

Romans: The Practice of Righteousness (part 8 of 13)

Be Like Jesus as You Relate to Others

Romans 15:1-13

Mark Vroegop

¹ We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. ² Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. ³ For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, "The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me." 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. ⁵ May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, ⁶ that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁷ Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. ⁸ For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, ⁹ and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, "Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles, and sing to your name." ¹⁰ And again it is said, "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people." ¹¹ And again, "Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples extol him." ¹² And again Isaiah says, "The root of Jesse will come, even he who arises to rule the Gentiles; in him will the Gentiles hope." ¹³ 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. Romans 15:1–13 (ESV)

On December 29, 1972, over one hundred people died in a plane crash in the Florida Everglades. At the time, it was one of the worst airline disasters in our nation's history. But what made this crash tragic was not just the loss of life; it was the cause.

When investigators pieced together the final moments of the plane's descent, they discovered that the only thing that malfunctioned on the plane was a small green light. Everything else was working properly. They learned that as the plane was preparing to land, one of pilots noticed that the landing gear indicator light was not illuminated. This light confirmed that the landing gear had descended and was locked. It wasn't on. However, the landing gear was, in fact, deployed and locked. But the light was out.

As the pilots scrambled to determine why the landing gear light was not on, they neglected to notice that the autopilot was deactivated. Their hyper-focused attention to the landing gear light caused

them to crash the plane. The landing gear did not cause the crash. Flight 401 crashed because of the crew's inability to see the bigger picture.¹

Forgetting about the bigger picture is not only a problem for pilots; it can also tragically surface in churches and in the relationships among fellow believers. If I took a poll this morning, I think you would be surprised at how many of us have experienced a church-split, a fractured relationship, or some level of conflict over things that in the bigger picture really did not matter. Unfortunately, human history and church history is filled with conflicts, divisions, and tensions that could have and should have been avoided.

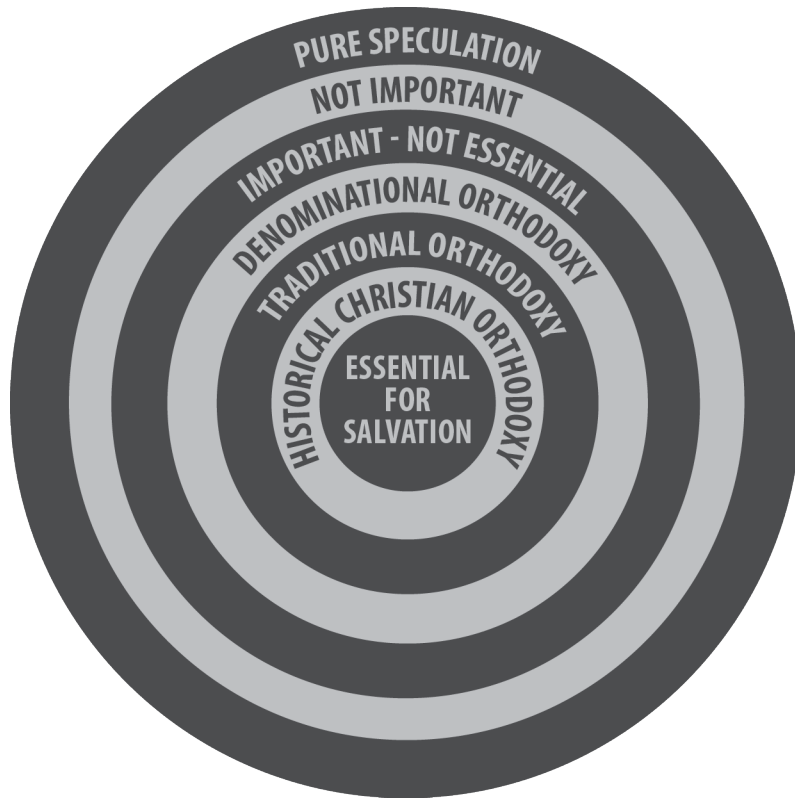
The Weak, the Strong and Stumbling Blocks

Today we return to our study of Romans, and in particular to this specific section of Romans where Paul is trying to help a church filled with very different backgrounds get along, love each other, and keep the bigger picture of the gospel in view. What is on the line here is whether or not the gospel is big enough and powerful enough to unite Jews and Gentiles together. And for our church the question is whether the gospel is still big enough for us to be unified in the midst of our unique preferences.

