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Romans 15:1-7 “Steps Toward Christian Unity”

Intro. Even though this text of Scripture begins a new chapter, it is really a continuation of Paul’s discussion in chapter 14. But here, the discussion takes on a new dimension. Paul’s argument widens into a plea for patience and forbearance, and a more specific appeal for the unity of all Christians, both Jew and Gentile. That is because discord strikes a deadly blow at God’s work in the church. Strife, envy, anger, bitterness, dissension, and selfishness violate the unity of the church. They violate the will of God and cripple His testimony in the world. The harmony of the church is of grave concern to God.

But on the other hand, unity in a church is wonderful. Psalm 133:1-2 says “Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! It is like the precious ointment upon the head...” Unity is a sweet and fragrant offering to God.

In Acts 2:41-46 we see an example of unity being realized in the early church. Unity of Spirit was one of the first amazing characteristics of the redeemed. They were of one accord – one in praise, fellowship, breaking of bread, prayer, doctrine, proclamation, and sharing their goods. That was the result of God’s Spirit within them. Then in Acts 4:32 we read, “They were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and the multitude of those that believed were of one heart and of one soul.” Ephesians 4:3 says we’re to be “endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” (Cf. also 1 Cor. 1:10; Phil. 1:27, 2:2).

Paul realized that one of the great dangers to unity in the church was the potential discord between the strong and weak Christians. They disagree over what is permissible for a Christian. This text has four principles, especially for the strong believers, which will bring to fulfillment the goal of unity found in v.6, “that you may with one mind and one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” We can have unity and thus glorify God with a unified voice. So how is this possible? It comes by following these 4 steps, which will also promote unity in your family life:

I. BE CONSIDERATE OF OTHERS

Paul says in v.1, “We then who are strong ought to bear with the scruples of the weak...” As we discussed in our last two messages, a Jewish convert would tend to carry over into their Christian faith their Jewish traditions, such as not eating certain kinds of meat, especially meat from a Gentile market. A recent Gentile convert could also have been hesitant to eat meat from the marketplace, fearing it had been from a sacrifice at an idol’s temple. Yet a strong, mature believer could have a different understanding of such things, and see nothing wrong with eating such meat. Should he go ahead and buy & eat such meat?

Today we deal with other issues. Christians have different opinions regarding what is appropriate for a Christian. Is it OK for Christians over the age of 21 to drink alcohol in strict moderation? It is OK for a Christian to go to a H.S. prom? Today, playing poker is a big craze. Is it OK for a Christian to play poker as long as you are not using real money? I could give many other examples. Last week we discussed the fact that just because you feel the Bible doesn’t prohibit a particular activity does not mean you are fully free to do it. Paul says here we should

be considerate of the convictions & opinions of other believers in making our decisions. Specifically, he says we “ought to bear with the scruples of the weak...”

So one thing this means is that we are to be considerate of others. We ought to consider how others feel before we freely engage in a questionable activity. He said in Philippians 2:4, “Look not every one on His own things, but every man also on the things of others.”

Now I want to share with you 3 ways you should be considerate of others. First of all:

A. Accept Your Obligation to Other Christians – The Greek word translated “ought” (*opheilo*) in v.1 means “to be a debtor.” In fact, in early English “ought” was the past tense of “owe.” Just as becoming a parent obligates us to care for our children, even so when you become a Christian, you must accept the fact that you take on an obligation to consider the needs of fellow believers. Yes, you are your brother’s keeper. You are not free to ignore your brother or sister in Christ. It is also a present tense, “We are under continual obligation.”

Timothy certainly understood his obligation to other believers. He was considerate of others. In Philippians 2:19-21 Paul says, “I trust in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy shortly unto you...For I have no man likeminded, who will naturally care for your state. For all seek their own, not the things which are Jesus Christ’s.” Timothy did not just think of himself. He thought about what Christ wanted, and what others needed, in each situation.

So what are we obligated to do? How else can we be considerate of others? We should:

B. Bear Up Weaker Believers – “Bear” could carry the sense of “bear with” or “tolerate.”¹ If that’s the meaning, Paul is saying that we should patiently bear with their religious scruples by refraining from exercising your liberty, especially in their presence. Some people are still bound to religious taboos from the past, and we need to be patient until they grow into a new understanding of such things.

On the other hand, the word probably has the more literal meaning of to “bear up, support, carry.” It refers to carrying someone’s load. This is the meaning in Gal. 6:2. You see, if we engage in an activity that others consider wrong, then we run the risk of leading them by our example to fall into sin, for violating one’s conscience is a sin. So there are times when we bear up or support the weak by refraining from the exercise of our liberty, at least until such time as we can help them fully understand that such an action is right and acceptable.

