

Sermon Title: Living in Harmony
Biblical Text: Romans 12:14-16
Teaching Series: Justified by Love
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Preacher: Jason C. Helveston

Romans 12:14-16

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight.

Paul has been constructing a vision for Christian behavior. It's rooted in the fact that we've been justified by love. Remember Romans 12 is a shift. The Apostle has taken eleven chapters to shape the mind of his readers. That's called *orthodoxy*. Right thinking. Now he's explaining what life ought to look like as a result of these doctrines. That's called *orthopraxy*. Right living. As he does, a picture of Christian community has emerged. Which is fitting, right? As much as right thinking is fruitless without right living, the Christian life is meant to blossom within the grove of Christian community. You and I are not simply individuals. We are not isolated followers of Jesus. Over and over again the Scriptures remind us of our collective or communal identity.

When we come to Christ, we also come together.

When we are saved by Jesus, we're saved with each other.

When we are reborn, we are adopted into a family.

Are you with me?

This, of course, is really good news, but it's also really hard work.

Today, Paul is going to instruct his readers to "***live in harmony with one another***" (v.16). I think this command is central to understanding the whole passage. It summarizes the charter of a people who bless and rejoice and weep and are humble. We live in harmony with one another. As always many things keep us from living the way God desires. So we'll have to address that along the way. But ultimately what we'll be learning is how to live with peace and unity by responding to a myriad of different circumstances, feelings, and differences of those around us. After all, our world is not very harmonious. *Is it?* Therefore many things threaten the harmony of a community, especially a church family who is called to live with distinction and love in our cultural moment. That's what I'd like to talk about. I want to talk about what it look like to live in harmony in a chaotic world.

We'll organize our time together this way ...

- Living in harmony when we're ***mistreated***.
- Living in harmony when we ***lack empathy***.
- Living in harmony when we're ***prideful***.

[Pray]

Movement 1: Living in Harmony When We're Mistreated (v.14, Matthew 6:43-48)

Paul begins with persecution. One way that chaos disrupts the harmony of Christian community is through persecution and mistreatment. Look at v.14. ***Read Romans 12:14 ... Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.***

We ought to be careful but not apologetic when we talk about persecution. We should concede that when the Bible speaks about persecution it speaks about something quite sacred and specific. Persecution is harassment, abuse, and violence caused by religious, racial, and cultural oppression. It's suffering inflicted as a direct response to difference and hatred. Therefore we ought to be careful about equating all sufferings with persecution. But we don't have to be apologetic. In other words, while we should have deference for those who are persecuted, we can still acknowledge that all types of suffering are hard. And though the suffering you go through physically, mentally, or spiritually may not be categorically persecution, your suffering matters to God and his Word speaks to your trouble. What's more, we can and should glean principles for every type of suffering from what the Bible teaches us about responding to persecution.

With that said, the principle here is clear. We're supposed to bless those who persecute us. This fosters harmony. Paul's instruction is multifaceted. It's a positive instruction, followed by a prohibition. *Bless, don't curse.* Perhaps when you are

mistreated it's hard enough not to curse someone or speak ill of them in return. However, the gospel compels us to not only refrain from saying something mean but to say something loving. *Don't curse. Bless.* In fact, even more is suggested. Paul is instructing his Romans readers—who no doubt were facing a myriad of persecutions—to pray for the people who hurt them. Paul is even going beyond forgiveness. Scholar Leon Morris notes, Paul "*is saying that they should actively seek their good as they pray for God's blessing on them*" (Morris, 449).

To bless a persecutor is to seek their good.

To bless a persecutor is to pray for them.

To bless someone who mistreats is one way we seek to live in harmony as God's people.

Why is this so challenging? Well, I think it's because we want to cancel them instead. In fact, many in our social moment find it repulsive to ask those who have been so hurt to bless and forgive. I'm less concerned with the larger cultural tendency to withhold forgiveness or end careers and publicly humiliate people for bad behavior ... and much more concerned with the way we automatically distance ourselves from people who hurt us. To be sure, mistreatment is unjust. Blessing and praying and forgiving may take time. While Paul is certainly critical elsewhere of those who do harm to the vulnerable, here he seems even to put the onus on the offended party to seek harmony. The one who has been sinned against is instructed to return persecution with blessing. Author Delia Owens expresses this tension in her novel, *Where the Crawdads Sing*. She writes, "*Why should the injured, the still*

bleeding, bear the onus of forgiveness?" It goes against the grain of our society and sensibilities to bless those who persecute us.

