

I was away at the General Assembly last week so today we get back to our series on prayer – and here's a reminder of what we've done so far.

We're looking at 4 specific prayers that the Apostle Paul prayed. In the first week we saw Paul pray, "*I pray that you would be filled with power so that Christ may dwell in your inner being.*" That little phrase, 'so that', is so significant.

In week two his prayer was: '*I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ.*' So we need to pray for God's help in sharing our faith, so that we can begin to understand everything that is ours as children of God.

In week three the prayer was, "*And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.*"

We're adding these prayers to our own prayer life because the reality is so many people know, "I should pray more often, I should be more passionate and faithful in prayer". The reality is, many of us do not know what to pray for, or even how to pray. So, we are learning these 4 new things to pray for that the apostle Paul prayed for.

Today I want to focus on a prayer on the idea of unity: unity in the family of God, unity in the body of Christ. Because, let's be honest, unfortunately today in the world, Christians are not always the most unified people around. I've just spent a week in Edinburgh with ministers and elders from across the Church of Scotland, and the wider world, and I can assure you that there are many things that divide us. I heard harsh words and deep cynicism – and that was just me! I also heard the Archbishop of Canterbury make history as the first Archbishop to participate in a debate at the General Assembly. His point was that what divides us is much less and much less significant than what unites us.

I would argue with all my heart that one of our spiritual enemies greatest schemes is to divide the body of Christ. Why? Because if we are united, we are unstoppable in what we can do for the Glory of God on earth. But if we are divided, we are deluded and we are weak. We are ineffective in the way God would want to use us.

So, today I want to dive into a prayer the apostle Paul prayed that really addresses the very important theme of the family of God being unified. Why? So that we will glorify God. If you want to glorify God, this is what Paul prayed.

Romans 15 verses 5-7. Here's his prayer: "*May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind towards each other that Christ Jesus had*". His prayer is, Would you treat each other like Jesus would treat you? Would you think about each other like Jesus thought about you? Would you love each other like Jesus loved you. 6 "*so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.* And he sums it up in verse 7, "⁷ *Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.*

If we want to glorify God, if we want to bring praise to God, what we need to do is treat each other as Christ treated us. We accept each other as Jesus has accepted and loved us. This is the prayer of Paul. Why? So that we would glorify God.

His prayer is very consistent with a prayer Jesus prayed and I want to read this to you as well from John chapter 17 verses 20-23

Jesus prayed, I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, ²¹ that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²² I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—²³ I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me..

Paul prayed for unity, Jesus prayed for unity. Why? So that God would be glorified and the world would know that God sent Jesus to reach a lost and broken world. May we be unified.

One of the real joys of being older and having older children is that they have learned to get on with each other. It's not always the case, but it happens much more often than when they were young.

Why do we fight so often in the body of Christ? We argue over theology, worship styles, what to wear or what version of the Bible to read. We fight with people in our own congregation, and we argue with people in other congregations.

We need to recognize that we have an enemy whose mission is to steal, kill and destroy. To steal the unity in the family of God, to kill the power the unity brings, to destroy the credibility of the local church that stands up for Jesus Christ. When we recognize his tactics and we stand together, we can do infinitely more together for the Glory of God than we can apart. That is why we need to pray that we will be unified. Why? So God that can be glorified and the world will know that he sent Jesus.

Here, very quickly, are three reasons why we need to pray for unity.

The first reason is because we desperately need each other. In Romans 12:4-5 ⁴ *For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, ⁵ so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.*

We form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. This is the body of Christ. We are part of a broader family and we are different, and this is by design. Unity is not the same as a uniformity. There is strength in our difference. It is our difference that gives us the ability to serve Christ more effectively. It is so easy to be critical of other believers. Very often when ministers get together it can become a bit of competition. You know the kind of thing: we had two professions of faith this month; well, we had four last Sunday; we had eight professions, six elders ordained and three baptisms. It's saying that we are better than you and it's an easy trap to fall into.

What I'm not saying is that we won't speak against blatant error - if someone says Jesus was only a man, there's no such thing as hell. We're called to take a stand on that. We'll say, actually that falls outside of the realm of historical Christian beliefs. We'll call that. But we're not going to nitpick over the incidental stuff when we have brothers and sisters being beheaded and tortured in other parts of the world. We're not going to narrow in on those incredibly small things.

I hope you heard the language I used. It was very intentional. When we have brothers and sisters being beheaded and tortured for Christ, we need to understand that they they need us. I'll tell you this, we need them. We need perspective and we need to pray and we need to be aware.