Let me give another example by talking about the perceived sins of omission. If you are a leader of the church, what if you decide that you are not bound by Baptist tradition of attending church Sunday morning, Sunday night, and Wednesday night. Suppose that you only attend on Sunday morning. Yet suppose a new Christian is in your ministry, and they had been taught that attending church 2-3 times/week is really important. However, by your example they are led to stop coming to church on Sunday night, Wednesday night, or both. That could result in sinning against their conscience. As a new Christian, they really need as much Bible teaching as they can get.

Should you ignore the impact of your example upon them? Should you say, “They’re not my problem.” Or based on v.1, should you bear the burden of being a good example, & support the weak?

This leads to another way we should be considerate of others. We should:

¹ There are only 2 of 27 occurrences where the word has a metaphorical meaning “to tolerate,” rather than “to bear or carry.” John 16:12, “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.” Revelation 2:2, “I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil.”

C. Please the Weak – Paul says in v.2, “Let each of us please² his neighbor for his good, leading to edification.” In other words, we should not express our liberty in such a way that it displeases our brother or sister in Christ. In 1 Cor. 10:23-24, Paul said, “All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful; all things are lawful for me, but not all things edify. Let no one seek his own, but each one the other’s well-being.”

Paul is not talking about the kind of pleasing that some people engage in. Such people have been conditioned to avoid displeasing others for just about any reason. That can be very frustrating, for as soon as you please one person in a group, you find yourself displeasing someone else. So it is not therefore, a weak compliance with the wishes of others. Nor is he talking about pleasing others for personal gain, like a politician. He is not talking about compromising or changing the Gospel message to please unbelievers (Gal. 1:10). Rather, this verse should be understood in light of its context. Paul has in mind a specific situation where pleasing others is for their good, “leading to edification.” He’s talking about pleasing others where you avoid tearing them down, and instead build them up. It is the pleasing that will maintain in the weak the peace of conscience which imitation of the conduct of the strong would otherwise disturb and destroy. Even though exercising our Christian Liberty would be pleasing to ourselves, we must be considerate of others and carry them along and build them up.

So think of others as you live the Christian life. Be considerate of how your actions will affect others. For example, when Paul talks about the strong limiting their liberty on behalf of the weak, we may certainly apply this principle to parents. Just because the government says a certain activity is legal for an adult, that does not mean you should go ahead & do it. You should consider how it could impact your children. They will likely follow your example, and they are not likely to wait until they are 21. And so wise parents voluntarily give up certain liberties for the good of their children.

So one fundamental principle that promotes unity is to be considerate of others. A second principle that promotes unity is this:

II. DON’T INSIST ON PLEASING YOURSELF

Paul specifically says in the last of v.1 that we are “not to please ourselves.” We live in a selfish world, and selfishness is the principal mark of the human race. Selfishness always leads to conflict. But self denial is an emphasis of the teaching of Christ. In 1 Cor. 13:5 Paul says that love “does not seek its own.” In order to preserve unity in the church, we must disregard selfish desires.

Paul cites the supreme example of selfless love. He says in v.3, “For even Christ did not please Himself; but as it is written, ‘The reproaches of those who reproached You fell on Me.’” Whenever Paul wished to enforce a point, he would often hold up Christ as the supreme example (Eph. 5:24; Phil. 2:5ff), not merely as a model, but also to motivate us. Does a strong Christian think he is making a great sacrifice by giving up some food or drink? Then let him measure his sacrifice by the sacrifice of Christ. He did not please Himself. He did not do only what He wanted to do. He put the will of God first of all (cf. Jn. 5:30; 6:38). If he had really wanted to please Himself, He would have remained in glory with God. He said in John 6:38, “I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will but the will of him that sent me.” He prayed in the Garden

² “Please” (*aresko*) is in the present tense. This is an ongoing obligation.

of Gethsemane, “not My will, but Yours, be done” (Lk. 22:42). Not only that, but He accepted great suffering on our behalf. In love He considered what would benefit us, not Himself.

Part of that suffering is described in the last of v.3, “but as it is written, ‘The reproaches of those who reproached You fell on Me.’” This quotation comes from Psalm 69. Based on that context, He bore this reproach & persecution because he was jealous for God’s honor. Isaiah predicted this also. In Isa. 53:3, 7 he wrote, “He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows... He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth...” In pleasing the Father, Christ received reproach, slander, false accusations, and insults. Christ received all that because He represented God. They hated the Holiness of God. Also, until Jesus came, the religious leaders looked like good men. But next to Jesus, they were shown to be the sinners that they truly were, so they hated Him.

Their hatred reached a climax when they condemned Him to death, and demanded of Pilate that He be crucified. Yet once again He did not please Himself, but accepted the suffering and agony of the cross. Why? He knew that was the only way we could be saved from our sin. So He did not please Himself, but died in our place.

If anyone had to right to please Himself, it was Jesus. He is the Son of God. Yet Paul said “even Christ did not please Himself,” or literally, “even the Messiah did not please Himself.”

