

## Fortified Fellowship

### Romans 15:1-7

#### INTRODUCTION

In Romans 14 and the beginning of chapter 15 Paul continues to expound on his theme of Christian unity. Paul cares about our sacrifice (chapter 12) and service (chapter 13) and citizenship (chapter 14). The undercurrent in Paul's exhortations swirl around the critical issue of unity. Paul writes stop judging each other (14:1-12); because we are all accountable to God. Avoid causing each other to stumble (14:13-23) but rather love each other. We please God and others and therefore must not seek to please ourselves (chapter 15:1-13). What is at stake? Unity! Christians sometimes have painful disagreements and Paul helps negotiate the treacherous waters where liberty becomes license or misguided legalism that unduly restricts Christian freedom. Paul has given us six basic principles—which we have translated into questions.\* (NOTE: These questions come from Wiersbe's New Testament Outlines; in Romans pp. 405-407)). How do we determine if the questionable or disputable activity is allowed or not allowed? Good or bad? Helpful or not helpful?

Am I fully persuaded or convinced? (14:1-5)

Am I doing this as unto the Lord? (14:6-9)

Will it stand the test at the Judgment Seat of Christ? (14:10-12)

Am I offending or causing my sisters and brothers to stumble (14:13-21)

Am I doing this by faith? (14:22-23)

Am I doing this to please myself or others? (15:1-7)

Paul encourages the Romans to follow Christ and his example. Paul anticipates the reader who asks the question in his or her mind; "Why in the world would I voluntarily restrict my behavior or activities in order to make someone else happy?" Why should I restrict myself? Paul's answer (Psalm 69:9); "For even Christ did not please Himself; but as it is written, "The reproaches of those who reproached You fell on Me." Paul cites the Psalmist—but again anticipates the question; "Does that Old Testament Scripture even apply to my circumstance? Paul writes "Of course does!" These things were written for our learning that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope! (v.4).

Do churches and congregations have the right to establish minimum standards of behavior and conduct? I think so—but not beyond what the Scriptures teach. We lovingly allow differences among Christians; but should never seek those differences as opportunities for division. What are the attributes of a healthy congregation? What constitutes a healthy church? We have measures for healthy families or healthy children or healthy business. What makes a church healthy? Paul's answers might surprise you! In Paul's world the healthy church is marked by the mature helping the immature (vv.1-3); everyone studies and seeks to obey the Scriptures (v.4); everyone works hard at harmony (vv.5-6) and everyone accepts everyone else—absent discrimination (vv.7-12). In Paul's dream church everyone has hope (v.13)! Not just any kind of hope! We are talking about hope in the Biblical sense of the word. We will have more to say about hope in the weeks ahead!

#### **The Strong Bear The Weak (vv.1-3)**

*Romans 15:1-7 (NKJV) I We then who are strong ought to bear with the scruples of the weak, and not to please ourselves.*

Paul counts himself among the strong ("we then who are strong"). How do the strong bear with the scruples of the weak? By not pleasing themselves; but rather pleasing those whose sensitivities require compassion and sensitivity. Do you count yourself among the strong? Then you look to the good of others and all things are done with a view towards building them up—(edification) (v.2). Jesus is our pattern or example or template (v.3).

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Paul is not surprised that in some church families there are weak believers. Who are the weak? Those who grumble, complain, criticize, and murmur! Who are the weak? It might be you—and with embarrassment me! Those who are weak sometimes still cling to the sad sentiment that Christianity is mostly a list of things we refrain from doing! The moment you look at a person and draw the conclusion that God is less likely to accept that person—not on the basis of the presence or absence of Christ in their life—but rather on dress or appearance you have abandoned maturity and opted for life with the weak. The weak are those who knowingly or unknowingly disobey God (ouch). The weak are those who are powerless to overcome their fears and addictions!

Who are the strong? Those of us who are willing to abandon our weakness, cultivate strength in the Lord Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit—and then are willing to bear the weak.

The expression “ought to bear” does not mean simply ‘to put up with’ or ‘reluctantly accept’. The expression means to carry along with tenderness, much like a mother carries a small child or a father his son who has some disability or special need. Some of us are familiar with the holiday image of a Christmas Carol where Bob Cratchet carries Tiny Tim along with his little cane on top of his shoulder. We might see a father pushing his son’s wheelchair or a son tenderly putting his mother’s walker in the car. Love lifts the weak on the shoulders of the strong; but make no mistake about it—hope creates the glue that makes bearing the burden bearable.

The word ‘bearing’ (*bastazein*) is the same word used in the gospels to translate Christ’s ‘bearing’ the Cross. We are to be self-less not selfish.

Who are the strong? Those of us willing to bear the weak. Those of us who refuse to preoccupy ourselves with lengthy debates of the rightness or wrongness of disputable matters (no evidence of sin)—but rather is deeply concerned how it might effect our fellowship in Christ with one another. The strong asks the question—“Am I tearing down or am I building up?” The Berkley translation reads; “We who are strong ought to put on ourselves the weaknesses of those who lack strength.”

*2Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, leading to edification.*

The word ‘please’ is interesting; used here and verse 3 “. . .for even Christ did not please Himself”. The word is *aresko*. It probably means “render service to”. What service might that be? Hope. Hope for the neighbor’s good. Strength for weakness. Beauty for ashes. We make ourselves useful by giving people hope! We make ourselves useful by giving them the hope of forgiveness of sin, hope of acceptance by God, hope for abundant life. We build up. We focus on what’s best for the other person. Jesus is our example.

*3For even Christ did not please Himself; but as it is written, “The reproaches of those who reproached You fell on Me.”*

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In what way was Jesus our example? Mark 10:45; “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”

In Psalm 69:19-20 David writes; “You know my reproach, my shame, and my dishonor; My adversaries are all before You. (20) Reproach has broken my heart, And I am full of heaviness; I looked for someone to take pity, but there was none; and for comforters, but I found none.”

