

## When Christians Differ, Pt. 3

Romans 15:1-12 (03/09/14)

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We are fast approaching the end of Romans. It's been a great ride! There is still good stuff in these last two chapters. We are in the third part of Paul's teaching on how to function together in the body of Christ when we differ with one another, and believers will always have differences.

Romans 14:1-23 taught us the principles of grace (accept one another), love (love trumps liberty), and conscience (whatever is not of faith is sin). This morning in Romans 15:1-12 we're looking at the principle of unity. But before we do, let's remember that God never calls us to peace at any price.

### TRUE AND FALSE UNITY

Our unity is always in Christ and based on the gospel and the Word of God. So we aren't talking here about forgetting all our doctrine and compromising with those who reject our core truths and practices. Down through the centuries churches and denominations have tended to slide into apostasy, seminaries become seedbeds for attacking Scriptures, church groups leave the clear truths of the Bible, and God raises up reformers to call the church back to the Bible, and if they don't return, they separate from the apostasy and form new groups. Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin were all Roman Catholic priests who ended up separating from Rome. Charles Spurgeon is another example of this. He held off as long as he could as a member of the Baptist Union in his day, but finally, on October 28, 1887, he wrote his letter disassociating himself because of their liberalism. Many of us here today have gone through similar experiences. When a church or ministry drifts into liberalism, then separation is a good thing. Our unity is first of all spiritual and doctrinal in Christ and then practical as the church functions and grows together.

There are all kinds of characters in the church, and the potential for division and conflict is huge. In the Roman church there were Jews and Romans and Greeks and barbarians. Jews naturally despised Gentiles, calling them dogs and cursed by God, and Gentiles returned the favor of hatred. Now God has saved people out of all these groups and wants them to walk in unity to the glory of God. Paul gives us five practices that will nurture this beautiful, godly unity in the body.

### First, God nurtures our unity as we learn to please others and not just ourselves – vv. 1-3.

*1 Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not just please ourselves. 2 Each of us is to please his neighbor for his good, to his edification. 3 For even Christ did not please Himself; but as it is written, "The reproaches of those who reproached You fell on Me."*

We are a body, and the body has many parts. Each part has its strengths for the good of the whole. Our knees support a lot of weight that our ears couldn't support, right? And they bend to help us walk. No bending and our walk would be pretty weird. So God says you may be a strong believer, but it isn't just for yourself.

Stronger believers are to give themselves to bearing other's burdens. You see this very word in Galatians 6:2, "Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ." To bear, *bastadzo*, means to carry something someone else doesn't have the strength to carry. Remember Mephibosheth, Jonathan's son? He was dropped as an infant and could not carry his own weight, so he had to be carried and cared for by someone else.

So God is saying, "You people who are strong, look out to assist others who need help. And don't do it reluctantly." He means come along side those who need help, put your shoulder under these hardships, and help them bear their burden. What's the opposite? Just pleasing ourselves. There's a lot of stuff we enjoy doing, and we naturally do stuff to please ourselves. God gave us taste buds and olfactory nerves to enjoy stuff. He gave us bodies that need sleep and rest. But we're a family. Look at that mother who, yes, grabs some self-pleasing stuff along the way, but she's all about lovingly caring for that infant. Dad is

changing diapers, puts in the car seat, turns off the TV or video game to go spend time with little Billy or Annie.

Paul even said there's a lot of stuff he could do, "it's lawful," but he asked these questions in 1 Corinthians 6 and 10: All things are lawful, but are they profitable for God's people? Are they edifying? Will they enslave me if I do them too much? Are they for my neighbor's good? Are they worth imitating? Why am I here? And the answer is not primarily to please myself!

Verse 2 is crystal clear. God says each of us is here to please others. Now, let's be careful to see this clearly. God also warns in Galatians 1:10 against being a people pleaser. If you are doing stuff so other people will think well of you, or you are wanting their praise, or you are flattering them so they give you strokes, or you are just telling people what they want to hear so you don't offend them, that's being a people pleaser, and that's sinful. Parents can ruin their kids by just selfishly pleasing them so they like them.