Now it has been a while since we have been in Romans, so let me give you a brief and high-level summary:

- The problem in the church was likely related to new Jewish converts who were having a hard time emotionally letting go of previous standards related to eating meat, drinking wine, and celebrating certain days. Pride could easily divide the church as non-meat eaters judged meat eaters, and as the meat eaters disdained the non-meat eaters.
- Two principles emerged in chapter 14: 1) welcome one another despite disagreements (14:1-12) and 2) be considerate of one another in your preferences (14:13-23).
- Paul pointed both groups of people – both meat eaters and non-meat eaters – to spiritual values more foundational than the specific issues. He pointed both of them to their individual consciences. He called on the non-meat eaters (“weak”) to not judge those who had more freedom. And he called the meat eaters (“strong”) to not put undue pressure on the weak (“stumbling blocks”), to not disdain the weak, and to consider that there are times when one’s freedom should be willingly restricted for the sake of love and unity.
- We learned that there are more important issues in play, and it is an important mark of maturity to learn how to weigh them. I called this theological and ethical triage, and I illustrated it with a chart that gave us three categories: absolutes, convictions and preferences. A week ago, one of our missionaries sent me another chart that I like just as well:

¹ Greg McKeown, *Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less*, (New York: Crown Publishing, 2014), 75.



The bottom line from Romans 14 is that the gospel is powerful enough to unite people from different walks of life and with different convictions and different preferences. And laboring to be unified is worth not only the effort, but also, in some cases, the limitation of one's freedom.

Two texts frame this discussion:

¹⁰ *Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law (Romans 13:10).*

⁵ *May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus,* ⁶ *that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 15:5–6.)*

Our love for others and the glory of God frame how to think about areas of difference and disagreement. Love and the glory of God are the big picture realities when it comes to how harmony is created.

Summarizing Harmonious Living

In chapter 15 Paul concludes the discussion about how to live harmoniously, and he starts the descent of the book of Romans. Our text today serves to reinforce the “why” behind the “what.” Or, how can a church have hope that harmony is truly possible? To make this clear, Paul talks about the acts, the source, the goal, and the plan for harmony. Let's look at each of them and see how they apply.

The Acts of Harmony (vv. 1-2)

Paul begins this section with a restatement of the specific actions that he talked about in chapter 14. There are strong brothers and weak brothers in the church. The strong have less of a conscience issue with the dietary restrictions and festivals that were a part of their spiritual heritage. The weak, however, are struggling. They are easily offended, they feel guilty, and they are unsettled.

While the weak brothers cannot stay “weak” forever, Paul clearly puts the onus on the stronger brothers. He connects his own position with the strong (“We who are strong”), and then says that the stronger brother has a two-fold obligation:

- 1) The strong are to “bear with” the failings of the weak. The weaker brother has a weakness – that’s what the word “failings” mean. And the strong need to understand their responsibility in light of the weak brother’s struggle. They are to “bear with” their weakness, which means to really help one another. The word is used in Galatians 6:2, in a passage that Andrew is going to preach on in November, which says, “Bear one another’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ.” The word is also used in Matthew 8:17 where it says that Jesus bore our diseases.
- 2) The second obligation is simply that you cannot live to please only yourself. Self-centeredness is often the root of division and disunity. Whether it is a friendship, a marriage, a small group, a staff, or a church, a lack of concern for others is contrary to the heart of the gospel.

Therefore, the stronger brother cannot write off the weak brother’s challenges. Central to harmony in the body is realizing the importance of our connection to one another. In order for the church to be a place of harmony, you have to value what it means to be the church and what it means for your life to be connected to other people. You do not have the right to use your rights without considering others. You cannot be concerned only about your needs and your wants and your rights.

Part of the problem here is that many American Christians have an inflated sense of entitlement related to their individual rights. And there is a tendency to have a low view of the church and the relationships in the church. The gravitational pull of culture is toward asserting your rights and having a lack of concern regarding others. That is one reason why church membership is important. It is one official way that you lay a stake in the ground and say, “My Christianity is not all about me. There is a people to whom I belong.” Being the church means being concerned about others.

Verse 2 provides a helpful balance to verse 1. I say “balance” because you might be inclined to think that the goal is just to make the weaker brother happy or to please him. But Paul adds the qualifiers of 1) “for his good” and 2) “to build him up.” So the weaker brother’s emotions and his struggles are not the ultimate and definitive test of what should or shouldn’t be done. The stronger brother needs to be considerate so that the weaker brother can grow and become more secure in his faith.

Do you see how Paul deals with self-centeredness in both the strong and the weak? The strong should not be selfish in not considering the needs of the weaker brother. And the weak brother needs to understand that his struggles and preferences are not the center of everything. Living

harmoniously means that both parties have a unique obligation to not become self-centered. The application is different, but the principle is the same.

Does this tone and heart fit with how you think about relationships inside the body of Christ and in our church? Have you made your “pet preferential issue” something that is more important than it should be? Are you dismissive of people who are struggling through issues that seem petty or “old school”? Do you have any friends who hold different convictions than your own? Part of the beauty of the body of Christ is that there is a harmony which is created as different people join together for a common vision and act on that vision with maturity, love, and grace.

