

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sister in Christ,

As many of you know, the church year begins with the season we are in right now, the season of Advent. As we heard this past Wednesday, the word “Advent” means “coming.” We are prepare our hearts with repentance for the Savior born in Bethlehem. That was his first coming. We rejoice also in this season in Jesus coming to us now... today... in both Word and Sacrament. We also ready our hearts for Jesus second coming in glory... a day that could come at any time.

Today we want to talk about one thing in particular that can really ruin the Advent season. It turns hearts unrepentant. It deafens ears to God’s Word and produces indifference about the sacraments. It pulls our focus from Jesus 2nd coming and makes us completely unprepared. What is it that could potentially ruin the Advent season for us? It is simply this: division within the church. A lack of unity can destroy a church.

Satan knows this very, very well. He works overtime trying to find any way he can to divide us. There are countless ways this can happen. Let’s face it, our church is made up of people who are very different. Those gathered today have different levels of **education**. We **grew up** in different areas of the country... or maybe even in a different country. We have very different **income** levels. We live in different parts of the **city**. Some are **young** some... not so much. Some are **life-long Christians**, others are relatively new to the faith. We have very different personalities. Some are outgoing, some introverted. Some are leaders, others followers.

When you consider all the ways we are different, and all the potential areas of conflict, it may seem that we are destined to have endless conflicts and disagreements. It may seem that unity under such circumstances is an unrealistic dream. And here is why that would be so tragic: Where there are disagreements, arguments, jealousy, bitterness and lack of love amongst Christians, our great God and Lord is not glorified. Faith is not built up. We hinder our ability to be prepared for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

So listen carefully to our God, who in our sermon text today says to his church: “**Glorify God with one heart and one voice!**” Is this really possible? Listen to Romans 15:4-13.

For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God’s truth, to confirm the promises made to the patriarchs so that the Gentiles may glorify God for his mercy, as it is written: “Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles; I will sing hymns to your name.” Again, it says, “Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people.” And again, “Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and sing praises to him, all you peoples.” And again, Isaiah says, “The Root of Jesse will spring up, one who will arise to rule over the nations; the Gentiles will hope in him.” May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

We see the potential for division in our congregation. But Paul was writing to Christians in Rome where the division was real, it was deep, and it threatened to tear apart the congregation. You see, the Roman church was made up of both Jews and Gentiles. This tension is so not a part of our modern experience that it’s hard for us to appreciate the gravity of the situation. Christians of Jewish decent had to fight an upbringing in which Gentiles (non-Jewish people) were looked down

upon because they weren't God's chosen people... they hadn't received God's promises over the centuries. They were looked on as "outsiders." Meanwhile, anti-Semitism is not just a modern phenomenon. It was certainly there in the first century when this text was written. So the Jew / Gentile mix in the congregation as already powder keg.

Now, couple this with the fact that some of the Jewish Christians in the congregation had a weak faith. They still felt compelled to keep Old Testament laws, such as abstaining from certain foods, keeping certain festivals, wearing certain clothes, etc. They knew that these things were no longer necessary because of the perfect life and innocent death of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, it was hard for them to break with their former habits. Meanwhile, members of the congregation with a stronger faith weren't understanding or helpful with these weaker Christians. Instead they sometimes offended them by flaunting the things that still bothered the consciences of the weaker ones.

Satan was successfully dividing the congregation. Paul wrote to stop it. And his words help unity in our congregation today as well. "Glorify God with one heart and one mouth!" How is this possible?

Paul said, "**For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus.**" True unity can only come if God himself gives it. Think about this... unity comes **from God** and from nowhere else. A congregation cannot be truly united if it finds its unity by standing behind the **pastor**. If that pastor leaves, the unity is gone. Nor can a church be united around a project or a **program**... such as building a church. When the project is done, the unity ends! Lasting unity only comes when we first of all recognize that God himself is the source of our unity. Our God, who is the source of patience and comfort, is the only one who can unite us! For unity, then, we must pray to God to give it to us.

And note that God unites us "**as you follow Christ Jesus.**" From Christ we learn that God expects us to be perfect. From him we learn that we have failed to meet God's demands. We know we deserve God's punishment. But from Jesus Christ we know that his perfect life has been given to us. We know his innocent death took away our guilt. In Christ we are reconciled to God and are accepted by God. Only when we know Christ better, know his teaching better, know his love better... only then can we become truly like-minded.

And where does God reveal Christ to us? Paul said, "**For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us,**" Scripture was given us for two reasons. First, it was written to **teach us**. We can't be united in our hearts and minds if we don't first have a common teaching. There is a lot which God wants us to **know** in Scripture about our sin, about God, about our salvation. God's Word is how he communicates these things to us. Without his Word, we have no basis for unity.

