

## ***Transformed into One Voice Glorifying God***

Spring Sermon Series on Romans

Romans 15:1-31

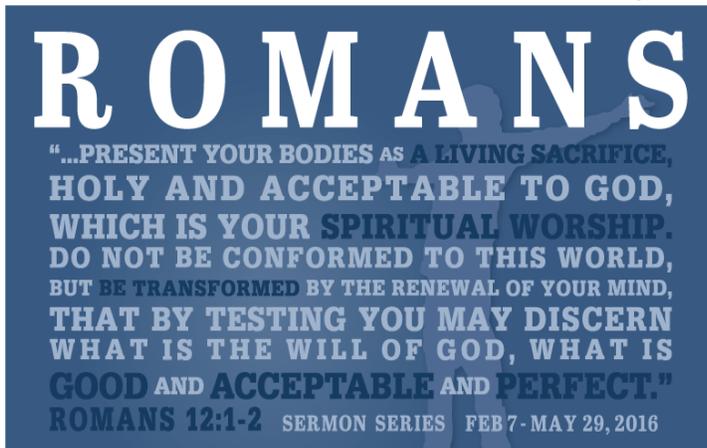
Kenwood Baptist Church

Pastor David Palmer

May 22, 2016

**TEXT:** Romans 15:1-31

I want you to keep in your mind the visual image of the nine Scripture readers this morning from various countries around the world, for you have just seen before you an enactment of



the ending of Romans 15. We will come back to it at the end of the sermon. This morning, we continue in our series on Romans to be transformed by the gospel, that the gospel of Jesus Christ does not leave us as the Lord finds us. God is at work to change us and transform us. If you do not need change in your life, then this would be a good time to leave the sanctuary and just

head straight to the coffee and donut area. If you desire change in your life, we need to sit underneath God's Word, because God's Word is always seeking to make us more like Jesus Christ. There is a powerful transformation, and this is the kind of change that is good for us. We have been listening to Romans this spring and seeing how the gospel transforms us into Christ-likeness.

In Romans 15, we come to the place where we see that the Gospel's effect on our lives, individually and together, is to take us from being a disparate group of people with our own interests, our own backgrounds, our own cultural preferences, our own different screensaver background settings on our handheld devices, and to make us into a single people with one voice glorifying God. I had never sung *How Great is our God* in Japanese until this morning, and I suspect that many of you hadn't either. Yet, we sang that together with one voice. The power of the gospel on display in the life of the local church is to signal that God's new humanity has really begun in Jesus Christ and that this disparate group of people are brought together. What binds them together is something infinitely greater than what would divide us. The natural setting of the human heart, the fallen heart, is to divide. We saw this last week in Romans 14, and we were challenged to be together, to pursue peace with one another. We ended last week defining the core of our faith saying that: we stand together as a unified people on the death

and resurrection of Christ and on the centrality of the Scripture in our life together; that all who put their faith in Christ are justified; that together we are being transformed into Christ's likeness by the power of the Holy Spirit; and that the church is to be an international, interracial community of faith awaiting the return of Christ.

This last essential, this last nonnegotiable of Christianity, is explored in much greater depth in Romans 15. The church is to be a united people, but it is also to be a diverse people. This is an area where we see that a genuine church stands in contrast to a false church. A false church is a church that does not preach the gospel, and we must be preachers and heralds of the gospel. Another false version of the church is when the church is just a single generation or when the church is of a single background. Many church growth experts will tell pastors and mail repeated high-gloss brochures to say that if you want your church to grow, then build a church where everyone is alike. Build it with one generation, the same background. I have a recycle bin in my office, and I always put that material directly into the recycle bin, because that is not a true church. A real church has diversity within it, because that heralds the gospel of Jesus Christ. We stand together around the core, and we must relate to one another in pursuit of peace, as we heard last week. Romans 15 begins on that theme. We see the other half of the equation in Romans 15:1:

