

Sermon outline and notes prepared by:
Dr. Stephen Felker, Pastor
[Swift Creek Baptist Church.com](http://SwiftCreekBaptistChurch.com), 18510 Branders Bridge Rd., Colonial Heights, VA 23834
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Romans 12:10b, 16 “Living in Harmony with Other Christians”

Intro. This morning my message is entitled, “How to Live in Harmony with Other Christians.” It is very important that we Christians live together in harmony. For one thing, disharmony affects our witness to non-Christians. It is not a good witness for a group of Christians to be fussy and fighting with one another.

Years ago there was a church that got into an argument over whether or not to have a piano in the church. Half wanted the piano, and half did not. One day, when the congregation showed up for church, they noticed that a piano had been placed in the church. Needless to say, the half that didn't want it were all upset about it. The next Sunday, when the congregation showed up for church, they noticed that the piano was gone. Of course, the other half became upset then. They looked and couldn't find the piano. Then, about 6 months later, quite by accident, someone found the piano. It was in the baptistry!¹

Do you see the moral of the story? Disunity hurts our witness, quenches the Spirit, and hinders people being saved. Indeed, whenever a church gets into problems with internal conflict, I can assure you that that church will see a decline in baptisms & growth. But harmony in the church is a great witness to the lost. It seems that conflict is normal among people, but love and harmony among Christians is a testimony to the transforming power of God. Also, love and unity improves the overall health of the church. When a church is in harmony, every aspect of the ministry goes better.

Now last Sunday I shared with you one vital aspect of achieving and maintaining harmony in the church, and that is love. If we love each other sincerely, if we love each other like a family, and if we love each other by meeting each other's needs, then that will go a long way toward preserving harmony in the church. But as I pointed out last week, though we must love each other, that does not mean that we look the other way when we know of unrepentant sin in someone's life. We are to abhor evil, even while we love people. The Bible says that open rebuke is better than hidden love. So we must not seek harmony in the church through compromise with evil. One of the most loving things you can do is to help someone overcome the sin that is hurting them and others.

Today I will share some other important commands that will promote harmony in the church. Now if we obey these commands, we will enjoy some heaven on earth right here in the fellowship of this church. One thing we can conclude from these commands is that self-centeredness promotes conflict & disunity, while putting others first promotes harmony & unity. So each of the three commands we will look at today will get our attention off ourselves, and help us develop an other-centered attitude. Now first of all, to have harmony among God's people:

¹ Dr. David Jeremiah says this is a true story.

I. WE MUST HAVE AN HONORING ATTITUDE

Paul says in the last of v.10, “in honor giving preference to one another.” The literal meaning of this phrase in Greek is “to lead in bestowing honor to one another.” We are to take the lead in giving honor and respect to others. Look for opportunities to bestow honor to others, and speak well of others.

This is in contrast to opposite attitude of seeking honor & recognition for ourselves. Jesus rebuked the religious leaders of His day for seeking for themselves “the chief seats in the synagogues, and the uppermost rooms at feasts” (Mark 12:39; cf. Mt. 23:6; Luke 20:46). This exhortation is directed against the conceit by which we assert ourselves above others. Some people get very upset and envious when someone *else* is honored. But just the opposite should mark a believer. We should seek to honor others above ourselves.

In 1960, Tinseltown met for the 32nd annual Academy Awards Banquet. One of the most tightly-contested prizes was in the Best Actor category. Jimmy Stewart had turned in a stellar performance for *Anatomy of a Murder*, and Charlton Heston had been Stewart’s equal in *Ben Hur*. During the pre-event festivities, photographers had requested that the two clasp in a well-wishing, superficial hand-shake. Yet once inside, Stewart put his hand on Heston’s shoulder and sincerely remarked, “I hope you win, Chuck. I really do!” That was vintage Stewart. Even though Heston won that night, he remembers Stewart’s unselfishness as much as receiving the Oscar.

So let us take the initiative in bestowing or wishing honor on others. Look for opportunities to speak well of another believer. Let us boost others rather than ourselves. If we do that, we will promote unity in the church.

Paul gives us another command that will promote unity in the church:

II. WE SHOULD HAVE A HARMONIOUS ATTITUDE

Paul says in v.16, “Be of the same mind toward one another.” Exhortations to unity of mind and spirit in the Lord are frequent in Paul’s letters. Paul asked God in Romans 15:5 that He might “grant you to be like-minded toward one another, according to Christ Jesus.” He said in 1 Cor. 1:10, “Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.” In 2 Cor. 13:11 he said, “be of one mind, live in peace.” Philippians 2:2 says, “fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind” (cf. 3:16). So the Scriptures are very clear. We should prayerfully seek to be of the same mind. We also need to be cautious about interjecting words that lead to division.

