



Central
Peninsula
Church

...to make and mature more followers of Christ

A Welcoming Church

Romans 15:1–13

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series: Romans: Unashamed • Undeserved • Unstoppable

Today we are continuing our teaching series through the book of Romans and we are almost finished. Two weeks ago we looked at Romans 14 and considered a serious issue facing the church in Rome: How do we deal with disputable matters and nonessential issues in the church? Things like alcohol, tattoos, politics, views on the end times, etc. We learned two things. First, instead of judging one another, we should accept and welcome each other. I know none of you have a problem with being judgmental, but the early church in Rome did. Second, instead of flaunting your freedom in Christ, we should not put a stumbling block before another believer. For them, that meant if you go out to eat with a Jewish Christian, don't order the baby back ribs, instead choose a salad! Our guiding motivation through it all is love. So what we've been seeing in the book of Romans, especially in chapters 12–16, is through the Gospel (the life transforming message of Jesus), God is both transforming people and forming a community of faith, hope and love. That means God wants to transform you from the inside out while connecting you to a body of believers, his church.

Here, in Romans 15, Paul is continuing to address his disapproval against the judgmental attitudes in the church. Remember, there was a huge conflict in the Roman church between Jews and Gentiles, between the "strong" and the "weak." The strong were mostly Gentiles, strong in faith and mature in Christ. The weak were not physically weak, they were weak in faith. These were mostly Jewish Christians, who at some point came to know and follow Jesus, but thought they could get a little more right with God by keeping all the OT laws. These two groups were disagreeing about what to eat and how to worship. The problem was not that one way was right and the other wrong. The problem was that these Christians were missing the whole point of the gospel. And the church was in danger of being divided and compromising the gospel.

So, how should the church address secondary issues, these "disputable matters"? How should the church treat one another, especially when they disagree? And how can the church become a welcoming and united place of worship? The church today desperately needs to hear what Paul had to say. Because last I checked there were roughly 33,000 different Christian denominations! And many of those were started because of deep disagreements over nonessential issues.

Put the Good of Others Before Your Own

We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please our neighbors for their good, to build them up (verses 1-2).

In order to be a welcoming and united church, Paul says put the good of others before your own. Great, how do we do that? He tells us two ways to start. First, the strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak. Notice how Paul openly aligns himself with the strong, "We who are strong." The strong in faith have a responsibility to bear the burdens of the weak in faith in the context of love. The word "bear" means to "carry" and to "support." This doesn't mean that you and I become pushovers. Paul's not saying to just put up with others who see things differently than you. To bear is to have an active and loving approach to those who are weak, to those who make nonessential issues primary issues. The strong are challenged to take on and carry the burdens of others. Specifically, the "failings of the weak." Those believers who are weak in faith, who are typically legalistic, we who are strong, are called to lovingly care for them. I'll give some examples of how to do that in a minute.

Second, each of us should not please ourselves but please our neighbor for their good, to build them up. This is really easy to do, right? No! It's incredibly difficult because we are naturally selfish people. Comfort, security, power, approval and achievements are some of the primary idols of our heart and culture. So our lives only have meaning if we get more of those things. And from early childhood we see the idols of our hearts. Kids don't naturally share their toys! Then through adulthood we learn how to perfect the art of idolatry and selfishness. If you are married, after the honeymoon, I bet you began to see real quickly how selfishness starts hurting your marriage. If you have kids, you get the wonderful blessing of seeing every day just how selfish you (and your kids) really are! And what happens is, the older you get and the closer you become to Christ, the more you see how insidious and ingrained the idols of your heart have become. Paul gives us a paradigm shift in thinking and behaving. He says the way to destroy the idols of your heart and selfishness is to please your neighbor for their good to build them up. That means you sacrifice your self-interests for the good of your brother and sister who are weak and for the good of your neighbors.

I know this isn't easy. And Paul doesn't mean we agree with everything people do or say. The idea here is the strong accommodate

the weak up to a certain point. The strong look for ways to appropriately challenge the thinking and behavior of the weak on all the issues that can divide the church. That means the strong must learn how to adjust to those who are weak. We look out for the spiritual good of others. We think through all the different ways we can build up the faith of the weak. Instead of causing our brother and sister to stumble, instead of tearing them down or damaging them, we build them up. We don't try to push our ideas of Christian freedom to the degree that would upset the unity of the church. We don't push our pet theological doctrines on others. One translation of this verse reads, "We who have strong faith ought to shoulder the burden of the doubts and qualms of others, and not just to go our own sweet way."

I like that. From my own life, I deal with this issue all the time, especially as a pastor. I constantly get asked about our church's views on nonessential issues. And I think people are surprised to hear that we don't take an official stand on some things other churches do. For example, we don't back politician, we don't care about how people dress for church, we don't have a strong opinion on how you should school your kids, and we don't make nonessential theological issues the main focus of our messages. For example, when it comes to the end times, we believe Jesus is coming back soon, but we disagree on how that will play out. Some of you are pre-millennial, others are a-millennial, some are post-millennial and even others are pan-millennial (it's all going to pan out in the end!). Some of you can drink alcohol with a clear conscience, for others it's a huge stumbling block. Tattoos may be no big deal in your mind, but for my missionary friend in Japan, he told me that tattoos are immediately associated with gangs, so he chose not to get any.

