

Racial Empathy and Gospel Symphony

Romans 15:5-7

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We are staying in Romans today, but in light of our national crisis over race, we are skipping ahead slightly to Romans 15 and a wish, a prayer, and a longing Paul expresses what I believe shows our way forward as a church.

"May the God of endurance and encouragement 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. Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God." (Romans 15:5-7 ESV)

The Racial/Religious Divide of the Roman Church

Sometimes it's easier to see other people's struggles with things, so let's talk about the church at Rome to whom Paul writes this letter. Why did Paul write Romans? We look at it as the quintessential statement of the gospel. We marvel at the depth of explanation of justification and union with Christ. It is hailed as the greatest book in the Bible and chapters like chapter 8 as the greatest chapter in the Bible. It's long. We have been in it since early 2018 and we just finished the 12th chapter with four more to go. Three quarters of the way. It's long. It's deep. One could assume that Paul was writing a dissertation on the gospel or that his purpose was to plumb the depths of the mysteries of the purposes of God.

Yet, what do we see when we get to chapter 12? Does he say, in light of all that I've written, study, study, study? Expound, expound, expound? Argue doctrine with anyone you can? Romans 12:1 is Paul's *so what*: *"I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship."* (Romans 12:1)

What is Paul's aim? Gospel transformation. These mercies of God poured out on us are to be turned in ethical directions with my whole being offered to God as an act of worship.

If his goal wasn't to make us scholars, what was his main concern for this church at Rome? He hinted at it in Romans 1:16, *"For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek."* (Romans 1:16)

The gospel is for everyone. But he doesn't say it that way. He says, *for the Jews and the Greeks*. The Jews and the Gentiles. What distinction is that? That's an ethnic distinction. Why does he go to the trouble to say Jews and Gentiles? Because in the church at Rome there was division; ethnic disunity. It played out in many ways. One we will learn in chapter 14 is that some people thought you could eat meat offered in the pagan temple that was sold in the marketplace. Others saw that as reprehensible and no good Christian would do such a thing. We know that some of the Christians practiced a strict sabbath. Most likely Jewish believers. Others did not.

Lest you think good Christians wouldn't argue about such things, think about the sharp disagreements recently over COVID-19 protocols. Mask or no mask. Pandemic or hoax. All of a sudden, the ancient Christians are sounding a lot like us.

When you look at chapter 12, you see all the admonitions to love one another, not retaliate, honor others above yourselves; chapter 13's exhortations about submission to governmental authority; chapter 14 and self-righteous attitudes about food and days. Taken as a whole, Paul wrote Romans to get the Roman Christians to forsake ethnic infighting and unite together in Jesus. Hindering that were centuries-old cultural, religious, and ethnic arguments that kept the church at Rome from experiencing harmony.

Now we look at them, and say, *what was wrong with you people? You are being so petty. Vegetables and sabbaths? You are letting these keep you from experiencing harmony and the fullness of Christian unity.*

But then we look in the mirror. *Mirror, Mirror on the wall, who are the best Christians of them all? We'd like to think we are, but then we see self-righteous attitudes emerge particularly in moments of turmoil. We see allegiance to political parties and agendas which keep us from speaking the plain truth.*

Is it so hard to say, George Floyd was murdered? It was evil. It was sin. Is it so hard to say burning and looting a shopkeeper's life savings to protest is evil and wrong? The Ten Commandments should make it easy for us to feel outrage over murder (6th commandment) and stealing (9th commandment) and deep empathy for all the suffering and grief they produce. We don't get to pick and choose which commands we like. But there are all these agendas today. In a few weeks we are going to read Romans, *"Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God."* (Romans 13:1).

This means we respect our government leaders and pray for them. It means we honor them, except when obeying them mean disobeying God. Can we say both things at the same time even if it doesn't fit some agenda? We render to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's with our allegiance being to God more than Caesar. That was the Christian ethic even when Caesar was feeding Christians to lions in the Roman Coliseum.

