

Pleasing God Instead of Ourselves
Romans 15:1-6, Psalm 78:5-7

Slide 1

Someone once said, "*The more I get to know the human race, the more I love my dog. Dogs are loyal, dependable, eager to please, and quick to forgive.*" Don't you wish people were more like that?

Yet, far too often we see these characteristics as signs of weakness instead of strength. Maybe we need to ask, "*What are the evidences of Christian strength?*"

Some would say knowledge. Others would say leadership. Others would say the ability to impose your will on others in the church.

Scripture says the evidence of strength in a Christian's life is the willingness to support and bear up the weaknesses of other Christians.

Every one of us, in some way and at some time, is "*the weaker brother.*" We may be the weaker brother morally, physically, educationally, spiritually or in some other area.

This is why, if we're to function as a New Testament church, we must learn how to relate to the weakness of one another.

God has always been concerned about the unity of His people. In salvation, He effected a spiritual oneness, through one faith, one baptism. and one God experience.

He recreated us to be brothers and sisters baptized into one body, the Body of Christ.

Apart from public sin, nothing shatters the fellowship, the spiritual growth, and the witness of a congregation so much as disharmony among its members.

Romans 15 continues Paul's teaching about the vital importance of unity in the local church. In this chapter he teaches that true Christian love shouldn't be selfish but it should seek to build up of others.

True Christian love is willing to carry younger Christians in order to help them along in their spiritual development. We're to encourage them to grow. This is the example Jesus left us to follow.

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Romans 15:1, *"We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves."*

This verse conveys the responsibility strong Christians have to support the weaknesses of others in the church. The fellowship of the saints is not to be broken for unessential matters.

We have no right to establish conditions for Christian relationship over non-essentials. If a man is a true Christian, he should be recognized and treated as such.

This is why, in this verse, Paul addresses the strong and even includes himself. A person's spiritual maturity is revealed by his discernment and his willingness to give up his rights that others might be helped.

He does this, not as a burden but as a blessing. Just as loving parents make sacrifices for their children, so the mature believer sacrifices to help younger Christians grow in the faith.

If this is the case, then what should the strong do? What is their Christian responsibility toward the weak? First, the strong ought to bear the weakness of those without strength.

To be self-centered and self-seeking is the way of the natural man. But we shouldn't use our strength to serve our own advantage.

The basic meaning of the word "*ought*" in this verse conveys the idea of "*owing a debt or having a strong obligation.*" Strong people are tempted to wield their strength to discard or crush the weak.

Paul says that we "*ought,*" we must use our strength, to "*bear*" them up. This verb "*bear*" means either to '*endure*' in the sense of '*tolerate,*' or to '*carry*' and '*support.*'

The context of this verse suggests that "*to carry*" or "*to support*" is intended here.

Bearing the weak brother doesn't indicate exceptional generosity. Supporting the weaker brother belongs to the deepest level of Christian debt, duty, and demand.

To bear the weaker brother doesn't simply mean "*to put up with*" him, but to bear him up or to carry him.

Yet, to respond to a weaker brother may place restrictions and limitations on our own liberty and freedom.

But Galatians 6:2a commands that we "*Carry each other's burdens.*" The world says crush the weak man. Christ says carry him.

Mature believers aren't simply to tolerate those with weaknesses but to help them by not being critical or condescending and by showing respect for sincere views or practices with which we may not agree.

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The second responsibility is stated in the last part of verse 1, "*we who are strong ought... not to please ourselves.*"

The right use of Christian liberty, which the strong believer understands and appreciates, often involves self-sacrifice.

This may mean forfeiting certain liberties and attitudes which, when exercised, would harm a weaker brother or sister.

Again, to be self-centered and self-seeking is natural to our fallen human nature. But we ought not use our Christian strength for our own advantage.

Christians with strong convictions and conscience must not trample on the convictions and consciences of the weak.

In the north, each fall geese can be observed migrating. As winter approaches, they wing their long flight south. For several weeks these birds fly in long, wavy V-formations, honking as they go.

They travel in a v-formation because, as each bird flaps its wings, it creates an updraft for the bird behind it. They can go 70 percent farther in a group than they could if they flew alone.

This illustrates what Christians should be like. When we have a common purpose, we're boosted by the encouragement of others who share those same goals. We can get a lot further together than we can alone.

Geese also honk at one another. They're not critics but encouragers. Those in the rear sound off to exhort those up front to stay on course and maintain their speed.

We too move ahead more easily if there's someone behind us encouraging us to stay on track and keep going. Remember, we can go a lot farther together than we can alone.

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A third responsibility is stated in verse 2, *"Each of us should please our neighbors for their good, to build them up."*

Neighbor-pleasing, which Scripture commands, must not be confused with 'men-pleasing,' which Scripture condemns.

If we merely set out to please our neighbors, we'll just be people-pleasers to which Paul was opposed.

