

A Forgiven Community of Hope
Romans 15:14-21

Ephesians 1

Ephesians 2

Responsive: Various

For the past few weeks here this book written to the believers in Rome we have been talking a lot about Christian unity, what that should look like, and also how we are to strive to attain it. Paul has spent quite a bit of time in his instruction on this subject, understanding the challenges, and also the importance of it, for the local church is the expression of God in its community, therefore she must strive to be this reflection of who we know that God is. Last week Jim touched on an important piece of this as individuals, we are drawn, or repelled to one another by what we see, hear and know. This reality is no different for a church body in her community. Is your fellowship known for its love and kindness toward on another? Or are you known as being stuck up, and haughty and pretentious. The world is watching, quick to judge on our perceived sins, and though I would argue the gathering of the church is largely for the saints, we must also not be so closed off that we do not invite and welcome outsiders to come and listen to the gospel preached, and strive to love our brothers and sisters in Christ in a Christlike fashion, reflecting a Christ like love toward on another.

Therefore this concept of Christian unity becomes important, for it is one of the outward facing attributes of a body of believers. If we acted like the world, if we are known for back biting, gossiping, being puffed up in pride and arrogance, or known for scandals and controversy, division and in-fighting we are not reflecting the God we represent and as such it hinders our ministry to the community we have been placed in. It would seem that the challenging facing the Roman churches was finding unity between the Jewish, and gentile believers and Paul in his writing to them reminds them over and over again that they are both bound together in the same unifying blood of Christ. The distinctions of separation that once existed are no more, for we who are in Christ, are bound together in this faith, having been washed and made clean by the blood of Jesus Christ. The local church, is a fellowship made up of forgiven sinners, who gather together to praise and worship the one who has forgiven, and even in this we should find a unity together as we strengthen, and exhort one another in the faith, as we strive together to live lives worthy of this calling. As Paul wrote in verse 4, “For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the scriptures might find hope. Now may the God of patience and comfort grant you to be like minded toward one another, according to Christ Jesus, that you may with one mind and one mouth glorify the God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

And this is accomplished by having the mindset of Christ, which through the spirit's work in our hearts and minds we may attain, seeing ourselves as servants to one another, putting each other first above ourselves, as Paul wrote in verse 7, “Therefore receive one another as Christ also received us, to the glory of God.” What does Paul mean by this? How did Christ receive us? He received us as sinners, calling us to be his brothers and sisters, giving us grace, and mercy, forgiveness and hope. Before Christ, we were caught up in our own pursuits of the things which edified and built up ourselves, seeking our own good, seeking our own glory, pursuing our own happiness with little regard to others. But the word of God instructs that those who are in Christ, have been given the mind of Christ, to think his thoughts after him...this changes our purpose, this changes what we strive for in life, this changes our goals and ambitions as we turn from seeking self gratification, to instead seek to please the one who has called us to be near him.

This is how we are to receive one another, in grace, mercy, and hope. Seeking the things which edify, which build up one another in Christ. As I had mentioned last time when we went through the first half of this chapter, we are all sinners, and while we are yet in this body, sin sadly is an intrinsic part of our lives as we struggle and fight against it. None of us are perfect, we may fail each other, we may hurt each other, but we need to take this instruction of Paul to heart as believers, remembering that before Christ came into our own lives we acted that way toward him, yet he loved us, he called us to be closer to him, he did not push us away, but instead he drew us nearer. Which brings us to our passage this morning, starting in verse 14. (read 14-21)

Paul here gives them a compliment, saying that he is confident in their knowledge, and goodness toward one another and he says, that they are therefore able to admonish one another. Many believe it is most likely that he is addressing the Gentiles in the Roman churches, acknowledging their own faith and spiritual growth, that they too having the spirit are able to discern, teach, and exhort one another. It is likely that the Jewish believers saw themselves as maybe a bit more qualified, or educated in the things of God since the old testament scriptures would have been much more familiar to them than to a gentile believer. But Paul knows, and understands that faith and understanding comes by the way of the spirit, and that these Gentiles believers have been given the spirit being granted knowledge and understanding, and in some ways may even have a greater understanding of the works of cross not having the previous baggage of interpretation and understanding of what came before. So Paul is encouraging them in their knowledge, and good intentions to not shy away from taking on such roles.