What am I saying? I'm saying this. I'm a Christian before I'm an American. I'm a Christian before I'm a Hoosier. I'm a Christian before I'm a white man. I'm a Christian before I'm a Protestant. I'm a Christian before I'm a pastor. I'm a Christian before and above all these other things. That is my identity. But when I elevate my politics or my preferences or my ethnicity above my identity in Christ, then I have hard time having empathy with my minority brothers and sisters and their pain. As H.B. Charles says, *"The Bible calls us to weep with those who weep; it doesn't tell us to judge whether they should be weeping."*¹ This brings us to this prayer:

The Prayer of God for Racial Harmony in the Church

"May the God of endurance and encouragement 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." (Romans 5:5-6)

Notice "may." May God grant you to live in harmony. This is a prayer. A wish. A longing. It's rooted in the person and work of Jesus. In accord with Christ Jesus. *Accord*. It's a thinking word. "Think the same thoughts together; be of one mind." Is this a longing you have too? If not, why not? What implicit bias, known or unknown, keeps you from personally pursuing

¹ H.B. Charles Jr., Source Unknown.

more harmony? *Why would I want to hang out with those vegetable-loving Jewish folk? Why would I want to hang out with Gentile temple-meat eaters?*

You ask, so we have to agree on everything? No. The early church didn't either. Read Acts. Yet, there was harmony. How? ***The gospel overcomes the disagreements that would otherwise divide.*** Be of one mind about Jesus. Be of one mind about the gospel. He doesn't say, everyone needs to agree on Rome's politics or Rome's foreign policy or who the emperor was at the time. No. If you are a Christian, that means that you and I have more in common in spite of our ethnic difference than I have in common with someone with the same skin as me, went to the same school as me, even in the same family as me. What unites ethnicities in Jesus is far greater than what can divide us.

Think of that a moment white Christian. You have more in common with a black or brown brother in Christ than you have with someone with your skin, from your tribe, and even from your own family. Therefore, the gospel is more important to a Christian than his skin color. The gospel is more important to a Christian than her politics. The gospel is more important to a Christian than anything that would otherwise divide us.

A simple illustration is found in the crucifixion itself. This is simple, but sometimes these are the best. A **cross** has a vertical and a horizontal. My understanding is that often they would set the vertical beam first. They would put a notch in it. The victim would first be nailed to the crossbeam, then slid up with poles until the crossbeam slid into the notch. Then the feet would be nailed and the victim crucified.

Intentional or not, it is a picture of how the gospel unites us. It starts with the vertical. Me and God. Sinner and Judge. Jesus's death reconciles me with God by trusting in Jesus as my Savior. I now have peace with God. Romans 5:1, *"Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."* (Romans 5:1)

This is why all attempts down through history to unite the racial divides without God have ultimately failed. Israelis and Palestinians. Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda. Serbs and Croats. Jacob and Esau. People try to fix the horizontal by itself and that is ripping our country apart right now. They want the horizontal, but they don't start with vertical. Remember, which direction did the curtain in the temple tear when Jesus died? Vertically. Top to bottom. The gospel starts with vertical reconciliation.

But a cross also has a horizontal beam. The vertical beam supports the horizontal beam. No vertical, no horizontal. There on that horizontal beam stretched the arms and hands of the Son of God. His hands outstretched at both ends to a lost humanity. His heart at the intersection of the vertical and the horizontal. The cross pictures the eternal reality. The vertical gospel creates a horizontal gospel uniting an ethnically redeemed humanity forever.

Paul doubles down with the next phrase, *"that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."* (Romans 5:6)

Together with one voice. What does that sound like? Many voices singing together. A choir. A choir sings with one voice. For a choir to be a choir it has to speak and sing the same song. No choir I have ever heard sings the same notes. What makes a choir sound awesome is when they are united in the same song even as they sing diverse notes. Some are on melody. Some are on harmony. Some are hitting soprano notes. Some are on the bass line. They hit different notes, but their unity of song and voice creates beauty.