*"We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves."*

Those who are strong are those who are more flexible, or more liberal, in their views. The strong are those who are very glad to eat calamari after church on Sunday. The strong are those that are flexible as to which day they gather. The strong are the ones who can tolerate a high level of ambiguity. I remember when we were interviewing Pastor Scott to come to Kenwood. We had gone through set of interviews, and then I had my one-on-one, let's really put the chips down and see if we are going to be able to work together, conversation with him. I asked him on the phone: "Are you the kind of pastor that needs the church, the sheep, to be in a single line, or are you the kind of pastor that sees the ranging, roaming flock undulating over the hills? While I am running up and down one side of that ranging flock, binding wounds, trying to keep people from falling off the cliff, feeding the hungry, could you be on the other side of the undulating flock? Are you that kind of person, or do you need a single line?" He said: "I can undulate over the hills." I said: "Good, that's what we need around here, another undulating pastor!" Do you see the difference, though? That ambiguity is important in our life together. Paul says the strong are obligated, and notice the obligation. The obligation is not to do whatever they want to do in their generous view. The ESV obscures this a little bit when it says their obligation is to bear with the *failings* of the weak. That's a little judgmental. It is always the liberal error to look over at the conservative and say: "You're just so uptight about that." It actually says we have an obligation to bear with the *weaknesses* of the weak. That's what he

really says. We have an obligation not to please ourselves, but to please our neighbor for his good, to build him up. This resumes the theme of Chapter 14. Romans 15:2 says:

*“Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up.”*

What you have got to decide and resolve is: “I’m in it for you,” not that I’m in it for myself. This is challenging. It was challenging for first century Romans; it is challenging for 21st-century Americans. In Romans 15:3, Paul grounds this charge in the example of Jesus Himself:

*“For Christ did not please Himself, but as it is written, ‘The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on Me.’”*

Christ did not seek His own agenda, but actually bore with the weaknesses, if you will, of the community. He grounds us with another line in Romans 15:4 and says:

*“For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.”*

The whole counsel of Scripture strengthens us. You need regular reinforcement to pursue peace. We need regular reinforcement from the Scripture to look out for the interests of the other. We need regular reinforcement from the Scripture to remind us that the Kingdom of God is not about us, but it is about the glory of God, gathering together a group of people united only by faith in Jesus Christ. We need the Scripture to teach us this regularly, to give us endurance, or literally patience. Sometimes have to really be patient with a brother or sister in Christ, especially when they think differently than we do on a secondary topic, and we need the Scripture to empower that, to encourage us in that. Romans 15:4 is my favorite spot on the University of Cincinnati campus. It is engraved on a bronze plaque over the exit of the Blegen Library of the third-largest classics library in the world. Romans 15:4 is there in a big uncial script in Greek. There's no pronunciation, no translation, there's no citation, but there it is: “Everything written in the past was for our instruction.” We need the Scriptures to drive us forward. This vision is nothing that you and I can achieve on our own. We will never think this way. You will think, and I will think, to gather people who are just like me and to have a little subgroup instead of being one big group, that undulating, roaming flock. Can we get excited about being that?

In Romans 15:5, Paul says:

*“May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus,”*

The literal statement he makes is: *“May God give to you to think in a united way, to think together, to think the same way.”* What is the way? That is to think in the pattern of Christ Jesus. To imitate Christ together will bring us close. We have a great wedding happening at Kenwood this afternoon. This is very exciting. One of my premarital counseling lines to young

couples is to say: "If you both pursue Jesus Christ, an inevitable outcome of that will be that you'll find yourselves growing closer together. If you both pursue the same goal, it will bring you together, no matter what." Oftentimes couples try to forge a unity just by looking sideways at each other. Sometimes wives think: "Oh, my dear husband, if I could just change him in these nine ways, we would really get along." Sometimes husbands think: "If she would just stop trying to change me in those nine ways, we could really get along." But, in reality, if you both move towards Jesus Christ, you'll end up together, and that's the vision. If you move toward Christ and think as Christ thinks, then, Romans 15:6:

*"...together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."*

Then he says in Romans 15:7:

*"Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God."*

You cannot put up a false barrier, an artificial line, that defines the community of faith other than: "I've trusted in Jesus, have you?" It doesn't really matter if you've been at Kenwood for five years or 50 years or five months or five weeks. If you have put your faith in Jesus Christ, then we share a table, we share a vision of ministry and life together in Jesus. This is a radical vision of a new humanity. Throughout history there been counterfeit attempts to secure the obedience of all nations. Throughout history there been rulers who have taken power and tried to compel the nations underneath their lordship, but this role has already been given to the Lord Jesus, and Paul says that Jesus became a Servant. This is the ministry of the Servant of the Lord in Isaiah 53. Jesus is the Servant of the Lord. He is a Servant to the circumcised, to God's ancestral people Israel. He has served them, become the Servant of the Lord, to show God's truthfulness in Romans 15:8:

*"For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the nations might glorify God for His mercy."*

Jesus comes into history in fulfillment of the Old Testament promise, and that is all true on the one side. But He comes to fulfill those promises in order that the nations of the world might receive God's mercy and praise Him. This is the broad, large, scriptural vision from the very beginning. In Genesis 12:3, God said to Abraham that in him all the families of the earth will be blessed.

