

Romans 15:1-13

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[0 : 00] Well, please turn with me to Romans chapter 15. We're going to read verses 1 to 13. So Romans chapter 15 and verses 1 to 13.

We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up.

For even Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, the insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.

For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us so that through endurance and the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope.

May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

[1 : 11] Accept one another then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, to confirm the promises made to the patriarchs, so that the Gentiles may glorify God for his mercy.

As it is written, Again, it says in Deuteronomy, in Moses' song, And again, Psalm 117, And again, Isaiah says, Amen.

Amen. Let's pray for a moment. Heavenly Father, these words of scripture were, we remember, words in a letter to your people in Rome.

And for them, they were truth and nourishment and correction. They were, from the apostle, what they needed to hear.

And no less so tonight, Lord, may these words be your words to us. For we need truth, your truth. We need to be nourished by your word.

[3 : 17] We need to be corrected. And taught and shaped. So by your spirit, our prayer is that you would speak. For Jesus' name's sake. Amen.

Well, before I get into the text, I want to speak firstly of two introductory thoughts as we turn to the letter to the Romans.

My guess is that after a summer break, you maybe can't remember what the rest of Romans is about. And so I want to just make two introductory remarks before we look at the text in a bit more detail.

And the first is this. Romans, the letter to the Romans, for all its theological substance, and for all its rich and deep truth, and for all the intricacy and precision of its argument, and the way in which the apostle builds his case for the gospel as he writes to the church in Rome.

For all of that, the letter to the Romans is, and we must remember this every time we believe it, it is every time we read it, it is for ordinary believers in Jesus Christ.

[4 : 41] Romans can become labeled in our minds, even if not by our mouths, as a letter of the New Testament to be avoided because it's theologically complicated, or because it is full of truth and not so full as some of the other letters in terms of practical advice for living.

But Romans was not written for theologians or for academics, it was written for believers, just like you and me. It was written for people who loved Christ and who formed a church fellowship in the city of Rome way back in the earliest days of the New Testament church.

I love to remember, when I turned to the letter to the Romans, a true instance that took place some 30 years ago, where a pastor here in the city of Edinburgh was preaching through the letter to the Romans to a large Sunday evening congregation week by week.

And after one of the services in his series on Romans, an academic student came to the pastor, having never been in the church before, and said to him, now I really think you ought to avoid

preaching as in-depth and as deeply as that sermon was.

If you want ordinary people to understand what you're saying, I really think you should concentrate on more simple things. Can you imagine the embarrassment of it?

[6 : 15] This 19 or 20-year-old student telling the experienced pastor this. And the pastor, because he was kind, listened for a while. And after some minutes of listening to this, he said, well, I think you're quite, quite wrong.

Romans may have stretched you beyond what you can understand, but see that man sitting over there? He's a plumber, and he loves listening to sermons in Romans. And that lady over there, she's a single mum, and she's been drinking it in Sunday night by Sunday night.

And you've never been here before, and you have the nerve to comment, I suggest you come for another 10 weeks and listen, and then we'll chat again. That was his advice, because Romans is for ordinary believers.

And the experience of the church down through the centuries is that when the letter to the Romans is preached and taught as God's word for ordinary folks, normal believers are captured and grasped by this divine word in this letter.

And their lives are mastered by the gospel that Romans contains. This letter is for you. It is for your church here, a local fellowship of God's people.

[7 : 36] It is not primarily for anything else. That's my first introductory thought. My second introductory thought is this, and here we turn to the section of Romans that we find ourselves in tonight.

The section begins at the beginning of chapter 14, and you may remember, if you've looked at this in earlier weeks, that Paul is speaking about the weak and the strong.

The particular issue in his day was whether or not believers should eat meat which had already been sacrificed to pagan idols.

And some, the strong, as Paul called them, said, yes, it's fine, it's just meat. It doesn't matter a hoot what it's been sacrificed to. It's meat, it's food provided by God.

