

November 7, 2021 - Jeffrey Smith

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Preacher: Jeffrey Smith

[0 : 00] We welcome you to the media ministry of Bethel Community Church, knowing Jesus, making Jesus known. As I was kind of getting ready for this message, I was thinking as a world-class procrastinator, which I am, every Sunday morning that I speak, this thought crosses my mind at some point in preparation, I wish I had more time. And the Lord answered that this morning. He said, here is one extra hour.

And so I'm feeling pretty good. I appreciate what David said just about, you know, the kids. Now we have this puppy and like they're all used to waking up at the same time. So it really doesn't matter. But when it's like getting late and you're thinking, man, this is not actually 12. It's like 11 right now. So mentally it does help. So we're going to be looking at Romans chapter 15, verses 1 through 13, if you want to turn there now. And I was thinking, just as an introductory story, last week, I think it was my son Josiah or Eli, one of the two older boys, we were looking at this map of the United States. And they're like, dad, why do we call it the United States? Because, you know, there's like, there's the states here, but then there's Alaska and there's Hawaii. So they're not all touching. And so I was like, well, son, you know, like United, it was one of those like scenarios where you're trying to explain a concept to someone younger. You're trying not to use the definition of what they're asking you to define. And you're like, well, you know, it's a bunch of states.

We're not all touching. Some of us are. Some are elsewhere. But we're all together. And we're under, like we have one kind of government, kind of. We have like the same vision goal, kind of. You know, there's the same overall ideal of what it means to be an American citizen. No, that's actually... And so you can see kind of like the difficulty I was having, and especially in this time that we live.

That's kind of the point I'm making here. In this present time, it feels like there is a little unity amongst our country as there's been in a really long time.

[2 : 35] It doesn't feel like we have this unified set of values and goals and, you know, kind of general direction. This week was a good example of that, you know, details of a mandate were given, and almost immediately, like same day or day after. Like, there's a number of states, Missouri included, that are filing lawsuits and things like that. And so when you're talking about, like, this unified country under a government, like, even that just feels kind of broken.

This may seem very far-fetched to some, but I've heard this quite a bit, so it's not like that crazy. But you hear people talk about terms like civil war. Has anyone heard that? And you're like, what? You know, like, it's been a long time since the first civil war, but this topic is being circulated. And you're like, you know, like, where are we right now? You know, 150 years ago, a number of the states in the southern half of the country decided to secede.

They obviously wanted to maintain, you know, the institution of slavery. They wanted to maintain some autonomy in their states' rights. There were some economic situations going on there. And then obviously, in the north, you had kind of the opposition of that secession and wanting to kind of keep the union together and wanting to abolish slavery. And I looked it up. I think it was like 700,000 people died, 750,000 people, something like that, died in the civil war. Like, so when you ask yourself, like, what would you be willing to die for?

I put myself in those shoes. I'm like, would I die for that? You know, if I'm on one side of that and the other wants to leave or we want to leave or whatever. I mean, that, you got to think about, you know, the causes that, you know, people were fighting for. And then to have that talk happen today, it's like, that, that's, those are pretty strong words. And so this, there's a level of broken unity today that really feels like we're in currently and, and it feels like, you know, seems to be escalating, you know, as we, as we continue on in this direction. So I bring all this up because of today's subject in the passage. And just to be very upfront with you, Paul is instructing us toward unity in the church.

So I want to, I want you guys just to like take the context of what's happening in our country and society, and then think about how things are so broken there, but look at like this example Paul gives us of unity in the church. And think of the church as a body of believers here at Bethel. Think of the church, broadly speaking, amongst other believers elsewhere. I'm not, I don't think I'm using that definition in kind of one particular example, but so unity is the topic this morning. Let's pray, and then we're going to read Romans 15.

[5 : 43] Heavenly Father, we thank you again for this morning. And for some reason, a topic like this, at least from my own heart, it brings up this need for humility. As a prideful person, I often think I'm right. They are wrong. And Lord, that is, you are calling us to humility.

You have given us direction in this passage. I pray that it is made clear to those here. So we do thank you for your word. In your son's name, amen. Okay, so let's read Romans 15, verses 1 through 13.

I got it here in the ESV. Please follow along. It says, We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves.

Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, the reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me. For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the scriptures, we may have hope. 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. For 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, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, therefore, I will praise you among the Gentiles and sing to your name. And again, it is said, rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people.

