



An Overview of Paul's Letter to the Romans

(16) Encouragement, Harmony and Concluding Remarks

Romans 15

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So, we come to chapter 15 in our quick tour through the letter of Paul to the Romans. I have found it to be quite interesting and edifying to go through this letter in this way and I hope that you have too. Taking whole chapters at a time kept me from burrowing too deeply into the details and forced me to summarize the main ideas, but that approach has its advantages. It helps you to see the overall structure of the letter and focus more on the overall message rather than dealing with the minutiae. Thankfully, both approaches have their place. And it is always good to consider the word of God from different perspectives.

Anyway, this evening we will turn our attention to what God is saying to us in chapter 15. I have given this sermon the title, "Encouragement, Harmony and Concluding Remarks." That sums up what we find in this chapter. The first half of the chapter concludes the discussion of the weak and the strong that begins in chapter 14. It gives encouragement for the weak and the strong in the congregation to get along and so we have both encouragement and harmony.

Verse 5 and 6 sum up the thrust of this section. "May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." Clearly there were issues in the congregation of Rome in the harmony department. That disharmony was rooted in the differing perspectives and inclinations of the Jews and the Gentiles. The Jews tended to be

more constricted by their old covenant background and the Gentiles tended to have a better understanding of their freedom in Christ. There is no doubt which side Paul most identified with even though he was a Jew. In the first verse of chapter 15, he identifies himself with the strong. "We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves."

So, the strong were strong in that whole area of understanding their freedoms in the gospel, but they were not so strong in the area of loving their weaker brothers and sisters and so quite a bit of the exhortation in chapter 14 and 15 is directed to them. Just because someone is strong in one area does not mean that he is strong in another area and that is an important factor in our understanding of this whole subject of the strong and the weak in chapters 14 and 15.

Anyway, what is the major concern in both of these chapters is harmony among the people of God. The New Testament teaching on the New Testament church places a tremendous emphasis on unity and harmony among the people of God and these chapters are part of that teaching. And central to unity and harmony are the virtues of bearing with one another and not pleasing ourselves. "We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up."

The Christian life is profoundly corporate. We live in a time that is profoundly individualistic, but that is very much contrary to the teaching and the emphasis and the concern of the Scriptures and of the gospel. Being a believer in Jesus has an individual aspect to it that is vital, of course. We must believe as individuals and we must have a personal relationship with the Lord. But from a biblical perspective it is never just about me and Jesus. By believing in Jesus we become members of his body and that had huge implications for the nature of the Christian life.

This is one of the reasons that when we fence the table for the Lord's Supper that we require that guests who celebrate the Lord's Supper with us are members in good standing of a faithful Protestant Church. In a very limited set of circumstances it is possible to be a saved person and not be a member of a church. The thief on the cross, for instance,

never had the opportunity to be counted among the people of God. But the biblical description of salvation includes being incorporated into the body of Christ and so unless a person is marooned on a desert island, or hindered in some similar way, not being a member of a church is not consistent with being a Christian as the Bible teaches it.

It is that conception of salvation that is reflected in this passage with its concern about the way in which church members relate to one another. This concern with unity is also something which is reflected in the Lord's Supper. The key passage here is 1 Corinthians 10:16-17 where we read, "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the body of Christ. Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread." The Lord's Supper is, among other things, a celebration of the unity that we have in Christ.

It is interesting and significant that these verses in 1 Corinthians occur in a similar context to chapters 14 and 15 of Romans. In 1 Corinthians 10 Paul is speaking about the issue of eating meat that had been offered to idols and there were differences in the congregation about the best way to deal with that issue. In that context Paul says in verses 23 and 24 of 1 Corinthians 10, "All things are lawful, but not all things are helpful. All things are lawful, but not all things build up. Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor." This comes in the same context as the reminder of the way that the Lord's Supper points to and celebrates the unity that believers have in their common participation in Jesus Christ.

So, the meaning of the Lord's Supper is relevant to this matter of the strong not despising the weak and the weak not judging the strong. The Lord's Supper is about our common participation in Christ and as such it is a celebration of our unity in Christ and thus a call to live together in harmony by bearing with one another's weaknesses and denying ourselves in order to build one another up. One of the purposes of the Lord's Supper is to help us and encourage us "to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together [we] may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Now one of the things that is striking about these first 13 verses of Romans 15 is the prominence of encouragement. Paul is dealing with a real problem in the congregation of this tension between the Jews and the Gentiles or the weak and the strong. But after analyzing the problem and exhorting his readers to change their ways and to live together in harmony, he brings tremendous encouragement to them.

That encouragement is rooted in Jesus Christ and in the word of God and in the character of God. First, the example of Jesus Christ is mentioned as an encouragement for believers to bear with one another and to not please themselves. Verse 3, "For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, 'The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me.'"