Is that not the picture here? Is this not the purpose of Romans in the end? Think of it. The most doctrinally deep book in the Bible has as its goal a racially harmonious church. You theology types, I love you, but have you considered the end goal of your doctrine is love?

I remember being at a gathering in a particular denomination and the leader said from the front, "Our doctrine's great; we just can't get along with each other." A friend leaned over and said to me, "Since when is love not a doctrine?"

Creedal churches like ours should be incredibly principled in our horizontal harmony. What does one faith, one voice, one song look like in a moment like this one? A moment when our minority brothers and sisters in particular are hurting so deeply? I reached out to my friend, Pastor Mark Vroegop. He has a book coming out soon on lament as a step toward racial healing. He sent it to me. In it, he describes five steps; five "L's."²

- **Love** - It is a time to make sure as the majority culture Christians that our minority culture brothers and sisters know we love them.
- **Listen** - We don't typically do that well. Listen. Hear the stories. Hear the pain. Don't argue the point. Listen.
- **Lament** - Lament is a prayer in pain that leads to trust. Lament cries out in pain that things aren't the way they should be. Lament grieves by turning to God and asking, *How Long, O Lord?* Take a moment right now for lament. In 2020, three deaths in the black community have been particularly painful. Breonna Taylor. Ahmaud Arbery. George Floyd. Take a moment right now and lament in your hearts those lives lost. Amen.
- **Learn** - Most of us, myself included, have room for much learning. Let's learn together.
- **Leverage** - This is the change and transformation stage. What can we do to better align with God's purposes through the gospel for true gospel community?

My personality is all too quick to jump from love to leverage, from love to change and fix. Just ask my wife Jennifer. If she's having a bad day or something's bothering her, I will say, *Honey I love you, therefore, I'm going to fix it.* I too easily skip the listen, lament, and learn parts. And all the wives said, *Amen!*

We need to slow down here and do it right. If we don't, we will have the same outcome as so many other outrageous racial moments. As a leadership, we want to do it right. What's right? "...*that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.*" (Romans 5:6)

One song. Multiple voices. Different notes. All blending in a symphony of praise to God. Together brings praise to God. Unity brings praise to God. NOT together dishonors God. NOT in unity blasphemes God.

How are you using your voice? I have seen a whole lot on social media this week from some people who call Bethel their church that I wouldn't call one-voice harmony. I wouldn't call it glorifying God with togetherness. I've seen people glorifying their political party. Glorifying their all-knowing opinion. Glorifying themselves. Think about your words this week. Would somebody hearing or reading your words think, *Wow, blessed are these peacemakers.* I have to say as your pastor I have been disappointed. I'm sorry to have to say that but it must be said. There are people fomenting the problem, not learning. Not lamenting, and certainly not listening.

² Mark Vroegop, "One People: Weep Together," www.yourchurch.com. March 17, 2019.

Here, Romans is our guide. If we saw this as one long social media post that celebrates the vertical gospel and concludes with the horizontal gospel, does your voice and tone sound like Romans? Does it take your reader or listener where Romans takes us? Are we using our voices to sing with the gospel melody and summon those who hear to sing along with us?

Our church needs to be such a place that when our society is burning, we can say, *this is what harmony looks like. Hear our song? See our lives. See our church. This is the difference Jesus makes.*

Surely, if we were honest about all this, we all can sing true to our hearts the words of the old Afro-American spiritual:

*"It's me, it's me, O Lord,
Standing in the need of prayer.
It's me, it's me, O Lord,
Standing in the need of prayer.*

*Not my father, not my mother, but it's me, O Lord,
Standing in the need of prayer....
Not my brother, not my sister, but it's me, O Lord.
Standing in the need of prayer.*

*It's me, it's me, O Lord,
Standing in the need of prayer.
It's me, it's me, O Lord,
Standing in the need of prayer."³*

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³ It's Me, It's Me, O Lord (Standing in the need of prayer), Afro-American Spiritual