How are you to please others? It is really very simple – we're here to help others for their good. And Paul immediately defines their good – to help them grow, their edification. Just doing stuff for people isn't necessarily for their good. It doesn't help an emerging butterfly to help them out of their cocoon, does it? Galatians 6:5 says we must all bear our own God-given load. So we must apply this practice carefully.

Paul goes straight to Jesus as not only our model but our motivation in verse 3. Jesus didn't leave heaven for a vacation or to hang out in a resort. He was coming from an absolutely glorious, beautiful place to dive down into this hellhole of a fallen Genesis 3 world, a place where He took the insults and hatred that man naturally has toward God. We reproach or curse God, and Christ took this very thing on Himself. But why? He didn't come to please Himself. He didn't come to be served, but to serve and give. Christ endured these reproaches. Why? For you, for me.

With Christ as our model and motivator, we understand that we are not here to please ourselves or to have as much fun as possible. He shows us we are here to please others for their good, to invest our lives for the blessing and good of others. You have some spiritual strength; whose heavy burden are you bearing?

#### **Second, God nurtures our unity as we ponder the great truths of the Scriptures – v. 4.**

*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.*

Wow, is this ever a verse. Paul is telling you how you should think about your Old Testament. He wants Jews to know he hasn't jettisoned the Old Testament. In fact, he says in 2 Timothy 3:16 that it is God-breathed. Genesis 1 to Malachi 4 is God's revealed Word, flowing from Him to us through all these different authors with a definite purpose – to instruct us. And not just for information, but to change our lives. It is practical and useful to lead us in our worship and walk with God. God expects us to study and know our Bibles. Through it you learn to trust God and see that He is faithful. You learn what man is really like. Recently some of us have been reading about Ahab, surely one of the dumbest guys in the OT who married that witchy woman Jezebel. You learn living for God doesn't always turn out rosy, as Naboth learned when Jezebel had false witnesses accuse him of blasphemy and had him stoned to death so Ahab could go take possession of Naboth's vineyard. You also learn about courage as you watch Elijah go down there and confront Ahab nose to nose, calling him the troubler of Israel.

Your Bible teaches you two things – to endure hardship and to be encouraged in God. Your Bible gives you hope as you know our sovereign God has the whole thing planned and is working out that plan. You see God Almighty marching right through your Old Testament, creating the universe out of nothing, bringing a man and a woman together in marriage, providing redemption after sin entered the world, marching Israel through the Red Sea, feeding them for 40 years, smashing the walls of Jericho, defeating enemies many times bigger than Israel, sending them into captivity and then in 70 years bringing them back, and 400 years later, right on schedule, sending Christ to earth to save His people from their sins!

What does this say about the importance of reading and pondering over the Scriptures every day? William Tyndale gave his life for you to have the English translation of the Bible, and what are you doing with it? The first thing the Reformers do is get that Bible into the hands of the common people so they can read and learn and grow and be strong and endure and be encouraged and filled with hope! What are you doing with your Bible? Could you write “damnation” in the dust of your Bible? This verse is truly unforgettable about the Bible. God’s Spirit didn’t take some 2000 years to inspire this book through some 44 authors with every word tested and true for us to throw it aside and ignore it! We need to sink into it every day! Let it form that mental grid Paul told us about in Romans 12:2, “be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”

But how does this nurture our unity? We’re all in one Book! We all love this one Book! We join with David in Psalm 119 where he says over eight times, “O, how I love your Word!” We gather to hear and study and ponder God’s Word together. We aren’t here learning about cognitive therapy or philosophy. With Jesus, we live under the authority of God’s Word together. It is our source for Truth.

### **Third, God nurtures our unity as we then pray for God to build this harmony – vv. 5-6**

*5 Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus, 6 so that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

This is a prayer. Paul is asking God to build into our lives the very thing he said the Scripture does for us. As we in faith read and ponder and pray our way through our Bibles, God is at work in us strengthening and motivating us to persevere through tough times, encouraging us every step of the way. God Himself is the source of these two beautiful graces.