But God's purpose in Scripture is not merely to give us some knowledge about spiritual things. It was given to us "**so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.**" God gave us Scripture so that we would have **hope**. We're going to meet that word "hope" again in our text, so it would be good to define it now. The Scriptural word "hope" is used differently than the worldly use. To put it simply: *Hope is the forward-looking aspect of trust*. God wants us to have sure confidence as we look forward to the rest of our life, to death, to resurrection, and to eternal life. From Scriptures, we have a sure confidence about the future. God's purpose in giving us his Word, the Bible, is to teach us his truth, and to give us hope – Biblical hope!

Now... some people will take passages like this and use it as evidence that God wants us to ignore differences in teaching, and unite. Many churches today try to unite by "agreeing to disagree" on certain teaching of Scripture. To establish an outward unity, they tolerate a variety of teachings in the church. But that's wrong for two reasons: 1) It doesn't fit the context of this portion of Scripture. The nature of the conflict was not doctrinal at all. Both Jews and the Gentiles believed the same. The source of division was a lack of love. 2) The second reason we know that

this part of Scripture isn't teaching "agree to disagree and unite" is that it emphasizes that Scripture is written to teach us, and that true unity comes from having a unity of *thought*. "Be single-minded" is what the text literally says. Think the same way when it comes to what God teaches us in his Word. When our minds are united, we will share the same hope and that hope will unite our hearts. The unity God desires in the Christian church is not an external, organizational unity which ignores differences in Christ's teaching, but a genuine unity in teaching, thought, and heart. Only in this way can we together glorify God and build one another up.

Now, it's possible for there to be a common teaching and hope, and yet still have disunity. This was apparently the case in the Roman church. The Jews and Greeks had a hard time getting along. Truly, as we talked about at the beginning of the sermon today, there are many things which can separate members of a congregation. Paul writes, "**Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.**" Both the weak and the strong should accept one another. Jew and Gentile should accept one another. In what way: just as Christ accepted you to the glory of God.

So we must ask: How did Christ accept us? He loved us unconditionally. "**While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us**" [*Romans 5:8*]. Jesus had compassion and mercy on all. Jesus loved, and taught Jews and Gentiles, men and women, tax collectors, prostitutes and fishermen, rich men and poor people, the sick and the healthy. Jesus was completely impartial when he preached the Gospel to people. The only instance where Jesus didn't accept others was when they were self-righteous people who saw no need for repentance. Or when he saw false teachers who refused to hear and teach the truth.

Friends we too should accept one another as Christ accepted us. If we are strong in faith, and know that a fellow member is weak, we don't ridicule them, put them down, or talk about their weakness to others. We build them up, encourage them, and don't do anything to offend them. And if we are the one weak in our faith in a certain area, we don't envy the strong or try to limit the freedom Christ has given Christians. We accept them, and learn from them, and thank God for them. As Christ, we learn to overlook external differences which are unimportant, and we pay attention to that which unites us... true teaching and true faith resulting in real hope in Christ Jesus.

Paul continues by showing the Romans that the same Lord and Savior Jesus Christ came for Jews and Gentiles. He is the Savior of all. "**For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, to confirm the promises made to the patriarchs so that the Gentiles may glorify God for his mercy.**" What is Paul saying here? He's saying that in the death and resurrection of Jesus, God showed his faithfulness to the Jews in fulfilling the promises made to the patriarchs; and he showed his mercy to the Gentiles, saving them who were without any promises at all. Thus the two, Jew and Gentile, shall fully become one. God accomplished the salvation of both Jews and Gentiles... so why should they disagree any longer?

Paul makes it clear to all that God's salvation for the Gentiles wasn't some after thought by pulling several quotes from the Old Testament to show it was God's plan all along.

The next time something threatens to break the unity of our congregation, stop for a moment and remember: The Lord Jesus Christ who loved you so much that he became man, suffered, and died for you, did the very same thing for that person whom you disagree with. Look at them through the eyes of Christ, and you will only see someone who is dearly loved by God. Friends, we bring glory to God when we accept one another despite our differences.

Our text ends with one of the most beautiful words of Scripture. "**May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.**" Let's paraphrase this passage in modern language. Paul says, "May the God who is the source of sure and certain confidence fill you completely with every joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you overflow with sure confidence by the power of the Holy Spirit." Do you want confidence about the future? It can only come from God. Do you want peace and joy in

your life? God can fill you completely with those things. Do you want hope that doesn't waver? It's yours by the power of the Holy Spirit. Don't let divisions destroy these divine gifts!

Dear friends, Christ is coming! Prepare yourselves! The days are evil. Satan actively seeks to destroy our faith. He's trying desperately to divide Christ's church. Be of one mind with one another in Christ Jesus through his Word. Continuously pray for such unity. Look upon one another as God looks upon each... as a dearly loved child who was saved through the blood of God's Son. In this way we, together and united, will be built up in our faith and God will be glorified. He will richly provide us with peace, joy, and hope. **Glorify God with one heart and one voice!** Amen.