

Activate | Week 6

Romans 15:1–13

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A few years ago, when I was mopping the kitchen floor, I noticed a crack in one of the tiles. As I looked more closely, I noticed that it wasn't just in one tile. The crack went through a whole line of tiles — all the way across my house. I didn't have to be an engineer to know that we had a foundation problem. It was expensive, but we were able to have the foundation repaired before the damage became more than cosmetic. But in the worst-case scenario, a shifting foundation can cause major structural damage. The whole house can collapse.

Paul is winding up his instructions to the Roman church. He has been challenging them to repair the rift that has threatened to destroy their fellowship. In the passage we will look at this week, he'll remind them of their foundation. If it is firm, then they will not only stand firm, but build each other up into a structure that brings praise to God.

Day 1

As we've seen, the Roman church was divided over Torah-observance. One group of believers, whom Paul calls the Weak was restricting their diets and observing Holy Days. The other faction, the Strong, didn't share these convictions. This difference was causing a major division in the church. The Weak were judging the Strong and the Strong were despising the Weak.

Paul doesn't insist that they all agree on one point of view, but he does insist that they demonstrate love for one another. He targets the Strong and asks them to protect the faith of the Weak by accommodating their convictions and not tempting them to act against their deeply held beliefs.

In Romans 15, Paul gives one final appeal to the Strong before summarizing his argument. Notice whose example Paul wants these believers to follow and the reasons he gives for his instructions.

Read the Word

Romans 15:1–13 (NIV)

¹ We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. ² Each of us should please our neighbors for their good, to build them up. ³ For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: “The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.” 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.

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

⁷ Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. ⁸ 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 ⁹ 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.”

¹⁰ Again, it says,
“Rejoice, you Gentiles, with his people.”

¹¹ And again,
“Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles;
let all the peoples extol him.”

¹² 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.”

¹³ 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.

- What words stood out to you as you read this passage? Do they point to the reasoning behind Paul’s instructions?

Reflect

From the start of this series, we’ve seen in Paul’s instructions to the church a reflection of Jesus. In his emphasis on sacrificial love, Paul has laid a foundation for Christian behavior on the one who died to save us and give us life. It is into his image that the Spirit will conform us. In a culture that relishes divisiveness, we will bring honor to Jesus’ name if we are a church

that accepts one another in spite of our differences. When we demonstrate Jesus' love and unite together as his body, we bring praise to God.

In this section of Romans, Paul is wrapping up his argument to the Strong and the Weak and reminding the church on whom that unity is built and the effect it can have on the watching world. This week let's once again consider how we can contribute to the unity of our local body and demonstrate Christlike love.

Pray

If it's helpful, use the following to begin your own prayer time with God.

Father, you are the almighty Creator and the true and faithful One. You give us endurance and hope. In Christ we are brothers and sisters. As a church, may we find unity in Jesus and bring praise to your name.

Day 2

In Philippians 2:5–8 Paul says,

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death— even death on a cross!”

Though he is the Son of God and King, with all the power of heaven at his disposal, Jesus never acts self-servingly, but instead uses his power to serve others. He is joyful in his generosity because it pleases him to give of himself in love. We were created to follow this same pattern.

Read the Word

Romans 15:1–3

¹ We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. ² Each of us should please our neighbors for their good, to build them up. ³ For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: “The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.”

- Practically speaking, what is Paul asking the Strong to do?
- In verse 2, Paul speaks to “each of us” which would include the Weak and the Strong. What is he asking both groups to do?

Reflect

Here at the start of chapter 15, Paul is using the language of obligation to describe the relationship of the Strong to the Weak. Those who are Strong *ought* to bear with the Weak. Paul wasn't presenting this as optional advice.

Roman believers would have understood this sense of duty, but not necessarily in the direction that Paul indicates. Generally, the privileged and powerful were used to receiving services and honor from those of lesser status. Paul reverses this usual pattern.¹ Yet, he also gives dignity to the Weak by giving them the opportunity to contribute to their neighbors' good (15:2). Everyone has some power to act on behalf of someone else.

Look again at 15:1. The word translated "failings" in the NIV comes from *astheneo* ("weakness," the same word as the Weak) and could be translated "the weaknesses of the powerless" rather than the "failings of the weak." In Greek, it describes one who has no ability, capacity or strength and doesn't indicate a moral failing. So, the meaning of 15:1 could be something like, "Those of us who are strong must accept as our own burden the tender scruples of the weak."² The Strong are not to shame the Weak with demands to get "stronger." They are not to merely tolerate them. The Strong should support and encourage the Weak.