Paul, when he signals the ingathering of the nations, bursts into praise. Paul is a man who is saturated with Scripture, and he doesn't even have Bible Gateway or a computer program to link up all these passages. In his mind, this torrent of passages comes rushing forth from his heart, and all the passages that he quotes in this string, this Catena of citations all hang together with a common term: *nations*. When he considers that Jesus has come to confirm the

promises of God of old and to bring the nations together under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, he bursts into extended praise. In Romans 15:9, citing Psalm 18:49, he says:

*“As it is written, ‘Therefore I will praise You among the nations, and sing to Your name,’”*

In Romans 15:10, he cites Deuteronomy 32:43:

*“And again it is said, ‘Rejoice, O nations, with His people.’”*

In Romans 15:11, he cites Psalm 117:1:

*“Praise the Lord, all you nations, and let all the peoples extol Him.”*

In Romans 15:12, the vision of Isaiah 11:10 is announced concerning the promised Son of David:

*“And again Isaiah says, ‘The Root of Jesse will come, even He who arises to rule the nations; in Him will the nations hope.’”*

This is the scriptural vision from the very beginning. From the very beginning, God's intention as Creator of the world is to redeem the world and to save the world, and that all who put their trust in Jesus Christ are grafted in to this single, united, God-glorifying people. That is what we are called to be a part of this morning. Diversity movements for the sake of diversity in our world have no theological foundation. You can't desire diversity for diversity's sake, but you can desire diversity and representation of the nations because you serve together the God who created every single person, and that ties us together. That means that the body of Christ is a signal to all the world.

You know, kings act this way; rulers act this way. They gather together emblems and evidence of the extent of their dominion. Roman rulers in Paul's day brought together the plunder of the nations. Have you ever wondered why there are Egyptian obelisks in front of St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome? It is because Roman emperors of the day brought in the treasures of the nations. They dragged that huge obelisk from the pharaoh's temple in Egypt. They dragged it and set it up in Rome as evidence that it is their dominion. They built statues and temples of themselves all over the known world in a counterfeit claim to say: “We rule the world.” The living God of the Bible is not represented by anything that we have made, but living human beings represent the living God. The commission in Genesis 1 is for living human beings to radiate out to the extent of the earth so that all the earth would be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord ~~like~~ as the waters cover the sea. When you see a human being standing in front of you, it is evidence that God is on the throne. When you see a human being standing there praising God, it is evidence of the scale and scope of His dominion, and that is supposed to be represented in a local church. It is supposed to be visible before us. It is not just a trendy cultural vision for a contemporary urban setting. It means that in Rwanda, Hutu and Tutsi tribes, who slaughter each other without Christ, sit down at a common table in Christ. It means that you can have diverse peoples who make war against each other at the table with shared

forgiveness in Jesus Christ. This vision of the church is so radical, so amazing, that it calls us to be part of it. It doesn't happen on its own. There is no way to just wish for this and hope it comes to be. For such a thing to happen, it requires intentional engagement, an all-out effort, and this is what we see in Paul. He says in Romans 15:13:

*“May the God of hope fill you with all joy. . .”*

I love what he says to the Roman church in the following verses even though he has never even met them. In Romans 15:14, he says:

*“I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another.”*

But then he says boldly—perhaps rustling a few feathers and maybe causing some of the calamari eaters to stop listening—in Romans 15:15-16:

*“But on some points I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given me by God to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the nations in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.”*

He explains the purpose of the grace given to him, and he expresses his own missionary vocation in categories and language that flow from a priestly vision of Leviticus. He says God's grace to him was really to be a priest. The ESV translates this as *minister*, but he says really that he has been called to be a *liturgist*, in priestly ministry to the nations, priestly service of the gospel, and his priestly ministry is to offer the nations to God as an act of worship. In Romans 15:17, he says:

*“In Christ Jesus, then, I have reason to be proud of my work for God.”*

He says literally he is *boasting* of his work for the Lord. What is he proud of? What is his boast? His boast is not his own achievement. His boast is not his fame and reputation. His boast at the end of the day is the transformation of lives through his ministry. Sometimes people will say to me: “That was a great sermon,” and I always like to reflect that back to: “It was a great passage. It affected me, too.” I don't care much if anyone remembers my name or my ministry. The greatest effect would be for your life to be changed, together with mine. If we were changed together by the gospel and became a different people united through faith in Jesus Christ, that would be the greatest outcome of all. This morning we had nine people read the Scripture for a very important reason. It is because the ending of Romans is in connection with a concrete action that Paul is taking at this very moment in his ministry. Romans is written in the spring of AD 57 after almost 25 years of his serving Jesus. He is at a critical crossroads in his ministry. He has been collecting funds from largely Gentile churches through his ministry, and he is bringing those funds to present them to Jerusalem as an offering for the poor. He is not only bringing a gift of money, he is also bringing a gift of men.

