

Romans 15:1-6
Pleasing Others Instead of Self

God has always been concerned about the unity of His people¹

- In the OT and in the NT
- In Israel and in the Church

Listen to some of these verses on unity

- “Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together in unity!” (Ps 133:1)
- “And they shall be My people, and I will be their God; and I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear Me always, for their own good, and for *the good of* their children after them.” (Jer 32:38-39)
- “And I have other sheep, which are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they shall hear My voice; and they shall become one flock *with* one shepherd” (John 10:16)

Unity was so much a concern of Jesus that we have an entire chapter citing His prayer (John 17)

- Jesus’ most extensive prayer had at its foundation His concern for unity in the Church

Such unity simply cannot exist when there are factions, divisions, and selfishness

- God’s design for the Church is that we all walk in humility, selflessness, and harmony

Let’s read Romans 15:1-6

These six (6) verses give us several motivations for wanting to please others instead of ourselves

- Edifying our neighbor (15:1-2)
- Following our Lord (15:3)
- Heeding the Scriptures (15:4)
- Praying for unity (15:5-6)

I. Edifying our neighbor (15:1-2)

1 Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength

Romans 15 is the conclusion to the topic of dealing with preference issues or gray matters

As you can see, our English translations don’t always do a good job of breaking information at the right chapter breaks

- This is a prime example

Verses 1-6 should really be at the end of Romans 14

- Since they are all talking about the same topic

The apostle Paul openly identifies himself with the strong here in verse 1

- He writes, “**now we who are strong**”

¹ John MacArthur, Jr., *The MacArthur NT Commentary, Romans 9-16*, 303.

We remind ourselves that to be strong in a preference issue is simply the ability to appropriate the Gospel and its ramifications to a given issue

- It is the ability to understand that Christians are no longer under the taboos and inhibitions of the past

This isn't to say that Paul was strong in every area

- I think that all of us are strong in some areas, but weak in others

Paul then puts forth a strong obligation to those who are strong as they interact with others who may not be like them

- The word “**ought**” is a term that originally referred to a debt

This goes a long way toward helping us to see what our responsibility is toward others in the body of Christ

- We have a spiritual debt to pay toward those who are different from us²

What is this spiritual obligation?

- The strong are “**to bear the weaknesses of those without strength**”

The word for “**bear**” can have a literal or figurative meaning, depending on context

- A man is seen carrying (bearing) a pitcher of water (Mk 14:13)
- Jesus uses the term of every Christian carrying (bearing) his own cross (Lk 14:27)

In Galatians 6, Paul uses this word in a spiritual sense, “**Brethren, even if a man is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, lest you too be tempted. 2 Bear one another's burdens, and thus fulfill the law of Christ.**” (6:1-2, emphasis mine)

- Those who are walking in the power of the Holy Spirit (and not the power of the flesh) are called to “**bear one another's burdens**”

In other words, the spiritually strong are to shoulder the load for others

- The strong are to help lighten the load

The strong are to help the weak develop into mature Christians³

- To see them become more like Christ
- To see them become less entangled in secondary issues by embracing the full ramifications of the Gospel

The strong must take their responsibility seriously in using their God-given strength to serve the body of Christ⁴

- Specifically, those who are weak in the faith

If there is going to be progress toward unity, the strong need to take the initiative⁵

- They will need to reach out and be a part of the solution

The attitude should not be, “I have to put up with this person? Let me do my duty and be done with it!”

- Rather, we should think, “What a privilege I have to serve my fellow Christian. I am being like Jesus when I serve others.”

² MacArthur, 307.

³ Robert H. Mounce, *NAC, Romans*, 259.

⁴ Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 496.

⁵ Everett F. Harrison, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Romans*, 151.

The manner in which we interact with other believers should be characterized by

- Patience
- Love
- Understanding

In Romans 14, Paul uses the terms “strong” and “weak” to describe the two classes of Christians

- At least on the issue of preference issues, like eating meat, celebrating various days, and drinking wine

But here in Romans 15:1, the apostle changes terms

- Instead of using the term “weak,” he uses the term “those without strength”
- It is similar, yet Paul uses a different Greek word

The “strong” are to help those “without strength”

- The idea here is a Christian who has not yet realized that his faith in Christ has liberated him from certain ritual observances and past inhibitions⁶

Sometimes, we need to walk a mile in someone else’s shoes

- Then we will have a much better appreciation for what that person is going through
- And perhaps why that person does things a certain way