The example of Jesus is a powerful incentive for believers to put the needs of others before our own. Jesus gave himself for us. That is the basis for our salvation. That is the key example of what it means to love. Salvation involves loving God because he first loved us. And that love for us is the source of our love both for God and for other people. That is true both in terms of its objective transforming power in our lives and its subjective psychological influence. From a psychological perspective, the self-giving love of Christ for us humbles us and softens our hearts to be willing to forgive others and to deny ourselves for others. There is an obvious problem if we are willing to receive Jesus' self-giving love for us and are unwilling to extend the same self-giving love to others. And there is also the fact that loving and adoring Jesus makes us want to be as much like him as possible. So, the example of Jesus is a very powerful encouragement for us "to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves." Indeed, this is one of the key dynamics of the Christian life.

Paul also mentions the word of God as a source of encouragement. He quotes a text from the Old Testament which had foretold of Christ's willingness to endure suffering as a righteous sufferer. And then he writes in verse 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." This very powerfully teaches the great significance of the Old Testament for New

Testament Christians and also one of the key ways that the Scriptures are to function in our lives.

This text mentions endurance. The Christian life is hard. That is why endurance is necessary. Even though we have the power of the Holy Spirit as believers, his work in us does not make Christian living easy. It takes effort on our part. It takes struggle against our sinful natures and temptations and weakness over the long haul. That makes weariness and discouragement realities in the Christian life. Concerning the subject of living in harmony with others in the church – it is easy to get fed up with others. Bearing with the failings of the weak is hard. And we have to do it again and again and again and again. Not pleasing ourselves is hard. And that is not a one-time sprint. We also have to do that again and again and again and again. It is easy to get discouraged and exasperated and just fed up with one another. And so, endurance is necessary.

And Paul here mentions endurance in connection with the encouragement of the Scriptures. The Scriptures are wonderfully encouraging. They are encouraging because they speak to us of the grace of God. They are encouraging because they teach the goodness and the beauty of a life that reflects the character of God. They are encouraging because they contain examples of people who failed and who were weak, but who persevered as a result of the grace of God. The Scriptures are very honest with us about our sinfulness and how serious that is, but they also bring the good news of salvation and the grace of God and of the love of Christ and of the all sufficiency of the Holy Spirit. And from this God-inspired passage we are reminded that, the Scriptures are intended to encourage us so that we might have hope.

Hope is a key biblical word. Hope is a key gospel blessing. Hope and encouragement go together. Hope is energizing. Hope is the psychological engine for endurance. In other words, hope keeps us going when the going is tough, and it is tough because of the struggle against our sinful natures – because of the attacks of Satan and because keeping going over the long haul wears you down. We need hope in the

Christian life and the Scriptures, which are God's words, to us are the primary source of hope.

The third source of encouragement that Paul mentions is the character of God. Verse 5, "May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." God is the "God of endurance and encouragement." Paul is saying here that endurance and encouragement come from God, but he is saying more than that. He is telling us something about God's character. It is God's nature to be encouraging. We know what that looks like in people. Some people are naturally encouraging. Some people are naturally discouraging. In Acts 4 we read of a man whose name was Joseph, but the apostles had given him a nick name that reflected his character. They called him "Barnabas (which means son of encouragement)." This Joseph was a wonderful encourager and so the apostles called him Barnabas – son of encouragement.

Well here Paul calls God, the God of endurance and encouragement. God is empathetic. He knows how hard it is to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. And he loves to give encouragement. And that itself is encouraging. It is encouraging in the struggle of the Christian life to know that God is near us and he wants us to be encouraged and to be hopeful so that we will endure and finally overcome. Indeed, who God is and what he is like is the greatest encouragement of all. That is why it is so exhilarating to be a Christian. The reason that it is so wonderful to be a Christian is who God is and what he is like.

The encouragement continues in verses 8-13. Remember that at the heart of the tensions that Paul was addressing were the differing perspectives of Jewish and Gentile Christians. The influx of a great number of Gentiles into the church which was originally comprised of Jewish believers in Jesus created all kinds of tensions. Many passages in the New Testament reflect that tension. In verses 8-13, Paul expounds the Old Testament promise that God's plan of salvation included the salvation of the Gentiles. He makes the connection between Jesus and

his mission and the salvation of the Gentiles. Verses 8-9, “For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised [Jews] to show God’s truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.” And then he quotes a number of Old Testament passages that show that it had always been God’s plan to bring salvation to the Gentiles - which is another way of saying to the whole world.

This too is an encouragement for Jews and Gentiles to get along. And it is also an encouragement for the strong and the weak to get along as well. God’s great plan of salvation is a great plan of inclusion rather than of exclusion – at least for all who respond to the gospel. For centuries the only way to belong to the people of God was to become a Jew. But God’s intention all along had been that through the Jews and ultimately through Jesus all nations would be blessed. And so, the plan of God is for the gathering in of the “other” – of the different – of those who do not naturally fit together or get along. One way that the Bible summarizes God’s plan of salvation is by the phrase the reconciliation of all things.

This is the great point of the last part of Ephesians 2 which deals with the reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles. In verse 16 of Ephesians 2, Paul speaks of God’s purpose “to reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.” The hostility between the Jews and Gentiles is the great biblical paradigm for the hostility between human beings and the reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles is the great biblical paradigm for the God’s great work of reconciliation between hostile peoples through the gospel.