For the church in Rome, they were dealing with what to eat and how to worship. But for us today this principle of putting the good of others before your own and building them up can be applied to almost every area of our lives. When it come our finances, I think Paul (and Jesus) would argue that Christians are called to look out for those with less resources and be generous with our own. When it comes to our friendships, we need to think about the different ways we can serve people for their good. We can do this, even with our enemies. Believe it or not, Christians can stand side by side with people we disagree with, people both in the church and outside the church, as we work for the common good of our society. And we can even show respect to them and be kind. Imagine that. This principle applies even to where we choose to live and work. Instead of thinking, "Where would I be the most comfortable? Where can I buy a house? What job will pay me the most money?", what if we asked ourselves, "Where can I be the most useful to God and others?"

Some of you are thinking, "This is all fine and dandy, but why is it so hard to put the needs of others before our own?" I asked that question on Facebook and got 50 answers! It was amazing

to read them and also very helpful as I prepared this sermon. Let me read a few answers:

"Because by nature I am fiercely committed to the comfort, safety, reputation and pleasure of me! It's why we are in desperate daily need of grace!"

"Lack of trusting there will be 'enough' left for you. (Time, money, energy...etc.)"

"We have lost a sense of community. Everyone is in their bubble and is focused on that and without a strong close-knit community and family it's hard to see how your actions impact others."

"Fear."

"The frantic pace and busy-ness of life (especially in the Bay Area), combined with the social pressures of keeping pace in a financially driven area, lead one to focus on self and pursuit to just keep pace. Yet, in my walk, my most incredibly rewarding and freeing times was when I was focused on serving others rather than myself."

For the church to become a welcoming and united place, it must learn to put others' needs above our own. The problem is, we don't do it very often. Why? Because of all those 50 reasons people gave me on Facebook. But for Christians the problem goes much deeper. I think the primary reason we don't put the good of others before our own is because we daily lose sight of our example and motivation. In verses 3-12 Paul gives us four reasons why Jesus is not only our example but our motivation. The gospel (what we believe about Jesus) creates ethics (how we live).

Why should we put the good of others before our own? Jesus is our example and our motivation.

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 the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope (verses 3-4).

Why should we put the good of others before our own? Four reasons. First, because Jesus did not please himself. Instead of pleasing himself, Jesus gave himself fully to do the will of the Father. Jesus said, "*I always do what pleases him [God]*" (John 8:29b). Jesus put the good of the world above himself. To illustrate this, Paul quotes from Psalm 69:9b, "*...the insults of those who insult you fall on me.*" This was a Messianic Psalm that points to the life and ministry of Jesus. Jesus endured unjust suffering and persecution to serve us. All the insults that were intended for God fell on Jesus. Jesus allowed himself to be mocked, spit on, tortured and killed for us. He lived a sacrificial life and by his death he built us up. This means, we as followers of Jesus are to seek the good of others even if we are misunderstood or

slandered in doing so. Because Jesus lived sacrificially, we live sacrificially. Because Jesus built us up, we seek to build others up. Scripture calls us to be “imitators of Christ.” Jesus is our example and motivation.

After quoting from the OT, Paul reminds us of the importance of the Scriptures in verse 4. The Bible isn’t a book to fight over. It’s a book to encourage and strengthen us. We may disagree over the end times, how God created the world in six days, whether we should sprinkle or dunk, and whether we choose God or he chooses us. But Paul says the purpose of the Scriptures is to teach us and to encourage us so we can endure hardship with hope. Do you need help to endure whatever you are going through? Do you need encouragement? Do you need hope? Paul says, get your nose in this book and get this book into your heart because we gain endurance and encouragement by reading the Bible.

May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (verses 5-6).

Why should we put the good of others before our own? Because Jesus unites our worship. Verses 5-6 are actually an incredible prayer for unity in the church. This unity cannot be manufactured on our own, it is given by God, “May God who gives...” This means it’s a supernatural unity. And this God-given unity leads to a church worshipping together with “one mind and one voice you may glorify God.” So, when we disagree with someone, first pray for unity. Ask God to give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Jesus had. And then worship God alongside some of those you disagree with. That’s the beauty and power of the church. What I love about CPC is we are incredibly diverse ethnically, socially, and economically. And yet, we are united together in Jesus Christ and can stand and worship Jesus together every Sunday. There is unity in our diversity. Where else in the world does this happen? Philip Yancy wrote about the power of this:

“As I read accounts of the New Testament church, no characteristic stands out more sharply than diversity. Beginning with Pentecost, the Christian church dismantled the barriers of gender, race, and social class that had marked Jewish congregations. Paul, who as a rabbi had given thanks daily that he was not born a woman, slave, or Gentile, marveled over the radical change: ‘There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.’

