

Romans 15:5-6 "The Importance of Following Jesus"

Here are two realities that don't seem to make sense when combined...

1. We are all so different.
2. We are one.

On the one hand, we are each very different from each other. We look different. We have different personal tastes, backgrounds, experiences, and tendencies. We are gifted differently. Our abilities differ. We are *different!*

Yet on the other hand, *we are one*. We are one body. We are one church. We are one in terms of purpose and reason for existence. We are *one*.

How do you explain how those two realities can both be true? The answer is, *Jesus Christ!* Through His life, death, and resurrection, Jesus Christ made us one. Likewise, through following Jesus together we who are different experience oneness. That's true for a married couple as well as for a church family. As we individually follow Christ we experience oneness.

This evening, I want to share with you a Scripture-prayer that I've prayed for our church for some time. About ten years ago our leaders began praying it. At that time I taught the congregation a song to help us memorize it. It's a Scripture in which we are asking God to help us keep our focus where it belongs. It's the February passage of the month at WBC.

Romans 15:5-6 "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."

What's the essence of the Christian life? We hear the answer in the NIV's translation of verse 5--it's to *follow Jesus*. What's the key to staying focused as a church? It's to *follow Jesus*.

Are you a good *follower*? Our dog, Maddie, is a focused follower. She loves to fetch a stick or a ball, and if she thinks there is a possibility that you may be soon throwing a stick or ball she is determined to be ready! And so she follows!

Quite often, we complicate things too much. We make it sound like you have to have the intelligence of a rocket scientist to get a handle on the Christian life, let alone live it successfully. We preach and hear sermons that speak of "Four Steps to the Abundant Christian Life," and "Three Keys to Fruitful Living," and "Five Mandates for Victory as a Christian Soldier," and we get overwhelmed. I can't even remember the "four steps" and "three keys" and "five mandates," let alone live them! I need a simpler approach.

And God gives us one right here. If you want to prosper as a Christian, *follow Jesus*. If we want to please God as a church, our task is to *follow Jesus*.

Following Jesus is the essence of the Christian life. How do I know? For one reason, because Jesus said so. To Simon and Andrew Jesus said, "Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men (Mt 4:19)." Just before returning to heaven, Jesus again said to Peter (Jn 21:19), "Follow me!" And when Peter objected to Jesus' explanation about the apostle John's future, Jesus replied, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must *follow* me (Jn 21:22)."

The apostles caught on. They themselves affirmed that following Jesus is the sum of the Christian life. Peter wrote (1 Pet 2:21), "To this you were called, because Christ has suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should *follow* in his steps." John put it this way (1 Jn 2:5-6), "This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must *walk as Jesus did*." Follow Jesus.

In the book of The Revelation, John described the redeemed in these terms (14:4), "These are they who did not defile themselves with women, for they kept themselves pure. They *follow* the Lamb wherever he goes."

Paul exhorted the Corinthians (1 Cor. 11:1; KJV), "Be followers of me, even as I also am of Christ." Following Christ was the passion of Paul's life, as we hear in the words of Philippians 3:12 (KJV), "Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect; but I *follow* after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus."

If you want to stay focused in life, determine to follow Jesus.

But what's involved in following Jesus? What will happen if we do follow Him? Why should we? And how do we do it? Romans 15:5-6 can help us answer those questions. We can learn from this text how to follow Jesus better. Allow me to share some lessons I've gleaned from this passage.

### **Lesson #1: Following Jesus is impossible without divine help.**

"May the *God* who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity..." It's not easy to follow Jesus. There are hindrances to following Jesus, roadblocks that get in the way. One is personal opinion.

The setting for this verse is the discussion of Christian liberties in chapter 14. There's an unfortunate chapter break at 15:1 that prevents us from seeing the context. Paul's subject in chapter 14 was the weak-Christian controversy. In the church then, as now, there was difference of opinion when it came to issues of Christian liberty. There are "disputable matters," as Paul puts it in 14:1. One Christian can eat anything, but another's conscience will allow him to eat only vegetables (14:2). One brother views certain days as holy, while another sees all alike (14:5). One church member uses the NKJV, while another holds the conviction that the KJV alone is the appropriate text. One Christian believes church music should be restricted to 4/4 time, while another prefers a more upbeat tempo (with drums and an electric guitar).

The fact is, we are different. All Christians are different. What keeps our differences in the areas of Christian liberty from paralyzing the church? How is unity possible? That's what Paul answers in chapter 15.

Verse 1, "We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves." Verse 3, "For even as Christ did not please himself..." When it comes to matters of Christian liberty, Christ is our example.