This exhortation to admonish one another, to teach and encourage comes from a place of understanding that it is God who works in the lives of of children through the holy spirit. God calls unto himself, teachers, and preachers, it is not because of some lineage, or background or past, but purely from God's intimate, and personal calling in the life of the individual. The Jewish believers likely believed this was a role that would have been given to them because of their past, and previous knowledge, but Paul is saying that it is God who calls people into that role regardless if they are Jew or Gentile. And in many ways we are all called into this role, to be teachers and preachers of the gospel, to bring and to share the good news to the dying world. WE are all called to exhort one another, to encourage, to pray, and even to mourn and rejoice together. Paul is not only addressing the church leadership here, in fact it is the opposite, he is addressing the congregation, and likely the gentile believers who are not looked at as being members of authority, and he says, "I am confident concerning you, that you are indeed knowledgeable, that you do indeed understand the word of God and are fully capable and able to teach the truths and message of Christ.

Sometimes we tend to think that teaching and preaching falls upon an individual, forgetting that God has called us to all be a nation of priests, proclaiming his good news. It is both true that God rises up leaders and teachers, and that we are all leaders and teachers in some way to our families, our friends, each through the spirit are given the ability to discern, to learn, and to minister this gospel message. This would be quite the profound message to a church mixed with Jews and Gentiles, that the Gentiles would have been given such authority? That they are able to discern, interpret and understand scripture themselves. The blood of Christ is the great unifier, the great equalizer, for all who have come to God, by the blood have not only been cleansed of their sins, but have been given the Holy Spirit as a tutor and a guide, having our eyes opened to see the truth, and our hearts and minds granted to ability to understand the things of God.

In Christ there is no partiality, there is no Jewish believer, and Gentile believer, there is no poor believer, and rich believer, but in Christ we are all a part of his body, each fulfilling our intended role which God has called us into, some teach, some exhort, some encourage, and these are descriptors of every one of us in the faith but it seems that God is pleased to give individuals differing measures of these things so that we may be knitted together, needing and relying on one another so we may operate as one united unit in Christ. And God has designed it this way, for his glory, that none of us may take glory in our positions, and none of us are fully self sufficient, but we rely upon and need one another as we all exhort and encourage each other through this Christian walk. Each fulfilling the role that God has called us to, not for our own glory and purpose but for his. And in the eyes of God, each individual in their given role is indispensable to the ministry of God. We humans like to rank, or elevate certain aspects, traits, or roles but God has designed it in such a way that we are each, everyone an indispensable part of the body of Christ.

We have been likened to a body, each with a role to perform, and each unable to preform that role, or exist without the other. It is just like the hierarchy in any Job, you have the managers, or people who work in the offices, they may look down upon the lowly lay worker..but the reality is, their job would not exist if it wasn't for the ones doing the thankless hard work that largely goes un-noticed. The work in the ministry is not really any different, except in the eyes of God there is no hierarchy, each is just as important, each is just as necessary, and we fulfill each of those roles that he has given simply because we love him, and seek to glorify him. Paul says that Christ came as a servant, the Son of God, the King of Kings, took on flesh to become like man, to serve as our sacrifice so that we may be brought into the kingdom of God. Christ is our example, each of us are nothing more then servants of the great high king. A part of one body, given our place so that we may by our lives, glorify him in the good works we have all been called into.

Verse 15 Paul states that he has written to them very boldly, to remind them again of their calling, of their salvation in which they are each partakers into the grace and mercy of God. This concept of unity, the salvation of the Gentiles being just as equal as the salvation of the Jews and that God has by the blood of Christ, brought together that which was previously separated. That Christ, through the cross has accomplished something the law could not, which is justify mankind before God. Therefore the distinction between Jew and Gentile is no more, and instead our identity is in Christ and Christ alone. All of the law and the prophets are fulfilled in Christ, there is therefor no longer a need to observe certain days, or diets, or rituals for all those things pointed to Christ. And now that Christ has come, we have him to look to, and through his written word we may know him, and we may grow in our faith and understanding of him. This is the entire point of our lives as Christians, it is not to adhere to some strict set of rules and regulations, but to reflect Christ himself by our love, and our actions toward one another and toward the world around us.

Paul understood his ministry to be largely to the gentiles, bringing this gospel message of hope to a people who were previously on the outside in verse 16 he says he ministers to them so that they might also become a offering acceptable to God. It is clearly understood throughout scripture that God has for himself a people, these are a people he has chosen for himself out of the nations, and has created for himself a nation of priests, a nation of messengers, who are to be about this business of spreading his gospel message so that others may also come into his family, and be partakers of his grace and mercy. We as his children are called to be living sacrifices, that is, our lives are to be defined as God sees fit, we have been called to serve, and to be a witness of his divine glory. That is our mission, that is our purpose in this life, that through Christ, and through the work of the Holy Spirit's conviction we may live as reflections of Christ, as beacons of light and hope in this dark and lost world.