The strong must go beyond merely tolerating the weak⁷

- The strong must lovingly minister to them after the pattern of Christ

It is important that we consider what Paul has in mind

- The strong have a spiritual responsibility – a spiritual obligation – to help those “without strength
- The measure of your spiritual strength and maturity could be calculated by how much you help those around you

But in order to embrace this challenge, it takes a lot of love

- Frankly, if you don’t love others, you won’t serve them
- If you don’t love others, you won’t help them
- If you don’t love others, you won’t shoulder their burdens

Even though Paul doesn’t mention love here in these opening verses of Romans 15, the thought is certainly there⁸

- We fulfill the Law by loving our neighbor as ourselves

But the danger occurs when we love ourselves more than our neighbor

- That is what Paul discusses at the end of verse 1

and not just please ourselves.

The quickest way to division is for everyone to live for the purpose of pleasing himself/herself

- Begin focusing inward and neglect your ministry to others

⁶ Douglas J. Moo, *NICNT, Romans*, 865.

⁷ Moo, 866.

⁸ Morris, 496.

Apparently, this was a real temptation at Rome

- Paul wanted to make sure that the strong understood their spiritual responsibility toward the weak

The easy thought would be, “I am going to live for myself, and it doesn’t matter what anyone thinks about it.”

- But that would be sinful and selfish

It’s sad to say, but Paul had to rebuke some at Philippi who “**seek after their own interests, not those of Christ Jesus**” (Phil 2:21)

- The potential is there!

Contrary to the thought of our current society, the problem is not that we don’t love ourselves enough

- The problem is that we love ourselves too much!

This is why the Law can be summarized in two commandments

- Love God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength
- Love your neighbor as yourself

God never commands believers to love themselves

- That is assumed

There exists a threat within the church wherein believers may begin to please themselves instead of looking to serve others

When this type of mentality begins to display itself, one thing is certain

- Those without strength will be overlooked

We have a glimpse into the church at Corinth

- It was divisive
- The members were looking out for themselves

Paul has to call them back to a Godward perspective

- Part of this is simply loving others through service

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

The solution to self-centered living is to focus on serving others

- In the words of verse 2, “**let each of us please his neighbor for his good**”

Wait a minute

- Doesn’t this sound backward to what the Bible tells us?

Isn’t our chief goal to please God?

- Aren’t there dangers with pleasing men?

Yes on both fronts

- But we must understand context

In the grand scheme of things, here is the premise

- Please God, not man
- Live for God’s approval, not man’s

But the context of Romans 15 is not about our relationship with God

- It is our relationships with our fellow Christians
- If you have a choice between pleasing others and pleasing yourself, Paul tells us to please others!

Does this mean that we are to be cosmic killjoys and not have any fun?

- Are to forfeit anything that would bring us happiness?

The only restrictions that come to my mind are the following

- Don't sin by bringing yourself happiness
- Don't cause your brother to stumble by bringing yourself happiness

Having our minds fixed on pleasing our neighbor will help us to avoid the sinful pitfalls of discouragement and depression

- These occur when people spend too much time focusing on their own circumstances

When we love our neighbor as ourselves, we will focus on “his good”

- That “good” is further defined as “his edification”

His/her spiritual benefit and profit

- Not his/her spiritual harm and detriment⁹

There is a warning here, however¹⁰

- What we think is good for our neighbor may not actually be good
- We need to define things from God's perspective

This takes us back to last week's message, doesn't it?

- Romans 14:19 tells us, “let us pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another”

Every Christian is to pursue with diligence, zeal, and gusto

- Peace within the church
- And the edification of other believers

Verse 2 is not only for the strong

- It is for every Christian!

One of the tangible ways in which we can please our neighbor is by refusing to become irritated over preference issues¹¹

- Choose to love and accept the person, in spite of any differences that you might have with that individual

Frankly, this is what I pray for this local body

- I pray that every single believer will have this mindset

I confess that it is very easy to be selfish in our thinking

- It is hard to be selfless

⁹ Moo, 867.

¹⁰ Morris, 498.

¹¹ William R. Newell, *Romans: Verse-by-Verse*, 519.