We're to set aside willfulness and self-pleasing actions for the sake of building our neighbors up. Our Christian convictions mustn't be a disguise for cold hearted treatment of our brothers and sisters.

Instead of causing our neighbor to stumble, or tearing him down, or damaging him, we're to build him up.

Edification is a constructive alternative to demolition. This is why Paul encouraged the stronger Christians to avoid causing undue distress on the weaker ones by respecting their opinions even if we disagreed with them.

Does this mean that any opinion is to be tolerated in the fellowship without being able to correct inaccurate or unchristian positions? No.

One of the opportunities given to the church is to "edify" the weaker members.

To edify means to promote another's growth in Christian wisdom, holiness, and spirituality, thus helping them become more mature in their Christian experience and convictions.

This needs to be done in a way that's not belittling, condescending, or confrontational. An excellent example of such edification is found in the way that Priscilla and Aquila taught Apollos, the ardent preacher.

When they heard him preach, they *"took him and expounded to him the way of God more accurately."*

They didn't just tolerate his inaccurate theology, but they took him aside and helped him grow.

Building up others in the faith is to be centered in the Bible. It takes patience, faith, and love. When such growth takes place, the unity of the body is enhanced.

Paul then adds a theological foundation to his appeal. This time it concerns Jesus Himself. He's now mentioned in almost every verse.

The reason God requires us to please others instead of ourselves is seen in verse 3a, *"For even Christ did not please himself."*

This simple statement is a summation of the meaning of the character of Christ's earthly life. He pleased the Father and others, not Himself.

Who was freer from legalism, taboos and inhibitions than He? Yet who was more careful to bear the weaknesses of others?

It's easy for a man, whose own conscience is quite clear about some course of action, to snap his fingers at his critics and say *"I'll please myself."*

He has every right to do so, but that's not the way of Christ. Christ did not put His own interests or welfare first. Christ put the interests of others before His own.

He put the will of God first over everything as prophesied by Psalm 69:9b, *"and the insults of those who insult you fall on me."*

This citation vividly describes the unjust, unreasonable suffering of a righteous man for doing right.

He identified Himself with the Father and with those He came to save so that the insults cast upon them fell upon Him, too. The man who lives for others will know hateful men's insults.

Does a strong Christian think he's making a sacrifice by pleasing others instead of himself?

Then let him measure his sacrifice by the sacrifice of Christ. No sacrifice we could ever make could match the Christ's life and His death.

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Romans 15:4-5, *"For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope. May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had."*

Now Paul shares two sources of spiritual power from which we must draw if we're going to be able to have a life that ministers to the needs of others instead of self-promotion: the Word of God and Prayer.

Verse 4 states the church and individual believers need the Scriptures so that we might have perseverance, encouragement, and hope.

Romans 15:4, *"For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope."*

"For everything that was written in the past" obviously refers to the divinely-revealed truths we now call the Old Testament.

They were written for the times in which they were recorded but also for our instruction today.

Most of us have heard of Peyton Manning. He's considered to be one of the greatest quarterbacks of all time. He been the NFL's Most Valuable Player five times and has won two Super bowls.

But there's something else that Peyton Manning does that you may not know.

For many years, when certain competitors Manning admired were retiring from the NFL, he took time to hand write a note to them, congratulating them on their careers and their character.

Each recipient who was interviewed by ESPN expressed deep appreciation that one of the greatest players of all time would do that. This is a great reminder of the power of the written word.

While a written note from a respected athlete such as Peyton Manning has much value, no human's words can compare with the written Word we have from God in Scripture.

In the life-changing wisdom of the Bible, we have a personal message that tells us what God desires for us to be and what He desires to be for us.

He's given us His written Word so we *"might have hope"* as we face the issues of life.

Sometimes we get impatient with immature Christians, just as parents become impatient with their children. The Word of God brings us perseverance and encouragement.

Perseverance, which is related to patience, is continuing surrender, faithfulness, and obedience to the Lord through all the circumstances. God gives us encouragement to persevere.

He provides this impetus by means of the Scriptures which chronicle all the reasons to keep believing. The Scriptures give us motivation to sustain hope in the future.

Yet, hope can be misplaced. It can be in riches, or in men, or in reliance on ideals or the government and when it eventually proves false and we become disillusioned.

Our hope needs to be in God first; founded in Who He is, His character and His attributes.

Then, educated by the Scriptures, we have proper hope concerning the daily, personal, temporal, earthly issues of human life.

This hope promotes a better adjustment to life, and greater success both for individual and the body of Christ.

God's Word and promises will sustain us and direct us so we can live in hope. Divine instruction is a prevention to despondency and an assistance in our trials.

The knowledge of the Scriptures affects our attitude toward the present and the future. The more we know about what God has done in the past, the greater the confidence we have about what He will do in the days ahead.

The lessons of endurance, which are taught and the encouragement which they supply, are strong incentives to the maintenance of Christian hope.