And again, praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples extol him. And again, Isaiah says, the root of Jesse will come, even he who arises to rule the Gentiles, and him will the Gentiles hope. May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit, you may abound in hope.

[8 : 14] If you want to talk about ending that passage in such a good way, that is a fantastic verse. So let me give just a little bit of a history lesson, a short history lesson, to give us context to what's happening here. Paul most likely wrote this letter to the Romans around 57 AD. So I'm just going to give you a couple dates and kind of like make this timeline in your mind. So 57 AD, he's addressing the Roman church, and specifically he's talking about a bit of this tension in the church. If you were here last week, Uncle Bill spoke on this, you know, in the passage before and talked about how there was some dietary conflict. And he gave this really, really gross story of a monkey. Oh, he said it was a missionary visiting another country, and they ate monkey brains. And you're like, that's pretty gross. Daniel's like, yeah, that's not too bad. But when he went on to describe that the monkey was alive, and it would be in the middle of this table, and they're cutting it open and eating its brains before it... Okay, you heard it. Okay, I'll stop then. That was really gross. I mean, wherever you kind of lie on, you know, what's clean and unclean, like that just seems kind of beyond consideration.

But here's what happened. You had these Jewish believers that had come to faith, and they were still struggling with this, like, concept of unclean food and, like, food, you know, sacrificed to idols. And we know, you know, from a variety of different verses, the, you know, vision given of Peter that it says, do not call anything in pure that God has made clean, that that just, that wasn't, you know, an issue for believers. Or when I say not an issue, it, you know, it was not a sin.

It was, you know, something that they could do. And so here's the history lesson. This is where it gets kind of interesting. There was a Roman emperor, Claudius. I think you kind of see him a little bit at the end of Acts, who reigned from 41 to 54 AD, so the time just before Paul wrote this letter. And in 49, he actually decreed that the Jews be expelled from Rome. Okay, so think about this. So 49 Jews are expelled. This guy reigns for another five or so years. And then a couple years after that, Paul writes this letter. So what happened in that time, or just before Paul wrote the letter? You had Jewish Christians starting to come back to Rome. And they're starting to kind of mix in with these Gentile believers who had been growing in their faith, but not having that same kind of baggage or history of like, we can't eat that, we can't do that. So you had, you had kind of this, a bit

of a, what feels like an oil and water kind of mix. On one hand, I would imagine you have these Gentile believers that feel like we have been growing, we are intellectually strong, you know, a bit of a know-it-all kind of prideful mentality. You have Jews kind of coming in with this more like, hey, that's wrong, that's wrong, that's wrong, a bit more of a legalistic type of kind of feel to it. And so the two coming together, you know, these Jewish believers and Gentile believers are intermingling in this church. And so Paul is addressing this kind of fractured unity, this brokenness that's happening in the church, specifically addressing the dietary differences, but I'm sure it applied to many things. And here's the beauty of this passage.

[12:06] If you look at Romans 15, take your eyes to verse 7. Some versions say, accept one another.

My version says, therefore, welcome one another. This is a message that Paul is giving to both sides. He's not letting one off the hook. He's telling them to both accept and welcome one another. And so this morning, I'm going to just kind of change my typical kind of message cadence a bit and just simply say this, that the point of the message is, let's pursue real unity in this church and in the church as a whole. Real accord, real harmony that is both rich in love, but is also bold in truth. And I say that because we'll get into this. I really don't like a surface level, everybody's smiling, everybody seems to be getting along, hey, we're all good, you know. That's not unity and that's not love. A real unity is tough sometimes. It addresses differences sometimes. It is iron sharpening iron, but it also has a real sense of love and ministry that you are carrying. And you're not just asking, hey, how you doing? Good, great. Move on to the next person. Like there's a real relationship or desire to fellowship with that brother or sister. That is the goal. Real unity. And so Paul begins this instruction in Romans 15 by telling us, hey, those that are strong, you are to bear or carry or lift up or take up the struggles of our weaker brothers. And this isn't to make the stronger person look good.

It's really truthfully to help build up that fellow believer, to bring that person on for his good, to kind of replicate or use the example that we have from Christ. Paul tells us in the, you know, tells the Philippian church to be a full accord or be in full accord and of one mind to do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain or conceit, but humility to count others more significant than yourselves. And we know that he goes on to kind of give this example in Philippians 2 of Christ, who had this equal standing with God, who took a step down to come to this earth, took a step down even further to be this sacrifice. We have an example. Our heavenly father was this perfect example of this, of this servant like, you know, savior.