And idols are just dead bits of stone and metal and wood anyway, and if the meat has been sacrificed to them, well, it's only been sacrificed to nothing, and so I'm quite happy to eat it and to enjoy it.

[8 : 40] The strong. But the weak found themselves thinking, no, no, no, I just couldn't. I couldn't eat that meat. Once it has been sacrificed to a pagan idol and used in that way and been involved in the lives of those who are worshipping false gods, it wouldn't be right for me as a follower of the Lord Jesus to eat that food, to associate myself with it.

I couldn't possibly, I couldn't bring myself to eat it. They, to use Paul's language, were the weak. Slightly more full of tender conscience, perhaps, we might think.

Slightly more afraid to take steps into the unknown. Slightly more fearful that they would be doing something that might upset God.

They were weak, weak in their faith, unable to see as yet that all good things are given by God for us to enjoy. It's fine. Eat the meat, as their brothers and sisters, their strong brothers and sisters, were saying.

And so there was, at that time, a very obvious difference of opinion over this particular issue. And Paul is writing to this local community of believers in Rome to help them sort this difficulty out.

[10 : 09] And the danger in becoming either the weak or the strong, one of the dangers in our churches is that perversely and paradoxically, the weak are often, in reality, as strong as an ox.

Now let me explain what I mean by that. The issue in their day was whether to eat meat sacrificed to an idol. I shouldn't think that many of us have been faced with that particular difficulty in recent months or years.

But we will have been faced with innumerable, comparable issues. Whether or not we should dress in a particular way to come to church and meet with our brothers and sisters on a Sunday.

Whether or not believers should drink alcohol. Whether or not believers should pop into Sainsbury's on the way back from church or not.

Whether or not you should feel free to go to the baptismal service of someone where the practice of baptism is different from what you hold in your particular church.

[11 : 33] Or much more painful and much more difficult and real in people's lives if I have a non-Christian family member, my brother or sister or son or cousin and they are getting married to

somebody who is a Muslim, should I go to the wedding?

The strong will say, well yes, he's your cousin. Go to the wedding. Show him that you love him. He knows you're not a Muslim and that you're not wanting him to follow this religious route but he's your cousin.

Go to the wedding. Whereas the weak would say, no, no, I couldn't. I couldn't. I just couldn't take part in it. There is no right or wrong but there is a very obvious difference of opinion, isn't there? And therefore a great potential for believers even within one fellowship to find themselves on different pages and pulling in different directions over such an issue as this.

Now, in a church fellowship, the weak, the person who has a tender conscience, the person who says, no, no, no, we mustn't be selling books on a Sunday.

[13:13] That is some kind of business matter that shouldn't take place on a Sunday. Whereas the strong believer will say, nonsense, we want to sell all the Christian books that we can possibly sell and get the good news of the gospel and good teaching from the Bible out into the lives and the minds and the hearts of all who are in our church.

But the weak says, no, no, I'll be offended, I'll be hurt if you do that. I couldn't possibly, I might have to leave the church. And so, the weak can become as strong as an ox because sometimes it only takes two or three of the weak to effectively hold a whole fellowship to ransom and to actually be strong enough to force their opinion on everybody and to be very strong indeed.

So, that's a great danger when we're speaking about the weak and the strong. And that's my other introductory thought this evening. So, that's the kind of issue that is being dealt with here.

That, by way of introduction, and so now to the text. And in chapter 15 verses 1 to 13, Paul is really wrapping up his thinking about this area.

Most of his teaching on this topic is done in chapter 14. And in chapter 15, he is wrapping things up. And having had two introductory thoughts as my first point, what I want as my second point this evening is to draw your attention to three enduring and central fundamentals of the gospel.

[15:07] just look at how Paul concludes this part of his letter. He takes the believers right back to basic fundamentals.

The word fundamental, by the way, is a very, very good and positive word. And what Paul does in verses 1 to 6 is he reminds them of the cross, the scriptures, and the Holy Spirit.