“In accord with Christ” means Christ is the focus of all of this. If your goal is to honor and love and obey Christ, you’ll be a blessing to everyone in your life. You aren’t all about yourself, getting your ego bruised because someone criticized you, or feeling you deserve better, and all the rest. No, you forget yourself and focus on Christ and others. Your life is hid with Christ in God.

“With one accord and one voice glorifying God.” You glorify God when you esteem Him highest in your life, above everything else, especially above yourself. You love and exalt Him above all. Nothing comes above God, not money, not sex, not your feelings, not your personal pleasures, not others’ opinion of you. This is how with one voice in God’s family you give Him glory! If your goal is to make much of God, you won’t be all about making much of you! And if you have an issue with a brother, do as Matthew 5:23-24 tells us, “If you come to worship God and remember there is an unresolved conflict between you and your brother, first go and be reconciled to your brother, and then come and worship God!”

### **Fourth, God nurtures our unity as we praise God together in worship – vv. 7-12**

*7 Therefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God. 8 For I say that Christ has become a servant to the circumcision on behalf of the truth of God to confirm the promises given to the fathers, 9 and for the Gentiles to glorify God for His mercy; as it is written, "Therefore I will give praise to You among the Gentiles, and I will sing to Your name." 10 again He says, "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with His people." 11 and again, "Praise the Lord all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples praise Him." 12 again Isaiah says, "There shall come the root of Jesse, and He who arises to rule over the Gentiles, in Him shall the Gentiles hope."*

We’re back to accepting one another! Paul has told us this over and over, probably because we don’t get it the first time. For a quick review, “accept” doesn’t just mean, “Ok, I tolerate you, but...” No, it’s a strong word meaning to warmly embrace, like the prodigal’s father who welcomed his repentant son with wide open arms. Accepting is opening the door wide, all the way. And here you see why. Why did Jesus warmly and willingly and lovingly and eagerly receive you? Because you were such a good catch? You were irresistible to Him, right? Or even, why did God elect you to be one of His children in eternity past? Did He see how great of a saint you would be and said, “I want that one!” Not even close. We all deserved His wrath, brother. Each of us was just as dead and revolting to divine holiness as the most

defiled sinner. Christ saved us purely by grace, so we should accept other believers just like Christ accepted us.

So, if you are a guest with us this morning or if you are a new believer, we warmly receive you. We welcome you. We want you to feel welcome. You are in the midst of a bunch of pardoned rebels against the most high God. We are, each of us, the chief of sinners.

Verses 8-12 Now Paul summarizes the fact that God is glorified in redeeming both Jews and Gentiles, keeping His promises to the Jews and gladly having mercy on Gentiles. He gives four quotes from the Jewish Old Testament's law, Psalms, and prophets to show that God intended to redeem both Jews and Gentiles. And that's exactly what He has done, putting them all in one body in Christ to bring Him praise and worship together.

So there we are, lifting our voices in praise to God together. This is one of the wonderful things about great music. You are lifted up as you join with others, and you forget yourself as it sweeps over you and unifies! Those flash mobs in public places are amazing, especially with the Hallelujah Chorus. For a few moments even unbelievers are given a taste of heaven, music surely being a gift of God! I can't imagine the chills we'll experience in heaven as millions, billions of voices are lifted up, singing praises in worship to God Almighty! It will be truly awesome.

**Fifth, God nurtures our unity as our prospect of future glory floods our hearts together –v . 13.**

*13 Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you will abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.*

Ladies and gentlemen, this is one magnificent verse! Feed on these three wonderful realities: God is the source of all your hopes. Outside of Christ this is a hopeless world! God fills us with the blessings of hope, rich joy, and heart peace as we trust Him. And God desires you and me to abound, not just slight hope, but to be saturated with hope, so full of hope in our hearts by the Spirit of God that we face our future with bright cheer and great expectation.

May God fill us with sweet unity as we continue to grow and serve one another as a local church! And let's stand and lift our voices to sing, "To God be the Glory!"