Verse five, going back to Romans 15 says that may the God of endurance and encouragement, grant to grant to you, uh, let me just read it from my Bible. May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another in accord with Christ Jesus.

[15:26] And so if you're asking yourself the why question, it's a dumb question, but you got to ask it sometimes. Like, why do we do this? Why do we pursue unity? Unity of, in the body of believers glorifies God. It brings worship to his name. And in a time where many are hurt by the church, by the church, um, this is an opportunity to make the church and the gospel a very appealing thing. To welcome one another as Christ welcomed you. It's as it says in verse, uh, seven, this is for the glory of God. There was an interesting point made by a commentator, Kent Hughes, and he kind of takes a bit of a twist on an age-old question.

So I want you guys to kind of take this question and think about it and, and, and maybe just in your minds, think about how you would answer. Um, we always hear the question, like, if you were given a definitive amount of time to live, how would you act? And obviously the first question is, well, how much time do I got? You know, do I have 70 years? Do I have 70 days? Do I have 70 hours?

What, um, you know, so if you had 24 hours to live, if you had 24 days, whatever that time is, the thought process is probably going to be similar. You know, you're going to think like, what is most important, uh, to me and how much time do I have left and how do I like execute upon that?

How do I, you know, if, if it is most important for me to spend time with my family, you will come up with a plan to do that. Um, if it is most important to, to go see something that you have never seen or to experience something, whatever it may be, that is what you're doing. Now here's the twist. There was someone that knew exactly how much time he had. Jesus. So from like day one, he knows I have, you know, this approximate 33 years of time. So when you think about it that way, you think, okay, if you know you have 33 years, your actions are very deliberate, especially as it comes to the end.

[17:40] Because that's when like, really, like when you're down to your final days and your final hours, you are very, um, specific about how you spend your time. And so Jesus spent a lot of his time in his final days with his disciples. He's instructing them with word and with action. But what else is he doing?

This is, this is connecting very well to our message. He spends a lot of his final time in prayer, a lot of his final time in prayer. And there was a really interesting kind of parallel passage to this topic of unity. And that is just before Jesus goes to the garden of Gethsemane, in John 17. If you want to turn to John 17.

He, he is praying. And it was remarkable to kind of see the, the, the theme of what he was saying. Um, and that theme obviously is the topic of unity or oneness, um, or harmony. And so if you look at, uh, let's just go to like John 17 11. It says, Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me that they may be one, even as we are one.

And so he's praying for this oneness. And then he's relating it to like, Hey, as, as you, my heavenly father and I are one, may they also be one. So he's praying for this profound unity amongst believers that is to like emulate this divine relationship. If I said, Hey, let's, let's be in unity here as I am with my dad. Like, okay. You know, a father son relationship, you know, that is what it is.

[19:28] But to say your heavenly father and his son, Jesus, that is kind of the goal. And so not only is it this shared common purpose in one mind, but that relationship grows closer as, um, it grows closer in sanctification and this like joyful communion, like as a father and son, grow together. And that relationship grows, it deepens. And it's really a great thing.

That is something that Jesus is kind of praying for in the oneness of us as, as believers. In verses 20 and 21, he says, I do not ask for these only, but also for those who believe in me, that me believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you father are in me.

And I in you, that they also may be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

Again, that we as a church would be unified as our heavenly father and his son, Jesus are unified. God. The reason here isn't just for our benefit of growth, um, but it's also so that the world around us may see this and ultimately believe in the gospel. That's the goal.

Another quote I came across said that the quality of our unity will either attract or repel this world.

[21:01] It was a pretty neat kind of, you know, display of unity. I felt like at the day, at the, uh, um, hayride yesterday with, you know, various families, daycare families, whatever it may be, um, to see this, this genuine unity, uh, in, in, in, in practice.

John 17, 22 also mentions unity, but here's a verse that really sums it up. Well, verse 23 of John 17, if you want to turn there, it says, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one so that the world may know that you sent me and love them even as you love me.