Three absolutely core Christian beliefs around which both the weak and the strong can and must unite in any local church.

A fundamental is a necessary base foundation is the word fundamental or fundamentalist we understand in our culture is now seen almost entirely negatively.

But you do not have a negative opinion, for example, of the fundamental importance of the foundation that sits underneath your house.

[16:28] It is absolutely fundamentally important that that foundation on which your house or flat or wherever you live sits is strong and well built.

And it is the necessary base of the cross of Christ in the thinking of the believer that Paul takes these people to in verses 1 to 3.

And this is very costly for us to hear properly. We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves.

That is with the failings of the genuinely weak, not the weak who are actually just being like strong bulldozers in the church. We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak.

Each of us, whatever our view, should please his neighbor for his good. That is, you and how you are doing in your faith and in your life, that is much more important to me than how I am doing.

[17:43] Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up, because, and here's the cross, even Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, the insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.

Remember Jesus hanging on the cross and how the passers-by, as if it wasn't bad enough that he was hanging there, the only innocent human being to have ever walked the face of the earth, being punished unjustly, with no mercy, as if that wasn't bad enough.

He then had the insults of the passers-by pouring out of their mouths into his ears. some leader you.

If you were up to anything, if you are even half of what you're cracked up to be, then come down off the cross and rescue yourself, and then we might believe in you.

Talk about kicking a man when he is down, and talk about the slicing and stabbing effect of wicked words.

[19 : 12] And Paul says, well, if that was how the Lord bore these insults for us, then in our fellowships together, are we not willing for the sake of our neighbor to look out for what is good and up-building for him, regardless of what people say about me and my position, whether it's one of weakness or strength in the two categories, what people say about me doesn't matter.

But what I do for my neighbor matters. It matters for him. And that is the cross engrafted into the attitudes and the lives of Christian believers in a church family like this one.

That's the first fundamental, and it's a very costly thing to hear, isn't it? Because it's telling us to bear the scorn, to bear the comment, to bear the insult, following in the steps of our Savior, the Lord Jesus.

The second fundamental is in verse 4, and it is the core truth of the scriptures. pillars. And here, if you like, another illustration to remind us that fundamentals are very good things.

A fundamental thing is like a central core around which everything else is built. Think, if you like, of a spiral staircase. Now, the staircase, the thing that you step on to get down the stairs, are the wooden steps themselves.

[20 : 56] But the vital, fundamental feature of that staircase is the metal core that goes up the middle to which all the steps are attached, isn't it?

Now, that is what the place of the scriptures is like in the life of the church. Look at verse 4, as Paul takes them to this topic. 4, everything that was written in the past, in the Old Testament scriptures, was written to teach us.

So that through endurance and the encouragement of the scriptures, we might have hope. What a wonderful thing for him to say when he has just taught them about the Christian prospect of bearing the pain of others' comments and abuse and cutting words and all the costliness of that.

What a wonderful thing for him to say that the fundamental Christian help for you, bearing such pain and cost, is the teaching of the scriptures.

Everything that was written in the past was written not only for the people then, but to teach us.

Now, he is saying to the Romans. And it's written to teach us so that through endurance and the encouragement of the scriptures, you might have hope to go on where there are fights and factions and differences of opinion in the fellowship.

[22 : 32] Have hope and encouragement. Keep going as brothers and sisters because week by week by week and day by day, the scriptures will give you that hope.

hope. They will, when you are enduring the pain of standing for the Lord Jesus, they will encourage you and point you to the future.

That's the second fundamental then, the cross and the scriptures, and thirdly, the spirit, verses five and six. may the God who gives endurance and encouragement from the scriptures, as he's just said, also give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, bear with me here. We're going to look at a few verses throughout the New Testament. Now, when a preacher does this, I can have an allergic reaction to looking at five or six different cross-references in the Bible, but tonight I want to risk you having that allergic reaction to really persuade you that this plea for united thinking born by the Holy Spirit is found everywhere in the New Testament scriptures.