And so even as Christ gave Himself for others, so the believer is to give himself for others. As Christ did not please Himself, so we should not insist on pleasing ourselves, but consider what is best for others. One main responsibility of the believer is to be like Jesus. First John 2:6 says, “He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked.” Will you follow His example? Instead of insisting on doing what pleases you, will you sacrifice some of your liberties for the sake of others, and for the sake of Christian unity? Don’t talk about your personal liberty as a right that you must always insist upon. Talk more about our responsibility to demonstrate love for others even to the point of self-sacrifice. We should follow the example of Christ.

Something else we should do to preserve unity is this:

III. DEPEND ON GOD’S WORK IN OUR LIVES

Paul says in v.5, “Now may the God of patience and comfort grant you to be like-minded toward one another, according to Christ Jesus.” Notice the relation between this verse and the next. Without the enabling grace of God, this exhortation to deny self and please others will not bear fruit. God Himself is the ultimate source of unity. As He fills us with love, we will put into practice the principles of our text, which will lead to unity.

If v.5 is going to be fulfilled in our lives, we must allow God to so work in our lives. The starting place is to become a Christian. One reason there is so much conflict is because too many, even in our churches, are not born again believers. If you are not saved, if you have not repented of sin and placed your faith in Jesus as your Savior, then I invite you to be saved today.

Furthermore, v.5 is essentially a prayer. Therefore, if we are going to have unity in spite of our difference, we need to pray, and ask the Lord to create unity within the Body of Christ. When we disagree, we should pray that God will bring about unity by His Word, and by His Spirit. Pray that God will give you the kind of self-less love that you need. Pray that God will grant you patience with other believers. When was the last time you prayed for the unity of the church?

IV. BE RECEPTIVE TO EACH OTHER

This appeal is stated in v.7, “Therefore receive one another...” This is essentially the same appeal given back in Romans 14:1, “Receive one who is weak in the faith...” Instead of rejecting one another through arguments over differences of opinion, let us receive one another in a spirit of unity. Let us overlook our differences over non-essentials.

Once again, Christ is the great illustration of this principle. Paul goes on to say in v.7, “just as Christ also received us, to the glory of God.” The Pharisees told everyone they had to be like them, dress like them, and act like them, or you were not welcome in their group. Luke 15:2 says that the Pharisees and scribes complained about Jesus saying, “This Man receives sinners and eats with them.” Aren’t you glad for that! He did not reject them just because they were different. Christ received us when we were vile, lost sinners to glorify God. He even received us Gentiles. In fact, “us” is “you” in many of our oldest Greek manuscripts, thus referring primarily to Gentiles. Christ has received men from all races and nations. As Christ thus received us, so we are to receive each other that we might glorify God together.

One contemporary issue that has divided the church is music. What kind of music is appropriate for worship? Even in our church there is not full agreement, and certainly in the broader Christian community there is not agreement. Most of the younger members and attenders would probably like the music louder, and more contemporary. Most have no problem with guitars and drums, and they would turn up the base sound. Yet most of the senior adults and some others have a hard time worshipping with that kind of music. A loud base sound actually physically bothers us. Many say it is worldly, or even has demonic associations. Now what is the church to do? Is this an irresolvable conflict?

Quite a few churches have ignored v.7 and told the senior adults & some others to take it or leave it. The leadership and the younger folks have done what pleases them, & rejected those who don’t like their music. On the other hand, some older adults have done what pleases them, and rejected those who would change their music in the least. Folks, that is not following the spirit of Christ. That is not following the teaching of our text. We should yield our preferences for the sake of others, and for the sake of the unity of the church. On Sunday morning in particular, we are going to have music that has broad appeal, or at least doesn’t hinder someone from being able to worship. As Paul says in vv.1-2, we are not to please ourselves, but please others to the extent that it accomplishes the good of building them up.

Why should we do this? Paul says in v.6, “that you may with one mind and one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” “One mind” (*homothumadon*) is often used in the early chapters of Acts to describe the early church, but there it is translated “one accord.” In v.6 Paul instructs believers to maintain unity with one mind (internally) and one mouth (externally) for the purpose of glorifying God. When one common aspiration reigns in the church, secondary diversities no longer separate hearts (Godet). The thought of a church (especially in our day) being unanimous and unselfish in its purpose is not a common reality.

Sources: Donald Grey Barnhouse (vv.1-3 only), *Expositions of Bible Doctrines Taking the Epistle to the Romans as a Point of Departure*, vol. 4, “God’s Discipline” (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964); F.F. Bruce, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963); Bruce Corley & Curtis Vaughan, *Romans: A Study Guide Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976); Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950 reprint); John MacArthur, Jr., *Unity in Action: Study Notes on Romans 14:1-15:13* (Panorama City, CA: Word of Grace Communications, 1987); John Murray, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible [CD-ROM]* (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be*

Right: Romans (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1977); Kenneth S. Wuest's *Word Studies From the Greek New Testament*, Vol. 1, *Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1955). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982). Hobbs read, but not new & useful material found.

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