In Acts 20:4, we read about the group that Paul is bringing with him to Jerusalem. It is eight people, together, with him, making nine in this traveling band. Let me tell you who they are. Luke tells us in Acts 20:4 that he brought Sopater, son of Pyrrhus, who is from Berea in central Greece. He brought Aristarchus and Secundus from Thessalonica in northern Greece. He brought Gaius from Derbe in the province of Lycaonia. He brought Timothy, a Jew from Lystra. They brought Tychicus and Trophimus from Ephesus in the province of Asia, and he brought Luke, the Macedonian physician together with him. He brought eight men representing every area of his missionary activity up until this point. He has men and money, and he is bringing them to Jerusalem to set them at the feet of the mother church, with a prayer that the church of Jerusalem would receive this offering for the poor, for the advancement of their ministry, and that they would also receive these men as brothers in Jesus Christ. This is a decisive moment in Paul's ministry. They do not appear empty-handed. They arrive in the city bringing the tribute of the nations, as Jacob had prophesied back in Genesis 49. They arrived with the gifts of peoples of the world, as David prayed in Psalm 72:10:

*“The kings of Tarshish and of distant shores will bring tribute to Him; the kings of Sheba and Seba will present Him gifts.”*

They stream to Zion, enacting the prophetic hope of Isaiah 2:3, that in the latter days the nations would stream to Zion and say:

*“Come, let us go up to the house of the mountain of the Lord that He may teach us His ways.”*

This is a decisive moment in Paul's ministry. He is enacting and living out what he is preaching and teaching. He is living it out in a very concrete way, and his hope and desire is that these brothers would be received in Jerusalem, the money would be received, that the Jerusalem church would send him forth with blessing, that he would arrive in Rome with blessing, and that they would say to Paul: “We got your letter. We understood that the gospel includes all peoples, we are radically on board with this gospel mission, we are going to commit to partner with you in prayer, we are going to commit financial resources, and we are going to send some members of our congregation with you as you go to the uttermost limits of the earth. That is his hope.

Paul doesn't know when he's writing this, what we know actually happens, that he arrives in Jerusalem and the church receives the offering, the church receives the men, and the church says to Paul: “Paul, we love you. We understand what you're doing, but there are some people here among us that are ultraconservative, some non-calamari eaters. They have the wrong view of you. Would you just do something to lighten their pressure? We have some guys who have taken a vow, and they are going up to the temple. Would you just pay off the Nazarite vow for them as a symbol of goodwill? Would you do that?” And Paul said: “I'll do that,” and they go up

to the temple, and Paul pays the Nazarite vow for these others. When he gets inside the temple courts, zealous, ultraconservative Israelites from Asia minor had seen Trophimus with him, and they start shouting out in the temple: "This man has brought the nations in to God." There is a riot in the city. The temple gates are closed, and Paul is arrested. His life is barely spared. He begs the Roman commander to let him speak to the people, and he addresses them in the language of their heart from the elevated Antonia Fortress. He says: "Brothers, I'm here I've done nothing against our people. I'm only saying that God has fulfilled His promise and He is calling the nations to believe." As soon as he mentions the nations, the crowd explodes. He is taken to Caesarea where he is in prison for two years. He finally appeals to Nero, and he does arrive in Rome. He just comes several years later, and he comes not as a free man, but bound in chains. We don't know until we get to Acts 28 about the original reception of this letter. When we get to Acts 28, we read that Paul landed on the shore of Italy in chains, under Roman arrest, and the Christians in Rome stream to meet him on the coast, and Luke says in one of the great understatement of the New Testament, *Paul was encouraged*. He was encouraged because the original recipients of the letter said: "We read it. Phoebe did a good job reading. We understood, and we are radically on board with this vision of ministry." Paul was released from his first trial under Nero. God spared him, and, according to early church testimony, he does make it to Spain. He ministers in the western limits of the world he knew until he was arrested again and eventually was beheaded.

Romans pleads with the original hearers and us this morning: Will you embrace this vision of ministry?" I want to ask you, as Kenwood Baptist Church, an application of three questions.