This world is watching, this world who despises God is waiting for us to fall, waiting for us to trip up so that they may point a finger and condemn us. Earlier this Jim talked about the attacks of Satan on the believer, through doubt, and accusation. These are Satan's tools to undermine the gospel message, to attempt to make Gods people and the message of the gospel unheard, or tainted. And in many ways he has succeeded, if we look at what has been happening in churches all across this country, the gospel isn't being preached, they have become dens of entertainment and emotional manipulation tactics, and given enough time become rocked with scandal. Satan has had some relative success in deceiving many into an empty faith, devoid of power. That is why it is all the more important that believers today stand upon the word of God, look to Christ and Christ alone, and find a body of believers who put Christ first in all things, who glory in his gospel, and minister his word faithfully. This to is why this concept of Christian unity is so important, because we are ministering to a world who hates us, and God has built up his people together so that we may each be a support for one another in the faith, and in the ministry.

In verse 17 Paul says, "I glory in Christ Jesus in my service to God." Paul had the servant mindset, knowing and understanding that his life is defined by that service in which he is more than happy to perform out of a great love he has for the one who called him from sin and darkness into forgiveness and truth. Paul saw this as a great privileged to be called of God, and he constantly glorified God for the honor and opportunity of being called into that service. How often do we feel tired, and dragged down in the ministry? This calling that we have each been called to is no simple path, the very thing that Paul subjected Christians to before he himself was saved, is what he himself endured afterward for the sake of the gospel. He was beaten, imprisoned, left for dead, but through it all he remained faithful because he understood his place before God as a chosen son, and rejoiced in tribulation for being found worthy by God to suffer for the gospel sake. This calling is not an easy one, this ministry is not an easy path, in many ways the life of comfort and ease is a life that rejects God. But as we see in our own society, a life that rejects God is weighed down by hopelessness, despair. It is better to suffer in hope, then to flourish in hopelessness. In this life we will have tribulations, we will have suffering, but fear not, for Christ has overcome the world. Our hope, our glory is not in this world, it can not be found in this life, but it is in Christ and what he has prepared for us afterward.

This life is defined by suffering, defined by the stain of sin, as we struggle daily in a war against our own nature, the spirit and the flesh. But we can rejoice in the hope we have through Christ, the gospel ministry of redemption and salvation, that though we are yet in this flesh, and though we yet each deal with our own sin, God does not see us as lost sinners, but as Sons and Daughters who he dearly loves. Satan wants you to focus upon your short comings, upon your failures, feeding into a sense of inadequacy, a sense of failure, but that is not who we are in Christ...we are more than conquerors because we are secure in the one who has defeated sin and death. God who is slow to anger, quick to forgive, and abundant in mercy is faithful to forgive when we confess and turn from our sins. We do not need to be like some, and feel we must pay a penance, or cause ourselves depression or suffering over our sin, for when God forgives, he also forgets. Confess, praise God for his grace and mercy, and move on. No need to dwell on our failures when the God who we have failed has forgiven them in such a way as to it not even have happened. And as hard as it may be, this too should also be our standard, when forgiveness is sought between brothers and sisters in Christ, we should do all that we can to restore, and move forward.

Often times we tend to want to push away those who have wronged us, or offended us but the reality is that is probably when we should bring them closer in a reflection of Christ like love. Our sins sent Christ to the grave, our wrongs caused the death of the just and holy messiah, and he died, so that he may draw us near. When we sin, we want to hide, flee and run but it is exactly when we should seek Christ and strive to be even closer to him for he is our hope, and our redemption, and our forgiveness. Forgiveness and restoration is the goal in Christian fellowship, seeing Christ in one another, loving one another through rough seasons, forgiving as Christ forgave us, loving as Christ loves us and if we can accomplish even a sliver of this, the light of our ministry to the world around us will grow even brighter. Imagine an outsider looking in at the early church, seeing Jews and Gentiles united together, worshiping together, forgiving and loving one another...I think that would have been a little confusing, how could this be that these 2 groups who for generations despised one another can now be united. Well, the answer is through the commonality of faith in Jesus Christ. This is what the world should see when it looks upon God's church, a mixed bag of messed up people, forgiving one another, loving one another, and coming together around the one thing that matters, which is Christ.

This is how we, as a fellowship of believers can reflect Christ into our community, that we are defined by our love for one another, by a peace found in Christ, and as a forgiven people who rejoice in that forgiveness always giving God the glory for his mercy and grace. We are a place where the broken can come and be made whole, where the lost can come and be home, through the gospel message of hope, found in the blood of Jesus Christ, so that all who come to him may find forgiveness, peace and rest. May we like Paul and the apostles of the early church be quick to share this hope, so that others may hear and believe, and find peace in the turmoil that is this life. And may we strive to ever more be like Christ, willing and able to forgive, encourage, exhort, and love one another so that our lives reflect the message, and we may be a beacon of God's holy light, into this dark sin sick world.