But by the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit, we can change

- We can live the kind of lives that Paul describes here
- **Edifying our neighbor (15:1-2)**

II. Following our Lord (15:3)

3 For even Christ did not please Himself;

Sometimes, it is helpful to have a pattern or example

- Paul gives the greatest Example ever, Jesus Christ

It should go without saying that Christ did not live for Himself

- He did not live to please Himself

We have ample support from Scripture that affirms Jesus' purpose in coming to Earth

- **"For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."** (Mk 10:45)
- **"Father, if Thou art willing, remove this cup from Me; yet not My will, but Thine be done"** (Lk 22:42)
- **"My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to accomplish His work"** (John 4:34)
- **"For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me"** (John 6:38)
- **"I always do the things that are pleasing to Him"** (John 8:29)

"For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich." (2 Cor 8:9)

- His ministry was for our benefit

Perhaps the best passage to consult is Philippians 2

- **Let's turn there together**

"If therefore there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, 2 make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. 3 Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself; 4 do not *merely* look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others." (Phil 2:1-4)

- Notice the repeated emphasis on unity, serving others, and being humble

Then Paul lists the specific example of Christ, **"Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, 6 who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, *and* being made in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."** (Phil 2:5-8)

- Christ didn't have to learn Earth, but He did so out of love and service to sinful humanity

Christ did not assert His own rights

- Rather, He put the will of God before His own

His whole life and ministry were consumed with ministering to others¹²

- That is the pattern set before us!

but as it is written, “THE REPROACHES OF THOSE WHO REPROACHED THEE FELL UPON ME.”

Paul alludes to an OT citation here in verse 3

- He quotes Psalm 69:9

The apostle alludes to the second part of the psalm

- But what about the first part?

Here is the verse in its entirety, “**For zeal for Thy house has consumed me, and the reproaches of those who reproach Thee have fallen on me.**”

- Does this verse sound familiar to you?

After Jesus made a whip and drove the moneychangers out of the temple, His disciples quoted the first part of this verse in reference to Jesus, “**ZEAL FOR THY HOUSE WILL CONSUME ME**” (Ps 69:9a)

- Jesus’ zeal and passion for the things of God stood out in the minds of the apostles

Jesus was so zealous for His Father’s purpose

- His focus was like a laser beam, centered on the Father’s will for His life
- Nothing could distract Him

Satan tried to distract Jesus from His earthly mission

- The three temptations at the beginning of His ministry
- Peter’s comment that Jesus would never die

But our passage here in Romans 15 has the second half of Psalm 69:9 in mind

- Christ willingly took the insults and reproaches that were directed at God and bore them on the cross

In so doing, Jesus took the penalty for our sin

- The consequences of which we should have paid

Jesus Christ’s entire life was one of humiliation

- He willingly surrendered the independent use of His attributes while here on Earth

He was still fully God

- He had omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence
- However, He chose not to use those outside of the Father’s plan for His earthly life

This is what makes Jesus the greatest Example

- He had the ability to do so much more, yet He voluntarily limited Himself to be obedient to His Father

There may be times when you are free to do something

- To exercise your God-given freedom and liberty

¹² Newell, 520.

However, you will have to make a hard choice

- Are you going to assert yourself and exercise your Christian liberty?
- Or will you follow the example of Christ and forego your rights for the sake of a higher purpose?

“If Christ, the Holy One, was willing to take upon himself so much suffering, in the form of insults hurled at him by his enemies, then should not we be willing to sacrifice just a little eating-and-drinking pleasure for the sake of our fellow-believers?”¹³

I can assure you, beloved

- Whatever inconvenience that you will have to endure for the sake of ministering to others can **NEVER** compare with what Christ suffered for us¹⁴

So in the bigger picture, abstaining from eating meat or observing a religious occasion doesn't seem like such a big burden when compared to Christ and to His burden

- **Edifying our neighbor (15:1-2)**
- **Following our Lord (15:3)**

III. Heeding the Scriptures (15:4)

4 For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction.

After citing one specific use of Scripture, the apostle Paul then makes a broad statement about the whole of Scripture

His wording “**whatever was written in earlier times**” cannot be used of any writing or piece of literature¹⁵

- Paul has the Scriptures in mind
- Specifically, the Old Testament Scriptures

We must keep in mind that when NT authors refer to Scripture, they are almost always referring to the OT

- We tend to look at things from the perspective of having both the Old and New Testaments

Consider this famous Text, “**All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness**” (2 Tim 3:16)

- What is the extent of “**all Scripture**”?
- The Old Testament

By way of application and implication, we can add the NT as being part of these Scriptures

- Fully inspired
- Fully profitable

So Paul lumps together all of the OT and makes a wide, sweeping statement that the OT was “**written for our instruction**”

- The Word of God truly transforms, teaches, convicts, rebukes, and changes us

¹³ William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary, Romans*, 470.