Suddenly when we recognize we have an enemy who is doing that to our own, all of the sudden we recognize we are part of a bigger family. Followers of Jesus in Asia, followers of Jesus in South America, followers of Jesus all over the Middle East and in Africa. I'm talking about from all over the world from every nation that our good God created.

They are men, they are women, they are children. Some are rich, most are poor. They speak every different language you can imagine. They come from every ethnic background possible, and from more denominations than you can even name. Yet we all worship one name and that is the name of Jesus Christ, our savior and our Lord. We need each other. Therefore, we pray. We don't just hope, don't just wish, don't just do nothing about it. We pray for power because we need power. We pray we will be active in sharing our faith so that we will have a full understanding of every good thing that we have in Christ. We pray for abounding love so that we can discern what's best. We pray for unity in the family of God so that God would be glorified and the world would know that God sent Jesus. Why do we do this? We do this because we truly, desperately need each other.

The second reason we do this is because the world will see God's love. When we are unified as the family of God, they see demonstrated, the active, passionate love of Jesus and his family. In fact I love the imagery in Romans 15:7 when Paul, along with his prayer, said this, "*Accept one another just as Christ accepted you in order to bring praise to God.*"

The Greek word for accept carries the imagery of embracing the other person and it carries on the idea of you walk hand in hand with a brother or sister. So when you accept somebody just like Christ accepted you--how did Christ accept us? While we were still sinners Christ accepted. Before we agreed, before we were perfect--which we still aren't--before we had everything together, he accepted us.

That's what we do to other followers of Jesus. You may be different, may have different focus, different emphasis, different style. We accept one another and, hand in hand, we walk together and embrace one another. When we do this then our reputation is going to change. It needs to change.

Instead of the body of Christ, the church, Christians being known for what they're against--oh, they're against that, oh, they're against that and they're against them and they're against that. Instead of being known for what we are against, then by the Grace of God, we will be known for what we are for. We are for people experiencing the grace and love of Jesus. When we love and when we accept one another we show that.

Jesus put it this way in John 13: 34-35 ³⁴“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. ³⁵By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” There is only one description of how the world will know we follow Jesus in all the bible. You know what it is? If we love one another. If you love one another they will know.

The third reason we need to pray for unity is because when we are united we can do infinitely more than we can when we are divided. We believe the local church is the hope of the world and we can do infinitely more together than we can apart. And, quite honestly, we need to do everything we can to demonstrate unity.

This was the heartbeat and attitude that made the first century church thrive. Think about it. What did they have? No buildings, no television ministry, no fundraisers, no special campaigns. What did they have against them? Massive persecution, people weren't just tweeting something bad about the church, they were taking the lives of those who said, we believe Jesus is risen from the dead. Yet this little band of non-educated, first century, passionate Jesus followers spread the gospel all over the world.

They were known throughout the community that said, "We may not believe in what they believe in, but look at how they love each other. The way they stand together, the way they are united is something I've never seen".

I want to show you how it was described in Acts chapter 4. This is so powerful. Luke described it this way, he said that all the believers were one. They were one in heart and mind.

No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own. But they shared everything that they had. Pause there. That's next level, I don't get it love. That's commitment to the family of Jesus unlike anything I've ever seen or ever lived like that myself. In fact they'd actually take their possessions and basically sell them and give the money to the church or to the leaders and say, you disperse it. So if they saw a need they'd give it to whoever was in need. Let me show you the result of this crazy kind of unified love. Verse 33-34: *With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all ³⁴ that there were no needy persons among them.* Sometimes the church is guilty of separating these two things and the focus becomes teaching OR loving others, but we need them to be together – not either or, but both and.

Do you see the power in that kind of unity? Every need was met by God through the family of God when they didn't see themselves as individual Christians but as a family a part of a body that needs each other, that wants to demonstrate the love of God, that recognizes that when they love each other amazing things happen. Think about if we acted like this, think about what people would say, "I don't know about the whole Jesus thing, and that whole rise from the dead thing, and I don't know about all that, but oh, man, you see how Christians treat people? How loving they are? Do you see how they forgive one another? Do you see how they take care of their own and how generous they are with us?"

You see, I think that the world is sick and tired of hearing about the love of Jesus. They want to see it. In fact, I think they need to see it. And how will they see it? They'll see it when we love one another. And that's why we need to pray and to put it into practice.

This is not a 'benefits me' prayer this is a prayer for the family of God. So we as a church, we need to pray. We pray for power. We pray we'll be active in sharing our faith. We pray for abounding love. We pray for unity in the family of God. Why? So that in all these things God will be glorified and that people will know that Jesus is Lord.