Paul is getting at a deeper reality and call in the Christian life to love our neighbors. In his famous address popularly known as *The Sermon on the Mount*, Jesus invited his followers into this countercultural way of love. ***Read Matthew 6:43-48 ... "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."*** Jesus' words are weighty. Hating your enemies is easy. It's natural. It's instinctive to hurt and hate people who hurt and hate you. But loving them is hard. It's supernatural. It's an act of grace to bless and pray for people who hurt and hate you. And it creates something withholding forgiveness never can, harmony. It's the audacious statement of Desmond Tutu's book ... *No future without forgiveness.*

Do you see? We will only bless those who persecute us, when we love them. And when we love people who mistreat us we'll live in harmony.

Movement 2: Living in Harmony When We Lack

Empathy (v.15, Philippians 2:2, 1 Corinthians

12:25-26)

Paul moves to rejoicing and weeping with others. Another way that chaos disrupts the harmony of Christian community is through comparison, jealousy, envy, and, ultimately, a lack of empathy. Look at v.15. *Read Romans 12:15 ... Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.* There is a union at level of emotion and heart within God's people. Rejoicing is not individual. Sorrow is not private. We share celebration and sorrow. In Philippians Paul went as far as to say, *Read Philippians 2:2 ... complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.* As a people we are meant to have the same mind ... the same love. It's about unity but it's also about empathy.

Henri Nouwen was a Dutch priest and professor. Much of his life was constructed to embody this ethic Paul is communicating. He became one of the primary caretakers of the L'Arche communities which developed social settings where differently-abled people lived together, sharing sorrows and joys, strengths and weakness, and resources. In his book, *Out of Solitude*, he beautifully describes what this all looked like. *“When we honestly ask ourselves which person in our lives mean the most to us, we often find that it is those who, instead of giving advice, solutions, or cures, have chosen rather to share our pain and touch our wounds with a warm and tender hand. The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief and*

bereavement, who can tolerate not knowing, not curing, not healing and face with us the reality of our powerlessness, that is a friend who cares.” In other words, real community, real friendship is an art of being and sharing. It's about sharing in their rejoicing and weeping.

Marva Dawn calls this aspect of the Christian life, "with-ness." As in we are a people who are with one another, mind, body, and spirit. It's a moral ethic born out of the incarnation. Jesus is the God who is with us (see Matthew 1:23). Therefore as his people, we bear this "with-ness" as a central and defining element. Amidst rejoicing and weeping, followers of Jesus draw near.

In generally this is a widely acceptable teaching. Few secular or religious people would argue the beauty and power of a community that shares celebration and sorrow. That's healthy. But it's rare quality. That's interesting, *isn't it? How could something so wonderful and universal be so hard to grasp?* Well, I think the primary reason is that we spend so much time in our own bodies. "*Empathy is seeing with the eyes of another, listening with the ears of another and feeling with the heart of another,*" that's how nineteenth-century Austrian psychologist Alfred Adler understood it. And that's really hard. Empathy is immersing yourself in another person's experience. And our cultural proclivity toward comparison and envy and jealousy is a fight to stay within ourselves, within our own experience when someone else is rejoicing or weeping. Make sense?

I've noticed this tendency in my own life. When I'm doom scrolling on Instagram when I should be reading or playing with my kids ... I see another preacher or leader (perhaps someone I even know) and see them praised or speaking at an important event or talking about their newly published book ... instead of rejoicing, and thinking about how wonderful it all must be for them, I stay within my own body and experience and become envious. Envy is the enemy of empathy. Perhaps for you it's when you see someone celebrate the birth of a child ... or get a promotion ... or get married ... or go on vacation, instead of rejoicing, and seeing with their eyes and feeling with their heart, you stay within your own body and experience and become jealous. Maybe even like me you compare yourself and think of reasons why you deserve what they got more than them. It's this war within that makes something so wonderful and universal so rare. This is not living in harmony.

It happens with our tears as well, but in a slightly different way. Rejoicing is often more public and present in our social landscape. Weeping is more private. Few of us resist empathy when someone is crying right in front of us. (Though admittedly, I get pretty annoyed when my kids cry about something I've determined to be pretty silly.) However what we more often do is avoid places and conversations that could make us or others sad. *We avoid weeping.* And yet, research increasingly tells us that allowing sorrow to "run its course" is the only way to fully overcome grief. Recently I listened to psychotherapist Julia Samuel explain on the podcast, *The Happiness Lab*, that grief has to rage through us with its full force in order to process what we're feeling and what we've been through. And this almost always

requires community. But instead of drawing near to someone else's body, someone who might need to be comforted, we're prone to avoid places and people and conversations that might cause weeping. We choose what's comfortable to us rather what brings comfort to someone else. This is not living in harmony.