There are two ways to interpret this command to “be of the same mind toward one another.” First, we should be of the same mind:

A. In Terms of Belief & Doctrine – In Phil. 1:27 Paul made appeal to the church asking, “that you stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel.” Many churches and denominations lose harmony over differences in doctrine, even the fundamentals of the faith. They are certainly not of the same mind. While some differences of opinion about theology & doctrine are unavoidable, we should nevertheless strive to be of the

same mind, and not strive to wage & win theological arguments. So how can we have the same mind?

1. Through a Common Life in Jesus Christ – The starting place of Christian unity is sharing a common experience of Christian conversion. Fellowship & unity is not to be based primarily on the amount of creedal knowledge that various people have in their heads, but in the life of Christ which they have in their hearts. It is a unity that is divinely produced. When church people quarrel, it may be due to unsaved members in the church. The tie that binds the hearts of true believers is indeed a blessed thing.

Next, we can have the same mind:

2. Through the Authority of God's Word – We need to submit our personal opinions and ideas to the authority of the Word of God. We need to have enough humility to recognize that we could be wrong. After all, God said in Isaiah, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, and your ways, my ways" (55:8). Differences of opinion among men of good will can be settled rather quickly by producing a standard of truth, an authority on a subject.

Could I have 2 volunteers. I want you two to stand on opposite sides of the platform, and use your hands to show us how long a yard is. We all know that's the same as 3 feet, or 36". Now who's right? I will settle this different of opinion by producing a yard stick. Let's see who is closest to being right. Hold your hands still while I measure.

I believe we need to be diligent to learn the Word of God, that we may be of the same mind doctrinally. Read the Bible on your own. Attend Bible study and church services. Be careful about the preachers you listen to on radio & TV. Quite a few will lead you down the path of false doctrine.

Furthermore, we need to maintain a harmony:

B. In Terms of Attitude toward Others – When Paul says in v.16, "Be of the same mind toward one another," this could mean that we are to treat everyone on the same level. This interpretation fits the context of the rest of the verse better. In other words, don't be a respecter of persons. Don't play up to certain kinds of people. Don't plan your strategy to reach only the elite. Rather, treat everyone equally. When Paul said in Phil. 2:2, "fulfill my joy by being like-minded," it was in a context of avoiding high-mindedness and practicing humility.

In James 2:1-9 we are told the story of a rich man and poor man entering the assembly of believers [summarize]. We are not to respect a person's position for improper motives. Rather, we are to love everyone the same.

So let us have the same mind toward one another in terms of our attitude toward them. Let us not give a lot of attention to some people in the church, while slighting others in the church.

Finally, this exhortation really spills over into my next main point. To have unity in the church:

III. WE MUST HAVE A HUMBLE ATTITUDE

Pride is a major source of contention among people. Twice in the Gospel of Luke we read that a dispute arose among the apostles as to who would be the greatest among them (9:46; 22:24). Their pride and ambition led to a dispute. But humility promotes unity. So Paul says in the last of v.16, "Do not set your mind on high things, but associate with the humble. Do not be

wise in your own opinion.” These clauses are directed against the high-mindedness of vain ambition. So to promote unity, we need to:

A. Reject Selfish Ambition – Again, Paul says, “Do not set your mind on high things.” This does not mean that we are to avoid noble thoughts (Php. 4:8), but to avoid prideful thoughts. We are not to be the type person who grasps for position and honor. There is a very good reason for this. When many different people in the church are seeking honor and high position for themselves, there will be conflict for sure. Man is incurably addicted to thinking of himself as worthy to be praised for what he is and does. The true believer should not seek to associate with worldly people who are in high position, or wealthy. He will not be impressed by the position or wealth of those whose company he seeks. He does not think of selfish advantages for himself that may accrue through such associations. In fact, Paul says in 1 Cor. 13:5 that love “does not seek its own.”

Instead, we are to “associate with the humble.” The word “associate” literally means “to be carried away with.” For example, when a girl is overwhelmed by a man’s attentions, we say, “She is carried away with him.”² The lowly ought to have for the Christian a force of attraction. Instead of actively pursuing high positions for ourselves and those in worldly positions of influence, we should be more active in seeking out those who are not highly esteemed in the eyes of the world.

Let’s suppose that two people enter a room. The first is president of the local bank. The second person is a 15-year old member of our youth group. Which one are you going to set your mind upon? Which one will get your attention? Which one will you seek to talk to? Human nature is drawn to the bank president. But Paul says in v.16, “Do not set your mind on high things, but associate with the humble.” If you obey this Scripture, you will set your mind on the young person just as much or more as the bank president. So don’t pursue people in positions that are highly esteemed in the world’s eye. When a local church decides it wants only a certain “high class” of people, it departs from the Christian pattern for ministry. That doesn’t mean we ignore those who are in high positions; it’s just that we shouldn’t seek them out more than anyone else.