For God, what do I think of when I hear that? I think of John 3, 16. For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life. Unity amongst the believers will display the love of the father. It is not just love amongst each other. It is not just, hey, we're going to look good, but it is going to display the love of the father and compel, uh, non-believers to, to, to investigate that and, and hopefully put their trust and their, their faith in Jesus. So how do we, how do we grow in unity? This isn't like rocket science. How do we grow in unity? Uh, Teddy, you asked an earnest question a couple weeks ago. How, how do we love our neighbor? You know, how do we love our neighbor? And, uh, maybe you gave an exact answer. I don't know, but it was a fairly open-ended question because there's a lot of scenarios in, in, in which we do that. Um, my answer based on how do we, how do we, how do we pursue or, or, or show unity? Um, I think there's some similar principles to how we love one another.

Uh, if you look at Romans 15, going back to Romans 15, it starts with, in humility, we help those who are weak grow in their walk.

It's like, it's like we're hiking up this mountain and we're doing it together as a group. It's not necessarily a race. It's not a, it's not a, a zero sum game where, hey, if I make it up, someone can't go. Like the goal is that we are all moving in the same direction. And when someone comes to an impasse, someone comes to a point where they cannot get up above that rock or they can't make that step or whatever it may be, help them along. Let's help them along. As we're looking in this room and we're, we're asking ourselves like, how can, how can I minister to someone? How can I disciple someone? How can I be involved to bring the body of believers together and to bring them along? That is so important. Let's help. There may be a number of weaknesses that we are dealing with. You know, the obvious ones to me, there are, there are weaknesses and struggles around

addiction. There are weaknesses and struggles around anger and, and how we respond to maybe our family and those around us. There are, and I am, I am in all of these camps, issues of pride. There's, there's a lot of things that, you know, we are struggling with. And so whatever it is, let's look around and think, how can we help people? Again, taking the plank out of our own eye and just like in humility, how can I help? Like, how can I help bring someone along? Let's seek the good of those, let's seek the good of those around us, not looking for selfish game. But here's my second point as to how we do this. Let's pursue this in truth and in dealing with sin. I mentioned early, earlier, unity is not always easy. It's uncomfortable sometimes. It's hard. It deals with relationships. [25 : 15] Relationships are people coming together, and we are sinful people. I am in that category. There's a really interesting passage in Titus 2. You can turn there if you want, or if you want to just hear. It says in the beginning, I think it's in the beginning of Titus chapter 2, it says, but as for you, teach what accords with sound doctrine. And he goes on to kind of expound upon that.

But then later, in chapter 3, he talks about, Paul talks about avoiding foolish controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless. As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once, and then twice, have nothing more to do with them. Knowing that such a person is warped and sinful, he is self-condemned. So Paul is telling Titus to preach what is of sound doctrine, and he goes on to explain what that looks like. And then he goes, but there's also some things that, like, they should not be divisive. I mean, if you have someone that is causing division, and they're foolish, things like that, that needs to be addressed. And after warning him once and warning him twice, if that person just continues on, it says, have nothing more to do with them. So the point there is this unity sometimes isn't easy. And we need to deal with those seeking division through this process. And there's a couple different templates for that. You know,

Matthew 18 is another example of to go to someone who has sinned against you. Again, if you're unsuccessful, take someone else with you. And it kind of goes through that process there.

So I can't emphasize enough that unity is both this concept of, like, how do we honestly love our neighbor and help those along us, move them along in sanctification, in discipleship, but also focusing on the truth of the gospel and teaching sound doctrine. There's a very kind of, like, there's a dance that's going on where you're kind of, you're doing both. This doesn't, this pursuit of happiness isn't, I'm sorry, this pursuit of unity isn't for the purpose of making people happy. That's not unity. Again, going back to my original example, I, to me, the definition of unity isn't, like, all fake smiles. This isn't, like, this facade of, like, yeah, everything's great. Like, to me, when I say that, I'm like, that, that means that something's not great.

[28 : 18] Things are not being addressed. Unity is the relationship we have that focuses on the gospel and that addresses differences through scripture and a biblical worldview.