This behavior fits beautifully with Paul's instructions from Romans 12, that we should all live as embodied sacrifices to God (12:1) and demonstrate genuine love for each other by honoring others above ourselves (12:10). We also see an echo of the idea expressed Romans 13:9–10, that in all our relationships, we can fulfill the law by loving our neighbor as ourselves. Paul's practical advice here in Romans 15:1–2 is the founded upon his previous instructions to love.

Our model in all this, as Paul points out here, is Jesus Christ who did not seek to please himself. Quoting from Psalm 69:9, Paul brings this reasoning to a climax. If Jesus was willing to lay aside his divine rights to the extent that he gave up his own life, how could those who have power and strength refuse to curb their own freedom when it was causing their fellow Christians to fall? Ultimately, "greater strength means greater responsibility for others."³

- As we think one more time about areas of conflict that we have with our fellow Christians, how can we imitate Jesus? What would that look like in your relationships?

Pray

If it's helpful, use the following to begin your own prayer time with God.

¹ Sarah Heaner Lancaster, *Romans*, Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2015), 243.

² Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 866.

³ James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9–16*, vol. 38B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1988), 842–843.

Father, give me eyes to see others as you do. Show me how I can do good for others and imitate Jesus. I want to have Christlike love for others, not to please myself, but to build others up in you.

Day 3

We won't find unity as the body of Christ if we follow the lead of our "follow your own truth" world. If we are each defining our own truth, then we will all be moving in different directions.

The Bible gives us revelation from our Creator that shows who he is, who we are, and how he designed us to live and flourish. It gives us tremendous hope to endure the difficulties of this life because we know all that God has done to bring us into a right relationship with him. It also allows us to find unity of purpose as we all seek to live as he has shown us in his Word.

Paul points the Roman believers to what the Scriptures have revealed to them about their past as the foundation for how they should live in the future.

Read the Word

Romans 15:4–6

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.

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

Reflect

People, in the church and outside of it, have a lot of questions about how they should understand the Bible, particularly the Old Testament. In 2 Timothy 3:16–17 Paul tells us that "all Scripture is inspired and profitable for teaching, correcting, rebuking and training in righteousness so the people of God may be fully equipped to do God's work."

Here in Romans, he is helping the Roman believers understand the place the Scriptures should have in their lives. While in the earlier part of the letter he has worked to help them see the law in light of the coming of Christ, he never advocates abandoning the Scriptures. The whole Old Testament "forms the God-given story of how the covenant people were called to

bring God’s salvation to the good but fallen creation” through their Messiah, Jesus.⁴ The Old Testament “continues to play a central role in helping Christians to understand the climax of salvation history and their responsibilities as the New Covenant people of God.”⁵

Paul’s view of a Christian use of the Old Testament is that “it is written for us to learn from, so that with the Bible in our hands and hearts we might have the courage to live in patience and hope. The Bible, in other words, is the earlier part of the story we ourselves are living in, explaining the roots from which we have grown.”⁶

Paul prays that the Romans would receive endurance and encouragement through their unity as the family of God. Paul’s instructions once again echo what he told the Philippian church:

Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind.

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. (Philippians 2:1–4).

- Compare Philippians 2:1–4 with Romans 15:5–6. How do both encourage and challenge you?

Pray

If it’s helpful, use the following to begin your own prayer time with God.

Father, thank you for revealing yourself in your Word. Give me endurance and hope for the future as you unite me together with other believers to praise you with one voice.

Day 4

A common thought in the late 20th century was that technology would help humanity overcome their differences and unite people together. After the unprecedented carnage of two world wars, and numerous attempts at genocide in places like Kosovo and Rwanda, there was hope that by connecting people through technology, peace and understanding could grow.

⁴ Tom Wright, [*Paul for Everyone: Romans, Part 2: Chapters 9-16*](#) (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 112.

⁵ Moo, 869.

⁶ Wright, 111–112.

You don't have to look too hard on Social Media to see that this hope was misplaced. In some ways our world feels more divided than ever. Only God can truly join people together by reconciling them first to himself. That is what he has done through Jesus.

