ambition. Associate with humble people, and be

¹⁰ The LXX is μη ισθι φρονιμος παρα σεαυτω while Paul says μη γινεσθε φρονιμοι παρ εαυτοις.

¹¹ Or the present imperative could mean that we are to stop making a habit of being wise in our own conceits (Robertson).

willing to take on humble tasks. Don't be wise in your own eyes, seeking to prevail in winning arguments. Rather, humbly listen to others.

The kind of attitude that I have spoken of today is contrary to the world, and distinctively Christian. The first step in acquiring such an attitude is to repent of sin and self-centeredness, and trust in Christ as your Savior. Follow Jesus, who was the supreme example of One who thought of others, far above Himself. If we do so, we will have a loving, harmonious fellowship of believers that will attract others who are tired of living in conflict and vanity. Let's commit ourselves to producing such a church!

Sources: William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible Series: The Letter to the Romans* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1957); Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Expositions of Bible Doctrines Taking the Epistle to the Romans as a Point of Departure*, vol. 4, "God's Discipline" (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964); Herschel Hobbs, *Romans: A Verse by Verse Study* (Waco: Word Books, 1977); Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950 reprint); John MacArthur, Jr., *Supernatural Living: Study Notes on Romans 12:9-21* (Panorama City, CA: Word of Grace Communications, 1985); Douglas J. Moo, *The NIV Application Commentary: Romans* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Vol. 12 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977 reprint); John Murray, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 5:80] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2021); A.T. Robertson, *New Testament Word Pictures*, Vol. IV (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1931, accessed through *Online Bible*); Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Right: Romans* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1977); Kenneth S. Wuest's *Word Studies From the Greek New Testament*, Vol. 1, Romans (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1955). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Crossway, Good News Publishers, 2001).

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