So look first of all with me at Romans chapter 12, verse 16. You can manage that one. It's just back one page. Romans 12, verse 16. Live in harmony with one another.

[24 : 35] In other words, as he explains, do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

Live in harmony with one another and appeal for unity with a very practical implication against conceit and pride.

Now, you can manage the next cross-reference too because it's just one page in the other direction. 1 Corinthians chapter 1, verse 10. 1 Corinthians chapter 1, verse 10.

These are very strong commandments. I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought.

that's a very high and lofty appeal, isn't it, to Christian people? But it's very strong and it was very necessary for the Corinthian church.

[25 : 47] Keep going forward to 2 Corinthians chapter 13, the famous love chapter and to verse 11. These Corinthians who were so puffed up and immature and full of themselves and their gifts.

2 Corinthians chapter 13 verse 11. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child.

When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. We went for a walk this afternoon with two lovely little girls aged about five and three and they were dressed in their matching pretty dresses like something out of a postcard from the southern states of the United States of America and they looked angelic as they wandered along the path and the dappled light of the trees and they were arguing the whole time.

And when we got home, they were arguing about whose was the dolphin and whose was the frog and they never stopped. They argued as little children can, morning, noon and night.

And what that verse in 1 Corinthians 13 is saying to Christians is grow up, grow up and stop bickering and arguing.

[27 : 17] It's a very strong appeal. Look at Ephesians chapter 4 verse 3. He's still awake. I'll keep going with another one or two until I see someone convulsing.

Ephesians chapter 4 verse 3. Make every effort. It's all very strong language, full of superlatives. Make every effort to keep the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace.

Now if you flick back to Romans chapter 15, our text tonight, and look at the verse there, Paul says, may God give you a spirit of unity.

Now that, what can that mean other than a spirit of unity born by the Holy Spirit? He's not saying may God give you a kind of transcendental feeling of peace washing over you as you sit and have your coffee together.

It's not that kind of thing. This is a work of God in the hearts and minds of believers where some are weak and some are strong and never the twain shall meet. May God by his spirit, and here it is in Ephesians chapter 4 verse 3, make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit, capital S, through the bond of peace.

[28 : 43] Philippians chapter 2 verse 2, make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose.

Colossians chapter 3 verse 14, this one and one other to make my point. Colossians chapter 3 verse 14, and over all these virtues, put on love which binds them all together in perfect unity.

And finally, not just Paul, but 1 Peter chapter 3, 1 Peter chapter 3 verse 8, finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another, be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble, live in harmony with one another.

another. So, this is a very widespread New Testament command, isn't it? I'm sure you're glad I didn't, but I could have done as many references again.

The Spirit, the Holy Spirit of God, is the one who works amongst and within his people to bring about a God-given unity, even where there are very different opinions about certain issues.

[30 : 24] Paul is not papering over the cracks here. Why? He's devoted a chapter and a half of his letter to dealing with how to cope with the strong differences of opinion in the fellowship.

But the Holy Spirit is the one who brings about a harmony and a unity within the church that will, verse 6, lead to us glorifying God with one heart and one mouth.

We may have all sorts of different opinions flowing out of our mouths when it comes to shopping and dressing and sport and goodness knows what else, Sabbaths and baptisms and special days and feasts and new moons and all the rest of it.

But with one mouth together we praise the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who by his Spirit unites believers around the gospel.

If I can return to the world of the Christian Union and the university, that is what to pray for Christian unions. They come to the Christian Union from all manner of different evangelical churches and together these Christian students must learn to form a united, clear witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

[31 : 54] That is why UCCF, the Christian Unions, or IVF as some of you will have known it in decades gone by, has consistently taken people to the cross, to the scriptures and to the work of the Holy Spirit bringing new life to the believer and uniting believers together in Christ.

These things Paul is saying here, these things, if primary and remembered, will bring your fellowship to honor the Lord Jesus Christ, whatever differences of strength and weakness are found among you.