The Source of Harmony (vv. 3-4)

The second thing Paul addresses is the source of harmony. I think that the reason he talks about this next is because Paul’s instructions here are counter-cultural. If you understand verses 1-2, you will be left asking, “Why would anyone do this? Why would they limit their freedom?” At another level the question could sound more like this: “This is really hard. I’m not sure I can do this. How do I get my mind and heart in the right place, because it seems so unusual?”

The fact of the matter is that harmony in any context – be it a marriage, a home, a church, a city, or a government – is very unusual. And it is supposed to be that way. The harmony in the gospel is designed to be a stunning statement to the world.

However, harmony does not come naturally, and that is why Paul cites 1) the example of Christ and 2) the sufficiency of Scripture. Without the life of Christ and the Word of God, there is no natural reason for harmony to happen.

The word “for” in verse three is important. As is often the case, it identifies that a reason is being given for what was previously said. Why should a stronger believer bear the weaknesses of another?

Answer: Look to Christ.

³ For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, “The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me.” Romans 15:3 (ESV)

Paul cites the example of Christ and quotes Psalm 69, a classic text on the suffering and passion of Jesus. The argument is pretty straightforward if you are a Christian: Our sins are a reproach against God, and Jesus bore them on the cross, thus making salvation possible. This is a fundamental truth as it relates to the message of the Bible. Jesus bore the weaknesses of others. Therefore, His followers are called to do the same. He bore our sin; surely we can bear the weaknesses of others.

By the way, if you are not a Christian, this might explain why relationships or friendships or marriage do not work very well. A Christian is motivated by what Christ has done for them, but a non-Christian does not have this basic core commitment. Self-interest or personal benefit is the natural motivation for human beings. Could it be that the reason that relationships keep blowing up around you is because there is no motivation other than self-interest? And for those of you who are believers in Jesus, remember that the thing that is supposed to define you as unique in the world is this critical,

core understanding regarding how to live like Jesus. So if you are struggling with having to be concerned about the needs of others around you, you need to be reminded about the work of Christ.

The second source of motivation toward harmony is the Scriptures themselves. Paul just cited Psalm 69, and now he elevates all of Scripture (the Old Testament in this context) as the means by which the church receives instruction, pursues endurance, receives encouragement, and has hope. The Bible fuels harmony in Christ's church.

The Bible provides instruction for both Jews and Gentiles. Even though parts of the Old Testament law had been changed, that did not negate the value of the Bible. In giving instruction, the Bible serves to aid believers who are enduring struggles or who are bearing up under difficulties. In context, I wonder if the endurance doesn't have something to do with their internal and relationship conflicts. The Bible serves as a guide and a rallying point for believers, even when they disagree.

Additionally, the Bible provides encouragement. The idea here is simply that the Bible provides comfort and help as believers try to honor God in general or specifically in regards to the issues related to disagreements. And finally, the Scriptures provide hope. At one level this hope relates to the future because the Bible speaks about a coming day when God will restore everything that is broken and place everything under the banner of the Lordship of Jesus Christ. But at another level, there is more near-term hope as we discover that the Bible has the power to change hearts, renew minds, and unite us.

Where does harmony in the body of Christ come from? It comes from understanding the person of Christ and knowing the Word of Christ. These two realities make harmony possible. Remove Christ from the mix, and there is no example or model to follow. You are left with what others do or what you think is best. Remove the Scriptures from the mix, and you have no instruction or objective truth by which to live. You are left with your own rules and a guide for conduct that can easily be distorted by the self-centeredness of your heart. So be warned today! Don't take your eyes off Christ, and don't stop immersing yourself in the Word, because without it, there is no real hope for harmony!

The Goal of Harmony (vv. 5-6)

We now come to the signature verse and the theme for Romans 14-15. It really is a prayer – something that Paul longs to see. And he hopes that they long to see it as well. The vision is compelling and beautiful!

⁵ May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, ⁶ that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Romans 15:5-6)

Did you hear the words "endurance" and "encouragement" again? They were previously connected to the role of the Scriptures in our lives, but in this context they are something that God owns and gives. These two words, in such close proximity to the previous verse, is not accidental. Paul wants us to

know that endurance, encouragement, and harmony must be granted by God. In other words, they are the work of a gracious God. They are gifts – miraculous gifts.

So any time that a group of people – be it two people or four thousand people – are able to get along, love one another, and consider others more important than themselves, it is a miracle. Additionally the beauty of people loving one another and getting along with each other, despite their differences, is worth striving for and working hard to achieve. Self-centeredness, a concern for your rights and opinions, and being easily offended are easy and normal. There is something other-worldly about the harmony in the body of Christ.