¹⁴ Alan F. Johnson, *Everyman's Bible Commentary, Romans*, 248.

¹⁵ Morris, 499.

The Old Testament isn't simply a bunch of stories

- It is the very Word of God, designed to teach us spiritual lessons

So the purpose is not simply to gain facts

- It's not to accumulate knowledge
- The goal of reading Scripture is to have our lives transformed!

Consider just a sampling of the lessons that we can learn from the OT

- Adam and Eve – the wrong way to deal with sin
- Cain – the consequences of unbridled anger
- Joseph – a life free from bitterness
- Abraham – the power of a life of faith
- Moses – what God can do with someone who doesn't speak well
- David – a heart broken over his sin
- Jeremiah – a life of faithfulness in spite of outward affirmation
- Daniel and the three Hebrew youths – determination and conviction to trust in God, even when one may lose his life

God has given us the OT for the purpose of “**instruction**”

- Yet how ignorant we are of the OT!

Paul quotes Psalm 69:9 as a prime example of his lesson

- The OT has much to teach us, if we will read and heed its message

In 1 Corinthians 10, Paul lists some examples of Israel's history from the Old Testament¹⁶

- “**Now these things happened as examples for us, that we should not crave evil things, as they also craved. 11 Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.**” (10:6, 11)

God has given the Word of God to the Church as a precious gift

- Listen to 2 Peter 1:3, “**His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence**”

that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.

This isn't the first time that we have encountered “**perseverance**” in the book of Romans

- Paul used it back in chapter 5, “**we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.**” (5:3-5, emphasis added)

Perseverance is from two Greek words

- ὑπο – under (hypodermic needle)
- μένω – to remain, abide (John 15 – abide in Me)

The thought is that you stay under the trial until God has achieved His purpose

- We don't pull the ripcord
- We endure

¹⁶ F.F. Bruce, *Tyndale NT Commentaries, Romans*, 241.

When we trust God like this, the result – according to Romans 5 – is “**hope**”

- Isn't it interesting, then, that here in Romans 15:4 we have the two words again – “**perseverance**” and “**hope**”

We need perseverance as we interact with others, don't we?

- We need to stay with the relationship instead of giving up over preference issues
- We need to love and accept people despite any superficial differences

But we are not left to ourselves when it comes to persevering

- It's not about trying harder
- It's not about looking inward

I think there is a close connection between perseverance and “**the encouragement of the Scriptures**”

- They complement one another

As we read the Scriptures (both the OT and NT), we are both challenged and encouraged

- We are challenged to live out the truths that God places upon His people
- We are encouraged to see God's grace, even when we fail to measure up to His Divine standard

Sometimes, we can become so discouraged when we look at our lives

- We fail to measure up to God's standard
- We see our sin and shortcomings

But as we read God's Word, we are encouraged to persevere

- We are challenged to continue pursuing Christ

The Scriptures are not a dead collection of stories and fables

- The Scriptures are the very living Word of God!

So if you are not reading the Word, guess what?

- You aren't going to be encouraged
- You most likely won't be persevering

“To separate oneself from Scripture is to turn a deaf ear to the voice of a Heavenly Father anxious to console.”¹⁷

- **Edifying our neighbor (15:1-2)**
- **Following our Lord (15:3)**
- **Heeding the Scriptures (15:4)**

IV. Praying for unity (15:5-6)

5 Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement

In verse 4, “**perseverance**” and “**encouragement**” were mentioned together

- Here in verse 5, we see the Source of these two qualities
- It is none other than God Himself who gives these traits to His children

¹⁷ Mounce, 260.

In verses 5-6, Paul issues forth a prayer for these Roman Christians

- It is very short and to the point, while achieving its purpose

The gist of Paul's prayer is this¹⁸

- That God would bring these believers – from different backgrounds and with different levels of spiritual maturity – to a place of unity

You might remember that Jesus prayed for this same reality to be evident in the lives of His followers

- John 17 records Jesus' high priestly prayer

Listen to Jesus' own prayer for His people as it pertains to the subject of unity, "I do not ask in behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; that they may all be one; even as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be in Us; that the world may believe that Thou didst send Me. And the glory which Thou hast given Me I have given to them; that they may be one, just as We are one; I in them, and Thou in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, that the world may know that Thou didst send Me, and didst love them, even as Thou didst love Me" (John 17:20-23)