And there will be many among you, even a number like this. Why, we can tell by looking at each other that that would be the case. So a necessary base, the gospel of the cross, a central core, and a spiral staircase, the scriptures, and a primary rule.

Make every effort to be united amongst yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus. Three enduring and central fundamentals.

What a wonderful way to wrap up his conversation about the strong and the weak. Point one was two introductory words.

[33 : 26] Point two was three enduring fundamentals. Point three is one world summoned to praise. Here is Paul's final writing on this topic.

Verses seven and eight and the first half of verse nine make the point that one world is summoned to praise.

He says in verse seven, accept one another then, just as Christ accepted you. Now, why did Christ accept you? He accepted you in order to bring praise to God because I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews, the people of God whom he came to, on behalf of God's truth, in order to confirm the promises made to the patriarchs so that the Gentiles may glorify God.

See what Paul is saying? Christ came to the people of God, the Old Testament people of God as their Messiah to confirm the promises made to the patriarchs and he came to them so that the Gentile world with them would honour and praise the living God and glorify him for his mercy.

All of this unity, all of this working out how to cope with the weak and the strong in our fellowship is because God wants there to be one voice of praise from all the nations throughout the world to the praise of his son Jesus.

[35 : 11] That's his point in verses 7 and 8. Accept one another because one world is summoned to praise.

And then he effectively makes the same point in verses 9 to 12 all over again by very beautifully drawing from the Old Testament scriptures this theme of one world being summoned to praise.

Look at Psalm 18 he says to them. Here is Paul preaching from the Old Testament scriptures. And here is Paul giving several cross-references which gives me hope. So here he's saying from Psalm 18 the song of the king therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles who would ever have thought it.

The Old Testament people were used to praising God among their own people but here he's saying I will praise you among the Gentiles. And then he goes to Jishoraname to Moses song rejoice O Gentiles with his people.

It was always God's purpose to have one world summoned to praise. That was his purpose in calling out his covenant people.

[36 : 33] Then his third reference praise the Lord all you Gentiles again in the Psalms 117 this time. Praise the Lord all you Gentiles and sing praises to him all you peoples.

and finally in Isaiah David's heir King David the great king of God's people King David his heir will rule the world the root of Jesse will spring up one who will arise to rule over the nations the Gentiles will hope in him.

This is not a New Testament idea that suddenly came up in the mind of Paul now that he was engaged in missionary endeavor in the nations.

This was fundamental to God's purposes from the word go. The global purpose of the gospel and the global purpose of God's call to his people embedded in the very Psalms that they sang was that the Gentiles too would praise the living God.

So in effect as he ends like that he's saying you know when you have your issues of strong and weak I could never do that I could do that what's the problem with that when you have these issues God says here in Romans 15 get over it get over it and remember the global purpose of the gospel there is a bigger purpose a much bigger purpose than how you relate in your fellowship over some cultural difference that has spilled through history and landed on your plate in its current form get over it and remember the global purpose of the gospel and the global purpose of the Old Testament scriptures that's how

[38 : 57] Paul wraps up his description of the strong and the weak and you know verse 22 of chapter 14 which we didn't read tonight is a very good place to end chapter 14 verse 22 so

whatever you believe about these things the meat the sabbath the shopping the sport whatever it is whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God because the cross the scriptures the spirit and God's call to the world should over arch all your squabbles and differences about these petty trivia and there is a time often when these things are about to burst into flames and cause destruction in a church family to say nothing and unite around the

Lord Jesus himself well let's pray dear heavenly father sometimes often perhaps we feel it better to speak our mind to others and to keep matters between us and you Lord you know our hearts you know when we rile each other you know in a way that I certainly don't all the potential problems of this fellowship but we pray this evening heavenly father that at one with the savior who died on the cross listening to your word in the scriptures and united by your spirit we might with one voice bring glory to Jesus even this coming week for his name's sake amen