Rejoicing with those who rejoice and weeping with those who weep is all about empathy. And empathy is about this "with-ness," entering someone else's experience. The Apostle explained it through his powerful extended metaphor of the Body in 1 Corinthians 12. He writes, *Read 1 Corinthians 12:25-26 ... that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.* What's wild is that in Christ, you and I actually share a Body. A body with eyes, ears, and heart through which we experience life differently than in our personal bodies. Seeing the world through each other. Hearing news through each other. Feeling emotions through each other.

Do you see? We will only rejoice and weep with others, when we love them. And when we love people who rejoice and weep we'll live in harmony.

Movement 3: Living in Harmony When We're

Prideful (vv.3,16, Proverbs 3:7,9:10)

Paul now moves to associating with the lowly. A final way chaos disrupts the harmony of Christian community is through pride, feelings and actions of

superiority. *Read Romans 12:16 ... Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight.* We will not live with peace and unity when we're all seeking our own self-interests. Paul delivers this news in three ways.

- First he says, don't be haughty. In many ways this is a reiteration of what Paul said a few verses back. *Read Romans 12:3 ... For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.* We should not think too highly of ourselves. We should not think too lowly of ourselves. We should think soberly, or accurately of ourselves before God. When we think too highly of ourselves we look to the community to serve us, this is not living in harmony. When we think too lowly ourselves we see ourselves only as servants of the community, this is not living in harmony. When we see ourselves accurately before God ... loved and in need of grace ... we'll live with harmony.
- Second he says, associate with the lowly. This a brilliant phrase in the original language which bears a ton of meaning. It's intentionally ambiguous. Essentially Paul is saying when we are haughty we see the community in a kind of hierarchy, with ourselves at the top. In doing so we place certain people at the bottom, presumably those who for one reason or another we determine are beneath us and therefore with whom we refuse to

associate. But this verse also could mean when we are haughty we see certain tasks within the community as beneath us. Paul is saying, cultivating a harmonious life is about refusing the urge to see anyone or anything as beneath you. In fact, the force of the language seems to suggest that those people and task who we think are lowly ... we should actually associate with them. We should do life with those people and love them. We should do the things we think are beneath us, out of love for our community.

- Thirdly Paul says, never be wise in your own sight. He is essentially quoting Proverbs 3:7. **Read Proverbs 3:7 ... "Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord, and turn away from evil."** The Proverb juxtaposes being wise in our own eyes with fearing the Lord. This is a bit counterintuitive. After all, we might think the remedy to being wise in our own eyes is to seek wisdom from others, or admit that you don't know everything. Instead what we learn is that the problem with being wise in your own eyes is a complete misunderstanding of wisdom. Wisdom is not about accuracy but humility. The moment you are congratulatory about how wise you are, you instantly expose your lack of wisdom. Proverbs 9 makes this idea clear. **Read Proverbs 9:10 ... "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight."** Wisdom begins with the Lord. The way then we live in harmony is not by being wise in our own eyes ... nor is it by seeking the collective wisdom of our community ... living in harmony is about fearing the Lord, centering his character, his Word, and love.

Do you see? We will avoid haughtiness when we love others and the Lord more than ourselves.

And when we love, we'll associate with who and what we might deem as lowly ... we'll live in harmony.

We will only bless those who persecute us, when we love them.

We will only rejoice and weep with others, when we love them.

We will only associate with the lowly, when we love them.

Living in harmony is about living with love. When we're mistreated. When we lack empathy. When we're prideful. But this not a result of moral effort. Harmony is a mark of grace and the evidence of a new heart, a new love. In other words to love like this we must realize we've been loved like this. We'll love those who hurt us when we remember we've hurt, and been loved. We'll love those who weep when we remember we've wept, and been loved. We'll love those who are lowly when we remember how low we were, and yet, were loved. You see, in our sin ... we were the one who mistreated the Lord ... we were the ones who were weeping without hope ... we were the lowly ones, dead in our trespasses and sin. And God in Christ, out of the great love with which he loved us ... blessed us when we persecuted him ... weeped with us in our grief ... associated with us in our low estate.

It's not just that in being loved first we see what love looks like. Jesus' love actually changes the composition of our being. His blessing creates peace in our hearts. His tears wash away sin and shame from our souls. When he draws near, we become family. His love makes a life of true harmony possible.