Now watch the connection. Having set Christ up as our model, in verse 5 Paul shares a prayer-wish, "May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity..."

It's no secret that church members have different opinions (and even convictions) in the areas where the Bible is silent. So how can we as a church experience unity? Verse 5 tells us God's part, and our part.

Here's God's part. "May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity." God gives endurance. God gives encouragement. God makes unity possible. If you are a person who thinks, "I just can't handle gray situations. I need things black and white all the time," then what do you do with verse 5? God wants to give us the ability to endure and encourage one another, even when we differ. God makes unity possible. That's His part.

What's our part then? To follow Jesus. Which brings us to a second lesson...

## **Lesson #2: Following Jesus is a group activity.**

"May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give *you*." "You" is plural. I must be mindful that I am not alone in this pursuit of following Jesus. I am part of a group of people who are following Jesus.

Did you ever take Geometry? I remember taking Geometry my sophomore year. Mr. Day made us learn a series of axioms--fundamental principles. The shortest distance between two points is a straight line, and so forth. If you look carefully, you'll see an axiom in verse 5. It goes like this: "Two people who are actively pursuing the same object will in turn get closer to each other."

Herein lies the key to unity in the church. If I am following Christ, and you are following Christ, we will in turn get closer, not only to Christ, but to *each other*.

You see, following Christ is an individual decision. I must choose to follow Jesus, and so must you. But it's also a group decision. Churches must choose to follow Jesus. We must ask, "Lord, where do You want *us* to go? Where do you want to lead *us*?"

A third lesson...

## **Lesson #3: Following Jesus requires that we surrender to His Lordship.**

"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."

Actually, in the Greek text the word "follow" isn't there. In fact, the word translated "follow" by the NIV isn't even a verb (the translators have given us what's called a "dynamic equivalency"). It's a prepositional phrase, that goes something like this, "...give you a spirit of unity among yourselves *according to Christ Jesus*."

Remember Paul's point now. He's burdened to see unity in the Roman church. He knows that his readers hold to differing opinions. Some have weak consciences, some strong. Some are conservative, others not. Some are traditional, some are contemporary. Some are Jews, some Gentiles. How can unity even be possible?

Does unity demand uniformity? Do they all have to get rid of their personal preferences and opinions? No. They simply need to choose to submit their preferences to the Lordship of Jesus.

"May God give you a spirit of unity in accordance with Christ Jesus." Jesus is our standard. If I am to follow Him, I must submit my will to His Lordship. So must you. And when two Christians do that, unity (not uniformity) results.

The year 2007 will be a year in which we make decisions as a church, a host of decisions regarding ministry opportunities, ways to do ministry, and so on. Does this verse have anything to say to us about such decisions? Absolutely. Beautiful things happen in a church when together we choose to submit to the Lordship of Christ, when the question that drives us is not, "What do *I* want?" but "What does *Jesus* want?"

A final lesson...

## **Lesson #4: Following Jesus is a means to an end.**

"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."

Following Jesus is a means to an end. What's the end, the goal that God seeks in the church? His glory. "So that with one heart and mouth we may glorify God."

Jesus is the only person to have ever glorified God perfectly on this earth. He said (Jn 17:4), "I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do." Jesus glorified the Father perfectly. And Jesus alone can restore fallen sinners like us so we can achieve the purpose for which we were created--to glorify God.

When we follow Jesus, the result is just that--glory to God. With one heart and one mouth, we will glorify the Living God. And when we are united in praising God, we won't be able to judge one another over minor differences of personal preference.

Let's resolve to stay focused. Let's resolve to follow Jesus. Will you choose to do so this evening? Our text indicates that when we do, it will affect our *mouths*. When a group of people are following Jesus, it shows up in verbal praise. We're going to do that in a few moments, praise God together with our voices by singing this passage. But first, let's discuss the implications of this passage...

### **Congregational Discussion of Message:**

- What can we do to become a better *follower* of Jesus?
- Following Jesus is a *group activity*? How so?
- What do we learn about unity from this passage?
- What is one practical difference this text should make this week?

### **Scripture Memory Song: Romans 15:5-6**

## **Romans 15:5-6**

May the God who gives endurance and encouragement  
give you a spirit of unity among yourselves  
as you follow, follow Christ Jesus,  
so that with one heart and mouth  
you may glorify  
the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ...  
so that with one heart and mouth  
you may glorify  
the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.  
May the God who gives endurance and encouragement

give you a spirit of unity among yourselves  
as you follow, follow Christ Jesus.

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[\[1\]](#) Adapted from message given at WBC on 6/8/97 PM, later revised on 4/14/02 PM.