Verse 6 sets the harmony in the context of worship. The vision and the goal is the glorification of God. The idea is that God's people are glorifying God with one harmonious voice. Notice that it is not that they are all singing the same note! Paul is not talking about uniformity or a group of Christian clones. There is a very important place for individuality and differences. He is not encouraging unity for unity's sake. His aim is for the people of God to remember what the ultimate goal is and to unified on that central purpose: to glory God.

Paul is not interested in peace for peace's sake or unity for unity's sake. True unity and biblical harmony come from people who are very different yet who have the same goal and love: the glory of God. Here is what Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892) said about corporate praise in his sermon entitled "The Power of Prayer and the Pleasure of Praise" in 1863:

United praise is like music in concert. The sound of one instrument is exceedingly sweet, but when hundreds of instruments, both wind and stringed, are all combined, then the orchestra sends forth a noble volume of harmony! The praise of one Christian is accepted before God like a grain of incense, but the praise of many is like a censor full of frankincense smoking up before the Lord. Combined praise is an anticipation of heaven, for in that general assembly they all, together, with one heart and voice, praise the Lord—"Ten thousand thousand are their tongues, But all their joys are one!"²

The goal of harmony and the reason the strong bear with the weak is because of the beauty of God.

The Plan for Harmony (vv. 7-13)

The final aspect of harmony in the body that Paul mentions connects Romans 14-15 to the bigger story of what God is doing in the gospel. You see, disunity not only robs God of glory in worship, but it also guts the power of the gospel. And as Paul closes this section, he connects this theme of unity back into the plan of God to redeem both Jews and Gentiles.

Do you remember the theme verses for Romans? The book of Romans could be summarized in Romans 1:16-17.

² <http://www.spurgeongems.org/vols7-9/chs507.pdf>

¹⁶ For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ¹⁷ For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.” (Romans 1:16–17)

The beauty of the gospel is both the amazing nature of righteousness given by faith and the fact that it is given to both Jews and Gentiles. This kind of righteousness is amazing, but it is even more stunning when you consider that it crosses racial and ethnic divides and makes them one.

Therefore, when Paul says, “. . . welcome one another one another as God has welcomed you, for the glory of God” (Rom 15:7), he is connecting them back to the heart of the book of Romans and the essence of the gospel.

Given all that Paul says here, I wonder if the church in Rome was on the brink of substantial and painful divisions. I wonder if Paul was concerned that the church in the capital city of the Roman Empire might collapse under the weight of divisions and differences. I wonder if he is battling to keep them together because of what would happen if the church was crushed by divisiveness.

Some of you are still recovering from that kind of experience. Perhaps it was an official church split, or maybe you sat in a raucous congregational meeting, or maybe you watched your Christian parents’ marriage fall apart. Regardless, you know the long-term effect on your view of Christianity and the gospel. A lack of harmony and disunity does not represent the gospel well.

Verses 8-13 recast the vision of the gospel being for both Jews and Gentiles with a special emphasis on four Old Testament texts. Notice how verses 8-9 include a reference to both Jews and Gentiles. It has the same tone as Romans 1:15-16.

⁸ For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God’s truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, ⁹ and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, “Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles, and sing to your name.” (Romans 15:8–9)

God’s plan to redeem Israel was never just about Israel. It always included a plan to reach the Gentiles. And despite their cultural differences, the heart of the gospel is to create harmony. The gospel and the glory of God are the basis for their unity and harmony.

Now to drive home this point, Paul cites four amazing texts from the Old Testament:³

- v. 9 - Psalm 18:49. David vows to sing praises to God’s name among the nations. He wanted to be the instrument on which God played the melody of the gospel to the nations.
- v. 10 - Deuteronomy 32:43. Moses celebrates his victory over Pharaoh, desiring that everyone would know about God’s great name.
- v. 11 – Psalm 17:1. The psalmist calls upon Gentiles to lift up their voices in worship.

³ Schreiner, Thomas R. *Romans*. Vol. 6. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998. Print. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament.

- v. 12 – Isaiah 11. Paul cites the famous Messianic promise that pictures a shoot coming up out of stump in order to draw the nations to Himself.

These texts are designed to take you higher and higher and higher into the beauty and awe of God's plan. And then Paul ends with a beautiful summary prayer. It could be considered a benediction of sorts.

¹³ 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. Romans 15:13 (ESV)

Where will harmony come from as Jews and Gentiles worship together? It will come as they both put their hope in the root of Jesse. It will come as they both look to Christ. True harmony and biblical unity comes as we set our eyes on what is really important, what the big picture plan is, and how amazing God's grace really is.

Paul wants them and you to see the bigness of God's mercy so that the difference between Him and us can be seen proportionately. When we are called to be considerate and welcome one another, it will be motivated by the depth of God's grace to us.

If Christ has welcomed us, should we not welcome one another? That's the question. And the answer of course is, "For God's glory -- yes!!"

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