The words translated “the humble” can actually refer to either things or persons. It is more likely that the former is correct because of the contrast with “high things.” Lowly things would be things of no great consequence so far as the spirit of this age is concerned. The thought would be that we are also to be content with a lowly estate and with humble tasks. Our feelings and attitudes are to be so much in line with lowly things that we shall be perfectly at home with these circumstances. If “the humble” refer to persons, then the thought is that we are to be at home with humble folk. The practical import would include both lines of thought, for the one would imply the others. Lowly people, lowly pursuits; the follower of the Lord Jesus Christ will indeed find himself carried away with these. Our Lord ministered to the common people, and they heard Him gladly (Mark 12:37). Though He was the Son of God, He did not consider Himself to be too good for the lowest tasks. In fact, in John 13 we see that He girded himself with a towel and washed the disciples’ feet (vv.4-5). That was the job normally assigned to a slave. Thus, the believer is not to think himself too good for any job in the church or any person in the church. Jesus said, “Whoever would be great among you must be your servant” (Mark 10:43). There is to be no aristocracy in the church, no cliques of the wealthy over against the

² The same word is used in Galatians 2:13, “And the rest of the Jews also played the hypocrite with him, so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy.”

poor. There should be no pedestals of unapproachable dignity for those on the higher social and economic state or for those who are in office in the church. Peter said that church leaders are not to be “lords over those entrusted to you” (1 Peter 5:3). This kind of attitude is distinctively Christian.

Jesus spoke of this in a very practical sense. In Luke 14:12 He said, “When you give a dinner or a supper, do not ask your friends, your brothers, your relatives, nor rich neighbors, lest they also invite you back, and you be repaid.” You know how it is: You plan a big meal at your house. Of course, you have limited seating. Who do you put at the top of your invitation list? Normally we give priority to people of influence and wealth. We invite those who can return the favor, which could prove advantageous for us. But Jesus gives a better suggestion in vv.13-14, “But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you.” It is the Lord who will pay you back. So whom do you want reward from – rich people, or God, who is the richest of all?

So when you invite a group over for a meal or get together, consider including someone like the widow who has few opportunities for such fellowship, & who doesn’t have the means to return the favor. Then, the Lord will reward you with eternal reward.

Furthermore:

B. Do Not Overestimate Your Wisdom & Intelligence – Paul says in the last of v.16, “Do not be wise in your own opinion.” This is a quotation of Proverbs 3:7, “Be not wise in your own eyes.” Literally it is, “Stop becoming wise along side yourselves.”³ Do you see the picture here? You have individuals in the church, all lining up next to each other, each claiming to be the wisest, and most worthy to be listened to.

There are several problems with this attitude. First of all, if you think you are so wise, then you will not tend to seek the wisdom that comes from God. Secondly, you will probably not listen to others. Paul’s words here strike at the opinionated person who has no regard for any one else’s judgment. Thirdly, such an attitude leads to conflict & disunity in the church. Conflicting opinions from people who are wise in their own eyes are not resolved easily.

So don’t act as if you know everything. “Do not be wise in your own opinion.” Have enough humility to acknowledge that you could be wrong, and the other person could be right. That will lessen our arguments among one another, and preserve our unity.

Conclusion: I want you to visualize a church living in harmony with one another. King David said, “Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!” (Psalms 133:1). Such harmony is possible if we are more eager to give honor rather than receive honor. We can dwell together in unity if we strive to have the same mind toward one another, and treat each other equally well, regardless of our social standing, race, or income. Finally, we can experience the joy of Christian unity if we have a humble attitude. Crucify vain ambition. Associate with humble people, and be willing to take on humble tasks. Don’t be wise in your own eyes, seeking to prevail in winning arguments. Rather, humbly listen to others.

The kind of attitude that I have spoken of today is contrary to the world, and distinctively Christian. The first step is acquiring such an attitude is to repent of sin and self-centeredness, and trust in Christ as your Savior. Follow Jesus, who was the supreme example of One who thought of others, far above Himself. If we do so, we will have a loving, harmonious fellowship of

³ Or the present imperative could mean that we are to stop making a habit of being wise in our own conceits (Robertson).

believers that will attract others who are tired of living in conflict and vanity. Let's commit ourselves to producing such a church!

Sources: Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Expositions of Bible Doctrines Taking the Epistle to the Romans as a Point of Departure*, vol. 4, "God's Discipline" (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964); Hobbs, *Romans: A Verse by Verse Study* (Waco: Word Books, 1977); Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950 reprint); John MacArthur, Jr., *Supernatural Living: Study Notes on Romans 12:9-21* (Panorama City, CA: Word of Grace Communications, 1985); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Vol. 12 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977 reprint); John Murray, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [CD-ROM] (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); A.T. Robertson, *New Testament Word Pictures*, Vol. IV (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1931, accessed through Online Bible); Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Right: Romans* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1977); Kenneth S. Wuest's *Word Studies From the Greek New Testament*, Vol. 1, Romans (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1955). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982). F.F. Bruce, Corley/Vaughan, McBeth, & McGee read, but no additional material found useful.

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