Again, I don't want to leave, anyone leaving here this morning feeling that unity is this outward, happy, smiling facade, when there's an inward turmoil and division. Relationships are tough sometimes and we hurt each other. Pray that the Lord humbles you in identifying the plank of sin in your own eye, but also standing for what is right. So it's this humility, it's, it's this, like, self-reflection of understanding my own sin, but understanding also that this is what God has laid out for various things, like the church, and this is what is truth. In verses 8 through 13, there's just so much to unpack here. I mean, there's, like, five references to Old Testament passages that I, I was like, man, this is gonna be great. I'm gonna be jumping all over New Testament, Old Testament. Like, I haven't, obviously. But Paul reminds the people that Christ fulfilled the promise given to the Jews. But that salvation is open to all, for the Gentiles included. Can I get an amen for that? That's right. I'm not Jewish, so this is a great thing. He has become the atoning sacrifice for my Gentile sins and the sins of the entire world. That's awesome. In closing, I'd just like to highlight the last verse of this passage. Like I said, this is the money verse. Verse 13, it reads, May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit, you may abound in hope. In addition to this theme of unity, Paul makes it a point to focus on the shared hope we have in Jesus. Our Heavenly Father is a God of hope. This hope is a joyful and confident expectation of eternal salvation. There was a really interesting, I meant to pencil this in here, but there was a really neat theme this morning, if you were, you know, here for the, for communion, about this eternal hope that we have in heaven. You know, there were quite a few passages read out of Revelation. That common hope is what brings us together. That's what, that's what allows us to all put on the same uniform as believers. We're on this team together. Doesn't mean that there, there

won't be conflict and some, some butting heads on this team, but that is where the common bond is.

This joyful and confident expectation we have of eternal salvation. Hope is mentioned in verse 4, it's mentioned in verse 12, you know, in pointing back to the Old Testament as the, as the, you know, with the promise of the Savior, talking about the line of, you know, the Savior Jesus coming through the line of Jesse and David, and in him Gentiles have hope. All of the world has hope.

[31 : 40] In Christ we have hope. Our unity is this common bond of the gospel. It's this expectation that Jesus died on the cross, was buried again, rose again, paid for our sins, so that we could be saved for this future, future, future eternity in heaven. So let's keep our eyes focused on the, on the hope we have.

Our focus will express itself in a heartfelt, kind love sometimes towards one another. It'll, you know, this unity will be this honest ask of, how are you doing? How can I help you? I'm praying for you, whatever it may be.

Um, but sometimes it can be this tough love where you're addressing sin and you're, you're, you're addressing division. Uh, I kind of made this comment just as I was thinking through this, you know, our Sunday school time, you know, as we're kind of going through this topic of, you know, looking at reformed theology is a great opportunity to exercise this unity muscle, right? Where we are looking at differences. We are taking them through the, the, the filter of what we see, you know, scripture, you know, kind of responding with. Um, and, and we're trying to discern truth, but while also keeping in mind that there is unity amongst believers, those that have maybe this other theology or, or differences of opinions or whatever it may be, um, we can have a lot of differences, but there is this like common bond of the gospel.

And if those, if those that disagree have put their faith in the gospel and that gospel is pure and true, then there is a, there is a level of unity there and we should, we should seek that out.

Um, there will be plenty of disagreements, but as I feel like the secular world is closing in on the church, let's love and appreciate our fellow believers. You know, um, we have enough going on.

[33 : 53] We've, there, there is enough, um, opposing force that the desire for unity amongst our body of believers here, amongst those that agree with us and some that don't agree with us on some of these non, maybe core issues. It is just a reminder that there is a need for unity. We have enough division in this world as it stands today. So let's carefully seek the oneness and unity that Jesus describes in this passage in the relationship with, uh, himself and his, and his father. Let's pray.

Lord, we, we thank you again for, uh, the message this morning. And I just, I pray that it, it was, um, understood clearly, Lord, uh, that, that your word and truth would go forth, um, this desire for unity. And while there were differences in the church 2000 years ago, there's differences today. Those differences may look differently than, than they did then. Um, but Lord, there are still differences. So I, what I, what I pray for is that as a body of believers, the leaders here that we would preach and search the scripture and, and, and, and share a message of sound doctrine and of the true gospel, um, that we would not put things aside that, that are, that are beyond that Lord, as far as just studying what, you know, um, various things mean, but, um, also keeping this sense of unity and unity that is one that carries, uh, love and, and real fellowship and a desire to see other, uh, brothers and sisters brought along, but also in dealing with, uh, things that are not right and, and sin and, and just various issues there. So Lord, there's a lot of words there. Uh, I think you, you understand what, what I'm trying to say here, Lord. And it is, um, it's an, it's a very important topic, Father. Uh, and just, I pray that you would just give us all humility, um, and discernment and, and truth as we go through your scripture and desire to glorify you as it says to, uh, make the unity of this body of believers, one that is really interesting and really appealing to those around because right now we are looking and we are seeing very little of that. And so there is, uh, something to be shared there. Heavenly Father, we thank you for this day. In Jesus name, amen. Amen.