The body of Christ can and should be a miracle worthy of notice to the surrounding world. Our unity should bring glory to God and praise to his name. But this is only possible, if we pursue that unity by imitating Jesus.

Read the Word

Romans 15:7–13

⁷Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. ⁸For 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 ⁹and, 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."*

*¹⁰Again, it says,
"Rejoice, you Gentiles, with his people."*

*¹¹And again,
"Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles;
let all the peoples extol him."*

*¹²And 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."*

¹³May 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.

Reflect

In this passage, Paul is summing up his instructions to the Strong and the Weak as well as pointing these believers to the even greater truth that he has revealed to them in this letter. God has done something remarkable through Christ by uniting the Jews and Gentiles into one family. This is probably not as stunning to us now as it was to the original audience, but it is still a truth that we can rejoice in as we seek to find unity as the body of Christ despite our differences.

The Strong and Weak are to welcome and accept each other because God has welcomed and accepted both the Jews and the Gentiles. The promises made to Patriarchs are being fulfilled – the salvation of the Jews *and the Gentiles* has been accomplished through the Messiah. Paul wants them to accept each other as one family who together praise and glorify God.

Paul cites several Old Testament verses as he sums up his thoughts. Each one supports the theme of unified worship. God’s purpose for Israel has always included the Gentiles, and these verses emphasize that idea.

While the immediate point of Romans 15:1–13 may be a practical one about accepting one another in spite of different customs, the underlying message is reinforcing Paul’s insistence that God is glorified by the “united worship of Jew and Gentile together in the Messiah.”⁷

For us living in the modern age, there are still racial, ethnic, economic, and cultural differences that can prevent us from coming together to worship God with one voice. We cannot let any of those factors intrude or disrupt our fellowship with one another. We may have to set aside our personal preferences in order to welcome those who are different. Instead of focusing on areas of disagreement, we have to set our sights on Jesus, link arms, and walk side by side with our brothers and sisters because our unity still brings praise to God.

- What can you do to show welcome and acceptance to all kinds of Christians? How might this demonstrate unity that would bring praise to God?
- How might a welcoming, loving, and unified church demonstrate God’s goodness and attract those who are not Christians?

Pray

If it’s helpful, use the following to begin your own prayer time with God.

Father, I want to bring praise to your name with my actions. Show me how to welcome and accept my brothers and sisters. May our church bring honor and glory to you so that people respond in faith to your goodness.

Day 5

Happy Friday! On Day 5 of our guide each week, we spend some time reflecting on what we’ve learned, connecting it with our lives and praying. Let’s also consider our next steps in following Christ.

⁷ N. T. Wright, “Romans,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary* 10, (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 642.

Reflect on what you've learned

Look over Romans 14:1–15:13. Think through what we've discussed over the past three weeks. How have you been challenged by these passages? Have you changed your mind about anything? How is the Spirit speaking to you through the Word?

Make Connections

In this letter, Paul has shown his desire for these house churches to reject the pattern of the Roman world with its focus on hierarchy and social stratification. Love should flow through the family of God without judgment or contempt. He wants Jewish and Gentile believers to find unity in Christ as brothers and sisters in spite of very real differences.

Paul ends his plea to the Strong and the Weak by asking these two groups to accept one another and bring praise to God. The Jews display God's faithfulness and the Gentiles his mercy. Both are to glorify God in their behavior. By stressing conformity to Christ and encouraging unity in spite of genuine disagreement, Paul is sketching a portrait of a family where members restrict their own freedoms for the good of others.

In our culture, we are encouraged to indulge our freedoms and pursue the "good life" however we define it. The only way Paul's vision for the church can come to fruition is through spiritual transformation and a commitment to becoming more and more like Jesus. Throughout Romans, Paul calls upon the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ to show the way. Jesus' sacrificial love may have led him to submit to death, but his defeat of death proves that evil cannot ultimately overcome the good. The way of Christ must be characterized by love.

Pray and Consider Your Next Step

Spend some time in prayer. Thank God for all that he has done for you in Christ. Praise him for his love, mercy, and faithfulness. Thank him for your brothers and sisters in Christ. Ask him to bring greater unity to your small group and to the church as a whole.

As you've taken the time to think through some "disputable matters" over the last few weeks, what conclusions have you come to? Are there any practical changes that you are making? For example, how about the way you post or respond on social media, or how you approach difficult discussions with a brother or sister in Christ. Has the Spirit led you to think or act differently? If so, how?