“One modern Indian pastor told me, ‘Most of what happens in Christian churches, including even miracles, can be duplicated in Hindu and Muslim congregations. But in my area only Christians strive, however ineptly, to mix men and women of different castes, races, and social groups. That’s the real miracle.’

“Diversity complicates rather than simplifies life. Perhaps for this reason we tend to surround ourselves with people of similar age, economic class, and opinion. Church offers a place where infants and grandparents, unemployed and executives, immigrants and blue bloods can come together. Just yesterday I sat sandwiched between an elderly man hooked up to a puffing oxygen tank and a breastfeeding baby who grunted loudly and contentedly throughout the sermon. Where else can we find that mixture?

“When I walk into a new church, the more its members resemble each other—and resemble me—the more uncomfortable I feel.”

Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God (v. 7).

This is the key verse of this passage. Why should we put the good of others before our own? Because Jesus Christ accepted you. The word “accept” means to welcome someone. It literally means to receive someone into your heart. It’s the same verb used in John 14:2 to describe how Jesus will welcome us when we get to heaven. What we see again here is how Jesus is our example and motivation for being a welcoming church. The gospel reminds us that Jesus Christ accepted you! And you are an absolute mess! You really are and so am I. God doesn’t accept you because you have become good enough and keep religious rules. Every religion on earth essential says “Obey and you will be accepted.” But the gospel of Jesus Christ says, “You are accepted so now obey.” Tim Keller put it this way, “The way you can tell how much you understand the gospel is to look at how much you love people despite their flaws.” Ouch. We love, accept and welcome all people because Jesus accepted us. By the way, this doesn’t mean we compromise truth or our historic theology. Romans 1-8 should always be our theological foundation.

For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God’s truth, so that the promises made to the patriarchs might be confirmed and, moreover, that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written:

“Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles;

I will sing the praises of your name.”

Again, it says,

“Rejoice, you Gentiles, with his people.”

And again,

“Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles;

let all the peoples extol him.”

And again, Isaiah says,

“The Root of Jesse will spring up,

one who will arise to rule over the nations;

in him the Gentiles will hope” (verses 8-12).

Why should we put the good of others before our own? Because Jesus was a servant to all. In verses 8-12 we circle back to the major issue in the Roman church—the relationship between Jews and Gentiles. His concern is for the unity of Jew and Gentile in the church. Christ has become a servant to them both so that God would accept them both. How did Jesus serve both Jew and Gentile? For one, he limited himself to a Jewish diet, even though he declared that all foods were clean. Then, he who was without sin insisted on a sinner's baptism and was baptized by John. And ultimately, Jesus served us by dying on the cross in our place and for our sins. Why did Jesus become a servant? Because God's vision for the church has always been multi-ethnic, Jew and Gentile. And his life, death and resurrection opened up the way to God for every sinner who repents. Paul then quotes from four OT sources to prove God's heart for a church, both Jew and Gentile, united in the worship of God. What Paul is saying here is this, "You do not need to separate; you do not need to split; you do not need to fight; you do not need to sue one another; you do not need to quit. You can work your problems out, for there is help available from all these sources, and God is honored and glorified when you do so."

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit (v. 13).

Paul ends with an incredible benediction. Do you need hope? Joy? Peace? Paul says, continue to trust and follow Jesus. He'll fill you up by the power of the Holy Spirit. And when God does that, which is what he desperately wants for each one of us, we'll welcome people the way Jesus welcomed people. Because it's not about us any longer. It's about the King and his coming Kingdom. And I think that's the point of this passage: Welcome people the way Jesus welcomed you. When we begin to welcome people

the way Jesus has welcomed us, walls begin to come down. The church is strengthened and united. Because through the Gospel, God is both transforming people and forming a community of faith, hope and love.

When you think about it, if everyone in the church is seeking the good of others, then disagreements can actually strengthen the church and not divide it. To seek the good of others, it means you need to listen to them and walk around in their shoes for a while. That takes time. But, it's worth it because God really does want his church to be a place that transcends all cultural, racial, and ethnic divisions in a unity and mission based on the gospel.

This is so practical but it can be truly revolutionary: start welcoming people the way Jesus welcomed you. Welcome people who look, act, and behave differently than you. Welcome people from all cultural, demographic, educational, and financial backgrounds. Welcome people you think are stuck up or are weak in their faith. Welcome people with no faith at all. In fact, don't wait around for people to welcome you. If Jesus would have treated us that way we'd all be on our way straight to hell. No, you go up to them and say, "Hi, we haven't met and I just wanted to say welcome and I'm glad you're here." What if we even invited them out to lunch? Or invited them over to our house to watch the Warriors Monday night? I hope some of you would do that today.

If we begin to treat people with respect, as people created in the image of God, as people for whom Christ died for, then they will never be the same. You will never be the same. And if we all do that, we will never be the same.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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