So, this big picture – plan of salvation perspective is also a great encouragement for us to live together in unity even though there are many differences among us that make unity a challenge. The biggest challenge is that we still have sinful natures and so we are varying degrees of stubborn and ornery and opinionated and close-minded and so on. Actually, I am grateful that we in our congregation have a great deal to be thankful for, for we do experience a great degree of unity and harmony. But that is the result of the amazing grace of God and it is always a challenge because we are all struggling with sinful natures that

make is difficult to love in some ways and to some people. We all have faults – that make loving us challenging and that make it challenging for us to love others. So, we need a lot of encouragement in this area and this passage it gives a lot of it.

One of the encouragements then is the big picture of God’s great cosmic plan of salvation of which the reconciliation of people to one another is such a central part. One of the first things that happened in the history after the fall is that the third person to exist and the first person to be born killed the fourth person to exist and the second person to be born. And the history of mankind in sin is the history of killing and separation and hostility. One of the words that sums up the whole of God’s plan of salvation is reconciliation and the church experiences that and witnesses to that by difficult and different people loving one another. It is a miracle when it happens. And the first part of Romans 15 gives us tremendous encouragement to preserve the unity that exists and to nurture the graces that make it better.

In the next section, verses 14-21 Paul wraps up his discussion of the issue of the relationship between the Jews and the Gentiles – the weak and the strong. He continues to stress the great significance of the salvation of the Gentiles. He is very diplomatic in how he addresses the Romans mentioning the good that he knows to be true of them and reminding them that God had called him to bring the gospel to the Gentiles. In verse 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.” There were issues in the congregation of Rome and yet there were good things as well and Paul is careful to mention them. This verse is also teaches us how Paul expected church members to minister to one another by instructing one another. The biblical teaching concerning the ministry of the church includes both the ministry of teaching and exhortation and leadership by those set aside for those tasks, but also the every-member-ministry of everyone sharing with one another what they know and helping each other to grow.

Finally, Paul speaks of his plans for the future. It was his desire to preach the gospel in places where it had not yet been preached. He mentions

his plans to visit the Roman Christians once he had visited Jerusalem to bring the money that had been collected along the Gentiles to help the Jewish saints at Jerusalem who were struggling financially. He speaks of his intention to go to Spain to preach the gospel there and he asks for the prayers of Romans that he might be protected on his mission to Jerusalem and that his service for Jerusalem would be acceptable to the saints there.

It is interesting that things did not go as he hoped for at Jerusalem he was arrested, and he came to Rome as a prisoner and he never did get to Spain – at least as far as we know. This shows again how God's ways are higher than our ways and that his way of making his kingdom progress is different from even someone like the apostle Paul. Paul had his ideas of how we hoped that God would use him by sending him to Spain, but God's plan for Paul and for the fulfillment of his purposes is that Paul should end up in prison and finally be executed.

And so, the purpose of God and the advancement of his cause have continued to our day. Through answered prayers and through prayers to which the answer was "not what you ask for, but something else." There have been plans and desires realized and there have been plans and desires not realized. Many lives of fruitful servants of God were cut short through martyrdom or sickness or accident. Christians throughout the ages have been forced to accept that God's ways are very much higher and very different from our ways. And through it all God's plan has been unfolding and his kingdom is coming, and the church is being built and the gates of hades are not prevailing against her.

And that is of great encouragement for us. God's ways are higher than our ways. They are often very surprising and very difficult. And yet he is fulfilling his plans for his kingdom and his church and each one of his people according to his perfect wisdom and unfailing love.

Table Meditation

I saved verse 13 for us to think about as we celebrate the Lord's Supper. "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope."

Paul did not write these words in connection with the Lord's Supper, but the wish that he expresses is consistent with the Lord's purpose in giving us the Lord's Supper. It is not twisting the Scriptures to say that the purpose of the Lord's supper is that "the God of hope full you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope."

When we consider the words that our Lord used when he instituted the Lord's Supper, it is clear that his purpose was to strengthen the faith of his disciples, to encourage them and to confirm to them the reality of his self-giving to them as their Saviour. Just think of his words as they are recorded in Luke's gospel. "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.... This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood." Notice that in connection with both the bread and the cup he wants them to know – I am giving myself as a sacrifice for you. The symbolism and the words are intended to affirm and assure – I am going to the cross for you.

The mention of the covenant has many facets of meaning, but certainly one of them is – to confirm the reality of the promises of forgiveness and new life for everyone who receives those promises and trusts in the one who makes them.

And so, it is not a stretch to adapt these wonderful words of Romans 15:13 to the Lord's Supper. This is why the Lord has given his sacrament to his church – that through reassuring us of Jesus' self-giving for us and to us. "the God of hope [might] fill [us] with all joy and peace in believing so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope." May the Lord so bless this symbolic giving on his part and receiving on our part that we experience the reality of these words.