**Number one: *Will you embrace with me as your pastor this vision of the church as uniting all nations under the Lordship of Jesus Christ?*** It will be very easy for us to ignore this vision, and if we ignore this vision and we say: "No, that's maybe good for someone else, but I want Kenwood just to be for me: I want Kenwood to be just about my preferences; I want Kenwood to be just for my family, what's good for me; I don't want any changes that might seem difficult; I don't want to learn any new songs; I certainly don't want to sing any songs in any other language!" You could do that, and if we don't embrace this biblical vision of the future of our church, we will be radically restricted. Will you embrace this vision? If you will, let me give you a practical suggestion. If you say yes to this, I want to challenge you to not leave Kenwood this morning without making an appointment to meet for breakfast, lunch, or dinner with someone that you don't know here. I'm just giving you permission. Get to know someone. Cross a line that you're not used to crossing. I'll even give you the awkward lead-in line: "Pastor David asked me to do this." Then you're in the clear.

**Number two: *Will you, together with me, invest significantly in the mission and outreach of Kenwood to support such a vision of the church?*** I was taught as a new Christian to tithe, and I've been tithing since I was 16 years old. My tithe as a college student was small, but it didn't

matter. I was taught early that the first giving you do in response to God is that you tithe. An awesome thing about a community of tithers at Kenwood is that your tithes and offerings are tithed, and that provides the missions budget for our church. We are counting on giving at least \$120,000 a year in direct mission and outreach, and that's not possible without a church that says I embrace this vision. Paul never tells us the amount that he's bringing to Jerusalem, but it has to be substantial because he has been collecting it weekly for years. It is to make ministry happen. Will you embrace that? Let me give you a concrete suggestion. Praise God our finances are really strong this year, but I don't take that for granted. If mission and outreach is to happen, it has to happen from a community that says: "Not only do I embrace that vision of the church, but I'm going to invest in that, because that doesn't happen on its own."

**Number three: *Will you become personally engaged with me in sharing your faith with your neighbors, friends, and the diverse people of our community?*** This is a sneak preview of where we are going this summer. This whole summer we are going to be trying to learn together how to start conversations and respond to questions that deep down we are really hoping no one will ask. I've been challenged. I like it when members of the pastoral team of the church challenge me to be bolder. You need people in your life like that. Lydia Davis said to us recently: "I'm going to try to share my faith once every day." I thought: "Oh, if you're going to do that, then I probably ought to do that." I've been trying to do that more. I had a pretty amazing conversation yesterday with five young boys who were sitting at Starbucks. I didn't see any adult with them, and I wondered why they were there. They were talking with each other, and I just inserted myself. I just started off easy with asking what grade they were in. They were a variety of ages, and I asked them how long they have lived here. They said varying lengths of time. They were struggling a little bit with clear expression because they were all Arabic speakers. My Hebrew is pretty good, and Arabic is a sister language, so I could hear what they were saying. After about two more questions, one of the one of the young boys said to me: "Are you a Muslim?" I said: "No, I'm a Christian." We began to talk some more about how school was going, and finally one of the boys said: "You know, my sister has leukemia, and we all came so she could be treated at Children's Hospital. That's why we're all here." I'm going to start packing an Arabic Bible. I've already given away a Chinese Bible. I'm going to start packing one of those so the next time I see those boys I can say: "I like talking with you, and I want to give you something." I saw a woman engaging them in conversation, and I had a sense that she was a believer. I know of one woman who is renting an apartment in an apartment complex because there are so many people from Saudi Arabia living in Mason whose children are getting treatment at Children's Hospital. This woman is renting an apartment there to offer English classes. So, will you become personally engaged like this? I don't know what will happen with ~~that~~ my conversation. I do not have the ending of that story. It is still open-ended. There are a lot of open-ended stories, except for the great big Story, and we already know how it ends, and that is that members of every nation are gathered before God's throne in worship and praise:

“Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, who has ransomed men, women, and children from every nation.” Will you embrace this vision? Will you invest in it, and will you become personally engaged in it? I think it is going to be a lot of fun. Let’s pray.

Dear Lord Jesus, You are awesome, and we praise You this morning because You have included us, and every single one of us here is the beneficiary of radical obedience in mission. None of us would know Your name this morning, Lord Jesus, without those who have gone before us embracing such a vision of the church, investing in it significantly, and becoming personally engaged in the spreading of Your Good News. Help us, Lord, we pray. Fill our hearts anew with the Holy Spirit.

In Jesus’ name, Amen.