Here in Romans 15, however, Paul issues forth a paradox

- Verse 4 tells us that we need perseverance and encouragement
- Verse 5 tells us that only God can give these two qualities

We are called upon by God to rely on Him and His Word to bring these realities to bear in our lives

- We can't produce perseverance or encouragement outside of the Scriptures¹⁹

grant you to be of the same mind with one another

The focal point of Paul's prayer – and Jesus' high priestly prayer – is that of unity

Spiritual unity cannot be achieved through organization

- Unity can only be achieved through the work of God in our hearts

Unity doesn't mean complete agreement on every issue²⁰

- We can disagree on preference issues
- We can even disagree on secondary doctrinal issues

But the goal of Paul's prayer is that we would all have the same mindset

- Living for God's glory
- Pleasing others instead of self
- Serving others
- Helping the weak

As each of us draws closer to God, do you know what happens?

- We draw closer to each other²¹

¹⁸ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle to the Romans*, 518.

¹⁹ MacArthur, 314.

²⁰ Newell, 522.

²¹ Mounce, 260.

We are the body of Christ

- We need to act like it!

according to Christ Jesus:

Once again, we have the Divine standard before us

- The unity to which we should aspire is that which is “according to Christ Jesus”

This isn’t an earthly standard

- This is a benchmark that is beyond our natural ability

6 that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Divisions over nonessentials divert precious time and energy from the main purpose of the Church²²

- Glorifying God
- Reaching the lost
- Edifying the believers

Contrary to a divisive church is a unified church

- Where members disagree on secondary, non-essential issues
- Yet they do so with love toward their fellow Christian

Christians should live for the glory of God

- This is the appropriate response of the creature to the Creator

How different this symphony of praise, worship, and exaltation is from the bickering, complaining, and judgmental attitude that was pictured in Romans 14

- Instead of arguing over preference issues, believers choose to worship God
- Instead of judging other Christians, believers choose to accept one another as a part of worship

Do you think that God is honored when His people are divisive with one another, then attempt to worship Him?

- Jesus is more interested in the heart than the ritual

If your heart isn’t right, then your worship will suffer

- In some instances, it would be better for you not to worship until you make mends with your fellow Christians

I would go so far as to say that God is not glorified when His people are divided

- Jesus died so that His people would be one
- Yet so often, we lack unity and prefer to be disjointed

Who are we to glorify?

- The apostle uses the long expression, “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ”

We have a reference to Christ’s deity

- He is “our Lord Jesus Christ”

²² Moo, 872.

On the cross, Jesus said, “**MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAST THOU FORSAKEN ME?**” (Mt 27:46)

- There is a sense in which Jesus addressed the Father as “**My God**”

He is the Son of God the Father

- This helps us to see His humanity
- The purpose in which He came to this Earth

Notice the progression of terms that Paul uses regarding Jesus Christ

- “**Christ**” (15:3)
- “**Christ Jesus**” (15:5)
- “**our Lord Jesus Christ**” (15:6)

As Paul contemplated his Lord and Savior, he was filled with this crescendo of praise

- His theology led him to worship

The apostle Paul certainly lived what he preached

- He was in the city of Corinth when he composed the book of Romans²³

Prior to this, Paul had undergone some serious trials

- He had suffered greatly

What kept the apostle going?

- What was his motivation?

First, Paul had an insatiable desire to love, honor, and glorify God in his life

- The apostle didn’t live for the applause or approval of men
- He lived for the pleasure of God

Second, Paul had a tremendous love for the Scriptures

- He knew the OT extremely well
- He knew that the Word of God fostered “**perseverance**” and “**encouragement**”

Third, Paul had a huge burden to see believers become mature

- He wasn’t content with people coming to faith in Christ
- He labored to see them come to a more mature mindset

Are you pleasing yourself or others?

- Edifying our neighbor (15:1-2)
- Following our Lord (15:3)
- Heeding the Scriptures (15:4)
- Praying for unity (15:5-6)

1. Are you reading the Word regularly?

- a. If not, then you are not going to be encouraged to persevere*
- b. You will be tempted to give up*

²³ Hendriksen, 474.

2. **Are you serving others or pleasing yourself?**
 - a. *We are called upon to glorify God and to please others*
3. **Do you even know the Lord Jesus Christ?**
 - a. *If not, then this is your first step!*