We should read our Bible diligently to increase our trust that God's will is our best hope for our best future. Through the Bible, God speaks words of love, faith and hope to our heart and mind.

One day in the 1950s, Mickey Mantle was having a bad day with the Yankees. After striking out repeatedly, he was really getting depressed.

"When I got back to the clubhouse," he recalled, "I just sat down on my stool and held my head in my hands, like I was going to start crying. I heard someone come up to me, and it was little Tommy Berra, Yogi's boy, standing there next to me."

"He tapped me on the knee, nice and soft, and I figured he was going to say something nice like, 'Keep hanging in there' or something like that. But all he did was look at me, and then he said in his little kid's voice, 'You stink.'"

Sometimes it's hard to find a good word. But we always find encouragement in the presence of the Lord and His Word.

It's through the encouragement of the Scriptures, that we have hope. So, don't rely on others to impart the cheer only God can give when life stinks.

Scripture also brings about like mindedness found in verse 5, *"May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had."*

Paul closes this section by praying for his readers. Praying that they might experience the spiritual unity that only God can give.

The first real danger to unity of the First Church of Christianity, the Jerusalem Church, came because the apostles were so busy they couldn't adequately minister the Word and pray.

When they found others to share their burden, they returned to their proper ministry, and the church experienced harmony and growth.

Paul's prayer is that God, through the Scriptures, would give them perseverance, encouragement and unity of purpose.

What God demands of them in verse four, He gives to them by the working of His grace through the Word and prayer in verse five.

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That's why, when Scripture is well received, the Holy Spirit brings forth His mind in the life of the believer and then in the life of the local church.

This unity of mind is unity in Christ; for only when we focus and abide in Him will there be agreement.

As we agree with Jesus about the purpose He has for our lives and church we'll more and more agree with one another.

God will supply His harmony if we'll just let the Spirit of Jesus apply it to our life. When there's unity with the will and purpose of Jesus, then we'll experience unity or harmony with each other.

Even in areas where the Bible is silent, there can be unity. Disagreement about nonessential issues will come about but it shouldn't cause conflict between believers.

Paul calls on believers, despite their differing views, to be in loving, spiritual and brotherly harmony with one another according to the common purpose of their calling.

God loves harmony in interpersonal relationships. When Christians live in harmony, it's music to God's ears.

When husbands and wives are loving each other, looking out for each other, and serving each other, it's like a symphony for the angels.

If you're musically inclined, you know that harmony isn't achieved without effort. You have to work at it and practice until you get it right. Interpersonal harmony is no different.

In today's passage, we're not simply directed to live in harmony, we're encouraged by the fact that God *"gives endurance and encouragement"* to our efforts.

He's not just commanding harmony; He's also empowering us by His own Spirit.

Inter-personal harmony isn't the fake patching over of disagreement. It isn't living a shallow life to avoid conflict. It isn't avoiding all discord.

On the contrary, it's doing the hard work it takes to live in peace and understanding.

The honest and respectful working out of disagreements is akin to practicing music together until it starts to sound good. The fact that it takes time and energy doesn't mean it isn't worth it.

So don't avoid healthy conflict. Work out those interpersonal issues with grace and patience.

The end result will be a beautiful song that delights you, your loved ones, and the God Who's empowering you to make beautiful harmony.

Romans 15:6, *"So that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."*

This is a purpose statement that declares what will occur if we allow Christ to harmonize us through His Word, His Spirit, and prayer: We'll give glory to God in corporate worship.

The result of this singleness of purpose is to glorify God, not to please other believers.

Disunity and disagreement with each person going their own way does not glorify God. A refusal to unify and agree in Christ keeps the worship experience from glorifying God.

Abraham's words to Lot are applicable to today. Genesis 13:8a, *"Let's not have any quarreling between you and me."*

The neighbors were watching! Abraham wanted them to see that Lot and he were different from them because they worshiped the true God.

In His prayer in John 17, Jesus prayed for the unity of the church to the glory of God.

Think about it. If you scatter grains of dynamite and ignite them individually, there's burning but no explosion. But, if you pack enough of them tightly together, you can blow a mountain apart.

Mountains of doubt, sin, or discouragement can be blown away by a church that worships Jesus in unity. Unity in the church removes all the mountains the world, the flesh and the devil bring against it.

Thus, this one mind is expressed through one heart and voice. Without the unity of mind and heart that Jesus brings, worship is impossible.

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Conclusion

An attitude of forbearance and tolerance of our weaknesses will promote a spirit of like-mindedness and Christi-mindedness in the fellowship.

The goal of the church is undermined when the fellowship of the saints is marred by suspicions and dissensions. Unless we bear with one another, the church cannot be the church.

Through perseverance and the encouragement of Scripture, God grants us unity in Christ Jesus.

Therefore, receive one another, build up one another, and please one another according to Christ's example, and glorify the Lord with your worship!