David experienced unjustified persecution. But Jesus experienced unjustified criticism in the most supreme way. In John’s gospel (15:25) Jesus says, “But this happened that the word might be fulfilled which is written in their law, ‘They hated Me without a cause’ (Jesus is quoting an earlier passage in Psalm 69:4!).

Both David and Jesus knew what it was like to live in world hostile to God, hostile to his love and his word! David and Jesus overheard the cursing, the dishonor the denial and the ranting’s against God! Paul’s point—Jesus does not live for himself. Jesus and David both contained a passion to remove all dishonor cast or thrown in God’s direction!

In Acts 20 we have Paul’s tearful farewell to the elders in Ephesus. In verse 35 We taste Paul’s tears and says; “I have shown you in every way, by laboring like this, that you must support the weak. And remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive’”. “Bear ye one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2).

Think of what a revolutionary concept this is—Paul says the mature believer—the serious believer—no longer restricts the conversation to the simple analysis of ‘is this right or is this wrong’—but must also include ‘is this healthy for my brother or sister’. Will this build them up or tear them down?

### **The Strong And Weak Study And Obey The Scriptures (v.4)**

*4For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope.*

The strong church, the healthy church studies the Bible. The verse is powerful and deserves a separate study. In very simple terms Paul lays out why God gave us the Bible! The Scriptures were written for our learning (*didaskalian*); *instruction, direction, guidance*. The instruction, direction and guidance includes patience and comfort and hope! God’s promises are found in God’s word. God’s Word is the source of hope!

This is why the most important place to point people in despair is to point them to the Word of God. Do you know where to find hope? Think of all the places where people look for hope. They might look to the human spirit, or the human condition, or human goodness, or human achievement, or human opinion. But what is hope? One simple definition might be—reliance

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on God's blessing and provision; the expectation of future good. C.S. Lewis called hope "a continual looking forward to the eternal world." Emily Dickenson called hope ". . .the thing with feathers/ that perches in the soul/ and sings the tunes without the words/ and never stops—at all". When Watts drew Hope he drew her as a battered and bowed figure with one string left upon her lyre" (see Barclay p. 196). Paul ranks hope second only to love. Hope bears all things. Hope keeps us alive.

We sometimes think about hope as something uncertain but possible.

A man in his middle years was on a Caribbean cruise. On the first day out he noticed an attractive woman about his age who smiled at him in a friendly way as he passed her on the deck, which pleased him. That night he managed to get seated at the same table with her for dinner. As the conversation developed, he commented that he had seen her on the deck that day and had appreciated her friendly smile. When she heard this she smiled and commented; "Well, the reason I smiled was that when I saw you I was immediately struck by your strong resemblance to my third husband." At this his ears perked up and said, "Oh, how many times have you been married?" She looked down at her plate, smiled demurely, and answered, "Twice."

In Proverbs 24:16 it reads, "For a righteous man may fall seven times And rise again, But the wicked shall fall by calamity." TEV "No matter how often an honest man falls, he always gets up again." Hope gets up again.

Why does so much of the Scripture focus on hope? Because people need hope. They are starved for it. God is the God of hope (v.13). Scripture is the source of hope.

We study the Bible because we believe it is divine and not human in origin. Peter wrote (2 Peter 1:20-21; "Knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, 21 for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. 2 Timothy 3:16; "All Scripture is inspired of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness."

Think about it. The Bible is a map to guide us. Every visitor or foreigner needs either a guide or a map to get around in unfamiliar territory. As we travel through life, the Bible is our road map, pointing us in the right direction. The Bible is our handbook on how to deal with the subjects of pain, of suffering, of sin and how to find solutions to life's greatest problems.

2 Timothy 3:17; "that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work."

The Bible is the source of truth—but we must never forget—it is truth with a purpose—truth that transforms—truth that equips us to do good. We do not study God's Word to simply increase our knowledge or prepare to win arguments. We study God's Word so we can know God's will and accomplish God's plan and survive the holocaust of a world marred, broken, disrupted by sin.

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God's Word should lead us to God's Messiah and God's gospel. God's Word should strengthen our faith and lead us to good works—and provide hope—hope for the hurting. The Bible points us to the person of God, and the promises of God, and that Jesus is the ultimate promise. Jesus used the God's Word to face the challenges and temptations of Satan in the Wilderness.

### **The Strong And Weak Work Diligently For Harmony (vv.5-6)**

*5Now may the God of patience and comfort grant you to be like-minded toward one another, according to Christ Jesus,*

How amazing! Paul reminds us that God is the God of patience and comfort. We are invited to allow patience and comfort to have its work. It will require patience to learn the Scripture and apply the Scripture and allow the Scripture to grow us and mature us. The healthy church loves harmony.

We must be like-minded toward one another—but this like mindedness is according Jesus Christ.

Think about what Paul is saying. Is this a like-mindedness absent Christ? No.

Here 'according to Christ Jesus' probably means 'what he wants' or according to His example.

*6that you may with one mind and one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

### **The Strong And The Weak Receive One Another (v.7)**

*7Therefore receive one another, just as Christ also received us, to the glory of God.*

Paul has come full circle in his argument. In Romans 14:3 Paul told us God has received the weaker brother. Now Paul points out God has received us!

“With all our own foibles and failures; with all our weakness and wickednesses; with all our own lack of loveliness, defects of character and spiritual infirmities, he has received us. How can we close the doors of fellowship to someone else who is genuinely saved but who has different problems? The spirit of Christ demands that we extend to all believers the hospitality of the Lord's Table and the warmth of local fellowship” (see John Philips p. 244).

## **Conclusion**

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